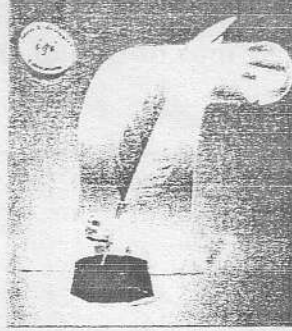


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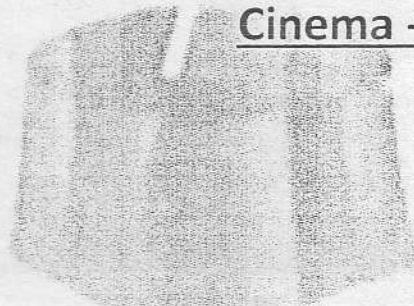
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**Dr. Reji A. L**

University College, University of Kerala, TVPM, Kerala

reji.reji777@gmail.com

**In and Of Space in Contemporary Popular Malayalam**  
**Cinema - Traffic**



## Introduction

Space and time are primary organizing or structuring principles of a film. Indeed, in different ways these are the organizing principles of all art. A film is a dynamic medium and art form: a medium and art form of movement.

Film in India has always testified to the powerful public presence of modernity. The sheer vastness of the film public points to the over whelming presence of a vibrant film culture. Throughout its history, Indian cinema has responded to local traditions, displaying a strong desire to maintain a distinctive form. Drawing on various visual, literary, and artistic traditions, each with its own distinct history, popular Indian cinema is an evolving, unabashedly hybrid cultural form that narrates the complicated intersection between tradition and modernity in contemporary India. Ashis Nandy's essay on Indian popular cinema outlines clearly why instead of a social revolution in terms of globalization, mediated popular culture in India in an accommodative spirit has robustly included changes but has simultaneously continued with traditional value systems.

Human beings are meaning making, interpretive beings. Social action is meaningful to those who perform it and to those who observe it. Raymond Williams, in his book *Culture and Society* (1967), points out that industry, democracy, class, art and culture are the important words in our modern structure of meanings.

'Culture' came to mean first 'a general state or habit of the mind.' Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole.' Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts.' Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual' (xvi).

No doubt, Culture is a process. A culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived. The terms "land", "place" and "space" take on multidimensional meanings in different socio-cultural contexts. Place is two dimensional, while space is multi dimensional.

Meena T. Pillai, in the introduction to *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalizing Gender Hierarchies*, points out that the category 'Malayalam Cinema' by its territorialization makes cinema stand for a subnational /regional identity, making it a means by which Malayalies can represent themselves. By probing how 'Malayaliness' is imagined and how it shapes objects and subjects in the contemporary socio-cultural life



life of Kerala, it becomes possible to re-territorialize Kerala not as an exclusive and clearly demarcated geographical and political space, but as one where fluid subjectivities are constantly remapping themselves. (5)

The main problem I am going to address in this paper is that in contemporary Malayalam popular cinema, a remarkable shift in perspective is perceptible in terms of the crucial role that spatiality effects on the filmic narrative. Where as in the past the filmic narrative more or less restricted its thematic explorations by constructing its narratives along the temporality, the contemporary popular cinema in Malayalam factors in the new possibilities of the *spatial practice*. The central idea of this paper is to analyze the narrative space of Malayalam cinema in its offerings of new spatial relations, which could then accommodate the changing nature of the socio- cultural atmosphere in Kerala. To this objective I will use the ideas of space explicated in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*.

Rediscovered in the 1990's, Lefebvre's theory opened up new ways of understanding of processes of urbanization, their conditions and consequences at any scale of social reality: from the practices of everyday life, through the urban scale, to the global flows of people, capital, information and ideas. First, Lefebvre was always interested in the relationship between Hegel and Marx, and thus in idealism and materialism. Instead of matter being seen as the embodiment of mental constructs, or mind being seen as the reaction to matter, Lefebvre saw both material and mental together. It is the fusion of the idealist and materialist notions that enables an *idealist and materialist* approach to questions of life and lived experience.

Social space is "not a thing but rather a set of relations between [objects and products]" (83). To help his discussion of space, Lefebvre offers a triad of concepts: "the perceived-conceived- lived triad" (39).

"The Spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space" (*The Production of Space* 38).

In Rajesh Pillai's film *Traffic*, a shift in perspective is seen in terms of the breaking away from the linear notion of spacetime.

### 1. Superimposition of images

In the film *Traffic*, the filmic narrative shows the characteristic of the city by showing fragmented images blurred together (breaking of one scene to depict four spatial experiences--Rehan travels in a bike with his friend, Abel in a car, Siddharth in another car, Sudevan walking and crossing the road). By projecting

more an outdoor space like roads, the film does point to the complexity of day to day life. Fragmentation and discontinuity have been central to the filmic representation of urban experience. The space of road spaces each and every characters. Road determines life and death at the same time.

Lefebvre describes: "Each living body *is* space and *has* space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (170).

Traffic is one of Benjamin's illustrations of the constantly jolting nature of urban experience: "Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him like the energy from a battery" (177). In "*The Metropolis and Mental Life*" the early twentieth-century sociologist Georg Simmel proposes that the psychology of the new urban person is predicated on "*the intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" (410).

2. Road is a space of action (moving vehicles, crossing zebra lines, side walkers, traffic signal ...). It is where two motor accidents happen in the filmic narrative of *Traffic*. Dr. Abel, who thinks that his wife, Shwetha (Remya Nambeesan) cheats him, hits her with a car. But what happened to Rehan is an accident resulting from the ignoring of traffic symbol by a car driven by a girl.

For not obeying one among the traffic rules--while driving a car, the driver should wear seat belt--Dr. Abel has to pay fine during the test drive.

### 3. Travel

In the film *Traffic*, a heart transplantation surgery is performed partly in Ernakulam and partly in Palakkad. In between these two locations, the heart is travelling. In the case of transplantation, one body part which occupies a physical space in a person's body finds a new space in the body of the recipient. For that operation, the laws of the space of hospital, road, Rehan's parents' concern, all matters. Here, the mental and the social interact.

A mission is a planned, calculated action. In the filmic narrative of *Traffic*, a space is produced for a vehicle to travel which contains the beating heart to reach its new body on time. Through the various power relations of the police, the people, the workers, the film at the same time invites the viewers' attention to the possibilities and impossibilities of an action, a spatial practice. How a space is created through the Bilal colony for the van to travel.



Dr. Abel's mental turmoil results in his sudden reaction of diverting the route of the van. While driving through the forest, Sudevan chooses to go left after hearing Rehan's friend Rajeev's suggestion, is viewed first as a mistake by the authorities. But later they realize that "it was a perfect mistake", the words uttered by the head of the police. Their journey which started as a chosen route from a geographical map, now takes a different route because the context demands it. They experience the spatiotemporal vector of displacement with multiple possibilities rather than the one dimensional linear distance travelled.

Arthur and Passini define it as follows; "wayfinding is continuous, spatial problem solving under uncertainty" (21).

#### 4. Theatre as a space

Theatre is a space of action (screening films). It is a space where people from various walks of life get together for some time to watch a movie. In the movie *Traffic*, there is a theatrical space within the frame of that cinema where (Rehan and his lover, Dr. Abel and his wife) friends, lovers and couples get together. Though each individual experience is different, they all share some peculiarity of that space. The people of the Bilal colony celebrate the release of the new film *Eeswar* of Sidharth Sankar within the frame of film *Traffic*, which shows the power and position of a film star within a society and the immediate growth of fans associations.

#### 5. The Mediaspace

A channel's shooting of Onam with film star Siddharth Sankar and his family is thrown in front of the viewers from the memory of another channel worker. As far as a media reporter is concerned Riya comes again as inevitable breaking news--as a dying patient, seeing death face to face in the cardiac care unit. It is quite problematic to think whether Riya gets media attention if she has not been born to a celebrity film star. In *Mediacity: Situations, Practices and Encounters*, Frank Eckardt investigates how the social settings and spaces of the city are created, experienced and practiced through the use and presence of new media.

It is important to note that Rehan will have to join a private channel as a journalist trainee. Miriam (Roma) is working as a Manager at an FM Radio station in the entertainment Channel 93.4 CLUB FM. Its slogan is 'twenty four hours entertainment'.

Rehan's rehearsal to interview the film star Sidharth Sankar is shot in the mobile camera by his mother and his friend Rajeev.

In the filmic narrative of *Traffic*, the film star Sidharth chats with his wife through video calling. With the shrinking of the non-virtual reality, the sense perceptions of individuals of the world around them is being somewhat blurred, elided, refracted, and even distorted through repetitive images of the non-virtual reality.

The evolution from parrot couriers to electronic mail, from the era of modern technology to the meta-technology of postmodernity has opened up avenues of social networking that is beyond all borders. As Durham observed:

Culture is produced and consumed within social life. Hence, particular cultural artifacts and practices must be situated within the social relations of production and reception in which culture is produced, distributed and consumed in order to be properly understood and interpreted (xxi).

Miriam (Roma), Abel's sister, gets an alarming text message on her mobile from her brother which helps the police to diagnose the problem. "The numbers are travelling" is an identical feature of mobile phones. The "inbox" space for message within a mobile phone results in a spatial practice—the police traces the numbers and identifies the place.

Lefebvre says, "Time and space are not separable within a texture so conceived: space implies time, and vice versa. These networks are not closed, but open on all sides to the strange and the foreign, to the threatening and the propitious, to friend and foe" (118).

#### **6. Spatial practices differ even within the same space**

Rehan's friend Rajeev teaches him how to drive a bike in a football ground, though it is a space for playing football. The normal function of playing football and the special function of driving practice occur in the same space.

The movement of the lift is in a vertical fashion from lower to higher levels or higher to lower levels. At one time it chooses only one direction. But the space within the lift acts as a private space for some time for Rehan and his lover (a space for their horizontal relationship between the bodies), though it is not at all a private space, but a space for the use of the public.

#### **7. Spatialisation of time**

All narratives take place on the 16th of September; when a few men and women, are going on with their distinct lives in diverse worlds, find their paths crossing each other at a traffic island. 16th becomes important in all the characters' life in the narrative space of



*Traffic*. But the actions they have to perform in various spaces are still different. For Sudevan, it is the date of rejoining after a break in service due to suspension. For Sidharth, it is the date of release of his new film. For Rehan, it is the first day in the channel as a journalist trainee. For Dr. Abel, it is the day of his wedding anniversary. He has plans to surprise his wife Shwetha (Remya Nambeesan) with a brand new car on their wedding anniversary. But it becomes a day of death for Rehan, which is unexpected. But it becomes a day of giving life to a dying body, Riya. In other words, it is a day of birth for Rehan, who occupies a new space in the mind of the people and in the body of Riya as a beating heart.

### Conclusion

My attempt in this paper was not to make a clear cut distinction between the city and the village or to make superior the city over the village, but to describe the living experience in and of the city in the filmic narrative of contemporary Malayalam films. In contemporary Malayalam popular cinema, the city space of unconventionality and mobility itself provides an infinite possibility of exteriorizing the present social practice. Another specialty of Kerala is that it is difficult to distinguish cities, towns, and villages. From Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Kasargode in the north, it is one suburban stretch, at times village-like, at times city-like. Villages in Kerala are fast becoming urban. Though there are differences between the two, their border seems to be invisible because of the spacial practice of travelling of persons and goods, technologies and information. It is useful here to mention about Arjun Appadurai's five scapes – termed as, *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes* (1-24).

Words are abstract as numbers. But we are living in a world of letters and numbers. So to understand the fact that words and numbers can have the ability to create their own 'realities' may help us to understand ourselves better. This paper is open to provide a scope for numerous further readings on culture, gender, class, caste and anything and everything related to human within the filmic narrative of Kerala, because space (mental/physical/social) is never empty: it always embodies meanings (Lefebvre 82).

South Indian cinema, from its inception has exhibited unique yet subtle moves in technology, production, distribution, consumption, spectatorship, aesthetics and representation. In a span of more than hundred years, South Indian cinema has created its own niche within the larger contours of World Cinema and the Indian film industry and has evolved as a significant cultural expression which deserves meticulous critical attention.

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