

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award 2021

2nd Best Film Criticism by Rohit Saha

**The Theatrics of Static Viewing: Spacing and Basing Suffocation in
*Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam***



***Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam*, 2020, Malayalam, 85 minutes, Dir. Don Palathara**

In understanding Don Palathara's *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam* (2020), the form and thematic structure of the film itself needs close examination. It is a one-shot film set during the 2020 pandemic. We exclusively focus on live-in couple Jithin (Jithin Puthenchery) and Maria (Rima Kallingal) as they take a car ride to a hospital to get a pregnancy test done. On the surface, the entire film is about the argument they have about their serious situation: she's not ready and mulling abortion while he feels ready to marry her and face the families. We are presented with a film that depends

on its minimalism and also makes use of analogies in regards to various genres and cinematic styles. Don Palathara exploits two cinematic devices: a single continuous take and a fixed camera facing the couple in the front seat. They superbly elevate a banal argument into an intricate portrait of conflict in a modern relationship. The space between the couple's seats is dynamic. Through the rear windshield, you see pieces of the city the car is passing through. Sometimes, out of the blue in between an intense conversation, she moves to pick up something from the backseat. At one point, as the

fight turns physical, she crosses the imaginary divide to land an angry bite on his arm. The screenplay manages to create a delectable emotional rhythm in the narrative. In a slightly long stretch, right before the car reaches the clinic, the couple goes quiet. But the air inside the car, rife with tension, speaks louder than the words.

The film is unique in its exclusive use of a car as the central site of drama and it is shot entirely from a camera placed near the dashboard within the protagonist's car. Pivoting for the most part around the couple having a chaotic fight over the prospect of life changing event, the conversations in the film are all mediated by the car. The car, however, is not merely the film's backdrop like it is in other road movies but is the structuring agent of the film itself, the catalyst of the affectively charged arguments. Like Nicolas Winding Refn kept the camera inside the car in *Drive* (2011) or Martin Scorsese did the same with *Raging Bull* (1980) and the boxing ring, Palathara keeps his camera on the dashboard allowing audience to feel like they are alongside their respective characters and draws our attention to the effects of the general atmosphere or site of the filmmaking act itself, effects which for him are as significant as the presence of the filmmaker or camera. Thus, the later switch from the discomfort of a conflict to violent outburst to bonding again seems transitionally smooth and meaningful. In the chiasm, we are presented a model of embodied subjectivity where the body is constituted through an enfolded proximity to the world, it is a body that stretches out toward objects in the world and is simultaneously inflected and shaped by those very same objects, Chiasm is a concept of subjectivity so immediately and intimately bound to the vicissitudes of the world that "one cannot indeed say of [the] body that it is not elsewhere, but one also cannot say that it is here or now in the sense that objects are." In short, the body is described as a complex field of forces that cannot be simply reduced to psychological interiority. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can thus serve to cleave a space in which to speak about Palathara's film more effectively.

Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam caters to the genre of dashboard camera filmmaking from the

school of Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi where the camera is not merely moving with the characters capturing their activities and emotions but the characters are literally putting up a show for the camera while performing their theatrics. It can't be entirely boxed in the category of Cinéma vérité filmmaking either. With most of the famous lengthy takes in film history (in classics like Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Touch of Evil*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* and *Under Capricorn*, or in modern films like *Birdman* or *Russian Ark* or *1917*), the camera moves with the characters. But here the fixed camera brings dialogues into sharp focus — you hook onto sounds if the visuals are static. It also gives you a feeling of being oppressively imprisoned by a single point of view, and that's also what plagues the couple throughout— they can't get out of their own heads while accusing the other of being self-centered. The protagonists are having heated fight but they are seated side by side to each other, thus making the fight look like more a fight with themselves than a fight with an opposition. Just like camera is fixed, the characters are fixed to their seats with a seatbelt, thus making the space feel more entrapping.

Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam's static dashboard camera invites us to critically engage with the typical subjectivity that direction brings with the camera framing. Jean Mitry sets forth an aesthetic principle of film by further circumscribing a camera's motivation in relation to the time of narrative events: The most important thing, in all cases, is that camera movement should be justified [i.e., motivated]— physically, dramatically, or psychologically. Whether it is being used to track or is static, the camera must follow the action of a scene and not anticipate it. It has been often believed that a static shot can democratize the eye of watching a scene as the audience can objectively decide where to focus in the shot rather than the director influencing that. Palathara leaves it to the audience to decide where to look at, rather than dictating it. Žižek's theory of subjectivity raises a basic question about the nature of motion on the screen. Depending on the occasion, some or many kinds of motions may be lumped together and strictly or loosely called

“camera movements.” Michael Shapiro deviates from Deleuze’s post-Kantian perspective which sees cinema as offering which prioritizes of time over space as the new “camera consciousness” of modern cinema is no longer defined by the movements it follows but by the use of the time image to contemplate the value and time of the present. A “static” image may elicit certain kinds of mental or psychic movements in a spectator that the spectator then projects back into the image, animating it, perhaps in unexpected ways.

Palathara has a bleak view of the world and the theme of existential crisis is predominant in all his movies. Films shot in gorgeous monochrome that seek to discover cinematic truth with the help of realism have been his forte. His earlier films, *Shavam*, *Vith* and *1956, Central Travancore* were experimental films, non-narrative films in the sense that they resist conventional plot and character development. All these films feature a number of static shots: the camera is still, locked into whatever action is taking place close or afar. But the closest to the film in discussion would be his black and white movie *Everything is Cinema* (2020) where he uses camera as a tool of violence by making it invisible. In *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam* every object and person inside the frame is obsessively colour-coordinated- almost everything is green, a colour he uses as an emotional trigger to express his bleak worldview: the man’s shirt, the woman’s top, the water-bottle in the car, her ear stud. It’s so determinedly monochromatic that — again — we could be seeing an extension of the black-and-white palette of, say, *Vith*. The camera is scrutinizing each and every action and words of Maria and Jithin thus inflicting violence on them. André Bazin’s notion of a distinctive mobile framing that creates a “lateral depth of field” may rest upon a real-world analogy: Just as an object in the world conceals what is behind it, so a static framing in film conceals what lies at a distance laterally from the sides of an object. Certain points of view are denied the spectator, and limits are placed on attention. Even though we’re stuck in a car with the couple, we travel back with their memories as they rake up events to shore up defence on their side. We’re introduced to Jithin

and Maria through their criticism of each other. They also reveal sides to themselves that shock the other. It’s like the existential stress due to a possible pregnancy was revealing a side of their minds they had suppressed. There are bursts of conversation, explosions of anger, mood swings, and a few risky long pauses making us wonder what they might be feeling or thinking. Jithin keeps his emotions subdued and eyes on the road, making a conscious effort to be a Sensitive Male but with his mind probably ticking away under that composed exterior; while Maria, more agitated and demonstrative, dealing with nausea as well as the possible bodily changes to come, worrying about career and societal judgement, frustrated at the man unruffled next to her since he isn’t as directly affected.

The creative decision of Palathara to switch to an enclosed space of the car adds to the claustrophobia in the conflict. In choosing an enclosed space, both Jithin and Maria become entrapped as the violence erupts first with words and escalates to Maria biting Jithin’s arm. In reference to the duality of the film, it is interesting to note that towards the end of the film when the outside conflict gets resolved, we see both of them bonding again as Maria leans on Jithin’s arms. The switch that takes place from evil and good in the protagonist is also suggested through the framing of the space, showing us how people are capable of bringing out their worst when they are thrown into the deep-end. The formal choice of the film is in tune with the time. Several references of both getting irked by each other’s habits highlights how co-existing in the same space during the pandemic has taken a toll on the romantic relationships of couples forcing them to address emotions bottled up over the years, something that was widely explored in Palathara’s previous movie *Everything is Cinema* (2020). Here the pregnancy scare becomes the final trigger for the couple to confront each other with the issues they would have otherwise avoided. Thus the space inside the car also becomes an extension of the enclosed space of their apartment during the lockdown and inhabits similar instances of toxicity, violence and intimacy.

A car is a geometrical object of planes which welcomes human complexity, idiosyncrasy, and adapts to the people inhabiting that space. During any journey, the car makes an impression on the human and the human makes an impression on the car and thus the space inside a car once experienced no longer remains an inert box and the inhabited space transcends geometrical space. When Jithin has an argument with Maria, he steps out of the car and walks behind. We see him at a distance, through the rear windshield. There's a five-minute stretch where we stare at an empty car and wait for Jithin and Maria to return and resume their conflict. Physically and psychologically, they are trapped in a situation (neither of them wants a child), and (visually) we are "trapped" right in with them through the awkward moments. They are in a private space – with each of them leaving it occasionally but soon returning – while other things orbit around them. People enter and exit (mostly as voices on a phone), there are conversations – with family, friends. One could argue the car is a microcosm of their world: it moves forward with rectilinearity but it also keeps their bodies motionlessly trapped in it. Gaston Bachelard has famously reflected on the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces in his book *The Poetics of Space*: "Outside and inside are both intimate- they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides". This becomes especially apparent when they give a lady a ride and she seems to embody all of society judging an unmarried couple. Maria and Jithin behave differently in the presence of a talkative stranger within a confined space. It is the only instance where Palathara allows someone to venture into the bubble, a mobile miniature of their

apartment shielded from outsider's view and lets a public conversation happen in private. The car is a container for the character and the drama, it also binds two heterogeneous spaces. The city's presence- the traffic, signal, landscape, tea shop, clinic, constantly interrupts the plot and injects itself in the punctuation of dialogue thus affecting the emotional spontaneity and anxiety. Thus the structure of the film had to be more unscripted and improvisational, designed to allow space for the performers to act and react without the over-determination of fixed dialogues and motivations.

In the film, the relationship between the car, the city, and the actors in the film best expresses Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasmic bond, and in particular, the determinate role of seemingly ephemeral or atmospheric phenomena. The car does not simply direct the characters' emotions, as if it were a transparent mechanism with clear cause and effect. The relationship between the car and characters, instead, is much more chiasmic. The car is not simply a neutral stage upon which the characters interact, but in a certain way, it is as if the car communicates through the characters. We witness the way that the car both subtly and explicitly inflects the characters in the film, allowing them temporary reprieve from a difficult scene via its windows, for example, or further complicating a heated exchange through its proximity to heavy gridlock. In this way, *Santhoshathinte Onnam Rahasyam* can be read as a comment on the affects of modern urban life as expressed in the car, perhaps the object most symptomatic of the contemporary metropolis. The uniquely interstitial space that the car inhabits (the way that it straddles both public and private space) makes it a particularly sensitive site for absorbing and expressing the dynamic between the subject and the urban romantic love.

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