Book Review

Cooper, Timothy. *Moral Atmospheres: Islam and Media in a Pakistani Marketplace*. 288pp. Columbia University Press 2024.

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Timothy P.A. Cooper's book Moral Atmospheres: Islam and Media in a Pakistani Marketplace is an incredibly rich book that details the Lahore-based circulation and politics of Pakistani visual media. The work pays careful attention to the ambiguities and contradictions of traders of media along Hall Road and its adjoining streets in Lahore as they respond to public demand and navigate their own religious views about their wares. The book offers a generative account of how markets and morality are linked in producing what Cooper describes as affective atmospheres, or mahaul, that cohere around media and shape the environments in which they circulate.

Cooper is a master of atmospheric metaphors. It is through these that the reader gets a taste for mahaul as being like a terroir, "the product of human cultivation and disturbance"(2), "containers which, like earthenware jars, retain the temperature of their contents"(11), or again as "a palimpsestic surface that retains the trace of moral debates, assertions of ownership, and censorship" (33). In his introduction, Cooper draws on these sensorial elements not only to familiarize the reader with the specific media objects and interlocutors that anchor his work, but also to argue that these key terms (atmosphere, threshold, interfaces) help us better understand transcendent phenomena and experiences of ethical life.

What emerges from his ethnographic descriptions helps illuminate Lahori traders and the public's experiences of media, ones so often occluded by facile debates on the Islamic permissibility/impermissibility of images and image making, the legality/illegality of pirated media, or the authenticity/inauthenticity or realness/fakeness of media objects. Rather than seeing the actions of media traders on Hall Road as inconsistent or contradictory, this atmospheric approach allows the reader to gain a clearer understanding of the different intensities and changes

occurring in urban Lahore. The book's detailed accounts of urban media place their presence in the wider context of their built environment, socio-political histories and sometimes dissonant religious milieux.

The book is organized into six thematic chapters that each build significantly on ideas and interlocutors introduced in preceding sections. The first chapter offers an impressive introduction to Pakistani film history and an overview of debates around binary understandings of film and the moving image in Islamic jurisprudence and in local lore. The common understanding of decline in the film industry is paired with perceptions of a turn in public opinion and "demand" toward more pious orientations. Interrogating two cardboard signs found in the wake of a demonstration by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan that read "Film actress pictures are haram" and "From film pictures to the fires of hell" (39), the chapter explores the patriarchal norms that shape the "epistemology of film labour" and the "ontology of the film image" which Cooper argues animate the mahaul of contemporary debates about this im/permissibility.

Chapter two explores the concept of demand in relation to atmosphere. "Common sense" is a key idea here, one that Cooper situates as currently being "mediated in the relationship between merchant traders and religious organization" (74), drawing on the work of Aasim Sajjad Akhtar (2018). Another concept that emerges is demand as an "alibi"; a description that elucidates how agency is displaced away from the personal and into public opinion on questions of morality. The chapter's detour into the Punjab Archives initially struck this reader as a distraction. However, Cooper ties together his experiences in the government's archive to the practices of current film board and past colonial officials' censorship efforts and then contrasts these with the passionate collection of film memorabilia by private citizens and the role of the market

in responding to demand. This method allows Cooper to compare the lack of policy—sometimes purposeful—from official channels with the informal archival practices by traders themselves and by audiences. He argues that the latter, often passing through transnational networks of distribution, animate not only his own archive, but the very experience of these media within Lahore. He carefully demonstrates how this leaves the authority of legitimation for what circulates (and doesn't) in the hands of the public. The elaboration of "threshold" as the key frame in chapter three is the most sustained and theoretically generative element of the text. In mining this polyvalent term, Cooper draws on the concept's anthropological genealogy, namely in the work of anthropologists of religion, by peeling apart two semantic uses. The first marks a frontier or spatial boundary (often of the sacred from the mundane) while the second speaks to "the magnitude of mood and awe" or the "intensity" of experience (113). Cooper convincingly argues that it is this latter element that must be studied, helping us to move beyond binaries such as those mentioned above; the value of this approach continues to manifest itself across the later chapters. Important here too is the earlier reference to the moral threshold brought into existence through the Hudood Ordinances (from the singular hadd meaning limit or threshold).

From discussing urban planning of small streets, road expansions, smog, AC units and loadshedding to USB power banks, mobile internet connections, VR sets and apps (including for tracking power outages), the chapter's dizzying twists and turns mirror the streets and alleys of Cooper's field site, with the convergences of film and more ambient media revealing a great deal about the nature of mahaul in the process. For example, Cooper highlights how air conditioning has, since the late colonial period, been used to intentionally mark cinemas' and cinemagoers' class positions. And, it is the lack of adequate AC, that is purportedly responsible for the irreversible damage to Radio Pakistan's archived recordings.

Chapter four offers a richly textured account of Shi'i media practices and the ways that majoritarian control over media markets more broadly engage (and contest) the presence of the religious minority group's distinctive media objects, their forms and the rhythms of public demand during the month of Muharram, and specifically the day of Ashura. The threshold reappears here in the form of majoritarian and minority communal tensions that have grown and persist in the public sphere. As other anthropologists of religion and media have discussed, questions of mediation, intimacy, authenticity, presence and immediacy are all central to the situated ways that mediation is experienced by Shi'i (and non-Shi'i) during Muharram. What stands out is how the "moral exception" of Muharram, a term borrowed from Schielke (2009) and repurposed to discuss competing values of presence and absence (another binary),

helps Cooper unlock a more capacious understanding of how atmospheres shape experience.

The focus of chapter five turns to the work of competing trade guilds within the wider media marketplace around Hall Road, linking politics, religious convictions and urban life. Reflecting on heritage and authenticity in the linked contexts of urban infrastructures and media, Cooper prods at the binary of kacha (temporary/informal) and pakka (fixed/formal), by discussing qabza (encroachment), an essential part of the spatial and aspirational politics of local business groups, for example the Khidmat trade association, in relation to the informal economy and piracy that define the media circulated by these traders. Attending to these embodied urban and ethical aspects of media circulation pushes Cooper's analysis beyond economic understandings of this informal media market and helps anchor these processes to the situated politics and discourses of these spaces.

In the final chapter, some aspects of the history of film archiving, the Shalimar Recording Company and arrival of the VHS (190-193) might have been useful for readers if placed earlier in the book as they offer a great deal of context, but here they set up the important concept of Master Copy. Along with vendors' faces (affixed on stores as indices of trustworthiness) and markers of Shi'i authenticity on media objects, Cooper focuses on Master Copies to show that value is apportioned in mutable ways that are rarely linked to audiovisual quality alone. The mediation of any particular film leaves its own distributed traces that inscribe value for publics and help constitute wider moral atmospheres.

This final chapter draws together earlier discussions of thresholds, politics and publics, by turning to material aspects of media and the moral atmospheres that cohere around them. Interfaces, drawing on Goody (1987), McLuhan (1962), and Scolari (2019), are summed up as "the common overlap between two otherwise separate practices" (184). The material qualities of media, whether it be noise, compression, provenance of reproduction, aesthetics of a film's cover (or what other films it shares disc space with), storage format and so forth constitute these interfaces for Cooper. His point is a methodological one. The breadth of his objects of study and the richness of his analysis makes this proposition persuasive. The attention to relational elements that link media objects to socio-political happenings and moral atmospheres allow for a capacious yet incisive appraisal of practices that appear separated temporally, spatially, materially, by scale, or in moral, ethical terms.

The vantage point of Idris, one of Cooper's recurring interlocutors who had recently returned from more than a decade in the Gulf and was now working with his family's

store, Durrani Electronics, is particularly useful in this regard. His reflections best highlight the interconnection of how wider infrastructural change and a quickly transforming media environment converge in constituting new ambient conditions. In my own work in Karachi, I observed similar changes at the Rainbow Centre and the adjacent Empress market, before and after the 2018 anti-encroachment demolitions that Cooper highlights as having also alarmed the traders in Lahore. The concepts of threshold, interface, and atmosphere allow for a rich account that links political economic aspects of urban life with the more culturally imbued aspects, whether these are hegemonic aspects of patriarchal public morality, or pluralistic perspectives on cultural heritage, religious media, and labour.

In his writing, Cooper weaves together an incredible array of actors and distinctive spaces, even as many of these are located within the same market space. The images throughout the chapters are also an important affective addition to the text, particularly for readers who may not have directly experienced spaces like Hall Road, the aesthetics of South Asian media, or the affects of these moral atmospheres. These are also evoked through further metaphor: "computer parts, computer mouses that hung like meat in a butcher's shop" (111) and "power pylons with their clusters of wiring, like date fronds heavy with fruit" (107) that bring the reader into the lanes and shop spaces along Hall Road.

In addition to its compelling focus on ethics and the atmosphere of media, the book provides a useful reflection on material concerns. From Idris's preoccupation with his inner being, tabeeyat, and his uncle's frustration that such perspectives are not for labourers to the ambient inequities of the working-class neighbourhoods and those of their employers on the other side of a major thoroughfare, the subjects in the book reveal the material and class-based aspects of atmospheres. Early in the text, Cooper explains that "what atmospheres and thresholds are most concerned with is alterity" (24) drawing from the philosophical work of Inayat Khan (1988), but he later goes further by arguing that this atmosphere, mahaul, "has a politics" (123). Scholars keen to find place for both religious life and historical materialism in their work have a great deal to gain from this approach.

In sum, the book is an important contribution to historical, religious, and media studies of Pakistan, South Asia, and the Global South, through its atmospheric approach to media. Cooper's efforts to locate and build from an environmental and infrastructural perspective toward a better understanding of affective moral experiences, aesthetics and subjectivities offer significant theoretical and methodological insights for scholars working on such approaches to informal media, media histories,

infrastructures and media convergences. With new media technologies and large media development projects as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) continuing to reshape everyday mediations for Pakistanis, holding onto the analytical frames from Moral Atmospheres will help guide future research by equipping scholars with the means to grasp the thresholds and interfaces of these changes.

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