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Cinema as a Cultural Communication Medium: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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1. Introduction

Sri Lankan cinema is a strong and rich tool of cultural representation. However, critical assessment of its ability to unite different groups, promote understanding, and foster cultural harmony is still crucial. In an attempt to fill this research gap, this qualitative inquiry examined the role of Sri Lankan film in the representation and impact of societal values.

Prominent and influential French film critic and film theorist, Andre Bazin (1918-1958) is notable for his belief that the interpretation of a film or scene should be left to the spectator. Bazin's (1951) view on the development of film studies, though generally acknowledged, remains contested. A passionate initiator of film culture during his lifetime, his ideas have been challenged, defended and revived throughout his afterlife. As he stated in 1971, "cinema is a window to different cultures and ways of life", and film is a fictional narrative medium that can efficiently communicate messages and concepts through its storytelling structure.

"Cinema starts to enter history. Twenty years ago, it was possible to have seen almost everything noteworthy in cinema; today many young people are ignorant about most of the outstanding works in film history. There could therefore be no more cinematographic culture which does not start with knowledge of the classics of the 'seventh art'. Besides, the evolution of cinema has been so the past twenty years, that the enlightened amateurs themselves will have the greatest benefit from revising their conceptions after a new viewing of the masterworks" (Bazin, 1948, p. 10).

By presenting a storyline with characters, plot, and conflict, filmmakers can engage the viewership and communicate complex themes and ideas. Cinema is an influential

medium for cultural communication, performing an important role in formatting and reproducing the values, beliefs, and identities of societies.

The same principle promoted in Bazin's texts in 1948, which suggests the audience's interpretation of a film, is still encountered decades later in a completely different film culture, according to French film critic Serge Daney as he mentioned in 'André Bazin.'

"When we re-read Bazin, it is another thing that moves us. The quality of his ideas, his carefully phrased statements, his measured tone, all that qualified his work as "constructive criticism" at the time have not disappeared even today" (Daney, 1983, p. 41-42).

American literary critic, philosopher and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson (1934-2024) is acknowledged for his analysis of contemporary cultural trends, particularly his analysis of postmodernity and capitalism. According to Jameson's Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), film integrates the styles of the past to its own "culture of the image", excluding any relationship to the past in its difference from the present. Jameson has never pursued to position himself as a film theorist, nor does he wish to be considered one now. But he examines film rather differently than most scholars within film studies proper, and this difference, in his case, resides in his firm and consistent Marxist approach to culture.

"Jameson's extensive travel for academic purposes allowed him to develop a global consciousness, with conferencing, keynote lectures, plenary sessions, and visiting professorships accumulating over the past five decades. This expansion of his Marxist-inspired, European-trained perspective, gained through his geographical movement and the

encounters he had with distant geographies and unfamiliar cultures, would profoundly transform his scholarship. What made this international travel and his various academic fellowships so important (at Peking University and elsewhere) is that they allowed a cultural and physical distance from the United States to influence his thinking" (Cramer and others, 2022, p. 15).

Further, as per the paper "Film as a Form of Cultural Medium: Trends of the Film Industry" by Yunlin Gao (2024) investigates into global cinema, analysing the significant factors that have shaped the patterns audience watch and evaluate films in recent years.

Correspondingly, Sri Lankan cinema is a dynamic and influential form of cultural communication, but it is essential to scrutinise its serving as a connection between different communities, fostering understanding, and contributing to cultural harmony. Therefore, this research study was conducted to find Sri Lankan cinema's influence on both reflecting and shaping societal values, making it an effective medium for cultural expression and dialogue.

Sri Lankan Cinema is completing its 100 years of history in 2025 with its first local Silent film production screening of "*Rajakeeya Wikramaya*" alias "The Royal Adventure" in 1925 (Dissanayake and Ratnavibhushana, 2000) in British Ceylon.

In 1947, January 21st, with the screening of the ever first local talkies, "*Kadawunu Poronduwa*" alias "Broken Promise" (Wimalaratne, 1988), the Sri Lankan Talkies completed a history of 78 years in 2025. 1412 films were screened during the above mentioned span of 78 years since then.

Sri Lankan cinema, with its dynamic nature, serves as a significant channel for cultural

communication. However, it is crucial to examine its role in bridging diverse communities, cultivating mutual understanding, and fostering cultural harmony. This research aims to investigate how Sri Lankan cinema influences societal values, serving as a powerful platform for both reflecting and shaping cultural narratives. Through a qualitative analysis, the study seeks to underscore the impact of Sri Lankan cinema as a medium for cultural expression and discourse, highlighting its key role in shaping collective consciousness and fostering inclusive societal discourse.

The research addresses a critical gap in understanding the specific capacity of Sinhala Language Sri Lankan cinema to bridge societal divides, foster mutual understanding, and promote cultural harmony by examining its dual role in reflecting and shaping societal values.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative research study was structured to gather primary data through a survey methodology. Employing convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, data collection primarily utilised questionnaires. Despite a set number of 150 participants, the survey had a return of 120. Of these, 45 were female and 75 male who are members of the cinema-going public. This kind of sample is indicative of cinema-watching members of the film audience, and it gives insight into cultural communication through Sri Lankan cinema. Although the sample size was less than initially intended, the data gathered help in gaining insight into how Sri Lankan film influences society values and cultural expression.

The study was limited in its specificity to Sinhala-language films, which dominate most local Sri Lankan films. The limit could deny the study concepts and insights from audiences watching films of other languages, such as Tamil or English, which are also a part of the nation's cultural experience. By

focusing solely on Sinhala language films, the study can capture nearly all aspects of the richness and diversity of Sri Lankan cinema. Subsequent studies might seek to overcome this shortcoming by using a more inclusive approach that includes a larger scope of languages and film productions and therefore, provides a larger, more inclusive explanation of the cultural forces present in Sri Lankan cinema and how these affect society values and communication.

3. Results

Born in Jamaica, British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was one of the initiators of the school of thought "British Cultural Studies" or the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Hall's (1989) examinations on encoding and decoding in the context of media and cultural texts have influenced the reception and interpretation of films within different cultural contexts.

"The Circuit of Culture (the Circuit) was refined as a tool of cultural analysis by British Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall in the late 1990s. This tool is adopted to explore the multiple modes and relationships that are adopted to construct and establish the role of film industry as commodity to satisfy the desires and needs of the audience. The film takes major role in informing and educating the mass regarding the cultural aspect of the society such as politics, economic, social, religion etc. The cultural of the society is based on this system which operates to establish social solidarity and harmony. Failures of any of this system will demoralise the entire society. The circuit of culture can be applied to understand the role of film as commodity is consumed by the audience. This article focuses on the application of circuit of culture in the media industry to understand the

culture of film production for the mass or audience (Arvind, 2019)."

Cultural communication involves utilising various mediums and communication tools to carry out the practices and obligations of communities by employing symbolic elements. These resources encompass both verbal and nonverbal methods, including visual imagery, within films, along with the regulations governing their utilisation and comprehension. Films, as a powerful form of cultural communication, harness a multitude of symbolic properties to convey messages, values, and narratives that resonate with audiences.

Through the integration of verbal dialogues, visual aesthetics, and cultural contexts, filmmakers can effectively communicate complex ideas and emotions, fostering understanding and connection among diverse communities. Moreover, the interpretation of these symbolic properties within films is influenced by cultural norms, beliefs, and experiences, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural communication and the cinematic medium. Therefore, recognising and analysing the symbolic elements embedded within films is crucial for comprehending their role in cultural communication and their impact on shaping societal values and identities.

Among the three (03) key methods that can be used for cultural communication, Sri Lankan cinema was primarily investigated as a medium, such as, Cultural Representation, Cultural Identity and Nationalism, and Cultural Influence and Globalisation.

Under 'Cultural Representation', the questionnaire inquired about the 'Portrayal of Diversity' in Sri Lankan cinema and whether Sri Lankan filmmakers present 'Cultural Authenticity'.

The 90% majority agree that Sri Lankan cinema showcases diverse cultures, traditions, and lifestyles. It

shows Sri Lankan cinema offers the audiences an indication of differences in human lives which fulfils the 'Portrayal of Diversity'. An overwhelming 90% of respondents agree that Sri Lankan cinema effectively showcases the nation's diverse cultures, traditions, and lifestyles. By genuinely portraying this societal assortment, it acts as a powerful medium for fostering understanding, appreciating diversity, and enriching discourse on cultural pluralism and social harmony.

The core logic is that authentic representation leads to understanding, which in turn fosters social harmony.

The 70% majority opinion is that Sri Lankan Filmmakers attempt an effort towards authenticity in depicting cultural refinements. It indicates that they represent the people with fine depiction of different cultures, the 'Cultural Authenticity'. All of them (70%) agree that Sri Lankan film prioritises cultural authenticity, considering to showcase a variety of traditions through earnest and gentle portrayals. This dedication gives the films authenticity and content and holds a closer relationship with audiences as well as advances cultural understanding through film.

The core logic is that authentic cultural representation builds credibility, which in turn establishes greater audience involvement, ultimately leading to cultural understanding.

Under 'Cultural Identity and Nationalism', the questionnaire inquired about the 'Cultural Pride' of Sri Lankan cinema and its identity of 'National Cinema'.

The 75% majority confirm that Sri Lankan cinema depicts cultural achievements or past events which

can provide one with a sense of pride and national identity when watching the same, the 'Cultural Pride'. A majority (75%) confirm that Sri Lankan cinema plays an important role in the formation of national pride and identity. In its celebration of cultural achievements and past successes through its storyline, it shares cultural values, pays tribute to heritage, and creates a shared sense of nationhood among audiences. This role reinforces its status as a cultural pride producer and nation builder.

The core logic is that Sri Lankan cinema encourages national integration through festive representation of cultural history and heritage for the development of common sense of pride and identity among the citizens.

85% of the majority hold the view that Sri Lankan cinema as 'National Cinema' can help to create national identity by depicting the history, struggle, and achievement of a nation.

An 85% majority agrees that Sri Lankan cinema, as a form of 'National Cinema,' is an effective force in shaping national identity. By reflecting the nation's collective history, struggles, and values, it acts as a unifying force that fosters a shared sense of pride and solidarity, transcending internal divisions.

The core logic is that being a symbol of the shared past and values of a country, Sri Lankan cinema makes the country more united, thereby a national force of unification.

Under 'Cultural Influence and Globalisation', the questionnaire inquired about the 'Cultural Exchange' of Sri Lankan cinema and its 'Global Impact'.

60% majority agree Sri Lankan film scenes are an impressive mode of cultural exchange, through which

individuals from all corners of the world can sense and comprehend the Sri Lankan culture, 'Cultural Exchange'. A 60% of people consider Sri Lankan cinema as a key campaigner of cultural exchange. By introducing the country's distinctive tradition and stories onto the international stage, it is a bridge between cultures, a promoter of cross-cultural understanding, a facilitator of cultural diplomacy, and an aggregator of global connectedness.

The core logic is that in representing the Sri Lankan culture to the world, its cinema is a bridge of international cultural exchange with cross-cultural communication and understanding.

The 55% considers that Sri Lankan cinema has to succeed in order to be a part of the world and affect cultures' thoughts and enrich one collective global cultural experience as 'Global Sri Lankan Cinema'. The 55% majority is that if Sri Lankan cinema is to gain global influence and create cultural characteristics, overseas success is a necessary requirement that will help participate in an equal 'Global Sri Lankan Cinema' experience and cross-cultural knowledge.

The core logic is that international success of Sri Lankan films is the forerunner of their capability to influence international cultural attitudes and lead to a two-way, cross-cultural consciousness.

Most of the respondents were positive about the effectiveness of Sri Lankan cinema in all three methods adopted for cultural communication. Sri Lankan cinema was analysed mainly as a medium in three main categories in this study: Cultural Representation, Cultural Identity and Nationalism, and Cultural Influence and Globalisation. Respondents' positive tone indicates Sri Lankan cinema performs its

function effectively in these cultural communication aspects. By its representation of various cultural representations, the cinema represents Sri Lankan society, tradition, and culture.

Apart from this, it builds and consolidates cultural identity and nationalism and evokes a sense of pride and identity among the audiences. In addition to this, Sri Lankan cinema affects not only globally but also shapes global perceptions and contributes to the discourse of cultural globalisation. The respondents' confirmation emphasises the importance of Sri Lankan cinema as a powerful cultural expression and dialogue tool, influencing society's values and enabling cross-cultural exchange at global and local levels.

4. DISCUSSION

After considering the main results mentioned above, the following facts need to be addressed in relation to the research study as per the opinions made by the respondents. The topics are aligned with Social Issues and Commentary, Language and Communication Styles, Tradition and Modernity, Cultural Memory and Heritage, and, Cultural Influence on Film Styles.

4.1 Aligned with Social Issues and Commentary the Sri Lankan cinema should address the social challenges.

Since Sri Lankan cinema can address and raise awareness about social issues such as discrimination, inequality, and injustice, and fostering cultural dialogue, Sri Lankan cinema acts as a vehicle for social change by using its storytelling power to expose discrimination and injustice, thereby raising public awareness, provoking critical dialogue, and inspiring collective action towards a more equitable society.

Alongside the Social Commentary by Sri Lankan Filmmakers, they should use their work to comment on cultural, political, and

societal issues, encouraging audiences to reflect on their values and perspectives. Sri Lankan filmmakers perform as agents of social change, using cinema to critique societal issues, amplify marginalised voices, and challenge power structures, thereby sparking public dialogue and advocating for a more just and equitable future.

4.2 Aligned with Language and Communication Styles of Tamil and English films need to be made, displaying Language Dynamics.

Sri Lankan Cinema may reflect the culture's diversity of language, including dialects, accents, and differences in language. Sri Lankan filmmakers employ film as a social commentary tool, employing narrative as a critique of cultural, political, and social issues. Through strengthening marginalised voices and challenging dominant power structures, they seek to awaken public thought, initiate debate, and canvass for a more equal and just society.

How cinematic characters communicate within Sri Lankan cinema must be an expression of cultural practice and communication style, and must take into account social dynamics. The making of films in Sinhala, Tamil, and English effectively reflects Sri Lanka's multilingualism, ensuring diverse cultural representation within the country while expanding overseas markets to promote global cross-cultural exchange.

4.3 Aligned with Tradition and Modernity, the Sri Lankan films created to preserve traditions.

Filmmakers should use their creative art to document and preserve cultural traditions that are at risk of being lost in Sri Lankan culture. Sri Lankan filmmakers are great rescuers of endangered cultural traditions because they preserve them on "celluloid". By doing so, they ensure the nation's heritage is

safe for generations to come, transmit cultural pride, and highlight its importance.

Alongside, Sri Lankan Cinema has to continually reflect the tension and hegemony of tradition and modernity, how cultures have learned to evolve with times. Sri Lankan film awakens citizens by looking at the conflict between tradition and modernity, with powerful stories that force the reflection on cultural adjustment and empower audiences to adjust to a changing world.

4.4 Aligned with Cultural Memory and Heritage by making Sri Lankan films to preserve Cultural Memory:

Sri Lankan film awakens citizens by looking at the conflict between tradition and modernity, with powerful stories that compel reflection on cultural adjustment and empower audiences to adjust to a changing world. Sri Lankan film is a precious caretaker of cultural memory, having conserved to the camera to record and inscribe stories, rituals, and traditions. This guarantees the nation's heritage for posterity, generating a continuing sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Alongside, Sri Lankan filmmakers may contribute to cultural preservation by documenting cultural artefacts, practices, and rituals. Sri Lankan filmmakers are obliged to function as visual archivists, utilising film to record cultural artefacts and practices accurately. This is for the purpose of creating a lasting record that preserves heritage for generations to come, which is an invaluable education tool and one that fosters greater consciousness of cultural identity.

4.5 Aligned with Cultural Influence on Film Styles in the Sri Lankan way of Aesthetic Choices in filmmaking.

Sri Lankan Cultural factors should influence the visual and narrative approaches of films, affecting storytelling, camera work, editing

and other artistic decisions. Sri Lankan filmmaking must develop an unique aesthetic by deeply integrating cultural factors into visual and narrative structures. This assists in ensuring authenticity, supporting national heritage, and creating a more intense connection with the audience, creating a culturally enriching cinematic experiences.

Alongside, Cinema studies must be taught in schools and, higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka. Integrating cinema studies into Sri Lanka's educational curriculum is essential for creating a cinema-literate public. By providing the learners critical thinking and media literacy skills, it encourages a deeper appreciation of film as an art form and improves their understanding of its cultural significance.

The success of Sri Lankan films as a means of cultural communication relies on national acceptance and recognition of several key factors. First, these films need to tackle social issues and offer insightful commentary through storytelling that connects deeply with audiences. Second, they should embrace different languages and communication styles that genuinely reflect Sri Lanka's linguistic diversity.

This ensures inclusivity and appeal to a broad audience. Third, filmmakers must find a balance between tradition and modernity while examining the complexities of social change in our fast-paced world. Fourth, it is important to preserve cultural memory and heritage by documenting and celebrating the rich traditions, rituals, and stories that shape Sri Lankan identity. Finally, recognising the cultural influences that shape film styles can create a vibrant and varied cinematic landscape that mirrors Sri Lanka's unique cultural fabric.

By embracing these elements, Sri Lankan cinema can connect with audiences at home and abroad. This can help promote appreciation and understanding of the

country's rich cultural heritage and current realities as a means of cultural communication.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In today's world, where cultural exchange is increasingly important, Sri Lankan cinema has a significant role to play. It can build connections between communities and help create a shared cultural experience worldwide. When local and foreign audiences watch Sri Lankan films, they join a journey that goes beyond borders, promoting a sense of closeness and mutual appreciation.

To achieve this effectively, cinema education is important. If it begins within Sri Lanka's formal education system from schools to higher education, it will provide individuals with the skills needed to understand the complexities of cinema as a way to communicate culture. This integration would also encourage critical thinking and an appreciation for the art of cinema. It is important for filmmaking to engage with the diverse stories in Sri Lankan society.

To conclude, cinema education would indeed go beyond creating better audiences and filmmakers by encouraging cultural literacy and a wider comprehension of the universe. **Ultimate recognition of the significance of cinema as a cultural communication medium underscores its role in promoting inclusive dialogue and understanding the further contribution to broader societal harmony and interconnection.**

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