

## ***The Serpent* (2021)**

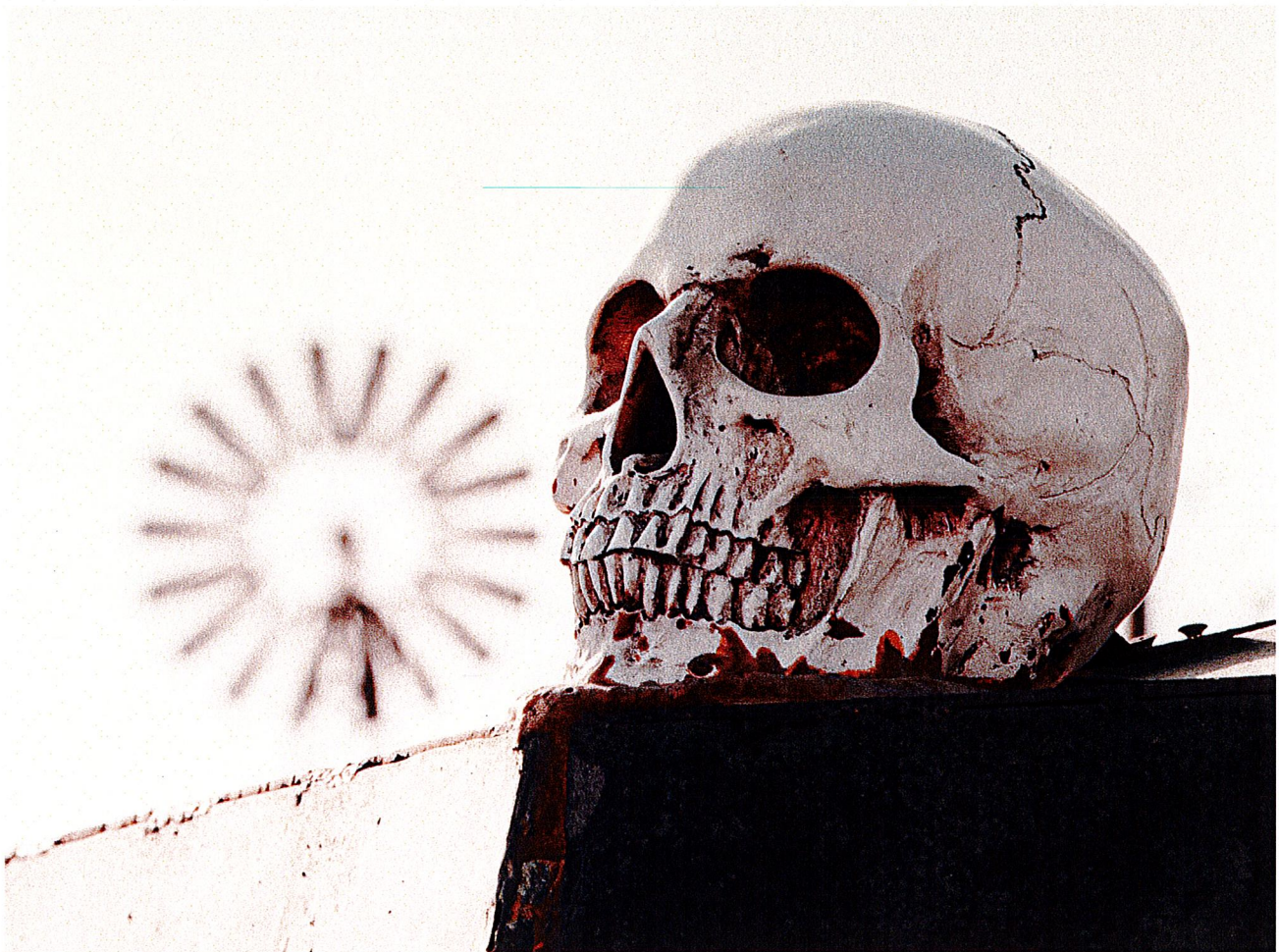
### **Monstrous Tourism, a Serial Killer, and the Hippie Trail**

**Gemma Blackwood**

University of Tasmania

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2835>



[Vol. 24 No. 5 \(2021\): monster](#)

Articles

---

The Netflix/BBC eight-part limited true crime series *The Serpent* (2021) provides a commentary on the impact of the tourist industry in South-East Asia in the 1970s. The series portrays the story of French serial killer Charles Sobhraj (played by Tahar Rahim)—a psychopathic international con artist of Vietnamese-Indian descent—who regularly targeted Western travellers, especially the long-term wanderers of the legendary “Hippie Trail” (or the “Overland”), running between eastern Europe and Asia. The series, which was filmed on location in Thailand—in Bangkok and the Thai town of Hua Hin—is set in a range of travel destinations along the route of the Hippie Trail, as the narrative follows the many crimes of Sobhraj. Cities such as Kathmandu, Goa, Varanasi, Hong Kong, and Kabul are featured on the show. The series is loosely based upon Australian writers Richard Neville and Julie Clarke’s true crime biography *The Life and Crimes of*



*Charles Sobhraj* (1979). Another true crime text by Thomas Thompson called *Serpentine: Charles Sobhraj's Reign of Terror from Europe to South Asia* (also published in 1979) is a second reference. The show portrays the disappearance and murders of many young victims at the hands of Sobhraj. Certainly, Sobhraj is represented as a monstrous figure, but what about the business of tourism itself? Arguably, in its reflective examination of twentieth-century travel, the series also poses the hedonism of tourism as monstrous. Here, attention is drawn to Western privilege and a neo-orientalist gaze that presented Asia as an exotic playground for its visitors.

The television series focuses on Sobhraj, his French-Canadian girlfriend Marie-Andrée Leclerc (played by Jenna Coleman), and the glamorous life they lead in Bangkok. The fashionable couple's operation presents Sobhraj as a legitimate gem dealer: outwardly, they seem to embody the epitome of fun and glamour, as well as the cross-cultural sophistication of the international jet set. In reality, they drug and then steal from tourists who believe their story. Sobhraj uses stolen passports and cash to travel internationally and acquire more gems. Then, with an accomplice called Ajay Chowdhury (played by Amesh Adireweera), Sobhraj murders his victims if he thinks they could expose his fraud. Often depicted as humourless and seething with anger, the Sobhraj of the series often wears dark aviator sunglasses, a detail that enhances the sense of his impenetrability. One of the first crimes featured in *The Serpent* is the double-murder of an innocent Dutch couple. The murders lead to an investigation by Dutch diplomat Herman Knippenberg (played by Billy Howle), wanting to provide closure for the families of the victims. Knippenberg enlists neighbours to go undercover at Sobhraj's home to collect evidence. This exposes Sobhraj's crimes, so he flees the country with Marie-Andrée and Ajay. While they were apprehended, Sobhraj would be later given pardon from a prison in India: he would only received a life sentence for murder when he is arrested in Nepal in 2003. His ability to evade punishment—and inability to admit to and atone for his crimes—become features of his monstrosity in the television series.

Clearly, Sobhraj is represented as the "serpent" of this drama, a metaphor regularly reinforced both textually and visually across the length of the series. As an example, the opening credit sequence for the series coalesces shots of vintage film in Asia—including hitchhiking backpackers, VW Kombi vans, swimming pools, religious tourist sites, corrupt Asian police forces—against an animated map of central and South-East Asia and the Hippie Trail. The map is encased by the giant, slithering tail of some monstrous, reptilian creature. Situating the geographic context of the narrative, the serpentine monster appears to be rising out of continental Asia itself, figuratively stalking and then entrapping the tourists and travellers who move along its route.

So, what of the other readings about the monstrosity of the tourism industry that appears on the show? The Hippie Trail was arguably a site—a serpentine cross-continental thoroughfare—of Western excess. The Hippie Trail emerged as the result of the ease of travel across continental Europe and Asia. It was an extension of a countercultural movement that first emerged in the United States in the mid 1960s. Agnieszka Sobocinska has suggested that the travellers of the Hippie Trail were motivated by "widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived conservatism of Western society and its conventions", and that it was characterised by "youth, rebellion, self-expression and the performance of personal freedom" (par. 8). The Trail appealed to a particular subcultural group who wanted to differentiate themselves from other travellers. Culturally, the Hippie Trail has become a historical site of enduring fascination, written about in popular histories and Western travel narratives, such as *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu* (Tomory 1998), *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India* (MacLean



2007), *The Hippie Trail: A History* (Gemie and Ireland 2017), and *The Hippie Trail: After Europe, Turn Left* (Kreamer 2019).

Despite these positive memoirs, the route also has a reputation for being destructive and even neo-imperialist: it irrevocably altered the politics of these Asian regions, especially as crowds of Western visitors would party at its cities along the way. In *The Serpent*, while the crimes take place on its route, on face value the Hippie Trail still appears to be romanticised and nostalgically re-imagined, especially as it represents a stark difference from our contemporary world with its heavily-policed international borders. Indeed, the travellers seem even freer from the perspective of 2021, given the show's production phase and release in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when international travel was halted for many. As Kylie Northover has written in a review for the series in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the production design of the programme and the on-location shoot in Thailand is affectionately evocative and nostalgic. Northover suggests that it "successfully evokes a very specific era of travel—the Vietnam War has just ended, the Summer of Love is over and contact with family back home was usually only through the post restante" (13).

On the show, there is certainly critique of the tourist industry. For example, one scene demonstrates the "dark side" of the Hippie Trail dream. Firstly, we see a psychedelic-coloured bus of travellers driving through Nepal. The outside of the bus is covered with its planned destinations: "Istanbul. Teheran. Kabul. Delhi". The Western travellers are young and dressed in peasant clothing and smoking marijuana. Looking over at the Himalayas, one hippie calls the mountains a "Shangri-La", the fictional utopia of an Eastern mountain paradise. Then, the screen contracts to show old footage of Kathmandu—using the small-screen dimensions of a Super-8 film—which highlights a "hashish centre" with young children working at the front. The child labour is ignored. As the foreign hippie travellers—American and English—move through Kathmandu, they seem self-absorbed and anti-social. Rather than meeting and learning from locals, they just gather at parties with other hippies. By night-time, the series depicts drugged up travellers on heroin or other opiates, disconnected from place and culture as they stare around aimlessly.

The negative representation of hippies has been observed in some of the critical reviews about *The Serpent*. For example, writing about the series for *The Guardian*, Dorian Lynskey cites Joan Didion's famous "serpentine" interpretation of the hippie culture in the United States, applying this to the search for meaning on the Hippie Trail:

the subculture of expats and travellers in south-east Asia feels rather like Joan Didion's 60s California, crisscrossed by lost young people trying to find themselves anew in religion, drugs, or simply unfamiliar places. In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Didion writes of those who "drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins". (Lynskey)

We could apply cultural theories about tourism to a critique of the industry in the series too. Many cultural researchers have critiqued tourists and the tourism industry, as well as the powers that tourists can wield over destination cultures. In *Time and Commodity Culture*, John Frow has suggested that the logic of tourism is "that of a relentless extension of commodity relations, and the consequent inequalities of power, between centre and periphery, First and Third World, developed and undeveloped regions, metropolis and countryside", as well as one that has developed from the colonial era (151). Similarly, Derek Gregory's sensitive analyses of cultural



geographies of postcolonial space showed that Nineteenth-century Orientalism is a continuing process within globalised mass tourism (114).

The problem of Orientalism as a Western travel ideology is made prominent in *The Serpent* through Sobhraj's denouncement of Western tourists, even though there is much irony at play here, as the series itself arguably is presenting its own retro version of Orientalism to Western audiences. Even the choice of Netflix to produce this true crime story—with its two murderers of Asian descent—is arguably a way of reinforcing negative representations about Asian identity. Then, Western characters take on the role of hero and/or central protagonist, especially the character of Knippenberg. One could ask: where is the Netflix show that depicts a positive story about a central character of Vietnamese-Indian descent? Edward Said famously defined Orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). It became a way for Western cultures to interpret and understand the East, and for reducing and homogenising it into a more simplistic package. Orientalism explored discourses that grew to encompass India and the Far East in tandem with the expansion of Western imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It examined a dualistic ideology: a way of looking that divided the globe into two limited types without any room for nuance and diversity. Inclusive and exclusive, Orientalism assumed and promoted an "us and them" binary, privileging a Western gaze as the normative cultural position, while the East was relegated to the ambiguous role of "other". Orientalism is a field in which stereotypes of the East and West have power: as Said suggests, "the West is the actor, the Orient is a passive reactor... . The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behaviour" (109).

Interestingly, despite the primacy in which Sobhraj is posited as the show's central monster, he is also the character in the series most critical of the neo-colonial oppression caused by this counter-cultural tourism, which indicates ambiguity and complexity in the representation of monstrosity. Sobhraj appears to have read Said. As he looks scornfully at a stoner hippie woman who has befriended Ajay, he seems to perceive the hippies as drop-outs and drifters, but he also connects them more thoroughly as perpetrators of neo-imperialist processes. Indicating his contempt for the sightseers of the Hippie Trail as they seek enlightenment on their travels, he interrogates his companion Ajay:

why do you think these white children deny the comfort and wealth of the life they were given to come to a place like this? Worship the same gods. Wear the same rags. Live in the same filth. Each experience is only then taken home to wear like a piece of fake tribal jewellery. They travel only to acquire. It's another form of imperialism. And she has just colonised you!

Sobhraj's speech is political but it is also menacing, and he quickly sets upon Ajay and physically punishes him for his tryst with the hippie woman. Yet, ultimately, the main Western tourists of the Hippie Trail are presented positively in *The Serpent*, especially as many of them are depicted as naïve innocents within the story—hopeful, idealistic and excited to travel—and simply in the wrong place, at the wrong time. In this way, the series still draws upon the conventions of the true crime genre, which is to differentiate clearly between good/evil and right/wrong, and to create an emotional connection to the victims as symbols of virtue. As the crimes and deaths accumulate within the series, Sobhraj's opinions are deceptive, designed to manipulate those around him (such as Ajay) rather than being drawn from genuine feelings of political angst about the neo-imperialist project of Western tourism. The uncertainty around Sobhraj's motivation for



his crimes remains one of the fascinating aspects of the series. It problematises the way that the monstrosity of this character is constructed within the narrative of the show.

The character of Sobhraj frequently engages with these essentialising issues about Orientalism, but he appears to do so with the aim to remove the privilege that comes from a Western gaze. In the series, Sobhraj's motivations for targeting Western travellers are often insinuated as being due to personal reasons, such as revenge for his treatment as a child in Europe, where he says he was disparaged for being of Asian heritage. For example, as he speaks to one of his drugged French-speaking victims, Sobhraj suggests that when he moved from Vietnam to France as a child, he was subject to violence and poor treatment from others: "a half-caste boy from Saigon. You can imagine how I was bullied". In this instance, the suffering French man placed in Sobhraj's power has been promoted as fitting into one of these "us and them" binaries, but in this set-up, there is also a reversal of power relations and Sobhraj has set himself as both the "actor" and the "spectator". Here, he has reversed the "Orientalist" gaze onto a passive Western man, homogenising a "Western body", and hence radically destabilising the construct of Orientalism as an ideological force. This is also deeply troubling: it goes on to sustain a problematic and essentialising binary that, no matter which way it faces, aims to denigrate and stereotype a cultural group. In this way, the character of Sobhraj demonstrates that while he is angry at the way that Orientalist ideologies have victimised him in the past, he will continue to perpetrate its basic ideological assumptions as a way of administering justice and seeking personal retribution.

Ultimately, perhaps one of the more powerful readings of *The Serpent* is that it is difficult to move away from the ideological constructs of travel. We could also suggest that same thing for the tourists. In her real-life analysis of the Hippie Trail, Agnieszka Sobocinska has suggested that while it was presented and understood as something profoundly different from older travel tours and expeditions, it could not help but be bound up in the same ideological colonial and imperial impulses that constituted earlier forms of travel:

Orientalist images and imperial behaviours were augmented to suit a new generation that liked to think of itself as radically breaking from the past. Ironically, this facilitated the view that 'alternative' travel was a statement in anti-colonial politics, even as it perpetuated some of the inequalities inherent to imperialism.

This plays out in *The Serpent*. We see that this supposedly radically different new group – with a relaxed and open-minded identity—is bound within the same old ideological constructs. Part of the problem of the Hippie Trail traveller was a failure to recognise the fundamentally imperialist origins of their understanding of travel. This is the same kind of concern mapped out by Turner and Ash in their analysis of neo-imperial forms of travel called *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery* (1976), written and published in the same era as the events of *The Serpent*. Presciently gauging the effect that mass tourism would have on developing nations, Turner and Ash used the metaphor of "hordes" of tourists taking over various poorer destinations to intend a complete reversal of the stereotype of a horde of barbaric and non-Western hosts. By inferring that tourists are the "hordes" reverses Orientalist conceptions of de-personalised non-Western cultures, and shows the problem that over-tourism and unsustainable visitation can pose to host locations, especially with the acceleration of mass travel in the late Twentieth century. Certainly, the concept of a touristic "horde" is one of the monstrous ideas in travel, and can signify the worst aspects contained within mass tourism.



To conclude, it is useful to return to the consideration of what is presented as monstrous in *The Serpent*. Here, there is the obvious monster in the sinister, impassive figure of serial killer Charles Sobhraj. Julie Clarke, in a new epilogue for *The Life and Crimes of Charles Sobhraj* (2020), posits that Sobhraj's actions are monstrous and unchangeable, demonstrating the need to understand impermeable cases of human evil as a part of human society:

one of the lessons of this cautionary tale should be an awareness that such 'inhuman humans' do live amongst us. Many don't end up in jail, but rather reach the highest level in the corporate and political spheres. (Neville and Clarke, 2020)

Then, there is the exploitative spectre of mass tourism from the Hippie Trail that has had the ability to "invade" and ruin the authenticity and/or sustainability of a particular place or location as it is overrun by the "golden hordes". Finally, we might consider the Orientalist, imperialist and globalised ideologies of mass tourism as one of the insidious and serpentine forces that entrap the central characters in this television series. This leads to a failure to understand what is really going on as the tourists are deluded by visions of an exotic paradise.

## References

- Frow, John. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Culture Theory and Postmodernity*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- Gemie, Sharif, and Brian Ireland. *The Hippie Trail: A History*. Manchester UP, 2017.
- Gregory, Derek. "Scripting Egypt: Orientalism and the Cultures of Travel." In *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*. Eds. Duncan James and Derek Gregor. Routledge, 1999. 114-150 .
- Kreamer, Robert. *The Hippie Trail: After Europe, Turn Left*. Fonthill Media, 2019.
- Lynskey, Dorian. "The Serpent: A Slow-Burn TV Success That's More than a Killer Thriller." *The Guardian*, 30 Jan. 2021. 1 Oct. 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/jan/29/the-serpent-more-than-a-killer-thriller-bbc-iplayer>>.
- MacLean, Rory. *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India*. Penguin, 2006.
- Neville, Richard, and Julie Clarke. *The Life and Crimes of Charles Sobhraj*. Jonathan Cape, 1979.
- . *On the Trail of the Serpent: The Life and Crimes of Charles Sobhraj*. Revised ed. Vintage, 2020.
- Northover, Kylie. "The Ice-Cold Conman of the 'Hippie Trail'." *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Mar. 2021: 13.
- Price, Roberta. "Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India." *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture* 2.2 (2009): 273-276.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin, 1995.



Sobocinska, Agnieszka. "Following the 'Hippie Sahibs': Colonial Cultures of Travel and the Hippie Trail." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 15.2 (2014). DOI: 10.1353/cch.2014.0024.

Thompson, Thomas. *Serpentine: Charles Sobhraj's Reign of Terror from Europe to South Asia*. Doubleday, 1979.

Tomory, David, ed. *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*. Lonely Planet, 1998.

Turner, Louis, and John Ash. *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*. St Martin's Press, 1976.

## License

Copyright (c) 2021 Gemma Blackwood



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

1. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licenced under a [Creative Commons Attribution - Noncommercial - No Derivatives 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
2. Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.
3. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (see [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

an  publication

Supported by  **creative industries**

Copyright © M/C, 1998-2021 ISSN 1441-2616

About M/C | Contact M/C | Accessibility