Topic: Film Studies

For BA (JMC)

Semester: 5th

Topic: Indian Cinema and Film Theories

Introduction to Indian Cinema:

Indian cinema is a unique phenomenon. It is just like brushing your teeth in the morning, you cannot escape it. The Indian film industry stands above most other national cinemas due to its local focus yet enormous size. It is one of the oldest cinemas in the world and the largest in terms of output, producing over 1,600 films in various languages each year. The first truly authentic Indian film to be screened was Dadasaheb Phalke's Raja Harishchandra, and thus Indian cinema was born.

After Raja Harishchandra, several other filmmakers joined the trend and continued to create silent films until 1931. From 1913 to 1931, Madras (now Chennai) rose as the center of the Indian film industry, followed by Bombay (now Mumbai).

Since these early beginnings, India's film industry has continued to flourish, growing in popularity, size, and reach. The Musical Talkie Era came into existence with films like Alam Ara by Ardeshir Irani. This era is also known as the Musical Era because actors were expected to sing their own songs. Films were mostly made in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Hindi. This age was also notable because, for the first time, an Indian film was screened at the Venice Film Festival. The film was the 1936 movie Sant Tukaram. With technological advancements, sound and dialogue became increasingly implemented in Indian cinema. This element took a strong hold in Hindi cinema and is a renowned quality found in many Bollywood films produced today.

Following India's Independence, the period from the late 1940s to the 1960s is regarded by film historians as the "Golden Age" of Indian cinema. Some of the most critically acclaimed Indian films of all time were produced during this period. Definite social contexts, a sense of historical reality, and immediacy became central to cinema production. Commercial Hindi cinema also began thriving, with acclaimed films such as Guru Dutt's Pyaasa (1957) and Phool (1959), and Raj Kapoor's Awara (1951) and Shree 420 (1955). These films expressed social themes, mainly dealing with working-class urban life in India. Awara presented the city as both a nightmare and a dream, while Pyaasa critiqued the unreality of city life.

Some epic films were also produced during this time, including Mehboob Khan's Mother India (1957), starring Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Rajendra Kumar, and Raaj Kumar. The film was the most expensive Hindi film production of its time and earned the highest revenue for any Hindi film at that point. Adjusted for inflation, Mother India still ranks among the all-time Indian box office hits. A number of Indian films

from this era are often included among the greatest films of all time in various critics' and directors' polls.

Films in India were made in multiple languages more than ever before. The era saw the emergence of exemplary filmmakers such as Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, V. Shantaram, Satyajit Ray, K. Asif, Mehboob Khan, Ritwik Ghatak, Ramu Kariat, Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Guru Dutt, K. V. Reddy, L. V. Prasad, Sivaji Ganesan, N. T. Rama Rao, Prem Nazir, and Rajkumar.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the trend shifted toward producing "masala" films because of their instant entertainment value. Leading figures of the masala genre included Amitabh Bachchan, Jeetendra, Vinod Khanna, Rajesh Khanna, Dev Anand, Nargis, Waheeda Rehman, Sridevi, Smita Patil, Sharmila Tagore, Hema Malini, Rekha, and many more. The era saw films in horror, mystery, comedy, action, thriller, and romantic genres. Actors and actresses became superstars, enjoying stardom like never before. Cinema moved from conventional and time-tested plots to burlesque, experimental, and innovative films. Advancements in sound technology, choreography, and special effects paved the way for Indian cinema to reach a global platform, as we see today. The 1990s marked a time when the corporate world slowly began making headway into the film industry as producers.

There are many factors behind this ongoing growth, one of them being the affordability of cinema in the country. From the early days onward, Indian cinema venues have made films accessible to the wider public by providing affordable ticket prices. Given the vast economic gap in India, this factor has allowed film to become an art form for the people, not just for the upper class. The Indian film industry has come a long way since its first silent film, and it still has a long way to go.

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What Is Film Theory?

Film theory is the study of film and how its many elements work together to present a vision of reality. It takes an academic approach to explaining the essence of cinema and how it holds a mirror to its audience and the world at large. Film theory differs from film criticism (which involves evaluating a film's effectiveness) and film history (which explores the development and evolution of cinema over time).

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, motion pictures emerged as a new form of mass entertainment. Critics and theorists were quick to analyze the new medium, comparing it to a similar art form: theater. In particular, they focused on the work of influential early directors such as Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Germaine Dulac. After World War II, French philosopher André Bazin (founder of the French film magazine Cahiers du Cinéma) began writing about film. He believed that a film should reflect the director's vision and that it is up to the viewer to interpret its content—ideas that influenced the French New Wave. Film theory during this era brought new focus to realism, auteur theory, and avant-garde filmmaking.

As gender issues, psychoanalysis, and sexuality began to dominate modern discussions in the 1960s and 1970s, film theorists became increasingly interested in analyzing films through these lenses. In the decades since, film theory has developed as an academic discipline, with cinema studies becoming more common in universities.

Five Types of Film Theory

Below are some examples of different types of film theory:

1.   Feminist Theory: Feminist film theory studies representations of women in cinema. A foundational work is Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in which she coined the term "male gaze." Feminist theory investigates how filmmakers may objectify and sexualize female characters without regard for their subjectivity.

2.   Marxist Theory: Marxist film theory examines the representation of power structures and class struggle in film. In Marxist readings, theorists often focus on protagonists fighting for collective needs against systems of capital and authority.

3.   Psychoanalytic Theory: Psychoanalytic film theory emphasizes the study of the human psyche, analyzing how elements such as narcissism, sexual desire, or unconscious thoughts influence a character's actions within a narrative.

4.   Queer Theory: Queer film theory explores queer subject matter and subtexts in film, analyzing how sexual orientation and gender identity are represented in cinema.

5.   Auteur Theory: Auteur theory assumes that the director is the primary artistic visionary of a film. It is based on the belief that the best films are created by filmmakers with a distinctive, personal vision, often expressed through consistent themes and stylistic choices.

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