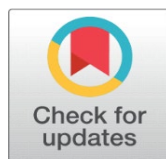


TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF SILENCE AND SLOW TIME: TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL TRANSCENDENCE IN THE FILMS OF G. ARAVINDAN

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ABSTRACT

Cinema, like many of the art forms, is an intervention, a becoming, a creative enterprise which is godly in its adherence to the creative principle. It etches images and moments by possessing, inhabiting and filling up spaces and time which otherwise would have remained unarchived. It is this idea of intervention in time and space, and the creation of a parallel universe not controlled by the dictates of linearity and narrative, not at all catering to the demands of the market and the conventions of time that distinguishes G. Aravindan. In his films, Aravindan chooses a locale and time removed physically from his own but ever present as part of his consciousness of the human condition. His consciousness in that sense encompasses different terrains and manifold specks of time. He traverses different timescapes and presents them in his inimitable style. This research paper analyses the treatment of temporal and spatial aspects of the films directed by G. Aravindan and attempts to establish that the characters in his films are 'always our contemporary', defying the constraints of time and space. The research paper attempts to place Aravindan in the context of the cinematic traditions that stretches from Ozu and Tarkovsky to the contemporary masters of slow cinema at the same time trying to establish how an Indian way of understanding time also informs his movies.

Keywords: G. Aravindan, Visual Space, Aesthetics of Silence, Temporal Transcendence

1. INTRODUCTION

Great works of art are said to stand the test of time. They inhabit the imagination of a community and become part of the heritage long after their moment of origin. Great cinema also goes through testing times. Aravindan's films have done both. Every film in spite of itself is a depiction of time. It is also a depiction in time. Cinema being an art form which involves editing and is limited in duration happens to be an exercise in manipulating time. As cinema is defined as truth 24 frames per second, every 24th of a second in cinema counts. Through the technique of montage, time is sometimes extended or dilated, whereas sometimes through ellipsis, it is nullified. Cinema can make us experience duration and also inhibit it. Being a record of how people and places inhabited the universe, cinema also happens to be an archive of memories.

Cinema also involves the process of seeing. The spectator is an integral part of cinema. Seeing is a process which involves opening up oneself to the possibilities of vision. Seeing involves first of all an inclination to see and then a certain consciousness about the objective world around us as inhabiting one's visionary space. Filmmaker as a seer is someone who is both the creator of that visual space and the perceiver of the same space. The spectator gets a glimpse of that

vision. S/he joins and sometimes becomes one with the imaginative vision of the film maker. The consciousness of time plays an important part in this process of becoming.

Aravindan's is not a parochial vision. Though most of the other regional language film makers have the exclusive stamp of their milieu in their works, Aravindan's trespasses into the yet to be known and unexplored imaginative and geographical and temporal realms sometimes beyond the confines of Kerala. Therefore, he has no qualms about portraying the Bengal of the 1970s and the banks of Godavari with the Rama Chenchus, the tribal communities. Even the Keralams in his work range from Malabar to the banks of Nila to Chavara across the length and breadth of the state. But at the same time his cinema is rooted in the myths and cultures of the region he portrays.

His cinema is peopled with circus artists, fisher folk, bogeymen, migrants, the lost souls—in short, the marginalized landscapes and mindscapes—the fringes of society rich and effervescent - where stories abound. This diversity and the difficult task of not repeating himself is another hallmark of his films. The characters wander about, they are flâneurs traversing diverse habitats. They do not have a permanent home. They do not adhere to the necessities of clock time. They inhabit a timescape which is forever in flux. Not for them the fixity of a stable income or the cushions of a permanent job. But they do observe and are willing subjects to our observation. They in a sense demand our close scrutiny. They demand our attention and time. They make us conscious that they once inhabited the space and milieu we now call our own and they had a shaping influence and significance in our own stories. Cinema in this sense demands our intellectual and aesthetic involvement.

The corpus of films of Aravindan also forms a part of the history of film in general. They form a part of the new cinema in India. They have a place in time at the same time shaping it. The range of films from *Uttarayanam* (1975) to *Vastuhara* (1991) also attests to the (d)evolution of a film maker in time as well as the (d)evolution of Malayalam cinema and the (d)evolution of an art form. It tells the story of the evolution of parallel cinema in Kerala and how it had to grapple with the pressures of the market forces.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research follows the qualitative content analysis. A detailed analysis of the select films of G. Aravindan is carried out by drawing perspectives of scholars in the field of film studies and film appreciation. Films like *Uttarayanam* and *Vastuhara* are analysed in detail with special reference to the role of silence as the aesthetics of Aravindan's oeuvre. Susan Sontag's concept of the aesthetics of silence has been explored as the theoretical framework to establish the arguments.

3. ANALYSIS OF G. ARAVINDAN'S FILMS

In *Uttarayanam*, Aravindan's gaze falls upon an idyllic village and a city teeming with life. The narrative falls back and forth in time through the memories of the master to the times of the quit India movement and the present of the film. The lead character journeys forth to the city from the village and back. What is this journey? A journey in time, an attempt to master time. Ultimately, he is on a spiritual quest in understanding himself. He learns to smile in the presence of an old woman who has seen it all and lived it all. His time is cut out for him. The ideals of revolutionary zest and movement for independence ultimately peter down to unemployment, corruption and loss of values. Wearing the mask of hope in material well-being finally yields to surrendering one's quest itself. Meaning lies beyond. Meaning lies in understanding the futility, being delivered into the hands of the impossible. Finally, one loses his battle with time. One surrenders. One masters it in another sense. Surrendering is a kind of mastery.

Kanchana Sita (1978) also has a saga of surrender to tell. The golden idol of Sita that replaces the Sita of flesh and blood tells of the injustice of Rama Rajya. At the altar of nationalism is sacrificed the honour of a woman. The only salvation for Rama in the film is the presence of Sita in the form of nature which follows him everywhere. It becomes his consciousness. Silence is eloquent in this film. Words are a burden. Being is a burden at every instance. Time is a burden. Being is in a sense being in time. How does Aravindan go about sculpting his *Ramayana* (*Aravindayanam*) or of *Kavalam's* Sita? How does he depict the eloquence of Urmila, the ignorance of Lakshmana, the effervescence of Lava and Kusha? How does he create a milieu for his *Ramakavya*? He goes back in time. He goes back to the original Gothras near Godavari. He ekes out a Rama and Lakshmana out of the ashes of the past. How much more authentic can a film maker be? An epic time is created which is at the same time slow and evolving. Susan Sontag speaks about the aesthetics of silence. She

says: "Silence is the furthest extension of that reluctance to communicate, that ambivalence about making contact with the audience... Silence is the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, consumer, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work" (Sontag 5).

In Aravindan, one sees only the bare essentials. The minimalism is everywhere. But how profound he makes it with the richness of the ambient sounds! One travels in a landscape unknown to one. One shuts oneself out from the world. Similarly, the film *Thampu* (1978) by telling the story of those who people the circus tent and the transitory nature of their existence is essentially about the fleeting nature of life itself. The documentary nature and depiction of still life in the film reminds one of the other masters of world cinema. Every Aravindan film is a spiritual experience. It is a journey back to our mythical past. It is a journey to our consciousness. It makes us see. It brings forth the humanity in us. It is at the same time an attempt at transcendence. Schrader's theory of transcendental style can be perceived as best applied in all the works of Aravindan. According to Schrader, major elements of transcendence are the 'everyday', the 'disparity' and 'statis'. By the recourse of these techniques, the auteur of the film can invoke spiritual experiences within the viewers. Aravindan has employed these techniques in his films to invoke a sense of timewarp. Similarly, the Bergsonian understanding of time can also be perceived in the works of the director. The Bergsonian understanding depicts time as duration. It is in a way time as a continuity. Every instance contains traces of the past. Past is present in the present moment and it informs the future too. Nothing escapes time. Time is the very essence of being. Being is being in time. Cinema makes us understand the passage of time, makes us realize the significance of every second that passes. It also makes us understand that every passing second becomes meaningful because it contains the traces of the past and possibilities for the future. For example, the film *Esthappan* (1980) portrays the eponymous character Esthappan as transcending our conceptions of time. He lives as a legend. He is mythical and poetic too. He inhabits a time and space which belongs to the fables. He appears in different guises at the same time. The case of *Kummatty* (1979) is no different. He comes from nowhere and leaves for nowhere. In another sense, he occupies a time which is constant and continuous, which has no beginning and ending.

When one takes Aravindan's entire oeuvre as one long journey starting from Uttarayanam to Vastuhara, his abiding interest in an Indian way of understanding and dealing with time become self evident. Vastuhara would seem least amenable to the slow and silent aesthetic idiom compared to the other films of Aravindan. The slow, silent idiom of his earlier works give way to an evocative, poignant and deeply empathizing narrative which nevertheless has its meditative qualities, which has a back story and which foreshadows possible future uncertainties. The story is set in the West Bengal of 1971 and the film is made in 1992. Venu the protagonist's family history is one of displacement with uncle Kunjunni leaving home for Bangladesh, marrying a Bengali, losing his bearings and his connect with what was once home. What once started with Kunjunni continues through his wife Arathi Panikker and children and then through Venu. There is a scene in which Arathi Panikker asks Venu whether he is a Malayali. His answer that though he is a Malayali by birth now he is a Bengali and in future he does not even know who he would end up becoming is poignant. The passage of time changes one's identity. One feels that much love is lost between Venu and his mother signifying his alienation.

The helplessness writ large on Venu's face despite his efforts at reconciliation with his long-lost uncle's family coupled with the plight of the vastuharas (the dispossessed), and the merging of the personal and social tragedies gives the film an unusual place among Aravindan's works. Instead of ending the film with the steamer leaving for the Andamans taking Venu along, leaving his niece and her mother on the dock, the camera meanders at the sight of women refugees making auspicious sounds (Kuravas), the sight of immersed Durga idols of Calcutta and then on to the footages of Ranaghat, the refugee camps and the dilapidated structures (where the film also starts), and finally onto the documentary footages of the war with Pakistan, making one realize that there is no escape from the cyclical nature of time. Mixing of Newsreel like footage and the fictional scape is a reminder that one can never escape history. Those initial and final sequences also connect the film to Aravindan's earlier oeuvre. Ranaghat described as permanent liability camp is a place where time stands frozen. The dispossessed can never feel at home wherever they are. They are stuck in history. All they have are memories of a lost time or their sense of being at home. Schrader's transcendental cinematographical mechanism of statis is evident in these scenes of the film. It inspires spirituality according to the zero or little movement of the camera, resulting in a frozen view of life. The view does not seem to resolve the disparity, but transcends the everyday and disparity into "something else".

The most evocative of the sequences in the film is the slow tracking shot which takes us through the now empty refugee camps and dilapidated structures whereas the voice over gives us a narration of the buried history. There are shots of the streets in Calcutta through which Venu walks towards the Writers building. These are in a sense time-images.

Aravindan idiom is also felt when the camera focuses on the faces of refugee families who come to Venu's office seeking a place in the Andamans. Bengla songs are playing in the background and children, young women and elderly are subject to the camera's (and our) gaze. In other words, the film denies movement, an escape into a promised future time. All Aravindan films mock at the idea of linear progress. They enmesh one in the labyrinths of cyclical time. One does not reach anywhere. One is bound by the human condition.

The silences and pauses one experiences, and the slowing down of the rhythm and the musicality inherent in each of the films point to an intimacy with the absolute. Instances lose their momentary significance and merge with an eternal present. The slow time and is tantamount to the Keatsean Urn: every art form is etched in silence and slow time. It is a sylvan historian waiting for those unheard melodies. Be it Marattom (1988), Oridathu (1986), Vasthuhara, The Seer Who Walks Alone (1989), Anandhi Dhara (1988), every Aravindan film offers rich scope for rumination and meditation over its treatment of time. The slowing down, the pauses, the sinking in, the meditation, the still life, the characterization, the interest in the everyday and the mundane seem to be a reaction against the breakneck speed of the industrial capitalist modern life.

4. CONCLUSION

The sparse and minimal style that G. Aravindan employs has affinities more to the contemporary resurgence of slow cinema from what once Paul Schrader described as transcendent style referring to the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Andrei Tarkovsky. No Aravindan film can be thought of without reference to the soundscape of its universe. The music, the rhythms of songs are also an indication of their timeless significance. Going beyond the momentary and dwelling into the eternal. The legacy could be traced from Ozu, Bresson and Tarkovsky to Bela Tarr to Apichapong Weerasethakul, Tsai Minh Liang and Lav Diaz, In India the cinema of Mani Kaul to Chaitanya Tanhane's Disciple. Aravindan's cinema can be said to be more about style and form than content. As the term 'mise en scene' denotes, the director as auteur is the one who puts things into the scene, the one who intervenes in space and time, one who sculpts time, one who frames the images and movements and creates a parallel universe brick by brick.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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