

Article

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Re-emergence of the Popular Kannada Cinema in the 21st Century: A perspective

Motion Pictures were screened from the 1880s. Beginning with still photography put together as a cinema to the present editing the shots on the computers and merging digitized images to the present PVR and OTT platforms the world of cinema has changed immensely. And from the beginning, cinema strides the two diverging worlds--of Arts and Commerce. The two divergent worlds have distinct demands and expectations from the Cinema that are as diverse as the disciplines themselves. Commercial aspects involved in the making of the cinema expect a return of its investment and a possible profit. It is a well-known fact that many times this motive has ruined many a good project and decades of Cinematic experiences for its audience with the stereotypical narrative and flat characters, with no cinematic vision or content. Cinema as Art is an artistic exploration of the script in the visual medium, negotiated by accomplished actors who portray powerfully sculpted characters and situations. Thus, like other forms of arts, cinemas present and/or re-present complex realities—socio-political, economic, cultural and psychological. Certain differences exist concerning between cinema as a form of artistic expression and the other forms of artistic expressions when it comes to ‘art experiences’. *Ed Sikov* observes the difference between painting, literature and cinema in the introduction to *Film Studies an Introduction*:

You can paint a picture of a woman without using a model or even without having a specific real woman in our mind. You can paint landscapes you have never actually seen, and in fact you don't have to paint any real objects at all. Your painting can be entirely non-representational—just splashes of colour or streaks on black paint. And bear in mind that all works of art in addition to being representations, are also real things themselves. The woman Leonardo da Vinci painted against a mysterious landscape may or may not have existed, but the painting commonly known as the Mona Lisa is certainly a real, material object. In literature, too, writers describe cities that never existed and people who ever lived. But on film—at least narrative films . . . directors have to have something real to photograph. Now, with the increased use of digital and computer-generated imagery (CGI) . . . things are changing in that regard, but . . . in a few rare cases...A filmmaker could conceivably take a strip of CELLULOID . . . and draw on it or paint it or dig scratches into its surface; experimental filmmakers have been known to use celluloid as a kind of canvas for nonrepresentational art. But otherwise, a filmmaker must photograph real people and things. They may be actors wearing makeup and costumes, but they are still real human beings . . . these sets have a physical reality . . .” (1-2, 2010.)

Thus, the directors focused on presenting artistic experiences through their camera. The cinematic movements-French New Wave, Italian Neo-Realism- to name two most influential movements, were the result of this exploration of the directors in their endeavour to create and implement the techniques to present coherent cinematic experiences. These efforts gained immense significance for the filmmaker and the audience. Directors, Producers and technicians viz. Editors/cinematographers/ Music Directors etc have aimed to present a cinematic experience that captures realities in the visual form/narrative.

Two important aspects of cinematography--Montage and Mise-en-scene –are taken up for discussion here. Both are part of important moments in the history of cinema; they play a decisive role in presenting a coherent yet insightful visual narrative.

Editing plays a vital role in communicating the vision of the script/visual narrative. Of the many styles of editing, Montage-especially Soviet Montage, has contributed to the creation of some great cinematic moments in the history of Cinema. Susan Hayward in *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts* notes the specific effect/s of Montage: “In his films of the 1920s, Eisenstein adapted Kuleshov’s fundamental theory that collision or conflict must be inherent to all visual signs (see semiology) in film. Juxtaposing shots makes them collide or conflict and it is from the collision that meaning is produced.” (P 85, 2010) This was prominently a Soviet and European innovation of cinematography that was rooted in the Imagist tradition of painting and literature. Some significant examples from cinemas are— *Odessa steps* sequence in *Battleship of Potemkin*, *The Baptism* scene in *The Godfather*, *Space Odyssey-2001* the bone to satellite scene. In its initial stage, the director captured complex moments as a montage to present multi-layered realities. In all these scenes, montage emerges as an important technique to capture complex socio-political, cultural and interpersonal realities the narrative presents for its audience to see and experience. These cinematic moments are defining artistic experiences that communicate not just the objective realities of the world; they are artistic interpretations and expressions to relate the emotional-psychological realities of the individuals in the narrative sequence/s.

Mise-en-scene could be understood as the next phase of the evolution of cinematic technique. Originating in France, it refers to a theatre term that means ‘staging’. It signifies the film production practices involved in the framing of shots, has an expansive reference to that of setting, costume and lighting, and movement within the frame. Andre Bazin in *What is Cinema* observes the importance of mise-en-scene. It is important for him as it places the objects within the frame of the camera in relation to its space and perhaps, more importantly, it gives the director more control over setting the scene. It means the director was in control of the aesthetics of visual narrative. Mise-en-scene presented immense opportunities for representing complex realities aesthetically and an opportunity to represent realisms through cinematic vision. This was a transnational influential moment in the history of cinema in its effort to capture and interpret realities as well as realisms in directors.

Directors-auteur-have constructed effective narration of the story while maintaining realities regarding the continuity of the cinematic experience. A well-knit cinematic narrative, with an effective arrangement of the setting--mise-en-scene—could well

provide opportunities for new perspectives and understanding to emerge. For example, Akira Kurosawa in *The Throne of Blood* (1957) recreates *Taketoki Washisu* as *Macbeth* in the eponymous play by Shakespeare. Watching *The Throne of Blood* is a powerful artistic experience that allows the audience to comprehend, across cultural differences, the treacherous nature of greed in the desire to succeed and the murderous ambition that leads to the destruction of the Self. All this is represented even as Kurosawa relocates the play to the cultural milieu of Japan. He does so by the use of Noh elements of the Japanese theatre, creative use of Japanese Music. The effect is a powerful visual representation of the cultural realisms negotiated through an extremely well-knit mise-en-scene.



(PC: Google images)

Another example of such an adaptation is *U R Ananthamurthy's* novella *Ghatashraddha* (1979) by *Girish Kasaravalli* in Kannada. In *Culturing Realisms*, *N Manu Chakravarthy* notes the influence the director as he weaves into the cinematic fabric a new perspective: ‘. . . that Yamuna’s transgression can be seen as not just the sinking of the old, punitive Brahmin-patriarchal world order; it is the emergence of agency of the woman. The powerful long shot at the end of the cinema as Naanu looks back at the disfigured Yamuna standing under the huge banyan tree one sees that the child is moved to compassion. Again, a new emerging world vision is depicted . . .’ (P.74-74. 2007). The final scene is a fine example of montage as well as the result of a structured mise-en-scene. The tightly knit vision leads the audience to this emerging empathetic world order that arises from the experiences of a woman who suffers and rebels, and a compassionate child. This is also the roots of indigenous feminism.



(PC: Google images)

Thus, in the hands of directors whose vision pervades the narrative, the technical aspects of the making of the cinema were the means of exploring, presenting and/or critiquing realities. So, the effect of artistic cinema on its audience is powerful, as they make exhaustive demand on the audiences' imagination and so, influences their comprehension of realities. For the audience to comprehend the subtle emotions, changes introduced to thought patterns, the challenge is to watch the cinema carefully--not just for the intricacies of the story; they must be equipped to notice the subtleties introduced through the camera movement and the mise-en-scene.

These early artistic narrative cinemas span almost three decades of the history of Cinema. With creative cinematography that set the ground rules for an insightful cinematic artistic experience for their audience. Of course, the 1970s also saw the rise of commercial cinemas that presented formulaic, banal and kitsch themes. At around the same time, there came several directors who explored and presented the everyday reality in a much less stylised manner. They were successful story-tellers who portrayed the sojourn of the common man in her/his life. These different layers of cinematic experiences are categorised as 'art', 'popular' and 'mass' cinemas.

These cinematic developments extend to the Indian cinemas too. The world of Indian cinemas is complex and complicated. The multilingual and multicultural feature of India, with rich cultural and literary histories, have explored and attempted to present their regional and linguistic concerns. So, along with the pan-Indian 'parallel' cinema, (with art cinemas from directors like Shyam Benegal, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak in

Hindi), regional cinemas have made their significant contributions to the World Cinema-viz. *Ghatashraddha*(1972) and *Ondanondu Kaaladalli*(1979), to name just two important contributions of Kannada Cinemas. (This apart from the cinemas directed by Satyajit Ray in Bengali, Adoor Gopalakrishna in Malayam, Priyadarshan in Tamil just to mention major contributions from Indian regional cinema)

As the influence and popularity of cinemas expanded, the aim and attempts of cinemas diverged. The three broad categories of Parallel/Art, Popular and Mass are made with reference to the aims and objectives of the cinema. The three categories of cinematic experiences- 'art', 'popular' and 'mass' are not watertight compartments of cinemas, especially the 'art' and the 'popular' category. Beginning in the late-twentieth-century(the 1970s), Kannada cinemas like *Ondanondu Kaaladalli*(1979), *Minchina Ota*(1981), *Naagamandala* (1996) *Thayi Saheba*(1997)etc were artistic-aesthetic attempts to portray realisms and were commercially successful. Cinemas like *Naandi*(1964), *Gejjepuje*(1969), *Sharapanjara*(1971), *Bhootayyana Maga ayyu*(1974), *Nagarahaavu*(1972), *Nodi Swamy NaavirodeHeege*(1983), *Bettada Hoovu*(1985), *America, America*(1995), etc attempted to weave in a more direct narrative while it paid deep attention to mise-en-scene. Their comparatively bigger commercial success should surely go the direct cinematic narrative and a clear social/political message that was influenced by the cultural realisms and epistemologies of the place.

It is interesting to note that the dominating interest in the twentieth-century Kannada cinemas was social/political realisms and detective fiction. The exploration of socio-political realisms was not limited to the problems of Urbanisation- *Kappu-Biluppu*(1966), *Bellimoda*(1967), *Bangarada Panjara*(1974), *Naagarahaavu*(1972), *Bettada Hoovu*(1985)to name the successful cinemas in the popular category. Some cinemas explored the theme of woman's sexuality-*Sharapanjara*(1971), *Gejjepuje*(1969), *Edakallu Guddamele*(1973), the plight of women in society with *Uyyale*(1964), *Phaniyamma*(1983). Another interesting dimension to explore this theme of realism is the genre of thrillers/detective fiction. Kannada cinema did take inspiration from popular heroes like James Bond. *Goadalli CID999*(1968) was influenced by James Bond movies, *27 Mavalli Circle*(1986) that was based on *Fredrik Knott's Wait Until Dark*(1966), *Gandhada Gudi*(1973) depicting the menace of smuggling of Sandalwood, *Tarka*(1989) was a take-on from the Hindi movie *Dhund*(1973). Cinemas like *Aparichita*(1978), *Aalemane*(1981), *Beladingala Baale*(1985), *Agantuka*(1987), *NighoodaRahasya*(1990), depicted the danger lurking beneath seemingly harmless relationships and situations. These two genres of romantic-comedy and detective/ thriller were the dominant genres that Kannada cinemas seem to have employed to represent and interrogate the contemporary milieu. Interestingly, both genres demand powerful mise-en-scene. Without this, the cinemas do not reach their objectives of artistic exploration of the theme of social realisms and commercial success. Most of the cinemas mentioned here did manage to combine the diverging world of Art and Commerce, even while successfully presenting a critique of the contemporary realities. These realities could be the nexus between bureaucracy-corruption, the darker side of human

relationships and/or the problematics of suppressed sexuality or the struggle with existing power structures.

The past decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence in the meaningful popular cinemas in Kannada. Like the twentieth century that was engaged in exploring the contemporary realisms, the twenty-first century seems committed to explore and interrogate the theme of the unknown depths of the human psyche. This demands innovative and realistic scenes that are constructed to reflect the contemporary scene and scenario. This exploration begins well with *Lucia(2013)*. Thematically, the cinema reminds one of *Cinema Paradiso(1988)*, as it constantly mixes and juxtaposes the cinematic and the real in the mind of the individual. Similarly, *Rangi Taranga(2015)* explores the damaged personality of a villager in the fictional *Kamarottu* in *Tulunaadu*, *U-Turn(2016)* a cautionary tale that warns against breaking traffic rules, *Last Bus(2016)* explore the sense of loss of self in many different perspectives. Interestingly, this genre gives the audience their first woman cop/detective in *D/o Parvathamma(2019)* and *Kannad Gotilla(2019)*. The latter especially is an interesting plot given the contemporary dissatisfaction experienced by the people of Karnataka against the apathetic and disrespectful attitude towards Kannada. The globalisation has seen a large number of people-individuals, coming into Karnataka, making their life here yet refusing to learn the language-albeit to communicate even.

If one looks at the trajectory of realisms and the engagement of the cinema to realities from the time of its inception to the present, one notices that there is a constant expansion that is visible. It is heartening to see that this expansion and continuation is enabled through the category of 'popular cinema' not limiting it to the Art cinemas. From this perspective too popular cinemas play a vital role in the oeuvre of world cinemas.

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