

**Globalization and Divergence**  
**Dynamics of Dissensus in Non-Dominant Cinema Cultures of South India**

An essay in fragment by Brigitte Schulze

**Preliminary thoughts: Analytical tools and phenomenological frame of reference**

Kerala's "public sphere" is not "the public spheres" of Habermas, Eley, Fraser, or Benhabib (cf. Calhoun 1992/ 1997). Its dynamics result of the two divergent dimensions of how it is *experienced*, either as "public support", or as the wrath of "public morality" that primarily silences the *dalit*/ 'untouchable' subject and the woman subject, whose 'willfulness' could destroy the modern patriarchal upper-caste identity construction that dominates

"Malayalam<sup>1</sup> novel maintains its essence of identity on its exclusion of *dalits* as subjects in both senses of the term. [...] [However, even the inclusion of *dalits* in the novel in Kerala] is designed in such a way that their choked presence functions as a distancing element in the process of organizing an **exclusive Malayali coherence** [cf. Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992, p. 8] [...] what is intriguing is the silence these novels keep on the question of **slavery and slave subjects** (*dalits*) at a time when their **emancipation** and **integration** were **live** issues [at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century][...] In spite of several social changes, Keralam is still a caste society. And patriarchic too. [...] But the **progressive image** of Keralam veils this fact. In her historiographic metafiction on modern Keralam, Arundhati Roy<sup>2</sup> unveils this fact [...] The driving force of *The God of Small Things* stems from the wrath at the wrongs gender discrimination does **to fundamental laws of love**, family and true feeling. But this novel is acclaimed as their own by *dalits* on the assumption that its hero is Velutha, a *dalit*. This perception fails to notice the role of **feminist poetics** in ordering the literary **equality** between castes. Integration is a myth as is evidenced by the lay out of **Kerala politics** which continues largely to be structured castewise."

T. M. Yesudasan "The Poetics of Integration and the Politics of Representation. An

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<sup>1</sup> ) *Malayalam* is the language spoken in Kerala. Long before Kerala was founded in 1956 as that tiny Indian State that stretches along the South-Westernmost coast and reaches to the Ghats in the interior East of the subcontinent, its people referred to it as 'Keralam' or as '*Malayalam*', the land of *Malayalam* speakers, the '*Malayalis*'.

<sup>2</sup> ) In 1998 Arundhati Roy received the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, her first novel, New Delhi: IndiaInk, 1997.

### Ambedkarian Reflection on Fiction in Keralam"<sup>3</sup> [bold letters mine]

T. M. Yesudasan's pointed "Ambedkarian reflection" on the nexus of the *Malayalam* novel and the modern *Malayali* identity, and on the latter's misleading democratic image brings to our attention *Malayali* identity's true ideological 'finesse': to claim "their people" as being free and equal whereas the *dalit's* [and the *adivasi's*, Kerala's indigenous tribal population] and the woman's daily experience is that of a deeply ingrained, more or less subtle and practically relevant discrimination. It also reveals the socio-historical blunder of a *Malayali* identity that never fought slavery (that existed well into the 1960s) in a joint effort, or as a common political platform. 'The modern Malayali who stepped out of the most rigid and inhuman systems of caste and slavery (cf. Jeffrey 1992/ 2001), never celebrated the 'fraternization' of all men and women irrespective of caste and 'community', and definitely not by publicly embracing each 'Other'. All to the contrary, 'the public' is still ruled by laws of 'public morality' that regulates body contacts and has been internalized to that extent that any Malayali would immediately start or apologize when he/ she touched or was touched in public by another person. Like this, until today, the *dalit's* and the woman's body and what they insinuate about the human zest for life are kept 'out' of the public, at a distance, as are the sensory and sensual desires to touch and be 'touched'.

If these basics are comprehended about the nexus of Malayali identity and the exclusion of the *dalit* and the woman as bearers of the sensory and sensual facets of the human being defamed as being of a 'Non-Malayali' nature, it will additionally pave the way to the realization that the Keralan society (unintentionally) plots its co-ordinate system of "civil society", "public sphere" and "media reception" etc. in such a specific manner that any application of concepts taken from European or US-American contexts, would but scratch at the surface of the phenomena.

If one further follows Yesudasan's argumentation, modern Malayali identity not only silenced the real existing women and *dalits* by depriving each one of her/ his own voice. It also negated their respective 'inner world' as an independent and 'free' subjectivity that created her/ his own vision of 'life'. These are thus reduced to nothing more than their utilisibility to contribute to the construct of 'the Malayali'. In sharp contrast to this, our cinema-related discussions and also our own films highlighted what the mainstream society ostracizes: the sensory-emotional dimension of human life and social inter-action

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<sup>3</sup> ) T. M. Yesudasan, English professor at Kottayam's CMS College, who generously enriched and encouraged my first attempts in coping with the paradoxical complexities of the modern *Malayali* identity constructions with many of his unassumingly wise comments, also gave this paper indicating that he had presented a "crude form" of it in the seminar on "Socio-political fiction in South Indian languages" at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Madras, May 8-9, 2000.

and markedly also the moral philosophical outlook of "the common people".

These are the most important dimensions of a more silent dissensus foregrounding emotional-moral-sensory questions of existence and the 'Good life' which have been exiled from Malayalam literature and also from the emergent Malayali 'public'. It seems as if it found refuge in the realm of the cinema: that peculiar 'private' space/ place which is in the center of 'the public'. Where the 'individual' joins the 'collective' of the cine-audience without losing her own contours in the formless 'mass'. And where the spectator can experience her versatility in assuming the (hero/ heroine) Other's joys and horrors of 'life'.

Thus, the potential and the socio-cultural role that the cinema can assume in an 'untouchable' environment where it mediates complex 'touching' experiences, opens up challenging new perspectives to studies of "media in transition".

### **The "womanly" aspect of modern Malayali identity**

Social historian J. Devika founded her insightful PhD "*En-Gendering Individuals: A study of Gender and Individualisation in Reform-Language in Modern Kerala, 1880s to 1950s*" (1999) on an unprecedented rich evaluation of the *Malayalam* magazines which formed an essential part of the modernizing endeavor. We understand that right from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Women's Magazines were prominent promoters of the assumedly right code of conduct of the modern female "individual" of upper-caste background and her role in society. Thus, modern Kerala's reform language, its speakers and its media like specializing magazines and newspapers included 'the (upper-caste) woman' as the fitting match to 'the (upper-caste) man' in his project to modernize and create 'the Malayali'. The undisputed and uncontested platform for this gendered public discourse ethics to be popularized amongst the respective upper castes and classes was what J. Devika wrongly terms the "public sphere".

The first of this kind of Women's Magazines appeared as early as 1892, around the same time as the *Malayalam* novels that T. M. Yesudasan analyzed. "The Womanly" is defined as denoting the "modern domestic domain" to be run in such a mode that it would foster "modernization". As noted by Devika (1999, FN 6), yet more pointedly reflected in C. S. Chandrika's "Women's History of Kerala" (1998) and aptly critically discussed from a *dalit* women's perspective by Lovely Stephen (1998), the shaping of Kerala's modernity and modernism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was essentially an upper-caste male venture.

It was masterminded on an unequivocally cognitive plain. The educated male elite 'thought out' the characteristics of the 'modern Malayali'. According to me the overemphasizing of its *own rationality* might be rooted in its (more or less explicit) antagonism to the colonial construct of the "irrational native", which mesmerized between plain racist and utilitarian perceptions. Each of these, however, was interested in the question how the 'Indian colonial subject' could be motivated to 'think British' and act loyal in accordance with what one claimed to be the 'civilizing mission of the Empire'.

The implications which this primacy of the attitudinal aspects of modernization had on the installation of a 'public sphere' that had to cater to that kind of a *self-evaluation* of

(male, upper-caste, educated) Malayalis and their preparedness to transform themselves into modern subjects and citizens are further explored below. Here it is important to keep in mind that the prominence of the upper-caste (corresponding largely to upper class) men amongst the modernizers was based on these men's access to modern education, modern thought, the newly emerging novel and the press:

“The newly introduced genre of the novel also got involved in the self-fashioning of a new middle-class ... voicing ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ interests may well be interpreted as a sort of indirect conversation involving the question of how the new self may be shaped. These are but a few of the arenas in and through which modern individuals who were both subjects and objects of modern reason were to be bound together for the purpose of forming ‘general’ or ‘public’ opinion.” (Devika 2000\*, 1)

It has rightly been highlighted by Devika that the fashioning of a sphere of domesticity which supposedly corresponded with the ‘natural givens’ of a woman to run the domestic matters was actually meeting the requirements of the modernization as monitored by the learned men of the affluent castes/ classes.

I would like to extend her argument and state that the installation of that ‘womanly sphere’ meant an implicit defamation of a woman who involved herself in the "public sphere" according to self-defined interests as ‘un-womanly’. In this manner an indirect censorship was installed that tended to exclude women from participating in public opinion making. The ‘censor within’ the woman, her self image, became a most influential agent of the woman's retreat from "the public sphere".

Today, the idea of the incompatibility of ‘the good woman’ – essentially hold and engineered by the middle classes – being ‘out’ in the public (sphere, or also: space, like streets, busses, etc.) is widely accepted. It paved the way to violence becoming an ingredient in social re-action towards 'public women' (compare the case of P.E. Usha, referred to below). Thus the structural politico-economical exclusion of women from controlling material resources is reinforced in the less visible sphere of women's construction of Self.

### **'Women's groups' in 'the public' - not the groups of the women**

This construction of the (Self-) image of 'the Malayali woman' who would not step 'outside' of what is ascribed to her as her 'womanly sphere' has two implications for understanding what Devika calls the "public sphere" [for my critique see further below] and the failures of women organizing themselves in groups in Kerala:

1. ‘women groups’ have mostly been formed as appendices of parties or exclusive ‘communities’ in order to secure better positions against ‘the other’ groups/ communities,
2. the frequent and very noisy demonstrations which still rule the public (streets, places etc.) in Kerala result from the need of the abundant interest and pressure groups existing to make themselves heard. The mobilization of members in the public space/ sphere is therefore just another instrument of competition. By means of ‘showing off’ as huge a number of ‘their’ group members as possible, by occupying thus a vast portion of public space, and by making it resound from their slogans, one asserts Self-identity of pressure groups. Thus, the still numerous public demonstrations in Kerala would be

misinterpreted, if one would take it as representations of the *gathering* of like-minded people for their common *cause*. The getting-together is not motivated by fighting for an issue, but it is of ritualistic nature and aims at securing public space for 'one-Self' *against* 'the Other(s)'.

Groups of women initiated by women<sup>4</sup> themselves and dedicated to a cause that was defined by themselves and according to their felt needs, and who were not following the logic of the formation of competing interest groups, are extremely difficult to spot in the otherwise vibrant history of group and party formations and their endless dynamics of splitting up in subgroups, that we have in Kerala.

Both women's groups that I am associating with in our 'cinema studies', *Dalit Women's Society* and *Mallussery Graamoodyooga Sangham*, wound up their former activities of income generation and the like because they experienced an invasion of party and interest group politics interfering into their activities, and that was detrimental to their cause. However, in the course of our mutual efforts to 'appropriate' cinema as 'woman's place', our work profited tremendously from the still existing bonds to *ayaalkuuttam*, their 'neighborhood', which, in turn received an infusion of new life energies.

The existence and the demonstrations of numerous and vociferous groups in Kerala, and the great number of people they mobilize, testifies a high level of preparedness to perform in ritualistically occupying and claiming the "public sphere" and public space. These public appearances and statements are neither the result of a preceding political discourse amongst members that treat each other's opinions as equal, nor are the 'demonstrating people' acknowledged as bearers of opinions which would be taken as serious statements and contributions to a democratic discourse on something like the 'greater common good'. This latter has no place in the cognitive, nor in the ethical, nor in the physical mobilization of 'the public'.

This provides the background to the fact that the real existing women and *dalits* are losing their subjectivity and agency in the same measure as the upper-caste male subject empowers himself and becomes the main agent of *claiming* public space and persons, who have been transformed into mere allegories or parables serving to render modernism in Kerala a democratic touch.

The author of the quote at the beginning of this text, T. M. Yesudasan, highlights another characteristic feature of the modern 'Malayali identity' mediated by the novel, which at

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<sup>4</sup>) I am summarizing information that I obtained during my talks to women in Kerala who have been either actively involved in women or feminist groups, or who have been informed observers of women/ feminist politics. My contacts cover a spectrum of women's organizations that includes the urban and the rural set-up, and that is also in terms of caste and class backgrounds as heterogeneous as possible.

the same time marks an important starting point for our trust in the cinema to offer space/ a place to women's Self-controlled reflexivity. The "interanimation" of *Malayalam* and English that went into the making of the *Malayalam* novel is characterized by what Yesudasan appropriately calls a "willful linguistic promiscuity" that is particularly discriminative against choosing slavery and caste in Kerala as subjects.

Thus the *Malayalam* literary body tends to rather represent the *estranged* images of 'the Malayali woman', 'the Malayali (upper-caste) man' that are depicted according to the nature of their appropriation by the dominant consensus on Malayali identity. Even *The God of Small Things* who is Velutha (which means 'the White', an ironic and sad reversal of the racist discourse on skin color that pervades Kerala's construct of identity along caste lines), the *dalit*, has been deprived of agency. Even if it was in a *loving* embrace. Because it is not Velutha *and* Ammu who share their love and mean to each other the 'loved Other' that would destroy even the faintest allusion of being 'used' in the respective other's world according to the dominant images. Yesudasan points out that the perspective of *The God of Small Things* is that of Ammu ("feminist poetics"), and that Velutha is - unwittingly though - objectified by Ammu's revolt against her upper-caste/ - class community of Syrian Christians. T. M. Yesudasan concludes that the *dalit* - though placed unusually prominent even as the subject in the title of the novel - is still bereft of any historical perspective and agency in that fateful love embrace. And that holds true, even if it is equally true that her love courageously defies the inhuman "laws" set by the dominant consensus on the differences installed between exclusive communities.

There is no space left in the realms of the written word world of the Malayalam novel and the press for the *dalit*-woman, they have to look elsewhere in order to find 'their place' for a self-controlled vernacular that would express and re-present his/ her humanity. In the cinema the 'marginalized *dalit*-woman' found her own *vernacular* of Self and Other. This is at least the first very general conclusion of our co-operative cinema-related efforts in gaining agency in the field of media that are relevant shapers of modern (gender) identities.

However, what Appadurai (1991) stated about "folk-lore" is equally true in our context. Therefore, we are not plunging into a requiem of the "lost lore" of 'true' femininity in order to install these views and voices that have been marginalized side by side to the dominant myths. But we intend to draft new co-ordinates that hold these daily experiences of 'life' and these visions of the 'Good life' on to their own terms because their significance lies far beyond being a simple anti-thesis to the established order.

Yesudasan's concepts for scrutinizing the Malayalam novel's projection of *dalit* agency was inspired by the programmatic titles of Ambedkar's agitprop journals: *The mute*, *The excommunicated*, *Equality*, *The people* and *Enlightenment*.

Our new framework of social experience, debate and public representation of the *dalit*-woman will break her enforced "muteness" ('silence'), bring to the fore the views of the "excommunicated" ('marginalized') and advocate "equality" amongst "the people" trying to inspire "enlightenment" ('knowledge'). It becomes obvious that our vernacular is very close to that of Ambedkar, too, and, if at all there is a 'tradition' of thought and political

praxis relevant to us it is that of activist-cum-theorist Babasaheb R. Ambedkar. In continuation of my contextualization of our project into the framework of asserting the marginalized/ *dalit*/ woman subject and subjectivity in the introducing paragraphs of this essay, the prime importance of the discourse on 'equality' and on the physical and moral-emotional aspects of the 'human touch' in the context of 'Malayali modernity/modernism', makes our approach one amongst the many voices that contested the hegemonic and dominant politics of modernism/modernity. This means that our's is not a postmodern approach, and, possibly, it is not a postcolonial either. I would appreciate, if this theoretical positioning would initiate a debate during the MIT conference that would help me to clarify my positioning.

'Subjective cinema' as practiced in the context provided by us, became an important instrument to the *dalit* and the 'marginalized' to assert her agency. However, due to the wider socio-economic framework that defines cinema as *Kulturindustrie*, the cognizance gained in our 'subjective cinema' cannot be but *fragmented* experience of that *fragmented* social life. It is this insight into these 'laws' of fragmentation that I gained during our practical cine-experiences that prompt me not to render to these experiences a theoretical form that would eliminate fragmentation. I am searching for a theory that would - by means of the appropriately abstracted concepts - make that fragmentation stand out in offensive sharpness.

Preliminary thoughts on self-reflexivity and subjectivity of the woman-field researcher:  
Modern Kerala's *ambivalence* vis-à-vis the 'woman-un-touchable', the fragmentation of her cognizance and her agency by 'power plays'

We 'women-untouchables' set out to explore our own cinema, i.e. our abilities in reflecting on our lives framed in 'moving images'. This was during my most recent phase of research in Kerala between January and mid April, 2002. As part of our larger approach, ten women of *Dalit Women's Society*, ten women of *Mallussery Graamoodyooga Sangham* and me went into our own small-scale filmmaking, and into discussions amongst ourselves regarding the meanings cinema could assume to women who consider themselves as marginalized.

### **Dalit Women's Society<sup>5</sup>, Kurichy (DWS)**

**Lovely Stephen:** "It is quite natural that we learn everyday, we change attitudes every day, we change beliefs everyday. And it is our experiences that bring in all these changes. And it is

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<sup>5</sup>) This summary of the experiences of *Dalit Women's Society* (DWS) was written by Lovely Stephen, one of the founder members and the present secretary of DWS who shared her views with me in oral and written form during our intense co-operation since the beginning of 2001. These following paragraphs are taken from a paper that she wrote and gave to me on March 27, 2002.

such experiences that motivated us to think and believe that *dalits* and dalitwomen have issues and problems that are different from issues of other people. The mainstream society do not acknowledge this difference. The progressive community (people) do not acknowledge 'caste'. They see and analyze everything in the frame of 'class' only.

Our experience with social action groups and progressive movements gave the conviction that *dalits* have their own problems which they must deal themselves first. Studies and transmission of findings of such studies are necessities.

Thus we, Resly Abraham from Thiruvalla and myself, decided to discuss with dalitwomen to have a group of our own. We took Kurichy village in Kottayam District as the place of initial work. And in January 1992 *Dalit Women's Society* was registered under Charitable Societies Act. We started our work with a survey of 100 *dalit* families. Landlessness, underemployment, unemployment, low educational standard of children, lack of saving habit in women etc. were some of the findings of the survey.

[...]

Proceeding years, we are in a particular phase where we allow our members to be part of the people's planning process of the State (*Janakeeya Asoothranam*), where we observe and study the impact of our activities, where we study ourselves.

[...]

Some of the impacts we understand are as follows: [...]

*Dalit* women in different places of the State developed the feeling that they can create their own history.

#### My Last 10 Years Experience – What It Taught Me

My working with *dalit* women for the last ten years gave me varied and mixed experiences. Some of them are encouraging while some are painful and more thought-provoking.

Encouraging experiences are examples of how people who are denied rights and privileges yearn for it and are committed to fulfillment of their needs. And the painful experiences I see as the balance sheets of slavery and prevailing caste system. The encouraging factor is that once the women are convinced on what they need and want, what their rights are, they are ready to go any far to achieve their aim. They are sincere and committed to their cause.

[... some of the negative experiences observed about *dalit* women and their political work]

- They seldom accept each other,
- They are happy to enjoy attitudes and approaches of equality but they seldom share such attitudes or approaches with others.

What I learnt from these experiences:

- studies on different aspects of *dalit* women's life must come out,
- instead of employment programs the group must take the responsibility of educating the community through relevant studies and production of knowledge."

It had already been during the first half of 2001 that I started discussions of the framework, body of theses and questions, and the aims of my research project with women/ feminist groups in and around Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) and Kozhikode (Calicut). It so happened that the location Kottayam and the visions that we hold about our aims, brought me very close to the women of DWS who were in search of strategies to assert their own Self.

The women of the *Mallusery Graamoodyoga Sangham* ('Mallusery Village Society', MGS) already co-operated with the *School of Social Sciences* of Mahatma Gandhi



University Kottayam (to which I am affiliated), and their active involvement in the *ayalkkuuttam* (neighborhood) programs against 'communalism' and alcoholism in the mid 1990s<sup>6</sup> made them receptive to my suggestion to start our exploration into the potential of the cinema to provide a space of reflexivity to women by monitoring the representation of women in the popular Malayalam films that were screened in the theatres during the *Onam* festival season in the first week of September 2001. In a next step the women of DWS and MGS made sketches of a storyboard for their own short films (8-17 minutes) ENTE LOOKAM ('My world').

The dynamics of our self-controlled cinema culture rendered the basics of content matter and arguments to this essay. At the same time the dynamics of our cinema's wider environment made itself felt by its destructive side, resulting also in this essay being a fragment.

Let me briefly sketch how the 'inner' and 'outer' dynamics that concurred with our efforts to give cinematic expression to the women's ideas of Self and Other intertwined. These processes were paradoxical indeed, and will *therefore* make a challenging point of discussion during the MIT conference.

I maintain that the unfolding of events that led to the 'physical' fragmentation of this essay which is my first attempt to theorize my most recent empirical findings, is well at the core of questions regarding the nature and potentials of 'counter media' in a wider

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<sup>6</sup> ) I greatly profited from the talks I had with Fr. J. Constantine Manalel on the history of MGS, and the involvement, not only of the women but also of the men, in the people-based politics of conscientization for an equal society, and of a material well-being sustained by *ayalkkuuttams*. I was also impressed by Anil who joint our discussion, leaving his auto rikshaw, his only means of subsistence outside Manalel's office, and sharing some of his experiences as a social worker at the high times of the MGS activities during the mid 90s. Leaving Fr. Mamalel and climbing into Anil's auto was as if I was literally 'driven away' by a most profound 'truth' : that the Keralan common man and woman have a strong urge for in-depth reflection of their existence, but that they won't communicate their thoughts and wisdom in the dominant public sphere, but rather within social contexts they consider to be their own, and they can share with others, uncontested, yet at the look out for polemics. In beautiful letters, and in English, Anil had written onto his auto's backside and into its inside two quotes of Nietzsche and Benjamin about the vanity of craving for 'love' and absolute truth.

context dominated by *Kulturindustrie* and by a caste-ridden, patriarchal 'actually existing democratic' society.

Secondly, the experiences I am referring to in this part of my preliminaries might appear at first sight as the 'private' affair of the researcher and not appropriate to be integrated into the academic theorization. But they are relevant to media studies because they hint at - what will later be analyzed in greater detail - the common notions of a dichotomous separation of 'the private' and 'the public' being inappropriate in the case of Kerala's 'civil society' and the status of 'marginalized women', a term that would include my status as a woman scholar. Kerala's "media in transition" can only be understood, if the scholar herself takes a dynamic and committed stand and leaves behind stationary conceptions.

During our cinema-mediated experiments 'we women' acquired a particularly rich insight into the life worlds of 'marginalized women'. Yet, the generally prevailing unfavorable conditions under which we were working forced us into an 'ambiguous' flexibility. It enabled us to respond to the ever changing situations and helped to get a little closer to our ambition to use cinema as a tool of cognizance and a humble 'social change' in our lives according to our immediate needs. However, when a woman's capacity to adjust and to find new solutions finally manages to wring a few moments of a self-controlled and healthily balanced reflexivity, it might nourish an attitude that will prove fallacious. The steadiness of one's own 'counter-power' might be overestimated, actually belying the knowledge about the logic in the working of the dominant 'power system'. As a consequence one might land up in a tiresome effort to balance the disruptive and erratic 'power play' though it automates beyond our control. I fell into this trap while writing this essay. It therefore presents itself to its readers deeply blemished by the material losses of whole files and the bibliography, that can not be fully recovered.

At the same time I need to address the non-material aspects of this rather extreme experience of not only working under conditions of fragmentation, but of having been subjected to a fragmentation of my subjectivity. It forced me into a strange kind of 'exile' from the physicality of my body and the mimetic desires of my Self to get psychologically and emotionally involved with 'the Other'.

Is it just a subjective, non-academic experience that I felt like an 'untouchable' since my world of social inter-action in mainstream Keralan society was bereft of any 'touching' experience - neither of hands reaching out to each other and meeting, nor of minds or hearts? To survive as a female scholar in Kerala I had to become yet another incarnation of the species of the 'marginalized woman'. What does it mean to the 'objectivity' of my study, if I am naturally employing the words "we women" while referring to "female cine-experiences in Kerala", though I won't deny the fact that our marginalization is different, in nuances or in kind? I have to work on this difference.

How to cope methodologically with this experience of mine that represents a form of the otherwise healthy self-evaluation of the researcher, but is pushed to extremes?

### **"Cinema means life", getting "life e-(in) motion"**

It was not only during this most recent phase of my field work on 'Women and Cinema in Kerala' that one woman would not emphatically contribute her view that cinema meant

"life" to her. Totally independently, at different places and times, this potential of cinema was discovered with an enthusiasm that we rarely come across in the routine inter-actions the women perform. While my field experiences and the women's self-controlled cine-experiences grew, we found that by means of the 'reflection of life' in the cinema, and the reflexivity it motivated in us, 'life itself' appeared in a new light. The change in outlook was accompanied, though hesitantly, by steps to alter life conditions, too. Some women started to act and create choices - with or without the support of their husbands and families.

Before our cinema related work had started, 'life' - to apply a fitting image - rather resembled a state that can be likened to a 'still photography'. A state of discouraging immobility. It got released of its 'stillness' by the photographic 'moving pictures' under the condition that this cinema was under the women's control, this is what I term 'subjective cinema'.

These hours that we spent together sharing, co-operating and holding introspection, sharply contrasted the daily life of each of us women. But before we achieved that state that we settled comfortably with the relaxed manners of communicating amongst ourselves towards the end of this research phase, we had to strip off the tightly knit corsets of the identity of an instrumentalized 'womanhood' that we are forced to wear in Kerala and which render us breathless. We had to regain our breathing capacity, our human bodies, our speech and our subjectivity, and cinema was instrumental to achieve this.

In our self-created and -controlled 'cinema space' - which was a room in the neighborhood of the women's houses for the discussions - where we shared our views on the popular films of local production running in the theatres, exchanged ideas about the storyboards we were drafting for each of the women's own short film on her life ENTE LOOKAM ('My world'), and finally the shooting of these films in and around their homes, the screenings in the course of our workshop along with a professional woman filmmaker's film SAREE ('The sari', 2001 by Suma Josson), we charged our energies that are otherwise sucked mercilessly. We could thus mutually support each other to attain a position to look at 'our world' from a distance.

'Our cinema' and its co-operative and considerate spirit worked on me in the same manner as it did in the case of the women of DWs and MGS (as it is documented in the video-recorded portions of our self-evaluations after the workshop, see below). The sharpness of my vision on my own and others' lives in Kerala had improved, and I feel grateful for what the women from Kurichy and Mallusery shared with me about 'their lives' beyond what I can express in writing. My handling of the camera for ENTE LOOKAM according to the direction of the women, my entering and leaving of their 'inside' and 'outside' worlds under their guidance, particularly contributed to my understanding of the specific intertwining of a woman's 'private' and 'public' life - including my own as that "unperson", the queer single woman scholar here.

### **The 'private-public' of family life**

In Kerala the 'private' and 'public' relate to each other essentially different from civil societies like the urban German, or the cosmopolitan Indian, where I lived and did

research before. This specifically holds true in respect to the performance and perception of a woman moving in and between these spaces in order to instrumentalize them to her ends. Her mere physical presence near to the 'public' that is male-guarded, forces her into a state of constant 'alert'. The interconnections and dynamics of 'private' and 'public' with the 'inner worlds' of women and men, their sentiments and emotions, make one of the main topics in the paragraphs that follow. The peculiar nature of 'public' and 'private' in Kerala that entails a specific organization and compensation of labor and work altogether, and a very delicate status of 'family' as the most important sphere of individual-collective reproduction, goes along with an unusual accentuation of collective-oriented emotions, morality and attitudes.

It is one of the most important dimensions of my theorization to work out a proper framework that would neither treat the phenomena in Kerala and 'the emotional-moral' or intuitive in its public-private spaces in particular as the mere, negatively connoted opposite to 'the rational', nor as an essentialized and idealized space of an 'Oriental femininity'.

Taking up the statement I already made about the ambivalence of the 'power' (of knowledge) a woman gains by the reflexivity cinema can motivate in her, it was my most fateful mistake to hold the view that I could accurately manage to separate 'the private' and 'the public' from one another in my research work. But adverse happenings in the 'private' do not even spare a woman's academic work.

I did not take into account that the 'private' time spent on mere reproductive activities inclines to prolong recklessly at the expense of the time that can be spent on academic writing. Therefore I totally exhausted myself trying to snap away the writing and thinking time from sleeping and eating. And there was no one who would support me because I am not a family member, as every one else is.

In Kerala the family is a production unit in the truest sense of the word. The family generally brings in cash and provisions by combining the insufficient wages with agricultural work and self employment. Even though the income generated does usually not meet the felt needs. Since the 1970s migration to the Gulf became another feature of releasing the great pressure on natural resources in Kerala. The availability of labor or work in the state services, in the industries, in agriculture and in the third sector is depressingly low.

Since the end of the 1990s, daily life struggles took another turn. One has to try harder and harder to compensate for the severe cuts in public spending which again multiply the pressure on all kinds of reproductive resources. In Kerala the density of population ranks amongst the highest in the world.

A family usually consists of two female and male members who are all fully engaged in contributing their shares to the family income. Every member is submitting her-/ himself to a tight time regime. Travelling on overcrowded buses consumes so much of time that one tries to avoid any additional mobility apart from the most essential to and from the workplace. The home-bound activities are as much the center of material as of psychological and emotional well-being. Corresponding to this primacy of the private family-centred space, the public space in the urban areas that caters to needs of its citizens to socialize is very limited.

In Keralan families there is not much time left for entertaining social contacts for purposes other than securing the standard of life one could achieve, but which is threatened. Social contacts are reduced to the minimum 'basic necessities' to foster the 'blood bonds'. The prime importance of family to the individual is thus self generative and tightly interconnected with the character of the 'public spheres' of the economy and politics.

Without being integrated into the reproductive unit of the family my 'private life' as a research scholar living outside the university campus and not having a servant (not as a matter of conviction but one of 'circumstances'), is therefore made up of acting as housewife in the home and a kind of self employee 'outside'. The wider conditions of existence are such that they are upsetting any calculation of time; be it the blocked streets by processions or demonstrations, the electricity cut due to power saving measurements by the government, or the thunderstorms and heavy rains.

In my temporary hometown Kottayam, during these last four weeks since our ENTE LOOKAM workshop ended on March 10 when I started to work out my MIT essay, everyday and at any time the schedule I had made was ridiculed by the above mentioned 'circumstances'. I even stopped wasting time on time scheduling.

Due to the mentioned factors of the generally prevailing immobility, the impossibility and insecurity of a woman to go out alone after 8 p.m., the family-centredness in social relations, and the intense workload of each person, including my colleagues, I found myself struggling with a strange kind of overworking coupled with social isolation. On the one hand the daily chores that are usually shared among family members have to be performed single-handedly. On the other hand, as far as social interaction is concerned, it is not the lack of communication, but the lack of emotional depth in them that disturbs. Out of sheer necessity one has to focus interaction on the organization of one's livelihood only. This state of being consists of the mere functioning according to standards not set by oneself, and thus it feels as if the Self dissolved.

My 'life' had in a peculiar way been turned into another tragic avatar of Charlie Chaplin as enacted in his wise MODERN TIMES fighting with the seemingly animated objects here and there, but not being able to find the switch to turn off the whole machinery that had set everything in motion according to a well-calculated masterplan.

It was as if 'nature' also wished to join in this dreadful mechanics that made me work like mad in order to be able to stick to deadlines with my recovering times near to zero. Then it happened. When I was giving the final strokes to this essay a chain reaction brought about the great finale: I lost large portions of the text which I prove-read and corrected and also my updated bibliography. And all losses are final, unrecoverable.

Imagine, within the context just designed, heavy thunderstorms and rains. A huge tree falling in front of your house on the electric line. The sparks. The fear that again, like yesterday afternoon and this morning, you will be cut off all your writings and resource material because of these incalculable power cuts. You rush from the sight of the fallen tree and the torrential rains to your computer to somehow save, go on as long as possible. The lightning strikes too close. You remember the news item telling about people struck by lightning during these pre-monsoon times. Being torn between desperation and the

will to continue. But what is possible? Fatalism creeping in. Nervousness due to lack of sleep. Suddenly, while unintentionally striking one of the keys your whole text 'vanishes'. Another lightning. And then the power is cut. You have to wind up because the UPS ('Uninterrupted Power Supply') will take you only for some 20 minutes more. While saving you confuse the newly written with the older version and overwrite the new one.

Next days are repetitions of this kind of spectacle. Then I have to move from my house, unwanted and at an undue point of time. The power did not return for the last 12 hours. You unplug the PC, the printer etc., put these into the boxes, into the car, into the new house. Power there? Yes, but the person who promised to install the PC is not there on the scheduled time, and also not later. Important files are now locked in my PC in that box, in that house in Kottayam until I will return from Germany mid of August.

What I am able to reconstruct during these sleepless nights I am providing in this text at hand. A fragment.

The objective fragmentation of modern life experiences forms an important part of my argumentation on the *divergent* tendencies in the media that go along with a strangely silent dissensus in 'subjective cinema' in Kerala. However, I should sincerely apologize for not having been able to compensate for the adverse 'power plays' and for not laying the thread that should run through a logically structured academic writing.

These preliminaries have been written and re-written between Kottayam, Chennai (Madras) and Frankfurt ...  
between April 8 - 19, and April 21 - 30, 2002.

## Introduction

### 'Community' and 'individual', dialectics of dissensus-consensus, and cinema

“**We** are all interdependent in this fast globalizing world of ours, and due to this interdependence none of us can be the master of our fate on our own. There are tasks which each **individual** confronts but which cannot be tackled and dealt with individually. Whatever separates us and prompts us to keep our distance from each other [...] We all need to gain control over the conditions under which we struggle with the challenges of life – but for most of us such control can be gained only *collectively*.

Here, in the performance of such tasks, **community** is most missed; but here as well, for a change, lies community’s chance to stop being missing. If there is to be a community in the world of the **individuals**, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the **equal** right to the human and the equal **ability to act** on that right.”

(Bauman 2001, *Community. Seeking safety in an insecure world*, 149-150, bold letters mine)

Bauman’s emphatic reflections on the significance to regain an “ethical community” in today’s “insecure world” open up an arcade of inspiring as well as provocative perspectives and outlooks. Even so his rich analysis suffers from a major shortcoming. He unfolds the complex dialectics of the *material* sites of ‘globalization’ and the corresponding attitudinal patterns only as to those men and women who *consent* to the compelling economic and political forces. But do only consenters populate today’s world? Are the laws of capital accumulation under global conditions such that only these mechanisms have been left to move things and people alike as commodities from here to there? If this were so, the above quote taken from Bauman’s concluding lines of his afterword that recall the potential of solidarity – which is linked to human agency – would make no sense.

In Bauman’s writing the individual dissolves in ‘individualism’ with a negative connotation. Individual choices or collective dissensus are absent. But who should act in solidarity, with whom, and why? The fact that readers do not get to know anything about dissenting views or voices strikes as particularly strange when taking into account Bauman’s design of that powerful ‘machinery’ called ‘globalization’ and the prevailing unequivocal mind-set going along with it. Thus, any kind of deviation would really mean an achievement that would be worth to be analyzed closely. Bauman’s conclusion weakens his otherwise valuable argumentation. However, it might not just be accidental. According to me it reveals the sociologist’s shortsightedness as regards acting subjects and their experiences. His conclusion is thus a mere invocation of the hope he holds. As a keen reader and a sociologist who deals mainly with daily life experiences of ‘community’, ‘identity’, and with consensus/ dissensus formation as present in Indian cinema cultures, I am feeling uneasy. However, Bauman’s sober analysis coupled with down-to-earth studies of existing types of dissensus, communicative and social action, will infuse new life into our discourses on ‘globalization’ and liberate them from being stuck at the dead end of the mere hopes of intellectuals.

I am therefore documenting and discussing a dissensus from the site of my still very fresh fieldwork in Kerala that in many respects is strikingly similar to Bauman's 'ethical community'. It is the lived and reflected experiences that I find contained in the realms of local commercial/ committed cinema cultures and in 'subjective cinema'. The latter denotes a dual kind of 'appropriation' of the local cinema scenery by 'marginalized women', and runs counter to the dominant representational modes. I will go into the details further below. What is of importance here is that this appropriation is done rather 'silently' and unnoticed. No slogans, and no movement. Yet, these women challenge the productions of the *Kulturindustrie* apparatus and also core institutions of civil and political society on a terrain which they control and define according to their morality, and their desires to know of, and to be 'touched' and 'moved' by the 'Other' in the cinema.

**Impressions of 'subjective cinema': 'Marginalized women' and committed cinema SUSANNA (by T.V. Chandran, 2001) - making her own choices of Self beyond the family?**

When the year 2001 eclipsed, the appearance of SUSANNA in the heavily guarded patriarchal realms of Kerala's public, and in the popular *Malayalam cinema Kulturindustrie* caused tremors of a new kind. It was particularly the women marginalized by the society who eagerly pushed towards cinema theatres where usually we find the male crowd flocking. Around SUSANNA new alliances, and new enmities were forged. Women spectators who felt electrified by that relatively free life Susanna leads, found themselves being criticized for different reasons by the feminists, as well as by middle class female guardians of public morality, and by their husbands. For its kind of a committed cinema SUSANNA had an unusually long run in the theatres of one week up to five weeks. Still many more women wanted to see that film, amongst them the women of DWS and MGS. I contacted the film's director T. V. Chandran in order to obtain a video cassette of SUSANNA, and show it and discuss it in September 2002.

In a unique move and initiated by women activists and media persons special screenings had been organized which brought together housewives, women earning in the socially accepted spheres of exploitation, and those women who are exploited in the not so accepted spheres: sex workers (Muralidharan K. 2002). The latter found in that film a medium to agitate for the public acknowledgement of their political and economic needs in the form of codified 'rights'. Yet, the actual meaning lay somewhere else. Many of these women felt moved and touched by the film and its projection of Susanna who chooses to be with five men at the same time. During the viewing and discussions the sex



workers released all the restrict and control they usually exercise upon their feelings<sup>7</sup> to be protected against being 'touched' by that business of selling their bodies:

“T. V. Chandran’s SUSANNA [is the film born at the most appropriate moment. Kerala has been awaiting a cultural change. Cinema is the most powerful medium that influence people’s outlook [...] cinema theatres have become the filthiest cultural space [...] Beyond entertainment there is a male pact **to outcaste women’s selfhood** from the space of cinema. The antiwoman dirty comments rising from the audience ensure the ‘absence of woman’ in the cinema world. SUSANNA courageously steps into this space and a silence descends over the men in the theatre. This is uncharted territory, careful, yes be careful! SUSANNA confuses the ‘Malayali mindset’. [...] T. V. Chandran turns his camera to the untouched virgin arenas of a woman’s life. If a woman strips for **herself**, articulates for **herself**, and thus ‘becomes a woman’, she suddenly appears strange. She is not more accommodated in our settled **mind and family**. But Susanna slowly enters into each one of us and disturbs us beyond all our resistance. She dismantles the fixed, but decayed value concepts of morality, family relations, sexuality and love.” (Jayasree 2001, bold letters mine)

'Marginalized women', individual 'freedom' and cinema in Kerala

Dr. Jayasree’s<sup>8</sup> commitment as a medical doctor, her critical involvement in programs against the transmission of HIV in Kerala, are tightly linked to her engagement as an activist in the sex workers’s struggles. She stresses two facts with regard to the life and outlook in life of a sex worker in Kerala which are unique to the State. Here, the women organize and control their profession generally on **their own**. There are no brothels in Kerala. The woman rends her services directly to the customer. The meeting places are in the ‘private’ sphere, either in hotels, in the house of the woman. Rarely, one is somewhere in the open. There are no middlemen. No ‘pimp business’ sustains itself from the trading of the women’s bodies. But an elaborated system of bribery exists that forces the woman to ‘pay’ in order to escape the aggressive tactics of policemen who arrest her even while just walking across to buy some vegetables. The sex worker is used as a profitable source of income, not only by some of the executioners of ‘law and order’, but also by her own in-laws. They do not find fault in that, and will at the same time cater to the standards set by Kerala’s public morality that conceals all these facts. The men who demand sex for money are out of focus of the ruling public morality.

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<sup>7</sup>) The very foundations and also the sensibility needed to see Kerala's sex workers' existence from a many-sided perspective I owe to extensive talks with social activist and physician Dr. Jayasree whom I met on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2002, at Kottayam. I am grateful to Reshma and Sija due to whose kind support this meeting could materialize. My second talk with Dr. Jayasree took place at Trivandrum, April 6, 2002.

<sup>8</sup>) My talks with Dr. Jayasree.

The situation of the Keralan sex workers is better than that of the women in the Red Light areas of Mumbai (Bombay) which is one of the worst places anyhow. Yet, the biggest problem sex workers are facing in Kerala is that, though they are declared non-existent by society, the latter doesn't find fault in tolerating the corrupt policemen, cunning family members, or sex customers. Sex workers are forced to pull on under these violent conditions and have to lead a **self-reliant life** that might end in extreme forms of social isolation, physical and psychological exhaustion. Because it is she who has to bare the consequences for having dropped out of Kerala's most important, cherished and also most hypocritical institution for the organization of livelihood and the rendering of Self esteem: the patriarchal family.

This provides the background for the strong motivation amongst Keralan sex workers to unionize – which they successfully did – and to demand that their means of livelihood would be legally acknowledged as a profession. Most of Kerala's feminists oppose the sex workers' demand for legalization of their profession because according to the former's view it would sanction the flesh trade.

This was the situation when SUSANNA hit Kerala's silver screens. The agitated discussions and meetings, the different standpoint of views held by the guardians of public morality, or by men and women who welcomed this fresh breeze, do not only give evidence to the high pressure that obviously builds up in the everyday life and is imperfectly sealed and unruly released. Issues touching public or private morality easily provoke these overreacting responses in Kerala's public arenas. Cinema is the most important medium to negotiate the private and public viewpoints on morality and on one's situatedness in society.

The sex workers made SUSANNA into a temporary ally in their struggle which is carried on with different means under their command. The significance of SUSANNA is neither that it represented an 'authentic voice' of 'liberated womanhood', nor a utopia that would cater to an escapist need – supposedly it existed. Dr. Jayasree makes it very clear that Kerala's sex workers have no illusions on the dominant society and its 'laws', on its falseness and the double standards for men and women. They do not aspire to be integrated.

Dr. Jayasree emphasizes that most of these women cherish a notion of freedom that would not allow the curtailing of what she feels to be her strong *individuality* as a woman. In that extreme type of the Keralan patriarchal family her selfhood would perish in the self-less-ness expected of the 'good Malayali woman'. In other words, the freedom of the sex worker is the *realization* that there are disciplining and violent mechanisms in institutions like family, civil society and state. And it is her *choice* to position herself *opposite* to them, and at the same time shed off any illusions on her present life, too. Yet, she opts for being a sex worker.

It might be useful here to recall Habermas's conception of the ideal public sphere. It is supposed to act as a *counter*-balancing force to the sphere of political power. The dissensus of the 'marginalized' and 'free' woman has similar qualities vis-à-vis the

hegemonic institutions of power but one can not state that it would spring of a purely 'rational discourse', nor would this dissensus opt for the verbal as her means of communication:

“Susanna is not representing any particular category of women. She is ‘the realizing woman’. Each and every woman in her life has a short living period of romance like Susanna. A glorified, imaginary ideal, which is fed by the patriarchal values. This usually gets burned out either in the wedding room or when the woman’s role changes as in SUSANNA. All women outgrow romance. They cannot afford it. They have to be responsible to life. They have to take care of the lives dependent on them.” (Jayasree 2001)

Therefore, SUSANNA, as regards the sex workers, does not serve as an escapist fantasy. The cinema forms part or even acts as means of self realization, the distancing of the individual vis-à-vis to her roles expected of her. It might hint at choices to opt out. It means that cinema can sharpen the awareness of the ambivalence of the women's freedom and of her suppression. Thus, far from getting 'lost' in an escapist space, the cinema experience can help to understand how the compulsions of the women's lives are interrelated with those of the civil, the economic and the political society. Even if there were illusionary constructions in SUSANNA, they would not find an echo in women who would think differently. There is no objective meaning in a film anyhow, and it is the spectator who attributes her/ his meaning.

This being true, Kerala’s feminists who criticized the sex worker’s positive reaction to the film construct spectators as passive receivers only, if they maintain that Susanna was a typically male fantasy of a woman who was sexually responsive to any of his needs. However, in Kerala, as elsewhere, cinema is no manipulative one-way-communication. I am elucidating the two sides of this ‘dialogue’ in the following paragraphs.

**Do women who ‘appropriate cinema’ form another type of 'private-public sphere'?  
Do they 'escape' the converging trends in the ‘globalization’ of cinema cultures?**

In Kerala women who ‘appropriate’ cinema do not only run counter the ‘laws’ and mechanisms of *Kulturindustrie*. But they subvert the attempt to forge ‘convergence and globalization’ into the unambiguously paired trend-setters of today’s media landscape, and they also defy the image of 'the woman' as that most fitting signifier and executioner of the dominant views on (gender) identities. Yet, this agency - which not necessarily implies a counter-acting on the ruling conditions - is not analyzed, or even made into a subject of media studies. Instead, the focus is on the 'ruling media' (like TV) and how they 'act' upon the people in a manipulative manner who are part of the mainstream society.

I briefly share with the reader why I chose 'divergence' in my heading. My ongoing research has not yielded ‘divergence’ as the main characteristic of the cinema cultures of Kerala (*Malayalam*, *Bollywood*, *Tamil cinema*, *Hollywood*, ‘subjective cinema’, committed cinema). It is just an attribute to the outer side of things that is difficult to miss. Actually, it was one of the starting points of my research.

This essay's focus on divergence was provoked by the MIT's choice of title. But my polemic does not aim at substituting 'convergence' by 'divergence'. I am interested in the quality of each of these states, provided they can be identified. I actually see media taking the one *and* the other in our 'globalizing world'.

In Kerala, for example, the popular *Malayalam cinema* represents divergent trends, whereas television can be said to tend more towards 'convergence'. With regard to single programs there are also elements of 'divergence'.

How these diverse processes intertwine with consensus and dissensus formation, and how one can relate a co-existence of divergence and convergence to the notion of 'globalisation' might be further lit up by my thoughts based on selected experiences in Kerala. Here, *Malayalam cinema*, civil society and 'subjective cinemas' challenge the validity of the concept of the 'public sphere', no matter whether it is that of Habermas (1962/ 1990/ 1995), Eley, Fraser, or Benhabib (all in Calhoun 1992/ 1997).

The dissensus in Kerala that I am exploring embraces the vision of an 'ethical community life' through *ayalkkuuttangal* (*Malayalam* for 'neighborhoods'). Similar to the 'silent' dissensus of the sex workers, it cuts all bonds to the prevailing standards in society, economy and politics. Here, too, the focus of the critique is on a morality without double standards. It is the ethics of profit and competition that are opposed. One also strictly dissociates from dominant institutions like the patriarchal family, money economy and state (Pankajaakshan 2001).

Resuming my argumentation in the introduction on the 'individual', 'community' and the ruling ethics, I am taking off from where Bauman left us. My focus on the actually existing 'dissensus' of 'marginalized women', as it is reflected in 'subjective cinema', reveals trends in the thinking and feeling of a significant section of Kerala's population, though the 'public sphere' of the press and TV will insinuate a homogeneous 'consensus' as "the people's outlook". Its understanding might also contribute to answering those vital questions that keep social and cultural theoreticians busy ever since Marx evoked that "spectre" haunting the established Powers: What makes men and women 'consent' to structures of social life that are objectively oppressive and destructive? What makes them 'dissent', and in which way are the conditions of their lives, and - from today's point of view - the role of media and communication intertwining with 'dissensus' and 'consensus'?

### **Deviating perspectives on 'public' and 'private', the 'common Good' and 'individual need' in Kerala**

In my research on the role of cinema experiences in the biographies of 'marginalized women', and their conceptions and perceptions of (gender) identities in Kerala (South India), it was essential for my theorization to constantly reaffirm my distance to the established sphere of institutionalized democratic debate in the civil society. It is constituted by the print and electronic media and bears strong characteristics of 'convergence' in its relation to global media trends.

The indigenous language *Malayalam cinema* is the most influential cinema culture in Kerala. It generally complements the aforementioned 'rational' and highly educative verbal media. The cinema adds a complex moral-emotional and sensory dimension of social experience. Both, Bollywood and Hollywood play only marginal roles in Kerala. This holds true in respect to their economic positions as well as to the impression they make on the Malayalee cine-spectators.

What today asserts itself in this established media arena as the 'regional identity', and what is represented as 'the' Malayalee woman and man and their 'needs', has been turned into a site of the "ideological mobilization of patriotic loyalty" as discussed by Bauman (2001) in support of the State governments' profound reorganization of fiscal spending that connects Keralan economy to 'globalization'.

Kerala's particular type of discourse on 'Malayalee identity' and globalization' has been initiated in the official political arena and spilled into the 'public'. Since 2000, when Kerala was chosen as the third Indian "Model State" to implement fundamental structural changes according to the ideas of effectiveness and rationality spelled out by the Asian Development Bank (*The Hindu*, February 19, 2002), it is in high swing and makes itself seen, heard and felt. It occupies a great share of the space in the dominant media that constitute what is usually termed as the public sphere.

In February/ March 2002 it cast its long shadow of claimed patriotic loyalty over the fiercely challenged social and economic security of a vast section of the Keralan population.

During the 32 days, when State Employees and Teachers went on strike forsaking their salaries for more than a month, they were taught a bitter lesson. That 'Malayali identity' goes with a spirit of martyrdom; that 'needs' of the people are nowadays prone to be reducible to zero because they have been turned into the residual of the 'needs' of the state and those of the ever present, yet fuzzy 'forces of conditions'. Political and union representatives unison term this selling out of the means of subsistence of the majority of the people a "moral victory of the people" (*Mathrubhoomi* March 11, 2002), while the state continues with its impending politics of mixing with the 'global players' in order to achieve and strengthen that very status.

Split over the costs that the thorough economic and political reorganization entails but not over the main goal to strengthen India's position in the power poker of 'globalization', the emphasis of the most influential print media (*Malayalam Manorama*, *Mathrubhoomi*, *Deshabhimani*) which have their clear alliances to the political parties, differs. However, having shed all real issues concerning real *needs* of the real people from their political agendas, they are indulging in a language of myth-making and invocation of the proper 'morality'. I am arguing that it is rather that sphere which could be labeled as promoting 'escapism' in the people's mindset than (self-controlled) 'subjective cinema'.

### **The "public sphere" in Kerala**

Kerala's established media and 'the public' it represents are far from what can be found in Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere' as a mediator between society and state, "in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion" (Habermas 1962).

Whether Habermas's notion might be idealistic or not, is not the point I am making. Therefore, neither Eley's critique, nor that of Fraser or Benhabib (all in: Calhoun 1992/ 1997) can be taken as a reference point. But the idea of a democratically organized 'public opinion' (whoever might actually control it) implies the installation of a forum of checks-and-balances, *opposite* to those in power. It also insinuates a public will formation that is necessarily an abstraction of the ensemble of concrete interests. If wanted, one can refer to this abstract public will opposite the state as the 'common good', leaving aside for the moment a polemic on what the 'Goodness' of all should be.

In Kerala the mediated opinions can clearly be identified as the extensions of the interest group politics that crowd the 'public'. Historically the strong position of interest groups that represent competing communities of caste or religious bonds, is rooted in the manner how the educated and propertied castes and classes had started to fashion their type of modernism under colonial rule (cf. Panikkar 1995/ 2001) and Devika (1999).

This project of modernity and modernization that was first launched by the new educated élites at the eclipse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, created a vivid arena of press and literary writing, reading and debate. However, even the massive pressure and actual incursion of the lower classes and castes into this arena after the foundation of the modern State of Kerala in 1956, did not essentially change the face of that public of *competing communities*. Despite the unquestioned concrete achievements of the revolutionary intervention by the lower castes and classes into the democratization process of public resources and public affairs since then, a new type of exclusion and 'outcasting' holds sway over the material, cultural and political wealth in Kerala. It is the 'public' that is nothing but another scarce 'resource', heavily contested. Like this it won't bear anything like the 'greater common good' keeping in mind the still ruling feelings of the exclusion of 'the Other': *dalit*, *adivasi*, woman.

Social historian K. N. Panikkar maintained during a recent function on "Secularism and Culture" in Kerala that there has been a severe roll back in the dominating outlook on and social practice of exclusive community and caste, that prompted him to the thesis that the public sphere of the State was dominated by "religious-based activities", and therefore he felt it to be imperative "to create the public sphere" and to correct the deplorable state ruling in Kerala. He stated that even civic society was absent. The "need of the hour was the attempt to bring the people from the homes to the public place [sic], especially in the era of liberalization and **globalisation**. The attempt has to assume the form of a **slogan**. [...]"  
(*The Hindu*, 8. 4. 2002, emphasis mine)

Panikkar's concern about the absence of 'public sphere' and 'civic society' in Kerala is augmented by his distress shared by many men and women here in India today. There are the traumata of partition, the anti-Sikh pogroms 1984, and the anti-Muslim pogroms of 1992/ 93. And in March 2002 this angst of 'communalism' holds us in its grip again with the recent systematically engineered and officially supported pogroms that took so many lives in the State of Gujarat. It might erupt elsewhere and at any moment. An analysis of

news items in the press shows that murders with communal coloring are on the rise in Kerala, too, where brutal killing has become a means of fighting out political rivalries.

It is most likely that Panikkar's insights and his appeal through the press and TV will wither in thin air as so many 'appeals' before his. All absorbed by a 'public' which serves mainly as a declamatory platform to those who can access it. Hardly anyone bothers to take up statements, opinions or views aired here for the sake of the issue itself. Fierce opinion battles are fought for the sake of securing one's status and position in the public arena that could be called a space for 'demonstrations' in the truest sense of the word.

Contrasting Panikkar's idealist appeal that is a testimony to his unshattered trust in reforming Kerala's civic society, its 'public' and its media, most of the 'marginalized women' with whom I am working and socializing, and of whom I came to know through social workers and activists, do not consider 'the public' to be theirs. They do not spare much thought on 'the public' being their sphere, their place, or anything that would cater to their social, cultural, political, emotional and cognitive needs altogether. This is another important aspect of the 'dissensus' that I am scrutinizing in my research, and that I am locating in Kerala's 'subjective cinemas'.

**Sociology of cinema and "Befindlichkeit" of a society/ community/ individual: trans-historically and -culturally 'touching' aspects of cinema experiences**

My theoretical approach that I worked out as a 'sociology of cinema' (cf. Schulze 1997/ 2001) profoundly benefited from the exciting perspectives that Miriam Hansen (1983, 1991, 1995) and Heide Schluepmann (1990, 1990a, 1994) had opened up on early cinema and female spectatorship. It forms one of my main theses concerning the theoretical approach:

It is the (historically) *early cinema* experiences and its theorization that constitute an appropriate framework of reference to our subject(s) and body of questions because the latter's basics are linked to the formative processes of the Keralan type of modernity/ modernism. The colonial condition is but one of the factors molding these processes. This also holds true for theorizing the most recent upheavals linked to what is generally referred to as 'globalization'.

During my research in Bombay/ Mumbai on the contribution of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke's first long fiction films made in this metropolis between 1911 - 1918, to the formation of Indian 'identity' and modernity/ modernism, I concentrated on the potential of a sociology of cinema to recover what the early Siegfried Kracauer had called the "*Befindlichkeit*" ('state of being/ situatedness') of a society (Schulze 1997/ 2001, chapter 5).

It is in *The Mass Ornament* of 1927 that Kracauer (1975) elaborated most decidedly on his understanding of *Befindlichkeit* of a society and the latter's 'refracted reflection' in the realm of cinema by the spectator's agency. It was his interest in the "inconspicuous surface manifestations" of a particular society that motivated his reflections on how cinema thus 'indirectly' communicated its *Befindlichkeit*. In contrast, the judgements

which "an epoch" held upon itself, did not attract the attention of Kracauer that queer thinker whose meticulous studies on modern life Benjamin once likened to the work of a "rag-picker":

"... a loner. A discontent, not a leader ... A rag-picker early in the dawn, who with his stick spikes the snatches of speeches and scraps of conversation in order to throw them into his cart, sullenly and obstinately, a little tipsy, but not without now and then scornfully letting one or other of these discarded cotton rags – 'humanity', 'inwardness', 'depth' – flutter in the morning breeze. A rag-picker, early – in the dawn of the day of the revolution." (as quoted in Frisby 1985, p. 109)

"Be-find-lich-keit" delineates a locatedness of which the space-time co-ordinates are diffuse. It denotes an abstract as well as a concrete 'state' of a collective or individual - as it is the case in the cinema theatre: a space as much 'private' as it is 'public'. If *Befindlichkeit* is used with reference to a person, it can simply attain to the state of her physical health and also to the person's perception of her health. Etymologically the basic compound of *Befindlichkeit* is *finden*, 'to find' with its double meaning inclusive of 'to assess', i.e. to express one's opinion which is accepted as not being founded on actual knowledge. In daily use *finden* is often relating to an awareness that has not exclusively been gained by thinking in the sense of 'I have a feeling that ...'.

The noun *Befindlichkeit* is also used in the sense of where one would place oneself. In a private letter in which David Frisby kindly extended his help to my problems in translating *Befindlichkeit* into English, he suggested the "situating of society" extending the meaning to its "decipherability" and "opacity". In order not to lose this kaleidoscopic set of meanings I will be using the original German *Befindlichkeit*.

My study titled *Phalke's 'cinema of truth' in Bombay around 1900: Marginalized views and visions of modernity* (1997/ 2001) provided evidence that these first long films of an Indian filmmaker were as much intrinsically linked to a particular Indian modernism/modernity, as to modernisms that prevailed in German cinema cultures. But usual film studies misinterpret Phalke's films as an expression of 'anti-colonialism', as bearers and promoters of 'tradition'. It was this challenge to my research to prove that and how his adaptation of mythological themes attained other meanings and an other significance in Phalke's cinematographic contribution to that early phase of 'nation building'. And that actually, compared to the contemporary press and the stage theatre, cinema was the only space where Phalke voiced a "Befindlichkeit" that one can well relate to several of his fellow film pioneer's with a 'humanist perspective' in their filmmaking. I am thus arguing that in those early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cinema hosted a vision of a humanity of fellow human beings that spanned from Bombay to Berlin (ibid, chapter 5), and had, in the case of Bombay - i.e. Phalke's films - a strong egalitarian note against the hegemonic politics and (stage) culture of casteism.

A contextualising sociology of cinema of which *Befindlichkeit* is an important element opens up new dimensions and perspectives. It shows that zeitgeist is relative and only a residual category to the 'capriciousness' of individuals or collectives who might decide for or against social action in accordance or despite their respective cognizance.



Consequently, I am suggesting that studies on cinema cultures have to attain the capability to break out of frameworks like that of a "national cinema" or of a "historically specifically cinema". They are inherently blind to the more hidden meanings of cinema as a locus of *Befindlichkeit* with its introspective moral-emotional dimension which tend to get so easily lost in the noisy atmosphere of the cinema as *Kulturindustrie* on which studies generally focus.

I am returning to my sociology of the 'subjective cinemas' in Kerala along these lines. That Indian cinema in its tight intertwining with modernism/ modernity has always been a location of a trans-cultural 'humanist' trend highlighting the moral-emotional facet of the 'Good life' and also advocating its praxis. The same reasons that I gave to argue in favor of a trans-cultural 'sociology of cinema' would further support to study its trans-historical aspects.

In metropolitan Berlin Kracauer was longing for "Action, powerful intervention [...]" instead of accumulating "knowledge" which he saw as 'infected' by capitalism and a science that could not have been 'neutral' (Frisby 1983 p. 113).

How do I connect these *averse* attitudes towards modernity that spring from the realm of cinema since nearly a century, but have so far not attracted much attention by media theories? Likewise: *what are* these Keralan daily life philosophies of "equality" and (individual) "freedom" and of the 'ethical community' of *ayalkkuuttam* ('neighborhood') that we find in the 'subjective cinemas', and that run counter to the dominant ideas of the 'ethnic' or the competitive and exclusive 'community'? In what way is this 'dissensus' linked to the dominant consensus, and to socio-political and -cultural praxis? These are the questions that can be concluded from the empirical experiences made so far in our space of 'subjective cinema' and which we will have to answer during these next months until August, 2002, when I'll return to Kottayam and participate in the next phase of our experiments with cinema and reflexivity.

### **Women's disillusionment - 'the public' as the woman's pillory**

The informative cultural and political magazine *Malayalam Weekly* published an open letter written by a woman and addressed to P. E. Usha. In December 1999 an enduring and painful phase began for P. E. Usha, social activist and academic. She became the center of media and public attention in Kerala. Riding on a bus during night time, she had been severely sexually assaulted. Later it was found that the police had manipulated the exhibits provided by her, and at the same time a campaign of character assassination was launched against her at her workplace at Calicut University. After she had approached the Dean many times in vain with her request implement the measures an employer can take on base of the legal protection against sexual harassment at the workplace, P. E. Usha who is not aligned to any of the leading party or union circles, decided to go on hunger strike. Her appeal to the public was "to get justice!" I am documenting this 'letter' in full length because it reveals in an exemplary manner the dynamics that characterize three most important avatars a Malayali woman can take in her relation to 'the public'.

Between each of these avatars the dividing lines are thin: the 'marginalized woman', the 'public woman' and the 'middle class' woman.

Understanding the main features of the 'marginalized woman' provides us with a key to the assessment of the other two types:

1. Her ‘marginalization’ is a state of reflection and existence that knows how the centrifugal forces of the society work, 2. her objective ‘victimization’ does not invoke in her the desire to rectify this status, 3. it also does not make her a champion of ‘resistance’, 4. her attitude is pragmatic, 5. her language while referring to ‘the public’ or to the ‘public woman’, respectively the ‘middle class woman’ is ironical or even cynical.

The ‘marginalized’ woman is usually of a caste or class background that make it difficult in the competitive, caste- and class-conscious Kerala public to sustain of a regularly income. The ‘middle class woman’ is the typical representative of the ruling consensus. Her social efforts are focussed on maintaining or elevating the status of her family. She greatly contributes with her wages to the family income and prestige, and at the same time she has to guard and to prove her ‘womanly’ qualities and morality. It means to keep the household proper, and not to spoil the reputation of the family by spending more time than necessary for the bus travel to and from the workplace in ‘the public’. It means to forsake her-Self.

The writer of the ‘letter’ to Usha speaks from a position of the ‘marginalized woman’. From her point of view Usha appears as a typically blinded ‘middle class’ woman who refuses to realize the futility of her search for ‘justice’ in ‘the public’. The language of the ‘marginalized woman’ is ironical when she commends on the ‘middle class’ woman’s efforts. At the end she points at the realistic option that a woman has once she *wills* to draw the consequences from what she *knows* about the destructive nature of ‘the public’. The ‘marginalized women’ carved out ‘a place of their own’ in those spheres that classical cultural theories term as ‘private’:

“Has P. E. Usha lost all her senses?

From the beginning I felt that P. E. Usha is not intelligent. But now I feel that she has lost her senses. In yesterday’s newspaper I saw a news item that P. E. Usha started an indefinite hungerstrike against injustice. She demanded that action should be taken against Employee’s Union leader who spread scandals against her, that an enquiry should be undertaken about the University officials who have protected the culprit.

If Usha is going on hungerstrike those who have done injustice will not be moved. After some days she will be admitted to the hospital and will be given food forcibly. After that the strike will end. Elections are coming. If Usha lies down without drinking and eating the public and the authorities have no time to attend to her. If the public is not listening the media also will not listen. What is the injustice to P. E. Usha? Usha first contacted the police for getting justice. They are not at all interested. The police manipulated documents. She had really bad experiences at the police station. She is lucky that she escaped without further blemishes.

In this situation Usha started the hungerstrike. Dear Usha! This is Kerala! It makes no sense here. Usha, isn’t it that you want to live in this land for 30 or 40 years in peace with your daughter? For that this hungerstrike and complaint are to no avail. Usha thought she would get justice after that. This is a blunder. [...] In our society it is like that whether she is intelligent or she has a high position does not count in this men-centred power system. But ordinary women manage beautifully. I tell you a story of how a working woman dealt with a similar situation. When she was working a male colleague used obscene words and gestures towards her. But she did not behave as if she noticed it. The next day this man could not come out of the office after work time. There were four or five people waiting for him outside the gate. He

trembled with fear and requested the union leaders and managers to save him. Nobody dared. At last he went to her and begged for her pardon. Within ten minutes the people at the gate disappeared. Till now nobody had dared to touch her, or even look at her.

Dear Usha, women folk of Kerala, including you and me, can only resort to the ways this poor working woman used. Usha should at least give up her idealistic approach and understand this truth. (*Malayalam Weekly*, April 27, 2001)

The writer finds fault with P. E. Usha's attitude that unintentionally strengthens the mechanisms that harm her. Leela Menon<sup>9</sup>, one of the rare species of committed feminist woman journalists in Kerala, elucidates this fact that women become the consensual accomplices of the patriarchal violence in most of her writings.

However, if it is right that women have to shed their illusions about accomplishing their needs as a creative, thinking, individual and social human being in 'the public', does this lead to 'the private' be recommended as her proper refuge?

*Anweshi Women's Counseling Centre of Kozhikode* (Calicut) informed "Domestic Violence in Kerala is not only amongst the highest in India [according to a survey by International Centre for Research on Women, *New Indian Express*, 10. 4. 2000], [but that] its psychological dimensions are particularly strong, and [that] there was an "internalized, systematic method of social control of women" (*The Hindu*, 9.4. 2000). The *National Commission for Women, People's Council for Social Justice* (Kochi), and the *State Vanitha* ('woman') *Commission* chairperson Sugatha Kumari document that domestic violence is as much on the raise as sexual harassment and rape in general "Though economically empowered, women did not enjoy psychological freedom [...] there has to be an "awakening of women's power" (*New Indian Express*, 9.1. 2000).

'Success stories' of women's unhindered mobility and self assertive involvement in "society" often hail from the rural areas where the economic pressures are also high, but do not pair with the psychological tensions that are an urban, and again a phenomenon that is mostly to be found amongst the aspiring 'middle classes'.

For all these reasons, in my field work I am co-operating with the 'marginalized' women', those who had the strength to consciously distance themselves from 'the public' and its existential rat race, who are bearers of that dissensus which I wish to understand in its relation to cinema, to social commitment, and to the visions of a 'Good life' beyond the options offered. The longer I lived amongst these women, and with every visit to the cinema theatres with them, and our later sharing of ideas and feelings about what were our cinema experiences, the more I realized that I was trying to understand a rather paradoxical constellation: 'marginalized women' would find in the popular cinema –

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<sup>9</sup>) In August 2001 I visited and talked to Leela Menon. Against all kinds of odds she courageously champions women's causes with a sensibility and alertness to the hypocrisies of mainstream Malayali society that defies the prevailing image of the 'good woman' who should neither enter a male sphere (journalism), nor be outspoken.

which is amongst the most typical exponents of the 'public' without doubt – a 'place of their own' and facets that highly correspond to their moral and emotional being? Did they fall prey to 'escapism'? This would mean that their detachment of the established mainstream society was not consistent. Because the vast majority of the films shown appeal to spectators with a soft spot for the hero-centered championing of the male fist as the main instrument of ruthless success.

A brief recollection of our discussions of the highly successful film RAVANAPRABHU ('Ravana Master', Ravana is a 'bad' character, by director Renjith, 2001) might be useful to found my argument about local cinema cultures as the *vernacular* of 'marginalized women' who bear and partially live the vision of an "ethical community" in Bauman's sense (2001).

### **Impressions of 'subjective cinema'II: 'Marginalized women's' idea of love**

As part of our movie-going exercises during the *Onam* period (first week of September 2001) which marks Kerala's most important festival season, we saw Renjith's 'popular' film RAVANAPRABHU. As indicated by the title itself, meaning 'Ravana Master' (Ravana is widely known as the 'bad' demon king who abducted Sita, chase wife of the 'good' divine king Raam) the 'demon' is in the center of attention. Mohanlal, who turned into a many-faceted character actor since the later 1980s, impersonates Ravana. For the last decade Mohanlal dominates Kerala's silver screen side by side with another captivating male star, Mammooty.

RAVANAPRABHU is a typical "Mohanlal-film" and was conceived as the sequel to the legendary success DEVASURAM ('God-Demon' by I.V. Sashi, 1993) in which Mohanlal also starred - that time as the impersonation of the 'Good' and the 'Bad' in one person. A kind of a schizophrenic man whose essentially 'good' side wins over the 'bad' by the power of the pure and uncalculating love of a woman dancer, and by chopping off his arch rival's right arm.

Summing up what the women - to whom I refer here according to their neighborhood as 'Mallussery women' - told during our meetings and discussions it was most fascinating to me to understand that the 'Mallussery women' felt and discussed *sneha* ('love') and compassion with regard to this film. Any person with major exposure to Euro-centric ideas of cinema and to film appreciation would have maintained that the 'meaning' of this film was - transmitted via the bullying hero - a dumb worshipping of violence. What can we scholars learn from these unexpected and obstinate perceptions of the women? Certainly not that they fell utterly pray to something like the manipulative power of this film. Also not that they searched for an escape from the exhibited violence and found it in 'love'.

When asked about the violence, the Mallussery women simply maintained that this was "just a film", and they found the nicely choreographed stunts and fighting scenes "entertaining".

When they assert the film's message of 'love', they shift their position from the consuming distant spectator to one who involves herself. She changes her vocabulary, too, and speaks in a different vernacular incessantly about "feeling deeply touched", or having been "moved". This vernacular of emotional involvement contrasts the merely describing language they employ for the entertaining aspects of the film.

What condensed as the meaning they attributed to the film and communicated in our discussions, were those scenes and gestures which were - from the standpoint of view of the objective montage of the film - more hidden and not in the forefront of the plotted action. It were those moments that 'echoed' in their senses and sensibility: the simple, silent and "true" *sneha* between old Mohanlal and his wife, their commitment towards and care for each other. What the Mallusery women also highlighted was the old man's love for his son, for whose sake the father finally sacrifices his own life.

The Mallusery women felt a "great moral strength" in old Mohanlal, a Hindu, who had once adopted a Muslim girl and given education to her. She was the daughter of his friend who has tragically perished. And though it had been very tough for 'Mohanlal' - he had even to mortgage his house and land - he extended this much of support to that girl. She became a doctor like Mohanlal-son's love Devaki, who is the daughter of his father's arch rival.

The 'Mallusery women' stressed that this was a "truly humane" initiative which transgressed bigot ideas of religion and exclusive community. According to them this could stand as a "model" for many a person's behavior in today's Kerala. But they also stated that this "kindness" is rarely to be found today, which made them "very sad". Yet, they maintained that fortunately until today in Mallusery the different persons belonging to different faiths and churches were living together peacefully and were supportive of each other.

Relating their receptiveness to *sneha* 'love' and compassion in the popular cinema to their real life experiences corresponds with rather than it contradicted them. Here *sneha* prevails in the minimum doses which they are infusing into their private and neighborhood lives, while the general violence and the struggle for the most basic needs abound in the 'outside world'.

Would they therefore sit and lament about this violence? They bare it - mostly silently.

In search of an 'empathic theory' of 'subjective cinema'

The selective response to *sneha* in the viewing of the 'marginalized women' corresponds greatly with Kracauer's emphasis on the mimetic identification that the cinema encourages, and what Hansen explained as the 'mobilization' of self. It also renders evidence to what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) theorized when rethinking the nature of the 'classical public sphere' altogether against the background of the historically newly emerging "public spheres of production" (cf. Hansen 1983, 155).

However, the Mallusery women's focus on *sneha* and the resolute empathic perspective they take, opens up another dimension of thought about the role of cinema in

modernizing societies which is consequential to my theory. If it is taken for granted *that* the female spectators exercise agency in constructing their own meanings, and if the quality of their agency is such that they can subvert the “message” intended by the filmmakers and guardians of the box office, it can be concluded (without idealizing this subversion into a resistance with immanent practical consequences) that there are types of a deviating media reception which are ‘passive’ in so far as they do not rush into action. The potential to subvert the ‘objective cinema’, i.e. the cinema as part of *Kulturindustrie* and its ‘laws’ to necessitate the revolving of the capital investment, is therefore just a ‘state of mind and heart’ with no immanent logic to necessarily spill into action.

The twisting of intended meanings of the ‘objective cinema’ by ‘subjective cinema’ in the context of the Keralan cinema, is hence called *sinima* (the Malayalam adaptation of ‘cinema’) according to the women’s vernacular. Arguing on the base of *sinima*, the oppositional distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ is to no avail to our theory. What marks the new territory that I am exploring through *sinima* in Kerala is the *quality* of this cinema culture of a dissensus that spurns both the views that the ‘objective cinema’ enforces upon spectators, as well as the ‘opportunistic’ language of modernism.

Hansen aptly defines the early cinema as a “medium for the integral organization of human experience” (Hansen 1983, 157, FN 22.), or, more specified and inspiring for media studies in the nexus of cinema and modernity/ modernism, as “vernacular modernism” (Hansen 1999). Yet, it is only *one* side of, and not the whole ‘vernacular modernism’ that Hansen refers to when she looks at the *integration* of men and women into the respective and historically specific constellation by films in the wake of modernity/ modernism. In other words, the deviating agency of spectators is left out, if, as Hansen points out with regard to Negt/ Kluge, one attributes agency only to the “hegemonic efforts [...] to suppress, repress, destroy, isolate, split, or assimilate any formation of a potential proletarian public sphere and to appropriate its material substance, experience, in the interest of private profit-maximization” (Hansen 1983, 157). I am not denying the fact that hegemony in “the public sphere(s)” functions in this manner. But, it is equally true that there had always been strategies that got round the normative and practical standards that claimed exclusive authority on the organization of social experience.

I am arguing here - an argumentation that resumes what I stated in the introduction with reference to Bauman's concepts of ‘community’, ‘consensus’ and ‘individuality’ - that a media-theoretical approach that theorizes media reception has also to take into account the spectator's agency to willfully ‘opt out’ of consensus and resist - though not necessarily in a visible or audible manner - the integrating pulls of the hegemonic cinema's “vernacular of modernism”:

“The mass appeal of these films [classical Hollywood] resided as much in their ability to engage viewers at the narrative-cognitive level or in their providing models of identification for being modern as it did in the register of what Benjamin troped as the “optical unconscious” [FN] It was not just what these films showed, what they brought into optical consciousness, as it were, but the way they opened up hitherto unperceived **modes of sensory perception and experience**, their ability to suggest a different organization of the daily world. [...] Yet, if we understand the classical in American cinema as a metaphor of a **global sensory vernacular**

rather than a universal narrative idiom [...] the fantasy of a cinema that could help its viewers negotiate tension between reification and the aesthetic, strongly understood, the possibilities, anxieties, and costs of an expanded sensory and experiential horizon – the fantasy, in other words, of a mass-mediated public sphere and its failed promises. “ (Hansen 1999, last page, bold letters mine)

On ground of the same arguments the cinema's viewers could also become *aware* in Kracauer's and also Benjamin's sense (Benjamin 1963/ 1977) of the "tensions between reification and the aesthetic" and her 'life'.

After having given some more thought to it, I became particularly unhappy with the term “non-dominant cinema cultures” which I had chosen to designate the women’s cine-experiences in the title of the essay at hand. Using ‘non’ for denoting the women’s *sinima* is a pseudo-theorization that reinforces the dominant’s claimed normative status. One insinuates a dichotomy and also distorts what the women do by labeling it as ‘resistance’. Relational categorizations intentionally or unintentionally imply that ‘the dominant’ still is the focus of the rebel’s eye.

In this manner the understanding of rebellions driven by convictions, by dreams or visions will be casual and lots of its substance that is not deducible of the ‘dominant’ is lost.

Greater flexibility of the scholar in perspective-taking would help to avoid this kind of distortion that tends to essentialize according to the relative closeness or distance towards the concepts which are generally assumed to set the standards which are, unwittingly so, presented as irresistible, only because 'dissensus' might communicate in a vernacular that is only poorly known and understood by media scholars.

### **Dalit Women Society (DWS) and Mallussery Graamoodyooga Sangham (MGS)**

I conducted my field studies on *Malayalam cinema* in co-operation with the two groups of women, *Dalit Women Society* (DWS) of Kurichy<sup>10</sup>, a village in Kottayam District

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<sup>10</sup>) I am warmly indebted to Lovely Stephen, one of the founder members of *Dalit Women Society*, for sharing lavishly her rich knowledge, sensibility for ,undercurrent’ issues, her friendship and her food with me.

(Kerala, South India), and *Mallussery Graamoodyooga Sangham*<sup>11</sup> (MGS, 'Village Employment Association of Mallussery', Mallussery is within the confines of Kottayam Town).

Around springtime 2001, when I first approached these women whether they would be interested to co-operate in my exploration of 'women and cinema in Kerala', both the groups had already slowed down in their community organizing and income generating activities a few years before.

Once they had very enthusiastically worked in their respective localities to bring about socio-economic and attitudinal changes in favor of a self-controlled egalitarian social environment based on *ayalkkuuttam* ('neighborhoods'), and income generation activities which guaranteed a sustainable social and natural existence. Though somewhat different in nature, the underlying core reason why the women stopped to engage in DWS and MGS was the same: Kerala's 'public sphere' and 'civil society' are occupied by the established interest group and party organizations and their respective agendas which leave no space for any one 'outside' these structures, striving to follow their own ideas. Due to the particularities of the historical formation of modernity and modernism in Kerala there is a 'high pressure' on 'the public' similar to the real existing earth, the land, the land as private property. 'The public' has this extremely important dimension of being a terrain of survival struggles in Kerala. The 'imagined space' of civil society and the political sphere represents as vital a resource for subsistence as real estate elsewhere.

### **Impressions of 'subjective cinema' III: Women and their own *sinima vernacular***

I showed how 'marginalized women' appropriate 'committed' and 'popular' cinemas to their own needs which contain those important emotional-moral and sensory dimensions. The 'the cinema in the heads' fuses with the 'cinema in the hearts' and in its cognitively and emotionally appropriated form, it turns into *sinima*: My cinema, my choice to know that the seeming fixedness of the 'montaged' moving images - which become a metaphor for the abstract mechanisms of economy and politics - can be manipulated and used by the individual for her ends.

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<sup>11</sup>) I wish to acknowledge the very rare type of empathic and reliable commitment of my research assistant Suresh K. R. without whose practical sense we would have been lost in the convulsions of the tensions and the general strike-ridden atmosphere during the times of the shocking pogroms against human beings in Gujarat. These were conducted in the name of those racist and inhuman conceptions of religious or national identities which DWS and MGS and our common commitment to a society which acknowledges its members as human beings with needs they would themselves define and work for in a co-operative, neighborhood based effort.



It is the 'homes' that become the locations of the appropriation of *sinima* as a new vernacular of Self, Other and "We", of morality, solidarity and love. From here the established public and its claims on "the woman" or "the people" are not actively encountered, but a vision and a practice of 'life' is situated here that *runs counter* the dominant.

The 'marginalized women' and me conducted our meetings regularly over a period of approximately one year at Mallussery and Kurichy at times when the women could afford to leave their work at home and 'outside'. I went there with the purpose to understand these women who perceive themselves as marginalized and poor, and had therefore once started their co-operative neighborhood activities.

Both groups did not know of each other before I brought them together during our workshop "*Stree sangalpam – ente lookam*" ('A Woman's imagination - My world'). Since 1999, I had started to learn Malayalam, viewing popular Malayalam films in the theatres, and doing preliminary studies into society and *Malayalam cinema*. Once this research project got sanctioned, it is in a co-operative approach with DWS and MGS to work out the interrelatedness of 'individuality' and 'collectivity' in identity- and community-formations. The assumed particularity of the local 'public sphere(s)' and the role of the cinema as being distinctly different from European experiences and theorizations, is worked out from the perspective of a woman as human being, as a discriminated citizen, as an actively involved cinema spectator and as a creative filmmaker. My main attention focuses on the role of the *Malayalam cinema* in the local 'public' and how women who consider themselves marginalized experience popular cinema in relation to their daily perceptions and conceptions of Self and Other – with a particular focus on their construction of femininity.

### **"Stree Sankalpam - Ente Lookam" ('Woman's Imagination – My world') a workshop**

On March 9 and 10<sup>th</sup>, 18 women of DWS and MGS came together for our workshop at the TMAM Centre, Kottayam. There were 13 short films that we made in a co-operative effort.

From end of January onwards, during our regular meetings and discussions on the meaning of cinema, i.e. the women's "*sinima*", we concentrated on the drafting of storyboards for the films and discussing the basics of the photographic frame, the relation between filmmaker and her object/ subject/ location, and the artistic possibilities of editing – in the camera (zooming etc.) and at the editing table. In order to give as much freedom to the women as possible to concentrate on the direction of their respective film, the photography with a Sony Mini Digital camera was done by the author of this essay.

February 20 and 21 we finished shooting 5 films by 9 women at Mallussery, and March 1-3, Kurichy was the location for 8 films by 9 women. Particulars about the editing, intertiting, sound etc. were also discussed then, and taken down as notes by B. Sch..

According to the priorities of the women C. Saratchandran, dedicated filmmaker-activist, and B. Sch. edited the films in two phases. First we worked on the 5 'Mallusery films' at Saratchandran's studio<sup>12</sup> "Third eye Communications" at Thrippunithura (Ernakulam District) from February 26–28. Between March 4 and 6 we edited the 8 films from Kurichy.

The workshop was the first opportunity for all of us, including Saratchandran, to watch the films, now transferred to a VHS cassette. It was emphatically stressed how important this whole experience has been to the women's lives (see the documentation below).

Filmmaker Suma Josson (JANMADINAM, 'Day of birth', 1997) attended the workshop from the beginning, saw the ENTE LOOKAM films and participated in the discussions. In the evening of 9<sup>th</sup>, we watched her recent feature film SAREE ('The sari'). It made a lasting impression on the women. SAREE did not only initiate the urge to exchange views on the film itself, but also to rethink the 'popular cinema', their own films, and their own lives, dreams and desires.

### **Documentation**

#### **Relevant extracts of our discussions: Empathic *sinima*, reflexivity and life ...**

**Lucy:** "I can see the life of different people through this workshop by making our own *sinima* ('films') ... if I would analyze [...] my life [through words] I could not understand most of the things happening [like I am able to understand by means of the film]."

**Suma:** "We make our own film that is the main thing, this is our first experience, we wrote our stories, and we make our own *sinima* ..."

**Priya:** "I could understand others through this workshop and their problems also, like the film SAREE never goes to the ordinary people, so they find it difficult to understand this kind of film because [it] is always indirect [in its communication]. We saw so many films directed by us, but only in one film we could see a man helping his wife, but the rest of the films are based on a woman's traditional job as housewife."

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<sup>12</sup>) That we managed to edit the original material of 320 minutes, mix the sound and subtitle the 13 films in 70 hours, to keep close to the editing instructions of the women from Mallusery and Kurichy, was one of those miracles that can happen in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and sympathy for the marginalized women's perspectives. Saratchandran and his wife Sudha have this very rare gift to see what others point out, and to listen what others say, and to just let it be without imposing their own views and voices.

**Jalaja:** "All these *sinimas* which are directed by us showed the real life of women, when we compare these to commercial films, we can see some difference. I feel that we can match up to other directors."

**Suma:** "In the film SAREE there is also a scene where the woman is working in her kitchen just as in your films, there is some connection in this way between SAREE and your film. SAREE is also trying to show that real life of a woman. After the workshop we should seriously approach these things, you will be more aware, you could understand more things about film, and you can better question what the role of a woman is. In Western countries men are helping women, as a woman we should realize our power and weakness also. We should never give up what we have attained. We have an identity."

**Aliyamma:** "The workshop was very fine, [though] we people from Kurichy were not able to make perfect *sinimas*. Most of them were not showing more than two locations. Can we add more scenes and locations [next time]?"

[...]

**Elsamma:** "Most of the established directors are men. Because of that most of the films are male dominated, and most of the films project the '*Hindutva*' ideology [...]"

[**Salsamma** and **Leelamma** are sharing this opinion ...]

**Elsamma** [continuing]: "... Suma Josson is a famous director amongst women directors, she is also trying to show the ordinary life in SAREE. We also tried to show our problems by our own *sinimas*. If the woman gets an opportunity, she can do anything. Whereas the women usually take over all the responsibilities, men make all the decisions. But we did not show this, all are trying to show what the woman is doing in the house."

**Shailamma:** "In our *sinimas* we could see only two locations, Mallussery and Kurichy ... everyone is [trying to] show the performance of the housework and the making of food, and focussing on the kitchen, etc. But in one *sinima* they tried to show the activities of a self help group, but it was not perfect. Most of the films are centered at the preparation of food. If we get one more chance to make a film, we should avoid that. How can we enter into other matters like the thinking about other current issues? We should be aware of this."

**Viji** [from Mallussery]: "For Kurichy people unemployment is a problem. But if there is no employment we shall find out about other employment possibilities, then it is not a problem."

**Elsamma** [from Kurichy]: "Unemployment is the main problem in Kurichy. Here the population is very high, most of the youth are doing Kuli works [daily wages] because of the increase of the prize in cement and earth\* they lost this type of jobs. My husband is also doing this work, most of the time he does not work and everyday he inquires about whether a load is coming or not. For Kurichy this is a main problem. Mallussery is an urban area, so they do not feel it is a problem."

**Leelamma:** "When I watch these *sinimas* I wish to act, and also I wish that anyone would call me to act, SAREE was a good *sinima*."

**Suma:** "If there is unemployment, we shall go outside and inquire whether there is any possibility to get a job."

**Lucy** [from Malluserry]: "We are doing some self-employment works, we took a loan from the bank, and with that money I bought a cow, and the milk we are selling to the people in the neighborhood. The second thing we do is that we fold paper into bundles. If we fold 1000 papers we get 7 Rs. only. If we fold 3000 pieces we get only get 21 Rs. per day, it is not profitable. Because of the unemployment we are compelled to do this. If there is not even one job to do we should be ready to do any kind of job."

**Suma:** "You all were making your *sinimas*, but nobody made a *sinima* about your own problems in your families, why?"

**Aliyamma** [from Kurichy]: "For Malluserry people unemployment is not a problem, they said they get loans from the bank but in Kurichy they never get loan because the men have no jobs, then when we approach the bank authorities for a loan they ask: How can you repay it without a job? - this is the problem."

**Lucy** [from Malluserry]: "The authorities of some organizations like church and self help groups will explain to these bank authorities, and then they will give loans. I went through the same process. I got the loan with the help of this kind of organization. This is my experience. And also with our self help group we buy things from shops and then we sell it, then we got a profit. This profit we used to give loan to our members."

**Elsamma** [from Kurichy]: "Kurichy which is a rural area, only 5 % are rich people, the remaining 95% are ordinary people. There are so many self help groups. And always these groups are facing competition, and there are no marketing possibilities also. Malluserry is a town area. You have the possibility to sell these things."

**Priya:** "If we ask whether unemployment is a problem, it might not appear as a problem to Malluserry women, but it is a problem in Kurichy. For Malluserry [definitely] there are problems, and Kurichy is also facing problems. But Suma Josson raised the question why we did not project family problems in our *sinimas*?"

**Shailamma:** "In one film directed Marykutty Raphael we saw this type of problem. Her husband is a gambler. For the last 40 years she is facing this problem. But we did not project this problem in the films very much, and why was this so? In most of the films we centered on preparing food instead of this type of problems."

**Salsamma** [from Malluserry]: "By seeing these *sinimas* I could understand the problems of the people from Kurichy. I think it is not so expensive to make *sinima*."

**Suma:** "That is the wrong understanding because we have to do so many things when we start to make a film. We have to see the location, and we have to decide about the actors, editors, etc.. I finished the work on SAREE within 8 days. If it would be a commercial film, it would take one month or more. So it is a very difficult task."

**Excerpts of a video-taped interview with committed filmmaker Suma Josson (SAREE, 2001), she spoke to B. Sch. at Kottayam, 11/ 3/ 2002 [bold letters mine]**

**B.Sch.: What do you think about the reactions received to SAREE from the 'Mallusery' and the 'Kurichy women' during our workshop?**

**Suma Josson:** SAREE is not a usual popular film ... it has a complicated structure ... Before the discussion with the women from Mallusery and from Kurichy I asked myself: What would be the reaction? I was quite apprehensive ... and surprised that they liked the film, that it made a kind of impression on them.

During other experiences in discussing the film, it usually comes up like this that the viewers say [with some negative tone]: We were not able to understand the film ... And I was expecting that also here, but in these women there was the desire to a detailed understanding, in **artistic** elements also ... Here is a group of women who usually see the popular films with all the violence etc. ..., [this is the] pattern – though in Kerala the situation is slightly different than in the Hindi cinema – but for these women it was the first time they saw this kind of a film, ... and they [were really interested in the film, in my views, etc.] ...

When I wrote the script ... often I was not conscious [about and why I got certain ideas] ... I leave it to the audience: You are the ones who interpret ... with reference to the death of the mother and her child ... I constructed a parallel... and that really caught on them ... their observation was that this [death symbol] could also relate to the **sacrifice** of the **mother** ... "**Death** ... Mother: I am leading you through **life** ... Here there is a mother who is dying ... one [of the women] said: The mother is taking the child through death, and through life. This is a film one has to think [reflect] about. And they said that they had been **discussing** the whole night. It made them very **sensitive**. These women are extremely **open**, they are not closed in that sense. It came through in our **interaction**: They are very open to things [...]

For instance, concerning the bicycle man [in SAREE], one woman observed and just said like this: "The bicycle man represents **death**" ... it is a key observation, and they made it just like this [...] Then they observed ... the sari wrapping the earth, and one woman said, yes, but death is also part of **nature**, and finally like this the sari also absorbs things ... wraps death, and I thought that this was a very **sensitive observation** ... [these women] go from their own **experiences** ... one woman said that she was **crying** at the end of the film, and that she has three **daughters**, ... and that is what is important to relate to one's experiences ... they were relating at a very ... **emotional level**, and that is actually what **cinema**, at the end, should be doing ... given all the **cinema's intellectual structure** etc.,

but at the end everything brakes down, and I think **basically cinema is emotional**, what it **gives** to the viewer [...]

There are certain observations of these women: The **bond** of the **two girls**, I was talking about **relationship** between those two girls, and also in general between people, at the level of society, ... two or three women [during the workshop] said that the **bonding** is so strong ... they are **sacrificing, sharing** etc., and that **was there when I was working on the script**, all this was there, passed in my mind. And what belongs **naturally** to the film is what these women had picked up, that was interesting for me, [...] a **good experience**, and this gives **hope** [...] they were also appreciating that I said this to them: **I leave it to you, I leave the film to you** [...] the very **humble** way of how it [their views] come across ... something I also found interesting ... when the girls were running down to the river ... they were **feeling** like: This scene should have had a **song**, why did Suma not put a song here ...? ... Put a song there! No, I do not like to put a song in, there was clarity ... it was **life! also death** ...

They felt also at a point awkward. That was the scene when that **drunkard** was **beating up his wife** ... that was a scene that was close to their own lives. Why [this scene]? ... but then they felt suddenly I am working at that level, but I am also working on another level, and they also observed that Radha [one of the girl protagonists] said [seeing this violence of the husband against his wife]: “I do not want to marry.” So **in a [true] dialogue they shared their observations** like this [...]

The second point I want to make [in SAREE] is that this **Kerala is a myth**: always represented and quoted as a **model** of literacy, development, ... economists like Amartya Sen hail it ... but I say that women in Kerala are no[t] better [off] ...

So what you [B.S.] said about women in Kerala ... with reference to the suppressed ... women it is true [that they are comparatively more free in spirit than women of the middle classes] ... the **middle classes** ... they are **alienated** from the **nature** ... they are at **home**, they watch these **TV serials** ... whereas these [poor] women are workers, they go out, they work with their **hands** so their relationship is also with nature, like she\* [a women during our workshop] said: early morning she is milking the **cow**, she is bringing the milk to her home, they consume the milk, she goes 3 kms for the water, ... so always she is working with her **hands and her feet** ... always **close to nature** ... **For such a woman, it is natural to relate to the cinema** [...] ... also she is put in various **roles** ... however, she manages to be much more open ... in terms of cinema. That is why I was really happy ... they would pick up something from the film, and then they would really **circle** it around, and would **relate** it to this, and to that, and they would also disagree: ‘No, no’ ... [contrasting this open and receptive attitude again with that of the middle classes]

The middle classes’ attachment with material goods is so strong. It shows very much in the **dowry system**, specially with the **Christians** ... being extremely **greedy** for the sake of their daughter, **saving** everything they have ... and the **attitude** in the husband’s family is vice versa... also the **taker** of dowry, the two sides of the same coin, that is really

damaging the **moral fabric of the society** [...] [the growing] **fundamentalism** [in all religions] ... is connected to the modern money economy, we can tie up a lot of other facts about Kerala together, the high **suicide**, [high alcoholism, high incidences of mentally disturbed] ... an extreme **helplessness** in the whole society, that is very frightening ... In Kerala we have taken a wrong turn ... the communism here is a Kerala type of communism ... Kerala was the first State of land reforms, then the free education in schools etc., that was once very positive, when Kerala started off. ... but now ... the **wrong mindset, viciousness** and poison, the **intellectual**, ... this Kurien who went out of Kerala and founded 'Amul Milk' observed that – and I would add to that – Kerala is a bottle of small **baby vipers** ... so for a filmmaker all this is there ... my sensibility is that I am culturally attached to Kerala despite all this ... everyone asks why do you again make a film about Kerala ... so I say, see I have to come back to my **home** ... when I am thinking, the next film, it is not only my own personal problem with Kerala, but in my film, I would like **to relate my problem to the bigger problems** [...]

During the *Surya* festival [cultural festival at Thiruvananthapuram] a lot of people were positive [about SAREE]. But it were people like the two doormen saying “Madam, we really liked the film” ... [because] there are **power** structures, seeds of power, they try to **manipulate** but if one has a **vision of cinema** ... that makes you to go on down the path

...

## Conclusions ...

In Kerala there is no space in the established public for the real material, cognitive and emotional-moral needs of 'marginalized women', and they feel solidarity with the 'common people'. It is no place for men and women of flesh and blood because 'the public' lives of its own creatures: myths like "the people" are used against the real people.

'The public' is essentially self-referential in its self-made vicious circles of the "pressures" that allegedly were inherent in situations. During these first months of 2002 one mostly refers to the myth of 'globalization' of which the agents are located *outside* of Kerala, labeled as 'Western'. But an analysis of the economics and proceedings of the restructuring of the fiscal spending in Kerala shows a mutuality between the 'outside' interests and those of the government in Kerala, and the Asian Development Bank. One understands that the dominant politics and economics and how these are represented in its 'own' media sphere are actually spinning around the very *real needs* of those who profit on the established structures which focus on securing a more influential position within the context of the global competition between aspiring and established 'global players'.

The most recent example of that fateful functioning of the alliance between the dominant media (press and TV) and the State Government and their mystification of "the people" and "the politics" was the factual and ideological victory over the strike of State Employees and Teachers on March 10, when it ended. The state representatives had claimed to be victimized by 'globalization' and the strikers, and to be thus affected in the same way as "the people" while the strikers were turned into the 'public enemy' of 'Malayalis'. There are few issue-oriented discussions in the established media on the nature and the objectives of the ongoing "reform politics" because they get easily defamed as anti-national - what they actually are, for good.

The dominant media of the public perfectly re-present the type of the harshly competing interest politics of the modernized 'ethnic communities' (in the sense of Bauman, 2001). The needs of the majority of the lower middle classes, the marginalized castes and classes including the *adivasis* (who are actually revolting since one year) do not figure in these politics that re-organize social and natural resources in order to start the established economics and politics of profit, private property, competing 'communities' and consumerism on a higher level and a faster pace.

However ghostly the mythical subjects of Kerala's public might be, the latter's way of functioning guarantees politicians to proceed because their actions appear as 'publicly' and thus democratically sanctioned. The priorities that are obscured in that manner are to cater to the needs of that peculiar combine of State, Indian and foreign capital, and to further marginalize millions who will have to cope with even greater un- and underemployment due to the closing down of state-run factories of the public sector industries.

Thus, during these times of the economics and the ethics of life being "in transition" the problem with media in Kerala is not only that the real women and men get 'lost' in the



public re-presentations but that these persons are transmuted. In the form of 'quotes' they are popping up as the newly invented reference points of the construed necessities of the "reform politics" to cut even deeper into the natural and socio-cultural infrastructure and fabric of the society. As a by-product of that mutation and mystification, a reversed version of the colonial construct of the 'Oriental identity' as the Other of the 'Western identity' is created: 'the Western' hijacking of 'globalization'.

Kerala's dominant media tend towards veiling dissensus and opposition in 'the West' against 'globalization', as they tend to veil the agency of their local politicians and capitalists in 'globalization'.

On the other side, it should have become clear by my documentation of and my arguments on the nature of the dissensus of 'marginalized women' as present in their *sinimas*, that this defies being categorized as a 'subaltern', 'contesting', or 'suppressed' opinion because its orientation point is not the established platform of opinion making. It does not aim at being accepted as *another* bearer of another opinion.

Secondly, is the nature of the dissensus particularly 'unfit' for what is usually the 'rational' trait of the negotiating processes of political outlooks and standpoints in the modern 'public'.

The dissensus and its primacy of Self-defined moral-philosophical and emotional dimensions points beyond the existing realities of politics and economics, and beyond misleading identity constructions like 'the Malayali people' vs. 'bad strikers' and 'Western globalization'. It expresses the felt urge for the 'Good life' but communicates it in its own *particular vernacular* that – as got documented in our different experiments with *sinima* – is very close to a vision of cinema held by the early Kracauer (and by Benjamin). Yet, isn't it possible that this assumed closeness in spirit - which could even be called 'humanist' - is but my hope, unfounded by objective arguments?

### Perspectives

**Can 'subjective cinema' cultures in Kerala provide a space for 'dissenting subjects' like *dalits*, (*adivasis*) and women to achieve 'freedom' and respect as 'individuals' - which has never been part of the agenda of Malayali modernity/ modernism?**

While thinking about perspectives I am gathering the loose strings of many an empirical evidence (my notes, newspaper evaluations, our films, the filmed and audio-taped talks etc.) of the reflections of the women from Kurichy and Mallussery, of my experiences, insights, theses and concepts reflected on in this essay. And again, it is the early Kracauer who seems very relevant for progressing in my theorization.

His critique of the mechanisms that strove for the "money value" only, for "the endowment of similarity and devaluation of the most diverse things" that ended in perceiving anything according to its "utilisability" with "a deep indifference to the 'what' of things" (Frisby 1983, p. 113, italics mine) reminds of the Keralan dissensus worked out in this essay.

Kracauer's opposition to the harmful abstract mechanisms of a society founded on capitalism, found it most desirable to reassert 'the individual', the *quality* of her life, and

also of her 'inner life', as against the forces that reduced any quality into quantity and functionality to the installed mechanics that made modernity's 'movement' into an end in itself. To him this was an existential crisis of the individual which could not be resolved within the system. Frisby resumed:

“The feelings and values of the individual can no longer be integrated into the social functions that are available. The modern individual, in his or her inner core at least, remains isolated. The only values that can be striven for are those of a lost humanity. But they can only exist in this objectified world as private residues (such as friendship). Such relics have nothing in common with that individualism which is compatible with capitalist strivings: ‘the self-adjustment to the rigid reality and the superior totality has its counterpart in an unbounded, arbitrary individualism.’ [FN ...] **What is totally absent, and what Kracauer calls for, is a form of association based on community. This longing for community, for friendship, for the fulfilment of inner life, for the realization of the individual personality all remain longings that cannot be realized**”

(Frisby 1983, pp. 114-115, bold letters mine)

If we recall my preliminaries about 'family', how 'the woman' figures in the daily practice of the modern Malayali identity on the one side, and the ideas of 'freedom' and 'love' of 'marginalized women' on the other side, we know that in the Kerala context friendship and romantic love are no "private residues" because the ideas of blood bonds, caste and functionality are established as the main orientation points of social interaction.

If this is right, could one conclude that 'subjective cinema' could generally provide a place for the Self-controlled inter-personal bonding like it did in the case of the empathic and mimetic viewing experiences of the women of DWS and MGS with Suma Jossen's film SAREE?

The early Kracauer's radical perspective denied any coherence to the material as well as to the cognitive and 'inner' worlds. “Only its individual fragments remain.” (ibid p. 115) This brought him very close to Simmel's methodological rejection “of abstract conceptualizations as the starting point for his analysis of reality” (ibid, 118). Consequently, Kracauer nourished sympathies with phenomenological procedures in sociology, and rejected the dissolution of the particular individual features in abstraction. From this standpoint of view, the abstraction 'the Fatherland' was equally objectionable, as was a sociology that would participate in the destructive project of 'fragmentation'. In consequence, his idea(l) of a sociology was that of

“a phenomenology of 'intentional existence and events'. Sociology must give up its claim to universal and causally necessary knowledge of reality, since, for Kracauer, this is only possible 'in an epoch filled with meaning'. [...] Sociology's role, for Kracauer, is a limited one. It is concerned with the 'intentional life manifestations of sociated human beings.' Its goal is the mastery of the immediately experienced social reality of life'. This cannot be achieved by abstract conceptualization. Rather, the starting point must be the object itself, whose empirical diversity provides no enclosed system of concepts.” (Frisby 1985, p. 120)

If one would subscribe to these arguments - which I do - wouldn't my 'sociology of cinema' run the risk to add to the destructive fragmentation of social experience instead of enriching our media and cultural theories by the cine-experiences of 'marginalized

women' in Kerala? Would it actually be able to contribute to a better understanding and a more founded critique of dominant or hegemonic "media in transition" in the times of 'globalization'?

According to Kracauer it is each *individual*, the sociated human being, whose *experience* of her/ his 'life' holds its very *own truth*. Society as a whole is made up as a composition of these truths. A sociology striving for abstractions about the individually perceived and conceived glimpses of 'reality' would necessarily destroy it.

Kracauer's fascinating phenomenological sociology accepted that it could only collect fragments of the social and the natural world, and that these would be defined by the respective individual that holds it. The individual's position gets immensely upgraded on the base of the creative and imaginative capacities that Kracauer ascribes to her. His uncompromising critique of the utilisability into which the modern man and woman in their whole 'inner' and 'outer' existence are forced, leads him to clearly distinct the 'individual' - who lost his integral humanness because she/ he lost her "feelings and values" - of "individualism". In sharp contrast to the revolting spirit of an individual striving for a materially, emotionally and spiritually fulfilled life, "individualism" to Kracauer represented the fitting attitude to cope with the pressures that are allegedly inherent in capitalism. Based on our empirical experiences it can be stated that the 'subjective *sinimas*' insist on foregrounding of her-*Self as individual* coupled with the respect and recognition of the Other.

Kracauer's thoughts on cinema, on the estranged and ambiguous relations between individuals, the individual and the community, and the individual and nature under the conditions of capitalism, actually caution of a mistake that lures here: to confuse the self-containment of the individual and individualism. Bauman (2001) committed it, though it actually contradicts his unquestionable credibility as an uncompromising critic of nationalism. It is problematic to project 'community' (of whatever kind) as the 'natural' abstraction of the socializing 'individual', and to insinuate the higher 'necessity' of the individual to join community life by invoking the (idealized) "loss" of the "ethical community" and by highlighting the individual's assumed "need" of 'community'. What is missed in this pledge for the 'true community' that isn't much more than the opposite of the 'degenerated community' is an investigation into the 'what' of the relation between individual and community beyond that of mutual utilisability. I consider it dubious to fall back in one's visions of a 'better life' and still employ a category like functionality in order to define the individual-community relationship. This kind of thinking is too close to the (nation) state constructions of the national/ ethnical community, also because the individual here figures as the dependent variable of 'community' only.

How would it be possible then to re-assert the individual in today's environment where estrangement has been perfected to such an extent that "individualism" emerged as the alleged mantra of societies that actually organize human existence along exclusive and aggressive collectivities like nationality, race, caste, property ownership or gender?

One response would be: By the potential of 'subjective cinema experiences' that allow to distant oneself, and to 'opt out' of mechanisms that then cease to appear uncontrollable once one gained the capability to 'move between' Self and Other.

Yet, as it had been to Kracauer we also are cautiously aware of the ambiguity of the 'realism' of film. This medium is *recording* reality as it is rendering a *strangeness* to it. The Self-estrangement in this world can be revealed, its whole 'meaning-' less emptiness (Hansen 1997, pp. xxiv-xxv). It is here, in the cinema proper, that the alienated 'I' can regain its individuality exactly by 'losing' itself in the act of 'gazing' at the film, i.e. fusing with 'the world', 'things' and 'beings' indiscriminately, by lovingly embracing "liquidity" in identity.

In her memorable introduction to Kracauer's *Theory of Film* ... Miriam Hansen does more than just professionally guiding the reader into Kracauer's absorbing world of cinema. Hansen arranges a graphic reconfiguration of the relevance of Kracauer's *Theory of Film* ... at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and, as I would like to add, to a trans-cultural theory:

"[...] the psychoperceptual process that Kracauer is concerned with is not one of identification with individual characters and the narrating gaze of the camera but, in a different conscious or subconscious register, a form of mimetic identification that pulls the viewer into the film and dissociates rather than integrates the spectatorial self. "In the theater I am always I," Kracauer quotes an anonymous French woman saying, "but in the cinema I dissolve into all things and beings." [FN] By the same token, this state of self-abandonment and dissociation becomes the condition of a perceptual movement in the opposite direction, away from the films, when a material detail assumes life of its own and triggers the viewer associations, "memories of the senses," and "cataracts of intrinsic fantasies and inchoate thoughts" that return the "absentee dreamer" to forgotten layers of the self [...] Film viewing thus not only requires a "**mobile self**," as Kracauer says of the historian's "job of sightseeing," but it also provides a framework for mobilizing the self." (Hansen 1997, p. xxviii, bold letters mine)

These impressions and ramifications of cine-experiences and the mobilization of self hold true in the case of Kerala, too. But here they are fueled by their vigorous desire to further expand into new dimensions of the empathic perspective-taking and these awe-inspiring human capacities of sensory and emotional involvement. Though this 'emotionality' is particularly strong in the Indian popular cinema cultures, in Indian media and cultural studies it fell even more into oblivion than in Europe or US-America. There are no theoretical traditions that could be taken up by our empathic *sinima* sociology.

In media studies empathic reflections on cinema and life experiences could initiate inspiring inter-cultural discussions, new insights, and even alliances for a combined action to ease the oppressiveness of social conditions. Kracauer's famous *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947/ 1970) for instance, could be rethought before the background of the many 'mad' protagonists on the Malayalee silver screen, as well as the fact that in Kerala mental and psychosomatic health is extremely unbalanced with large sections of the mainstreamed population. The number of suicides triples the Indian average, alcoholism and domestic violence are at their peak.

In 2000, I scripted and theorized an imaginary encounter of the spectres that haunted the early Weimar cinema culture, and those I am finding in the present day Malayalam cinema and society (Schulze 2000). These trans-historical and trans-cultural "Reflections

on cinema and split identities in modernizing societies, From JANAKIKUTTY (Kerala 1997) to CALIGARI (Germany 1920)” during a seminar on “Film and Philosophy” at Calicut University (Kerala).

But then, as it is still the case today, only few Keralan scholars take note of the complexities of the dynamics of dissensus-consensus formation in societies in Europe or the US-America. Like this, academic perspectives (unwittingly) fuse with the dominant constructs criticized in the preceding paragraphs. In this homogenous 'Occidental' ideology the dissenting views, voices and visions of common women and men are lost in the systematic forgetfulness of a selective focus on the official representation of consensus and social progress/ development in the established 'public'.

In her “Re-reading Nietzsche through Kracauer: towards a feminist perspective on film history” (1994, p.85-86) Heide Schlüppmann who teaches film history and film theory at Frankfurt University, explicates the place which a feminist film history has in the humanities. It is like a ‘social anthropology’ of cinema in search of the “lost processes” in which the scholar herself figures as much as an analyst as she is the object of analysis. Her reflections unfold what I find equally crucial for the theoretical positioning of our empathic, trans-historical, trans-cultural *sinima* sociology:

“The history of the aesthetic theory of cinema elucidates the notion of the formative powers and interpretative capacity of the historian. In Kracauer’s *History [History – the last things before the last, B.S.]*, interpretation plays a secondary role in relation to the historian’s ‘self-effacement or self-extinction’. This occurs, according to Kracauer, in the name of lost processes. However, the perception of lost processes in history depends on how much space the theoretician is willing to grant to his own lost processes and the extent to which he permits the recurrence of nameless history in his theoretical relationship to the world. The formative capacity which is appropriate to history is thus nothing outside of self-abnegation but it presents self-abnegation within the realm of philosophy; it consists in the philosophical self-reflection which is open to the recurrence of lost processes in history instead of constituting the kind of formalistic approach to the world suggested by Kant’s critique of reason. Feminist critique has no philosophical tradition – it merely borrows one. Instead, its contribution to the formation of a historical theory lies in its ability to permit the transition from self-reflection to a perception of the history repressed therein. Feminist critique is familiar with ‘self-experience’ in its truest sense.”

Schlüppmann’s fascinating fusion of the historical, the critical and the philosophical-aesthetic theories in the feminist film history ‘naturally’ comprises the “historian” or the scholar. She is at the same time the common woman, because the starting point for her academic studies was her ‘private’ life and her search for her own “lost processes” as a woman.

Elaborating further on what one will gain through applying an appropriately empathic and engaged sociology-cum-phenomenology of cinema/ *sinima* I am visualising a new sensibility, too, and a proper theorization of emotions, body feelings and daily life moralities.

However, it will not only focus on the "lost" histories but also on the ones that have already been gained at the margins of the established 'public' and that are sketching their

visions of a social and cultural life beyond patriarchal, caste-ridden and bourgeois-dominated capitalism and imperialism.

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