SUBRAMANIYAPURAM

The Tamil Film in English Translation

M. Sasikumar

Edited by Anand Pandian

Architects of a Cinematic World

Anand Pandian

The sound of a gentle voice drifts down the dusty lane of a Madurai neighborhood, musing on the music of a woman's eyes. The year is 1980. Bharathiraja's *Kallukkul Eeram* has just been released, and one of composer Ilaiyaraja's most popular tracks from the film is playing on a roadside gramophone. A bearded young man in bellbottoms and an orange polyester shirt courts the shy glances of a young woman who lives in a towering house across the lane. Azhagar hears the song once more, a few days later, when Thulasi appears at a door within the house. "On the heart sown with seed, a citron has ripened," a woman's voice now sings, as the two exchange avid looks unseen by her nearby uncle.

The space resounds with what is expressed in their eyes. But then, when Azhagar's friend grabs his arm and pulls back his attention, the music suddenly cuts off. You realize that the sound was a figment of the lovers' imagination, borrowed from a film to create an imagined world of shared feeling. Azhagar and Thulasi, like everyone else along these lanes papered with film posters, live in an ordinary world that is already cinema.

Enter into a film and you enter into a world of imagination, some other world of thought, feeling, and experience beyond your own. Though this is always the case with cinema, films rarely do this as powerfully and effectively as *Subramaniyapuram*. Accept the film's invitation to come inside, and you find yourself within an urban world of political and commercial intrigue; a social world of friendship, love, and betrayal; a cultural world of veneration and violence; a material world of leisure, pleasure, and danger, all of this crafted with an anthropological fidelity to detail.

Consider how artfully the film conveys the integrity of such worlds in some of the first glimpses it gives of Madurai in 1980, in that sequence of shots that follow Azhagar and Paraman's release from the

Subramaniyapuram police station: one foot starts a scooter while someone else's arm works a handpump, one tin door closes as another nearby opens, the voice of a frustrated sister-in-law leads into the complaint of someone else's mother, a ladle of chutney in one house gives way to a ladle of sambar in another, water pours into one household tank at the same time that water is drawn from another such tank nearby.

Images, sounds, characters and scenes must come together in the creation of cinematic worlds. Films are some of the most powerful vehicles of contemporary imagination, giving their audiences a tangible sense of life in diverse environments and situations. All of this depends, however, upon their ability to pull others into the time and space of their unfolding: their hold upon audiences, but also, crucially, upon filmmakers themselves.

The emotional life of cinema fully depends upon the immersion of its makers themselves in cinematic experience. Everything turns on those moments of potential resonance between those who populate films, those who watch them, and those who make them. "If you get stuck in that world, you can't come out. That's what happened to them," says director Sasikumar, describing the fate of the two central characters of *Subramaniyapuram*, Azhagar and Paraman. But he could just as well be speaking about the experience of those who watch the film, or the experience of those involved in its creation.
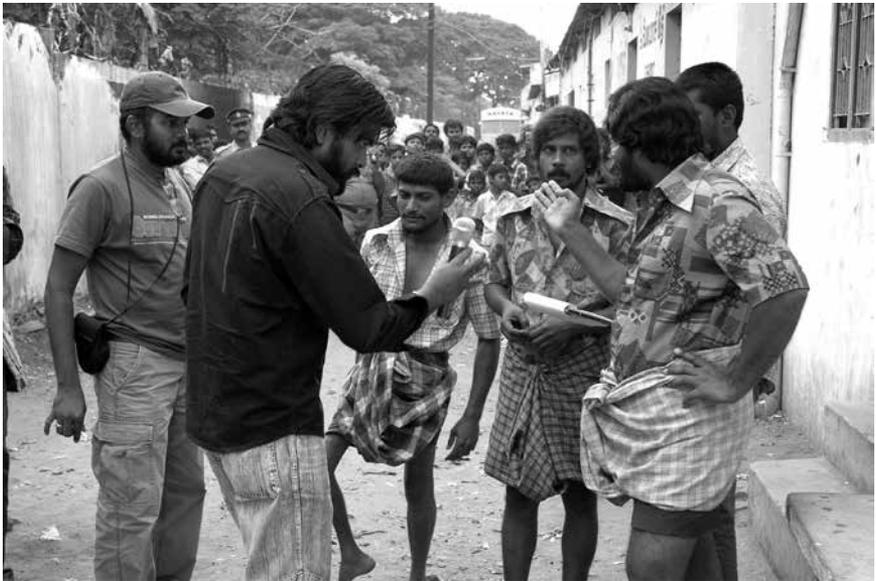
For the last several years, I've been looking at how films are made in the popular Tamil film industry. Working as an anthropologist with diverse film technicians—producers, directors, actors, cameramen, art directors, music directors, and so on—as they work on location and in studio environments, I've been studying the practical techniques these filmmakers use to affect their audiences, as well as the many ways that they themselves are affected by the emotional force and eventual fate of their own images and productions.

We often imagine that these filmmakers somehow manipulate their audiences from a safe distance, from a position of rational and mechanical precision. Instead, what I've found, again and again, is that the emotional course of cinema fully depends upon the shifting and deeply felt experience of those most responsible for its emergence. Over the last few years, I've had the chance to meet and converse with several of the technicians involved in the making of *Subramaniyapuram*. Consider what they say about the feelings, intentions, accidents, and circumstances that came together to yield the film and its world of experience.

"This is a story of our place," Sasikumar (Sasi) told me: "what we feel, what we have seen." The director grew up in a village that was slowly encompassed by an expanding Madurai. His family owned a fabric business in the town, and a movie theater along the main road to Melur. During his college years in Madurai, he had joined the Yadhartha ("Realist") Film Society, and a certain kind of realism was also essential to *Subramaniyapuram* as he conceived and produced it. By lingering on local festivals, conflicts, and styles, "we're talking about who lives there, what kind of people live in that area," he explained—the culture and concerns of his native town. "The whole of Subramaniyapuram is a character in the film."

The texture of this place was built up, carefully and meticulously, with a host of details that subtly pass throughout the film. Art director Rembon spoke to me about how much he appreciated Sasikumar's encouragement to invest time and resources in such details, rather than dismissing their importance—"No one will see all that!"—as other directors might do. Sasikumar, Rembon and their assistants sought out photo albums, magazine illustrations, calendars, posters, and other memorabilia for that time in order to compose the streetscape and its various interior settings.

Rembon described how they developed props as small as cigarette packs and matchboxes with the aid of such references. Many of these things, such as the lightbulbs they had filled with colored water to hang

before storefronts—a common practice in Madurai at that time—went unused because they seemed to crowd the space. "It shouldn't distract the audience, take them out of the script," Rembon observed. "In that flow, they shouldn't say 'Hey, look at that, look at this!'" He described art direction as a practice of deception, akin to the way that children might make fake candies out of seeds and whittled soap. "They have to feel that they are there, in that locality, in those circumstances." People had to forget that they were immersed in a film.

As is always the case with popular cinema, one of the most important challenges faced by the filmmakers was imagining the film from the standpoint of its audiences. The details of the screenplay and its various elements were all closely guarded, never tested with a public for their plausibility or appeal. Instead, these filmmakers took most seriously their own emotional reactions to what they were making. "I'm the first audience for my film," Sasi often said to me, an idea echoed by many others who worked on the film. Editor Raja Mohamed, for example, described his use of cuts and shifts that he imagined would be imperceptible to others who would later watch the film: "The audience shouldn't see that it's a cut."

As he worked, the editor would try to anticipate the perceptions and

reactions of his audiences, a forecast whose accuracy could be established only when he attended the first day of the film's release. "While we were editing, we'd think, 'We'll get claps for this bit,'" he recounted as we chatted one morning at his editing studio in Valasaravakkam. "But suppose we didn't get them? Sometimes what we'd thought turned out to be wrong, and we'd only know it by going to the theater."

For the film's technicians, such conjectures regarding how audiences might react to particular shots or scenes were also matched up constantly against their sense of what the director himself wanted. Cinematographer Kadhir, for example, told me how he sought to attune himself to Sasi's "vision" for the film, as the director narrated it to him, shot by shot and scene by scene: "Each and every frame, I'd look through the viewfinder, and that would be the first thing on my mind—what Sasi described, is that happening here? If not, can I do something to make it happen?"

As a cameraman, Kadhir had at his disposal many different kinds of techniques to try to realize this vision. He relied, for example, on wide shots of lengthy duration to depict the murder of the politician just before the interval of the film, punctuating the darkness of the street with both sodium vapor and fluorescent lighting for a contrastive texture of black, amber, and blue. The feeling of that moment is expressed almost entirely by the scene itself, until one final shot conveys the fear on their faces as they run. "I will travel with the mood of the director," Kadhir explained. "Whatever he wants to portray, I will be very conscious about that."

When he is invited to speak in public, as I have seen, Sasi often begins with something like: "As you know, I'm not one to speak very much." With a director as taciturn and reserved as Sasi, it was not always easy for his technicians to discern his mood. Music director James Vasanthan told me a very amusing story about the first music that they had composed for *Subramaniyapuram*, the song for the temple festival.

" 'Let's first try out a temple festival number,' Sasi told me. I immediately imagined a song from a Vijay kind of film, where Vijay dances with a dhoti folded with a turban and 40 friends of his," Vasanthan admitted, as we chatted in his seaside studio south of Chennai. "I created a typical filmi masala *kuthu paattu*."

The music director could see that the director was dissatisfied with what he had done. Still, Vasanthan said, "It took almost six to eight months for me to understand that Sasi had a really different film in his mind." Sasi had never told him that he did *not* want anything in particular. Instead,

Vasanthan said, the director would repeatedly just say "try out something more, try out something more."

Finally, the music director came to understand that what was expected from him was a "rustic folk sound," and he gathered a troupe of *naiyandi melam* players from Madurai to make a rough recording of their sound. When he played the recording for Sasi and the director expressed his satisfaction, Vasanthan brought them to Chennai to compose and record the song, without the involvement of any film industry musicians or singers.

With one individual centrally involved in the film as its producer and director as well as one of its lead actors, it is not surprising that Sasi's vision for the film proved decisive. Tamil films often evolve quite dramatically over the various stages of their production, into even the very weekend of their release. In the case of *Subramaniyapuram*, however, as editor Raja Mohamed recalled, the way that they ultimately shot and edited the film deviated very little from their initial scripted plans. "We didn't remove a single scene that we had shot," he said. "Whatever was written in the script, the film was shot in that pattern, and edited in that pattern."

At the same time, however, certain accidents of circumstance were critical for the way that the film ultimately felt and looked. Take, for example, its "period" look, one of the film's most celebrated qualities. Cinematographer Kadhir knew that most Tamil films had been given a historical texture through the use of black-and-white imaging, or through the use of a sepia tone. But both of these options seemed too predictable and unappealing.

It so happened that the cameraman had been testing out some Super 16mm film stock for another short film project at the time, and he saw how the conversion of 16mm to 35mm produced a grainy, lower-quality look that gave the feeling of an older image. He organized a test shoot with this film stock, and Sasi liked the results of their test footage. "Just go with this," he he told him. Other unanticipated possibilities also unfolded as a consequence of their adoption of 16mm film. For example, they were now able to experiment with a wider range of lenses, such as a 5mm lens that gave wide shots of the neighborhood an exaggerated sense of depth and reach that the space would have otherwise lacked.

Discussing *Subramaniyapuram* with its technicians, I often got the impression that the creative dimensions of their respective roles in the film had to do with precisely such things: using the materials they had at hand to express more deeply potential forms of experience already nascent in the film. Our conversation about the film took James Vasanthan, for example,

back to the moment when he composed the music for the difficult scene when Thulasi reveals her continued love for Azhagar, despite all of the violence he's already committed.

Vasanthan described the course of his own feelings as he encountered the visual materials of the scene: from the boredom he imagined that Thulasi felt with the lecture, to the burst of romantic feeling that would come with the knowledge that Azhagar was waiting outside, to the tightening of anxiety around the question of what would happen when they met once more, to the sense of joy at the resurfacing of a shared feeling of love. The echoes of "Kangal Irandal" that he composed for this scene were meant to further convey this shifting play of moods. "I am not just a robot," Vasanthan said. "Suddenly it chokes my throat, and I know that in the theater it's going to happen to most of them."

What was most fascinating about the music director's description of this moment was his insistence that the music he composed for this scene was somehow already there, in the way that he experienced it for the first time: "When I watch the film, the music is already running in my head, that's the music I put on paper." This was true, Vasanthan suggested, even when he first encountered the film as a story narrated by the director: "You've already fallen for the script, you're enjoying it, you know you're going to accept this film. When he says there's a song situation, the tune already plays in your head, the tune already runs into your head."

Like all Tamil films, *Subramaniyapuram* was made through process of improvising with available circumstances and resources. There is a continuous movement of encounter, wager, choice, and conjecture through which such films are put together, stage by stage. In the midst of such processes, things often take a turn contrary to hope and expectation.

Most of *Subramaniyapuram* was shot in Dindigul, for example, where the streets still looked to the filmmakers somewhat like the Madurai of the 1980s. The exterior façade of the big house where Thulasi lived with her uncles was built as a set on a vacant plot of land. Meanwhile, they'd arranged to shoot the interior scenes within a house in Madurai.

"The family kept promising, 'We'll give it, we'll give it,'" Sasi recalled. "But when the shoot began, they were taken aback by the number of people who suddenly overran their house. They thought that just a couple of people would come, like those who take wedding videos." The filmmakers were in the midst of intense negotiations with members of the family when one of their own craftsmen stepped through their discussion to hammer

a nail into a wall in order to hang a photograph. For the family, this was unforgivable. The crew was chased out of the house, their shooting schedule was suspended, and they began to work once more only after another house had been located in Sholavandan.

Although things could sometimes take these sudden and difficult turns, it is clear that Sasi also relied on such moments—charged with the potency of the unexpected—as a resource in crafting the mood of the film. Throughout the shoot, no one knew the way the story ended except for the director and his cameraman. The actors Jai and Swathi, for example, learned of Thulasi's betrayal of Azhagar only two days before those scenes were shot. "Swathi went crying to her room," Sasi said. She called him on the phone from there, wailing, "I should've died instead of betraying him like this." But this was exactly what Sasi had wanted from his heroine. After they had shot these scenes, Sasi told Swathi and Jai that she would never have been as shy with him, nor he so earnest with her, had they known what would happen. "Only because I told you at the end was I able to get that shock from you."

Sasi told me about his own struggles with Paraman's role. "As an actor, I was not there," he admitted, something he felt when he first watched the rushes for a substantial portion of his scenes. He had another young man

in mind for the character, who ultimately proved unwilling to change his hair and physical appearance for the 20 days that the shoot would require. "Then I became an artist," Sasi said, describing the difficulty in shifting his own perspective from that of the director to that of his character. They were forced eventually to reshoot these scenes, as Sasi, studying the video feed on the monitor and soliciting the advice of his cameraman and assistant directors, gradually learned to approach the two responsibilities independently. "I differentiated myself," Sasi said: "There an artiste, here a director."

The director had amusing stories to tell about the casting of many other actors for the film. Madurai Mari, who played Dumkan, was found at a tea stall outside a Madurai theatre. Sasi convinced his own office accountant, K.G. Mohan, to play the role of Chithan, and the man has since quit the office to pursue an acting career full-time. Samuthirakani had already directed two films when Sasi signed him to play Kanagu, and Sasi, in turn, has since acted in two of Samuthirakani's directorial ventures. Swathi, meanwhile, was signed to play Thulasi just four days before the *Subramaniyapuram* shoot was scheduled to begin; Sasi's first conversation with her was interrupted again and again by anxious phone calls from art

director Rembon about the set for Thulasi's house—"Have you signed her yet? Can we begin nailing the planks?"

I met Sasi and the other technicians involved in *Subramaniyapuram* in the months and years that followed the release of the film. All these moments in its making I came to understand only retrospectively, through the stories that they told me. Still, however, I gained some sense of their improvisational style of daily working practice through a small degree of exposure to the production of Sasi's second directed film, *Easan* (2010).

I spent a couple of weeks with Sasi and his crew at the outset of that shoot, as they planned and undertook a "test shoot" on the site of a defunct gas cylinder factory beside the East Coast Road south of Chennai. They had pinned so much of their hopes and expectations for the film on the scouting of this site. I saw how they tried to prepare themselves to encounter and work with the space just as it was, rather than remaking it in the image of a space that they already had in mind. You could see how their own sense of the film grew and evolved organically as they moved from shot to shot, each new development framed by certain open-ended questions: "Shall we try this? Or, shall we do something like this?" What the test ultimately yielded was a very short film "trailer" that would guide them as the remainder of the process unfolded. "We have enough space to play on this ground," Sasi said, sometimes likening their preparations here to games of war and combat.

Playful moods and moments come and go in both of Sasi's first two films, *Subramaniyapuram* and *Easan*. Both amount to dark portrayals of some of the most troubling dimensions of modern life in cities such as Madurai and Chennai. I found *Subramaniyapuram* quite disturbing when I first watched the film in Madurai, and I still find myself squirming at certain moments each time I watch it again. Confronted by the angry pulse of its masculine aggression—think of Azhagar ranting to Paraman about the young gangsters they will go on to kill, "He made me beg for my life from a woman, man, he made me fall at the feet of a woman, man!"—I find myself wondering, with Thulasi, or with Azhagar's mother, why it seems so difficult for these young men to understand what lies within their hearts. And yet, there is something undoubtedly powerful and compelling about these characters that the film has etched so tragically.

"People watched *Subramaniyapuram* and called me," Sasi recounted, "saying that it made them very disturbed." He knew what was happening in theaters all over the state: "Everywhere, the whole auditorium claps when

I sever his head in that auto rickshaw…This is what our epics say: destroy the evil one." For the director, such reactions lay at the core of the film's realism. "What we've shown is what happens. It frightens them, troubles their hearts." The world that films such as *Subramaniyapuram* allow us to see, both on and beyond the screen, is not always a world of beauty, love, and joy. The games afoot are often dark and brutal.