



What happened to 'art' cinema?

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ISSN 2583-1836

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Abstract: *The terms 'art', 'parallel' or new wave were employed extensively by the Malayalam film critics in the 1970s to talk about the avant garde cinema of the time. The critics of the earlier generation never employed such a term to describe or categorize critically acclaimed or award-winning films of their times. It would be interesting to probe the emergence of such a generic or aesthetic category to talk about films at a particular point in time, which has to be seen not only in terms of form, themes, content and style of the 'new wave' films, but also related to the radical shifts in aesthetic sensibilities and discourses of that period. The delineation and promotion of such a category had significant impact on several fronts: on the one, it spurred a new understanding about art cinema among the youth. It also triggered discourses about cinema and thus nurturing a niche audience and eventually creating a slot for such films in the mainstream exhibition system. The article also probes the predicaments of such a category in the present times, which is marked by an erasure of such distinctions and categories, the retreat of state from sponsorship of art cinema, and the globalization of visual consumerism and tastes.*

Keywords: *art cinema, parallel cinema, avant garde*

The terms 'art', 'parallel' or new wave were employed extensively by the Malayalam film critics in the 1970s to talk about the avant garde cinema of the time. It would be interesting to probe the emergence of such a generic or aesthetic category to talk about films at a particular point in time. For instance, if you read film critics and writings of the earlier decades, one wouldn't find any

critic describing even serious films of the 1950's and 60's like Neelakkuyil, Rarichan Enna Pouran, Aranazhikaneram, Yakshi or Bhargavinilayam as an 'art film'. They were produced by mainstream production houses in the industry along with all other genres like crime thrillers, Northern Ballads, socials etc., and were seen as part and parcel of a continuum in terms of its production, marketing and exhibition. But the films by the new set of filmmakers who entered the scene in the mid-1970s – like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, K R Mohanan, KP Kumaran, John Abraham, Pavithran, early KG George, Bharathan and Padmarajan etc - were described as 'art' films as against the 'commercial' films churned out by the industry.

When one looks back, such branding or marking were justified on various counts: for one, most of these films were made outside the commercial-mainstream production setup, either by Film Finance Corporation, Film Cooperative like Chitralekha or enlightened entrepreneurs like G Ravindran Nair . These films were also noted for introducing an array of new actors and technicians: actors like Gopi, Karamana Janardhanan Nair, Nedumudi Venu, Srinivasan, Dr Mohandas etc who were unlike the film stars who reigned the screen till them, cinematographers like Shaji N Karun and Mankada Ravivarma, editors like Ravi and Raman Nair, music directors like Bhaskar Chandavarkar, art directors like CN Karunakaran and Nambudiri etc entered cinema through these art films.

Another aspect that made the emergence and popularity of this category possible was the intellectual atmosphere of the times: it was a period when there was a surge in modernist writing, which was being hotly discussed in the literary circles: the works of writers like Ayyappapanicker, OV Vijayan, Sachidanandan, M Mukundan, Maythil Radhakrishnan, Zachariah etc that radically departed from the old schools of literature ushered a new sense of thrill and

excitement among the youth. There were also very intense polemical debates between the various literary traditions and imaginations— social-realist vs modernist, 'art for art's sake' vs 'art for social change' etc – happening, and many of the young literary critics were also celebrating the works of new generation or writers, by differentiating them from their predecessors. They dwelt upon the new modernist themes, styles and aesthetic concerns pitching them against that of the previous generations of writers as well as critics. The same phenomenon was happening in theatre with the dramatic works of G Sankara Pillai, CJ Thomas, and CN Sreekantan Nair, and in arts with painters like KCS Panicker, Padmini, MV Devan etc.

The rumblings of such surges in other fields had its resonances in the film scene too, which was furthered by the arrival of a host of young talents who graduated from the Film & Television Institute of India. Their cinematic imaginations and inspirations were different and in radical contrast with the norms and tastes, practices and genres that existed in the commercial film industry. The look and feel, thematics and visual compositions, even acting styles and narrative pace of the 'new wave' films (another category that came into vogue to describe these films) were distinct and fresh. These films did away with the usual formulaic and dramatic elements of the commercial-mainstream of their times, like songs, dance, comedians, melodramatic scenes and dialogues, stunts, artificial sets/settings etc. The new wave filmmakers opted for a slower pace, very melancholic, often silent protagonists, and a different kind of visual language and symbolism. They were accused as 'obscure' and difficult. Take for instance, one scene from Pavithran's *Yaaro Oraal*, which could sum up the mood of the times. It is a scene where one of the characters is sitting on a rock and reflecting upon his own life and times in a long monologue:

The animal instincts of youth were undeniably true. They matured eating into my my social dreams and the skies of my horizon. I saw butterflies taking birth from her body. I became a lover, a husband, and then was banished from marital life. Extremism was a destination of solace for me. But the innocence that was left in me was butchered in the jails by the law keepers. After that, it was not difficult to be an acharya. It is an inevitable stage in the evolution of being. Now, my god, is there a spiritual effulgence in my face?

Don't swear at me, weren't the turning points in my life my destiny? Each stage, like the other, was equally restless..

When I was thrown from one to the next, where is peace?

But I will assure you of one thing

Demolishing the gates of the fortress before which I stood terrified, tearing apart the boots from the legs that kicked me, I see strong men surging forward, I bow before them. The mysterious pulsations of the storm that they are gathering to hit back tomorrow, spreads in my head too like moonlight..

But it is cruel to swear at me..

Yes, I am a romantic.. a romantic who is caught between Marxism and Spirituality..

Please forgive me..

The above monologue in many ways reflects the melancholic nature and deep sexual and political disquiet in those films.

What also facilitated the propagation of a new critical category like art or parallel cinema was that it had parallels in other fields like literature, theatre and arts. Like in other areas, a new set of audience, critics, discourse spaces and interface sites emerged in cinema too. Film society movement was the driving force behind keeping the spirit of the new wave filmmakers alive and agile, despite their marginalization by mainstream film industry and popular cultural forums like magazines and other publications.

Most of the critics of that generation like Chintha Ravi, Vijayakrishnan, A Soman, Shanmughadas, O K Johny, Neelan etc first published their critical articles in film society brochures and journals. There were also little magazines run by youth groups from different parts of Kerala that eagerly promoted the culture of parallel cinema, introducing the classics and masters of world cinema, and celebrating the new films and filmmakers from India and Kerala. The campuses and the youth counter culture of the times too were supportive of this new wave in film – in production, appreciation and also writing.

As for the question whether such a category helped film or film theory, one could say that it had significant impact on several fronts: on the one, by creating, identifying and celebrating a new genre of sorts among the youth, it triggered a discourse, created a niche audience and thus helped create a slot for such films in the mainstream exhibition system. The new wave films or award films as they came to be described later – were given an exhibition slot at noon time in theatres (noon shows, which were derogatorily called 'ucchappadam') across Kerala, which helped sustain the high noon of sorts of Malayalam new wave. This slot showed films of all kinds, and so, even the so-called obscure and difficult films received the opportunity for a theatre release. Another impact was that the consistent writings about these films in little magazines and later gradually in mainstream publications too, established new wave as a different kind of cinema, and prompted the readers – or the potential audience for art cinema – to make an effort to understand them, and adopt a serious attitude and consideration towards these films. The writings tried to establish that these films do not belong to the usual visual entertainment fare, but something that demanded more serious attention on the part of the viewer. In turn, watching and appreciating them became a mark of an intellectual, especially among students and youth of the time. So the creation of the category, in some ways, also helped creating a niche audience to sustain and propagate it.

In retrospect, the lines that were drawn between art and commercial cinema, and the writings based on that polemics runs along certain other binaries too: it was as if body and its desires, - or, the realm of the senses - belonged to the commercial, and mind and intellect to art cinema. In many of the art films of the time, the protagonist was a silent and brooding youngster, educated, unemployed and from upper/middle caste/class (Swayamvaram, Aswathamavu, Utharayanam, Prayanam, Yaro Oraal..). They were totally different from the valiant and tragic film heroes of commercial cinema, who confronted the world, took control of things and tied up all the loose ends of the narrative. The new wave films, by shunning all the pleasures of the body – and within the film narratives, shunning songs, dance, stunts and comedy scenes – dealt instead with conflicts of the internal kind - existential dilemmas and other abstract problems of the mind and the intellect were at the core of these films.

But by the 1990s, with the New Economic Policies promoting globalization and privatization, the opening up of the sky and the coming of television, the media scene underwent radical changes. Television not only entered homes and captured the audiences, but also captured the many thematic terrains of cinema – family feuds, triangular love, marital conflicts etc. Film society movement was also on the wane, so was the little magazine movement and the radical left movements. In film writing, the lines between art and commercial were becoming thin or irrelevant. The critics identified the rise of another category called ‘middle cinema’ that mixed elements of both art and commercial, that made any water-tight compartmentalization redundant.

Art cinema Today

But, despite its marginalization in film writing and criticism, art films (serious, independent and experimental films) were

consistently being produced in Malayalam throughout the post-liberalization decades. It gathered even more momentum in the digital age when filmmaking process became much more accessible, affordable and easy to handle. Though they are now sometimes referred to as 'indies' the earlier categories like 'art' or 'parallel' seem to have lost their potency. Now, though many independent films are being made in Malayalam – much more than in the 1970s and 80s – they no longer have any special status in film discourses, nor are they celebrated even by a subculture of cineastes or youth. With the best of contemporary and classic movies freely available through torrents and internet platforms, even film societies have shifted their focus to the global-contemporary, leaving cinematic experiments from their own localities by the wayside.

Another factor that contributed to the erasure of such aesthetic categories was the advent of the discipline of Cultural Studies whose focus was preeminently on popular culture/cinema than on avant garde or art cinema. With the attention of film critics, researchers and academics shifting to the study of commercial film culture, stars, representational dynamics, gender etc. the limelight was on commercially successful films and filmmakers, audience tastes, trends and stardom etc. This further turned away from the experimental and independent films and filmmakers the critical attention and 'care' that they, deserved, demanded and needed. If critics of the earlier generation sharply differentiated – maybe a little too simplistically - between art and commercial and stood firmly on the side of 'art' or 'parallel' cinema, the focus of post-Cultural Studies generation was more on popular culture and commercial films. If at all art films were considered, they were limited to the first generation of the new wave (of the 1970s). With 'award films' becoming a kind of expletive, theatres began to shun them as these films by then had even lost the niche audience of youth and students. The case of television was no different; but for

the state-run Doordarshan, none of the private channels gave significant space or sponsored art cinema. So, the independent filmmakers of today do not even command any slot in the mainstream exhibition spaces – in even in the form of noon shows movie theatres or in television channels.

The erosion of the niche audience base and the withdrawal of critical support the experimental and independent filmmakers are literally left on the lurch. Their works are not given the attention they deserve – leave alone adulation as in the earlier decades. Losing connection with the film discourses whose main and sole focus became the commercial mainstream, the experimentations and creative efforts of independent, art filmmakers were not given the intellectual and critical attention they deserved. This move away from art films also severed the symbiotic links that existed between independent filmmakers and the community of critics. With the links with the larger reading public broken, and with Film Societies splurging in the free availability of world cinema, the independent filmmakers were increasingly marginalized from film discourses and writing.

Every art form/practice is sustained not only by financial sponsors (who often sponsor only the viable and the successful) but also through the active and sustained participation of the audience, along with vibrant critical engagements with its contemporary creations. If one looks at the body of film writing and research in Malayalam during the past two decades, one can see that there has been an overwhelming preoccupation with popular cinema culture. Though no one can deny the vital importance of analyzing and studying popular culture, it is also incumbent upon the film scholars and writers to engage with the solitary experimentations that happen in one's culture, placing them with the socio-political and film industrial context of the region, as well as in terms of its aesthetic and political engagements with

world cinema. Without that, film writing itself may end up as something that obediently 'follows' the currents and trends, but misses the 'events' and ruptures, the dissonances and disruptions. If such 'events' and ruptures are not identified, marked and reflected upon, we may be missing out on our own contemporaneity and the creations and expressions that are really contemporary in and of our times. As Giorgio Agamben reminds us, "Contemporariness is... a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it." (What is The Contemporary?)