

A Study on Visual Story Telling Techniques of Maniratnam Movies: Cinematography and Mise en scene Analysis of Selected Movies

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Abstract

Visually representing a story is an art. Mastering that art and capturing human minds into the soul of the characters of the film and mirroring the very own society was part of Mani Ratnam's life for the past three decades. This research paper points towards some of the techniques employed and experiments conducted in visual storytelling in his various projects by using Mise en scene elements and cinematography in beautiful ways. In *Raja* what he Sasanthosh Sivan and Mani Ratnam experimented was painting the reflectors green, to look the grass greener than it actually is. In *Thalapathy*, Mani Ratnam projected a yellowish light, like an aura into the protagonist which symbolizes his history and background. In *Bombay*, he throughout kept a blue tone in order to give an element of mystery in the film. In *Raavanam*, he played with shades and light and that too in two different ways at the beginning and at the end of the films. In *Alaipayuthe* he presented the story more through the movements of camera and through micro expressions and symbolizations. The globalization and evolution of Indian Cinematography can be traced out through the works of Mani Ratnam. His movies have been always acclaimed for their technical finesse. And we can identify the importance of Mise-en-scene elements in making a movie much more marvelous. The cinematography in all his movies has been path breaking. Basically this study indicates the Maniratnam's visual story telling experiments in cinematography and mise-en-scene.

Keywords: Cinema, Cinematography, Mise en scene, Lighting, Settings, Maniratnam

Introduction

1. Cinema or moving picture

Cinema is a visual form of art which is used to communicate different stories, ideas, perspectives, feelings, emotions, thoughts, observations and beauty came into existence during the 19th century. It is made by recording the images that move along with sound and visual stimuli. Cinematography is a term derived from the cinema and it is the mandatory position in the art space. The moving images are created by capturing the scenes, miniature models and drawings with a motion picture camera and with the usage of computer software and animation it gets processed. This will be shown through movie projectors along with an optical sound track to accompany the film stocks.

Today films are made on different genres includes cultural, real life, thrillers, mystery, and horror which indicates the marvellous evolution happening in the field. The overall narration will be depended upon the category of the film. The professionals behind the camera have their creative freedom to express their ideas and thoughts.

Basically cinema is offering entertainment along with emotional factors to think and evaluate.

Every movie is born with the full hardwork of the professionals and technicians behind it. A producer will oversee the film production and plan various coordination aspects such as selecting script, arranging, financing etc. A producer gets the story idea from a talented script writer.

Once the story finalized, the producer and writer will work together to plan scenes. They will be written in paragraphs for clarification. The story outline will be followed by characters and emotions.

Screenwriter works on the screenplay to dramatize the scenes in an arranged manner. This will bring more clarity to the cinema. After finding out the angle which story is told, financier and distributed will be approached. Casting directors will approach suitable characters. After pre productions, shooting dates will be finalized and the movie is all set to roll with a lot of Mise-en-scene elements.

2. Mise-en-scene elements

The director of the movie and other professionals such as cinematographer, art director, location managers, prop masters, production designers, visual effect supervisors as well as costume designers will deal with the Mise-en-scene elements.

Mise-en-scene is the arrangement of everything that comes in front of the camera or it is the settings and surroundings of the cinema. We can call it as stage design shortly.

There are so many Mise-en-scene elements such as cinematography, lighting, settings, color, costumes, and makeup

2.1 Cinematography

We can call it as motion picture photography. This is the fundamental aspect of film making. It is done by electronically or employing an image sensor, or a movie camera. Light sensitive materials such as film stock is also used for cinematography.

Lens is used for focusing reflected light onto a real image. This will be transferred onto the image sensor.

2.2 Lighting

Suitable use of light will enhance the mood, drama and depth of the film. There are plenty of lighting tricks such as bouncing and diffusing. These tricks will help to adjust the light and colour temperature.

2.3 Colour

Colour is an unavoidable mood factor in each film making. It is used to set the tone of the scenes which interprets the inner meanings of story, and enhances the emotion of movies. Each colour psychology will be applied in respect of the theme of story.

2.4 Costumes and make up

Audience will watch the character from head to foot. So the appearance of each character should communicate a lot of significance about the whole nature of the story demands. So the costume and make up will be done by designers and makeup artists according to the characteristics and nature of characters. This will communicate so many background information about the character to the audience.

2.5 Settings

Settings refers to the time and space. It may include character's time of life, time of day, time of year, period etc. As well as it covers buildings, country, city, beach, forest, transport such as car, bike, bus etc.

3 Movies under consideration

Maniratnam is a brilliant film director who brought huge cinematography experiments in Indian cinema. His films have beautiful usage of Mise-en-scene elements in his own unique way. We can identify this by evaluating his films from beginning to till his last movie. Here I am going to do the study with his 5 movies which are

BOMBAY, THALAPATHY, IRUVAR, ROJA, ALAYPAYUTHE, RAAVAN

Statement of the problem

Visual story telling is a beautiful technique that will enrich the quality and standard of the movie. Maniratnam Movies have unique way of storytelling which strengthens the back bone of art. As per Maniratnam's words, how you treat a frame is very important. Each element should count for something. This statement lead us to the importance of Mise en scene elements and cinematography experiments in creating a beautiful effective visual story.

Literature Review

“FROM THE HEART” by Pat Padua

Pat Padua differentiates between a film and a movie. He says, “Bollywood is an industry in which every movie is filled with spectacular singing and dancing. Critics who have forgotten the great American musical might dismiss such shenanigans as mere entertainment. He says it is fine for a ‘movie’ but not a ‘film’.

He observes that the work of Mani Ratnam blends art and commerce in a manner that is vital, provocative, wildly entertaining, and socially conscious. He observes the influence of ‘American films such as’ The godfather’, ‘E.T’, ‘Singing in the rain’ which is filtered through Indian music, dance and fashion. He examines that Mani Ratnam has more sophisticated approach while revealing the Bollywood songs and dance numbers. Ratnam film integrates a fantasy plot and speaks out the social comments through the plot. Ideas give depth to the entertainment; entertainment makes the ideas sing. Though that even political satire finds their way into dynamic, delirious musical numbers. A technique which is introduced by Mani Ratnam in India.

Pat Padua has commented on various works of Mani Ratnam. Nayakan (1987) is mentioned as Mani Ratnam's version of ‘The Godfather’ (Revolutionary Hollywood film). The story is inspired from the life of VaradarajaMudaliar an Indian mafia don. He bought the colour scheme and lighting which were very similar to ‘God father’. He introduced the first in a trilogy through Roja (1992), he observes. The film depicts human relationship against a background of politics. The movie created a new genre which can be referred as a ‘patriotic love story’. He introduced simple, tome-worn frame blending with rich musical and political ambience.

The film ‘Alai payuthe’ (2000) is identified as the “Technical mastery” of Mani Ratnam by the writer. He observes that this film is a mix of technicality with a fluid narrative that combines past and present in this study of a romance.

Later the research paper deals with the information available on the five selected movie for the analysis.

Methodology

Content Analysis

This study analyses the way of visual story telling in each movie according to the presence of Miseen scene elements and cinematography experiments. The use Miseen scene elements are given extra importance and focus as they play huge role in making a film successful. Taken elements are unavoidable and analysed deeply. Each movie has a corporation with Miseen elements right from the beginning. So this analysis evaluates the importance of the presence of Miseen scene elements in the process of an experimental evolution of Maniuratnam movie cinematography.

Research Questions

- How effective is the visual story telling techniques in Maniratnam movies?
- How Mise en scene analysis and Cinematography experiments involves in visual story telling?

Objectives of the study

- To identify the visual story telling techniques of Maniratnam movies
- To identify the importance of Mise en scene elements and cinematography experiments in visual story telling

Hypothesis

Maniratnam movies are enriched experiments in visual storytelling through the right way of using Mise-en-scene elements and cinematography.

Findings and Discussions

Maniratnam is clearly a director who took visual storytelling to next level in Indian cinema with experiments in cinematography and mise-en-scene. When the experiment process blends with the narrative elements in a right way, his films depict unique way of storytelling. These movies are the evidence to prove this point.

- **Thalapathy**

The first cameo of Mani Ratnam and SantoshShivan, made this film among the must watch series in Tamil film industry. The story that was portrayed here is the story of Mahabharata from the viewpoint of Karna, the first son of Kunthi. Karna is regarded as the son of Sun God (Suriyabagawan). So naturally the tone of the film is set with that description itself, it would be done with the backing up of the shades of sun. There are many instances that we can analyse the way and manner in which Mani Ratnam says the story of Karna. After the birth of Suriya (Rajanikanth) when he is first received in the hand of his upholding mother this is where the colour seeps into the film, we can see that the scene is set in the backdrop of Sun (who in turn is regarded as his Father as per the literature). In the most emotional sequences of Suriya we can always find him confronting Sun in the backdrop or he would be facing sun, may it be the breakup sequence with Subbulakshmi, the scene where he comes to know the identity of his real mother or the scene in which he and his mother finally meets up in full realisation in his home. With the plot points being big and the stars acting under Maniratnam are of huge value, he brought down wonders with the use of slow motions in all action sequences, and we can also see that almost all the songs are being rendered in slow-motion except Rakkama.

Suriya lives in the slums so his house gives a claustrophobic feeling to viewers. But the neatness implies the presence of a female companion of Suriya. One of the most important property in the scene is the shawl that is indeed the link between this two characters, and it is placed and highlighted in the scene where Kalyani is entering. As the sun rises we see the gushing of sunrays (the light is made to strike inside the house) illuminate in room and clears the shadows between the two character and illuminates the space between them. The same change of light can be noticed in the face of Suriya as he sees his mother Kalyani. Thus the scene is warm toned throughout the scene. The characters in this scene framed in profile shots, providing a space in one side of the frame, showing how lonely they are without each other. The camera zooms in to Kalyani and gets to her close-up shot, the reaction and intensity of their relation are shown close shot of kalyani and of Suriya. Suriya too do get a dolly forward zoom shot as he sees his mother. The costumes do vary as they are from two different characters from two different social strata.

- **Roja**

Roja is a story of a young girl from a village in Tamil Nadu, who finds herself in a place of marrying a cryptographer in the most unfavourable situation. Things changes out when Rishi (Aravid Sami) gets kidnapped and Roja is seeped down alone in an unknown world and she fights to attain her husband back from the terrorist. The most famous song sequence “KaadalRojave” has been shot to bring us the intensity of the pain that Rishi is feeling for roja in the separation. He is aware that she is somewhere, not knowing where he is. There is angst, worry, concern that he’s

pulled Roja from a small town, from somewhere else, and brought her at this situation. If he were a writer, the thought process would have been written in terms of randomness with which he recalls the ups and downs of what she could be going through, and so the song sequences glide over the golden memories of his wife along with him, it's a sort of consolidation from his point of view. This is the first film by Mani Ratnam to use a steadicam, this is shot in the terrorist camp, when we introduced to the camp (a long shot). This film is also a great experiment for SanthoshShivan as a cinematographer as there is a wide range and variation in the landscape of the entire film, the film takes off in a greenish village then passes over the city life, flats and then at last ends under the snows capes of Kashmir. To do a film with such a variation at that time (1993) is quite a challenge, even keeping in mind o cut down all the additional cost. The green fields that we see in the opening sequences of the film is regarded as the best greenery shot in Tamil cinema back then. Roja has a timeless quality. It recorded how light behaves across the entire length of the country. It is a film that could accommodate the tenderness of a young girl's eyelashes as well as the ferocity of a machine gun. The scene is set inside Rishi's working space. He is a free man and in an odd way he is placed to be working by sitting on the floor. The interior of the house is lit evenly with less shadows. We can see a lot of indoor plants kept within the house which can indeed suggest Rishi's fascination towards villages of India. We can see books in the background of Rishi's mid shot as it depicts that Rishi is an avid reader and has a personality of his own. The phone in the wide shot is also an important property in this scene as it gets noticed only after the ringing of it, and it comes only after the confession of Roja. The characters are both framed in the center and only cuts to the reactions of the two characters and in their dialogue. The costumes of both are of same color and Roja is dressed in her old village style manner, whereas Rishi is much more into a modern style dress, with track pants and t-shirts.

- Bombay

Regarded as one of the most controversial film by Maniratnam, but Bombay stood for its standards. This is the first time Mani Ratnam is teaming up with Rajiv Menon. As rest of Maniratnam's recent projects Rahman did have his share in this film too. The music in this film has been acclaimed as the best of Rahman, the theme of Bombay had been the heart breaker for generations followed. This is a story of Shekhar (Aravind Sami) and ShailaBano (ManishaKoirala) who gets married in the face of strident opposition and they leave to Bombay in the hope of a happy future. Unfortunately, Hindus and Muslims begin to lunge at each other's throats. The city burns. The children go missing. An arduous search ensues for the boys and for peace. The work of Rajiv Menon is softer, less contrast, more realistic and more even. In Bombay the colour graph was from an almost bluish school to a darker area- with fire and riots and black smoke. The scene where Shekhar goes to ShailaBano's house with the marriage proposal. The scene takes place inside the house of ShailaBano, where we see her father doing his namaz, which indicate that their family is very much leaned towards orthodox, as the properties within the house do suggest the same.

A Single shot that pans left revealing Shekhar waiting to talk to her father. The panning tracks her father and then stops at the point where they both meet. Both are framed at the left corner as in the later scene we come to see ShailaBano covering up the right side of the frame. Later the framing changes by tracking the movement of her father taking the knife placed at the wall back then back to Shekhar. The single shot emphasis the growing tension of the scene which started up as a clam peaceful one. The first cut appears when Shekhar cuts his hand which is a mid-shot as well as a suggestion shot, and then to the second cut where he cuts ShailaBano's hand which is a mid-shot but ends up in a close shot of ShailaBano, The lighting is top lit and the background details are provided with source lights such as the knife that he takes to hurt Shekhar. The lighting in the 2nd and 3rd shot of the scene changes, as there is an introduction of harsh and sharp shadows and contrast to the character's faces. That emotes their inner turmoil.

The scene is shot using a wider lens, maybe a 24mm prime lens and then the cut shots with a 50mm lens under the framerate of 24fps.

The costumes are minimalistic but the lead characters are provided with a brighter color dress such as yellow t shirt for Shekhar and a blue churidar for ShailaBano. The rest are in white or black attires. This indeed shows the characters have a thought process of thinking out of the so called society. Bombay is also one of the best visually brilliant works by Maniratnam.

- Alaipayuthe

This film is famous for its brilliance in screen direction and Cinematography. The story discusses the aftermath of a love marriage, in which the characters have only each other to rely on. The eventful journeys of the central characters are portrayed in such a manner that the energy and enthusiasm of the youth was not compromised. The movie gained a widespread appeal over the way the colours were used in this film throughout.

The framing of each highlight emotions in this film have been experimented by introducing a new element or lighting to the scene. For example the scene just after the first break-up of Karthik and Shakthi, we come up with a scene where a little girl (Karthik's nephew) hands over the phone to Karthik by dialling to Shakthi without his knowing, and takes the phone and answers the call. Both the character in this sequence feels a mental trauma, but it is portrayed and framed on a different manner. In the case of Shakthi, she is been chained down to her emotions by her family. She is not able to break the emotions that are impounding within her. This was brilliantly cinematographed and framed by placing a close suggestion of Shakthi with the backdrop of the chained weigh. This indirectly provides an image of the character is shackled down. Whereas in the case of Karthik, he is being reflected upon himself, his life which has always had its own loose ends and his is at the verge of questioning himself, his career, personal life etc. Such where the framing and cinematographic style of Alaipayuthe.

Cinematography of song sequences

The song sequence of YaroYarodi, has just a 10 shot song sequence. The whole festive mode of the song needed to be captured in the best way, and indeed the best way to strike the first meet up between the lead characters. Long takes in this manner was planned and the cultural vibrance of each and every details in the marriage had been revolving around the characters.

PachaiNirame stood at the top of the list due to the introduction of various colour patterns according to the lyrical meaning of the song. In fact the song was indeed termed as the Shades of love. The freshness in the lush green, the depth of the ocean blue, the pride of yellow, the playfulness in red, the purity of white and the mystery of black where all clubbed under this song.

KaadhalSadugudu out broke a new technique, a choreography of camera. The camera was so well choreographed that at moments we start doubting the reality in the reverse of the song. The entire song, have different scenes and each scenes are reversed, to show a feeling of antigravity and liberation of the life of the central characters. This was the main reason that the song was planned and set in such a manner. The setting of their house was similar to the environment that the characters are in their life, and unfinished but yet a beautiful space.

The sensational EvanoOruvan has played its eventful role in creating the space between the two characters and the eagerness in Karthik to come across the borders and find his lost love. The colour tone eventually changes when it reached to this song. It takes the part of blue and black shades throughout the song, so that the depth of the feelings in the characters minds is fully captured. The additional wind that is placed in this song throughout the song eventually portrays the hurdles that they are facing. In this song we see that Shakthi is in-taking or is accepting the strong winds, it's as if she is accepting the norms of the society and the terms to which she should live. But whereas Karthik moves against the wind, so that he overcomes the hurdles and reach his destination and reach her out. Such is the creativity of Mani Ratnam when it comes to song sequences. The camera movement in this song sequence deducts the situation. We can see that there's presence of wind in the entire sequence. Wind represents the disturbed mind set of Shalini and her feelings. Whenever Shalini is on frame, the camera moves laterally, which evokes a feeling that Shalini is going away from the frame as well as audience. Whereas the shots of Madhavan is traveling towards the frame,

towards us. Subconsciously it says that Madhavan is going towards Shalini and the Shalini is moving away.

- Iruvar

Proclaimed to be the best of Mani Ratnam, Iruvar is in fact a huge guide in terms of cinematography. Santhosh Sivan had been experimenting each and everything available to him to showcase the film. The importance of blocking a character in the frame has been a great experiment in this film.

In many a cases we see the character having a tight close up in the frame, and covering half of the frame, while the shot is eventually a wide shot. This is the main purpose of implementing the power of the character in the particular sequence, or the manner in which the character is receiving the entity of the sequence. The political speeches are kept in this camera angle so that we can have the feeling of the power the leader possesses in his speech over the people. This film has a progressive colour tone, the film gains a refined quality in its tone as it reached the end of the film, this was the main purpose of showing the transition of the cinematic era, or the changes that are undergoing in the field of cinema.

The famous 360 degree shot twice in this film made it an amaze for all the budding cinematographers, the power each of the shots that portrayed was immense. The first 360 came when Anand makes a speech during the funeral of their party leader (in which dialogue are censored), the censored dialogues were understood without a word due to the perfect implementation of the 360 degree as well as the background. This 360 degree was not just focusing on the central character alone, but it occasionally shifts its focus to the other characters that are affected by the speech. The second 360 shot came where Tabu and Prakash Raj are lying down and a poetic romance conversation is conveyed, the camera is at a tilted down position and is rotating along with the dialogue. The depth of the romance was felt because of the tilt angle in the scene.

The staging of the characters is yet another important factor that is depicted here. In the scene where Anand first meets Tamilselvam, we can see that the way the conversation is told and their body language itself is a study. The camera pans back as the two of them walks as they talk; it is the journey that they are going to take together. Prakash Raj is found taking up the charge in this opening seconds of the scene as he delivers his dialogue, he is revolving around Mohanlal and Mohanlal in turn is following his path, later on as Mohanlal takes up the power, we see that the reverse is happening as Mohanlal revolves around Prakash Raj and Prakash Raj in turn follows him. The whole content of the film is revealed in this opening shot of the friends.

- Raavan

This film released in 2010 is another adventurous milestone born in the combo of Mani Ratnam and SanthoshShivan. Compared with the other storytelling order of Mani Ratnam, Raavan differed from the approach of it. The story begins at the middle of the events and then gets us carried off to why these events are happening. Raavan stood off its mark as the way it was visualized. The well noted among being the scene where AishwaryaRai prays to God (a broken idol in the middle of a lake) and as she filled her mind with the prayers and was about to surrender down to the feet of lord we see Vikram sitting over the feet of the Lord, and an immense conversation takes place. The hidings of detailing have been the art in this film. The travel of sound was very beautifully depicted in this film as AishwaryaRai screams out for Pritviraj of when he will come to help her. At this portion as we see the camera travels away from the central character, and show the vastness and the isolated space where she is held up in. Whereas it is interlinked using the reply of her call by the camera moving towards her and it too is swaying in the wind and reaches her who is in a pit, and that return call wakes her up. The scene where Pritviraj burns the faces in the paper of the kidnappers using the cigarette is remade as one of the most minimal thrill sequence of the film, just using the photo as well as a voice over we are agitated with the motive such intense where the framings in the film.

Raavan as the name suggested the film have many portions showing the ten faces of the antagonist of the film in a particular sequence, the scene where the subordinate of Pritviraj is taken up by Vikrams tribes and at a scene arrives where Vikram is in a dilemma whether to shoot him or not, this dilemma is wonderfully shot by fierce jump cuts of close-ups showing the different voices running around Vikrams head. The usage of mist and wind has played a great part in establishing the emotions of both the antagonist as well as the heroin. The ending of the film we see that the antagonist and heroin meet together at the same feeling so the provision for what was left in during their journey together comes across, the mist and it ends up . The climax choreography of action and the way it was cinematographed is a milestone as mentioned in the beginning, An artificial bridge constructed across the two hills and the shot of one of the most anxious stunt sequence could never be better cinematographed other than SanthoshShivan.

Conclusion

Maniratnam movies are clear evidence for cinematography experiments and unique way of using Miseen scene elements. Miseen scene elements play a significant role in cinematic narration. The observations and analysis revealed that, Maniratnam made use of several miseen scene elements in different movies by different means of creativity and that made the films much more meaningful. The creative experiments with the elements made the path between audience and film much easier and communicative.

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