

Ciphered Gangsterism: Visual Storytelling in the film Chekka Chivantha Vanam and Factors Influencing Visual Narrative - A Study.

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ABSTRACT

Visual language is the most unique form of expression that transcends cohesive narrative of events through space and time. Visual Storytelling is the story told primarily through the use of visual media. The term Visual Storytelling covers a broad spectrum of visual mediums from cave drawings, paintings, comics; photography to films. Visual storytelling can overcome language barriers but has its own limitations to socio-cultural background. Film primarily is a visual medium with complementing audio medium. Thus the visual storytelling in a film widely differs from other storytelling narrative mediums such as novels and theatre. What sets film medium apart from any other visual medium is the sense of constructed reality -- the reality that makes us, sometimes, to “suspend our disbelief” This study aims to analyse the critical concepts in visual narrative that aids in storytelling process. Mani Ratnam as a filmmaker, who has done 25 films in 35 years in film industry, is well known for his film aesthetics and visual narration. His mastery over the craft is much appreciated over three decades across India. As a mainstream director, his films have managed to evoke critical response and commercial success. Chekka Chivantha Vanam (Crimson Red Sky) is a Tamil multi- starrer gangster drama ensembling the clan of Senathipathi and his three sons. On the surface, the film talks about the power struggle in the father’s criminal empire, but on the inside, it carefully ciphers the narcissistic patriarchies in the fractured family of criminals. Ironically this film evokes a sense of celebration of nothingness. The methodology used in this study is thematic analysis, which helps in exploring the underlying themes and how it is constructed in this visual narrative. The study aims to look for visual patterns, motifs, symbols and their representation and movement in the film and also to explore how the counterintuitive form plays a role in shaping the film. This study aims to find the layering function of visual narrative by identifying and unifying the visual themes within the film.

Keywords: *Visual Storytelling, Visual Narrative, Film Thematic Analysis, Chekka Chivantha Vanam, Visual Language of Films.*

INTRODUCTION

Visual language is the fight for power begins; the three brothers avenge war against each other and it all ends badly for most unique form of expression that transcends cohesive narrative of events through space and time. According to Ekaterina Walte & Jessica Gioglio Visual (2014), a visual storytelling is a story told primarily through the use of visual media. Instead of relying on text-heavy content, a successful visual storytelling strategy requires a “show, don’t tell,” approach with the goal of generating more potential for engagement, conversation, and sharing. The term Visual Storytelling covers a broad spectrum of visual mediums from cave drawings, paintings, comics; photography to films. Visual storytelling can overcome language barriers but has its own limitations to socio-cultural background. Film, primarily, is a visual medium, with audio playing the complementary role. Thus the concept of storytelling in a visual medium is quite different from other narratives mediums such as novels and theatre. What sets film medium apart from other medium is its ability to construct reality -- the reality that makes us, sometimes, to “suspend our disbelief”.

CHEKKA CHIVANTHA VAANAM SYNOPSIS

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam is a 2018 multi-starrer Tamil Gangster Thriller film written by Siva Ananth and Mani Ratnam and directed by Mani Ratnam. The narrative of Chekka Chivantha Vaanam begins with a murder attempt on an ageing and dreaded gangster, Senapathy, and it brings his three sons together along with their family. However, the question on their mind is: Who will take over his place, once he passes away? The film takes a thriller form there on and proceeds in search of who the attempted murderer is. Senapathy reveals to his wife (Lakshmi) later that it was one of his sons who tried to kill him. Soon after, he dies. After Senapathy’s death, the film largely rides on the shoulders of the three brothers. The them. Rasool, a friend of Varathan (elder brother) steers the narrative from shadow from the beginning and when situation demands, he takes charge of Operation Red Sky. According to Sudhir Srinivasan (2018) Chekka Chivantha Vaanam, while having women who don’t, on the looks of it, seem to matter a great deal, is yet different. And this is what filmmakers like Mani Ratnam do so well. They pick up weakness and transform it into strength. The film underlays women characters Lakshmi (played by Jayasudha) Chitra (played by Jyothika), Parvathy (played by Aditi Rao Hydari), Renuka (played by Aishwarya Rajesh), and Chhaya (played by Dayana Erappa) but only to highlight their sufferings as the consequence of men’s action.

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam as a narrative construction has several interesting factors to consider. The form of the film largely argues against its own treatment and elements of darkness comes very early in the film. Visually, every frame of the film, as the name suggests, is soaked in blood red with complementing detailing to masculinity. This analysis focuses on how the visual storytelling is carefully constructed to make the narrative seemingly glorifying the perceived theme “Gangstersim” but functions otherwise. It, rather, uses heedless violence to put the spotlight on the plight of the family.

ABOUT MANI RATNAM AND HIS FILMS:

Gopala Ratnam Subramanian known by his screen name Mani Ratnam is an Indian film director, writer and producer. He has directed 25 films in a career spanning 35 years. His filmography comprises his struggling periods in Kannada, Malayalam Tamil film industry to his breakthrough films in Tamil such as Mouna Ragam, Nayakan, and Thalpathi. His film Roja (1992) gained him national acclaim and from then on his films went on to make international recognition.

As a director, Mani Ratnam is known for his exceptional film aesthetics and narrative style. His uncompromising and unconventional narrative style has been critically acclaimed and commercially recognised. Baradwaj Rangan (2014) says that right from the beginning of Mani Ratnam's career, his works were noted for their technical expertise in areas such as cinematography, art direction, editing and background score. For his debut film, he managed to handpick Balu Mahendra, Thotta Tharani, B. Lenin, and Ilaiyaraaja, leading craftsmen in their respective fields, he adds. As a director who has strong command over his visual form of storytelling, Mani Ratnam's medium of expression is an important document for study.

His central themes include urban relationships. His portrayal of characters is grounded to urban reality and the conflicts arise thereof within. Most of his characters, including his female leads, have pivotal role to play in the narrative as against merely sharing the screen space. Some of his films were experimented with mythological texts as reference. His films have had pan-India appeal with politics and terrorism as central themes.

Though his work is popularly said to have Hollywood conventions, his struggle through the conventional parameters of mainstream cinema is evident in his aesthetics and hence he was considered to be one of the auteurs in Indian film industry. Mani Ratnam is well known for his mastery over use of *mise en scène*. His screenwriting with *mise en scène* sets the mood and atmosphere of the film, thus lending a unique narrative form. Mani Ratnam's grammar of cinematography and editing has a strong denotation to expression of the film's ideology. His biggest inspiration being Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese film director's influence is evident in Mani Ratnam's motif of using the five elements of nature as an integral part of storytelling. His actor's performances are not traditional. Most of them are restrained and subtle. He uses space and time effectively in his scene setup. Even his approach to scene establishment deviates from "classical Hollywood scene breakdown".

Besides, Padmashree, Mani Ratnam has won many regional and national awards.

Gangster genre

Gangster genre is a sub-genre of crime. Plots revolving around any organised crime - both large and small - belong to the gangster genre. The American Film Institute defines the genre as "centred on organized crime or maverick criminals in a twentieth century setting". However similar it may sound with "western" genre, according to Fran Mason (2017) it is very different in terms of use of conventions such as historical, ideological, and sociocultural context". The general characteristics of gangster genre include materialistic individuals who are street-smart, unethical, megalomaniac or self-destructive. The visual construction in these genres generally has elements such as high contrast, dark, disruptive rhythm and symbols of dominance.

According to Thornton, S.A.(2007), the origin of gangster films dates back to 1930 in Japan, branched from Tendency films, where it is known as "Yakuza films". In Hollywood, gangster films gained ground around the same period - in 1930's - with popular films like Scarface, The Public Enemy and Little Caesar making their mark. It is to be noted that the gangster genre suffered heavily due to Hay Code and its restrictions in Hollywood cinema. The genre became popular during the New Hollywood movement which also revived the Film Noir genre. Since the grand success of Francis Ford Coppola's 'The Godfather', there has been a steady flow of films about Italian American gangsters and mafia. Directors like Martin Scorsese keep this genre more contemporary in American films today. Apart from this, gangster films are also popular in countries such as France, Italy, Britain and other cult that follows "Latino gang films".

In India, gangster films were popular as "Dacoit films". According to Paul Salopek (2019) the bandits flourished during the period of 1940's and they became the central theme of the genre. It began with Mehboob Khan's 'Aurat' popularly remade as Mother India. The Nature of gangster films in India is different from that of western films. Drama serves as the primary supporting element in Indian gangster films. Most popular Indian dacoit film till date is Sholay. Other Indian gangster films include Mumbai underworld films; which mostly have an urban underbelly as its setup.

In Tamil films, gangster genre is more of an element of structure to story narrative than a separate genre by itself. In most self-claimed gangster Tamil films, the idea of gangster is only set as a backdrop of the screenplay. Though classical films like Ganga (1972) may have had heavy influence of 'western genre', the film is more of an action drama than gangster. However contemporary films such as Baashha (1995), Pudhupettai (2006), Aaranya Kandam (2011) to recent films like Kabali (2016) and Chekka Chivantha Vaanam (2018) there has been a steady stream of gangster films in Tamil.

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam film is a gangster drama depicting the fall of a clan. The film shifts from crime to power struggle and the journey each character takes within. Interestingly, the film sets the stage against "machismo" and its glorification and marches towards the ideology of existential nihilism.

CHARACTER STUDY

According to Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, Ralf Schneider (2010) How we define character is relevant not only with regard to theoretical questions, but also in quite practical terms, for the definition influences how we analyse characters: The characters in this film plays an important part in narrative progression. The important characters such as Senapathy, his sons, police officer and women as a whole are taken for analysis.

Senapathy

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam opens with the exposition of Senapathy (played by Prakashraj) in the voice over of Rasool (played by Vijay Sethupathi). "Newage criminals go by many names industrialist, educationalist, real estate

kingpin, sand mining mafia – Senapathy. Senapathy took to crime from young age and spent a few years in juvenile prison. He went on to become a gangster and then a gang leader. Then a businessman, with strong political backing he reached insurmountable heights. The most powerful man in the city”, while the complementing visual shows a grey-haired, aged man in his car with his wife stating “40 years.. We have been through ups and downs together”. Though Senapathy is the anchor point of this film’s plot, his character arc in the screen time is short-lived. He is an aging don lived through the glory of his time and now he is at the verge of retiring. His character, however, acts as the catalyst of the narrative.

Varathan

The eldest son of Senapathy, Varathan is physically well-built, aggressive but also impetuous in decision-making and as Senapathi says, of the three sons, Varathan is the closest to him. When his wife Chitra (played by Jyothika) states “The nation’s PM is passing overhead and our home’s new PM is here with me”, it becomes clear, as a subtext, Varathan’s interest in taking Ethiraj Ethiraj (played by STR) is the last son of over the place of his father. His frustration of playing the secondary role in his gang as a subordinate to his gangster father also becomes evident later in the story. When Parvathi (played by Aditi Rao), Varathan’s girlfriend asks “A beautiful wife and kids. You have everything. So, why do you need me?” He says, “My dad controls everything there. I am just one amongst 35 henchmen. With you, I am the sole king.” Varathan ironically feels inferior in his own place, he considered as kingdom. Throughout the film varathan is clouded by guilt, rage and aggression. He is always in the run both physically and mentally because of his ploy against his father in the first act and ploy against his brothers in the second. When his wife, his only redemption, dies in a shootout, his reason to exist ends.

Senapathi. He is far seemingly carefree but actually longing for love and struggling to be at peace. Though not an introvert, he is less vocal of his thoughts. Be it reminding his father that he is his father’s impression in the hospital lift to begging his mother to give him the motherly love he deserved, his character reflects on his search for the identity in his own family and his feeling of being neglected and less loved out of the three. Even with his girlfriend Chaaya (played by Dayana) with whom he gets married later, he is not happy about introducing her to his parents or even inviting his parents for his wedding. Ethiraj is coming back primarily for taking revenge for the killing of Chaaya than taking the place of his father. To be fair, the only mistake he makes in this conflict is giving two choices to Rasool, which gets him killed.

Thyagu

The middle son of the three. Thyagu Rasool

Rasool (played by Vijay sethupathi) is a (played by Arun Vijay) is a hustler, a businessman. He is either affectionate, attentive or conditional and calculative. He is someone who “celebrates too early”. A dreamer. His heedless quality is reflected in several places -- when he celebrates his victory over Varathan, by screaming at the top of the voice in his empty house. We get a glimpse of his desire when he sits in his father’s sofa and turns back to say let’s not tell brother. Even when his wife Renu (played by Aishwarya Rajesh) is jailed, instead of standing by her, he says "I won't leave the ones who sent you to jail. Till then stay here for your safety." His character arc begins from being master of wrong judgements to getting killed because of the same police inspector and a school friend of Varathan. Rasool’s father was a gangster, who gets killed in a shootout when Rasool is only eight years. He is brought up by his aunt. Rasool plays an omniscient messenger, who carefully manoeuvres the minds of the three brothers and steers their game plan. According to Siva Ananth (2018) the film starts with the voice over of Rasool, as excerpts from the files of Operation: Red Sky. Rasool being a master manipulator baits the characters efficiently. Be it giving Varathan and Ethi vital information about who the attempted killers are; suggesting Varathan that Ethi and Thagu might be planning something against him to disclosing Varathan's plan to Ethi and Thyagu, Rasool efficiently plays the game where he can hold the cards closer to him. Ironically, Rasool is the only point of redemption in this rage filled violent world.

Women in the film

Lakshmi Senapathi (played by Jayasudha) is the wife of Senapathy. She accepts her life as it comes. Chitra (played by Jyothika), wife of Varathan, is straightforward and is not afraid to take control of any situation. She puts her family first. Renuka (played by Aishwarya Rajesh), wife of Thyagu, is finding it difficult to fit in the Senapathy family. Renuka bears the brunt of Thyagu’s actions.. Unfortunately, Operation: Red Sky report does not reveal what happens to her in the end. Chaaya (played by Dayana), girlfriend and briefly wife of Ethiraj, is adventurous, and spontaneous but her dreams are short-lived as she dies too early in the script. Parvathy (played by Aditi Rao) is a liberal, TV journalist and also Varathan’s romantic interest.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

According to Thomas Elsaesser, Warren Buckland (2002), both thematic and auteur film criticism focus on the central ideas behind a film, particularly those ideas that unify a film (or a director's oeuvre). Both thematic and auteur criticism can be applied to any film or group of films, and they aim to generalise, i.e. determine a film's underlying, abstract meanings. These abstract meanings, relating to fundamental human experiences such as suffering, alienation, freedom, and creativity, bring the process of criticism to a close, for they seem to offer a 'natural' end point, for once the thematic or auteur critics finds these fundamental human experiences in a film, they feel the film's ultimate meaning has been identified.

Fractured relationships

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam is based on a dysfunctional family and their egos. Senapathy, in his period, has put everyone in the family in their places. But the patriarchal clan is not dancing to the tunes of chief Senapathy anymore. Out of the three brother's Varathan is at home and more loyal to his father. This comes as a huge resentment for Varathan as his other two brothers have spread their wings to more profitable global enterprises. On the contrary, Thyagu and Ethiraj have their eyes on Varathan as he gets closer to becoming the next chief. Thus Senapathy's clan is suffering from mistrusts within. Even the concerns of the supporting characters like Chinnappa (Sena's rival), Khalid (Ethi's accomplice), Chezhiyan (Senapathy's brother-in-law), Gowtham Sundararajan (Assistant Commissioner) revolve around mistrust and betrayal. The fragile nature of this family is so much that they don't even pretend to like each other.

Prisoners of patriarchy

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam, though fraught with the overdose of masculinity, rather does not glorify it. Women in this film, at large, suffer. They are the prisoners of the situation. Even the most front-driven characters like Lakshmi and Chitra are limited by the decisions made by the men. They bear the brunt of men's action. Lakshmi, Chitra, Renuka, Chaaya & Parvathi are the vantage points of the narrative. They do not take the front seat in steering the narrative rather they are deliberately placed behind the outrage of testosterone. And yet most interestingly, these characters share the visual space, which always holds them in the prominent place. In a strange way, they are the reason and solace for the men in this film to exist.

Antagonism and Aggression

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam is a film high on antagonism. Reckless revenge, greed and ego drive the plot progression. For example, the narrative arc of Varathan begins with the blood on his hands, followed by series of hasty actions as cover up which only leads to more bloodshed and violence. The main drive for this emotionally constrained character is to suffer through guilt, fear and rage against his brothers only to run away from them. Similarly, both Thyagu and Ethi have more self-centred motives. Thyagu couldn't go to his father's funeral but he needed to ensure that his younger brother too does not make it. So he goes to the extent of killing his brother's wife. There is no place for love, redemption or trust in the plot. At the end, it all winds up in desolation - an emptiness beyond recovery. No matter how many Rajas' existed in the clan of Senapathy, in the end, nobody lives to rule. It all ends in a void.

Beginning of the end

There is a strong criticism and argument against the film that it lacks backstory for each of the characters and situations. One could argue that this is intentional, because backstories can most often give selective attention to characters' motives and intentions. A plot without backstories eliminates the need for strong moral motives and judgements on the characters. However, if we look carefully, the details necessary for the narrative are implied and rooted within.

The film is all about the Fall of the Clan and not about the Rise to Power. The film is about the power struggle. It starts with the question of who is at an advantage when Senapathy dies? A.k.a. who plotted the murder of Senapathy? When Senapathy comes to know that it is one of his own sons, it takes a toll on him. As the film progresses on this note, it becomes clear that it leads towards a tragic end. At one point, even Rasool states that "A legacy is over, that's all we humans are?"

Underscoring human insignificance

The idea is to use the elements of a narrative to counter argue its own form. That is, the film offers an overdose of high-octane stunts, guns, chases and blasts but at the same time, it tries to convey how meaningless these madly acts get beyond a point of recovery. From the beginning, the film is steered carefully to highlight the existential crises of the characters. It gives an outsider's perspective of events so that we do not invest in a character and are able to see the larger picture - insignificance of the struggles of the power hungry male characters. The film largely advocates how life comes a full circle. Even the supposedly redemption character Rasool, who chooses a different path from his gangster-father, ends up closing the case in a shootout. Thus giving an interesting poetic justice in the end.

VISUAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

According to Karl Kroeber (2016), the power of visual storytelling is generated by compelling us to focus on a particular set of events for what it is "here and now" in itself—or at least what the moviemaker wants us to believe the set of events is in itself. If we analyse the tools and techniques that aid in this process of participatory effect, the listed below are some of the important factors that lead the visual Narrative of any film.

Cinematography

Chekka Chivantha Vaanam is racy, warm, powerful and cold. The movie has brilliant cinematic space with visuals panning from beautiful interiors, constructed tight spaces to contradicting barren lands and spaces with minimalist elements. The camera movements are controlled with very less to no movement at all. Frames are mostly crowded with people but are brilliantly crafted by blocking and staging according to the emphasis in the frame. Santhosh Sivan (2018), cinematographer of Chekka Chivantha Vaanam, stated that "I don't differentiate people and landscape;

each actor is unique and of course, I see them in a different way which translates to the screen” This is contrary to the previous reference film of Mani Ratnam with three protagonist, Ayutha Ezhuthu, which was colour segmented to differentiate between the characters. Of course there is also an inherent reason -- in Ayutha Ezhuthu, the story is told from three points of view’, whereas here it is the omniscient view.

The lighting in Chekka Chivantha Vaanam is hard and mostly direct. It gives a rough, high contrast look. In most of the outdoor and some indoor shots, the lighting is angular thus creating good contours. Colours shift from warm yellow to bright earthen hues and then to red symbolising daring, obsession, power, anxious, defiance, and caution. There is an interesting repeated use of bluish purple throughout the film. The brother characters and Rasool wear purple or shades of purple in many scenes in the film, especially in the buildup towards the shootout scene. Patti Bellantoni (2005) says, “Purple sends a signal that someone or something is going to be transformed. It may always be someone or something that will die or be lost when purple appears onscreen.” Purple symbolises power, cold, mystery, ominous and ethereal. The use of sun as a primary motif and use of wind particularly in the scenes with Varathan on the run demand special mention. Use of earth in the negative denotation to counter narcissism and pride is interestingly handled throughout the film.

Location & Set Design

The movie pans through several key locations: The field of play involves events happening in Chennai, Puducherry, Dubai, Serbia, Kathmandu and Andhra Pradesh. The central location is Senapathy’s house, but the movie shuffles through, Chennai roads, streets, inside of police office, under-construction buildings, hospital, brothel home, Parvathy’s house,, Rasool’s house,, Thyagu house, airports, Dubai waters & jail, Kathmandu airport, Serbian fields & streets, Chinnappadas’s house, beaches, warehouses, Renigunda roads, hospital, sub registrar office and Gandikota.

The use of space and set design complements the nature of the situation or the character or both at times. For example, the stature of Senapathy is always associated with warm earthy set props and design symbolising majesty. The conversations between Varathan and Rasool are set mostly under concrete walls and under-construction buildings. This gives us the sense of the complex nature of their friendship and mistrust. Similarly Thyagu is mostly floating like his character; Parvathy’s home is not out open like her situation in the film. There is also an interesting contrast from wide open space with single characters to heighten dominance like shots of Senapathy in the staircase or to show insignificance like shots of Rasool after the final shootout to completely contrasting frames that are more tighter and gripped with faces like, many interrogative sequences, Sequence of the brothers in the car, in hospital, in the home about the discussion of who gets the next place baring their mother as the witness. The use of barren land as a symbol of life, circling round and round is an interesting analogy contrasting to the ego pride aggression that these characters is been suffering through and Above all the home that brings everyone together is Senapathy’s home made of glass symbolising the fragile nature of the family itself.

Editing

There is a sharp difference in editing Chekka Chivantha Vaanam in comparison with other films of Mani Ratnam film. Sreekar Prasad (2018), editor of this film, who has a longstanding collaboration with director manirathnam states that “Whenever he makes a film, he tries to explore something different — in terms of narration, structure and storytelling”. Editing in Chekka Chivantha Vanam is racy and fast paced in its rhythm. Even the lengthier sequence is cut to parallel narrative to keep it going. This complemented the kind of action and the visual grammar this film demanded. The editing rhythm gets into action right from the first frame, even when there is intense drama the pace is hasty with short-lived frames and jumps to the next sequence. This largely reflects the psychology of the characters and situation.

Background score & songs:

The background score and the songs of the film largely succumb to the visual contrast in the film. It is either aggressive violent or melancholic and sad. There are seven audio tracks in the film album. Of which Bhoomi Bhoomi, Sevanthu Pochu Nenju, Mathura Marikozhundhae, Praptham emotionally connects on the themes of empathy, love, trust, loss, consequences of violence and brutality. Songs like Hayathi, Mazhai Kuruvi and Kalavaani is more on the positive themes. The songs unlike in other films is delivered in small packages that underlays the scene movement. Similarly the background score of the film lets us ponder about the unknown or the unsaid.

CONCLUSION

Through careful usage of visual elements such as patterns, motifs, symbols and representation, the Chekka Chivantha Vanam lets audience see beyond the madness of crude violence and lust for power. With convincing visual language, evocative colours, complementing music, thematic sets and designs, and a path breaking portrayal of women, Chekka Chivantha Vanam exemplifies as a visual narrative film. As a gangster film, it handles a antithetical viewpoint quite exceptionally.

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