

Understanding mise-en-scene as a tool for visual storytelling in malayalam cinema of the past decade (2010-2020)

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Abstract

Inorder to understand how stories are conveyed through the details of the visuals, a few films were selected and read in the light of mise-en-scene. This is a structured documentation of the studies.

1. Introduction

Malayalam cinema has undergone what is now known as a new wave¹, after 2010. The end of the 20th century Malayalam film industry witnessed a majorly non-adultery content, like coming-of-age romance (*Niram*-1999), unemployment (*Nadodikkattu*-1987, *Ramji Rao Speaking*-1989), political satire (*Sandesham*-1991, *Varavelpu*-1989), etc keeping in mind the large family audience. In the following decade (2000-2010) the popularity of the films depended heavily on the star value of the cast.

The years after that saw innumerable films stripped of the glamour of cinema. *Traffic* (2011) directed by Rajesh Pillai is one of the initial movies that marked the beginning of the New Wave in Malayalam cinema. The non linear narrative of a real life incident that happened in Chennai, was critically acclaimed and celebrated. A lot of new directors came forward with fresh perspectives and styles of filmmaking. In this paper, I attempt to understand the visual storytelling in the light of mise en scene, reading one movie each from the different genres and styles I could identify in the said period.

Why mise en scene? There are multiple techniques to analyse movies. As an illustrator, I am more interested in understanding how the setting, colours, lighting, composition, style of costumes, frames,

¹ Gopinathan, B. S. (2016, March 2). *The New wave Of Malayalam Film Industry: Before and After – A Complete Analysis*. Retrieved December 19, 2019, from <http://filmmakersfans.com/the-new-wave-of-malayalam-film-industry-india-reviews/>

camera angles and POVs could contribute to the visual storytelling. The objective is to employ the observations of the study in my future projects and thereby be a more informed illustrator and storyteller.

2. Analysis

After categorising the films released in the mentioned time frame into different genres, I chose one film that best represented each genre to study. Below are my brief studies of the films chosen in the chronological order of their releases.

2.1. Amen- A Divine Comedy (2013)

Amen, directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery is a romantic comedy musical, made in a style of magical realism. Nowhere in the movie is it mentioned when the story is said to happen and in an interview² the director says it was essential to establish that Amen's is a story that takes place in an imaginary setting slightly far from reality, revealing it as an attempt at magical realism. This however, is not unseen in Malayalam cinema. A lot of films like *Nandanam* (2002) and *Njan Gandharvan* (1991) have successfully and beautifully woven elements of fantasy into real life narratives in the past. There have been a number of musicals as well; *Sargam* (1979) and *Bharatham* (1991) to name a few.

Amen's is not a narrative cycle that is unheard of. Starting from Romeo and Juliet, the story of a poor man who has fallen in love with a woman from a wealthy family is something that has been done over and over. Apart from the elements of magical realism and surrealism, what makes Amen truly stand out as a film would probably be because of the auteur en scene³. A narrative that's so old, is highly contextualised to a small village by the name Kumarankari, where the church of Geevarghese Punyalan is the prime factor binding the people who are constantly in conflict.

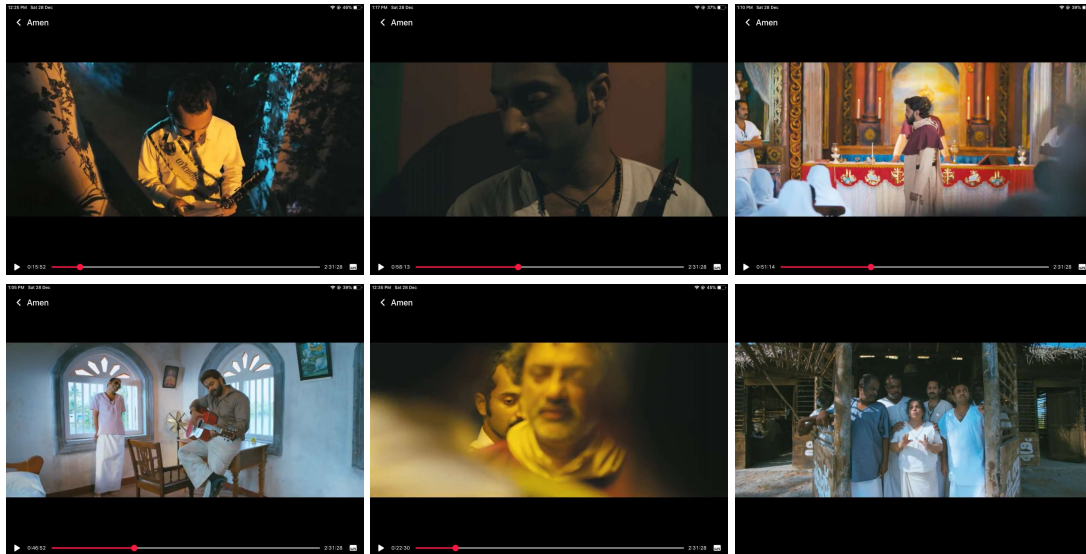
The extensive use of symmetry through the movie is something that is notable. Directors tend to avoid symmetry as it makes everything feel staged, taking away the natural dynamism. At the same time, in the movies by Wes Anderson (*The Grand Hotel Budapest*-2014) symmetry is used widely. The vertically symmetric composition of frames is one main thing that contributes to the style and exaggerated drama in Amen.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zTLyVr-ROQ>

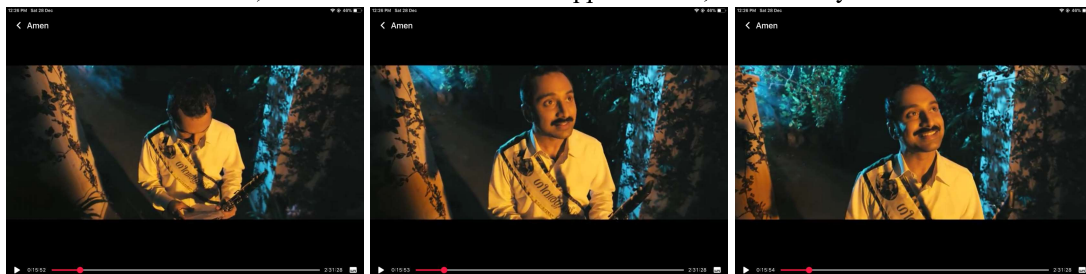
³ Elsaesser, T., & Buckland, W. (2014). *Studying contemporary American film: a guide to movie analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.



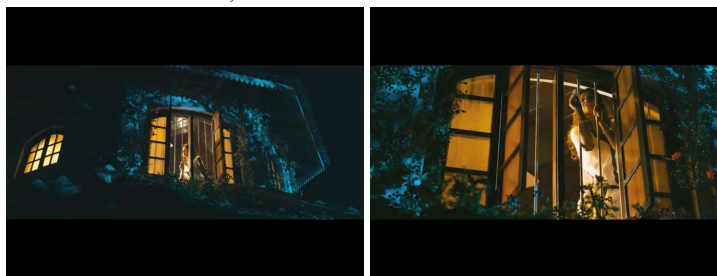
Solomon is a person with a lot of insecurities. He is not confident with himself, prefers running away from problems than fighting them, and is never able to stand up for himself. Even though he is the protagonist, he is almost never shown in primary focus in any frame until very late into the film. This is achieved through extreme high angle shots, shadows on his face and his positioning in the crowd that show how unimportant he is. He is always overshadowed and is just shown as one among the 100's of residents in Kumarankari. He merges with the crowd.



There are however a few scenes where he shows signs of happiness and traces of willingness to do something, like the one where he goes to meet Sosanna. The camera slowly lowers to an almost eye-level shot and he is seen smiling; Actually smiling, after having read Sosanna's letter. He is confident about himself; She has seen his talent and appreciates it, unlike everyone else.

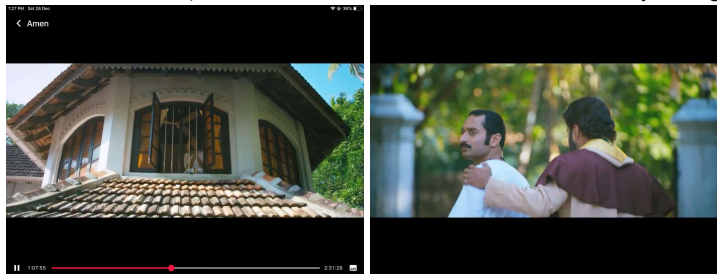


In the same scene, notice Sosanna and the windows:

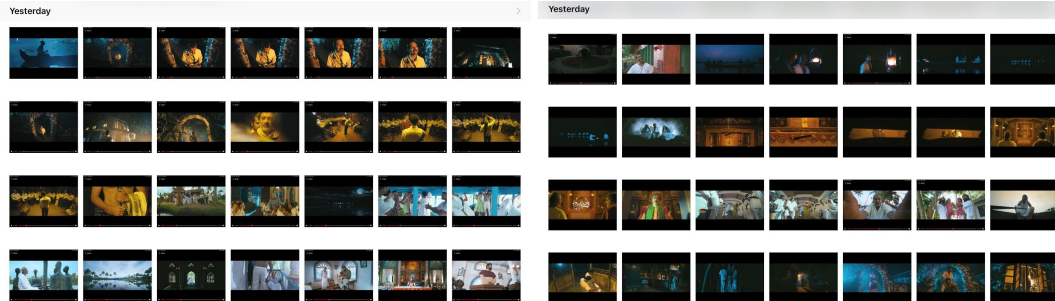


Both the archway and the windows are so embellished with flowers that it's dreamy. The exchanges between Solomon from the gate and Sosanna from behind the windows couldn't help but bring references of the classic Romeo and Juliet. The foreground-background relation makes such an interpretation possible.

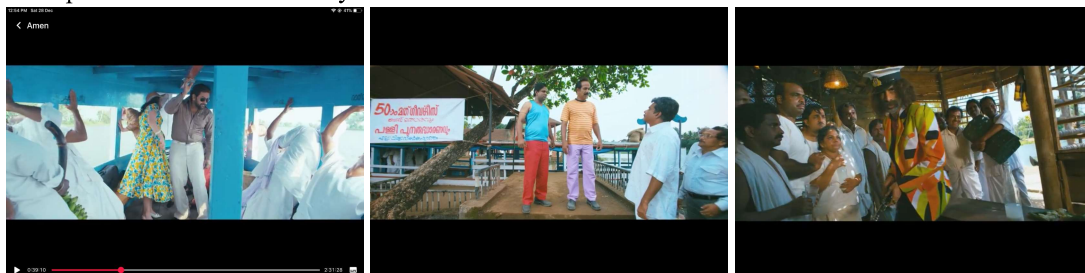
In the daylight, they are exposed and are not in their own world. The above mentioned props (the vines and flowers) are absent here. The set becomes ordinary, bringing things back to reality.



A lot of the elements of fantasy in this movie are shown after dark. The stark change in colours never goes unnoticed; The warm yellow lighting of lamps and the cool blue of the moon. From the bright natural lighting for the absurd comical events of the day, it goes to harsher shadows and highlights of the night.

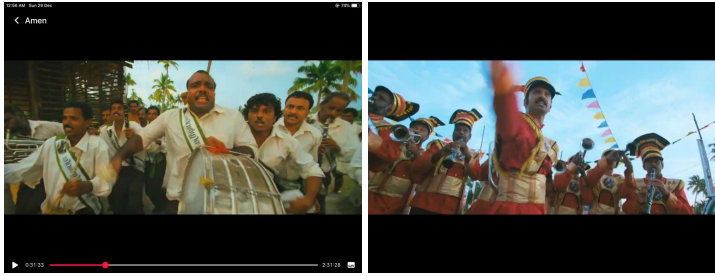


Like setting, costumes can have specific functions in the total.⁴ People in Kumarakari are clad in white or very light pastels. It's ironic, considering how much they argue and fight over petty things. Keeping in mind the place being dominated by Christians this does not seem like a conscious decision until outsiders start coming into picture. They are dressed contrastingly colourful and funky, putting an emphasis on the fact that they are outsiders.

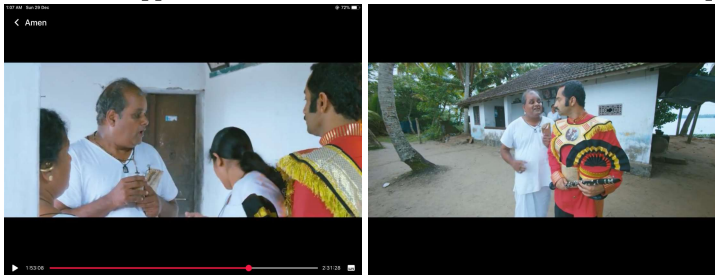


The Geevarghese Punyalan band's uniform changes from shades of dull white and grey to more confident, enthusiastic red and gold, marking an end to its unsuccessful days.

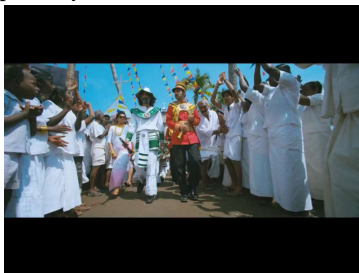
⁴ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (1993). *Film art; an introduction*.



This change to red also plays an important role in visually bringing Solomon's character into focus for the first time in a crowd after being continuously overshadowed through the movie. Solomon's talent is now discovered, admired and appreciated. He is shown slapping his sister for insulting him in front of Ousepp. He also doesn't look down at the feet when Ousepp threatens him.



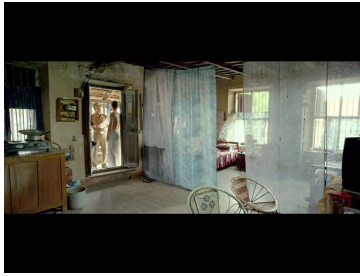
Later he is shown leading the band, walking like an equal with Pothachan. He is the character of primary focus in the frame.



2.2. Annayum Rasoolum (2013)

Annayum rasoolum is the directorial debut of the acclaimed cinematographer Rajeev Ravi. The film is a love story between Rasool, a taxi driver and Anna, a salesgirl. A lot of the communication between them in the first half of the movie apart is just silent glances from across the boat and the road.

The film begins with a file that's carried from the police station to Rasool's house. The camera follows the file, leading us to an ordinary day in Rasool's life. As the police talk to him at the doorstep, we get a glimpse of his house.

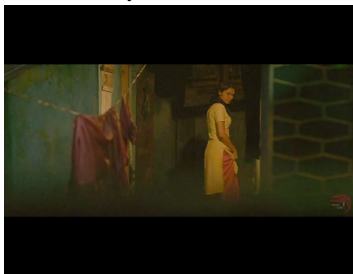
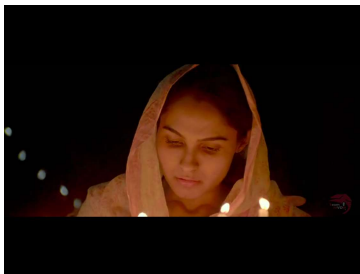


There are light coloured furniture, and white, pale blue curtains that soften the scene. The hall that is the house is clean and well kept. We immediately know that the brothers we are introduced to are simple ordinary men, and more or less ordered.

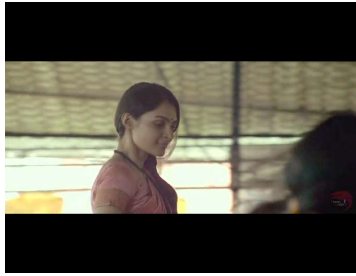
Further into the film, we see Colin and Abu planning on lifting a car. They need Rasool's help. Even though he agrees to it, we see he is quite restless and petrified at the prospect of stealing a car. revealing he is not the kind who is willing to do anything and everything just for good money. He is however a genuine friend.



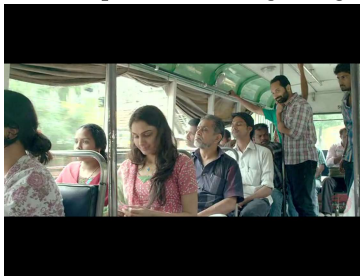
There are barely any dialogues for the female protagonist, Anna. She is a very quiet girl whose life revolves around her workplace, her home and the church. She is seen in pale, simple clothes. Her uniform is also monochrome. Her hair is always tied back.



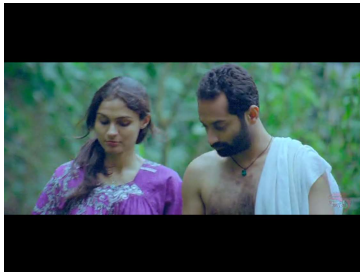
In the second image she is shown wearing a pale kurta on an in skirt she wore to work, emphasising on the fact that she is not from a very well off family. Neither does she care too much about how she looks or what she wears. She is not even shown smiling. This changes a little into the film. And that's when we know she likes Rasool. She wears bindi, and takes time to braid her hair as opposed to her usual, lazy tying.



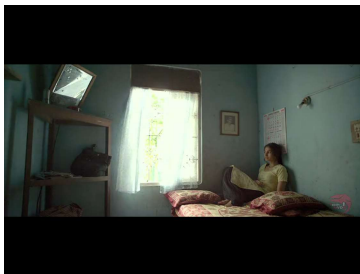
Later when she decides to give in to her desires, she meets Rasool, breaking her daily habits; With her hair open and wearing a bright pink and green churidar. She is more cheerful.



After she runs off with Rasool, she is constantly shown in bright colours;



As she is taken home after Rasool gets arrested, she goes back to wearing pale, dull clothes.



2.3. Maheshinte Prathikaram (2016)

Directed by Dileesh Pothan, Maheshinte Prathikaram is a realistic film, despite instances of slapstick comedy. And it's definitely not the narrative that makes it one. As a film that belongs to the post-superstar era, Maheshinte Prathikaram has characters that are earthly and everyday; Each one of them has depth, and unique quirks. Mahesh Bhavana is a tender hearted man who leads a very ordinary life with his father. He is unintentionally pulled into a street fight that humiliates him in front of a big crowd. It hurts the man's ego. He takes a vow that he would not wear chappals until he pays back Jimson for the humiliation. This narration is inspired from a real life incident in script writer Shyam Pushkaran's neighbourhood.

Malayalam movies for a very long time had this concept of a sidekick next to the main character played by a popular actor⁵. In Maheshinte Prathikaram the two main characters Mahesh and Baby are given an equal depth and importance. This is achieved through various shots where they occupy the same screen space, and their shops are located at the same level of a building, right next to each other. In the second picture, you can see 'Baby' written on the chair Mahesh is sitting on. The character is re-asserted here through subliminal visual perception.

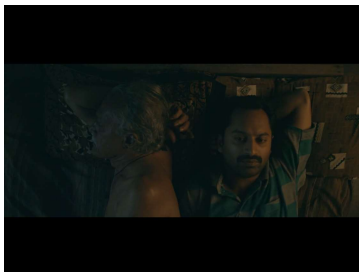


The movie opens with the scene where chappals are being intensely cleaned before bath. Clearly, they play an inevitable part in any man's everyday life, and so, in the movie.

⁵ Venkiteswaran, C. S. (2018, March 14). *How To Laugh In Malayalam: Outlook India Magazine*. Retrieved June 14, 2020, from <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/how-to-laugh-in-malayalam/299929>



There is a scene where Mahesh is worried that his father is going crazy. He sleeps next to him that night, clearly uneasy and restless. His father on the other hand is calm and peaceful. The two characters are at two different places mentally; This is executed by the orientation of the two in the frame. There is no closure to this conflict.



Later in the film, Soumya has to choose between Mahesh and a better marriage proposal. She is sleeping next to her mother, again clearly restless. Her mother tells her “The problems you have now could be simply resolved by just hugging me and crying”. She does it, indicating she has made a decision; The conflict is resolved.



Mahesh’s father is generally shown sitting around, observing everything. It seems a little mysterious, even to Mahesh. It’s evident in the unresolved uneasiness in the night he sleeps next to

him. After the father's talent in photography is revealed, he is shown more in light and in action. There is communication and dynamism in his postures.



Following these, we see Mahesh more observant in enjoying the beauty in the things around him that he was so far oblivious to. There are montages of sceneries that are generally seen as beginners' photographs. This is the only time we see his dog not tied up as well, marking how he has opened up to things more.



2.4. Ee Ma Yau (2018)

Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Ee Ma Yau* is a realistic portrayal of a funeral, set in a small village called Chellanam, significantly populated by fishermen. Eeshi promises his father Vaavachan a grand funeral minutes before he passes away. The film revolves around a very broke and stubborn Eeshi struggling to make his father's wishes come true.

I could not help but feel a strange resemblance towards the Swedish classic *The Seventh Seal* (1957). Both the films revolve around death, and are set along sea shores. Certain imageries drew direct parallels and are intentional:

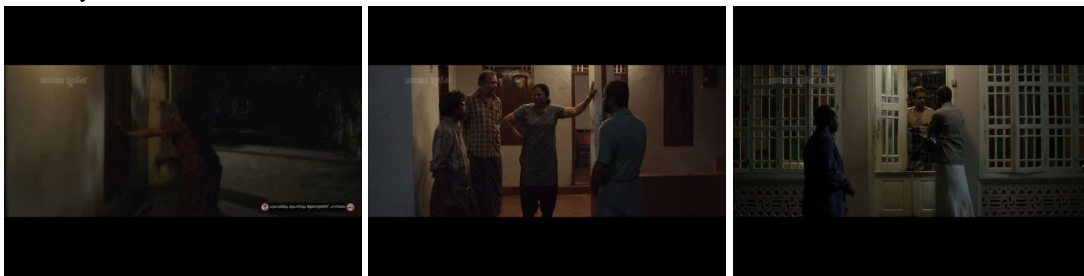


A major part of the film is set in the dark. It's all grey, except for the sparse yellow lighting from a few houses; There is a constant foreboding of things about to get worse that comes out as a result of it; And it does. A funeral that was supposed to be a grand send off ends up being a disaster because of a number of absurdities that occur.



This is contrasting to the opening scene in the film that is a grand funeral procession, shot on a clean, sunny beach. Lijo Jose Pellissery in an interview with *Film Companion*⁶ reveals that it is a dream sequence, showing how Vavachan would have wanted his funeral to be. The end sequence on the other hand shows how his send off actually was.

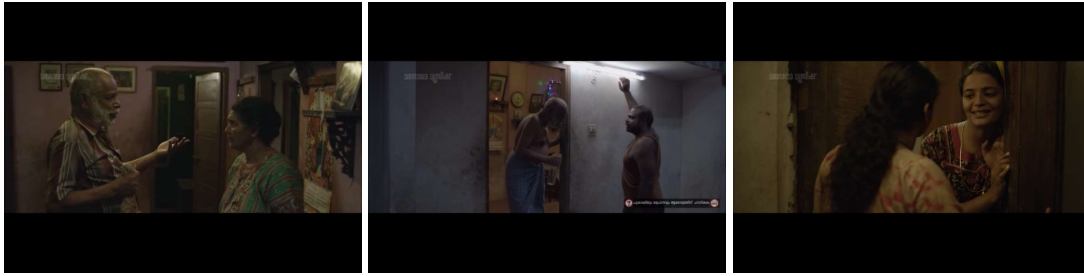
Doorways are used in films for a number of reasons⁷, like to show the relationship between the characters (*Frozen-2013*), representation of escape (*The Truman Show-1998*), separation of worlds (*The Wizard of Oz - 1939*), etc. *Ee Ma Yau* features a number of exchanges and conversations happening at doorways. Initially it might not strike many thoughts, but further into the film, it would not seem like a coincidence. There is a beaming urgency about the interactions that happen at doorways.



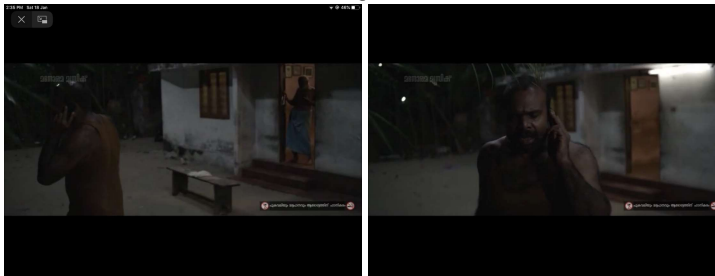
They are also very unsettling; It emphasises on how we are always in a hurry. Even between family members, a lot of interactions happen at the doorways;

⁶ Sequeira, G., Rangan, B., Shah, R., Ghosh, S., Mohan, A., Mehrotra, S., ... Team FC. (2020, June 12). *First Shot Last Shot: Lijo Jose Pellissery's Ee Ma Yau*. Retrieved January 10, 2020, from <https://www.filmcompanion.in/features/malayalam-features/first-shot-last-shot-lijo-jose-pellissery-malayalam-movies-ee-ma-yau-chemban-vinod-jose-dileesh-pothan/>

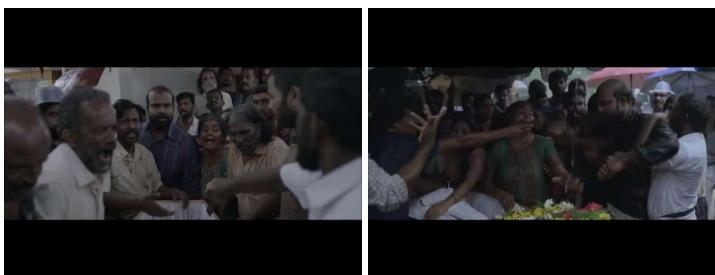
⁷ Risk, M. (2020, February 27). *How These Oscar Winning Films Use Doors To Tell Better Stories*. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/how-these-oscar-winning-films-use-doors-to-tell-better-stories/>



Vavachan dies as well standing at the entrance of the house;



Lijo Jose Pellissery does not care for any specific individual. His concerns are firmly rooted in the community. Specifically, the Christian community and its various facets in Kerala. If it was the Syrian Christians in *Amen* and *Angamaly Diaries*, it is the Latin Catholic in *Ee Ma Yau*. His films don't follow a main character's life, instead they use the character as a pivot around which the community he belongs to comes at odds with his motivations, his struggles and his frailties⁸. This is apparent when after Vavachan falls dead, Sabeth runs door to door asking for help and the camera follows her, as the central characters in the film gather around. We don't learn their names, but we get introduced to the community. Another way in which the chaos in the storyline is brought about visually is through extremely packed frames. As the day gets more and more miserable, it starts raining, and the tarpaulin falls, cramping the frame further.



Amidst all the chaos, the nurse lazily ties Vavachan's chin. As it slowly loosens, it appears like he is wailing, for some peace even in his deathbed, looking straight into the camera.

⁸ Shrikrishna, A. (2018, May 23). The recurring themes of 'Ee Ma Yau' director Lijo Jose Pellissery. *The New Indian Express*. Retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2018/may/23/the-recurring-themes-of-ee-ma-yau-director-lijo-jose-pellissery-1818160.html>



2.5. Jallikattu (2019)

Lijo Jose Pellissery's yet another experimental film Jallikattu is an attempt at minimalism. A buffalo wrecks havoc in a village, and the humans start acting like barbaric creatures, diminishing the fine line that separates them from animals.

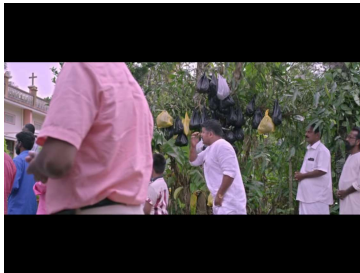
Beef is widely consumed in this village seemingly surrounded by forest. Killing and butchering buffaloes is a routine and having the meat daily is a habit the villagers have gotten accustomed to. When the day's buffalo escapes its shackles, the order in the village is in question. It's interesting how the mundane routine is depicted in the film, without taking up much screen time (this is important because the film is just 1.5 hours).

Consider the following series of shots from the movie:



A full walk cycle consisting of fractions of it from different people walking with the bought meat, in plastic bags.

On Sunday mornings, everybody attends Kurbana in the church. Food is generally cooked in houses after these; The meat is hung on a tree outside the church, and it is like a big cross:



It is interesting to note how only the first half of the film is shot in the daylight. The director claims it is to ease the audience into the life of the people the movie revolves around⁹. As a viewer you move along with the pace of the story as night, that is way more eventful and happening, approaches.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nhcx8lXxnSg>

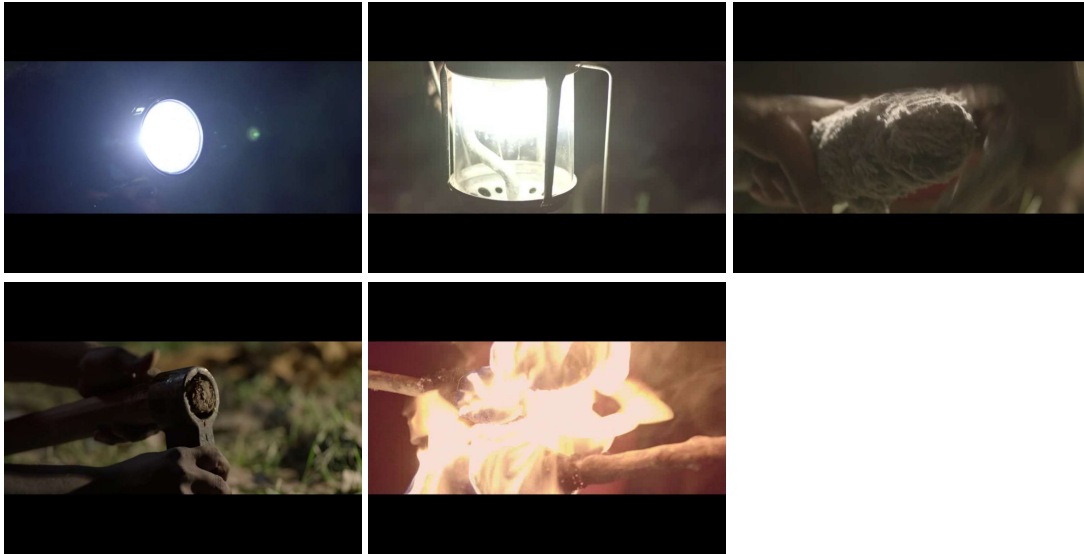
This worm's eye view of the buffalo trapped in the well seems like a three dimensional stage, and Anthony is performing, with all the light from the fire and torches from up above. He needs to do it on his own to establish himself as the alpha male over kuttachan.



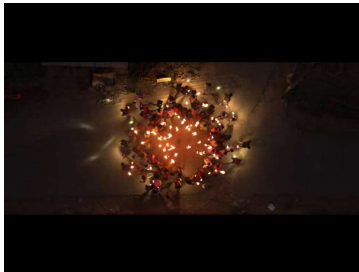
After the buffalo escapes from the well, causality increases. A man dies and a lot of people are injured. The destruction is shown with a series of shots;



And they get ready to catch the escaped buffalo, again shown with a series of montages:



There are these images through the films that suddenly become meaningful after the end scene showing Neanderthal men being aggressive over a dead buffalo. For example this shot where the people light their flame torches in a circle and then split up; Like a group of primitive men before hunting.



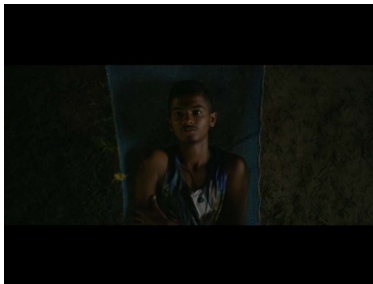
2.6. Kumbalangi Nights (2019)

The directorial debut of Madhu C. Narayanan, *Kumbalangi Nights* is a film rich in image systems. It's a story of a dysfunctional family of four brothers Saji, Bony, Bobby and Franky who are always at odds with one another, but still have each other's back. These men, despite having all the freedom men enjoy, are unable to find happiness in their lives. The movie challenges and questions the patriarchy in the society.

Kumbalangi nights opens with the scene of Franky leaving his hostel for home at the start of holidays. We see the other kids making plans for when they reach home. There is an overhead shot showing Franky looking up. He is disturbed. We see unpacked bags, and belongings lying all over.



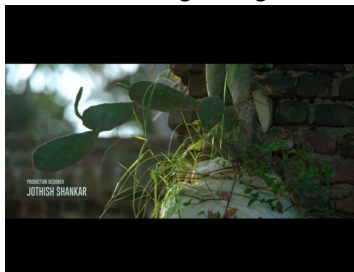
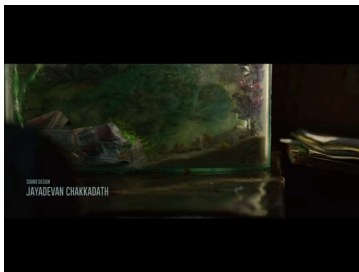
Later after he reaches home, he cleans up the place and cooks food. After a small scene showing how restless his home is, Franky is again shown in an overhead shot, lying down near the iconic lake in Kumbalangi. This brings back the shot mentioned above. Two different instances, but Franky is still shown the same; He hates that his home is dysfunctional.



Following this is a lullaby, with montages of the house that is falling apart. Each of these compare the present to figments of the past. Say, the sarees (probably left back by their mother) tied across the roof, a few adult magazines near a framed childhood group photo and shoes on an old sewing machine.



We see a broken fish tank in a corner and cacti growing on the roof.



Both these elements reappear in the film. There is a live fish tank in Shammi's house, possibly to show the contrast between the two families; to ironically emphasise on the apparent concept of 'idealism' in Indian society.



And the same cactus has bloomed, with yellow flowers when Franky's house actually turns into a home, with the arrival of all the women. The metaphor doesn't go unnoticed.

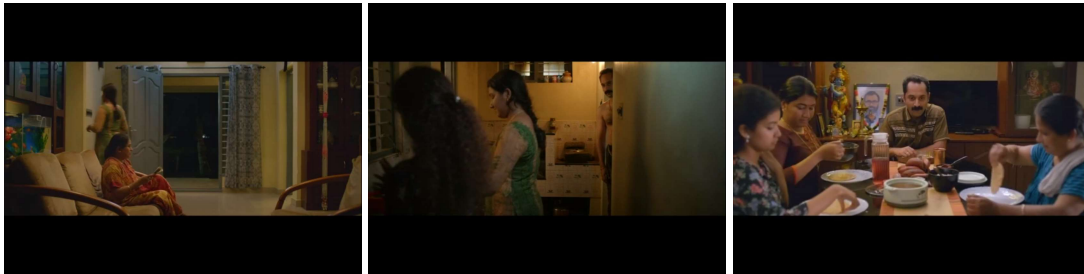


Shammi's character is introduced to us through this following scene, which is a close up of his face on the mirror. Clean shaved, spotless face with a thick, perfectly trimmed mustache, smiling at his own reflection in the mirror. In the following shot, he scrapes off a bindi stuck on the mirror with his blade. But His sense of masculinity is not unfamiliar to us; He is a symbolic representation of the toxic masculinity in society, which is normalised and even celebrated in movies widely. But Shammi is not shown as a sane man. He calls himself a complete man, as he perfects his moustache. The scraping off of the bindi is a foreboding to how he slowly asserts his dominance over the women in the family.



Being the only male member, Shammi considers it his duty to protect the honour of the women in the family. This is shown through a few beautiful crafted shots- when the mother corrects her posture when he walks past he room, when he insists to know the private conversation between Simi and

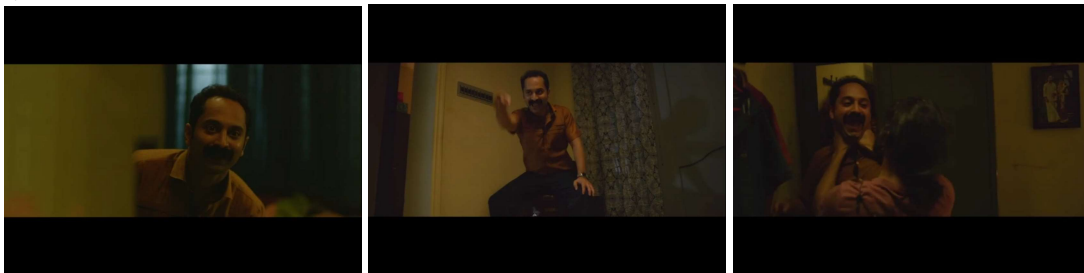
Babymol and when he pulls his chair to the end of the dining table covering the photo of the deceased father.



Shammi makes us extremely uncomfortable. His insanity is shown subtly through a few shots, that completely makes us look down at the celebrated sense of masculinity he portrays, and along with it, the patriarchy of the society.



As the film approaches climax, his insanity is manifested double fold, as the family refuses to go by his commands;



Another character whose portrayal is notable is Saji's. he is introduced to us as a sensitive, irresponsible but loving elder brother. He is in shock after his friend dies trying to prevent him from killing himself. Feeling extremely guilty, he looks at everything differently.



The scenes following it mark the transition of the characters of Saji and Bobby. They finally seek help and try to find comfort in being open about their emotions that they had kept bottled up inside for long, thus breaking the social convention that men should not cry.



The house the brothers live in slowly turns into a home as a consequence. The beginning of the change is marked when Bonny brings his girlfriend to stay over; Franky washes one tea cup from a pile of broken ones to serve her tea:



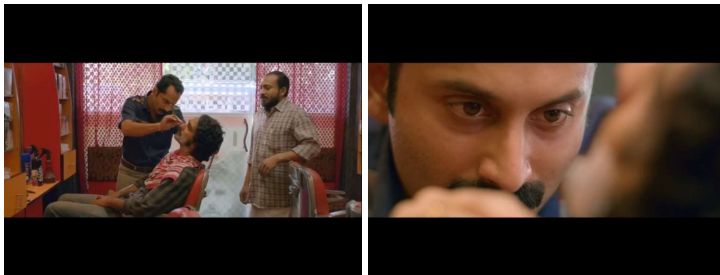
Consider the following iconic scene from when Saji brings home his friend's widow.



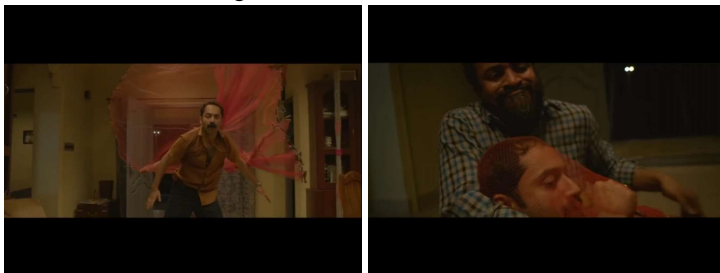
The same shot is planted earlier in the film; Franky longingly looking at a picture of Mother Mary with baby Jesus.



Colours have been used wisely in the film. For example the shop Shammi works in is bright red. The visually aggressive quality of its¹⁰ builds tension upon the borderline scary character that Shammi already is. The extreme close ups of the shaving blade on Bobby's throat also add to the anxiety in the scene.



Later into the film, Shammi is taken down by the brothers by a red fishing net, putting an end to his toxic masculine regime.



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