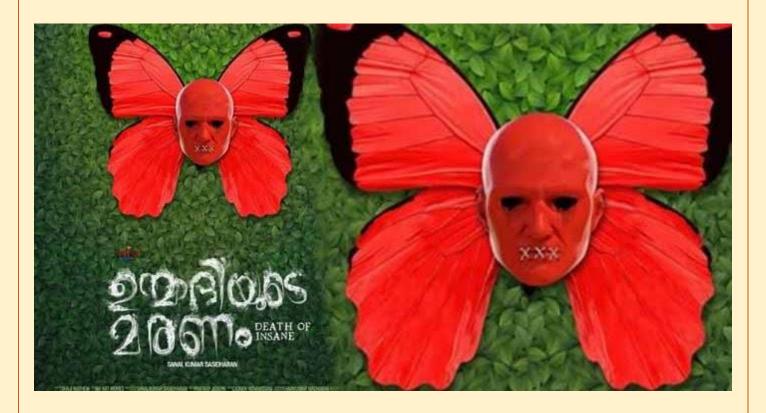*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition on Film Criticism 2020*
Certificate of Merit
Amartya Bhattacharyya

Unmadiyude Maranam: Death of Insane
A Redefinition of Political Cinema

Sanal Kumar Sasidharan, known for critically acclaimed films like 'S Durga' and 'Chola', created an aesthetic masterpiece that might not have reached the number of eyeballs it deserved. 'Death of Insane' (or Unmadiyude Maranam, in Malayalam) takes a different route as compared to his other films, and reaches a different level, making it one of the most important films from India in recent times.

The film has a very interesting premise, though it goes beyond its premise and invades into other alternate spaces as well. The protagonist Unmadi's infectious dreams cause social chaos. The authorities try to enforce a censor on his dreams, and when they fail, they try to ban him from dreaming.

The film is a bold statement at the core, cooked metaphorically in sarcastic steam, garnished with philosophical toppings, packaged in a poetic wrapper, and served with a profound sense of craftsmanship. The film doesn't intend to be emotionally startling or cathartic, yet it does have subtle peaks that are thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating, if not cathartic.

The blend of fiction, animation, surreal images, absurdity and abstraction, with real life-like footage creates a whole new form in itself, which cements a strong base for this unique film to explode in the minds of 'insane' people (those who dare to dream). The film defines the 'insane' (much sarcastically named, of course) as one who dreams and shows others how to dream. The film, through its compelling formalism, critiques the socio-political milieu of present-day India.

Prathap Joseph and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's cinematography is most unconventionally outstanding in this film. The film intercepts aesthetic classicality in cinematic compositions with radical incongruence. The lack of uniformity is the key to the cinematic brilliance of this film.

The film is edited by Sasidharan himself, which appears a masterstroke since the film defies most techniques of conventional editing.

The film starts with a certain rhythm, but doesn't follow it for long. The rhythm shifts gears, on and off, holding hands with the cinematographic departure from normalcy. Sasidharan lays out vast canvases in between, stretching time in building spaces, or rather zones. Soon after, he squeezes the space, departs from the narrative and follows it up with phases of randomness, much in line with what is referred to as the intellectual montage in the words of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein.

One unusual scene that comes to mind is a monochromatic hand held casual-looking night shot at the beach where a chaos starts and then turns ugly. The entire scene is shot in a very raw and crude manner, and by the time one feels it's not just taking us anywhere, there's a red flicker. The red flicker is followed by the same earlier monotony and by the time one assumes that red flicker to be a technical glitch, more flickers appear. The scene, apparently amateurish and ordinary, takes on an extraordinary form leading to a very significant turn where the 'insane' is killed. The bizarreness only adds to the portrayal of insanity in our society. But minutes later, the viewers will be blown away by a classical aerial shot of the nude body of 'insane' lying on the desolate beach. The cinematographic crudeness that went on for a long stretch gets a grand poetic culmination.

One might ask if the crudeness added cinematic substance to the film. It certainly did. It enhanced the follow-up shot in a dramatic manner. How? How does the preceding sequence impact the follow up shot? Take an example where a person is getting down from an air-conditioned car and entering an air-conditioned office. And another person who ran a mile under the heat enters the same air-conditioned office. Does the same entry at the same space at the same time create the same impact? No. Just like our real life experience, cinematic transitions can either enhance or smoothen the experience of moments or frames. It can dramatize, nullify, enhance, intensify, or shock the viewer depending on how the cinematic compositions, screenplay and editing took the viewer to a certain landing point.

The film has several take off moments and several landings. It hardly chose an 'Aravindan' plateau (G Aravindan's films had several long spans of saintly non-dramatic plateaus).

Technically supreme, the film may be elusive to an average Indian film lover. The film's form is such that comprehension becomes difficult at a prosaic level. While it is the form that makes the film outstanding, it is also the form which makes the film limited in terms of reach. Digression from narrative, abstract interceptions, and surrealist undertones are aspects that don't make 'Death of Insane' an easy-to-digest film.

The film features actors like Suni R S and Rajshri Deshpande, but their performances are so well integrated within the mise-en-scène, that it appears as if there's no acting in the film. Actors are like elements of a scene, or sketches of an animation. They are omnipresent, yet absent. It is also the sense of objectivity in the frames that make the film an auteur's personal view, rather than a character's experiential story.

Death of Insane has strong presence of music, but it's not overdone. Lucineh Hovanissian delivers some haunting musical moments that lingers on for a long time. Harikumar Madhavan Nair's sound adds proper envelope for the overall film experience.

Another aspect that catches the eye is the area of special effects. Though conceptualized well, there are elements of animation and special effects that could have had a better finesse. There is a scene where the human body is shown escaping the material home and is seen rotating in space along with other cosmic bodies. It is a brilliant idea, but the execution could have been better.

Budget and infrastructure can surely be limitations when it comes to special effects, but this film has several examples where Sasidharan has creatively bypassed the need to resort to expensive infrastructure. The scene in context didn't bypass the need, and that's the reason why it is relatively a low point in the film, in spite of the fact that it is a highly thought-provoking idea.

Technicalities apart, 'Death of Insane' is a political film. Fiercely revolutionary in spirit, the film voices the angst of an artist against a system that conspires of suffocate him. It finger-points at certain

hollowness and hypocrisy in the society, and raises voice against the systematic imposition of homogeneity in the society, robbing alternate thinkers off their thoughts and dreams. The enforcement of censorship to thought is not just authoritative, but vindictive in a sense that it subjugates the voice that dissents it.

The film redefines political cinema, at least in Indian context. It's political, yet not propagandist. Keeping Jean-Luc Godard aside, there are very few filmmakers around the world who could create political cinema, rising above directness. Propagandist films are not necessarily weak, but they get the advantage of direct statement and ideological support.

That paves the path to a certain extent. But 'Death of Insane' is a very difficult film. Rather, it's a film that chose a very difficult path. It chose to integrate political views and statements within the framework of a strong cinematic structure and form. The film connotes much more than what it denotes. Denotations often make films simple by bypassing certain idioms. But 'Death of Insane' constructs cinematic idioms, plays with them, and in its act of playing, it subtly hints at the socio-political crisis. It's therefore a film made with a lot of maturity, conviction, and courage.

The film operates at multiple layers, of which the socio-political reality is just one. In terms of the concept and its form, it could be seen as a trend-setter.

A much-needed trend that will dare break the stereotypical perception of Indian cinema. It's a very daring film. It's daring not in terms of showing sex or violence, it's daring because it dared to explore certain dreams through the cinematic language, it's daring because it throws away certain conventions into the dustbin, and picks up what it feels is fit, it's daring because it instils faith, trust and dream in aspiring thinkers across the country, who crave to create something different from what is appreciated and celebrated by the majority.

Sasidharan's style evolves from the relentless minimalist linear approach in 'S Durga' to an overwhelming non-linear and un-patterned collage of artistic ingredients. 'Death of Insane' deserves to be watched more than once. With multiple viewings, one can dive deep into the subtexts of the film, without which the film will be incomplete. Dreams and dreamers, like the 'insane' protagonist of the film whose infectious dreams instil a sense of hope, struggles to live in a society as moralistically concrete and ideologically constipated as the one we're living in. Yet some dreams find manifestations as paintings, texts, carvings, films, or other forms of art. The dreams, once expressed, lives on. 'Untamed by readings and interpretations, they smiled at civilizations.'

■ *Mr. Amartya Bhattacharyya is a writer and a national award-winning filmmaker based in Bhubaneswar. He won many awards as director, cinematographer and editor of his films.*