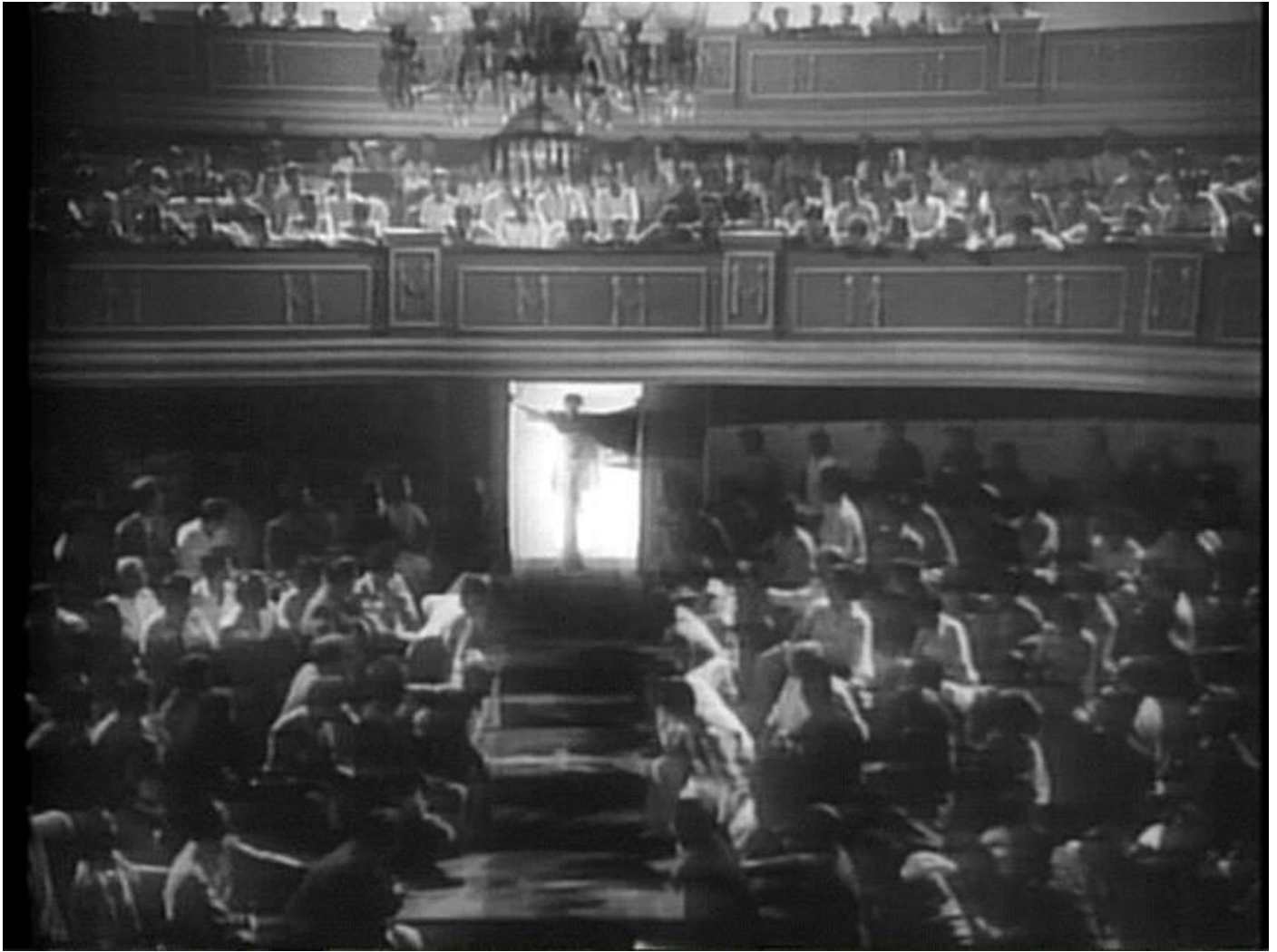


Article

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The Cinema of the Elite - Question Marks



"The cinema has no boundary; it is a ribbon of dream." ~ Orson Welles

It is very effortless to understand this phrase by Welles, but the execution and acceptance of the same are unsmooth. As a form of art, cinema has gone through the waves of French Impressionism, German Expressionism, Absurdism, post-modernism, etc. Experiencing a rugged and variant path of movements and ideas, the concept of cinema has been broadening enough from 'Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory' to 'Everything, Everywhere All At Once', from 'A Trip to the Moon' to 'Oppenheimer'.

During the initial days of Cinema, as an infant, it was able to amaze every folk in the world; however, with time, cinema has become a prime matter for Art Critiques. As a form of art that promises the ethics of aestheticism, cinema should permeate the thoughts of all sections of society. It is not justifiable to look into cinema as a split personality. Still, like every form of art is divided into various categories, some cinema scholars have categorised it into two identities - Commercial and Parallel. This identification is prominent primarily in South Asian countries. According to critics, this differentiation is due to the different styles of

storytelling cinema uses, or one may say the character or genre a cinema possesses, but this statement is not entirely agreeable. As cinema is an audio-visual medium, one of the most important elements for a cinema to do well is the perspective of the Audience.

For the first time when I got exposure to World Cinema, the first thought that came into my mind was that what had led me and is still letting my people, from where I belong, witness this grand world of cinema that is so different and beautiful from the movies that we watch in television or blockbusters that we watch at theatres. Tarkovsky's *'Mirror'*, *'Sacrifice'*, *'Stalker'*, Kiarostami's *'Close Up'*, *'Taste of Cherry'*, Kieslowski's *'Three Colours: Red, White, Blue'*, Wong Kar-wai's *'In the Mood for Love'* were a few of the first pieces that attracted me and many such pieces like these are still to be deeply analysed and understood by people. People in my place are still one step back from understanding the depth of Guru Dutt's *'Pyasa'* and consider Bhansali's *'Devdas'* a piece of art rather than a blockbuster. Because of the so-called barrier we have set between us and good cinema by categorising cinema into art house films and commercial 'masala' films, we are lagging in witnessing the marvel that cinema produces. Cinema, as a whole form, belongs to the house of art.

It is to be noted that the quality of films I have already mentioned are films popular among a certain class of people. It would be a surprise for me if a milkman from Assam recognised any of these movies just by hearing the name. Still, the same individual would give a list of a hundred Bollywood action movies starring Akshay Kumar or Salman Khan. The kind of movies people are used to creates a difference in taste. However, why has good cinema been confined to the reach of certain cinephiles only? Or what is the actual meaning of the term 'cinephile'? Does a person need to be a great lover of Western art house films, films nominated for international festivals or movies directed by acclaimed directors like Bergman or Godard to be called a Cinephile? Why cannot we consider a person who is deeply into Bollywood, watches every film in theatres or a constant audience of OTT platforms as a 'Cinephile'? Where has the boundary been set? Does it only end on critiques' note of acclamation, or are there other

sublime principles leading to it? We often ignore these questions and multiple questions such as these in spreading the word of Cinema as a whole.

In a recent interactive session with a very well-known filmmaker from Assam, the question of the popularity of Film Appreciation Courses was raised. The same question that I have been constantly asking in my other articles and speeches is, why are Film Appreciation Courses or Screenings of 'Good Cinema' confined to the urban region of Guwahati and some sort of elite residing regions of developing districts like Nagaon or Tezpur only? And the answer was what I and anyone could expect at that time, not very volunteering, that if the person is raising the question of spreading awareness, then he himself can take initiative in his place or other rural places that have never got the blessing of knowing the true essence of cinema, and invite films and filmmakers for screenings, no filmmaker would deny throwing light in areas of dark. Every time I visit a film festival or a screening, I always carry a hawkeye if I can find a person from my village or any other villages such as mine, and every time I lose myself amidst the cinephiles carrying the identity of an elite class or city dwellers. I constantly try to answer my own questions, but I find an obscure answer. If I, as an enthusiast, want to bring change and get the concept of good cinema into areas where people watch daily soaps, how? When Himangshu Prasad Das' film *'Goru'* was screened all over Assam, in local halls and auditoriums, I somewhere got my answer. But for a film to enter every nook and corner of Assam, we need groups of many such individuals who would come out for the sake of good cinema and people without thinking much about the loss of economy and manual labour.

It is not only because of the ignorance of people that good cinema doesn't reach a mass audience but also because of the reasons leading to this ignorance. This ignorant class has never been exposed to 'Good Cinema'. In the first case, because good cinema is costly. Earlier, the rate of tickets was affordable, and middle-class people, especially the youth of that time, could watch a film every week, sometimes the same film three times in a row. With the price hike in movie tickets, it can be seen how

people have lost interest in watching movies in theatres. OTT platforms are lesser known facts among middle-aged people of less-elite class, and for the youth, who are merely satisfied with their pocket money and starving for a job, it is less affordable. Secondly, the state of Assam has limited halls for screening, so even if the people have a slight interest in cinema, it is obviously impossible for them to travel for an hour or two to watch a film in the theatre every week or every month. In this regard, I really appreciate Himangshu Prasad Das' attempt to screen his movie in every district's open field or auditorium. For a film to reach people, it is the makers' duty first to ensure how it would reach. People are not bound to watch one's movie. It is irrelevant to bring 'Assamese Community Sentiment' for spreading the message of a film or blaming the community sentiment again when the film doesn't work. To bring about change in society, one has to be the change.

Thirdly, it is the conservative thinking of makers, critics, and so-called cinephiles that conserve films for a particular class only. Many filmmakers talk about the audience for whom they have made the film. It is obviously very important to know the audience for whom one is making the film, but if the film speaks for the labour community, then the first prior audience of the film should be the labour class itself; if the film tells about the conservative traditions of the society, then the film should play the role of making a change by entering the sentiments of that particular society; if the film has good message for children, then the message should reach the children of all classes and all sections of the society. The publicity and reach of a movie should not be only for the profit of the film but for the profit of the people. Good films can form a good society. However, it is ironic how good films remain unwatched and unheard while 'not at all good films' reach and get adored by the audience.

The most important factor, then, is the low popularity of Film Appreciation and Film Studies. Firstly, do the people of my place know the meaning of the term 'Film Appreciation'? Do people know that Films can be studied? Secondly, what is the role of Art Critiques and Film Institutions in spreading awareness? Surprisingly, there is an abundance of resources and initiatives in Urban Guwahati (urban areas in other states of the country) but less, nearly zero in other districts. Whatever is present, it is only confined to the Elite class or middle-class people such as us who luckily reside in Guwahati or urban areas of other districts and luckily for the social gazettes in our hands. Most Elite class people who flaunt their knowledge in cinema and usually don't like to merge their taste with people unaware of cinematic knowledge or history have much less interest in taking good cinema into the nook and corner. Perhaps because of the hurdle of transportation or manual labour or perhaps the fear of getting trapped in a trial and error process, or maybe the traditional way of conserving good cinemas for people 'with knowledge of Cinema' and not for people who 'are in need of getting the knowledge of Cinema'. It is quite a Hercules task for middle-class folks such as us, though not impossible, and many of us are trying to do so.

The analysis of the character of Cinema and the reasons behind its split personality is complex, though Cinema is easy to understand and feel, like an emotion. In a gist, the quality of cinema also showcases the elite-tempered society of the state. The complex state of the economy of production of independent films and the complex factors of the unpopularity of good films define the economic condition and quantity of intellect in the state. Cinema as a modern art is political, and the political analysis of cinema is very alarming for the development of cinema and the perspective of the audience.

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