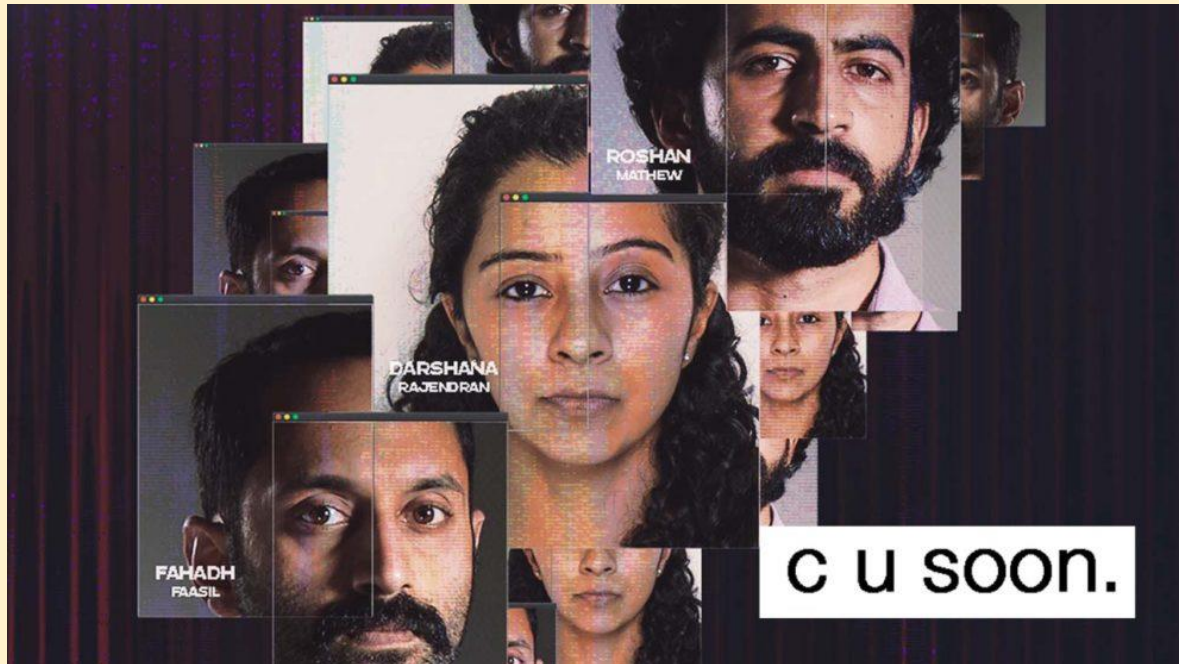


Competition for the Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award for Best Film Criticism

2nd Best Award (Joint Winner)

Labanya Dey

***C U Soon* (2020)**



***C U Soon*, 2020, Malayalam, 98 minutes, Director- Mahesh Narayanan**

Have we ever paused and asked ourselves about where we are living right now? Some would say we live here; some would say there - that street, beside that temple or at the end of that lane. But would it be so wrong to say that in this era most of us are living somewhere that is timeless and spaceless - a medium called the digital screen? Doesn't a part of our existence reside inside a computer or mobile screen for a significant portion of our life?

The pandemic that we're experiencing at the moment, spread

worldwide, has only increased our dependence on the digital media, so much so that even our physical existences in the real world are in jeopardy. All of our physical interactions have been converted to suit a digital platform. Starting from school/college classes, office work, etc. to hanging out and chatting with friends, everything has shifted from the physical space to online. Now, our online existence dominates our physical one. In this digital world, our identity has become an image, framed into a rectangle or square box. We

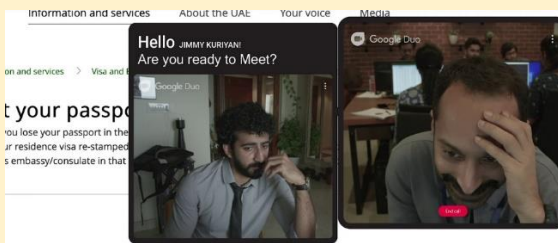
have become images. People have started identifying each other on the basis of their images. Of course, this would happen before the pandemic as well, but this pandemic has caused an exponential rise in such an idea. At this very point, more than ever, we are living in a world of images where we are both a subject and a spectator. We are providing our images as well as consuming the images of others. Our ways of seeing have changed. Now, from this point which is a historical landmark of sorts, how are we going to address cinema which completely relies on images? How will the language of this medium adapt to its future? These questions and observations may find a space for extensive deliberation if we try and critically engage with Mahesh Narayanan's Malayalam language film *C U Soon*. It is a film that is in search of a new cinematic possibilities in this context.

C U Soon is a computer screen film, a sub-genre of films in which the entire narrative takes place, framed by a computer or mobile phone screen. The story itself is quite simple- two people meet on a dating app. The woman then suddenly goes missing and it is revealed that all this while she had been forced into the sex trade. After a few rapturous incidents, the film ends with a hint about the reunion of the lovers. To me, it feels like the narrative was just an excuse for Narayanan to make this film. An excuse to explore as well as exploit this form, to indulge into the possibilities of making films even in the time of physical distancing.

Now, what is this form? Here in this film, we see, the characters are interacting with each other in a video call by the mediation of a computer or a mobile screen. They are inside the framework of a screen-

within-a-screen structure. All the actions happen within the corpus of digital media which is flooded with multifarious notifications and disruptions. This resonates our existential experience of dwelling within a digital screen. Now from this point, a new idea of cinema can emerge. Let us first try to clarify a point. What is Cinema? In the 1960s, the French film critic Andre Bazin was intrigued by this question and wrote two volumes, eponymously named. If I were to attempt an answer to the question in one sentence, I would say that cinema is a medium which consists of images and sound. This medium is fundamentally different from other mediums of art in a number of significant ways. In theatre or a live show, when we see someone singing or performing, we see them perform in person. But in cinema, when we watch someone doing the same thing, we never actually see them. What we see is their image and therefore, a representation, not the reality. Though cinema had always tried to make an illusion of reality, on-screen we never see the actual people but their reproduction. If we gather up the threads of these observations, we see that cinema itself has a close association with our everyday experience of digital media. Digital media comprises a continuous flux of images and sound- so does cinema. But, there is a subtle but massive difference. In cinema, the images are sacrosanct, never inviting any kind of disruption. In digital media, images are ruptured - an email notification in the middle of reading an article, a friend request while scrolling the newsfeed, and in various other ways. *C U Soon* welcomes this kind of rapturous experience into the experience of watching a film. In generally, Realist cinema always pretends as if what is happening on screen is happening in reality;

it never tells us that they are only images which are the reproductions of reality. The computer screen doesn't create that illusion. It shows images consciously and flaunts that fact. *C U Soon* encapsulates the philosophy of these two mediums. Now I would like to complicate the argument a bit more. There was a time when the cinema was to be seen only on the big screen inside a dark theatre hall. But now, more and more, we have started watching films on OTT platforms with our laptops or mobile phones which inherently indulges distractions. Today, we watch cinema which is conventionally meant to be an uninterrupted experience, on a digital device (eg: mobile phone), which is interruptive, by nature. In the 21st century, the idea of the sacrosanct image in cinema is close to being lost. Hence, the form of *C U Soon* which has been named as a computer screen film is quite intriguing in this discourse about the politics of images.



In this discussion about form, I would like to raise the question- Why is this form important? To me, it seems that the form is not disassociated from the circumstances we are living in. A film

being made in this pandemic, under multiple restrictions, must explore newer possibilities. *C U Soon* was made after the pandemic broke out. The director and the cinematographers used an iPhone to shoot the entire film. This shows an acceptance of the limitations of film-making during a pandemic but nevertheless a continuation of the search for a new language of cinema. In this context, one of the names that come to my mind is that of Jafar Panahi, whose formal experience of film making drastically changed after his ban and forced confinement in Iran. He situated his cinematic apparatus inside the closed space of his house and a car and started exploring the idea of an alternative cinema. Godard's statement, "to make films politically", resonates with the film practice of Panahi. And today, we can refer and be thankful to Panahi, who inspires us to keep on making films even in this dark hour. In the last part of 'This is not a Film', Panahi abandons his movie camera and starts shooting with his mobile phone camera instead. Very easily he replaces the high-resolution images with the shabby images of his phone camera. His choice of using shabby mobile phone images, giving them the same status as a high-resolution image, is political and invites a call for a new cinema. In *C U Soon* we get an echo of this - as if this film is responding to Panahi's dream of a new cinema, yet to come. In a way, this film also caters to the idea of Alexandre Astruc who in the 1960s, in France, spoke about the camera being used as a pen.

If I take the traditional experience of watching a film- there are two sides. On one side, there is the film - the characters, events, and the onscreen space. On the other side, there are the spectators watching the screen. In this kind of traditional experience

of watching a film there is usually no screen-within-the-screen structure. But for *C U Soon*, this equation gets complicated. The audience watch the film, while the characters themselves also watch each other on a digital screen and perform, responding to each other. Hence, the characters themselves become the spectators within the film text. The actor-spectator relationship is broken, or more accurately, rebuilt in a new kind of way. Now, from the spectator's point of view, they observe the characters who are also spectators and derive a novel pleasure through this avant-garde experience.



From the late 20th century till now, we have been introduced to the aesthetics of rupture in television, social media and other digital media. Cinema too, therefore, cannot stay outside of that. Today we watch films more on our digital devices than inside a cinema hall. The experience differs. In 'Death 24x a Second' Laura Mulvey talks about the phenomenological difference of experiences after the spectators got a chance to pause and rewind a film in their devices. So, watching a film today is different from how it was in the pre-digital days of cinema, at an experiential level. It's quite fascinating how *C U Soon* tries to capture these experiences and prospects into the body of its text. The creation of such films, even during the devastation caused by a worldwide pandemic, tells us that the search for a new cinema will always prevail, no matter what.

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