

Introduction: Volume 4

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In the introduction to Volume 3, we looked back at the challenges brought on by the global pandemic. As life came to an abrupt halt, and we moved indoors and shifted online, we became more reflective and appreciative of the world outside. While many of us felt lonely while enduring lockdowns and quarantines, there was some comfort in knowing we were in this together. Across the world, schools, universities, and offices stood empty as life online became the new normal. Internet traffic became more of an issue than street traffic. Cinemas shut down and streaming platforms became our constant companions. With film industries around the world having to close production, we looked towards the classics and explored films and television shows we had missed out on. Yet while we entered the pandemic together, returning from it has been less synchronised. Students returned to in person classes at different times, Covid protocols on set varied from country to country, and even in the cinemas, masking became more of an individual choice. Now more than halfway through 2022, on the surface at least, it seems that most of us have returned to our old lives.

As television, webseries and digital media continue to grow, we are still waiting to see what the full impact of the pandemic will be on cinema. This year saw several Pakistani releases, especially during the Eid holidays, and more films are in production—all of which are good signs for the local industry. However, it once again raised concerns about release schedules and competition as Hollywood films, and in particular superhero franchise films, also returned to Pakistani cinemas. At the same time, Pakistani stories and voices have found a global stage this year with the success of *Joyland* (dir. Saim Sadiq, 2022) at the Cannes Film Festival—with a planned release in Pakistan later in the year—and the release of *Ms. Marvel* on Disney+ (Marvel Studios, 2022). *Joyland* is the first Pakistani film to premiere at Cannes and win jury awards, including the Queer Palm and the Un Certain Regard Jury Prize. Meanwhile, *Ms. Marvel*, featuring the first Pakistani American superhero in the Marvel Universe, got a special three-part cinematic release in Pakistan with two episodes screened at a time in local cinemas. Yet, while people have returned to the cinema (we are happy to report that unlike at the time of the publication of Volume 3 we too have returned to the cinema!), streaming platforms pose an even greater threat to the traditional cinemagoing experience, which will bring further challenges for the local industry.

As we continue to navigate these challenges as individuals, communities, and industries, we turn towards the papers presented in this Volume, which, much like Volume 3, were written at the height of the pandemic. These papers were presented during the virtual edition of the Screen Studies Symposium in December 2020—“Pakistan Screen Studies: Widening the Frame”—which saw nearly 300 participants register from around the world and included keynote talks by Dr. Lindiwe Dovey from SOAS and Dr. Esha Niyogi De from UCLA, and featured a masterclass

with filmmaker Bilal Sami. Looking back at these papers, it fills us with pride to think about what our students accomplished when serious academic work, leave alone presenting at a conference and producing a journal volume, seemed impossible.

In this volume of *Reel Pakistan*, our writers explore the larger field of Pakistani screen cultures, often looking beyond cinema, while television remains a key interest. Rabail Faizan's paper may be of particular interest, following the success of *Joyland* as it examines the representation of transgender dancers on Pakistani screens, which includes Saim Sadiq's short film *Darling* (2020), a television drama and a music video. Delving deeper into television, Izza Malik's examination of class not only looks at its representation in popular dramas, but is also interested in the performance of class, and the corresponding role of capital in its many forms. Mahnoor Ghani Sadar's interest in television dramas raises questions on gender, morality, and sexuality. Here social media is also brought into the discussion through the interaction of content creators and audiences.

New and digital media, and audience and fan interaction through these avenues, continues to be of concern in this Volume as evident from Rimsha Saleem's exploration of the circulation of Punjabi stage dramas on digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, as online audiences exceed those in attendance at live performances. Continuing with theme of Punjabi stage dramas and digital interventions, M Balach Khan's focus on the cinematography in the recordings of stage dramas, and the implications this has for viewer experience, brings a technical and stylistic perspective to the filming and dissemination of Punjabi stage dramas, while also engaging with questions of the male gaze and the sexualization of performers.

While staying with a topic that is very pertinent to the digital distribution of content, Muhammad Faizan ul Haq's exploration of piracy looks at the distribution of pirated content, and more specifically videogames, through DVD and CD stores, which continue to operate in Pakistan. Moving from the shadows of piracy to the bright lights of Netflix, Amna Ejaz's paper highlights the role streaming platforms played during the pandemic by examining the choices viewers are making in terms of content, and the role of binge-watching and algorithms, while continuing to engage with the issue of piracy. Fittingly, the final paper of the volume is Safa Imran's discussion on Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). Through selected screen texts including a web documentary, television drama, and an advertisement, this paper questions the role of censorship in the construction of a national identity that is supported by the State through its control of media content.

Digital and alternative forms of viewership, along with the implications, opportunities, and complications they offer, dominate this volume. They point towards the evolving entertainment landscape and how screen cultures are developing and changing at an ever-increasing rate. These developments have only been accelerated by the pandemic and point to exciting new avenues of research in forthcoming volumes.

Yet as we look towards upcoming volumes of *Reel Pakistan* (and the challenges and exciting new opportunities presented by digital media production for this publication as well) and future screen studies symposia, it is important to acknowledge that the return to so called 'normal life'

has not been easy for our students or this platform. While we have all welcomed the return to in person classes, seeing our friends and colleagues, and being on campus, the shift back has brought with it new anxieties and difficulties. Some of the writers in this and Volume 3 have graduated. Others are entering their last year or two of university. As they venture into uncharted waters, we hope that this Volume reminds them of what they achieved during an extremely difficult time and that it gives them confidence to move forward with the knowledge of what they can accomplish. We hope that you, our readers, will join us in congratulating them and wishing them the best of luck. And, as a final note, we would also like to take this opportunity to thank our editorial assistants, research assistants, and coordinators who have put countless hours behind the scenes in preparing this and past volumes of *Reel Pakistan*.

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