CHAPTER 7

MALAYALAM CINEMA AND OTHER ART FORMS

The task of analysing the links between cinema and other art forms such as theatre, painting, music, dance and literature becomes very difficult and complex because of the fact that cinema contains elements of all these arts (or has freely borrowed from them and yet in totality, remains, very different from all of them, a distinct entity, with its own specific qualities. Another factor which makes this task even more complex is that, cinema is more technology based than all these other art forms and also requires a comparatively larger financial base which automatically gives it an economic function. Besides this, there is the difference pointed out by Walter Benjamin, the critic, that film can be mass produced and therefore can reach the many, rather than the few, as is the case with the other art forms, which revolutionises it inasmuch as the exclusivity accorded to the other art forms is not exactly applicable to films.1 Film is available on a regular basis to a larger number of people, and rather than having people come over to see it in its homeground or originating place, it goes out

(via distribution channels) and meets the audience in their own homegrounds. Film has, therefore by its plurality (as opposed to uniqueness) and its reproductibility (as opposed to originality) changed the very romantic traditions of art such as, that art is unique and irreproducible; that it is available only to a few and not to many; that the viewers, have to go and see it wherever it is located and not expect it to come to their homegrounds.

This chapter is restricted to reviewing how cinema differs from other art forms in its socio-political and psychopolitical equations dealing with the relationship between the art form and society and politics and the art form and the individual, respectively. It would also evaluate the contribution of each of these art forms to cinema and the effect of these contributions. Lastly, the influence of cinema on all these art forms and the changes brought about in them because of their association with cinema, will be examined.

In Kerala, as everywhere else in India, all the other art forms, such as theatre, painting, music, dance and literature had evolved and had developed their own traditions and styles for more than 500-600 years. In that sense, cinema is the latest and newest art form with a short span of life - approximately 50
years. It is pertinent to remember that the world cinema itself has only a history of less than 100 years and within that short period it has made phenomenal progress in form and content. When cinema appeared on the scene, the people of Kerala did not welcome it wholeheartedly or accept it willingly.

In the first twenty years of cinema's life in Kerala, the quantitative and qualitative growth was negligible. In those twenty years, only six films were made and those six were not of a high quality. The three early pioneers in film lost all their money and withdrew from filmdom in total abjection. This proves that film as an art form did not appeal to the makers or the viewers. They viewed it with a contempt similar to that of the traditional aristocrat to the nouveau riche. The use of technology distanced the product of art from the artist, more than any other art form. The plurality and the reproductibility robbed it of its exclusiveness and the artist's individual control over the production as well as exhibition. The material distancing of the art from the artist made it look less of an art piece and more of a technological gimmick or entertainment piece.

However, it should be noted that the revival of the cinema as an art form was initiated by artists

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2 Supra, ch.2, p. 82.
themselves, from other fields. They came forward and
redeemed cinema from being a mere entertainment and
gave it a new aesthetic and lease of life. When the
artists from the other fields began to view cinema as
an art form, the viewers also gave it an artistic
status. Thikkurissi Sukamaran Nair, who wrote the
script of Jeevithanauka3 (Boat of life) was a dramaturge
and theatre activist. The film was a success and ran
for about 204 days in theatres. That was the first time
when a Malayalam film received the approbation of the
audience. Subsequently, there was an upsurge, in the
fifties and the sixties, of novelists, poets, theatre
activists, painters, musicians, composers and dancers
into the field of film. In fact, it was considered to
be an honour to be associated with the film in some
capacity or other. Novelists such as Late Uroob (P.C.
Kuttikrishnan), M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Parappuram, K.T.
Mohammed, S.K.Pottekkat, Ponkunnam Varky, Thakazhy
Sivasankara Pillai, P. Kesava Dev, Vaikkom Muhammad
Basheer, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan etc gave the rights
for their novels to be made into films. Some like
Uroob, M.T.Vasudevan Nair, Basheer and Varky wrote the
scripts for their novels and honed their skills to
perfection. M.T. Vasudevan Nair who has received the
State and National awards for the best script of the

3 Supra, ch.1, p. 18.
many times is considered to be one of the finest cine script writers of India.

Poets tried their hand at composing lyrics to film songs. The most famous among them are the inimitable trio - P. Bhaskaran, Vayalar Ramavarma and O.N.V. Kurup. Thoppil Bhasi, who earned a name through the plays he wrote for the famous KPAC troupe made them into film scripts. Painters such as P.N. Menon, I.V. Sasi and Bharatan started as art directors and later became full fledged directors. Many others from all the above categories became directors such as M.T. Vasudevan Nair, P. Bhaskaran, Thoppil Bhasi etc. Classical music artists such as Dakshinamoorthy, K. Raghavan, P. Devarajan, and Baburaj entered the film field and became music composers. Musicians who had a classical training and background such as K.J. Jesudas, S. Janaki, P. Leela, P.B. Sreenivas and P. Susheela began to lend their voices to film songs. At one stage, Jesudas was more well known as a singer of film songs than as a classical music exponent. Classical dancers such as Lalitha, Padmini and Ragini entered films as danseuses and later on became actresses.

Thus, there was a veritable exodus from all fields of art to cinema. The recognition given by the creative artists earned cinema the respect of the intellectual and the attraction for the common man. Thus cinema gained popularity in the box office, as well as entry into the elitist artistic crowds. However, one has to doubt whether cinema gained substance, credibility and popularity through a respect and understanding of the medium itself and its potential or through the support of artists from other fields who tended to interpret the medium through their own media.

An independent assessment of the medium and its grammar, language and potential came much later, when Film Institute trained Adoor Gopalakrishnan brought in a new type of movie in 1972, Swayamvaram, followed by others such as Aravindan, John Abraham, K.G.George, K.R. Mohanan, P.A. Backer etc. Till then, cinema was a conglomeration of several art forms such as literature, painting, theatre, music, dance—all joined haphazardly and not synthesised properly.

Malayalam cinema upto the seventies was always based on a story—a story either taken from one of the existing novels or short stories or a new one written
by the story writer.⁵ A cinema was considered good if it had a good story line and the characterisation was good.⁶ No one commented on the visual quality of the film, or the most important elements such as editing, sound or special effects. Again, no one experimented on the form or content. Even when a novel was made into a film, the basic differences between the novel and the film were not taken into consideration "Because film operates in real time, it is more limited. Novels end only when they feel like it".⁷ Commercial film cannot reproduce the range of the novel in time. Almost invariably, details of incident are lost in the transition from the book to the film. Therefore, when a novel is made into a film, the film maker has to make up for the possibility of shorter narration through pictorial possibilities the novel doesn't have. Novels are told by the author. We see and hear only what he wants us to see and hear. Films, are in a sense told by their authors too, but we see and hear a great deal more than a director necessarily intends. Whatever the

⁵ Novels: Ummachu, Odavil Ninnu, Randidangazhi, Chemmeen
Short Stories: Chidambaram, Murappennu, Kutti Edathi
New Stories: Swayamvaram, Kotiyettam, Esthappan, Pokkuvevil.

⁶ Opinion of critics such as NAIR, VASUDEVAN, M. (Cynic) and NAIR, APPUKUTTAN (Kozhikkodan).

⁷ MONACO, JAMES, Op.cit, p.27.
novelist describes is filtered through his language, his prejudices and his point of view. With a film, we have a certain amount of freedom to choose, and select one detail or other. "The driving tension of the novel is the relationship between the materials of the story (plot, character, setting, theme and so forth) and the narration of it in language; between the tale and the teller, in other words. The driving tension of the film on the other hand, is between the materials of the story and the objective nature of the image. The words on the page are always the same, but the image on the screen changes continually as we redirect our attention."8 For the film maker, it becomes a major problem as to what details are to be omitted and what are to be chosen. The presentation of the theme, without losing its essence, however, relating it through pictorial narrative rather than linguistic narrative, poses another problem. In films such as Chemmeen or Odayil Ninnu or Ummachu and in other such adaptations of novel into film, transference of incident through translation into image is not done imaginatively so as to make up for the loss of certain incidents. The story (narrative) is given the emphasis, and not the essence or spirit of the story and the relating of the story is done not through the image,

8 Ibid., pp. 27, 28.
but through the dialogue which is again only another variation of the linguistic narrative. In most of the Malayalam films, the sound track is adequate to grasp the story, and the images do not in any substantial way enhance the impact that one has from listening to the sound track. So basically the effect that one has is that of reading a novel or listening to someone reading a novel. The most vital element in cinema, seeing the images, becomes secondary. That is why novels made into films are mere repetitions of the novels, sometimes bad repetitions and in any case not good cinematic representations.

There are certain short stories which have been made into films such as *Iruttinde Atmavu*, *Murappennu Kutti Edathi* and *Nirmalyam* based on short stories of M.T. Vasudevan Nair and *Chidambaram* and *Purushartham* based on short stories of C.V. Sreeraman. Here the problem is slightly different from that of the novel. The short story has material only for a very short film. So, in order to make a full length film of two hours, it has to be lengthened by inclusion of more incidents, details and probably sub-plots. Another way of filling in time is through inclusion of songs, dances and comedy.

In *Iruttinde Atmavu* and *Nirmalyam* the additions have been done in a fairly innovative manner that the
films turned out to be powerful renditions of the original story. The spirit of the original story is preserved and the pictorial narration in both cases have been equal to or in some respects superior to the language narration. But in Purushartham and Chidambaram the additions are artificial and the overall effect is of a thin story line stretched beyond its limits.

Whether it is a short story or a novel, that the film maker is using as raw material, his aim should be to transcend the unimportant details and catch the essence or the spirit of the story or of keeping the framework of the story, and creating another essence and spirit which is elevating and noble. In Malayalam cinematic tradition, when a novel or a short story is made into a film, imaginative adaptation expressing a keen awareness to the potential of the medium, is rare. Serious attempts to study the medium and its potential have started only during the Seventies and even then only a few persons have paid the attention the medium deserves.

Film and theatre seems to be closest to each other at first sight. In fact, the roots of the earlier

9 Discussions with film critics such as VIJAYAKRISHNAN, RAJAKRISHNAN, V.

10 Eg.: GOPALAKRISHNAN, ADOOR, ARAVINDAN, G., ABRAHAM, JOHN
films lay in theatre productions. Malayalam cinema borrowed freely from the Tamil theatre and later from the Malayalam theatre itself. Exposure to International cinema was negligible and hence they resorted to the imitation of the form which was readily available. At no time has Malayalam cinema been completely free of the influence of the theatre. It is significant to note here the words of James Monaco. "But the film differs from the stage drama in several significant respects, it has the vivid, precise, visual potential of the pictorial arts; and it has a much greater narrative capability. The most salient difference between staged drama and filmed drama as it is between prose narrative and film narrative, is in point of view. We watch a play as we will; we see a film only as the film maker wants us to see it. And in film, we do have the potential to see a great deal more. It has become a truism, that a stage actor acts with his voice while a film actor uses his face"\(^{11}\).

Another difference is, that while theatre is live, film is recorded and therefore, while in theatre the contact between the actors and the audience is one of participation, but no identification with any particular actor or situation, in the film, the contact between the actors and the audience is more detached

\(^{11}\) MONACO, JAMES, Op.cit, p.33.
and yet, because of the dark room, the resemblance of the filmic experience to dream/memory/stream of consciousness, and the individual response to film, the opportunity for identification with actors and situations is more. In Malayalam cinema, during the earlier years, what was churned out by way of cinema was photographed theatre. The theatrical conventions of flat, static poses, gesticulation, voice variation, stylised gestures, dramatic rendition of dialogue, carefully controlled exits and entrances of actors and a one dimensional approach were all observed in cinema also so that the films were over-theatrical, melodramatic and stereotyped. In fact, there was virtually no difference between watching a play and a cinema except that one was live and the other was recorded. There were others during the fifties and the sixties like Thoppil Bhasi, who came to the field of film from the arena of theatre. His films are the best examples of photographed theatre. He repeated the themes which were enacted as plays, and the plays were more appealing and effective than the films, for they were mere repetitions of the plays without the advantages of a play such as active participation of

12 Earlier films such as Gnanambika, Nalla Thanka and Prahlada belong to this variety.

13 Enippadikal, Sarvekkallu, Aswamedham, Ningalenne Communistakki
the audience. This trend was changed to some extent when new film makers like P. Bhaskaran, Ramu Kariat and K.S. Sethumadhavan came to the forefront. They began to pay more attention to the visual content - the images, shots, montage etc. But even their films were filled with songs, dances, verbose dialogues and melodramatic situations - a virtual hangover from the theatre. It was with the advent of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan etc. that film moved away from the clutches of theatre and became an entity on its own. The best example of an original filmic adaptation of a play is Aravindan’s Kanchana Seetha. This was based on the play with the same title by a well known playwright, K.N. Sreekantan Nair. In fact, Aravindan has completely changed the content of the play.

Seetha never appears on the screen in person. She is visualised as the Nature, the ever present, perennial Nature. Her unseen presence is felt through the vibrations of Nature. Dialogue is minimal and the silences are long and resonant with sounds, inflections and meanings. Whereas the play is filled with eloquent, long and authoritative dialogues, the film permeates with eloquent silence and Aravindan’s explanation is very meaningful. "There are some specific reasons for deciding to have sparse dialogues in Kanchana Seetha. One, the episode taken from Ramayana is familiar to us
all. Two, Ramayana is not a supernatural reality for us, as it is ingrained in us. It is therefore, not necessary to educate people about the film through lengthy dialogues. I did not think that Seetha should come in the film in the form of a woman. That is why Seetha appeared in the film as Prakriti (Nature) and Prakriti is a character in the film. When the emotions of Seetha like pain, sadness, joy and equanimity are manifested through the moods of Prakriti dialogue becomes redundant. I felt I could make the film without dialogue"^{14} He also says, "What a good writer achieves with the imaginative use of language, cinema has to achieve with visuals."^{15} thus putting the final emphasis of the success of films on visuals and their placement.

"Music has become an integral part of the film experience. Silent films were normally performed with live music"^{16} Malayalam Cinema which had as its model, Tamil cinema and Tamil theatre, had two kinds of music, integrated into it; the vocal music in the form of songs and the background music.

15 Ibid., p.13.
In the usage of songs also there has been a radical change. Initially the song was used as a punctuation mark in cinema. The duration of the cinema was fixed as three hours with approximately 18 reels of 1000 ft each, and in order to fill up the time, apart from dialogue and comic bits, an important device used was song. There were films with 12-18 songs of 3 1/2 to 4 minutes each, so that roughly one hour out of the three hours was allocated to songs. The songs were not situational. On the contrary, the situations were created to accommodate songs. However, as the musical dramas of Kerala had a convention of having a predetermined number of songs, so also cinema which was the successor of the music drama tradition continued to include songs without any rhyme or reason.

In the fifties, with the advent of Neelakkuyil\textsuperscript{17} the situation changed. The number of songs were reduced to six or eight. They were sung to emphasise or dramatise a particular situation. The lyrics were composed by poets and were poetic and emotional and the tunes were very appealing. It was at this time that the folk tunes and folk idioms began to be introduced in the songs. The credit for revolutionising Malayalam film songs go to the poets - P. Bhaskaran, Vayalar Ravivarma, O.N.V. Kurup, Yusuf Ali Kecheri etc. In fact

\textsuperscript{17} Supra, ch.1, p. 22.
these poets created a special genre in poetry - The poetry of film songs. Film songs became a section of literature. However the song picturisation in most of the films was stereotyped. Often the essence of the lyric was not integrated with the images. The Malayalam film makers of the fifties and the sixties lacked the skill of Satyajit Ray and Ritwick Ghatak\textsuperscript{18} who introduced songs in their films which harmonised with the images and situations of the film. The background music used was often unimaginative, loud, repetitive and stereotyped and often jarred with the mood and movement of the film. In the Seventies, with the advent of the parallel film makers, the role of music in cinema was revolutionised. The music became a predominant factor dictating the tempo, the emotional highs and lows and the mood of the film at all stages. Various Indian instruments such as the veena, the sitar, the flute and at times even the folk instruments such as the pulluvan kutam are being effectively used in Malayalam cinema to give the films a distinctive indigenous flavour.

While these parallel film makers have experimented and changed the concept of the use of music in cinema, the mainstream cinema continues with

\textsuperscript{18} Music of \textit{Pather Panchali} and \textit{Jal Sagar} by RAY, SATYAJIT and \textit{Meghe Dhaka Tara} and \textit{Subarna Rakha} by GHATAK, RITWICK are good examples.
the quota of songs (which is reduced to 3 or 4) and its loud jarring background music.

The tempo of the music has also changed with the advent of Jerry Amaldev, Ilaya Raja etc. The lyric has become unimportant. It has been reduced to a few words to go with the beat of the rhythm. The rhythm is more Western, the pace faster and there is an increased use of the Western instruments such as the guitar, the saxophone and the congo drums. This is distinctly used to catch the attention of the younger crowd who form a substantial portion of film goers, who are exposed to Western music and probably are more aware and knowledgeable about Western music than Eastern music. The lyric of the music has ceased to be of significance and has lost its poetic quality and depth of meaning.

The art of painting has affected Malayalam cinema inasmuch as the general principles of the frame composition, lighting, depth, tonality are adopted from the painting. Those trained in painting have taken up filmmaking, such as Aravindan, I.V. Sasi, Bharatan and P.N. Menon. But the various movements in painting such as expressionism, impressionism, cubism, surrealism

19 Jerry Amaldev is a modern music composer of Kerala and Ilaya Raja is a music composer of Tamil Nadu; both use Western tunes and Western instruments in their music.
have not, in any significant way, affected the art of film making as in the West.

Dance has always been added as a bit in Malayalam films. There are scenes where the heroine dances a classical or semiclassical dance, or group dances are introduced in the folk style to give the film a Kerala touch. Sometimes a cabaret dance or a night club dance is shown as part of the formulae. These dances are a part of what has come to be known popularly as the "song and dance sequences" and often there is no relevance or situational importance to these dances.

When determining the contribution of film to various art forms, one finds that the novel, painting and dance have not been substantially affected. In the West "The novel responded to the challenge of the film and expanded its activity just in this area, the subtle, complex issues of narration. Prose narrative in the twentieth century turned away from mimesis towards self consciousness. In the process it bifurcated: The popular novel (Irwing Wallace, James Michener, Leon Uris et al) which is now closely connected with film that it sometimes begin life as screen play; and the elite novel, where the "artistic" avant garde work is being done"20 in Malayalam, novel has gone through the

transition from mimesis to self consciousness not because of its association or challenge from film, but by itself, through exposure to its counterpart in the West.

In fact, there is no such practice in Kerala as the novelists writing novels with filming in mind. Novels, which have already been written are being adapted as screenplays to make them into films. And in many cases the screen plays have been verbatim copies and not imaginative adaptations to suit the film medium and hence the film turned out to be less effective than the original novels. Now, more and more scripts are written specifically for the films by script writers, and often they do not show any originality, suspense or dramatic tension.

In the sphere of poetry, a distinct section of film song lyrics had developed in the fifties and the sixties, though not formally recognised by the literary connossiers. They tended to look down on film songs as inferior products and the poets who wrote them as outcastes who sullied their art for money making. But the fact remains, that due to the active efforts of poets in the film field, the Malayalam film songs are a class by themselves, loved by those who appreciate music and poetry of classical and folk varieties. These songs are very popular and are sung by all and sundry
in Kerala. The tunes are also very appealing. In fact, one could almost say that the song in the Malayalam cinema was the most socially unifying factor - liked and studied by all without any caste, class, age, position, distinctions. With the advent of Aravindan and John Abraham, music and songs have taken a further new texture and dimension.

Theatre in Kerala has experimented and changed so frequently that it is a very dynamic force. There are three types of theatre prevalent in Kerala. The popular theatre (with its realistic approach) followed by people such as Thoppil Bhasi, N.N.Pillai and several others, the Brechtian-Epic theatre initiated by Late K.Sankara Pillai, and the classic theatre introduced by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. The main contribution of cinema to theatre has been a renewed interest in the ritual of communal celebration. There is also an intense emphasis of contemporary dramatic theatre on mise en scene as opposed to text, which is also a contribution of the film.

The majority of Malayalam cinemas is narrative realistic cinema. There has not been too many

21 Discussions with PANIKKAR, NARAYANA, KAVALAM and NARENDRA PRASAD, well known playwrights in Malayalam.

22 Discussions with PANIKKAR, NARAYANA, KAVALAM.
experiments in the form of cinema. There have been a few directors such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, John Abraham, P.A. Backer, Padmakumar who have experimented with the form itself. But of late, even Adoor and Aravindan have gone back to narrative realism. They are making cinemas based on stories already written. While novel, poetry, painting and theatre in Malayalam have undergone changes in form and content and shifted from realism (mimesis) to abstraction (self conciousness), cinema has not kept pace with such experiments mainly because of the economic factor involved. Cinema is by far, a private venture and the financing is in the hands of private businessmen who can dictate terms to film makers. They are more interested in formulae that will fetch box office collections than in experimentation which may result in box office failures. The government financing is being made to young innovative film makers, but the progress is very slow. When the government or some other organisations subsidise or take care of funding, one can expect greater experimentation, liberalisation and variety in the form of cinema.