From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: Locations of Leisure in Genre Histories of the Spy Caper

What would it mean to approach a genre history of spy-action films “on location,” in terms of locations of not only production, but also distribution and imagination? From the colonial contexts of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* to the late Ottoman settings of pulp novels from the interwar period, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean locations have been embedded in espionage fictions—and eventually films—since the very emergence of this quintessentially modern genre. Drawing from a book-length project titled *Agents on Location*, Dr. Sunya focus on the spy-action caper’s meta-visual concerns with transgressive border crossings on the one hand, and spaces of modern leisure on the other, through themes of disguise, subterfuge, staging, and spectacle. By approaching this genre history through a genealogy of Hindi-language Bombay films’ trysts with coastal locations, the speaker highlights espionage films themselves as historically fraught border-crossing objects whose celebrations of spectacle, sensuality, and leisure have seduced audiences as much as they have confounded regulators. While some have attributed the 1960s emergence of the Hindi spy film to the popularity of James Bond in the wake of *Dr. No*, for example, this attribution skips over the enormous impact and popularity of Italian and Eurospy films throughout South Asia. In Indian cities, Italian and Eurospy films were in fact frequently advertised (and exhibited) as “Adults Only” films, which only deepened the genre’s associations with leisure, indulgence, transgression, and erotic spectacle. By bringing Mediterranean and Indian Ocean locations to the fore of this historical inquiry, Dr. Sunya looks with fresh eyes at a genre whose imaginations and logics of scale have been resolutely global, and whose fuller accounting requires a commensurate, globally-oriented methodological approach.

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