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The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and Visible in the Margins of Mumbai

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The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and Visible in the Margins of Mumbai

Abstract

This is a book review of *The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and Visible in the Margins of Mumbai* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Keywords

Mumbai, Bollywood, Film industry

Author Notes

Darshana Sreedhar Mini is a PhD Candidate at the Cinema and Media Studies Division, University of Southern California. Her dissertation explores the media publics and precarious labor formations in the soft-porn industry that emerged in the southern Indian state of Kerala in the 1990s.

Elison, William. *The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and Visible in the Margins of Mumbai*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

William Elison's *The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and the Visible at the Margins of Mumbai* (2018) explores how sacred symbols mediate ideas of "neighborhood" and belongingness in the space of Mumbai. Locating a range of religious artifacts from roadside shrines to identifiable markers of Sai Baba of Shirdi, *The Neighborhood of Gods* addresses how marginalized communities negotiate claims over urban space through religious images. The book locates visual culture as a vector that can mediate different understandings of social spaces. The Mumbai that Elison lays out before the readers is quite different from the glitz and glamor usually associated with Mumbai due to its proximity to the film industry of Bollywood. Instead, Elison locates the quotidian spaces that are mostly relegated as peripheral and brings into visibility the lives that are often assumed as part of the mundane aspects of city life. What assumes importance once we get into the nitty-gritties of the sociality that Elison lays out is the question of publics. Whether it be public interest, public culture, or publicness, there is an interesting way in which publics and legibility are entangled to create social imaginations of class. With new scholarship in film studies exploring spatial historiography such as Priya Jaikumar's *When Histories Reside: India as a Filmed Space* (2019), Elison's work and its focus on Filmistan Studios will be of immense interest to those working at the intersection of religion, space, and film. Moreover, *The Neighborhood of Gods* also expands the study of Indian studio systems put forth by a recent special issue on the Indian Studio System in *Wide Screen* (Vol. 8, No. 1, January 2019: ed. Hrishikesh Ingle) and works that focus on religion and film in ways similar to Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The distinction between *pakka* (cooked) and *kaccha* (raw) that Elison makes in the beginning of the book runs as a connective tissue throughout the work. He uses this opposition to

tease out the power dynamics that make the marginalized communities take up strategic postures and identities to leverage recognition from those in the positions of authority. The author's interest is governed by the processes through which what is seemingly *kaccha* is transformed to *pakka* amidst the influence of varying scales of visible and invisible power brokers. This processual turn is what makes *The Neighborhood of Gods* a meditation of different kinds of encounters, some between respondents, others between different modes of visual mediations. In foregrounding the different orders of space that resonate with his findings, Elison outlines a three-order model of spatial ordering that includes the official space, sacred space, and spectacularized space. While official space offers a rational scheme of calculability (drawing from Lefebvre's idea of rationalized space), sacred space houses the deities who are hosted alongside marginalized communities, and spectacularized space is marked by aspirational mobility (8).

The first chapter discusses Filmistan Studios, one of the leading production houses in the 1950s which is now reduced to sound stages and outdoor lots that are rented out to producers. Located in the city's suburbs, the organization of space in Filmistan Studios is dictated by the social importance and cultural capital that can mobilize different realms of visibility for the subjects. Using "light boys" as representative of the subaltern population, the author locates how they navigate between the fantastic modernity that Mumbai signifies and their own subjective location among the marginalized sections. Similar to the "flux, contradictions and ambiguities" (42) that Sandeep Pendse refers to in his discussion of "toilers," Elison's respondents engage with erecting and demolishing studio sets (44). Shuttling between the realms of creating illusions and breaking it down, the light boys inhabit the "visual mediation of the experience of space" (48). Another aspect that is addressed in this chapter is the existence of a village in the same space of

the studio that houses members of the Warli tribal community. The village also hosts a shrine of Waghoba, the tiger god that guards the outskirts of villages in tribal areas.

The second chapter teases out the varied ways the ideas of “Site, Sight and Cite” function in the case of religious markers used to signpost public spaces. While the author uses “site” to refer to the ethnographic observations where public and sacred ideas collide, “sight” refers to the responses that the roadside shrines have on the passersby, and “cite” refers to the discursive fields that such observations and analysis falls into (60). An interesting discussion here is the section Elison devotes to the varying patterns of “transient publics” mobilized by the wayside shrines that are erected in the public space to house deities and spirits (80). The author’s observations from the walking tour of South Mumbai where he visits many of these “illegal religious structures” (88) offer us a layered understanding of how the roles performed by the shrines vary from offering protection to their neighborhood to a bulwark against pedestrians relieving themselves. The discussion of *darshan* (the reciprocal, visual relationship between the deity and the devotee) allows the author to locate how deterritorialization, mass reproducibility of images, and public nature of roadside shrines demand a nuanced understanding of what falls beyond the traditional temple spaces. He also looks at the lawsuit that was filed at the Bombay High court when a citizen’s group took up a public interest litigation against the “illegal religious structures” in 2003.

The third chapter maps the Sai Baba of Shirdi, one of the predominant figures to feature in the street shrines and how these sites are able to capture a sacred quality that moves beyond the Hindu and Islamic affiliations attached to such a figure. Drawing on the larger conversation on *darshan* and engaging with Lacanian scholarship, Elison theorizes the encounter in *darshan* as a reciprocal recognition (114). One of the highlights of this chapter is the role of photography in *Shri Sai Satcharita*, the writings that shed light on Sai Baba’s life and teachings. Drawing from

the Peircean distinction between indexical and iconic modes of signification, the author argues that the indexical mode is fundamental to the subaltern spatial imaginary (118).

The fourth chapter, which the author describes as a companion piece to Chapter 1, takes the readers back to Filmistan Studios and emerges from the author's engagement with his local guide Vikas, a member of the Warli community. Through an ethnographic sketch, Alison unravels how Vikas places himself through the rights of customary law rather than political society. This chapter also locates the process of "*pakka*-fiction" (the process of formalizing and removing "raw" characteristics) through which a temple in the confines of the studio dedicated to a tribal goddess was converted into a Brahmanical one.

The fifth chapter locates the history of the Warlis, a tribal community in Maharashtra by locating how official discourses incorporate state anthropological studies to construct the identity of the tribal as that which is integrally connected to that of nature. The sixth chapter locates the inhabitants who occupy the wooded areas to the west of Filmistan and the addresses the public interest litigation filed for the eviction of the residents at the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The court ruled that those residents who could demonstrate that they are "bona fide tribals" (209) can stay and the rest of them have to vacate the premises. Expanding the nuances of category labels and bureaucratic red-tapism that complicates the identity formations of the marginal communities, the sixth chapter looks at the shifting conditions of production that accompanies the movement of Warli art from ritual contexts to transnational art markets.

With the rise of ethnic nationalism and right-wing Hindu fascism in India, Alison's study assumes a new relevance to critically look at varied shades of public assertions that make use of religious symbols to amass identity building in a deeply divided society. In the recent happenings in India in 2019-20, including the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, internet and

communication blackouts in Kashmir, and the curtailment of mobility and rights faced by the Muslim and *dalit-advansi* (indigenous) communities, the public manifestation of religion is a core question that demands thorough enquiry. Alison's intervention on the visual aspects of religion is remarkable as it locates the ruptures that allow the aestheticization of politics (something Walter Benjamin alludes to in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") to prevail amidst dominant imaginations.

While the book is mainly written in a lucid and readable style, readers would benefit from a clearer, more nuanced understanding of Alison's methodology. Alison terms his methodological approach "posttheological ethnography" (xi). While this is an interesting concept, this is an orientation that needs further explication to contextualize the historical specificities of where it emerges from. As the book intersects with other disciplinary fields such as film studies and urban studies, Alison's "posttheological ethnography" requires some translation for the uninitiated reader. This would also be a way of foregrounding the wider applicability of the framework, as the approach of "posttheological ethnography," one would imagine, might also be useful to ethnographers and scholars of religion located elsewhere. Such minor points aside, *The Neighborhood of Gods* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on religion and film and makes a crucial contribution to South Asian Studies, Anthropology of Religion, Visual Culture, Film and Religion and Urban Studies.