

Chapter 8

From Screen to Crime Scen: Cinematic Imitation and Criminal Psychology in Malayalam Cinema

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines how Malayalam cinema, particularly films like *Drishyam* (2013), *Marco* (2022), *Pani* (2023), and *Aavesham* (2024), intersects with psychology and criminology through its engagement with realism, moral ambiguity, and cultural specificity. Using theories such as social learning, cognitive scripts, cultivation, and cultural criminology, it explores how cinematic narratives shape identity, moral reasoning, and imitation, especially in the digital era. The rise of OTT platforms and social media has intensified ‘cinematic imitation’ and real-life ‘copycat crimes’ in India, rooted in moral disengagement and subcultural identity. Cinema emerges as both a potential trigger for deviant behavior and a tool for ethical reflection. The chapter concludes by advocating for media literacy and interdisciplinary collaboration to reduce harm while preserving artistic freedom.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always been far more than just a form of entertainment; it is also a social institution, a cultural product, and a psychological force that can affect the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of its audiences (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). With the increasing convergence of traditional and digital media, films are now distributed not only in theatres but also online, on social media platforms, and in virtual spaces, reflecting broader shifts in media ecology and convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). The interaction of digital technologies and cinematic narratives produces a synergy that amplifies the psychological weight of one over the other, producing a confluence of influences (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). These interactions bring into view social psychology's greatest concerns of how individuals and groups interpret films, replicate behaviors exhibited on-screen, and negotiate their identities in virtual and real-world contexts, consistent with principles of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009). The effects of film on behavior is a well-established area of media psychology that has been studied for decades. Films largely serve as symbolic models, providing us scripts for behaving morally, or templates for how to navigate real-life decision-making. Rarely is entertainment framed as a behavioral model, but this is an important point of reference for Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1977) which has meaning within films, and was originally framed for television violence: we can observe, think about, and later emulate in practice what we see in films. In cases where the film exists as content in an online realm - memes, fandoms, streaming - the opportunity for creating meaning, including normalizing and desensitizing, multiplies. The virtual landscape acts an enhancer of the power of films - adding the potential to invest the narrative in interactive and participatory culture(s) that extends far beyond the immediate screen experience of consumption.

Copycat crimes are one of the most striking and troubling effects of media exposure. Copycat crimes, where a person executes an unlawful act inspired by a representation of crime or criminals in the mainstream media, have been conceptualized in media psychology through a number of mechanisms such as desensitization, cognitive priming, and imitation (Bandura, 2009; Huesmann, 2018; Surette, 2015). Movies often sensationalize crime through aestheticized detail, leading the viewer to ascribe a form of rationality, cleverness, or even glamor to the process of criminal engagement as one possible drama for understanding conflict in their real life (Surette, 2015). In digital spaces, the social dialogue that surrounds a film can work to normalize and generate collective discussion as well as glamorize the crime depicted on screen and/or demonstrate acceptance of a potentially criminal or even violent narrative (Jenkins, 2006). The merging of mass communication media and social media dialogue becomes a corollary to the genre not only of the

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