

Cinema Reception in a Digital World: A Study of Cinema Audiences in India

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Abstract : Traditional film theory assumes the cinema audience in a darkened room where cinema is projected on to a white screen, and the audience suspends their sense of reality. Shifts in audiences due to changes in cultural tastes or trends have been studied for decades. In the past two decades, however, the audience, especially the youth, has shifted to digital media for the consumption of cinema. As a result, not only are audiences watching cinema on different devices, they are also consuming cinema in places and ways never imagined before. Public transport often crowded to the brim with a lot of ambient content, and a variety of workplaces have become sites for cinema viewing. Cinema is watched piecemeal and at different times of the day. Audiences use devices such as mobile phones and tablets to watch cinema. The cinema viewing experience is getting redesigned by the user. The emerging design allows the spectator to not only consume images and narratives but also produce, reproduce, and manipulate existing images and narratives, thereby participating in the process and influencing it. Spectatorship studies stress on the importance of subjectivity when dealing with the structure of the film text and the cultural and psychological implications in the engagement between the spectator and the film text. Indian cinema has been booming and contributing to global movie production significantly. In 2005 film production was 1000 films a year and doubled to 2000 by 2016. Digital technology helped push this growth in 2012. Film studies in India have had a decided Euro-American bias. The studies have chiefly analysed the content for ideological leanings or myth or as reflections of society, societal changes, or articulation of identity or presented retrospectives of directors, actors, music directors, etc. The one factor relegated to the background has been the spectator. If they have been addressed, they are treated as a collective of class or gender. India has a performative tradition going back several centuries. How Indians receive cinema is an important aspect to study with respect to film studies. This exploratory and descriptive study looked at 162 young media students studying cinema at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The students, speaking as many as 20 languages amongst them, were drawn from across the country's media schools. The study looked at nine film societies registered with the Federation of Film Societies of India. A structured questionnaire was made and distributed online through media teachers for the students. The film societies were approached through the regional office of the FFSI in Mumbai. Lastly, group discussions were held in Mumbai with students and teachers of media. A group consisted of between five and twelve student participants, along with one or two teachers. All the respondents looked at themselves as spectators and shared their experiences of spectators of cinema, providing a very rich insight into Indian conditions of viewing cinema and challenges for cinema ahead.

Keywords : audience, digital, film studies, reception, reception spectatorship

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