

RESURRECTING REALISM

A Study of Internet Film Genre in Indian Context

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Abstract

Realism is an art movement, endeavouring to create an illusion of reality in any medium. The movement heralded in cinema in Post Second World War Italy, was the flag bearer of similar movements across the world, like the parallel cinema movement in India. With passage of time, the cinema that was on fringes of mainstream with the likes of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, came to the foray with the likes of Madhur Bhandarkar, Anurag Kashyap and Vishal Bhardwaj. Today, as cinema in India is moving away from the big screen to the smaller screen in the living room and micro screens on smart phones, Internet has emerged not only a platform, but it is also replacing the need of a film theatre or measuring box office collections and has even become the media for publicity and marketing of films.

Current study tries to gauge if the shifting of the screening medium has invoked a shift in content and treatment of the films. It tries to verify if the platform today is giving space to stories breaking the narrative hegemony of Bollywood and in the process altering the public discourse. It also checks if the movement of Realism is seeing an unofficial revival through the cinema of the Internet.

To ascertain that, a thorough content analysis was done of the most popular films of 2017, produced for, screened, marketed and followed on the Internet. The tool was devised on the basis of the parameters of Realistic Cinema (Bondanella, 1987). Sample was selected with the help of keyword filtering, YouTube search engine and video suggestions algorithm. The findings hint at a parallel uprising, albeit with few positive changes like star power backing these films and thus largely the film movement as well.

Keywords: Realism, Internet, Cinema, Narrative Hegemony, YouTube

Introduction

History of film spans the entire past century and a bit more. It is a history that not only charts the course of film as a medium, which is dependent on technology for exposing, development and post production to tell a story; it also talks about the narratives and stories which found a platform through it (Slide, 2018). The books trace the beginning from the Lumiere brother's shooting a train entering a station, sending a theatre full of viewers into a rushed frenzy, racing to leave. They believed that a 'real' train was rushing towards them. This effort to recreate an illusion of reality on screen gave birth to the term 'Realism' in films (Stam, 2017).

Realism has been a long-standing movement in art, which broadly means - aiming to depict a subject as realistically as possible. It chases verisimilitude in a piece of work, i.e. using the designing elements of an art form to capture or recreate an illusion of reality, or things, 'as they are'. Italian Neo Realism (1944-52) was a movement in Italian Cinema when the filmmakers abandoned the traditional and popular film making techniques and focused on depicting life as it was in post war Italy. While the resources were scanty, the filmmakers made the best out of what was available and told stories that were relevant to that era.

Situated in a war-torn country, dealing with poverty, unemployment, lack of health, sanitation, education and other problems of a recuperating nation, the narratives of the films took a U-turn from the established popular narratives of the old Italian film industry. The earlier school of cinema was called White Telephone Films, because they inexorably featured a white telephone, which back then was a symbol of prosperity in the Italian society. The films were an escape far from reality. In such scenario, the neo-realistic movement, which talked about issues relevant to the masses rather than showing them a glamourized life, was considered to be iconoclastic of the earlier cinematic establishments (Ruberto & Wilson, 2017).

The sets now moved outdoors as the studios were shattered. The actors were real people and not the popular stars; the equipment was light to enable movement and the style was experimental, to make up for the lack of resources (Ruberto & Wilson, 2017). Films like '*Rome, Open City*' (Roberto Rossellini, 1945), '*Shoeshine*' (Vittorio De Sica, 1946), '*Bicycle Thieves*' (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), '*La Terra Trema*' (Luchino Visconti, 1948) were made during this movement. The movement has had great impact on various film movements around the world, including Cinema Novo in Brazil, and parallel cinema movement in India (Norte & Favela, 2015).

In India, Satyajit Ray is lauded to start the art-house, or the parallel cinema movement, which was inspired by Ray's connection with Renoir (Ray, 1994). Joining the leagues were film makers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Sai Parnajpe to the more recent Meera Nair and Deepa Mehta. As per its name, 'Parallel cinema', it existed along with the mainstream commercial cinema and carved a niche for itself. With popularity of TV, Telefilms adapted realism for TV – '*Star Bestsellers*', '*Zee Rishtey*' etc. are few of the earliest examples (Busselle, 2003). With Internet ruling the media platforms today with the help of digital technology, audio visual story telling has found a new stage.

Internet has revolutionized film making and watching. Digital technology has made shooting easier and lighter with video cameras, now present in every one's hands in shape of smart phones. It has also eliminated the need for a postproduction laboratory dealing with chemicals and replaced it with a sleek computer managing post-production single handedly. The need of a theatre has also been made obsolete with Internet, which has made channels like YouTube and Netflix possible, which have given space to several stories and narratives (Hanson, 2004).

This reach has also impacted the content. Stories are now not mainstream formulaic spins, but represent many walks of life. Diminishing budgets and scales have brought out narratives, which earlier were handicapped and thus hidden (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Being a popular medium today, Internet also has a space and scope as an alternate medium, while providing platforms to every niche and class. The 'films' are not aiming to please the masses but telling a story for the story's sake. The stardom and the studios have taken the backseat, while the content emerges as the winner once again.

While few film makers like Quentin Tarantino, James Cameroon and Christopher Nolan swear by the film stock in the digital date as it is more tactile and 'real', the mascots of the digital movement claim that digital is bringing the reality even closer to the screen. Even those who are shifting to shooting on video mode are choosing to filmizing the final print and then releasing the films online (Alan, 2002).

Keeping this discussion as the premise, this study is being suggested to analyze the content of cinema of the Internet today. It aims to question how close the story telling is to the 'reality' in digital era? Is the digital technology pushing away the reality, bringing it closer or entirely altering it? The study also attempted to probe whether the film realism movement is seeing a revival through the film of the internet.

Review of literature

The study aims to ascertain whether the Realism as a film movement is seen emerging in the Internet film genre in India. In order to understand the foundation of the study and understand the challenges of the reviewers, theoretical frameworks and other industries seeing similar patterns, few studies were reviewed in depth.

Ken Dancyger is his book *The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory, and Practice*, makes a strong point in case of film. Citing the 'finer grain' of film, he credits the film with greater 'realism' projected, while video 'has a flatness and tendency to desaturate color' (Dancyger, 2014).

James Monaco gives three endings to the chapter on digital media, in his book *How to read a film*. He asks the reader to choose any one, depending on their outlook. First says that films are here to stay, everything else (video) will fade away, trying to match up. Second says that film will see decline, like other mediums before this. Third says that what is the question? Art is to recreate life, if any of them does so; the purpose is solved (Monaco, 2000).

Kunze talks about films like *Hugo*, *The Artist*, *Midnight in Paris* etc being shot in Digital and yet romanticizing film in his book, *'Flickers of film: Nostalgia in times of Digital Cinema'*. So while the digital takes over, the hangover of the film continues (Kunze, 2017). Maule on the other hand, suggests that Digital Technologies have made it easier for women to become filmmakers, thus promoting a feminist perspective in popular story telling (Maule, 2017).

While all these studies deal with other markets and not India, a necessity of a similar study in Indian context arises. With keeping all these studies as the principle supposition, and the findings as the brimstone, the current study is being proposed.

Theoretical framework

This study aims for checking for a point of reference between Internet as a platform and films as the medium hosted. Films in this context are small videos, telling stories. Applying the Habermas' theory of the public sphere internet is emerging as a public platform, which encourages equal participation, with no hierarchy. It postulates that Internet is a participatory medium. The study aims to check where this is extended to film making as well (Habermas, 1974).

Another theory that fits the study is Techno-romanticism (Barron, 1996). The theory states that art depends and is linked to technology and its development. Hypotheses postulate that Internet, a technological medium, is impacting storytelling, an ancient art form. It is a theory adapting from traditional romanticism and marrying it with technological advancements of the time. The study in context would be testing the postulates of these theories as well, proving or disapproving them by the end.

Aims and objectives

This research aims to ascertain whether the cinema movement of realism is seeing a revival through the rise of the Internet Films in India.

The research objectives are:

- 1) To ascertain if the popular films on internet are following the parameters of realism
- 2) To recognize the similarities and differences between the Internet Films and the realism movement.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) Do the films of Internet follow the parameters of the films of the Realism film movement?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences between the Internet Films and the neo-realism movement?
- 3) What could be the reasons behind the relationship between the Internet Films and the neo-realism movement?

Methodology

Approach: The study uses the qualitative approach as it examines the film content and treatment.

Method: Qualitative content analysis has been utilized to scrutinize the content and delivery method of the films and classify them accordingly.

Tool: A Likert scale, designed on the basis of the characteristics of Realistic cinema according to Bondanella was used to study the content. According to Bondanella, the films belonging to the Neo Realism Era have the following characteristics:

- “A definite social context;
- A sense of historical actuality and immediacy;

- Political commitment to progressive social change;
- Authentic on-location shooting as opposed to the artificial studio;
- A rejection of classical Hollywood acting styles; extensive use of non-professional actors as much as possible;
- A documentary style of cinematography.” (Bondanella, 1987)

Using these seven parameters, a three-point Likert scale was designed and findings were analyzed.

Sample: Sample was chosen after critical application of the following filters:

- 1) Films produced and screened on Internet
- 2) Shared on YouTube
- 3) By Indian film makers
- 4) In past 1 year – 2017
- 5) Crossed 2 Million view

The aggregator used was the video suggestion algorithm of YouTube.

Data collection and analysis

Over 1,30,00,000 videos were accessed through the video aggregator algorithm of YouTube. After applying the set of prescribed filters, 11 videos were shortlisted. Viewed in a random order, the films were crosschecked for the seven parameters (Bondanella, 1987) fitting the films of the era of Neo realism.

‘Juice’ was the first film, dealing with a dinner party where men are sitting and having drinks while women are bonding over their kitchen duties. ‘Khujli’, the next one dealt with a couple past their prime, bonding over their sexual fantasies. ‘Kheer’ had the protagonists having another trust with romance, in their old age while ‘Dekhne Mein Kya Harz Hai’ had new age parents setting up an arranged match for their new age daughter. ‘Khaney Mein Kya Hai’ is a story about a mother and daughter duo, talking about sex, without mentioning the word because of social taboos associated. ‘Chhuri’ is a wife’s tale, who has come up with a solution to deal with her husband’s adultery. ‘Naked’ deals with our society’s obsession with women’s bodies, gossip and a need to sensationalize everything. ‘White Shirt’ talks about relationships and our need to reminiscize and romanticize.

‘Gutargu’ is about flights of romance, across terraces and religions. ‘Meera’ is a fairytale about unrequited love, in today’s time of instant gratification. And lastly, ‘Unarranged’ is about a bride and groom in an arranged match, deciding to handle the affair themselves, just before the marriage. All the stories were from different film makers, different tones and treatments and lastly, different point of views and narratives from the society. Following is the table with the Likert scale responses against each film and parameter.

S. No	Name of the film	Views	Social Context	Historical Actuality	Progressive Social Change	On Location Shoot	Non Classical Acting Style	Non Professional actors	Documentary Style
1.	Juice	3,000,037	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2.	Khujli	2,668,864	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3.	Kheer	3,248,113	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
4.	Dekhne Mein Kya Harz Hai	2,578,681	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes	No	Neutral
5.	Khaney Mein Kya Hai	6,328,757	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Neutral	No	No
6.	Chhuri	3,168,342	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7.	Naked	6,986,834	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
8.	White Shirt	8,800,947	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes	No	No
9.	Gutargu	4,544,859	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Neutral
10.	Meera	14,148,628	Yes	No	No	Yes	Neutral	Yes	No
11.	Unarranged	3,609,370	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Neutral

Table 1. List of films and Likert Scale Responses

Findings

With the help of a Likert scale and a tabular qualitative analysis, few interesting observations cropped up. Firstly, all of the films involved some social context. The content was seen rooted in various social issues prevalent in the society in current time, space and context. Be it elderly living alone after the kids had moved out or the moral barriers in discussing issues important to sexual health of women, the film characters dealt with various methods to address these issues.

Secondary, most of the films talked about a progressive social change. With the exceptions of 'Meera' and 'Gutargu', films usually ended with a positive outlook, providing a fresh

perspective or at least opening a two-way dialogue. In case if these two films, a pessimistic attitude was seen in display, which at the end is the story teller's prerogative.

Historical actuality was the third parameter. Most of the films were found to be either inspired by or based on some real life incident. While the sequence of events seemed relatable, and grounded in reality, the context seemed based in the current scenario of the society.

Fourthly, non-confirmation of the classical Hollywood style of acting, or in this case, Bollywood style. There was an observed lack of melodrama, song and dance routines, action sequences and other major ingredients of a Bollywood potboiler. The films utilized an absence of dialogue and breaking of the fourth wall frequently to take the narrative forward.

Lastly, documentary style of filmmaking. While the camera was observed to be shaky, and not mounted on a studio pedestal, there was an observed rejection of the conventional camera angles as well. Most of the films utilized natural and available light sources, as visible and deduced from the shots. Some films suffered from grainy footage as well because of this. Sound effects used were diegetic and not overtly accentuating as usually in case with Bollywood films.

The visual grammar was experimental and rugged, as compared to a neatly shot, packaged and glossed over with special effects TV series and films of the day. Low depth of field, due to low light conditions lent a commendable shallow depth of field to the shots and frames. Floor level shots were also seen in a couple of places. Editing style did not stick to traditional continuity scheme of editing, i.e. establishing long shot etc. Few films used extreme close ups to establish locations, characters and situation.

Lastly, one parameter was not strictly adhered to. Use of non-professional actors was not observed on a popular scale. The actors were mostly ranged from recognizable to very famous. Few famous stalwarts of theatre were also seen starring in these films, while others who could not make it big in Bollywood, found a different platform.

Thus, to summarize, with the help of qualitative comparative data analysis and utilizing Likert scale coding for the same, few parallels were found drawn between films of the Internet and the Italian neo realism cinema movement.

Conclusion

While it is debated across platforms, within scholars in academic fraternity as well as film makers and media practitioners that video, digital technology, mobile films etc. are sucking the life out of the traditional film and is making the story telling colder and distant. The art is dying while the process has become easier and more accessible to masses. While filmmakers like Scorsese and Nolan still swear by film as a medium to shoot their magnum opus's on, video is still struggling for acceptance in the big league.

The 'New Age' theoreticians talk about how good video is, and it is evolving to be as good as 'film', the medium in demand, in nostalgia and in big league remains the celluloid film. But with the current research, there emerges evidence that points to the video being closer to reality than film, in the context of Internet. While infamous for the ease of shooting, the video and the digital technology is making the video storytelling more accessible to the masses.

Taking the camera off that tripod pedestal, out of the studio and from in front of those blazing lights, the new age film maker is now out in the street, capturing life as it is, without the glamour and sheen of the halogen lights. While the movement of Neo realism was brought about with lack of resources, today an abundance of resources is also prodding towards a similar content, and thus another movement uprising in cinema.

On the other hand, as an audience, while earlier one had to pay the price of a film ticket, now you need to have an Internet connection and a smart phone or a laptop. Interacting with the filmmaker has also become much more easier through comments and likes, thus taking the engagement with the content even a step further. This also breaks down the hegemony not only in storytelling, but accessing those stories, interacting with them and letting your own opinion speak.

The stories are relatable; the camera becomes the fly on the wall as it captures the events happening around it. The filmmaker is not only a story teller, he is sharing a piece of his/her life with the audience. Thus the stories are based on a social context bringing out voices from all walks of society. Talking about a progressive social change, the films end on a positive note, hinting at a better society in near future.

An important factor makes these films stand out from the original Neo realistic film movement. While the former made use of non-actors to star in the films, shunning the established faces bringing star value to the table, the latter stars many actors of acclaim. Actors like AnupamKher, Jackie Shroff, Neena Gupta, Tisca Chopra and Shefali Shah star in these films and thus help in tapping into an existing fan base as well. Thus, it can be assumed that the established film actors and film makers are also supporting and patronizing this movement on the Internet, which is a fresh perspective.

Keeping all these factors and recurring parameters in mind, it can be safely assumed that the movement of realism in cinema, which rose with Neo Realistic Cinema Movement of Italy, and led to the parallel cinema movement in India, is finding fresh foothold through the medium of Internet. Thus proving the postulates of Techno-romanticism (Barron, 1996) and repositioning the Theory of Public Sphere (Habermas, 1974) as technology impacts the art and enables the public to participate in the act of story telling.

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