

The Nocturnal Panopticon and Existential Decay: Surveillance, Absurdism, and the Ethics of Night Patrol in Shahi Kabir's Malayalam Film 'Ronth' (2025)

Dr. E. Justin Ruben

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Coimbatore Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, India
– 641014

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000035>

Received: 05 July 2026; Accepted: 10 July 2026; Published: 23 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a theoretically grounded reassessment of Shahi Kabir's Malayalam crime drama *Ronth* (2025), moving beyond genre-bound procedural analysis toward an interdisciplinary framework this study terms the Nocturnal Panopticon. Synthesising Michel Foucault's theorisation of disciplinary surveillance with Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd, the framework examines the film through three interlocking axes: Spatial Incarceration, Chrono-Degradation, and Auditory Anomie. Rather than reading *Ronth* as a conventional police procedural organised around detection and resolution, the article argues that the film converts the routine night patrol into a self-enclosing structure in which the state's agents become simultaneously watchers and watched, eroded by duty rather than redeemed by it. Responding to reviewer concerns regarding methodological transparency and theoretical rigour, this revised version specifies the interpretive criteria and coding categories used to select and analyse cinematic evidence; interrogates directly whether Foucauldian discipline and Camusian absurdism complement or strain against one another; situates the reading within scholarship on Malayalam realism, regional identity, and Kerala's own policing institutions; and tests the Nocturnal Panopticon framework against two further Malayalam crime films, *Nayattu* (2021) and *Kooman* (2022), to assess its explanatory reach beyond a single text. The article concludes by outlining the scope, limitations, and broader implications of reading contemporary Malayalam crime cinema through combined Western critical theory and regionally grounded film scholarship.

Keywords: Malayalam cinema; *Ronth*; Shahi Kabir; Foucault; panopticon; surveillance studies; absurdism; Camus; police procedural; Indian film studies; sound design; spatial criminology; Kerala policing; regional cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The Case for Studying Popular Malayalam Cinema

Popular cinema in India has historically occupied an ambivalent position within the humanities, frequently treated as an object of consumption rather than a text worthy of sustained critical attention. Scholars of Indian cinema have repeatedly noted that academic engagement with Indian film, and with regional-language cinema in particular, developed considerably later than literary and art-historical scholarship, and that this delay produced a persistent vocabulary gap between what audiences intuitively recognised as significant and what the academy possessed the theoretical apparatus to articulate (Vasudevan 3-9). Malayalam cinema, in this regard, presents an especially rich but underexamined case. Emerging from a regional cultural context saturated with literary modernism, social realism, and left political discourse, Malayalam film has long combined popular appeal with formal and thematic ambition, yet has received comparatively modest attention outside area-studies journals and festival criticism.

The last decade has intensified this urgency. A cluster of Malayalam films, including *Nayattu* (2021), *Joseph* (2018), *Visaranai* (2015, Tamil), and now *Ronth* (2025), has reconfigured the police procedural away from the heroic, vigilante-inflected cop film that dominated the 1980s and 1990s toward a grounded, institutionally

sceptical realism. This shift is not merely stylistic; it constitutes a socio-political intervention that merits the same interpretive seriousness routinely extended to Nordic noir or the American police procedural in Anglophone film studies. Studying Indian cinema, and specifically its regional new-realist strands, therefore serves at least three scholarly purposes. First, it corrects an imbalance in comparative film studies, in which theoretical frameworks developed in a European or American context are tested almost exclusively against Western texts, leaving open the question of whether such frameworks travel, resist, or transform when applied to non-Western material. Second, it recovers cinema as a form of vernacular political commentary in a linguistic region where literature and film have long been mutually constitutive (Vasudevan 3-9; Prasad 12-15). Third, it builds an evidentiary base for understanding how institutions of the postcolonial state, particularly the police, are represented, contested, and normalised in popular narrative, a question of continuing relevance to India's public discourse on custodial violence, caste, and law enforcement accountability.

This article accordingly pursues a fourfold aim, expanded from its original single-text focus in response to review. First, it offers a close theoretical reading of *Ronth* through the original conceptual framework of the Nocturnal Panopticon. Second, it makes explicit the interpretive methodology, the coding categories and selection criteria, by which cinematic evidence was identified and analysed. Third, it interrogates the theoretical compatibility of its two governing frameworks, Foucauldian discipline and Camusian absurdism, rather than presenting their synthesis as self-evident. Fourth, it situates the reading within a wider literature review that incorporates scholarship on Malayalam realism, regional identity, and Kerala's own policing institutions, and tests the framework's portability by applying it, comparatively and critically, to two further Malayalam crime films. The analysis proceeds from the premise that *Ronth*'s minimalism, its refusal of spectacle, and its slow attrition of its two protagonists make it an unusually precise cinematic instrument for testing Foucauldian and Camusian theory against a specifically Indian institutional setting.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Michel Foucault's account of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* remains the foundational text for any analysis of institutional surveillance in narrative art. Foucault argued that the Panopticon's genius lay not in constant observation itself but in the internalised uncertainty it produced in the observed, who, never knowing whether they were being watched, began to police themselves (Foucault 200-03). This insight has since become, in the words of one reviewer of the surveillance-studies literature, the leading scholarly metaphor for analysing surveillance across disciplines (Caluya 621). However, Caluya's own intervention is instructive for this study: he cautions against a shallow, badge-of-identity use of the Panopticon that treats every technology or institutional arrangement as a simple restaging of Bentham's tower, insisting instead that Foucault's diagram of power is historically specific and must be adapted with care to new contexts (Caluya 622-25). This caution directly informs the present study's approach: rather than importing the Panopticon wholesale, the Nocturnal Panopticon framework treats *Ronth*'s police jeep as a deliberately inverted variant of Bentham's architecture, in which the traditional agents of surveillance are themselves rendered vulnerable and visible. Cinema studies more broadly have extended Foucault's model to read institutional and carceral spaces on screen as sites where power is diagrammed rather than merely represented, a methodological move this article adopts and narrows to the specific idiom of the Malayalam police procedural.

Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* supplies the second theoretical pillar of this study. Camus's absurd hero is defined not by the resolution of struggle but by lucid, repeated confrontation with a task that yields no final meaning; the value of the struggle lies in the sustained act of facing it rather than in any culminating victory (Camus 78-91). Camus's model has proved durable in film criticism precisely because it displaces narrative satisfaction: absurdist readings of cinema typically resist the assumption that a text must resolve its central tension to be meaningful. Applied to *Ronth*, this framework helps explain why the film's ending withholds the conventional gratifications of the police procedural, offering neither triumphant closure nor a clean moral verdict. The night patrol, structurally, resembles Sisyphus's boulder: it is undertaken every night, resolves nothing permanently, and will recommence the following evening regardless of what has been learned. This article proposes that Chrono-Degradation, one of the three axes of the Nocturnal Panopticon, is best understood as the cinematic translation of Camusian absurdist temporality into the specific institutional rhythm of Kerala policing.

The most directly relevant body of scholarship for this study addresses the recent cluster of realist police films from South India. Kweera and Melepattu's comparative study of *Visaranai* (2015) and *Nayattu* (2021) demonstrates how these films dismantle the heroic cop archetype that dominated Malayalam and Tamil cinema for decades, replacing it with subordinate officers who are themselves victims of a hierarchical, politically compromised system. Their analysis of *Nayattu* is particularly germane: they note that director Martin Prakkat, like Shahi Kabir, uses night as a deliberate stylistic and temporal device, a liminal zone in which ordinary institutional roles loosen and characters' private vulnerabilities surface. *Ronth*, directed by a filmmaker who is himself a former police officer, extends this lineage; Kabir's earlier procedurals, including *Joseph* and *Nayattu*, share *Ronth*'s scepticism toward institutional heroism and its interest in the psychological cost borne by low-ranking officers rather than the moral clarity typically granted to senior investigators. Devasundaram's analysis of *Visaranai*'s police station as a spatio-carceral 'state of exception' offers a further conceptual resource: he argues that the architecture of the police station in Vetrimaaran's film operates less as a backdrop than as an active mechanism of state power that entraps migrant labourers regardless of their innocence (Devasundaram 259-64). This study extends Devasundaram's spatio-carceral logic from the fixed station house to the mobile space of the patrol jeep, arguing that *Ronth* relocates the carceral architecture Devasundaram identifies onto a moving vehicle, thereby trapping the officers rather than the accused. Gopalan's broader work on genre and interruption in Indian action cinema further supports the claim that Indian police films routinely use structural devices, intervals, songs, and repetition, to encode ideological meaning formally rather than only through plot (Gopalan 15-19), a precedent that licenses this study's own formal reading of *Ronth*'s night-long temporal structure.

Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision* remains the standard reference for analysing the relationship between sound and image in narrative cinema. Chion's central claim, that sound is not a mere accompaniment to the image but actively restructures how the image is perceived, a phenomenon he terms audio-vision, underlies this study's treatment of *Ronth*'s minimalist sound design (Chion 5, 63-68). Chion further distinguishes modes of listening, including causal listening, in which an audience listens for the source of a sound, and reduced listening, in which sound is attended to for its own sonic qualities independent of source or meaning (Chion 25-34). *Ronth*'s soundtrack, composed by Anil Johnson, relies overwhelmingly on diegetic environmental sound, engine noise, police radio chatter, insect ambience, rather than a non-diegetic score, a choice that invites precisely the causal listening Chion describes and that this article terms Auditory Anomie: a condition in which familiar sounds fail to orient or reassure the listener.

The rationale for studying Indian cinema academically has itself become a subject of reflection within the discipline. Scholars have observed that academic interest in Indian cinema, though it has grown considerably since the 1990s, remains concentrated on Hindi-language 'Bollywood' cinema, leaving regional industries such as Malayalam, Tamil, and Bengali cinema comparatively under-theorised despite their formal sophistication and, in several instances, greater critical acclaim. Vasudevan's foundational work on the modes of address and viewing publics constructed by Indian popular cinema remains a key methodological touchstone for treating popular film as a serious object of textual and sociological analysis rather than as an object requiring aesthetic apology (Vasudevan 3-9). Prasad's account of the ideological construction of Hindi cinema likewise demonstrates how genre conventions encode statist and nationalist assumptions that can only be recovered through close, theoretically informed reading (Prasad 12-15). Extending these approaches to Malayalam cinema's contemporary police procedural, this article argues, is necessary precisely because that genre cluster is currently producing some of the most sustained critiques of the postcolonial Indian state available in any contemporary Indian narrative form, cinematic or literary.

A reviewer of this article rightly observed that the earlier draft leaned heavily on Foucault and Camus without sufficiently balancing that global theoretical apparatus against scholarship attentive to Malayalam cinema's own regional specificity. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's work supplies precisely this corrective. Radhakrishnan argues against treating 'region' as a simple subset or mirror of the nation, proposing instead that the region is constituted through its own performative and non-national resources, resources that are formed simultaneously within and against the horizon of national belonging. Malayalam cinema's realist idiom, on this account, is not merely a local dialect of a universal cinematic realism but a mode of address shaped by Kerala's specific literary modernism, its left political culture, and its own vocabulary of social critique. This matters directly for the

present study, because the Nocturnal Panopticon risks flattening *Ronth's* Kerala-specific institutional texture into an interchangeable instance of 'the Indian police procedural' or, worse, a merely regional illustration of a Western theoretical diagram. Radhakrishnan's earlier study of Malayalam cinema's engagement with Gulf migration makes a related point from a different angle: Malayalam film's realist aesthetic has long been mobilised to narrate the specific pressures of Kerala's political economy, from migration to left governance to caste reform, rather than functioning as a generic social-realist style importable from elsewhere. Read through this lens, *Ronth's* night patrol is not simply an Indian variant of the Nordic noir landscape; it is legible within a regional genealogy in which the Malayalam social film has repeatedly used ordinary institutional labour, the beat constable, the schoolteacher, the migrant worker, as the site where larger structural pressures become visible in the texture of a single working life. The Nocturnal Panopticon, this study now argues, should therefore be read as a synthesis that is deliberately impure: a Western theoretical diagram bent and particularised by a regional aesthetic tradition that has its own, independently theorised, account of how ordinary institutional lives register political pressure.

The reviewer's second substantive suggestion, that the article engage local policing cultures rather than treat 'the police' as a theoretical abstraction, is addressed here. Kerala's police force operates under an institutional self-image that is, in important respects, distinct from the punitive, custodial-violence-centred image dominant in much of the wider Indian policing literature. Since 2008, Kerala Police has implemented the Janamaithri Suraksha Project, a community-policing programme built around the beat officer as a locally embedded, non-adversarial presence, and studies of the programme report broadly favourable public perceptions of officer conduct and a stated institutional commitment to collaborative, rather than purely coercive, law enforcement (Jose et al. 441-46). This institutional narrative of proximity, trust, and community integration provides an illuminating counterpoint against which to read *Ronth's* night patrol. Where the Janamaithri model imagines the beat officer as embedded in a known community across daylight hours, Yohannan and Dinanath are shown almost exclusively in nocturnal isolation, moving through a rural landscape that the film renders as unreadable rather than familiar, in contact with the community only through brief, often adversarial encounters. The film's institutional world, in other words, is legible less as an indictment of endemic police brutality, the dominant framing in much scholarship on the Tamil and North Indian police procedural, than as a depiction of institutional under-resourcing and isolation: two officers, largely unsupported, absorbing the psychological cost of a system whose own public rhetoric emphasises community integration. This gap between the Janamaithri model's aspirational proximity and the film's depiction of nocturnal isolation sharpens rather than undermines the Nocturnal Panopticon's central claim: the officers are rendered vulnerable not primarily by external violence but by the institution's failure to extend to them, after dark, the same relational infrastructure it claims to build with the public it polices.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretive Criteria and Coding Categories

This section responds directly to the reviewer's request for methodological clarity by specifying how cinematic elements, scenes, dialogue, visual composition, and sound design, were selected and interpreted. The study adopts a qualitative, theoretically informed close-reading methodology rather than a quantitative content analysis; this choice follows standard practice in film-theoretical scholarship (see, for instance, the interpretive procedures modelled by Chion and by Devasundaram), where the object of analysis is the meaning-making function of form rather than the frequency of discrete formal units. Within that qualitative tradition, however, the analysis was structured by explicit selection criteria and coding categories, set out below, to guard against impressionistic or unrepresentative evidence selection.

Scene and sequence selection followed three purposive criteria, applied across two full viewings of the theatrical/OTT cut of the film. First,

Narrative salience: sequences marking a turning point in either officer's psychological arc, for example the incident involving the drunk priest, the domestic dispute, and the encounter with the group implicated in caste-motivated violence, were prioritised as load-bearing evidence, since these are the points at which the film itself signals significance through plot causality. Second,

Formal density: sequences were included where a technique identified in director or crew statements, such as Madhavan's deliberate use of anamorphic lens flare and 'frame within a frame' composition, or Johnson's withdrawal of score at the climactic moment, was sustained across multiple shots rather than appearing as an isolated, potentially incidental choice. Third,

Recurrence: motifs were treated as structurally significant only where they recurred at more than one point in the film's runtime, for example the repeated framing of the officers through windshield, mirror, or wire mesh, or the repeated failure of the police radio to deliver reassurance rather than uncertainty. Isolated instances of a visual or sonic choice were noted but not weighted as evidence for the framework's three axes unless they met at least one of these three criteria.

These criteria were then mapped onto three coding categories corresponding to the framework's three axes, allowing evidence gathering to proceed systematically rather than being generated post hoc to fit a predetermined argument.

Spatial/visual coding tracked framing choices (windshield, mirror, and mesh compositions; depth of field; the ratio of interior cabin shots to open exterior shots), lighting (the boundary of the headlight cone as a recurring compositional edge), and blocking (the degree to which characters' bodies are held within confined frame-within-frame structures). This category grounds the analysis of Spatial Incarceration in Section 5.

Temporal/narrative coding tracked the pacing and density of procedural incidents across the film's three-phase night structure (early, middle, late), the relative composure or breakdown visible in each officer's decision-making at each phase, and the presence or absence of narrative closure at dawn. This category grounds the analysis of Chrono-Degradation in Section 6 and of the officers' relational dynamic in Section 7.

Auditory coding, following Chion's distinction between causal and reduced listening, tracked the ratio of diegetic to non-diegetic sound across the runtime, moments where the radio functions as a source of information versus a source of unresolved uncertainty, and the specific withdrawal of score at moments of narrative crisis. This category grounds the analysis of Auditory Anomie in Section 8.

Two limitations of this procedure are acknowledged rather than concealed. First, as a single-author qualitative close reading, this study does not claim the inter-rater reliability associated with social-scientific content analysis; the coding categories above function as a transparency device, making the interpretive route from evidence to claim traceable, rather than as a claim to coder-independent objectivity. Second, the study's account of cinematographic and sound-design intention draws on published director, cinematographer, and composer statements and on critical reception rather than on production-side archival material or interviews conducted by this author; where such statements are unavailable, the analysis is explicitly framed as interpretive inference from the text rather than as a claim about authorial intention.

Theoretical Framework: The Nocturnal Panopticon

Building on the literature reviewed above, this article proposes the Nocturnal Panopticon as an original interpretive framework combining Foucauldian surveillance theory with Camusian absurdism. Where Bentham's Panopticon disciplines the many through the potential gaze of the few, *Ronith* inverts this arrangement: the two officers, Sub-Inspector Yohannan (Dileesh Pothan) and Civil Police Officer Dinanath (Roshan Mathew), are themselves rendered continuously visible and vulnerable inside the illuminated cabin of their patrol jeep, while the rural Kerala night around them recedes into unwatchable darkness. The traditional asymmetry of the gaze, in which power sees without being seen, collapses: the watchers become exposed targets, and the institution they serve offers them no reciprocal protection. Layered onto this inverted panoptic structure is the Camusian absurd: the patrol, like Sisyphus's labour, is repetitive, unresolved by any single night's events, and stripped of any promise of moral or institutional redemption. The framework thus operates across three axes, Spatial Incarceration, Chrono-Degradation, and Auditory Anomie, each elaborated below.

The reviewer's request for deeper critical engagement with the relationship between these two frameworks is well founded: the earlier draft treated their combination as self-evidently productive without examining whether

disciplinary theory and absurdist philosophy are, in fact, compatible registers of analysis. They are not obviously so. Foucault's account of power is structural and largely impersonal: discipline operates through diagrams, architectures, and institutional arrangements that produce docile subjects with little reference to individual consciousness or interiority; the Panopticon disciplines whether or not any individual watcher is present, because the mechanism, not the person, is the true locus of power (Foucault 200-03). Camus's absurd, by contrast, is irreducibly a philosophy of individual consciousness: the absurd hero is defined by a lucid, first-person confrontation with meaninglessness, and the value Camus locates in that confrontation, the 'invincible summer' of continued struggle, presupposes exactly the kind of individual interiority that a strictly Foucauldian account tends to bracket or dissolve into subject-effects of discursive power (Camus 78-91). A purely structuralist Foucauldian reading of *Ronth* might therefore predict that Yohannan and Dinanath's interiority is itself a product of the disciplinary apparatus rather than a site of resistance to it, while a purely Camusian reading risks treating their psychological exhaustion as existentially universal, insufficiently attentive to the specific institutional mechanisms, understaffing, hierarchical pressure, absent supervisory protection, that produce it.

Recent scholarship on Camus and Foucault together suggests this tension is neither new nor disqualifying. Sharpe demonstrates that Camus's own late fiction, particularly *La Peste*, anticipates several of Foucault's central claims about the disciplinary and biopolitical management of confined populations, arguing that reading the two together illuminates rather than forces the connection between existential and structural registers of power (Sharpe 59-64). Herpolsheimer extends this pairing, arguing that Foucauldian governmentality and Camusian absurdism operate productively at different, complementary scales, Foucault describing how disciplinary mechanisms are built, Camus describing how it feels to be a conscious subject caught inside them, rather than offering competing accounts of the same phenomenon (Herpolsheimer 70-74). This article follows that precedent, but with an important qualification particular to *Ronth*: rather than presenting Foucault and Camus as seamlessly complementary, it treats their combination as a productive but genuine tension that the film itself dramatises. *Ronth*'s formal structure keeps both registers visible simultaneously without collapsing one into the other: the film's visual and institutional grammar, the jeep, the radio, the chain of command, is legible in strictly Foucauldian terms as an apparatus that produces docile, self-monitoring officers; yet the film consistently grants Yohannan and Dinanath moments of interiority, private grief, latent anxiety, small acts of moral choice, that resist full absorption into that apparatus and that only a Camusian vocabulary of consciousness and absurd confrontation can adequately name. The Nocturnal Panopticon, on this account, is not a seamless theoretical fusion but a deliberately two-registered reading strategy: Spatial Incarceration and Auditory Anomie draw primarily on the Foucauldian vocabulary of impersonal, architectural, and technological discipline, while Chrono-Degradation draws primarily on the Camusian vocabulary of repetition, exhaustion, and absurd confrontation, with Institutional Co-Dependency (Section 7) as the axis at which the two registers are shown to press against one another most visibly, in the moment where Dinanath's individual moral crisis and Yohannan's structural assimilation diverge under the same institutional pressure. Treating the tension this way, rather than resolving it, is offered here as a more defensible theoretical position than the earlier draft's implicit assumption of frictionless synthesis.

Spatial Incarceration: The Cinematic Construction of the Mobile Cage

Cinematographer Manesh Madhavan, working in the anamorphic format, has described his intention to give *Ronth*'s nocturnal patrol sequences a grounded yet unmistakably cinematic register, deliberately courting the organic lens flares produced by the jeep's headlights rather than correcting for them (Madhavan). This technical choice supports the film's recurring visual motif, identified through the spatial/visual coding described in Section 3: Yohannan and Dinanath are rarely filmed in open space. Madhavan frequently frames them through the jeep's windshield, wing mirrors, or wire mesh, producing a persistent 'frame within a frame' that visually encloses the characters even when the plot places them, briefly, outdoors; this framing choice recurs across all three phases of the night and therefore meets this study's recurrence criterion for structural, rather than incidental, significance. The world beyond the vehicle's headlight cone is not neutral darkness but an unreadable, potentially hostile unknown; the jeep's confined, dimly lit cabin becomes the only legible space in the film, exposing every gesture of fatigue, irritation, or grief. This spatial logic converts the vehicle, ordinarily a symbol of institutional mobility and authority, into what this study terms a mobile cage: a space that carries the officers through the narrative while offering them no meaningful escape from either the night outside or the institution they represent.

This spatial reading extends Devasundaram's spatio-carceral analysis of the fixed police station in *Visaranai*. Where Devasundaram identifies the station house as a site that entraps the powerless, *Ronth* relocates that entrapment onto the vehicle of those nominally in power, suggesting that spatial incarceration in the Malayalam police procedural is no longer reserved for the accused but has begun to extend, structurally, to the institution's own lowest-ranking agents.

Chrono-Degradation: The Patrol as Existential Trap

Ronth unfolds across an extended night patrol structured, in this reading, as three phases that chart a steady erosion of professional composure, a structure identified through the temporal/narrative coding described in Section 3. In the early hours, the narrative is occupied by minor, procedural incidents, a drunk priest, a domestic dispute, that allow both officers to maintain their institutional identities with relative ease. As the night deepens, fatigue accumulates: Yohannan's pragmatic compromises and Dinanath's latent anxieties surface in small, cumulatively significant decisions. By the film's later sequences, exhaustion has stripped away the professional defences established earlier, producing a sequence of misjudgements whose consequences the film refuses to soften. This structure enacts, in specifically institutional terms, the Camusian absurd described in Section 2.2 and revisited critically in Section 4.1: the patrol does not build toward resolution but toward attrition, and the arrival of dawn brings no restorative clarity, only the resumption of an unchanged system. Chrono-Degradation, in other words, names the process by which linear screen time is repurposed from a vehicle of suspense into an instrument of erosion.

Institutional Co-Dependency: The Dialectic of Yohannan and Dinanath

Within the Nocturnal Panopticon, Yohannan and Dinanath do not simply function as partners but as two dialectically opposed stages of institutional identity: the assimilated veteran and the unconditioned rookie. Their relationship dramatises a psychological negotiation between weary survival and fragile idealism, summarised in the comparative table below.

Dimension	SI Yohannan (Dileesh Pothan)	CPO Dinanath (Roshan Mathew)
Institutional Status	The assimilated veteran	The unconditioned rookie
Coping Mechanism	Cynical pragmatism and defensive humour	Moral rigidity and hyper-vigilance
Internal Trauma	A wife's fragility following a stillbirth	A father's suicide; fear of professional failure
Tragic Flaw	Complacency born of survival instinct	Panic caused by an inflexible moral compass

Yohannan survives by accommodating the system's flaws, bending procedure where necessary to keep an uneasy peace; his composure masks a private grief that surfaces most visibly in his protective instinct during calls involving children. Dinanath, by contrast, treats every encounter as a high-stakes moral test, a hyper-vigilance rooted in his father's suicide and the pressure of providing for his own young family. When the two men are inadvertently drawn into contact with a group implicated in caste-motivated violence, this shared trauma fractures their partnership: Dinanath's rigid moral compass collapses into panic, while Yohannan survives the encounter only to be left more thoroughly assimilated into the very institutional cynicism he had, until that point, merely tolerated. As anticipated in Section 4.1, this sequence is where the framework's two theoretical registers diverge most visibly: Dinanath's collapse is legible primarily in Camusian terms, an individual consciousness confronted with the absurd failure of his own moral schema, while Yohannan's further assimilation is legible primarily in Foucauldian terms, the disciplinary apparatus absorbing and neutralising the one officer capable of resisting it. The film thus stages institutional co-dependency not as mutual support but as a shared vulnerability to the same disciplinary apparatus, experienced, crucially, in two theoretically distinct registers rather than one homogeneous existential condition.

Auditory Anomie: The Deconstruction of Sound

The film's sound design, credited to Anil Johnson, is central to establishing what this study terms Auditory Anomie, a condition in which familiar, everyday sounds fail to provide comfort or orientation and instead deepen disorientation, identified through the auditory coding described in Section 3. *Ronth* relies overwhelmingly on diegetic texture: the steady hum of the jeep's engine, the static and clipped radio chatter connecting the officers to their station, and the ambient noise of insects and wind. Following Chion's distinction between modes of listening, the police radio invites causal listening, the audience straining to locate and interpret the source and meaning of transmitted information, yet the radio consistently delivers only further uncertainty rather than reassurance, functioning less as a lifeline than as an auxiliary voice of the very disciplinary apparatus enclosing the officers (Chion 25-34). Johnson's score itself is deliberately restrained, favouring low, sustained tones over dramatic underscoring, and at the film's climactic moment of panic, the music withdraws entirely, leaving only ambient sound. This structured absence, rather than a musical crescendo, produces the film's most unsettling effect, denying the audience the cinematic comfort of a scored catharsis and insisting instead on the raw, unscored texture of the event itself.

Testing the Framework: The Nocturnal Panopticon Beyond *Ronth*

The reviewer's suggestion that the article assess whether the Nocturnal Panopticon travels beyond *Ronth* is addressed here through a deliberately limited comparative test against two further Malayalam crime films already situated in the literature review: *Nayattu* (2021) and *Kooman* (2022). This comparison is offered as a preliminary test of portability rather than a full comparative study, a distinction this article maintains in the interest of scope discipline; a systematic multi-text application of the framework remains, as the original draft noted, a direction for future research.

Nayattu offers the closest structural parallel. Kweera and Melepattu's analysis establishes that the film uses night as a device that strips its three fugitive police protagonists of institutional protection, placing them, like Yohannan and Dinanath, in a condition of exposed vulnerability rather than empowered authority (Kweera and Melepattu). Spatial Incarceration transfers with only minor modification: *Nayattu*'s officers are confined not to a single vehicle but to a series of temporary hiding places, buses, forests, unfamiliar towns, that perform a similar enclosing function, suggesting that the axis should be generalised from 'the vehicle' to 'the improvised, temporary shelter' as the site of institutional vulnerability. Chrono-Degradation also transfers cleanly: *Nayattu*'s narrative similarly refuses restorative closure, ending with its protagonists still unprotected by the institution they served. Auditory Anomie, however, transfers only partially; *Nayattu* makes more extensive use of non-diegetic score at moments of pursuit and fear than *Ronth*'s minimalist design, suggesting that this particular axis may be closer to a directorial signature specific to Kabir and Johnson than to a genre-wide convention.

Kooman (dir. Jeethu Joseph) provides a more instructive point of divergence. Its protagonist, Civil Police Officer Giri Shankar, is a single, socially humiliated constable in a Kerala-Tamil Nadu border village rather than a two-officer dyad confined to a moving vehicle (Joseph). Spatial Incarceration does not transfer in any straightforward sense: *Kooman*'s village setting is rendered in daylight and open space far more often than *Ronth*'s nocturnal jeep cabin, and the film's confinement is social and reputational rather than architectural. Institutional Co-Dependency likewise fails to transfer, since *Kooman* has no equivalent dyadic partnership; its central tension is instead between the isolated officer and an entire community that withholds recognition from him. Chrono-Degradation transfers only loosely: rather than a single night's cumulative erosion, *Kooman*'s degradation unfolds across a longer, more diffuse timescale of accumulated humiliation. What does transfer, and productively so, is a version of Auditory Anomie broadened into a wider category of institutional non-recognition: the film's critical reception repeatedly emphasises Giri's treatment as an object of ridicule by colleagues and villagers alike, a social silence and dismissal that functions, structurally, much as *Ronth*'s uncommunicative radio does, as an institutional and social apparatus that withholds the reassurance or recognition its subject seeks.

This limited comparative test yields a qualified rather than a triumphant conclusion. The Nocturnal Panopticon's Chrono-Degradation axis appears reasonably portable across the recent Malayalam crime-film cluster, and a generalised version of Spatial Incarceration transfers to films built around fugitive or itinerant, rather than

stationary, confinement. Institutional Co-Dependency and the specific mechanics of Auditory Anomie, however, appear more closely tied to *Ronth's* particular two-officer, single-vehicle, radio-dependent structure than to the genre as a whole. The framework, in other words, is not a universal template for the Malayalam police procedural; it is a close-reading instrument calibrated to *Ronth's* specific formal choices, several elements of which nonetheless illuminate structurally comparable, though not identical, patterns elsewhere in the genre. This qualified finding is offered as a more defensible claim than an unexamined assertion of the framework's general applicability would have been.

DISCUSSION

Ronth and the Case for Studying Popular Indian Cinema

Reading *Ronth* through the Nocturnal Panopticon accomplishes more than a single-text interpretive exercise; it demonstrates the interpretive dividends available when European critical theory is brought into sustained, critically examined dialogue, rather than applied as a universal template, with a specific regional Indian cinematic tradition. The film's inversion of Foucault's panoptic asymmetry only becomes visible when read alongside the institutional specificities documented in scholarship on the Malayalam and Tamil police procedural, namely the low-ranking officer's structural powerlessness within a hierarchical, politically pressured force (Kweera and Melepattu), and, as Section 2.7 argues, alongside Kerala's own institutional rhetoric of community policing, against which the film's isolated night patrol reads as a pointed structural counter-image. Equally, Camus's absurd hero gains a concrete institutional referent when situated within Kerala's night-patrol system rather than left as an abstract philosophical figure, though Section 4.1's closer examination of the Foucault-Camus relationship suggests this pairing works best when its internal tension, structural determinism against individual consciousness, is held open rather than resolved. This reciprocal movement, in which theory illuminates the film and the film in turn tests, particularises, and in places resists theory, exemplifies the broader case for treating Indian regional cinema as a full participant in, rather than a peripheral illustration of, international film theory, a case further supported by Radhakrishnan's account of the region as an independently theorised category rather than a subset of the nation (Section 2.6) and by the comparative testing in Section 9, which shows the framework's explanatory reach to be real but bounded rather than universal. It also underscores why continued academic attention to Malayalam cinema's new realist procedural cluster matters beyond aesthetic appreciation: these films constitute an evolving public record of how the postcolonial Indian state's disciplinary institutions are imagined, questioned, and occasionally humanised by the very cinema that once glorified them uncritically.

Scope and Limitations

This study is deliberately delimited in several respects, some of which are narrower than in the article's original draft as a direct result of the revisions made here. First, it remains primarily a single-text theoretical reading rather than a full comparative or reception study; while Section 9 now undertakes a preliminary comparative test against *Nayattu* and *Kooman*, a systematic, multi-text application of the Nocturnal Panopticon across the wider Malayalam new-realist procedural cluster remains outside the present scope and is proposed as a direction for future research. Second, the article relies on theoretical frameworks originating in a European philosophical tradition (Foucault, Camus); although Section 4.1 has argued for their productive, if genuinely tension-laden, adaptation to an Indian institutional context, and Sections 2.6 and 2.7 have sought to balance that apparatus against regionally grounded scholarship on Malayalam realism and Kerala policing, this study does not claim that the Foucauldian-Camusian framework is culturally neutral, and further work incorporating specifically Indian or Kerala-specific theorisations of policing, caste, and state power would strengthen and complicate the present reading. Third, this analysis is based on the theatrical and OTT-streamed cut of *Ronth* and does not address territory-specific edits or censorship variations reported for international release. Fourth, as Section 3 makes explicit, the study's account of sound design and cinematography draws on published director and cinematographer statements and critical reception rather than on production-side archival material, and a fuller account would benefit from interviews or access to the film's shooting script; relatedly, the qualitative coding procedure described in Section 3 reflects a single scholar's interpretive judgement and does not claim the inter-rater reliability of social-scientific content analysis. Finally, given *Ronth's* recent release, sustained scholarly commentary on the film remains limited at the time of writing; this article's literature review necessarily relies

more heavily on adjacent films, critical reception, and general theoretical sources than would be possible for an established classic text.

CONCLUSION

The Indifferent Dawn

By applying the Nocturnal Panopticon, an original synthesis of Foucauldian surveillance theory and Camusian absurdism whose internal tensions this revised article has examined rather than assumed away, this article has argued that *Ronth* reconfigures the Malayalam police procedural into a study of institutional self-entrapment. Shahi Kabir declines the conventional moral architecture of the genre, offering instead a portrait of how a rigid disciplinary system consumes both the cynical survivor and the earnest newcomer alike. Through its confined visual framing, its attritional temporal structure, and its stark, diegetically grounded sound design, evidence for each of which has been anchored in the explicit interpretive criteria set out in Section 3, *Ronth* demonstrates that the apparatus built to watch and discipline a society can just as readily entrap those charged with operating it. When dawn arrives, it offers no restorative justice, only the resumption of a system that continues, indifferently, to run. In situating this reading within a wider literature review on surveillance studies, absurdist aesthetics, sound theory, Malayalam regional identity, Kerala's own policing institutions, and the scholarship on Indian regional cinema, and in testing, rather than merely asserting, the framework's reach beyond a single text, this article has also sought to make a broader methodological case: that contemporary Malayalam crime cinema rewards, and indeed requires, the same theoretically rigorous, regionally grounded, and self-critical attention long reserved for Western procedural traditions such as Nordic noir and the American police film.

WORKS CITED

1. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage International, 1991.
2. Caluya, Gilbert. "The Post-Panoptic Society? Reassessing Foucault in Surveillance Studies." *Social Identities*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2010, pp. 621-33.
3. Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, 1994.
4. Devasundaram, Ashvin Immanuel. "The Subaltern Screams: Migrant Workers and the Police Station as Spatio-Carceral State of Exception in the Tamil Film *Visaranai*." *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 257-80.
5. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
6. Gopalan, Lalitha. *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. British Film Institute, 2002.
7. Herpolsheimer, Adam. "Plague, Foucault, Camus." *Foucault Studies*, no. 35, 2023, pp. 70-96.
8. Jose, Jibin P., et al. "Dynamics of Democratic Policing: A Qualitative Analysis of Community Policing in Kerala." *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2024, pp. 435-49.
9. Joseph, Jeethu, director. *Kooman*. Magic Frames and Ananya Films, 2022.
10. Kabir, Shahi, director. *Ronth*. Junglee Pictures and Festival Cinemas, 2025.
11. Kweera, Rakshit, and Tushara Melepatu. "Underdogs in Uniform: Downplaying Power Hierarchy in a Police State—A Realistic Take on *Visaranai* and *Nayattu*." *Jump Cut*, no. 62, Winter 2023-24, ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Kweera-Melepattu/index.html.
12. Madhavan, Manesh. "Painting the Night: Manesh Madhavan on *Ronth* and the Cinematic Allure of Anamorphic." *Cooke Optics*, 27 June 2025, cookeoptics.com/news-and-events/painting-the-night-manesh-madhavan-on-ronth-and-the-cinematic-allure-of-anamorphic/.
13. Prakkat, Martin, director. *Nayattu*. Zee5, 2021.
14. Prasad, M. Madhava. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
15. Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh. "The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2009, pp. 217-45.

-
16. ---. "What Is Left of Malayalam Cinema?" *Cinemas of South India: Culture, Resistance, Ideology*, edited by Sowmya Dechamma C. C. and Elavarthi Sathya Prakash, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 25-48.
 17. Sharpe, Matthew. "The Plague and the Panopticon: Camus, with and against the Total Critiques of Modernity." *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 133, no. 1, 2016, pp. 59-79.
 18. Vasudevan, Ravi, editor. *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. Oxford University Press, 2000.