



## King's Research Portal

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Vom Lehn, D. (2017). Book Review: Re-engaging with the 'Active Audience': an Ethnography of Indian Cinema. *SYMBOLIC INTERACTION*.

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Re-engaging with the “Active Audience”: an Ethnography of Indian Cinema**

Dirk vom Lehn  
*King's College London*

**House Full. Indian Cinema and the Active Audience.**

By Lakshmi Srinivas. 2016. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London. ISBN: 9780226361567.\$37.50

When the lights go out in cinemas in most parts of the Western world the audience sits and stays silently in their seats until the end of the screening. Save for special sing-along screenings, for instance of musicals like ‘The Sound of Music’, audiences do not exhibit vocally or bodily their response to films; and if they do, their actions are sanctioned by other audience members. In her ethnography “House Full. Indian Cinema and the Active Audience” Lakshmi Srinivas powerfully demonstrates that in Bangalore/ India cinema-going is foremost a social event undertaken and experienced in often large groups.

The book has eight captivating chapters that offer the reader detailed observations of the organization of making and consuming Indian films as well as a discussion of the theoretical contribution of the study to a sociology of cinema-going in particular and a sociology of film in general. Throughout this outstanding book Srinivas shows that in Bangalore where she conducted most of her study, going to the cinema and experiencing film is fundamentally a social experience. The social aspects of the visit to the cinema take priority over the appreciation of the movie. And going alone to the cinema, in particular as a woman, is considered to be inappropriate (p. 133).

The social experience of Indian cinema begins when people queue outside waiting to purchase tickets. Here, they unavoidably mix with other people who also wait to be let into the theatre. The behavior in the waiting-queue is managed by security guards and the police who not seldom use bamboo sticks to discipline unruly people (p. 103). Once people have been let into the theatre physical barriers and ushers segment the audience by ticket class. Traditionally, the best seats in the house are on the balconies whilst the front rows tend to be occupied by those holding the cheapest ticket. This segmentation of the audience today does not necessarily reflect the socioeconomic status of audience members as in India ticket prices in contrast to wages have not increased much for the past few years, allowing also people who are less well-off to purchase balcony tickets. Moreover, after the intermission that interrupts the screenings people often do not return to their seats mixing up the original segmentation of the audience.

In Srinivas' account cinema-going in Bangalore is a social event filled with ritual, excitement and noise. In cinema halls the film is the facilitator of a social occasion that is organized as a special treat or gift for another person, an adventure for children who skive off school or a family outing (p. 146-152). When going to the cinema as a family the well-being and enjoyment of everybody takes precedent. Nobody, not even the smallest children are left at home, although the film might have an adult rating. Food and drinks are purchased before the arrival at the seats where then a semi-public area is setup for the family, including sleeping places for the children.

Published on Early View of Symbolic Interaction on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

During the screening people follow the film as much as the social action around them. They continually exhibit their experience of the film by talking to their family and friends, by shouting out responses to scenes for the entire audience to hear, by applauding to scenes or the appearance of actors in the film, by singing along with the actors on screen, by dancing spontaneously and by throwing coins and bank notes to the front. Through these actions audience members encourage others to align with their response to individual scenes and the film. Despite these noticeable emotional responses to Bollywood films and to particular scenes and actors in these films people never become preoccupied with the film at the cost of their interaction with others. People might enter the theater late as they have been waiting for friends to arrive or leave during the screening to talk with friends for a while before returning to their seats. Such lapses of people's interest in the screening might occur when the film bursts into songs or when scenes are shown viewers are not excited about. By disattending from the film at will, audience members become the editors of their own film experience. They do not view the film as pre-structured by the producer and their team but interweave the film experience with their interaction with others. Moreover, comments and responses voiced aloud throughout the screening of films influence other people's film experience. When vocal outbursts include assessments of scenes or stars' performances they can lead to the eruption of "taste wars" "as groups seek to appropriate or hijack the film for that instant and win over fellow viewers to their interpretation and sensibilities" (p. 181).

The film audience not only produces the film experience in the theatre but it also is involved in the making of films. Rather than starting from a film script Indian film producers assemble a team that includes the director, actors and other staff who

Published on Early View of Symbolic Interaction on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

discuss their ideas. The script that results as a rough transcript from this discussion allows for spontaneity and improvisation of the film production. Interestingly, it is not informed by formal market research. Instead, producers talk informally about their ideas with family members, friends and “tea boys” (p. 46), attend screenings of their own films in disguise to observe the audience’s response, and rely on astrology and other forms of superstition to decide on a release date and a location for the first screening of a film (p. 45).

With this review I have only touched on Srinivas’ achievement. Unfortunately, the space for the review does not suffice to discuss, for example, the influence of the multicultural and multilingual environment on the production and consumption of film in India (Chapter 3) or the exciting events at the first screening of a film (Chapter 7). Nor was I able to go into any detail about the importance of space and locality for the film experience. Despite these omissions, I hope to have shown that the book provides a deluge of resources to fundamentally rethink reception as conceived by scholars in media and cultural studies that thus far have often focused on the individual viewer of film as an interpreter or “reader” of content pre-produced by film creators. Srinivas’ ethnography powerfully demonstrates that film consumption is not an interpretive process but an interactional process through which experiences emerge that feed back into the production of films. Therewith it offers numerous points of connections to interactionist debates about media production and media consumption. I highly recommend the book for academics and others with an interest in current debates of art production and consumption, not only in sociology, media and cultural studies but also in arts- and film marketing.

Published on Early View of Symbolic Interaction on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

### **About the Contributor(s)**

**Dirk vom Lehn** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Management & Business at King's College London. His research uses ethnomethodological video-analysis to examine the action and interaction of members of museum audiences and in optometric consultations. In 2014 he published a book titled "Harold Garfinkel. The Creation and Development of Ethnomethodology." (Left Coast Press/Routledge).