
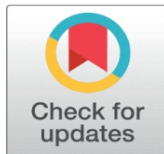
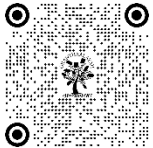


MALAYALAM CINEMA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPLORING THE SEMIOTICS OF NARRATIVE TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the symbiotic relationship between cinema and technological advancements, underlining the substantial impact of these advancements on both the artistic and technical aspects of filmmaking. It underscores that innovations in areas such as cinematography, recording techniques, lighting, and post-production editing have led to profound changes in the cinematic landscape. These changes not only manifest in the creation and presentation of films but also significantly influence the audience's perceptual and experiential dimensions.

Moreover, the article emphasizes that cinema functions as a reflection of societal and cultural paradigms, embodying principles from aesthetics and semiotics. It posits that cinema is not solely a medium for storytelling but also serves as a canvas upon which the aesthetics and semiotic interpretations of different time periods are portrayed. The discussion extends to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and cultural dynamics, thereby contributing an additional layer to the examination of how cinema adapts and asserts its influence in this context. In this milieu, the pandemic has compelled filmmakers to explore alternative digital platforms, prompting a reevaluation of Malayalam cinema from both a creative and semiotic perspective. This article strives to engage in a comprehensive exploration of these intricate interactions, aiming to shed light on the multifaceted relationship between cinema and technological progress.

Keywords: Covid-19, Digital in Cinema, OTT Platform, Malayalam Film Industry, Semiotics

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as an artistic medium, fundamentally operates as a vehicle for visual storytelling, with its primary means of conveying the narrative residing in its visual compositions. [Sabu Sankar. \(2008\)](#). Herein lies the pivotal role of shots, where the overarching narrative is communicated through the amalgamation of these constituent visual units. Consequently, it is crucial to acknowledge that cinema is fundamentally an assemblage of such shots, with each shot encapsulating its own unique significance. Nevertheless, it is imperative to underscore that these shots do not inherently carry fixed or immutable meanings. Rather, the interpretation of each

shot is inexorably contingent upon the broader narrative context in which it is situated.

In scrutinizing a film's narrative construct, the contextual interpretation of each shot within the specific parameters of the narrative becomes a requisite exercise. According to [Jithesh \(2009\)](#) the arrangement and temporal duration of each shot featured on the cinematic screen serve as critical determinants in ascertaining the intended meaning that is being conveyed. Each shot is, therefore, a deliberate artistic choice on the part of the filmmakers, with its duration, composition, and other constituent elements contributing to the comprehensive interpretation of the narrative. Consequently, the language of cinema is, in essence, the language of shots.

In a cinematic context, each shot augments the narrative in a distinct manner, with each shot being read within the context of the narrative's unique demands. The positioning and temporal span of each shot that graces the screen play a pivotal role in deciphering the narrative's intended meaning. Each shot represents an intentional decision on the part of the filmmakers, with its temporal longevity and visual arrangement contributing to the holistic interpretation of the narrative. Consequently, in the analytical deconstruction of a film's narrative, it becomes imperative to examine how each shot is meticulously organized and how the temporal durations of these shots on the screen contribute to the effective conveyance of the intended meaning.

Recent times have borne witness to the emergence of Malayalam films, which have found their way into the public domain through online platforms, in the backdrop of the COVID-19 era. In this context, there has been a pronounced proclivity towards showcasing external landscapes as opposed to their antecedents. Contemporary Malayalam cinema has thus witnessed a renaissance in the lexicon of visual storytelling, characterized by an augmented emphasis on external landscapes. There has been a conspicuous deployment of various shot categories, notably close-up shots, extreme close-up shots, medium shots, and point-of-view shots, discernibly evident in these films. Close-up shots, in particular, have been employed with notable frequency, enabling the audience to forge a more intimate and immediate connection with the characters.

In contrast, the use of long shots has been relatively circumscribed in recent Malayalam cinema, with the overarching focus directed towards engendering immersive visual experiences via a panoply of close-up shots. These shots, especially close-up and extreme close-up shots, have emerged as pivotally instrumental in advancing the narrative. This shifting emphasis has correspondingly resulted in a limited use of long shots in contemporary Malayalam cinema, as the overarching priority has veered towards heightening the visual engagement of the audience.

In summation, the present exposition undertakes a rigorous and analytical examination of the organizational dynamics of shots in contemporary Malayalam cinema within the crucible of the COVID-19 pandemic. The comprehensive exploration of the divergent shot typologies and their contributory roles in narrative delivery within recent cinematic offerings stands at the crux of this inquiry. This scrutiny underscores the quintessential role of shot composition, placement, and temporal dimensions in shaping and directing the audience's comprehension of the narrative, thus underscoring the evolving visual dialect of Malayalam cinema.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) **Understanding Narrative Shifts:** Analyze how the narratives in Malayalam cinema shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring themes, character arcs, and storytelling techniques.
- 2) **Semiotic Analysis:** Employ semiotic analysis to dissect the symbols, signs, and cultural representations embedded within Malayalam films produced during the pandemic.
- 3) **Impact of the Pandemic on Filmmaking:** Investigate how the constraints imposed by the pandemic, such as lockdowns and safety measures, influenced the production processes and creative decisions in Malayalam cinema.
- 4) **Exploring Sociocultural Reflections:** Examine how Malayalam films during the pandemic reflected and responded to the sociocultural realities, anxieties, and transformations brought about by the crisis.
- 5) **Comparative Analysis:** Compare the narrative trends in Malayalam cinema during the pandemic with pre-pandemic trends, as well as with cinematic responses to crises in other film industries.
- 6) **Implications for Future Filmmaking:** Assess the implications of the pandemic-era narrative trends in Malayalam cinema for future filmmaking practices, industry dynamics, and audience preferences.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

- 1) **Cultural Documentation:** It serves as a documentation of a significant period in the history of Malayalam cinema. The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges and opportunities for filmmakers, and analyzing narrative trends during this period provides valuable cultural insights.
- 2) **Impact on Filmmaking Practices:** The pandemic brought about significant disruptions to filmmaking practices globally. Understanding how Malayalam filmmakers adapted to these challenges, both creatively and logistically, can provide insights into the resilience and adaptability of the industry.
- 3) **Academic Contribution:** The study contributes to academic discourse by adding to the body of research on cinema studies, semiotics, and cultural studies. It provides a case study of how a regional film industry responded to a global crisis, enriching scholarly understanding of the intersection between cinema, culture, and societal change.

4. CINEMA AND THE AESTHETICS OF VISUAL COMPOSITION

The evolution of visual storytelling aesthetics in Malayalam cinema commenced in 1928, with a more pronounced expansion during the 1950s. Prior to this period, spanning from 1928 to 1950, the era of silent cinema in Malayalam witnessed the production of seven films, namely Vigathakumaran(1928), Marthanda Varma (1931), Balan (1938), Jnanambika (1940), Bhakthaprahada(1941), Nirmala(1948), and Vellinakshatram (1949). The thematic underpinnings of films from this era predominantly centered on social issues and class conflicts [Venkiteswaran \(2011\)](#).

Titles such as *Jeevithanauka* (1951), *Sarvekallu* (1954), *Neelakuyil* (1954) and *Randidangazhi* (1958) exemplify this thematic orientation. However, despite the gradual expansion of film production during this period, cinema did not hold a dominant position and theaters remained the primary locus of cultural engagement. The pivotal transformation of Malayalam cinema, as a medium, took place in the 1970s, as underscored by films like *Olavum Theeravum* (1970) and *Swayamvaram* (1972).

Olavum Theeravum is considered a seminal work, emblematic of the momentous shift in the narrative style and visual presentation of Malayalam cinema. In *Olavum Theeravum*, a distinctive approach to cinematography and editing emerged, radically reconfiguring the storytelling paradigm. It underscores the pivotal role of visual elements as a narrative medium and redefines the visual aesthetics of Malayalam cinema. The ascendancy of Malayalam cinema as a predominant narrative medium in the 1970s was chiefly galvanized by *Swayamvaram* a film that profoundly restructured the narrative discourse within the Malayalam cinematic landscape. This film ingeniously harnessed dialogue and visual composition, ushering in a new era in the cinematic lexicon and restructuring the comprehension of the language of cinema.

In the panorama of Malayalam cinema's history, [Menon \(1970\)](#) and *Swayamvaram* loom large as exemplars of how they have contributed to the metamorphosis of cinematic storytelling and the rejuvenation of Malayalam cinema. These films have embraced the power of visual elements and introduced innovative narrative paradigms that became emblematic of this transformative phase. As stated by [Rajakrishnan \(1987\)](#), p. 123, a notable characteristic of *Olavum Theeravum* lies in its method of composing shots, which conveys a balance between expansiveness and confinement. In this particular film, foundational cinematic elements, including shot composition and background music, are harnessed to articulate the concepts of openness and closure. V Rajakrishnan's insights offer a valuable perspective on the manifestation of cinema's inherent characteristics in terms of their comprehensive realization.

The film *Swayamvaram* directed by [Gopalakrishnan Adoor. \(1972\)](#), ushered in a notable transformation in Malayalam cinema by incorporating formal cinematic education from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) into the filmmaking process. Released in 1972, the film initiates with an extensive bus journey, lasting over five minutes, which culminates in an urban setting. This extended cinematic journey, characterized by its adept shot composition, serves as the initial manifestation of the film's distinctive approach.

[Gopalakrishnan Adoor. \(1972\)](#)'s work introduced a fresh visual language and narrative structure to Malayalam cinema. This transformation is evident in the film's visual settings, dialogues, and thematic representations. *Swayamvaram* boldly embodies the director's artistic vision. According to [Vijayakrishnan. \(1996\)](#), 126, *Swayamvaram* represents the first genuine and complete realization of a unique Malayalam cinematic language, exemplifying the essence of the autorenfilm concept within the Malayalam cinematic context. Vijayakrishnan further emphasizes that *Swayamvaram* stands as a significant milestone in the history of Malayalam cinema, acknowledging it as the first fully self-made Malayalam film and a paramount contribution to the evolution of cinema. The film's distinctive narrative language, marked by the utilization of long shots, visual compositions, and impactful dialogues, introduced a new paradigm for Malayalam cinema. It highlights the importance of autorenfilm in shaping the course of cinematic history within the region.

Within the annals of global cinematic history, the involvement of Griffith stands as of paramount importance. Griffith's distinctive contribution lies in the meticulous division of cinematic scenes into multiple shots and his adept utilization of these shots, thereby cementing his prominent status in the world cinema panorama. This is evident through the utilization of cinematic techniques such as close-ups and intercuts, which exemplify the various facets of his work. Griffith's enduring recognition in the realm of film history can be attributed to his discerning focus on the diversification of shots and their effective incorporation. This singular emphasis underscores Griffith's preeminent position in the realm of cinema.

In the broader context of global cinematic history, the role of seminal movements, such as German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and Dogme 95, in shaping the aesthetics of cinema and influencing visual composition and narrative techniques, cannot be understated. Therefore, the notion of cinema as a medium, along with its visual storytelling components, has perpetually occupied a pivotal place, both within Malayalam cinema and in the wider annals of world cinema history.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in an era of digital transformation, redefining the landscape of the film industry and expanding the scope of what is referred to as digital cinema [Fardis \(2020\)](#). This transformation encompasses a multitude of changes and innovations that go beyond the technical aspects, encompassing the very essence of filmmaking, distribution, and consumption.

5. COVID AND CINEMA

The impact of the digital revolution on cinema production and distribution has been substantial during the COVID-19 era. This impact extends to various dimensions of filmmaking, including the realm of independent cinema projects, over-the-top (OTT) platforms, small-screen cinematic experiences, mobile film making, and more. These aspects have become more accessible and prominent in the cinematic world. The COVID-19 period has acted as a catalyst for these technological advancements, driving the exploration of new horizons in film production, distribution, and artistic endeavors, both in terms of technology and presentation. It is in this context that the digital age in cinema has ventured into new frontiers.

The advent of the COVID-19 era has brought significant transformations to the world of cinema. These changes encompass not only the production and distribution of films but also the very act of cinematic consumption. A notable development during this period is the emergence of a new cultural landscape facilitated by Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. This shift entails a migration of cinematic experiences from traditional large screens to smaller screens, fundamentally altering the way audiences engage with films. This transition from large to small screens has substantial implications for cinematic aesthetics, particularly in the domain of cinematography. The change in the medium of viewing has introduced an entirely new audience, reshaping how visual elements in films are appreciated. Consequently, the COVID-19 era has given rise to a fresh segment of the viewing population, primarily driven by the prevalence of OTT platforms. In the context of Malayalam cinema, this digital cinematic revolution has resulted in the release of a multitude of films that were hitherto unseen, characterized by varying content, presentation, and authenticity. The release of films during the COVID-19 era, particularly through OTT platforms, has raised questions about the nature of their production, reception, and the extent to which they represent reality. The

examination of these aspects constitutes an ongoing exploration within the framework of cinema in the COVID-19 era.

5.1. POINT OF VIEW SHOTS

From an academic standpoint, the fundamental elements of cinematography that convey perspectives to the audience are predominantly achieved through the utilization of point-of-view (POV) shots in cinema (Jithesh T, 2009). Each shot imparts directions for visualizing a scene. The use of POV shots has gained substantial prominence in the context of cinema during the COVID-19 pandemic, where perspectives presented to an individual's point of view become more pronounced.

Through an individual's perspective, scenes are discovered in diverse ways, and the emphasis on these scenes distinguishes POV shots in COVID-era cinema. Consequently, the employment of POV shots plays a significant role in shaping the cinematic experience. This approach brings previously unnoticed perspectives to the forefront and reveals deeper meanings not limited to on-screen actions but extending to implied perspectives within the context of POV shots.

The implications of this approach are highly relevant in the COVID-era films, resulting in more comprehensive audience perceptions. Various scenes are unveiled through the characters' viewpoints, representing a primary focus in COVID-era cinema. This shift in cinematography not only alters how scenes are observed but also involves an in-depth exploration of those scenes, shedding light on concealed aspects and offering the audience new interpretations.

Noteworthy films like [Varghese \(2021\)](#) [Arkariyam \(2021\)](#), [Joji \(2021\)](#) [Pothan \(2021\)](#) exemplify the significance of character perspectives in the COVID era. These films have set the framework for a narrative that adapts to the challenges of the pandemic. They explore characters' attitudes in a patriarchal society and challenge societal norms. In [Arkariyam](#) the narrative explores individual attitudes within a patriarchal society and justifies injustice, while [Sharaf U Dheen's](#) character, Roy, at the focal point, offering perspectives that challenge societal norms. These narratives, through their character-driven viewpoints, make substantial contributions to the cinematic discourse. The perspectives of these characters redefine the cinematic experience, addressing questions and doubts while providing legitimate answers. In essence, these films introduce fresh viewpoints, encouraging audiences to engage with a more profound understanding.

[Sanu John Varughese's](#) recent post-COVID film signifies a shift toward a more conscientious approach. [Sharaf U Dheen's](#) character, Roy, introduces fresh viewpoints, fundamentally altering the cinematic perspective and playing a pivotal role in enhancing narrative comprehension. These films challenge societal norms, scrutinize historical contexts, and seek to legitimize injustices within a patriarchal society. The conclusion of these films underscores the resolution of doubts and the provision of well-founded answers, emphasizing the necessity to challenge and transform contemporary cinematic norms, especially in the post-COVID era. In summary, films such as [Aarkariyam](#) by [Sanu John Varughese](#) play pivotal roles in presenting character perspectives, significantly contributing to the evolution of cinematic perspectives. These films have ushered in a more profound narrative structure, intriguing the audience with their distinctive viewpoints and answers to questions and doubts, ultimately reshaping the cinematic landscape in the post-COVID era.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the film *Joji* directed by Dileesh Pothan explores the aftermath of the pandemic. It narrates a tale of familial discord within the context of the post-COVID period. The central figures in this film are Panachel Kuttappan and the offspring, who serve as the catalysts for the familial conflicts. The narrative revolves around the actions of individuals driven by power dynamics and the pursuit of authority, depicting the consequences of their manipulations. Notably, Panachel Kuttappan and *Joji* are the primary protagonists of this cinematic narrative.

In the initial segment of *Joji*, the character *Joji* is portrayed by Fahad Faasil, which instigates a transformation in Panachel Kuttappan. Subsequently, this transformation is perpetuated as the story progresses through the portrayal of characters such as Bincy, Poppy, and the household staff, all of which contribute to an evolving perspective associated with *Joji*. *Joji*'s viewpoint plays a pivotal role in reshaping the character of Panachel Kuttappan and influences other characters within the narrative. From an alternate perspective, it is through these distinctive viewpoints that the construction of a male individual unfolds.

5.2. FACE TO FACE CONVERSATIONS

The use of mid-shots and close-up shots in cinematic dialogues is notably prevalent in contexts where they bear substantial significance. These visual techniques find frequent application in a variety of scenes within films produced during the COVID-19 era. Conversational exchanges assume a central role as a predominant narrative device within COVID-era cinema, often featuring extensive and intricate dialogue sequences. [Don Palathara \(2020\)](#) *Joyful Mystery* (2020) serves as an illustrative case in point. It exemplifies how the film's narrative unfolds through protracted conversational scenes involving two individuals during a car journey.

In the realm of COVID-era cinema, dialogues serve as a primary conduit for narrative development. Noteworthy films such as *Arkariyam* underscore the significance of dialogue scenes, involving characters like Roy, Sherly, and others. Several films, including *Arkariyam* (2021), *Joji* (2021), *Wolf* (2021) and *Irul* (2021) allocate substantial importance to dialogue scenes. Within COVID-era films, these interpersonal confrontations hold a pivotal role in depicting a spectrum of emotions, including doubt, suspicion, fear, and apprehension. Characters portrayed in these films frequently embody individuals laden with various emotions, encompassing mistrust, fear, violence, and ethical quandaries. These dialogic encounters have been central to the portrayal of human sentiments, fear, and moral dilemmas inherent in the dynamics of character interaction. [Shaji Azeez \(2021\)](#)

5.3. INTERPRETATION OF INNER VISUAL PERCEPTIONS

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable shift in the narrative focus of films, with particular emphasis on visual elements. This transition was characterized by the extensive portrayal of scenes depicting various aspects of daily life, such as residential settings, urban streets, and vehicular activities. It is imperative to scrutinize the underlying implications conveyed by these visual representations.

Residential environments emerged as a significant backdrop in contemporary cinematic works. Many films delved into the intricacies of domestic life, offering a microcosmic perspective of societal dynamics. Notable examples include *Joji* (2021), *Arkariyam* (2021) and *Krishnan Kutty Pani Thudangi* (2021) which exemplify this

trend. Simultaneously, the cinematic landscape extended its gaze to destinations along the journey, exemplified by the film *Irul* (2021) [Izuddin \(2021\)](#)

The rationale behind this shift from external to internal settings in cinematic narratives can be attributed to multifaceted factors. These films effectively unraveled narratives that unfolded within confined spaces. The meticulous planning of cinematography was instrumental in the visual presentation of these narratives. Moreover, the strategic use of colors played a pivotal role, contributing to the creation of a subdued and ominous ambiance. The acceptance and recognition of these cinematic styles have been widespread, and they are characterized by their utilization of dark and muted color palettes to recurrently portray scenes.

5.4. CHARACTERIZATION

Numerous films produced during the COVID-19 pandemic period adopted a narrative framework prominently centered around two or three principal characters. A noteworthy and recurrent element within these character dynamics was the portrayal of a single male character alongside two female characters. This particular narrative structure, featuring one male and two female protagonists, became a prevalent theme across a multitude of films during the COVID era.

This thematic framework is evident in a variety of films, including but not limited to [Mahesh Narayanan \(2020\)](#) *C U Soon* (2020), *Arkariyam* (2021), *Wolf* (2021), *Irul* (2021), *Krishnan Kutty Pani Thudangi* (2021) and others. The narratives often revolved around a fierce competition for a woman, persistent conflicts that thus arises between two protagonists, and the transformation of character dynamics towards male antagonists. This narrative construct garnered significant popularity during the COVID-19 era.

6. CONCLUSION

An examination of COVID-era Malayalam cinema in the context of its reception by the general audience reveals a persistent adherence to established narrative and representational patterns that had garnered popularity in prior cinematic periods. The cinematic offerings on digital platforms, particularly over-the-top (OTT) services, are significantly influenced by market dynamics and viewer preferences. Notably, there is a discernible trend within Malayalam cinema during the COVID era, which appears to cater to personal inclinations.

This trend revolves around a narrative framework primarily focused on the desires and fantasies of a middle-class male protagonist. It encapsulates elements such as celebration, opulence, clandestine relationships, and depth, all presented with a rich aesthetic. The constraints of COVID-era Malayalam cinema become apparent in the manifestation of a singular perspective centered on the aspirations of a middle-class male. This perspective is prevalent in films characterized by grand celebrations, extravagant spectacles, secret liaisons, and intricate aesthetics. It is worth noting that not all COVID-era films exhibit subtlety in cinematic storytelling and innovation. Nonetheless, certain recurrent themes and representations in select narratives still highlight that elements of novelty and originality are not entirely absent from the cinematic landscape.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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