

Cash Conventions: Decline of Cinema in 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate into the tendencies of recent film makers which have lent them an edge in the business of cinema, and in turn have resulted in a subsequent loss of sharpness of their cinematic craft. Cinema, which took birth in a generation of film makers who were conscious of their responsibilities as artists, has retrogressed to the current format of a business run by corporate giants who have failed to acknowledge the artistic spirit of the cinematic venture. Cinema has hence, come at the brink of becoming irrelevant, which is perhaps the true nemesis to any form of art. It needs to be reclaimed by artists and technicians who serve cinema, than their purses. The paper hopes to rekindle fire in the now hermit hearths of true film makers who make copious attempts to enliven a craft that has lost itself in the concrete jungle of bills and bank notes.

KEYWORDS: Cinema, Business, Producer, Economy, Art.

“If movies disappeared overnight, I wouldn’t care.”

~David Cronenberg (qtd. in Macnab)

“The cinema I grew up with and that I’m making, it’s gone.”

~Martin Scorsese (qtd. in Epstein)

No other art form could flourish as rapidly as cinema did within the age of a single century. This century-plus old cinema has been shape-shifting, time and again from Lumiere to Godard, from Eisenstein to Andy Warhol, from German Expressionism to the Cinema Novo of Brazil. It is fairly pointless to write about its historic transformation as per the variation of taste and aesthetics changing gradually among the filmmakers and audience and requirements and threats of the age since it has always been the case. But it seems increasingly probable that cinema since its first exhibition by the Lumiere Brothers of Lyon in front of a paying public in Paris on a chilly Saturday night, is going through for the first time so serious but little-comprehended crisis. I think there are several aspects that best represent this crisis the present paper cares to talk about.

Filmmaking is universally conducted within a division of interest, often an antagonism between artists and financiers. And what finally emerges from this contradiction has always produced different results, most of which have been frequently unhappy for either of the parties. But the history of cinema would have been radically different if purveyors like Pathe or Mayer had not been there guiding or decoding the fate of cinema. “The earliest producers in England and France had mostly been happy potterers, enthusiastic photographers and ingenious instrument makers who had created little films at the cost of a pound or so in their own backyard, and been astonished at the profits that could accrue from a success.” (Robinson, David, 28) Charles Pathe manufactured equipments, expanded the business, took

robust control of exhibition and assured French Cinema a definite dominion on the world stage. Irving Thalberg was deeply conscious of the value of MGM's reputation and confidently determined the style of his films. He gave the go ahead for the controversial and experimental subjects like *Hallelujah* (1929) or *The Big House* (1930). These astute businessmen knew very well the art of a producer in assembling the necessary talents and impeccable craftsmanship of the times and were conscious of the quality of their products as sheer entertainment which remains unimpaired. It was compulsory for every actor at Bombay Talkies (1934) to watch world cinema as part of their education and submit critical estimation of films to producers. The producers or studios who worked on the principle of maximum economy consistent with quality could risk social subjects like the agricultural depression in *Cabin in the Cotton* (1932) and plight of homeless children in *Boot Polish* (1954). Producers of the then newly independent India showcased their political leanings through the cinema they produced. It was perhaps the limited means of cinema making, that forced them to make more informed and conscious decisions as to how and what kind of cinema they made and invested in, and associated themselves with. Cinema became a far more socially relevant medium for people to take it in the seriousness it deserves. It was a time when a proper judgement was made to create a correct estimation of how influential the mode of cinema is, and how it shall be employed in shaping the contemporary society. Now the producers have reduced themselves to being money men unwilling to indulge in risky ventures since their multi-billion projects made with limited cinematic sensibilities cry for predictable returns. More measures are taken in the post production of cinema, and in its marketing and publicity that the film no longer remains an experience to be lived through. The cinema screen rather becomes the chart where the scales are measured to weigh out the generated versus fulfilled expectations, of revenue for the production houses, and content for the audience.

Films cost but the artist must look for the new adventure and the radical. Godard by the end of the sixties rejected the whole machinery of commercial cinema, creating his films on 16 mm and 8 mm. The world has changed a lot within a few decades so far as socio-economy and telecommunication are concerned and to some extent it is an abrupt change. To fish in this troubled water a trend in the producers is markedly being witnessed towards the production of multi-billion projects. Such films are flashy jumble of high speed cross-cuts of computer generated images aiming at the acceptance of the mass watchers. Consequently, the serious directors are also following the footprints of those who leave the aesthetic sides of cinema aside and are attentive to projects after projects. The shift of a cinematic investment can be seen in the number of franchise films that have spawned over the recent times. Financers are willing to write their cheques to a sequel script that may be absolutely unnecessary, and cash in on the fame of a previously commercial success. The implicit intention is to create a line of monarchs that rule the box offices, decided upon by merely nepotistic parameters. The branding of cinemas and the various cinematic universes is such, it creates a cult following by sheer procreation of spin-offs and sequels, which may, and mostly, may not have the quality and claim of the first of its lineage.

Such projects contribute to generic eccentricities and disciplinary negatives resulting in a series of gross productions of assumptions, taboos, biases, exclusions of other voices and falsification of ground realities. In past we had a very rich tradition of political films in India especially in the forties and fifties. Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* (1946) which shared the Grand Prix du Festival International du Film award at

the first ever Cannes Film Festival in 1946 showed Marxist leanings in exposing the disparities of the Indian society. Amit Maitra and Sombhu Mitra's *Jagte Raho* (1956) made a powerful comment on the murkier side of the society. The socialist director V. Shantaram's *Do Ankhen Barah Haath* (1957) made a humanitarian claim for the reformation of prisoners and went on to win the Samuel Goldwyn Award at the Golden Globes and the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. Contemporary films no longer voice that kind of political commitment or seek paths towards change.

The biases and prejudices through which women experience is perceived are widely current in films, more so in its stripped down, skeletal form of pornography and soft-core pornography. Adrienne Rich writes, "The function of pornography as an influence on consciousness is a major public issue of our time, when a multibillion-dollar industry has the power to disseminate increasingly sadistic, women-degrading visual images" (641). Lesbian pornography is smeared with male voyeuristic appetite and equally excludes women voices. There are very few exceptions like Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) or Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). Moreover, a feminist critique itself sometimes becomes bondage of its own reservoir always everywhere looking for pernicious messages and prejudices confidently excluding everything else. An erotica then evokes nothing more than a climate where women are stripped of their dignity, autonomy and sexual potential. Other hidden tissues, possibilities as well as the disciplinary positives are completely neglected by feminist lens. Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974) is a rare instance (despite a strong resistance from the French feminists) where Japanese feminists were able to recognize its subversive potential in the dominant image of the eponymous heroine. Danny Shipka writes "In Asia, many women saw it as a liberating piece focusing on the power and strength of Emmanuelle and not her exploitation" (300).

The film adaptation of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger *A Canterbury Tale* (1944) recognized similar inherent potential in film-adaptation during the time of World War II and widened its scope from mere a depiction of the social picture of medieval Britain to deal with the immediate political issues of the time. The theme of "eccentric characters on a religious pilgrimage" becomes the inevitable excuse without which it would have been impossible to talk about the great past of Britain during the time of crisis and reasserting the worth of Britain. It remains one of the most artistic films of the directors and now hailed as a masterwork of British cinema. On the other hand, in India any experimentation is discouraged, crushed and forced into oblivion. Not many seem to remember Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1969) a film about waiting which showed impatience with a particular narrative disposition or even the narrative form itself and employed several experiments such as sustained shots, de-dramatization of scenario, emphasis on objects rather than concepts, expressionless faces refusing to surrender to the conventions of subjectivity. Directors like him who do not conform to the conventional set up of the trade are considered outsiders. "The entertainment industry searches frantically for the next big money making thing. It's tricky of course, because culture-industry moguls do not want to invest large sums of money in unproven ideas" (Lull, 204). They facilitate the star system to depend on, to sustain their machinery and to control through media the cultural and intellectual climate within which these films are circulated or received.

The result varies from cardboard fantasy to asinine melodrama, from ghostly tales to extravagant display of meaningless sexuality which are being validated and circulated under the banner of popular cinema. Although there exist a wide variety of critical opinion regarding the definition and achievements of popular cinema (difference between projects and popular cinema being the former essentially is formulaic money-making machinery while the later primarily aims to attract a very large audience), its capacity to capture the attention and imagination of a very large audience is unquestionably enormous. The crisis lies in the little-comprehended change that popular cinema is constantly losing the pulse of cinematic art and being overpowered by business-projects. Audience who enjoyed *Star Wars* saga because of the commonality and psychological resonance created by the Mythological motifs put together from all around the world are now allured to the screen on the promise of the same formula refashioned with more glamour and superficiality. The domain of popular cinema of course has a “potentially transgressive” (Kuhn 141) quality to defy assured limits, monolithic conventions and attack dominant culture. John Fiske writes: “There can be no popular dominant culture, for popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination. This does not mean that members of dominant social groups cannot participate in popular culture – they can and do.” A popular film in such “popular dominant culture” can easily be a stupid person’s idea of what an intelligent piece of art can be. Will Self claims:

“... *Inception* wasn't the last word in sci-fi meta-sophistication, but rather a stupid person's idea of what an intelligent film is like. And by the same token, as the Coen brothers' *True Grit* comes galloping into our multiplexes surrounded by dust clouds of Stateside approbation, someone has to take a bead on the whole sweep of their careers, squint, and then if not exactly shoot them down, at any rate cold-cock the notion that the Coens are the great American auteurs of their generation, when, sadly, they are only a moderately clever person's idea of what great American auteurs might be like”. Worse is the case with most other contemporary Hollywood films which are collages of high speed cross cuts of computer generated imagery demanding an unremitting attention to be pinioned to the screen to suspend the disbelief for the moment. The audience is offered the very machine code of reality in the name of cinematic art.

Watching cinema is a personal oeuvre through the flux of time and memory. A film exists in time. We need to dwell with it for a certain amount of time to experience its “rhythm”. Tarkovsky argues, “The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm...rhythm is not determined by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them (117). Not always an image is just a reproduction of reality but direct perception of time as a way of viewing life in its essence. It possesses the power to go beyond the events on the screen. Sometimes it prepares our field of imagination where images are born. One has to live with them, spend time with them, and interact with them to experience the essence and thousand other images they try to hint at. “Works of art are...formed by organic process; whether good or bad they are living organisms with their own circulatory system which must not be disturbed” (Tarkovsky 124). Although survival to the next century depends on new emerging techniques and new economies, this primary and indispensable means of communication mustn’t at any cost cease to be the “living organism” of our dreams and hopes, fears and anxieties, goodness and demons.

By the mid-fifties when the old structures were breaking up, new possibilities of cross-fertilisation gave way to the rise of cinema of international standard. International festivals recognized the cinemas of the countries which had hitherto been unknown to Europe and America. Directors like Akira Kurosawa or Satyajit Ray could startle the world at a time when the concept of world cinema was in cradle and the art was undergoing different experiences to collect the hygiene of its growth and cameras began to peep through undiscovered corners. Unfortunately a lot of presently working eminent cinema makers are not considered to be valued with their contributions since the gleam of their widespread genius to be perceived in their artistic creations could not light the wet hey in consideration of the money-makers deciding the fate of the cinema. The points of shame should have been dug out in the centenary celebration. Does the production of a film humming the eternal tune of life need really bigger budgets?

Looking back to India, a strange nature to value an artist after his death makes an artist die in peace with the consolation that he might roam into the world of intellect after a half or quarter century. A hope wets the mind with the thought that Debabrata Biswas' Rabindra Sangeet recorded in ordinary tape recorder at home are highly valued and accepted by all after his death. So is to be said of the poems of Jibanananda Das and even of the paintings of Tagore. Here a dream dares to wink with the expectation that filmmakers like Buddhadeb Dasgupta or Adoor Gopalakrishnan are being valued by the cinema watchers on the days ahead and the ghosts of the artists following the content face of the audience with a smile of satisfaction playing in the phantom lips recollect the days of the hardships for the classic production.

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