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The many stories of cinema and cinephilia in Pakistan

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In the area of South Asian film studies, Pakistani cinema has rarely been the subject of focused and dedicated scholarship. As such, Mushtaq Gazdar's *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997* has remained the only historical study of Pakistani cinema, its disputed origins, and its evolution from the creation of Pakistan in 1947 until the late 20th century. In what has since become a seminal text, Gazdar imagines and constructs the category of 'Pakistani cinema' along linguistic and nationalistic axes, a history which has since been debated and contested by a series of publications on Pakistani film history in the past decade. With the publication of Ali Nobil Ahmad and Ali Khan's *Cinema and Society* and Ahmad's dossier on Pakistani cinema for *Screen* in 2016, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in Pakistani film cultures, and in the fundamental question of the limits of a Pakistani national cinema. Recent scholarship on Pakistani cinema, therefore, has been preoccupied with questions of film historiography and with thinking beyond the national cinema model which informed Gazdar's work.

It is within these debates of film historiography and national film cultures that Ali Nobil Ahmad and Ali Khan's recent volume *Film and Cinephilia: Beyond Life and Death* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020) situates itself. Compared to their previous volume,^[1] *Film and Cinephilia* is a more focused endeavor in making visible alternative histories of Pakistani cinema as well as regional film cultures that were excluded from Gazdar's history. In a similar vein, another recent publication on Pakistani cinema which offers alternative historiographical models is Vazira Zamindar and Asad Ali's edited volume *Love, War, & Other Longings: Essays on Cinema in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020). This review focuses on these two volumes and explores the ways in which they each tell particular stories

of cinema in Pakistan, stories that seem to be in conversation with each other about Pakistan's cinematic pasts and its evolving present.

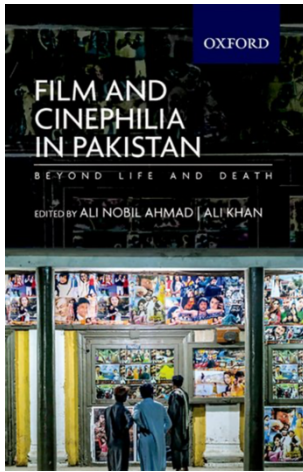
Film and cinophilia in Pakistan: Beyond death and revival

As noted above, recent publications on Pakistani film cultures have been in conversation with Mushtaq Gazdar's history of Pakistani cinema and its claims about the decline of the film industry during the 1970s. Gazdar associated this decline to the strict censorship policies introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup, as well as to technological and industrial transformations brought about by the rise of VHS and television. As a result, there was a marked decline in the number of Urdu-language films produced after Zia's coup which, according to Gazdar, heralded the death of the Pakistani film industry. It is this account of death and decline which Ahmad and Khan attempt to re-narrativise in their volume by focusing instead on regional Punjabi and Pashto film cultures which not only survived the Zia years but also sustained cinemagoing culture in Pakistan. In doing so, their intervention lies primarily in national cinema debates and the so-called 'national question' (p. 3) which foregrounds studies of postcolonial cinemas.

For where Gazdar saw Pakistani cinema declining after the decrease in the number of Urdu-language films in the 1970s, there was a specific Pakistani cinema he was imagining that was Urdu and decidedly upper-middle class. Ahmad and Khan's intervention then lies in thinking beyond Gazdar's idea of the national, as they argue: 'In South Asia's multilinguistic societies, where borders of every kind are contentious and porous, it is problematic to speak of language, territory, and nationality as neatly interchangeable and overlapping entities.' (pp. 3-4).

Film and Cinophilia thus takes the frameworks of the regional and the vernacular to think about what can possibly constitute a Pakistani cinema. Furthermore, rather than thinking of regional film cultures as disparate and discrete, Ahmad and Khan's invitation to think transregionally and transcolonially also frames several of the contributions in the volume. In this respect, Iftikhar Dadi thinks about the linguistic fluidity and the inherent connections between Pakistani Urdu and Indian Hindi cinema, and thus offers a transnational mode of approaching the question of film history and canon formation. If Gazdar had constructed the idea of a discrete Pakistani cinema based on Urdu-language films, Dadi explores the 'intimate connections between Pakistani "Urdu" cinema and Indian "Hindi" cinema' (p. 25) to problematise such nationalist constructions. In a similar vein, Lotte Hoek's two essays in the volume take a similar transcolonial and inter-regional approach in exploring the entangled histories of cinema in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In tracing 'the long-term impact of the interactions between East and West Pakistan on the histories of cinema in Pakistan and

Bangladesh' (p. 37). Hoek is similarly preoccupied with questions of film historiography and in thinking beyond discrete national boundaries.



In conversation with Dadi and Hoek's emphasis on historical connections, Julien Levesque and Camille Bui's essay focuses on regional Sindhi cinema and its tenuous relationship to constructions of Pakistani nationhood in the decade immediately preceding Partition. As Pakistani cinema as a nationalist category was emerging in opposition to a mutually discrete Indian cinema, regional cinemas like Sindhi cinema built their identity in opposition to Pakistani nationalism and yet were subsumed in the expansion of Pakistani cinema (pp. 90-91). The early essays in *Film and Cinephilia* therefore offer alternative historical and theoretical frameworks for not simply approaching Pakistani film history but

also to think about the category of Pakistani cinema itself.

As mentioned earlier, *Film and Cinephilia* takes the question of what has historically constituted Pakistani cinema as one of its central concerns. For this purpose, Ahmad and Khan have further included early writings on Pakistani cinema which think about the emergence of a distinct national cinema in Pakistan and what that might mean and include after Partition. In this respect, the translations of the writings of Urdu intellectuals like Saadat Hassan Manto, Muhammad Askari, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz offer insight into how the idea of cinema in Pakistan has evolved over time. Where for Manto, a Pakistani cinema had yet to emerge that had 'a stamp of its own' (p. 98), the question of what might be considered authentically 'Pakistani' has driven conversations on Pakistani film studies in the past two decades. Askari and Faiz might be less invested in the questions of national cinema, but their writings on technological advancements like the use of colour in Pakistani cinema and the culture of film criticism in Pakistan offer different entry points in thinking about the constitution of a Pakistani film culture. By bringing these early writings on Pakistani cinema in conversation with filmmaker Sabiha Sumar's interview on contemporary debates regarding the absence of a world-class cinema in Pakistan, *Film and Cinephilia* offers a unique archive where past debates and contemporary discussions on Pakistani film cultures are brought in dialogue.

Considering the absence of official film archives in Pakistan, *Film and Cinephilia* further offers unique approaches to thinking about what archives can look like in the context of Pakistani film culture. In this respect, Ali Khan's essay on Pakistani film poster art is at once an exercise in thinking about archival ephemera and furthermore also comments on the

importance of an industry that has slowly become obsolete. In the same vein, Timothy P. A. Cooper's essay on film circulation and unlikely archives of pirated media continues the conversation on thinking about archival practice in the context of Pakistan. Returning to Ali Khan's essay on the labor and craft involved in the Pakistani film poster art industry, he makes prominent the issues of an industry gradually becoming obsolete. This is further echoed by Gwendolyn S. Kirk's essay which traces the impact of digital technologies on Punjabi filmmaking and the ways in which traditional technologies are slowly becoming replaced. In this respect, both essays look at issues of craft, labor, and class politics as central to discussions of marginal film cultures and practices.

As *Film and Cinephilia* centers discussions of marginal film cultures and especially their relation to class politics, it would be remiss to not mention films like Yunus Malik's *Maula Jatt* (1979) which found success and notoriety during General Zia's military regime, and which have enjoyed immense cultural longevity. *Maula Jatt* is mentioned throughout the volume, but it is in Iqbal Sevea's essay that it gets focused attention as Sevea explores constructions of masculinity and competing discourses of class and caste in his reading of the film. While Sevea looks at a film from the past to think about marginal film cultures, Gwendolyn S. Kirk, in her second essay for the volume, analyses the Pakistani slasher film *Zibahkhana* (Omar Ali Khan, 2007) in terms of its class politics and representations of Muslim identity. Both essays serve as theoretical models for analysing specific Pakistani film genres and the aesthetic conventions that have emerged in marginal Pakistani film cultures.

Overall, *Film and Cinephilia* is a timely intervention in the field of Pakistani film studies. The limitations of this volume are limitations that come from being one of the few scholarly publications dedicated to the theorisation of a subject still vastly under-researched. Therefore, it might be generative to approach this volume from a methodological lens and analyse whether the frameworks offered in these essays are adequate to lend themselves to the study of Pakistani film cultures, histories, and traditions excluded in the volume. However, the importance of this volume cannot be overstated for initiating conversations about a still nascent and emerging field, as Kamran Asdar Ali's afterword further emphasises. This is also made evident in Vazira Zamindar and Asad Ali's *Love, War, and Other Longings*, a volume which continues these conversations and theorisations of film historiography, archival practice, and bygone film cultures in Pakistan.

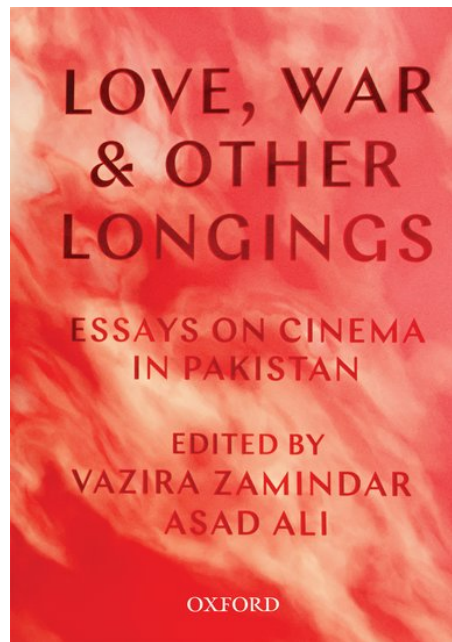
Love, War, & Other Longings: Essays on cinema in Pakistan

If *Film and Cinephilia* thinks about the so-called 'death' of Pakistani cinema and theorises beyond such historiographies, then *Love, War, & Other Longings* thinks about potential revivals. The revival of cinema in Pakistan in recent years begs the question of what exactly it was that had died. To think of the death or so-called revival of cinema in Pakistan then

becomes a question of what has historically constituted Pakistani cinema? What does it mean to long for something that might have never died or might have never existed in the first place?

Vazira Zamindar and Asad Ali's introduction to their edited volume begins with the question of desire, of collective loss, and of trauma. Their story of cinema in Pakistan takes the late 1990s and the early 2000s as a starting point and thinks about industrial transformations which brought about the so-called revival of film culture in the beginning of the present century. To think about Pakistani cinema's assumed decline at the turn of the 20th century and its revival in the age of multiplexes and digital technologies is to fundamentally think about what the category of Pakistani cinema even means, what it contains, and what such nationalist constructions exclude. Zamindar and Ali explore this important ontological question early in their introduction and yet theirs is a project less interested in defining the scope of a Pakistani cinema and more preoccupied with the representational and the affective dimensions of New Cinema in Pakistan. They write: 'Film's inherent capaciousness, its proliferating significations, ensures it necessarily gestures to forms of being, belonging, and politics that exceed the frame of the nation.' (p. 11) This volume therefore is an offering to think beyond the nationalist limits and the historiographical impasses which contain film histories.

The volume consists of a compilation of nine essays, all of which take a unique approach not simply in methodological terms but also in subject matter. Fahad Naveed's chapter, titled 'After the Interval', is an ethnographic study of cinema spaces in Lahore and Karachi. Naveed's respondents, which vary from cinema operators to spectators to small business owners, ruminate on Pakistan's transition from single-screen celluloid theatres to multiplexes in the last two decades. Many of his respondents speak of this transition in a language of nostalgia and loss (p. 29), while others mention the possibilities in newer technologies to make cinemagoing accessible and affordable for audiences and yet lucrative business for investors (pp. 38, 40). As the aim of this collection is to theorise Pakistani cinema's turn towards the digital and the new film culture which has emerged in the past two decades, Naveed's essay complicates a linear historical telling of



Pakistan's lost cinematic past and the recent emergence of something new. The *awaami* or local film culture still persists from the time of General Zia's military coup in the late 1970s (p. 30), and so Naveed's ethnography complicates frameworks of decline and revival.

Similarly, Meenu Gaur and Adnan Madani in their chapter 'The Ghost in the Projector: New Pakistani Cinema & its Hauntings' explore frameworks of decline and revival that have marked Pakistani film historiography but offer a different conceptualisation of Pakistan's cinematic past. They theorise Pakistan's current film culture as one haunted by the specters and ghosts of the past. If Naveed's essay shows the persistence and survival of regional film cultures in terms of physical spaces of the *awaami* theatres and their audiences that have survived the difficult years of Zia's military dictatorship, Gaur and Madani focus on the film texts, generic codes, and icons themselves that continue to haunt contemporary cinema in Pakistan today. They think through the lens of hauntology and trace the hauntings of one of Pakistan's most important films, *Maula Jatt* (Yunus Malik, 1979) and the continued legacy of its star, Sultan Rahi. Released during the time of martial law, Gaur and Madani's retrospective on *Maula Jatt* foregrounds the cultural impact as well as the influential role the film played in terms of heralding a new cinematic form which would become the template for Pakistani films for decades to come. In this respect, Gaur and Madani are in direct conversation with Iqbal Sevea's essay in *Film and Cinephilia* where he explores the figure of the new film hero cemented by the success of *Maula Jatt*. Instead of frameworks of death and revival, their essay then thinks through the language of possession which disrupts the linear temporal progression of Pakistani film histories.

Following Gaur and Madani's articulation of the specters of cinema's past is Bani Abidi's photo-essay showing a series of burnt film reels from a fire which decimated one of Pakistan's oldest cinemas in Karachi. The burnt film reels, symbolising that which has simultaneously been erased but which still persists, perfectly encapsulates Gaur and Madani's theorisation of the haunting presence of Pakistan's forgotten cinematic worlds. Abidi's photo-essay is followed by Iftikhar Dadi's analysis of *Zinda Bhaag* (Gaur and Nabi, 2013) and his reading of formal conventions and thematic tropes which define New Pakistani Cinema. In his critique of the formulaic nature of recent Pakistani films, Dadi sees a future for Pakistani cinema in the form and thematic engagement of *Zinda Bhaag*, 'a future in which narrative form is critically rethought, where a fuller range of social, cultural, and media references are engaged reflexively and intelligently rather than resorting to congealed stereotypes' (p. 110).

In a similar vein, Ayesha Jalal's contribution on the different biopics of Saadat Hassan Manto and Vazira Zamindar's essay on *Waar* (Bilal Lashari, 2013) and New Cinema's relation to the Pakistani military are provocative invitations for thinking about New Cinema's ideological frameworks and representational politics. Asad Ali's essay 'Pissing Men, Dancing Women, and Censuring Oneself' takes the case of gender constructions and class dynamics in his analysis of two major New Cinema films. These essays provide useful theoretical frameworks

that can lend themselves to the study of other New Cinema films that have not found focal attention in this volume.

Finally, Kamran Asdar Ali's essay on finding a queer archive of female friendships in Pakistani visual culture and Vazira Zamindar's essay on the Guddu Film Archive both rethink modes of archiving in a country that is marked by the absence of official film archives. Zamindar's conversations with Guddu Khan, who collects film ephemera, reveal other histories of Pakistan's cinematic pasts, ones outside narratives of death and decline; and Asdar Ali's reading of *Saheli* (S. M. Yusuf, 1960) makes visible a queer archive of desire that at once remained illegible to the state and yet which left its fugitive traces across history. The volume concludes with Rachel Dwyer's afterword which makes a compelling case for further engagement on the cinematic traditions of Pakistan not simply for its own sake but to also account for the continued transnational linkages Pakistan has had with Indian cinema and the cinemas in South Asia. Overall, Zamindar and Ali's volume effectively foregrounds the ideological underpinnings and formal conventions of New Cinema in Pakistan. They begin from where *Film and Cinephilia* leaves off, and together both volumes seem to be in direct conversation with each other in terms of writing a different history of Pakistani film culture, one which exists outside of linear temporalities of emergence, death, revival, and so on.

In thinking of and through these two publications together, *Film and Cinephilia* imagines history in a different way, not one of decline but of what else had survived and emerged during the same period of obsolescence. *Love, War, & Other Longings*, however, takes the narrative of death sometimes matter-of-factly (Gaur and Madani's essay on hauntology is an example) but instead of seeing historical time as linear, it sees the past's spectral presence inflecting, shaping, and informing the present. Current scholarship on Pakistani cinema then is essentially preoccupied with the questions of memory, history, time, and ontology. In asking what is Pakistani cinema, what is fundamentally asked is when and from where does the time of the postcolony begin. Manto, in Ahmad and Khan's volume, and Gaur and Madani in Zamindar and Ali's volume seem to imply that something like Pakistani cinema could and might have never really existed. The many discrete and overlapping film cultures in Pakistan might be better theorised through the lens of the regional, the local, or the transregional and the inter-connecting. However, to say that a thing like Pakistani cinema does not exist does little to account for the specificities of cinematic conventions and film languages unique to the post-colony, as well as erasing a part of a larger entangled history between the other post-colonies that were once the Indian subcontinent.

For the future scholar of cinema in Pakistan, the work is immense. The most glaring lacuna in both volumes is the absence of focused theorisation of the period of Pakistani film history between late 1970s and 1990s, the period which is constantly invoked as the beginning of the so-called decline, but a period which has not yet invited dedicated study. Instead of

selecting individual case studies from this period (for example, both volumes have an essay on *Maula Jatt*) future scholarship on Pakistani cinema can address the period of so-called decline in Pakistan much more cohesively. Furthermore, both volumes in their respective film case studies have mostly focused on thematic interpretation, but formal conventions of filmmaking themselves have not been properly theorised. Film genres and aesthetic traditions in Pakistani cinema, therefore, can also become a worthwhile subject for future scholarship.

Essentially, these two volumes offer numerous potential avenues for future inquiry and research for film theorists and historians, as what both these volumes show is that the continued study of cinema in Pakistan might not simply serve the area studies scholar, but to theorise film and cinephilia in the context of Pakistan offers radical potential for film theory itself and areas of postcolonial film historiography, archival practice, unusual reception and exhibition practice, and genre theory. To think of cinema in Pakistan is then to think of the function and political potential of cinema in a more urgent, transformative, and radical way, and to fundamentally think about what it is that still draws a crowd to sit in communion in a darkened cinema hall despite the many fires raging outside.

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Notes

- [1] By this, I refer to their volume *Cinema and Society: Film and Social Change in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2016).