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'AT HOME' IN CINEMA

INDIAN CINEMA AND THE COMMON MAN'S
ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINATION

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Author: Sneha Singh

ABSTRACT

This thesis makes two arguments: First, there is a dissonance between the aspiration of the common Indian masses and the set narratives of modernity and its aesthetic output. Whereas Indian architects have followed on the experiment of Chandigarh and done seminal work on low-cost housing etc., the popular imagination will have none of it. Inversely, this popular taste has been written off as kitschy and uninformed. This has been a slippery slide from a social agenda of modernity to that of an exalted aesthetics of the few. Second, and the significance of the study stems from this, is that in post-Independence India, cinema provides the reference to all experience, and subsumes all other art forms, such as epics and **Nautankis** (street plays) and more current ones such as music, art and architecture. Consequently, the radical rethinking of domesticity in popular imagination stems from it. This thesis sheds light on this dialogical relation between cinema and the collective imagination and its complexity; and more importantly an antipathy to many aspects of modernity.

However, cinema was not the only mode of publicity. Print-media played a substantial, and often supportive role. Post-independence journalism in India tapped into the affinity of the common masses towards commercial films and projected them in their content, styles and references. Thus, the thesis also looks at such popular household magazines such as **Grihshobhal**¹.

Overall, though, the scope of the present research is limited from the formation of Board of Censor in the 1950s to the liberalization of cinema ticket prices in the 1980s. The aim is not to provide a historical sweeping narrative. Rather, the methodology is to carefully read specific scenes, leitmotifs, repeated tropes and the mise-en-scène—in cinema and print media—to show how the domestic ideal was created. I posit three thematically distinct issues: **Construction, Displacement** and **Dissemination**.

¹ Indian Institute of Public Opinion, Monthly Public Opinion Surveys, Volume 39, (University of Michigan, 1993), 2-5. 5

In the 50`s cinema was still new to Indian masses and had limited access. Construction of the domestic ideal was the result of this first interaction of the cinema with its audience. Here the upper class house is centered in the palatial salon and the lower class house in the hearth. Second, cinema had to always address two different economic classes concurrently. To do so, cinema conjured first a series of common values and ideals. And second, it came up with a narrative and design sensibility that can be termed displacement. By the 70`s this would take a distinct turn. Portrayal of large, unreal domestic spaces would allow upper middle class audience to identify with lower middle class protagonist, such as clerks and police inspectors. And lower middle class and migrant audiences would identify first with the characters and then find succor in the large, clean spaces that contrasted with their real situation. And lastly, the ideals and designs that cinema portrayed, were disseminated through visual and nonvisual systems, such as songs, film posters, film magazines and advertisements. This is not the beginning of a modernity at large, as some early form of globalization. Rather the domestic ideal propagated in cinema and its publicity was always a nationalist construct.

This thesis then promotes designers to acknowledge this imagination and address it in their design process, if not incorporate. Almost half a billion domestic urban units have been added in India in the past 70 years, perhaps equivalent to all of Europe.² The common man living in these domestic units dreams cinema.

Keywords:

Cinema, architecture, domestic spaces, Bollywood.

¹ Divay Pranav, 'India Preparing for the Biggest Human Migration on the Planet', Investment Promotion and Facilitation Agency, January 02, 2018, , accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.investindia.gov.in/team-india-blogs>.