Scouting the Past
A Conversation with Priya Jaikumar on Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space

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The tropics really pop in Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951), the first film to be shot in Technicolor in India. The film's photographic depiction of a wet, verdant Bengal prompted Rumer Godden, author of the novel on which Renoir's film is based, to complain that the film's backgrounds had “swamped” its narrative with an “overabundance of Indian life and color.”¹ In his memoirs, Renoir refers to scouting locations along the banks of the Hugli with his production designer, Eugène Lourié. There, Lourié discovered a palace that belonged to the maharaja of Gwalior, but its grounds were deemed insufficiently green. The lawn, yellowed somewhat by the summer sun, was torn out and a new one sown. Yet even the freshly grown grass wasn't green enough for Renoir: on the day of filming, Claude Renoir (the director of photography and the director’s nephew) could be seen splashing the grass with green paint.²

This story appears in Priya Jaikumar’s new book, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space*, as an example of an auteur’s exacting demands of set design. Jaikumar unravels the anecdote to reveal, first, how it punctures the logic of on-location filming, and then how it confirms, with literal specificity, that the Orient has always been a product of the European imagination. But such observations are the premises, not the conclusions, of *Where Histories Reside*, which transforms a hundred years of familiar production stories by repositioning them within a philosophical, political, and very cinematic speculation about what happened when the camera’s lens opened on India’s mountain peaks, aristocratic mansions, and gentrifying cities. This is a “spatial film historiography” fascinated by how film—understood as a social ensemble, technological practice, and discursive institution—lives off and in the spaces it records. Rich archival research, ethnographic description, and the close analysis of a range of fiction and nonfiction genres, as well as photographs and policy papers, enable Jaikumar to re-create the environment that once thrived around the camera.

By privileging space as the object of analysis, *Where Histories Reside* brings into view aesthetic lineages and power relations embedded on-screen. Five case studies spanning a century-long “history of films on places, and a history of places on film,” from British colonial films to Bollywood, illuminate the major “epistemic dispersions” that have powerfully and perpetually reorganized India as “filmed space” (1). Filmed space, which Jaikumar is careful to distinguish from prior concepts of filmic and diegetic space, refers to “that captured
artifact of an encounter between a camera and its environment” (3). Closely linked to the concept is Jaikumar’s idea of the film camera as “locational,” both “a part” of the environment it films and “apart” from it (153). Conceptualized this way, filmed space allows Jaikumar to pan left and right of what endures on film, exploring how lived, historical spaces have been produced, destroyed, and remade as framed, scaled images.

For example, Jaikumar focuses on the haveli (mansion), a precolonial architecture form that once dominated the northern Indian landscape. Following the successful British suppression of the mutiny of 1857, a retributive colonial imagination leveled the haveli into a pictorial ruin for circulation in “insurgency” picture albums and short films like The Relief of Lucknow (Edison, 1912). Jaikumar describes these as “colonial disaster tourism” (197). After independence, the ruin was restored in popular cinema: in Hindustani melodramas, gothic romances, and horror films of the 1950s and after, the haveli is constructed—sometimes literally, on a film set—as a feudal, Islamic heritage site, a residual filmed space laced with nostalgia and trauma for citizens of the newly democratic, secular India.

Thinking with and through space is thus a theoretical maneuver that has consequences for film history, enabling stylistic and disciplinary continuities to newly appear and “reshelving” films across time periods and genres (57). In her discussion of instructional films produced by British film studios in the 1920s and 1930s, Jaikumar demonstrates how two seemingly disparate film series, Secrets of Nature and Secrets of India, shared not only personnel and expertise, but also narrative and visual tropes of “detection” through which nature and the colonies were brought into view. “Histories reside everywhere,” Jaikumar reminds the reader, “but institutional and visual regimes ensure that we look at only that which we are conditioned to see, or see in particular ways” (309).

Reading Where Histories Reside, I was reminded of the idea of the “punctum,” used by Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida to describe a photograph’s power to illuminate off-screen space. For Jaikumar, “retrieving a film’s background as a point of focus and analyzing it as a distinctive aesthetic and produced entity” unsettles hierarchies between the material and the virtual, background and foreground, the profilmic and the filmic, and politics and aesthetics (22). The book’s poignant final chapter examines how working-class “junior artists” of the traditional film unions are excluded from the rapidly gentrifying screen spaces of Bollywood, which casts its extras from modeling agencies instead. Whether calling attention to this forced visual erasure, or directing the reader to other kinds of violence hidden in plain sight of rivers, mansions, mountains, and more, Where Histories Reside, in asking us to see all the elements “in the frame” as equal, is itself an ethical “punctum,” a poke in the eye of the film scholars reading her text. In the conversation that follows, Priya Jaikumar elaborates on the political, methodological, and disciplinary stakes of a spatial film critique.

**KARTIK NAIR:** Could you begin by explaining how the idea for your book developed?

**PRIYA JAIKUMAR:** It emerged between 2007 and 2009. With America’s continuing war against Iraq and Afghanistan, every other day we were witness to images of their cities and structures turned to rubble. I was grappling with these disturbing images and the sudden familiarity of U.S. media with places like Kirkuk, Mosul, and Tikrit, covered exclusively in the context of anti-U.S. insurgencies and evacuated of their other histories. I started studying visual records of an earlier (and for its time, unprecedented) insurgency in India in 1857 against the British East India Company. In parallel ways, a global performative arena and mass public for “mutiny” images emerged then through the circulation of photographs and films about the leveling of Indian cities, even as surviving inhabitants in cities such as Lucknow, Meerut, and Kanpur lived through environmental devastation. I was trying to understand how one writes about images of places that become globally familiar when such familiarity is predicated on their destruction.¹

**NAIR:** How did Where Histories Reside become a bigger project that grapples with space, power, and history across the span of moving-image cultures?

**JAIKUMAR:** Wars, insurgencies, and occupations are particular cases. But the question of how to write about the mutually implicated yet splintered histories—of those involved in producing moving images, those consuming them, and those who are a part of profilmic spaces—is relevant to any encounter between a camera and its filmed environment.

In 2009, I was invited to help collate a vast archive of British colonial films.² In this material, I was taken with a series of short films on Indian towns produced by Bruce Woolfe’s Gaumont-British Instructional (GBI) in 1937. These shorts were used as visual aids in geography classrooms in Britain to instruct an expanding British electorate on the perspective of liberal imperialism. Writing about them involved deciphering how British geography, as a discipline, incorporated visual education about the empire during the dissolution of territorial imperialism in preparation for a decolonizing world order. This led me to study the legitimization of films...
in British geographical vision, the geopolitical vision shared by a production company’s slate of theatrical, instructional, nature, and travel films, and broader debates in Britain over the challenges of visually mapping colonies during this period. 5

What began as an interest in the spatial tropes of a film depicting a location became a study of the governing logics and institutions defining the filming process, and an exploration of profilmic places. These alternative records are the ones elided or suppressed by the rationalizing grids of state power and imperial geography, which constituted the visual frame for the locations.

I knew that I was interested in the aesthetics, production contexts, circuits, and geopolitics of films that either were shot on location or were about real locations. I also knew that I wanted to start from the encounter between a locational camera and its profilmic environment, and build outward—in layered and historical detail—the contexts shaping and shaped by these encounters. I also wanted to give myself the latitude to move between feature films, documentaries, theatrical, and nontheatrical films. This point of entry made it possible for me to hold on to the theoretical ambition of thinking about cinema’s ontological function as a simultaneously documenting and abstracting medium in relation to profilmic space, while accounting for the geopolitical asymmetries of our modern world. Whereas my first book was about Indian and British cinema in the interwar period, this one would deal with the interplay between geographical locations, films, artistic visions, and state power across a much broader spatiotemporal scale, albeit through a narrower focus on location-based films. 6

NAIR: You write in your book that the subject “came in fragments” [xii]. At what point did you realize that these very different historical and ethnographic case studies—from the 1920s to the contemporary—were in fact “fragments” of the same conceptual map?

JAIKUMAR: They fell into place quite quickly, keeping in mind that it took me a decade to write this book, so “quickly” is relative. For the past decade at USC, I have designed graduate seminars on social theories of place and space. These included the prolific scholarship from the “spatial turn” in cinema and media studies, which was very generative. I started by collecting material on international films shot on location in India, and Indian films shot domestically and abroad. The range of films soon became vast and their agendas extremely varied. How do you write, for instance, about Jean Renoir filming The River in West Bengal in 1951 while also discussing the Hindi blockbuster Evening in Paris (1967), Indian New Wave Cinema’s neorealist commitment to location filming in the 1960s and 1970s, and Mumbai, Wai, or Ooty in Bollywood films today?

Well, here’s how. Thinking about them together pushed me to decipher the broader dispositifs (to use Michel Foucault’s term) that cinematically organized a territory to designate as India. I decided to focus on that. Sometimes, as with Edison’s Relief of Lucknow (1912), this meant that Bermuda stood in as a proxy for India. Films from early-twentieth-century British empiricist traditions, which privileged techniques of rational observation combined with firsthand experience in learning about one’s environment, created a different sense of India as a location than films made by directors invested in seeking spiritual and metaphysical lessons from the land. The variations in visual productions were clearly going to be a key part of my story. It was going to be about the singularity of each perspective, and simultaneously about its suppression of other potential relations that could be staged between location, history, and memory.

Critical geographers suggest that when dealing with the production of space, we are dealing with a history that is not merely a supplement to other histories; it is a distinct process and problematic in and of itself. Scholars studying film and media in relation to urbanism, infrastructural networks, runaway productions, digital and immersive media, and increasingly eco-criticism have absorbed this lesson. But how does a sustained focus on cinema and space alter the uptake of film history? I felt there was a need to answer this question, and I took it up through my particular focus on location-based films.

NAIR: Where Histories Reside begins with the contention that the “full force of a spatial critique in film studies remains unrealized” [3]. Could you say more?

JAIKUMAR: I know that is a cheeky thing to say. Anyone familiar with our field can point to any number of writings on cinema and space. The array of approaches to thinking about film and media in relation to narrative or aesthetic or social or affective or geopolitical space is vast, but consequent bewildering. The question is, Is it possible, or even desirable, to think across these approaches?

I think it is a lost opportunity if we don’t try. As a discipline, cinema studies is interrogating an object that is exemplary because film cuts across these different kinds of spaces, and it has shaped these spaces since the late nineteenth century. (I mostly focus on film as celluloid, but the book is an invitation to consider media in its other formats.) Cinema studies is well positioned to study the double helix of sociality
and spatially, I note, because of the form and distributive logic of its object of analysis. Cinema records and simulates settings and landscapes; it extends, subverts, and prefigures natural and social environments, of which it is also a part. It depends on circuits of technological hardware, regulations of commodity, conventions of practitioners, places of public exhibition, and private screening—including, as Giuliana Bruno says, the human “atlas of emotion.”

Studying varied cases also made me contend with film as a “sociospatial” object. The fusion of social and spatial in this phrase indicates the need to think about the spatial qualities of film as a moving image, regulated commodity, and affective experience, in relation to social spaces, whether those of commercial institutions, communities, aesthetics practices, or state policies. So in addition to the fact that I track overlapping personnel, locations, and regulatory policies across chapters, the project was conceptually unified since its inception.

With a focus on the encounter between a locational camera and its environment, I wanted to look at how a place becomes part of a screen’s enframed space and how that cinematic image is produced and subsequently resides within the social spaces of industry, archives, regulation, ideology, memory, consumption, and daily life. I wanted to force back the horizon of analysis to overlapping sites whose histories are not usually written together because they do not appear to be part of the same process unless we look through the optics of space.

Nair: It seems that the dimensions of a projected image in a theater are not of the same order as, say, those of film as a global commodity that travels through a network of personnel, policies, and digital pathways. Could you give an example of a spatial critique capable of holding these different definitions of space in productive tension, or alignment, and undoing commonsensical organization and hierarchies of space?

Jaikumar: You are right. The spatial design of a filmic image is not the same as the import regulations governing film stock, and that is not the same as a viewer’s spatial imagination generated by cinema. There is no equivalence, and I am not claiming equivalence. What I am saying is: let us not presume a predetermined fixity to these different spatial registers. Rather, let us examine how, and through what relationships, they take shape.

For example, in the 1950s, raw film stock was closely regulated by the Indian government. Stock was released piecemeal to those filmmakers who kept within a certain shooting ratio between featured and discarded footage. State filmmakers like the documentarian N. S. Thapa faced strict surveillance on their stock usage, and they were reprimanded for waste. This gives another piece for the story of the catalog aesthetic of state-sponsored landscape shorts. Thapa constantly reuses footage across his landscape films. The challenge in integrating the various topics covered by his films may have had something to do with the pressure of managing stock wastage from the 1950s through the 1970s.

What does spatial thinking reveal here? Even as landscape documentaries assembled disparate information under a secular nationalist address in pre-Independence India, the state exercised its power and made itself visible, concrete, and quotidian through licenses, requests, and permits involved in issuing raw stock to filmmakers. The state was financing documentaries by requiring commercial theater exhibitors to hold mandatory screenings of the documentaries and pay rental fees. In other words, as a governing body the state took shape by shoring up its power through this process; the regulation of theaters and film stock defined the fiscal boundaries of a nation’s commerce and the terms and boundaries of trade for commercial and documentary filmmakers, and filmmakers created their spatial aesthetics under these conditions (although they also tried to push against the regulations, which is another story, which I pick up in another chapter).

Nair: Film theory, as you note, betrays a “citational practice of using films, events, and experiences of twentieth-century Western Europe and the United States” [29] as the basis of universalist claims, while works of non-Western film scholarship tend to be categorized under the label of “particular” film histories. How deliberate was your choice to write a book that simultaneously reinserts space, the non-West, and granular film history into film theory?

Jaikumar: Let me start with the idea of granularity. The concept of “space” has been deployed in such wide-ranging ways in the humanities that any use or reuse of it needs clear definition. If I had not illustrated my arguments with examples, anything I had to say about cinema and space would have been entirely vacuous. So in each chapter, when I suggest what spatial film historiographies might enable us to do and to see, I concretize those points and orchestrate the methodology with thick historical detail.

Granular histories that retain theoretical ambition are also just more persuasive to me. In the spirit of disciplinary self-interrogation, I will say that as a result of cultural-studies critiques of economic and technological determinism, we often talk of “mutually constitutive” factors in film and media studies. All too often the “mutual constitution” of cinema and economics or society or politics is noted, but insufficiently dem-
onstrated. History becomes an inert context or descriptive narrative that frames what is finally a formalist analysis of a range of films. Alternatively, theory and theoretical citations supplant history. To avoid this, I wanted to demonstrate my claim about dispersed causalities and multiple determining contexts. My guiding assumption is that film is a heterogeneous artifact, as a moving image, commodity, affective experience, and professional practice. If an object of analysis gives us permission to delve into economics, industry studies, ethnography, visual analysis, sociology, and more, then we need ecumenical tools and methods. The granularity comes from the need to demonstrate multiple and overlapping histories.

This connects to your question about the “reinsertion of the non-Western.” In my first book, I argued that although Britain’s 1927 film quota policy was avowedly about national protectionism, one of its intents was to make inroads for British films into colonial markets, to counter rising U.S. hegemony. The possession and exploitation of colonies was temporally contiguous with the emergence of Western modernity and cultures of modernity. It was causal. This is often effaced from dominant accounts. Where Histories Reside spans a broader time period, but it shares with my first book a desire, as Edward Said put it musically, for “contrapuntal” readings. Colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal economies obscure and naturalize how they divide up territories and bodies to extend their power. My interest is in dismantling those sociospatial divisions, and in Where Histories Reside I use the tools that cinema itself offers, such as the profilmic and the mise-en-scène, to bring out histories that are a part of the abstracted visual space of images, often in ambient and assumed ways.

Ontological discussions of cinema do not often concern themselves with questions of geopolitics. This is one of the fault lines I identify in disciplinary thinking around cinematic space. In writing a book about spatial film historiographies, I had to take on the discipline’s internal segmentation of ideas. Films discussed as exemplary cases of cinema’s ontology, and those used to theorize cinema, have typically been European, American, or at best auteurist, which makes it easy to think of all others as vernacular, or national, or particular, in variation from a universal template. As I note, a sustained interrogation of locations on film is a good opportunity to feel the rub of epistemic and territorial categorizations in film history and film theory. It gives us a chance to think about the “politics of location” in history and theory.

**NAIR:** How can the “analytic reshelving” [57] afforded by thinking spatially reorganize film archives? Could this have implications for how films are sorted—curated, made searchable, tagged—and who could be interested in them?

**JAIKUMAR:** Yes, absolutely. With colonial films, the reorganizational question is significant because categorization was so endemic to the colonial process. In India and Africa, people were assigned racial and caste categories as a part of extending a modern imperial dominion over them, and they have been blighted by it ever since. Moreover, colonization was central to the emergence of a politically active European bourgeoisie and their domestic support of liberal democracy. My point in that section of the book is that as we archive and digitize colonial films, we have to actively confront the legacies of Europe’s contradictory political affiliations. The cataloging and cross-referencing of the Colonial Film Archive does so remarkably well.

If I can open your question up beyond its reference to archives, my book as a whole aims to construct an alternative cartography or a remapping of India as a territory, through a scrutiny of its filmed locations. I am inspired by feminists, critical geographers, spatial-humanities scholars, artists, filmmakers, and activists who puzzle over the reorganization of bodies, societies, and imaginations, to make them more egalitarian, less hidebound. I have learned a lot about the need for “reshelving” from them.

**NAIR:** What would a holistic “spatial critique” entail, and what is at stake in leaving it unrealized?

**JAIKUMAR:** I am not proposing a “holistic” spatial critique so much as a heterotopic one. In Jorge Louis Borges’s story, the “Aleph”—the place from which all spaces can be beheld at the same time “without superposition and without transparency,” plunging the writing into “hopelessness”—is elusive and shattering. Similarly, the realization of a perspective from which we can see all the moving parts of cinematic and social space is impossible; it threatens to be too reductive or too totalizing when put into words. But here’s what the ambition suggests for historical writing on film: the need to consider space as an ontologically central but politically contingent and historically scattered force in cinema.

With this ambition, I try out a few things. First, with my focus on films shot on location in India, I look for the relations between filmed space, defined with precision by classical film theorists in relation to the cinematic vocabulary of shots, edits, camera movement, and mise-en-scène, and filmed space, which are the social spaces including profilmic spaces, the spaces of preproduction and production practices, and the circulating or stored afterlives of images. Second, I respond to the question “What is cinema?” by saying that
whether understood as stock or pixels, functionally cinematic technologies retain the paradoxical capacity to record profilmic objects as well as generate symbolic meanings. In so doing, they authorize certain intersections between what Henri Lefebvre charts (fluidly) as “physical, mental and social” worlds, in ways very particular to the medium.\(^\text{10}\) I track the spatiality of film across these material, social, and imagined registers to illustrate a range of spatial film historiographies that I hope will be of broad relevance to the field.

There are several excellent books in progress about spatial and geographical questions in film and media (and not just pertaining to location filming). I enter a very busy field. But beyond the particular historical and geographical cases we are all studying, I felt that there was a need to articulate the stakes, methods, and processes for spatial thinking in film history and theory.

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**Notes**

4. These films are housed at the British Film Institute (BFI), the Imperial War Museum (IWM), and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (now available at www.colonialfilm.org.uk).
8. “Sociospatial” is a term used by Edward Soja to analyze the ways in which society is space forming and space contingent. Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).