IDR Journal Vol. 02 (Issue 01) 2025
ISSN 3030-7139, eISSN 3030-7147
idresearch.uom.lk

Early Sri Lankan Cinema and the Emergence of the Production Designer

FERNANDO B.S.C.[1]*, **SAMARAWICKRAMA S.**[2]
[1, 2]*Department of Integrated Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka*
[1]*shermilafernando82@gmail.com* [2]*sumanthris@uom.lk*

Abstract — *This study explores the emergence and evolution of production design in early Sri Lankan cinema during its first transformative decade (1947–1957), shaped by political independence, economic change, and the quest for a national cinematic identity. As part of a PhD documenting the contributions of production designers across 50 years of Sri Lankan cinema, this extract focuses on 18 accessible films out of 49 produced in the first decade. Using a historical and analytical approach, drawing from archives, critiques, and expert interviews, the study examines sociopolitical and cultural influences on early production design. It highlights the initial dependence on Indian studios and aesthetics, followed by a shift toward realism and local authenticity after independence. The establishment of local studios such as Sri Mayuragan Nawakala and Nawajeewana Movietone encouraged local talent and visual perspectives. Landmark films like Amma (1949) and Rekhava (1956) exemplify this shift through location-based storytelling. The study also investigates the evolving professional identity of production designers through film credits, situating Sri Lankan practices within global cinematic trends and neorealist influence. It underscores the vital role of production design in crafting authentic narratives and articulates Sri Lanka's cinematic and cultural independence.*

Keywords: *Sri Lankan Cinema; Production Design; Visual Authenticity; Cinema History; Sri Lankan Film History; Visual Storytelling*

**Contact: Phone +94-714403399*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(1).2025.12

I. Emergence Amidst Indian Influences

The release of The Jazz Singer in 1927 by Warner Brothers marked a pivotal moment in cinema history, heralding the transition from silent films to sound films (Musser, 2011). This technological breakthrough rapidly influenced cinema worldwide, with Germany, Great Britain, and France adopting sound technology in their industries. The impact extended to South Asia, where Indian cinema quickly embraced this innovation, producing its first sound films: *Alam Ara* (Ornament of the World, 1931), a milestone for North Indian cinema, and *Kalidas* (The Servant of Kali, 1931), a landmark for South Indian cinema (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999: 20). By the 1940s, South India had developed a robust studio-based film industry, heavily influencing Sri Lanka due to its geographic proximity and cultural ties.

Sri Lanka's association with cinema began in 1901 with the first private film screening for Governor West Ridgeway and Boer War prisoners by a photographer named A.W. Andrew (Senevirathne, 1958). The concept of regular film screenings was introduced by Warwick Major, an English entrepreneur, under the name "Bioscope." Held in open-air tents, these screenings quickly became a popular form of entertainment, competing with traditional drama, dance, and novels (Ceylon Government, 1965). By 1903, cinema gained a more permanent foothold with the establishment of theatres as Madan Theatres Limited, an Indian cinema chain, expanded its operations to Sri Lanka (Barnow & Krishnaswamy, 1963). This was soon followed by competition from the Olympia Theatre, founded by Noor Bai, a wealthy Indian businessman (Mannamperuma, 1963). The construction of theatres facilitated the introduction and exhibition of American and Indian films in Sri Lanka by Indian merchants (Senevirathne, 1958). Given this methodology, Sri Lankan audiences exhibited prior familiarity with the cinematic medium due to the consistent exhibition of these international films.

Despite Sri Lanka's early exposure to cinema, the production of its first narrative feature film, Kadawunu Poronduwa (Broken Promise), did not occur until 1947. Early Sri Lankan filmmakers, although artistically skilled, lacked the technical expertise and infrastructure necessary for sound film production (Weragama, 2014). Consequently, they turned to the established film industry in South India. Three pioneering groups ventured to India to create these early productions. The first group, led by the owner of the Lanka Kala Mohini Company, aimed to produce *Divya Premaya* (*Divine Love*), inspired by the Telugu film *Laila Majnu*. The second group, led by S.M. Nayagam and B.A.W. Jayaman, sought to adapt the stage play *Kadawunu Poronduwa* (*Broken Promise*) into a film at Chitrakala (Gemini) Studio in Madurai, India. The entire cast from the original stage production travelled to India for this purpose. The third group, led by Shanti Kumar and Ceylon Theaters Company, produced *Ashokamala* at Central Studio in India in 1946 (Dissanayake & Rathnavibushana, 2000; Weragama, 2014:Savarimuththu, 1977). The journey of these groups to India highlights Sri Lanka's reliance on the Indian studio system, which was modelled on Hollywood's centralised production practices (Shoesmith, 2009). Studios like Chitrakala (Gemini) and Central Studio employed extensive resources and skilled technicians, making them attractive for Sri Lankan filmmakers seeking professional production capabilities.

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

The release of Kadawunu Poronduwa on January 21, 1947, coincided with a pivotal moment in Sri Lankan history as the nation neared its independence in 1948. The film generated significant excitement among the Sri Lankan audience, who were already well-acquainted with Indian cinema. However, despite their initial enthusiasm, viewers expressed dissatisfaction with the Indian-influenced visual style of Kadawunu Poronduwa, particularly criticizing its aesthetic choices. While the film garnered popularity, it also faced considerable criticism for its use of South Indian aesthetics, especially in portraying sets, costumes, jewellery, and hairstyles, which led to a cultural dissonance with the Sri Lankan context. They emphasised that films that featured only Sinhala dialogues lacked any meaningful representation of Sinhala's cultural characteristics or customs (Piris, 1947). Similarly, *Ashokamala* (1947), the second Sri Lankan film, was scrutinised for its historical inaccuracies in depicting the reign of King Dutu Gemunu (161–137 BC) and Buddhist cultural elements. Mayurapada (1947) critiqued the visual elements, such as set, costumes, and characters, for being incongruent with the era, noting that the portrayal of Sri Lankans from the period did not match historical evidence (Mayurapada, 1947). The film failed to convey the grandeur of Sri Lanka's heritage, as iconic landscapes like Anuradhapura's stupas were replaced by barren plains and small streams, leading to further criticism (Kanthi, 1947). This misrepresentation led to a disconnect between the film's depiction and the audience's expectations of historical authenticity.

The production of these early films emphasised Sri Lanka's dependence on Indian technicians and aesthetic conventions, which were often mismatched with the cultural expectations of local audiences. Press reviews and public sentiment highlighted a growing demand for a national cinema that authentically represented the culture, traditions, and lived experiences of Sri Lankan society. This call for cultural authenticity gained momentum after independence, gradually redefining cinematic practices and setting the stage for a uniquely Sri Lankan identity. At the heart of this transformation was the role of production design, involving the creation of visual worlds that align with narrative content and cultural context. Despite its significance, the role of the production designer in Sri Lankan cinema remains unexplored in academic scholarship. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the evolution of production design in early Sri Lankan cinema, focusing on its emergence amidst Indian influences and its gradual adaptation to local cultural, political, and economic realities.

II. Developing a Local Cinematic Identity: Cultural Transformation

Sri Lanka's independence from the British Empire in 1948 was a significant turning point in its political atmosphere as it searched for a national identity. As a result, storylines were deeply influenced by and resonated with the emerging Sri Lankan identity. Critics noted that films from this era, often influenced by Indian technicians, particularly Indian directors and crews, lacked authenticity and failed to capture the nuances of indigenous Sri Lankan experiences. This shortfall was primarily due to the technicians' and film director's limited understanding of the local context, resulting in a disconnect from the cultural realities they intended to portray. From the inception of Sri Lankan cinema, press reviews and social ideologies underscored the necessity for a national cinema that reflected the culture, traditions, and unique characteristics of Sri Lankan society.

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

Issues related to colonialism, modernity, and cultural identity were particularly salient during this period of establishing a new national identity (Dissanayaka, 2008). For the national cinema movement to be truly impactful, it was essential that film narratives be deeply rooted in local contexts and that the visual representation authentically embody Sri Lankan culture, the social environment, and the unique characteristics of its people. This placed a significant responsibility on production designers to create visual worlds that were true to the nation's evolving identity.

In response to critiques about authenticity, *Kapati Arakshakya* (*Cunning Guard*, 1948), the third film in Sri Lankan cinema, marked a pivotal step toward establishing a distinctly Sri Lankan visual identity. Although the primary narrative was filmed in Indian studios, the filmmakers deliberately incorporated shots of Sri Lankan landscapes to infuse the production with a sense of local authenticity. This strategic decision signified a departure from the entirely studio-bound productions of its predecessors, offering audiences glimpses of the island's natural beauty. Combining authentic Sri Lankan landscapes with studio-based scenes elevated the film's visual narrative, creating a richer and more immersive cinematic experience.

The move toward utilising actual Sri Lankan landscapes was a crucial advancement in production design, setting a precedent for future films. As a result, *Kapati Arakshakya* contributed to a more accurate portrayal of Sri Lankan cultural and environmental contexts, influencing subsequent productions to embrace natural settings and fostering a more authentic cinematic representation of Sri Lankan heritage. Nimal, a film critic, acknowledged the film's various shortcomings but noted that *Kapati Arakshakya* felt less unnatural than *Kadawunu Poronduwa* or *Ashokamala* (Nimal, 1948). This suggests that the production designer made a concerted effort to infuse a Sri Lankan identity into the visual world, fostering a more progressive sentiment among the audience.

Similarly, the sixth film, *Amma* (Mother, 1949), stands out for receiving favourable critiques and marking a significant shift in how Sri Lankan stories were portrayed on screen. This film diverged from previous productions, which were heavily influenced by foreign aesthetics, and began to authentically depict the cultural and social realities of Sri Lankan life. *Amma* narrates the contemporary story of a mother who, after causing turmoil through adultery, sacrifices her life for her daughter, who grows into a virtuous individual. Despite being produced in India, the film, inspired by Wimalaweera's stage play, received positive feedback for its portrayal of a Sri Lankan story set against a Colombo backdrop (Monarawila, 1949). However, some critics felt that the film's Indian setting did not effectively convey the intended local authenticity (Jayakumar, 1949). Nonetheless, *Amma* is viewed as a pioneering step in developing national cinema, beginning to overcome the predominant Indian influence on Sri Lankan films.

The gradual shift from Indian-dominated aesthetics to a more culturally authentic representation in Sri Lankan cinema during its formative years highlights the crucial role of production design in reflecting national identity. Films like *Kapati Arakshakya* and *Amma* exemplify this transition, setting a precedent for future productions to embrace local landscapes, narratives, and cultural nuances. While critiques persisted regarding some authenticity aspects, these films marked a

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

significant step in overcoming foreign influences and establishing a distinctly Sri Lankan cinematic identity. This evolution resonated with audiences seeking cultural representation and laid the foundation for the national cinema movement to thrive in the following decades.

III. Establishment of Local Film Studios

Amidst the quest to establish a distinct local identity following the end of British colonial rule and Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the imposition of government travel restrictions significantly impacted the film industry (Ceylon Government, 1965). These restrictions marked a pivotal shift in early Sri Lankan cinema, making reliance on Indian film studios obsolete. This development catalysed the establishment of local production infrastructure, paving the way for the emergence of a uniquely Sri Lankan cinematic identity. *Kapati Arakshakya* (Cunning Guard, 1948) was the last film produced under unrestricted travel conditions to India.

In response to these new challenges, S. M. Nayagam established the Sri Mayuragan Navakala Studio in 1951, providing a profitable and vital local alternative that significantly contributed to the growth of the Sri Lankan film industry (Moraes, 1967). This studio became a crucial asset, enabling domestic film production and fostering the development of a national cinema movement. However, despite its establishment in Sri Lanka, the studio initially relied on South Indian technicians brought in by Nayagam (Savarimuththu, 1977). As a result, early productions reflected a hybrid aesthetic that combined Indian cinematic traditions with emerging Sri Lankan elements, illustrating the complexities of this transitional period.

The production of *Banda Nagarayata Pamineema* (*Banda Comes to the City*, 1952) marked a milestone as the first film produced and shot entirely within Sri Lanka (Weragama, 2014). This achievement underscored the central role of studio-based production in this era. Subsequent films, such as *Prema Tharagaya* (*Competition in Love*, 1953), *Puduma Leli* (*Strange Daughter-in-Law*, 1953), and *Ahankara Sthree* (*Haughty Woman*, 1954), continued to display Indian influences due to the involvement of Indian technicians.

Within these studios, production design relied heavily on the craftsmanship of painters and carpenters. Hemapala Dharmasena, a pioneering Sri Lankan production designer, emphasised the meticulous work involved in crafting elaborate sets and hand-painted backdrops, which were integral in creating the visual environments essential for narrative settings (Dharmasena, 2021). These films often incorporated characteristic elements of Indian cinema—such as song-and-dance sequences, action scenes, and comedy—further reinforcing the hybrid nature of their visual identity.

The *Navajeevana Movietone* studio, established by Sirisena Wimalaweera in 1951, marked another significant development. Initially dependent on Indian technicians, Wimalaweera prioritised training local craftsmen to assume key technical roles. In an interview published in the *Dinamina* newspaper on October 10, 1957, Wimalaweera emphasised his commitment to cultivating a distinctly Sri Lankan identity:

"I have trained the necessary technicians in each sector. Now, except for three at Navajeevana, all of

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

them are Sri Lankans. Three Sri Lankans replacing the remaining three Indians will soon complete their training" (Sirisena–Wimalaweera, 1957).

Wimalaweera's efforts became evident at the beginning of the second decade of Sri Lankan cinema, as he prominently credited Sri Lankan production designers in films such as *Ekamath Eka Rataka* (*Once Upon a Country*, 1958) and *Ma Alaya Kala Tharuniya* (*The Girl I Loved*, 1959). This transition underscored the growing importance of local expertise in shaping the visual and narrative identity of early Sri Lankan films.

The establishment of local studios marked a transformative phase in Sri Lankan cinema, symbolising the shift from reliance on Indian infrastructure to the development of a distinct national identity. Studios like *Sri Mayuragan Navakala* and *Navajeevana Movietone* not only facilitated domestic production but also played a crucial role in training local technicians and introducing distinctly Sri Lankan visual narratives. While Indian influences persisted, these studios laid the groundwork for a uniquely Sri Lankan cinematic language, reflecting the cultural aspirations of a newly independent nation. This era represents a critical juncture in the evolution of Sri Lankan cinema, setting the stage for future innovations in production design and storytelling.

IV. The Emergence of Production Design as a Profession

Efforts to train local technicians through the establishment of local film studios highlighted the growing recognition of production designers' contributions to early Sri Lankan cinema. This acknowledgement became increasingly evident by including Sri Lankan names in film credits, marking the profession's emergence and gradual formalization. For instance, in Kadawunu Poronduwa, the professional role of production designer was credited in English as "Art Conception," while in Ashokamala, it appeared as "Art Direction and Setting." By 1948, in the film Kapati Arakshakaya, the role was referred to in Sinhala as Chitra Sanvidana (Art Composition). Later films, such as Seedevi (1951) and Podi Putha (The Younger Son, 1955), employed the title Chitra Adyakshaka in Sinhala.

This varied application of titles not only reflected the evolving nature of the production designer's role but also acknowledged the individuals shaping the visual aesthetics of early Sri Lankan films. From 1947 to 1957, the terminology for production designers varied widely, incorporating combinations of Sinhala and English terms as the industry sought to establish a consistent professional identity amidst changing cinematic practices.

One notable trend was the gradual shift from English to Sinhala for professional titles, signaling an alignment with the country's post-independence cultural identity. Early films exclusively used English titles, but by the third film, professional roles began to appear in Sinhala, reflecting a deliberate embrace of the local language and culture. Some productions presented titles bilingually, translating terms like "Art" or "Art Direction" into Sinhala as *Chitra*. By the mid-1950s, *Chitra* became a standard term synonymous with "Art," with examples including *Chitra* (Art), *Chitra Adyakshanaya* (Art Director), *Chitra Sanvidanaya* (Art Organizing), and *Chitra Shilpi* (Artist).

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

The term *Chitra* in Sinhala demonstrates remarkable versatility. As a noun, it refers to "picture" or "image"; as a verb, it encompasses the technical processes of visual creation; and when describing a person, it signifies an "artist." This linguistic flexibility underscores the integral role of the term in visual arts and production design within Sri Lankan cinema. Furthermore, its use suggests that early production designers were closely linked to traditional art forms, mainly painting, emphasising a connection between the visual aspects of cinema and classical artistic practices.

This evolution in terminology reflects more than just a professional shift—it mirrors the broader cultural and socio-political changes of the post-independence era. The deliberate transition from English to Sinhala terms symbolises the national effort to reclaim cultural identity and assert local narratives in the arts. By embracing these linguistic and cultural changes, the profession of production design became a key player in shaping the visual and cultural narrative of early Sri Lankan cinema, as depicted in the credits of pioneering films.

V. From Studio-Bound Sets to On-Location Realism

The shift from studio-bound sets to on-location shooting marked a transformative moment in global cinema, profoundly influencing Sri Lankan filmmaking practices. This cinematic movement, originating in Italy, was characterised by natural lighting, authentic storytelling, and a focus on the lives of ordinary people often underrepresented in cinema (Kartal, 2013; Sharma, 2008). Neorealism's emphasis on visual and narrative authenticity found a prominent example in Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*), which portrayed the rural Bengali experience with poignant realism and became a benchmark for regional cinema (Cardullo, 2019).

One year later, *Rekhava* (*Line of Destiny*), directed by Lester James Peries, brought these neorealist principles to Sri Lankan cinema. Released in 1956, *Rekhava* represented a dramatic departure from the formulaic, studio-based filmmaking that had previously dominated the industry. Its production design prioritised on-location shooting, using natural environments to depict rural Sri Lankan life with unmatched authenticity. One year later, *Rekhava* (*Line of Destiny*), directed by Lester James Peries, brought these neorealist principles to Sri Lankan cinema. Filmed entirely on natural landscapes and existing locations (Gunawardana, 1971), Rekhava marked a significant departure from the studio-based, formulaic filmmaking that had previously defined Sri Lankan cinema. The film's visual analysis highlights that the production design prioritised authenticity and realism, avoiding artificial ornamental and highly decorated studio settings to accurately portray the Sri Lankan environment, society, culture, traditions, and daily life and rhythms. This attempt to create authenticity exemplified everyday scenes such as women weaving, children playing, and villagers repairing bicycles while integrating traditional elements like puppet shows and the Balitovil (spiritual folk ritual) ceremony. The applications of existing settings in *Rekhava* align with Baddock's (1991) assertion that authenticity in the film depends on accurately recreating specific environments, enabling the audience to perceive the cinematic world as credible. Demelo (2007) similarly argues that a well-executed production design blurs the distinction between created and real environments, encouraging viewers to accept the constructed world as truth. *Rekhava's*

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

production design embodies these principles, merging natural settings with narrative elements to create an immersive and authentic cinematic experience.

Rekhava garnered international recognition, earning accolades at the Cannes Film Festival and becoming the first Sri Lankan film to achieve international attention. (Uluwitiya, Conrich and Gillet, 2012). While gaining global recognition, Rekhawa achieved critical acclaim, with international critics praising it for its realistic and unembellished portrayal of Sri Lankan rural life. Anderson emphasised that its slow-paced narrative contributed to its authenticity (Anderson, 1957,p.25). Furthermore, Houston emphasised in Sight and Sound magazine that the film marked a significant departure from the Indian-inspired cinematic imagery that had previously dominated Sri Lankan films, offering a more realistic depiction of rural life (Lindsay, 1957, p. 99). The production design of *Rekhava*, while not explicitly credited in the preserved copy of the film, has been attributed to Titus Thotawatta. Although officially listed as the film's editor, Thotawatta played a significant role in shaping Rekhava's visual authenticity. This assertion was confirmed through an interview with Sumitra Peries (Peris, 2020), the wife of Lester James Peries, who revealed to the author that Thotawatta oversaw the film's production design. Scholars such as Weragama (2014,p.120) and Kumara (2006) later reinforced this claim, identifying Thotawatta as the *Kala Adyakshka* (Art Director). His innovative approach broke conventional norms, combining visual realism with cultural authenticity, and set a new standard for Sri Lankan cinema. Guided by Peries' vision, Thotawatta's work on *Rekhava* marked the beginning of a significant shift in Sri Lankan cinema. Peries' decision to work with an independent production designer, unbound by the conventions of studio-driven aesthetics, was deliberate. He sought to remove the decorative and overly formal styles in Indian cinema, particularly those imposed by South Indian studios. This independence allowed for a more authentic and culturally resonant visual style, aligning with Peries' neorealist approach. This pivotal decision made by Peries to use an independent production designer marked the beginning of a movement toward creative independence in Sri Lankan cinema. It also signalled the emergence of a new generation of production designers who were no longer confined to studio-driven formulas. Instead, these designers embraced the freedom to craft visual worlds that reflected Sri Lankan culture, environment, and identity.

Despite its artistic success and international acclaim, including recognition at the Cannes Film Festival, *Rekhava* faced challenges in resonating with local audiences. It lacked traditional commercial elements like songs and dance (Weragama, 2014,p.125). Nonetheless, the film's groundbreaking production design and storytelling set a benchmark for Sri Lankan cinema, paving the way for culturally authentic, independent filmmaking practices.

VI. Discussion – The Story of Production Design's Emergence in Sri Lankan Cinema

The emergence of production design in Sri Lankan cinema reflects a transformative interplay of socio-political, cultural, and economic factors. In its early years, Sri Lankan cinema heavily relied on South Indian studios for technical expertise and production infrastructure. Films like *Kadawunu Poronduwa* (1947) and *Ashokamala* (1947) bore a distinctly Indian visual aesthetic, creating a

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

dissonance between narratives rooted in Sri Lankan life and their visual representation. This lack of visual authenticity drew criticism from audiences and critics, highlighting the need for skilled professionals to craft visuals that resonated with local contexts. The Sri Lankan audience, well experienced in Indian cinema, readily discerned the pervasive Indian influence in early Sri Lankan films, which led to significant critique. This criticism centred on the need for a cinema that was not only visually authentic but also contextually grounded in the local cultural and social landscape. The demand for such films highlighted the growing call for a distinct national cinema—one that could reflect Sri Lanka's unique identity, diverging from the dominant Indian aesthetic that had previously shaped the country's cinematic representation.

Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 marked a turning point. The newly independent nation's aspirations spurred filmmakers to move away from Indian influences. Due to the political shift in Sri Lanka, travel restrictions were enacted, leading to increased travel and film production costs. This shift contributed to the establishment of local film studios, such as Sri Mayuragan Navakala (1951) and Navajeevana Movietone (1951), which played a crucial role in the development of indigenous expertise. In response, training programs were introduced to nurture local talent, initially with the guidance of Indian technicians. Over time, this evolution became evident in the film industry's credit sequences, where Sri Lankan names gradually replaced those of Indian technicians, signaling a significant move toward the nationalization and localization of the cinematic workforce.

The evolving terminology in film credits, transitioning from English terms like "Art Conception" to Sinhala phrases such as 'Chitra Sanvidanaya' (Art Organizing), signified the growing recognition of production design as a technical and artistic discipline. The term "Chitra," denoting art, image, and artist, encapsulated the production designer's role as a skilled creator of visually authentic narratives.

Kapati Arakshakaya (1948) represented a significant effort to respond to criticism by integrating Sri Lankan landscapes into its Indian studio-based production. By the time of *Amma* (1949), visual authenticity had gained traction, allowing narratives to resonate more closely with local environments. These films demonstrated how production design began to close the gap between narrative content and visual representation, marking a shift toward visually authentic storytelling in Sri Lankan cinema. The release of Rekhava (1956) symbolized this transformation. Departing from studio-based aesthetics, it embraced location-based realism to illustrate rural Sri Lankan life. While an individual was not credited as the production designer in the preserved film copy, research identified Titus Thotawatta as the production designer. His work in Rekhawa visualised a break from the decorative styles of Indian cinema, emphasizing simplicity and specificity in visual storytelling. Rekhava set a benchmark for visually convincing narratives, earning critical acclaim and establishing production design as a turning point in visual and narrative authenticity.

*Contact: Phone +94-714403399
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

This evolution from reliance on Indian influences to the emergence of independent professionals underscores the pivotal role of production design in shaping Sri Lankan cinema. By creating visually believable and authentic stories, production designers contributed significantly to making an identifiable, distinctive cinematic identity, affirming their place as essential collaborators in the film industry's journey toward artistic self-expression.

VII. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that production design was not merely a technical discipline but an integral aspect of Sri Lanka's cinematic transformation. It played a critical role in forging a distinctive visual language for Sri Lankan cinema, underscoring the broader implications of production design in national cinema movements and the pursuit of visual authenticity in postcolonial contexts. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between narrative, visual storytelling, and cultural representation in the early history of Sri Lankan filmmaking. The importance of this research lies in its ability to shed light on the pivotal role of production design in shaping national identity through cinema. Furthermore, it opens avenues for future research to explore the evolution of production design in postcolonial cinema, particularly in other South Asian contexts, and to investigate how visual styles continue to reflect and influence cultural and political narratives in contemporary film industries.

References

Anderson, L. (1957). Cannes 1957. Sight and Sound, 27 (1), 25.

Baddock, B. (1991). *Film, authenticity and language teaching*. The Language Learning Journal, 3 (1), 16–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571739185200061

Barnow, E., & Krishnaswamy, S. (1963). *Indian film*. Columbia University Press.

Cardullo, R. J. (2019). *Pather Panchali and the cinema of Satyajit Ray, reviewed*. South Asian Popular Culture, 17(1), 81–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1585618

Ceylon Government. (1965). *The report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Film Industry in Ceylon*. Government Press.

DeMelo, R. L. (2007). *The general principles of reality*. A. R.L. DeMelo.

Dissanayaka, J., & Rathnavibushana, M. (2000). *Early Sri Lankan cinema and its development*. Sarasavi Publishers.

Dissanayake, W. (2008). *The early phase of Sri Lankan cinema*. Asian Cinema, 19(2), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.19.2.4_1

Dissanayake, W., & Rathnavibhushana, A. (2000). *Profiling Sri Lankan cinema* (pp. 1–14). Asian Film Centre.

Gunawardana, A. J. (1971). *Theatre in Asia: An introduction. The Drama Review*: TDR, 15(2), 47–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144620

Hemapala Dharmasena. (2021, June 25). In-person interview with S. Fernando.

Jayakumar. (1949, August 21). *Amma* ('Mother') [Film]. Silumina Newspaper.

Jyothish, S. (Director). (1947). *Kadawunu Poronduwa* [Film]. Ceylon: Chithrakala Movietone.

Jyothish, S. (Director). (1948). *Kapati Arakshakaya* [Film]. Ceylon: Ceylon Theatre (Pvt) Ltd.

Kanthi, S. (1947, May 3). Sinhala Bauddhaya Newspaper.

Kartal, E. (2013). *Defining Italian Neorealism: A compulsory movement*. Cinej Cinema Journal, 2(2). http://cinej.pitt.edu. https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2013.73

Kashmeer, R. W., & Raj, A. B. (Directors). (1952). *Banda Nagarayata Pamineema* [Film]. Ceylon: Sri Murugan Nawakala Company.

Kumar, S. (Director). (1947). *Ashokamala* [Film]. Ceylon.

Lindsay, A. (1957). *A filmmaker in Ceylon - Lester Peries*. Sight and Sound, 27(2), 99–100.

Mannamperuma, E. (1963, October 13). Full series. Ceylon Observer, Sunday Edition, 16.

Mayurapada. (1947, April 27). Silumina Newspaper. Lake House Publications.

Mayurapada. (1947, July 15). *Review of Ashokamala*. Dinamina Newspaper*.

Monarawila. (1949, August 9). Peramuna Newspaper.

Contact: Phone +94-714403399

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12

Morayas, P. (1967, September 17). Ceylon Daily Mirror.
Musser, C. (2011). *Why did Negroes love Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer? Melodrama, blackface and cosmopolitan theatrical culture*. Film History: An International Journal, 23(2), 196–222. https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.23.2.196
Nayanajith, K. N. (2005). Sri Lankeya Sinama Wanshaya ('Sri Lankan Cinema Dynasty'). Sarasavi Publishers.
OCIC. (n.d.). Film annual of Sri Lanka. OCIC Publications.
Peiris, L. (Director). (1956). *Rekhawa* [Film]. Ceylon: Chithra Lanka.
Peris, A. (1947, March 29). Sinhala Balaya Newspaper. National Lanka Newspaper Company.
Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willemen, P. (Eds.). (1999). Encyclopedia of Indian cinema (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/978131506254
Ratnavibhushana, M., & Manzoor, A. (2012). Sri Lankan cinema in the 20th century. Sarasavi Publishers.
Savarimuththu, R. (1977). Development of Sinhala cinema (1947–1967) (pp. 16–44). OCIC Publications.
Senevirathne, D. V. (1958). Chithrapata Kalawa ('Film Art'). Anula Publications.
Sharma, M. (2008). *Neorealism in Italian cinema: 1942–55*. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 69, 952–964. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147257
Shoesmith, B. (2009). *Changing the guard*. Media History, 15(4), 439–452. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688800903211022
Sisil, W. (1947, July 22). *Critique of Ashokamala*. Lankadeepa Newspaper.
Sumithra Peris. (2020, September 3). In-person interview with S. Fernando.
Uluwitiya, T., Conrich, I., & Gillet, N. (2012). *Lester James Peries and the evolution of Sri Lankan cinema*. Asian Cinema, 19(2), 84–97. https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.19.2.84_1
Weragama, G. (2014). Deshiya Sinama Wanshaya ('Local Cinema Dynasty') (pp. 30–153). Sarasavi Publications.
Wimalaweera, S. (Director). (1951). Seedevi [Film]. Ceylon.
Wimalaweera, S. (Director). (1958). Ekamath Eka Rataka [Film]. Ceylon.
Wimalaweera, S. (Director). (1959). Ma Alya Kala Tharuniya [Film]. Ceylon.

**Contact: Phone +94-714403399*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.v2(2).2025.12