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PERFORMING ETHNICITY: THE VIDEO ARTIST SHYAPORN THEERAKULSTIT

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Abstract

Shyaporn Theerakulstit, also known by the name Shy, is a Thai-American actor and filmmaker whose short video clips focus on the topics of popular culture, mediated identities, performativity and parodism. Several of them humorously reflect on US discourses on Asianness, hyphenated identities and political correctness, drawing from the filmmaker's diasporic perspective that enables him to simultaneously partake in and critique these discourses. This article aims to introduce Shy's work and analyses three of his short films, concentrating on questions of cultural stereotyping, identity construction, and ethnicity as performance.

"Hi, my name is Shy": many of Shyaporn Theerakulstit's video clips begin with this short and simple self-introductory sentence. The filmmaker speaks into the camera lens, addressing his audience directly and establishing a casual, familiar relation with it by introducing himself with his nickname. This familiarity, however, betrays the fact that the person we see is in fact a character, a role the filmmaker plays that derives from, and merges with, his own biographical background. Ethnicity plays an important part of this background and of the public persona that is created. This article aims to look into the ways that Shyaporn's video work stages and comments on ethnicity and performance.

Shyaporn Theerakulstit was born in 1973 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to diasporic Thai parents and grew up in the USA as a second-generation Thai-American. He now lives in New York, where he graduated from the NYU Tisch School of the Arts acting programme. He studied at the Stella Adler Conservatory and received the Tisch Creative Artist and Scholar Award. Since 2006, his main creative activity is making video clips, which he posts on Youtube. He calls them "comedy sketches"; they are short films that usually employ humour, often in an ironic or parodic way, to reflect on popular culture and medial representations; ethnicity and identity are recurring focal themes. Some of them mock popular US holidays, such as Valentine's Day, Christmas and Halloween,

by showing mishaps of Cupid and Santa Claus. Others are abridged renditions of movies or TV series, such as *Wolverine* (*in 30 Seconds*), *Lost* (*in 10 Seconds*), or *Star Trek* (*in 47 Seconds*). Another strand of clips focuses on performance and show the filmmaker singing musical numbers or dancing improvised Ballet pieces in the freshly fallen snow in his backyard. Pop culture figures strongly, especially icons from Asian pop cultures that are popular in the USA, such as Godzilla and *ninja* characters. With references to the Superbowl or US movie classics like *West Side Story* or *Tron*, American culture is also well-represented.

All in all, a key element of the clips is the extracting of the essence of cultural phenomena and their oddities by reading them against their grain. Shyaporn comments on their peculiarities by reducing them to an extremely dense short form, filtering the essence of their style, and using irony and parody to reproduce it. The shortness of the clips – their length ranges between under one minute and five minutes at the high end – is crucial for the way they work, as it underlines the brevity and conciseness of Shyaporn's observations and of his humour.

Up to today, Shy's body of work encompasses over sixty videos; in sum, they have been viewed over four million times.[1] About 10,000 viewers have subscribed to his Youtube channel, forming a significant followership and making him fairly well known and popular on the site. Additionally, Shy has his own homepage, runs a blog and posts with high regularity on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. His internet presence is strong and accounts for an active and lively self-presentation, making Shyaporn a public figure whose popularity and amount of self-exposure contrasts with his nickname. The short "Shy" is not necessarily a pun, as it is the custom for Thais to have a nickname. Nevertheless, the common Thai name pronounced as "Shyaporn" is usually transliterated from Thai letters as "Chaiaporn"; Shy's innovative spelling might well be a conscious language play that hints at his diasporic identity and his command of the English language.[2]

In the following text, I shall take a closer look at two of Shyaporn's early video clips that were widely received and played an important role in establishing his followership.

1 These numbers are given on Shy's channel according to Youtube statistics in February 2011.

2 This is, however, not absolutely clear, as there is no official transliteration system for the Thai language into the Latin alphabet.

500 Impressions (in 2 Minutes)

At the beginning of this clip, Shyaporn announces that he will attempt to do five hundred celebrity impersonations in two minutes, thus taking a popular Youtube genre to an extreme. While warming up for this feat, he says: "Now bear in mind: some of these are from foreign films. From Asia. Because I'm Asian." After some deep breathing, focusing and neck-rolling, the impersonator faces the camera and music soars up. While Shyaporn poses, looking the viewer in the eye, letters scroll over the screen image. They are names of male Asian celebrities: Sammo Hung, Tony Liu, Taky Kimura, and many, many others, at times in alphabetical order, and at a rather high speed. They are names of actors, musicians, sportsmen, and other public figures from Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, as well as diasporic Asians.

The scrolling speed and sheer quantity makes it nearly impossible to focus on all names and observe Shy's face at the same time. This gives the names an effect of becoming interchangeable. The clip operates with a minimalist visual punch line: Shy's face remains mostly still, his expression hardly changes, but the names whizz by. This implies that we assign any and all of the names to an Asian face, or simply to any random Asian face, on the mere account of its Asianness. The absurdity of Shy's physical stillness and posing are accented by his warm-up before his performance as well as by the exhaustion he acts after completing it.

The minimalism of the humour is echoed in the sparse setting and the fixed camera angle, as well as the minimal props: to pose as Bruce Lee, Shy does not change his appearance or expression, but merely adds a *nunchaku*, a traditional Japanese weapon, he holds up. Chow Yun Fat is represented with a revolver, Jet Li with a sword, and Tony Jaa with a miniature wooden elephant figure. These objects are typical for the specific styles and storylines of the martial arts films the respective actors appear in. During the impersonation of Ernie Reyes Jr., a Filipino actor known for his short body stature, only Shy's head is visible, the rest of him disappears below the image frame. The props function as symbols, as pars pro toto: they become icons of ethnicity, ironized through the reductionist way they are being employed. All it takes to impersonate any Asian celebrity is, it seems, an Asian face and, at the most, perhaps an additional prop, which only further accentuates the stereotyping of each figure's Asianness.

The music track is the iconic title theme by Vangelis from the motion picture *Chariots of Fire*. Heavily relying on 1980s synthesizers and piano, the track is heroic and full of pathos, similar to a hymn or an anthem. The heroicism

it suggests stands in an absurd contrast to the fact that Shyaporn is really not doing much at all besides striking a few poses that bear no relation to the multitude of names that he claims to impersonate.

The video refers back to the cliché that all Asians look alike to Western eyes. The individuality of Asians seems to disappear, to be disregarded, or viewed as less obvious in Western societies than that of Western subjects. It also uses generic male Asian stereotypes, commenting on cultural stereotyping by using clichés and reinforcing them. For example, as Shy puts on glasses, the names of well-known spectacle-wearing Asians scroll by, followed by the phrase "any Asian guy with glasses". This image touches on a stereotype common especially in the USA, that of Asians as nerds and geeks. The closing credits end with the phrase "no stereotypes were harmed during the making of this film".

Stereotyped Asianness and the Postcolonial Exotic

The film refers to a certain iconography of Asianness displayed in US popular culture and transported by the entertainment industry: *ninjas* (spies and killers from feudal-era Japan), martial arts characters and the like have become stereotypical media icons, as have certain actors, sportsmen, and musicians. This use of "Asian" creates a new, imaginary pan-Asian identity representation that emerges from pop culture. Taking its cues from commercialized Asianness, it forms an Americanized version of a pseudo-authentic and exoticized Asian heritage.

Graham Huggan creates the term of the so-called postcolonial exotic, which he describes as a dilemma:

> [...] a discursive conflict [...] that marks the intersection between contending regimes of value: one regime – postcolonialism – that posits itself as anti-colonial, and that works toward the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures; and another – postcoloniality – that is more closely tied to the global market, and that capitalises both on the widespread circulation of ideas about cultural otherness and on the worldwide trafficking of culturally 'othered' artefacts and goods. (HUGGAN, 2006: 355)

Thus, according to Huggan, the struggle of postcolonial cultural works against dominating structures and forms of imperialism extends to their symbolic power (HUGGAN, 2006: 355). Shyaporn's film fits into this discourse by displaying a form of postcolonial ethnic identity that, albeit indirectly and ironically, comments on the construction of this ethnicity through commodified cultural other-

ness, found especially in the fields of food, pop music, movies, clothing, and the travel industry. The stereotyping of Asianness through martial arts icons, for example, relies on the fact that these icons have become objects marketed for international consumption. While forming an alternative to mainstream Western cultural products, they are, themselves, absorbed into the same global market flow and value systems as that of the dominating mainstream. This makes them, at the same time, figures of resistance and desirable objects fully aligned to global market values.

The core of this video performance lies in the filmmaker's self-presentation and in his ironic flirting with the display of his own ethnicity. The artist's employment of his own person, even physically, is an element of classic performance art. Shyaporn here presents himself as "Asian" in the sense of being different and other from "white", perhaps even as opposed to "white". At the same time, however, he acts – also ironically – as a mediator between the supposedly white audience and the Asian personalities he imitates. By clearly posing and doubly positioning himself, he emphasizes the artificiality of the category "Asian" – the clip groups together a multitude of nations and regions from East and Southeast Asia, regardless of the significant cultural and ethnic differences among the named celebrities and their occupations.

500 Impressions does not so much portray Asianness itself but rather its perception in US-American eyes as generic and stereotypical. The clip's special and humorous twist is that it does not do this by breaking stereotypes; instead, it spoofs their construction by providing a version of it that is so overly simplified that its absurdity becomes obvious. In fact, Shyaporn's performance suggests an absurdity about the very term "Asianness".

By posing as "Asian", Shyaporn poses as a discursive figure, as a construct. He becomes a flesh-and-blood empty signifier that points out the vagueness of meaning of what he is supposed to signify. By using the term "Asian" in this context, as an ethnic term that does not make sense, Shy makes fun of, and critiques, its overly general and vague use. He remarks on this in an interview:

> Q: Do you believe you fit an Asian mold or a stereotype?
> A: Well, I played violin growing up, did well on my SATs, eat lots of rice, study *kung fu* and have a braid down to my waist. No, I don't think so.
>
> Q: What do you think of Asian Media becoming more mainstream?
> A: It is? Did I miss a sign-up sheet? Oh, do you mean because there are 3 Asian people on *Lost* now? Yeah, that's very cool.

> Q: Is the mainstream audience getting the wrong idea of Asian culture via media?
> A: What exactly IS "Asian culture" anyway? Asia is the world's most populous continent by far; there are over 60 countries in Asia and in terms of culture it's as wide and varied as you can possibly imagine. (ANONYMOUS, 2008)

It is remarkable that Shyaporn uses the term "Asian" for his self-description instead of the term "Thai", since Thainess is an important issue for the Thai discourse on national identity, also among diasporic Thai communities. The concept of Thainess has a long history and is of high significance; at the present moment, it is especially urgently discussed due to the collective identity crisis brought upon the nation by the political unrest Thailand has lately been seeing.[3]

Shyaporn's next short film after *500 Impressions* takes the vagueness of the term "Asian" to extremes in its title and continues to reflect on ethnicity, as we shall see in the following analysis.

Asians: The Asian Response to Asian Responders

This slightly longer, more elaborate short film bears many similarities to *500 Impressions*. It begins with Shyaporn in the role of a television show host, seated on a sofa in a living room, dressed in a suit and tie. Facing the camera, he greets his audience and announces that he is here to speak about "a problem: recently, there has been a trend among Asian-Americans to publicly denounce instances of Asian defamation in the media". The fact that Asians are speaking up against the negative portrayal of their ethnic group in the US media is, according to the TV speaker, a problem that must stop, because Asians objecting to stereotyping are, as Shyaporn now shouts, "screwing up the plan".

After a text insert reading "The Master Plan: Review Guide", we see the same speaker, now dressed in a white Chinese-style men's shirt and instructing us, standing in front of a black background on which appear text excerpts, maps, charts and other instructional aids. He launches into a presentation on the announced "plan": its goal is, in short, the subjugation of the USA by Asia. It has been on for a while, as Shyaporn makes clear by explaining its details. Thus, the surrender of Japan at the end of World War II was staged and, in fact, a scheme to force allied nations to restructure and modernize their industrial complex. The division of Korea into two parts was made to keep tabs on the two main oppo-

3 See RENARD, 2006 and BOEHLER, 2010.

nents of the cold war. The communist rule in China from 1949 onwards is another scheme, thought to cover up the nation's laying the foundation to become the foremost capitalist superpower of the 21st century. The Vietnam War was an Asian plot to induce fear of Asian nations in the USA.

The explanations continue throughout history: Bruce Lee's death in 1973 was faked to give rise to a slew of bad action movies leading to a US cultural decline. The 1980s introduced *sushi* to the Western world, the 1990s Jackie Chan and Jet Li, and the 2000s outsourcing. At the end of the plan, conceived for 2020, stands the total economic and cultural colonisation of America. It is, in the words of the instructor, "a simple, 75-year plan": by causing the world to underestimate and ignore Asia, it silently grows to power and then "strikes with the white-hot fury of a thousand *ninja* warriors, riding on *samurai*, wrapped up in Shaolin monks (Buddhist monks well-known for their practices of martial arts)". Thus, the fight for political correctness and complaints about racist undercurrents in the USA destroy decades of work in which Asians have established stereotypes of themselves as an inferior minority, in order to be underrated and therefore able to operate in the shadow of other, seemingly more urgent and threatening, political ongoings.

The instructor's final appeal to his fellow Asian Americans is to stick to the plan. He ends his speech with the words, "let's leave playing the race card, as we always have, to the Blacks and the Jews". Political correctness would lead to the establishment of equality, which in its turn might lead to the acknowledgement of Asian Americans by white US citizens; this, however, would change the perception of Asians as not to be taken seriously, which is, according to the plan, a camouflage.

As in *500 Impressions*, Shyaporn flirts with self-promotion and with the display of his own ethnicity. Being "Asian" is, again, a pose, performed in order to comment on a racist discourse by use of humour and of exaggeration. This time, Shy takes the pose of a television spokesman and an expert; this role, too, is that of a mediator between Asian American and white viewers. He breaks this role though, by mocking the suaveness and the slight arrogance of expertise and television talk show behaviour. The clip employs a dual camera perspective, which additionally ridicules the typical pseudo-confidential, over-friendly, and patronizing speech style of television presenters, seemingly addressing the viewers face to face via the camera lens – another style element also found in *500 Impressions*. Again, there is a double self-positioning: as Asian and as Asian American, the latter taking on the role of a pseudo-mediator. This in-betweenness is mirrored in the double camera perspectives on the speaker and in the

change of costume and background that takes place. It also doubles the film's audience, strangely positioning it as Shyaporn's fellow Asian Americans on the one hand, and on the other, as a Western audience in need of explanations.

And again, the film focuses on reflections on US discourse about Asians. It stresses awareness of ethnicity and the effort to create political correctness – even by reprimanding Asians to strive for it. Meanwhile, the film's real stance is, of course, to call attention to racist undercurrents in US media culture.

Another recurrent motif are the stereotypes that are parodied through exaggeration, especially those in the discourse on Asian inferiority that sketch Asian males as, as Shy puts it, "subservient, rice-eating, asexual math whizzes who can't drive". Another example for these exaggerations is the description of bellicose war-lust mentioned above with its absurd combination of *ninja* warriors, *samurai*, and Shaolin monks, that ridicules the stereotype of Asian passionate warfare. The film's speech ends with the phrase "praised be the Buddha", this time using a stereotype of Asian religiosity. Furthermore, the clip is full of visual references to clichéd Asianness. The living room setting is adorned by a paper scroll, a collection of swords and a bamboo plant. Curiously, a quilt, a typically US-American textile handicraft, is prominently placed on the wall, perhaps as an ironic counterbalance. Other visual cues are Shyaporn's long hair, worn in a braid, and his Chinese costume.

The vagueness of the term "Asian" is also reflected in the lumping together of Asian nations and cultures that neglects the differences between the various nations and regions. It shows the pan-Asianism of the so-called "Master Plan". The vague meaning of the terms "Asian" and "Asian American" comment on the US concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity has, over the last twenty or so years, strongly gained significance in the discourse on US citizenship. Political correctness now calls for the description of US citizens who are of non-white origin as "Asian American", "African American", and so forth. Being "ethnic" in this sense, however, is automatically opposed to being white, which remains to be the privileged norm. As it is often very unclear what this ethnicity encompasses exactly, its emphasized mentioning seems to stress otherness rather than account for a detailed description of, and reflection on, one's origin and homeland.

Postcolonial Paranoia: The "Yellow Peril" Discourse

In this clip, the imagined lumping together of Asian nations occurs as a stance against the block-like formation of America or the so-called West. All of these terms lump together highly diverse population groups and thus create the notion of, respectively, "Asia", "America" or "the West" as an imaginary homogeneity and unity.

While absurd when delivered in this humorous way, Shyaporn's plan of an alleged pan-Asian colonization of America is, meanwhile, more than just a joke. It touches on the Western fear of Asian nations taking over global power and getting ahead of the Western world in terms of culture, sexuality, military prowess or economy. This fear does, however, have a longer history. Anxiety over Asian expansionism has appeared in Hollywood movies since around 1915. This might be seen as a reaction to Japan's growing international presence and military prowess as well as the rapidly growing number of Japanese immigrants to the USA.[4] Fictional tales that warned of the invasion of Japanese on American shores depicted them as a threat and reinforced the already existing discourse on the "Yellow Peril" that pervaded American popular culture at the time. Although China was not regarded as a world power at the time, the "Yellow Peril" became linked to East Asia in general. A key character in this discourse was Fu Manchu, a Western-educated, Chinese master criminal who appeared in a series of British novels, radio shows, movies and, later, television. Being a cultural hybrid, he became a ubiquitous stereotype of the wily Asian:

> [...] Fu Manchu clearly represents British ambivalence about the consequences of imperial conquest and the opening of global routes for the exchange of people as well as goods. Fu Manchu symbolizes the fear of colonial hybridity as a product of Western education and European violence that gave him the motivation and the ability to threaten white supremacy. (MARCHETTI, 2001: 40)

This fear of hybridity and self-inflicted inferiority in the face of the colonies and other non-Western nations continues in the postcolonial age. It expresses itself in various forms of discourse, in conspiracy theories, veiled racism, and the like. At the present moment, it manifests itself in the discourse on the economic rise of China and India and the possible demise of Western economies and value systems in its wake; in any case, there exists tension between the US melting pot

4 See MARCHETTI, 2001: 39ff.

ideology and its "Yellow Peril" fear (MARCHETTI, 2001: 56). Shyaporn's fictional Master Plan, the pan-Asian takeover of US power, reflects this historically rooted anxiety and its discourse by not only confirming its existence, but revealing its strategy of hiding behind Asian stereotypes of inferiority and thus using racism as a shield.

Identity as Performance and the Politics of Fun: *West Side Story*

In general, Shy's work can be seen not only in the light of ethnicity, but also in the broader context of the postmodernist and postcolonial reflection on identity discourse. One of the key aspects of this discourse is the concept of identity as performance.

As Hamid Naficy points out, minorities often make use of performance strategies as a creative means of fashioning new identities. They do this to counter subalternity and marginalization, by using performance types such as mimicry, posing, camp, drag, doubling, and similar strategies (NAFICY, 2001: 270). Since they are situated between at least two different cultural spaces, diasporic and exilic subjects display a special closeness to the performing of identities. Creative strategies of identity performance often consist in the repetition of an original as "the same with a difference"; it is in this difference, in the gap between the ethnic template and the performed ethnic self, that there lies the space for criticism of the imitated (NAFICY, 2001: 270). It opens up possibilities of new interpretations, revisions, constructions or deconstructions based on the version of ethnicity that is perceived as original.

Shyaporn's diasporic identity provides him with a double reference frame, that of US culture, and a mixed US-Thai one. Drawing from this double set of cultural contexts, he fashions a performed mode of identity that entails a self-reflexivity of US-Asian identity and of the represented self. It also, and especially, comments on hyphenated identities and the underlying imperative of political correctness, the superficiality and sanctimoniousness of which this performance criticizes.

As a second-generation diasporic, Shyaporn's command of American-English language is fluent; his knowledge about local current affairs, pop, and media culture is in-depth. This lends him a superiority concerning strategies of representation and allows him to comment, ironize, and criticize it with ease and eloquence. It is a very different position than that of first-generation emigrants,

who often struggle with harsh living conditions, economic hardship and the cultural adjustments that relocation entails, and therefore face significant obstacles in their processes of acculturation, learning the language of the host land, and self-expression. A crucial focal theme of first-generation emigrants is the attachment to the homeland, the nostalgic yearning for it, and the fantasies of returning home. Shy, in contrast to this first generation, seems at home in the USA, being born and raised there. It is therefore, perhaps, indicative that his clips are not so much about the experience of being Asian-American, but rather about the discursive construction of Asianness, about Asianness as a performance. There is hardly any comment on Shy's own personal ethnicity or identity issues. Instead, there is lots of posing, mocking, parody, and pastiche that all point to the constructedness of identity.

This constructed nature of identity is played upon in a more recent video clip by Shyaporn called *West Side Story: One Man Quintet* (*Tonight Ensemble*). It is fashioned after a sequence in the musical film *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins, USA 1961), an adaptation of the Broadway musical of the same name, which is again an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". The plot is set in New York in the late 1950s and focuses on a love story between Tony and Maria, two young people who are caught between feuding gangs: one of white Americans and one of Puerto Rican immigrants. The sequence Shy's clip is based on is a musical montage that interweaves the various strings of the plot, leading up to the film's climax: the tension between the two groups escalates, while the lovers await their meeting. The montage, thus, involves various characters singing, cutting forth and back between them.

In Shyaporn's version, it is he who plays all the roles: the white and the Puerto Rican gang members, the romantic hero Tony, his love interest Maria, as well as Anita, Maria's friend, and a number of policemen. It is a multiplying of identities that Shy seems to undergo effortlessly, adapting costume, hairstyle, makeup, singing tone, and even accent. Again, ironic over-stereotyping gives the sequence, which is highly dramatic in its original version, a humorous twist. The blonde and black wigs Shy dons to act the white and Hispanic gangsters are visibly artificial and ill-fitting, the Latino accent is mocked by use of an overly rolled "r". Additionally, Shyaporn's impersonation of female characters introduces a campy element into the clip that defamiliarizes the earnestness of the original.

Most of all, the fact that the same person acts all roles lends the scene a curious ethnic twist: we watch a Thai playing whites and Puerto Ricans who are, in the well-known original movie scene, themselves obviously played by whites.

West Side Story: One Man Quintet (*Tonight Ensemble*) suggests a playful positing of identity as multiple, fluid, and transgressing the borders of gender and ethnicity. The fun in taking on and experimenting with multiple roles is at the same time a statement on identity politics.

Ethnicity and Authenticity

Shyaporn's video work can, under the aspects described above, be understood as part of a filmmaking style that forms a further development of accented filmmaking, a mode and style of exilic, diasporic and migrant cinema described by Hamid Naficy.[5] It is perhaps indicative of a next generation of makers of accented films in increasingly multicultural societies, and of their negotiation of their diasporic identities in an age of globalisation and cultural transnationalisation.

There are obvious differences between Shyaporn's clips and the accented films in the original sense – they are shorter, non-narrative, directly performative, and situated in a different medium. Moreover, the situation of second- or third-generation diaspora filmmakers differs from that of first-generation immigrants: while their identities are hyphenated, their sense of being at home in the new homeland is usually stronger than that of their parents. At times, there is a sense of disengagement or even alienation from the parents' country of origin. The distinction between the home and the host land softens, in part as a result of the transnationalisation of culture and the growing accessibility of non-Western cultures, and there is a development towards a more free-floating self-understanding, characterized by a simultaneous closeness and distance toward the new homeland. The social and economic situation of the second- or third-generation diaspora is often more comfortable, as a result of their parents' work, their social integration and advancement that provides them with an education, fluency in the language of the host land, and often, a middle-class status and consumer power.

As a result of the globalised commodification of ethnicity and a certain disengagement from the homeland, the latter-generation diaspora might employ stereotypical images of ethnicity for building their cultural identity, such as the Asian martial arts icons mentioned above. In other cases, cultural stereotypes

5 See NAFICY, 2001.

serve as templates to playfully negotiate ethnicity and identity. In this case, there is a strong awareness of ethnicity as constructed, as an identity mode and performance, also due to the crucial role of the media and media representations of ethnicity. It is probable that this awareness has been intensified by the rise of the new media; without a doubt, these mediascapes play a key role in the construction *and* the blurring of national identities and in the softening and transgressing of geographical and cultural boundaries.[6]

Metaphorically speaking, the "accent" of second- or third-generation accented filmmakers is sometimes a chosen attribute; while their social and educational background allows them an accent-free existence, similar to that of a native speaker, their accent is re-learnt and performed: an ethnic identity consciously fashioned, in imitation or mimicry of national stereotypes, that can, by all means, have an impact on one's personality, biography, and perception by oneself and others. Thus, mimicry serves as a tool for the creative negotiation, construction, and expression of identity:

> Mimicry [...] involves the kind of overimitation or underimitation of the other that, in its surplus or deficit and in its irony, produces partiality of identity, where there is a slippage between the original and its copy. It is in this slipzone of unfitting that the critical tensions of exilic mimicry and irony can be deciphered. (NAFICY, 2001: 285ff.)

While cultural identity is not a fixed essence and can, therefore, be multiple, transgressive, playful, and evolving, it is important to note that it is, at the same time, not solely a fabrication, but also factual.[7] Being discursively formed, cultural identities become embedded in their social contexts:

> Performance of identity is not a free state because there is still a set of primary categories of belonging (sediments) to which one attaches in order not to become totally weightless, atomized, or alienated. In addition, one cannot join or leave an identity or a group formation without social sanction. [...] Even in the most radical of exilically accented films, there are moments of sedimentation, moments of so-called authenticity, when the copy corresponds more or less fully to the original, bringing to a temporary end the chain of repetition, signification, and mediation. [...] What is more, at certain points in an exile's life – for political or personal reasons – it becomes important to reach for a firmer ground, to establish the facticity, not the fluidity, of identity. (NAFICY, 2001: 286)

6 See APPADURAI, 1996 on the linkage between ethno- and mediascapes and the role of visual media for diasporic identity constructions.

7 NAFICY, 2001: 286.

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