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# Lessons of Pause: Writing Media Histories in the Middle east and South Asia

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## Abstract

This essay considers stalled projects, inaccessible materials, flops, and other so-called failures in film scholarship that have occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I demonstrate that, rather than unique to the current moment, developments such as these are endemic to historiography in the Middle East and South Asia for reasons such as the contiguous regions' unique experiences with the chronologies of colonialism and capitalism. Drawing on work by scholars who have used junk, strikes, noise, and other perceived obstacles as generative in their methodologies, I propose pause as a concept for film historiography. With the tempo shift it requires, pause challenges timelines taken for granted in national cinema frameworks that prioritize male auteurs, innovation, and box-office hits. In addition to its potential as a critical tool for scholarship, pause proves urgent for framing contemporary dynamics of neoliberalism, academia, and scholarship during ruptures such as a global pandemic.

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In March 2020, Arabic newspapers reported on COVID-19's impact on the Egyptian film industry. An article entitled "Corona and Egyptian Cinema: Delay, Suspension, and Loss" considered several Egyptian films that were in different phases of (in) completion when the industry ground to a halt.<sup>1</sup> Some of the films were in post-production and had been expected to premiere during the lucrative *Eid al-fitr* holiday.<sup>2</sup> In other cases, filmmakers had just started filming, were waiting to start as soon as contracts with stars and producers had been signed, or were re-assessing their budgets in light of expected losses. Another newspaper reported that the Egyptian film industry, the "Hollywood on the Nile" and leader of cinema for decades across North Africa and the Middle East, faced a more severe financial crisis than the one brought about by the 2011 Revolution -- possibly the worst in its history.<sup>3</sup> Others made guesses about the industry's future, asking whether movie theaters would be obsolete when it was safe to attend films in person given the increasingly available options of digital platforms and online screenings. Turning to past examples, uncertain presents, and possible futures, journalists tried to understand the implications of the Egyptian film industry on pause.

How should media historiography consider indefinitely delayed projects? What do pauses like

those caused by the pandemic tell us about the history of cinema and various temporal trajectories, whether delays, cancellations, or destruction? And how might considering them productively challenge our assumptions of what constitutes historical evidence? In studies of early cinema in the American context, film historians have turned similar moments into generative methodologies. In outlining a method of historiography that takes failures, false-starts, and dead-ends seriously, Rick Altman has challenged the teleological and presentist ways of plotting a technology's history that are informed by capitalist narratives of success.<sup>4</sup>

In Egypt and other contexts of the Global South, forces such as colonialism and nationalism have also historically impacted how we understand the temporalities of cinema history. While methodologies such as those outlined by Altman have grown out of Foucault-inspired critiques of "linear narratives of technical progress," Rakesh Sengupta notes how these theories have not taken colonialism into account in their historic revisionism.<sup>5</sup> Sudhir Mahadevan reminds us of the influence of nationalism in histories of cinema in the Global South, noting how cinema's "ultimate consequences and legacies are darker, perhaps, more deeply entrenched in state power" and therefore different from the

market focused and innovation centric framings of cinema and modernity in the Global North.<sup>6</sup>

In the same way that nationalism influenced contemporaneous filmmakers, critics, and other film stakeholders, national frameworks have historically informed scholarly and popular understandings of cinemas outside of North America and Europe. In the Middle East and South Asia in the early twentieth century, national film industries became a powerful symbol of independence in their struggles with imperial powers and their competition with Hollywood and other film imports. In the face of doubts among colonizers as to whether a colony was capable of self-rule, cinema and its infrastructures provided evidence of a nascent nation's modernization.<sup>7</sup> In efforts to win the support of the state and cultural elites—something that became especially important with the increased expense of making film with synchronized sound—stakeholders promoted cinema as a respectable medium integral to nationalist aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

National aspirations have equally influenced the developments of film preservation and other archival practices. Efforts have often unfolded along the lines of sustaining a national narrative and at the exclusion of materials and bodies that do not align with state-sanctioned national narratives, such as co-productions, and filmmakers and personnel with hybrid identities.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to an indebtedness to national borders as an organizing, legitimizing, and archiving force, national cinema frameworks often uncritically depend on linearity, teleology, and other modern notions of time. They operate according to understandings of history and chronology embedded not just in modern conceptual structures of nation but also temporalities that have dictated the clocks of capitalism and imperialism.<sup>10</sup> The linear chronology upon which the story of the nation state is told developed in close conjunction with industrialization and colonialism, forces that the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions of the Global South have lived in uniquely material and violent ways. These were the same notions of time that cast the Global South as “places of incompleteness, the ‘not-yet’ of the West; it is the earlier state, temporally behind, and the constant reinforcement to prove the advanced West.”<sup>11</sup> The theoretical fusion of the technology of cinema

and the nation in national cinema frameworks has reinforced the modern notions of time undergirding media histories. North American and European film and media scholarship have historically bracketed cinemas in the Global South according to these national and colonially defined borders and reinforced the national and its chronologies. Many film history syllabi in the United States, for instance, often begin with the medium's trajectory in North America and Europe only to attend to other global contexts in their final weeks.

The tricky relationship among national cinema frameworks, time, and historical evidence is not new to scholars of media history in non-North American and European contexts given the material effects of historical methods' entanglement with imperialism. The national and its colonial predecessors have presented challenges to historians when it comes to the resources that comprise the archives of the histories they write: its scholarly frameworks, state narratives, chronologies, and prioritization of certain traces over others. On a logistical level, many early and mid-century films and other materials are missing, destroyed, or have not been kept or recorded in the first place. Even if extant, it can prove difficult for scholars to access materials as they have to negotiate the politics of state archives and potentially face certain risks for carrying out research in particular locations. How do film histories from the Global South bring other tools, directions, and conceptions of time to film historiography?

Thinking of alternative roots, timelines, and evidence is part and parcel of the historiography of film and other media in the Global South. Rather than frame failures or delays as dead-ends, scholars have reconsidered moments of discontinuity that open up possibilities for thinking about film history in new ways. Missing film texts and other perceived roadblocks have pushed scholars to think beyond approaches that prioritize certain historical evidence and to consider absence critically. As Neepa Majumdar notes, issues such as the absence of film texts teach “us a new kind of textual attentiveness that cannot rely on notions of a bounded text or even a definitive single text.”<sup>12</sup>

Here, I pause on Majumdar's use of textual attentiveness. Rather than coming to foreclosing conclusions to which one may arrive in the absence of a text, Majumdar takes a reflexive tempo shift.

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Similar to the way in which one would press pause on a video or audio recording, Majumdar temporarily halts the onward march towards a finite confusion of dead-end to consider constructive directions of inquiry along a different time vector.

In this essay, I bring focus to the work of scholars on cinemas in the Middle East and South Asia to propose 'pause' as a concept for media historiography. Through a positive approach to pause, scholars bring attention to assumptions about time that challenges traditional historiographies of cinema and its industries. Drawing on experiences of the Global South, they question the dominance of the national, its chronologies and implicit assumptions of linear progress, and capitalist-influenced understandings of what constitutes legitimate evidence. Pause offers a tool with which to consider chronology in different ways and to help us challenge a "capitalist appetite for novelty" that often informs media studies.<sup>13</sup> In the following section, I theorize a method of pause by putting into conversation the work of scholars who employ temporalities that challenge capitalist and nationalist narratives and its accompanying understandings of gender. Afterwards, I return to forgotten stories of past pauses and failures across the Middle East and South Asia to put a historiography of pause into practice.

### Theorizing Pause Through Noise, Junk, and Strikes

Given a disenchantment with positivist cinema histories in the 1980s, scholars in the Global North turned to postmodern historiographical methods such as media archaeology.<sup>14</sup> Those working in the Global South, however, came to parallel histories of cinema through postmodern methods out of necessity.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the absence of extant films, assumptions of prioritization and hierarchies of knowledge have long dictated library acquisitions and digitization in the United States and other archive-rich places of the Global North. The fact that optical character recognition (OCR) remains limited when it comes to sources written in non-Roman alphabets underscores and reinforces these imbalances. Through their work with evidence initially perceived as obstacles, scholars of cinemas in the Global South have used pause as an opportunity to expand film historiographical methods. Pausing

on damage to film objects, idiosyncratic media circulations, alternative forms of authorship and gendered bodies on strike, these scholars evade one-dimensional industrial, capitalist, and national narratives that have undergirded the histories of cinemas with which they work.

Earlier film histories of the Global South often revolved around technological firsts and what they represented to narratives of national progress and innovation. The first sound films produced in national languages have therefore been major points on cinema timelines in national cinema histories. The first Persian talkie *Dokhtar-e Lor* ("The Lor Girl", 1933) is an example of how the nexus of progress, modernization, and nationalism have influenced the chronologies of film history. Made in Bombay in collaboration between an Iranian expatriate and Parsi industrialist and film pioneer Ardeshir Irani, *The Lor Girl* has provided an influential structuring device for histories of Iranian cinema given its status as the first Persian talkie. What proves unique methodologically about *The Lor Girl* for historians is the fact that it exists. In addition to a copy hidden away in the National Film Archives of Iran, a version of *The Lor Girl* is on YouTube for all to access.<sup>16</sup> However, this YouTube version of this presumably ideal piece of historical evidence is filled with distortions and other signs of VHS decay. These material blemishes and warped sounds potentially detract from the film's narrative, technological uniqueness, and the novelty of the fact that this is the first sound film in Persian. They also distract the viewer from the progression of the film's linear narrative.

In an essay on *The Lor Girl*, Blake Atwood pauses on these blips and blurs of the version of the film uploaded to YouTube from VHS to understand a dimension of Iranian cinema often obscured by the national and its chronologies of success and triumph. Rather than lament and accuse the blemishes of preventing access to the film, Atwood frames them as opportunities. In fact, they reveal a history of access and "point us to a material history of *The Lor Girl* that operates at a different pace than the usual tempo of Iranian film history."<sup>17</sup> Atwood uses the literal mechanism of pause that digital technology affords, pausing the YouTube video to examine its blemishes such as traces of a scratch to the original celluloid and specks of dust. Atwood draws on these

distortions now embedded in the digital version to uncover a history of access that complicates linear, nationalist narratives of Iranian cinema.<sup>18</sup>

*The Lor Girl* itself tells a story of the birth of modern Iran with a chronology determined by the nation state and its role as a harbinger of progress, industrialization, and modernization in the 1930s. The film is a tale of love between Golnar (Sedique Saminejad) and Jafar (Abdolhossein Sepanta) in the twilight years of the corrupt and decrepit Qajar Dynasty Iran when provinces near the borders with modern day Iraq were susceptible to chaos. It is in this context that a government soldier named Jafar is sent to this border region to subdue Arab bandits who are wreaking havoc. There Jafar meets Golnar, a woman who was captured by bandits as a child and now has the demeaning job of dancer for the male patrons of a café. Jafar initially encounters Golnar when he comes to her rescue when an Arab sheikh attempts to rape her in the middle of the night. A series of chase scenes ensue in which Golnar proves her courage and bravery as she outsmarts the bandits and saves Jafar from captivity. Finally, the couple manages to escape the danger of Qajar Iran and flee by boat to Bombay. Afterwards, we see the couple in their grand home in the colonial city wearing modern haircuts and outfits. Intertitles inform us of the spectacular changes that have taken place in Iran while Jafar and Golnar have been in exile now that a new shah has come to power. While the film had initially positioned Golnar as strong and brave in her interactions with the bandits, Golnar in the final scene is subdued, quiet, and associated with the bourgeois domestic space of the home and European-associated pursuits (Figure 1).

As communicated by the film's plot, the film's conception of history is accompanied by dangerous anti-Arab politics, narrow definitions of Iranian identity, and rigid gender norms that restrict its female heroine. Shifting away from temporalities of modernity to think about the existence of *The Lor Girl* on YouTube through pause, Atwood brings into question the primacy of film texts in hierarchies of evidence in histories of media industries. Pausing to consider dimensions beyond the text challenges dangerous exclusionary narratives that accompany the national – narratives that dovetailed with official efforts to establishment a modern nation state in Iran at the time.



Figure 1: Golnar plays the piano and Jafar sing a song praising Iran and the shah's new reforms from their modern home in colonial Bombay. Series nab, "فیلم دختر لر Dokhtare Lor 1312," YouTube Video, 1:27:20, March 30, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6r3fUtsrPY>

In reflecting on a surge in scholarship on *The Lor Girl*, Atwood points to how access and availability of certain film texts have structured and potentially skewed canons of national cinema histories. Through the film's blemishes, Atwood narrates a history of Iranian cinema that does not follow a trajectory of technological firsts and national triumphs. Instead, he tells one of limited access and failure of national film policy. This history starts at the National Film Archives of Iran in 2016, then moves to a period of identity crisis for Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution and the burning of pre-revolution films and ends with the informal circulation of illegal video cassette tapes in an underground network in the 1980s. Through this material version of *The Lor Girl*, Atwood maps a history of failures of access, technology, and state policy in ways that critique linear narratives of progress and offer alternative temporalities for the study of Iranian cinema. In tracing the film's provenance through his archaeology of access, Atwood reveals a dimension of *The Lor Girl* obscured when sole attention is paid to the bounded film text.

Through pausing on scratches and other material traces that may initially seem like obstacles to the enjoyment of a linear narrative, we can begin to create a methodology that intrinsically complicates the national and technological chronologies of industrial success and innovation undergirding national film industry histories. Pause is a tool with which to interrogate notions of time embedded in the capitalist mode of the film business, such as ideal tempos and trajectories of circulation and distribution. In his work on the

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afterlives of what he calls “junk” prints, Kaveh Askari pauses to consider the asynchronous directions and temporalities of the circulation of Hollywood films into Iran in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A term that emerged in industrial modernity with the increased circulation of goods, junk is a “slur upon the pristine efficiency associated with modern industrialism... [its] visibility offends because it is nonsynchronous material.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than thinking of junk negatively, Askari considers how old celluloid films or “junk prints” appeared in Iranian theaters years after their release in the United States in order to re-think the temporalities and archives of Hollywood that have cast the California-based industry as the central example of the industrial mode of film production. By pausing on these film’s idiosyncratic timelines and geographies, Askari complicates narratives of modernity as a process of speeding up that have framed the cinema and its attendant cultures in the Global South. In these afterlives of film circulation—uncontainable by Hollywood as films crossed borders and became untraceable—Askari complicates how we understand circulation as a linear trajectory from origin to destination.<sup>20</sup>

A historiography of pause in the Global South also requires consideration of the embodied experiences of film personnel. As Sengupta reminds us in his critique of material-focused postmodern methods such as media archaeology, the Global South has faced “human costs of accelerated automation” in ways much greater than in the Global North. As such, film historians should “radically write the human back into media histories” such as through the consideration of unseen film labor.<sup>21</sup> In tracking the afterlives of Hollywood films as they circulated idiosyncratically into Iran, Askari considers the unseen labor of Iranian below-the-line sound designers of mid-century commercial Iranian films. Working years before the rise of respected composers in Iran in the 1960s, these sound designers created film scores by drawing on an archive compiled by studios and its sound editors of imported commercial recordings. Askari takes seriously these designers’ work of creating soundtracks from found sound that circulated into Iran through Hollywood junk prints before the rise of so-called professional composers. In doing so, he challenges notions of authorship that have been informed by individual, capitalist understandings of inventors and auteurs.

How does pause bring our attention to

gendered labor, invisible in many contexts given the fact that the kind of work performed by women in the film industry has not been considered labor?<sup>22</sup> In an essay on female labor and Bombay cinema in the 1930s, Debashree Mukherjee considers pause as it manifests in the bodies of film workers in the wider context of robust anti-colonial and industrializing efforts towards consolidation of the Indian film industry in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> To do so, Mukherjee invokes an article that actress Shanta Apte wrote and published in 1940 about her experiences in cinema. She also brings attention to a hunger strike that Apte performed in 1939 in which she protested her ill treatment at the hands of the directors of the Prabhat Studios in Poona. Apte staged her hunger strike outside the film studio and symbolically next to the studio’s clock, attracting large crowds and the attention of local and international newspapers. Through her strike, Apte demonstrated how the body of an actress is “vulnerable to depletion” and that the star body “participates in everyday rhythms of energy and exhaustion.”<sup>24</sup> Mukherjee invokes Apte’s paused body to expose the extractive capitalist mode of the film business, “where labor must be relegated to the fringes of recognition.”<sup>25</sup> Here, the paused body—whether on strike, exhausted, or otherwise not participating in the demands of industry—acts as evidence contrary to the expectations of work, efficiency, and productivity under capitalism. Although potentially understood as an obstacle towards the completion of a film text, a paused body serves to circumvent industrial discourses that assume a temporality of unlimited progress and expect a machine-level output of its workforce.

Thinking of Apte’s paused body in gendered terms, moreover, we can understand how a historiography of pause brings critical feminist perspectives to the patriarchal and capitalist narratives embedded in national cinema frameworks. As in many other contexts, film histories have given focus to the great male auteurs and heroes of cinemas in the Middle East and South Asia. Historians have mostly focused on female film personnel, meanwhile, in terms of stardom and rarely as it concerns their off-screen labor. Scholars have demonstrated the ways in which female stars have provided sites and sights for demonstrating national identity and

respectability in national cinema frameworks.<sup>26</sup> In the context of 1930s Bombay that Mukherjee discusses in her essay, for instance, the spectacle of the singing-female body of the female actress was “a marker of the vitality of an indigenous industry and nation on the cusp of political independence.”<sup>27</sup> Despite the visibility of the actress on screen, public discourse obfuscated her labor through focus on her glamor and in suggesting a continuity between on and off-screen words.<sup>28</sup> Through her act of pause, however, Apte disrupted understandings of stardom that were in line with industrial and national inspirations. She drew attention to harmful labor practices in the male-dominated industry and challenged the nationalist and capitalist-industrialist framing that relegated women to the immaterial realm of the representational.<sup>29</sup> In her pause from film work, moreover, Apte took time to write about cinema and adopted the powerful role of the theorizer of the conditions in which she worked.

With the temporal shift it requires, a historiography of pause brings reflexive attention to the vectors of industry, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism that have undergirded traditional methods of film history writing. In momentarily stopping the march of a seemingly linear narrative and the continuous output of industry, pausing compels us to consider our past and future presents from different temporal frameworks. Blips, blurs, dust, scratches, and other signs of material decay that detract from a film’s narrative provide important parallels to capitalist narratives of innovation and progress. Idiosyncratic circulations of junk prints and their afterlives in new contexts complicate film periodization, understandings of distribution, and the official archives and authors of powerful industries such as Hollywood. Paused bodies make visible industry’s exploitative labor practices and the gendered contours of its capitalist and nationalist machinations. In what follows, I consider cancelled and delayed film projects, thrown-away films, and censorship in the Middle East and South Asia through a historiography of pause. I demonstrate how these pauses point to possibilities and temporalities that defy the restrictive and seemingly inevitable narratives of nationalism and its capitalist and patriarchal undercurrents.

### Pause in Practice: Delayed and Cancelled Projects

In 2001, Iranian filmmaker and actor Parviz Khatibi recalled the early years of filmmaking in Iran when they lacked the infrastructure to make sound films. Before the late 1940s, Iranian filmmakers traveled to neighboring industries such as those in Egypt and India as they could be potential bases of operations. Khatibi recalls that a member of the Egyptian film studio Studio Misr traveled to Iran in the mid-1940s hoping to recruit actors to make a film version of the epic Persian tale *Rustam va Subhrāb* into Persian and Arabic in Cairo. At the time of the agent’s visit, Khatibi was an actor in a theater version of the tale and so was cast to be in the film version, as well. What Khatibi hoped would be the first of many others, the film would be exported to Iran and other places in the region, bring stardom to Khatibi and his fellow actors, and represent a step towards the establishment of an Iranian national cinema. Khatibi and his fellow Iranian actors who were to star in *Rustam va Subhrāb* eagerly anticipated their upcoming trip to Egypt. Yet to their disappointment, they never made it to Cairo. The procurement of visas became suddenly impossible due to a conflict that arose between Israel-Palestine and Egypt, most likely the result of Israel’s declaration of independence in 1948 and subsequent partition of Palestine.<sup>30</sup>

Trans-regional projects in the Middle East and South Asia have often faced moments of pause or uncertain futures. In one case, a cholera outbreak in Egypt prevented a group of Iranian voice-actors from traveling to Cairo to dub films into Persian. In India, plans to create Iranian-Indian co-productions and to dub Indian films into Persian were stalled due to the declaration of Indian independence and subsequent partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Although many transregional co-productions and collaborations came to fruition, stories of cancellation are rarely anomalies in histories of cinema in the Middle East and South Asia. The cholera outbreak in Cairo and the effect of nationalist events such as the partitions of Palestine in 1948 and India in 1947 on attempts to make and dub Persian-language films in Egypt and India reveal the various networks that undergird national film industries. Similar to the way in which system breakdowns make us aware of the otherwise invisible infrastructures that support our daily

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lives, pause reveals connections otherwise taken for granted through its asynchronous temporality.

Pause brings our attention to the way in which so-called national film industries in the Global South were dependent for their emergence and success on infrastructures that defied increasingly policed and consolidating borders. These networks -- layered upon each other through previous centuries of trade and exchange before and during colonialism and anti-colonial movements -- challenge the inevitability of national frameworks as a geographical and temporal structuring device for film historiography. Cancellations and other perceived failures as a result of nationalist sentiment point to the national's role in foreclosing certain cinematic futures. These paused and ultimately failed projects highlight the way in which film industries emerged out of transnational networks. Their national framings grew out of exclusionist narratives and violent declarations of independence were not actually inescapable.

Even if successfully produced, censorship has also paused the distribution and circulation of films in the Middle East and South Asia. In 1937, Egyptian female filmmaker, scriptwriter, production company owner, musician and actress Bahiga Hafez released her film *Layla, bint al-sabrah* ("Layla, Daughter of the Desert") (Figure 2) in British occupied Egypt. Based on the famous Layla and Majnun story that is popular in Middle East and South Asia literary traditions and that inspired many early films across the region, the film tells the story of an Arab poetess named Layla who is kidnapped by the King of Persia. Before her sweetheart ultimately rescues her, Layla suffers humiliation at the hands of the Persian king. Before its release in Egypt, the film premiered at the Venice film festival in 1937 around the same time as the engagement of Egyptian Princess Fawzia to future Iranian shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. Due to the perceived parallels between the film and the upcoming marriage, the film was thought to promote anti-Iranian sentiment. In response to the film's release, the Iranian government threatened to withdraw diplomats from British colonies if the British did not ban *Layla, Daughter of the Desert* and prevent its circulation across the empire. The British blocked distribution to Palestine and India in 1937, and in 1938 the French did the same in Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia.<sup>31</sup> With her

film forbidden from appearing on film screens in Egypt and across the Middle East, Hafez lost the small fortune she had put into its production.<sup>32</sup> Although the film was removed from theaters at the time, its current existence in fragments on YouTube suggest that a copy may still be extant. Through censorship, the life of the film *Layla*,



Figure 2: Film poster for *Layla, Daughter of the Desert*. The photo in the bottom right corner depicts characters from the film, the King of Persia and Arab poetess Layla. The pair were thought to parallel contemporaneous Egyptian Princess Fawzia and future shah of Iran Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. "*Layla bint al-sabrah*" Youm 7, August 4, 2020 <http://www.youm7.com/4911981>

*Daughter of the Desert* was put to a premature end and Bahiga Hafez's career damaged. Similar to the fates of the cancelled Egyptian-Iranian and Indian-Iranian co-productions, the censorship of *Layla, Daughter of the Desert* meant that the film and this work of female producer Bahiga Hafez would barely appear in histories of Egyptian cinema. But framing this failure through pause, the circumstances surrounding the release of *Layla, Daughter of the Desert* reveal the dynamics of the distributional networks connecting the nascent Egyptian sound film industry to markets in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. In pointing to the significance of the film's potential release in several contexts, its pause challenges colonial mappings that separate the Middle East from South Asia, and the Arab world from non-Arabic speaking nations such as

Iran. Even in the excitement of the emergence of national film industries, the move by the British to block distribution of the film reiterates colonialism's simultaneously limiting and enabling influence on the movement of films in the region. The film's censorship underscores the unique role that colonialism played in determining success and dominance in the Global South.

The unfortunate provenance of film texts can reveal other dynamics otherwise obscured in patriarchal genealogies of cinema. In some cases, productions that defied consolidating national boundaries such as Abdolhossein Sepanta and Ardeshir Irani's *The Lor Girl* were successfully produced and screened to enthusiastic audiences. The film was one of several Persian talkies made by the Iranian expatriate Sepanta during his time in India in the 1930s, though subsequent films he made featured a new female star, Fakhrozzaman Jabbar Vaziri. In an interview with her in the United States decades after her work as an actress, Jabbar Vaziri spoke about her time acting in early Persian talkies.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the interview, Vaziri was asked whether she had copies of any of the films in which she had starred. "I had them," she replied, "but I threw all of them out." The films she destroyed could have unlocked secrets of the first Persian talkies and other early films produced by the Indian film industry in ways similar to *The Lor Girl*. Given that they were in Jabbar Vaziri's possession and not in the inaccessible National Film Archives of Iran, the films could have been made available to film historians.

This perceived obstacle is an opportunity to pause to consider why Jabbar Vaziri would destroy the now coveted copies of the film in which she starred. Earlier in the films, Jabbar Vaziri discussed the abusive treatment she received at the hands of the director and scriptwriter, Sepanta. "I now believe that had Sepanta treated me differently I could still be in the industry today." Jabbar Vaziri expressed conflicting feelings about her acting experiences in general. Although she remembered how much she enjoyed starring in films, she believed that people treated her adversely for the rest of her life for having done so. In Iran and other contexts in the region, acting had been widely considered a disreputable profession for women. Like Apte and the other female stars Debashree Mukherjee writes about in the film industry in

1930s Bombay, those who pursued careers on the silver screen sometimes suffered unfortunate and sometimes violent condescension in their offscreen lives. Jabbar Vaziri's decision to destroy the films in which she starred brings these experiences to the fore in historiographical considerations of the early films of a burgeoning film industry. Pausing to understand why Jabbar Vaziri threw away the films brings feminist considerations to film historiography in ways that the films themselves as bounded texts may not have. Rather than examples of technological firsts, nationalist feats, and apolitical cultural exchange, the first Persian talkies as destroyed by Jabbar Vaziri center the experiences of female labor in the male-dominated industry.

## Conclusion

Framing indefinitely postponed projects, instances of censorship, and destruction of film texts through pause brings our attention to the limiting national frameworks that have often determined the study of films in non-Hollywood contexts. National frameworks often depend on the existence and accessibility of film texts, box office hits, and festival awards for scholars to analyze. Given the limitations of the national, the absence or inaccessibility of film texts and moments of pause have had *productive* implications. Framing these idiosyncratic circulations, stalled projects, or damaged evidence generatively through pause, we can consider possibilities that are foreclosed in capitalist, patriarchal and nationalist-informed chronologies. Pause may signal a temporary break in momentum, but it questions the tendency to idealize momentum in historiography. As such, it represents a threshold from which to consider "new pathways for circulation and invention that circumvent the temporality of linear progress."<sup>34</sup> In other words, pause encourages us to think of possibilities, mobilities, and identities that nationalist and capitalist narratives cast as impossible. As a methodology, pause forefronts chronology and temporality as a component of historiography not to be taken for granted. In addition to its potential as a critical tool for scholarship, pause proves urgent for framing contemporary dynamics of neoliberalism, academia, scholarship and university structures during ruptures such as a global pandemic.

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Notes

1 Muhammad Jabbir, “Kūrūnā’ wa al-sīnamā al-miṣriyya: ta’jil wa tawqif wa takhfid,” *al-‘arabi al-jadid*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%22%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7%22-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AE%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B6>

2 *Eid al-fitr* is a holiday that marks the end of Ramadan and has historically been the most important and lucrative time of the year for the film industry. The date of the holiday changes every year as it corresponds to the lunar, Muslim *hijri* calendar.

3 “ḍarba jadīda wa “khasār kabīra” lil-sīnamā al-miṣriyya bissabab firūs kūrūnā,” *France24*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20200828-%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7>

4 Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 17.

5 Rakesh Sengupta, “Towards a Decolonial Media Archaeology: The Absent Archive of Screenwriting History and the Obsolete Munshi” *Theory, Culture & Society*, (July 2020), 2, DOI: 10.1177/0263276420930276

6 Sudhir Mahadevan, *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of Cinema in India* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 6.

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8 Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

9 Works that focus on hybrid and otherwise non-mainstream identities in national cinema histories include: Deborah A. Starr *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema*; Golbarg Rekabtalaei *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History*, Claire Cooley, “Soundscape of a National Cinema Industry: *Film-farsi* and its Sonic Connections With Egyptian and Indian Cinemas, 1940s-1960s,” *Film History*, 32 no. 3 (Fall 2020): 56

10 Stefan Tanaka; *History without Chronology*. *Public Culture* 1 January 2016; 28 (1 (78)): 161–186. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-3325064>

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12 Majumdar, Neepa. “What Is “Early” Cinema?” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 54, no. 2 (2013): 138. doi:[10.1353/frm.2013.0015](https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.2013.0015)

13 Bhaskar Sarkar, “Tracking Global Media in the Outposts of Civilization,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43.

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tube.com/watch?v=X6r3fUtsrPY

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19 Kaveh Askari, "An Afterlife of Junk Prints: Serials and Other 'Classics' In late-1920s Tehran" in *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space* eds. Jennifer M. Bean, Laura Horak, Anupama Kapse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 101.

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25 Mukherjee, 30.

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27 Mukherjee, 22.

28 Mukherjee, 30.

29 Mukherjee, 40.

30 Parvis Khatibi, *Khāterātī az hunarmandān* (Tehran, Iran: Mo'in, 1390 [2001]). 363.

31 Marlé Hammond, "If only al-Barrāq could see...': Violence and Voyeurism in an Early Modern Reformulation of the Pre-Islamic Call to Arms," in *Warfare and Poetry in the Middle East 216*

32 Rebecca Hillauer, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 30.

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