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The Virtual Vistas: Cinematic Aesthetics in the Pandemic Era

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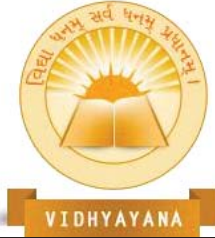
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Abstract:

This study examines the newly formed cinematic art during the pandemic and its influence on the audience. While the people of the world were suffering in the global pandemic, some artists came up with the innovative idea to perform in the lockdown through their devices in isolation. This initiative was for entertainment and to keep the art alive to motivate people who were struggling. The purpose of this creative effort was to express the feeling of isolation and social distance through digital canvas. Artists worldwide, from different countries have experimented with this, and Indian actors have also tried this remote filming concept and given some of the master pieces. This paper contains the critical analysis of such art form assessing its impact on the audience during the pandemic. Additionally, the study also examines the challenges encountered and the sustainability of such remote filming without enough props, camera quality, music and dressing.

Beyond analysing the impact of remote filming during pandemic, this paper presents the impact of conducted experiments and its indication to the implications for the future of performing arts. Technological advancements in filming techniques and digital distance performing through unconventional cinematography is worth noticing. As these innovations



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gain popularity while lockdowns, this research considers how they can be further improved post-lockdown to enhance audience advancement. This research sheds light on the process of such innovations and contributes to shaping the post pandemic landscape of cinema with some existing examples of experiments.

Key words: Pandemic, Digital distance performing, Remote filming, Unconventional cinematography, Aesthetics.

1. Introduction:

In the wake of the global pandemic, people were suffering from the disease and its consequences, everything was at a distance but the virtual world was rising parallel, as payments, schools, business, contacting, meeting, entertainment, and many more was only possible through the digital devices, but on the other side of this monotonous way of operating devices, artists were proposing several efforts to encapsulate the new paradigm in the field of entertainment. Here the word entertainment not only conveys its traditional meaning of enjoyment, but also expresses the feeling of isolation and pain of the pandemic. As people were isolated and separated from the physical social world, the virtual world started gaining popularity and all gatherings including personal and professional meetings started happening there, as did art performances.

Artists have started their virtual performances to express the pain of the pandemic and how the suffering is covering the world into darkness but in an unconventional way. Such versatile artists have started creating content which helps people to get joy and hope for the future and more specially to get connected with the outer world. This study unveils the new theatrical creativity emerged during the epidemic and its success and challenges through critical analysis and review of some films and plays shot by Indian artists. The analysis contains the films like Home Stories (2020), A Viral Wedding (2020), Wakalat at Home, and Family - made at home. These films can be compared with the OTT (over-the-top) but these films were shot without the facilities.



2. The Evolution of Virtual Theatre:

In the book "Theatre of Lockdown" (Fuchs), Barbara Fuchs has well explained the intricacies of digital and distanced performance with the lens of pandemic. It also contains the experiments conducted by artists globally and the way artists work efficiently to convey their messages to the audience without their presence. Along with the challenges of remote filming, artists have shot several drama series, narratives and short films just to get fit in the small screen. This could be considered as the historical record of a unique period in theatre and cinema. Theatre and Epidemic have a strong connection as in many dramas, the effect and crisis of epidemics are shown and this is like historic documentation of such conditions. (Ristani)

3. The Virtual Vistas:

Numerous series and dramas emerged during the lockdown period, and the researcher has selected three highly impactful and popularised series that gained success due to their excellence. These popular series are available on Erosnow, Prime Video and Netflix.

3.1 Home Stories:

As the name suggests, "Home Stories" (Sethhi et al.) by Netflix is an anthology which contains four stories of different covid-19 situations. All these were shot at home during the pandemic and with limited resources available. The only story which has a setting other than home is a story of a delivery guy who is also a vlogger.

3.1.1. Story 1 - Out With it:

The first story "Out with it" (Sethhi) directed by Sahir Sethhi showcases the effective camera work in the duration of ten minutes. The story contains the protagonist who grapples with a phobia of going out of the house, accompanied by several anxieties and disorders. Cinematic excellence could be seen from the opening shot, where the wake-up call sets the tone with the camera focusing on Angad. Along with this, the grayscale filter establishes the serious mood and foreshadows the upcoming threat. He attends counselling sessions and



motivates himself continuously by listening and repeating the slogans provided by his counsellor. The hammering dialogue of “I will go out today” expresses his struggle to fight with social anxiety. He is separated from his friends and beloved, which adds another layer of complexity.

The use of several sounds like door opening and closing, locking-unlocking, water tap, alarm, breathing, stomach aching- along with the counselling dialogue in the background created the heavy environment of stress. Several scenes like meditation, self-motivation, struggling to get the carton of egg from the otherside of the door, navigating stairs and the triumphant movement of overcoming phobia are well expressed and filmed. With only a few dialogues and a wealth of emotions, the artist Arjun Mathur speaks a lot through his expression and body language. The unexpected twisting end significantly impacts the mindset of the audience. After the intense struggle when the protagonist finally exposed himself to the sunlight and fresh air, the narrative takes an ironic turn as the government announces a lockdown for three weeks.

3.1.2. Story 2 - Will you be my quarantine?

The second story “Will you be my quarantine?” (Kashyap) is directed by Anubhuti Kashyap, revolves around a one-night stand which unexpectedly turns into a one month long companionship due to the lockdown. The initial struggle to know each other and get adjusted leads to the way of growing comfort. The protagonists helped each other and managed to be good friends in such an unanticipated situation. In contrast to the complexity of the first story, this is a simpler tale. However, the use of space within the house is well managed by the artists and director. The utilisation of each area, from the kitchen to bathroom, and closed balcony indicates the constraints of living and working in confined space. Breaking away from the gender norms, the character Rehaan wears his lockdown partner’s clothes, this highlights a departure from gender biases. The journey from hook-up partners to strangers compelled to coexist and eventually become best friends is well portrayed. The wide-angle shots of the house with lockdown conditions such as working from home, partying, sharing stuff effectively depicts the journey of the development of the relationship.



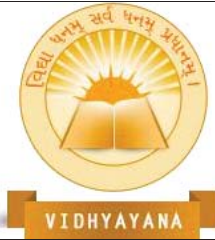
3.1.3. Story 3 - Delivering Smiles:

The third story “Delivering Smiles” (Gandhi) is about a delivery man directed by Tanvi Gandhi. Centres on the delivery man who meticulously documents all his travels and his deliveries along with the interactions with his customers. His whole day journey with his own perspective and narration is a good idea of capturing the lockdown moments and experiences of such frontline workers. The character is too optimistic and seeks goodness and hope in all the people he encounters. The opening shot in which he starts his day shows he is trying to fit in the world of vloggers and starts his first delivery-day in lockdown. The film captures empty roads, aloofness of the customers, and blurred reflection on the lift door when he says “All the best guys” to his audience (viewers), frightened behaviour of people, struggles of earning and not getting acknowledgement, rumours regarding delivery men and how a single gesture of kindness and consideration can change the stress of the entire day into happiness. The film eloquently presents the routine life of an average individual. The courage of frontline workers to venture out and provide essential service, help people without getting enough appreciation has shown gracefully.

The whole short film employs a frame of the mobile camera of the delivery man for the filming purpose, he records his whole day by holding his phone in his hands, and we as audience seem to watch the vlog he has uploaded on his social media platform. This creative way of filming involves the artist directly capturing everything by himself without any additional camera. This technique is used by multiple contemporary vloggers and the director skilfully incorporates this technique to enhance the authenticity of the story telling.

3.1.4. Story 4 - Web ne Bana Di Jodi:

The fourth story “Web ne Bana Di Jodi” (Narayan) is about an online wedding directed by Ashwin Lakshmi Narayan. The couple Ashu and Jia decide to marry on 25th April, but the sudden lockdown compels them to postpone the date, but they are not ready to drop their plan of marrying on the same special day they have fixed, and thus they go for an online wedding option. The entire film unfolds within the frame of online meetings through a web platform, capturing their communication with each other as well as other family members. In India,



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weddings are a week-long celebration and that has been done in this story with online platforms. The struggle of the preparation of several wedding functions through online meetings is well expressed. Though the storyline is not very impactful, and fails to show the real struggle of maintaining togetherness across distances, the cinematography deserves commendation. The filming contains the challenge for all the artists too, as more than half of the film, only their face and upper bodies are visible. Despite this limited space, the actors convey emotions and engage with the audience effectively. However, the commendable cinematography and the portrayal of the challenges faced in planning an online wedding contribute to its overall appeal.

3.2. Wakaalat at Home:

“Wakaalat from Home” (Pal and Sippy) is the story of a divorce case by Anuvab Pal and Rohan Sippy which unfolds with only five characters during the lockdown. The story is set in March 2020, capturing the early stage of lockdown. The protagonists Radhika and Sujin have decided for separation, initiate divorce proceedings in family court, but due to lockdown their proceedings are executed through video conferences with their lawyers and judge. The whole series revolves around the arguments and claims of lead characters to each other. Categorized as a comedy-romance genre, this dramedy is shot with each artist isolated in their respective homes. This experiment has been successful because of the well-crafted screenplay and the versatile acting skill of the artists particularly Sumit Vyas and Neha Singh. The mini-series contains ten episodes, each with a duration ranging from ten to fifteen minutes.

The series aptly captures the struggle of working from home and living in a new normal. With full of punch lines and casually delivering dialogues, this series holds the audience and though there are repetitive four faces on the screen in the video conferencing frame, it does not fail to captivate the audience. Cinematographically, the series relies on a static mobile camera with the usual background setting, in this set up, the whole burden falls upon the actors and their talent to convey the essence of the narrative. There are noteworthy comedic movements such as the past incidents of the life of husband-wife, a lawyer pretends that his screen is frozen and the culmination in the last episode. This is a unique way of filming and



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taking a risk in which the audience may lose interest because of mere discussions, but this series has got appreciated and got 6.2 IMDb ratings showcasing its success in navigating this unconventional approach and sustaining audience engagement.

3.3. A Viral Wedding:

“A Viral Wedding” (Dhanwanthary) by the Shreya Dhanwanthary and produced by filmmakers Raj Nidimoru and Krishna DK’s D2R Indie unfolds the story of a social media influencer who decided to marry through video conferencing and how it has got managed by her and the family member. The mini-series contains eight episodes with a duration of eight to ten minutes. The basic storyline includes the planning of the wedding and sudden lockdown, but as the protagonist is a social media influencer, she takes an unconditional decision to proceed with the wedding online. As the storyline progresses, the protagonist, Nisha, starts preparing for all the ceremonies. Throughout the series, the narrative experiences highs and lows. Challenges arise, such as her father has tested corona positive, re-entry of her ex-boyfriend in her life and the couple have started doubting the compatibility of their relationship. The unfolding drama within the mini-series offers a nuanced exploration of the protagonist's journey in navigating the complexities of a wedding conducted entirely through the digital realm.

Cinematographically, this entire story has been remotely filmed in the respective houses of the artist, with this, it has been meticulously planned that the background should not be monotonous and boring but should be providing visual interests. The role of *Panditji*, a brahmin who carries out all the ceremonies is funny and lively. Camera angles have been set in a way that the frame looks eye catchy. Along with this, the use of visual effects (VFX) to realistically depict messages and likes popping on the screen adds authenticity. Additionally, beyond the technical aspect, an emotional appeal could be felt when the distance is portrayed through the character of Nisha and her father, when her father tests positive and when Nisha communicates with her fiancé through the balcony as social distancing is necessary. Though many elements could have been added, the series has got 7.5 IMDb ratings indicating its



success in entertaining audiences with a well-rounded package of visuals, humour, and emotional depth.

4. Cinematic Aesthetics:

The analysis of all three series above demonstrates that the pandemic has provided a platform to artists to craft such innovative cinematic styles to entertain and empathise audiences. In navigating the challenges posed by the global health crisis, all the artists, including directors, screenplay writers, actors, cinematographers have showcased their utmost dedication in the little available resources and presented the art of remote acting with the technological innovations and redefined traditional filmmaking. In addition to the series discussed, there was another short film with the duration of four minutes titled “Family - A Made at Home” (Pandey) directed by Praseon Pandey featuring Amitabh Bachchan, Rajnikanth, Priyanka Chopra and many superstars. This film was also shot remotely by these mega stars at their home and has got featured on Sony entertainment (SET India). Collectively, these films have successfully engaged audiences and generated several opportunities. It is noteworthy that even college and school students have taken inspiration from such endeavours, experimenting with similar approaches in their creative pursuits.

Conclusion:

In the analysis of these films, it can be clearly observed that such a cinematic experiment requires technical support first, with a significant burden on the actors who perform. A successful execution relies on the effective screenplay, well-crafted dialogues, suitable background, quality gadgets, and talented actors. With these elements on place, filming is possible with a low budget and incorporating innovative approaches. This study finds the effectiveness of unconventional cinematography with digital distance performing, and remote filming as a successful art form. Notably, this approach was accepted by the audience widely during pandemic as they found connection with their actors who were also in the same situation as their viewers were.



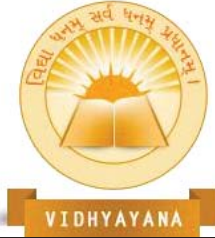
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Beyond its application in mainstream cinema, this style can offer school and college students to perform their drama in a low budget and can provide a space to emerging artists to show their talent on social media. Ultimately, this innovative practice exhibits considerable potential for growth and enhancement in the future. The ability to produce engaging and meaningful content with limited resources opens up new avenues for creativity and democratizes the filmmaking process, allowing diverse voices to be heard and talent to flourish.



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