

Social Sense and Embodied Sensibility: Towards a historical phenomenology of film going

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This chapter reflects upon how we might develop a more phenomenological approach for the historical study of social experience at the cinema. To do this I will consider some recent scholarship and a few examples drawn from my own research on the history of cinema exhibition in south India during the early decades of the 20th century to suggest several possible starting points for writing a historical phenomenology of filmgoing. On the most general level, I want to encourage more attention on the cinema going experience as a complex play between you, me, them, the film, the place of exhibition and the wider world beyond (Breakwell, 1990). Certainly, historians of cinema need to be much more attentive to the sensory texture of the past and to ask phenomenological questions of our source materials that can help us relearn how to do history using our senses. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on one aspect of this sensory history of cinema that has all too often been overlooked, namely how embodied sensibility went together with the social sense of being part of an audience. Before moving on to specific examples I will first explain my focus on social sense and how this relates to phenomenology.

There is a part of watching a film within the shared space of a theatrical setting, almost too obvious to mention, that involves variable degrees of awareness of being in a collective. Even though films take centre stage and often work to blind us to everything else going on around their projection, filmgoers nonetheless also routinely experience other

filmgoers. There is always a jostling proximity of bodies within touching and smelling distances of each other. This embodied social sense is a fundamental part of filmgoers' experience of themselves as being part of an audience while watching films. However, this social aspect of cinema experience has all too often been overlooked in what is now a substantial body of historical work on the relationship between audiences and cinema. In several recent contributions, theorist Julian Hanich (2010: 2014) has urged cinema studies scholars to pay more attention to the phenomenology of the collective viewing experience. Hanich argues that film scholars have tended to focus upon the relationship between viewer and film at the expense of the relationship between viewer and viewer. Citing Miriam Hansen (1991) on the cinematic public sphere and Janet Staiger (1992) on the history of film reception (amongst others), Hanich notes that their approach was limited by an objective third person perspective on communal viewing situations without consideration of accompanying phenomenological aspects of audience interrelations (2010: 4). He also acknowledges the work of new cinema historians as helping to shift the agenda from individual movies-as-artefacts or as texts to consider a broader conception of the social experience of cinemagoing (Hanich, 2014: 338 and 343). In this regard, he cites the work of Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, Annette Kuhn, Philippe Meers and Robert C. Allen as usefully highlighting the social significance of watching film. Yet, Hanich also complains that new cinema history needs to take a further step to embrace a phenomenological approach for the study of cinema's social collectivities.

I believe that Hanich is, up to a point, correct on this issue. New cinema historians have not made phenomenology an explicit theoretical move. However, Hanich also underestimates the extent to which new cinema history scholarship has at least implicitly been informed by and is compatible with phenomenology. For example, Richard Maltby's

introduction to the edited volume *Explorations in New Cinema History* identifies social experience as a central question (2011). Likewise, Robert Allen's contribution to the same volume distilled the lessons learned over 29-year research project on cinema history in North Carolina into a renewed call to focus our attention on the sociality and spatiality of the experience of cinema (2011: 48). This same discernible, yet still implicit, phenomenological emphasis on social experience can also be found in Annette Kuhn's book, *An Everyday Magic* (2002). Though primarily highlighting the work of memory, Kuhn's project amassed an extremely rich set of first person accounts of cinema experience in 1930s Britain which speak directly to the embodied sensibilities of communal viewing. Clearly, leading figures of new cinema history have already been exploring common ground with a tradition of phenomenological scholarship, even without explicitly acknowledging it *per se*.

There may well be good reasons why new cinema historians have not made the explicit move toward phenomenology while exploring the social aspects of cinema experience. Following the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology started as a philosophical endeavour that privileged the embodied, subjective, and lived experience as the necessary starting point for understanding human practice. This tradition has in many ways tended to privilege an individualistic approach that begins at the point of subjective perception. Within film studies Vivian Sobchack (1992: 2004) has, more than any other scholar, helped to bring this phenomenological tradition into the discussion of how film studies theorized spectatorship. Through a new emphasis on the embodied, sensory experience of films, Sobchack's philosophical intervention significantly altered the terms of debate about how people make sense of the cinema. Yet, her analysis has largely been aimed at the level of an abstract individual. While it is

important to acknowledge the significance of Sobchack's critique of the implicit mind/body dualism in spectator studies, her work has not led others to build on this opening to examine the social experience of cinema with the tools of phenomenology. Film studies' theorization of a film spectatorship that is always caught up in textual strategies and produce filmgoers subjectivity will not get us very far in being able to account for the theatrical social experience of cinema. However, if we can agree with Sobchack that films mobilize a differential extension of the senses amongst their spectators, then we must also explore how film exhibition practices marshal audience experience as part of their own complex sensory, aesthetic, emotional and social environments.

Though phenomenology has been strongly associated with and sometimes criticized for an individualistic emphasis (Howes and Pink, 2010; Spiegelberg, 2012), it would be wrong to dismiss the approach on this basis. Phenomenologists have also stressed the importance of constitutive, intersubjective and interactional processes that bring people into worlds of shared meaning. For example, the work of the philosopher Alfred Schutz (1944; 1967) on what he referred to as 'social phenomenology' was a sustained effort over decades to explore how phenomenologists could approach an understanding of the collective shared experience of social groups. Schutz' project was a highly detailed and exacting analysis of how the interior of experience goes together with the exteriority of social relations. On this account, intersubjectivity and the raft of social relations it entails becomes a key concept for developing a phenomenological understanding.

Hanich's phenomenological challenge picks up on this focus on intersubjectivity as an ever-present part of the cinema experience, even if we are not always aware of it. In putting forward his theory of collective spectatorship Hanich has argued that a quiet attentive audience predominantly experiences cinema without reflexively experiencing each

other. Though filmgoers are always to some extent aware of being in a collective, Hanich emphasises that the viewer's conscious experience of co-present others remains for the most part at the margins of their consciousness. Nonetheless, even without having an awareness of others at the forefront of a viewer's attention, the quiet attentive watching of a film is still a collectively shared activity (Hanich, 2014: 341). This point is especially important for Hanich because he says there has been a tendency for historians to celebrate and over-emphasize the more expressive, boisterous and distracted mode of collective viewing at the expense of the quiet attentive audience. Hanich probably makes a valid theoretical point that historians have not placed as much emphasis on the quiet audience. However, the crucial difference between Hanich's theoretical exercise and the work of a historian (or an anthropologist for that matter) is for the latter no general theory of audiences would be advanced *a priori* for all people and places without empirical research of some kind. It may seem reasonable to assume that in theory a quietly attentive audience is the normative, taken-for-granted, unreflective social sense of filmgoing. But doing so misses out on how the immediate setting and occasion of any given film exhibition bares upon the embodied social sense of the cinema. Historians would, in general, want to turn this normative assumption around into historically contingent and culturally specific research questions.

Scholars have taken up these questions of the cinema experience in a variety of research settings and repeatedly found that quiet attentive audiences are not necessarily the norm. Working in northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in the 1960s Hortense Powdermaker (1966) found mining labourers to be highly expressive filmgoers. Likewise, Elizabeth Hahn has written about film screenings in Tonga as raucous events of intense audience participation. Walter Armbrust (1998) described moviegoing in downtown Cairo as

a secular ritual that verged on the carnivalesque. And perhaps most relevant for my own research interests in India, the recent work by Lakshmi Srinivas (2016: 3) has argued that “the voluble cinema hall audience and an in-theater experience marked by a spontaneity, improvisation, and performance that is far removed from the silent absorption of film associated with mainstream audiences in Anglo-American and Western European exhibition settings.” In light of this body of scholarship from very different settings, Hanich’s privileging of the quietly attentive audience may well appear to be a Eurocentric emphasis. Certainly, we need to be attentive to the cultural diversities of audience experience. However, we also want to be careful not to reify active and passive audiences as diametrically opposed cinema experiences that fall into a simplistic west versus the rest or high-class and low-class dichotomies.

In what follows I consider some common ways that the embodied social sense of filmgoing was experienced within cinema theaters using examples that mostly derive from my research on the south Indian city of Madras (now known as Chennai) during the first decades of the 20th century (Hughes, 2000, 2010, 2011). In order to examine some of the ways that a heightened social sense was brought to the forefront of cinema experience, I distinguish three main kinds of embodied social sense at the cinema. First (in no order of priority) is the mundane, routinely taken-for-granted part of theatrical filmgoing that involves a collectivity of people. A second kind of social sense was deliberately organized as promotional activities and competitions whereby exhibitors actively involved audience members to take part in the show before, after or in between films. The third kind of social sense at the cinema was produced by unplanned and spontaneous incidents where audiences variously distracted, interrupted, interfered or upstaged the screening of films.

Collective encounters in the dark

Roland Barthes spoke of his social sense of cinema as a kind of ghostly presence illuminated by the flickering lights of film projection. In his short essay "Leaving the Movie Theater" (1989) he wrote evocatively about his own cinemagoing experience as part of an effort to assess the political possibility of freeing the spectator from the grasp of the spectacle. He argued that the experience of going to the cinema was as much about what goes on in the darkness of the auditorium as about the film itself. Thus, under cover of darkness, surrounded by the shadowy company of strangers, "Barthes remarks on the postures of the spectators in the darkness, often with their coats or legs draped over the seat in front of them, their bodies sliding down into their seats as if they were in bed" (Burgin, 2004: 31).

For Barthes, this was a kind of diffuse social eroticism that piqued his distracted and surreptitious interest in those seated around him. This twilight communion was made all the more fascinating by the light from the projector which not only illuminated images on the screen, but also the crowd from the back of their heads. Rather than being momentarily hypnotized by the film, completely engulfed in the narrative, film-goers in a darkened auditorium are also involved in their architectural and social surroundings. Barthes (1989) explains:

...as if I had two bodies at the same time: the narcissistic body which looks, lost in the close mirror, and the perverse body, ready to fetishize, not the image, but precisely that which exceeds it: the grain of the sound, the theater itself, the darkness, the obscure mass of other bodies, the rays of light, the entrance, the exit.

Barthes did not explicitly pursue this observation as a matter of phenomenology. But, the *perverse body* that he described as having come unstuck from the imaginary in the movie theater was the embodied historical subject sensuously embedded within a set of physical, material, emotional and social relations. In thinking about the limits of the filmic medium, Barthes stumbled bleary eyed into the phenomenological realm of the extra-cinematic. And he left us hanging there without trying to make sense of this excess. For my purposes here, this is a good example of the habitual commonplace sociality that so often goes without mention in historical accounts and sources on filmgoing and aligns with Hanich 's (2014) concern with the quiet attentive audience sociality.

Stage managed sociality

A second kind of social sense at the cinema was orchestrated by cinema managers in an explicit effort to try to get their patrons more involved with their film shows. These most often took the form of promotional activities and competitions. A 1924 article in a leading English daily newspaper in Madras entitled 'Fairground of the Film' explained how cinema audiences had become a key part of the attraction of the theatrical setting (*Madras Mail*, 5 April 1924, p. 8). The article was very clear on this point: "The picture goer has become an exhibit; he has taken the place of the Fat Boy of Peckham." The "Fat Boy" here refers to John Trunley (1898-1944) from what was then a suburb of London, who gained fame for reaching an unusually heavy weight at a young age and went on to perform in music halls and in films. The 'Fairground of Film' article suggested that shrewd exhibitors had already figured out audiences came to watch themselves as much as anything else. To help capitalize on the attraction of the audience exhibitors came up with various competitions and promotions that made "the audience part of the show, so that still more may stand and

gape at the gates” (Ibid). Film exhibitors in Madras used a variety of promotional practices often themed as a kind of tie-in with a specific film and/or leading screen actor where audience members were invited to participate in contests against each other. Such schemes were numerous: filmgoers were encouraged to write descriptions of leading actors, speak on the moral values of a film, to recognize isolated scenes in a film and put them in their proper order, act out key scenes and to come up with new endings or with alternate titles. It was common for audience members to be invited on stage as contest participants or winners in what amounted to a kind of talent show where audiences could appreciate each other as performers in their own, alongside the films. As the ‘Fairground of the Film’ article put it: “Competitions are showered upon the happy client.” This kind of active audience involvement in the show helped to heighten and encourage filmgoers’ awareness of themselves as an attraction.

Performative disruption

The third kind of social sense at the cinema was the product of unplanned and spontaneous incidents where audiences variously distracted, interrupted, interfered or upstaged the screening of films. This kind of social sense at the cinema is by far the best represented in my historical sources from Madras. Any sudden, unexpected, persistent or dramatic eruption of loud and participatory audience reactions within the theatrical space of the cinema produced collective audience responses. Such incidents provide key moments where filmgoers imposed their presence as part of the show and in so doing became aware of themselves as being interactive, spontaneous, performative and sometimes antagonistic. They helped filmgoers sit up and take notice of themselves as something more than mute witnesses absorbed in watching films. The social experience of being part of a cinema

audience involved different sensibilities and styles of film appreciation thrown together in a darkened and confined place. From my historical sources, I have found that accounts written about loud interactive incidents serve as a kind of auto-ethnography of how cinema audiences came to understand their own collective social experience. This kind of embodied social sense of filmgoing is an important constituent of what Hanich has referred to as “affective audience interrelations” (2010: 2).

Already by the 1920s there seems to have been a common and well-rehearsed crowd response to the apparently not infrequent technical hitches in the smooth running of a film show. In the words of a newspaper correspondent who described an incident where there was a cut in the electrical supply: “They yell, whistle, and shout as soon as the picture fades and the lights fails from the screen and keep up their outcry, often accompanied by more active demonstrations until the light comes on again, or some other means of illumination is found” (*Madras Mail*, 19 February 1921). The correspondent was writing from his own experience as a member of the audience at the event, even though he adopted a third person voice to describe it for newspaper readers. The strong emotions on display during the incident moved the writer to express his own social sense of the situation. He speculated that even though such boisterous and interactive scenes might seem to pose a general threat to public order, it was probably due to a more harmless fear of the dark. The loud shouting, whistling and outcry was thus got rationalized and explained away by a fear of the dark in a manner that also betrayed the author’s overriding sense of amusement. For my argument, the predictable audience reaction to a power outage is a clear and reoccurring example of how at the flip of a switch the social sense of filmgoing took center stage and a communal expression of strong feelings helped to create a heightened, if only transient, moment of togetherness.

Another common talking point about disruptive events in Madras cinemas was the frequent incidence of audience intervention during the screening of a film, -- ranging from incidental conversations unrelated to the film to pointed commentary aimed at what was on screen. We only know about these interjections because they were written about by commentators in a manner that suggests a mix of annoyance and amusement. Vocal outbursts, chatting and other such interventions would have punctured audience attention on the screen or, in Barthes' terms, unstuck the spectator from the imaginary by insisting on the here and now of the historically located and embodied filmgoer. However, these audience interjections were also in themselves a kind of performance of an extra cinematic social scene that was a regular part of the experience of cinema.

The chair of the Indian Cinematic Committee of 1927-28, T. Rangachari, recounted a story about the behavior and reactions of what he described as lower-class film audiences in Madras. Rangachari, who was a lawyer from Madras, drew on his own first-hand experience as a film goer who personally visited most of the cinema halls in the Madras as part of the official investigation. On one evening, he watched an "old-fashioned serial" at the Liberty Cinema, which he described as "a cheap theater in Madras":

The white heroine in every reel was being persecuted by a cosmopolitan band of villains whose leader was an Oriental and whose rank and file comprised other Orientals. Whenever the white hero made a timely appearance or the heroine escaped from the toils, spontaneous applause broke forth and on one occasion when the screen showed the heroine about to fall in the hands of her Oriental persecutor an excited voice cried out in Tamil 'Look out Miss, look out!' (Government of India, 1928: 111-112)

Unlike most accounts of vocal outbursts, Rangachari did not seem to be the least bit annoyed at the disturbance and accepted it as a commonplace occurrence. As he moved from a first person experience to a third person analysis in the retelling of the incident, he framed the film screening according his own social sensibility. He argued that this incidence showed uneducated Indians could easily follow the narrative plot, even sometimes more quickly than educated audiences. For Rangachari, even lower class Indian audiences could fully understand action serials when the films appealed to basic human emotions. Indian audiences were able to “see the play enacted before their eyes, and to partake vicariously in the emotions of the players [on the screen]” (Government of India, 1928: 111). This affective bond allowed Indians to identify with the white heroes and despise the “Oriental” villains within the moral economy of the action serial film. For my argument, it is important to point out that Rangachari’s reading of Indian audiences’ emotional involvement with the content of the film was itself triggered by his social sensibility in the theatrical setting. The well-timed vocal interjection catalysed his own social perception of a moment of collective emotion of the filmgoing experience. The interjection prompted Rangachari to shift his focus to the extra-cinematic social scene, so that in his account, the interactive and inter-racial relationships between a vocal Tamil audience member and the Hollywood action film serial were rendered as co-constituents in a conjoined performance. Rangachari’s explanation suggests how audience interactivity with the screen helped to express a shared affective social sensibility.

As already eluded to in previous paragraphs, class was a key social register of the filmgoing experience (also see Chatterjee 2012; Dass 2016: 91-97). Most of the commentary from my 1920s sources were couched in terms that betrayed a snobbish concern for

maintaining an “orderly, well- behaved house” (*Madras Mail*, 11 June 1921: 8) that explicitly targeted the “rowdy element” of the “cheaper seats” in the front. For example, a short newspaper notice under the title “Noisy Audiences” complained,

It is a pity that something cannot be done to induce the masses who frequent Madras cinemas to conduct themselves with a little less noise. At times one would believe that pandemonium had been let loose in the lower priced seats to hear the shouting, whistling and cat-calling that takes place there.” (*Madras Mail*, 15 October 1921, p. 10)

Noisy audiences were implicitly judged in comparison to the “orderly, well- behaved” patrons in the more expensive seats above and behind them. Within the theatrical space of the cinema, audience social experience involved both a self-awareness of one’s class, gender and racial identity as well as kind of social performance of those distinctions. Accounts about others’ behaviour at the cinema were very much part of this performative social enactment of distinction.

The dominant discursive trope about the alternatives of the active and passive, loud and silent audiences were most often portrayed as a showdown between the masses and the classes. However, the negative social commentary against disruptive talking and sociality were not always limited to the lower class Indian cinema patrons. On occasion those occupying the upper stalls also came in for sharp criticism for their own bad “cinema manners”. In a letter to a newspaper editor using the pen name “Disgusted” wrote:

Sir, I cannot understand why some men and women who occupy the best seats at the Cinema think that it is quite the right and proper place to discuss their domestic and Club life and chatter all through the show to the utter disgust of those who have paid to be entertained or amused. No one objects to a few remarks (*sotto voce*) but some people who patronize the cinema think it the best of good form to drawl out their remarks about the film or read out aloud the matter projected on the screen and discuss domestic matters in a high-pitched voice so that their audience may be impressed by their importance and know how many are lunching with them next day and so on and so forth. If these people could see and hear themselves as others do they would not sin again, but unfortunately they are blind to their own faults and cannot see how ridiculous they make themselves. (*Madras Mail*, 20 April 1924: 4)

This comment suggests that elite European filmgoers used the cinema for socializing in a manner that had little or no relation to what was going on in the film and without self-awareness or regard for those around them who wished to watch a film quietly.

“Disgusted”’s annoyance was not merely about the disturbance, but how this chattering class performed their own privilege through their indifference of others.

The marked annoyance with noisy filmgoers disrupting the possibility of a quiet and attentive atmosphere in both these last two examples may have been aimed at opposite ends of the social hierarchy, but they nonetheless shared a common cause of reforming public cinema manners. For my purposes here, I want to bracket the explicit disciplinary intent of this commentary to draw our attention to a fleeting glimpse of an important experiential social sense of film-going implicitly revealed in these quotations. Madras cinema theaters created a social space where the experience of filmgoing as a group

encounter juxtaposed widely divergent social classes in close proximity for over two hours at a time. Cinema shows brought different social aesthetics together and spatially materialized them from top to bottom as different seating classes, which literally allowed the elite to look down on those down in the front on benches. In this sense filmgoing was, in addition to everything else it might be, also a chance to participate in a public performance of class and racial hierarchy.

Even though many of the first-person accounts of filmgoing spoke about the experience of social differences, cinema nonetheless also produced its own kind of affective social ties that offered moments that transcended these differences. The class diversity on show at the cinema also produced powerful moments of collective feeling that was not disruptive. For example, the newspaper correspondent for the *Madras Times* described such a moment when the British film *Twelve-Ten* (1919, British & Colonial Kinematograph Company) was screened at the Gaiety Theater:

‘No film play has ever worked me up so much as this one’, was the remark I overheard at the Gaiety Theater last week ... So tense does the atmosphere become towards the end of the fifth part that it is no exaggeration to say that one could hear a pin drop in the theater...but what pleased me more about this visit was the keen interest of the crowd in the cheaper seats in the production. (*Madras Times*, 18 February 1922: 9)

Silence, in this case, was an audible phenomenon that communicated a common interest in the film (Hanich, 2014: 347). This affective communal response is what Julian Hanich (2012) has spoken about in another context as a double aesthetic response. This occurs when an

individual becomes self-aware and self-affirmed by an affective lived body experience within a collective group encounter of shared emotions responding to the same aesthetic object in a theatrical setting. But in this case, we also see the correspondent's recognition of how an especially intense moment of drama rendered the stereotypically noisy patrons of the cheaper seats into a quietly attentive audience. The so called 'classes and masses' were brought together as one in the shared communal emotions of dramatic suspense. The correspondent's social sense of class difference was overcome by the emotional 'co-presence' between participants, which at least briefly engendered feelings of solidarity and commonality. These descriptions of audience behaviour reflect an awareness of oneself and others in an intersubjective embrace. That is, there was an ambiguous and shifting sense that audience experience involved both social diversity and communal togetherness.

In posing a historical phenomenology of cinema experience we do not have to pretend to be able to somehow mysteriously reconstitute the subjective experience of filmgoing in the past. We will never have any unmediated access to some autonomous or unified consciousness of these filmgoers apart from our institutional and discursive sources. The task, instead, becomes a matter of how we go about using historical sources to find the elusive trace of film-goers' experience of each other as a collectivity within the social spaces of cinema at sites of exhibition. I outlined a series of examples drawn from my research to show how social sense was articulated in theatrical settings of cinema in Madras. If, as Barthes claimed, films create a "festival of affect" (1989: 376), then the collective

experience and forms of intersubjectivity amongst audiences at cinema theaters are another kind of festival — a festival of fascination with people and place.

The fragments from my research about film audiences and their critics suggest that, contrary to normative expectations, the cinema experience was contested and dynamic, laden with the possibility of multiple aesthetic sensibilities at work within the theater spaces. Though some filmgoers may well have preferred to lose themselves within a film narrative, theater sociality routinely dominated cinema experience (Larkin 1998: 47; Srinivas 2016: 187). Moreover, easy contrasts between active and passive, quiet and loud audiences are not an either/or proposition. Both kinds of aesthetic sensibility fed off each other in a kind of push and pull of ever present social possibilities on any given outing to the cinema. Both were part of the routine ways that cinemagoers both performed and reflexively experienced themselves as being audiences.

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