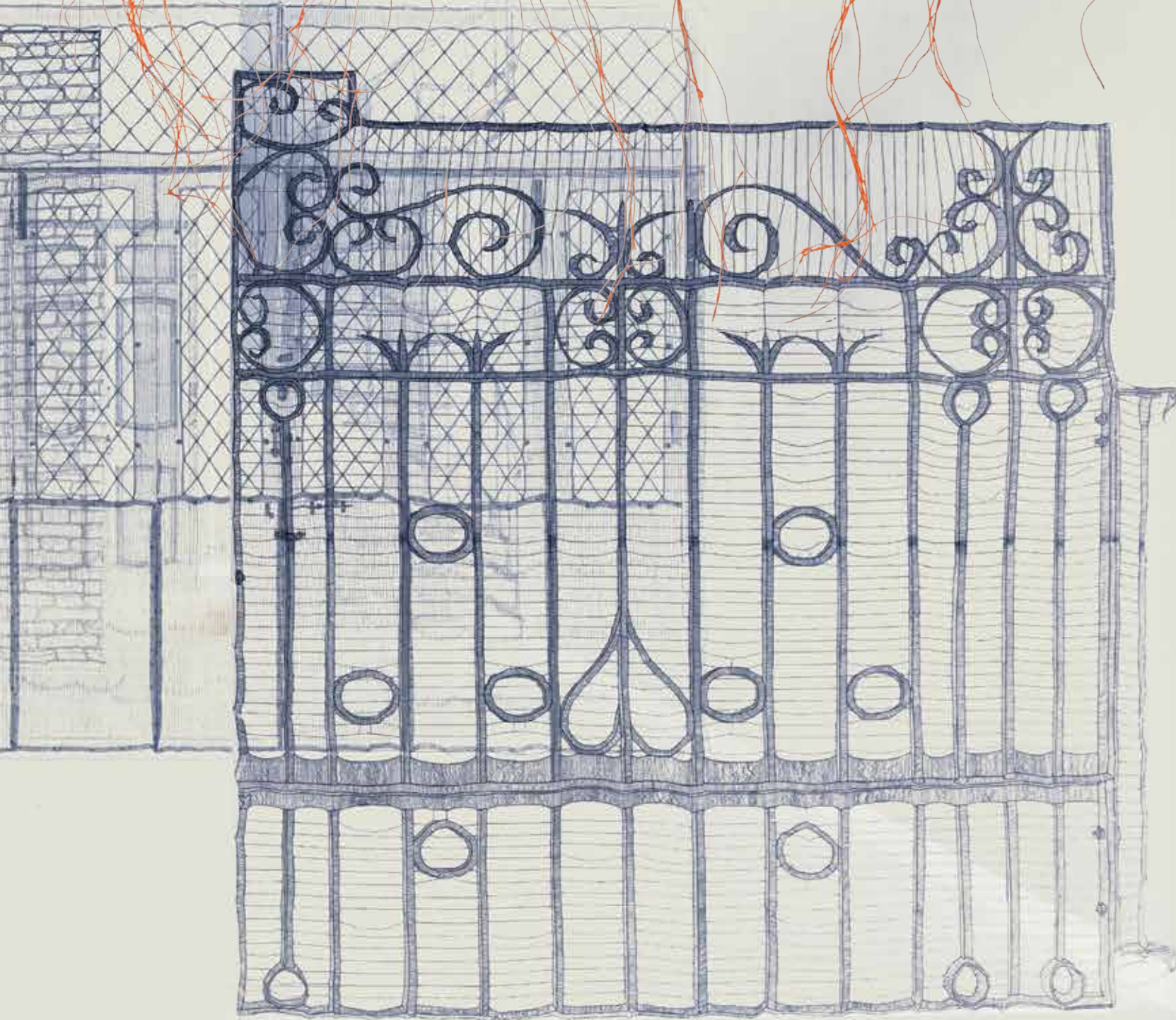


ai

ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Cinema

Desiring the Detail

Thiagarajan Kumararaja's two films, *Aranya Kaandam* and *Super Deluxe*, seven years apart, are a study of details clamouring for attention to tell a bigger story

Praveena Shivram

Still from *Super Deluxe* (2019).

I watched *Aranya Kaandam* after I had booked tickets to watch *Super Deluxe* the following day. I am not sure why this detail is important, but much like Thiagarajan Kumararaja's two films that abound in a veritable sea of details, I somehow feel compelled to set the chronology of the watching experience. One small detail for Pra, a giant leap of faith for Kumararaja.

No, that can't be right.

But what this back-to-back movie watching experience did was for me to become hyperaware of cinematic devices, character arcs, plot twists and the generous smattering of details of colour, objects, scene, dialogue, pop references, camera movements and even the movement of characters within a frame. It was like a bunch of dominoes carefully set up, but even before the first one (last one?) was pushed, the patterns were already clear. And this, for me, this ability to set up the enigma and then shatter it, is both Kumararaja's success and shortcoming as a film-maker.

In 2011, when *Aranya Kaandam* released, it burst through Tamil cinema's yo-yoing landscape of rustic violence and city romances, giving the audience a delicious taste of local neo-noir sensibility, with background music (no songs, in both his films) so starkly contrasted to the scene playing out – a hot-headed chase/fight sequence either has peppy Irish-type music or a slow, lilting melody – and with characters who were absurd, incorrigible and unexpectedly charming, that the movie instantly attained cult status. The disparate storylines – two warring gangsters; a father and child battling poverty; and a girl, kept as a mistress to revive the aging gangster's libido, and her affair with the simpleton working there – find each other like lover's hands, leading us to the moment that Kumararaja says in an interview earlier this year that he wrote first. '*Aranya Kaandam* was conceived entirely as a climax. Generally, movies have first, second and third acts. But I wrote it only as a third act. Ditto for *Super Deluxe*, where I start off the stories with that climactic moment¹.' *Aranya Kaandam* was entertaining, yes. Pacy, yes. Different, an overwhelming yes. But pathbreaking? I am not so sure, because Kumararaja's style of film-making, at least going by the two films he has made, is a largely

Still from *Aaranya Kaandam* (2010).

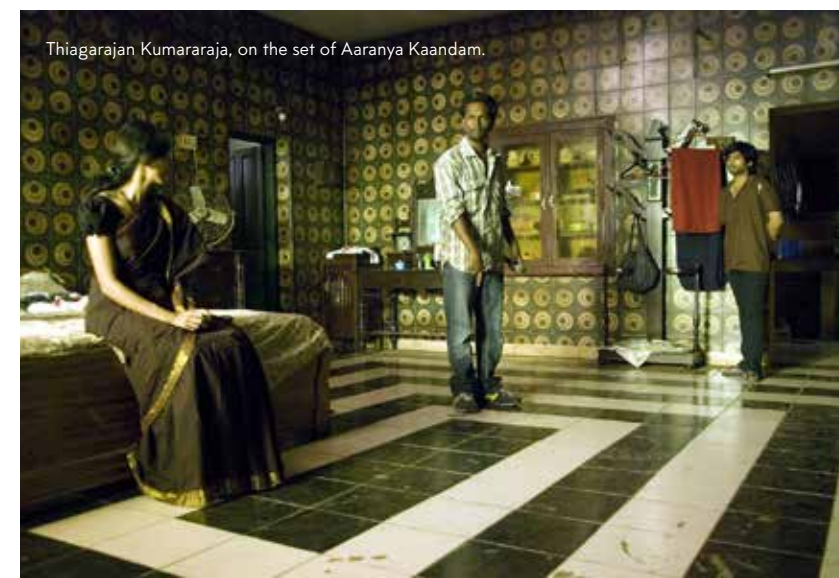


contrived style of film-making, where the details emerge the winner and not so much what they all make together.

If the underlying premise in *Aaranya Kaandam* was drugs – a crude packet of cocaine in the wrong hands takes everyone on a wild-goose chase (sometimes, even us the audience – then *Super Deluxe*, a much more sophisticated film in terms of its production values and writing (the film boasts of three writers: Nalan Kumaraswamy, Mysskin, who also plays a pivotal role, and Neelan) runs on the premise of sex and sexuality. Even as the titles rolls against a black screen, we hear the voices of two ex-lovers on the phone. Clearly, they are flirting, and when the scene finally opens, we see that they have just had sex, and two minutes later, the man dies. The other thread is of three teenage boys trying to watch a porn film only to find that the mother of one of the boys is in the film. And the third, the most compelling, is that of a trans-woman Shilpa who returns to her family after seven years. Between the corpse, the three boys and Shilpa's struggle for acceptance (and even a brief stint by aliens, yes, don't ask), *Super Deluxe* unfolds, and much like *Aaranya Kaandam*, the beauty of the plot lies in the places where they converge and the beauty of that convergence lies in its details. 'The story begins on a high note from the very first scene.

Nobody can guess where the story is headed to. Instead of the word "puzzle", it's more like connecting the dots², he said in an interview last year. 'I had this idea for a long time, but I did not want to do yet another movie with multiple storylines after *Aaranya Kaandam*. But then I thought that since some years have passed, it was okay to do another movie with multiple tracks³.'

While in *Aaranya Kaandam* the multiple tracks felt more organic, even though many of the loose ends weren't tied up (I wanted to know who that female protagonist, Subbu, was, so intrinsic to the twist in the end), in *Super Deluxe* they felt more conscious, like the narrative device was more important than allowing the narrative to breathe. The star cast is better, the characters are better and no one is saddled with an unnecessary



Thiagarajan Kumararaja, on the set of *Aaranya Kaandam*.



Still from *Super Deluxe* (2019).

expression like Jackie Shroff making faces in *Aaranya Kaandam*. Even the dialogues are better as they straddle worlds of religion, fidelity, morality and belonging, and yet *Aaranya Kaandam* still feels like a better film than *Super Deluxe*. *Aaranya Kaandam* still feels truer to the experience than *Super Deluxe* that, for the most part, wallows in its own self-importance. The neon sign screaming 'super deluxe', the writing on the wall when Shilpa is looking for her son, the flickering tube-light in the subway when Mysskin's character realises the futility of religion, a t-shirt that spells 'fuck' in Tamil, the black plastic bags floating in space in the alien's house, and the excessive moralising in the end were like intellectual signposts, forcing the experience to pause and appreciate, before moving on. And maybe this is why Kumararaja finds that he goes back constantly to his first film, be it the ice-cream metaphor or the father-son relationship – the scene of the father trying to hug his son and the son resisting are exact replicas – or even how the shots are mounted with extreme low angles or tight close-ups or upside-down shots, *Super Deluxe* is like the younger sibling forever emulating the older one while trying hard to be different.



Still from *Aaranya Kaandam* (2010).

In the 1998 Pixar film *A Bug's Life*, the film begins with a long trail of ants carrying food, when a leaf falls unexpectedly in front of one of the ants and the trail is hampered. The ant immediately begins to panic till the supervisor ant arrives and gently walks the ant around the leaf, and the trail is picked up once again, except, now there is a visible gap.

And that, to me, is what Kumararaja's films are about – a trail carrying some exquisite detail, but always with a big yawning gap.

1 and 3: <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/i-start-my-stories-at-the-climax-super-deluxe-5671754/>
2: <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/thiagarajan-kumararajas-super-deluxe/article25214564.ece>

