

## Article

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### Compassion as Salve for Vituperative Violence



*A critical and perspective peek at the gratuitous glorification of vacuous visual violence in Mysskin's films*

*“The idea that all violence in movies is okay simply because it happens is bull. Directors and writers have a responsibility” – **Julie Raymor** - American director - writer of theatre, opera & film.*

*“I don't like gratuitous violence. I don't like anything that is violence for violence's sake” - **Michael Connell Biehn** – American actor.*

Straddling the Kollywood movie marquee, in the last dozen plus years like a lodestar among his peers, is Tamil film director Mysskin, nee Shanmugha Raja. Since his trailblazing debut in 2006 with *Chithiram Pesuthadi*, he has been the toast of elitist and eclectic film critics, especially in Tamil Nadu. So much so, he has been valorised as a shrewd filmmaker whose film aesthetics bring in a

certain idiom of visual expression to his narratives.

Sure enough, reams have been written about ‘smart aleck’ Mysskin’s “mad as a hatter” celebration of on screen violence, in eulogising terms by critics conveniently glossing over the film’s otherwise mundane and banal reality.

Sweeping safely under the proverbial carpet, how such stark visual depiction, could lead to misguided misadventurism among audiences taking voyeuristic pleasure at the gory blood splash without let or rhyme, given that majority tend to mimic their screen idols in their real life situations.

Sure enough, basking in this newfound fame of critics' fascination with his films, you have had the director too unabashedly flaunting his erudition and education on cinema giving "juicy quotes" and "sound bites" in keeping with the media engaging him.

From its aesthetics to its functionality, naming the choicest celebrated auteurs who have influenced his appreciation, approach and understanding of the film craft, which, both himself, and the critics, aver "finds visual expression" in his medley of films.

Why to cite an example you had a writer gushing in unequivocal eloquent terms: "*One of the greatest pleasures of watching filmmakers such as Mysskin is how they weave myriad stories out of the same fundamentals. At the core, his films are always about compassion, no matter how amoral and gloomy the flourishes are.*"

Born Shanmugha Raja, he went on to take the professional nom de plume Mysskin — having been much inspired by Prince Myshkin, the protagonist in Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's celebrated classic novel - *The Idiot*.

Mysskin's low budget directorial debut *Chithiram Pesudhadi* coveted critical commendation for his unique narrative style and *mise en scene*. It speaks of how driven by financial hardship, Thiru, becomes henchman of a local don, and how a headstrong, upper crust Charu, on verge of enplaning aboard, falls for the vulnerable, hardened contract killer, much against her family's misgivings,

leading to a convoluted, contrived denouement resulting in matrimony.



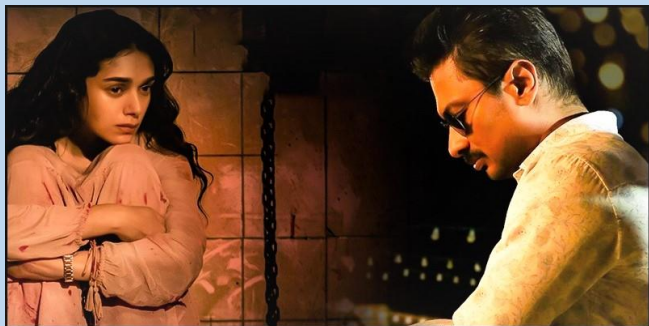
His sophomore essay *Anjathey*, catapulted him into the big league making him a name to watch out with awe. Virtually running on a familiar template of his first film, in *Anjathey*, you have in Sathyavan, a typical, reckless, drunken lout given to violent ways picking up tiffs much to the chagrin of his dear dad before donning the khaki uniform.

Such then are Mysskin's familiar tropes and fondness for exploring the human complexities in his films, with compassion as a subtext – again from the feminine principle – catalysing the rowdy's change after mitigating circumstances have made him what he is.

Thus, given the director's favourite subjects — his protagonists, caught on the wrong side of the law, violent and bloody thirsty in nature — his films are as distastefully dark, dismal and dreary as one can deem them to be.

Mysskin's subsequent forays have brought him much appreciation and accolades for his visual style and directorial acumen.

Additionally, Mysskin has also been hailed as one of the trendsetters of contemporary Tamil cinema, changing its otherwise accepted, staid image of rolling out familiar flicks in an assembly line fashion.



In a *Masterclass on Film Appreciation*, you have the director profoundly stating: “Cinema acts as a therapy when any good story is properly told. It also acts as a metaphor.”

Citing Robert Bresson’s *A Man Escaped* and Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, among films that have greatly influenced him, he further eulogises “Simplicity is the hallmark of a classic,” going on to grandiloquently state: “If Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky were alive today, they would be making films.”

In another interview, justifying the excessive graphic violence in his *Psycho*, Mysskin says “All sincere stories have death. All sincere stories have murders. All sincere stories are full of evil.”

Further, the director has no qualms blatantly justifying stalking as means of expressing one’s love to another. “I like my protagonists to be like lightning. Their unpredictability creates an interest in my audience.”

If only one could fulsomely agree with Mysskin’s idea of cinema and appreciate his approach to film making, which is quite the contrarian to the classics and the masters of cinema and their influences that he so effusively cites in interview after interview!

Of the nine films in his repertoire so far, four of them virtually run on time-tested template of most violent and virulent bloodletting. It would appropriate to invoke Mahatma Gandhi here, who observed: “*I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.*”

From first foray *Chithiram Pesuthadi*, whose protagonist turns hit man to stave off his debtors, or *Anjathey*, where the reckless hero indulges in violent tiffs, thereafter, in *Yuddam Sei* you are greeted with a nauseous trail of bloody bodies as a CID officer embarks on mission to trace his missing sister or for that matter *Mugamoodi*, wherein hero is chasing criminals who leave trail of dead bodies. But taking the cake being his latest and most obnoxious, *Psycho*, whose serial killer hero systematically severs heads of females leaving their decapitated bodies in the open for police to find.

However, his *Nandalala*, incidentally inspired by Takeshi Kitano’s *Kikujiro*, is sublime and sedate, a clear departure from his violent preoccupation. Other equally enterprising ensembles that provide a saner, subtler and much appreciable side of Mysskin being *Onaayum Aattukkuttiyum*, *Pisasu* and *Thupparivaalan*—the last being an ode to Sherlock Holmes and his Baker Street irregulars.

Otherwise, you have Mysskin faithfully following in the footsteps of Asian directors such as Takeshi Kitano, Kim Ki Duk, Park Chan-wook, and Miike Takashi known for bloody, gut-wrenching violent portrayals, and American director Quentin Tarantino renowned for his macabre violent films full of blood, guts, and gore.

It is understandable and somewhat acceptable that film directors such as Mysskin resort to stark depiction of visual violence as *mise en scène* acting as a crucible for social



commentary on marginal lives ostracised by social opprobrium and driven by circumstances. On the contrary, what one is experiencing across the whole spectrum of modern day entertainment world bit television, movies, video games, et al., violence has become ubiquitous and often glorified without as much pondering how deleterious it could be for viewers who are constantly exposed to it.

Studies, after studies, have found and published that, such constant exposure to visual violence can needlessly trigger depression, anger, aggression, resulting in impulsive behaviour among the uninitiated audiences as to how cinema works. Studies have revealed that violent images only make teenagers less sensitive to violence, which, in turn, catalyses aggressive attitudes and behaviour among them, who incidentally, are the major consumers of cinema in digital age today.

It is here that one is unable to digest the fact that where subtlety and nuanced narration and suggestive visuals could effectively convey the angst and anxiety of these fringe people, Mysskin prefers distasteful and disgusting visualisation of violence to evoke empathy towards the victims.

According to him, these blighted persons, who come across as violent, due to mitigating situations, if showered with compassion and care, a job conveniently left to female protagonists ultimately change.



It is at this juncture, one would hazard to state, cinema, given its overarching influence on susceptible and impressionable

minds, needs certain modicum of sanctity. A certain ethical sense of sensitivity. An iota of sanitation. A dose of subtlety and sensitisation. Above all, certain aesthetics whose narrative does not cross the Rubicon of excessiveness to achieve its larger social and moralistic purpose.

For, cinema is a collective experience. The visual images received and assimilated in the receptacle of the darkened theatre is subconsciously internalised into an individual's own moral and ethical dispositions and the cultural moorings that they have evolved from.

The majority of these audiences unable to differentiate between reel depictions and the harsh reality of their own everyday existence. For, it has been established fact that various media have a deep psychological impact on young adults, unlettered minds, shaping their attitudes and affecting long-term behaviour much to the detriment of civic society.

That being the case, it indeed becomes incumbent and imperative upon a film maker to realise his immense responsibility and ethical duty towards civil society and disparate audiences that come to watch his films and to ensure his films do not corrupt the gullible or vitiate the discerning and more cinema literate viewers' sensibilities.

Given that each person carries his/her own individual experience and understanding from the visual narrative they have been relentless bombarded with for nearly three-hour-plus running time of the film — most Mysskin's films are that long — it becomes imperative the film does not leave a bitter aftertaste.

Mysskin may argue that his foregrounding of gut-wrenching violence is to specifically critique the social inequalities and the disenchantment that his protagonists find themselves in, in the world around them, and speak of the trauma of societal alienation, and

therefore, in response, brutally lash out. But it is a given fact that, unlike in a majority of narrative cinema, the characters' violent actions do not necessarily lead to "empathetic" resolution.

Instead, as researchers note, violence only creates a recursive loop, as is evidenced in the brutal killings, rapes and other forms of real-life violent incidents that one sees in real society today.

Therefore, instead of being a cathartic experience, the brutal cinemas of directors who push the representation of violence to its point of acme, repeatedly, using it as a justified means to legitimate ends, only triggers a wave of such formulaic films to cash in on its success.

By their celebration of violence in the most stylistic fashion, such as Mysskin's *Psycho*, they become counter-productive to their intended objective, leading to misplaced formulations of masculinity, driven by viewer's sense of self-esteem and personal identity injured and defeated by social injustices.

Violent depictions only catalyse and instigate the minds of susceptible audiences to mimic their theatrical experience in their own real existence as a form of valorous requirement, justifying their acts that run contrary to the very ethos of normal, law abiding, and socially obligatory living.

It is here that Mysskin's handful of films and his central motif of taming the violent brute in the form of understanding, all-sacrificing female principle is contrarian to his own assimilated views on cinema, given his exhaustive reading and learnings about films, film making and cinema as art form.

One would like to suggest that Mysskin works on the rather indulgent self-belief that majority of the audiences who grace his films seeking "entertainment" would also

be erudite enough to read the metaphors, symbolisms, allegories and appreciate the fine craft of cinematic excellence he is trying to bring from his own knowledge and education.



Unfortunately, these "cinema illiterate" as well as "poorly literate" masses who indulge in such "escapist entertainment" to rid themselves of their diurnal worries and problems, wistfully cheer at the goings on, being lost in the world of make-believe, unlike erudite critics who seek to gloss over the film's inherent dangers at peripheral level and its construct of images, perforce, mandatorily mimic it in real life, overawed by its enticing allurements to uplift themselves from their own station in society and living conditions. The larger and purposefully intended motif and metaphors of Mysskin's films are simply lost in the high decibel volatile action and explicit execution.

Thereby, the modus operandi, fails the very idea of cinema Mysskin venerates and espouses but himself shirks to take up. His mind weighed heavily by the commercial dynamics of a film's destiny at the box office and purse strings of producers rather than aesthete aspects. There upon, Mysskin's films, quite to the contrary of his expectations, end up striking a discordant, disquieting note.

Gainsay, one could accede to a more pedantic and popular academic / theoretical approach that each of the actions has been specifically designed to convey a certain metaphor or to allegorise on the state of mind to the spectator. As to how much of these are

meaningfully assimilated by the viewers who come primarily for “time-pass” and “entertainment” and become inured so as to eschew it themselves in their own real life scenarios, though, is rather moot.

For, instances have been cited by police and investigative agencies of crimes committed in real life wherein, culprits have confessed to being inspired by depictions of brutal graphic mutilations, including severed heads, in mainstream films such as Mysskin’s *Psycho*.

Mysskin’s arguments, as he depicts through his heroines, who, invariably, fall in love or are forced to fall in love and be empathetic with the troubled protagonists, through their love, care, affection and compassion will reform, is just a fallacious aspiration. As social realities, bespeak otherwise, much as directors may try to dismiss them as being a result of their cinemas.



While films of the genre of Mysskin’s may make handsome material for contemporary critical discourses on flawed individuals and society at large. Raising false hopes of acceptance of judiciously unpardonable crimes committed by the protagonist, who in real life, would pay the price for such heinous acts.

In reality these aggressive transgressions cannot be so easily dismissed and one needs to take a very strong stand against such films. The nature of their on-screen violence, and the absurd play of

narratives that they bring into their equally trite and mundane tales. It is an undeniable fact that films with violence have come to sadly represent a growing trend in the booming film industry of India.

Take the case of Anurag Kashyap and his ilk whose every second film turn out to be a celebration of violence and machismo in its most depressing regularity. Such stylised superficiality only give audiences adrenaline rush as they watch the proceedings in the darkened recess of film theatres, when, in actuality, in real life, things may not work the same, with no time for rationale thought, whatsoever. With filmmakers’ sense of commitment to mirror social reality hardly remaining untarnished by strong market force influences, despite cinema being described as art form to creatively portray social reality, the drive to link the success of a film to box office returns with attendant commercial claptraps, puts to shade the real intent of directors, much as critics may sing paeans about their products in esoteric terms.

Profit prioritisation overpowering their films’ social and developmental goals, obscenity, lewdness, and violence have emerged as integral feature of Indian cinema and sure-fire success to their own popularity and pulling power.

Finally, there are two schools of thought on this issue. One line of thinking being films can never affect or reform the social body or events taking place within it. The other believing that the medium does have a direct or indirect impact on social streams, even though it may not be immediately perceptible.

As usual, the ball is in the spectator’s court even as censor and certification boards lock horns with filmmakers on what is the done thing and what is not, with OTT platform (as Mysskin himself puts it: *with censorship becoming a problem, the OTP platforms have*

*come as a boon*) becoming convenient conduits to push in contents that otherwise would not have passed the censor's stringent scissors.



For now, fired by the patronising criticism of his films, more from the perspective of film form and technique and their metaphors and allegories, rather than the actual quality of content and the crass way it is

treated, at a more sub peripheral level, and purveyed to gleeful audiences with wet, hanging tongues, Mysskin, one should confess with rightful concern, is rather enjoying a great gambol run with his kind of cinema.

I end with this quote by **Wendell Berry**, American novelist & cultural critic, in support of my hypothesis on Mysskin's misconstrued notion about visual violence emanating from various life experiences, can abate in the face of human compassion and empathy: *Violence breeds violence: Acts of violence committed in justice or affirmation of rights or in defence of peace does not end violence. They prepare and justify its continuance.*

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