

Kochi in Making: Polyphonic Articulations of Space and Subjectivities in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Pramod L S & Remyasree S

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to scrutinise the aesthetic construction of the urban space of Kochi, a south Indian port city, in contemporary Malayalam cinema. It argues that there is a noticeable shift in how urban environments are portrayed in recent narratives, with a prevalent use of short lenses to articulate the urban setting. Such portrayals convey the perception that the city is not a static entity but rather an ongoing process that entails a series of evolving ideas. Contemporary narratives set in the urban geography of Kochi illuminate the multifaceted nature of urban landscapes and their varied impact on individuals. Through the deployment of particular cinematic devices and stylistic tools, these narratives achieve a polyphonic articulation of space and subjectivities.

Keywords: cinematic urbanism, Malayalam cinema, urban representation, hybrid urban spaces, aesthetic conventions, formal devices

One cannot study the development of cinema without placing it in the context of urban advancements. Cinema, deeply influenced by the rhythm and spatial dynamics of the city, reciprocally served as a critical element in defining the pace and space of the cityscape. Right from the genesis of the art form to modern times, the unique environments of cities, the hybrid lifestyles they accommodate, and the impact of these settings on human life have always been one of the major thematic preoccupations of cinema. In terms of form, this art form has flaunted its remarkable potential to reflect and articulate the intricate spatial dynamics of urban spaces through its quintessential tools and strategies like cinematography,

filming in actual locations, and editing (Shiel 1). Spatiality sets apart cinema from other forms of art and helps us get deeper into the lived spaces within cities and urban societies (Shiel 6). Koeck and Roberts extend this argument further and contend that cinema provides radical templates to experience and comprehend urban spaces (3).

These investigations into the interconnection between cinema and city started emerging in academia in the 1990s, following what is often referred to as the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities. These investigations span over diverse disciplines, including geography, history, cultural studies, and urban studies (Hallam 277). As a result, cinema is often approached as an ideal site to speculate on and scrutinise the conditions of the urban and the way they are interpreted by individuals. In its engagement with the urban space, cinema serves as a versatile medium to unveil aspects related to culture, architecture, history, and society (Barber 7). Paris, for instance, holds a pivotal role in the scholarly discourse on cinema and urban studies, particularly in texts on urban modernity authored by philosophers such as Baudelaire, Benjamin, Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Anne Friedberg (Philips and Vincendeau 1). Similarly, scholars have undertaken academic inquiries into Los Angeles and New York, scrutinising the methodologies through which these urban landscapes are appropriated and articulated by filmmakers across diverse temporal epochs (Pomerance, 2007; Deleyto, 2017). The cities of London and Liverpool are also put under scrutiny to understand the significations of filmic images and imaginations (Brundson, 2019; Hallam, 2010). Within the South Asian context, scholars have extensively examined the intricate interconnections among cinema, urban environments, and the dynamics of modernity through a corpus of literature (Kaarsholm 2007; Mazumdar, 2007).

The complex interplay between major global metropolises and movies has been examined exhaustively within the annals of such scholarly tomes. These studies often approach the urban as a concrete component and fail to address the processes that construct urbanity, film being one of them. Analysing David Harvey’s book *The Limits to Capital*, Eric Sheppard observes that “spatiality is a social construct... not an exogenously given absolute coordinate system (473). Little attention has been given to the ways in which cinema uses its tools and devices to construct cinematic urban spaces. While focusing their analyses on the cultural, socio-political, economic, and historical implications of urban representations, scholars often neglect an examination of the formal strategies and mechanisms employed by cinema in imagining the urban landscape. This paper is an attempt to scrutinise the aesthetic

construction of urban in contemporary Malayalam cinema, particularly focusing on the visualisation of the hybridity of the city of Kochi, a south Indian port city located in the district of Ernakulam in Kerala. By delving into this previously less explored subject, I contend that a seemingly distinct transformation happened in this arena, where the articulations of the city evolved from a monstrous and formidable presence to a multifaceted domain that provides possibilities for polyphonic expressions. My focus here is to delineate the intricate formal techniques, particularly the use of short lenses, in the representation of the urban milieu of Kochi, all while shedding a discerning light on the historical rationales underpinning these choices.

Kochi in Malayalam Cinema

Kochi, as depicted in cinema, has traditionally been portrayed as a setting where people migrate looking for better employment prospects. It is also depicted as a space where violence and various criminal activities hold sway. The emergence of this portrayal of the new Kochi city as a thematic concern gained prominence in the late 1970s. Films from this era substantiated this notion by crafting narratives in a specific fashion. Many of these narratives retained the social realism that characterised the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s. For these films, the urban identity of Kochi was primarily rooted in the presence of its port. The port, along with the multitude of factories that sprang up in its vicinity, offered opportunities for new forms of labour and industrial activity. This symbiotic relationship between the port and the city played a crucial role in shaping the urban narrative within the cinema of that period.

The majority of cinematic narratives set against the backdrop of Kochi were situated within the crime thriller genre. Instead of delving into the intricate nuances of urban life, these narratives are primarily fixated on the generic perception of the city as a focal point for criminal activities. This structural opposition between the rural and urban settings unfolds in a predetermined pattern within these films, with the countryside perpetually embodying notions of purity and innocence, in stark contrast to the perceived vices and threats associated with the city. Consequently, the frames of such films were often filled with close-up and mid-close shots of characters whose characteristics extended to define the city they inhabited, rather than offering a comprehensive portrayal of the actual exteriors of Kochi.

The 1979 film *Thuramugham*, directed by Jesey, is an interesting early example of the cinematic representation of Kochi. The film appears to utilise the urban identity of Kochi as a central element of its narrative setting. What sets it apart from other contemporary works is its extensive use of exterior shots, which help to establish a distinct visual identity for the film. The film begins with title cards featuring a series of watercolour paintings depicting the dialectic of urban and rural aspects of Kochi that represent the modern and traditional aspects of the place. The incorporation of a folkish tune in the background further reinforces this connection, creating a sense of nostalgia and longing for the cultural and historical heritage of the region. This approach is likely intentional, serving to establish the central theme of the film, which appears to be the coexistence and conflict of traditional and contemporary elements in the city of Kochi. As the storyline unfolds, it becomes evident that a prevailing sentiment of vanishing moral values and lost innocence permeates the lives of the characters, who associate the port with negative foreign influences.

As indicated by the title of the film, the urban is largely represented by and visualised through the port and the activities in and around the port. The narrative opens into the lives of all major characters, and we are introduced to the Anglo-Indian antagonists, Peter and his father, Rosario (who works in the port), and the seemingly naive rural populace. The urban-rural divide is articulated right from the beginning of the narrative and is emphasised both on the level of subjectivities and spatialities. The space, with the presence of huge ships, large machines, and the people controlling them, demands wide shots as a pertinent formal choice. The introduction of the chief antagonist, Peter, with his Anglo-Indian lineage, his costume (particularly his shorts), and the use of English as the very first dialogue in the film are deliberate cinematic choices that serve multiple purposes. It appears to be a way to emphasise the distinctive cultural and social elements associated with the Anglo-Indian community in Kochi, setting the region apart from the rest of Kerala.

The narrative of the film conspicuously employs an unrestrained utilisation of zoom lenses in the contextualization and delineation of characters within their respective lived environments. Long and looming zoom shots abound throughout, with the first appearing in the opening sequence as the character Peter's casual gaze while monitoring the activities in his trawler. An extreme close-up shot captures Peter's visage as he turns left, a sequence promptly followed by a gradual zooming out from a diminutive, traditional fishing vessel. As the camera completes its zooming manoeuvre, the expansive port and its industrial machinery

emerge on the horizon, thereby confirming the intrinsic insignificance of the fishermen aboard the modest country boat. This cinematographic technique, although occasionally manifesting as a cutaway or an insert, serves to not only encapsulate the dominant stylistic preference but also underscores a salient thematic preoccupation inherent in the film—namely, the progressive submergence of rural and traditional modes of life under the inexorable tide of urbanisation.

An important song sequence early in the narrative assumes significance as it endeavours to articulate the distinct identity of the city verbally. The song "Kochu Kochoru Kochi," authored by lyricist Poovachal Khader, who is not a native of Kochi, touches upon the city's general connection with water and port but refrains from delving into the specificities that distinguish the city from others in its category. The song features characters, some standing on their boats and some on the shore, singing the verses. What is noteworthy here is the immobility of the camera. The camera remains stationary, refraining from physically traversing the actual city and instead zooming in on the characters' faces. This approach relies heavily on extreme close-ups and confines the frames to a mid-wide shot's boundaries. The camera's fixed perspective, tethered to the land, limits spatial exploration, opting for optical zooming facilitated by a zoom lens. The urban presence and visual identity of the city are predominantly confined to the initial shots of the port and the subsequent song sequence. Throughout the rest of the narrative, the urban essence is conveyed primarily through thematic preoccupations rather than explicit visual representation.

The film *Adiyozhukkukal* (*Undercurrents*, dir. I.V. Sasi, 1984) came a few years later and notably endeavoured to construct a formidable and monstrous identity for the city. The film narrates a tragic story involving three individuals—Karunan, Gopi, and Devayani—who aspire to build new lives in the port city of Kochi. However, their dreams are mercilessly crushed by the pervasive corruption and unscrupulous individuals in the city, rendering their lives utterly miserable and leaving them in a state of helplessness. Scripted by the renowned Malayalam writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair, the film, like *Thuramugham*, significantly hinges on the port to render a monstrous urban identity to the locale.

The introductory establishment shots of the film focus on the colossal cranes and other machinery in the port's environs. These huge cranes and their operational activities are strategically captured using low-angle shots. These meticulously composed shots serve two fundamental narrative purposes. Firstly, they establish a visual parallel between the tangible

materiality of the industrial machines and the broader narrative milieu. The iron structures prominently featured within this port environment are employed as metaphors, symbolically representing the socio-material conditions that define this urban space. Secondly, the deliberate application of low-angle framing imparts an imposing and intimidating quality to the cranes. This technique underscores the monstrosity of the urban condition, which is poised to exert an overwhelming impact on the lives of its inhabitants. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, it becomes evident that the lives of the three central characters have been irrevocably disrupted by the corrupt and morally compromised circumstances prevailing in the city. One can argue that their existence has been metaphorically crushed and fragmented by the gigantic iron structures introduced at the narrative's beginning.



Figure 1: Low-angle shot of cranes from *Adiyozhukkukal*

In contrast to the perspective presented in *Thuramugham*, *Adiyozhukkukal* portrays a village that has already succumbed to the corrosive influence of the opportunities presented by the expanding port city. In *Thuramugham*, the dialectical tension between urban and rural is artfully introduced through water paintings that juxtapose images of rural life with activities at the port. However, in *Adiyozhukkukal*, this dialectical element is conspicuously absent in the initial sequences, with the city's identity being exclusively established through visual depictions of the port. With the exception of the three central characters and a handful of minor ones, the city is portrayed as a place characterised by greed and moral degradation.

Additionally, the narrative within *Adiyozhukkukal* touches upon the early waves of migration to the city from other parts of the state. A significant wide shot of passengers in a boat in the early part of the narrative positions the three central characters in one frame. The shot spans 50 seconds and introduces the three central characters. Devayani's questions about

the place meet with cold responses as her fellow passengers are also strangers to this space. Both Devayani (enacted by Seema) and Gopi (enacted by Mohanlal) are migrants to this city, while Chandran (played by Mammooty) is returning to his place after serving a jail sentence. Unlike in *Thuramugham*, where everyone knows everyone else in the village, *Adiyozhukkukal* portrays a space that gives refuge to umpteen strangers and is open to welcoming more. The film thus serves as a cinematic document of the urban transition, portraying not only the physical changes in the urban landscape but also the corresponding sociocultural shifts and demographic transformations associated with them.

New Films and the Deployment of Short Lenses

As the twenty-first century dawned, a diverse array of narratives began to emerge from Kochi's urban landscape, marking a significant departure from earlier cinematic representations. The development of improved film production facilities made the city a thriving hub for all film-related activities. These films emerged as a genre in themselves, and scholars like Ratheesh Radhakrishnan labelled these cinematic ventures as “Kochi films” (Radhakrishnan 174). Due to the distinctive formal strategy employed by these films, I find it imperative to categorise them as exemplars of "short-lens cinemas." The subsequent section will explicate the rationale underlying this classification.

Ignacio Farias, in the work *Urban Assemblages*, challenges conventional approaches to urban studies that perceive the urban as a discrete and confined entity. Instead, he introduces the concept of urban assemblages, which facilitates the conceptualisation of the urban as an entity continually being assembled at specific locations of urban practice. According to Farias, the city is a multitude of processes in a state of constant evolution, a decentred object that resists classification as a bounded entity, specific context, or delimited site (2). At the heart of these contemporary cinematic narratives, we are analysing here, lies a distinct inclination towards absorbing the processes and non-human details that construct the city. These narratives present Kochi not only as a city with a distinct identity but also harness its cityscape as a vital component in the storytelling process, emphasising the hybrid urban geography as essential to the unfolding narratives. A significant and remarkable shift in the stylistic choices of these new films is evident in the realm of cinematography. To provide this

immersive hybrid urban experience, these new films started incorporating more shots taken with short lenses.

Lenses with a focal length below 35 mm are commonly categorised as short lenses or wide-angle lenses. These lenses are generally employed to provide a wider field of view, encompassing more of the scene within the frame. Additionally, they help maintain multiple layers of the scene in focus simultaneously. In comparison to telephoto lenses, short lenses possess a greater depth of field. The use of this device in cinematography is instrumental in achieving what is often referred to as ‘deep focus.’ Deep focus is a technique that emphasises a substantial range of the image to be in sharp focus, from the foreground to the background. Consequently, a short lens proves to be a valuable tool in facilitating the interplay of various levels and layers of meaning within a given shot.

In contrast to narratives from previous eras that often treated the cityscape in a generic manner, framing it as a pervasive and formidable backdrop that presented challenges to characters seeking their place within it, these new short-lens narratives are characterised by a proliferation of short lens mediation that provides a deliberate and nuanced approach. These contemporary narratives place a strong emphasis on acknowledging and exploring the subtleties of urban spaces, encompassing a range of dimensions—linguistic, geographic, and historic. The city here serves as a multifaceted environment, simultaneously offering avenues for positive growth and transformation while also serving as potential arenas for moral corruption. Furthermore, it is also portrayed as providing sanctuary for individuals fleeing persecution or adversity, yet presenting opportunities for exploitation. With the advent of these fresh films, it became evident that a novel articulation of urbanity was unfolding across contemporary cinematic horizons.

Within the new films that emerged in the Malayalam industry, the proliferation of short lenses reflects a shift in the visual sensibilities of contemporary filmmakers and cinematographers. These short lenses enable the filmmakers to transcend the perceptual filters inherent to human vision and allow them to represent urban spaces as they would appear to a stranger or an uninitiated viewer. By employing wide-angle lenses, the cinematographers could remove the limitations of human cognitive filters, enabling the camera to assume an apparent objectivity in visual storytelling. This is achieved by deprioritising any specific layer of meaning or plane within the frame, ensuring that various elements within the cityscape receive equal attention. These short lenses encourage a more

comprehensive view of the urban environment, allowing the camera to encompass a wide range of visual elements and contextual details. This departure from conventional cinematographic approaches demonstrates a commitment to offer viewers a more immersive and unfiltered experience of the cityscape. By embracing short lenses, filmmakers can capture the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of urban environments, effectively enhancing the visual narrative and its capacity to resonate with contemporary audiences.

The prevalent use of wide shots and short lenses in contemporary cinema can be attributed to several factors, including significant technological advancements in the film industry. Vehicles, emblematic of modernity, constitute an indispensable facet of urban existence. The inclusion of vehicle shots in urban geographical narratives necessitated the adaptation of camera mounts designed for the secure attachment of film cameras to vehicles. New camera mounts became available in the market that facilitated easy mounting of cameras both within and outside vehicles (L S *Wide Angle* 85). Contemporary Malayalam cinema looks for customised solutions to meet specific cinematographic requirements, which resulted in the development of a new career in this industry called camera rig designer. The adoption of cutting-edge camera mounts designed for placement in moving vehicles and other challenging positions necessitates the use of lenses with shorter focal lengths. This choice helps mitigate vibrations and jerks in the visuals, ensuring smoother and more dynamic shots (L S *Wide Angle* 85). With an increasing number of sequences involving moving vehicles integrated into the narrative, these lenses and camera mounts have become an integral component of modern film productions.

Furthermore, the inclusion of panoramic shots that encompass actual exterior locations has become a prominent feature in contemporary filmmaking (L S *Wide Angle* 86). To capture the diverse layers and elements of such expansive spaces, lenses with a wider angle of view are indispensable. These new narratives often place character amid exterior urban environments characterised by streets, towering buildings, numerous signboards, and advertising hoardings. Such shots demand the use of short lenses to encapsulate their complexity and visual richness. A third significant shift in contemporary cinema that drives the use of short lenses is the incorporation of crowd scenes. Crowd sequences set in authentic exterior locations have become a fundamental element of these narratives (L S *Wide Angle* 86). Unlike earlier Malayalam films, where crowds typically appeared in action sequences in an organised way, modern films integrate crowd shots as inherent components of the

storytelling. The apparent familiarity of the people in Kochi with film shooting also helped filmmakers handle location management with ease. Films also started developing guerilla sequences where actual crowds are incorporated into the filmic texture without their awareness. Moreover, the narrative focus in contemporary cinema has shifted from single protagonists pursuing singular goals to a more expansive approach that narrates the lives of multiple characters within a specific locale. Unlike the popular films of the 1990s and early 2000s, where the camera focused mostly on the countenance and body of superstars, with the emergence of this new trend, films expanded their narrative horizons to accommodate the stories of more than one character.

Gangsters and Violent Exteriors

In the 1980s, Malayalam cinema was dominated by crime and action thrillers set in Kerala. Most of these narratives were developed in different urban centres in the state, particularly Kochi and the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram. Films like *Athirathram* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1984), *Aavanazhi* (dir. I. V. Sasi, 1986), *Rajavinte Makan* (dir. Thampi Kannanthanam, 1986), *Shobhraj* (dir. J. Sasikumar, 1986), *Irupatham Noottandu* (dir. K. Madhu, 1987), and *Adikkurippu* (dir. K. Madhu, 1989) explored the world of crime and criminals and the complexities of their existence within the urban fabric of the state. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these narratives neither effectively conveyed the identity of the city in which they were set—verbally or visually—nor significantly contributed to the development of a unique urban identity for that city.

By the end of the decade, a remarkable shift happened in the thematic premise of the Malayalam film, in which the city of Bombay (now Mumbai) started figuring as the backdrop. These cinematic narratives mostly fall into the genre of gangster films and were heavily influenced by Bollywood films in the same genre. Contemplating the patterns of gangster films in Bollywood, Ranjani Mazumdar writes: “Despite differences and variations, the core configuration of the gangster genre is easy to see—an urban backdrop, the play of criminality within a community of men, a performative masculinity, the impossibility of romance, the crisis of the family, and the experience of everyday fear and terror” (152). Films like *Aryan* (dir. Priyadarshan, 1988), and *Abhimanyu* (dir. Priyadarshan, 1991) engage with the underworld mythology of Bombay City and visibly follow the patterns identified by

Mazumdar. Both *Aryan* and *Abhimanyu* narrate the story of the protagonists' encounter and entry into the underworld in Bombay. Contrastingly, in later films such as *Aaram Thampuran* (The Sixth Lord, dir. Shaji Kailas, 1997), *Ustaad* (dir. Sibi Malayil, 1999), and *Praja* (Citizen, dir. Joshiy, 2001), a notable thematic element emerges, wherein the central character seeks to conceal his gangster identity, a narrative trope driven by the aspiration to ground the storyline within the cultural context of Kerala, thereby imparting a distinctive regional essence to the crime drama genre. These films achieved significant financial success and contributed to the consolidation of the superstar image of actor Mohanlal. His portrayal of masculinity in these films played a pivotal role in reshaping prevailing notions of male identity and masculinity within the context of popular culture.

In the initial years of these short lens films, narratives were mostly rooted in themes like crime, gang rivalry, murder, and revenge and made use of the urban identity and geography of Kochi to visualise the themes. An exceptional work that captivated the collective imagination of the audience with its exploration of gang violence and revenge is the 2007 thriller *Big B* (dir. Amal Neerad), which starred actor Mammooty in the titular role. This film intricately constructs an underworld mythology within the urban landscape of Kochi, shedding light on both familiar and innovative tropes of gangster narratives. Stylistically, the film is noted for its deliberate use of slow-motion sequences, the employment of low-key lighting reminiscent of the film noir genre, low-angle framing, and the frequent use of wide-angle lenses. These visual techniques are instrumental in shaping the identities of three key elements: the protagonist, Bilal; the primary antagonist, Sayipp Tony; and the underworld of Kochi.

The gangster theme is explored from a humorous perspective in the 2010 film *Best Actor* (dir. Martin Prakkatt). Though humour is the dominant mode of the film, the use of short lenses to connect the theme of violence to the urban topography of the city is evident in *Best Actor* as well. The 2011 film *City of God* (dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery) delves into themes that revolve around violence, gang rivalry, and brutal homicides, among other pertinent subjects. Functioning as a multi-protagonist hyperlink film, the narrative unfolds through four distinct plotlines that initially develop independently but intersect through a consequential road accident. Within the narrative framework of *City of God*, the escalation of violence, a prevailing theme from the film's outset, culminates notably with the public killing of the character Punnoose. The cinematography in the murder sequence is notable for its use of

short lenses with varying focal lengths, emphasising the impact of violence on urban space. Rapid and unsteady camera movements intensify the brutality depicted. The perpetrators, including the central character Jyothilal, are wearing masks, but when Punnoose removes Jyothilal's mask, his face is exposed to public gaze. This metaphorically signifies the city's direct confrontation with violence, previously concealed from public notice. The cinematic sequence effectively communicates the profound societal implications of urban violence.



Figure 2: Murder in the middle of the city from *City of God*

Director Rajeev Ravi offers a distinctive perspective on the theme of gangs and gang violence in his films. Notably, in *Annayum Rasoolum* (Anna and Rasool, 2012) and *Kammattippadam* (2016), he examines these themes through the lens of the marginalised, portraying the urban environment as a space marked by exploitation. Ravi's cinematic works espouse the ideology that violence is not an intrinsic characteristic of the slums in Kochi; rather, it emerges as a consequential byproduct of the unjust conditions and societal practices prevalent within these communities.

Actor Mammooty and director Amal Neerad teamed up again in 2022 for another gangster film set in Kochi—*Bheeshma Parvam* (The Chapter of Bheeshma). The film, which tells the tale of a regional mafia don Michaelappan in the 1980s, is a loose adaptation of the familiar plotline of the Hollywood classic *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). But this time the city is not articulated in terms of spatial elements, primarily because of the difficulty in establishing the landscape of the period and due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic period. Except for the few wide shots of the Old Harbour Bridge, space is mostly articulated verbally, and visuals are often limited to the interiors. Time, on the other hand, is designated by costumes, props, film posters, and the headlines of newspapers of the

period. The narrative combines tropes from Indian mythology, Hollywood Mafia films, and anecdote tales from the Bombay underworld to construct a unique mafia folklore for Kochi.

By the time *Bheeshma Parvam* was released, low-key lighting, low-angle photography, and slow-motion sequences had become a pattern that the audience identified Amal Neerad with. These stylistic devices are used strategically to develop the central character's image, while the dialect and cultural references the character makes extend that impression to the city. In an early sequence, Michael explains to his henchman Shivankutty the regional etymology of the local word *panjikkiduka* (cotton-scutching). The word, according to Michael's explanation, has a unique connection with the region and its geography. Michael explains:

Do you know what the slang *panjikkiduka* (cotton-scutching) means here in Kochi? It's an old method of fending boats to prevent damage while berthing at the jetty, way before the fenders made of tyre and rubber came in. Raw cotton rolls would be hammered on to the wood so that there is no line left between the cotton layer and the wood (00:13:16-00:13:40).

These articulations help locate the narrative within the regional geography of Kochi. But one can very well argue that rather than anchoring the narrative against the tangible physical backdrop of Kochi, it positions itself within the fabric of cinematic history from the preceding decade, characterised by the extensive use of short lenses. For viewers already acquainted with the urban geography and sensibilities of Kochi through cinematic narratives of the previous decade, the seamless integration of this new narrative into that familiar context becomes accessible, even in the absence of authentic exterior shots depicting the city.

One last addition to these gangster narratives is the 2023 film *RDX: Robert Dony Xavier* (dir. Nahas Hidayath), which once again locates the narrative in Kochi between 1997 and 2005. The narrative, though it deviates from the ideological commitment of films like *Annayum Rasoolum*, relies heavily on the visualisation of the slum in Mattancherry to augment the theme of violence. Short lenses are widely used in the depiction of the slum and articulate slums as a site of unchecked violence, a trope we observed in the 2007 film *Big B*.

Commute as an Urban Ritual

The city is often represented as a space teeming with opportunities for employment, and most of the jobs associated with the city involve some sort of commute. The 2012 film *Annayum Rasoolum* arguably portrays this daily commute as an urban ritual in which most of the characters are involved. In the first part of the narrative, we see Rasool, the central character, shadowing his beloved, Anna, during her daily commute to her workplace in the city. Anna's routine entails a boat journey from her village in Vypin to Mainland Ernakulam. Notably, the interior of the boat is rendered through the application of short lenses, allowing the audience to familiarise themselves with the fellow commuters of Anna. The continuity of this ritual is evident as the same group of individuals is observed during the evening return voyage to their respective villages. The persistent portrayal of this routine, facilitated by the short lens, establishes the daily commute as an urban ritual wherein all participants are collectively engaged. This communal engagement is further accentuated as these familiar fellow passengers reappear on subsequent occasions throughout the narrative.

In the final segment of the narrative, a poignant convergence occurs as a majority of these individuals urgently rush to Anna's residence upon learning of her tragic demise. The nuanced exploration of the identities of these commuters on various occasions is facilitated by the probing gaze of the short lens, enriching the narrative with a multifaceted portrayal of their lives. The argument finds reinforcement in the closing credits, where the actual names of these recurring passengers are included in the cast list.



Figure 3: A screengrab from *Annayum Rasoolum* featuring the boat ride

In *Chappa Kurishu* (dir. Sameer Thahir 2012), the character Ansari's daily journey to his workplace, a supermarket where he works as a sales staff, sheds light on the challenges of surviving in a bustling metropolis, particularly for individuals who may lack certain street-

smartness. This commute vividly illustrates the struggles faced by the character in the urban environment. Swarnavel in *City of God* (dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2011) rides his bicycle through the city to reach his coworkers. His commute is recorded in around ten long- to mid-shots, all mediated by short lenses that powerfully visualise the space with numerous visual signs. A unifying feature in all these commutes is the use of short lenses, which enable the capture of numerous urban elements within each frame.

Buildings and Other Landmarks

Short-lens cinemas made against the backdrop of Kochi often leverage the presence of historic colonial-era buildings in the region to create a distinctive and evocative identity for the locale. These architectural landmarks not only serve as visually captivating elements but also imbue the narratives with a sense of historical and cultural richness. Prominent structures like Aspin Wall, Vaco House (locally known as “Big B House”), and the slum houses in Mattancherry are recurrently featured in short-lens cinemas, contributing to the unique atmosphere of the place. In addition to these, several other notable constructions are commonly utilised in short-lens cinemas to enhance the cinematic representation of the city. These include the Bolgatty Palace on Bolgatty Island, Bastion Bungalow in Fort Kochi, Pepper House in Mattancherry, and Netto Bungalow in Eda Kochi, among others. The enduring appeal of these buildings to the film industry is largely attributed to their Indo-European architectural designs, which not only evoke a sense of historical continuity but also blend seamlessly with the narratives, enriching the visual and cultural tapestry of the cinematic portrayal of Kochi.

Just like these old buildings, a plethora of authentic visual cues are skilfully employed to establish and underscore the unique identity of the city. But a significant change happened in the visualisation of those huge cranes we observed in narratives like *Thuramugham* and *Adiyozhukkukal*. In contrast to the older narratives, which heavily leaned on low-angle shots of these cranes from close proximity to articulate a monstrous urbanity, the new narratives strategically present them in distant, wide shots. This deliberate shift in perspective and framing allows the cranes to assume a different role within the narrative. Instead of accentuating the modernity of the region, these cranes, when framed from a distance, now function as a backdrop that harkens to a recent past. Cranes no longer carry the connotation

of monstrosity, but they serve as essential visual cues that help locate the narrative in the urban geography of Kochi.

Along with these old ionic structures, new icons are also introduced to the texture of these new narratives. A notable addition is the Kochi Metrorail, which commenced operations in 2017 and swiftly integrated itself into the visual tapestry of the new urban narratives of Kochi. Perhaps *Mayaanadhi* (Mystery River, dir. Aashiq Abu, 2017) was the first popular film to turn its discerning gaze towards this new urban phenomenon. Even though the film features no scenes inside the coaches of the metro, the wide shot of the arrival of a metro train in the beginning effectively supplants the more conventional urban landmarks that previously served as symbolic gateways into the city's cinematic landscape. The city's vastness finds its most pronounced expression through the presence of the colossal pillars of metro rail, which often form the background of the nocturnal wanderings of the central characters, Appu and Mathan. Soon, Kochi Metro Rail became a crucial element in these new films, as seen in films like *Vikruthi* (mischief, dir. M. C. Joseph, 2019), *Varane Avashyamundu* (groom wanted, dir. Anoop Sathyan, 2020), and *Ancham Pathira* (the fifth midnight, dir. Midhun Manuel Thomas, 2020).

Identity in Flux

Short-lens cinemas also serve as a canvas to vividly portray the multifaceted ways in which the urbanity of the city leaves its indelible mark on the characters within their narratives. This portrayal marks a notable shift from films of previous decades, which primarily depicted the struggles and hardships of survival in the urban milieu. The contemporary narratives, however, venture into the realm of character development, illustrating how the city can catalyse personal transformation and empowerment. These narratives feature characters who undergo a profound metamorphosis as a result of their urban experiences. A prime example is Ansari in *Chappa Kurishu*, who, initially portrayed as a naive and unassertive individual, undergoes a remarkable transformation, emerging as a more assertive figure by the narrative's conclusion. The final mid-wide follow shot captured using a short lens convincingly presents the transformation of this character. We see Ansari coming out of his usual restaurant after grabbing fifty rupees from the restaurant owner, who routinely belittles him. Outside the restaurant, he elbows another character in the

neighbourhood, who also passes comments at him as a routine. The wide lens maintains these characters and their surroundings in focus while registering the bruises on his face that were the result of his recent fight with another central character. It is imperative to note that Ansari does not strictly conform to the conventional archetypes of a protagonist or an antagonist within the narrative; rather, the socio-cultural milieu of the city exerts a transformative influence, thereby rendering him a character whose moral alignment fluctuates between heroism and villainy within the narrative's context.

Similarly, in *Best Actor*, the character of Mohan, an ordinary school teacher, adeptly assumes a new identity as a formidable goon from Mumbai as part of his plan to ensure a negative role in an upcoming film. This underscores how the urban context enables individuals to adopt new personas and adapt to diverse roles, showcasing the malleability of urban life in shaping character dynamics. As Jonathan Raban in *Soft City* observes:

It's easy to 'drop' people in the city, where size and anonymity and the absence of clear communal sanctions license the kind of behaviour that any village would stamp out at birth... In the city we can change our identities at will, as Dickens triumphantly proved over and over again in his fiction; its discontinuity favours both instant-villains and instant-heroes impartially.
(Raban ch. 1)

The consistent deployment of short lenses across the narrative of *Best Actor* ensures that the urban environment plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the character transformation of Mohan. This transformation is most conspicuously manifested within the confines of a salon, where an unconventional and innovative hairstylist undertakes the task of adapting Mohan's appearance to align with his impending role shift. In this visual sequence, a wide-angle lens is employed to vividly encapsulate the interior space of the salon, characterised by its distinctively vibrant green colour scheme and prominently displayed photographs of film actors. The hairdresser's performance from Mohan's point of view and from a wide shot covering the interior of the salon takes around fifty seconds to complete. The wide-angle lens facilitates the dual task of maintaining focus on the salon's interior while simultaneously amplifying the lens's capability for visual exaggeration that adds a touch of humour to the scene. Nevertheless, the film does make use of the binary values associated with village and city, with Mohan's past life and space symbolising the virtues of innocence and his current urban existence in Kochi compelling him to grapple with the complexities of evil. The

carefully crafted façade of Mohan's feigned persona is abruptly shattered when, by an unfortunate turn of events, his friends and family from the village inadvertently witness him engaged in a fight with another gang. The rural disallows such a fictional façade.

In *King Liar* (dir. Siddique-Lal, 2016), Sathyanarayanan, a habitual liar and manipulator, shifts his operation from his home village to Kochi city, where he can conduct his fraudulent activities with remarkable ease. His character highlights the city's unique environment and the opportunities that can facilitate such endeavours. As Madhava Prasad rightly observes, in “urban spaces, individuals encounter each other as strangers, reified entities whose position in a social network cannot be known immediately” (Prasad 84). Sathyanarayanan resides temporarily with a friend in a room situated atop the regional office of Cochin Corporation in Vyttila. By choosing a government-owned public building to provide the living space of Sathyanarayanan, the narrative thematically and visually validates Michel De Certeau's idea of "tactics." Explaining the concept, De Certeau writes: "It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises for them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (37). *King Liar*, in that way, metaphorically reflects the urban tendency to reinterpret the established structures imposed by authorities to facilitate a private function. In the absence of evident visual cues within the room to establish a connection to the character's subjectivity, the audience is invited to associate it with the urban environment. His fabrications, schemes, and tactics are associated in the narrative with the environment he resides in—the urban. The adoption of distinctive visual strategies also implies the boundless nature of the cityscape, where space exists in an abstract form, making it challenging to delineate the boundary between the interior and the exterior.



Figure 4: A screengrab from *King Liar* featuring protagonist's private space and the urban horizon in one frame.

This space, meticulously constructed by the film's art department on the actual Corporation Office building, was subsequently dismantled upon the completion of its cinematic use. The visual representation of this environment primarily employs short lenses to initiate a visual discourse juxtaposing two disparate notions of space—home and office. The room's expansive windows effectively encourage the external environment to become an integral part of the interior space's composition. The use of wide-angle lenses, in conjunction with the thoughtful use of yellow and white colour tones, applied correspondingly to distinguish between night and day visuals, effectively erases the perceived demarcation between the external and internal spaces.

Kochi serves as a sanctuary for individuals seeking to conceal themselves from their pasts. In *Mayaanadhi*, Mathan comes to Kochi in order to escape persecution. Mathan's ex-boss Shaji is also leading a peaceful domestic life in Kochi, eschewing his past life of villainy. But unlike *Big B* and *City of God*, Kochi is not portrayed as a setting where criminal activities unfold openly during daylight. The crime that Mathan committed in the beginning happens outside the state. Even when he encounters the investigating team in Kochi, the entire action is choreographed inside a lift in a mall. As the fight turns violent, Mathan uses the fire extinguisher to shatter the light within the lift. The rest of the sequence is skilfully edited using a colour inversion technique, imparting a visual resemblance to film negatives and mitigating the raw brutality of the fight. The outdoor city scenes are bathed in a warm, yellow glow, complemented by supporting colour filters. This deliberate use of colour aims to craft a romantic atmosphere, providing a backdrop for Mathan to rekindle his lost love with Appu.

Conclusion

While films like *RDX* demonstrate that the urban landscape continues to offer rich narrative possibilities, there has been a noticeable decline in the frequency of films exploring various facets of the city. Recent cinematic ventures emerging from Kochi, even when situated within its urban backdrop, appear to avoid incorporating visual elements that effectively convey the city's identity. Furthermore, narratives like *Kumbalangi Nights* (dir.

Madhu C. Narayanan, 2019), even when set in the rural suburbs of the city, tend to avoid the inclusion of urban elements and focus more on individuals and their interiors (L S “Visual Dialectics” 66). Nevertheless, the trend set by short-lens cinemas continues to exert influence on Malayalam cinema. It initiated a shift that transcends traditional binaries and embraces the inherent hybridity found in cityscapes.

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Pramod L S teaches at the Department of English, Govt. College Attingal. His areas of interests include Film Studies and Screenwriting. His PhD thesis was titled "Wide Angle Lens as a Flaneur in Imagining the Cityscape of Kochi."

Remyasree S teaches at the Department of English, Ayyankali Memorial Arts and Science College, Pathanapuram, Kollam. Her areas of interests include Film Studies and Gender Studies. Her PhD thesis was titled "Imagining the New Malayali Woman: The Performance and Politics of Gender in Early Malayalam Cinema."