

# Journal of Visual and Performing Arts

ISSN 2651-0286

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | 2025

UVPA 20th Anniversary Edition 2025



Published by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

# Journal of Visual & Performing Arts Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL)

**UVPA 20th Anniversary Edition**  
July 2025

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | 2025

**UVPA 20th Anniversary Edition**

ISSN 2651-0286

Published by: University of the Visual and  
Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka

## Journal Aim and Scope

The Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL) is a biannual research publication issued by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The journal seeks to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work in the fields of visual and performing arts, while also promoting multidisciplinary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. JOVPA-SL welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioner-researchers engaged in arts-based research, fostering critical dialogue and innovative perspectives on creative practice and inquiry. It serves as a platform for critical engagement, experimental methodologies, and creative pedagogy, addressing themes that are either discipline-specific such as dance, drama, performance studies, music, or visual arts or situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. The journal invites original, rigorous, and meaningful research in creative arts and performance studies, both within and across academic boundaries. It encourages critical debate and cross-disciplinary exchange through diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to: theatre studies, performance studies, dance studies, ethnomusicology, music education, popular culture, dance and movement analysis, art history, art theory, visual and cultural studies, crafts, digital arts and design, film studies, and fine arts.

Cover Photo: Final Year Dance Production, 'Oracle' performed in 2018 at Panibharatha Theatre. Dept. of Theatre, and Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance.

## Editor in Chief

Prof. Saumya Liyanage  
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and  
Modern Dance  
Faculty of Dance and Drama  
UVPA Colombo – Sri Lanka  
Email: saumya.l@vpa.ac.lk

## Coordinating Editors

Mr. Ranga Manupriya  
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and  
Modern Dance, Faculty of Dance and  
Drama  
UVPA Colombo Sri Lanka  
ranga.l@vpa.ac.lk

Ms. Chamane Darshika  
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and  
Modern Dance, Faculty of Dance and  
Drama  
UVPA Colombo Sri Lanka  
chamane.d@vpa.ac.lk

## Journal Administration

Center for Research, Creative Works and  
Knowledge Dissemination (CRCKD),  
UVPA Colombo

## Journal Contact

Address: Editor in Chief, JOVPA-SL, 21  
Albert Crescent, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka.  
Email: jovpasl@vpa.ac.lk  
Telephone: +94 718328086

Printed and Bound in

.....

## Cover Design and Page Layout:

Chamara Amarasinghe, Saumya Liyanage and Bandhuka Premawardhana  
UVPA Colombo

ISSN 2651-0286

**CHAMILA GUNAMUNIGE**  
University of Texas at Austin

## **Form Beyond Content: Defining the Public Sphere through Māyāmān Political Performance in Northern Sri Lanka During the Civil War**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The form of a performance does not depend solely on its content but is also shaped by the agency of the space in which it is performed. The play Māyāmān, performed in rural Jaffna in the 1980s at the onset of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka, is used as a case study to support this argument. The uniqueness of Māyāmān lies in its ephemeral form. This article explores how that ephemeral form is not derived from the play's content but rather results from the agency of the counter-public space in which it was performed. The Tamil society that performed Māyāmān had a significantly more vulnerable agency compared to the dominant Sinhalese sphere of Sri Lanka. Hence, the ephemeral nature of Māyāmān can be understood as a result of that limited agency. In contrast, this paper questions whether a performance presented within the dominant Sinhalese sphere is necessarily more free. It becomes evident that the mere presence of agency within a space does not guarantee the freedom of the performance. The key determining factor is the degree to which that space is autonomous from the state.*

### **KEYWORDS**

Public Sphere, Māyāmān, Political Performance, ephemeral nature, autonomous

## INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the mutual relationship between a performance and its public sphere through a Tamil-language performance called Mäyämän, which was performed in northern Sri Lanka in the 1980s. The Tamils living in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka were the most affected by the civil war that lasted for almost thirty years (1980 - 2010). As a reaction to the brutality of the war, a stage play was created in 1985 by students and teachers studying theater at the University of Jaffna to discuss the rights of the Tamils affected by the war. Eventually, this group formed an organization and decided to perform selected scenes of this play at the rural areas outside the university. As a result of this, traveling performance of Mäyämän were born. Since the government security forces imposed censorship on public gatherings, especially performances, this group had to develop tactics to protect the performance and their lives. For instance, the group rode bicycles from village to village while covering their faces with masks, not identifying themselves to the people. In addition, these performances were brief, and the performers tried to erase all evidence afterward. The performance resembled a guerrilla attack, as even the audience was unaware of it. The distinctive feature present within the form of Mäyämän provides a clear pathway for this paper to discuss how the agency of the public or counter-public sphere influences a performance. Susan Lorrie Parks writes in *The Six Elements of Style*: "A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent." (07) On the contrary, the ephemeral form of the Mäyämän was not a requirement of the content but was determined outside the performance. Therefore, the question raised in this paper is why the form of Mäyämän was determined by external factors that was not related to its content. The public sphere of Mäyämän consisted of Northern Tamils who had been oppressed by state repression and violence as a consequence of the war. This paper shows how the powerless condition of Sri Lanka's minority Tamil community affected to determine the ephemeral form of Mäyämän performance. Eventually the paper argues that the form of performance is not necessarily determined by its content;

somewhat, it is shaped by the agency of the public or counter-public sphere in which the performance takes place, particularly within a specific political context.

## MÄYÄMÄN AND ITS PUBLIC SPHERE

A key characteristic of performance is its capacity to generate a distinct public sphere. For example, when a play is performed, it creates a public that exists within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the theater. Michael Warner articulates this idea, stating: "A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space" (50). In this sense, the space that Mäyämän created for Tamil rural communities living in the war zone can indeed be understood as a form of public space. Nevertheless, there was a unique aspect of Mäyämän that extends beyond Warner's definition. In the politically volatile environment of the Sri Lankan civil war, public gatherings of Tamils in the North were often suppressed or discouraged by government security forces. Under such conditions, the act of assembling for a political performance—especially one addressing human rights violations—became far more complex than the conventional notion of a theatrical public. Yet, the fact that Tamils gathered around Mäyämän despite the dangers they faced reveals the distinctive nature of the public space created by the performance. This space was not merely defined by physical presence but by a shared sense of urgency, resistance, and collective identity. On the other hand, when Tamils were isolated by the dominant majority and its ideology, they experienced a deep identity crisis. To cope with this, they needed to come out of their isolated lives and find a shared space where they could connect with others and feel a sense of belonging. In this context, the Tamil people find themselves in a challenging situation where they must protect both their private and collective spaces. In such circumstances, the ephemeral nature of the Mäyämän performance becomes particularly effective due to its guerrilla characteristics, which make it difficult for security forces to track and disrupt the collective space being created.

## PUBLIC AND COUNTER-PUBLIC

Mäyämän performance provides an excellent approach to identifying the division between a public and a counter public. In simple terms, a public sphere is a space where private goals are hidden and public interests are brought into focus. Nancy Fraser Writes, "According to Heberams, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest""(58). Habermas's conception of the public sphere opens a pathway to understanding the political context of Mäyämän's public sphere. The Tamil audience came together to the Mäyämän, putting aside their personal life aspirations and gathering around the performance for their community and political freedom. The key question is whether this unique political space was considered unsafe simply because it challenges or opposes the government. Warner's following statement leads to a deeper discussion in this regard. "If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state" (51). Since Mäyämän did not stand on behalf of the state, the space constructed through that performance cannot be called a public space. Fraser writes, "Thus, at one level, the idea of the public sphere designated an institutional mechanism for "rationalizing" political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) the citizenry." (59) As Fraser emphasized above, Mäyämän did not justify the dominance of the state, on the contrary, it challenges the suppression carried out against the Tamils by the state. So, such a space can be identified as a counter-public sphere. Fraser further writes: "I propose to call these subaltern counter publics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (67) All the characteristics identified by Nancy Fraser as defining subaltern counter publics are clearly reflected in the space created by Mäyämän, highlighting its role as a site of resistance, alternative discourse, and marginalized voices.

The war in Sri Lanka led to numerous major crises, most notably the significant loss of life and property, as well as the deepening divide between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Furthermore, the war reinforced a dynamic in which the minority Tamils came to be viewed as subordinate by the Sinhalese majority. According to the Sinhalese dominant historical narrative, the Tamils are a foreign nation to Sri Lanka. The recent history of bringing Tamils from India to work in Sri Lanka's plantations may have also contributed to shaping this narration. In such a situation, the Tamil people are excluded from the greater public space of Sri Lanka and are positioned as a subordinate social group. Hence, the space created by *Mäyämän* aligns with Fraser's concept of subaltern counter publics. The primary demand of the Tamil rebels during the war was that they needed a separate state. The central government opposed this separatist idea and announced the war was to ensure it remained an undivided country. The Tamil rebels wanted to escape from the greater public space of Sri Lanka to obtain sovereignty on their own, which meant making a greater public space for just the Tamils. Ultimately, the counter public space formed around *Mäyämän* aimed to establish a public sphere independent of the dominant Sinhalese space. Warner writes: "Counter publics face another obstacle as well. One of the most striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency" (88). Due to the counter public space of the performance, it did not have much agency, so, *Mäyämän* formed a guerilla performance for its survival. This performance lacks a strong public space to confront censorship by security forces because the Tamils have no agency in the dominant Sri Lanka's historical narration. The ephemeral form of *Mäyämän* emerges in response to this historical obstacle.

## **AGENCY IN NATIONALIST CINEMA AND THE DADA MOVEMENT**

This section discusses the impact on artistic works within public spaces that are either supported by the government or exist without its support, through two examples outside of *Mäyämän*. The first ex-

ample is films that glorified Sinhala nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war. Many movies were produced during the final stages of the Sri Lankan war and, notably, centered around the dominant historical narratives of the country. These films appeared to be inspired by stories from the Mahāvamsa, the primary historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, which spans from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century CE. The central theme of the Mahāvamsa is to glorify the superiority of Sinhala Buddhists—the ethnic and religious majority in Sri Lanka. This chronicle has significantly contributed to the formation of the recent Sinhala Buddhist dominant ideology. So, the films based on the Mahāvamsa's stories glorified the war ideology against the minority. For instance, the Sinhala film *Abā* is based on a king who is regarded as an ancestral figure of the Sinhala ethnic group. Since these films aligned with the government's ideology, they received significant support from the state. Building on Fraser's concept of the public sphere, the space created through these films attained a degree of sovereignty from the state. These movies were not subject to any censorship, and the movie makers didn't want to hide their identities to survive as performers of Māyāmān. When comparing these two spheres—movies and Māyāmān—reveals that the agency of the space plays a crucial role in shaping forms of performance. This raises an important question: can the form and content of performance truly be independent when it emerges from a public sphere that has agency? Sinhala nationalist movies were not independent of the state's ideological influence; rather, they were deeply embedded in the dominant narratives approved by the state. Nancy Fraser writes, "The official public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination" (62). Thus, performance is often subject to the power structures and dominant ideologies of the public space in which it takes place.

To further clarify the relationship between public or counter-public space and agency, it is vital to examine the Dada movement, which emerged during the First World War. The Dada movement began during World War I in a secret cabaret space in Zurich, Switzerland. In response to the repression caused by the war, several artists gathered in secret to create artworks in this space. Lacking the freedom to produce fully developed pieces, Dada artists embraced improvisa-

tion and spontaneity, which gave their works an immediate and raw quality compared to conventional art forms. The immediate, improvised nature of Dadaist works can be understood as a response to the crisis of agency within the counter public sphere constructed by the Dada movement. Dada emerged from a space purposely created by artists who opposed the war and refused to align with the hostile states. This lack of official support meant that Dada artists operated in precarious conditions, often creating under the threat of repression. As a result, their artworks are shaped by the insecurity and limited agency of the space. The interplay between the ephemeral form of Mäyämän performance and its counter public sphere echoes the Dada movement and the cabaret sphere in Zurich. Nevertheless, whether public or counter-public, the ultimate control and agency of these spaces often remain under the influence of the state. As a result, artistic works produced within these spheres cannot be fully independent of the influence of the state. This tension is a shared characteristic of both Mäyämän performance and Sinhala nationalist cinema in Sri Lanka.

### **ART BEYOND THE AGENCY OF THE SPHERE.**

When discussing the connection between an artwork and the agency of the space, it is impossible to overlook the recent aragalaya movement – public protest in Sri Lanka against the government. In 2022, Sri Lanka faced a severe economic crisis that sparked widespread protests against the government. Initially, these protests began with quiet candlelight vigils, but they soon escalated as opposition political parties joined in, organizing large marches with significant public participation. A defining moment came when people from all regions of the country set up tents at Gall Face in Colombo, declaring they would not leave until the President resigned. Over time, this protest site evolved into a "protest village," transforming into a cultural hub. Within this space, a variety of cultural expressions flourished. It became home to a theatre, cinema, school, library, university, and even an art gallery. Protesters and visitors engaged in live performances, music, theatre, and puppetry, with some attending simply to experience these cultural expressions. The content and

form of these artistic creations were not determined in any way by the protest space. Using Augusto Boal's Image Theatre technique, I developed a performance that served as a powerful example of this. Both the content and structure of this piece were designed specifically to critique the prevailing political authority. Notably, the form of the performance was not influenced or restricted by the nature of the protest space in which it took place. Together with my team of actors, we presented the performance across the protest grounds over several days, drawing significant attention and engagement from large audiences. In her book *Communal Luxury*, Kristin Ross highlights Élisée Reclus's perspective on the Paris Commune, which helps in understanding the nature of the artworks that emerged in the protest spaces of Sri Lanka.

"The Commune, we might say, is perhaps best figured as having the qualities Reclus attributes in his book to the mountain stream. Its scale and geography are livable, not sublime. The stream, in his view, was superior to the river because of the unpredictability of its course. The river's torrents of water barrel down a deep furrow pre-carved by the thousands of gallons that have preceded it; the stream, on the other hand, makes its own way."  
(19-20)

Many of the artworks created within the Sri Lankan protest space, which took resistance as their core purpose, carried the characteristics of a stream of artistic expression independent of state control. Like the Paris Commune, the Sri Lankan protest site functioned as a counter public space autonomous from the state. As such, the question of agency did not arise in the works created within it. Therefore, the purpose, content, and form of these protest artworks were not shaped by any external authority but emerged with a sense of independence. In contrast, when discussing the ephemeral nature of the Māyāmān form, in the end, was subject to the agency of the state. The concept of a separate Tamil state introduced by Tamil rebels was, in fact, an attempt to escape this very agency. As Habermas states, "Private designated the exclusion from the sphere of the

state apparatus; for public referred to the state that in the meantime had developed, under absolutism, into an entity having an objective existence over against the person of the ruler" (11). According to this view, although Māyāmān could be considered an activist performance, it cannot be described as part of a truly public sphere, because the space in which it was performed remained under state control. Its ephemeral nature reflects this very limitation. In contrast, the artistic expressions that emerged in the recent Sri Lankan protest space demonstrate a level of autonomy characteristic of the evolved public sphere that Habermas describes. Therefore, the autonomy and interdependent relationship between the content and form of a performance largely depend on how free the public sphere is from state control or the influence of any dominant ideology.

## CONCLUSION

A central question that emerged in this discussion was how the ephemeral form of Māyāmān performance came into being. It became evident that the character of the counter-public space in which Māyāmān was performed played a decisive role in shaping its form. During the civil war, the Tamil community faced repression, and gathering in public spaces posed significant dangers. In such a context, expressing dissent or injustice through performance in public was extremely risky. Māyāmān performances emerged in response to this danger, utilizing brief, improvised acts and dispersing quickly as strategies for minimizing risk. These characteristics, shaped by the precarious nature of the counter-public space, reflected the limited agency available to the performers. On the other hand, using Sinhala nationalist movies created during the Sri Lankan civil war, the paper raises an important question: can the form and content of performance truly be independent when it emerges from a public sphere that has agency? Therefore, for the content and form of an artistic work to be truly independent, the public space must be completely free from state influence.

## REFERENCES

- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Phelan, P. (2017). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. (Original work published 1993). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rathitharan, K. (2025). Mäyämän [Interview by Chamila Priyanka].
- Ross, K. (2016). *Communal luxury: The political imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London, England: Verso Books.
- Sithamparanathan, K. (2025). Mäyämän [Interview by Chamila Priyanka].
- Warner, M. (2002). Publics and counterpublics. *Public Culture*, 14(1), 49–90. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49>

---

Chamila Priyanka Gunamunige (he/him) is a theatre artist and scholar. He is a PhD student with a specialization in performance as public practice at The University of Texas at Austin. His recent publication is "Ideological Crisis, Compliance, and Self-Censorship: Identifying the Symptoms of Sinhala-Speaking Theatre Through Its Responses to the Civil War" for the *Asian Theatre Journal*, 2024. He won the USA Fulbright Scholarship in 2016, and as a result of that, He obtained his MFA in Theatre Directing at Long Island University, New York. Chamila did his BA in Political Science at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.