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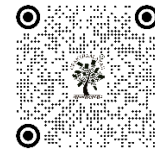
RECONFIGURING CINEMATIC FORM: A NEOFORMALIST STUDY OF NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE IN OTHTHA SERUPPU SIZE 7

Shivani K. V. ^{1*}, Dr. P. Panbuselvan ², Rahul S. ³

¹ M. Sc. Electronic Media, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore – 14, Tamil Nadu, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication and Electronic Media, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore – 14, Tamil Nadu, India

³ Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore – 14, Tamil Nadu, India



ABSTRACT

This study takes up a neoformalist analysis of Oththa Seruppu Size 7, written, directed, and performed by R. Parthiban, to address a significant lacuna in Tamil cinema scholarship. While existing studies of Tamil film have mainly focused on star systems, populist narrative structures, and socio-political representation, there is a critical lack of sustained formal analysis of minimalist cinematic experiments within the film industry. Oththa Seruppu Size 7, as a single-visible-character film unfolding almost entirely within a confined interrogation space, presents a radical reconfiguration of traditional Tamil narrative grammar. With the neoformalist framework proposed by David Bordwell's theory of narrative construction and stylistic systems, this study analyses how the film generates and carries narrative tension through restricted narration, spatial unity, acousmatic sound design, and performance. Particular attention is paid to the formal function of off-screen space, the structural use of voice without visible source, and the transformation of performance into the main narrative engine. Rather than approaching the film through sociological or ideological interpretation, this analysis foregrounds how meaning is generated out of the organisation of cinematic form itself. By placing Oththa Seruppu Size 7 within both Tamil cinematic traditions and global minimalist single-character cinema, the study asserts that the film represents a significant formal experimentation that questions dominant commercial conventions. Ultimately, this research contributes to Tamil film studies, as it analyses the neo formalistic aspects of the film in examining contemporary regional cinema and also by establishing a framework for studying minimalist narrative architecture film practice in India.

Keywords: Neoformalism, Narrative Architecture, Minimalist Cinema, Tamil films, Performance-Centred Narrative

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Tamil cinema has developed in a paradigm of spectacle, melodrama and star centred films. The story development is usually attained by building up of numerous characters, broad spatial action, sequence of songs and spectacle. This system tends to generate meaning out of scale, repetition and visual extravagance. Thus, formal analysis of cinematic structure has been relatively underdeveloped, although ideological analysis, political representation and star studies have been given more priority by critical scholarship. Oththa Seruppu Size 7 is a very startling diversion against this overwhelming grammar. The movie does not contain the majority of traditional movie elements, as it takes place almost entirely inside a single interrogation room, and the only character that is seen. There is no other character than a disembodied voice, and there is no use of classic devices like flashback, cross-cutting, and a multi-character communication. All that is left is the barebones narrative structure where the dramatic burden is borne by

*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Shivani K. V. (shivanis.workspace@gmail.com), Dr. P. Panbuselvan (dr.p.panbuselvan@gmail.com), Rahul S. (rxhulofficial@gmail.com)

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performance, sound and spatial restriction. This form of minimalism is not just reductive but is a reformulation of the formal logic of this film.

This paper is based on neo formalist approach and mainly relies on the theory of narration by David Bordwell who highlighted the fact that the systematic arrangement of style and narrative elements forms cinematic meaning. Neo formalism changes the focus on what a film is to an arrangement of how it is constituted, the distribution of information, space and time, and the way spectators are led to create meaning. This kind of treatment is especially appropriate to films that do not follow the conventional wisdom. To this end, the paper discusses the manner in which Oththa Seruppu Size 7 creates narrative tension and meaning by using a limited narration, space-constrained, acousmatic sound, and performance to redefine the grammar of Tamil cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Russian Formalism is a crucial starting point of any serious neo-formalist analysis, which predetermined the autonomy of the artistic construction. The idea of *ostranenie* (1917/1965) by Viktor Shklovsky suggests that art will work by interfering with habitual vision. Form to Shklovsky is not ornament, but rather the process by which the perception is revitalized. Narrative devices, repetition, delay and distortion are all used to make familiar strange. Reduction itself is a defamiliarizing technique of minimalist cinema; when all the excess of conventional cinema is eliminated, the spectators become highly conscious of structure organisation. Roman Jakobson (1960) emphasised the structural relations between the sender, message, and receiver with particular emphasis on the poetic role where the message foregrounds itself. The morphological analysis (1928) by Vladimir Propp indicated narrative functions as systematic units. Russian Formalism created an analytical orientation to the study of artistic works as orderly systems of devices.

Neoformalism, as described by David Bordwell (1985), extends these ideas into film studies. Bordwell theorises narration as a process by which spectators generate meaning by formulating hypotheses. The distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* enables analysis of how films regulate information. Restricted narration prevents the viewer from accessing complete information and creates suspense. Edward Branigan (1992) explains focalisation, while Kristin Thompson (1988) introduces motivation as a justification for stylistic devices. Bordwell and Thompson (1988) define film style as a system consisting of *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, editing, and sound. Narratological distinctions by Seymour Chatman (1978) and Gerard Genette (1980), along with Meir Sternberg (1985), further explain narrative structure through information control and delayed revelation.

Classical film theory presents contrasting approaches to form. Sergei Eisenstein (1949) emphasises montage as the collision of shots, while Lev Kuleshov (1974) demonstrates relational interpretation. Vsevolod Pudovkin (1929) stresses constructive editing. In contrast, Andre Bazin (1967) supports realism, depth of field, and spatial continuity. Noel Burch (1973) identifies the institutional mode of representation. These approaches frame minimalist cinema as a shift away from montage toward continuity of performance within constrained space.

Sound theory provides tools for analysing films organised around off-screen authority. Michel Chion (1994) introduces the acousmatic voice, where the source of sound is invisible yet powerful. Rick Altman (1992) and Claudia Gorbman (1987) establish sound as a structural component. In minimalist cinema, sound becomes a primary narrative resource instead of ornamentation.

Spatial theory explains how cinematic space contributes to meaning. Henri Lefebvre (1991) conceives space as socially produced. Stephen Heath (1976) and Christian Metz (1974) connect spatial organisation with spectatorship. Gilles Deleuze (1985) redefines cinematic space and time, while Vivian Sobchack (1992) emphasises phenomenological perception. These theories show how constrained spaces intensify perception.

Performance theory overlaps with formal analysis when narrative depends on corporeal expressivity. Bela Balázs (1952) highlights expressive detail, while Murray Smith (1995) explains alignment and allegiance. Richard Dyer (1979) and Erving Goffman (1959) conceptualise performance as structured representation. In minimalist cinema, performance becomes a structural mechanism.

Tamil cinema scholarship has largely focused on ideology, stardom, and socio-political representation. M. Madhava Prasad (1998), Sara Dickey (1993), and Velayutham (2008) analyse cinema in terms of modernity, fandom, and industry. Theodore Baskaran (1996) provides historical insights. However, systematic neoformalist analysis of minimalist Tamil films remains limited.

Film analysis as a methodology supports structured interpretation. Bordwell and Carroll (Eds.). (1996) emphasise analytical clarity based on observable structures. Aumont and Marie (1992) propose segmentation, while Bellour (2000) supports close textual analysis. These approaches reinforce the focus on patterned organisation.

Studies on restricted narratives and chamber cinema highlight spatial confinement as a narrative strategy. Noel Carroll (1990) explains suspense through limited information, and Thomas Elsaesser (2009) discusses cognitively engaging narratives. Auteur theory is relevant where a single creator controls multiple roles. François Truffaut (1954), Andrew Sarris (1962), and Peter Wollen (1969) define authorship in terms of consistent vision and structural patterns. Cognitive theories of spectatorship emphasise viewer engagement. Murray Smith (1995) explains alignment and allegiance, while Noel Carroll (1990) highlights curiosity and suspense as effects of structured information gaps.

LITERATURE GAP

The current film studies literature also provides rich theoretical models of understanding the form, narration, sound, space, and performance in cinema. The independence of artistic means in Russian Formalism was developed Shklovsky (1965), Tynyanov (1971), and the construction of the narrative and the organisation of stylistic elements was systematised by neoformalism, and in particular by Bordwell (2008) and Thompson (1988). Detailed models of focalisation and information control have been described by narratological theorists like Genette (1980), Chatman (1978) and Branigan (1992). The structural contribution of audio to the narrative authority has been proved by sound scholars such as Chion (1994), Altman (1992) and Gorbman (1987).

In the Tamil cinema studies, the prevailing theme has been ideology, stardom, political modernity, caste representation, and industrial structures Prasad (1998), Dickey (1993), Velayutham (2008), Baskaran (1996). Though these contributions are structural, they scarcely proscribe continued formal study of systems of style. There is minimum scholarly address to minimalist experiments in Tamil cinema, especially those that organised around the visibility of one character, the space of confinement and the acousmatic narration. Oththa Seruppu Size 7 has been mostly discussed critically in a journalistic or descriptive way, highlighting its novelty as a one actor film as opposed to its structural organisation.

In that way, there is a large gap between neoformalism and Tamil cinema academia. It is also essential to note that there is no thorough study currently who incorporates the elements of restricted narration, acousmatic authority, space limitation and performance-oriented architecture into a single neoformalist framework within contemporary Tamil film production. This gap is filled by this research which conducts a systematic neoformalism critique of Oththa Seruppu Size 7 as a result of which the research adds to both the formalist and the study of Tamil films by analysing minimalist narrative architecture as a conscious reorganisation of the film form.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How does Oththa Seruppu Size 7 structure limited narrative and information flow to build narrative tension in a minimalist structure?

RQ2: How does spatial confinement become a structuring principle but not a narrative space?

RQ3: What is the effect of introducing acousmatic sound and reorganizing cinematic authority and breaking the traditional shot-reverse-shot grammar?

RQ4: What is the performance functioning of a substitute of montage-based variation to maintain narrative and stylistic coherence?

METHODOLOGY

The proposed study will use a close textual analysis and neo formalist theory-based design of qualitative research which is a discursive research approach. Being a single-case study, it not only does not treat Oththa Seruppu Size 7 as a representative sample but also does not consider it a unique instance of formal experimentation. It is not with the purpose to generalise but to examine the inner structure of the cinematographic text. The repetition and segmentation of viewing and analysing the film serves to identify trends of repeat, variation, and deviance on the narrative, spatial, sonic, and performative planes. Special emphasis is made on the dissemination of the information, space design, the role of sound and performance mechanism. Interpretative statements are based upon observable stylistic forms and not the theoretical or ideological interpretation, and this is in accordance with the focus of neo formalism on analytical clarity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper is based on the qualitative interpretive research design, rooted in close textual analysis and neoformalist film theory. Given that the study is limited to one cinematic text - Oththa Seruppu Size 7, the approach is a single-case study as described by Robert Yin (2014).

The phenomenon to be examined is the minimalist narrative architecture in Tamil films and the movie is an intrinsic case portrayed by Stake (1995). The movie is not regarded as a representative statistical sample but a structurally single case.

The study is qualitative as it aims at interpreting patterns of the formal organisation. According to Denzin and Lincoln (Eds.). (2011), qualitative inquiry refers to an interpretive practice concerned with meaning-making. This dissertation focuses on the internal organisation of the cinematic text. The approach is aligned with textual analysis McKee (2003).

This study does not make recourse to purely ideological interpretations. Bordwell and Carroll (Eds.). (1996) support mid-level research based on observable aspects of form. The interpretive claims are the result of stylistic patterns. This research design favours formal description and focuses on the functioning of the movie. The single-case qualitative design is chosen due to research questions related to narrative construction, spatial organisation, sound, and performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK GROUNDING

This study is based on neoformalism developed by David Bordwell. Neoformalism is the heir of Russian Formalism, especially Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum, and Tynyanov.

Bordwell (1985) theorises narration as a process by which spectators generate meaning. Neoformalism studies the organisation of information and cognitive assembling of story events. The key distinction is between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. *Fabula* is the chronological narration created by the viewer, and *syuzhet* is the organization of narrative facts in the film text. This distinction allows analysis of delayed and withheld information.

The research maps the effect of *syuzhet* cues on reconstructing the *fabula*. Neoformalism views film style as a system consisting of *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, editing, and sound (Bordwell and Thompson (2010)). Supporting theories are incorporated without replacing neoformalism. The concept of *acousmatic* (Chion (1994)) and *alignment* (Smith (1995)) are used. The theoretical basis remains neoformalism.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework applies neoformalism through close reading. The aim is to describe how the movie achieves its effects. The method involves close viewing and segmentation to identify patterns of repetition, variation and deviation.

The first dimension is narrative architecture, examining distribution of information, delayed exposition, and disclosure of causal connections. Limited narration functions as the key organising principle. The second dimension is spatial organisation, examining framing, camera placement, actor blocking and off-screen space. Spatial limitation is treated as a formal tool. The third dimension is sound structure, especially *acousmatic* voices. *Disembodied* voices restructure narrative authority. Sound functions as a structural anchor. The fourth dimension is performance as a structural mechanism. Variations in voice, gesture, posture and expression carry structural value. Performance maintains narrative flow.

ANALYSIS

Synopsis

Oththa Seruppu Size 7 is a narrative built around a situation of extreme restrained narration, in which everything is mediated through the main character, Masilamani. The movie does not provide the viewer with visual impressions of historical events that are unfolding in the past, but rather through word and action displays. This lack of visual flashback forces the spectator to create a *fabula* out of the testimony fragments, obtained information bits, and narrative perspective changes. The story is told by the exposition that comes late and every confession alters the perception of the viewer about the events that have occurred before.

In space, the movie acts in one limited setting, in the interrogation room of the film, but it is a closed formal space and not just a setting. With repetitions and minor variations this narrow space creates meaning. The pieces of art like the kite, slipper, and fan become narrative, serving as the stimuli of memory and emotional connection. The lack of spatial expansion does not restrict the narrative; rather, we have a layered *diegetic* world, with off-screen elements and sounds giving space a conceptual expansion.

In the movie, sound has been made a central structural element, especially in relation to *acousmatic* voices. The power is transferred out of tangible objects and into intangible ones since the police officers and other characters are presented only through sound. This reversal of the traditional cinematic order questions the primacy of the visual and puts sound as one of the main sources of narrative information. Sound is also used as the tool of transition, and the sounds take the place of the traditional forms of editing. Auditory elements are used to express memory, emotion and time changes, and frequently, the line between *diegetic* and *psychological* sound is obscured.

Performance becomes the main narrative force, which makes up the lack of montage and interaction between characters. The body of Masilamani is turned into an object of narrative production, which at the same time assumes various functions due to the voice, gesture and posture differences. Reenactment scenes show how a performance can substitute the *shot-reverse-shot* editing, with the illusion of a dialogue in one frame. Minor changes in the movement and voice presentation create a rhythm and narrative development and the encounters with the objects further expand the performative system.

These elements include narration, space, sound and performance not working singly but as a formal system. Narrative restriction requires performative articulation; the space which is confined enhances the role of sound, and sound in its turn organizes narrative development. This interdependence shows that minimalism in the film is not a simplification of the state but restructuring of the functions of the cinema.

NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE AND RESTRICTED NARRATION

In architecture, the term narrative architecture is used alongside restricted narrative to describe a form of architecture that uses its structure to communicate a story. The narrative structure of *Oththa Seruppu Size 7* is built by the extreme regime of restricted narration where all the narrative data is filtered, delayed, and restructured on the basis of the field of perception, speech, and performance of Masilamani. The film refuses the visual validation, instead forcing the spectator to build the fabula as a result of fragmented narration, enacted embodiment, and sensory stimuli in a limited space, which is not characteristic of classical narrative cinema where visual access stabilises story understanding.

The movie creates a sense of narrational constraint by withholding perception right at its beginning. The opening scene displays a black screen with background police station noise, then objects are displayed one by one, in a distorted shape, a handicap shoe, a school bag with the name of the school; M. Mahesh II std and a superhero iconography of a father and son.

One of the main peculiarities of the narration structure in the movie is that there are no visual flashbacks at all. The most important events of the story multiple murders, family discord, betrayal, and loss are shown not visually but through narration by Masilamani. The past is not depicted but encroaches into the present by way of sound and subjective perception. This process is repeated in the rest of the film, as story movement is not determined by visual movement, but rather by associative stimuli within the mise-en-scene.

The viewer must comprehend these performances as narrative testimony even without visual validation. This generates an intricate relationship between narration and embodiment such that the body is a place of narrative articulation. Narrative data is also arranged using a technique of progressive disclosure and delayed exposition. The movie does not show the killings in chronological order but discloses them step by step, making each confession more difficult than the one before the murder.

The combination of diegetic and non- diegetic sound also makes it more difficult to follow the narration. Voice of missing characters - Usha, Mahesh, etc - sprout in the minds of Masilamani, and are shown devoid of visual accompaniment. Objects in the frame in turn serve as network nodes of recurrence that anchor and restructure the flow of information. The kite in the film used as a representation of the child. The slipper motif is a more complex functioning device. First introduced as an unaccounted factor related to the murders, it acquires meaning with the repetition in the various accounts of the murders. Its meaning is finally reconfigured in the last revelation.

Cognitive delay is also used to create narrative tension in the film. Information is not only held back but also deliberately misled. As an example, the insistence with which Masilamani refers to the illness of his son at the beginning of the film sets his behaviour into a moral framework of sympathy and directs the viewers to align. Yet, later revelation - like the unfaithfulness of his wife and his own reasoned proceedings make this alignment complicated and add ambiguity. The emotional and cognitive involvement of the spectator is thereby at a constant recalibration with the appearance of new information.

SPATIAL CONFINEMENT AS STRUCTURAL SYSTEM

The structural system is spatial confinement. The spatial arrangement of *Oththa Seruppu Size 7* is not just a logistical demand but a strictly designed formal organisation where confinement is the major structuring force. The interrogation room is not regarded as the background but rather an active subject of variation as repetition, deviation, and micro-modulation create narrative development. It is in this limited diegetic space that cinematic meaning is constructed by reorganizing space relations, positioning of objects and camera orientation as opposed to geographical extension.

Table 1

Table 1 Establishment of Spatial Confinement and Object-Oriented Space				
Time Code	Spatial Element	Formal Strategy	Semiotic Function	Narrative Effect
00:01:53– 00:02:19	Black screen → shoe → school bag	Delayed spatial reveal	Objects precede character identity	Constructs emotional context before narrative
00:02:19– 00:02:34	Interrogation room (partial reveal)	Occluded framing (face hidden)	Space controls visibility	Establishes restriction as governing principle
00:03:33	Table, spectacles, caps	Object clustering in foreground	Authority displaced onto objects	Visual hierarchy without bodies
00:04:46	Fan (“Usha”)	Object-triggered perception	Object as memory conduit	Space generates narrative transition

ACOUSMATIC SOUND AND NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

The sound design of Oththa Seruppu Size 7 works not so much as an additional layer of visual storytelling but as a core structural mechanism in which the power of narrative, the extension of space, and the inner world are built around. Without visual multiplicity, sound is left to play the role conventionally performed by montage and multi-character interaction. The motion picture methodically uses acousmatic sound such as voices that have no visible apparatus to restructure the hierarchy in the cinema, unseating the power of the visible to the off-screen space.

Table 2

Time Code	Sound Source	Visibility	Formal Strategy	Narrative Function
00:02:49 - 00:03:33	Police officers (DC, Saami)	Off-screen	Acousmatic authority	Establishes unseen power structure
00:04:46	Usha (memory voice)	Off-screen	Memory-triggered sound	Initiates narrative shift
00:11:57	Mahesh (child voice)	Off-screen	Emotional anchoring	Constructs parallel emotional space
00:20:22	Inspector interruption	Off-screen	Disruptive sound entry	Breaks narrative continuity
01:30:31	Commissioner	Off-screen	Remote authority	Expands political dimension

PERFORMANCE AS NARRATIVE ENGINE

In Oththa Seruppu Size 7, performance is not only character psychology, but presupposes the structural role in the formal system of the film, playing the role of montage, a multi-character interaction, and a visual multiplicity, which is the chief means of narrative progression. In an enclosed space with limited visual perception, variation is created by means of voice modulation, gesture, posture and rhythm modulation. The performing body becomes the key area where the narrative information is generated, structured, and changed. In contrast to traditional cinema in which performance functions in a narrative framework that has been pre-established, here performance functions to build the narrative itself. Masilamani not narrates the events, he enacts the events, who moves between roles, time, feelings. This creates a hybrid narration where narration, reenactment and projection of psychology exist as one corporeal being.

Table 3

Time Code	Performance Mode	Role Shift	Formal Strategy	Narrative Function
00:15:05– 00:18:25	Reenactment	Masilamani ↔ Thambi Durai	Dual vocal + bodily enactment	Constructs murder event without visual cut
00:17:23– 00:20:22	Voice alternation	Self ↔ Victim	Vocal differentiation	Replaces shot–reverse-shot
00:48:34	Emotional recall	Husband ↔ Father	Tonal modulation	Builds psychological layering
01:02:48	Confessional expansion	Narrator ↔ Perpetrator	Performative confession	Extends narrative scope
01:28:28+	Political revelation	Individual ↔ System participant	Controlled delivery	Repositions narrative authority

INTEGRATED FORMAL SYSTEM: A NEOFORMALIST RECONFIGURATION OF CINEMATIC FUNCTIONS

The formal structure of Oththa Seruppu Size 7 is not a detached mechanism of stylistic techniques but a highly connected mechanism where the narrative, space, sound, and performance system works together. The minimalism of the film can thus not be diminished to the lack of traditional cinematic elements but rather it should be viewed as a re-allocation of their roles. Instead of reducing the cinematic complexity, the movie reconfigures it, giving a number of roles to a smaller number of formal elements. To show this systemic organisation, the following map forms the interactions between formal domains, the strategies they work with and the effects that they produce into a narrative. This mapping is analytical and does not seek to classify, but rather to demonstrate that it is the coordination of formal elements that gives rise to meaning and not any one device alone.

Table 4

Table 4 Integrated Neoformalist Matrix of Cinematic Systems

Formal Domain	Device / Strategy	Interacting Domain	Mode of Integration	Resulting Narrative Effect
Narrative	Restricted narration	Performance	Story delivered through enactment	Fabula constructed through embodied narration
Narrative	Delayed exposition	Sound	Information revealed via voice	Suspense through auditory disclosure
Narrative	Fragmented testimony	Space	No visual flashbacks	Temporal reconstruction within single location
Space	Spatial confinement	Sound	Off-screen voices expand space	Acoustic extension of diegesis
Space	Object-based triggers	Narrative	Objects initiate memory	Narrative transitions without editing
Space	Repetition of layout	Performance	Body repositions within same frame	Variation within confinement
Sound	Acousmatic voice	Narrative	Voice controls information flow	Authority detached from visibility
Sound	Layered audio	Performance	Voice + enactment combined	Multi-character illusion
Sound	Interruptions (noise)	Narrative	Breaks storytelling flow	Destabilised narration
Performance	Role-switching	Sound	Voice modulation differentiates roles	Replacement for shot–reverse-shot
Performance	Gesture variation	Space	Movement within confined frame	Spatial dynamism without expansion
Performance	Object interaction	Narrative	Objects mediate performance	Symbolic reinforcement of story

DISCUSSION

The discussion evidence shows that *Oththa Seruppu Size 7* cannot be sufficiently explained by relying on traditional paradigms of emphasis on narrative content or ideological representation. Rather, the movie requires transition to the analysis of formal organisation. In this regard, minimalism should not be considered as a subtractive process but a redistributive process, in which the elimination of traditional items increases the functional burden of the rest that is left.

Such redistribution results in a reorganization of cinematic hierarchy. Sound and performance play the main roles traditionally played by visual representation; space plays the roles of an active agent in organizing perception. The viewer has ceased to be a passive receiver of information but a producer of meaning, which he forms by inference and hypothesis. This intellectual activity fits in with the neo formalism insistence on the spectator as part of the process of building the narrative.

In the framework of Tamil cinema, the film helps to put forward the fact that formal analysis should be paid more attention to. It shows that even regional cinema can be of a great formal experiment, opposing established narrative norms and increasing the opportunities of the image representation. This study makes a contribution to a more subtle image of current Tamil cinema by anticipating the organisation of form.

CONCLUSION

The research has discussed the way *Oththa Seruppu Size 7* re-configurates the cinematic form in a neoformalist approach and has centred around narrative architecture, space organisation, sound design and performance. The movie shows that minimalism may serve as a form of structural change where the functions of the cinema are reallocated, not abolished. The creation of narrative meaning is achieved by means of limited information and spatial limitation, acoustic sound performance and narrative storytelling that all work within a synthesized formal system. This paper will apply neoformalism to an Indian regional film, thereby broadening the application of formalist analysis to the areas where it has not previously been applied and bridging a gap in Tamil films scholarship. Finally, the movie shows that expressiveness of the cinema is not found in the multitude of elements but rather in how they are organised to make the limitation a generative and inventive power.

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