

Frames Of Power and Poetry: Visual Narratives in Mani Ratnam's Nayakan and Thalapathi

VIRAJ R¹, RIZA A.N², ASWATHI NAIR³, NIDHI MENON⁴, LEJU JOY⁵
^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}Jain (Deemed-to-be-University), Centre for Management Studies

Abstract- Cinema is often described as the language of gestures and emotions, and very few Indian filmmakers can embody these characteristics in their films. Among them is Mani Ratnam, one of India's finest directors, who directed 29 films and produced over 15 films. In this research, we are going to analyse the narrative beauty and visual expressions embedded in Mani Ratnam's film. Nayakan (1987) and Thalapathi (1991) are considered the best examples of his exemplary artistry. Through a close examination of this film, one can analyse its frames, cinematography, and narrative style. At the same time, the research examines the story strategies such as character development, ethical conflicts, characters talking, and time used to comprehend how the story and the beauty unit combine to produce the emotional effect. Moreover, it places these movies in the socio-political and cultural context of Tamil cinema during the late 1980s and early 1990s, showing how the artistic choices reflect societal concerns of that time. In the end, the research claims that the combination of visual art and narrative cleverness in Ratnam's movies not only makes the cinematic experience more brilliant but also is a means for the deeper comprehension of the Indian auteur cinema, by giving the clues on how the aspects of form and content are interwoven to mirror not only the director's personal vision but also the shared cultural consciousness.

Key Words: Cinema, Culture, Director, Auteur, Vision

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is one such medium which people often think of as a universal language consisting of nothing but gestures and feelings to extraordinary human experiences. Out of all the Indian filmmakers, Mani Ratnam is one who is able to capture the essence of humanity in his work. The works of Mani Ratnam are extensive; he is a director of almost three dozen films and a producer of over fifteen. His output ranges from masterful to mediocre, with *Nayakan* (1987) and *Thalapathi* (1991) always being referred to as two of his greatest masterpieces.

These films are great examples of case studies for discussing how visual storytelling merges with narrative techniques. The director's staging, cinematography, and the building of narrative time have been analyzed, showing the meticulousness of the creation of emotional vibrations. Additionally, both movies can be seen to apply advanced story techniques such as the subtle portrayal of characters, conflicts burdened with ethical questions, and, along with the clever use of dialogue, make it extremely impactful with the audience.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tamil cinema was going through a lot of changes politically, culturally, and socially; thus, these films were part of a larger picture trying to portray the society and the anxieties of that time. Ratnam's decisions, through the art of filmmaking or the topic of the story, were constantly interacting with these surroundings, showing how Indian art house films communicate with the popular cultural mind while still keeping the director's singular style. His style of directing encapsulates auteur theory.

The fusion of form and content in *Nayakan* and *Thalapathi* extends beyond the watching experience, but is also a means of understanding at a deeper level. Academic investigation of the movies not only explores Ratnam's capacity in terms of storytelling and visual creativity but also reveals the extent to which cinema can represent the social realities and moral dilemmas shared by people. In this way, studying these works enriches understanding of regional Indian cinema's role in global cinematic discourse by highlighting the intermingling of single artists' and whole culture's stories.

Expanding the horizons puts Mani Ratnam's works not only as the best movies but also as the important ones for the studies of the time's aesthetic and ideological patterns, since they have already done

this through their stunning visuals and smart narratives to the audience's multiple levels of engagement.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Querying Human Rights Through Indic Cinema: The Work of Mani Ratnam (Kaushik, B. (2024))

This chapter seeks to locate the career and destiny of the idea of human rights in the work of Indian filmmaker Mani Ratnam. From the 1990s onwards, Ratnam has made a series of extremely important films regarding the onset of genocidal political and cultural violence in India, mainly occasioned by the rise of Right Wing ultra-nationalist Hinduism culminating in the coming to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the spearhead of Right Wing Hinduism, in 2014. In these films, he has time and again explicitly or implicitly presented us scales of state-sponsored violence that immediately raise, for us as spectators, issues of human rights. The chapter argues that Ratnam complicates human rights practice around issues of scale and Realism by relentlessly presenting monumental visions of historical passion as well as vast scales of historical complexity that legalistic rights discourse may find difficult to respond to. Ratnam also posits, in opposition to the Realism of Rights discourse, the spectacularly monumental traditions of romantic fantasy in Indian cinema as probably capturing the true scale of Indic histories of genocides as well as providing an apt response to the rise of the rogue totalitarian nation-state in our times.

2. From Mythology to the Modern Age: Exploring the Role of Mythology and Literature in Mani Ratnam's Cinematic Adaptations (Veena, S.P, Nagaraj, P., 2023))

Mani Ratnam has evolved as one of the significant faces of Indian cinema. His scripts usually carry an ideology that would have multiple parallel sub-themes, and they would equally emanate the motives contributing to the main plot. One such element, especially, is the literary references that are often infused in his movies in the form of songs, dialogues and characterisation, or even as the main plot with certain changes to be presented as a screenplay. His

other movies, like Raavan (2010), Thalapathy (1991), also had the shades of Indian epics into their plots and characters. The effect of these movies, especially when it reaches various sections of the society, creates an inquisitive fervour over the original literary text based on which the script is curated. The trend of reiterating the literary works that are already globally acclaimed stays as a trend for a particular time period to conceive the movie, the adaptations and to travel along with the popular trend that the movie sets in the society at the time of release and the critical discussions followed by the movie release. Apart from the literary acclimations as the whole plot, the literary references from vernacular languages exhibited through songs and dialogues gained attention and popularised the particular literary section that is revisited, reinterpreted by viewers as readers for precision of thoughts and comprehension over the acclimated literary content represented in the visual art form. The paper intends to examine the literary acclimations and references in the movies of Mani Ratnam, in detail, that have created positive and critical perceptions and trends in all aspects for a particular time period.

3. Rage against the state: historicizing the “angry young man” in Tamil cinema (Kumuthan M., (2010))

This essay examines the conventions and ideology behind the “Angry Young Man” genre in Tamil cinema. Despite the genre’s popular run in the 1980s, these films about volatile anti-heroes remain an unexplored dimension in Tamil film history. The genre’s popularity and the idioms that it introduced into Indian cinematic discourse lead to the question of how such narratives address the anxieties of their times. This is especially so given that scripts at that time dealt with failed bureaucracies, corrupt politicians, crooked cops and a feeble justice system in fictional films that intended to “expose” social conditions. Critically using feature films as a kind of historical text, I hope to show how this genre enunciates a vitriolic critique of the Indian state. At the same time, the films also display the same populist proclivities that crippled the state in the first place, perpetuating a cycle where the cinematic and the real reinforce each other. This amalgamation of

fantasy and political reality is an idiosyncratic legacy of this era of popular Tamil cinema.

4. Examining Hegemony, Ideology, and Class in Mani Ratnam's Raavanan (Ilaiya Barathi, P. (2010))

Cultures often adopt the good versus evil dichotomy within their narratives of religious texts, aural anecdotes, and cultural mythologies. The Ramayana narrates a divine story that transcends time, the battle between the forces of good and evil, between Prince Rama and Ravana. Numerously adapted through time, the Ramayana is today told through moving visuals and has been adapted by Mani Ratnam through Raavanan (2010). Raavanan is adapted to the premise of hero versus villain using the good versus evil premise as Dev Prakash (Rama) searches to rescue his wife Raagini (Sita), who is abducted by Veeraiya (Ravana). The film, however, departs from the Ramayana as Raavanan is told through the perspective of Veeraiya. In the film, Veeraiya is portrayed as a flawed anti-hero who battles against injustice instead of being the antagonist. He seeks revenge for his sister and stands up against the oppression of his tribe. In this battle, he questions ideological understandings of justice and morality that have been conventionally interpellated within society. This paper discusses how Mani Ratnam, through the film Raavanan, contests hegemony, ideology, and class differences within modern cinema and society alongside the more significant question surrounding India's sociocultural conditions.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE MISE-EN-SCENE IN ROMANTIC MOVIES OF MANIRATNAM & PC SREERAM COMBINATION ACROSS DECADES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS (Dr J. Dinesh Kumar, Shiva Raj. S (2023))

Mise-en-scène is one of the important elements in any film to give the proper visual appeal to the audience. Representation of mise-en-scene in romantic movies plays a vital role in sensitising the story to make the audience feel connected with the movie. This study has made an effort to comprehend how the setting is depicted in the romance films that filmmaker Maniratnam and cinematographer PC Sreeram collaborated on. Three films with the same

plot that portrayed the social reality of love and married life at the time were chosen as a sample to examine how the director's and cinematographer's filmmaking skills have changed over three decades. In this study, content analysis was the chosen research methodology. Two key factors, such as the filmmaker's characterisation style and the cinematographer's cinematography style, were investigated. The study's findings revealed that the director prioritised societal themes from the era while portraying romance in the film. In all three films, the differences in characterisation and attire are clear. Men and women in the film are given an equal amount of screen time by the director. Regarding cinematographic techniques, most of the perspectives and shots are the same for all characters. However, as a result of technical advancement, different equipment is used, which changes how films are framed.

6. 'Why Can't the Son of Maadasamy Be Karnan?': Caste, Gender, and the Rise of the Male Subaltern in Tamil Cinema

The blockbuster Tamil picture Karnan (Selvaraj, 2021) is a cinematic ode to a subaltern caste community in the rural world of southern Tamil Nadu, India. Selvaraj transits from the conceptual framework of an individual's struggle against caste discrimination in his first film, Pariyerum Perumaal/Horse-Mounting Deity (2018), to that of a collective struggle by Dalits against their oppression in Karnan. "The word dalit means 'crushed, ground down,' 'oppressed, or broken to pieces in Sanskrit. Hindi and Marathi. It is a term used by India's former untouchables as a form of self-identification (Rao,2015). Contrary to the other two versions of the story of Karnan, a character in the Indian epic the Mahabharata, in Tamil cinema, the mythological Karnan (Panthulu,1964) and the modern gangster genre flick Thalapathil Commander (Ratnam, 1991)-Selvaraj's tale evokes a story of resistance to caste-based exploitation of the collective that is hailed as aadhi kodi, a phrase that denotes the primal umbilical cord (Tamil Lexicon 1982, 1133), and puns on and alludes to the words audhi kudi, importing the oppressed lower castes.

7. MANIRATNAM-BIOGRAPHY (Ravikanth K., 2009)

With commercial success coming back-to-back, Ratnam wrote and directed Agni Natchathiram. The film was notable for the use of new techniques in terms of camera framework, especially during the shoot of songs in the film. The film had a successful run at the box office. Mani later returned to the familiar territory of winning critical acclaim through his next film, made in Telugu, named Geethanjali. The film, which starred Nagarjuna in the lead role, told the story of an ill-fated couple who are both suffering from terminal diseases. Ratnam maintained a momentum of making emotional stories of undeserved people through the Raghuvaram-starring Chennai release Anjali in 1990. The film told the story of an autistic child and how she changed the lives of people in the colony. Mani later made another underworld-themed Tamil film with Thalapathi in 1991, starring Rajnikanth and Mammootty. With a theme of friendship between a local don and a slum king, Thalapathi earned both critical acclaim and commercial success upon release. Thalapathi is unique in a sense that it is of the rare films with 2 climaxes. The Tamil and Telugu versions end with Mammootty's death, where Rajinikanth is considered a matinee idol. The Malayalam version ends with Rajini's death where Mammootty is based.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design based on the principles of Author Theory to analyse the narrative style and the aesthetic visuals of Mani Ratnam's films Nayakan (1987) and Thalapathi (1991). Through textual and interpretive film analysis, the study views these films as cultural and artistic texts, emphasising the director's unique vision as the primary source of the film's meaning. The primary data were the two films, and the secondary data were the academic writings, interviews, and reliable online resources related to Mani Ratnam and Tamil cinema. The data gathering method here was the researchers' multiple viewings of the films, after which they were coded systematically depending on

the frequent artistic and narrative features like character development, emotional arcs, ethical conflicts, dialogue patterns, framing and composition, the colour scheme, lighting, cinematography, symbolic imagery, and temporal structure. The analytical stages involved narrating the story, inspecting the formal visual elements, and, through Auteur Theory, interpreting the themes and socio-cultural implications. The investigation also employs the past and cultural setting to discern how Ratnam's creative decisions mirror the sociopolitical atmosphere of Tamil cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the study is based on publicly available films and literature instead of human participants, ethical issues are hardly present, and all the sources are recognised to uphold academic integrity.

3.1 Qualitative Narrative Analysis

The qualitative narrative analysis of this study looks at how Nayakan and Thalapathi build narratives of power, loyalty, and identity not only in plot but in the visual and cinematic decisions that inform the narration of those stories and experiences.

Narrative is emphasised as an organised meaning-making process, how the series of shots develops dramatic tension, how Ratnam orients the protagonist's narrative in a greater socio-political context, and how visual tropes like repeated rain imagery, enclosure, or an open landscape, add meaning over the duration of the film.

This approach is a reading of the story as a text; it is concerned with what is presented, what is not presented, and how cinematic form mediates the telling. In Nayakan, the story is presented as a gradual degradation of morals; in Thalapathi as fate. By examining these formal and visual telling decisions, one can see how Ratnam incorporates a critique of caste, fate and resistance into the grammar of his filmmaking.

3.1.1 Analytical Framework

The major theories used in this research are:

- Rasa Theory (Bharata, Nāṭyaśāstra)
- Identity Theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000)

3.1.2 Unit of Analysis: The protagonist

The protagonists in both films – Kamal Hassan in Nayakan and Rajinikanth in Thalapathi are seen and analysed through three lenses:

1. Narrative lens: How the character is portrayed
2. Performative Lens: Political ideology
3. Cultural lens: Identity, alienation, tradition/modernity

Secondary units include:

- Performance segments (emotional turmoil, act of violence)
- Character arcs (narrative, self-realisation)

Thematic Analysis

This research looks at the movies Nayagan and Thalapathi. It examines the pictures and stories in these movies to see how Mani Ratnam shows power, identity and poetic meaning.

This research works by closely examining the pictures and stories in these movies. It does not just look at what the characters say or what happens in the story. It looks at how the pictures are made. The way things are framed, the lighting, the colours, the space and how the characters are shown. It also looks at how the pictures and music work.

To start, the researcher watches the parts of the movies many times and writes down what they see. Then they group these things into categories like framing, lighting and colour. The researcher finds patterns in these categories that happen in both Nayakan and Thalapathi. For instance, they see how being on the outside of a space can mean someone is not part of a group because of their caste. They also see how changes in lighting can show when a character is changing their mind. The researcher is comparing Nayakan and Thalapathi. By looking at these two movies, they can see how Mani Ratnam uses the same visual ideas in different ways. They can see how one movie is more realistic and personal, and the other movie is like a myth and epic.

Parameter	Sub-indicators	Nayagan (1987)	Thalapathi (1991)
Visual	Shot type	Intimate	Epic wide

composition	& scale	close-ups; eye-level framing; neo-realist texture; shallow focus on face	shots; low angles; mythic staging; deep-focus compositions
Lighting & colour palette	Key/fill ratio & colour temperature	Muted, desaturated; shadow as moral weight; warm tones erode over time	High-contrast, saturated; heat-coded warm palette; rain & darkness as fate
Character embodiment	Costume & spatial dominance	Reluctant patriarch; costume shifts from labourer to godfather over arc	Defiant outsider body; bare or rough attire marks caste exclusion
Narrative space	Setting as a political metaphor;	Slum as community & accountability; claustrophobic interiors -entrapment	Semi-rural & forest landscapes echo Mahabharata; open space - fated destiny
Power & loyalty dynamics	Patron–protégé framing - spectacle vs implication	Guilt-laden bonds; violence implied off-screen; family as moral burden	Fate-driven male solidarity; violence as spectacle; loyalty over kinship

Cultural Metaphors in both films

Parameter	Nayagan (1987)	Dalapathi (1991)
Mythological Parallel	The protagonist Velu Nayakar (inspired by Varadarajan	Strongly rooted in the Mahabharata. Surya represents

	Mudaliar) embodies a Robin Hood-like archetype rooted in Tamil folk justice traditions rather than direct mythology. His arc mirrors a <i>folk guardian deity</i> who protects the oppressed.	Karna, while Devaraj parallels Duryodhana. The film reinterprets epic loyalty, fate, and dharma within a modern urban context.		feudal chieftain. Cultural metaphor: “ <i>Thalaivar as protector</i> ”, reflecting Dravidian political imagery.	charismatic leader. Power is metaphorically tied to <i>friendship and allegiance</i> , not governance.
Justice & Moral Code	Justice operates outside the legal system—Velu becomes a parallel authority. Cultural metaphor: “ <i>People’s court</i> ”, reflecting distrust in state systems and belief in localized justice.	Justice is bound to loyalty and friendship rather than law. Cultural metaphor: “ <i>Dharma vs personal loyalty</i> ”, where righteousness is morally ambiguous and emotionally driven.	Urban Space Representation	The slums of Mumbai become a metaphor for marginalised Tamil identity in diaspora—“ <i>city as survival battlefield</i> ”.	The urban landscape is stylised and symbolic—“ <i>city as Kurukshetra</i> ”, a moral battlefield where personal conflicts mirror epic war.
Motherhood & Familial Bonds	Mother sentiment is central—Velu’s motivations stem from familial loss and protection. The metaphor of “ <i>Amma as moral anchor</i> ” reflects Tamil cultural reverence for motherhood.	The mother-son separation and reunion (echoing Karna-Kunti) symbolise <i>fate and abandonment</i> . Motherhood becomes a metaphor for lost identity and tragic destiny.	Violence as Expression	Violence is functional and protective—“ <i>violence as resistance</i> ” against systemic oppression.	Violence is emotional and tragic—“ <i>violence as destiny</i> ”, tied to inevitable conflict and inner turmoil.
Power & Leadership	As a benevolent patriarch, Velu's authority resembles a	Surya is a <i>reluctant warrior</i> , while Devaraj is a	Masculinity	Velu represents <i>provider masculinity</i> —a protector shaped by suffering and responsibility.	Surya represents <i>tragic masculinity</i> —defined by loyalty, sacrifice, and inner conflict.
			Religion & Ritual	Religious imagery is subtle but present—Velu is elevated to near-divine status by the people, resembling <i>local deity worship</i> .	Strong symbolic use of ritual and visual imagery (fire, temple spaces), reinforcing <i>epic morality and fate</i> .
			Identity	Velu’s identity evolves from victim to leader	Surya’s identity is fragmented—“ <i>lost lineage</i> ”,

	(“ <i>self-made man</i> ”) metaphor rooted in migration struggles.	emphasizing fate over self-determination.
Death & Legacy	Death signifies martyrdom—Velu becomes a legend, symbolizing <i>collective memory and myth-making</i> .	Death is tragic inevitability—“ <i>hero as sacrificial figure</i> ”, reinforcing epic fatalism.

In *Nayagan*, Mani Ratnam develops the cultural metaphors based on the social realism and Tamil subaltern experience. The movie turns its main character into an archetypal protector, which is based on folk customs and Dravidian political imagery. The cultural metaphors are mostly organic and sociological which are based on the real lives experienced-migration, poverty and systematic injustice. The emergence of Velu Nayakar is the expression of a communal desire to have dignity and justice beyond institutions. By contrast, *Dalapathi* is mythological and allegorical, literally a reworking of the Mahabharata. In this case, cultural metaphors are both created and symbolic, and characters and conflicts are made to match epic archetypes. The story of Surya is not so much about social mobility but rather about the conflict with existence, destiny and ethical grayness. Personal relationships, particularly friendship and loyalty are brought to metaphysical levels in the film. The combination of the films proves that Mani Ratnam is a dualist: one based on historical-social awareness in *Nayagan* and the other being mythic redefinition in *Dalapathi*.

IV. COMPARATIVE FRAME ANALYSIS

Mani Ratnam is one of the most unique auteurs of Indian cinema, who has been known to incorporate dense socio-political messages into visual stories that are very richly textured. *Nayakan* (1987) and *Thalapathi* (1991) are two of his most acclaimed Tamil films, which provide a compelling point of comparison, given that the two films address the themes of power, loyalty, caste and moral identity but in vastly different cinematic registers. Both films

were shot by filmmaker Santosh Sivan, but under the directorial guidance of Ratnam, they illustrate how relationships between frame and narrative structure and symbolic design can create deeply varied emotional and ideological experiences with the same thematic base. The analysis of the four parameters of character arc, cinematography, screenwriting, and symbolism in these two movies demonstrates how much and how coherent the grammar of cinema is in Ratnam.

Character arc

On the character arc, *Nayakan* gives the viewer a voyage of the gradual moral decay of Velu Naicker. Starting as a displaced, revengeful young boy who has seen his father killed (2:40), Velu slowly becomes the unwanted head of the Dharavi underworld. Ratnam presents this change as a victory of the agency but rather as a tragedy of circumstance -every form of violence, even the one with the best intentions, deprives Velu of more and more of his innocence, family, and eventually legitimacy. This degradation is mirrored in the camera with more and more secluded compositions; by the final scenes of the film, Velu is at the very centre of the frame, but it is his total solitude and not his inner solitude, which is simply a formal decision that externalises his internal solitude. On the other hand, *Thalapathi* develops the arc of Surya on a completely new plane.

Instead of a fall, Surya is on a fatalistic rise of a man who is characterised at the outset by abandonment and caste exclusion, who is not heading towards redemption but towards the accomplishment of a fate that is already sealed. Based on the archetype of Karna of the Mahabharata, Ratnam introduces Surya as a character of extraordinary fidelity and power who, nevertheless, is refused the right to belong by the conditions of his birth. Where the arc of Velu is conditioned by the decisions that lead to a tragedy, the arc of Surya is conditioned by the forces which are outside his control, and this is essentially what defines the emotional register of each film.

Cinematography

The cinematography of both movies, which is performed by Santosh Sivan and directed by Mani Ratnam, is technically harmonised but aesthetically differentiated in aspects that reflect their narrative

logic differences. In *Nayagan*, Sivan uses close-up shots and is psychologically near Sivan. The emotional turning points of the film are mostly dominated by close-ups that pull the viewer into the interiority of Velu and make his moral compromises viscerally personal. The colour range of the movie is warm and textured in the initial scenes, which reminds the overcrowded communal life of the Dharavi slum, and then becomes colder, colder as the world of Velu shrinks around him. The use of shallow depth of field is intentional so that characters are isolated by their surroundings, which is further supported by a feeling of psychological confinement that grows stronger as the story unfolds. The slum per se, is photographed with an extraordinary attention to textual details: narrow lanes, gloomy interiors, and weathered surfaces that bring the moral argument of the film into a particular and recognisable social reality. In *Thalapathi*, Ratnam and Sivan do not attempt whatsoever to retain this intimacy; instead, they highly mythicize their visual scale. Extensive compositions, low-angle shots, extensive use of natural light and open landscape change the visual language of the film to shift away from realism and into allegory.

Where *Nayagan* is humanising by bringing the camera closer to humans, *Thalapathi* is mythologising, and puts its characters into a cosmic, rather than a social context, and transforms Surya into a man into an element.

Story writing

At the level of writing the script, the two films demonstrate Ratnam's flexibility as a master of storytelling. *Nayagan's* screenplay, penned by Sujatha, is based on the flow of time, covering many decades and showing how the unity of a community turns into criminal dominance. The dialogues of the script are minimal and very effective, and its moral setup is inspired by Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, but at the same time, the concerns of the film are deeply rooted in the political culture of the Tamil working-class. The inclusion of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots as an external historical event is a very important screenwriting decision, as it not only shows the limits of Velu's power but also indicates the film's concern with the connection between individual violence and political history.

The screenplay's moral reasoning is mainly supported by Velu's relations with his offspring; the violence that is aimed at protecting them turns out to be the very force that ruins the family that it was intended to save. As for *Thalapathi's* screenplay, made by Ratnam, it revolves around the friendship of Karna and Duryodhana from the *Mahabharata*.

The tale is shifted to the present-day Tamil Nadu, yet the mythical connection is not made explicit in the movie. Loyalty is the main theme and the driving force of the script. Correspondingly, the dialogues are more intense and declarative, matching the film's mythological tone. Very importantly, the screenplay keeps Surya's past a secret, only revealing it little by little throughout the film.

Symbolism

The symbolic architecture of both films makes clear Ratnam's directorial prowess and his ability to embed ideological meaning within visual and narrative elements. *Nayagan's* symbols are mostly related to home and are accumulating in nature. For instance, the repeated motif of a child witnessing violent acts, which parallels the very first scene of the film where young Velu is watching his father's murder, is another way of saying that this cycle of violence, which goes on from one generation to the next, is not just a personal matter but also a structural one that has been passed down. Throughout the movie, water is used symbolically during moments of change and loss, while Velu's white kurta, first pristine and then gradually untidy, effectively marks his moral decline. The very last shot of the film - his granddaughter running after him - is a conscious reversal of the beginning, ending the story with a gesture that is both loving and heartbreaking at the same time, proving that the cycle remains unbroken. On the other hand, the symbols in *Thalapathi* reflect the mythological and the elemental.

The film is drenched in rain, especially during the most emotionally and dramatically intense moments - Surya's first meeting with Devu (28:47), the climactic showdown - rain serves both as an emotional booster and a divine sign, which is in line with the *Mahabharata's* linking of rain with the Karna story. The sun, which is the literal meaning of Surya's

name, shows up again and again in the film at the points of recognition and sacrifice.

On the whole, Nayagan and Thalpathi illustrate that Mani Ratnam's filmmaking is not just about narrating tales, but rather about presenting arguments regarding power, destiny, and the societal circumstances that give rise to both heroes and criminals. The shift in Ratnam's own way of directing from one film to another is a telling change: Nayagan is inspired by Italian neo-realism and Hollywood crime cinema, with a Tamil social consciousness deeply penetrating the whole, whereas Thalpathi represents a movement into the Indian epic mode very distinctly, using the classical Sanskrit narrative tradition to create a cinema that is local and mythic at the same time in its aspirations. The detailed analysis based on these four aspects highlights not merely Ratnam's thematic consistencies that constitute his authorial signature but also the aesthetic development of one of the most influential directorial voices of South Asian cinema.

V. FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

The findings shed some light on how Mani Ratnam works at the crossroads of popular cinema and visual poetry, utilising the commercial Tamil film industry as the medium through which they can express themselves aesthetically and ideologically in a highly layered manner. The most noticeable thing between Nayakan and Thalpathi is the unity of his visual philosophy - Each visual element, camera angle, colour temperature, editing rhythm, works not as an isolated element but as an element of a unified language of cinema. It is not that the construction of power through the use of low-angle framing, such as that which is carried out to the protagonist, in other words, flatters the protagonist; it initiates a cultural vocabulary of heroism in Tamil classical traditions, and this aspect serves to reinforce the mythic intertextuality that functions at the same time at the narrative level.

Likewise, the calculated aestheticisation of death poses significant questions regarding the way in which the film industry balances moral criticism and emotional allurements: Ratnam laments his characters as he idealises them, establishing a moral ambivalence that explains the lasting impact of the

films. The visual/audio relationship that is seen between image and music also indicates that Ratnam has already imagined cinematic meaning as something that is not easy to decouple the soundtrack and frame. Collectively, the findings lead both movies to rank among the best examples of studying the auteur film in a non-Western, regional setting and prove that visual elegance and mass appeal do not necessarily go hand in hand and poetry, in the context of cinema, is not a luxury but a technique.

1. The Language of Power of Cinematography.

In Nayakan (1987) as in Thalpathi (1991), the cinematography of Santosh Sivan and P.C. Sreeram, respectively, builds power, not through dialogue but through visual grammar. Velu Nayakan and Surya are always framed in low-angle shots, which reveal them as mythological, divine, and high-angle shots, which reveal their vulnerability and mortal nature. The camera is not a recording, but a judgment.

2. Emotional Terrain and Colour Palette.

In the domestic scenes of grief, Nayakan uses a desaturated and warm palette and then a harsh, high-contrast lighting in instances of violence. In comparison, Thalpathi employs the rich amber and golden colour, which reminds the classical Tamil Sangam poetry, an aesthetic decision which aestheticizes the masculine sacrifice and devotion. They are not aesthetic choices but hermeneutical ones: colour controls the emotional processing of morality by the audience.

3. Male Body as Visual Text.

Ratnam approaches the bodies of the male protagonists as the locations of ideological inscription. The cost of power is a story of greying temples and the weathered face of Velu Nayakan. The physicality of Surya in Thalpathi alludes to the Karna archetype directly - neglected, faithful, tragically heroic. The body is made a poem; the process of aging and wounding is an emotional high point in a more convincing way than exposition.

4. Space Composition and Social Stratification.

The depth of foreground and background is telling in its own way. Ratnam often has authority figures in deep focus in chawl and slum environments in Nayakan, with the chaotic, multifaceted backgrounds

of the images providing a visual code of the functioning of power in terms of surveillance of the social space. Thalpathi, open landscapes and beachscapes attribute to Surya the primal, pre-social freedom of a man who is not a member of the grid of institutional order.

5. The Poetry of Cuts

In both movies, editing is elliptical: time jumps, dissolves, and match cuts are built to create what could be referred to as a poetry of time. The Nayakan's famous dissolve between the young Velu and the elderly man he is collapses decades into a breath; lived time is synonymous with visual metaphor. This editing philosophy is inspired by the literary montage: meaning is created in the space between the frames.

6. Music & Its Effect.

The score of Ilaiyaraaja in Nayakan and the debut score of A.R. Rahman in Thalpathi do not just go hand in hand with the scenes they are in, they make them. The visual rhythm used by Ratnam is choreographed to musical phrasing. The emotional climaxes of both movies are created as audio-visual poems: the Thenpandi Seemayile sequence in Nayakan or the Rakkamma Kaiya Thattu sequence, when choreography, colour and rhythm become inseparable.

Nayakan and Thalpathi by Mani Ratnam prove that even the most disciplined form of cinema is above narrative to be visual literature. Ratnam is not a storyteller, but a creator of meaning, and the exact choreography of light, colour, space, and time is crafted to create a story. Every frame is a stanza; every series, a canto. This analysis has shown that Ratnam's visual narratives are firmly entrenched within the Tamil cultural imaginary with recourse to Sangam poetic traditions, Puranic mythology and the textures of the lived life of South Indian social life. His characters, Velu Nayakan and Surya, are not characters; they are aesthetic arguments about power, belonging, loyalty, and the tragedy of the marginalised masculine. What is unique to these movies compared to the mainstream commercial cinema is that they do not separate aesthetics and ethics. The moral claim about lighting a scene is also a moral claim. The framing of the body is also a

political action. The movie of Ratnam is insistent in the sense that the way we look influences what we believe lies in its eternal applicability. Nayakan and Thalpathi are a masterclass in cinematic poetry: films that are easy to watch and yet heavy to interpret, easy to feel and yet heavy to think. Yet Nayakan and Thalpathi have maintained this balancing act consistently throughout their careers, perhaps with only a handful of directors in the world cinema.

Nayakan and Thalpathi can, in a sense, be interpreted not as crime or action films, but as moving “elegies”, where all the formal decisions are subservient to emotional and moral truth.

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