

## Alternative Cinematic and Critical Practices

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I want to briefly discuss an article which Neil I. Perera wrote for the *Attha* newspaper in 1972 called "ungrammatical cinema." In this article he talks about a young man's response to seeing Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*: "I can see that there is something serious being said in this film, but I cannot grasp it. Can you explain this to me?" It is to solve the problem involved in this question that he wrote the article reflecting on his own viewing of some 10 years prior to this of some major international modernist films such as *Hiroshima mon Amour*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, both by Alain Resnais, *La Dolce Vita* by Federico Fellini, *Ashes and Diamonds* by Andre Wajda and also Lester James Peries' controversial film *Nidhanaya* (The Treasure).

The question he asks is a paradoxical one - what makes "some films so fascinating to watch and yet so difficult to understand?" He poses here an important question about cinematic fascination which makes him vulnerable - vulnerable because these films seem 'ungrammatical', because we have to learn their grammar and syntax even as we watch them spellbound. In fact he involves the image of a child in order to understand this difficulty. The point of the analogy lies in the fact that a child's perceptual capacity outruns his/her conceptual capacity - a child constantly asks "What is this?" but his/her capacity to understand is less developed. Neil Perera says that these films make us child-like in this sense and yet that they do provide deep intellectual and emotional stimulation.

I find this article utterly engaging because a mature Sri Lankan critic has shown a responsiveness to a younger man's intellectual curiosity which then leads the critic to explore in an open way what films can do to us. He seems to explore the ontology of the cinematic experience experientially. This attitude is very different from that of the "realist critic" who is so sure of what films must do, that he/she goes to a film armed with an image of our "reality" and unflinchingly measures the film in relation to that monolithic construct in

his/her head and gives the film a plus or a minus. This marking practice is what I would call the policing of meaning, policing of the film to fit one's preconceptions of what film must do. In this model the film is rarely given an active productive function. The knowing critic always already knows what reality is and knows what film must do in relation to that.

Neil I. Perera's approach is far more appealing because of its generosity of spirit, its intellectual and emotional readiness to be transformed by the cinematic experience. But it isn't only great European modernist films that address us in a multiplicity of unpredictable ways. And here, following Neil Perera's practice of listening to a young male cinephiliac I wish to mention an anecdote told me recently by a friend, about how a group of young women reported individually their experience and reading of a recent Sinhalese film, *Sihree* (Woman, 1991) by Malini Fonseka.

This is an ambitious film that I thought would be impossible to make in Sri Lanka because of its subject. Who would want to watch the story of an old woman and her bull - even if the woman was played by Malini Fonseka. As it turned out, many did; as my friend said, these women (who rarely ever see films because they come from a rural area where there are no cinema halls) each of them read it as an allegory of our recent violent history. They read the vengeful killing of the cattle thief by the old woman as an allegory of a mother's fierce and absolutely justifiable anger at the disappearance and brutal murder of her bull/son - she does after all touch the bull and address him as son.

This reading made sense to me on reflection because there is a sequence in the film which involves the goddess/demoness Kali, via her statue. This image of the blood thirsty *kali* is I think one of the rare cinematic moments in a film that is rather undistinguished formally, despite its ambitions. I was therefore quite lukewarm about it until I heard this particular

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\* Part I of this essay appeared in *Pravada*, February 1992

reading of it. Until then I too, like another urban Sri Lankan Marxist woman, thought what's all this fuss about a bull when so many human beings are being killed today in Sri Lanka. The more inventive reading by my sister and my other self I find enthralling. It doesn't, however, make it a great film but it does show how people do make something out of what is given them in popular culture, however unpromising the material might be. This is a particularly moving example of how a film (whether modernist or not) is actively produced by the viewer; Malini Fonseka's intention in making this film is irrelevant - what matters is what sense we make of it here and now.

*Palama Yata* (Under the Bridge), a film by H.D. Premarathna made in 1990, is most certainly a film of multiple address. The different, often contradictory ways in which this film was interpreted by both the public and the critics makes it worthwhile trying to study its reception. The fierce critical debate which attended it, its huge box office success, its mega advertising campaign (unprecedented in the history of Sri Lankan cinema) certainly make it a mass media event or phenomenon.

I don't intend to do a detailed analysis of this critical debate nor that of the film itself here. But what I want to do is extend my argument in part I by making a defence of melodrama within the context not only of this formula (genre) film but also films usually designated as "serious" or realistic by our critics.

To this end I want to look at *Palama Yata* as melodrama or more precisely as a hybrid of a certain realism and melodrama. But before I do this I want to map out the history of the melodramatic form in western theatre as the necessary background to support my argument.

### MELODRAMATIC FORM, A HISTORY

Though melodrama as a western theatrical genre is a 19th century form, many scholars have argued for its centrality to 20th century mass culture, especially to cinema. This scholarship dates only from the 1960s. Prior to that, from the turn of the century to the 1960s, melodrama has been thought of largely as a trashy form. The melodramatic impulse may be seen in the 19th century rewriting of King Lear with a happy ending. Dickens is assigned a second rank by F.R. Leavis, definitely outside 'the great tradition'. Dickens was seen as a writer who, because of his melodramatic tendency, fell short of the high-seriousness and maturity of the realist novel. In this critical field tragedy and realism became standards of high cultural value, needing protection from the encroachment of mass melodramatic entertainment.

Dickens was of course a master of entertainment, a showman, writing under the pressure of the serial form.

In fact, it was cinema's intimate association with melodrama that had prevented for so long the acceptance of cinema as a serious object of study both in the university and in critical discourse. It is only with the growth of theatre studies in the 1960s (outside departments of English literature) that a concern with theatricality and performance came to the forefront of scholarship. It is within this context that melodrama received serious scholarly attention. It is even a little later that cinema studies took up the theoretical investigation of the concept of genre and melodrama in particular. Melodrama had low prestige in the early days of cinema studies itself because family melodrama and the weepies or the woman's film were, in Christine Gledhill's words, "condemned by its association with a mass female audience." In contrast, the western and the gangster films enjoyed a higher prestige as major national genres of American cinema.

Melodrama as a genre came into critical visibility due to at least two reasons. Feminist critics had begun to write about the genre giving it some minimal status. The most important reason was however methodological. Anglo-Saxon film criticism opened up to French structuralist and neo-Marxist theorising on culture which led to the discussion of popular culture and high culture, both of which were seen to be affected by capitalist commodity production. The new methods made available by structuralism and its attitudes democratised the cultural field. It was now possible to analyse a commercial film, considered either good or trashy, by using structuralist methods. It is this context, intersected by feminism, that brought melodrama firmly into the film theory agenda.

In the 20th century, in cinema, the term melodrama is less easy to localize and define because it seems all pervasive. Crime films, films noir, westerns, have all been regarded as melodramas. It has been said that hollywood's great success as a national and international cinema depends on its melodramatic inflection.

In a more limited sense, melodrama has also come to be associated with a cycle of films centering on women and the family - films that are markedly different from the action genre. This is the area of the 'woman's film', and the TV soap opera.

Christine Gledhill has argued that the 20th century restriction of the genre melodrama to refer only to family melodrama and the weepies is an impoverishment of the more full blooded 19th century sense of genre, and she traces its history in theatre and shows its class origins and its ability

to respond to the beginnings of the commodification of entertainment.

The so called "legitimate theatre" in both France and England had dialogue while the visual or so called "illegitimate" theatre specialised in spectacle such as ballets, pantomime, acrobatics, clowning, exhibitions of animals, freaks, music and song. All of this depended on visual display or spectacle. Here we see the commodification of former folk and popular entertainment forms.

What came out of this was an alternative dramatic rhetoric that was visual, rather than verbal. It is this spectacular mode which is one of the main sources of 19th century melodrama. Because this form of theatre was very popular and attracted a wide public (the emerging middle-class, the lower middle-class and the working class) the "legitimate" theatre of the aristocracy was compelled to use aspects of this popular theatrical rhetoric, so as to not be obsolete in the entertainment business.

Another source that fed into 19th century melodrama was the form of drama known as bourgeois sentimental drama which was a corruption of classical tragedy. In this form, the family became the central focus of personal, moral and social conflict. The triad of hero, villain and heroine derives from this form. It is from this sentimental form that melodrama draws its character types and plot devices.

According to Peter Brooks<sup>3</sup>, this bourgeois sentimental form lacked "overt excitement", "the cosmic ambition" and a sense of evil; and violence which melodrama would provide. It is these missing theatrical elements that were drawn from the popular forms of spectacular, non-verbal, physical theater. It is the merging of these two quite distinct theatrical traditions that gives rise to melodrama in the 19th century. With the entry of film into the cultural field it inherits this rich tradition of theatrical melodrama. Part of cinema's immediate popularity lay in its ability to combine photographic realism with pictorial sensationalism.

Let us remember that B.A.W. Jayamanne's Minerva players who created some of Sri Lanka's earliest films, came from the Nurti theatrical tradition into film. Nurti, deriving from a Parsi theatre was a melodramatic form of variety entertainment which was influenced by western variety theatrical forms of the 19th century.

Peter Brooks has developed the theoretical and philosophical implications of the "melodramatic imagination" in a very influential book of that name. According to Brooks the aim of melodrama is the spectacular staging or enactment of moral imperatives, the struggle between strictly polarised forces of good and evil, conscious and unconscious in a

post-sacred era. He posits the European Enlightenment and the consequent French revolution of the 18th century as the two moments of the decisive end of the sacred era marked by Christianity in the west. His argument is that in a post-sacred world popular melodrama fills a moral vacuum. Further, its formal devices and structures enable the expression of an essentially moral universe. Melodrama, according to him, feeds a demand for significances unavailable within the constraints of socially legitimate discourses. To fulfil this demand, melodrama invests in highly symbolised personages, events and relations. The characters are of the type father, mother, son, so that there are really psychic types. The events in the narrative are plotted to maximise tension, to bring out and stage conflicts. He says that melodrama uncovers the "psychic occult" and the "moral occult," i.e., it drags out psychological forces from the depths of the family and evil forces from cover.

Christine Gledhill agrees with Brooks in saying that melodrama is less about the release of individual repression and is more about "the public enactment of socially unacknowledged states" - the family is a means to this end.

So this staging of the social unconscious is essential to the melodramatic impulse, which is why melodrama includes not just tears but terror as well. This imperative to and delight in a spectacular staging of the socially repressed or inexpressible is probably what makes melodrama still so popular in mass culture. So it could be said that, from the 19th century on, the melodramatic imagination is a pervasive mode of understanding and constructing worlds.

### *Palama Yata* as critical melodrama

I want to return to *Palama Yata*, (Under the Bridge), after this recounting of the history of the melodramatic form. The two aspects I want to develop are: (i) melodrama's capacity to stage the social and psychic unconscious and (ii) the relationship of melodrama to forms of realism. While melodrama may be limited by its will to stage conflict in highly polarised forms such as good vs. bad, etc., this aspect may be modified by a realism in the acting and the staging (mise-en-scene).

The critical debate on *Palama Yata*, anthologised in the booklet "Under the Bridge and its Critics"<sup>4</sup> is itself a sharply polarised one. There were those critics who thought it a good film and those who thought it bad.

This melodramatic polarisation of the critical field is itself a noteworthy phenomena in the Sri Lankan context. But what is even more striking to me is that critics of both camps

do not discuss the film as melodrama. Indeed, a concept of genre is absent as a critical tool in the evaluation of this film. So I see my function here to be one of reformulating the terms of the debate, not taking sides, though I do in fact like the film.

I would call *Palama Yata* a maternal melodrama because it spotlights and stages the tensions of the life of a lumpen mother. It is an iconoclastic representation of the maternal. The icon that is shattered is that of the sexually pure, long suffering, sacrificial mother. We do have other maternal melodramas in our cinema which represent bad mothers, for e.g. *Duhulu Malak*, *Ihatha Atmaya*. The mothers in these films are middle-class, so in this respect, too, *Palama Yata* marks a departure from tradition. What is new about this representation of the lumpen mother, Dottie in this film is that her active sexuality, expressed in adulterous desire is made appealing. Dottie is torn between her lover and the love for her son, her desire to give the child a proper future.

This is an unusual triangle, because the husband is absent in prison. One might say that this very triangular configuration is a melodramatic one, because it polarises conflict in order to heighten it, to stage it. The choice of the actress Geetha Kumarasingha as the unconventional mother is perfect because in her past roles she has always represented sexual desires in the realm of taboo (*Karumakkarayo*, *Siribo Aiya*). One has to only think of interchanging Vasanthi Chaturani for Geetha Kumaranasinghe in this maternal role to realise how an actress' body gets coded and over-coded by the roles she has played. The polarisation of conflicts, which are economic, sexual and familial are carried out through a melodramatic narrative structure. If the imperative of the melodramatic imagination is to stage the unspeakable, the socially repressed, then the narrative structure of melodrama has to be flexible. That is, it cannot work within the logic of linear causality and psychologically motivated action. Linear causality and psychological motivation of action leads to a certain coherence, whereas the melodramatic experience is about incoherence and the attempt to articulate it. Therefore, melodramatic narratives are structured on the following:

- Revelations
- Loaded moments
- Sudden reversals
- Last-minute rescues
- Lack of satisfactory cause-effect relations

These are structural elements that realist narratives shy away from. Melodramatic narratives are constructed on these principles because they are concerned with intensity and with staging contradictory desires. Melodrama has been aptly called the 'art of proper exaggeration' and what the above structural features show is how it is created at the level

of the plot. It can also be done in terms of acting and mise-en-scene (the visual composition of the frame). Or instead, one of the elements such as the plot can be melodramatic while the acting may be realist; any of these elements can be structured in such a way that melodramatic devices and realist ones are mixed in uncertain ways. I see *Palama Yata* as a hybrid of melodrama and realism.

I wish to argue that the film's huge popularity has something to do with the convergence of a melodramatic aesthetic with a certain realism.

While the plot is melodramatic in order to stage the 'unorthodox' desires of the lumpen mother Dottie, the realism of the film is to be found in the conception and performance of that role by Geetha Kumarasingha. The plot is under motivated in typically melodramatic fashion. Dottie's catastrophic fall into a stage of degradation under the influence of her gangster-lover is never explained. It is shown as a fait-accompli. A simple title "10 years later" shows us the changed Dottie addicted to drugs and alcohol, endangering her son's life. The plot transition condenses her emotional experience melodramatically. Dottie has to reach the depths of misery and why she got there, the various moments in this journey, are of no importance. She has to reach a point of intense degradation before something else could happen. The misogyny, the punishing of the feminine that characterizes melodrama is however absent in *Palama Yata* and characterizes H.D. Premarathna's earlier works as well.

Here it is worth mentioning his *Sikuruliya* (The Fated One) 1978 which displays a fine melodramatic sensibility in contriving the marriage of beauty and the beast (a midget). The fated one circulates among several men before she is rescued by her true love. But none of her previous liaisons are judged moralistically. So the woman is not condemned by the narrative. This sympathetic representation of woman is central to H.D. Premarathna's work and brings in a new realism in its refusal to melodramatically punish the woman who breaks the norms of sexual conduct thought proper to women. Like in much of melodramatic cinema, Sri Lankan cinematic melodrama has also thrived on the punishing of the feminine and consequent spectacular display of victimhood. In such a context H.D. Premarathna's *Palama Yata* marks a significant advance.

*Palama Yata* is a well structured narrative and has a tighter formal organisation than any of H.D. Premarathna's previous work. This formal care strengthens the film. The realism in the performance of the role of Dottie is seen in certain key scenes. The scene of seduction is one such. While the scene is played for its full melodramatic theatrical value, the way in which Dottie shows her ambivalent desires for the gangster makes the representation of adulterous desire complex,

no small achievement this, for our cinema. It is this nuanced, complex representation of sexual desire outside a moralistic condemnation that makes the scene of seduction so powerful.

Even the narrative plotting swerves from full melodramatically polarised conflict by making the imprisoned husband's return a peaceful one. According to the melodramatic conventions of our cinema, an absent husband usually returns to punish the adulterous wife by butchering her either in imagination as in *Duhulumalak* or in reality as in *Suddilage Katawa*. But in the case of *Palama Yata* our conventional expectations are left unfulfilled by Dottie's husband who returns only to see his son and leave. That the same actor plays a similar role in this film and in *Suddilage Katawa* but reacts so differently is I think worth noting. It is as though a certain cinematic education in the performance of genre roles is being conducted between certain films, actors and roles.

The other aspect of realism I see in this film is the scenario of the weak son killing the strong gangster villain, which certainly has a certain melodramatic charge to it. However, I still see a new realism in this because, unlike in say *Ihatha Atmaya* where the son (unknowingly) kills his adulterous and mad mother, in *Palama Yata* it is Dottie who fights back against her degradation and attacks her lover. It is after she has initiated this act of self-defense and self-reclamation that the son joins in, inadvertently killing the villain in defence of his mother and himself. Nowhere in this scenario is the mother condemned for the choices she has made. This is a major achievement in the context of the Sri Lankan cinema.

The main slogan used to advertise the film was "the story of a Mother Courage of the lower-depths". This conjunction of the maternal woman with the idea of the illicit (lower-depths) has created an unusual representation of the maternal which would have contributed to the film's popularity. Within the context of our genre cinema this configuration marks a new realism. Conflicting emotions (both sexual and other) are presented without moralising. It is the non-judgmental manner in which a melodramatic situation is elaborated that creates a new realism in our cinema. Here I would like to invoke a statement R.W. Fassbinder made in relation to his melodramatic films:

The only kind of realism that interests me is that which happens in the head of the spectator, not the realism on the screen.

The criticism that found *Palama Yata* deficient and inadequate was based on its alleged inaccurate representation of the lumpen milieu under the bridge. This view holds that the film was a look at under the bridge from on top of the bridge, i.e. that it romanticised misery. The film in fact has a strangely depopulated feeling and this has been criticised as

being unrealistic of a milieu where people live in close proximity to each other due to poverty and such isolation seems improbable.

According to this view, if the film is called *Under the Bridge*, then what it must show is the life there and not the erotic life and struggles of one woman. Perhaps it is the title that has led critics to expect more than the film gives; perhaps if it was called *Dottie's Story*, much of the adverse criticism may not have arisen. Perhaps the sense of isolation and foregrounding of Dottie's emotional and economic struggles need not be used to condemn the film if we view the film as melodrama - let us remember Fassbinder's *Ali-fear eats the soul* where the German city in which the circular drama of ethnic and sexual oppression is enacted seems strangely empty - depopulated. These are melodramatic devices that intensify the emotional experiences of the protagonists and are as such justified. To wish for an "epic presentation" of life under the bridge is to wish that it changed its genre. This is not fruitful criticism. At a time when Sri Lankan films are showing signs of widening their range, to melodramatically pose options as an either/or choice between "good film" vs. genre film is constricting and debilitating. The possibility of the development of a critical melodramatic genre cinema is lessened by such criticism. H.D. Premarathna's *Palama Yata* more than any other work of his approaches this ideal both formally and thematically. Perhaps in this instance the audience was definitely ahead of the critics in endorsing the film.

### Cinematic Capability

In this final section, I want to briefly introduce Jean Baudrillard's<sup>5</sup> theorising of the successive phases of the image, as a way of talking about the productive power of the cinematic image. He says that in the first phase it is the reflection of the basic reality. So one could make the distinction between

Image and Reality

In this phase the image reflects a basic reality. In the second phase the image deforms a basic reality, so that we would have the following model

Image	vs	Reality
False	vs	True
Illusory	vs	Real

In the final phase the image precedes and in fact forms our reality. This is when the clear distinction between Image and Reality can not be maintained because images are part of our reality. This process of images forming their own reality is what he calls stimulation in order to distinguish it from



representation. The latter assumes the separability of reality from the image, from the representation. According to Baudrillard it is the technologies of mass reproduction and the electronic media that create the new regime of image-making in the era of late capitalist consumer culture. According to this argument, TV and the mass media are not simply reflecting our reality; they are in fact forming or constituting our experience of the real. Following this logic, the image of Dottie in *Palama Yata* can not be criticised for being unreal. There might not be a woman like Dottie in real life yet she has a palpable screen presence and she is the result of a significant mutation in the image of femininity in our cinema. To see the issue of the construction of femininity in film not simply as a reflection of the social but as an active struggle within genre representation is to give cinema a productive power. Film is not simply a mirror; it can in fact create affects and hopes that we can barely articulate without its help.

I wish finally to present three brief examples of cinematic capability from the history of cinema:

- 1 D. Pathiraja's *Bambaru Evith*. In the midst of largely very favourable reviews there was one criticism of the film that I found limiting, which was the criticism of the character played by Wimal Kumar de Costa. It was said that his character was unrealistic, that such a character does not exist in contemporary Sri Lanka. The assumption underlying this argument does not permit the cinematic medium to produce characters, because it assumes that the function of the cinema is to realistically reflect the real. This is only one of the many ways in which cinematic capability or filmic performance can create the human form. Pathiraja, who came to cinema after writing and producing the stage play *Kora Saha Andhaya*, was never criticised for creating those two memorable characters on the ground that their counterparts did not exist in everyday life. This is because theatre criticism in Sri Lanka had/has a far more sophisticated sense of theatre's creative potential, while cinema criticism based on a realist epistemology is far too restrictive.
- 2 The next example is about gender - the celebrated face of Greta Garbo (the Swedish actress who worked in Hollywood). Via lighting, framing, texture, make up,

**Like much of melodramatic cinema, the Sri Lankan too thrives on punishing the feminine. Some critics found 'Palama Yata' inadequate because it inaccurately represented the lumpen milieu under the bridge. To wish for 'epic presentation' of life under the bridge, however, is to wish that it changed its genre.**

- a bisexual - masculine and feminine image was created from the body and face of the actress. But even more surprisingly, her image was perceived to have achieved a transcendence of the category of gender altogether - a sublime visage/face. This is cinematic capability or filmic performance creating a Utopian figure, which is not yet.
- 3 The third example is about ethnicity, image and the register of voices. Here I'd like to involve another local example of cinematic capability by moving from the face of Garbo to the voice of Rukmani Devi. Rukmani Devi, as we all know was of course a Tamil and also the first and foremost star of the Sinhala cinema. I should imagine that no one thought, then or think now, that she took a place or a job that should have gone to a Sinhalese girl. It is only in a utopian medium like film that we may see, hear and experience what is as yet not possible in flesh and blood.

#### Notes

- 1 Neil I Perera, *Aththa*, March 12th 1972, Reprinted in *Sinesith*.
- 2 Christine Gledhill (ed) *Home is where the heart is, Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, BFI, 1987. This whole section is drawn heavily from Gledhill's introductory chapter "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation".
- 3 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination, Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Yale University, 1976. I have drawn heavily from this book to present the philosophical implications of the notion of melodrama.
- 4 *Under the Bridge and its Critics*, A Lanka Kala Kendra publication, 1990.
- 5 Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulation, Semiotext*, 1983, NYC. p.11.
- 6 The question that has guided me in writing this lecture is how does one produce alternative readings of films without constructing some monolithic Big bad Thing, be it Hollywood or our own formula cinema? I have tried to move away from simple oppositional binary thinking to a more complex way of trying to create change in the field of study.