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# Workers Leaving the Cinema: Rhythms of Work and Cinematic-Time in Old Delhi

Rosemary Grennan

## Abstract

Screenings at the Moti cinema in Old Delhi are full of interruptions, the cheap front seats are full of daily wage-labourers from the surrounding area there to watch the latest Bhojpuri film release. As the film is screened people start to leave the cinema, called to work to make a delivery and later returning to catch the rest of the film. Scholarship on cinema in India has focused on how elements such as song-and-dance sequences, censorship, disrupt linear continuity and create a distinct visual and narrative time-space, however the role of work in this has had little attention. This contribution draws on structuralist film practices, found footage and ethnographic research to explore how the increasingly erratic rhythms of precarious labour experienced by workers in the area are mirrored in the space of the cinema. Focusing on three temporal elements; watching, leaving and working, it shows how cinema in this context becomes destabilised as a coherent product becoming instead a measurement of duration for work-time, waiting and distraction.



Figure 1.

Screenings at the Moti cinema in Old Delhi are a disruptive affair; the cheap front seats are full of daily wage-labourers from the neighbouring market, there to watch the latest Bhojpuri film release. As the film progresses, the people wander in and out of the exits, called to work to make a delivery

and later returning to catch the rest of the film. Indian cinema has been often characterised as a 'cinema of interruptions' in which song-and-dance sequences, censorship, and other factors create a distinct visual and narrative timespace; this contribution will explore how rhythms of labour further disrupt the coherence of cinematic form. The name of this contribution is a reference to the first film ever shot, *'Workers Leaving the Factory'*. The film shows the men and women who worked at the Lumiere factory leaving in a hurry through the factory gates at the end of the working day. The purpose of this film, above all, is to show the possibility of rendering movement in images, however, the compulsion for the movement in the film is the end of work, not the velocity of the image form. The act of leaving formed the first articulation of cinematic-motion; the same is now true in the cinemas of Old Delhi. It is rhythms of increasing precarious labour in the area that propels workers away from the cinema, transforming the experience of film into partial units of expression defined by work rather than linear narrative coherence.

The video that accompanies this contribution is a short montage of found footage clips with an accompanying graphical timeline, generated through anti-alias scanning where time is represented spatially, with each frame represented as one pixel along a horizontal axis. This creates a spatial representation of the time-axis of the film and puts a graphical emphasis on movement, colours and changing consistencies, rather than the film image itself. In the context of the Moti Cinema, there is no strict demarcation between the time of cinema and the time of work. They co-exist, and the oscillation between the two transforms my informants experience of duration in their everyday life. Ravi Vasudevan has shown that the space of cinema leaks out into extra-textual spaces (Vasudevan, 2003), and these timelines attempt to playfully break open the self-contained world of the film into lines and movement that go beyond the confines of the frame, to visually explore the different textures of fluctuating time pressures that make up cinematic experience in Old Delhi.

Much of my research looks at a street-level file exchange of audio-visual material, and much of the Bhojpuri film material that makes up the montage was found on Micro SD cards purchased from mobile phone kiosks around Delhi. This footage is accompanied by footage from other sources such as Pad.ma (public access digital media archive), adverts and tours of the markets surrounding the Moti, and amateur documentary footage of single-screen cinemas across India downloaded from Youtube. The short texts below mirror the structure of the film sections—watching, leaving and working—and are meant to accompany the films as an experimental interplay of written and visual engagements with cinematic duration and rhythms of work.

**Please see HTML version for accompanying video**

<https://vimeo.com/747564516>

*Figure 2: Workers Leaving the Cinema, film [3m]*

### Watching



*Figure 3.*

The audience of the Moti cinema were predominantly working-class men, taking a break from work-related tasks, coming in for a nap or waiting for the next job to start. Their viewing style was participatory, boisterous and interactive; they would applaud and whistle loudly, shout out comments, put their feet up and chew *gutka* (a type of chewing tobacco). Even as the room descends into darkness for the start of the film, the experience of spectatorship was far from what you might expect from the silent spaces of many multiplexes in Delhi.

On a particularly hot late August day, we were watching *Sangharsh* (2018), starring Khesari Lal Yadav, who is presented as charming but lacking in responsibility or care for religious and family commitments, wearing the usual attire of a Bhojpuri star: half-open shirt, tight trousers, gold chain and a handlebar moustache. Soon after the opening credits, there is the fight scene, which takes place outside a cinema showing *Gulami*, Yadav's previous film. During the fight, slow motion kicks that send the local goons flying into *golgappa* stands (a type of street food) and *paan* kiosks (a kind of chewing tobacco) with exaggerated sound effects are interspersed with hard-talking dialogue. Directly after this, we meet the star's love interest who stops Yadav's motorbike with her foot; they flirt using double-entendre about Google, mobile networks and WhatsApp—'I will feed the Google in your heart', 'You will change my Google settings'—and the first dance number begins. The music reverberates around the cavernous hall, mixed with the visual effects. The audience is seemingly unimpressed by Kajal Raghwan as she offers herself up to be kissed or when she rocks Yadav's head against her belly as she dances. His rebuttal that she will destroy him if he were to give in is met with many cries of approval.

As screenings progress, somewhere between the first fight scene and the first song-and-dance number, some of the audience start to leave the cinema to make deliveries and perform other work-related tasks. As the double doors at the side of the auditorium open to the courtyard outside, the bright light of the afternoon sun floods in, dulling the screen and encouraging shouts of protest from the audience. Then, as quickly as they opened, the doors were closed again and the auditorium plunged back into darkness.

These interruptions continually punctuate the film, occurring after distinct sequences (a fight scene, a song-and-dance number, a comedy routine) as some of the audience leave to make deliveries and perform other work tasks, returning to watch later parts of the same film after the task is complete. 'I always know when is a good time to leave', said a regular at the Moti, 'you can often predict what will happen next, the mix is always the same'. Cinematic pleasure in India is often conceptualised as a visual equivalent to a *masala* spice mix or a *thali* (a platter of several different balanced dishes) (Thomas, 1985). Bhojpuri, much like earlier Hindi cinema, contains an assortment of aesthetics, 'with a fair dose of the heroic, the familial and the feudal spiced with erotic and violent supplements' (Kumar, 2020, p. 190). This form of cinematic montage, one that does not aspire to the seamless linearity of continuity narrative, is conducive to this interrupted viewing pattern.

One of my interlocutors described how, even if he had a delivery to make, he would wait for a certain amount of 'ingredients' to show (a chase, a dance number and a fight scene) before leaving the cinema. Then, depending on the film or the star actor, would rush back to make sure that he could catch one or two things before the end. The actual ending of the film was not of much interest to him, but the build-up to the climax often intensified the sequences, which was always exciting to get back to from a job. Like the dynamic shifts in tempo between fantasy and reality that occur in Bhojpuri films, here the duration of deliveries is combined with the time-space of the cinema hall, transforming experiences of spectatorship for the audience. Pandian argues that 'our ordinary perception of things always ebbs and flows, coming in and out of focus...but there are those who live more intensely with these cinematic mechanisms, those who constantly work to modulate their force and texture' (Pandian, 2015, p. 24). At the Moti, rhythms of labour give a new 'force' to

cinema, and, in turn, cinema to work: the continual interplay between watching, working, relaxing, waiting and rushing give a new sensory texture to disruptive viewing.

### Leaving



Figure 4.

One of those leaving the cinema was Suresh. Originally from Bihar, he had been in Delhi for the last few years working for an intermediary making deliveries around the markets of old Delhi, from which the Moti cinema provided a good point of departure for most deliveries. During the screening of *Sangharsh* (2018), Suresh was called to make delivery from Lajpat Rai market to the lanes behind the Jama Masjid. After he received a call about a delivery, we then waited until the scene we were watching was over, and we made our way to the exit. He told the usher at the lower gate that we would be back in a little while and we left, blinking into the bright light of the courtyard, leaving the cries of protest from the cinema behind. After taking a moment for our eyes to get accustomed to the light, we were off. Crossing the road that separates Lajpat Rai market from the cinema, we pick up a set of speaker cones from one of the stalls in the colonnades that enclose the market. In the summer months before the monsoon season, the oppressive smells of dust and petrol mix with the passing scents of *rabri falooda* (a cold dessert), frying oil and the occasional waft of *attar* (fragrant oil) as we hurry past. Suresh would play music or video-songs on his mobile as we moved quickly through the lanes, giving a cinematic overture to our journey.

The journey took no more than fifteen minutes, 'it only usually takes a few song-and-dance routines to get here, if we return now, we might reach for another fight scene'. This was not necessarily an accurate measure, but the prevalence of fight scenes in the film meant that the anticipation of seeing another as we returned would be high. On days when he frequented the Moti cinema, Suresh described how the competing worlds of Chandni Chowk and the world of film intertwined, spilling over into one another; 'film can make you lively or relaxed and this can be very different to your experience on the street, but the film stays with you'. Kracauer describes film as the relentless patching together of 'shot after shot and from these successively unfurling images that recomposes the world...the ensemble of simultaneous impressions that corresponds to the filmic technique of association' (Kracauer, in Hansen, 2012, p. 10). This back-and-forth between work and cinema creates cinematic associations that often textured my interlocutors' experience of both.

## Working



Figure 5.

If Suresh sat through the whole film, then it had been a slow day. In addition to this, he would have to watch the whole film, which he didn't always want to do—he found the experience slow and did not always want to see everything in the film; 'many of the dialogues are boring and, if there is no work, I often message on my phone or go into the courtyard for a bit'. Srinivas observed a similar occurrence with cinemagoers in Bengaluru who would predict scenes they would not like and to go to the snack stand or start a conversation with the person next to them (Srinivas, 2016). Suresh and the others that I spoke to at the Moti cinema described how, sometimes, the more enjoyable way to watch the film was through the anticipation of leaving and the pressure to get back after a job, as this gave the whole experience a certain momentum.

This time-sense was also mediated by its relationship to money; the cost of the cinema ticket, the length of the film, and the payment and duration of the job. Often, my informants would attempt to re-enter the cinema for the next showing if they felt they had missed too much of the film, arguing with the cinema attendant that they had only seen a short piece of the film so had not got their money's worth. Sometimes the attendant relented; other times, they would just sneak back in often after the film had already started, arriving at a point they might have already seen or at a place in the middle that was unrecognisable. Here, cinema was actively constructed to fit around the working day by my informants and was seen as both a financial measurement as well as a series of 'attractions' (Gunning, 2006) or selective scenes (Srinivas, 2016) that could be pieced together to create a durational performance, or 'piecemeal cinema'. This structure of wages and the precarity of task-oriented work restructured the film into sections based on the duration of work, or reoriented work around the approximation of how long a scene might last.

E.P Thompson, in his iconic article *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, looks at the emergence of a specific mode of measuring time around work by looking at how time is referred to in vernacular and working-class culture (songs, poems, diaries). He looks at the enclosure of time as a measure of productive time through the subsumption of labour into an industrial mode of production away from previous articulations of time. He argues that previously, there was little distinction between "work" and "life" in task-oriented communities. Work and the social are intermingled effortlessly, and there is no great conflict between labour and one's "own" time (Thompson, 1967). Cinema gave my interlocutors a similar time-sense, in which they mobilised the mechanisms of anticipation and prediction to give them a sense of rhythm to the working day as well as measuring the duration of tasks in relation to film sequence. This rhythm mirrored the erratic temporality caused by hanging around for work before being hired into intensive and fast-paced jobs within the space of the cinema hall.

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## Filmography

[\*Sangharsh\*](#) (2018) Parag Patil, Worldwide Records Bhojpuri

## Author bio

Rosemary Grennan is a PhD student in Material and Visual Culture in the Anthropology department at University College London. Between 2018-2019 she conducted fieldwork in Delhi, her research interests include the relationship between cinema and work, vernacular archives, practices that subvert intellectual property regimes, and local infrastructures of visual media. She is also the co-director of MayDay Rooms, an archive and educational space in London which seeks to connect histories and documents of social movements and resistance to contemporary struggle.