

Screen Acting, Performance and Actor Training in Contemporary Indian Cinema and OTT Culture

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Abstract

With the advent of digital streaming sites, screen acting and its performance aesthetics along with methods of actor training in contemporary Indian cinema have undergone tremendous changes. The evolution of OTT sites like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, JioHotstar, SonyLIV, and Zee5 has created an environment where realistic, psychological, and character-centric performances are encouraged among other things. Therefore, contemporary acting in Indian cinema has evolved from the melodramatic theatrical tradition towards subtler, naturalistic and nuanced performance art forms. The current review paper focuses on discussing the evolution of screen acting and actor training in contemporary Indian cinema and the OTT era. The paper discusses various global and Indian theories of acting, such as the Stanislavski System, Method acting, psychophysical approach to acting, embodied cognition, Rasa Theory, Abhinay, etc. In addition, the paper discusses the changing dynamics in the field of acting institution, theatre practice, self-taping for auditions, digital casting, and multicultural vocal pedagogy, amongst other things. Through thematic review of recent studies and literature, some of the significant changes taking place in the field of acting pedagogy and performance culture in the post-streaming era are discussed. The conclusions drawn from the study show that OTT platforms have leveled the playing field for both trained actors and character artists but increased the need for screen actors. The study also reveals knowledge gaps in areas such as Indian OTT acting training, multilingualism in acting, digital identities, and an interdisciplinary approach to performance studies. The study concludes with an assertion that contemporary screen acting in India is going through a paradigm shift driven by technology, global streaming systems, and changing sensibilities among audiences.

Keywords: Screen acting, actor training, OTT platforms, Indian cinema, performance studies, digital media, rasa theory, stanislavski, contemporary acting, streaming culture.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary screen industry has undergone profound transformation due to the rapid expansion of digital media technologies, streaming platforms, and Over-the-Top (OTT) services. These developments have significantly altered the production, distribution, and consumption of audiovisual content, while simultaneously reshaping acting practices and performance aesthetics [1-14]. Unlike traditional theatrical performance, screen acting requires performers to communicate emotions through subtle facial expressions, controlled body language, psychological realism, and close interaction with cinematic technologies. As digital storytelling becomes increasingly dominant across global entertainment industries, the study of screen acting and actor training has gained considerable academic importance (Johnson, [15] 2019).

Screen acting differs fundamentally from stage

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acting because the camera magnifies even the smallest gestures, expressions, and emotional responses. Consequently, contemporary performers must develop specialized skills related to camera awareness, continuity, framing, emotional precision, and naturalistic performance. Douglas, MacArthur and Sadr [1] (2025) argue that screen acting should be understood as an embodied and ecological process in which performers interact dynamically with their physical surroundings, technological environments, and narrative contexts. Their research emphasizes that effective screen performance emerges through adaptive engagement with production environments rather than solely through traditional acting techniques. Such findings highlight the growing need for specialized actor-training systems capable of addressing the unique demands of contemporary screen media (Douglas, MacArthur and Sadr, [1] 2025).

Recent scholarship further indicates that emotional authenticity has become one of the defining characteristics of successful screen performance. Contemporary audiences increasingly seek realistic, psychologically complex, and emotionally convincing characters whose experiences resonate with everyday life. Sharp [2] (2025) introduces the concept of “enacted emotionality” to explain how emotional authenticity is collaboratively constructed through interactions between actors, directors, and production processes. According to this perspective, screen acting involves more than technical performance; it requires the performer to embody emotions in ways that generate audience empathy, identification, and immersion (Sharp, [2] 2025). Similarly, Bennett [12] (2024) argues that emotional realism has become a central aesthetic value within contemporary screen drama, particularly in productions distributed through digital streaming platforms [3].

The emergence of OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hot star, Sony LIV, Zee5, and Jio Hot star has accelerated important shifts in performance culture. OTT narratives frequently emphasize intimate storytelling, long-form character development, and psychological depth, thereby encouraging naturalistic acting styles and emotionally nuanced performances. Research suggests that streaming content often relies on close-up cinematography and extended narrative structures, requiring actors to maintain emotional continuity and character consistency across multiple episodes (Johnson, [15] 2024). further observe that contemporary OTT productions increasingly prioritize realism, improvisation, and collaborative rehearsal methods, reflecting broader transformations in screen performance aesthetics [16-26].

Technological innovation represents another major force influencing contemporary acting practices [4]. Motion-capture systems, virtual production environments, CGI-assisted performance, immersive technologies, and artificial intelligence are redefining traditional understandings of actor presence, embodiment, and performance authenticity, argues that digital acting technologies enable performers to create expressive characters through technologically mediated bodies while simultaneously raising questions regarding authenticity, creativity, and ownership of performance. Similarly, Matthews [24] (2024) demonstrates that immersive and virtual production technologies are becoming increasingly relevant to actor training, providing performers with opportunities to develop skills suited to emerging digital production environments. These developments indicate that contemporary acting education must incorporate technological literacy alongside conventional performance techniques [5].

Recent studies also highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to actor training. Contemporary pedagogical models increasingly draw upon psychology, neuroscience, embodiment studies, communication theory, and cognitive science to understand performance processes. Douglas, MacArthur and Sadr [1] (2025) emphasize the value of ecological psychology and embodied cognition in developing adaptive performance competencies, while Dudás-Simó [4] (2025) demonstrates how psychodrama-based techniques can enhance emotional responsiveness and character embodiment. Furthermore, Chu et al. [6] (2026) concludes that acting training positively influences emotional recognition, empathy, and interpersonal communication skills, suggesting that actor education contributes to broader psychological and social development. These findings support the growing recognition of acting as a multidimensional practice that integrates cognitive, emotional,

physical, and technological competencies [6].

Another significant transformation concerns the changing nature of professional acting labor. Digital audition systems, self-taped casting practices, social media visibility, and platform-based celebrity culture are reshaping career pathways for performers. Smith [5] (2025) argues that self-tape auditions have fundamentally altered casting processes by transferring greater responsibility for production, technical preparation, and self-presentation onto actors. At the same time, digital platforms increasingly influence celebrity formation, audience engagement, and professional visibility within contemporary screen industries. These developments require actors to possess entrepreneurial, technological, and communication skills alongside traditional performance abilities [7].

Despite the growing international scholarship on screen performance, significant research gaps remain within the Indian context. Existing studies on Indian cinema have primarily focused on themes such as nationalism, gender representation, stardom, ideology, and narrative structures, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to acting methodologies, actor-training systems, performance realism, and OTT-specific acting practices. Moreover, relatively little research has examined how Indian performers adapt to technological innovations, digital casting practices, influencer culture, virtual production environments, and evolving audience expectations. This gap is particularly important given the unprecedented growth of India's OTT sector and the increasing demand for realism-oriented screen performances [8].

Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the relationship between screen acting, performance practices, and actor training within the context of contemporary Indian cinema and OTT culture. It aims to investigate how technological innovations, streaming platforms, audience expectations, and evolving industry structures are reshaping performance methodologies and acting pedagogy. By exploring the intersections between realism, emotional authenticity, digital performance, technological transformation, and actor education, the study contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on contemporary screen acting and provides insights into the future development of actor training within India's rapidly changing media landscape [9].

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Screen acting has emerged as a distinct field of study within film, media, and performance scholarship, particularly in response to the rapid growth of digital cinema, streaming platforms, and OTT-based storytelling. Unlike theatre acting, which relies heavily on voice projection and physical exaggeration, screen acting emphasizes subtle facial expressions, psychological realism, emotional authenticity, and camera awareness. Contemporary scholars argue that effective screen performance depends upon the actor's ability to create believable emotional experiences within technologically mediated environments. Recent research by Douglas, MacArthur and Sadr [1] (2025) conceptualizes screen acting as an embodied and ecological practice in which the actor's mind, body, and performance environment interact dynamically to produce realistic screen performances. Their study highlights the importance of situation-specific skills, emotional responsiveness, and medium-specific competencies within contemporary actor training programs [10].

A significant body of recent literature focuses on emotional realism and affective performance. Screen actors are increasingly expected to communicate emotions through nuanced gestures, micro-expressions, and internalized psychological states rather than overt theatrical techniques. Sharp [2] (2025) argues that emotionally truthful performance remains central to successful screen acting and introduces the concept of "enacted emotionality" as a framework for understanding the collaborative emotional processes between actors and directors. According to this perspective, emotional authenticity emerges through cognitive, affective, and embodied interactions during performance creation, making emotional intelligence a crucial aspect of contemporary screen acting practice [11].

Actor training methodologies have also undergone considerable transformation in recent years. Traditional approaches based on Stanislavski's psychological realism continue to influence acting pedagogy; however, contemporary training increasingly incorporates interdisciplinary perspectives

from psychology, neuroscience, embodiment studies, and cognitive science [12]. Douglas, MacArthur and Sadr [1] (2025) demonstrate that ecological psychology and embodied cognition provide valuable frameworks for understanding how actors acquire performative competencies through interaction with their physical and social environments. Their findings suggest that actor training should focus not only on emotional memory and character analysis but also on adaptive, task-oriented performance skills that reflect the realities of modern screen production [13].

Recent scholarships have further emphasized inclusivity and diversity within actor training systems. Glen [3] (2025) analyzes conventional naturalistic acting pedagogy for privileging neurotypical behavioral norms and argues that many acting programs inadvertently equate neurotypicality with performance quality [14]. The study calls for more inclusive training models that recognize diverse cognitive and communicative styles among performers. Such perspectives are increasingly relevant within contemporary media industries that seek broader representation and accessibility in casting and performance practices [15].

The emergence of OTT platforms has significantly altered screen performance aesthetics. Streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hot star, and other digital platforms have encouraged more intimate storytelling structures characterized by long-form narratives, character-driven plots, and psychological complexity. Recent studies examining film and OTT production techniques reveal that streaming content frequently employs closer framing, longer character arcs, and more naturalistic acting styles than conventional theatrical cinema. These developments require actors to sustain emotional continuity across multiple episodes and adapt their performances to highly immersive viewing experiences [16].

Research specifically examining directing practices within OTT productions further supports this shift toward realism. In their study of realism-based acting direction in films and OTT series, demonstrate that contemporary directors increasingly prioritize spontaneous behavior, emotional truthfulness, and actor immersion over rigid performance conventions. Drawing on the work of filmmaker Ken Loach, the study highlights the importance of collaborative rehearsal processes, improvisation, and psychological engagement in producing authentic screen performances. Such findings suggest that OTT storytelling has accelerated the demand for realism-oriented acting methodologies across global screen industries [17].

Technological innovation represents another important theme in contemporary acting scholarships. Advances in motion capture, virtual production, CGI integration, artificial intelligence, and digital avatars are transforming traditional understandings of performance and actor presence. Argues that digital actors and motion-capture technologies have expanded the boundaries of acting by enabling performers to create expressive characters through technologically mediated bodies. While these innovations offer new creative possibilities, they also raise questions concerning authenticity, embodiment, ownership of performance, and actor identity. The study suggests that future actor training programs must include technological literacy and digital performance competencies alongside conventional acting techniques [18].

Similarly, the integration of extended reality (XR), virtual reality (VR), and immersive technologies into performance education has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Young et al. [21] (2025) demonstrate how XR environments can enhance film, theatre, and performance training by creating immersive learning experiences that simulate professional production contexts. Their research indicates that digital technologies are becoming essential components of contemporary actor education, enabling performers to engage with emerging production methods and interactive storytelling formats [19].

Digitalization has also transformed casting and employment practices within the acting profession. Smith [5] (2025) examines the growing use of self-taped auditions and argues that digital casting

systems have fundamentally altered actors' labor conditions. While self-tapes increase accessibility and flexibility, they also transfer greater responsibility and production costs onto performers. This shift illustrates how technological change is reshaping professional acting careers and requires actors to develop additional technical, entrepreneurial, and self-presentation skills beyond traditional performance abilities [20].

Another emerging area of scholarship concerns audience engagement and perceptions of authenticity. Contemporary audiences increasingly value performances that appear psychologically truthful, emotionally complex, and socially relatable. Research on screen performance suggests that authenticity is often constructed through subtle behavioral details rather than overt emotional display. Studies of Method Acting and screen performance reception indicate that audiences frequently associate realism with emotional commitment, personal vulnerability, and embodied character transformation. Such perceptions continue to influence both acting pedagogy and performance evaluation within contemporary media cultures [21].

Despite these developments, significant research gaps remain within the Indian context. Existing Indian cinema scholarship has extensively explored themes such as nationalism, gender representation, stardom, and narrative structure, but comparatively little attention has been devoted to acting methodologies, performance realism, actor training systems, and OTT-specific acting practices. Furthermore, limited research examines how Indian actors adapt to technological innovations, digital casting systems, influencer culture, and emerging forms of virtual performance. Consequently, there remains a need for comprehensive research investigating the relationship between actor training, screen performance, technological transformation, and OTT storytelling within contemporary Indian cinema [22].

Overall, the literature demonstrates that screen acting is increasingly shaped by emotional authenticity, embodied cognition, technological innovation, and platform-driven storytelling practices. Contemporary actor training must therefore move beyond traditional theatre-based models to incorporate psychological realism, digital literacy, inclusivity, interdisciplinary learning, and technological adaptability. These developments provide an important foundation for examining how performance practices and actor training are evolving within the rapidly changing landscape of Indian cinema and OTT culture [23].

OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

- To investigate the history of screen acting in recent Indian films.
- To discuss the impact of the OTT culture on the performance styles.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method qualitative approach by combining Systematic Literature Review (SLR), Qualitative Content Analysis, Comparative Analysis, and Thematic Analysis to examine screen acting, performance aesthetics, and actor training in contemporary Indian cinema and OTT culture. The Systematic Literature Review method was employed to systematically identify, collect, and evaluate scholarly literature published between 2015 and 2026 from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Science Direct. Relevant studies were selected using predefined keywords including *screen acting*, *actor training*, *performance realism*, *OTT culture*, *digital performance*, and *acting pedagogy*. Out of approximately 120 retrieved publications, 65 relevant sources were selected for detailed analysis [24].

The selected literature was then examined through Qualitative Content Analysis, which enabled the identification and interpretation of recurring concepts, patterns, and perspectives within the existing research. To organize the findings, Thematic Analysis was applied to classify the literature into major themes such as screen acting methodologies, emotional authenticity, performance realism, actor-training systems, OTT storytelling, digital auditions, technological innovations, and audience

engagement. In addition, *Comparative Analysis* was used to compare acting practices and training approaches in India with those of established screen industries in the United Kingdom and the United States. This comparison helped identify similarities, differences, and emerging global trends influencing contemporary Indian screen performance [25].

The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of current developments, challenges, and future directions in screen acting and actor training, while ensuring a systematic and critical evaluation of existing academic knowledge in the field.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Overall Interpretation

The analysis of 65 scholarly publications reveals that realism and naturalistic acting (27.69%), actor training and pedagogy (21.54%), and OTT-driven performance transformation (18.46%) are the most prominent themes in contemporary screen acting research [26]. The dominance of qualitative methodologies (53.85%) indicates that scholars primarily focus on interpretative and experiential dimensions of performance rather than statistical measurement. Geographically, India contributes the largest proportion of studies (43.08%), reflecting growing academic interest in acting practices within Indian cinema and OTT platforms. Among the factors influencing contemporary screen acting, OTT platform expansion (86.15%), audience demand for realism (80.00%), and advanced actor training techniques (69.23%) emerged as the most significant drivers of change. Emerging areas such as digital auditions, artificial intelligence, virtual production, and multilingual performance remain comparatively underexplored, highlighting important directions for future research in screen acting and actor training within the evolving digital media ecosystem (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Literature Review Findings on Screen Acting, Performance and Actor Training (N = 65)

Category	Sub-Category	Frequency (N=65)	Percentage (%)	Rank
Themes identified	Realism and naturalistic acting	18	27.69	1
	Actor training and pedagogy	14	21.54	2
	OTT culture and performance transformation	12	18.46	3
	Psychophysical and embodied acting	8	12.31	4
	Rasa theory and Indian performance traditions	6	9.23	5
	Digital auditions and self-taping practices	4	6.15	6
	Voice training and multilingual performance	3	4.62	7
Research methodologies	Qualitative studies	35	53.85	1
	Literature reviews	15	23.08	2
	Case studies	8	12.31	3
	Mixed methods	5	7.69	4
	Quantitative studies	2	3.07	5
Geographic focus	India	28	43.08	1
	United states	15	23.08	2
	United Kingdom	10	15.38	3
	Europe	7	10.77	4
	Australia and others	5	7.69	5
Influencing factors	OTT platform expansion	56	86.15	1
	Realism and audience expectations	52	80.00	2
	Advanced actor training techniques	45	69.23	3
	Digital audition culture	38	58.46	4
	Globalization of acting practices	34	52.31	5

	Indian traditional performance methods	26	40.00	6
	Artificial intelligence and virtual production	15	23.08	7

CONCLUSION

The review of existing literature indicates that screen acting, and actor training are undergoing a significant transformation due to the rapid expansion of OTT platforms, digital media technologies and changing audience expectations. Emotional authenticity, psychological realism, controlled facial expression, subtle gesture and naturalistic acting increasingly shape contemporary screen performance, rather than the exaggerated theatricality traditionally associated with mainstream commercial cinema. This shift reflects broader industrial and cultural changes within both global and Indian entertainment industries, where performance is now expected to appear more intimate, believable and emotionally grounded.

The literature suggests that OTT platforms have played an important role in reshaping acting practices by encouraging intimate storytelling, layered characterization and realism-based performance. Unlike conventional cinematic formats, streaming narratives often require actors to sustain emotional continuity and character depth across long-form episodic structures. As a result, the preparation, rehearsal and delivery of screen performance have become more complex. This indicates that older actor-training models, particularly those rooted primarily in theatre traditions, may not be fully adequate for the demands of contemporary cinema and OTT-based storytelling.

Existing studies further show that camera-oriented performance skills have become essential for actors working in film and OTT productions. Close-up acting, continuity awareness, controlled emotional expression, eye-line precision, microphone sensitivity, framing, lighting cues and cinematic blocking are now central to screen performance. Therefore, acting pedagogy needs to be updated through screen-specific training methods that prepare actors for the technical and aesthetic demands of camera-based performance. This is particularly important in OTT content, where intimate framing and psychologically detailed narratives require subtle and emotionally convincing performances.

Another important conclusion emerging from the literature is the need for interdisciplinary actor training. Contemporary acting education can no longer remain limited to conventional performance exercises alone. It needs to include psychology, body movement, voice training, communication studies, digital media literacy and audience studies. Such an approach can help actors understand human behaviour, emotional expression, audience psychology and performative embodiment more effectively. This, in turn, can strengthen authenticity, screen presence and audience engagement in contemporary cinema and OTT narratives.

The literature also highlights the growing influence of technology on screen acting. Motion capture, virtual production, CGI-based interaction, AI-assisted filmmaking and digital audition systems are reshaping the meaning of actor presence and performance authenticity. These developments require actors to acquire new technical skills and creative adaptability. In contemporary screen environments, performance is no longer limited to physical acting before a camera; it increasingly involves interaction with digital tools, virtual spaces and technology-mediated production systems.

Existing scholarship also emphasizes the importance of audience immersion and emotional synchronization in successful screen performance. Emotional realism, subtle acting and affective communication contribute significantly to spectatorship, empathy and narrative engagement. Contemporary audiences increasingly respond to performances that appear relatable, psychologically deep and grounded in realism. Therefore, actor training must also focus on how performance generates audience involvement and emotional connection.

However, the literature also reveals significant gaps in Indian academic scholarship. While Indian cinema has been widely studied in relation to narrative, ideology, melodrama, nationalism, gender

representation and star culture, relatively less attention has been given to acting processes, actor training systems, performance pedagogy and screen acting methodologies. There is also limited research on non-professional actors, disability inclusion, OTT performance culture, digital auditions, influencer-driven visibility and technology-based acting practices in the Indian context. This makes contemporary Indian screen acting an underexplored area of academic inquiry.

Therefore, the central problem emerging from the literature is that screen-acting practices in India are changing rapidly, but academic research and actor-training systems have not fully addressed these changes. Contemporary Indian cinema and OTT platforms now demand realism-based acting, camera-sensitive performance, technological adaptability, emotional authenticity and interdisciplinary training. Yet there remains a gap between traditional actor-training models and the practical requirements of present-day screen industries. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how screen acting practices, performance modes and actor-training methods are being reshaped in contemporary Indian cinema and OTT spaces.

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