

Middlebrow Cinema in the 21st Century: A Critical Analysis of Spectator Experience in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract : The Malayalam film industry, known as Mollywood, has a longstanding tradition of rich storytelling and cultural significance within Indian cinema. In recent decades, particularly post-2010, the industry has undergone significant transformation with the rise of a generation of filmmakers. This study explores the evolution and impact of Malayalam middlebrow cinema in the 21st century, focusing on films released after 2000 to understand their influence on contemporary spectator experiences. Middlebrow cinema refers to films that are neither high art nor purely commercial. These films are characterized by their ability to appeal to a broad audience while maintaining thematic and narrative complexity. They often tackle social issues and personal dramas and have a solid emotional core, making them accessible yet substantial. The study explores recent Middlebrow Malayalam films Maheshinte Prathikaaram (2016), Take Off (2017), and Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum (2017) that push the envelope of traditional storytelling, providing audiences with a blend of entertainment and thought-provoking content. This research employs a theoretical methodology, drawing on cultural studies and audience reception theory, utilizing frameworks such as Bordwell's narrative theory, Deleuze's concept of Deterritorialization, and Hall's encoding/decoding model to analyze the changes in Malayalam middlebrow cinema and interpret the storytelling methods, spectator experience, and audience reception of these films. The findings indicate that Malayalam middlebrow cinema post-2010 offers a spectator experience that is both intellectually stimulating and broadly appealing. This study is relevant as it highlights the critical role of middlebrow cinema in reflecting and shaping societal values, making it a significant cultural artefact within the broader context of Indian and global cinema. By bridging entertainment with thought-provoking narratives, these films engage audiences and contribute to wider cultural discourse, making them pivotal in contemporary cinematic landscapes. In short, this study highlights the importance of Malayalam middle-brow cinema in influencing contemporary cinematic tastes, positing that the nuanced and approachable narratives of post-2010 films will assume an increasingly pivotal role in the future of Malayalam cinema.

Keywords : Malayalam cinema, middlebrow cinema, spectator experience, audience reception, deterritorialization

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