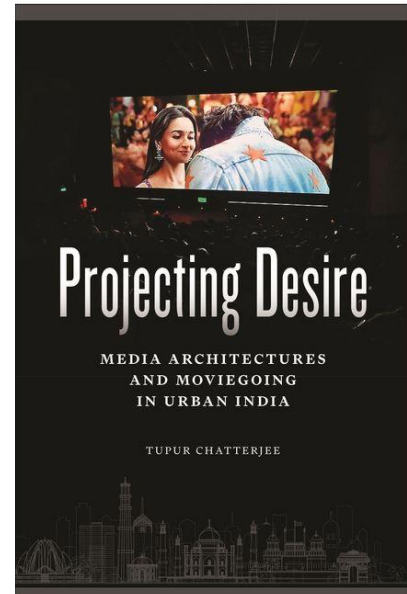


Tupur Chatterjee, **Projecting Desire: Media Architectures and Moviegoing in Urban India**, New York: NYU Press, 2025, 240 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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***Projecting Desire: Media Architectures and Moviegoing in Urban India*** by Tupur Chatterjee brings to light the many connected themes around cinema studies and urban architectural planning in India, foregrounding gender as a key vector in the configurations of malls and multiplexes in India. The relationship among architecture, urban planning, and consumer culture in globalizing Indian cities runs throughout the book as an important undercurrent, helping readers situate how different spectatorial categories were made and unmade in the process. Divided into four chapters, the book traces the development of the multiplex by historicizing India's cinematic practices, considering how public behaviors and colonial and class politics shaped spectatorship in India. The capital city of Delhi is the book's case study, which Chatterjee calls an often-overlooked media city discussing it as a "laboratory for the country's many experiments with urban design, modernization, and globalization" (p. 8).



The introduction provides a historical glimpse into the spatial imaginaries of India's cinema halls, from single-screen theaters to contemporary moviegoing cultures where shopping and food are inextricably linked with the cinemas, among other sensory regimes present in malls. Focusing on Hindi films, Chatterjee discusses the evolving syntax and aesthetics of mainstream filmmaking post the introduction of economic liberalization and privatization policies in India; Hindi films from the early 2000s onward increasingly became geared toward a more cosmopolitan, film-literate audience that was getting attuned to the pleasures of a consumerist lifestyle.

Chatterjee importantly notes that while public leisure and moviegoing were being reimagined in India's postglobalization economy, there were significant sections of the Indian population being marginalized from these industrial developments. Hill and Athique (2013) have also argued that "exclusive leisure facilities such as the multiplex illustrate the growing socio-spatial segregation in Indian cities" (p. 601). Discussing private urban development in Indian cities and multiplexes usually being situated near business districts, IT hubs, and affluent neighborhoods, they show how urban geographies of leisure are framed around the commercial interests of private sector developers, often with encouragements from state governments (Hill & Athique, 2013, p. 611).

In chapter 1, Chatterjee looks at the 1960s–1980s, contextualizing early theatrical infrastructures with references from postcolonial scholarship, highlighting how taste cultures operated in colonial and

postcolonial India. Chatterjee notes that universal access to space was not an existing concept in India precolonialism, and "while the colonial state had little interest in creating inclusive enclaves for everyone it governed, the cinema hall quickly became a container for shaping anxieties and encounters with the unknown" (p. 45). This access posed a threat not only to the colonial authorities but also to educated Indian upper caste and upper-class elites, who in their attempts to mimic and appease the colonizers had cultivated ideas of elevated taste, moral superiority, and propriety, separating themselves from the supposedly unhygienic, morally depraved crowds. The cinema thus became a site of contention where risk, disease, and depravity were solely associated with the working-class, illiterate "masses," exposing the class and caste-based barriers among India's population, and leading to "precautionary segregations" (p. 47) in the structuring of cinema halls. Another theme the chapter addresses is the role of television and home video from the 1980s onward not only as a project to imagine a national audience but also to inspire diverse taste cultures in domestic, nontheatrical settings.

Examining the concept of the female shopper-spectator as a critical consumer category in the material environment of the mall, chapter 2 underscores how gendered anxieties around women's safety and increasing consumer culture in a rapidly urbanizing, postglobalization Indian city were central elements in the design and execution of the mall's built environments. Considering the case of Delhi's popular Select Citywalk mall and its in-house multiplex PVR Select City, Chatterjee traverses the mall as a shopper-spectator to encounter the sensory and visual politics present in the design of the mall. Discussing the spatial designs of the malls that demand gazing and immersion within the retail environment of the mall to reach the multiplex, Chatterjee posits that the mall and the multiplex become spaces for class performativity, whereby the mall is a "necessary symbolic and material passage to gain access to the multiplex" (p. 86). Evoking Anne Friedberg's conception of the urban female subject or *flâneuse* (p. 17), Chatterjee situates the female shopper-spectator of today as produced by the nexus of multiple industry actors like architectural planners, mall developers, interior designers, surveillance companies, hospitality planners, and retail brands.

Chapter 3 discusses three films from the past two decades that encapsulate Delhi's environs as an urbanizing, postcolonial city. The films *DevD* (2009) (p. 132), *NH10* (2015) (p. 116), and *Pink* (2016) (p. 127) depict the cultures of rage, fear, violence, and crimes against women associated with the city of New Delhi. Through nonhyperbolic narratives laced with crime and angst, the films capture how peoples' lives in Delhi are entwined with the city and nation's larger problems and persisting regressive ideologies. The broader commentary also considers how public spaces in Delhi were and continue to be unsafe for women commuting alone, as evidenced by gang-rape cases (specifically the Nirbhaya case from 2012) (p. 112), numerous harassment cases, and even murders. The films serve as apt case studies to elucidate how filmic language and music, the Delhi locales showcased, and the symbolic references to contemporary crimes in Delhi (the molestation scene in a moving car in *Pink*, the use of the iron rod in *NH10*, etc.) capture the "psychogeographic uneasiness" (p. 141) and a pervasive sense of risk in the globalizing city. The spatial reading of these films shows how spectatorial imaginaries are created in these films to depict a gory world outside the comforts of the urban multiplex to "generate controlled encounters with traumatic events and nihilistic landscapes" (p. 110).

Chapter 4 utilizes an archival deep dive and ethnography of nostalgia to examine the changing dynamics of cinematic exhibition today: the “dying” of the single screens in Delhi (p. 145) and public nostalgia-induced rereleases of former classic Hindi films. Chatterjee posits that while the multiplex today attempts to redefine the Indian spectatorial experience and demarcate itself as a state-of-the-art, sensorially advanced exhibition space, it cannot completely disown the “familiar tactility of the single screen” (p. 146) but only reposition it and adapt to newer industrial challenges. As discussed in the chapter, mere films are not enough to “de-couch” (p. 166) the spectator anymore—the multiplex experience needs to be a sensorial assemblage of technologies like VR lounges, 4DX, and Superplex theaters, among other immersive mechanisms to entice spectators into leaving their homes. The pandemic marked a key moment of rupture in the already contentious industrial dynamics with digital streaming platforms entering India and promising both global and local content in their very homes. Outlining how risks of contagion led to a need for public reassurance of a hypersanitized, touchless, safe viewing environment in multiplexes, Chatterjee details how a highly digitized spectatorial regime was heralded both for employees and spectators, where touchless ticketing, digital thermometer temperature checks, and contact tracing via government-mandated smartphone applications became normal. Critically, the chapter also posits how these new regimes create a new spectatorial body that is acquiescent to bio surveillance and datafication of self.

The epilogue offers an insight into the current cultural and political climate of India by acknowledging how cinematic cultures in India today are influenced by right-wing Hindu nationalism. It effectively shows how despite their polished glass structures and haptic sensorium, the built environment of malls and multiplexes are also prone to the politics of minority-villanization, hatred, and fear, with rampant presence of vigilante publics, and state support of outright nationalist propaganda films. Chatterjee discusses the theatrical reception and controversies around the maximalist, historical drama film *Padmaavat* (2018) (p. 178) and the Muslim-villainizing propaganda film *The Kashmir Files* (2022) (p. 176). While recentring the category of gender in describing Hindu-majoritarian anxieties around Hindu women’s honor as reflected in the reception of these films, Chatterjee notes that “religious identity thus quickly supersedes any possibility of gender as a site of solidarity; multiplex-going middle-class Hindu women can also be active participants in such spectatorial affirmations of xenophobic national pride and historical revisionism” (pp. 177–178).

The book leaves readers with pivotal analyses of the fast-evolving economies of public leisure in India, conceiving the “shopper-spectator” as a key discursive category. While evaluating the mallmultiplex as its research object, it also provides a fresh take on spectatorial constitutions and tastes in India, especially with the flux of digital streaming platforms and the rise of “pan-Indian” cinema. Situated at an intersection of scholarly disciplines and introducing newer stakeholders in media spectatorship in India, this book will be of interest to graduate students and scholars in South Asian media studies, public culture, urban space studies, and spectatorship.

### Reference

Hill, D., & Athique, A. (2013). Multiplexes, corporatised leisure and the geography of opportunity in India. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 14(4), 600–614. doi:10.1080/14649373.2013.831198