CINEMATIC IMAGE AND IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION: A MARXIST READING OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN DIGITAL MEDIA STREAMING LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The contemporary transition of Sri Lankan cinema from traditional theatrical exhibition to localized OTT applications, independent YouTube channels, and global streaming platforms fundamentally alters the visual construction of class dynamics. Addressing the conference theme of advancing an inclusive cultural future, this qualitative study critically investigates how digital media innovation impacts the representation and cultural visibility of economically marginalized communities in post-crisis Sri Lanka. Grounded in Marxist cultural theory specifically Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses and Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony the research deconstructs the structural shifts in subaltern representation beyond traditional cinematic boundaries. The methodology employs Christian Metz's film semiotics to perform textual and visual analysis on a purposively selected corpus of eight contemporary Sri Lankan audio-visual texts (five independent short films and three web series) released on digital platforms between 2022 and 2026. Findings reveal a dual ideological mechanism: while lowered digital production barriers initially democratize content creation and provide space for subaltern narratives, this inclusivity remains largely superficial. When processed through digital streaming ecosystems, radical working-class consciousness undergoes systemic commodification, where socio-economic struggles are aestheticized into digestible melodrama to align with middle-class digital consumption patterns. Consequently, the study demonstrates that digital platform structures do not automatically liberate the cinematic image; instead, they shift the battlefield of cultural hegemony into the digital domain, neutralizing social discontent into marketable commodities. By mapping this intersection of film semiotics, platform capitalism, and inclusive representation, this study bridges a critical gap in Sri Lankan media scholarship, offering insights into equitable media access in the digital era.

Keywords: Cinematic Image, Marxist Theory, Class Consciousness, Sri Lankan Cinema, Digital Streaming.