

Reviewed by Pamela Robertson Wojcik

Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space

by Priya Jaikumar.

Duke University Press.

2019. 416 pages.

\$109.95 hardcover; \$29.95 paper; also available in e-book.

As the disciplines of film and media studies have expanded and diversified, with academic publishing following suit, there has been a much-needed decentering of the field but at the same time a tendency toward siloing. While many of us may have interests that align with more than one subfield, few of us read broadly across the plurality of subjects that constitute the larger fields of film and media studies; instead, we tend to focus more closely on one or a few specific areas or approaches, and our cloistered views sometimes prevent us from noticing books that may be vital to our interests. Even more interdisciplinary fields, such as area studies or spatial analyses, can become insulated specialties. A cursory glance at Priya Jaikumar's book *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* might point one to consider it predominantly a book about Indian cinema, mainly of interest to those who specifically focus on the expansive Indian film industry. The Indian case study may lead someone who works on film and space but tends to focus on Europe or the United States to think it beyond her ken.

However, *Where Histories Reside* not only illuminates how India has been filmed, negotiated, misrepresented, shaped, maligned, and celebrated in various cinematic forms but also offers a theorization of filmed space in general. Jaikumar is interested in both filmic space, the space within the film frame, and filmed space, the "captured artifact of an encounter between a camera and its environment."¹ In focusing on India, *Where*

1 Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

Histories Reside seeks to displace film theory and criticism from its normative attention to “one (Western) modality of capitalism and modernity” and consider India not as Other but as operating in tandem with Western cultures in “mutually implicated histories of global modernity.”² Through an analysis of filmed space in India, Jaikumar works to unseat assumptions within film theory, and especially within approaches to space, that take for granted European and American reference points. Offering a critical spatial film historiography, *Where Histories Reside* breaks down the notion that cinema’s indexicality gives it a privileged connection to reality and dislodges “the centrality, though not the significance, of cinema’s representational space” to focus on the ways in which Indian space and cinematic space are both constructed via “multiple underlying determinants of a moment, not only in time but also in space.”³

More than simply broaching the spatial turn in film studies, Jaikumar brings to bear on her spatial analysis of India other approaches to cinema, including the perspectives of history, the law, government, education, media industries, archival research, labor practices, authorship, and colonialism. Her analysis further draws on prior studies of feature filmmaking, useful cinema, documentary, travelogues, and Indian and European filmmaking. *Where Histories Reside* shows the deep interconnectedness of the many approaches needed to understand cinema and filmed space as well as the complex interplay between and among “states, institutions, economies, societies and ideologies” that constitute filmed space.⁴ The book aims to show how space is both a product of and an agent shaping human life and social relations; it further posits the persistence of spatial logics that exceed a normative Western spatial understanding. Overall, it convincingly argues for understanding the situatedness of film in space and synchronically through complex interwoven histories.

Where Histories Reside attends to the way in which the colonial imagination shapes perceptions of Indian space. In a chapter dealing with what she calls disciplinary space, Jaikumar shows how educational British geographic films inculcate an “imperial understanding” in school children and highlight intersections between the visual practices of geopolitics and geography.⁵ Indian Town Series films, intended to teach British children about Indian geography, flatten differences between places in India or places with connections to India that have “distinct roles in imperial administration”—including Afghanistan, Darjeeling, Bikaner, and Udaipur—to focus on “vocation or ethnic types of inhabitants . . . an incongruous range of transportation (camels, motor cars, bicycles, and horse carts . . .) and quaint modes of entertainment . . . portraying the place’s awkward relationship to modernity and temporal progression.”⁶ Aimed to encourage “accurate imagination” about far-flung places, the geographic films “prescribed an imperial outlook on the world” but also show rifts in that understanding,

2 Jaikumar, 29, 30.

3 Jaikumar, 288, 297.

4 Jaikumar, 4.

5 Jaikumar, 85.

6 Jaikumar, 43.

including how to map India, whose cartography did not fit international mapping protocols.⁷

A chapter on what Jaikumar characterizes as residual affective space considers the temporality of space and the tension between the disappearance of a place and its immortalization in film and photography. The British destruction of the North Indian city of Lucknow following the Indian Revolt of 1857 made Lucknow “an idea and a memory.”⁸ Examining multiple imaginings of the 1857 Lucknow uprising as a kind of “colonial disaster tourism,” Jaikumar argues that the ruins function as a marker of modernity, “a demarcation of difference for the present” that allows capitalist modernity to “assert itself via the self-justifying claim to novelty made by ceaselessly measuring its progress against an imagined and slower past.”⁹

While never losing sight of institutional and governmental practices, Jaikumar also considers the interplay between the state and individual auteurs. A chapter on travelogue, expedition, and mountaineering shorts and what Jaikumar terms “regulatory space” focuses on Narain Singh Thapa, a newsreel photographer who became top cameraman for the Film Division then a producer and regional officer of the Censor Board. Jaikumar situates Thapa’s aesthetic within the state’s strict regulation of film stock, subsidized mandatory screenings of documentary films in theatrical settings, and competing and capricious bureaucracies. Mapping out the complexity of licensing systems—and all the bureaucracy, paperwork, corruption, and difficulty attendant upon those systems—Jaikumar convincingly shows how state-controlled licenses for exhibition and import determined filmmakers’ access to theatrical space and film stock and thus shaped the entire industry. Describing Thapa as “an affective microcosm within whom state power over the spatial imagination of a nation became individualized and idiosyncratic,” Jaikumar uses him as a case study of sorts for assessing the multiple layers of institutional and sociopolitical history governing the short films while also showing how Thapa’s decades-long career presents a sense of India in visual panoramas that serve “to make the state appear territorially and symbolically coextensive with the land.”¹⁰

A chapter on sublime space examines Jean Renoir’s film *The River* (1951) to explore how the “differences between a film’s location and its assumed viewership,” in this case India versus an American and European art house market, “are frequently used as triggers to explore the singularities of a place and, contrarily, the universals of the human condition.”¹¹ This chapter considers Renoir as director, including his flirtation with what he perceived to be Eastern philosophies, alongside various competing reviews and discourses around the film and its production, exhibition, and reception. Discussing the conjoining of the orientalist and the cinematic sublime in *The River*, Jaikumar underscores that “the portrayal of a place as a simultaneously ethnographic and sublime, or immanent and transcendent location, is not so much

7 Jaikumar, 46.

8 Jaikumar, 185.

9 Jaikumar, 197, 186.

10 Jaikumar, 113, 86.

11 Jaikumar, 127.

an aspect of the place as the production of a perspective and projection of a desire on it.”¹² Here, Jaikumar not only complicates our understanding of filmed space but also provides a vital model for the analysis of “the cinematic use of politically and economically vulnerable populations and territories as ambience in location-based films,” or indeed any “classic of cinema and literature that is a product of its period’s blind spots and social hierarchies.”¹³

Where Histories Reside also evinces a particular interest in below-the-line personnel. The first chapter situates educational geographic films in the context of nature films, orientalist short films, and commercial features not only due to their shared images but also because they share overlapping personnel and can thus “disclose shared visualities and desire across different forms and genres.”¹⁴ Looking at contemporary film, the fifth chapter, on global space, considers below-the-line personnel and the culture of location shooting to suggest a form of erasure as “brand India” expunges everyday life and the “lived messiness” of Indian life in favor of a frictionless global signifier of Indianness.¹⁵ With more emphasis on location-based realism in Bollywood productions, Jaikumar notes, location shooting navigates the tension between onscreen and social spaces. Hindi cinema’s mise-en-scène reflects and furthers “the current commodification of land and leisure” as below-the-line workers mediate between transnational multimedia corporations and local operatives to help produce a version of India that does not represent or reflect people like them.¹⁶ In a fascinating discussion of casting for extras, Jaikumar convincingly demonstrates how blockbuster Indian films use white and multiracial extras, labeled “models,” drawn from college students, tourists, and conventional models to connote “global cosmopolitanism,” whereas international productions favor “junior artists” drawn from the Indian working class to show India as a land of poverty.¹⁷

Whereas many books on cinema and space focus on one space, such as the city, the suburb, or the home, *Where Histories Reside* considers the way in which various spaces, such as Indian towns, the Himalayan mountains, and ruins, construct the larger imagined space of India. An absorbing discussion of the *haveli*, a topic worthy of a book on its own perhaps, suggests how one aspect of the built environment works as a cultural signifier that revises history. An outmoded architectural form of mansion with an interior courtyard dating back to the precolonial era, the *haveli* today functions mainly as ruin or tourist attraction. But in post-independence cinema, the *haveli* has a curious dominance. Where historically *havelis* “created segregated spaces for women of North Indian Hindu and Muslim families ranging across a wide spectrum of wealth,” post-independence films have transformed these “nondenominational precolonial structures” into “predominantly Islamic feudal structures inhabited by wealthy, fading nobility.”¹⁸ In collapsing the

12 Jaikumar, 169.

13 Jaikumar, 128, 137.

14 Jaikumar, 57.

15 Jaikumar, 286.

16 Jaikumar, 239.

17 Jaikumar, 249, 261.

18 Jaikumar, 213.

reality of different religious backgrounds and statuses, representations of the *haveli* “scramble history and erase India’s colonial period” even as British colonialism is key to the *haveli*’s decline.¹⁹ The “popular imagination of an architectural form” thus ruptures a sense of continuous history and absents British colonialism while also creating an “antihistory to nationalist narratives of India.”²⁰

Where Histories Reside shows that space is not a thing to be filmed, nor simply a place to film in, but a constellation of material, social, institutional, and imagined spaces that briefly cohere to be captured on film but also exist in different constellations, alongside different representations, in different reception contexts, and at different historical moments. Thus, the space we call India can be simultaneously a sublime space, a regulatory space, a global space, a local space, a space of production, and a produced space. Jaikumar’s book invites us to regard both national and cinematic space as overdetermined and also to consider that seeing filmed space requires multiple overlapping lenses.

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19 Jaikumar, 213.

20 Jaikumar, 214, 224.