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## The Subtle Architecture of Creating Fear

**Dr Sunitha Srinivas C**

Associate Professor of English,  
Govt. College Mokeri.

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### **Abstract:**

Fear is a complex phenomenon. It is a social and cultural construct that necessitates the sociological study of cultural background and the emotions that connect it to culture and circumstance. In the daily lives of ordinary people, terror and fear regimes are manufactured and implemented in various ways. There are numerous discourses of/evoking fear, which are socially constructed and managed to promote one's own objectives. Fear is evoked, traditional subject-object entities created, and authority maintained through the exercise of power. Fear has been extensively discussed by Locke, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Tocqueville, Hannah Arendt, and Zygmunt Bauman, among others. Fear, violence, and mayhem are indispensable components of Malayalam mainstream cinema. Cinematic fear operates through the dialectic of 'showing' and 'not showing,' or 'seeing and not seeing.' This paper attempts to analyse the multiple ways in which the visual culture (in this case, Malayalam cinema) incites and communicates fear, fueled by the threats posed by our own imagination.

**Keywords:** John Locke, Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes, Alexis de Tocqueville, Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, Malayalam cinema, fear, culture of fear, unaesthetic, **visuality.**

*“Fear’ is arguably the most sinister of the demons nesting in the open societies of our time. But it is the insecurity of the present and uncertainty about the future that hatch and breed the most awesome and least bearable of our fears.” Zygmunt Bauman*

We find around us multiple ways in which regimes of terror and fear are manufactured and performed in the daily lives of ordinary people, creating fearful docile bodies. It is a part of our everyday discourse despite our constitution assuring us to the contrary. Fear is undeniably an emotion on which psychology focuses incessantly. The discourses of/evoking fear abound, being socially constructed and managed to promote one's own goals (like the fear a teacher can instill in the student, the fear that a Principal or a System can instill in one through issuing of orders/exercise of powers). Fear is related to

violence. It is employed to repress dissent as well. Fear of fire, flood, plague, infidel invasion, death, witchcraft etc. was among the anxieties that plagued the early world. The ‘controlled fear’ associated with Covid19 being the modern one. Fear is the name we give to our uncertainty in the face of the dangers that define our fluid modern age; to our ignorance and uncertainty of the nature of the threat and our inability to determine what can and cannot be done to combat it. Many of our most troubling fears are mostly related to ‘losing face’ and being disgraced or suffering slights to our reputation. The media also produce and reproduce fear (a people’s felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being)—the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups. Fear is a highly effective sales tool--“The use of fear has become a widely accepted device for the promotion of a variety of goods. The promotion of fear and the propagandist manipulation of information is often justified on the grounds that it is a small price to pay to get a good message across to the public” (Füredi 2005, p. 33). The fear of natural disasters, environmental catastrophes, or indiscriminate terrorist attacks, force human beings to live in a constant state of anxiety about the dangers that could strike without warning. Unlike private fear, political fear arises from conflicts within and between societies. Fear springs from pervasive social inequities, and often sustains long traditions of torture and subordination. It is related to risk, uncertainty, threats, our very intuition and imagination as well as governmental actions. Fear also acts as a unifying factor, uniting the social groups and encouraging co-operation.

Fear, according to John Locke, one of the guiding spirits of modern liberalism, is a mental unease, and it is the primary, if not the only, impetus for human industry and action. Locke distinguishes between “conscience for conscience's sake” and “fear for fear's sake” as two distinct reasons for submission (Locke 120). On the other hand, to Aristotle and Augustine a person's rational evaluations of righteous and malevolent were intimately related to their fear. Hobbes, like Aristotle, emphasized the political and moral aspects of fear, demonstrating that it required elites, laws, institutions, and education. In contrast to Hobbesian fear, Montesquieu's terror was caused by a single despot's use of lawless violence, which decimated institutions and elites and eradicated education. Terror was not the result of moral artifice or political calculation; rather, it was a manifestation of the despot's twisted psyche, his desire for destruction, and his propensity for cruelty. However, like Hobbesian fear, Montesquieu's terror was meant to inspire political and moral enlightenment. Hobbes and Montesquieu believed that those in positions of power used fear and terror as tools. It

was believed that political fear emanated from the mass psyche and culture following the French Revolution and the dawn of democracy. According to Tocqueville, this new political fear was the result of the overthrow of traditional authority and the isolation of modern society, without a clear object or focal point. The absence of laws, elites, institutions, and education allowed fear to flourish. It was also not a response to a despotic ruler, as the era of despotic rulers was thought to have ended. Democracy, the authority of the masses, was the order of the day, and its innate psychological state was anxiety. Tocqueville argued that in response to this profound insecurity, the masses yearned for a strict disciplinarian who could restore order to society. From this desire would emerge a new type of despotism: a state that dictated every aspect of daily life, a state more powerful, invasive, and intrusive than its predecessors. Hobbes and Montesquieu believed that the repressive actions of the powerful incited fear or terror in the powerless, whereas Tocqueville and his successors believed that the anxiety of the powerless legitimized the repressive actions of the powerful. Hannah Arendt, like her predecessors, believed that the concept of total terror, exemplified by Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, could serve as the basis for a new political morality. She believed, like Montesquieu, that terror was a consequence of violence. She believed, as did Tocqueville, that the tyrannical behaviour of the political apparatus was the result of an anxious populace. She added the concept of ideology, the absolute, fanatical faith in ideologies such as communism and Nazism, which appealed to lonely men and women in desperate need of reassuring truth. Hobbes argued that it was the primary responsibility of the state to teach people to fear specific objects. Individuals, society, and the state work together to cultivate fear.

Emphasizing the significance of ‘liquidity’ as a sign of modernity, Zygmunt Bauman (in his *Liquid Modernity*) argued that in an increasingly interconnected, globalized, and affluent contemporary world, the individual can ‘move fluidly’ between social positions. This liquid environment while liberating people from a number of traditional burdens also created new problems; including a suffocating form of unease and dread, and the desire to escape. He underlines the fact of protean ‘change’ within modern society:

What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) 'post-modernity' and what I've chosen to call, more to the point, 'liquid modernity', is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the final state of perfection’

-- now it means an infinity of improvement, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired. (82)

While Bauman emphasizes the reality of change in contemporary social life he also underscores the instantaneous malleability of a liquid. As he puts it, "flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs" (97).

States' engines of surveillance and social control are the most fearsome--gallows, gulags, and prisons. The state uses them to control domestic, but not always internal, enemies. Against foreign enemies, it employs war. These domestic control mechanisms rely on public compliance; the state cannot maintain them unless the majority of the population accepts them, even tacitly. Outside of war, they display the ugliest face of state power. They are the deific violence of secular societies, before which citizens are expected to stand in 'fear and trembling.' Hannah Arendt attributed fear mainly, if not exclusively, to totalitarian regimes, and their use of camps, among other things. Nonetheless, parliamentary, liberal democracies use them and other forms of confinement and punishment for much the same ends. As the state and its laws initially created (legal) subjects, it now transforms them into objects, just as the criminal justice system transforms designated criminals from subjects to objects. A 'culture of fear' (a term that has gained much prevalence) creates fear among a majority against a marginalized minority. Then it generates fear among the majority of those they have given the power to protect them against the marginal. It culminates in 'pervasive fear' where everyone fears everyone else. Gallows and prisons all follow the same logic and have the same origin: the desire to dominate, to gain advantage, and fear of being dominated.

The culture of fear has become an inevitable accompaniment to postmodernity. As David Altheide points out, fear is cumulatively integrated over time and in the process becomes associated with certain topics. The process is semiotic, in which object, sign, and interpretant are bound together through concerted action, ideology, and policy. Eventually, the 'fear' becomes implied and unstated. Hying threat and fear is central to terrorist and counter-terrorist rhetoric. Altheide goes on to link fear of crime with fears about major events, such as the 9/11 attacks. The resulting linkage becomes part of an 'ideology of fear' as described by Vološinov, the aim of which is social control. Political discourse has explicitly used fear (in cinema as well) as a master interpretant, binding sign and object. Repeated recourse to fear as a master interpretant increasingly produces a pervasive 'culture of terror.' Exploring two interrelated themes—Why has fear acquired such a morally

commanding status in contemporary society, and how has the way we experience fear changed since the past?— Furedi tries to analyse key moments in the history of fear to help situate the workings of this emotion in contemporary society. The unravelling of moral authority, he argues, is one of the primary causes of the culture of fear. Fear appears to provide a temporary solution to moral ambiguity, and for this reason, a variety of interests, parties, and individuals embrace it. Furedi predicts that until society adopts a more optimistic view of uncertainty, the politicization of fear will thrive. He asserts that (fear has become a 'perspective') this fear 'perspective' has acquired a dominant status because, in contrast to other options, it appears to be uniquely effective at influencing the behaviour of individuals. To control politics, the government manipulates the mass media and, through the mass media, public opinion. The most fundamental human experiences, including love, loss, desire, fear, hope, and solitude, are utilized to influence the masses. In all non-totalitarian systems of government, the action principle guides individual behavior. In a totalitarian regime, fear is 'exactly despair over the impossibility of action.' Tyranny destroys the public sphere of politics and is therefore, by definition, anti-political. Power in its different manifestation controls the conduct of individuals; operating through various institutional apparatuses and techniques (visual culture being one). Through the exertion of power (at any level of its operation) fear is evoked, traditional subject-object entities created and authority sustained. The most visible is the body of the criminal 'disciplined' in a variety of ways. Punishment takes place violently on the body through torture.

Fear is a cinematic tool used to efficaciously unnerve, and entertain audiences. Violence and gore, objects of disgust are used to induce fear on screen. From a personal narrative, visual discourses of fear may move on to the public imagination of fear (often shared narratives). Within the sphere of visibility, fear is more or less a 'normalized' event introduced to disorient as well as entertain. Visual representation of vampires, ghosts, occult, cannibalism, serial killers and other threatening situations, work on the deepest fears of the viewer. Film, genre, viewer, cultural and historical context all influence the distribution of cinematic pleasures. Through a purposeful arrangement of its elements cinema conveys fear, and its close association with the socio-political system from which it emerges. In terms of special effects and what it takes to startle or shock the audience, films have evolved over time. The oxymoronic 'pleasurable fear' situation inside the cinema raises the question as to how we derive pleasure from the fearful engagement with the movie and what frightening aesthetic techniques are employed to produce the concomitant fearful effects? The emotion of

'art-horror' here is a commingling of fear and disgust. The body is important here keeping in purview the bodily transformation (multiple(x) experiences) brought about-- the film, the viewer's living body, and the cinematic environment (in particular the rest of the audience). Throughout the film, the field of consciousness is reorganized at various points; it moves and adaptably shifts its emphasis. The body and cinema occupy the foreground and command attention, while the film as an intentional object loses its position at the center of the stage—a flexible shifting of emphasis. Screening quality, advanced sound technology (surround sound, the elimination of distraction through unintentional noise outside the film, introduction of digital sound, the now boosted acoustic pressure), interior design, all contribute to the 'experiences' (theatrical, filmic as well as group/social activity) of the viewer. Fear is induced through settings, protagonists, and effects: dark, terrible places and 'evil' houses; scenes in the constricted and disorienting space of basements and other labyrinth-like places; psychopathic stalkers or killers with almost unstoppable rage; shocking scenes that made the audience jump; and graphic violence--a frightening, engrossing, and potentially overwhelming confrontation with vivid, moving images of threatening acts of violence or a dangerous monster that are supported by ominous sounds. Shadows and monsters induce fear. Costumes, makeup as well as sound in horror films give a frightening image of the antagonist and evoke dread. Sound designers use different sound effects to express fear and distress to the audience. The abrupt amplitude fluctuation heightens the intensity of moments as when anticipating a killer in the dark. Clowns have the capacity to provoke fear.

The deployment of fear, on-screen aggression, violence and mayhem is an indispensable component of Malayalam popular cinema; especially those of the action/horror genre that conjure up terror. Body as well as the mind becomes a site of torture. Movies tend to focus on societal issues in a manner that both piques public interest and normalizes killing to mete out justice and maintain order. Fear is visualized on screen through the mechanism of torment depicted in all its brutality as a part of human nature/natural reflex for survival, a threatening situation, emerging of anger (as in Sameer Thahir's *Kali*, 2016), confrontation (as in most superstar movies), domestic violence (a subtext in many a melodrama), war and terrorism (as in Major Ravi movies), ethnic massacre (*Memories* 2013), or political (as in *Left Right Left*) context. *Kali* uses the emotion of anger (indicated by the title) as the center of focus. It revolves around the quick tempered Siddharth (ironically, the name a synonym for calmness is in contrast to the character's *Kali*/angry nature) played by Dulquer Salman, and his wife Anjali (Sai Pallavi). The hero's angry outbursts instill fear and his untamed rage

turns out to be dangerous. The background score (rash driving and the raising sound of the accelerator, the sound of *chenda* in crescendo) adds to the tension and fear generated by the movie. The setting enhances the theme by presenting seedy highway hotels with bikers, night driving (in total darkness), lecherous men in chase, and dirty hotels. The visuals turn bloody with group rivalry, violent attacks and stabbing. The fights leave a picture of total disarray with shattered glasses, cupboards, tables and wounded people. Films like *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014) and *Memories* employ plots where fear lies entwined with bullying, attacking, police atrocities, vendetta, gang war, drunken violence, mass murder, politically initiated violence, or any form of physical assault, as well as anxious anticipations. As in *Satyam* (2004), *Vargam* (2006), *Vasthavam* (2006), *Thalappavu* (2008), *Puthiya Mukham* (2009), *Anwar* (2010), *Oozham* (2016), *Vetta* (2016) where the dark tones leave the audience uneasy, violence and brutality unfold before the audience, reminding them of the disturbing external systemic ‘reality,’ they need to fear. The ‘threatening’ content (as in *Drishyam*--Jeethu Joseph, 2013, and *Oppam*--Priyadarshan, 2016), rapid movements and visual changes, intensifying cinematic shocks, dangerous proximity through close-ups, omission and suggestion, precision, volume and sounds of the sound track (even stillness), the inconspicuousness of the special effects, chase-and-escape scenes, the horrifying and disgusting moving-images all contribute to the total fear-affect. By means of cinematography, editing, sound, and *mise-en-scène* (figures, lighting, setting, etc.) the viewer is able to observe and hear the action from a series of ideal vantage points. Film makers create atmospheres of constriction and isolation to evoke terror and fear. The acceleration and agitation of the scene are achieved through various strategies. Among the most common and effective techniques to elicit emotional response are camera dollying, tracking, craning, panning, tilting, zooming, and shaking.

The ‘genre experience’ (suspense, thriller, drama, and science fiction) offered by horror employs fear and offers explicit cues via narrative forewarning and verbal foreshadowing. Plots circulate around victims trying to free themselves from the monster-villain, whose main aim is to subject ‘good’ to infirmity and death. The audience is caught in the trauma of this attempt to escape the deadly game of suffering and anguish to evade deformity and death (and thus the ugly). The gothic elements here create uncanny effects and chilling horror. Recourse to medieval settings, devices and events such as endless spaces, labyrinths, ruined castles, graveyards and charnel houses contribute to the screen affect. Horror ‘texts’ aim at generating a distinct emotional state of fear and anxiety defined through

sensations like physical agitation, cringing, nausea, a reflex of apprehension, physically heightened alertness, or even involuntary screaming. This specific emotional state is brought by blood curdling plot lines and character appearance as well as the evil monster-villain whose appearance enhances intended effect. Distortion in size, shape, skin colour or facial configuration—hunchback, a small disfigured or gargantuan stature, burnt or scarred bodies, missing limbs, some physical abnormality or distortion—sets them apart from the characters they victimize. They take on different shapes, mostly being mentally and/or physically anomalous (which further accelerates their fear-affect). The body is gagged, cut, slashed, burnt, bled, strangled, chopped, shot, decapitated, poisoned, blown up, decomposed, possessed or corroded within the trajectory of the ‘biomedical imaginary’. The body of the monster is deployed as a weapon of terror. Black cats, bats or howling dogs haunt through their on-screen presence, instilling fear of evil. The sound of anklets (haunting people at night), her *damshtra* (the large, pointy incisors) and the scary laughter of ‘evil’ have become synonymous with the *yakshi* in the Malayali conscious; often signifying the dreaded uncontrollable power. One of the significant characteristics of these narratives (as in *Aakashaganga* by Vinayan, 1999) is the element of fear (of the avenging woman who returns to earth after death). The thrill of these narratives revolves around watching the body of the monster transform to display new and terrifying sites of disablement. This fear (of being punished) is evoked through displaying of ugliness and distortion. They are creatures fashioned by normative imagination to be supernaturally malevolent, bent on terrorizing and devouring the able bodied world. Viewers gawk, gape and stare in simultaneous wonder and terror at these figures that are able to shape-shift into various forms of mutilation and revulsion—the viewer’s fascination with the monster as an object of horror. The viewer’s emotions mostly reflect the emotional response of the affirmative characters to the monsters before them (indicating the cathartic potentialities that arise through the viewer ‘becoming’ the human victim or evil being punished). Films like *Vellinakshatram* (Vinayan, 2004), *Anandabhadram* (Santosh Sivan, 2005), *Yakshi Faithfully Yours* (2012), *Geethanjali* (Priyadarshan, 2013), *Raktharakshas* (R Factor, 2014), *Pretham* (Ranjith Sankar, 2016), *Aadupuliyattam* (Kannan Thamarakkulam, 2016), *Ezra* (Jayakrishnan, 2017) are instances of the supernatural and the eerie creating an ambience of fear. Camera movements which distort visuals, dilapidated buildings, blazing fiery eyes, evil spirits, severed heads and fire spurting eyes, distorted faces and the use of light to create effects enhance fear and horror here.

Good triumphs over evil, and the social order, disrupted by the actions of the supernatural, the immoral, and the villainous, is reinstated by the power of good in Indian popular films. They attempt to reassert the moral authority of a world that was in danger of succumbing to evil forces that need to be feared and avoided. As in fairy tales, evil temporarily gains the upper hand or usurps the hero's legitimate rights, but its failure and destruction are inevitable. The cinematic space provides a venue for the exercise of evil and the management of evil in all of its manifestations—power and privilege, vice and corruption—scattered across individuals and collective manifestations. The enemy is demonized; assigned satanic characteristics (in physicality and action) to connote his/her inherent evil, especially in movies where the supernatural predominates. Murders, strange unnatural events accentuate the intrigues which spring from a frighteningly gothic air and psychological frailties. Mansions host brooding dark interiors and the inmates are beset by waves of ominous events. Creaking windows and looming shadows amplify the eerie. Fleeting moments of silence heighten the effect of terror ready to strike. The body language, disfigured faces, loud hysterical laughter, flashing apparitions and facial expressions often create a sordid atmosphere. Sound is used to warn the audience of the evil in store and sustain fear and enhance the ugly action and physicality.

Fear is a complex and multifaceted emotion that has been extensively studied within the context of cultural theory. Cultural theorists have also investigated the use of fear in literature and film, where it is frequently employed to examine social and cultural anxieties. Fear has been examined in a variety of contexts, including political and social fear. Fear of the Other, regardless of whether it is based on race, ethnicity, religion, or any other, is frequently shaped by historical and cultural factors such as colonialism, imperialism, and slavery. More than any other medium cinema has contributed to the visualization of evil, ugly and the forbidden in the modern age. Across history, human animality has posed a seeming threat; reminiscent of powers and forces beyond human control. The emotive responses of the audience run parallel to the emotions of characters (reliant on the latter's histrionic abilities to evoke the same in the audience). Horror and violence contribute to creating fear on screen. Violence is reconstructed in all its gruesomeness, implying an equally brutal and ugly reality. The recreational terror in cinema works through the dialectic of 'showing' and 'not showing' 'seeing and not seeing.' Violence, vampires and social ugliness though existing outside aesthetic parameters, are placed within an aesthetic space in cinema. The pleasure evoked or fear/psychological state induced in the viewer by violence and horror (both of which calls for

their manifestation through ‘aestheticized ugliness’) of cinema is largely dependent on the depiction of the unaesthetic. Visual culture incites the notion of fear which is goaded by the threats posed by the imagination of our own making. Fear is a complex phenomenon; a social and cultural construct that necessitates the study of cultural background and the emotions that link it to culture and circumstance for sociological comprehension. It is an effective tool for engaging the audience and keeping them invested in the story being told on screen.

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