

P A R I C H A Y P A T R A



Spectres of the New Wave :  
The State of the Work of  
Mourning, and the New Cinema  
Aesthetic in a Regional Industry

1 *Introduction*

My title refers to Derrida's controversial account of his concern with Marx amidst the din and bustle of the 'end of history'. Time was certainly out of joint and the pluralistic outlook of the great thinker was pitted against the monolith that orthodox communists used to uphold. My primary concern in the paper would be an account of the Malayalam film industry in its post-New Wave phase as well as a handful of filmmakers whose works seem to be difficult to categorize. Within the domain of the popular and amidst the mourning from the film society circle for the movement that lasted no longer than a decade, these films evoke the popular memory of the New Wave. Though up in arms against the worthy ancestors, these filmmakers are unable to conceal their indebtedness to the latter. The New Wave too was not without its heterogeneity, and the "disjointed now" that I am talking about is something "whose border would still be determinable".

I would like to consider the possibility of moving towards translocal contexts without shifting our focus from a specific site of inquiry which, in this case, is Malayalam cinema. The paper will concentrate upon the phenomenon known

as the resurfacing/resurgence of art cinema aesthetics in Indian cinema. Recent scholarly interest in the history of this forgotten film movement is noticeable, more so because it was ignored in the age of disciplinary incarnation of cinematic scholarship in India. Yale university organized a seminar on the Indian New Wave, and most of the speakers in the Jadavpur University, Film Studies Department seminar on 'Alternative Cinemas in India: Forms and Institutions' preferred to talk about the New Wave exponents. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in a fairly recent seminar at Jadavpur University, discussed in detail how they are trying to arrange a novel exhibition space for Mani Kaul's films by screening them in an art gallery amidst video installations. Along with this resurgence, I will consider the emergence of different exhibition spaces and contexts that are shaping the conditions surrounding the appearance of the new cinematic idiom that I am concerned with.

Bombay industry's alternative production strategies are noticeable as well. Transformations of urban spaces, inflow of multinational investments, shifts in everyday living and consumption habits, and the emergence of the multiplex as an exhibition space are some of the factors that contributed in the development of these alternative production strategies. The low budget productions with their 'realistic' narrative mode, and their consumption by the upwardly mobile new middle class, are no less intriguing for the student of Indian cinema. Bombay cinema's attempt at reaching beyond possible binaries predominant in the older days is a part of this phenomenon.

Situating new wave in its context is quite problematic. Paolo Cherchi Usai commented upon the way in which moving images should be "interpreted in relation to the physical and psychological conditions surrounding the appearance of cinema" (Usai 2001, 57). I would like to suggest a gap between these two conditions, physical and psychological. The question that comes up is where we can locate cinema of a specific kind along with those psychological conditions associated with its appearance. We will return to this question later.

Here I will be considering the industrial contexts and conditions of the arthouse movement as well as the novel cinematic idiom that is emerging. Theodore Baskaran, while talking about the various phases of film production in his native state in particular and in India in general, notes the importance of the current state, labeling it as the era of the freelancers as opposed to the cottage industrial state, the studio era, and the era dominated by the star-system (Baskaran 2009, 11). Even in contemporary writings in the vernacular, we encounter an anticipation of the end of the star-system, as Rajan Krishnan's recent article in a Tamil film journal unhesitatingly mentions (Krishnan 2010,

6-11). This notion of ‘freelancing’, a term that carries the sense of authorship, will determine the nature of the new cinema and its generic experiments.

2.

The category ‘Malayalam Cinema’ by its territorialization makes cinema stand for a sub-national/regional identity, making it a means by which Malayalies can represent themselves. By probing how ‘Malayaliness’ is imagined and how it shapes objects and subjects in the contemporary socio-cultural life of Kerala, it becomes possible to re-territorialize Kerala not as an exclusive and clearly demarcated geographical and political space, but as one where fluid subjectivities are constantly remapping themselves.<sup>1</sup>

In this section I will be concentrating on a specific regional industry from the southernmost coastal areas of India, an industry which is neither large nor a great revenue earner<sup>2</sup>. It differentiates itself from its neighbouring industries, namely Tamil and Telugu, and operates within the discursive practice of ‘exceptionalism’. S.V.Srinivas defines the term ‘exceptionalism’, albeit in a different context, thus: “Exceptionalism also suggests that there is a contradiction between a given instance of the cinema and the filmic (that function of the technology of the cinema and film form, which is a part of a global history) as necessary foci for the study of cinema.” (Srinivas 2005, 175). Malayalam cinema, along with the state where it finds itself, is characterized by narrative supremacy, dominance of the middle class, development in the tertiary sector resulting in the production of that class, the Gulf connection and the remittance capital determining the financial condition of the industry, and the presence of the populist Left. Kerala has a long association with the leftist parties existent in India and the film society groups were peopled largely by the left-leaning intellectuals with a background of IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association), KPAC (Kerala People’s Arts Club) and/or other leftist cultural associations<sup>3</sup>. This self-proclaimed brand of rationality contributed in the middle classicization of the market and shaped the film society criticism in a certain way. Thus realism attained a certain status in the critical discourses and the industry tended to remain aloof from the national popular and from the other neighbouring industries alike.

The other southern industries like the Tamil industry or the Telugu industry are better known for their big-budget blockbusters and for the production of the spectator as a curious category called ‘Fan’. Fan’s associations dominate the industrial conditions and create havoc in the exhibition space. They

determine the turnouts from the industry, the narratives, even the political career of the hero, the reason why the southern film stars retire from the industry only to join politics. Madhava Prasad argues that fan's devotion or *fan bhakti* is an instance of subaltern sovereignty and it is 'the crisis of sovereignty in the Indian republic which gives rise to various phenomena, including the political power of film stars.' (Prasad 2009). Elsewhere Prasad quotes from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and from Spivak to problematize terms like representation and sovereignty in the southern Indian context (Prasad 1999, 46). This conditional loyalty, the politically motivated behaviour and the class components of the fan association (associations are often comprised of 'rowdy' people or petty urban crooks) are the defining characteristics of the southern industries.

To define Kerala's historic insularity, a closer look at the documents published in film society periodicals is needed. There are excerpts from reviews dated as early as 1940 that tend to alert the industry about the "third rate films" that their 'neighbourhood Tamilians' are circulating<sup>4</sup> and some more fiercely territorial reviews might be found even a decade after the formation of the state stating that, "The *Sivalinga* culture of the TAMILIAN can't be delectable to the Malayali"<sup>5</sup>(original emphasis). Discussions and critical writings on Malayalam cinema foreground the role played by the 'writers' and the 'intellectuals' in the history of the industry without fail. The 1950s cinema is tagged with its characteristic 'cultural distinction' and the literary minds that were behind it, namely P.Bhaskaran, Nagavally R.S.Kurup, Thoppil Bhasi, Ramu Kariat, et al. The trend continued with the advent of Uroob, Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai, Kesava Dev and M.T.Vasudevan Nair. C.S. Venkiteswaran suggested a route to the genealogy of the modernist 'New Wave' cinema in modernist literary figures like K.Mukundan, Vijayan, Kakkanadan and K.Satchidanandan<sup>6</sup>. Even a recent scholarly essay on the renowned Sreenivasan-starrer *Chintavishtayaye Shyamala* (dir. Sreenivasan, 1998) could not avoid a passing reference to the Kumaran Asan poem with a title that possesses considerable similarities with that of the film (Shyama P. 2010, 78). Literary affinity of film criticism and emphasis on an international cinematic language is explicit in the digital database run by the 'Kerala Chalacchitra Academy' as well<sup>7</sup>. The relatively large database devotes a single page to the entire history of Malayalam popular cinema, regards its 'realistic' productions as the only mentionable ventures from the industry<sup>8</sup> and *Swayamvaram* (dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1972) is regarded as a watershed in the history of Malayalam cinema. The kind of film criticism that the database foregrounds, especially by

people like Baburaj or Rajmohan, shows an avid interest in the unfavourable comparison between ‘world cinema’ and cinema at home. Rajmohan employs a cliché compare and contrast method between their favourite Kiarostami and Sokurov films and the indigenous products. Adoor’s latest production like *Naalu Pennungal* (2007) finds itself within this debate that seems to be concerned with the sole question of whether Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai’s stories are worthy of adaptation or not. Most of the vernacular histories of Malayalam cinema refuse to talk about the popular oeuvre, and remain silent on most of the films produced after the 1970s.

To understand the logic that presupposes a dominance of the narrative, and therefore, of the writer, let us look at the standpoint of Miriam Hansen concerning the narrative vis-à-vis the star. She suggests that the presence of a star

undercuts the [narrative and scopic] regime’s apparent primacy, unity, and closure. By accepting a discourse external to the diegesis, the star’s presence enhances a centrifugal tendency in the viewer’s relations to the filmic text and thus runs counter to the general objective of concentrating meaning in the film as product and commodity (Hansen 1991, 246).

Though Hansen’s claim concerning the way star system defies cinema’s commoditization has been countered by many, including Richard Dyer and Srinivas, the understanding of star system as contrary to narrative’s supremacy and meaning production will be much helpful for an understanding of cinematic production and consumption in Kerala. We will see how the shift in the nature of the star system as well as the emergence of the ‘fan association’ earned the wrath of the traditional film society criticism.

#### *Compartmentalization of cinemas: Kerala and the new wave*

The only place other than Kerala that the New Wave reached in the southern peninsula is Karnataka, and that too on a much smaller scale. Emergency was issued in the 70s and the crisis in Indian democracy was apparent. It was the period that marked the crisis of sovereignty in the Indian republic and Bombay industry adopted the figure of the ‘angry young man’, personified by Amitabh Bachchan. What ensued was his ‘subaltern anger and affiliation with the masses’ that Prasad so aptly describes through the term ‘the aesthetic of mobilization’ (Prasad 1998, 142).

Those films were not without their imitations, as most of Bacchan hits were remade in Telugu casting NTR in the lead role. Malayalam films employed

Jayan as a new hero in films of the period that used to have smuggling and other urban anti-social activities at the core.<sup>9</sup> Those films were dubbed into all the major languages of the region, even in Sinhalese. The outlaw and/or industrial worker features as the hero in these films and they seek to represent the economic mobility that the gulf connection was going to offer<sup>10</sup>. Despite their close association with the Hindi cinema of the time, they were not without their aesthetic differences. As Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes in an article of his, “While in Hindi cinema the ‘aesthetics of mobilization’ marked a discontent with the promises of the new nation... in Malayalam cinema one witnessed the staging of the struggle over the definitions of the regional identity, played out on the grounds of aesthetics of the film form itself.” (Radhakrishnan 2009, 220).

The New Wave was a product of the same time. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, and it was governmental intervention in the form of subsidy and other monetary benefits, thanks to FFC (Film Finance Corporation) and NFDC (National Film Development Corporation), that paved the way for a state approved progressivist cinema. But Malayalam cinema differed significantly from its counterparts in terms of funding, as the major New Wave people there depended largely upon self-made collectives like ‘Chithralekha’ or ‘Odessa’ instead of these aforementioned funding agencies. This new strand of cinema came to represent the regional in the national and international circuits and it aspired to get included in the emerging national cinema not without “legitimizing a larger political regionalism” (Rajadhyaksha 1983, 14).

As Bindu Menon shows in her analysis of two K G George films, the categories of *Kala/ Samantara* cinema (parallel cinema/ art cinema); *Kachavada* cinema (popular cinema) and *Madhyavarti* cinema (middle cinema) “were non-existent before the new discourse on cinema in the 1970s.” (Menon 2010a, 106). C S Venkiteswaran, one of the oldest film society activists from the region, mentions the spectatorial conditions that made the New Wave possible. Most of the patrons of this cinema, like him, were from a semi-urban background and belonged to the lower/middle class and middle/upper caste. They were unemployed youths, their passion was fueled by the European mentors who never ceased to haunt them from the film society screen, and some of them were employed in the ‘parallel’ colleges (euphemistic expression for private tuition centres). Adoor’s hero in *Swayamvaram*, namely Viswan (played by Madhu) was a fortune seeker in the big, bad city who ended up in a college of similar nature. Thus the possibility of identification with the New Wave

hero was not too distant. Unlike the other new wave heroes of the other regional cinemas of the nation, the Malayali New Wave hero never moves to the country from the city, his path lies the other way round. He always tries his luck in the promises of the metropolis.

*Madhyavarti* cinema of Padmarajan, George, Bharatan or Lohitadas seemed to be taking the place of the New Wave, and it earned the wrath of the major exponents of the New Wave. Girish Kasaravalli's tirade against middle cinema in the pages of the *Deep Focus* is significant in this respect, as well as Adoor's writings that came between *Elippathayam* (1981) and *Mukhamukham* (1984). In his collection of essays entitled *Cinemayude Lokam*, Adoor mentioned the 'problems' of identifying many films as belonging to the parallel cinema tradition (the word he uses in Malayalam, *apakadam*, is not without its connotative meanings of danger and accident) and drew attention to the aesthetic issues coming out of various national cinemas which are in conflict with the *Kachavada* cinema (Gopalakrishnan 1983).

To define *Madhyavarti* or middle cinema, this particular branch of cinema must be pitted against its other, the parallel cinema. Bindu Menon tries to give us a definitive sense of what middle cinema means,

The poetics of middle cinema was thus based on a struggle between two poles- an attempt, on one hand, to make films that would appeal to the discursive construct of 'audience' and, on the other hand, the desire to create an art which would reflect the reality of its time and place and display its cinematographic specificities and conventions of language, ...these movies were thematically and formally tuned towards a family-viewing experience, the spectatorial relations established through the same exhibition patterns as those of commercial cinema. (Menon 2010a, 108).

Showing his discontent with the later turns that the New Wave took, Venkiteswaran praises the middle cinema exponents. He was not in favour of the way in which the parallel filmmakers started casting stars in their films<sup>11</sup>, and followed the conventional narrative style and techniques upsetting their ideals. On the other hand, the filmmakers associated with middle cinema were not confined to the 'self-conscious' style of the New Wave and they "transgressed their taboos like the aversion to songs, dance, humour and action.", "obliterating the *lakshmanarekha* that divided 'art' and 'trash' ." (Venkiteswaran 2010, 54-55, emphasis original).

Film society criticism in Malayalam deployed a different kind of rhetoric which is more in a tune with political/ideological jargon prevalent usually in

the leftist discourse. The way the dichotomy between *kala* cinema and *kachavada* cinema is defined in a now famous article by Sanjeev S. in *Drishyatalam* (Sanjeev 2002, 65-71) can be taken as an instance. Sanjeev shows that *kala* cinema in Malayalam is characterized by the absence of the ‘body’ and its pleasures, thus categorizing *kala* cinema with soul (*‘atmavu’*) and *kachavada* cinema with body (*‘sareeram’*). Most of the Malayalam film scholars retained the distinction in their writings.

*The Left and the popular: A slum’s eye view of Kerala politics?*

Ashis Nandy suggested in an article of his that the indelible link between Indian popular cinema and the popular politics in India is the rhetoric employed which, as it seemed to him, unmistakably designates a ‘slum’s eye view’<sup>12</sup>. The undesirable mass inhabiting the ‘unintended city’ demanded his attention. It becomes quite obvious that Nandy is referring to the parliamentary left in India, but only in the context of the ‘national popular’. In Kerala, a state that voted the first democratically elected Leftist government to power, the domain that the leftists inhabit is a different one. As Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observed in a recent article of his, Kerala Left occupies/ usurps the same space which is occupied by popular cinema in the neighbouring states. Following Partha Chatterjee’s idea of the ‘political society’, Ratheesh demands that a history of popular politics in southern India should incorporate Kerala’s case and that too not as something anomalous. Any revised history of the narrative might find a study of the cinema a useful starting point and “cinema might tell us more about the domain of popular politics rather than search for simple narratives of similarities” (Radhakrishnan 2010, 42).

The obvious link between the film society and the middle class can be elaborated much further which is beyond the scope of this paper. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan writes:

But undoubtedly, this strand of cinema did address a Malayalee who was the subject of the Kerala model of development, who survived within the service sector receiving the benefits of the welfare measures of the government without engaging in the production sector. The mushrooming of the film society movement in Kerala in the early 1970s could be read as an indication of this development. (Radhakrishnan 2009, 230).

*The transition and the loopholes: A narrative betrayed*

Malayalam cinema was generally defined, as I have said earlier, as an ‘other’



while keeping the so-called aesthetically deplorable conditions of its neighbouring industries in consideration. Jenny Rowena proposed an interesting argument looking at the ways by which Tamil cinema attains the status of the 'other' within the cinematic discourses of Kerala. She suggests that the characteristics of Tamil cinema that are regarded as negative (including the colour black) are in fact a response to Dalit culture in Kerala, which gets displaced on to the Tamil (Rowena 2002). The middle classicization of the Malayalam cinema and its spectator resulted in the identification of Malayalam cinema outside Kerala either as a high art practice or as a soft porn venture, and by soft porn venture non-Malayalis meant not only the Shakeela films but also some important industrial practices dealing with the complex issues of sexuality, for instance *Avalude Ravukal* (dir. I.V.Sasi 1978) or *Rathi Nirvedham* (dir. Bharathan, 1978). This increasing middle classicization provoked the dichotomy<sup>13</sup>.

The ever-threatened financial condition in contemporary Malayalam industry has received much attention from the journalists and the scholars alike. Bindu Menon's article is well-informed and gives us a sense of the tension within the unions, the much-scandalized suicide of an emergent actor, self-imposed pay-cut of the actors - everything that is associated with and constitutes the 'Kerala model crisis' (Menon 2010b, 66). She also locates the trajectory of the new 'cinophilia' in the state. With the emergence of the 'fan associations' and the advent of film society magazines publishing hardcore film studies articles devoted to popular cinema, the hope of harbouring a different brand of cinema altogether gains momentum. Once the emergence of a specific notion of stardom was perceived as an active threat, as stardom is capable of disrupting the supremacy of the narrative that the literary critics were so fond of. The emergence of fan associations was not welcome and was seen as an ill omen for the 'unsocial activities' in the exhibition space. Mohanlal was critiqued for trying to perform in the manner of Rajnikanth, especially after the release of *Narasimham* (dir. Shaji Kailas 2000). Radhakrishnan honestly admits, "It is also important to recognize that the middle-class 'fan' of yesteryears...is upset about the lowering of standards of Malayalam cinema." (Radhakrishnan 2002, 36).

In the following section I will address three important film texts that seem to be defying generic categorization or, as Madhava Prasad would put it, show instances of "creative fabrication" with ideological significance (Prasad 2011, 69-81).

3.

Naturally in the changed circumstances, the votaries of 'pure art' like me were finding ourselves becoming redundant. Our own icons had moved from their sanctum sanctorum, mixing with its other. Godless, we were stranded between Europe and Kerala. For us, it was all departures and no arrivals.<sup>14</sup>

In a personal conversation with me, Adoor Gopalakrishnan made some observations on his inability to keep faith in the auteurs that succeeded him. He criticized almost everyone, especially Jayaraaj, whose meddling with different forms of cinema could hinder the possibility of a canon formation. His dissatisfaction with his successors was not without its reason. Most of these filmmakers were producing a cinema that is beyond his grasp and none of them were very assertive about his later productions.<sup>15</sup> But my conviction is that this very generation of Malayali filmmakers belongs to a completely novel set of filmmaking practice which can be experienced in Mumbai as well, and they do not strictly adhere to the conventions of middle cinema. The concluding section of my paper will offer an analysis of some of these films and will tend to show why the middlebrow cinema does not exist.

Most of the major exponents of the middle cinema seem to be out of work nowadays. T.V.Chandran or Lenin Rajendran's current works did not meet with box office success<sup>16</sup>, nor do they receive much critical acclaim. Middle cinema was sustained by a specific kind of spectatorship which is no longer in existence, and my conviction was firmly supported by my interaction with Blessy. Blessy worked with all the major middle cinema representatives like Padmarajan, Bharathan and Lohitadas, and his own position within the *Madhyavarti* cinema domain was further sustained by the literariness of his films and the publication of his screenplays, especially that of his debut film *Kazhcha* (2004). Blessy discussed with me the industrial conditions at length. Blessy blamed the changing taste of the middle class, the advent of the multiplex culture and the satellite channels for their refusal to telecast 'meaningful' films. He let me know that it is because of the multiplex culture that the films from Bombay are now earning considerable revenue from the region which was unthinkable even some years before. According to Blessy, *Three Idiots* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2009) has been a huge hit in Kerala, and being a representative of a regional industry he is quite anxious about the fate of their own films. He regretfully asserted that realism is no longer acceptable to the middle class, the reason why his film on flesh racket and forceful prostitution- namely *Calcutta News*- made no mark at the box office. Blessy told me how

difficult it has become nowadays for the filmmakers making 'sensible' (by which he meant realistic) films to go through the proper exhibition channel as none of the stand-alone theatre-owners are eager to sacrifice any slot for their films.<sup>17</sup>

Blessy's problem with the satellite channels was identical with Adoor's resentment against them. Adoor told me that none of the channels telecast his films, and he does not allow them to do so either because of the poor amount of money they usually offer. Notwithstanding Adoor's conviction that these channels are not helpful to the filmmakers, filmmakers of the new generation are quite assertive about their presence. Madhupal, whose debut film has surprised most of the critics, told me that the new filmmakers are being immensely benefited by those channels.

Film society periodicals bear the signs of the changing scenario. Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI) publishes a Malayalam periodical known as *Drishyatalam*. From 1999 onwards, it started publishing hardcore film studies articles devoted entirely to popular cinema. Articles by Tejaswini Niranjana and S.V.Srinivas found their way into the film society periodical after getting translated into Malayalam.<sup>18</sup> Even Venkiteswaran seems to be appreciative of some of the recently released films in his writing in the IFFK (International Film Festival of Kerala) brochure.

Like some of the filmmakers in Mumbai, Malayali filmmakers of the new generation are forming collectives, making films for multiplex audience and producing-distributing each other's films. Jayraaj, whose works ranged from the cheapest of the blockbusters to one of the greatest festival touring films like *Kaliyattam* (1997), was known earlier for his allegedly pro-Hindu controversial productions like *Deshadanam* (1996). Ranjit, who was better known for his association with the Mohanlal starrer blockbusters like *Devasuram* (dir. I.V.Sasi, 1993) and *Ravanaprabhu* (dir. Ranjith, 2001), has formed a collective and produced films like *Kerala Café* (2009), a novel venture in the history of Malayalam cinema. It is a Malayali Decalogue, comprising of ten separate stories by ten filmmakers with diverse backgrounds. It opens with a plea to the audience from the renowned comedy filmmaker Satyan Anthikkad and then the stories follow.

#### *Challenging the New wave: Deploying Arthouse Issues in Different Contexts*

Jayaraj's *Ashwarudhan* (2006) is a popular film with feudal vendetta as its theme. An otherwise unimportant film, *Ashwarudhan* shows how even a popular film can threaten the art cinema practice by taking up issues which were a

priority of the filmmakers belonging to the *Kala* cinema camp. It was Girish Kasaravalli's debut film that critiqued the Brahminical tradition of 'Ghatashraddha' (funeral rituals used as a punitive measure by which an aberrant person is excommunicated) with the portrayal of the ritual that was meant to punish the sexual transgression of the woman in *Ghatashraddha* (1977). *Ghatashraddha*, along with some other films produced at the same time, earned the wrath of the Karnataka Brahmin Mahasabha as they marched to the *Bangalore Doordarshan Kendra* (the state-run television centre) in protest of the unfavorable representation of the Brahmins. *Ashwarudhan* critically looks at the 'Ghatashraddha' ritual, but here the offence of the woman is not sexual transgression but a larger issue of socio-political transgression. The woman, though a Brahmin, joins hands with some Adivasi militant groups of probable Naxalite leaning, and it causes her castigation. Protagonist Veerabhadran (Suresh Gopi) accompanies her to her home after her acquittal and subsequent release, only to find that the elaborate ritual is going on.

Jayraaj's *Navarasa* (1999-2002) series comprising films addressing different *rasas* mentioned in the Indian aesthetic tradition, his *Theyyam* adaptation of *Othello* in *Kaliyattam* (1997), or *Gulmohar* (2008), a film on the self-immolation of a failed revolutionary, are some of the works that are more in tune with the kind of filmmaking practice that defies generic categorization.

*When popular quotes the cult: "Is it artillery fire or my heart pounding?"*

Ranjith's works are generally cited as instances of the new cinema that is in question. Ranjith's recent hit *Thirakkatha* (2008) can be termed as a representative of the newly emergent cinema. A film allegedly based upon the failed affair between Kamal Hasan and Srividya, *Thirakkatha* retains various conventions of the *kachavada* cinema including an erotic after-wedding song. But its narrative structure is highly unconventional and it deals more with the industrial hierarchies and power games, with Page 3 reporting and several other issues, rather than mere gossip of the tinsel town. I found a sequence particularly amazing where the old, fragile and cancer-stricken actress of the yesteryear takes refuge in a café called *Casablanca* where she watches the eponymous Hollywood cult film on TV. Ranjith quotes *Casablanca* visually and positions the actress (the Srividya character, played by the Tamil actress Priyamani) in front of the TV screen in a way where she seems to be controlling the exhibition. The sense of empowerment/ emancipation is evident, though a detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

*When Christ stopped at Wayanaad: Gospel redefined*

Madhupal's *Thalappavu* (2008) is the last of the instances that I want to cite. It is the debut film of an actor whose upbringing is often described by the media as of a *Cinema Paradiso* kind.<sup>19</sup> His cinephilia influenced his debut film considerably, and he admitted that his inspiration for *Thalappavu* came from Francesco Rosi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1979) and Passolini's *Gospel According to Saint Mathew* (1964). Passolini was once the most favourite of the Malayali film society scene. Madhupal's film about the secret assassination of a Naxalite leader by the police (allegedly based upon the life of Comrade Varghese) and the intense psychic trauma that the constable who was forced to shoot the leader was subjected to began with newspaper clippings of the leader's secret assassination, imposition of Emergency and many other issues, culminating in the news of the constable Ramachandran Pillai's confession after three decades. It reminds one of *Mukhamukham* (Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1984), as Adoor's protagonist (another assassinated communist leader of mythical stature) also was constructed "out of memories of people."<sup>20</sup> It shows that the new generation is unable to do away with the legacy of the New Wave altogether. The film startles us with stylistic amalgamation. There are places where it may remind someone of the Telugu Naxalite films<sup>21</sup> with its action sequences. On the other hand, there is an overabundance of Christian imagery so characteristic of John Abraham or KG George. Varghese belonged to the Syrian Christian tradition, the reason why Madhupal represented him as a messianic character (he enjoys a mythical status in modern day Malabar). There are places where Madhupal quotes the scriptures and the revolutionary leader's movements in the execution scene allude to the crucifixion, bearing resemblances with the Gospel according to Saint Passolini.



News and views: *Thalappavu*

The film's metonymic title (*Thalappavu* means the *topi* that the Kerala police used to wear) refers to the faceless, panoptic notion of power. The left used to occupy the space of the middlebrow cinema in Kerala and the exemplary virtue of the leftist leaders used to feature in the films. In his film Madhupal continues the practice of introducing an ideologue, but not without the



News and views: *Thalappavu*



Scriptural Betrayal: *Thalappavu*

elements of the popular. *Thalappavu* earned success in both multiplexes and standalone theatres.

*Conclusion*

In an earlier section of this paper, I have mentioned the defining characteristics of middle cinema as suggested by Bindu Menon. Most of these characteristics are not relevant in the context of a discussion of the emerging cinematic practice, as it seems. These films do not conform to the conventions of language, nor are they interested in maintaining a so-called family viewing experience. They offer an amalgam of various styles posing instances of ‘creative fabrication’.

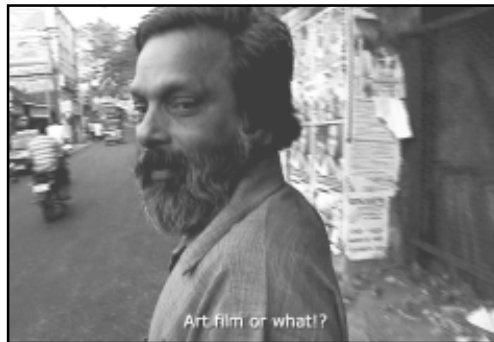
An interesting documentary by K R Manoj, *16mm: Memories, Movement and a Machine* (2008), concerns itself with the decline of a particular form of cinematic projection intimately associated with the film society screenings. At the end of his documentary, people are shown to use the silver of the 16 mm reels as bangles. The erstwhile Soviet cultural centre at Thiruvananthapuram gets shut down because of fiscal stringency, and the film society activist watches a DVD of *The Seventh Seal* on his PC. Interestingly enough, the film opens with shots of the glossy hoardings of films like *Ran*, *The Seven Samurai*, *Amarcord*. *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *Belle de Jour*, *The Phantom of Liberty*, and other favourites of the film society days, and this sequence is followed by a mundu-clad commoner walking down a narrow lane whose walls are full with indigenous film posters. The person cares for the camera only once and facing it frontally he asks, “Artu cinema endu?” (“Art film or what?”).

The puzzle that this question causes the lower/middle class and middle/

upper caste spectator/critic is something that led to the idea of this paper, as the arthouse movement ends with the possible metamorphosis of its spectator into a ‘phantom viewer’. Paul Willemen has discussed how the participants in a textual practice construct both the author and the reader as part of a specific ideological project, how the reader constructs a reader all by himself, which is different from the text’s desired/imagined reader. Willemen suggests, “...the paranoid game of attributing to the other what the I is unwilling to assume starts all over again.” (Willemen 1994, 77). Srinivas takes off from this point to define the term ‘phantom viewer’. In reference to the *Alluda Majaka* controversy, he notes:



*Vivre sa Vie* hoarding: 16 mm



Frontal Address: 16 mm

(...) it is possible to suggest that the gap between the spectator and the viewer is indeed an important one because, in the space of this gap, various phantom figures emerge. These are *created by audiences themselves but are thought to be produced by the cinema*. (Srinivas 2009, 183).

I would like to argue that the middle class viewer that is most revered in Kerala, whose obituary is being published in the film society periodicals almost everyday, whose presence was pitted once against the culturally degenerate Malayali *nouveau riche* coming from the Gulf, is actually a ‘phantom viewer’. The psychological location for the New Wave, or the psychological condition surrounding the appearance of it, seems to be the product of a utopian vision of a specific kind of spectatorship.

We remain concerned with deaths and reincarnations in cinema for most of our time, except when film historians like Kaushik Bhaumik give instances

of the return of some of the repressed marginal genres to the mainstream unearthing the archival materials. Because of the presence of these instances and also of the one given here, I think we should take a critical look at the various possible deaths and reincarnations of cinema itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Meena T.Pillai, Introduction to *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalizing Gender Hierarchies* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike the other southern industries, Malayalam industry has quite a small domestic market. The gross annual turnout of the industry is between sixty to seventy films. In 2007, there were 86 films shown in the theatres, 20 among which were dubbed versions of films from other regions. In 2009, there were 69 indigenous productions with a high rate of successful ones, the reason why the number of dubbed versions circulating in 2009 was relatively low. See Perunthani Balachandran Nair, compl., *Malayala Cinema Innale Innu* (Thiruvananthapuram: Yavanika, 2009). In contrast to this, Tamil industry possesses a vast overseas market and Telugu industry is not only the second largest one after Mumbai, the state Andhra Pradesh is the single largest market for cinema in India.

<sup>3</sup> Kerala voted the first democratically elected communist government to power, and the leftist parties have successfully managed to remain a major force there. For a detailed discussion see A.Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Palai M.K.Gopalan Nair, 'Keraliya Chithrangal,' cited in Muralidharan Tharayil, 'National Interests, Regional Concerns: Historicising Malayalam Cinema,' *Deep Focus* (Jan-May 2005): 90.

<sup>5</sup> K. R. Ramakrishnan, 'Ee Pokku Nallathinalla,' cited in Muralidharan Tharayil, "National Interests, Regional Concerns: Historicising Malayalam Cinema," 91.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Venkiteswaran, 'Film, Female and the New Wave in Kerala,' in *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalizing Gender Hierarchies*, ed. Meena T. Pillai (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 41.



<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/cinemaproblem\\_eng.html](http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/cinemaproblem_eng.html) (accessed on May 8, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Films like *Neelakuyil* (dir. P.Bhaskaran & Ramu Kariat, 1954), *Newspaper Boy* (dir. P. Ramadas, 1955), etc.

<sup>9</sup> This is quite anomalous since the Kerala society is not an urban society at all and what is relevant in the context of Mumbai is not relevant here. See Adoor's interview with Venkiteswaran, available online at [http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/adoor\\_df4.html](http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/adoor_df4.html) (accessed on May 8, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> See Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, 'The Gulf in the imagination: Migration, Malayalam cinema and regional identity', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 43, 2 (2009): 217-45.

<sup>11</sup> See Venkiteswaran, op.cit., 54.

<sup>12</sup> See Ashis Nandy, 'Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics,' in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-17.

<sup>13</sup> Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, 'Soft Porn and the Anxieties of the Family', in *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies*, 197.

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Venkiteswaran, 'Film, Female and the New Wave in Kerala', in *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalizing Gender Hierarchies*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Madhupal, during his interaction with me, referred to Adoor as a backdated filmmaker and Adoor's own assistant Joshy Joseph, himself a celebrated documentary filmmaker, harshly criticizes Adoor's latest films in his autobiographical narrative *Calcutta Cocktail* (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> I am referring to films like *Rathri Mazha* (dir. Lenin Rajendran, 2006) and *Bhoomimalayalam* (dir. T.V. Chandran, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> According to Blessy, their films were given the slot of the noon show in the theatres. This is supported by Venkiteswaran who reminded us of the fact that these films were called 'Uccha Padangal' or 'Noon Films' which is a pun at their oddity.

<sup>18</sup> Journals like *Samvaadam* and *Drishyathalam* started publishing articles by film studies scholars. Here goes the editorial from a special issue of *Drishyathalam* that features Niranjana's and Srinivas' writings:

In the coming pages are readings that might disturb you. There will not be any Bergman or Kurusowa or Ray or Ghatak here. Instead, the readers will come face to face with the infinite "others" of "dominant" culture and "great" cinema... In some English departments (like the Central University and the Central Institute of English and Other Foreign Languages in Hyderabad) that otherwise study Shakespeare's and Shelley's great works time and again, Tejaswini's and Srinivas' readings of cinema have taken shape and are opening our eyes. 'Palatharam Kaazhchakal', *Drishyathalam*, January-June, 2001, 5 (translation mine).

<sup>19</sup> Madhupal's father Madhava Menon was the owner of a movie theatre in northern Kerala. Madhupal was introduced to cinema at a young age because of being present in that very theatre. He eventually deserted his successful professional career to make his entry into the tinsel town. See Madhupal's interview with Sarswathy Nagarajan, "Crowning Glory", *The Hindu*, December 13, 2008, Metro Plus.

<sup>20</sup> See Adoor's interview with C.S.Venkiteswaran, available online at [http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/adoor\\_df7.html](http://www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/adoor_df7.html) and also in *A Door to Adoor*, ed. Lalit Mohan Joshi and C.S.Venkiteswaran (Middlesex: South Asian Cinema Foundation, 2006), 84.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Telugu Naxalite films or *Erra films* (Red Films), see S.V. Srinivas, *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T.Rama Rao* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 198-199. I am referring to films like *Erra Sainyam* (dir. R.Narayana Murthy, 1995) and *Osey Ramulamma* (dir. Dasari Narayana Rao, 1997).

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