



The Ugly Scene: Counter-aesthetics and Malayalam Cinema

Arunlal K & Sunitha Srinivas C
Govt. College, Mokeri

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Abstract: *Ugly is a category that constitutes whatever is 'other'ed in a culture. It occupies the 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones that circumscribe the domain of the veritable subject. The 'dis-identification' from the Ugly is a necessary prerequisite of beautiful subjects. Though an abstract category in itself, the Ugly is understood as apparent and real because one's aesthetics of everyday experience develops from a 'notion' regarding actual physical realities, including human bodies, that are to be catalogued as ugly. From the bodies that are regarded as 'ugly,' specific ugly social categories, with regard to gender, race, caste and class take shape. These 'unaesthetic' wholes are reinforced as they are performed in representational arts such as cinema and television. The present paper tries to reflect on a few dimensions in which representation of ugliness happens in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Apart from being an aesthetic project, representing the ugly has certain deeper social functions beginning from galvanizing the racial and gender 'commonsense.' The paper uses the concepts of 'assemblage' and 'social imaginary' to address the subtler levels of ugliness in films.*

Keywords: *Ugly, Aesthetics, Popular cinema, Social imaginary, Assemblage*

Aesthetics of cinema has long been a contested field: combining music, dance, drama and visual artistry in creating its body, using print, electronic and online media in its release-phase, resorting to market appeal for upping its sale, cinema is a complex aesthetic form. Part of the complexity arises from the fact that cinema in its popular avatar, more than other art forms, is bound by the need to present what is not aesthetically agreeable. The formula-cinema appears hard-pressed to bring gory fights, death,

and sleaze-in-sex in its diegesis. More seriously than that, the popular formula leans heavily toward conventional social biases and political incorrectness assuming that these leanings will result in better commercial circulation. In discussing popular cinema we must, therefore, have a functional understanding of what constitutes the anti-aesthetic of our culture. Commercial cinema is not a beautiful terrain; it is a field that in equal amounts revels in the aesthetics of the ugly, the mad and the monstrous.

In general, in cultures, the term ‘ugly’ refers to the *othered* aesthetic categories. With ‘ugly’ aestheticians denote any event, thing or body that is dis-identified with the *beautiful*. Though an abstract category in itself, ‘the ugly’ is understood as delineable because the aesthetics of everyday experience evolves from a catalogue of encounters with *ugly* physicalities (of things, events and bodies). The category of ‘ugly’ is also a component in shaping the commonsense of condescension surrounding the minorities and unprivileged strata in gender, race, caste or class divisions. It could also be noted that the commonsense of ugliness about and around the marginalized groups get reinforced as they are performed in representational arts such as cinema.

Malayalam cinema assembles and configures the ugly components in its own specific ways. The current paper is an attempt towards understanding the representations of the variations of the category of ugly in Malayalam cinema. As we have said in the beginning, the formula-cinema’s space has seldom shied away from depicting what is ugly, mad and monstrous. Ever since its inception, these fascinations have stayed with Malayalam cinema. We find monsters and bodies-cursed-to-ugliness making their appearance in *Vadakkan Pattu* films and in mythologicals; gruesome murders and rapes are narrated in early social-realist movies; horror and ghost movies have always remained strong sub-genres; soft-porn movies have served a strong parallel to the

mainstream productions. Since this is a vast field of counter-aesthetic enquiry, the paper tries to limit its scope to two main tasks: a) an enquiry into the representation of madness in Malayalam cinema (since this is a major subcategory of the idea of the ugly/monstrous), and b) a perfunctory historicization of the New Generation cinema's representation of the abject.

Because it is a way of perceiving cultural realities, cinema addresses the audience using culturally intelligible narratives and performances. Consequently, they can reaffirm and intensify a sense of belonging and impart a rarefied aesthetic education through these narratives. In this sense, cinema as a 'shared narrative' falls within the ambit of the 'social imaginary'—a narrative that is developed in relation to other human narratives to locate themselves in a community. They are anchored in a complex system of cultural relationships determined by institutions and social forces. In its potential to address large communities—in the case of Hollywood productions, for instance, cinema is made to address a global consumer crowd—cinema communicates a comprehensive artistic vision that few other contemporary cultural artefacts can aspire to develop. A total grasp of the whole 'text' (the visual assemblage) at any one time eludes the audience, and a 'complete' understanding arises only as the show comes to an end. As an 'imaginary' (a representation of collective life) it visualizes a set of values, bodies, laws and symbols common to a particular group and the corresponding society through which people imagine their social whole. It (as a 'social imaginary') presents an array of visual images which are socially shared and lets the individuals belonging to a society identify and distinguish what should be considered real/unreal or normal/abnormal in their milieu. Social imaginaries (like those of violence and beauty) are often constituted by the circulation of literary metaphors and visual images; in this sense, a 'social imaginary' is a specific network of significations, collectively shared in a society at a point in history. This network and its referrals

could be circulated outside the original society so as to represent its aesthetic, moral and political stands.

Early twentieth-century thinkers like Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai have described how with an increasing affordance of the ‘mass mediation technology’, “imagination” as politico-cultural category gets increasingly incorporated into the everyday practices of modern subjects. Appadurai even goes to the extent of stating that ‘imagination’ is “a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity.” He points to how it has become “a collective, social fact” (Appadurai 3-4). Cinema, television, Cable TV and the related visual culture industry, have transformed prior forms of social production, consumption, and circulation of cultural texts and have doubtlessly brought about a change of social relations. A variety of emergent imagined communities imagining and feeling together (a collective imaginary) has now become a reality. In other words, cinema offers moral and aesthetic systems that feed on and is fed upon by actual human community systems. The judgment of what is aesthetic and what is unaesthetic, what is ugly and what monstrous, what is heroic and villainous and so on, are therefore important to the constitution of a cinematic narrative system.

According to Cornelius Castoriadis, the ‘imaginary’ may be both individual and collective. It gets expressed by means of the narratives that socio-cultural representations create. There are two processes that go into the expression of this: one is the process of anchoring, where a certain meaning is given to a new object by bringing it among the previous stock of notions. The second is that of objectifying. Here, an object is given concreteness selecting its main features and recomposing them in a scheme or figure. In objectifying, it gains a more accessible structure and becomes tangible as an object. Being a social representation cinema supplies the ‘social imaginary’ with ample raw materials regarding the beautiful and the ugly. Since it relies on the affect-aspect for its

narrative impact, a multi-layered analysis of the main features of the film text (the filming angle, the star persona of the actors/characters, actions, affects and the soundtrack, a content/discourse analysis of the verbal material), as its aesthetic resources, becomes essential. In fact, the affect aspects of stars, music, spectacle, emotion, and dialogue have always been investigated seriously by film theorists. Allusive words, images and ideas when deployed successfully, bring out an explosive effect on screen.

Since the visual aesthetics of modern feature cinema is principally constituted around representing the concrete and the physical, body is cinema's central semiotic site wherein ideas of beauty and ugliness are played out. In a popular cinema, the representation of the body more often than not revolves around the depiction of the hero, the heroine and the villain, three important bodies that form the focal points of the unfolding narrative. Their bodies serve as 'locations' of the preferred and the ugly, and consequently, the good and the evil. While watching an engaging popular film, the narrative can get the spectator to identify with the Hero/star as a superhuman/charismatic individual and allow himself/herself to engage with society's prevalent political and moral convictions.

On a micro-level, representing the Ugly in cinema involves several picturization procedures that dispense images of abjection centered on the human body— depiction of the dead, dying or diseased bodies, and bodily waste like blood, vomit, sweat, tears, saliva, and putrefying flesh are frequent. On the other hand, representing the aesthetic of ugliness in a macro-level involves redrawing the representational boundaries. The vampire/zombie cinema and the horror genre in general, for instance, redraws the binary differences between human and nonhuman, man and beast, and natural and supernatural; the soft-porn cinema problematizes the divide between normal and abnormal sexual desire and gender

roles, the ideal and the dirty/object body. It is possible to read the portrayal of murder, carnage, adultery, jealousy, craftiness, sorrow and similar morally problematic acts as extension of this problematization of boundaries: it is possible that the cinematic portrayal of a psychopath serial killer might add more glamour to the character in question, though the horror of the murders is graphically depicted in the cinema. Some psychological states such as hysteria, schizophrenic behaviour, depression, obsession and misdirected desire-related diseases are now part of popular vocabulary and visual commonsense thanks to their repeated representation in commercial cinema. In the popular imagination a hysterical, or a schizoid person might coincide with how the popular films represent them. In fact, one of the central depictions of the 'Ugly' in Malayalam films happens to be the representation of the mad subject.

The 'impaired body' is often placed in antithesis to the 'normal body.' Acts of madness and animality make the former category 'outsiders' and position them outside of the rational social order. Onscreen representation of object bodies is a two-faced activity: on the one hand, it stresses on the need of psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry, and on the other it legitimizes sorcery and exorcism as well. The mad subject's exclusion and the taboo of the possessed body are juxtaposed in the plots: the exorcist shares his insignia with the psychiatrist's couch.

In the years that marked Kerala's modernity and Malayalam cinema's coming of age cinematic representation became perhaps the most important means in to demarcate the abominable from the acceptable. The popular conception and faith in modern medicine gathered strength during these years. However, the arrival of newer medicinal practices did not replace the the earlier norms of social exclusion completely (viz. physical disability, caste hierarchy etc): illnesses carried metaphors of exclusion with them.

Movies that had hospitals as their plot setting, or doctors as their protagonists, took liberties in the representation of excludable ‘mad’ bodies. Cinematic madness took its primary lessons always from popular psychoanalytic ideas. Psychoanalysts like AT Kovoov wrote movie scripts during the 1970s, and even played the character of psychoanalysts in films. With the release of such marital and erotic psychodramas as *Punarjanmam* (1972), *Swapnadanam* (1976) psychological narratives emerged as a subgenre in Malayalam cinema.

In *Punarjanmam* and *Swapnadanam*, the two original, early and successful psychologically inclined film narratives, the mad characters are represented as patients controlled absolutely and exclusively by the institutions of psychological authority. The bodies of the mad are sites where power was exerted visibly and with impunity. The psychological institution could ‘discipline and punish’ so that the subject improves status and becomes ‘normal.’ The subjects were also ‘monster-patients’ who posed threats to the ‘normalcy’ of the society. This stigma has a long genealogy, connecting it up to the pre-modern social understanding that mad people carried God’s will or judgment against sinfulness.

Certain mannerisms such as innocent nudity, inability to engage with the hospital’s procedures, an inclination to ‘break the law’, a lack of proper sense of the past, or a confused memory mark the aspects of the physical monstrosity of mad subjects. In the cinemas that came after the 1970s, mad characters were shown to be treated with corporal punishment: it was passed off as ‘part of the treatment’. Sequences of punishment-treatment involved subjecting the patient to electric shock, performing bloody surgeries on the patient, castration, paralyzing and caning. The punishments of caning and blood-letting were also part of the indigenous witchcraft regime: the exorcist performed these acts to rid the body of the demons. Exorcism meets Psychoanalysis squarely in this

aspect, and in many a successful psychodramas of Malayalam cinema, (such as *Manichithrathazhu* 1993) the two figures of exorcist and psychiatrist work together. Exorcising a demon and curing madness (even delusional projections of characters as in *Arikil Oral* (2013) and *Njangalude Veettile Athithikal* (2014)) both use, in the cinema, an esoteric vocabulary and sadistic methods.

Psychiatrists in the cinema signify a central social agency: he clearly exercises a power directly connected to the ugly body and aberrant mind at his disposal. The characters' penal-cum-therapeutic improvisations in the plot (which often involves prolonged corporeal torture of the mentally sick subject) are both popularly applauded and medically sanctioned. In such plot events, the character of psychiatrist wins positive support from the other characters; they even agree to play roles in the drama that he would direct. Films like *Ulladakkam* (1991), *Manichithrathazhu* (1993), and *Ayal Kathayezhuthukayanu* (1998) and *Naranathu Thamburan* (2001) are cases in point. In the Malayalam movies, the institution of the mental hospital is a lock-away of not just derailed minds, but also gross and monstrous physicality. The assumption is, individuals here are "trained to new habits, new patterns of conduct; their bodies subject to a dressage of disciplinary routines, their conduct monitored as closely as possible. [...] Classifications, timetables and routines organize activity in space and time" (Jones 118).

Apart from hysteria, schizophrenia and erotic abnormalities which went into the plots of a majority of the psychodramas, the cinema of the 80's and 90's also used the loss of memory as a trope to represent mad and maladjusted subjects. There were many movies — *Innale*, *Mookkilla Rajyath*, *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Nottandu*, *Friends*, *Varnakkazhchakal*, *Oru Abhibhashakante Case Diary*, *Pranayavrnangal*, *Thoovalkkotaram*, *Thilakkam* to name a few — that portrayed characters who partially or completely lost

their memories. This amnesiac condition also placed the affected under the protection and scrutiny of the institution of psychiatry. In films like *Innale*, the heroine who cannot recollect her past after she meets with an accident, is protected first in the mental institution, and later as an extension, in the marriage to the man who runs the institution.

Films used varieties of amnesia freely in the decades to come for the obvious reason that the condition offered easy diegetic reversals, suspense or plot resolutions. Regardless of whether the film was a comedy or melodrama, the plots reinforced that the mad persons must be separated from the family; that the hospital is the best choice for accommodating these people; that, if they are kept in the family, they must be chained; that the modern state allows the mad subject ‘a license to kill’ (a dangerously distorted reading of the legal provisions allowed for the mentally abnormal) and therefore the farther away s/he is kept, the safer the society. The psychiatrist and the institution of psychiatry was represented to be wielding a license to confine and control the ‘monstrous’ people. The plot-horrors about ‘demonic possession’ extended to the beliefs that mental disability is a concern beyond the scope or control of scientific/medical knowledge. The operative aesthetic metaphor in this case — of the ‘mad monster’ as an ‘outsider’ or an abnormal creation — also depends largely on a culturally enforced equation (between inner and outer beauty and goodness, along with its converse), according to which ‘outer ugliness’ visibly testifies to the state of an ‘inner world’ (individual or collective).

In recent decades, with the institutions of modernity running into several historical crises, and post-modernity and digital technologies finding their way into the social structure, the cinematic aesthetics has come to change significantly. A newer ‘Noir’ variety of cinema, dubbed “New Generation cinema,” appeared in Kerala roughly in the first decade of the millennium.

These films tried to connect to Noir experiments elsewhere in the world, and many promising cinematic experimentations that were afoot in Tamil cinema during this period. As is usual with noir varieties, a closer and more realistic take on the monstrous and uglier side of life was a major preoccupation of Malayalam New Generation cinema too. Plots stopped shying away from discussing extramarital relations, and the camera started picturising violence and sex in a more graphic way. Special effects and computer generated graphics were increasingly deployed in the visualization of the seamier side in these films (as in the spectacle of mayhem one finds in *Angamali Diaries* and *Jallikettu*).

Apart from the Noir variety, the New Generation Malayalam cinema also ushered in an interesting brand of comic films into the culture. These were increasingly meta-cinematic and self-referential in nature. Language is less dramatic, expletive-ridden and more dialect-based than it was in earlier comedies. One of these recently successful comic films, *Kattappanayile Hrithik Roshan* (2016) was built explicitly on the idea of the aesthetic superiority of the fair-skinned. The film revolves around a dark-skinned youth who cannot make it big in the films because of his looks. He debuts in a film during his school days as an extra, playing the role of a chain-snatcher. Ever since, he was offered only roles of petty thieves, pickpockets and chain snatchers. The charisma of the name of the North-Indian film-star Hrithik Roshan is used as a foil to foreground the ‘ugliness’ of Kichu, the protagonist. The film brings a fair-skinned heroine as Kichu’s object of desire.

Using ugliness and deformity as resources for comedy is however not new. From circus clowns to television shows, the stereotypical comedians have for the most part been physically ‘unaesthetic.’ Or rather, the fact that they perform crude comic episodes made it imperative in the representational logic that such bodies are not to be taken seriously— ‘they are ugly and

undesirable, and at best only laughable'. Physiognomical differences are underlined and are symbolically accentuated by differences in bearing, gesture, posture and behaviour. Dress and food are all signposts that derive their meaning and value from their position in the system of distinctive signs which they constitute.

The body is perceived as the most natural expression of one's personality in visual culture. The 'physical'/facial signs (the colour and thickness of lips or expressions as well as the shape of the face or the mouth) are indices of a 'moral' physiognomy that is socially characterized. In other words, in the representational visual culture, body is usually perceived as the very materialization of class and taste. In New Generation cinemas like *Kammattippadam*, *Salt and Pepper*, *Da Thadiya* and *Thamasha* these differences are shown in a very pronounced fashion. *Kammattipaadam* supposedly uses the dark-skinned characters, played by Vinayakan, Manikandan and Anitha to dismantle the stereotypes of hero/heroine that exist in Malayalam cinema. Yet, the depiction or superimposing of typical features on the characters Balan and Ganga raise questions of 'ethnographic violence' even here. Though it subverts the dominant aesthetic sensibility, the Dalit body is maintained in the visual fabric as the 'other' (Markose 50-51).

Aesthetic engagement is also an aspect of spectatorship since objects are understood through particular embodied positions, cultural values, beliefs, and points of view. The significations of ugliness and monstrosity attach themselves to individuals in ways that grow in and out of the concept's changing cultural construction. The Ugly has its own identity in systems of aesthetics where it generates tension in intriguing and repelling—one of the ways it challenges a pure aesthetic judgment. It is to a collective imagination that cinema appeals. On another axis, cinema also goes into creating this collective imagination. In the years to come,

understanding cinematic aesthetics in our culture will also mean understanding the category of ugly in its nuances. As Žižek points out, contrary to the standard idealist argument that conceives ugliness as a defective mode of beauty (as its distortion), “one should assert the ontological primacy of ugliness. It is beauty that is a kind of defense against the ugly in its repulsive existence *tout court*, since . . . what is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the real) as such” (Žižek21). In a convergence of aesthetic and social practices, bodies in art and in society not only contribute to a genealogy of ugliness but also destabilize a singular definition of the category of the ugly.

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