Cinematic Memory and Neuroaesthetic: Cultural Memory Construction through Sensory and Emotional Resonance in Malayalam Cinema

K Pradeep*[1], Varghese Riju Joshua[2], Lalmohan.P[3], Paul T Benzikar, S Sujatha[5]

[1]Associate Professor, Nitte Institute of Communication, Nitte (Deemed to be University), Mangaluru, India. Mail: cpradeepklee@gmail.com

[2]Department of mass communication, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Nizwa branch - South Campus, Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman.

[3]Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Kerala, Thiruvanathapuram, India

[4]Associate Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Nehru Arts and Science College(autonomous), Coimbatore, India.

[5]Research scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India.

*(Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This study examines the intersection of neuroaesthetics and cultural memory theory to explore cinema's active role in shaping collective remembrance through sensory, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Drawing on the frameworks of prosthetic memory, cultural memory, and multidirectional memory, this study examines how cinema transcends mere representation to become an affective archive, embedding historical narratives into the collective imagination. Through neuroaesthetic processes, neural regions are activating emotion, empathy, and sensorimotor simulation, which transform external stories into embodied, internalised experiences. Using the Malayalam film *Odiyan* (2018) as a case study, the research demonstrates how indigenous culture and ecological traditions are reanimated through cinematic aesthetics, generating neural-cultural feedback loops that reinforce cultural identity. The study highlights how early cinema practices, as articulated by Klippel, fostered collective memory through communal spectatorship, a function that persists despite the digitisation of film culture. Through synthesising cultural theory and cognitive neuroscience, the research underscores cinema's role in fostering emotional salience, constructing prosthetic and multidirectional memories, and creating dynamic memoryscapes where tradition, trauma, and resilience are affectively encoded. Ultimately, the findings position cinema as a vital and evolving site for the negotiation of cultural memory, identity, and historical consciousness, affirming its centrality in the contemporary reshaping of collective pasts.

Keywords: *Cultural Memory, Neuroaesthetics, Malayalam Cinema, Memory, Cultural Identity, Sensory Engagement.*

Introduction

Malayalam cinema holds a peculiar position in the global arena, though its narrative canvas is rigid with nature, culture, eloquent memories, tradition, cultural heritage, and its contradictions in modernity. The film *Odiyan* (2018) serves as a compelling medium for intertwining cultural memory with neuroaesthetic engagement. The narrative dialectics portray the Odiyan, a peculiar community rooted in Kerala's folklore, known for their shapeshifting abilities and occult practices. The film not only resuscitates indigenous narratives but also stimulates sensory and emotional responses in viewers. This dual impact reinforces collective memory

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and cultural identity. The cinematic techniques employed in *Odiyan*, such as immersive visuals, traditional music, and symbolic storytelling, tradition, and modernity, propulsively activate neural pathways associated with emotion and empathy. This aligns with neuroaesthetic principles, in which art induces embodied experiences in the audience. Consequently, viewers do not just witness the Odiyan traditions; they emotionally and cognitively engage with them, leading to a deeper internalisation of these cultural narratives. Moreover, the film's depiction of the Odiyan's rituals and societal roles offers insights into Kerala's historical caste dynamics and the subverted status of certain communities in the society. Comprehending these stories to the forefront contributes to a multidirectional memory framework, where suppressed histories are acknowledged and integrated into the broader cultural consciousness. In essence, Malayalam cinema, through films as Odiyan, not only entertains but also educates and preserves cultural heritage through memory. It creates a neurocognitive space where tradition and modernity converge, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Kerala's folklore, cultural identity, and the innate bonding among people—from marginalised to elite—continues to resonate with contemporary audiences."

The Interplay Between Cultural Memory and Cinema's Theoretical Overview

The relationship between cinema and cultural memory offers profound insights into how societies construct, reinterpret, and contest their collective pasts. The cinematic, as an inherently dynamic medium, plays an active role in the construction of cultural memory. Despite this, it is not merely documenting historical events but engages audiences in complex processes of sensory, emotional, and intellectual recollection. Theorist Assmann conceptualises cultural memory as a dynamic process that is externalised and institutionalised, often facilitated through symbolic means such as texts, rituals, and media (Assmann, 2011; Assmann, 2018). In this context, cinema plays a crucial role in shaping how historical events are remembered, transformed, and even forgotten by society, which is very clearly contextualised in the film *Odiyan*. Jan Assmann (2011) defines cultural memory as a collective memory system, emphasising the role of media in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. Cultural memory, according to Assmann, is institutionalised through symbolic practices that contribute to the formation of collective identities. The concept of "horizons of expectation" (Assmann, 2018) conveys the idea that memory is not static but rather a dynamic negotiation between historical experiences and future aspirations (Assmann, 2011; Assmann, 2018; Jisha, 2022). In the cinematic context, films contribute to this process by bestowing historical narratives in ways that allow for both the preservation and reinterpretation of collective memory.

Various scholars have explored the role of cinema in the context of cultural memory. For instance, Heike Klippel (1999) critically observes how cinema differs from other forms of media, such as print or photography, in its ability to invoke memory. Unlike the fixed nature of written texts or archived images, cinema offers a unique form of embodied memory that comprises affective engagement with the viewer. Klippel states that cinema's fleeting, sensory nature, its reliance on movement, sound, and visual effects, make it a more dynamic medium for memory formation than traditional archival media (Klippel, 1999). This dynamic engagement helps audiences to experience historical events as present, immediate experiences

rather than as distant, static facts. Cinema's ability to create emotional resonance and visceral responses facilitates a deeper connection to the past, making it an active participant in the construction of collective memory. Kilbourn (2013) further extended on the idea that cinema operates as a technology of memory rather than simply presenting historical facts; films actively shape how memory is formed by simulating the psychological processes associated with memory, including fragmentation, emotional intensity, and selective recollection. Through aesthetic strategies such as montage, non-linear storytelling, and mise-en-scene visual symbolism, filmmakers can structure the way audiences experience history, often highlighting the affective dimensions of the past over objective historical facts (Kilbourn, 2013; Vallance, 2017). This active shaping of memory aligns with Assmann's view of cultural memory as a performative process, emphasising cinema's role in constructing and misrepresenting historical consciousness. Reframing film history not merely as a chronological account of cinematic production but as a form of cultural memory work. He proposes that film history should be viewed through the lens of collective remembrance, where the rituals surrounding film-going and the communal experience of watching films in theatres are integral to the formation of memory (Biltereyst, 2015). The collective engagement with films, especially in the context of early cinema, plays a significant role in how historical events are remembered and emotionally processed. This perspective highlights the importance of cinema as a social practice that extends beyond individual consumption, emphasising its role in shaping collective memory through public rituals and shared experiences.

Landsberg (2015) introduces the concept of prosthetic memory, which highlights cinema's ability to foster emotional connections to historical events that audiences have not personally experienced. Through films depicting historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, or colonial violence, cinema enables spectators to internalise these events as part of their own memory. This process of emotional engagement broadens the scope of cultural memory by incorporating histories that individuals or communities may not have experienced firsthand, thus fostering empathy across temporal and cultural divides (Landsberg, 2015). Landsberg's concept also highlights cinema's potential to create new forms of collective identity that transcend individual experiences, extending memory beyond personal recollection. Additionally, cinema plays a central role in articulating the memory of marginalised communities. Patterson (2021) examines how indigenous filmmakers have used cinema to resist dominant narratives and recover lost or silenced histories. Rothberg (2009), with his theory of multidirectional memory, argues that the remembrance of one group's suffering does not necessarily compete with but can enhance the remembrance of another group's historical trauma. Cinema, in this sense, becomes a tool for articulating counter-memories—memories that challenge hegemonic historical discourses that have traditionally marginalised certain groups. Insights into early cinema are also relevant in understanding how film serves as a democratic medium for marginalised communities. In the chaotic, vibrant spaces of early cinema, social hierarchies were suspended, allowing for a more inclusive form of collective memory (Klippel, 1999; Jisha, 2022). Early cinema, with its fragmented programs and public audiences, embodied a more fluid, participatory form of memory than the controlled, privatised forms of media consumption that followed. This democratising potential of cinema is crucial

for understanding its role in empowering subverted voices and providing space for alternative memories.

 However, the increasing dominance of digital technologies reshapes the cinematic landscape and brings new challenges and opportunities for safeguarding and transmitting cultural memory. The digitisation of film archives and the rise of streaming platforms have democratized access to historical narratives, allowing individuals to access and engage with memory in more personalised and decentralised ways (Sturken, 2008). However, Elsaesser (2016) cautions that this shift to digital formats risks eroding the embodied, communal experiences that traditionally defined cinematic memory. As digital technologies increasingly dominate the landscape of memory production, it remains to be seen how they will affect the collective, affective dimensions of memory that cinema uniquely fosters. The cinema emerges as a powerful agent of cultural memory, facilitating the construction, transmission, and contestation of collective remembrance through its sensory, emotional, cultural, and social dimensions. As explored by theorists such as Jan and Aleida Assmann, Klippel, Kilbourn, Biltereyst, Landsberg, Rothberg, and others, cinema does not simply document the past; it actively participates in the ongoing negotiation of how societies remember, mourn, and imagine their histories. Through examining the various ways cinema engages with cultural memory; spectators gain a deeper understanding of its transformative potential in shaping both individual and collective identities.

Cultural Memory and Embodied Experience in the Cinematic Representation

The representation of indigenous tales and regional traditions in cinema opens a great opportunity for interdisciplinary inquiry, particularly through the converging lenses of cultural memory and neuroaesthetics. The Malayalam film Odiyan (2018), which dramatises the memory and folklore of Kerala's marginalised community, highlights the importance of cinema as a medium for cultural inscription and affective transmission. Central to this exploration is Jan Assmann's (1995, 2018) theory of cultural memory, which frames memory not only as a personal or collective recollection but as a mediated, performative, and institutionalised process that sustains cultural identity over time. It is also connected to spatial dimensions. Through visual semiotics and narrative construction, the film mobilises act symbols, shapeshifting, ancestral wisdom, the sacred grove (kaavu) as mnemonic devices that rooted Kerala's oral traditions and reality within contemporary cinematic language. Scholars such as Erll (2011) and Rigney (2022) argue that media, particularly film, can act as memory generators that create "mnemonic communities" through recirculating and reframing traditions in forms accessible to modern audiences. In this light, Odiyan does not merely represent a cultural identity; it reactivates dormant cultural codes in the public imaginary Erll, 2011., Rigney, 2022). As Rigney posits, the memory function of cultural artefacts is minimal for historical accuracy and more about their capacity to resonate emotionally and symbolically across generations. The visual dramatisation of rituals, folklore, and identity of the marginalised culture, notably the Odiyan figure, activated the Keralite viewers to re-engage with their heritage, which echoes Astrid Erll's claim that memory in media is shaped by narrative templates and aesthetic strategies.

Extending from cultural memory into embodied and cognitive domains, this film can be examined through the lens of neuroaesthetics, especially Gallese and Freedberg's (2007) theory of embodied simulation (Gallese and Freedberg, 2007). This theory suggests that viewers neurologically "simulate" observed emotions and movements, activating the mirror neuron system to generate empathetic and emotional responses. Such processes are especially pertinent in scenes where the protagonist transforms, both physically and symbolically, into mythic form. These sequences, rich in somatic gesture and environmental immersion, engage what Chatterjee and Vartanian (2014) note as the "aesthetic triad," comprising sensory-motor, emotion-valuation, and meaning-making systems of the brain. In doing so, Odiyan enables what Kansteiner (2021) describes as "neuro-cultural feedback loops," wherein cultural artefacts (like film) shape brain activity while simultaneously being shaped by pre-existing cultural frameworks. The brain's response to aesthetic stimuli is thus culturally inflected; viewers socialised within Kerala's symbolic universe are more likely to experience emotional resonance due to cultural competence (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). Additionally, film theorists such as Elsaesser (2014) have emphasised the affective turn in cinema studies, where emphasis is placed on the bodily experience of film, its textures, rhythms, and visceral intensities as primary vehicles of cultural meaning and symbolism. In this sense, Odiyan functions as a sensorium a cinematic space where memory, culture, identity and affect coalesce to produce a neuro-affective response in the viewer which closely aligns with Smelik's (2021) work on "affective memory" in screen media, which posits that film has the unique capacity to mobilize deeply rooted emotional histories through visual, sonic, and spatial design.

Furthermore, Odiyan must be understood in its ecological symbolism and the spatial politics of sacred, cultural, and mythic geography. The representation of kaavu, village landscapes, and nocturnal imagery creates what Bennett and Joyce (2019) refer to as "affective ecologies," where environment and memory intersect to shape collective emotional landscapes. Drawing on material ecocriticism, the sacred grove is not merely a backdrop but a narrative agent that communicates cultural values of reverence, fear, and ecological interconnectedness (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014). In addition, scholars such as Bond and Rapson (2023) have underscored the role of landscape in preserving eco-cultural memory, whereby natural settings are imbued with mythic significance that informs community identity and ethics. The respective film opens into this terrain by visualising rural Kerala not just as a site of cultural identity, but as a lived ecological archive. Recent Neurocinematic research (Hasson et al., 2008) demonstrates how synchronised emotional and cognitive responses can occur in viewers exposed to the same audiovisual stimuli, creating a kind of neural collectivism akin to Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence. This effect is particularly pronounced in scenes involving transformation and ritual, where rhythm, movement, and sound converge to produce a state of heightened sensorimotor engagement. The importance of media memory studies in interpreting these affective responses as socio-technological phenomena, arguing that media does not merely transmit culture but actively constitutes it through repetition, aesthetic formalisation, and immersive engagement. Thus, in *Odiyan*, we find an intricate interplay of ecological symbolism, cultural performance, and neural entrainment, creating a cinematic field where memory is not only preserved but embodied and enacted (Garde-Hansen, 2021).

However, integrating cultural memory theory with neuroaesthetic and ecocritical perspectives, this theoretical framework positions *Odiyan* as a cultural artefact that operates across neural, social, and symbolic registers, enabling a dynamic re-inscription of tradition in the digital age.

Cinema Memory and Neuroaesthetics

Cinema's unique ability to evoke sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses makes it a powerful tool for shaping cultural memory through neuroaesthetic engagement. As Landsberg (2015) contributed the concept of prosthetic memory, viewers can internalise traumatic historical events they have not personally experienced. Despite the neuroaesthetics, such portrayals stimulate brain regions like the amygdala, which are responsible for processing fear, empathy, and sadness, enabling an affective connection to the traumatic past that transforms external narratives into internalised collective memory. This sensory engagement strengthens remembrance not just through visual retention, but through emotional resonance (Landsberg, 2015). Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006) demonstrates how elevating narrative arcs and emotionally charged aesthetics, poignant visuals, musical scoring, and empathetic character journeys trigger the brain's reward circuitry, including the ventral striatum, thereby fostering a shared cultural narrative of perseverance and hope (Elsaesser, 2016). These emotionally encoded experiences help embed social ideals into the cultural memory matrix. In the context of early cinema, Klippel (1999) explains that films like *The Kid* (1921) evoked spontaneous physical and emotional responses, with slapstick humour and kinetic imagery stimulating sensorimotor and affective systems, resulting in communal, embodied forms of memory that were experienced collectively in public theatres. The participatory and ephemeral nature of these screenings underscores cinema's role as both a democratic and affect-driven space for memory formation. Moreover, the neuroaesthetic aspect of empathy is central to understanding how contemporary films such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013) reclaim silenced or marginalised histories. Cinematic narratives depicting historical trauma with emotional intensity, such as films, activate viewers' empathy circuits, nurturing identification with the Other and generating intersubjective experiences that expand the boundaries of cultural memory (Rothberg, 2009; Slave, 2013; Patterson, 2021). This aligns with Rothberg's (2009) theory of multidirectional memory, in which memories of one group's suffering enrich, rather than compete with, the remembrance of others. Cinema, therefore, develops an affective and cognitive archive, one that not only preserves memory but actively constructs it through the embodied spectator's engagement. When seen through the combined lenses of cultural memory theory and neuroaesthetics, it is evident that cinema does not merely reflect history but becomes a dynamic, multisensory medium that shapes collective consciousness by embedding affect-laden memories into the shared cultural imagination and other social texts (Rolls, 2014; Chatterjee, 2018; Seamon, 2024).

The intersection of neuroaesthetics and cultural memory in cinema reveals how films not only represent historical events but actively participate in the construction and transformation of collective memory. Neuroaesthetic principles highlight cinema's capacity to engage the brain's emotional centres, amygdala, and ventral striatum, which are activated by sensory cues such as visual effects, music, and movement, allowing films to evoke emotional

resonance (Landsberg, 2015; Yang, E., et al.,2023). This emotional engagement facilitates prosthetic memory, where audiences internalise historical events that are not directly experienced, such as the Holocaust in Schindler's List (1993), where the visceral response to trauma helps solidify the event in cultural memory (Landsberg, 2015). Similarly, films like The Pursuit of Happiness (2006) evoke positive emotional responses through uplifting music and poignant storytelling, triggering the reward pathways of the brain and reinforcing shared societal values (Elsaesser, 2016; Finn, Nand and Benedettini, 2021). Early cinema also contributed to collective memory by engaging audiences' sensorimotor responses through movement and humour, creating communal memory in public spaces (Klippel, 1999). These dynamic, embodied experiences facilitated the formation of a shared cultural identity, where individual recollections were woven into a larger, collective remembrance. Furthermore, cinema provides a platform for reclaiming suppressed histories, as seen in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which activates viewers' empathy circuits, allows marginalised groups to reclaim their histories and fosters multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009). In this way, cinema becomes not merely a medium for documenting the past but an active participant in shaping how societies remember, interpret, and even contest their histories. The neurobiological foundations of aesthetic experience. This fusion of neuroaesthetic insights and cultural memory theory underscores cinema's role in not only recording history but actively shaping collective identities through emotional, sensory, and social dimensions.

Cinematic Cultural Memory and Neural Resonance

Cinema, in its richest form, is not merely a reflection of society but a cognitive and emotional stimulus that shapes how cultures are remembered, imagined, and embodied. The Malayalam film *Odiyan* (2018), directed by V. A. Shrikumar Menon, emerges as a powerful case study in understanding how indigenous traditions, specifically the cultural memory surrounding the Odiyans of Kerala, are represented through cinematic aesthetics that resonate both culturally and neurologically. In recent years, the intersection of culture, memory, and neuroscience, particularly in the field of neuroaesthetics, has opened new paradigms for analysing how media conveys cultural narratives and physically and psychologically impacts viewers through deeply embedded sensory and cognitive processes. The cultural memory embedded in Odiyan and how the film generates neural resonance, engaging the viewer's brain in ways that activate emotional, perceptual, and symbolic understanding of a nearly forgotten cultural tradition. On the contrary, whether these practices are contextual or fabricated, which is contradictory, instead the film shares the very approach to the subverted community and their social relation, and cultural identity.

The Odiyan occupies a unique space in Kerala's folkloric consciousness, blending superstition, environmental symbolism, psychic transformation, and false identities. According to the traditional belief, shape-shifters could transform into animals and travel invisibly at night. Odiyans are profoundly associated with rituals rooted in black magic, nature worship, and the sacred grove culture (kaavu). These stories have existed in oral traditions and local performances for a long time, but have rarely been rendered on screen with such thematic and visual depth. Despite the trajectory of Odiyan, while dramatised and stylised for popular

appeal, it offers an aesthetic construction of people's identity that goes beyond representation; it occupies the sensorium, the neural mechanisms of perception and imagination, to foster an immersive and empathetic experience which is deeply rooted in the memory of native people. When they experience the mise-en-scene, the spectator is embodied with the existing mental image to incorporate the mental cut. Despite this, it typifies the neuroaesthetic principle that the perception of art is both a bodily and cerebral event, one in which viewers actively simulate, rather than passively observe, the emotional and cultural weight of what they see.

Locating the theories of embodied cognition and mirror neuron activation, Odiyan utilises movement, transformation sequences, and symbolic gestures that align with viewers' internal motor systems. When the protagonist, Manikyan, undergoes bodily shifts or performs rituals, the audience neurologically simulates these actions, creating what Vittorio Gallese (2009) refers to as "embodied simulation." Such simulation bridges the narrative and viewer, allowing audiences to feel physically the mythic journey. This somatosensory engagement is a cornerstone of neuroaesthetic experience, aligning closely with the aesthetic triad framework proposed by Chatterjee and Vartanian (2014), which includes three systems: sensory-motor (how we perceive movement and form), emotion-valuation (how we assign emotional significance), and meaning-knowledge (how we relate it to cultural or personal memory. Comprehending the spectacular film, *Odiyan*, these three systems interact continuously. The sensory-motor aspect is triggered through highly stylised visuals, use of CGI in transformation scenes, and the rural-scape of Kerala's sacred spaces. Emotion-valuation is elicited by the narrative of betrayal, exile, and return, a motif familiar in both classical epics and modern storytelling, which stimulates empathy and catharsis. The meaning-knowledge system is conceivably the most culturally grounded, as viewers who are familiar with Kerala's folklore may experience a deeper resonance, while those unfamiliar are introduced to an entire belief system coded in cinematic language. The narrative trajectory of native tonal sound design uses traditional peculiar instruments, atmospheric tones, and natural sounds, further enriching this multisensory input, triggering emotional memories associated with local myths or childhood tales of the supernatural.

Moreover, the episodic nature of the mise-en-scene supports the native cultural identity and the proximity of the beauty of the village and the close memory of the specific land. As a multimodal artistic medium, cinema inherently integrates neural patterning and intrinsic cultural influences within its aesthetic traditions. The film *Thudarum* (2025) exemplifies this synthesis by embedding the cultural heritage and environmental beauty of the region into its narrative structure. Beyond its visual portrayal, the film engages profoundly with emotional contagion mechanisms, reactivating and reinforcing pre-existing neural pathways associated with collective memory. A particularly striking example is the cinematic representation of the Wayanad landslide of July 30, 2024, where sequences are meticulously constructed to stimulate memory-driven emotional activation. In this regard, *Thudarum* aligns with Ramachandran's neuroaesthetic framework, which posits that art can reconfigure and reinforce neural circuits through the strategic invocation of memory, emotion, and sensory experience. The film's use of cultural and natural symbolism not only memorialises the event but also operates as a

cognitive-emotional interface, bridging the past trauma with present affective resonance through the cinematic medium.

The neuroaesthetic immersion is not incidental; it is structurally embedded in the grammar of cinema. Locating with the meaning of neurocinema (Hasson et al., 2008) argues that film has the unique capacity to control the viewer's attention and emotional response through thoughtful manipulation of visual and temporal elements. The film utilises these techniques, especially in its pacing, use of light and shadow, and spatial composition, to induce a form of cognitive synchronisation with the viewer's brain states. The protagonist Manikyan moves through the night, enveloped in darkness and suspense; the viewer's mirror systems and emotional centres, particularly the amygdala and insula, are activated, generating not just fear or suspense, but a primal empathy for the character's liminal existence (Hasson et al., 2008; Pradeep, 2019,2022). Through this process, the film *Odiyan* constructs a neuro-symbolic experience: plot becomes not just story, but felt truth.

Furthermore, the film's treatment of landscape and nature positions it within an ecocritical and eco-neuroaesthetic context. The kaavu, the village, and the fields are not mere backdrops but living spaces imbued with sacred and psychological energy. Film and the reuse of the memory from the existing knowledge are prominent in the narrative trajectory of the film. Drawing parallels with films like *Sherni*, which uses cinematic space as a discourse on environmental conflict, *Odiyan* embeds ecological and cultural consciousness within the viewer's perceptual map. This aligns with the emerging theory of eco-neuroaesthetics, which suggests that art representing nature can stimulate brain areas associated with wellbeing, memory, and identity (Bertling et al., 2021; Jisha, 2021; Das, 2022). Through this lens, *Odiyan* becomes not just a folklore narrative but a cognitive ecology where cultural memory, environmental symbol, and emotional resonance coalesce.

On the contrary, important to address the critique that *Odiyan*, in its cinematic adaptation, may distort or romanticise cultural practices for mass consumption. Scholars such as Jisha & Gill (2022) argue that the persuasive techniques used in the film misrepresent the authentic practices and beliefs of the Odiyan community, reducing them to cinematic tropes. While this criticism is valid, from a neuroaesthetic standpoint, even a stylised representation can activate cultural empathy and memory through emotional simulation. The aesthetic exaggeration might enhance neural encoding of mythic essentials, ensuring that even simplified versions of tradition are retained in the viewer's long-term memory. This suggests a paradox of representation: the more emotionally and sensorily amplified the story, the more deeply it is remembered, what neuroscientists refer to as the "salience effect." Ultimately, Odiyan becomes a vital case for examining how cinema can function as a neural-cultural archive medium where folklore is not just preserved but embodied, reactivated, and neurologically mapped. This approach expands traditional film analysis by integrating cognitive neuroscience and cultural theory, allowing scholars and viewers alike to understand how stories, rituals, and identities are felt as much as they are told. In an era where traditional cultures face both erasure and exoticization, the neuroaesthetic framing of Odiyan provides an ethical and epistemic space to engage with indigenous narratives not as relics, but as living, evolving, and neurally resonant phenomena.

Conclusion

Cinema emerges as a dynamic and transformative agent in the construction and evolution of cultural memory, operating through the intertwined mechanisms of sensory, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Locating insights from neuroaesthetics and cultural memory theory, this study demonstrates that films do not merely depict historical events but actively shape collective remembrance through embedding emotional and cognitive traces into the cultural identity and imagination. Through the activation of neural circuits associated with empathy, memory, and reward, such as the amygdala, mirror neuron systems, and ventral striatum, cinema transforms external narratives into embodied, lived experiences. Malayalam cinema, particularly *Odiyan* (2018), exemplifies how indigenous culture, their identity and ecological traditions are reactivated and reimagined through cinematic aesthetics, generating neuro-cultural feedback loops that bridge tradition and contemporary identity. The aesthetic triad—sensory-motor stimulation, emotional valuation, and meaning-making facilitates immersive engagements that resonate across individual and communal memory systems. Early cinematic practices highlighted by Klippel (1999) reveal that cinema has long served as a democratic site for collective memory formation, a role that persists even amidst digital transformations. While the shift to individualised, digital media threatens traditional communal memory spaces, the emotional and sensorimotor resonance inherent to cinematic experience ensures its continued potency. Cinema's affective engagement enables prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2015), fosters multidirectional remembrance (Rothberg, 2009), and contributes to cultural resilience by embedding histories of trauma, hope, and identity into collective consciousness. Thus, cinema operates not simply as a vehicle for historical representation but as a living, evolving memoryscape, an affective, cognitive, and social platform where cultural identities are contested, reshaped, and reaffirmed. Through its unique ability to evoke visceral, emotional, and cognitive responses, cinema remains central to how societies remember, imagine, and reconfigure their pasts.

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