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Dossier: Early Cinema in South Asia: The Problem of the Archive

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DOSSIER

**Early Cinema in South Asia:
The Problem of the Archive**

Introduction

Kaveh Askari

The authors included in this dossier, *Early Cinema in South Asia: The Problem of the Archive*, initially grouped as a panel for The Society of Cinema and Media Studies 2013 conference, address the need for more specific methods of conducting research on early cinema in South Asia, but they also reveal broader historiographical imperatives for all of us working with similar archival challenges. Indeed, one of the benefits of dossiers such as this is that they operate in multiple registers at once. They sharpen focus on a specific field at the same time that they address methodological questions that speak across specializations. Academic publishing does not always adequately document these exchanges across fields, which occur so often in panel discussions and workshops. I can attest to this personally, as each of the four contributors has influenced my projects on early cinema in the Middle East far more than it is usually possible to acknowledge. My aim here is to help demonstrate the adaptability of their contributions by providing a few points from a neighboring field.

Each of the authors takes up the central question, framed by Neepa Majumdar, of the role of space in the definitions of “early” cinemas. This concerns nearly everyone working in regions where the commercial configurations diverged widely from the most robust film industries, and where drastically less material has survived. Periodization is necessary, but it is of course always contingent on several factors, two of which are particularly relevant for the discussion that follows: those related to the archive and those related to the institutions of film study. The typical demarcation of 1915 as the outer limit of early cinema has opened up countless lines of inquiry into European and North American archives, but begins to seem

downright arbitrary when simply transplanted from one archive to another and from one part of the world to another. Each of the writers here shows how the 1915 periodization can cut through the middle of, and thus threaten to marginalize, those very phenomena that it was designed to reveal. When used unreflectively, this definition of early cinema forces researchers to give too much weight to the mostly lost material that fits established methods while potentially ignoring the value of what does remain. The growing attention to the diverse spaces of early cinema, to the locations in which films are created, circulated, and archived, requires a more flexible approach to cinema's chronologies.

There are few who would disagree with this idea of revising the definitions of early cinema for different locations, but to do so would involve taking account of the institutions of film scholarship that have made use of these definitions. On this point, let me offer an example from an organization on whose executive committee I currently serve. Domitor, the International Society for the Study of Early Cinema, held its 2012 conference in Brighton to commemorate the influential 1978 Brighton FIAF conference. The opportunity to reflect on the history of the organization and on this historical turn in cinema studies, with talks by some who participated in the 1978 conference, was particularly satisfying for those of us who have come to the field more recently. Presenters reflected on the 1915 boundary as part of an institutional turn designed to highlight aspects of film history left out of the canonical histories written by Georges Sadoul and Lewis Jacobs. One important goal was to bracket cinema's industrial norms as a way of gaining traction in unexplored archives and, indeed, to broaden our sense of what can comprise these archives. It has resulted in an expanded sense of moving-image performance that embraces the ephemeral lectures, songs, lantern slides, and devices of different media ecologies. The majority of this research has focused on Europe and North America, but regardless of which regions have seen the majority of research, the advantages of this shift in methodology for histories of other cinemas have been clear. Some encounter with this change in perspective has influenced all of the contributors here at the institutions where we attended graduate school, which include the University of Indiana, New York University, University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Chicago.

Domitor conference organizers have recently added language to their calls for papers welcoming work beyond the 1915 boundary, work that explores how "cinema developed unevenly on the global stage."¹ This marks an important adaptation to the global scope of some of the exciting new work being done in the field. But as the contributors here note, the question remains whether this is a stopgap on the way to more systematic shifts in historiography. Consider the case of early cinema in Iran as just one parallel example among many others. In a fundamental material sense, early cinema exhibition spaces and distribution

networks in Iranian cities constantly comingled past and present, challenging any singular timeline of film's development. Traditions crossed within the space of individual theaters. Exhibitors placed peephole Kinetoscopes from the 1890s in the lobbies of their 1930s cinemas, while in the main seating area 1910s serial films played on the screens. One week the kinds of spectatorship seen in Kinetoscope parlors comingled with cliffhanger-driven, medium-length serial spectatorship, and then the following week a classical feature film might have played on the same screen. In the urban geography of Tehran, sound cinemas and silent cinemas (with their screen narrators) coexisted for much longer than they did in many other places around the world. These cinema situations create the need to expand upon the work of historians who think about asynchrony not as an obstacle to writing cinema's cultural and technological history, but as an opportunity. For example, Rick Altman has offered the term "crisis historiography" to turn attention away from the average and standard practices that make cinema appear stable and defined.² He highlights the processes underlying cinema's identity crises, asking us to focus instead on the networks of technologies and cultural institutions that contribute to the constantly changing definitions of the medium. Such reflection on medium identity seems appropriate to the Tehran case, as it can suspend the impulse to trace the emergence of a defined cinema. The challenge is how to push this farther. What do you call an identity crisis with a chronology so elastic that it overlaps Kinetoscope displays with screenings of Jean Epstein films, or Méliès impersonators with 1930s modernist dandies in *Haji Aqa, Aktor-e Sinema* ("Mr. Haji, the Movie Actor"; IR, 1933)? Is it still appropriate to talk about a film like *Dokhtar-e Lor* ("The Lor Girl"; IR, 1933) in terms of a medium identity crisis? It does operate in an interstitial mode as a Persian-language film about modern Iran that was made by the Imperial Film Company in Mumbai and combines musical interludes with stunts borrowed from serial melodrama. There is certainly a play with medium identity in films like these, but the term "crisis" could mislead. It might suggest an urgency at odds with the casual and enduring experimentation that continued until the end, in 1941, of what Hamid Naficy refers to as Iranian cinema's artisanal era.³

The essays here signal some of what might be on the horizon as we work through these questions of historiography. Neepa Majumdar cautions against the tendency to sacralize those rare documents that provide comprehensive but ultimately one-dimensional accounts. She favors the kinds of inventive juxtapositions of historical fragments that are possible once researchers dispense with the idea that each fragment must be representative in order to be relevant. Ramesh Kumar further challenges notions of "early" with an institutional definition from the National Film Archive of India. In this definition, early cinema stretches to include films made up through 1950. He offers this definition in the context of

the architecture of the NFAI, and he recommends that we attend to the institution itself as an item of consideration rather than as simply the repository of our items of consideration. Anupama Kapse and Sudhir Mahadevan each suggest methods that move more fluidly across periods. Melodrama provides Kapse with a way to juxtapose fragments of films with other documents of social history. As a diachronic mode, melodrama helps her to link fragments across media as well as across decades. Reexamining the technological history of cinema in light of new cultural histories, Mahadevan contends that we might even consider a recent street performer's assemblage of DVD player and megaphone as a kind of archive of early itinerant cinema performance. It preserves the practices and even some of the technologies of the Bioscopewallah, who circulated the products of film industries in spaces where the infrastructures of those industries were left behind. Each of these prescriptions highlights those contingencies of historical film studies most in need of revision as new archival work engages early cinema's fragments and asynchronies.

Kaveh Askari is an associate professor in the English department at Western Washington University. He has published articles on Iranian cinema, on early cinema and art education, and on early 16mm color. In 2008, he edited a special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture on the Middle East and North Africa*. He is currently at work on his book *Picture Craft: Discourses of Art from the Magic Lantern to Early Hollywood*.

NOTES

1. *Call for Papers*, Twelfth International Domitor Conference: "Performing New Media, 1890–1915" (Brighton: June, 2012).
2. Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 15–23.
3. Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 1: the Artisanal Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).



Figure 1. Seeta Devi as Gopa reclining in *Prem Sanyas/The Light of Asia* (Franz Osten and Himansu Rai, IN, 1925).

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