

# Unnatural Acting: A Study of Mohanlal

*Mohanlal: India's answer to Marlon Brando.*

– Someone

*He is the man born on the wrong side of the world; if he was from another country he would have already had an Oscar.*

– A French Technician on the set of Vanaprastham

Mohanlal, as actor and person, is a fascinating character. There is the sophisticated performance on the screen, mostly before and near the dawn of the century, before succumbing to acting mostly in popular cinema (relative to arthouse and critical) - as is the case with the Indian film industry. Even the Malayalam Industry, which was relatively small scale leading to tremendous productions precisely due to their nonchalance on matters of economics, started following trends of the economically bigger neighboring (and afar) industries - Tamil, Telegu, Hindi (or as the world looks at Indian cinema, Bollywood).

Numerous interviews reveal the man's simplistic, perhaps ostensibly too simplistic, process and character. An admiration of partially-dubious spiritualists (Osho), complete swindlers “Godmen” (Amritanandamayi), to the extent that he endorsed the infamously barmy “Bang pots” campaign of the Indian government to ward off the coronavirus, founding its efficacy on the “positive energy” it is supposed to produce. At the same time, the sheer child-like curiosity that fosters him to try anything and anything at all. Perform a live Sanskrit play (he doesn't know Sanskrit), act and dance as a classical dancer (he hasn't studied classical dance), performs as a Kathakali artist, on average requiring training lasting a decade, (he had a training period of 1 month), performing a concert and singing a song in a movie (he is not a trained singer) and now directing a film (Barroz). A juxtapositioned picture that reveals an immense amount of contrast.

Audience, and the film industry, have awarded him the title: Complete Actor. A master of versatility, whether it be physical demands (action sequences or dancing), the sheer variety of genres (comedic, drama, musicals, thrillers), and to top all of this off - his natural acting. Mohanlal is a natural actor, the most natural there has ever been, so they say. But this claim of naturality is

dubious - Mohanlal, if anything, is an unnatural actor, the most gifted unnatural actor (ever?), a natural unnaturalness emerging through his practice.

## **Comedic Exaggeration: Acting as Unnatural Performance**

Comedy as a genre, until now, plays on distance. The joke is always made at the expense of a distance - it might be a transgression of tragedy into comedy, an exaggeration of something trivial. The distance is utilized with the help of the plot and the degree to which the actors enhance it. A play on the distance, in a physical sense - eyes, fingers, props, anything and everything that the actor is and comes into contact with.

### **Scene 1A: Vandanam (1989)**

Here, Mohanlal and Mukesh interrupt a wedding ceremony. It is all based on a misunderstanding, the distance, they suspect Mohanlal's love interest to be the bride and immediately before had just barged in and confessed loudly. Also consider the (then) conservative backdrop of India, where romantic relations were unthinkable. Hence, the physical altercation by the not-yet groom.

Look at the expression by Mohanlal upon realizing the mishap, it is not his love interest who is the bride - and the consequence, that we have shattered a marriage. There is the look to Mukesh, which is reflected, "Oh, this isn't it" - but he still isn't sure, the eyes move horizontally, a confirmation, the confirmation is received. A tensed-up-ness, a little allusion in the background where a spectator says "Don't let anybody outside" - referring to the wedding crashers. And the run. Note the difference in degree of expressiveness between both actors, while Mukesh isn't a bad one, a technically good one even, the noticeable difference in degree is the demarcator here.

This particular scene isn't too out of the ordinary, there is certainly an exaggerated physicality (the eyes) which isn't unusual when it comes to great comedic actors - Jim Carrey's style comes to mind. But this serves as a referential point, an introduction.

### **Scene 1B: Nadodikattu (1987)**

Mohanlal has just lost his job, not even completing a whole month. He has no money to buy groceries and has just approached the neighbors planning to borrow some rice and oil. Note that the young woman is also a potential love interest in his eyes.

A short scene in comparison. Faciality is a lot more subtle here. There's the neutral expression turning into an awkward smile, which sporadically bursts into look-downs, head turns to the left and right with the same awkwardness.

### **Scene 1C: Kilukkam (1991)**

A tour guide in Ooty, Mohanlal has just met a new client - a beautiful young lady, the other protagonist of the movie. He has been showered with relatively exorbitant amounts of money, an anomalous occurrence, for helping her book a hotel room - the possibility of showing the client around in the background. Reaching home, he is describing the situation, the scene is set in exaggeration for he describes an experience where there was a mutual emotionally-charged interaction between them, as is clear from the dialogue, when in reality it was slightly awkward, the lady being silent for the most part too.

A case of slight bragging is at play. The exaggeration primarily lies in the physical. From the fairly normal side-to-side, a rotational frontal turn-around, a shoot upward, and a curved downball. As gestures progress, the words start to sound more and more like a mimicry of the English language, now just unintelligible words that seem like English to a non-speaker, which his friend is, tailing off.

### **Scene 1D: Oru Marubhoomi Kadha (2011)**

This is perhaps the best example of unnatural acting in the comedic lot. Mohanlal is an employee who just looted money, and more importantly to his boss (the person sitting on the chair), the destroyed painting. Now, they did the theft with masks but at some point, a drunk Mohanlal removes it and curses at his superior officer (who is an owner, Mohanlal is an executive). Police are with them waiting for any clues that the CCTV footage could give them.

Initially, an about-to-faint when the footage shows the painting about to be stomped upon- the hands shaking in the background before the about-to-faint and before the impending face reveal when it is suddenly cut abruptly by a belly dancing footage. At first, an uncomfortable disbelief (with a tint of happiness?) in stasis. As soon as his colleague is surprised by the cut and turns to him, a flurry of facial affects transpire: disbelief, happiness, slight sadness, a euphoric laughter erupting transitioning into discomfort... the transitions and nuanced specificity of the emotions are one that I cannot recount. Those transitions represent these heterogeneous configurations of facial effects that emerge out of his specific method of acting.

## **Non-Comedic Sequencing of Affects**

### **Scene 2A: Iruvar (1997)**

A struggling actor, who just lost a pivotal role, now relegated to play an extra, all because he couldn't remember his lines! Then the conversation between his agent and him. Additionally, he was previously cast as a lead, a movie that made some buzz in the cinema world but unfinished due to financial issues. He is tired of playing smaller roles, a concern appears that a smaller role would once again typecast him, leaving the just out-of-reach dream completely out of.

There is frustration, the about-to-burst tears, a femininity embraces Mohanlal while he is trying to undress, removing each button of his shirt. It is also quite childish, like a kid who just lost his toy, throwing a (relatively) silent tantrum. As his agent hands him the beard, "You won't be recognized in this!", there is a subtle burst of anger pointed out at the agent which immediately dissolves away. Anger turns into frustration and frustration lets the built-up tears into the prop beard.

### **Scene 2B: Iruvar (1997)**

Now, this is a scene that showcases spacing, pausing, leaving a trace of facial affects - an exemplary performance in communication, as communication. The prominent actor turned soon-to-be-politician asks his friend, the current chief minister for a position in his ministry. But the chief minister declines, stating the apparent reason - that he must stop acting to be a minister, as pressured by other members of the ministry. A fact both of them know, that the chief minister, Selvam (Prakash Raj), is concerned about MGR's (Mohanlal) rise in the political world - threatening his reign. So it becomes a convenient excuse to reject him, whereas in reality with Selvam's power, a minor ministry would've been easily MGR's.

The friendly smile, a tint awkward, transitions slowly and subtly as Selvam raises the problem. It doesn't go: Smile -> Awkwardness -> A subtly pointed anger concealed in an awkward closed lipped smile. Rather there are pauses in between, even his mouth transitions from Awkwardness to the pointed, silent, closed-mouth, subtle anger with pace. It is a guide for the viewer to follow. Then the smile and subtle anger zig-zag amongst them. Movement of facial affects, the multitudinal rhythms they can occupy.

### **Scene 2C: Vanaprastham (1999)**

Playing a Kathakali artist (a native dance form of Kerala, a southern state in India), Kunjukuttan, just learns that he has received a will from his father. The bastard son of an upper caste father and a

lower caste mother, denied paternity all his life just receives an acknowledgment of it through means of immense wealth. Both his mother and his wife want him to accept the will. The backdrop of an unsatisfying marital relationship is present, the reason why she was married off to Kunjukuttan was in expectation of such a subsequent reconciliation, and the status and financial benefits thereby.

Kunjukuttan gets emotional regarding this fact, even burning the document, and pushing his child around when she comes to stop him from burning it - an unlike-him act given his gentle parental role exemplified up until now in the movie. Frustration-anger-sadness, sometimes coagulated, otherities in transition. There is a transition from primarily anger -> sadness -> anger. Immediately after walking from his mother, the wall protects him from the gazes, now of his wife which he walks into and anger takes over once again. Lighting primarily associated sadness, then anger after pushing his child, a frustrated sadness balancing on the pillar, a private moment.

## **Anti-Method: Mohanlal's Philosophy of Acting**

A while ago, the reality show personality Akhil Marar made a (rare) perceptive comment on Mohanlal's acting. He considers three movies of Mohanlal - Kireedam, Spadikam, and Narasimham. All three feature the father-son pair played by Thilakan and Mohanlal respectively. As Marar continues, all three are concerned with a central plotline - a son who goes against his father's expectations and dreams for him. However, each character is so different from the other that this commonality flies over our heads. Each character even takes upon the role of a ruffian of the town, even given that the similarity isn't pronounced.

To refer to Anti-Oedipus, the Body Without Organs specifically. Mohanlal is precisely this bland persona, an overtly liberal one. Although not maximal, for his persistent insistence on maintaining a variant of negative utilitarian ethic (let us reduce hurt and harm, attempt to be happy, in order of priority). Nonetheless, anytime he is asked to comment on any controversial remarks made about him, he proceeds to reply in strict nonchalance, political remarks, again strict nonchalance (although as mentioned before, he is political even though he is unaware of it), it is this nonchalance combined with the explicit attitude given the quote that has become a meme - Isn't all this a make-belief, son? Anecdotally, people who have visited Mohanlal wonder how he is a good actor, for he is shy, introverted, and bland in real life. Perhaps this is exactly it. Maybe he is the BwO that plugs and orients the desiring machines of Anti-Oedipus, but in this case, in the domain of acting, various intensities of faciality and physicality - even his fingertips act.

But Mohanlal isn't the maximal embodiment of such a form of acting. Can we create the form out of the entity though? At the onset, two modes of this "Anti-Method" stand out.

1. Linear Disjunctive: Suppose the scene traverses from an emotional intensity A to B. The idea is to explore and trace out in faciality, all possible emotions, even the most apparently remote ones, to that scene. Instead of a linear A -> B, can we produce a curve A -> B instead?
2. Radial Disjunctive: Say the scene demands a central emotional intensity C. The idea is to produce C, travel to other intensities, and come back to C. Rinse and repeat. An example would be Oru Marubhoomikkadha.

In each case, the crux revolves around the tracing of affects with pace and rhythm. Rather than emotional intensities in an array, [A, B, C, ...], to allow for the trace to happen. Not to say that sudden breaks aren't justified, an example would be Mamooty's high-pitched shrill in Kadhal, that the transgression has a ground to transgress, for instance.

Thus a maximal form of this Anti-Method would consist of an actor so radically amoralist, disposed to malaise, to be disliked and unrecognized, for they could paint new trace forms out of facial-physical affects, verbal-visual paintings, inflection and dialects, ultimately even fingertips. Perhaps one that surpasses the grand trembles of the entity Mohanlal.

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