



John Abraham : Cinema and the Idea of the Collective

I should begin the essay on a personal note. I narrowly missed the opportunity to contribute a small amount of money to the making of the film *Amma Ariyan* and perhaps meet with John Abraham. In early 1986, a friend who had gone to the International Film Festival of India at Hyderabad came to Trichy, a town in central Tamil Nadu, where I was a young film society activist. I saw among the several photos and memorabilia he picked up at the festival an odd pamphlet. It was distributed by Odessa Films, asking for contributions to the making of the film *Amma Ariyan*. It said that the film was being made by collecting funds from the public and in turn would be screened freely in as many venues as possible. It also said that it was to be directed by John Abraham, a name made familiar by his earlier Tamil film *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (1977) that I had heard of and read about. I was very excited by the idea of a film being funded by an un-instituted “collective producer”, a multitude. I told my friend that I wanted to contribute to the film and perhaps go to Kerala to meet with the people who have undertaken the venture. Unfortunately, my friend strongly discouraged me. He said that he found the group disorganised and learnt that John Abraham was a dysfunctional alcoholic.

He was dismissive of their effort, claiming that the film would never be completed the way the people appeared to go about it. Though I wanted to find out the truth of the issue, independently, other local engagements with the film society and theatre activities kept me from taking the effort. Not only was the film completed and screened in 1987, but John Abraham died soon after in the same year. It was only in 1989 I met with the members of the Odessa collective and learnt through them about the life and legends of John Abraham and their experiences in the making of the film. Their desire to repeat the feat by making another film through public donations, as far as I know, could not be realized. The premature death of John somehow appeared to have sealed the possibility of repeating the feat. Or even if it has been accomplished it never retained the novelty of the attempt and hence was not widely talked about.

I would like to propose that the text of *Amma Ariyan*, and the manner in which it was made were part of the same idea, which is the emergence of a collective. John's success in securing an anonymous public, collective funding of his last film appears to be a culmination of his long time exploration of the idea of the collective in his work. Let me present a short biographical note to the extent I know and necessary for the purposes of this essay. John Abraham was born in 1937 in Kerala. I learnt from his former colleague in the Life Insurance Corporation of India in Karnataka, that he had taken to drinking much before he went to Pune Film Institute reportedly sponsored by a group of colleagues in the LIC. In Pune, he was famously close to Ritwik Ghatak, the Vice-Principal of the Institute at that time, who apparently named John as the most favourite student. After graduating, John assisted Mani Kaul in the making of *Uski Roti*. He later found a producer in Chennai, Udhuman Moideen, widely known as Minnal, for his first film *Vidyathikale Ithile Ithile* addressing a collective of students in the very title of the film. The film was a moderate success in Kerala after the State Government announcing a tax exemption. The producer told me that he did not lose money in the project but had a tough time handling John's eccentricities. John had started his nomadic ways of living even before the film was made. It intensified in the following years. It was the second film *Agraharathil Kazhuthai*, a Tamil film that was again privately funded, that brought him attention and some critical appreciation. By that time many writers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala knew him for his sudden appearances and disappearances sober or inebriated. His third film *Cheriyachande Krura Krithyangal* (1979) was also privately produced raising money from family sources. Odessa Films discovered him sometime afterward involved with street

theatre groups in Kochi and provided him a place in Calicut and a team to nurture towards his final collectively funded project.

Except for a few essays, to the extent I know, the films of John Abraham have not received the critical attention they deserve. While there is a general dearth of critical literature in India, John Abraham runs the risk of nearly being forgotten, or much worse, remembered only for his radical or deviant life-style and the weak consensus generated about his creative genius that did not find full expression in his films due to innumerable constraints. The films betrayed a poor production quality due to lack of funds and often people get to see them only in bad prints. The purpose of this short essay is to underline the need to critically engage with John Abraham's films since they are unique artistic mediations on the formations of a collective.

The art of cinema refers to the idea of the collective in many ways. The first can refer to the contribution of many people to the making of the film. Director's is one among many talents with the cinematographer, set designer, actors, costume designer, light-man and so on. Kracauer suggested that the condition of possibility for the team to create something together is often grounded on national culture¹. As we all know, auteur film theory suggests that the vision of the director is determinative of the results. John was and clearly insisted that he was an auteur. In somewhat an awkward phraseology, he declared in one of his interviews "I am the Hitler of my cinema." Hence, John had no interest in exploring the possibilities of collectivity in creative expression in the normal sense of the term.

The next reference to collectivity is in the viewing of the film which brings disparate groups of people into the orbit of the film experience or message. John had great faith in this – he believed cinema is a tool in bringing about collective consciousness as can be seen from the unusual closing frames of the film *Amma Ariyan*, his last film. The final or closing image of the film narrative is transformed into an image on a film screen within the screen; we then see audiences within the film image in front of the screen image that we just saw, thus extending and locating our own viewing activity within the film narrative. Such a narrative device shows the self conscious desire on the part of the film maker to treat the audience as an emergent collective who have now received certain shared impetus from the film narrative. However, John is not exceptional in hoping for such an outcome which is often held by most film makers or perhaps artists of all times, so to say. Except that in twentieth century cinema played a considerable role in dissemination of national identities. John had no simplistic interest in nationalism. He was more concerned about the liberation

of the oppressed. All the same, John cannot be described as one who used films as a tool to influence a “target” audience, say for example, as propaganda film makers do like in the famous case of Leni Riefenstahl.

There is another complex set of implicit phenomena that brings cinema to refer to collectivity. The connection can tentatively be named as tri-fold coeval of time-narration-history. Discrete temporal elements that a narrative brings together, by devices such as cause and effect sequences, sequential and consequential actions arranged in temporal succession, makes narrative history. A collective emerges in historical time. It is often called a movement, a spatiotemporal metaphor implying a passage in time; workers movement, women’s movement. Hence, the moment of the narration has much to do with the birth of the movement, emergence of the collective.

While this being the case with narration in general, cinema is essentially a re-realization of movement in space-time. In reconfiguring movement it can subsume time to narration and history in enacting the birth of the collective through sequencing disparate images by splicing. Thus films implicitly collectivize the disparate instants and spaces. However the ordering of time into narration is fraught with many difficulties and cinema is unique in resisting the simple abstraction of the plenitude of the sensory world. A verbal narrative does not have the same problem since it uses words that have already abstracted the physicality of the referents. It is in this regard, John’s engagement with the idea of the collective through the film narrative is most interesting and rewarding.

All of John’s films are explicitly concerned with collective action and social conflict. The first film was about how school children who are asked replace a statue broken by them make a collective effort to raise funds to achieve the task. The idea is to show how in the process, through a series of encounters they learn their role in the society. The second film, *Agraharathil Kazhuthai*, replete with allegories, metaphors and symbols, points towards the emergence of a subaltern collective in a highly theatrical finale, when the orthodox social establishment is engulfed in a purifying fire. Even the third film *Cheriyachande Krura Krithyangal* which has a paranoid protagonist Cheriyan as the focus of the narrative is actually about the tormented mind of an individual absorbing the social conflict and his failure to become part of the emergence of the historical collective because of his class position. In fact, the mere storyline of the films of John, when presented in verbal narration, tends to make them appear didactic and unimpressive. Understanding the donkey in *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* or the mother in *Amma Ariyan* as allegorical figures does not guarantee

the unravelling of John's serious meditation on the collective. *I propose that it is only by studying the film images in their autonomy and in their relationship to the abstracted narrative that we can begin to discover the many nuances of John Abraham's thought regarding the emergence of the collective.*

Let me state, very briefly, my theoretical sources in undertaking the task. I am going to avoid several citations and explanations about what I take and leave behind from these sources; not only for the sake of brevity but also to allow the premises of my exploration to come through in some straightforward manner. Gilles Deleuze's cinema volumes provide the breakthrough. He takes films to be sets of images and signs. Anchored on Bergson's philosophical expositions of time, Deleuze organized the books into two main divisions of film images with all further classifications following them. One set of images are movement images and the other set is time images. What is remarkable about the exercise is Deleuze pays no attention to the abstraction of the narrative, the story of the film, from film images that all film viewers are concerned with and most film theorists are concerned with. His concern is purely with what film images do to movement and time in their near autonomy.

At the same time when Deleuze's cinema volumes appeared in 1983, another French philosopher, Paul Ricouer published a three volume study on *Time and Narrative*. Significantly, his concern was exclusively with prose narratives and his work does not deal with cinema for reasons that are philosophically significant. He has shown how semantics of action and emplotment constitute time in both fictional and historical writing. We need to remember that the exploration of Ricouer is grounded in language. My interest in reading both these tracts together is to extract the difficulty cinema has in providing the equivalent for semantic of action since it can only bring action in all its material setting to the view. Hence, films compound the problem of narrative history.

Let me now discuss the problem. All instances are singular. All spaces are singular. Narrative emerges from privileging certain instances over others. I want to recall a passage from memory, I read in Tamil translation, from the foreword written by Atin Bandyopadhyay to his 'In Search of the Blue Bird' (*Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje*). "Thousands of years will pass and the sun will rise and set as usual. So many things would have happened and changed in human life. Where in all that history the amazement and wonder of the child playing in a lonely forest path one afternoon chasing butterflies would have been recorded?" This child's instance is a classic singular instance or in the phrases of Deleuze any-instant-whatever in any-space-whatever. The historical narrative goes for choosing a privileged instance over any-instant-whatever. The

everydayness of life gets left behind while history marches on as a privileged collective of some instances. Ranajit Guha has located this problematic of historiography in Hegel's philosophical reflections on history².

The main thesis of the Deleuze books is that the sensory-motor schema which propelled movement images as action sequences to form the narrative, broke down after world war II to allow Italian neo-realism to come up with time images which in their autonomy from the narrative produced the materiality of the world in temporalities of their own without surrendering to imperatives of the narrative to privilege instances of action. Let me just quote one passage: "In the model of old realism or on the model of action-image, objects and settings already had a reality of their own, but it was a functional reality, strictly demanded by the demands of the situation, even if these demands were as much poetic as dramatic (for instance, the emotional value of objects in *Kazan*). The situation was then directly extended into action or passion. After *Obsession* (1943), however, something appears that continues to develop in Visconti: objects and settings take on an autonomous, material reality which gives them an importance in themselves. It is therefore essential that not only the viewer but the protagonists invest the settings and objects with their gaze, that they see and hear the things and the people, in order for passion to be born, erupting in a pre-existing daily life."³

Eisenstein clearly privileged action. Even as Deleuze recovers his dialectical montage as belonging to an immanent dialectic and says that Eisenstein turns privileged instances to any-instant-whatever in the process, Eisenstein clearly belonged to the class of movement images in his scheme. It is important that though the collective that worked to make *Amma Ariyan* called itself Odessa Films in reference to the famed Odessa steps sequence, John Abraham used no dialectical montage in his films. His images are lyrical and prosaic in turn which ground action fully in the multiple temporalities of everyday life which cannot be fully assimilated into the privileged thread of narrative action. This is clearly where I see the promise of John's engagement with the idea of the collective. In the opposition between everydayness and historical time, any instant whatever and the privileged instant, John placed the emergence of the collective as somewhat incomplete, yet unrealized and wanted to look for the sources that would provide the energy to make the real emergence of the collective possible. He has left his search for the sources in the array of images he has produced.

With these background remarks let me now turn to the two films I want to discuss: *Amma Ariyan* and *Agraharathil Kazhuthai*. At the outset both these films

are sensitive to the political history of the two states in which the films are set. John understood that the most significant moment of the emergence of the political in Kerala belonged to the rise of the Marxist parties and mobilizations against the exploitation of workers. Hence *Amma Ariyan* revolves around the police repression of the Marxist Leninist activists. In Tamil Nadu, he saw the Non-Brahmin movement providing the moment of political mobilization and hence *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* is set against the culture of corrupt orthodoxy and ritual power. Through his films he appears to provide several critical remarks about the respective histories. I would like to insist that his critical remarks are embedded in the formal elements of his films. Let me first take up *Amma Ariyan*.

Amma Ariyan

Amma Ariyan (Let it be Known to Mother) begins with Purushan taking leave from his mother to go to Delhi to pursue higher education. He is to meet his girl friend who is also leaving for Delhi for studies. However, before he reaches the place of the meeting, Purushan's travel is intercepted by police who want to take a dead body to the hospital in the town. Purushan gets off the jeep, but on catching a glimpse of the corpse, he is compelled to think that he knew the man, most probably as belonging to a leftist group. He gathers that the man hung himself from a tree atop the roadside rock. Purushan, disturbed by the possible circumstances of the suicide of the young man, climbs the rock as if in an act of homage. He then goes to meet his girlfriend and says that he would join her in Delhi after finding out the identity of the dead man, who he presumes to be an activist. After mild protest the girl leaves. Purushan goes to meet with a friend who works in the medical college; the later arranges for him and a local leader to take a look at the corpse at the mortuary. Eventually, friends confirm that the man indeed was Hari the tabla player. He used to play tabla in the theatrical performances of leftist groups. He once got arrested for his alleged involvement in an attack on a police station. The police tortured him, as a result of which his fingers got crooked, a handicap that would not let him play tabla. It can be inferred that due to the depression caused by his inability to play the instrument, Hari committed suicide.

On realizing the dead man is Hari, Purushan and friends decide to travel to Kochi. On the way they stop and gather other friends who they think would have known Hari. The journey turns allegorical as the group swells to become a collective when eventually the mother is given the message. The mother on receiving the message responds with composure and dignity. She turns to the

camera showing her back to the crowd, wiping her tears behind the spectacles. The frame, in which she appears to lead the collective, then becomes a projection on a screen and we find a crowd sitting in front of the screen watching.

In terms of narrative, the film consists of a series of departures. Men leave home to undertake a journey. On many occasions we find the mother left behind. In most of these instances we find the image first showing us the situation. Then people arrive and leave. The camera does not leave with them. It stays on to show whatever is left behind. In the scene in which the two friends reach the house of Balettan, a local communist leader, the image opens with the cattle being fed by a woman. The friends come in inquiring about Balettan. The woman tells them where to find him. The two friends leave. The camera stays on to show the cattle being fed.

In a sequence sometime after this, friends go to meet a theatre person with whom Hari presumably worked. As they climb the stairs they hear some performance being rehearsed with the cry “Free, Free Nelson Mandela”. The friends approach the director who gestures them to wait. Then setting the performers on a loop, he turns to them. When they tell him that he ought to come to identify the corpse, he goes back to the group of performers and put them on rest asking them to lie down on the floor. He leaves. The camera stays on to show the group of performers lying on the floor.

It is through the meticulous attention paid to what is left behind or the situation exceeding the scope of action (arrival and departure), John Abraham appears to pose a riddle to the nature of the journey. The figure of the mother, often centrally framed among what is left behind, is also the destination of the journey. The film is a report to mother. However, mother is also part of a situation. For example, when Purushan met his friend in the medical college the latter was addressing a demonstration against commercialization of medical education. He leaves that demonstration behind. The camera lingers on the posters after Purushan leaves (the posters are shown to the accompaniment of the rousing music of the drums but not without irony; we see in an earlier frame a cow licking at the posters). The mother figure is absent in such situations— “left behind”.

In a certain sense, the film seems to attempt to represent a metaphoric collective, a journey in which all disparate struggles would come together. However, that would be the obvious first level reading. At a deeper level there appears to be simply too many things in the world that defy the very idea of the collective march. The refrain that repeatedly gets played out towards the

end of the film in the sound track “People ask: where are you going?” taken presumably from a devotional lyric addressed to a saint, suggest the indeterminacy of the destination of the metaphoric journey of the emerging collective, the very march of history. Rather than trying to offer a prescription to the right kind of revolutionary practice, John appears to pose a question to the very claims of revolution. He is certainly not taking away its historic or ethical imperatives but seeks to ruminate on the spiritual capabilities which can understand the plenitude of the world that triumphalist claims of history do not seek to accommodate.

It will be relevant here to think of Deleuze’s discussion of small and large forms of cinema. The small form of cinema presents an action and shows how a given situation transforms that action. The large form shows a situation and presents how a given action alters the situation. Deleuze considers Eisenstein to be presenting a deforming form in which he begins with the large form (the ocean, the ship, the city in *Battleship Potemkin*) and a series of action chain alterations with that. According to Deleuze it is the crisis faced by both these forms that results in the breakdown of the sensory motor schema that largely operates in cinema resulting in the emergence of time images with Visconti and neo-realism. John Abraham’s form is certainly large. It focuses on the situation. However, like Eisenstein there is a concern with action, but the action does not produce any consequent altered action or even situation. There is only a tentative gesture towards newer forms of action and transformed situations. Hence in reverting back to unchanged situation at every sequence, John Abraham produces time images of Visconti rather than the images of Eisenstein.

There is more to be said of this when we discuss *Agraharathil Kazhuthai* (Donkey in the Brahmin Quarters).

Agraharathil Kazhuthai

An orphaned colt strays into the compound of the residence of a college professor. He takes sympathy to its plight leading to his decision to raise it. As his students make fun of his pet, he is forced to take the donkey to his ancestral Agraharam in the village, where a few families of orthodox Brahmins live. He leaves the donkey with his parents. He appoints a mute lower caste girl to take care of the donkey in his absence. The orthodox Brahmins do not like the donkey in their midst. They use it to defile the ritual occasions of each other, by employing a few mischievous boys to drive the donkey into ritual spaces at auspicious moments. In the meantime, the mute girl is seduced by a worker

who relates to her in a dilapidated temple. The girl becomes a pregnant but delivers a still born child. The girl's grandmother leaves the dead child in front of the village temple. Presuming that it was the donkey which pulled the child's corpse into the sacred place, the village Brahmins pay the lower caste men to kill and bury the donkey on top of a hillock. Miraculous acts of good fortune take place in the village following the death of the donkey, leading the Brahmins to believe that the donkey was a divine creature. They decide to build a temple in the place it was buried. When the professor learns about the still born child of the girl and the death of the donkey he takes the girl to the place where the donkey was buried. They dig up the place and recover the skull of the donkey. In a highly ritual enactment they hand over the skull to the lower caste men who dance around it beating their drums. Flames start up from the skull and engulf the Agradharam. In the final frame we see the silhouette of the temple tower and a rising sun.

Though the emergence of the collective through a ritual performance of dance is placed at the end of the film, the entire film meticulously collects stray everyday events into a narrative. In a highly interesting compression of time and events John Abraham places a string of events narrated and happening sandwiched in what appears to be a single conversation. When the professor visits the village a few months after placing the donkey there, his father begins to recount the happenings in the village. The conversation is intercepted by three sets of images. One set is a string of flashbacks in which the donkey is set upon each other by the village Brahmins to defile auspicious occasions. The second set consists of how the affected person yells at professor's father who had to keep the donkey. The third set is the gradual seduction of the mute girl by the worker. Following her encounters with him, she returns home with the donkey walking through the two men speaking. It is an extra-ordinary conception of time and processes. The conversation appears to be endlessly stretched over a long period including as the process of the girl's seduction and the events relating to the donkey. John Abraham retains the timelessness of the situation unaltered by action but proposes a ritually enacted action that might alter the situation in some way in future. What Deleuze had to say of Visconti's films ("It is as if action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it. This is the source of Visconti's visionary aestheticism⁴") may as well be true of John Abraham. This is not to suggest a similar ranking as Visconti and John Abraham in the classroom of world film makers, but to emphasize the conceptual practice that his film images involved. If this paper induces readers to pay close attention to the films of John Abraham

and the conceptual practice involved in the images of the films in a scheme similar to Deleuze it would have achieved its purpose.

References:

¹ See Kracauer, Siegfried. 1947. *From Caligari to Hitler, a Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press.

² Guha, Ranajit. 2003. *History at the Limit of World History*, New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 22-25, 28-31.

³ Deleuze, Gille. 1989. *Cinema 2: The Time Image* Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, p.4.

⁴ Ibid.