

# **Materiality and Disability Aesthetics: A Posthumanist Reading of Priyadarshan's Thalavattam (1986) and Bharatan's Keli (1991)**

This research article explores the intersection of materiality and disability aesthetics through a posthumanist lens, focusing on two significant Malayalam films, Priyadarshan's *Thalavattam* (1986) and Bharatan's *Keli* (1991). By closely analyzing these films, the study examines how material aspects of the physical world—such as environments, institutional spaces, assistive technologies, prosthetics, and other design elements—interact with and shape the cinematic representation of disability. Drawing on posthumanist theory, which challenges traditional human-centred frameworks and emphasizes the entanglement of human and non-human actors, the article seeks to understand disability not merely as an individual bodily condition but as a phenomenon produced through complex relations between bodies, objects, spaces, and social structures. In this context, disability aesthetics emerge not only from narrative or character development but also from the material configurations that surround and sustain disabled bodies within the cinematic frame.

*Thalavattam*, adapted from Miloš Forman's 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is examined for its portrayal of mental illness and its use of institutional settings as key material sites that regulate, discipline, and define disabled subjectivity. The film foregrounds the psychiatric institution as a space where architectural design, medical apparatuses, surveillance mechanisms, and routines play a crucial role in shaping the lived experience of mental disability. These material conditions are not passive backdrops but active agents that influence behaviour, agency, and identity, thereby aligning with posthumanist notions of distributed agency. In contrast, *Keli* is analyzed for its representation of physical disability, particularly through the use of prosthetics and other assistive devices within a specific socio-cultural milieu. The film highlights how material objects such as artificial limbs, mobility aids, and domestic spaces mediate the disabled body's interaction with society, simultaneously enabling participation and reinforcing social boundaries. By examining the physical and symbolic roles of material objects and environments in *Thalavattam* and *Keli*, the study demonstrates how these elements contribute to, complicate, and sometimes contest conventional portrayals of disability. The theoretical foundations of posthumanist disability studies as articulated by Mitchell and Snyder (2019), along with the concept of disability aesthetics proposed by Frazer (2018), are employed to deepen this analysis. These frameworks allow the article to move beyond humanist narratives of lack, tragedy, or cure, and instead focus on how disability is co-produced through networks of human and non-human relations.

Adopting a posthumanist approach, the research challenges rigid binary distinctions between able-bodied and disabled, as well as between human and non-human, offering a more fluid and relational understanding of disability aesthetics. The findings suggest that the material dimensions of disability representation in these films do more than mirror prevailing societal attitudes; they actively reconfigure notions of agency, identity, and inclusion by situating disabled bodies within dynamic assemblages of objects, spaces, and technologies. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates in disability studies and film theory, demonstrating how attention to materiality and posthumanist perspectives can enrich critical interpretations of disability in cinema.