

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The (Un)Aesthetic: A Study of the Ugly in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

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Article History: Submitted-21/07/2017, Revised-26/08/2017, Accepted-31/08/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

Every period or culture develops its own aesthetic principles, often defined against those which precede or surround it. In recent years, and particularly with the development of modern art, the traditional aesthetic picture has been widely criticized. It has been pointed out, based on the proliferation of art works that evoke intense feelings of displeasure, that ugliness can be greatly appreciated. Ugliness is an indispensable part of the visual culture for its 'aesthetic' as well as neo-realistic properties. Man feels himself repulsed and at the same time attracted by scenes of pain and terror. Ugliness on screen offends the eyes, clashes with the taste for order and harmony, and arouses repugnance without ones taking into account the real existence of the object he/she perceives as ugly. Malayalam cinema too, like any other visual culture, has drawn on the ugly for its effects. The paper analyses how this negation of beauty has been visually manipulated as well as the various ways in which the ugly 'aesthetically' places itself on screen before the viewer who is filled with disgust/fear/pain and, paradoxically, a certain sense of pleasure that art bestows.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Ugly, Karl Rosenkrantz, Adorno, Hugo.

Beauty and ugly are primary and elementary, universal notions within aesthetics. Whenever aesthetics attempts to positively determine the beautiful it has necessarily to touch its negation the ugly as well—signifying a 'knottedness' which acknowledges the 'existence' of the ugly. Beauty is cultivated, but, ugliness avoided and even shunned. The 'absence' of beauty becomes the 'essence' and 'presence' of the ugly. The beautiful is the 'positive' presupposition of the ugly and the ugly exists as a 'negative' binary enhancing the value and meaning of beauty. Marked by a 'lack', an 'absence', ugliness has been mostly approached as an indispensable binary of the beautiful. Being on the fringes, as 'negative beauty', it rarely is the focus of aesthetic analysis. Every period or culture develops its own aesthetic principles, often defined against those which precede or surround it. The aesthetic is conceived as a dynamic relationship (between specific artifacts and specific readers, audiences and viewers in specific conditions) and not an intrinsic essence—as an ongoing dialogue and exchange in specific material conditions, and not as the observance of fixed codes. A major claim of modernism is a demand for recognition of the truth that the world is not beautiful. The world is fractured, decaying, horrifying, depressing, empty and ultimately unintelligible. If truth is that reality is fractured and empty then both form and content must express it. Modern ugliness involves self-limitation, an invocation of noisome, the degrading, the inhumane, of

deseccration, revulsion and alienation. It has been pointed out, based on the proliferation of art works that evoke intense feelings of displeasure, that ugliness too can be represented, enjoyed and appreciated. Twentieth century beauty could be reproduced, but it was also transitory and perishable. It had to persuade the 'consumer' of the need for rapid replacement, either out of wear and tear or disaffection, so that there might be no cessation of the circuit involving the production, distribution and consumption of 'goods'. Cinematography, fashion, make-up—the very aesthetic sense—as well as the cinematic apparatus is 'framed' according to the model of beauty/ugly offered by magazines, cinema or television, in other words mass media. It followed the ideals of beauty suggested by the world of commercial consumption.

Ugliness has its positive presupposition in beauty, which it distorts to create the 'mean', the 'repulsive', and the 'caricature'. The comical is impossible without an ingredient of ugliness, which it dissolves and re-forms in the freedom of beauty. As beautiful is that which gives rise to the feeling of pleasure within us, the aesthetic value of both nature and art works is measured in terms of the aesthetic pleasure they generate in us. Ugliness (linked to the feeling of displeasure) on the other hand, has been traditionally theorized as an aesthetic category that stands in opposition to beauty, and therefore associated with aesthetic disvalue and worthlessness. In recent years, particularly with the development of modern art, the traditional aesthetic picture has been widely criticized and challenged. It has been pointed out, based on the proliferation of art works that evoke intense feelings of 'unaesthetic' (as in Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, or Andre Serrano), that ugliness/unaesthetic needs to be considered seriously. In tandem arises an apparent contradiction as to how it is possible that something that we find displeasing and ugly can nevertheless retain our attention and offer aesthetic pleasure. Accosting this problematic critics point out that an art work may evoke negative aesthetic feelings due to the ugly objects that it depicts, but what is valued is the creative artistic representation of the 'ugly' subject matter. What is valued is not ugliness, but the pleasure of intellectual exploration that artistic ugliness affords.

Experiencing something or someone as ugly is a powerful aesthetic response that is accompanied by intense negative affect (fear, horror, disgust, and/or loathing), moral condemnation, and behavioral reactions (being repelled, looking away, fleeing). These affects have been partially explained by the fact that ugliness embodies fantasies of a disturbing nature, linked to aggressive wishes, sexual desire, and developmental disturbances. Constantly reworking the space between subject and object, ugliness resists static figuration and helps us to re-evaluate our shifting perceptions. Stressing the simultaneous existence of beauty and ugly, Victor Hugo (in his Preface to *Cromwell*) says, "...everything in creation is not humanly *beautiful*, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light." He goes on to ask "if a mutilated nature will be the more beautiful for the mutilation; if art has the right to duplicate, so to speak, man, life, creation; if things will progress better when their muscles and their vigour have been taken from them; if, in short, to be incomplete is the best way to be harmonious" (Hugo 31). The basic reason for representing the ugly in art, he held, was that it exists in reality. Friedrich Schiller in his essays argues that it is a general phenomenon of human nature that, that which is sad, terrible and even horrendous holds an

irresistible attraction. The manner in which beauty and ugliness are dealt in modern society and arts, perpetuate repression, domination and violence. The term ‘culture industry’ (Theodore Adorno) highlights the extent to which the cultural products that s/he consumes, and the demand that gives rise to them, are imposed upon him/her from above, rather than arising spontaneously from the masses—is indistinguishable from modern reality. This is the ‘new ideology of the culture industry’—it depicts reality exactly as it is (extinguishing the revolutionary potential of the masses). Ugliness is associated with the emergence into consciousness of certain fantasies that alter the person’s aesthetic sense in such a way that the formal qualities of the experience, the shape, texture, and color, appear to become the sources of most disturbing and repulsive feelings. More benignly (but no less significantly), the artist/director works to convert ugliness into artistic knowledge and beautiful form. In the context of modernist aesthetics the reversal between the beautiful and the ugly becomes necessary for a defense of the artwork against the impact of the ‘culture industry’ and its commercialization of the ‘beautiful’ (into the ‘ugly’). The autonomy of the artwork depends on its oppositional force, a quality that is enhanced by the ugly. It is precisely the violation of the traditional aesthetic code that separates the advanced artwork from the threat of the culture industry.

Ugliness and concern about ugliness is common to all societies—allusive of the relationship between the conscious organization of experience and unconscious fears and fantasies that occupy human minds. From a psychoanalytic perspective, ugliness is not a ‘quality of things’; rather, it is a ‘psychological experience’ that is felt to be external to the self, although its source lies primarily in fantasy and psychological conflict. It involves a disruption of the formal/aesthetic dimension of our subjectivity (which forms the core of ugliness). There occurs a severe disruption of a person’s sense of aesthetic organization (for example indicated allegorically in scenes/images like that of a mirror shattering to designate the chaos/disruption that has resulted), in which the value, order, and vitality of subjective life is violated and/or transgressed, to such an extent that, rather than experiencing merely a disturbing sense of messiness and disorder, the individual feels shocked at the perception of chaos, disfigurement, and horror.

The ideological construct ‘ugly’ permeates society through socially constructed ideals of beauty and ugliness as represented in film/media texts. Cinema establishes the aesthetic/unaesthetic through representation, discourse and images. Films play a pivotal role in shaping and influencing identities; reinforcing existing standards of beauty, creating new ones, exposing flaws or creating a ‘conversation’ with the audience. The pleasures of cinematic identification, the relation between the stars and the audience, and processes of the formation of subaltern identities occur/are established/maintained through cinematic modes of address. In cinema ugliness may relate to the ‘content’—the theme or object represented may be ugly. Ugliness of the object/character may be ‘characteristic’ or peripheral to it/him/her. Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung are expressive of the unpleasant and ugly. The spasms, retching and vomiting, the repugnance that thrusts one to the side and turns him/her away from defilement, sewage, and muck constitute the ugly. Food loathing, lack of cleanliness or health causes abjection, a wound with blood and pus, or the

sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay disturbs the identity, system, or order. Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the dismal and horrible. The use of ugly in cinema carries quite complicated functions. It is interwoven into the structures of sympathy and antipathy as a thematic motive; supports the ideological viewpoint of the film; prompts a process of attraction/distraction or identification/alienation by manipulating the viewers against the characters and narrative, and takes a central role within the poetic and rhetoric system of the film (Planting a *Moving Viewers* 212). Presenting or making certain subjects, objects or situations ugly in a film, is equivalent to deciding on what will be affirmed and rejected in line according to the discourse of the narrative. The viewer differentiates 'I' and 'other' by distancing himself/herself from the character, object or situation that is ugly. The ugly may exist in relation to the structure of the film—in terms of theme/content or sloppy cinematic techniques. The use of the aesthetics of ugliness in films is also an 'ironic' critique of mass culture. Ugliness provokes one to re-evaluate cultural borders, including bodies that have been included and excluded, to question one's own place in it.

Malayalam cinema reveals powerfully the ways in which the society responds to the horrid or sordid conditions of modernity, and the emergence of the modern subject (a prioritization of society over the subject/the subject socialized into given roles). The hooting and screeching of modernity no less than the ritual noises of savages, with the arrangement of well constituted pitch, rhythm, tonality and harmony, in which music has disguised its non-aesthetic functions of conveying signals or acting on the nerves, are entwined with the visuality before the viewer. The appeal of the Malayalam cinema is directed to an audience so diverse that it transcends social and spatial categories. Malayalam cinema is seen as a mixture of various traditional art forms like music, dance, dance-drama, mimicry and the like. Connecting these various disparate elements is the storyline which often showed the triumph of the good over the evil. Malayalam films have come out with scathing criticism and satires on the hollow ideals and hypocrisy widely rampant in the Kerala society. Movies like *Karumadikuttan* (2001 Vinayan movie where caste and physicality are problematized through the hero Kalabhavan Mani), *Kunjikoonan* (2002 Sasi Shanker movie in which the central character is a dark skinned hunchback with protruding teeth and ugly appearance), *CID Moosa* (2003 Johny Antony movie which uses humour to highlight hypocrisy and evils rampant in society), *Amen* (2013 Lijo Lose Pellissery movie abounding in humourous ugly visuals of shit and farting), *Honey Bee* (2013 Jean Paul Lal film with ugly visuals and dialogue), *Da Thadiya* (2012 Aashique Abu movie which daringly places a fatso at the centre of the plot and raises questions on the 'looks' of a 'hero'), *Vallim Pullim Thetti* (2016 Rishi Sivakumar movie on the crookedness of human nature), *Kali* (2016 Sameer Thahir movie which has the human emotion of anger at its centre), *Kattappanayile Rithwik Roshan* (2016 Nadirshah rendering of the 'looks' of a 'hero'), *The Great Father* (2017 Haneef Adeni movie which takes up murder and rape as its theme) are a few which show preoccupation with the different aspects of the ugly and its treatment in different socio-cultural-political-contexts. The modernist cult of ugliness involves self-limitation, an invocation of the cacophonous, the degrading, the inhumane, of desecration, revulsion as well as alienation. The representation (a

perspective) of the ‘ugly’ is indispensable to produce the new ‘beautiful’ artifact—cinema. Ugly has become a critical discourse in representation of art; interrogating political regimes, social class distinctions and cultural transformations in society. Ugliness in Malayalam cinema ranges from images that provoke mild discomfort to ones that elicit grim loathing or horror. The ugly gets communicated in cinema through the theme (which may be socially relevant and focusing on corruption or other social evils like dowry, bribery and the like; mythological or supernatural, fantasy or historical), character (his body, gestures, action, thoughts, words), the use of camera angles and shots or the setting (which may be drab and dismal, or modern and urbane). The body becomes an important site of filming the ugly and the unpleasant—as infested with wounds, deformed, mutilated, dead and decaying, disabled mentally or physically, wrinkled, with grimaces etc.. Thus, cinematic images cover a gamut of ‘unaesthetic’ bodies—screaming bodies and quivering flesh, running and fighting bodies, beautiful bodies and those with sexual appeal, bodies in pain and agony, invincible bodies, dead bodies as well as masochistic bodies. The most natural features of the body, the dimensions and shapes, of its visible forms which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body (way of treating and caring for it) reveal the deepest dispositions of the habitus.

Films re-represent a segment of reality within a particular duration. We ‘see’ into the past/present/future through the camera which ‘preserves it. To achieve aesthetic/unaesthetic effect, a filmmaker makes specific choices—costume, make up, colours, the object is filmed from a certain angle, the camera moves or does not move (extreme close ups, panning to linger on an object or to evoke disgust), the colour is bright or dull (lighting is important in shaping meaning—a dark/shadowy room creating a eerie/scary feel), the object is focused on or fading, apparent or hidden, the background clear (so that the object is seen in context) or vague (so that it is isolated), the shot held for a long time or briefly, and so on. Film settings too are not inert containers of or backdrops to action but themselves charged with significance. Particular items and combinations may index national identity, class allegiance, subculture affiliation, gender position, emotional or psychological status. It reinforces already established meanings. Films are shaped to reflect facts of reality as closely as possible (even similar in their basic form)—stratified according to the tastes of particular groups. Malayalam cinema reinforces/questions these ideological patterns in relation to the social reality. It makes use of audio-visual potential to present sight, sound (the sound in step with the visual presentation), smell, taste and touch in relation to ‘unaesthetic’. Ugliness in Malayalam cinema (as in nature) appears in the form of content/theme, social phenomenon, catastrophes, objects, spaces, deformed characters, witches/superhuman beings, the conflict between good and evil, the use of humour, drab run down city streets/dilapidated houses (as in neorealist cinema) and even as radical evil. The films depict physical ugliness (which do not conform to standards of beauty) of the character/hero (the ‘real’ bulky actors as well as the ugly/deformed depicted on screen; Mohanlal in *Thandavam*, 2002 Shaji Kailas movie), linking it with moral concern, retribution and nemesis. The protagonist of the film *Beautiful* (2011 VK Prakash) is a quadriplegic, in *Akam* (2013 Shalini Usha Nair) his face is charged with acid burns, in *Nidra* (2012 Siddharth) he is a paranoid. Those in *Chappa Kurish* (2011 Sameer Thahir) and *Cocktail* (2012 ArunKumar Aravind) are unfaithful lovers. *Pranayam* (2011

Blessy) depicts its hero on a wheel chair, *E Aduthakalathu* (2012 ArunKumar Aravind) is sexually impotent, *Da Thadiya* is fat, *Pranayam*, *Adaminte Makan Abu* (2011 Salim Ahamed) and *Ozhimuri* (2012 Madhupal) have old men as heroes. The negative stereotypes or bodies marked by gender/ethnicity/caste get depicted as black skinned, cruel, rough and rude and capable of violent deeds. The heroine flirts openly, drinks in public, and passes lewd comments. Maya and her friends (*Salt N' Pepper*, 2011 Aashique Abu) celebrate the New Year by having beer in the terrace of their town home. In *Chappa Kurishu*, *22 Female Kottayam* (2012 Aashique Abu) and *Ee Adutha Kalathu* to the female protagonists break traditional barriers without qualms. This deviation from the norms of 'purity' and 'ideal' womanhood myths propagated by New Generation Cinema is facilitated by the strategic location of the characters into the (corrupting) urban landscapes. *Da Thadiya* presents a 'hero' whose physical appearance violates the norms of 'handsome'. It offers black humour that is clever and perspicacious to draw attention to the physical drawback ('ugliness') and the concept of beauty. *Thadiyan* refers to his identity, which is mocked at. The film makes an attempt to present a changed perception (an attempt at asserting that fat is no longer ugly), and ends with the hero telling, a now willing heroine, that he is not her dream boy. *Trivandrum Lodge* subverts the conventional masculinity is by the introduction of a woman into the then hitherto masculine space of a lodge. The self-proclaimed masculinities who used to boast about their sexual exploits (in contrast with the ugly reality of the dismal lodge), face crises while encountering the new audacious woman (errant in traditional terms). The New generation heroes of *Chappa Kurishu*, *22 Female Kottayam* and similar movies epitomize the rise of uncertain/subverted masculinities—actors who embody an 'absence' rather than the presence of 'traditional masculine' traits. The movie *Kattapanayile Rithwik Roshan* places the issue of 'looks' (of a dark 'ugly' hero as he laces up a blue Jeans and white shirt reminiscent of the poster of *Kaho Naa Pyar Hai*) at the centre forcing one to accept the (modern) reality that black is ugly. The movie's protagonist is named Krishnan Nair called Kichu (Vishnu Unnikrishnan), after the late actor Jayan (indicating the ardent relationship of the family with the film world). His dark skin tone and average looks make Kichu the butt of all jokes. The widespread association of physical ugliness with evil character is manifested through physical appearance, behaviour, dialogue etc.. It is linked with moral corruption illness and old age. Ugliness is seen as a purely physical phenomenon, devoid of spiritual significance. Ugly faces emptied of meaning indicate a divide between physicality and identity. Ugliness is infused with moral and supernatural import and gets linked with abusive discourse also. Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo held that the introduction of the ugly into the realm of beauty could also considerably expand the realm's imaginative horizon. Centrality of the ugly—monstrous figures, extreme poverty, aspects of everyday life—in life and art places the unaesthetic at the centre of aesthetic and cinematic discourse. Ugliness is also seen as artistic imperfection. It appears in the works of art that do not meet artistic requirements and therefore fail to produce aesthetic beauty as in movies that are artistic failures. The artist works to convert ugliness into artistic knowledge and beautiful form.

Malayalam cinema through its audio-visuality artistically evokes negative aesthetic feelings of ugliness and repulsion, and at the same time, even a positive appreciation of them in the viewer. The onscreen images are manipulated and made better through the use of

technologically advanced visual effects (a tool for story telling). The divide between the imaginary and the real blurs through the use of techniques like morphing or resorting to post production editing (when many a superstar wrinkles in real are effaced on reel). The hero's looks, his movements are digitally enhanced, while the villain is made to look more villainous. The skin tone, the age of the characters are all manipulated (becoming easier with developments in technology) not only through the use of makeup but even through the intervention of digital effects (vfx and sfx) which perfect it. Impossible stunts and feats inhuman, gruesome accidents or mishaps like a severed head, amputated hand, fire or fall from a skyscraper are made possible in this digital era with more exactness (with the ultimate intention of alluring the crowd to the theatre). Violence is exaggerated and visuals generated digitally (visually aggressive). Fantasy and imagination, horror and action, mythology and supernatural and magic realism resort to the digital mode (not preferred by the directors of parallel cinema with its realistic approach in visualization, but by the more 'loud' popular/commercial stream) for effects.

Ugliness, essential to the representation of modernity, is mostly confined to physical representation, landscape distortion, depiction of the socio-political reality (which is ugly) and the comic or morally reprehensible (as a means of exposing the presence of evil/the morally depraved). Deformed figures serve as the butt of standing jokes and basis of orchestrated public pranks (as in *Adbuthadweep* (2005 Vinayan, the film presents an island of dwarfs), *Sound Thoma* (2013 Vysakh, the hero has a cleft lip which affects his speech and looks), *Kunjikoonan*, *Chanthupottu* (2005, Lal Jose, the hero is brought up as a girl which makes him a misfit in 'male' society)). Resorting to the grotesque enables a portrayal of those aspects of reality which are deformed, horrible, comic and droll. In these movies the grotesque canon decenters the beautiful body through the deformed hero and his antics (and use of comedy in dialogue and action) that turns to be hidden barbs at a society that prefers the beautiful. One comes across the activation of a grotesque mode of existence that thrives on disproportion, deliberate distortion, and rejection of the sense of proportion. The ugly (as a part of social reality) is maneuvered through the plot with the intention of shocking the viewer into action and social betterment. Malayalam cinema through its realistic representation works towards exploiting the audience's visual/cognitive capacities to recognize the object/situation/audio-visual content depicted. The days when evil used to have a recognizable face and appearance in both real life and reel life have faded. Bloodshot eyes, thick moustache, big black wart on the upper cheek, unkempt hair, demonic voice and laughter—the physical characteristics of movie villains were more or less the same in early Malayalam cinema, very distinct from that of the heroes. As times progressed, the rift between the good and the bad diminished both on-screen and off-screen. In new-age Malayalam cinema, artists are realistic and versatile and heroes do not hesitate to take up negative roles. In 'new generation cinema', the young actors including Jayasurya, Indrajith, Prithviraj, Fahad Faasil and Asif Ali have tried roles as hero and anti-heroes. The villains entice with their sheer evilness and corruption in contemporary Malayalam films

Film's aesthetic significance to a large extent might be determined by unconscious forces or by the audience. A film contains many elements and the key is to bring those

elements into 'significant relationship' so as to create a unity which conveys the film-maker's vision to the audience' cognitive activity. Malayalam cinema has manipulated human emotions with its depiction of the ugly and the beautiful. Ugliness on screen offends the eyes, clashes with the taste for order and harmony (evokes a sinister mood as in *D Company* 2013 M Padmakumar), and arouses repugnance. Physiognomy associates facial features with character and moral disposition (cruel men with protruding teeth, disfigured bodies) using it as indicators of inner/social ugliness. Movies like *Style*, (2016, Binu S) move away from this correspondence presenting a 'cool' yet distinctly negative Edgar (played by Tovino Thomas). Dismemberment of living bodies, killing of animals, illness are all a source of ugliness. The enemy (villain/enemy/adversary always being the 'Other'; a battle between good and evil) is demonized and assigned satanic characteristics. His/her features do not correspond to the aesthetic criteria of beauty. Physical unattractiveness of characters/actors in cinema reflects the changing relationship between the body and the self. The stigma of revulsion attached to ugliness pertaining to subaltern/disempowered groups ('ugly' groups demarcated because of gender, race, caste, sexuality or other such markers that make them 'invisible' in society), which persist in present society, is reflected on screen (through skin colour/physical appearance, dialogue etc.) in movies like *Celluloid* (2013 Kamal), *Kamatippadam* (2016 Rajiv Ravi), and most Mohanlal movies (with their clearly etched 'feudal' structure). The practice of stereotyping confines the marginalized groups to a state of being victimized. With a mass production of consistent images and discourse, a (false) 'reality' is fixed and 'consumed'/accepted by the society. As the mass 'consumes' this 'reality' the system responds by providing and responding information to support the (elitist) 'demand'. Representations (of caste, gender, sexuality etc.) are steeped in ideology and produce a variety of meanings, negotiated from viewer to viewer. Ugly infiltrates into the frame through the depiction of violence as well. Violence in cinema has become more explicit (just as images of the 'flesh'/sexuality have become more unequivocal) in contemporary times. It is incorporated into the text (films) as a reaction to a concrete situation or against others to defend one's identity. Crime films/gangster movies illustrate a larger and a fictitious representation of criminals and gangsters who operate outside the law, focusing on their mannerisms, lives, lifestyles and their specialized modus operandi; glorifying their rise and fall of crime kingdoms. They also highlight the victim's life and their struggle to justice. Money, power, greed, revenge, gambling, drugs, murder, robbery, masculinity and violence (all that are ugly and disharmonious) are some of the central themes of these movies. Cultural elitist discourses, transcendental mysticism or dogmas, hegemonic notions or practices of culture are rejected and critiqued through the use of action and violence. Characters playing the role of gangsters and the bad guys are etched with materialistic, immoral, and dishonest traits. Gangster films are usually loaded with the rise and fall of criminals and their activities leading to their aftermath (usually being punished for their misdeeds and sinful acts). Ironically, within this disharmonious entity exists as a priority 'loyalty' (something positive) towards each other (in a gang and to the central power running it even while letting loose mayhem). Betrayal in any form is desisted from and if performed, gives way to vengeance and bloodshed. Revenge is an integral part of its plot which takes the story forward to climax. Violent acts compel an aesthetic response in the beholder of awe, admiration, or bafflement. The deployment of violence and mayhem is a component of Malayalam popular cinema,

especially those of the action/horror genre. It is depicted in cinema in all its brutality as a part of human nature/natural reflex for survival, a threatening situation, because of anger (*Kali*), confrontation (most superstar movies), domestic violence (form a subtext in many movies), war (Major Ravi movies), robbery, ethnic massacre (*Memories* 2013 Jeethu Joseph), abuse, political (*Left Right Left* 2013 Arun Kumar), or related to sports (*Godha* 2017 Basil Joseph). Violence is also a part of redemptive punishment, as justice is meted out and nemesis takes its toll. The ugliness and repulsive nature of violence is conveyed through the onscreen body, emotion, sound, posture, setting, camera movements and the like. As the literary scholar Naomi Baker holds, the ugly body becomes the 'site' where multiple cultural tensions are negotiated and where potential models of identity are interrogated and confirmed. The 'ugly' can turn ordinary bodies into extraordinary bearers of social meanings, where treatments range from damnation to reverence, ridicule to commodification, and more. The everyday reality of horrifying sights gets represented/transposed onto the silver screen arousing disgust, fear and repulsion. Witches/supernatural beings appear ugly, transform themselves into attractive creatures, but are always characterized by ambiguous features that reveal their inner ugliness (*Aadupuliyattam*, *Akashaganga*-1999 Vinayan, *Pretham*-2016 Ranjith Sanker, *Oru Murai Vanthu Parthaya*-2016 Sajan K Mathew). The dark dungeons, cobwebbed attics, mutilated corpses, coffins, violent pursuit and killing (spaces) in these movies disclose the inner logic of their narrative worlds. The monstrous feminine manifested in the *yakshi* is a prominent figure of Kerala folklore imagined as an evil female with supernatural powers living on *pala* trees. The filmic representations of the *yakshi* in contemporary Kerala are many. Close shots are essential in terms of effects created by the aesthetic disposition of ugliness for they minimize the distance between the subject and the object. They bring forth the ugly and disgusting object's disturbing effect to the viewer psychologically, and place the unwanted object to the focus of the 'gaze'. The sight of (repulsive/ugly) bodies/physically repellent characters humiliated by torture or capital punishment, dismemberment of living bodies (often conveying socio-political signification), killing of animals, cruelty that springs not only from hatred or perverse taste for disfigurement; even from excessive feelings of love and veneration, illness when it involves deformation; poor, demented, prostitutes, thieves, criminals, sexually deviant all occupy the screen as ugly, abject and abhorrent (if not physically then morally). The viewer is constantly reminded that there is something implacably and sadly malign about the world in which he exists. What is (culturally) obscene, villainous, subaltern are tagged as 'unaesthetic', offensive and even disgusting. Ugliness as a social fact reverberates through Malayalam cinema—as in *Drishyam* (2013 Jeethu Joseph) which blends words with visuals to craft a thrilling portrait of a man's struggle to prevent his much adored family from falling apart in a corrupt society; *Achan Urangatha Veedu* (2006 Lal Jose) and its sequel *Lisammayude Veedu* (Babu Janardhanan 2013) which takes up the issue of corruption, rape and prostitution based on the real life Suryanelli case; in *Puthiya Niyamam* (2016 A K Sajan) which explores, sexual harassment, the drug fuelled crimes and consumption of marijuana and LSD by youth; *Left Right Left* which takes the audience through the nineteen sixties, eighties and into the present. It presents the lives of three men and how politics influence their motives, changing the course of their life. The effect of politics on individuals, corruption (a judiciary and media that ensures the guilty go scot free making the film melancholic, morbid and foreboding), disillusionment with the communist

ideology, political killings, death, bloodshed and bitterness act as pointers towards the mean unjust world around. It makes a ferocious exploration of the hard hitting realities in Kerala--the corruption scandals involving communist leaders, brutal political murders, the internal conflict of a political party (or in *Oru Mexican Apaaratha* 2017 Tom Emmatty) and the grave implications it has on human lives all echo in the dark; *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (2015 R S Vimal) casting Prithviraj and Parvathy to present the real life story of Kanchanamala and Moideen which took place in the 1960-70s. The difficulty of inter religious marriages and the doom love casts on the life of the lovers in a strictly religious Kerala society lays bear in its wake a lot of hideous religious fundamentalism. Similar movies do away with a reified reality, visually conveying the ugly reality ('real') through the 'reel' without camouflaging it with the flashing and the seemingly beautiful. A similar take on reality is perceptible in the Mammootty starrer *Kasaba* (2016 Nithin Renji Panicker). College activism, power politics, brutalities, sexist one-liners all around here as sour temper, bitter expressions and bitter curses (most Mammootty-Mohanlal movies). *Amen* (2013 Lijo Jose) makes use of humour and the ugly to bring out the events that happen in a picturesque *kuttanadan* village following the arrival of a young priest Fr. Vincent Vattoli (played by Indrajith). The movie strikes a different note and starts off on a 'shitty', 'smelley' note--a stinking gift that looks alluring in its golden wrapper does rounds at Kumaramkari, a tiny village in central Kerala. It gets passed around, until it is flung right onto a dinner table. Here, along with the senses, the ugly also gets manifested as good and evil through the sense of power and clout that has transformed Ottapalakkan (Joy Mathew) the priest into a conceited religious leader. Aashiq Abu's *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) unravels a bitter raw confrontation of a truth from which the society has always shirked away--of pseudo morality. The visuality (the shots, the setting all differently dealt with as in the 2015 Nadirshah depiction of the antihero in *Amar Akbar Anthony*) the movie offers wedges into our psyche with ferocity leaving the viewer in discomfort. The crime scene remains a callous reminder of the sordidness of the act. Back home with a broken skull, fractured fingers, and bite marks all over her body (a bruised body, a shaken mind) Tessa (Rema Kallingal), the heroine, tries to pick up the bits of her life that lie all over the place after the sexual assault on her--as soiled carpets, blood stained bed sheets and broken flower pots. Shift in aesthetic perspective is seen in movies like *Vallim Thetti Pullim Thetti* (2016 Rishi Sivakumar) which turns yesteryear actors and their performativity into instances of humour and melodrama. It is on the nature of the active response (that ugly and beauty elicit in us) on the viewer's own part that depends the application of those terms 'beautiful' and 'ugly' in every single instance. The stark realities of treachery, duplicity, poverty, pain, withering relationships and a degrading world fill the visual frame.

Films have a unique set of ideological, social, cultural, industrial and economic contexts and determinants. It can never free itself from these contextual analyses in which they were produced and consumed. Malayalam cinema, from its inception, was strongly rooted in the contemporary social reality. It is a 'site' of social action and intervention where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled. Cinema makes use of the ugly in order to criticize/denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image. Malayalam cinema seeks strictly to reproduce the world of everyday perception. The

more densely and completely its techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema. As a shape-shifting modifier, ‘ugly’ tends to reflect the perspective of the observer more than qualities of the observed. The ugly rouses deep-set emotions and its horror/disgust lingers in memory even after the viewer leaves the ‘dark space’ of the theatre. It stirs the fantasy so profoundly that minds cannot let the object alone. What is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the ‘real’) as such. Ugliness in the context of Malayalam cinema is to be seen as a *presence*—which makes viable an aesthetic experience of the ugly. The general use of ugly in contemporary cinema is the indirect expression and ‘imaginary’ representation of the pessimist, miserable and terrible which dominate the ‘modern’. The cruel, hurtful, ugly or disgusting representations that we face with in artistic representations are (as Antonin Artaud states) necessary for us not to believe that we are in a totally safe world (Aaltonen 25). Ugly as an aesthetic quality operates relationally, constantly negotiating different meanings and challenging cultural stasis. Malayalam cinema in its representation of the Ugly attempts to subvert ugliness in all its forms; ‘transforming’ it into the beautiful—attempting to transform the deficiencies, the degraded and the dysfunctional into something positive.

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