

SOME CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON ALTERNATIVE CINEMAS

PART I

SRI LANKAN FAMILY MELODRAMA: A CINEMA OF PRIMITIVE ATTRACTIONS

by

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"I think a truly national cinema will emerge from the much abused form of melodrama when truly serious and considerate artists bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it."

Ritwik Ghatak¹

"I look forward to receiving your completed scenario. I hope it will contain pathos, thrills, well-timed and well-calculated comedy situations, intermingled with the other emotions, which I am sure every large picture requires."

William Fox to Murnau²

"If the film industry is destroyed, there can be no "art" cinema. So I say we have to work out a balance between commercial and artistic films. There are hundreds of people who are dependent on the film industry for their survival ..."

Anoja Weerasingha³

The much abused form of melodrama is of course now critically respectable, due to the work of scholars and critics who have theoretically and historically explored its centrality in popular culture. Some have argued for its importance even within the tradition of high modernism. Despite the critical valorisation of melodrama, it is a reality that there is a hierarchy of the popular - Murnau's Melodrama *Sunrise*, Sirkean Melodrama, and those of Fassbinder, and closer to home, Ghatak are at the top end of the critical paradigm. My concern here is with a form of

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melodrama that is critically thoroughly disreputable, the Sri Lankan melodrama which has been castigated decade after decade by local film critics and intelligentsia committed to the development of a "truly indigenous national cinema".

Underlying virtually all this criticism is the implication that because the generic formula was copied from Indian cinema (Tamil and Hindi) it is alien and, given its mythical formulaic structure, it is unable to express/represent what is perceived to be Sri Lankan reality.

The purpose of this paper is to disagree with these assumptions with the hope of critically salvaging the maligned generic formula of the Sri Lankan melodrama for a different practice.

I have argued the following elsewhere⁴:

- 1 That in the period 1947-1979 there were basically two types of films being made in Sri Lanka:
 - a. Genre film
 - b. Departure from genre towards a social-realist mode
- 2 That unlike Indian cinema (from which it derives its generic model), Sri Lankan cinema in this period had only one Genre: what I call the family melodrama

The Formula ("Vattoruva")⁵

B.A.W. Jayamanne, whose stage play *Kadauna Poronduwa* (Broken Promise) was made into the first Sinhalese film in 1947 (it was in fact shot and processed in South India) observed and described the structure of the formula as follows:

"The duration of the film had to be 2 1/2 hours. One hour of this had to be given to scenes with dialogue, 1/2 hour to songs (about 10 songs) another 1/2 hour given to silent background scenes, with an interval of 15 minutes."⁶

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In this comment he does not account for the 15 minutes, but the plan gives some indications of how the structure of the film was conceptualised. Though it is not as detailed as William Fox's letter to Murnau, one factor common to both pieces of writing is the conception that a popular film has to have certain essential ingredients, whether it be "pathos", "thrills", "comic situations" or situations to generate "emotions" or songs (which are always accompanied by dance or movement) and background "scenes" of visual interest. This is a structure developed not from the interiority of character driven plot but rather from a set of ingredients around which a narrative is to be generated. This way of working is similar though not identical to G. Melies' method of working at the beginning of cinema - in the early part of the 20th century.

"As for the scenario, the "fable", the "story", I only worried about it at the very end. I can assert that the scenario so executed was of no importance whatsoever because my sole aim was to use it as a "pretext" for the "staging", for the "tricks" or for picturesque tableaux."⁷

These statements by early practitioners of cinema indicate that this particular approach is not a retarded third-world formal structure but an older filmic economy. Though the earliest Sinhala films were made well within the era of sound they are based on an economy that has much in common with the conception of cinema prevalent in the silent era.

Though the Sri Lankan genre film always tells a story, its great investment in the act of staging picturesque tableaux and trick effects impels me to think this structure is impervious to value judgements based on taste and or nationalist rhetoric. One can safely assert that the melodramatic form of the Sinhala cinema is a vital one - it continues to attract people in the fourth decade of its existence in Sri Lanka. Wherein lies this vitality is a question that has fascinated me for over a decade. Depending on the methodological tools at my disposal, I come up with different answers, and I am returning now to this genre from a rather different perspective than I had ten years ago when, under the influence of the British *Screen* theory, I viewed this melodramatic structure/form with some reservation. This was due to the way in which the twin operations of "narrative" and "spectacle" were conceptualised in the 70s. The psycho-analytic paradigm made it impossible to think of the genre outside a mode of guilty pleasures.

If one forgets psychoanalysis for the moment and starts with an idea of modernity and modernization and what this might mean in the context of the genesis of a national cinema and the creation of a new public sphere, then it is possible to develop analytic tools that can salvage the abused genre. The formula film can be divided into its narrative operations and its scenic operations. The narrative economy of this type of cinema is characterised by what I call prodigality - arbitrary rupture of continuity and causality of the action, proliferation of minor parts, characters and events to a dizzying degree that one forgets the main action line. The term "prodigality" also refers to the non-parsimonious, uneconomic expenditure of energy so characteristic of these films up to this day. Though the plots can be called 'episodic' the economy is extravagantly wasteful. Therefore the word prodigal describes it best.

The scenic operations can be thought through with the help of a set of terms coined or revived by Tom Gunning, the historian of silent cinema. What he has done over a series of suggestive articles is to situate early cinema of the period 1895 - 1906 (the so called 'primitive' era) within the context of modernization and the concomitant transformation of the human sensorium. Gunning calls early cinema, a cinema of "attractions", and its effect an aesthetic shock and astonishment. According to him and other historians, this silent cinema is one which is prior to the hegemony of narrative film. Thus it is characterised more by a desire to "show" something rather than to tell, and is an unashamedly exhibitionist cinema, unlike the voyeurism of the later classical mode (in Hollywood). Concomitant with this propensity to display views is an ability to solicit the viewer directly, signified by such devices as frontal composition, the recurring look at the camera, the gratuitous displays of cinematic trick effects. It is a cinema that delights in its visibility, and conceives of its impact on the viewer as a series of visual shocks and thrills.

Gunning points out how the term 'attraction' refers back both to the 19th century popular entertainment such as fair ground amusement parks, magic and variety theatre and circus, as well as to Sergei Eisenstein's radicalisation of the concept via his theatrical, filmic and theoretical work. He reminds us of the enthusiasm of the early avant garde for the emerging mass-culture at the turn of the century and of their fascination with the new kinds of stimuli provided for an audience not acculturated to the traditional high arts, an audience created by processes of modernization and urbanisation. This conjunction of a new audience (largely working class) with a new set of perceptions gave a utopian dimension to the creation of a new public sphere. The traditional aesthetic of contemplative absorption necessary for the 'consumption' of bourgeoisie high-art was challenged by the new mode of exhibitionist confrontation with the viewer. The fact that film itself was first exhibited as an attraction within vaudeville aligned it with this mode of perception both in structure and in the mode of exhibition. The 'attraction', then, according to Gunning, is an aggressive and sufficiently autonomous peak moment in a performance that is visually striking.⁸

What is fascinating in Gunning's formulation is his insistence that though the concept of attraction and the pleasures peculiar to it are different from those of story-telling, it is not opposed to the narrative impulse.

"In fact the cinema of attraction does not disappear with the dominance of narrative but rather goes underground both into certain avant-garde practices and as part of narrative films, more evident in some genres (musicals) than in others."⁹

The exhibitionist scenography of the cinema of attraction is characterised by a temporal operation fascinated by the instant rather than by developing situation. What it is after is the fleeting, intense moment whether it be a pleasurable thrill or a thrilling repulsion. The early films are largely one shot films where editing is not significant. A visual economy of this sort is not interested in causality and verisimilitude. But even in the more complex work of Melies and E.S. Porter where editing does have a function, the principle of attraction, the series of relatively autonomous thrills, can still be said to operate.¹⁰

Spectacular Moments/Denigrated Attractions

What I will do in this section is to try to think of the Sri Lankan formula film through the ideas generated by Gunning. Across the 40 odd year history of the Sri Lankan cinema certain scenes or attraction recur with absolute predictability:

- Love Scenes, with Songs and Dances
- Night Club Scenes
- Wedding Scenes
- Lullaby Scenes
- Crying Scenes with Songs
- Fight Scenes
- Rape Scenes
- Murder Scenes
- Deathbed Scenes

These scenes are so identified with the formula film that on occasion it is possible to hear a director proclaim his (sic) intention of making a 'serious film' (which really means a departure from the formula) by saying that there won't be a single song in it. Though the formula film always tells a story, as I mentioned earlier, its narrative economy is prodigal. It is, in this respect, quite different from the tightly knit narrative economy of classical Hollywood cinema. This feature of the formula film probably derives from the variety theatre format of the (nurti) plays that were first adapted to the screen.

The mandatory scenes of attraction are what make the local melodramas so "tasteless" to their critics in comparison with the realism of Western melodrama, and I don't want to argue that the formula films are great cinema (most of them are very poor both technically and conceptually). But I do think that the structure, the film's formal properties, are an immensely valuable resource that could be put to better use. The prodigal narrative economy and the mandatory scenes conceived as attractions (the repertoire of which can be changed) can work together in tension, in a montage of attractions, even. Audience appreciation of such a flexible structure, which permits the shifting of visual and narrative registers, is striking, and the formula's ability to effect instant displacement between reality and fantasy could certainly open the social field to cinematic refiguring.

The *love scene* with its songs and dances is a peak 'autonomous' moment; the image of fulfilled desires. It is an enchanted space/time created by cinematic magic. The change of locations and costumes in a single scene, the shots of lovers driving in motor cars in scenic locations are, equally, fantasies of social mobility. In the very early films these scenes were shot in long-take, more recent films (influenced by rock clips) use a fragmented editing style. But in both, the lovers are conscious of performing not only for each other but also for a viewer.

This is especially so with female performer who looks directly at the viewer, soliciting her/his gaze. These moments of the pure 'visibility' of material and personal felicity are simple allegories of love transcending class, the recurring plot motif in the Sri Lankan cinema. They offer a series of intense scenes (where the narrative logic of before and after does not operate) that can be expanded up to a duration of 2 to 3 minutes. Unlike scenes of kissing, and copulation, which usually have a narrative trajectory leading to a climax and resolution of tension, these love scenes figure a highly formalised 'foreplay' that extends time in a non-climactic duration. They are the felicitous moments in otherwise catastrophic narratives of class-crossed lovers. Several of the new

directors of the 80s have been particularly respectful of this dimension of the popular cinema and have explored their utopian impulse in darker, more dystopian registers - (see, for example, Vasantha Obeysekera's *Palangetiyo* [Grasshoppers] and *Dadayama* [The Hunt]).

The *fight scenes*, (low tech Karate type fighting) have a peculiar attraction because the sound is post-dubbed, quite often out of synch, and very loud. There is a visceral intensity to these scenes on both the audio and visual registers. That they seem incredible is not the point; for the *afficiado* of that cinema (still largely the urban working class), such attractions provide moments of corporeal intensity and magical possibility.

The *death bed scene*, where a parent extracts a vow from a child to renounce her/his desire in favour of being a dutiful child, is also constructed as a frontal composition, just like the happy endings where all concerned gather together as if posing for a photograph. The former scene figures a moment of irreversible temporal change in order to render palpable one of the key themes of the family melodrama - the conflict between duty and desire, between loyalty to the family and the expression of individualistic values.

Though such scenes are related to the narrative they also hold and expand climactic moments to increase their emotional effect. Their duration (usually in long take) extends well beyond the needs of the plot. If the death scene provides a shock that fissures the seeming unity of the family, the 'family photograph' affirms its wholeness.

Rape scenes are always allegories of class and power in Sri Lankan cinema. Usually a rich man rapes a poor woman. She gets raped when she leaves her home, usually looking for employment. It is this figure of the woman that the major binary schema of the genre's mythical structure is articulated:

Urban	Rural
Rich	Poor
Westernised	Traditional
Bad	Good

In *Pitisara Kella* (Village Girl), 1953, by S. Wimalaweera, a young poor village girl loves a poor village boy. But the girl's mother orders her to give up her true love and marry a rich man who has connections with the city. After their marriage he impregnates and abandons her. She accuses her mother of destroying her life. Their house catches fire and the mother dies in the flames thus necessitating the village lass to come to the city. After an initial period of hardship she becomes a famous dancer in the city as is westernised in manner. This narrative of the pressures of modernization on a woman who can now not depend on marriage as means of economic survival is, however, elaborated within a moral frame. The woman's passage into modernity, signified by the city, is fraught with danger (she is solicited as prostitute but chooses the career of dancer instead) and she herself becomes urban, rich, westernised, and bad. In a key attraction she addresses her own image in the mirror in her dressing room, while smoking and taking a posture signifying a hardened sophistication influenced by western mores, and says "you were once a village girl but now you are a dancing lass."

The shock and thrill of this scene is that it is not a scene of narcissistic rapture but an image which invokes a memory of a difficult process of transformation. It is quite usual in such scenes for the image then to step out of the mirror and address the addressee in a multiplied series of attractions. At the level of spectacle this is a rare attraction of a woman's economic mastery (she is no longer an abject victim) and yet at the narrative level she stands condemned.

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This is achieved by the ploy of the unfaithful husband's desire to return to his wife. The wife, no longer a docile village lass, drives her husband to murder by telling him that the only condition on which she will come back to him is if he brings her Rs. 8,000. In his desperation to return to her he kills her manager and attempts to steal the money in his keeping. The modern woman's economic independence is seen as a cynical desire for money which leads to catastrophe. So after her husband is imprisoned she renounces her career and used her ill-gotten wealth to become a giver of alms to the poor. It is while engaging in this culturally valorised activity that she meets her true love at the foot of a giant Buddha statue. The film ends, if not with a wedding, at least with a hopeful meeting, affirming the importance of traditional values.

Two scenic attractions prior to the scene with the mirror also show the prodigality of the narrative structure. One is a comic routine of a village couple come to town. The comedy is generated by their rustic appearance and response to the city, as well as by a routine of cuckolded husband and shrewish wife. The husband terminates this episode with his line "the village has light, Colombo is dark". There is no narrative motivation in terms of causality in these extended attractions but they can be retrospectively read as scenes where consensual assumptions about gender roles are disturbed, given as city attractions to enjoy but not condone. But because the main character is not present in either of these scenes, the sense of their arbitrariness in terms of plot logic hovers in one's mind, especially if one is not accustomed to this narrative economy. The modern woman in the film also transforms her gender identity, but in a more sombre manner. The absence of the family (or its destruction) is directly related to the woman's need for independence, and the city figures as an ambivalent locus of woman's independence and loss (of virtue).

The director of the film, S. Wimalaweera was one of the earliest ideologues of an "authentically indigenous Sinhala cinema". Thematically such cinema calls to woman to return to traditional virtues and pieties, and yet through its "attractions" it also, perhaps unwittingly, suggests the attractions of modernity for women.

My attempt to rethink the aesthetic/signifying viability of the formula (its financial viability is unquestionable) has a historical urgency in the context of the current problems in the film industry exacerbated by, among other factors, the introduction of T.V. and Video in the early 1980s. One of Sri Lanka's leading actresses and a star in Pakistani cinema, Anoja Weerasingha, has the following defence to make of the formula film:

I would say that the film industry in Sri Lanka today exists as it does only due to the dedication and devotion of those who are involved in it. One of the reasons why I don't like to attack the commercial cinema is because most of these films are produced by persons involved in the film industry themselves. What happened was that the outside producers abandoned the film industry as bad investment. The film artistes stepped in. It is we who have preserved the film industry in this country, it is we who have not allowed it to die, even if it was by making copies of Hindi films. It was a matter of life and death. Nobody asks us why we are making copies of Hindi films. They only attack us for copying them. Today, once more, the film industry is beginning to flourish. There can be no "film as art" if the film industry doesn't exist as an industry. If the film industry is destroyed, there can be no "art" cinema. So we have to work out a balance between commercial and artistic films. There are hundreds of people

who are dependent on the film industry for their survival - from the light boy on the camera crew, to the toilet attendant in the cinema. We have to safeguard their livelihood. While giving people what they want, we can also begin to introduce them to something different.¹¹

The cogent position argued for here by Anoja Weerasingha goes against the dominant rhetoric of the Sinhala cinema, which has declared that its advancement depends on its emancipation from dependence on Indian generic influence.

My defence of the formula, though, is based on the belief that it is still underexploited as a set of formal/structural possibilities, which could work as a corollary to Weerasingha's argument. In fact the more astute film directors have not departed too far from the formula because of the danger of losing audience and career. The example of the work of a director like D. Pathiraja, who began the new wave of a young critical cinema in the 70s, is instructive. While his earlier work such as *Eya dan Loku Lamayek* (She is a Grown-up Girl), and *Bambaru Avith* (The Wasps are Here) contain elements of the formula (songs), his last film *Soldadu Unnahe* (Old Soldier) is a rigorous departure from the conventions of the family melodrama. The reasons for the box office failure and hesitant critical response to *Old Soldier* (1981) are, I think, intimately related to its eschewal of both action (narrative development) and attractions (spectacle specific to the family melodrama), in favour of a cinema of stasis. This is perhaps, our only rigorously modernist film, it contains no family, not even a viable couple, only a group of four social outcasts. But as there are no avenues for independent production and exhibition in Sri Lanka, box office failure also means the end of a career, and Pathiraja's importance as a pioneer of a new critical cinema in Sri Lanka makes his long silence since *Old Soldier* lamentable. The question of how innovation can be effected in the context of a popular cinema without completely alienating the audience remains a pressing one for the Sri Lankan cinema, especially given the competition now from TV and video. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Ritwik Ghatak, *Filmfare*, Bombay 1967
- 2 William Fox, letter to F.W. Murnau quoted in Murnau, Lotte, Ht. Eisner, Secker & Warburg, London, 1965, P. 183
- 3 Anoja Weerasingha, *Framework* 37, 1989 p. 98 (Special issue on the Sri Lankan Cinema)
- 4 Unpublished PhD thesis on "The Positions of Women in the Sri Lankan Cinema, 1947-1979", University of New South Wales, Australia, 1981
- 5 The Sinhalese term 'Vattoru' comes from traditional medical discourse. It is the prescription which tabulates the proportion of herbs and other ingredients needed to prepare the traditional medicine
- 6 B.A.W. Jayamanne, quoted in *Cinemanarupa*, 1962
- 7 G. Melies, in George Sadoul *George Melies* as quoted by Andre Gaudreault, in "Theatricality, Narrativity and Trickality, Re-evaluation of the cinema of George Melies", *Journal of Popular Film and TV*, No 15, 1987
- 8 Tom Gunning "An Aesthetic of Astonishment, Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator" *Art & Text*, no 34, 1989
- 9 Tom Gunning "The Cinema of Attraction": Early Film, its spectator and the avant-garde, *Wide Angle*, Vol 8. No 3/4, 1986, p. 64
- 10 Tom Gunning, "Primitive" Cinema - A Frame-up? or the Trick's on us", *Cinema Journal*, No. 28/2, 1988