

An Exploration of the Cinematic Geography of Dir. Manikandan's *Kaakka Muttai* (Crow's Eggs)

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Cinematic geography ... can be regarded as established and reproducible action, movement and border-crossing. - Escher

ABSTRACT

Cinema has been very influential in Tamil society since the second-half of the twentieth century, especially in the immediate aftermath of independence, and its prominence in Tamil politics cannot be ignored. Cinema in Tamil Nadu has not been considered just as a means of entertainment but widely used as a tool for political communication as well. Tamil cinema has tackled a wide range of issues from caste, class, gender, nationalism, identity and environment leading to the establishment of a distinct Tamil cultural identity through films. Globalization has provided Tamil films a world-wide reach with the option of taking the international film festival route to release films. *Kaakka Muttai* (2015), the National Award - winning Tamil film directed by M. Manikandan, is one such movie that premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2014. The film examines the sharp contrast between the impoverished present of the two young protagonists and their desire to eat a slice of pizza in the newly-opened pizza-parlour in the vicinity.

As a visual medium, cinema has tremendous capacity to transmit images from and throughout the whole world, indicating strong connections and a symbiotic relationship between cinematic space and lived geographical spaces. Film geography is an interesting area of interdisciplinary research that tries to explore the connections between cinematic space and lived geographies or social/cultural geographies of daily life. Lukinbeal and Zimmermann write that the scope and span of film geographic research can be better understood by focusing on four dominant themes in the analysis of films: geopolitics, cultural politics, globalization, and science, representation and mimesis. This paper attempts to explore the cinematic geography of *Kaakka Muttai* using the four broad themes suggested by Lukinbeal and Zimmermann.

Keywords: *film geography, Tamil cinema, Kaakka Muttai, cinematic space*

As a visual medium, cinema has tremendous capacity to transmit images from and throughout the whole world, indicating strong connections and a symbiotic relationship between cinematic space and lived geographical spaces. Film geography is an interesting area of interdisciplinary research that tries to explore the connections between cinematic space and lived geographies or social/cultural geographies of daily life. One of the most important features of film geography is the strong connections that exist between cinema or cinematic space and everyday life or lived spaces. It creatively engages with the relationship between place/s and film-making. In the last two decades, the focus of film studies has shifted from textual approaches to “more action, practice and process-oriented approaches” (Lukinbeal & Sommerland, 2022, 2) Hence, it is essential to understand the geography of cinema as a means of presenting information in a visual format.

Cinema has widened the access of geographic spaces to the viewing audiences by placing them before them, through films, unknown places and landscapes with an acuity and detail that may not be possible for the general viewing public to have. Geography also influences film production and activity so that decisions regarding shooting at certain places and ways in which the geographical environments are presented in cinema contribute to perceptions regarding cinematic space (Orueta & Valdes, 2007, 408). Beyond all this, there is the most apparent duality: the real space the everyday world and the fictional space, the world of cinema, and how the viewer’s experience of the real world is mediated by the images that unfold on screen through cinema.

Cinematic Geography

A wide range of factors – natural, economic, accessibility, aesthetics, demands of the narrative – determine the use of geographic space in a film. One of the ways of understanding cinematic geography is to analyse the use, creation and arrangement of space in films. Anton Escher (2006) writes that the “cinematic space of a movie is created as a result of continuously crossing borders” (308). Escher suggests that every time a cinematic figure or the camera perspective exits a given space, it is a border-crossing. Such crossings can be geographical, linguistic, cultural, social or gender-related and it is the dynamics of these crossings that contribute to the heightened reception

of the film by the viewing audience. They also help in challenging the conventional and broadening the worldview of the audience by opening up new geographies.

Another way of visualizing cinematic geography is to look at landscape in films. Cinematic landscape is representative of material from the real world which is subjectively organized and has cultural additions, or it may be a fictional landscape which has recognizable elements from daily life (Escher, 2006, 309). Landscape may be just a framework in which the action takes place; it may be a character by itself, or it may supplement the moods and dispositions of the characters (Escher, 309-10). Films also create a fictional cinematic world which not only appeals to the imagination of the viewers but influences it as well. So much so that the audience expects to see fictional landscapes in real places and it disappointed sometimes with the incongruence between the lived world and the cinematic world. However, it has also accelerated the growth of movie tourism with tourists flocking to locations where films were shot. Physical and virtual maps illustrate the various places that appear in a film thereby enhancing the curiosity and experience of the tourists.

Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) do not see film as representational; rather they see it as simulcral, in the Baudrillardian sense. They opine that scholars working on film geography need to move beyond binary distinctions of reel-real, primary-secondary, material-non material, etc. and focus on four trajectories that can chart the course of future geographical research into films. Drawing on Jameson, the first trajectory they outline is that of geopolitics and how films help to map the geopolitical imaginary by outlining the relationship between capitalism, film and space. Film geography aids in building identities, ideologies and value systems (317).

The second trajectory is cultural politics. Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) assert that films are not just representational texts but cultural documents that reveal the tensions in creation and contestation of meaning. Using the example of Hollywood film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, they show how the film uses binaries to naturalise cultural politics and conclude that these binaries are

dynamic and testify to the cultural-political dialogue of that era. They suggest that such binaries, categories and spatialities “are not pre-determined, but are constructed through a cultural dialogue” (318).

The third trajectory that they focus on is the impact of globalization and films as commodities that are objects of transaction in a world market. Globalization has also resulted in Hollywood’s expansion into new markets and an Americanization of the world. Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) note that Hollywood “reinforces and reifies geopolitical imaginaries centred on capitalistpatriarchal-Western hegemonic dominance” (319). The cultural politics of America is spread to a global audience through the medium of Hollywood films. Not only this, using its economic dominance, Hollywood controls all activities related to cinema such as film production, distribution and consumption. Locations are displaced while using appropriate symbols to create an aura of authenticity. For instance, a ‘reel’ location is created in lieu of the ‘real’ location (where shooting may not be possible for any economic/political/social reason) and the reel location is commodified and sold back as a cinematic landscape to the same audience who comes back as the traveller/tourist.

The final trajectory discussed by Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006) is the crisis of representation and mimesis in films. They differentiate between mimesis (an as accurate reflection of the world as possible) and cinematic realism (a representation in films that the audience sees as a realistic representation) and express dismay at the American audience’s greater concern about the lack of cinematic realism in films rather than a concern over the suppression of ‘real’ mimetic representations in society. They conclude that the battle for realism is yet another power struggle with the attempt to have one’s ideological world views naturalised through cultural politics or the mimetic process. “Cinematic images are always socialized just as technologies are always socialized” (322). The crisis of representation raises important questions related to the real and the represented, authentic and fake, recreation of meaning through reconstruction and changes in context.

Tamil Cinematic Geography

It is difficult to encapsulate the wide and varied field that is Tamil cinema in a few paragraphs. This section will attempt to provide a few glimpses of its cinematic diversity as is essential from the point of view of this paper. Since independence, a fledgling Tamil cinema started to take root and become popular among the viewers. Political parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), both used films as a means of cultivating and propagating their ideologies through the audiences who were also their voting public. The popularity of Tamil cinema and how it facilitated the entry of leading film personalities like M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalitha into politics, even propelling them to power (and the highest position of chief ministership) in the state is well-known. Very recently, we have seen *Captain* Vijaykanth form the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) and rise to the position of Leader of Opposition in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (2011-2016), *Uлага Nayagan* Kamal Hassan launch Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) in 2018 with low electoral success and *Thalaiva* Rajnikanth flirt with an entry into electoral politics before backing out. There is also an eagerly anticipated entry of *Thalapathy* Vijay into electoral politics.

Tamil cinema has played an important role in buttressing the linguistic and cultural identity of the southern state and raised a wide range of issues related to caste, class, gender and nation. Cinema is seen as a very powerful tool for political communication and has been used by all political parties in their mass campaigns during the election season. Thus, it only serves as a means of entertainment but also as a means of transforming the political landscape of the society and the state. The earliest films in the pre-independence period used epic and allegory to arouse nationalist fervour within the viewers and encourage them to challenge the authority of the British ruling over them. Velayutham and Devadas (2022) refer to the “close alliance between Tamil cinema, Gandhian political rhetoric and Indian nationalism” which enabled a stringent critique of colonial rule (99). Parallel to the anti-colonial struggles, Tamil films also showcased caste inequalities as well. Post-independence, we see the rise of DMK, a Tamil nationalist party that took “film seriously as a vehicle of political mobilization” (Hardgrave qtd. Velayutham & Devadas, 2022, 100). Leaders of the DMK like C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, both well-established

filmwriters, challenged caste hierarchies, Brahminism, religious hypocrisy and consolidated Tamil literary and cultural identity. The eighties and the rise of the AIADMK sees disjointed political narratives coming to the fore in Tamil cinema. Velayutham and Devadas (2022) use the term ‘fragment politics’ “to capture the heterogeneity of Tamil cinema and its engagement with the various modalities of Tamil social life including gender, caste, nativism, ruralism (especially in southern parts of Tamil Nadu), identity politics, spatialities and civil society ...” (103).

Since the 2000s, films have begun to showcase and celebrate the imaginative geographies of city spaces in Tamil Nadu, especially Chennai. Films like *Kaadhal* (2004), *Ghilli* (2004), *Paruthiveeran* (2007) and *Subramaniyapuram* (2008) explore Chennai as a modern and liberal space offering freedom and anonymity to the characters and contrast it with the state’s cultural capital, Madurai, which is exoticised as a space of caste conflict. Other films like *Angadi Theru* (2010), *Marina* (2012) and *Kaakka Muttai* (2015) lay bare the difficult, arduous, violent life of the characters living on the fringes of society. The capital city is not glorified but revealed to be and unequal, exploitative and adversarial space. Still other films like *Madras* (2014), *Maanagaram* (2017), *Vada Chennai* (2018) go a step further and expose the criminalisation of the city space by focussing on themes of goondaism, gang-war, extreme violence and uneven development of the city. Though the films mentioned above are selective, it is possible to discern a trend where the initial decade of the twenty-first century sees a return from rural settings to the city and a valorisation of Chennai, followed by an ambivalent attitude towards the city with a focus on the harshness and callousness endured by the underprivileged and marginalised sections of society, to the very recent depictions of criminalisation and ghettoisation of certain areas of the city, especially North Chennai. Tamil cinema in the new millennium is thus rooted in different cinematic geographies – rural and urban, affluent residential complexes and urban slums, Chennai and Madurai, traditional and modern spaces.

The Cinematic Geography of *Kaakka Muttai*

In my analysis of *Kaakka Muttai* directed by M.Manikandan, I will attempt to explore the cinematic geography of the film through the four trajectories of geopolitics, cultural politics,

globalisation and representational crisis that Lukinbeal and Zimmermann outline as new areas of interdisciplinary research in film geography. *Kaakka Muttai* is a simple, poignant film rooted in an alternate cinematic geography from the mainstream, urban, affluent, posh cityscape of Chennai. *Kaakka Muttai* was officially selected for the Toronto film festival (2014) and went on a tour of several other film festivals before being released in India in 2015. *Kaakka Muttai* did brilliantly on the international film festival circuit as a result of collaboration with Fox Star Studios and the backing it received from Tamil superstar Dhanush and famed director Vettrimarana. Paul Byrnes in the *Sydney Morning Herald* refers to the film as “a feel-good movie with a wide streak of social conscience”. The film is a commentary on the class-divide in society, on wily politicians exploiting the poor, on the media and its penchant for sensationalism as well as a critique of the effects of globalisation. The film explores the desire of two young slum boys to taste a pizza. The desire originates from an advertisement they see on television, is fuelled by the opening of a pizza shop in their locality and reaches a high point when the young cine-star, Silambarasan aka Simbu arrives in the locality for the inauguration of the new store.

Set in the slums of North Chennai, the film has several layers, just like a pizza. However, the title draws from another coveted item (one that is gained easily), kaakka muttai or crow’s eggs. Sankeertana Varma calls it a cleverly named film that “uses the quirk a title like that provides to hide the darkness, the same way it hides the symbolism of using a black coloured bird to talk about two kids who live in the slums”. The two young boys who christen themselves Periya Kaakka Muttai (older Crow Egg) and Chinna Kaakka Muttai (younger Crow Egg) regularly steal crows’ eggs and are no paragons of virtue but there is an endearing charm in their pursuit of the dream of eating a pizza. Hooked by the colourful advertisement for a pizza they see on television, the duo steal coal from the railway yard (aided by an empathetic railway linesman, Pazharasan) to gather the 300 rupees needed for buying the pizza. Stopped at the entrance to the pizzeria by the security for their ordinary clothes and termed “kuppattu pasanga” (slum children), the duo now embarks on getting a good set of clothes to gain entry to the store. But the brothers’ hopes of getting a pizza are dashed as the elder one is slapped by the supervisor of the store and humiliated despite the money and the clothes. This incident, recorded on camera, goes viral leading to the involvement of the local politicians, protests, media frenzy and finally, the entry of the boys into the pizza shop

under media glare to assuage the hurt sentiments of the local populace and to save their owner from their ire. The bitter-sweet irony where the boys find that the taste of pizza is not to their liking and their preference for their grandmother's *dosai* over the pizza ensures a relatively palatable finale.

In keeping with the trend of stories rooted in reality, especially the minutiae and mundane of everyday life, the film opens with a close shot of the younger boy, Chinna Kaakka Muttai, wetting himself in sleep. The impish manner in which he attempts to stop the flow from waking his mother who is asleep right beside him, and his hiding of the soiled clothes establishes the light-hearted tone of the film. The room where he lives with his brother, mother and grandmother is sparse and part of a large slum area. Long shots establish the closely-packed tenements, the restricted living and moving spaces, the filth, the squalor, the open drains and the inhospitable conditions of living. The constricted space is emblematic of their constricted lives as well: a father in jail for unknown reasons, a mother toiling away at an industrial unit but not making enough to pay for the husband's bail or to afford school fees or to indulge the boys' desires for toys. To achieve realism, Manikandan shot Kaakka Muttai in a real slum and on the streets and roads of Chennai. He also cast two slum kids, Ramesh and Vignesh, in the role of Periya Kaakka Muttai and Chinna Kaakka Muttai rather than using professional child actors in order to make the portrayal more convincing. In an interview to Suhani Singh of India Today, director Manikandan explains that the kernel for the movie came from his own son's yearning for a pizza based on the advertisements the boy saw on television. This set him thinking of what would happen if a boy who could not afford a pizza desired it. In the film, the desire of the two boys for the pizza is aroused by the advertisements they see on television. Ironically, the television is given at the fair-price, ration shop by the party in power in fulfilment of their electoral promise. The practice of political parties in Tamil Nadu to offer such items as freebies in their election manifesto and to fulfil them results in two television sets brought home by their mother and grandmother. The biting satire of the ration shop distributing television sets while not being able to distribute rice is not lost on the audience: "*adutha vaarum daan varum*" says the mother – the rice to be received through the ration shop will be available only in the next week. On the lines that Lukinbeal and Zimmermann state, the audience seems to relish the cinematic realism in *Kaakka Muttai* but the critical reality in the everyday, difficult lives

of these underprivileged sections of society is hardly lingered upon or lingered upon enough to dismantle the feel-good tone of the film. S. Easwaran (2018) concludes that “*Kaakka Muttai* does focus on a distinct community of people in the slums and represents them with warmth, but ultimately uses them for the purpose of its plot surrounding a pizza” (271).

The fact that the desire for a pizza (a fast-food item, alien to Indian, especially South Indian, traditional cuisine) is the central plotline of the film reveals the penetrative impact of globalisation and its cultural politics. The pizza displaces the local cuisine as a coveted food item by repeated, colourful and seductive advertisements on television and through the setting up of the pizzeria, Pizza Spot, in the vicinity of the slums where the boys live. One particular stand-out scene is where the amiable grandmother tries to replicate the pizza by making a *dosai* with a topping of vegetables. This is directly rejected by the older boy as it is not cheesy and ‘stringy’ as shown in the advertisement. The response of the grandmother, emerging from her own food culture, is equally hilarious and poignant: To her grandson’s “nool vanda daan pizza” (it’s a pizza only if it’s cheesy), she replies: “kettu pona daan nool varum” (only if it gets spoilt does food go stringy). The obsession with the pizza and its control over their imagination is also noticed when the boys ask their mother for a pizza, and she refuses for lack of money. As she attempts to explain her inability to raise money for their father’s bail, the older boy, in a moment of childish immaturity (but a harsh, cruel moment as well), says “*ennakku appa vendam ... pizza daan venum*” (I don’t want father ... I only want pizza).

The film’s geopolitical imaginary is also shaped by the cinematic aesthetics of the director. It is a middle-class gaze at life in the slums with a cheerful ending that will resonate with the theatre/multiplex-going audience as well as audiences abroad. Baradwaj Rangan writes in his review of the film: “Rarely has the divide between the haves and the have-nots been laid out with such devastating understatement, without the moralistic gavel-banging our filmmakers are so fond of.” It allows a privileged audience to empathise with the underprivileged lives of the boys and the community they come from without feeling guilty about their own privileged lifestyle or confronting their connivance in the grim reality faced by the people living in the slums. But director Manikandan goes beyond this by sneaking in vignettes without attempting to preach. The camera follows the boys as they traverse the narrow lanes through the slums to the open ground where the

slum children play and where stands the tree with the crow's nest (the one from which they steal the eggs). Both the tree and the open ground are lost to the vagaries of development as the pizzeria is built on this encroached land with the collusion of local politicians. The juxtaposition of the consumerist, high-priced pizza shop with the bleak, sordid tenements in which the slum dwellers live reveal the class-divide and enhances the poignancy of the mother's words: "*illadavanga veettu munnadi kadai pottu usupu ethranga*" (deriding by putting up their shop in front of the homes of have-nots).

Director Manikandan also uses gates, fences, grilles, glass and other walls as framing devices to establish those within and without, the privileged and the marginalised: the slum children watching from beyond barricades as a posh pizza parlour is built on their open ground; the brothers' conversation with an empathetic young boy from an affluent residential complex separated by a grille; the other slum children standing outside the gates as the brothers walk into the pizza shop the first time; the mother framed outside the glass walls in the last scene when the boys are invited into the pizza shop by the owner. Baradwaj Rangan notes that the pizza "comes to represent the desire of these kids to get access to a better world – an entry ticket to an exclusive club." As the credits roll, we see the boys and their mother back in their humdrum, meagre existence taking joy in the daily chores and in a sense of family bonding. Their lives may be tough and deprived but there is a cheerful optimism and an indefatigable spirit that helps them move beyond the pessimism of their lived spaces.

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