

Project Proposal: Memory, Nostalgia, and Cinema in Kolkata: A Community History of Single-Screen Theaters

1. Introduction

My project seeks to explore the intersection of memory, cinema-going, and community, specifically focusing on the gradual closure and obsolescence of Kolkata's single-screen cinemas. I aim to study how the obsolescence of these cinemas reflects broader cultural shifts and the erasure of community identities tied to them. A parallel, comparative study of such closures of single-screens in big cities of America may consolidate the general findings of the proposed project.

The research will investigate how nostalgia and memorialization shape collective experiences of these spaces, exploring patterns of film-going through the lenses of gender, class, sexuality, and community identity. The project aims at establishing “Nostalgia” as Social Emotion, defined such by theorists like Svetlana Boym, and if newer identities—both cultural and economic—can be generated by reestablishing these spaces based on a foundation of Social Emotion.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

The core of this project revolves around understanding how memory is not a static, unchanging reflection of the past but a mobile, evolving process. I seek to address the following research questions:

- How do different patterns of cinema-going (family gatherings, conjugal intimacy, queer cruising, etc.) reflect the intersections of gender, class, and sexuality in Kolkata?
- What role do single-screen cinemas play in the collective memory of communities, and how does their obsolescence contribute to a loss of community identity?
- How can memories of cinema-going serve as a site for reimagining history and collective belonging?
- What changes are palpable when a single-screen cinema shuts down in a locality, both in the urban landscape and the socio-culture fabric?

This project will document and archive community memories, focusing on photo narratives and testimonies from volunteers who have experienced these cinemas as part of their social and cultural fabric. By examining the evolving nature of these memories, I hope to create an archival memory map of cinema-going in Kolkata, engaging with the complex ways in which time and mobility shape collective remembrance. Apart from traditional methods (oral histories, photographic documentation), I aim to incorporate digital tools, creating an open-source digital archive that allows continued access and engagement with this community-history.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of memory, particularly in relation to nostalgia, will be central to this study. Drawing from the work of theorists like Charles Maier, who asserts, “Nostalgia is to memory as kitsch is to art,” this project will engage with **nostalgia as a critical lens for understanding how historical narratives are shaped and reshaped**. Michael Kammen’s assertion that nostalgia functions as “history without guilt” further informs my investigation into the cultural and ethical implications of memorializing the past.

This project will also challenge the traditional view of nostalgia as a passive, sentimental longing for the past. Instead, I aim to explore how nostalgia can serve as a form of rebellion against modernity’s linear conception of time and progress, particularly in relation to the closure of single-screen cinemas. I ask whether these cinemas, and their cultural significance, have been unfairly dismissed as symbols of outdated technology, or if they can instead be viewed as vital expressions of community identity and memory.

4. Research Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative, ethnographic approach to community memory. It will involve:

- **Fieldwork/Oral Histories:** Conversations with former cinema-goers, filmmakers, and local historians to collect oral histories and testimonies about their experiences with single-screen cinemas.
- **Archival Research:** Examining historical records, news articles, and photographs to reconstruct the cultural history of cinema-going in Kolkata and the role of single-screen cinemas in local communities.
- **Photo Narratives:** Capturing visual representations of the spaces, people, and memories associated with single-screen cinemas, and weaving these images into a broader narrative of memory and nostalgia.

A key component of the project will be the creation of a **Digital Archive** using Python and frameworks like Flask or Django for a dynamic front-end for interacting with the user. Python’s flexibility allows for seamless integration of the back-end, using libraries for data processing and management, without the need for separate coding. This digital archive will:

- Store and organize oral histories, photos, and other media in a user-friendly, searchable format.
- Serve as an interactive platform for users to explore and contribute their own memories, ensuring the project remains dynamic and collaborative.
- Be developed as an open-source tool, offering future researchers and the public access to a valuable cultural resource and enabling them to contribute to the archive’s growth.

The outcome of this research will be an archive of photo narratives and personal testimonies, serving as both a record of the past and a living, evolving document of community memory.

5. Significance of the Study

This project will contribute to the field of memory studies by offering a nuanced understanding of how communal memory is constructed, preserved, and transformed over time. It will also provide insights into the cultural implications of the obsolescence of public spaces like cinema halls, which have historically served as sites of social gathering, cultural expression, and collective memory.

By focusing on Kolkata's single-screen cinemas, this research will highlight the broader socio-cultural and economic forces that shape our understanding of history, nostalgia, and community. Additionally, it will provide an opportunity to reconsider the role of cinema in the contemporary world and its potential to shape cultural identity in the face of rapid technological and social change.

6. Deliverables

The primary deliverables of this project will include:

- **Digital Archive:** A fully functional online archive built using Python, Flask/Django, that will house oral histories, photo narratives, and other media related to the memory of cinema-going in Kolkata. This archive will be publicly accessible and open for contributions from users.
- **Photo Narratives and Oral Histories:** A collection of visual and narrative documentation that captures the memories of cinema-goers and provides a rich, multi-dimensional view of Kolkata's cinematic history.
- **Final Report:** A comprehensive written analysis that synthesizes the research findings, examines the role of nostalgia and memory in the context of obsolescence, and outlines the potential future use of the digital archive.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, my project will explore the fluidity of memory as it pertains to the experience of cinema-going in Kolkata. By examining the interplay of memory, nostalgia, and community, this study aims to offer a more dynamic, historically situated understanding of the ways in which we remember and memorialize our past. Through photo narratives, oral histories, and archival research, I hope to create a lasting record of the cultural significance of single-screen cinemas, preserving their legacy as both a physical and metaphorical space of collective memory. By incorporating digital humanities tools into the project, I intend to create a lasting, accessible archive that not only preserves these memories but also enables others to engage with and expand upon them. Lastly, I propose to investigate the progressive potential that the revival of these cinema halls hold for urban societies.

