

Article

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## Meditative, Pondering and Singularity: The Cinema of Arun Karthick

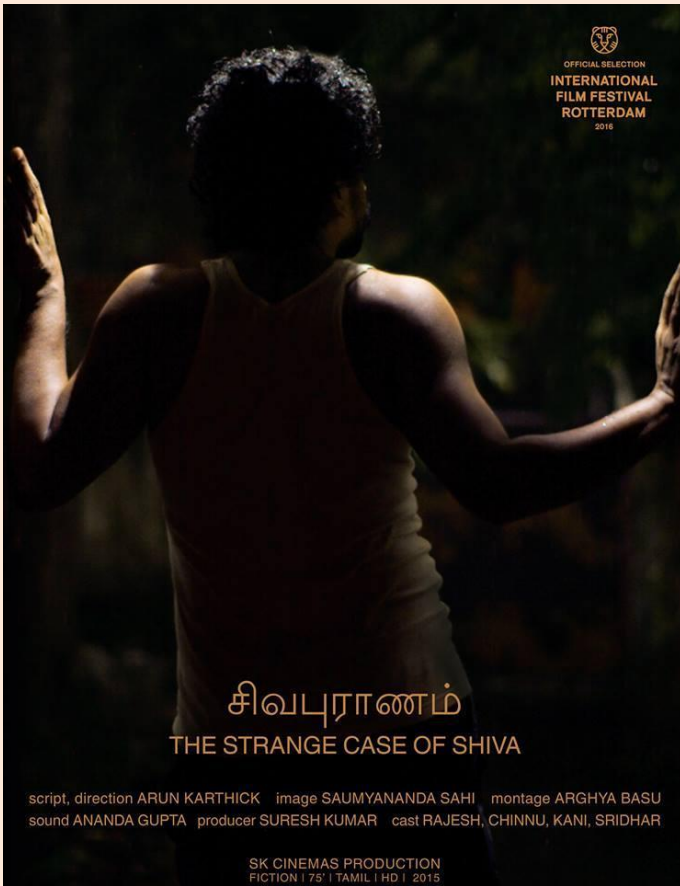


The young Turk of contemporary Indian cinema, in general and Tamil cinema, in particular, Arun Karthick, has carved a niche for himself by making films that have distinct aesthetic conventions and modes of a cinematic idiom. His films not only challenges but also defines the boundaries between what is alternative and niche cinema. The poetic reduction to his cinematic images exploits the auto-reflexive potential of the medium and evokes the lives of ordinary individuals. Arun has an innovative style, which is sometimes abstracted, experimental, and always unusual. The triangulated relationship among temporality, materiality, and aesthetics is fundamental to the understanding of his filmmaking practices and film diegesis. To hone his skills as a feature filmmaker he started making short films, early in his career. 'According to me, cinema is a practice. I did not go to a film school, so when I was in college I began understanding that I need to make short films to strengthen my relationship with cinema and understanding of the practicalities of filmmaking — such as how to choose locations, how to write a screenplay, how to set up shots in location, how to improvise, talk to and work with actors and

performers of the film. So, all this small nitty-gritty of filmmaking you freely improvise in the form of a short film where there is not much pressure on you. There is no huge kind of investment that is kind of reminding you that this is how it should be done. Short films give you the freedom of taking your time to do it. So, these short films that I made on the digital platform Cinema Obscura were instrumental in forming my foundation for the films to come' says Arun<sup>1</sup>. His maiden venture *Sivapuram* had its international premiere at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam, 2016, under the section Bright Future. The Indian premier of the film took place at Mumbai Academy of Moving Images, 2015, under the section India Story. His 2020 sophomore release, *Nasir*, won the NETPAC award at IFFR and Grand-Prix at Tarkovsky Film Festival, Zerkalo, and recently the Grand Prix, FIPRESCI-India, 2020.

### Underpinnings of Realism

*Everything had first to be reality before it could become picture. Hence the film we see on the screen is merely a photographic reproduction.*<sup>2</sup>



*Sivapuranaam* (The Strange Case of Shiva, 2015) is an enigmatic take on young designer Shiva (Rajesh Balachandran), who gets obsessed with the photo of a girl clicked using his mobile phone, serendipitously. As days pass by the intensity of his *idée fixe* with the image grows deeper and deeper as his restless mind takes delight in constant gazing. His fixation treads him to the psychological zone of a stoic demeanor and he becomes an anguished man brimming with voyeuristic pleasure. The storytelling pattern adapts a documentary style, where the camera rather than capturing the activities of the actor, follows the movements played to the camera frame by the actor. Shiva is trying to escape his boredom but is caught up in a maze and finding only boredom once again. He is not able to push himself to the outer edges of logic and reasoning. The film uses *dedramatization* to create dead time, where narrative causality and progress are abandoned to facilitate contemplative viewing.

*Sivapuranaam* visually embodies aspects of this voyeuristic activity through the systematic use of framing, not only to draw attention to the processes of looking but also to emphasize our inability to grasp what lies beneath by holding the shots for no noticeable change. The narrative of the

film contains little action and lacks story development. And in effect creates temporal gaps for contemplation through an oblique, yet motivated arrangement of *mise-en-scène* and camerawork. In this respect, the eccentricity of the framing functions in moving the viewer away from the banal and allows them to engage with an ephemeral, sublime truth. While the narration frequently undermines conventional notions of narrative causality and obfuscates important plot points. The realism expressed in the film is psychological and presents an apparent analogy to reality, and exploits.

The titular character (Koumarane Valavane) in *Nasir* lives a contented life with his mother (Yasmin Rahman), wife (Sudha Ranganathan), and nephew (Sabari) in a closely populated segregated area. Employed in an apparel shop, as a salesman, at the heart of Coimbatore, the middle-aged Nasir is a hard-working person. The film progress as a normal day in the life of our resilient protagonist as he carries out his routine activities, unaware of his fate. The off-screen blaring of provocative and hate messages towards the beginning of the film, from the loudspeakers, is used as a narrative device to prepare the viewer for the mayhem that takes place at the climax. The film evocatively portrays the fate of an ordinary individual caught in the quagmire of an unfortunate event that is beyond his control. The subtle framing and measured juxtaposition of shots accentuate the violence that has become an integral component of our society.

The victimization of the protagonist due to the increasing communal bigotry draws the focus from the larger structural issues at play. His social class emerges from the narrative and captures the traumatic plight experienced linearly. On the other hand, the cast of the film manages to escape the temptation to staged performance and behave in unexpected and non-uniform ways, embracing verisimilitude. From the outset, Arun's approach manifests a self-reflexive social realism with a heightened reality. His cinematic language inhabits a ground between documentary and drama without ever fully conforming to either. The success of the narrative lies in creating an effective reality, which never settles to moral cliché, encouraging empathy, but not easy understanding or judgment.

### Quotidian Subtlety

*Boredom pulls things out of their usual contexts. It can open ways up for a new configuration of things, and therefore also for a new meaning, by virtue of the fact that it has already deprived things of meaning.*<sup>3</sup>



Arun's films are less than eighty minutes and fashioned in a style of making that does not subscribe to the carnivalesque of larger-than-life characters and situations, melodramatic orientation, and highly romanticized canvas. He explores the contemporaneity of his protagonists who live not even on the fringes of society, but beyond its edges. So, under such creatively adopted measures, his film creates a kind of boredom in absence of any traditional dramatic turn of events in the plot points. By using the term 'boredom', I am trying to categorize Arun's films as uninteresting but rather as a style of cinematic language, which is unhurried, languid, and slow in its nature of unfolding the happenings. By the slowness, I mean what Jonathan Romney describes as "a varied strain of austere minimalist cinema" with "a certain rarefied intensity in the artistic gaze, . . . a cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality"<sup>4</sup>. And in this metaphysical universe, the audience is rewarded for its patience in waiting for a story, focalizing and tracing the macro-level configurations within the sequences of the film that retain its narrative coherence. Thereby, his films can be christened or as might be described as tedious or contemplative, depending on the viewer's perspective.

Shiva is shown engaged with his routine life chopping vegetable, preparing his meal in a cooker, visiting the woods armed with a digital camera, clicking random images from his smartphone, sweeping the front yard, consuming his meal in

isolation, meandering in the road on his motorbike at night. While Nasir composes poems, smokes *beedis*, drinks multiple cups of tea, goes to the mosque for midday prayers, visits a boys hostel to deliver the blazers, taking care of the mannequin at the shop, amongst others. In both the films we come across the following characteristic features:

i. Performances are mostly constructed from scenes of people performing fairly mundane and quotidian activities. Such detailing of the slow-paced minutiae of life in the narrative pattern highlights the precariousness of contemporary life. It emphasizes the everyday ongoing nature of cycles of the imperceptible unfolding of life and bases daily activities around these cycles. Thus it involves a greater interest in the protagonist so that the audience can follow with the character. The spectator believes in the characters in their milieu, not because they are 'true' in word and deed but because a kind of cinematic language has been developed that deflates the expectations from a traditional plot-driven narrative.

ii. Both the film has presented the viewers with interesting ways of dealing with time. Behind their slow-paced depictions of the banalities of daily life, there is a lurking sense of monstrous alienation and a loss of faith in progress. Quotidian action occurring in real-time encourage a specific way to sense, forcing the viewer to decode the story and meaning behind the actual visual or acoustic image. So, narratives with this kind of visceral effectiveness impact our viewing experience and stand as an exemplar of cinema's adaptive potential. It also belies the long-held supposition that strict adherence to character and storyline are the principal constituents of a 'successful' cinematic universe that continues in the viewer's mind.

iii. Arun and his editor Late Arghaya Basu have paced the two films with remarkable tonal precision, pruning nearly every shot in a manner that encourages the mind to entertain a stray thought or two while maintaining a steady, languid focus on building the drama.

### The Aberrant Gaze

*Cinema renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively*

assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences.<sup>5</sup>



Arun's films are devoid of excessive dialogues or conventional expositions; the images speak for themselves, as they often do, in art, and life. The images are motivated by the commitment to develop and increase the function and effectiveness of images, sounds, and performances. It aesthetically formulates, translates, and changes the effects of contemporary cinema to higher dimensions and qualities of art. Arun emphasizes the selective and manipulative role of the camera in orchestrating his narrative concerns. The significance of the form comes forward, and the photographic dimension of the narrative creates static and momentarily captured intensities. Arun also invests the narrative with plan-sequences and reproduces the way we see things in the world. His collaborative effort with his cinematographer Soumyananda Sahi shows that cinematic language is rendered by selectivity, viewpoints that function as developed through choices. Through this kind of mechanism, a series of cinematic shots shape into a series of emphasizes, throughout the selective role of the camera. The resulting cinematic experience is a creative exploration of reality.

In *Sivapuram* there is a strong demarcation in framing the interior and exterior locations. When inside the house Siva always gets prominence but when he is on the roads or in the outskirts of the city, he becomes a part of the habitat. The close-ups shots provide a conspicuous attribute to the subtle psychological anxiousness of the character. The framing thus works in tandem with the co-relationship between the protagonist and the objects surrounding him. Whereas, *Nasir* shot in an aspect ratio of 4:3 takes us closer to the character as we observe him going through the routine drill, unaware of his fate till the end of the film. As the narrative approaches the brutal and vicious lynching scene, the camera adopts a frenzy-like movement. It is as if we as viewers are equally responsible for perpetuating the bigoted outburst along with the faceless mob. The final shot in the film is a static shot of almost two minutes long. It is staged with the intention that the unfateful incident sustains our memory and prods us into thinking that continuing on this current path of intolerance and hatred could spell the destruction of India's pluralistic ethos.

From *Sivapuram* to *Nasir* Arun Karthick's vision is constant. There is no conscious attempt to be conventional and call attention to get him tagged as audacious or unorthodox. It is the likeness between the two that tells us that he is the kind of budding talent who had utilized all the tools he needed at the beginning of his journey, as an inquisitive short filmmaker, and has continued to scrutinize them confidently at his own pace, as a promising feature film director.

<sup>1</sup> <https://vaguevisages.com/2020/07/22/an-interview-with-nasir-writer-director-arun-karthick/>

<sup>2</sup> Bela Balazs, *Theory of the Film*, (Dennis Dobson, 1952, p.46)

<sup>3</sup> Svendsen, Lars. 2005. *A Philosophy of Boredom*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2005, 142)

<sup>4</sup> Romney, Jonathan. 2010. "In Search of Lost Time." *Sight and Sound* 20(2): 43–44.)

<sup>5</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 300.)