

Single-Screen Cinema to Multiplex: The Cinema going Experience of Turkish and Russian Societies

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ABSTRACT

As a cultural product and medium, cinema could be viewed as an important medium in the mediatization processes in the societies. The aim of this paper is to examine the social experience of the older cinemagoers and to determine the role of the cinema in the early mediatization of Turkish and Russian society comparatively. The methods employed comprise a combination of qualitative techniques, including memory and oral history inspired ethnographic methods and the new cinema history perspective. In addition, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 20 Turkish and Russian older cinemagoers on their consumptions of the films, in both past and present. From dedicated single-screen large capacity cinema halls to multiplex venues, has progressively transformed cinema exhibition across the world since the 1980s. This paper seeks to explore the ritualized media uses of Turkish and Russian older cinemagoers since the single-screen cinema era in their countries. One of the key motivating factors for participants was the emotional experience. In this context, this research aims to analyse the cinematic experiences in Turkey and Russia from past to present.

Keywords: Turkish and Russian cinemagoers, new cinema history, oral history, single-screen, multiplex

Introduction

The new cinema history perspective is a helpful perspective in trying to understand larger trends, factors or conditions explaining differences and similarities in cinema cultures. The similar researches point out that the cinemagoers' memories are concentrating on their social experiences and cultural practices constituted by going to the single-screen cinemas, not on the films, the stars etc. Furthermore, Roland Barthes (1989) estimated this situation his essay *Leaving the Movie Theatre*: "Whenever I hear the word cinema, I can't help thinking *hall*, rather than *film*."

The cinema history research has shifted its focus away from the content of films to consider their circulation and consumption, and to examine the cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange over the past 17 years. The new cinema history perspective explores the cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange, including patterns of popularity and taste, the role of individual movie

theatres in creating and sustaining their audiences, and the commercial, political and legal aspects of film exhibition and distribution. Robert Allen's central proposition is that the subject of what we are calling the new cinema history is the experience of cinema. That experience, for most of the history of cinema, has been "social, eventful and heterogeneous", so that the history of the experience of cinema is ineluctably a social history (Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, 2011).

Annette Kuhn (2002) used the term "ethnohistory" to underline the re-entry into the history of movie reception and the everyday experiences of the gods and goddesses of Tinseltown by researching the stories of moviegoers themselves. This paper analyses the cinema going habits and experience of the older Turkish and Russian cinemagoers comparatively. Moreover, this paper seeks to understand cultural practices explaining differences and similarities in cinema cultures by regarding the new cinema history perspective that is a major *new* force in the field of *film studies*.

Methodology

Within this study, the oral history is applied as a method, along with the literature review and a series of in-depth interviews is conducted with 10 Turkish and 10 Russian participants in Antalya (Turkey) and Saint Petersburg (Russia). Oral history shares a number of striking resemblances to other narrative methods, including ethnography. A qualitative approach is more appropriate at this stage as we wish to determine what phenomena are occurring and what questions are worth asking. Total 20 Turkish and Russian older cinemagoers completed questions regarding basic demographic information (see Table 1 and Table 2). The current average age of the Turkish and Russian cinemagoers was 69.80 (range=63-82). The *educational status* of the Turkish and Russian cinemagoers was: PhD (n=7; 35%), M.S. (n=5; 25%), B.A. & BSA (n=8; 40%).

For the qualitative portion of the research, 20 self-report were collected from each country. Each one of the interviews conducted for this research project was undertaken with a single respondent. Because of interviewing individually, all respondents felt comfortable during the discussion of potentially sensitive topics. Semi-structured discussions were held in a relaxed and informal atmosphere so that much of the shared information emerged from the natural flow of the conversation. Duration of an individual discussion varied from forty-five to sixty minutes. All the discussions were tape recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

Table 1 Demographic Features of Turkish Participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Nationalities	Gender	Education
Zeynep	63	Turkish	Female	M.S.
Hasan	70	Turkish	Male	PhD
Meliha	68	Turkish	Female	M.S.
Pars	70	Turkish	Male	PhD
Mustafa	74	Turkish	Male	B.A.
Gizem	67	Turkish	Female	M.S.
Hakan	74	Turkish	Male	B.A.
Erkin	73	Turkish	Male	BSA
Arzu	81	Turkish	Female	PhD
Özlem	67	Turkish	Female	B.A.

Thus, it was aimed to observe parallelism between the opinions put forward through literature review and real-life practices. This study applied to the in-depth analysis and thematic analysis of Keyton as qualitative methods for the data gathering and analysis. The most important characteristics of Keyton's thematic analysis is that it enables the grasp and categorization of the views of the participants about the most sensitive topics within their daily communication practices (Akiner, Waldnerova, Retfalvi, 2012).

Table 2 Demographic Features of Russian Participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Nationalities	Gender	Education
Mikhailovna	66	Russian	Female	PhD
Natalia	66	Russian	Female	B.A.
Sergeevich	67	Russian	Male	PhD
Anatolyevich	77	Russian	Female	M.S.
Pavlovich	63	Russian	Male	BSA
Vasilyevich	82	Russian	Male	B.A.
Sergeevna	67	Russian	Female	PhD
Petrovna	71	Russian	Female	M.S.
Chiznik	67	Russian	Male	B.A.
Jivago	63	Russian	Male	PhD

In-depth Interviews and Analysis

This study applied to the in-depth analysis and thematic analysis of Keyton as qualitative methods for the data gathering and analysis. Interviews were analysed by thematic analysis which is sometimes referred to as thematic interpretation and “is based on participants’ conceptions of actual communication episodes” (Keyton, 2011).

Emerging themes from the participants’ narratives included:

(a) Daily life and cultural function of cinema in the 1950s: cinema, candy, bouquet and fighting for girls (b) Eating popcorn in the cinema is irritating cinemagoers (c) Current movie theatre has no taste: I don’t prefer to go multiplex cinemas because of their atmosphere

Daily life and cultural function of cinema in the 1950s: cinema, candy, bouquet and fighting for girls. The social practice of cinema-going was a significant social routine, strongly inspired by community identity formation, class and social distinction (Biltereyst, Lotze, and Meers, 2011).

Miskell (2005) states that the value of cinemas as social places where couples could meet were all things that cinemagoers of the 1930s and 1940s remember more vividly than the films themselves and these aspects of popular experience are less frequently discussed. Both Turkish and Russian respondents' narratives point out that the cinema was the social places and brought people together in the 50's. According to Christine Geraghty (2000), cinema was selling a non-material good, a shared experience of seeing a film rather than the film itself, and the responses generated – the shared laughter and tears. The whole cinema-going was surrounded by glamour and physical pleasure.

One emerging theme from all respondents focused on daily life and cultural function of cinema in the 1950s:

Natalia 66-years-old/Russian: "Cinema has always affected the relationship between people. You know, the cinema is associated with a "candy-bouquet" period in relations between young men and girls. When they begin to meet, the attributes of that period are candy, flowers, and cinema. Cinema is one of the ways of courtship. At the same time, when I was a young student, the cinema was an educational and cultural phenomenon for me more than an attribute of courting. We went to the "Motherland" cinema, to the House of Cinema. We went to the cinema "not for everyone". I remembered watching Tarkovsky's "Andrei Rublev" (1966) and "Mirror" (1975) – people during the movie sessions were sitting on the floor. There was a special audience. They were people who watched the movie "not for everyone", it was a unique circle of communication and interests."

Cinema halls are more than just a movie viewing place in those years. Cinema halls brought people together through direct interpersonal communication and they are Foucault's heterotopic spaces: Foucault (1986) states that real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, an effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. In contrast to utopias, these places which are absolutely other with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias.

Michel Foucault introduced the term 'heterotopia' in a lecture for architects in 1967, pointing to various institutions and places that interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space. Because they inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society, Foucault called these places 'heterotopias' – literally "other places" like the school, military service, the honeymoon, old people's homes, psychiatric institutions, prisons, cemeteries, theatres and cinemas, libraries and museums, fairs and carnivals, holiday camps, hammams, saunas, motels etc (Dehaebe and De Cauter, 2008).

Mustafa 74-years-old/Turkish: “The friendship of those days was completely different. We were very close to our friends in the cinema hall. Everyone would know if I had a headache. Now I don't know if my neighbor dies. We used to have fun together, laugh together, and cry together. When we were students, sometimes we'd run away from class and go to the City Cinema. There was a Girl Art Institute around the cinema. There were romantic moments in the cinema hall, and jealousy fights because of the girls at the same time. We would protest the film that didn't start in time. Sometimes there would be ruptures on the reel while the film was being watched. We used to yell, “don't sleep with the mechanic”. Then the lights were on. The mechanic used to insert the broken place and paste it again. This process lasted at least five minutes. The film reels moved from one cinema hall to another with a bicycle for other shows.”

Eating popcorn in the cinema is irritating cinemagoers. A remarkable detail of *in-depth interviews* of Russian and Turkish participants is that the Turks in the Altay region of Russia and the Turks in Antalya eats the sunflower and pumpkin seed while watching the movies:

As **Vasilyevich 82-years-old/Russian** stated, “I don't like to eat something while watching the film in the cinema hall. But when I was working in the Altai Region, young and elder women were sitting and chewing the sunflower and pumpkin seed during movies. In the same time period, there were Barricade and Aurora on Nevsky Prospekt in St. Petersburg. The actors were making a speech before the movie in these cinema halls during the Soviet period and eating something during the watching movie was not a polite behavior.”

Meliha 68-years-old/Turkish added, “In the past, most of the audience were eating pumpkin and sunflower seeds in the cinema hall. The sound of the sunflower and pumpkin seed eaten in movie theatres was very uncomfortable for me and my friends. After a while, eating the sunflower and pumpkin seed were banned and replaced by popcorn. I'm uncomfortable with the food being consumed in today's cinema halls also.”

The Great Depression increased consumer spending on cheaper luxury items such as popcorn and movies, and the two industries teamed up. Cinema halls would allow a particular popcorn salesman to sell right outside the theater for a daily fee. By the mid-1940s, cinema halls begun to have their own concession stands in the lobby. The introduction of the popcorn-driven concession stand to movie theaters kept the movie theater industry afloat, and popcorn has been a movie watching staple ever since.

Petrovna 71-years-old/Russian: “When I go to the cartoons with my grandchildren, of course, we buy everything that is necessary: popcorn, sweets, sparkling water... When I go to the cinema myself, of course, I don't eat something while watching a movie. I perceive cinema as an art. That's

why I'm respectful to watching a movie. It is inappropriate to crackle popcorn in a cinema hall. We were raised with such decency."

Hasan 70-years-old/Turkish: "Food and drink culture comes to mind when we talk about cinema in Antalya in the 50's. There were two types of cinema halls in Antalya: Outdoor summer cinemas and winter cinemas. Antalya's old winter cinemas had an audience of about 800 to 1000 people. For example, the winter version of Saray was 800 people. There would be peddlers at intermission or before in the cinema hall. On hot summer days, boiled corn and domestic production of cold soda were generally consumed. The most popular food in winter was roasted chestnut. Peanuts, sunflower and pumpkin seeds, roasted chickpeas and the like were consumed also. The popcorn and Coke duo became popular afterward, and the magic of cinema was over."

Current movie theatre has no taste: I don't prefer to go multiplex cinemas because of their atmosphere. When asked about their memories of cinemagoers, all Turkish and Russian respondents used almost the same expressions about the single-screen cinema times: "it was wonderful moments, unforgettable experience and happiness". *Hannah Arendt (2006)* argues that life experience occurs in the blank space between past and future and, as we cannot properly reflect on our circumstances in the present, we are ill-equipped to comprehend its meaning. Meaningful happiness, therefore, exists in the story of the past and not the moment of the present, while expectations of future detract from the possibility of happiness itself. Happiness is, perhaps, the one emotion that individuals spend more time thinking about that experience, and so the relationship between feeling an emotion and thinking about an emotion (through the memory of the past or hopes for the future) (McKenzie, 2018). Because of all participants are older generation, narratives of them point out that they were happier in the past with their single-single-screen large capacity cinema halls' experience.

By definition, multiplex cinemas have at least five screens, and many have now in excess of twenty (e.g. Star City, Birmingham, is a 30-screen cinema, the biggest in Europe). As well as featuring Surround-Sound systems (360° digital sound experience), wide screens, a wider range of confectionery, more leg space, air conditioning, and free/easy parking, multiplexes claim to offer a 'family entertainment' experience that does not stop when the film does. Additionally, multiplexes allow exhibitors to maximize capacity utilization by switching films between different-sized auditoria according to their audience (Hubbard, 2004).

The narratives of all participants about today's the cinema-going habits, it is obvious that they don't like to go the multiplex cinemas that are usually located in the shopping malls:

Pars 70-years-old/Turkish "I usually meet my friends at the cafes located in the big shopping malls. I don't really like making shopping in such malls, but I usually watch the audience who visit the

multiplex cinemas there. I am concerned with how *films* construct a *cultural environment* for society. I see the families while having their lunches or caring about their children who are jumping on the trampoline, etc. After that, they prefer to watch the film. But cinema is an art and it would be better to use these spaces for exhibitions or for other cultural events.”

Anatolyevich 77-years-old/Russian explains: “There are several large shopping centers with *multiplex cinemas* near to my house. I visit them every week. But it's basically shopping trips, and this is not connected with the cinema experience. I don't prefer to go multiplex cinemas because of their atmosphere. When I was young, I always went to the cinema halls once a week to watch the film. We were very happy at that times. At the House of Cinema in Leningrad, there were usually themed shows, children's movies, scientific films, documentaries... Before the movie started, newsreels were shown. Sometimes there was a live music before the movie. Today, there is no such practice. When I see people eating popcorn in today's cinema hall, I get bored and uncomfortable. I'm very happy to talk about old times right now.”

On the other hand, several Turkish and Russian respondents focused on present film scenarios and added: **“the criminal must be punished and imprisoned, and everything should be fine”**.

Erkin 73-years-old/Turkish: “Only housewives were interested in Turkish films in the past. They would take a large handkerchief with them when they went to the movies to cry. Men and educated people preferred American movies. There was a rule in old movies: the good people win at the end of the film. But now the winners are bad in movies. The criminal must be punished and imprisoned, and everything should be fine. On the other hand, if you watch a movie in the multiplex, you are being forced to watch several ad movies. Those realities keep me away from modern cinema halls. Our favorite movies were *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Hercules* (1958), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Papillon* (1973) etc.

Sergeevna 67-years-old/Russian: “In the old movies, criminals would have been punished. Love films had an immaculate romance. The films' scenarios had definitely very instructive messages. For example, we learned tolerance through the film *The Circus* (1936) directed by Grigori Aleksandrov. In *The Circus*, the main character Marion Dixon who had a black child slowly comes to accept the Stalinist ideology and sees that the Soviet Union is an accepting nation. The whole country was worried about Dixon and discussed this story for a long time. *The Carnival Night* (1956), *The White Sun of the Desert* (1970) and other films taught respect for the country, the love of peace and the love of our neighbor. Sure they have propaganda function too.”

Conclusion

Communication depends on the interpretation of signs and knowledge, implicit or explicit, of the elements to be interpreted and the rules of interpretation, the codes involved. The theory of signs is therefore necessarily a theory of interpretation. In this comparative study, it was observed that the Turkish and Russian participants focused on their emotional experiences rather than the films and related details of it. Both Turkish and Russian respondents' narratives point out that in both cultures, the single-screen large capacity cinema hall is the metaphor of the longing and memories of the old days. In other words, the single-screen large capacity cinema halls are the object that is used in place of fulfilment of an emotional experience.

Semiotics states that a lot of the issues can be regarded as sign systems: not only language but also architecture, history, landscape, organizations. All these structures deserve to be treated as more or less coherent sign systems, governed by their own laws of meaning, their own codes, and conventions. Sign- systems can be linguistic and non- linguistic. Architecture is a non- linguistic sign-system: buildings can mean things, more or less clearly, more or less objectively, according to more or less widespread and more or less clear rules (Chandler, 2007; Bal and Bryson, 1991). Although Barthes (1988) provides a truly universal definition of what the 'city' means as a space of communication or a place to meet, he under-estimates the signifying strength of urban centrality when the center is seen as the place of most intensive communication, 'erotic space' (Barthes, 1988). Lefebvre (1991) offered the most comprehensive understanding of the urban with political semantics, assuming that all urban space is political, that the city is constituted by ideologies. His prioritization universal dimension of the urban (Lefebvre, 1991).

The global media system is one of the most powerful ways that the US maintains its control of global power through the creation of shared ideas and goals. It is this media system that serves as one of the greatest tools inside the hegemonic process as outlined by Antonio Gramsci. The United States is characterized as global hegemonic elite. The films are shown in the theatres in Turkey where liberal democracy dominated in 50's, were mainly the products of the Hollywood film industry. In the same period, the films in the Soviet Union were watched in the state-owned cinema halls. The ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was based on *Marxism–Leninism* in 50's. The film was one of the major instruments of communist propaganda for Bolsheviks and the Soviet film industry was supported by the state. Although there was a distinct difference in the political systems of Turkey and Russia in the 50's, all Turkish and Russian respondents used very similar expressions about their single-screen cinema experiences. All Turkish and Russian respondents have not addicted the popcorn and coke that are the primary film snacks. The narratives of all participants about today's the cinema-going habits, it is obvious that they don't like to go the multiplex cinemas that are usually located in the shopping malls.

Popcorn and coke can be described as a metonymy of the culture prevailing in the multiplex cinemas in the modern times. Both Turkish and Russian participants choose popcorn and coke to tell about their point of view regarding the culture dominant in the multiplex cinemas. Because popcorn and coke are the well-known characteristics of the capitalist-consumerist culture that is dominant in the global world's multiplexes.

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