

Aesthetic dislocations:

A re-take on Malayalam cinema of the 1970s

Abstract:

One of the visible developments of the 1970s has been the emergence of 'parallel cinema'. The paper attempts to closely read the aesthetic strategies employed by three films of 'parallel cinema' category in Malayalam to understand how of realism as a mode of address came to be consolidated. While Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamvaram* presents melodrama and realism as inimical to each other and assembles a spectatorial location for the emergent parallel cinema, KP Kumaran's *Athithi* and PA Backer's *Kabaneenadhi Chuvannappol* foregrounded aesthetic choices that can be placed more in a continuum with cinema that has preceded them. All these films, while staging the aesthetic dialogues of the time, employ strategies such as casting, direct address and the configuration of the inside and the outside as in the service of these negotiations. The paper argues that the narrative and aesthetic choices made by the films of a particular point of time should be central to any discussion of the legacies of the period.

Keywords: parallel cinema, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, spectatorship, realism, melodrama, Malayalam cinema

Discussions on the legacies of any historical period or moment will necessitate the bracketing off of nostalgia and attending to the intricate histories of cinematic practices. On the one hand, it could be an exercise in the producing a narrative of how the existing understanding of the period came to be formed through film journalism and criticism. On the other, it could attend to the aesthetic practices of films of the time to see how they actively intervened in the debates on how a future framework on

cinema has to be imagined. Attempting the latter approach, the paper juxtaposes two relatively un-discussed films categorized within parallel cinema from Kerala, KP Kumaran's *Athithi* (Guest, 1975) and PA Backer's *Kabaneenadhi Chuvannappol* (When the river Kabani went red (*sic.*), 1975, *Kabane*, hereafter), with *Swayamvaram* (One's own choice, 1972), the debut feature of the canonical auteur, Adoor Gopalakrishnan (Adoor, hereafter). Focusing on select moments from these films, the paper unpacks the consolidation of realism as a mode of address that generates certain spectatorial response, and presents two instances of cinematic practice, which worked outside the framework of realism. It will suggest that the 'turn to realism' was always a contested move within the cinema of South India. If the avant-garde in Indian cinema was in conversation with globally emerging aesthetic and political concerns, it was the lineages of popular cinema within the art house that provided with the contests with realism, in this instance. As will be briefly touched upon, film criticism and the monetary structure that allowed for the emergence of parallel cinema provided the conditions of possibility of such a contestation and its discursive resolution, to a large extent, in favor of realism.

Assembling the spectator

Ten minutes into Adoor Gopalakrishnan's first feature film *Swayamvaram*, something unexpected happens that could be a starting point for the re-examination of the narratives about Malayalam parallel cinema of the 1970s. The film narrates the story of a couple Viswam (Madhu) and Seeta (Sarada), who has eloped into the city. Around the tenth minute, their romance in a hotel room is cut to a fantasy sequence on the beach and in secluded idyllic spots, accompanied by a romantic score.¹ These spaces of fantasy are those that are familiar from popular cinema. The couple performs standard romance routine like walking on rocks, sitting on the beach with Viswam's head on Seeta's lap and holding hands while walking on railway tracks, until a shift happens in the sequence. The couple is

¹ John W Wood identifies this sequence as a flashback (149-150). This reading, based on no evidence, is an attempt to account for these sequences in terms of a linear story – a reading that I argue against.

shown spread out on the beach at the edge of water in a visual quotation of the tragic climax of the much-celebrated classic, *Chemmeen* (Ramu Kariat 1965)²: the union in death of the romantic couple Pareekutty and Karuthamma. The fact that Pareekutty was one of Madhu's most memorable and successful characters makes for a further layer for the quotation. Seeta wakes up from that posture as Viswam remains still. Devoid of any background score, these extra seconds present a moment of anxiety and a break in the romantic routine. This is followed by another romantic moment with Viswam playfully keeping his ears on the railway track as we hear the rain arriving. This innocent prank turns into a moment of anxiety with the noise of the train going up on the soundtrack and the shaky camera lingering on Seeta's face disallowing spectatorial access to what she is seeing. The couple is then seen in a tight embrace intercut with sketches of iconic Malayalam film couples Prem Nazir – Sheela, Sathyan – Vijayashree etc, in amorous embrace. Immediately after the montage of popular stars, Viswam leaves Seeta's embrace and starts running away from her with a mischievous smile. The run suddenly picks up speed, the smile changes into an expression of pain and he disappears. What follows is a long sequence of Seeta's search for Viswam as she runs through forests and hilly terrains. The background score is replaced with the sound of wild animals. As a tired Seeta stops her search, a hand, presumably Viswam's, enters the frame and grabs her. She screams loudly. In place of the standard romantic resolution, in the next shot we see Viswam and Seeta on the rocks by the beach, looking grave and thoughtful, far away from each other in a single frame, and later to Viswam deep in thought, alone in the hotel room.³ Here a clear conversation between melodrama, put together by acting styles, references to earlier popular cinema and the promise of the new moment that keeps on interrupting the

² *Chemmeen* became the first South Indian film to win the President's Gold Medal for the Best Film in 1965. The film also received a Certificate of Merit at the Chicago Film Festival. Till the emergence of parallel cinema, *Chemmeen* was seen as one of the most accomplished film made in Malayalam.

³ Venkiteswaran lists the many references to cinema in *Swayamvaram* and rightly identifies the statement about aesthetics. I differ from him on one significant count. He presents this argument about aesthetics as 'self-referential and [as pointing] towards notions about creativity and 'art' inherent to the new wave project" (*Swayamvaram*" 31). For me this set of references is the central project of the film and not a matter of mere self-referentiality. This is the meta-narrative of the film – one that ties every single aspect of it together.

melodramatic, is initiated. This, I submit, is the promise of realism. The instability of the couple at the end of the sequence is not the result of any visible development in their relationship. What is at issue is the aesthetics of couple formation.

In Malayalam film historiography, *Swayamvaram* is read as a film that inaugurated realist cinema by dealing with 'real' problems for the emerging middle class like modernity, urbanization and poverty.⁴ On the other hand, within the frame of a national parallel cinema, it is often erroneously seen as one of the many films from the South to deal with "caste, religion and the decadence of traditional village life" (Kishen 29). Realism is understood here to mean a variant of the earlier prevalent social realism or at least an extension of it, with emphasis on its ability to deal with the real world. The logic of a nation-wide thematic for parallel cinema has been challenged in recent times on the grounds of the themes that they dealt with. It has been suggested that unlike its counterparts in other parts of the country, Malayalam parallel cinema was not especially concerned with rural themes given that the urban-rural divide does not obtain in the region (Muraleedharan 194). I argue that the grounds of this debate need to be rethought. To understand the specific contexts of the emergence of what is termed the realist aesthetic in Malayalam cinema, one will have to keep a safe distance from the thematic concerns and focus on the disjuncture of the kind that I described from the early moments of *Swayamvaram* – of aesthetics.

Swayamvaram is a film that elaborates an aesthetic argument and not one that inaugurated new themes. The sequence I discussed above could be seen as symptomatic of this elaboration. The disjuncture between realism and melodrama is introduced right in the beginning of the film. The title sequence of the film is a five minute long bus ride with the landscape outside changing from rural to urban, shot entirely within the space of the bus. Among the passengers of the bus are the protagonists of the film. The sequence does not centralize them through techniques of framing and centralization.

⁴ See Venkiteshwaran ("Swayamvaram" 32), Wood (149-154).

The first sighting of Viswam and Seeta is effected through a shot showing their backs to the camera, following a series of shots showing other passengers. We identify them as the protagonists by a rather commonplace strategy – casting. Two of the biggest stars of the time, Madhu and Sharada, are seen traveling in the bus. The discordance between the realist strategies of *mise-en-scène* and montage (the long sequence, the successive shots of the interior of the bus that locate the passengers in clear time and space) and the presence of the stars who are already known for their melodramatic acting styles, is one that could miss the eye of the spectator who, by the early 1970s, was entrenched in cinema that work with economies of stardom. This dissonance is kept in place through the following sequences including the one we discussed earlier in the paper. In a scene after they check into a hotel (before the fantasy sequence), a bellboy knocks on their room door interrupting a moment of intense passion. Rather than romance itself, it is a particular representation of romance as exemplified by the melodramatic and excessive acting styles of Madhu and Sharada that is being interrupted. The aesthetic disjuncture is presented again, later in the film. In an attempt to publish a novel he has written, Viswam meets with the editor of a journal, played by the well-known novelist Vaikom Chandrasekharan Nair (as himself). In his office, we are made privy to a discussion on literature in the presence of a number of other writers including G Sankara Pillai (playing himself), considered to be the founder of modern theater in Kerala. Viswam's novel, titled 'Nirvrithi' (Ecstasy) is rejected on the ground that "it is too sentimental". The link between the condition which Viswam and Seeta find themselves in, i.e. sentimentality, is linked to cinema again in the sequence following the rejection of Viswam's novel. As he walks through the city, a sentimental song is heard, coming from the cinema theater in the background. The theater that we see is 'New Theater' in Thiruvananthapuram, one of the oldest cinema halls in Kerala (established in 1930) and the biggest in the state, established by one of the pioneers of Malayalam film industry P Subrahmaniam (who established Merryland Studio in 1951), accused by film magazines of the 1970s (along with Kunchacko of Udaya Studios) of indulging in crass

commercialization. To make matters explicit, the song is sharply cut to a hall where a public speech on the conditions of the working class is underway, into which Viswam enters.

In *Swayamvaram*, interior and exterior landscapes are mapped on to melodrama and realism respectively. Inside is the space of the couple, of melodrama. As the initial sequence in the bus reveals, it is a well-organized external landscape that provides for the framing of the inside, occupied by Viswam and Seeta. In the initial sequences the space of the couple and the city are neatly divided and separated though intercuts. The moments of transgression, like the entry of the bellboy, interrupt the melodramatic and excessive performance of romance by the lead actors. It is not accidental that the bellboy's entry is on cue to Viswam's dialogue, "unbelievable, like a dream". This pre-figures the relationship between the melodramatic interior and the realistic exterior that the film carries forward. The world outside is the privileged space of 'reality' – of politics, unemployment, illegal economies and sex workers – represented by the various characters that the couple encounters in the film. The thematic ingredients that critics have identified with *Swayamvaram* and later art house cinema are deployed here to put together a domain (exterior/reality/context) from where the aesthetic argument is to be launched. This is the space where the spectator – the idealized Metzian abstraction⁵ – will be enshrined through the course of the film. In mapping the film in these terms, I differ from the argument that Malayalam art house cinema, and especially *Swayamvaram*, is *about* the middle class nuclear family (Venkiteswaran, "Swayamvaram" 29-30). Rather, it is about the ordering of the outside, which houses the melodramatic domestic, into a spectator position. *Swayamvaram* is also not *about* Viswam and Seeta. It is about the how their world has to be read. Viswam is similar to most of Adoor's heroes in that his tragedy is signaled by a failing system – in this case the system is an aesthetic one – melodrama.⁶

⁵ In his *The Imaginary Signifier* (1986), Metz argues that the viewer in the cinema hall identifies with himself as a narrativized and abstracted subject position put together by the filmic text (97, 42-57). As has been noted by many, the suturing of the actual viewers with the abstract spectator is never complete. This has implications in understanding the viewers of Malayalam parallel cinema, and calls for an elaboration of the kind that is outside the scope of this paper.

⁶ And in other films, matriliney (*Elipathayam*), Communism (*Mukhamukham*) and feudalism (*Vidheyan*).

The stark distinction between the inside and the outside gets its elaboration and the status of *the gaze* in the character played by the actor Gopi in the film, the very spectatorial position in question. Gopi, in a striking and memorable cameo, is a disgruntled young man who accuses Viswam of usurping his position as manager in a sawmill factory. In the latter half of the film, Gopi appears a number of times in the margins of the frame (and once as an intense close-up) projecting a look of anger and betrayal at Viswam. In a telling sequence, Viswam gets up from his table at the sawmill, presumably to take a break, only to be stopped by the mere look of Gopi's character. The distinction between the inside and the outside gets coded into spectatorial activity with the narrativization of the look from the outside. Gopi's gaze onto the world of the couple is elevated to the metalanguage of realism by making him disappear from the film as abruptly as he appeared.⁷ The space of 'reality'/outside is transformed into a spectatorial position through the embodiment and the subsequent disappearance of the gaze, via this character. Most of the last sequences of the film are shot in the interior as a space that can be fully negotiated, now that the relationship between the private and the public is put in place. The end sequence of the film presents Seeta after the death of Viswam, alone with her child, looking anxiously at the closed door as some force from the outside (the wind, people?) pushes at it violently. Her anxious gaze, which freezes on the camera, has been seen as "raising the question of the viewer's implication in the conditions portrayed in the film" (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 415). Even while moving away from the standard understanding of the last shot as ambiguous (what will Seeta's future be?), Rajadhyaksha and Willemen continues to understand the spectatorial ordering as that which could be accounted for within the narrative. The end is unambiguous precisely because the narrative burden of the film is to produce a spectator who has to ponder upon this very question. This anxiety over Seeta's future is the

⁷ Madhava Prasad describes the structuring of realism as metalanguage thus:

... a contractual link [is established] between the members of the audience, including the film-makers, thanks to which the object-world can be represented in its there-ness. It is this latter contract that is at the base of the metalanguage of realism and it is because of the operation of this contract that it is possible for the metalanguage to effectively disappear in its material aspect without eliminating any of its effects (73).

Reality in these articulations is contractually produced. Realism is then the way of apprehending this contractually formed 'reality', a specific way of 'looking'. See also Rajadhyaksha (124-126).

culmination of the enshrinement of the new spectator. The spatial structuring of realism as the outside is relocated as spectatorial response – a contract that provides the parallel cinema definition of realism.

The film engenders a subtle slippage between the location of the disgruntled young man played by Gopi and the arrested gaze at the end of the film. The casting of Gopi, by then well known as an actor in the modernist *thanathu nataka vedi* (indigenous theatre) – itself a response to popular theater, as the brief holder of the gaze aids such a slippage. The casting collapses the character's working class location with the actor's middleclass and modernist, though extra cinematic, image, providing layered location for the gaze.⁸ Gopi went on to play the protagonist in Adoor's next film and then to become the face of Malayalam parallel cinema and middlebrow cinema (also acting in Mani Kaul's 1980 *Satta Se Utha Aadmi* and Govind Nihalanani's 1985 *Aghaat*) translating the location of the gaze into economies of stardom, as a parallel structure to mainstream stars of the time.

Here, the film is involved in a definitional struggle, not at the level of a realist humanist narrative, but on the terms on which realism, as an aesthetic will be delineated. This move should not be confused with filmmaking traditions within art house cinema in India like that of Ritwik Ghatak's which simultaneously draw and veneer away from "the representational logic of humanist realism...and the purely affective transactions of melodrama" (Dass 244) in an attempt at producing an alienated spectator engaged in a critical dialogue with the contemporary. Rather the move in Adoor is one of pedagogic intent, narratively assembling the spectator of realism. As mentioned above, realism and melodrama are carefully and hierarchically separated out in *Swayamvaram*.

The institutional structure of cinema at the time in regional, national and international contexts were amenable to the aesthetic positioning engendered by a film such as *Swayamvaram*. In Kerala, the setting up of film societies and the increased state support that followed national initiatives led to the formation of parallel cinema. The conscious production of the realist position was aided by the financial

⁸ The presence (in a sequence discussed earlier) of G Sankara Pillai, one of the founders of the *thanathu nataka vedi*, provides us with another clue to the salience of modernist theatre in articulating realism in this film.

choices that these films made.⁹ The funding came from co-operatives like Chithralekha that produced *Swayamvaram* and later, more importantly, from traditional elite such as Raveendran Nair ('General Pictures' Ravi) at a time when money from the Persian Gulf was entering the film industry. Support to art house cinema of the realist kind was part of the efforts by the state to relocate the film production to Kerala and to save it from such illegal economies. By arguing that state support should be given to "films with a Kerala background and the smell of the Malayalam soil (*sic.*)" ("Malayalacinema Keralathil" 156), Adoor became significant voice in the attempts to link economics and aesthetics with cultural authenticity. This was also the time of the consolidation of the middle class, within the largely Marxist political framework, in Kerala – a story that is yet to be told and its long standing effects yet to be evaluated. The re-structuring of film festival programming across Europe in the wake of political developments post-1968, resulted in a renewed interest in filmmakers from the 'Third World'. This allowed filmmakers to bypass national governments and directly approach film festivals (de Valck 61-62), giving more leeway for the emerging parallel cinema. In 1982, Adoor's *Elippathayam* (1981) was screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' section at Cannes Film Festival and won British Film Institute's Sutherland Trophy, marking the triumph of the realist aesthetic framework.

Another site where one could identify the enshrining of the ideal spectator of realism is in the domain of film criticism in Kerala that emerged in the wake of parallel cinema. In a fascinating introduction to a 1981 collection of screenplays, titled *Yaadhaarthyathinte Naalu Mukahangal* (Four faces of reality), Nissar Ahammad, using Barthesian semiotics and thus introducing a new language for film criticism in Malayalam¹⁰, makes a distinction between *ithivrutha pradhana cinema* (content based films), *lahari pradhana cinema* (cinema of intoxication) and *rachana pradhana cinema* (writerly cinema).

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the economic context and the emergence of parallel cinema in Kerala, see Radhakrishnan (219-231).

¹⁰ This book, along with a series of essays (earlier published in magazines) collected and published by the same publishing house (Nila) in the path breaking *Kalaavimarsham: Marxist Maanadhandam* (Art Critique: Marxist Yardsticks 1983) edited by Raveendran, could be seen as consolidating a form of art/film criticism that was influenced by Antonio Gramsci and Frankfurt School. It is this strand that film studies attempted to replace in the late 1990s.

Even though he clubs most of the parallel cinema into the last category, he makes a significant classificatory move that reads *Chemmeen*, *Olavaum Theeravum* (PN Menon 1969) and *Nirmalyam* (MT Vasudevan Nair 1973) together as *ithivrutha pradhana cinema* (14-27).¹¹ The marking of the distinction between *Swayamvaram* and *Nirmalyam* (usually clubbed together) provides one axis of differentiation in Malayalam parallel cinema. This useful taxonomy emphasizes the fact that the all of the new set of films are not interested in thematics, but does not provide a description of their concerns in positive terms. About *rachana pradhana cinema*, Ahammad writes: “Taking *Swayamvaram*, *Ekakini* and *Athithi* together, we see that there are only moments of passage in them and no moments of arrival”(23). It is the collapsing of these distinct films in one group that Ahammad makes this argument that once again falls back on the content, albeit negatively, to provide an argument for these films. This intervention symptomatically misses out is the fact that, of the films in the category, *Swayamvaram* (as opposed to *Athithi*, as we will see later) does have a definitive moment of arrival – that of the production of a new spectator position. Film criticism, from the late 1970s and continuing to date, has been an active participant in the discursive erasure, and further, the naturalization of this point of arrival.

Swayamvaram, with this pedagogic intent, is not a typical film of the Malayalam parallel cinema, of which Adoor’s later films are best representatives. It is an aesthetic manifesto for realism, founded on the production of a spectator position. Once this elaboration is engendered in *Swayamvaram*, Adoor proceeds to ‘become’ a realist filmmaker through his later films starting with *Kodiyettam* (1978), which, for most commentators and interviewers, constitute his oeuvre. The rest of the paper attempts to present other aesthetic possibilities that were available within emerging parallel cinema.

¹¹ The link with literature seems to be the one that seems to produce the most enduring narrative of good cinema in Malayalam. Vijayakrishnan, in his *Malyalacinemayude Katha* (The story of Malayalam cinema), which is seen as the standard history of Malayalam cinema, marks the linking of cinema and literature as that one move that produces authentic Malayalam cinema (61). The films directed and/or scripted by MT Vasudevan Nair (starting in the 1960s) among others is central to this narrative. He wrote the script for *Olavaum Theeravum* and made his debut as a director with *Nirmalyam*, which is seen along with *Swayamvaram* to have inaugurated the Malayalam parallel cinema.

Re-take: The not so parallel

While *Swayamvaram* began by locating the time-space structure of the film in the very first sequence of the bus ride, both *Athithi* and *Kabaneer* starts with dislocating the frame from such coordinates.

Athithi starts with a sequence of a sand dune that is being mined. The expansive sand dune does not provide any specific codes as far as the location is concerned, like urban-rural, modern-traditional. The first shot is cut to Karunan (PJ Antony) who, from behind the window (almost like a prison) of his house, looks at the sand dune. Even though the structuring of the inside and the outside is central to the film, its elaboration is entirely different from *Swayamvaram*. The inside becomes the location from where the look at the outside is launched. And the outside is the space of fantasy. The film turns around the wait for someone named Sekharan who everyone in house expects will solve his or her 'problems'. Though everyone has a materially definable problem for himself or herself, the common problem as is evident from the early sequences of the film is related to lack of an affective bond between people within the domestic space. Dialogues and actions seem to be at cross-purposes in the tradition of the absurd. At one point the viewers are told that Sekharan has arrived but we never get to see him. He returns without changing anything or appearing on screen by the end of the film.

The film employs popular actors of the time like Kottarakkara Sreedharan Nair, PJ Antony and Sheela in central roles. The use of popular stars, whose acting styles are undoubtedly melodramatic in *Athithi*, is radically different from that of *Swayamvaram* where it is circumscribed by the 'outside' and made visible. Melodrama is employed in its fullest in the film. Within such a structure, the distinction between the inside and outside cannot be mapped on to melodrama and realism. In a telling sequence, we see Ramani (Karunan's wife, played by Sheela) observing her sister Latha and Raghavan (Balan K Nair) in a moment of passion under a tree next to the sand dunes. Both Ramani and the couple are placed in the public. In a subsequent sequence we see Ramani, from the same location as before,

observing herself dancing amorously with a man. At the end of the film, after the father (Kottarakkara) announces that Sekharan has disappeared and all the characters realize that their plans are shattered, the shot is cut once again to the sand dunes. We see Ramani running away, followed by Raghavan. The fantasy-like resolution of the film has the two of them in a passionate embrace. With the splintering of the melodrama/realism, inside/outside oppositions, the film proposes a third location where we can theorize spectatorship.

I propose that the unseen Sekharan is that location for the spectator. I will point to two sequences in the film. In a flashback sequence featuring a full-length romantic song, we see Ramani's unfulfilled past romance with Sekharan. Shekharan is absent in the sequence. But the way in which the song is shot presents the camera, i.e. the spectator, as Sekharan. In a series of frontal shots, Ramani literally romances the camera. The second sequence is again in flashback. We see Ramani and Karunan, after their marriage, visiting the fair. Ramani watches six clowns dancing to a song, the lyrics of which is more or less a moral lesson about the entire film. The voice claims the position of the enlightened one and sings: "*Aham Brahmasmi*/ the fantasies of a blind man who looks for the non-existent cat in the sack of darkness/...." At one point Ramani starts to believe that one of the clowns is Sekharan. But before she can check, the clown disappears. While the latter sequence positions Sekharan as an absent presence (by the time we know it is him, he has disappeared) who can make a judgment, the former aligns him along with the camera, thus elevating it to the position of the spectator. If the sequences in the fair narratively privileges Sekharan as the moral centre of the film, the romance sequence transforms him into the position of the spectator. The absent gaze of Sekaharan then is the central problem in the film. In another telling moment we see Latha dancing on a stage. She is a bad dancer, her dance almost comical. She ends the dance and bows to the audience, to the camera. The shot is cut to the audience to whom she bows to, but what we see is an empty auditorium. The position of the spectator, capable of aesthetic judgment and critical of this comical performance, is once again rendered empty. When, at the

end of the film, the old man announces Sekharan's disappearance, we have two shots in film negative, so as to indicate the very visual nature of the issue at hand. Sekharan then is not a character that is awaited in the film, but the location of spectatorship that will render the disorganized world intelligible in realist terms. The loss is that of a possible realism that has shifted from being a moral placeholder to that of greed and desire for wealth because Sekharan is representative of an economy that is founded on migration to the corruptible outside. With the film collapsing the desire for Sekharan into the desire for realism, the latter is deemed obscene and a lost promise. This collapse shows up the class positioning of the realist gaze, i.e. of the emerging middle classes in Kerala. The moment of tragedy in the film is the realization that the agency of order, the realist gaze, is an impossibility and probably undesirable. What is usually seen as the problem with *Athithi* is its central concern – the impossibility of a realist ordering of time and space. What remains is the fantastic and the apparent conventional popular resolution on the sand dunes.

Issues of dislocation in *Kabaneer* begin with the fact that the film is shot on location in the city of Bangalore (Karnataka), outside Kerala. This is unique because parallel cinema was mostly shot on location in Kerala, while popular cinema that was shot outside Kerala used mostly studio floors. The space of the city, outside Kerala, allows the film to sidestep the space of the domestic and cultural located-ness completely. Even though most of the action in the film happens inside the house of Shari (Shalini), there is no attempt to structure it as the domestic – the space of the couple/the family. Gopi (Chandran), a Naxalite on the run after being involved in a political murder, has come to meet his girlfriend Shari for one last time. Unlike both the films that were discussed earlier, *Kabaneer* starts with the interior in a long tight shot with a conversation between the couple in the background. Once the slow moving tightly framed camera rests on Shari, it cuts to Gopi's close up. To Gopi, who is now looking straight at the camera, she poses the question on behalf of the spectator: "Can the world be changed with murder?" Dispensing with realism, the entire film is shot in a series of frontal shots where

characters either ask questions or proclaim revolutionary ideals to the camera, producing an alienated spectator. With a clear pedagogic intent, the film does not attempt to locate itself either with a cultural frame or within realism/melodrama debate.

Cinema is a recurring presence in the film. Interestingly, because of its geographical dislocation, the references are not of Malayalam cinema, nor does it make indexical reference to a condensed version of melodrama as in *Swayamvaram*. An amateurish rendering of the song '*Chingaari koi bhadke...*' from the Hindi film *Amar Prem* (dir: Shakti Samanta 1971) is heard in the background when the protagonists are discussing their relationship. The incorrect and incomplete lyrics of the song points to the fact that it is not used here as a framing device but as a component of youth culture where the protagonists (and the film itself) can be located. The second prominent image of cinema is the close up shot of the poster of the Hindi film *Sholay* (dir: Ramesh Sippy), which was released in the same year as *Kabaneer*.¹² Rather than being a statement of the aesthetics, *Kabaneer's* invocation of cinema is part of its landscape and points to its cinephilia. This is not surprising as PA Backer has been associated with Malayalam cinema from as early as 1957 when he became assistant director to Ramu Kariat in *Minnaminungu*, production in-charge of *Chemmeen*, production manager for a number of films and later producer for *Olavum Theeravum*. G Devarajan, known for his music for stage and film melodramas associated with the Communist party, composed the background score of the film. In fact, parts of *Kabaneer* were initially shot with mainstream stars like Sudheer and Usha Nandini before it was abandoned. A number of individuals associated with the film including the producer Pavithran, the hero TV Chandran and actor Raveendran went on to become directors in their own right.

The city as constituted by the images of cinema is seen on a continuum with the space of the house where Shari lives. There is no attempt in the film to elaborate the outside just as the inside is shot

¹² A third film reference is the poster of a film titled *Aa Maze Lelo* (Come, have fun), possibly a B-movie, on the back of an auto rickshaw. This is the only reference that could be a direct comment on popular cinema, but I guess that, even if it were, it would have completely missed the audience in Kerala.

mostly in tight frames. The sequences of romance is located within the memory of the protagonists and thus in the past, as that which is lost, unlike in *Swayamvaram* where romance is not temporally, but aesthetically distanced. This radical re-figuring of the inside/outside completes the spatial dislocation. *Kabaneer* is a film about impossibility of authenticity, describing a world dislocated both in space (migration to the city) and in terms of politics.

It is erroneous to think of *Kabaneer* as a politically radical film though the period of Naxalite politics becomes its background.¹³ Backer himself suggested that it is a film about Shari and not about Gopi, the revolutionary (Krishnakumar 64).¹⁴ The film successfully manages to stage a pedagogic structure by making Shari its protagonist, right from the first sequence where Shari vocalizes the question on behalf of the spectator. In another sequence, Gopi is seen looking at the mirror and saying that he hasn't seen himself for a long time. Shari enters the frame of the mirror to complete the circle of looking and ingraining the spectator into his field of vision, with Gopi now looking at Shari's reflection instead of his. The film is more or less devoid of moments where the looks of the characters can be worked into an aesthetic of realism. The film's central concern is a flattened out world of desire where the connection between individuals can only be built through static frontal shots and address. In the final shot of the film we see Shari, after she knows that Gopi has been killed by the police, looking straight into the camera with Gopi's voice in background: 'I am sure that the time when human beings love each other and will listen to each other words like music, will definitely arrive' – a dialogue we hear him say earlier in the film. Gopi's presence in the film – with Chandran's plain style of acting – is spectral. It is almost as if the political voice enters the life of the service sector middle class, represented by Shari, through the voice. Within the pedagogic economy of the film, the spectator is aligned with

¹³ The film, which was and started finished during the Internal Emergency between 1975 and 1977, could get a release only after being subjected to a number of deletions by the then Censor Board which was more powerful than ever.

¹⁴ Perhaps as a testament to the ambiguity of its politics, at the height of Internal Emergency in 1975, *Kabaneer* was selected as the Second Best Film and Backer was selected as the Best Director by the State Film Awards for the year. Backer accepted the award from the hands of the then Home Minister of Kerala, K Karunakaran who spearheaded the hunt, and in many cases murder, of Naxalites. Backer writes that Karunakaran said to a journalist that *Kabaneer* was a film with a message that if you indulge in anti-State activities, you can be killed (Krishnakumar 42)

Shari, as the one who is to be guided by this voice. In an early sequence in the film, we see Gopi in the foreground of the frame, arms spread, reminding us of Christ. In another sequence towards the end of the film, Shari is seen dragging Gopi on the ground a la Christ carrying the cross. An interesting character in the film is that of the worker, played by Raveendran. Silent through the film, his purported role in the film is of a messenger and a go between Shari and Gopi once the latter moves out of her house. It is implicit that it is on his behalf Gopi's politics is played out. The film operates in between his mysterious silence and Gopi's constant revolutionary rhetoric. The film never attempts to imbue the figure of the worker with any moral authority as we saw with the similar figure in *Swayamvaram*.

Different strategies of dislocation are central to the two films that I discussed above. Of the two films, the mode of address employed by *Kabane* has had a staying power in Malayalam cinema with Backer following up on the theme in the more absurd political film *Sanghaganam* (1979), and receiving a more striking aesthetic elaboration in John Abraham's *Amma Ariyaan* (1986). On the other hand the modes by which *Athithi* dislocated the hegemonic presence of realism was never followed up even by Kumaran in any fruitful sense, making it a singular film.

Waiting for realism?

Looking back at the time, one is surprised to see how the realist aesthetics, which was put together in *Swayamvaram* and dominated the imagination of 'good cinema', was a marginal presence in the cinematic practice in Kerala in the 1970s. There are a number of other films that complicates the narrative of realism. Two of the screenplays presented in *Yadharthyathinte Naalu Mukhangal*, Pavithran's *Yaro Oral* (1978) and Raveendran's *Iniyum Marikkatha Nammal* (1980), along with GS Panicker's *Ekakini* (1975) stand out. So do the films of G Aravindan who, after his first film, attempted to delineate the spaces of cultural and aesthetic authenticity on grounds far away from realism through the

use of myth and by bringing cinema closer to practices of visual art and music, especially in films such as *Esthappan* (1980) and *Pokkuvayil* (1981).

Salaam Karasseri, producer of a number of Malayalam films and an actor in *Kabaneer* remembers an incident after the preview of the film at Ajanata Theater in Thiruvananthapuram. After the screening, Kulathoor Bhaskaran Nair, the co-founder of Chithralekha, which produced *Swayamvaram* and *Kodiyettam*, asked Backer if the film had some problems with the postproduction. Adoor followed and asked him if there were some problems in the editing. Though Karasseri remembers Backer retorting sarcastically to these comments saying, “once you guys decide between yourselves, let me know”, he himself agrees with the criticism of formal incompetence (Krishnakumar 105). It is not difficult to see that the criticism of *Kabaneer* is made here from the realist standpoint. Film criticism, institutional structures and discourse around cinema in general had quickly accepted realism as the yardstick to understand cinema. One witnesses a consensus on realism as the teleological goal of these films being built around this time. This allows for the dominant retelling of all the films I discussed here including *Swayamvaram* as flawed and awaiting, like the characters in *Athithi*, for a realist future. Refiguring these indefinite waits as aesthetic statements in themselves, as constituting definitive arguments about film form, is imperative for a possible retake on the 1970s. The legacies of the 1970s can be located not in what gets formed within dominant film discourse nor in nostalgia, but in the contests that were central to the aesthetic and political concerns of the time. These more or less forgotten interstitial spaces are yet to be mined for what it could tell us about our present.

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