

Effect of Visuality of Indian Cinema on Society and Individual Psychology

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Visuality simply means the state or property of being visual. The word was coined by a Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle. These days the term is much used in the field of visual culture which includes films, sculptures, paintings etc. Cinema is an immensely popular element of visual culture.

It embraces limitless possibilities for the expression and representation of ideas, especially in a country like India with diverse languages, religions and cultures. Indian cinema binds this diversity in one common thread. It is not only a major source of entertainment but if deployed wisely, it has enormous potential of bringing about social changes.

Woodman Taylor in his essay, 'Penetrating Gazes: Sight and visual display in popular Indian cinema', talks about the meanings created by popular Indian cinema for their intended audiences. He identifies two notions of visuality. One is that of *drishti*, which is activated in the Indian religious context. "The deity gives *darshan* and the people take *darshan*" (Diana Eck). The other one is the notion of *Nazar* which is borrowed from Persianate poetry and is used for the exposition of love.

He focuses on how a shot taken from the camera, which shows the point of view of the actor or indeed the viewer, can affect the psychology of the viewer. In other words, in what manner can the gaze of the actor onscreen effect the viewer's point of view. It is a more focused way of asking the question that how far can mass media affect the behaviour of a nation.

This paper will take further, the discourse of Woodman Taylor on how the popular Indian cinema creates meanings for its viewers. It will try to tackle the question of how does visuality of Indian cinema affect the society and individual psychology. It will also dwell upon how Indian cinema can play a more meaningful role for the nation, by comparing the repercussions that the visuality of commercial and art cinema have on people, especially in the time frame of the last decade.

Whether 'art imitates life' or 'life imitates art' is an old debate. Is it just the films that affect the society or does the popular culture also affects the films? Historicist criticism in literary theory inclined to emphasize on life's influence on art (eg. Society's influence on films) and understated art's influence on life (eg. A film's influence on

society). But according to New Historicists, the relationship between art and life is bilateral. It is a two way process.

The society and cinema feed off one another and affect each other in a very complex manner. Let us see how Indian cinema has affected the society, culture and psychology of Indians.

Bollywood is the most important aspect of Indian cinema. Other branches include Tamil Cinema, Bhojpuri cinema, Parallel cinema etc. For years Bollywood has been affecting the popular culture of India. From the coming out of the bobby colour after the film Bobby to Salman Khan's hairstyle in the film Tere Naam and Kareena Kapoor's size zero figure in the film Tashan, Bollywood has never failed to sway the audience and act as a trendsetter for fashion and music sense of the nation.

Let's have a look at some of the Bollywood films from the last decade that helped in bringing about major cultural changes in India. Films like Girlfriend and Dostana brought forward the gay culture to the popular discourse. The film Dil Chahta Hai changed our perception of urban sensibilities through its proficient script. Anurag Kashyap in Dev D reconstructed the traditional Devdas with something more radical and modern. Some films by Amir Khan productions like Taare Zameen Par and Peepli Live have carved a niche for themselves and proved a helping hand in bringing about some significant changes in the mind-set of the people.

In the recent years the censorship laws have become quite liberal as compared to the earlier times when a film was not passed by the censor board because it filmed a rape scene.

This has directly affected the onscreen portrayal of women, violence, sex etc. It also gives birth to various stereotypes within the society. For instance, Kareena Kapoor's size zero avatar in the film Tashan, influenced the view around the country that being extremely thin is being beautiful and acceptable.

Objectification of women is a sad fact of Bollywood. It has always been a part of the visual tradition of Bollywood, but in the last decade there has been a change in the manner this objectification has been looked at. Earlier the actresses doing item numbers were looked down upon by the society, but in the contemporary films, item number is a much sorted after feature of a film. This objectification has been accepted by the viewers, especially by the female audience.

In a recent study the University of South California's Anneberg School of Communication and Journalism analysed top 100 Bollywood films in the year 2012. The female characters accounted only for 28.4% of the speaking parts. Also the percentage of women wearing revealing clothes increased by 20% since 2009. After having a look at these statistics, its not tough to estimate the scenario of our mainstream cinema.

Strong female characters are a dying breed in the popular Indian cinema. Films like Mother India, Arth, Mirch Masala in the earlier times and Kahani, No One Killed Jessica and

Highway have used female leads and portrayed them as capable of introspection and subjectivity. But their commercial success is nowhere close to male oriented films like Dabangg, Dhoom etc. Thus, this objectification of women in the visuality of Indian Cinema reiterates the already existing patriarchy in the Indian society.

Another major trend which has sprung up in the last 5 years is the portrayal of unrealistic machismo and violence in Bollywood. Recent films with all the major actors have these elements. For instance Chennai Express, Dabangg, Rowdy Rathore etc. Let us analyse whether this violence affects the society, and if it does then how far does it affect the behaviour of an individual or the society.

One interpretation can be that, the violence in the films produces the effect of Catharsis. The frustrations that build up in our everyday lives can be purged by the pity and fear we experience while watching violence onscreen. Thus, if we go by this theory of Aristotle, then we remain less prone to violence or aggression after watching the same in a film. But whether the same can be concluded about sex portrayed onscreen is a question worth cogitating.

Another view, opposite to the theory of Catharsis is that onscreen violence produces aggressive behaviour, but that it actually prepares you for aggressive action." In other words, it is not necessary that we will become violent after watching a violent film, but that it increases the chances of affecting the society. Berkowitz's Aggressive Cue Theory states that "A stimulus does not directly do so. The manner in which violence is represented also matters. In many cases, Bollywood portrays justified and glamourized violence performed by the 'hero'. For instance in films like Dhoom, Dabangg such examples of violence can be seen. According to the crime branch of Delhi, 36 criminal incidents were inspired by Bollywood movies, in the year 2013. (Times of India)

Films that influenced criminals of Delhi in the year 2013	No. Of cases
Special 26	16
Dhoom	15
Khosla Ka Ghosla	2
Bombay to Goa	1
Munna Bhai MBBS	1
Oye Lucky Lucky Oye	1

Berkowitz's theory can be furthered by Albert Bandura's Observational Learning theory according to which we can learn by observing aggression in the films or other media. So, not only does the violence in the films increase the possibility of committing violence or aggression by the viewers, but it also teaches one how to do it. Thus, such a portrayal of violence may have serious repercussions for the viewers, especially the young and impressionable minds in the society.

Parallel Cinema is another component of Indian Cinema which works on an altogether different line from Bollywood. An interesting way of looking at the visuality of Indian Cinema

would be comparing the visuality and the influence of the parallel cinema with that of the commercial cinema of India.

The basic difference between art cinema and commercial cinema in India is essentially the difference between serious films and films for entertainment. The gaze of the actor or indeed the viewer is very different in both the cases.

Commercial cinema shows people what they want to see while parallel cinema displays a glimpse of that part of society over which we have turned a blind eye.

Commercial cinema takes up good looking actors with eye-catching make-up and costumes. These films are shot in most beautiful locations in various corners of the world, in grand studios etc. There is an excessive use of songs and dances including the much sorted after item numbers. Not much emphasis is laid on realism; rather these films delve into a fantastic and glamorous world.

While on the other hand, parallel cinema moves away from the glitz and glamour of Bollywood and try to portray reality in most natural settings. It is a serious kind of cinema which does not pay any heed to the entertainment quotient and works towards highlighting some social themes. Much of it is inspired by literature. The actors use minimal or no make-up with clothes that are worn in our daily lives. Also these films are shot in the real locations which are generally villages, ghettos etc, with minimum amount of songs and dances. Thus the effects produced by both the type of cinemas are different.

Let us compare how these two genres of cinema affect the society, using the parameters of visuality given by Woodman Taylor in his essay, 'Penetrating Gazes : Sight and visual display in popular Indian cinema'.

In the commercial films, the 'unearthly' beauty of the 'stars' is looked upto by the viewers by the gaze similar to that of 'darshan' of a deity. People can not only see them through their eyes but can also reach out to touch them through this gaze. Also the concept of nazar is somewhat applicable here, as the gaze of awe has physical attraction attached to it. Also the concept of nazar in terms of expressing the physical desire has been exploited by Bollywood for ages and still continues to be deployed in one form or the other. For instance the Bollywood film Jai Santoshi Maa is a typical Bollywood film with portrayal of heaven, powers of the goddess and a maiden Satyawati who has to go through a lot of hardships in life, but she eventually sails through with the help of the goddess. The film very aptly exploits the concept of drishti for commercial gains. Also an analysis of the highest grossing bollywood films i.e. Dhoom3 (Rs.560.35 crore), Chennai Express (Rs.462.79 crore) and Krish-3(Rs. 295 crore) brought forward the conclusion that they portrayed onscreen what the viewers want to see. Apart from extremely high entertainment quotient and extremely low seriousness quotient, what these films have in common is a love story, action and lots of machismo.

On the other hand, Parallel Cinema makes use of the concepts of drishti and nazar not for commercial gains but to

make the viewers aware of various socio-political issues. For instance, in the art film *Devi*, the director Satyajit Ray portrays the story of a simple village woman Dayomayi who begins to think herself as an avatar of goddess Kali. This superstition leads to her ultimate tragedy. In the film there are many instances in which the so-called *devi* gives 'darshan'. But here the whole concept is used to create awareness rather than use the superstition of the masses for commercial gains.

Being inspired from Italian Realism, parallel cinema tries to take up non-professional actors in the films. For instance, if there is a role for a cobbler in the film, then they try to take up a cobbler for their film. This is because an actor will have to act like a cobbler but a cobbler will just have to do what he does in his daily life.

Eg. In the National Award winning film of 2011-*Anne Ghode Da Daan*, the director Gurvinder Singh made the villagers of Sivia to act for most of the roles. Samuel John-the actor playing Melu states, "The film features a majority of non-actors and has real-life labourers in it. To keep the role natural there was no make-up. I had to wear a kambal for the month-long shooting in Sivan village of Bathinda, which even gave me blisters." (The Tribune) But when the viewer looks at these characters in the parallel cinema, there is nothing awe-inspiring about their appearance. Through the gaze of these actors they see their own selves and lives represented in a starkly realistic manner. Neither the viewers worship them (as most of the actors of popular cinema are worshipped), nor is there the nazar of love present. They might make use of the concepts of *drishti* and *nazar* but their aim is always to defamiliarize the viewers of the superstition and stereotypes as opposed to the popular cinema, which uses and sometimes even promotes them for their commercial gains.

Why is it that parallel cinema never reaches a wide audience and the viewership of Bollywood films increases every year? The answer to this question is "entertainment value".

People primarily pay money for entertainment and this is what the parallel cinema lacks in. Thus, there has been a decline in the art cinema, not just in India but all around the world. This cinema is considered fit only for a limited number of audience, mainly the elites in the society. Thus even if they portray some really serious and sensitive issues, these films fail to make any visible impact on the society.

Thus, in order to bring together entertainment and didacticism, film directors have gone for the middle path and co-opted art cinema and commercial cinema which led to the springing up of a new type of cinema called Middle Cinema.

Shyam Benegal is one of the first people to bring up such films. "Being an ardent supporter of the 'gradualist strategy,' he (Benegal) believed that the essence of cinema depends on the right concoction of the popular elements of the mass audience with pleasant suggestion." (Srijita Sarkar)

These directors club the 'masala' element of the popular cinema with didactic messages against social evils and create aesthetic works with entertainment value. A good number of films have been made in this fashion, for instance *Pyaasa*, *Ankur Udaan*, *Munna Bhai MBBS*, *Taare Zameen Par*, *Peepli Live* and many others.

To conclude, mainstream cinema is an art which is essentially used for commercial gains. Thus, in order to maximize their profits they focus on providing a very high entertainment quotient to the viewers which has degraded to degenerate entertainment in some cases. However, its influence on the society is very high. It governs the fashion sense of the viewers, music they hear, their stereotypes and social behaviour up to a large extent. On the other hand there is parallel cinema in the scenario, which fails to influence the masses because of its low entertainment quotient. Thus the mainstream filmmakers should realize the kind of effect their works have on the masses and find some ways to amalgamate entertainment with some social message.

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