

Joel Gordon – AIPS Travel Proposal

Movie Stars without Borders: Fashioning National Identity in Regional Studios/
Regional Identity in National Studios

I am interested in the ways in which film stars (as well as producers, directors and other creative figures) cross regional borders following the lure of dominant regional film industries and in doing so how they have been embraced by and at times become representative of the host nation, while becoming – or remaining – popular in a much wider cultural sphere. My frame of reference is the Arab world, in which Egypt has always been – and remains – the cultural and artistic center of Arabic-language film production and a draw for talent from other countries. As a result, Arabic-language movies historically have been Egyptian stories related in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, which is widely understood from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. But I will open the discussion to include a comparative lens toward the national and regional cinemas of South Asia.

Despite obvious linguistic, ethnic and religious differences, as well as the politics of decolonization, I believe there are intriguing parallels to explore within a network of scholars devoted to the study of South Asian media networks: the lure of opportunity that brought stars from throughout the Raj to Bombay cinema and the borders imposed and choices confronted by partition; the fluidity with which some major stars have often crossed over and between centers of Hindi, Urdu and Bengali production; the regional and global hegemony of an established commercial center; ways in which new identities at times needed (and at other times perhaps did not need) to be crafted to fit stylized norms; and the ways in which obvious outsiders posed – and were accepted – as insiders and what this has signified across cultural and political boundaries.