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The allure of otherness: transnational cult film fandom and the exoticist assumption

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ABSTRACT

Academic scholarship addressing transnational cult fandom, particularly Western cult fans forming attachments to films outside their cultures, has frequently addressed the issue of exoticism. Much attention has been paid to how Western fans are problematically drawn to artefacts outside of their own cultures because of exotic qualities, resulting in a shallow and often condescending appreciation of such films. In this article, I critique a number of such articles for merely *assuming* such processes without proffering sufficient supporting evidence. In fact, I argue that a number of such exotic-oriented critiques of transnational cultism are actually guilty of practising what they preach against: an insufficient contextualization of fandom and a tendency to downplay the messiness of empirical data in favour of generalized abstractions. Further, I argue that the constant critique of fans as avoiding contextualization has not only been overstated but stringently used as a yardstick to denigrate fan engagements with texts as improper. As such, fans are often 'othered' within such articles, a process mirroring the ways they are accused of othering distant cultural artefacts.

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Work addressing transnational cult cinema, in particular its reception across cultural boundaries, has grown steadily over the past few decades. A significant corpus of this work has analysed how non-Western cult films are celebrated by fans from Western locations, with many scholars focusing on the ways that cultists' love of such films arises from a dubious process of exoticization. In this article, I will explore some of the prominent arguments that mark exotic-oriented critiques and take issue with some of the assumptions underpinning these types of arguments. Before tackling these questions, however, I feel it is necessary to clarify a few issues. The first regards the concept of the transnational: I do not wish here to explore the meaning of the term in detail, as a number of different approaches exist under its rubric. I use the term to interrogate the interfaces 'between global and local, national and transnational' (Higbee and Lim 2010, 10). In a globalized era, the local and the national are increasingly interconnected with other regions and nations, which enables people to communicate with others outside of their locality, as well as receive and disseminate ideas and goods – such as films – beyond one's territorial location. Secondly, the critical work I

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have looked at stems from Anglo-speaking Western countries, primarily the United States but also other prominent countries including Australia, Britain and Canada, and critiques of exoticism in cult cultures largely focus on how cultists from primarily Anglo-speaking territories exoticize products originating from very different cultures. One important consideration underpinning exotic-oriented critiques is that these transnational encounters are marked by inequalities: cult fans in such scenarios are interpreting cultural objects from positions of power and dominance; they speak the dominant global language and they operate within territories that are – to different degrees – relatively wealthy and powerful. Language, I would argue, is the most important factor here, in that many European productions have been considered ‘exotic’ when viewed within the United States or Britain, though language is of course linked to broader issues of cultural dominance (i.e. there is a lot more English language media in non-English speaking regions than vice versa). It is this broader framework of cultural dominance that has, in my opinion, overdetermined the trope of exoticism within analyses of cross-cultural reception of cult items.

One other issue I need to clarify is that while my focus here is on films and their cultification across regional borders, I also draw on work that looks at media more broadly. Arguments about cross-cultural reception and exoticism can be found in studies of cult media more generally, not just cult film. While this article centres specifically on the medium of film, it is no longer as easy as it once was to consider film totally separate from other forms of media, particularly following the recent flowering of research in intermedial studies (exploring how distinct media inform one another) and transmedia studies (how different media platforms can extend the story worlds and experiences originating within a specific media form) (see, e.g. Jenkins 2006; Elleström 2010; Petho 2010; Evans 2013). I will, therefore, also draw on work that looks at other forms of film-related media on occasion, such as film music, in surveying critiques of exoticism.

This is a largely theoretical study of a problematic tendency amongst some to *assume* that fans are drawn to films from other regions largely because of their exotic qualities, and to assume that exoticism is always negative regardless of context. While I critique approaches that decontextualize fan engagements and tend to avoid investigating fan interactions empirically, I have not myself conducted empirical analyses of fan engagements. I do believe that empirical investigations of fans should be conducted in order to arrive at broader conclusions about their activities and motivations. Yet the core aim of this article is to demonstrate that there is a tendency to overlook empirical, and other, evidence in order to arrive at conclusions about Western fans exoticizing films, rather than to explore a specific fan community in empirical depth.

Transnational cult consumption

In the introduction to *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* – a widely cited collection of articles on cult cinema – Jancovich et al. (2003, 4) address how a number of films become cultified across national contexts, and how such processes tend to be underpinned by exoticism:

many cult movies are films that have been transplanted from one specific cultural terrain and consumed within another quite different one. However, not only are these products celebrated in this new context for their supposed difference from the ‘mainstream’ (although they may in fact be the mainstream of their own culture) but this often involves an exoticisation of other

cultures. In other words, cult movie fandom often relies on a celebration of the ‘weird and wonderful’ of world cinema, but does so in a way that has no interest in the meaning of those films within the contexts of their own production (see, e.g. Tombs 1998).

This excerpt exemplifies the problematic ways in which exoticization is frequently drawn upon to explain processes of transnational cult film reception. There is, for example, a lack of specific information, such as which countries these films are consumed in, and which countries have produced such films that are considered exotic. While this is an introduction – where generalist discussion is to be expected – there’s no real pointer to further evidence within the collection beyond mention of Willis’s own article (2003), which looks at the cult of a selection of Spanish films produced between 1967 and 1973. With only two other chapters even touching on transnational cult film fandom (Hutchings 2003 and Hunt 2003a), the line of argument in this excerpt is weakened by over-abstractation, a problem that afflicts a number of arguments that employ exotic-oriented critiques. It is further hampered by only drawing attention to one artefact – Pete Tombs’ *Mondo Macabro* book – as an example of such decontextualized exoticism, a puzzling inclusion considering that there is actually plentiful contextual information about the respective contexts of various film productions in this publication.

Exotic-oriented critiques of cult reception across national borders isn’t always quite as abstract, but even when used in cases that focus on more specific examples it is often beset by problematic assumptions. For example, in an article on cult Indonesian films and their marketing in the West, Ekky Imanjaya notes how these films appeal to Western cult fans because they are enjoyed as exotic, as cultural artefacts that offer cult fans something new and different: ‘The Western spectators find such Eastern mystical stories to be exotic, unfamiliar and consider the movies as representing otherness’ (2009). In this article, Imanjaya draws upon a specific case study and also engages with how these films have been distributed in the West, focusing on Pete Tombs’ *Mondo Macabro* DVD label, which distributes its titles in the United States (it formerly distributed its titles to the UK as well). Yet though it is certainly the case that ‘exotic’ is a word used by Tombs in a quoted interview, and that *Mondo Macabro* highlight the exotic in their marketing techniques – the label’s motto is ‘The Wild Side of World Cinema’ – Imanjaya presumes that Western ‘cult-fan boys’ automatically frame these films as exotic. He writes that ‘distributors sharpen the mutual interaction of Western cult-fan boys and Eastern mystical/exotic movies, through certain branding and marketing strategies that cult fan-boys cannot refuse’. This assertion implies a perfect fit between marketing and consumption, but it is extremely doubtful whether the interaction between these two fields is ever so neat. Imanjaya’s argument here would have benefited from citing evidence of exoticism within fan discourse. Though he does mention actual websites, blogs, forums and fanzines that evidence the ‘cult fan boy’ engagement with Indonesian cult cinema, he does not provide examples of how such fan boys are unable to refuse marketing strategies.

Even when distinctive evidence *is* proffered to support exotic-oriented critiques it can still prove questionable. In an article on Bollywood music’s increasing ‘hipness’ within American culture in the 2000s, Chan (2008) also focuses on exoticism as a major factor in transnational reception. Chan doesn’t mention the term ‘cult’, though his focus on Bollywood as increasingly popular within ‘hipster alternativism’ (277) does implicitly link his statements to issues within cult media. He contends that exoticism is evident in the Western appreciation for both high art and populist artefacts, but that ‘an exoticization marked by kitsch has become

the reigning sentiment that governs the NBC's [non-traditional Bollywood consumers] encounter with Bollywood over the years' (264). While he states that this isn't just a third-to-first world issue, but one of modernity more generally, it is the former framework that most pervasively underpins his argument. He further argues that a modernist desire for universalism co-exists with exoticism in the reception of Indian filmsong amongst American consumers, and that kitsch – as an interpretive framework – is the dominant mode through which such differences are dealt with. Unfortunately, Chan rarely provides any evidence from actual reception processes, instead relying on examples from promotional and informational discourses found in CD liner notes, film and television references, and personal anecdotes. This leads to a troubling paradox at the heart of his argument: he critiques the ways in which the reception of such texts papers over difference (including inequalities) in a desire for universality (in this case via kitsch), which therefore leads to abstraction and a suppression of specificity, yet his own assertions are undermined through reducing all such encounters to universal desires:

We all reside in difference, after all, and yet we yearn for that uncorrupted condition, which might be more appropriately thought of in terms of antiseptis or even prophylaxis: we want to be able to neutralize the alien microbes of difference so that we can penetrate the membrane that separates us from the exotic other without harm to either party. (281)

Chan's problem is that he relies on suspect universal assumptions (do we really all yearn for an uncorrupted condition?) to make a case against humanist universalism in a bid to encourage people to recognize difference. Even when he does discuss difference, he does so in a binary sense: large-scale differences between high art and popular culture, for example, or between Western democracies and everywhere else. The first of these oppositions doesn't really account for anything in-between, even if Chan does acknowledge that borders between such categories are not rigid. While the high art/mass culture binary does still exert some influence, it is doubtful that it is as solid as it once was. The growth of cultism is one factor that has led to the weakening of these boundaries, for it can be considered a process through which people have staked out alternatives to mass culture *through* popular culture (in its more obscure varieties, for example, or through culturally distant examples, or even through critically making a claim for a popular text largely considered worthless) (see Taylor 1999). That is, however, only one way of conceiving cultism and we should be wary of making too many assumptions based upon high culture/cult culture/popular culture being single, bounded concepts; instead we need to remain appreciative of the textural diversity that mingles amongst any one of these classifications. If the texts that belong to these categories are diverse, the actual ways they are engaged with at the level of reception are arguably even more so, affected as they are by numerous cultural and social factors.

Even articles that demonstrate greater sensitivity to specific contexts can occasionally fall into problematic assumptions about the exotic. In an article documenting cult cinema in Latin America, Dolores Tierney notes a number of issues related to the discussion of cult Latin American cinema. Despite attention to specific contexts within which cult operates, she does at times slip into what I would call an *exoticist assumption* when explaining that Latin American cult films gain this status in the US and Europe due to their otherness. Discussing the cult appeal of Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (Mexico, 1970) she writes:

With *El topo*, this status is predicated on US-based (or indeed, European-based) consumption and/or spectatorship, in which the film's subcultural value relies on its 'otherness' to an Anglo or European mainstream. The cult qualities that are celebrated and admired in *El Topo* (and

other 'world cinema' films labelled 'cult') are those qualities that make them inaccessible or difficult to consume or understand, or, alternatively, those that fit in with preconceived notions of the 'other.' (2014, 131)

Tierney doesn't actually use the term 'exotic,' though the argument she makes here certainly has similarities to exotic-oriented critiques: the otherness residing in these films is considered exotic as it is a marked feature of texts that appeals to cult consumers looking for something different from the mainstream. Later in the article, Tierney refers to colonialist underpinnings associated with Western cult fandom, again echoing assumptions previously noted: that the exotic difference of these films is a fundamental appeal for Western cult fans, who nonetheless celebrate such films in problematic ways reflective of colonialist inequalities.

The work of Henry Jenkins becomes useful in casting these readings as colonialist (rather than textual) 'poachings,' which ignore local readings and contexts in favor of celebrating the seemingly weird and wonderful. [...] These acts of cult colonialist appropriation often include celebrating the technical failures of Latin American films. Here, the operation is the same as other cult appropriations: finding pleasure in a film's failure to 'replicate dominant codes of Hollywood realism.' But in the case of Latin American films consumed by US metropolitan audiences, also present in this viewing protocol is a potentially dominant group that thrills in seeing the cultures of the peripheries failing to copy the culture of the center.

This quote seems again to lack any evidence to support it and also doesn't reflect the ways in which *El Topo* or *The Holy Mountain* (1973) were received as cult films in the US, where they tended to gain admirers not for the ways in which they were seen to poorly mimic more dominant models, but largely because they were considered to be artistically innovative and appealed to countercultural audiences, many of whom considered them profound films (Hoberman and Rosenbaum [1983] 1991, 93–96). That this doesn't chime with the mocking forms of pleasure Tierney refers to should at once alert us to beware of assuming that such exotic modes of consumption are the only ways in which transnational cult films are perceived.

Another problem with many exotic-oriented critiques is that they are often applied to an extremely diverse set of texts and locations, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. While this line of critique is frequently underpinned by unequal power relations – often related to colonialist histories – such inequalities are often left as generalized and vague. No matter which territories are focused on, whether East Asia, South Asia, Latin America or even European countries such as Italy and Spain, processes of exoticism are frequently considered to be similar, without any regard for the respective social, economic and cultural specificities of the territories mentioned. This, it may be argued, results from the ways in which largely English-speaking, Western audiences exoticize all types of 'foreign' culture in a superficial manner that reflects their sense of cultural superiority. But as I have argued, while some audiences might do this, many do not; by overlooking the different ways in which exoticism can manifest itself across (and within) different contexts and ignoring plentiful non-exotic cult discourses and processes, attempts to mount arguments of this kind merely replicate the superficial generalizations they attribute to cult fans.

Such generalized critiques homogenize large territories, both in terms of production and reception. Exotic-oriented critiques of cultists often assume that products originating from a specific territory are straightforwardly representative of a national and/or regional culture. Yet many films are influenced by diverse cultural traditions, while a number of

others may be produced by people from a range of territories, which is particularly common in international co-productions. Jodorowsky's *El Topo* may be a Latin American film, but many currents outside of Latin America influenced it. Jodorowsky himself was culturally omnivorous and moved to Paris in 1953, where he was influenced by Surrealism in particular. *El Topo* also evidences other influences, such as the work of Antonin Artaud, Italian spaghetti westerns and the films of Federico Fellini. Theorizing that Western cultists embrace 'otherness' in transnational films because of their exotic allure overlooks how 'otherness' can exist *within* one's own culture. Such approaches tend to homogenize large tracts of culture and conveniently play down the hybrid nature of identities (diasporic communities and identities, for example, are often overlooked).

If we look at the broad history and development of cult cinema, in particular the range of films that have gained cult status and the reasons why many cultists embrace such films, then *otherness* is a key factor that fuels a significant proportion of cult consumption in general, not just transnational cult consumption. Across lists, articles and online discussions about cult cinema, it is films from the United States that dominate, which should alert us to how otherness has been detected in films that emerge from the same national context in which they are received.¹ Otherness is apparent in many of the prominent appeals of cult cinema and associated concepts listed in studies of cult cinema: *difference*, in particular from a notion of what constitutes the 'mainstream'; *transgression*, usually of acceptable/conventional content, but also of technical norms (evident in examples of cult films that are celebrated for being outstandingly poor); and *weirdness* or *strangeness* – qualities which have been readily acknowledged in academic studies as appealing to some cultists (Telotte 1991; Mendik and Harper 2002; Mathijs and Sexton 2011).

If otherness is a key (though not necessary) component of the appeal of cult films generally, then it is not surprising that otherness is a prominent factor in the transnational reception of cult films. Yet too often the attractions of otherness are explained away as demeaning, condescending modes of exoticism. We should not automatically assume that English speaking, Western cultists enjoy cult films from other regions just because culturally specific aspects of these films connote the exotic, or that they celebrate the films as 'other' merely due to the ways in which they fail to replicate the codes of Hollywood cinema. As it is the case that many films produced within the US gain cult status because of their difference (which can manifest itself in variable ways), then it is no surprise that films emerging from diverse contexts can also gain cult status because they represent something unusual for cultists. The appeal of difference does not necessarily coincide with exoticism, however, even though it is often assumed to within transnational cult film fandom. If it did, then there would be many more analyses of how American films appeal to American cultists because of their exotic qualities. One could make an argument that some American films *do* gain fans through exotic appeals, particularly if we think about older movies from the US that gain a cult status at a much later time than when first released. Yet such intra-national appeals across temporal contexts are more commonly investigated in relation to nostalgia rather than exoticism, as is the case with classical Hollywood films that gain cult followings in later eras (see Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 185, 186). Annalee Newitz's investigation of the concept of 'cheese' does perhaps point to slight similarities between the consumption of texts across time and transnational reception, in that she claims that 'cheesy consumption' often relates to how we can sarcastically laugh at cultural objects from the past due to their heightened cultural constructedness: this can apply to

both representation (she notes black and white racial stereotypes circulating in 1970s pop culture, for instance) and also aesthetic conventions (Newitz 2000).¹ Such connections, however, are not often made within cult research.

Familiarity and difference

A further problem with many exotic-oriented critiques of global cult fandom is that they tend to focus too heavily on difference as a textual appeal. Without wishing to downplay the appeal of difference, it is usually the case that films appeal to audiences through combining fresh and familiar elements. Film genres, for example, have been examined in terms of the ways that they fuse repetition and difference (Neale 1980, 48). Some viewers may seek out difference to a greater extent than they do familiarity – through, for example, alternative forms of film production including cult films, art cinema and avant-garde films. Yet even attachments to more ‘alternative’ modes of film rely on some kind of familiarity to exist, otherwise we would have no way of understanding or processing them (and, even if an art work did manage to bear no resemblance to anything preceding it, humans would need to fit it into pre-existing categories and schemata in order to engage with it).² Thus, markers of difference can also become familiar tropes through repetition, which leads to alternative forms of cinema – such as art cinema, cult cinema, and independent cinema – becoming generically codified. As such we should also pay attention to how Western cult fans may be drawn to familiar aspects and features of transnational films *in addition* to the appeals of difference.

Hills (2002a) and Chin and Morimoto (2013) have already started to problematize the frequent positioning of transnational cult fandom in terms of national difference and exoticism. In a paper on the cult appeal of anime in Western contexts, primarily the US, Hills has argued that a focus on *otherness* and *difference* has outweighed other approaches:

Set against these familiar narratives of transcultural misrecognition, transnational Othering and the nation as iconically-imagined ‘imagined community’, I want to argue here that fandom and national identity might have a more complex relationship, one that does not simply locate fan cultures ‘in’ a given national context, ‘against’ other national contexts, or as ‘appropriating’ transcultural products in a global economy/culture. (2002a, 2)

Hills does not claim that nationality is irrelevant when accounting for the factors feeding into the appeal of anime for Western fans, and actually criticizes Napier (2001) for downplaying the importance that ‘Japaneseness’ plays for many American otaku. He does, however, warn against overstating the importance of the national in such encounters, suggesting that for fans it is arguably a number of affinities across cultures/nations – or ‘transcultural homologies’ – that may be more important factors than national difference.

Building on Hills’ work, Chin and Morimoto (2013) have also criticized an overemphasis of the national in transcultural research (and they adopt the term transcultural over transnational precisely because of the problems that they have encountered with a predominant focus on the national.) After noting the dearth of research on fan cultures outside of the US and fan research which focuses on the global dimensions of fandom, they argue:

Where such analyses do occur, it is the nation that (over -) determines fan appropriation and engagement, with the effect of both severely limiting the kinds of questions that are asked, and effectively ghettoising (or even exoticising) cross-border fandoms.

Further, they contend:

We argue that, while national identity and transnational historical and socio-political contexts may inform fannish pursuits, this is neither necessarily the case nor the only possible mode of transcultural fan engagement.

They claim that the over-determination of the national in such research has been influential and has blocked off other areas of investigation. While my focus is not specifically on the nation, it nevertheless feeds into ideas of exoticism and transcultural engagement; yet it is not *just* the nation, but rather specific *regions* and differences between such regions that are important factors in exotic-oriented critiques of global cult fandom. Whether we conceive of place in terms of nation or region, however, it is clear that the importance of these factors is both overemphasised and over-abstracted in many studies of global cult cinema and fandom.

Following Chin and Morimoto, I accept that 'national identity and transnational historical and socio-political contexts may inform fannish pursuits', but argue that this focus has blocked other modes of investigation and resulted in the exaggeration of exoticism as a transnational (or, more suitably, transcultural) allure. If we look at more empirical studies of how fans engage with culturally diverse forms of global media, then the picture is somewhat different. One particular problem of much previous research in this area is that the attitudes of Western cult fans is often assumed by the researcher rather than actually investigated. In lieu of looking at fan engagements with such media there is a tendency to 'read off' fan responses from marketing materials.

Equating fan responses with marketing and promotional discourses is extremely problematic, however. In researching fans of 'Asia Extreme' cinema, Emma Pett (2013) has shown how fan interactions with both marketing discourses and global products are far from straightforward. The term 'Asia Extreme' was a brand name for a range of VHS and DVD releases from Tartan Films that gained strong cult followings. As it gained popularity the term 'Asia Extreme' became more broadly used to refer to a number of Asian films that were appealing to Western cultists. While this adoption of a marketing term to refer to a range of films by fans themselves could be seen as confirmation of Imanjaya's contention that fan 'boys' cannot refuse how such intermediaries frame films, it is far from being this straightforward. Pett's research actually challenges common stereotypical assumptions about fans in academic work. Importantly, many of these fans had some issues with the 'Asia Extreme' category. As Pett (2013) argues, 'different audience groups make specific uses of particular film categories for their own purposes; here, these include embracing "Asia Extreme" as useful promotional tool, and resisting it as a means to display their individual expertise and connoisseurship'. Importantly, her findings respond to a number of critiques of the Tartan Asia brand as an exoticizing force, and specifically to Choi and Wada-Marciano's (2009) contention that such marketing strategies shape audiences' interactions with these films. Pett's research is important as an empirical investigation not just of how Western fans engage with non-Western cult media, but also how they perceive intermediaries such as distributors of global media. This counters the numerous assumptions about fans accepting the ways in which distributors promote such films and points to more intricate patterns of negotiation. Fans, for example, interpret films based on a range of orientations, some of which can be influenced by paratextual materials such as promotional discourses. Yet these materials constitute only a small percentage of materials that fans may draw on when engaging with films from different cultures. Even accepting that such promotional materials shape audience interactions, we also need to be aware that exotic-oriented criticism downplays the polysemic nature of such materials by tending to only focus on those discursive elements that bear traces of exoticism.

Exoticism and contextualization

Downplaying non-exotic discourse inevitably leads to an imbalanced perspective. In particular, many of the critiques I have perused assume that the presence of exotic imagery or language within paratextual materials will lead to a reduction of interest in contextual issues. This both overlooks the plentiful contextual information that such materials regularly feature and also assumes that fans are not interested in discovering anything about the contexts of the culturally distant films they celebrate.

Within a number of paratextual materials that frame transnational cult films for Western audiences, both exotic and contextual elements can appear side by side and/or inform one another. In the liner notes of ‘filmsong’ that Chan scans for evidence of exotic kitsch, for example, we can also come across contextual information about this music (such as cultural backgrounds of artists, information on the films that featured music appeared in, etc.). Likewise, DVD and Blu-ray releases from Mondo Macabro may well feature images and language that emphasize exotic weirdness, but these releases also often feature documentaries that contextualize the films within particular national cycles of production: the Mondo Macabro double-bill release of *The Deathless Devil* (Atadenis, 1973)/*Tarkan Versus the Vikings* (Aslan, 1971) features a documentary on ‘Turkish Pop Cinema’, for example, while the region 2 release of *Mystics in Bali* (Djalil, 1981) is accompanied by a documentary on Indonesian exploitation cinema (which featured on a different Indonesian film, *Lady Terminator* (Djalil, 1989)), for the region 1 release). Pete Tombs of Mondo Macabro had actually made a number of documentaries on pop and exploitation cinema cycles from around the globe for Channel 4, titled *Mondo Macabro* (Starke and Tombs, 2001), that were first screened in 2002, and many of these have now been used as extras on Mondo Macabro releases. Tombs’ previous books, *Mondo Macabro* and *Immoral Tales* (Tohill and Tombs 1994), meanwhile, featured a good deal of information about specific films and the broader contexts within which they emerged. This is also the case with Finders Keepers’ releases of global cult film soundtrack material – such as *Bollywood Bloodbath*, *El Topo*, *The Holy Mountain* and *Valerie and her Week of Wonders* (Jires, 1970) – which contain a blend of hyperbolic, exotically tinged language and an informative, contextualizing discourse.

Roy (2015), in her study of the *Finders Keepers* record label, is a scholar who *has* looked at such paratexts as polysemic and has analysed how exotic elements can co-exist with contextualizing (and other) currents. Analysing the promotional blurb of the label’s records, she notes how they provide information about artists as well as links to other artists and traditions. The liner notes provide historical information and place the music and films within new contexts (by noting, for example, their placement in new traditions that include artists inspired by the discussed artist(s)). Roy argues that these reissues may, therefore,

prompt a deeper engagement with the material. The liner notes and diverse paratexts accompanying these releases may notably provide a theoretical or narrative space to begin thinking about a specific music genre, and its implications and entanglements with situated socio-historical realities. (112)

Roy’s argument can be more broadly applied to transnational cult fandom and points to how exotic tropes within films and accompanying paratexts – when they do exist – always co-exist with other features; as such, it is important not to overplay their importance even when they are apparent. Further, it suggests that relations between global cult films and how they are both mediated for, and received by, Western fans is a complex process and not an inevitable, predetermined encounter. Many companies may be exploiting quite hyperbolic

and sometimes exotic tropes within their products, but this partly needs to be related to the ways in which they also need to raise the awareness of potential buyers within a crowded market (and a market within which they are generally drowned out by larger films released by larger companies, with a far larger market presence). Marketing language and imagery may sometimes be problematic in terms of emphasizing the exotic but this doesn't mean we should think that the majority of global cult film fandom is fuelled by an underlying wish to propagate, celebrate and condescendingly enjoy exotic cultural stereotypes. As Thomas Austin has argued, publicity and 'hype' surrounding films 'do not entail the straightforward determination of audience wants and decisions', (65) as these materials are neither discursively uniform nor do they exist in a contextual vacuum.

In looking at the Western reception of Indian genre cinema, Smith (2014) has also argued against overemphasizing its reception as merely exotic and kitsch. Though he does outline aspects of such tendencies within reception, he also claims that they can function to broaden awareness of such texts amongst Western audiences and lead to a firmer engagement with, and understanding of, the contexts from which they emerged. He refers to this phenomenon as 'cult cosmopolitanism' and contends that it 'can also function to draw attention to areas of global culture that have previously been neglected and ignored'. He further argues:

As we have seen in the growing fandom surrounding Indian genre cinema, these cultists are mapping out and historicising areas of Indian cinema that have up till now been largely overlooked, especially in English language scholarship. This desire to seek out and understand a foreign culture, even while focused on the exotic and the bizarre, still has the potential to produce a genuine cultural engagement upon which a deeper understanding can be built.

Smith's claims here echo points indicated previously by Hunt (2003b) in his discussion of Hong Kong action cinema and its appeal to Western audiences. Hunt notes accusations of exoticism but stresses how Western cultists' engagement with these films are fuelled by a number of different interests; he argues that fans are not monolithic and do not engage with such films in a uniform manner. He notes, for example, how Western fans often identify with Eastern stars of these films, a process that cannot be easily reduced to a condescending, imperialist mode of enjoyment frequently associated with Western cult consumption of non-Western modes (13). He also discusses how the films themselves often acted as a form of education for Western fans, particularly through introducing them to new styles of martial arts. The films can thus act, for some fans, as a means to discover more about different cultural traditions. In this sense, rather than retaining a neo-imperialist, distanced relation to the texts, these fans use the films as a means of moving closer to the cultural terrain that fascinates them. Watching these films is, in many instances, 'a form of learning, an ongoing 'education' of the audience' (Hunt 2003b, 4).

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated how critiques of exoticism within the distribution and fan reception of global cult cinema – in particular films which do not stem from Anglicized countries – are beset by a number of issues. These issues should alert scholars studying such trends to steer clear from making rather superficial judgements about exoticism without more fully investigating the broader range of ways that global cult reception operates. Too frequently claims are made that films gain cult status in the West through offering alluring, exotic pleasures that are politically suspect as they reflect neocolonialist positions towards

films. In this sense, any form of pleasure stemming from exotic desires indicates a similar process of superiority on behalf of Western cultists: the exotic global cult film is hailed by Western cultists for being 'other', but this otherness can only remain pleasurable if underpinned by an ignorance of the qualities of the exotic (i.e. it must be left as an abstract, exotic other whose meaning is reducible to representing something outside of Western norms).

To reiterate, I do not wish to deny the existence of exoticization amongst Western cultists interested in varied forms of global cinemas; it is clear that exoticism can and does exist in many instances. Scholars have tended to rely, though, too heavily on the concept of exoticism without fully examining how it operates in concrete contexts. Taylor (2007) has criticized the use of exoticism within studies of music, arguing that it has often functioned as a stylistic label homogenizing diverse practices. In this sense, argues Taylor, the concept obscures more than it explains and often impedes – rather than fosters – 'deeper historical, cultural, and social analysis' (209). Taylor argues that exoticism doesn't exist in an ahistorical vacuum; instead he posits a range of *exoticisms*, each of which may function very differently according to context. Chin (2007, 212) has also touched on similar critical issues when she ponders 'whether fan cultural theory creates, and assumes, a homogeneous fan culture, so much that it might not necessarily allow us to explore the possibility that other (fan) identities might exist, influenced by the social, cultural and national contexts'. Certainly a number of exotic-oriented critiques of cult fans problematically assume what cult fans are and do, and too often hastily jump to conclusions based on the hyperbole of promotional materials.

A related problem with a number of exotic-oriented critiques is that they frequently assume that exoticism is always politically suspect (falling foul once again of fixing the concept of the exotic transhistorically). And yet, to do so is to once again make assumptions about the allure of the exotic. Exotic qualities can exist within a variety of global cult films, but they don't always carry with them implicit assumptions about inferior and 'unknowable' other cultures. I would agree here with literary critic Roy Shapiro, who has argued that much literary criticism is stifled by the assumption that exoticism is always dubious:

I do not wish to deny that, as a political strategy, the exoticising of the Other can have, and has had, disastrous consequences ... Yet ... it seems to me that the more subtle aspects of the exoticising process have been given insufficient thought by those who are so keen to accuse it ... I wish to suggest ... that the exotic is not necessarily something false and evil, some cancerous creation of the mind, but is part of the ordinary process of the construction of alterity. (Shapiro 2000, 42)

Shapiro notes how such critiques within literary studies often draw straightforward parallels between creative acts and political statements, when these relations are in fact often more complex. He claims that 'it is important to maintain a clear distinction between imaginative ideas on the one hand, and the possible political abuses to which imaginative ideas can be put on the other', as well as warning against reducing all forms exoticism to uniform ideological tools (43).

Why is this *exoticist assumption* so pervasive in academic work exploring transnational cult film fandom? I would speculate that it stems from a large corpus of work in this discipline being rooted in a postcolonialist tradition of seeking to shed light on marginal or peripheral cinemas from around the globe and to interrogate issues of inequalities in global culture (Higbee and Hwee 2010, 9). As such, when focusing on Western fans involved in raising the cult reputation of films from very different cultures, the issue of exoticism is

considered an important aspect of the political inequalities marking transnational flows. This factor combines with a tradition of suspicion towards cultists and fans in general that has marked areas of academic studies of film. Despite increasing research into cult fans from different cultures (e.g. Alemán 2011; Vivar 2016) – which complicate abstract notions of an idealized cult cinema fan – there still exists amongst many an assumption that cultists are white, straight, privileged males, assumptions which block out detailed investigation of these subjects, and therefore propagate stereotypes about cult audiences. These assumptions, however, are often guilty of exoticizing fans at the same time as they critique fans for exoticizing films from other cultures: that is, they tend to homogenize fans – and regions – in an abstract manner that overlooks any interest in the contexts within which these activities occur. In some ways, the constant criticisms of global cult cinema fans as exoticizing and decontextualizing films might be considered a defence mechanism by academics policing the boundaries between themselves and ‘fans’. There are, for example, implicit suggestions in a number of such critiques that fans do not undertake *proper* work, which is to place these films within their contexts of production. This seems to me overly restrictive and prescriptive about how we *should* engage with films from outside our cultural sphere.

Of course, as I have noted, a number of fans have actually played an important role in contextualizing films that they have been interested in. The downplaying of such roles by a number of academic strengthens this sense of retaining a distance between academic and fan activities, and of creating categorical distinctions between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ modes of analysis. Not all academics, of course, are guilty of such assumptions and there has been in more recent years an increased convergence between the two fields, with the terms ‘aca-fans’ and ‘fan scholars’ (Hills 2002b) having been used to indicate how many individuals now combine these two profiles. This has, in turn, led to a number of academics now taking fan activities seriously and acknowledging their crucial role in producing knowledge about a number of cinematic modes that have traditionally been overlooked within more scholarly environments. Bordwell (2011) is an example of an extremely respected scholar who has written about his debt to fans when researching his *Planet Hong Kong*, as they had produced most of the information about Hong Kong action cinema at the point he began his research (Bordwell 2000). Yet, despite such acknowledgement, there still exists amongst many academic scholars a rather suspicious tone towards the activities of global cult fans, which includes downplaying the hard work that many such fans have put into discovering and sharing knowledge about cinematic artefacts that have been little understood within Western contexts.

Notes

1. It should be noted that she does also consider national questions, in that cheese can be related to national differences, and in this sense cheese has commonalities with exoticism. But she also, importantly, claims that this can work within national cultures and across time.
2. Peterson (1994) has interestingly applied cognitive theory to making sense of avant-garde films, noting that their unusual structure may frustrate and/or seem nonsensical to some viewers, and thus dismissed. He outlines, though, a number of ways that we can cognitively make sense of such films, which involve familiarization strategies (such as understanding them historically, in relation to other art movements and styles, through contrasting them with mainstream films, etc.). Within writings on art cinema, many have pointed out formal conventions apparent across many such films. The key work here is Bordwell’s ‘The Art

Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice' (1979). More recently, Kovács (2008) has outlined a number of familiar features across modernist art films and also looks at how they often draw on more familiar generic elements.

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