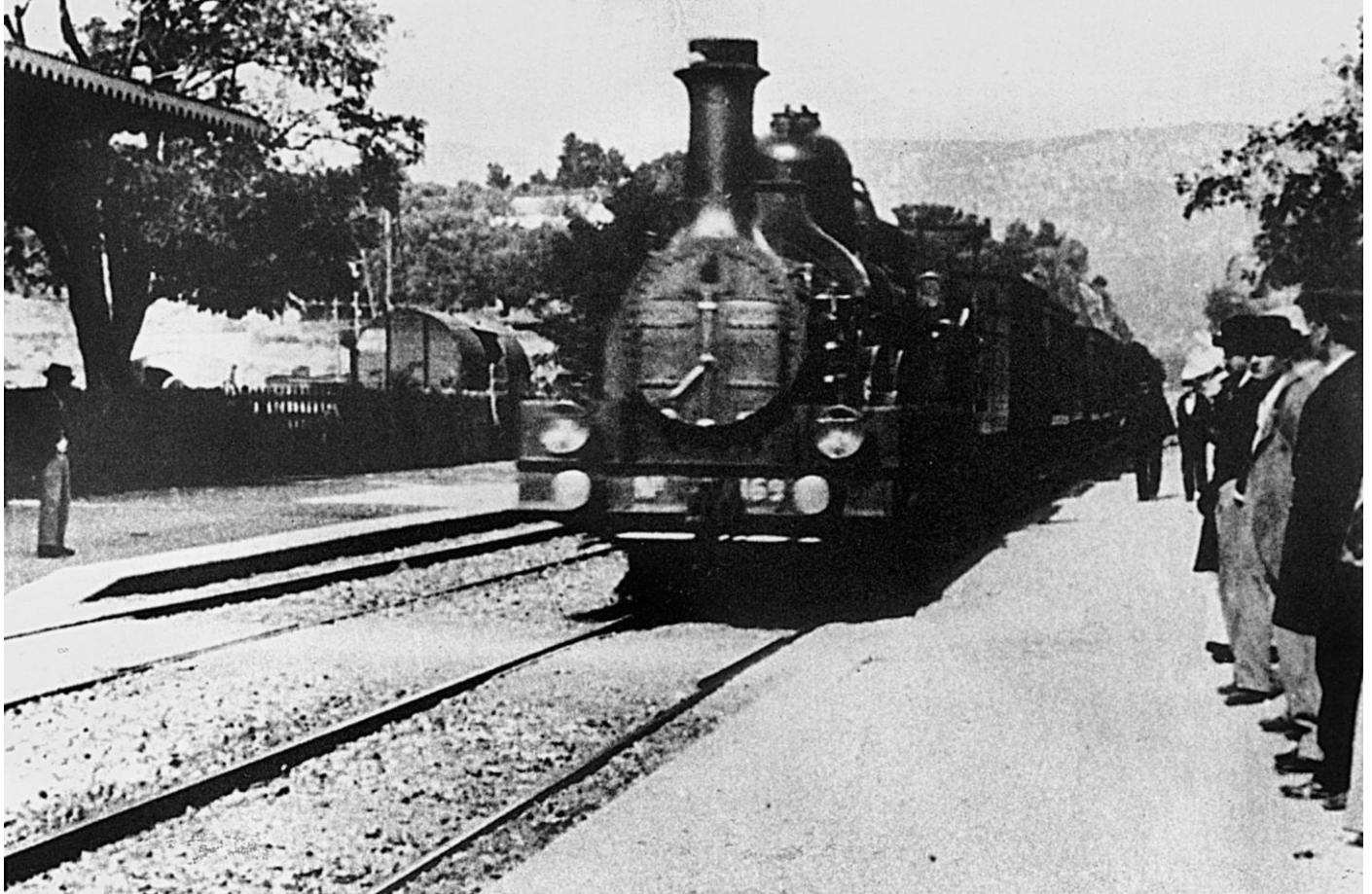


Article

Shivika Sharma

Is Cinema Dead?



L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (1895)

How did cinema begin? It started with stories. Simple ones, told through shadows and moving pictures. At the time, people had no idea what to expect. When they saw a train approaching the screen in *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, they screamed and ran. They genuinely thought the train would come out of the screen and hit them. That is how powerful moving images were. The audience was not just watching a story unfold. They were a part of it. That was the real power of the big screen.

Cinema was never just about entertainment. It was about presence. You sat

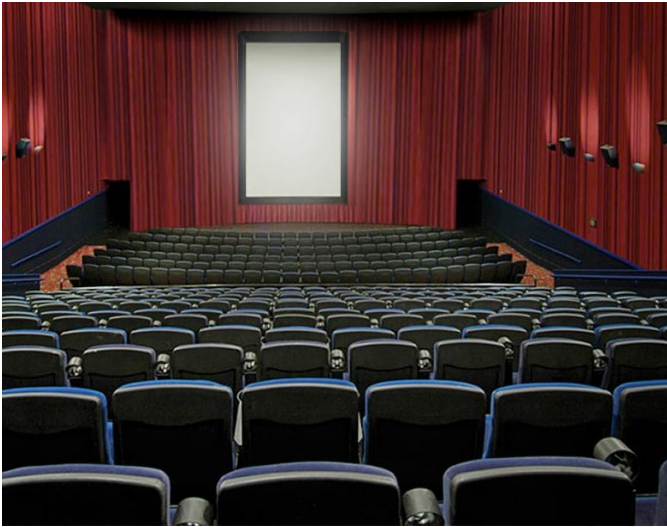
in a dark room with strangers. You gave your full attention to a film. You stayed still, you watched, and you were transported. You were invited into another world. That experience is what made it feel sacred.

If all people wanted were stories, they would have continued reading books. But cinema offered something more. It gave us silence, movement, light, shadow, sound, and music. That combination was unique. And now?

Now we scroll. We scroll through movies, through music, through lives, through art. We scroll through everything and

label it as content. Even our own lives have been reduced to this endless loop of consumption.

That brings us to vertical cinema. What was once a large-scale, curated experience projected onto a massive screen has now been compressed into a vertical rectangle that fits in your hand. A story can now be told in fifteen seconds. And the surprising part is that it still works.



Vertical cinema is any video shot upright, matching how we naturally hold our phones. It was never intended to change the game. It simply emerged because our consumption habits changed. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat trained audiences to view content vertically. So creators adapted. They started making short films, trailers, music videos, and sometimes even full-length movies in this format.

Bollywood caught on as well. You can see it in teaser clips, music launches, and promotional content. While big-budget films are not fully embracing it yet, independent creators and smaller studios are actively experimenting. Some do it as a marketing move. Others do it to tell stories in a way that feels more direct and intimate. Because that is exactly how vertical cinema comes across. It

feels like someone is talking to you. It does not demand hours. It demands a moment.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this shift. Many filmmakers consider it a downgrade. They believe we are lowering standards, prioritising convenience over craft, and making everything shorter because we are afraid people will lose interest.

And maybe they are not entirely wrong.

But we also need to be honest about how our lives have changed. Cinema is reacting to the world we live in. It is not always about perfect visuals or traditional formats anymore. Sometimes it is simply about reaching people where they are. And right now, they are on their phones.

This shift is not just about the look of a frame. It also has political and cultural implications. With vertical cinema gaining space, something else is slowly losing control. That is gatekeeping. The kind that Bollywood has protected for decades. The belief that only a certain type of person deserves a screen presence. That you need the right surname, a network, or a mentor to be taken seriously.

That gate still exists. But now, there is a side entry. If you have a phone, a story, and the courage to share it, you no longer need to wait for permission. You do not have to be discovered. You can be seen. You can be heard. Vertical cinema has made that a reality. The tools are already in your hands.

That reality is what unsettles the old structure. Because power is shifting. New voices are rising. Voices that are not polished, rehearsed, or public-relations-trained. People with odd accents, unpredictable energy, and unfiltered thoughts are gaining traction. They do not fit the clean, idealised image of what a Bollywood face should be. But they are still

getting attention. They are building an audience on their own terms. They are not waiting to be accepted. That in itself is a massive shift.

Today, you will see creators with no industry ties sitting in the front row of film premieres, attending major campaigns, and participating in large-scale promotions. They are labeled as influencers or digital personalities, but they are gaining space that used to be locked away for insiders.

Obviously, not all vertical content is impressive. A lot of it is repetitive, shallow, and noisy. But that criticism also applies to mainstream cinema. For every remarkable film, there were always several that were formulaic and made only for profit. The only difference now is that the average viewer has to scroll through that clutter every day. But even in that chaos, there are stories that stand out.

And sometimes, a vertical story told in sixty seconds can deliver more emotion or clarity than a traditional three-hour film.

But let us be clear. The big screen is not going anywhere. It still delivers an emotional intensity that vertical videos cannot match. Sitting in a theatre, surrounded by sound, watching a story consume your full field of vision, still holds value. That immersive feeling is irreplaceable. It is just not the only choice anymore. Many still crave the cinema experience, overpriced popcorn included, but that is another conversation altogether.

What is interesting is how both worlds now exist at the same time. A Sanjay Leela Bhansali epic with elaborate six-minute sequences can be watched in the same world where a girl films a raw, one-minute video from her bedroom using her phone camera.

Both are being consumed. Both are being felt. They serve different purposes, but they both belong.

That is the contrast we are currently living with.

Some people call it the downfall of cinema. Others call it evolution. The truth probably sits somewhere between both.

Whether we accept it or not, change is constant. Charlie Chaplin eventually added sound to his films. Directors who began with black and white transitioned to colour. Resistance was natural, but so was evolution.

What cannot be ignored is that vertical cinema has increased accessibility. It has made space for creators who were previously overlooked. It has given visibility to stories and perspectives that the mainstream often ignored or rejected.

So, the question is no longer about whether vertical cinema qualifies as real cinema.

The real question is what defines cinema today.

Cinema started with stories and it will continue through stories. The format may shift. The screen might shrink. But the core purpose remains. Whether the story is unfolding on a theatre screen, a mobile device, a rooftop projection, a drawing room wall, or shared through a quiet voice note or a reel, storytelling continues.

And let us be honest about one thing. As filmmakers or storytellers, we can put in the time, money, skill, and emotion to create something, but at the end of the day, none of it holds weight without an audience. We need people to watch what we make. That is the reality. And if the audience today would rather skip a beautifully crafted song

sequence or fast-forward through emotional beats just to get to the next plot point, how exactly are we supposed to respond to that? How are we expected to create for people who no longer have the patience to sit through the very form that cinema was built on?

OTT platforms have completely shifted how people think about watching films. There is a very common mindset now that says, “Why should I spend money on a ticket and go all the way to a theatre when the same film will eventually come to my phone or television?” This line of thinking has become the new normal. And practically speaking, it makes sense to a lot of people. Audiences today, especially working individuals or students with packed schedules, prefer the comfort and convenience of watching something at home. They want control over how they engage with content. They want the option to pause, rewind, skip, or watch at double speed. The idea of giving three uninterrupted hours to a film in a theatre is no longer appealing to many.

That is the environment we are creating for. The challenge is not just making a good film anymore. It is making something that holds someone’s attention long enough to not be skipped. That pressure is new. And it is real.

I personally still prefer big screens. But that might just be my film student side speaking. The part of me that thinks watching

a proper film on a phone is a crime. I still believe a movie really works when you are stuck in a cold theatre, sitting in uncomfortable chairs, with overpriced popcorn and zero control over the play button. Maybe it's because I studied film. Maybe it's because I'm dramatic. Or maybe it's just years of taking cinema too seriously. Either way, I still romanticise the whole big screen thing. That said, I might just make a full series on reels one day. I mean, come on. It sounds fun. Quick cuts, messy energy, fast feedback. You get to create something and throw it straight at people. No waiting, no approvals, just instant chaos. What’s not to love? Let’s get back to the topic in question.

Vertical cinema may not carry the same sense of exclusivity as traditional film, but it has revealed something important. It has surfaced raw talent. It has given platform to individuals who had no access to studios or formal training. That says a lot about where this industry is heading.

Bollywood thrives on glamour. We defend it. We celebrate it. We attach pride to it. But at the end of the day, whether you are watching something commercial or independent, everything boils down to the same thing.

It is always about the story.

Cinema does not disappear. It evolves. The screen might be smaller now. But the stories have never been bigger.

Shivika Sharma is a film student based in Mumbai, currently specialising in direction and writing.