

Introduction: Volume 3

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At the risk of echoing a chorus of clichés, 2020 posed unprecedented global challenges to nearly every aspect of human life and society. This of course extends to our small area of concern, Pakistani screen cultures. While it remains to be seen what the full impact of the pandemic will have been on cinemas in this country, last year saw the fewest box-office releases in Pakistan since 1948, when the industry first began to rebuild itself after the violence of the Partition. For most of 2020 cinemas remained closed and productions were shut down, and they have been picking up slowly in 2021. We ourselves have not yet ventured out into the cinema halls, as despite our masks and vaccines the specter of Covid-19 still looms. Whether things will “normalize,” or what that normal might even look like in the context of Pakistani cinema, remains to be seen. Although the new multiplexes built across Pakistan over the last decade may still stand half-empty, television remains a cornerstone of Pakistani screen culture, and digital media, in seemingly limitless forms, continues its unprecedented and dazzling expansion. The development of digital infrastructure and increased availability of technology of course also point to the democratization of media production, as we have seen, for example, from the way young and emerging filmmakers in Pakistan have used YouTube and other streaming platforms to make their short films available to a large and diverse audience since the start of the pandemic.

Our students this past year braved all the challenges of higher education in a new and often more difficult way as well, for months battling screen fatigue, limited access to resources, and often infrastructural limitations as simple as poor internet connections. However, we were delighted at the success of the virtual edition of the 2020 Screen Studies Symposium, our third, entitled “Pakistan Screen Studies: Widening the Frame.” We had nearly 300 participants register and attend the event, including many from beyond Pakistan. Due to the online modality, we were thrilled to be able to welcome our distinguished keynote speakers Dr. Lindiwe Dovey from SOAS, and Dr. Esha Niyogi De from UCLA, and feature a masterclass with filmmaker Bilal Sami. The digital platform also allowed our students to explore new and innovative ways to present their research beyond a traditional conference PowerPoint presentation, and we were amazed by the energy and creativity they brought to this task. Although we too have weathered our share of pandemic-related challenges and delays, we are so proud to finally be able to present Volume 3 of Reel Pakistan, which features a selection of papers presented in the 2020 Symposium (with more of the papers to be highlighted in our forthcoming Volume 4).

As with much scholarship on Pakistani film and television, a key concern of these papers is how screen narratives construct and contest notions of identity in the Pakistani nation-state, contextualizing them within the historical currents of the region and beyond. Usawah e Fatima’s work on the complex and ambivalent relationship between the Pakistani and Indian film industries offers insight into the ways production communities themselves negotiate concerns of national identity both on-screen and off. Humair Ahsan’s detailed investigation of film style during the Ayub era of the 1960s also charts the development of the film industry as a lens reflecting the aspirational optimism of nation-building and its embrace of the trappings of transnational modernity. However, as firm as ever in our belief in the importance of recognizing the plurality of Pakistani cinemas, we also appreciate that the flip side of the coin of national

identity is contestation and reconfiguration of subnational identities. Here, Wajeeha Amir's compelling essay charts the changing character of Pashtun identity in Pashto cinema with a comparison of two film versions of the story of Ajab Khan Afridi, one from 1971 and one from 1995. We are especially proud to include this paper as it represents one of the first serious film studies on Pashto cinema, an industry heavily marginalized within film scholarship and often openly derided in popular discourse on Pakistani film. Additionally, Nimra Tariq's exploration of Kashmiri rap videos alongside Palestinian ones as well as Mina Khan's explorations of the portrayal of lesbian relationships in different Muslim-dominant contexts across the Global South also offer ways to understand marginalized local identities as imbricated within national and transnational flows.

Finally, although we had not planned it this way, gender emerged as perhaps the most dominant overarching theme in this past year's Screen Studies Symposium. Several of the papers in Volume 3 engage with gender in surprising and productive ways. Khan presents a detailed analysis of filmic techniques employed in the nuanced portrayal of queer female relationships, emphasizing the subtlety of these portrayals (out of both necessity and for filmic effect) and exploring how they create space for the audience to identify with lesbian characters even in societies where heteropatriarchy is deeply entrenched. Amir's paper on the other hand puts masculinity into deeper focus, exploring the shifting qualities of male characterization in Pashto cinema over several decades. Sabeeh Ahmad explores how lyrics as well as visual language enact gendered norms on the body and through the voice of Noor Jahan, Pakistani cinema's grand doyenne and "Melody Queen." Lastly, Hajrah Yousaf's paper combines the themes of transnationalism and gender in its analysis of filmic portrayals of honor killings in the Pakistani diaspora.

Despite the difficulties faced during the pandemic, we are so pleased to be able to continue providing this platform for our emerging scholars and their contributions to the study of Pakistani screens, and we hope that our readers find this diverse selection of papers as informative and fascinating as we have. Stay tuned for, among other upcoming projects, the release of *Reel Pakistan* Volume 4 in 2022!

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LUMS, December 2021