Fandom on display: intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle
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fandom on display

intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle

Tamil movie fans typically manifest themselves in public space during movie releases and other special occasions. Scattered all over Tamil Nadu their fan club organizations put up a plethora of billboards, posters and murals. With this 'fandom on display' fans pursue aspirations of power that seem to go beyond fan club's cinematic roots. This ethnography explores these diverse ambitions by looking at the images that fans produce, disseminate and consume. Images, I argue, are crucial for fans in engaging with their star, but they also assist in putting forward their own personas and hence they underpin desires and individual careers of power.

A second important focus of this dissertation situates fan images in Tamil Nadu's wider mediascape and public sphere. It investigates the role of urban space in the dissemination of political imaginations and aspirations. I show how new imaginations embedded in neoliberal, global imaginaries of "world class" which are articulated in public spaces are slowly changing the ways in which fans utilize public spaces, watch films and engage in socio-political networks. I show in the latter part of this dissertation how public space and the images present in them become the canvas on which these clashing and shifting discourses are played out.

fandom on display
intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle

ROOS GERRITSEN

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FANDOM ON DISPLAY
INTIMATE VISUALITIES AND THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus Prof. P. van der Heijden,
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties.
Te verdedigen op 8 november 2012
Klokke 15:00h

Door Roosje Gerritsen
geboren te Leiderdorp
In 1979

Promotiecommissie

Promotor: Prof. Dr. P. Spyer (Universiteit Leiden)
Overige leden: Prof. Dr. C. Brosius (Universität Heidelberg)
                 Dr. K. Jain (University of Toronto Mississauga)
                 Prof. Dr. P. ter Keurs (Universiteit Leiden)

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[1] The photo on the cover depicts a wall painting for Rajinikanth's birthday made by the late artist Ranjit. Pondicherry 2008.

CONTENT

Notes on language and figures

To keep the text of this dissertation readable for a broader public I have only used Tamil words where I think they are important to convey their meaning.[1] There exists a major difference between literary (or written) Tamil and spoken Tamil. Also, in spoken Tamil and its transliteration into Roman script, people spell words in a variety of ways. For example, two films that I write about regularly in this dissertation can be spelled *Shivaji* or *Sivaji*, *Endhiran* or *Enthiran*. A name like Satheesh can also be spelled Sathish. The name of the movie star Kamal Hassan can also be written Kamal Haasan, Kamalahasan or Kamalhassan. Also in newspapers, billboards and the like, whenever Roman script is used, the spelling can vary.

The use of English also changes the ways in which words are spelled in Tamil. Hotels,[2] canteens and street vendors that sell the staple food of Tamil Nadu, a selection of different dishes served with rice (*saappaadu* in Tamil) announce that lunch can be eaten with a signboard saying "meals ready" written phonetically in Tamil script as மில்ஸ் ரெடி (transliterated back literally as "mīls reddy").

Because this research is about the vernacular, about the everyday, I prefer to stay as close to the everyday experience as possible. For that reason, whenever I use Tamil words, I have not used one official orthographic way of writing them but have instead used a spelling that comes as close as possible to how the people with whom I worked would have used or encountered them, while also making it readable for a non-Tamil audience.

The photographs in this dissertation are all taken by the author unless stated otherwise. Wherever possible I have asked permission to publish photos that depict people. I have archived the work of several banner artists in Pondicherry by photographing their archival albums. When I use photos from these collections, I indicate the artists' names as the original source. Their work is also published with their permission.

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[1] The photo on the next page depicts a part of a political mural. Chennai 2011.
[2] A hotel is a common word for a restaurant in Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

The things that need saying step out of people, just as people step out of houses and begin to walk the street. Messages find walls, images their imprints, bodies leave traces.

People and pictures, objects and subjects, machines and meanings, wires, cables, codes, secrets and the things that need saying out loud crowd the streets, become the streets, and move, overwriting old inscriptions, turning in on themselves, making labyrinths and freeways, making connections, conversations and concentrations out of electricity.

(Raqs Media Collective 2002, 93)

Images come and go. They don't just float without direction; there is a logic and resonance in how they move (Larkin 2008).[1] In the words of Raqs Media Collective images crowd the streets and become the streets. Cityscapes in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry[2] are no different in that respect. They are dominated by hoardings, posters, murals, cutouts and other signboards of diverse styles and formats. Willingly or unwillingly these images become a presence that cannot be ignored. Typically, signboards present a plethora of stimuli displaying the most diverse range of products. Huge billboards may advertise jewelry, saris, underwear, mobile networks, new urban development plots, or the latest movie releases. In cityscapes such as these, buildings blend in with the billboards in-between. Shop fronts carry all sorts of ads on their shutters. Walls of buildings become vast displays of cement brands, underwear and all sorts of commercial paraphernalia. Unless clearly marked otherwise with the typical "stick no bill" sign, building façades and walls are sure to be painted with something. Whenever possible, their walls double as commercial advertisements that bear little or no relation to the shops that they shelter. Villages in Tamil Nadu are thus sometimes almost literally overshadowed by advertisements. Political imagery is even more pervasive, covering buildings and compound walls in political party symbols and images of their leaders. Cutouts in their turn, used to tower over cityscapes, displaying larger-than-life images of Tamil Nadu's main political leader and movie stars. Film stars like these present yet another of the city's visual tropes: their faces adorn movie posters and billboards but also appear on signboards belonging to photo studios, tailors or barbers who use them to attract customers.

As I navigated the towns and streets of Tamil Nadu, this whole visual landscape, a bombardment of signs and images, would become part of my everyday experience. I would have stopped noticing it at a certain point, I believe, if it hadn't been such a transient presence as well. Everything in this landscape could look strangely different, as if some of its characteristic forms and media had changed, disappearing from sight and trading places on the visual horizon with new ones that were now raising their heads.

The visual is not merely a way of describing a cityscape but rather a focal point where many

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[1] The picture on the title page depicts the ubiquitous signboards on the main shopping street in Pondicherry. Pondicherry 2008.

[2] For the sake of convenience I will refer to Tamil Nadu as a region which includes Pondicherry instead of always indicating the two formally separate states. The Union Territory of Pondicherry officially changed its name to Puducherry in 2006. Most people, however, still call it Pondicherry or Pondy. To avoid confusion, I will use its former name Pondicherry throughout this work.

phenomena overlap: film stardom, politics, publicity and the vernacular social world of fans. The intricate ways in which these overlaps come to the fore form the golden thread of this dissertation.

When I first arrived in Chennai in 2002, I experienced an initial disappointment. Despite being exhausted after my long journey from Amsterdam I looked around excitedly. Sitting in the back of the (then still) inevitable Ambassador car taking me to my hotel in the center of Chennai, I craned my neck, hoping to finally see the city's legendary cutouts, these huge figures of politicians, popular actors and cine-politicians (or any combination of the two) which I had heard so much about. The south Indian state of Tamil Nadu and its capital Chennai in particular were famous – notorious even – for their larger-than-life displays of political and cinematic heroes. But on my way to the hotel and during the next few days while travelling around the city, I could not spot a single one of these structures. Only at movie theaters did I manage to locate much smaller versions of the painted cutouts and hoardings publicizing the most recent film releases. My disappointment almost prevented me from noticing what was now becoming increasingly dominant in the city: vinyl banners made by fan clubs and political supporters that were populating walls, junctions, streets, film theaters and the like. Even though the spectacular, enormous painted image had diminished in presence, vinyl banners had replaced it and thereby changed the public realm considerably: not only in outlook but also in the ubiquity of their usage.

Film fan clubs actively contribute to the ubiquitous visual culture of Tamil Nadu's cities and towns. Movie releases and stars' birthdays reveal particular kinds of images. These images portray a selective range of local Tamil stars, and contain visual signs that give away the presence of their respective fan clubs. Figure 1 shows such an image. The signs and images that emanate from these fan clubs leave behind an ubiquitous trail of imagery that, despite being rather ephemeral, has a continuous, familiar face and hence one that can have a strong evocative effect (Holland 2004, 2).

1. Banner commissioned by a Rajinikanth fan club. Pondicherry 2006.

It is this ephemeral yet consistent and resonant trail of images marked out by fan clubs that I seek to explore in this dissertation, in particular the traces left by Tamil movie actor par excellence Rajinikanth. I focus on the question of how these practices traverse the cinematic and political worlds, as well as public spaces and public spheres. How should we understand this presence of vernacular images in Tamil Nadu's public spaces? What do these images tell us about their producers and their social worlds? This dissertation looks at some of these images that seemed to appear and be part of people's lives, only to disappear again to be replaced by something else.

Images articulate the desires, ambitions, political projects, and agency of their users. They are part of the everyday practices and experiences of their producers and consumers. At the same time images trigger and represent feelings of collectivity and resistance beyond the images themselves. In articulating collectivity and opposition they become central to how individuals and collectivities imagine and recognize themselves (Strassler 2010, 3). In other words, images are not simply reflections of social life, they are actively making it (Pinney 2004; Rajagopal 2001; Ramaswamy 2003; Spyer 2008a; Williams 1975). In a Baudrillardian sense they are hyperreal simulacra of social life as well as of film stars that do not simulate reality but become a reality of their own (Baudrillard 1994).

In this dissertation I explore the everyday experiences and articulations of fandom of film fan clubs members of one particular movie star, Rajinikanth. While people become fans primarily because of *filmi*[3] images of a movie actor, I argue that an actor's image is largely constructed through the images that circulate on the fringes of film (Thomas 1989). I am interested in revealing how mundane, vernacular images are tied up with larger political and social histories (see also Strassler 2010). It is the central argument of this dissertation that the monumental banners and posters actively shape the social worlds of fan clubs and individual fans, as do the more intimate commonplace images that fans keep and exhibit in the everyday space of their homes and close to their body. But the images discussed here are also situated in and contribute to a period in Tamil Nadu's history in which public space serves as a backdrop for various political constellations that fans have become or aspire to be part of. I will show how throughout the lives of fans the significance of fan club membership and fandom remain changeable and contested.[4] Images, I argue, play a key role in the articulation of fandom and the aspirations of power and prestige that it enacts. I define power as the ability to act or produce an effect. This effect, we will see, varies from obtaining film tickets to the establishment of sociopolitical networks through which fans attain visibility and recognition. The networks that I refer to here are networks of men through which they negotiate political power. This becomes crucial especially in the context of Tamil Nadu's personality politics.

Hence, images play a role in a double sense: firstly as a popular conception of someone and secondly as a visual representation. By looking at the role of the image, I reveal how it mediates the image of a movie star for individual fans as well as that it produces fan clubs as networks that herald a particular kind of politics based on personalities, charisma and patronage. The early

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[3] *Filmi* is the word indicating popular film music in India. Here however, I use the term more freely to indicate a relationship with film. So *filmi* images are images of or relating to films.

[4] See also Mankekar who argues that viewers have "variable and active interpretations of televisual texts" which makes meaning "unstable and is frequently contested by viewers, historical subjects, living in particular discursive formations, rather than positioned by any single text" (1993, 543)

dovetailing of cinema and politics, we will see, explains why the singling out of cine-stars and cine-politicians has become so important.

Another important focus of this dissertation is the role of urban space in the dissemination of political imaginations and aspirations. We will see how new imaginations embedded in neoliberal, global imaginaries of "world class" which are articulated in the built environment and public spaces (Brosius 2010) are slowly changing the ways in which fans utilize public spaces, watch films and engage in socio-political networks. The ways in which neoliberalism in Tamil Nadu appears and how it attracts and caters for a rising middle class seems to displace lower middle class groups to which most fans belong. This shift in attention reveals itself in political projects in which political parties try to distance themselves from the image of populist personality politics. Moreover, it reveals itself in public spaces in which movie theaters change their audience and images exhibited on streets get harder to be placed. For fan clubs these changes signify that the manners in which they have created networks that make the system work for them are less and less workable. It shows how in Tamil Nadu, just as in other places, neoliberalization widens the gap between different types of public, particularly between rich and poor. This change becomes clear throughout the chapters of the dissertation, in which I take images as part of this change.

This dissertation does not seek to offer an ethnographic account of fan clubs in South India. This work is by no means intended to cover fan clubs or fandom as an entity. Instead I look at the grassroots ways in which images produce and articulate fame and power in the form of a celebrity and in the social worlds of fans. Urban spaces and the profiling and rivalry via images become the canvasses of urban politics. This makes my approach different from earlier works on fan clubs and the close relations between cinema and politics. While previous works on fan clubs have predominantly investigated the political agency of fans (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009), and while Tamil Nadu's dovetailing of cinema and politics has been looked at in terms of the blurring of images of stars (through film or popular culture) (Jacob 2009; Pandian 1992), I want to stress the importance of the vernacular image practices of fans.[5] These practices tell us something about the ways in which politics, visual culture and urban space come together. Images shape a fan's social world and the use of public space for politics. The term "politics" as I use it here refers to the negotiation of relations, mostly between men, in which fans attempt to let the system work for them. I use the term politicking specifically to indicate the various practices, interaction and regimes of value that fan activity brings with it.

This approach also turns it into an ethnographic account of images that circulate and resonate in everyday spaces of the domestic and the public. I am interested in these cinematic fringes and the tangible ways in which social life revolves around film and film stars. This shift away from relating fandom exclusively to the cinema enables us to include the embodied, political and spatial practices and images related to fan activity. In the following sections I will outline several of the themes, concepts and histories in which fan activity and image practices in particular can be situated.

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5 I elaborate on these works in other chapters.

Fans and stars

Dear friends, I have officially joined the list of those who have become infected with a virus which affects the senses and spreads to everybody around. The virus has been identified as a seasonal one, that which [sic] comes into existence every time that a film of a certain actor called "SUPERSTAR RAJINI" releases all over the world. The virus induces restlessness, anxiety, sleeplessness, feverish excitement, strange sensations and a nonstop recitation of two words – "Rajini" and "Shivaji".

The virus is called 'SHIVAJI' VIRUS

Kaza Raja

This message was posted by Kaza Raja on the Yahoo Group RajinifansDiscussions (at Rajinifans. com) a few weeks before the long awaited release of *Sivaji: The Boss* (Shankar 2007). Kaza Raja uses the metaphor of a virus, "the causative agent of an infectious disease"[6] to indicate the anxiety experienced by him and others in the run-up to the release of the latest film starring his movie hero Rajinikanth. But there is more to it than that. The virus is highly contagious and, as Kaza Raja put it, creates all kinds of sensorial effects. His metaphor of the virus suggests on the one hand a personal and physical experience and on the other it plays up the causative infectiousness of the movie release: you cannot help but get infected by it; it spreads in many ways and is thus collectively experienced by a larger group.

The sixty-one-year-old Rajinikanth, Kaza Raja's film hero, is probably the most famous and popular movie star of the Tamil film industry and certainly the one with the biggest fan following in terms of organized fan clubs. Rajinikanth's star persona is the result of his being continually typecast in certain roles and styles. Rajinikanth comes from an underprivileged background: his supposedly modest lifestyle is a point of familiarity and connection for audiences. Yet Rajinikanth is as much a self-made star as a public persona who has been actively shaped and molded through fan pressure persuading him to take on the same type of role time after time. Almost all the feature movies in which Rajinikanth tried to move away from his conventional role proved unsuccessful. Even though the frequency of his films has decreased somewhat of late and although Rajinikanth's advanced age has reduced his flexibility in dancing and fighting scenes, he remains extremely popular with a large section of Tamil-speaking audiences.

As well as Rajinikanth, several other actors of various generations make up the Tamil movie industry and its acting scene. Yet the generation of movie stars, led by the actors Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan in particular, that came to the fore in the 1970s, still appeals to new generations of fans, even though they are now joined by a younger generation of actors such as Vijay, Ajith, Simbu and Danush. Tamil star actors are mostly men: actresses may be renowned as well, but their male counterparts remain the major heroes in films.

In this dissertation I am not particularly concerned with celebrities and how their persona attracts fans. Instead I want to provide an ethnography of the socio-political worlds of fans and

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[6] Virus. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved April 29 2009, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virus.

their engagement with images. Films are watched passionately in Tamil Nadu.[7] Although families visit film theaters less frequently than they used to – particularly nowadays with the widespread coverage of television networks, satellite channels, DVDs and VCDs – young men continue to spend time at theaters watching films. Most of them have one particular star that they really like, one star that they are dedicated to as a fan. Many young men in Tamil Nadu are therefore also often a member of a fan club.

Fan clubs of movie stars (*rasigar manram*) are widespread throughout Tamil Nadu; their number often runs into the tens of thousands dedicated to one actor alone. Their members consist mostly of men and they are devoted to local, Tamil movie actors, in whose names they organize certain events. Fans go and watch their heroes' films together in local movie theaters; they celebrate the stars' birthdays and share the latest news they have picked up about their star. These are leisure activities, but fan club members themselves emphasize their philanthropic outlook by their involvement in social work. In the name of their heroes they donate blood or distribute schoolbooks, saris, and food, especially on the occasion of their star's birthday or on other important occasions. Moreover, once fan club members are a bit older, they become active in local political and patronage networks. In several instances, actors have started their own political parties: while they entered politics, their fan clubs transformed themselves into party cadres.

All major male Tamil film heroes have their own fan clubs. The number of fan clubs devoted to actors corresponds directly to their popularity. The older, established Tamil movie stars have a relatively stable base of fan clubs, whereas younger actors depend on their movies' success as well as on their fan clubs' activities. There are hardly any fan clubs dedicated to actresses, although there are a few exceptions to this rule. The first, which is not really a fan club, is the temple built for actress Kushboo by her fans in the southern city of Trichy. The temple was later demolished by protesters who objected to Kushboo's controversial remarks on premarital sex. In addition, in 2006, a fan club was founded in the name of Tamil actress Trisha. As far as I am aware, the fan club, consisting of male members, is still active, and primarily conducts social work in Trisha's name. But the number of fan clubs for and activities organized in the name of actresses remains limited.

The number of fan clubs for Tamil male actors is impressive, although exact figures are difficult to verify. Rajinikanth, for example, has put a limit on the number of fan club registrations, restricting the number of fan clubs to about 20,000, with an average of ten to thirty members per club. However, this does not hold his fans back from starting new, unregistered, clubs. When these clubs are taken into account as well, the number of his fan clubs probably doubles. Some fans[8] estimate the number of official Rajinikanth fan clubs to be around 70,000. Vijayakanth, another contemporary movie star who started a political party in 2005, had a fan base of an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 fan clubs (Swaminathan 2004, 13). Younger actors such as Vijay, Ajith and Surya also have a considerable number of fan clubs dedicated to them. For Surya it is said that there are 25,000 registered clubs in Tamil Nadu and several thousand more if we include Kerala, Mumbai and some other cities.[9] These numbers are not reliable, though, as fans tend to

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[7] See Derné 2000b; Dickey 1995; Mankekar 2002 for ethnographic accounts of film watching in India.

[8] When speaking about fans, I am referring to fans who are members of a fan club.

[9] Stated by the leader of the Surya fan club, Madhavan. Chennai 10 December 2009.

quote higher numbers and official fan club documents relating to the main organization were not accessible to me at the time.

The number of memberships is also dependent on the area, as most fans come from a lower socio-economic background. Fans often belong to working class or middle class neighborhoods; they are employed as auto rickshaw drivers, bicycle and motorbike mechanics, and lower-grade clerks in government offices; or they run a shop of their own, a tea stall or a small business and some young men are lower middle class college students (Dickey 1993b; Jeffrey 2010; Rogers 2009; S. V. Srinivas 2009). The fans higher up in the fan club hierarchy, as I will explain in Chapter 4, are often also economically better off by being involved in all kinds of business, from money lending, and construction work to the real estate business.

Fan activity is labeled a lower class activity. For this reason, many young men of more affluent backgrounds are not allowed by their parents to be a fan club member. However, it is noteworthy that affluent or more educated young men do become actively involved on virtual fan platforms (see also Punathambekar 2008). When I started my fieldwork in 2006, there were two main online fan websites run by fans. In the meantime, social networking platforms such as Orkut[10] and Facebook have seen their numbers of online fans rising, mostly on web pages dedicated to the newer generation of Tamil film stars. The website rajinifans.com pioneered this online fan activity. It is run by men who work primarily in the IT sector in Chennai. They have kept the site in English and not in Tamil to include NRIs (non-residential Indians, the official term used in India to refer to Indian nationals living abroad) working in the Gulf States, Singapore, the USA or Europe. The members can follow news on Rajinikanth on the website and a Yahoo Group is used to post messages containing news, expressions of the desire to see Rajinikanth and imaginings of what films will look like, such as the one posted by Kaza Raja.

Internal socio-economic divisions mean that less affluent fans hardly participate in these online fan sites, first of all because they do not have regular access to the internet, but also because of the language barrier, as most of the "on the ground" fans do not speak (sufficient) English. Even though one could clearly see the class distinctions in fan activity, caste or religious stratifications do not seem to play a noticeable role in urban fan clubs. Most fan clubs consist of men of various religious and caste backgrounds and their members are active in all levels of the fan club hierarchy. I did not observe any socially impeding stratifications within the fan club environments that I followed closely. In rural fan clubs, however, I did observe divisions of fan clubs into Dalit and non-Dalit areas, or the so-called colony and village proper.[11] Even though these rural environments were not within the range of my research and therefore I cannot make any obvious conclusions, it seemed to me that the colony and non-colony fan clubs in rural environments were working together and low caste men had high positions within the fan club. The main reason for the separation of fan clubs into colony and non-colony seemed to be the fact that young men start a fan club in the place they live and therefore are bound to the social

[10] Orkut is a social networking website like Facebook. At the time of my research it was much more popular than Facebook in India.

[11] Due to caste discrimination, Dalits commonly live in the outskirts of villages, clearly separated from the village itself. They are often cut off from basic amenities and infrastructures.

structure of their immediate living environment. Because of the apparent irrelevance of caste and religious distinctions as I observed it throughout my research, I will not pay explicit attention to this subject.

Tamil film stars and politics

Fan clubs are not unique to Tamil Nadu but they do not exist all over India, and especially not in the form and numbers in which they can be found in Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu they stem from a rather specific history in which film and politics have become mutually reinforcing. Since the end of the 1960s the state has been ruled by Chief Ministers who started their careers in the movie industry. The first major film star to become Chief Minister, M.G. Ramachandran, commonly known as MGR, was also the first film star with active fan clubs that supported him, both in his capacity as a film star and as that of a politician. From MGR's era onwards, fan clubs have become a permanent presence with their own aspirations in terms of film watching as well as in politics. Before describing the ways in which fan clubs engage with cinema and politics and how the production of images plays a role therein, I first need to give an outline of the history of cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu.

India has many regional movie industries, catering to the various language groups that define India's different states. Chennai is the center of the Tamil film industry, sometimes called Kollywood after the neighborhood Kodambakkam where most studios are situated.[12] It is one of the largest film industries in India, producing between 150 and 200 films each year (Velayutham 2008).

Despite the size of Kollywood, Bollywood, the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai, is by far the most recognized of India's film industries. Its global circulation and the public's increasing fascination with it have made it the dominant film industry in terms of attention in- and outside academia. It has left India's other film industries in its wake, "provincializing" them, as they are often dismissed as regional cinema (see also Velayutham 2008). The frustration felt in Tamil Nadu regarding this status of regionality is offset by the occasional moment of joy. So it is with great pride that Rajinikanth fans continually mention that their actor is the second highest paid in Asia: not after Rajinikanth's celebrated contemporary of Hindi cinema, Amitabh Bachchan, but after Jackie Chan, the world-famous actor from Hong Kong. In addition, fans recount with pleasure that *Endhiran* (Shankar 2010), one of the latest Rajinikanth movies was the most expensive film ever made in India and the biggest release of an Indian film around the world.[13] My mentioning these details is not a counter attempt to provincialize Bollywood, or Hollywood for that matter, but rather to put the Tamil film industry in a broader perspective. With more than eighty million potential viewers in India and abroad and an annual film production above that of

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[12] See Baskaran 1996; Dickey 1995; Forrester 1976; Hardgrave 1964; Hughes 1996; Hughes 2006; Irshick 1969; Pandian 1992; Prasad 1999; Sivathamby 1981a; Velayutham 2008 for more in-depth accounts of Tamil cinema.

[13] Films songs are officially released weeks or even months before the actual film release. The circulation of songs creates a desire to see the film (see also Manuel 1993). The soundtrack to the film, which was composed by the famous music composer A.R. Rahman, was the bestselling album in the iTunes store in the days after *Endhiran*'s music release in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Official *Endhiran the Robot* website. http://www.endhirantherobot.com/endhiran-audio-songs.htm Retrieved 11 December 2011.

Bollywood one could hardly call the Tamil film industry regional, if regional denotes a marginal status on the fringes.

Chennai, formerly Madras, is one of the three centers, together with Mumbai and Kolkata, where cinema arrived and settled in colonial India in the late 1890s.[14] In the early days of film screening in colonial Madras, silent films were not restricted by linguistic or social identification or stratification and hence brought several language groups to the film theater: "Rather than as a medium of some already existing linguistic group, the silent cinema innovated its own language of address. Compared to other cultural forms of music, literature, drama, the emerging public institution of the cinema in south India worked to allow castes, classes and communities as well as women, children and families to participate and mix in new public ways within a new kind of social space" (Hughes 2006, 34; see also Sivathamby 1981). The first screenings were primarily dramas and serials from overseas, starring movie actors such as Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln who were extremely popular at the time (Baskaran 1996; Hughes 2006). These stars had a huge fan following in South India (Hughes 2006) and were the first to have fan clubs devoted to them.[15] These fan clubs, however, were completely different in structure, activity and class formation to what they would later become.

Besides the foreign films and serials that were screened, from the 1910s Indian films began to be shown as well. This initiated the beginning of a distinctive film industry. Pioneers set up studios and production companies in Madras and other cities in the Madras Presidency (Thoraval 2000; Velayutham 2008) and when sound was introduced into films, the scene changed completely. Indian productions increased in number and became popular at once. Their popularity ended the American domination on screen (Thoraval 2000).

The introduction of sound resulted in films that were similar to Indian or Tamil Nadu theater traditions, as they could now include songs and dance and portray stories that Indian audiences were familiar with from the theater. The first sound feature films were portrayals of mythological stories and included around fifty songs. But sound also brought with it language issues as now the film itself and not the accompanying entertainment of the film had to make the story understandable to its audience. As India has no lingua franca that is understood across the whole country, filmmakers started to make films in different languages. The pioneer studios and production companies turned Madras into the location of a booming film industry in the following years.

In the meantime, resistance in India against the colonial regime grew, heralding what appears to be the first link between film and politics. As with theater productions, films were used to criticize colonial rule and refer to India's independence (Bhatia 2004). Theater performances in Tamil Nadu were already articulating social reform and conveying political messages. As many theater actors shifted to the film industry, they implemented their political and social commitment there as well. With a growing desire for independence in India, theater as well as film was used to convey criticism of colonial rule.

In Tamil Nadu this criticism was not only directed against the British but also against Brahmin hegemony in South India. This period in Tamil Nadu's history was marked by a strong re-

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14 Chennai's former name is Madras; Mumbai's name Bombay and Kolkata's name Calcutta.

15 Personal conversation with Theodore Baskaran, 23 May 2008.

gionalist discourse in politics, which also flourished after independence, emphasizing the distinctive Dravidian history and Tamil nationalist ideologies.[16] I will not address the larger narratives of how Dravidian politics have been played out on a Tamil Nadu state level as others have done that already in great detail. In this dissertation I am largely interested in the vernacular politics of fans and how images come to play an important role therein. Even though a sense of "Tamilness" becomes important in the images discussed in the last chapter, I think the ways in which, at state level, Dravidian history has been put forward has already been discussed extensively. Let me just give a short overview of how Dravidian ideology has come to play a role in past and recent state ideologies.

The anti-Brahmin sentiments before and after independence were propagated by a Dravidian movement called the Justice Party and later the DK (*Dravida Kazhagam* or Dravidian Party), led by E.V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973), popularly known as Periyar (meaning great one or great leader in Tamil). The DK was the first movement that called for a separate Dravidian state. The movement opposed the hegemony of Brahmins and North India and had a strong anti-religious stance (Bate 2009; Hardgrave 1964; Irshick 1969; Pandian 2007; Price 1996; Ramaswamy 1997; Subramanian 1999). The movement argued that a north Indian, Sanskritic Hinduism had spread to the South, resulting in the domination of Brahmins in positions of power and the suppression of women and subaltern castes. The rich Dravidian civilization, it was argued, was being suppressed and the north Indian tradition had brought social structures such as the caste system and Brahmin Hinduism. The movement defied these social malpractices and aimed to restore Dravidian civilization. The rich Dravidian culture was said to find expression in the Tamil language and literature traditions and had to be revitalized and celebrated. Moreover, because of north Indian oppression, social reform should do away with the existing caste system and Brahmin religious traditions. Within this Dravidian nationalist paradigm politicians engaged in practices that, even though they themselves were openly anti-religious, drew heavily on religious forms such as processions through public spaces, pilgrimages and public meetings that displayed a similar logic as worship (Bate 2009, xvi).

Periyar's strong presence in the movement started to agitate other members. Periyar for instance did not want to make the movement into a political party to contest the elections. Moreover, he was fierce in his anti-religious, anti-Brahmin standpoint. A group of DK members who did not feel comfortable with this vehemence and who wanted to continue as a political party split and founded the DMK (*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, Dravidian Progress Party). Scriptwriters, directors, movie stars and others involved in the cinema industry were drawn to the DMK. As a result, the party attracted massive crowds with its pervasive use of cinema's heroic images and movie stars.

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[16] For in-depth discussions on the Dravidian movement and a political history of Tamil Nadu see (Bate 2009; Hardgrave 1964; Irshick 1969; Pandian 2007; Price 1996; Ramaswamy 1993; Ramaswamy 1997; Subramanian 1999; Widlund 2000).

Politics and film

Many DMK members came from the field of theater, including its first leader, C.N. Annadurai. Annadurai, a dramatist, writer, director, and producer, was a charismatic rhetorician (Hardgrave 1964, 401; Widlund 1993, 9) who, in combination with the mobilization of movie stars to attend party rallies, attracted thousands of people and resulted in a growing electorate (Dickey 1993b, 343; Hardgrave 1964, 400–401). The public was drawn to party rallies by the new popular movie stars such as MGR, K.R. Ramaswamy, Sivaji Ganesan and S.S. Rajendran whose fame spread with the extension of cinema to rural areas through electrification (Sivathamby 1981). Movie actors for their part were drawn towards the DMK because of its position in the film industry as owners of film companies (Widlund 1993, 11) and its generous awards and grants to encourage the cinema industry in Tamil Nadu (Jacob 1997, 152). For artists, being linked with the DMK was founded on a desire to become famous (Hardgrave 1964, 401) and by the fact that the DMK sponsored cultural events on political subjects (Widlund 2000, 65). The DMK for their part used the artists to attract the public to their party rallies and as such enlarge their voting base.

From this period until the 1970s films addressed moral imperatives with social realist themes such as caste discrimination, the struggles of the poor and family relations (Velayutham 2008, 4). The emphasis on social reform in the 1950s and 1960s was increasingly explicitly related to party propaganda for the DMK. The close relationships between film stars, directors and politics heralded decades in which films were used for political (particularly DMK) publicity. Films of all genres, from mythological and social to melodrama, were infused with political imagery and rhetoric relating to the political subjects the party was interested in at the time (Thoraval 2000). Annadurai's portrait, the DMK symbol of the rising sun, the party colors red and black and dialogues and songs referring to the party were inserted into films (Widlund 1993, 11). In addition, the party's publicity material started to be modeled on the visual vocabulary of film publicity by using similar pictorial conventions. In this shared visual language of film and politics banner artists used similar colors for political as well as cinematic cutouts, murals and banners. The public culture that developed in Tamil Nadu out of this close relationship between film and politics prefigured the fan club imagery that is the subject of this dissertation.

Mgr and the cine-political connections

MGR (1917-1987) was one of Tamil Nadu's most prolific movie stars and Chief Minister, and he was also the star with the first mass fan club following. MGR acted in 136 films; his last film was released in 1978, a year after he had become Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. In 1950 MGR joined the DMK. He attended party rallies and acted in movies containing DMK party messages. This was of mutual advantage; MGR gave the DMK a face with his status as movie star and the DMK gave MGR a platform on which to develop himself as a movie star and politician. Rapidly, MGR became extremely popular. Now he was in a position to control the content of his movies which were directed towards DMK propaganda. However, by being in charge, he was careful to maintain his own separate image which was not entirely merged with the DMK (Dickey 1993a; Sivathamby 1981). MGR exerted control over his image as well as film production of the films he appeared in (Pandian 1992; Prasad 1999). For example, MGR demanded that producers

sign a contract stating that his image should always be bigger than that of the heroine or other characters in the movie.[17]

Another way that personalized MGR's political career was the existence of his fan clubs which formed an organizational structure parallel to that of the DMK.[18] During MGR's participation in the DMK, fan clubs that voluntarily worked for the party began to spring up throughout Tamil Nadu in his name. The first fan clubs were founded in the early 1950s and they were made formal in 1961.[19] Even though the fan clubs had been founded by MGR's film fans, political support was part and parcel of the club's subsequent activities. Thus the early days of MGR's cinematic and political popularity serve as a substantial point of reference relevant to contemporary fan club practices in which film as well as political networks have come to play a role. The fan clubs were involved in promoting MGR's films by pasting posters and banners and in party recruitment and voter mobilization through campaigning practices. An older fan of Sivaji Ganesan in Pondicherry, Napoleon Anthony, who was first a DMK member told me how the DMK was carefully molding MGR's popularity:

> I was with the DMK party for five years. I had to clap for MGR when I was watching MGR movies. At the time, N.S. Ilango was head of the Tamil Nadu DMK. He ordered DMK members to watch and clap MGR movies to promote MGR. When he visited Pondicherry for a meeting he asked us to promote MGR movies in order to help grow the party. Organizers of the fan club paid money to people to get tickets so that they could clap. What happens if the public hears the sound of clapping? They also start clapping. That's how they cultivated MGR's image.

MGR's fan clubs were devoted to MGR but his political activities made fans participate in political activities as well. This was not straightforward devotion, as many fans, particularly more established fans in the club, had political ambitions of their own (Dickey 1993b).

Fan clubs were not the only associations in which politics manifested itself. Along with the rise of Tamil or Dravidian nationalism in Tamil Nadu informal and formal associations from literary societies to film fan clubs developed (Subramanian 1999, 44). Even though these associations were affiliated to the party, they enjoyed substantial autonomy with local leaders being more influential for local support than those at the top (*ibid.*). Yet, during MGR's DMK membership the All World MGR Fans Association (*Akila Ulaga MGR Rasigar Manram*) was not considered an element of the party and was looked down upon by politicians within the party (Dickey 1993b, 362).

After DMK leader Annadurai died and Karunanidhi took over the reins of the party, Karunanidhi felt threatened by MGR's popularity. He attempted to weaken MGR's position within the party by promoting his son and film actor Muthu (Subramanian 1999, 243–244). The film plots written by Karunanidhi were clearly drawing on MGR films and Muthu imitated MGR's gestures. Moreover, Muthu fan clubs were formed by loyal supporters of Karunanidhi

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[17] Personal conversation with 'film news' Anandan 18 May 2008.

[18] A contemporary of MGR, Sivaji Ganesan (1928-2001) also had fan clubs devoted to him. Sivaji Ganesan also followed a political path by joining the Congress Party and had his fans to support him but never achieved MGR's level of success in politics. In film, however, he was and still is widely respected.

[19] His first fan club was founded in 1954 by the Tamil Brahmin Kalyanasundaram, who in earlier times sold film song books at movie theaters and later on worked at the MGR-owned Sathya Studio in Madras (Pandian 1992, 30).

and MGR's fan clubs were approached and forced to change into Muthu fan clubs. The fan clubs protested and said they would disaffiliate from the DMK (Swaminathan 2004). But Muthu was not successful as a film star and failed to achieve the public image of MGR.

MGR for his part was not amused by the fact that his fan clubs had been approached in this way and felt the opposition against him rising. He also felt as if he was being overlooked in the party. After a conflict MGR was removed from the DMK and he announced the formation of his own party, the ADMK (*Annadurai Dravidar Munnetra Kazhagam*, Annadurai Dravidian Progress Party). The more than 10,000 branches[20] of the MGR association (*MGR manram*) transformed into party cadres and several ADMK leaders had their origins in the fan club (Pandian 1992).

It should be noted, however, that most fans did not attain political posts; this was only the case for fan club leaders higher up in the fan club structure. Most fans kept on working for the ADMK at grassroots level by campaigning for local candidates, fund-raising, assisting at party rallies, carrying out social work, and promoting re-releases of MGR movies (Widlund 1993, 25). The social work consisted of practical help in neighborhoods by mediating between the "neighborhood and the government or by making government programs accessible to those entitled to them" (*ibid.*).

In 1977, after the first elections that MGR and his party participated in, MGR became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and continued to occupy this post until his death in 1987. His popularity as Chief Minister was undoubtedly the result of his immense popularity as a movie star: MGR, "the hero of the downtrodden." Both as an actor and politician, MGR remained extremely popular during both his DMK and AIADMK period. This is remarkable since Tamil Nadu did not fare well under his governance (Subramanian 1999; Widlund 1993, 17). Voters were critical of the AIADMK but never of MGR himself. MGR seemed not to be interested in long-term structural issues but relied for his popularity on charity and welfare schemes. Welfare schemes and donations are still highly important in establishing a political image.[21]

The popularity of MGR was still a burden for the DMK and they started to attack the use of cinema, even though they themselves had made use of it previously. Karunanidhi, frustrated by MGR's success now referred to the ADMK as the "*Nadigar Katchi*" (party of the actor) (Pandian 1992, 123). The DMK tried to remind people, unsuccessfully, that cinema and politics were different worlds. They wrote propaganda songs, which were sung at party rallies, in which cinema was described as misleading. This shift is noteworthy as it prefigured the many ambivalences that were to appear with regard to the close relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu.

MGR died in 1987. His funeral procession was attended by over two million people, there were several incidences of self-immolation and more than twenty-five people committed suicide out of grief over his death (Pandian 1992). After his death, Jayalalitha, MGR's co-actress and alleged mistress, eventually took over the leadership of the ADMK. Jayalalitha carefully molded her image as politician by relying on MGR's fame. From the beginning of her political career until the moment she could stand her ground, it was the cinematic association with MGR that gave her authority. In her account of Jayalalitha's public representations, Preminda Jacob (1997)

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[20] "According to India Today (Nov. 15, 1984) it had 15,000 branches with 1.8 million members in 1984" (Widlund 1993, 25).

[21] In Chapter 3 I will say more about how politics and politicking in Tamil Nadu rely on patronage and gift donations.

2. Wall painting displaying MGR (left) and Jayalalitha (middle and right) commissioned by AIADMK party members. Chennai 2010.

illustrates how devote, victorious and iconic images of Jayalalitha and MGR constitute Jayalalitha's propaganda in which she clearly displayed her dependency on MGR. By showing her images on billboards and posters with MGR looking down at her, as if he is approving her rule, Jayalalitha was able to transfer MGR's "divine" image onto herself. However, once she established her own reputation, MGR's presence in visual propaganda was reduced to almost nothing (Jacob 1997, 144). MGR's fans, older adepts and party members did not appreciate Jayalalitha's neglect of MGR. A few years earlier she had been heavily criticized for the fact that the publicity images of the AIADMK hardly contained any images of MGR.[22] After this complaint, MGR's image seems have returned in impressive numbers.

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[22] Although political supporters seem to devote themselves to their leader through the manifold devotional images that they display, looking closely at the stories and image practices of these supporters shows that the relations with party leaders are highly ambivalent. Also in the context of fans and the images they display, the images cannot be seen as mere expression of cinematic devotion. I will show how also for contemporary fans, the ways in which they display images of their star reveal a fine balance between devotion, prestige and political gain.

A new generation of stars

The political dominance in film stories disappeared as, in the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of movie stars, with Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan as most popular actors, came to the fore. The films that came into vogue in this period can be described as melodramatic stories with a strong social component. The films are often set in rural environments and venerate the innocent, honest, rural populace, and also repeatedly glorify the Tamil language, people and culture (Velayutham 2008).[23] The film's hero usually fights injustice imposed by an evil person towards the honest but helpless people. A love interest between the hero and heroine runs through the story, their romance being expressed in songs (see e.g. Dwyer 2004; Gopalan 1997; Taylor 2003). More recent films, from the 1990s onwards, have focused increasingly on urban environments and middle class audiences as well.

But politics have not disappeared from the film industry as will become clear throughout this dissertation. The leaders of the main political parties in Tamil Nadu still have links to the movie or media industry and it is alleged that many politicians launder money through film productions. Most films are produced with money issued by the DMK, and several political parties own television channels and newspapers. With the latest change of government in 2011, the film industry was relieved that the DMK had been replaced by the AIADMK. Almost the entire film industry, from film production, distribution and screening to the sale of rights is dominated by a few production houses owned by relatives of Karunanidhi. Kalanidhi Maran, a relative of Karunanidhi is the chairman of Sun TV, one of the biggest television networks. Udhayanidhi Stalin is a movie producer and owner of Red Giant Movies. He is the grandson of Karunanidhi and son of M.K. Stalin who is also a politician and former actor. Dhayanidhi Azhagiri, another grandson of Karunanidhi is the owner of the Cloud Nine Movies and is also a cinema producer and distributor. Also his father, M. K. Azhagiri, is a politician. (Ravikumar 2011). The smaller film production companies in particular have complained in recent years of not being able to enter the market because of a lack of funds for production and nowhere to screen the film among other things.

As well as MGR, Jayalalitha and Karunanidhi, there are other movie stars who were or are politically active. Fan clubs also still reinforce the political ambitions of their members. Many movie stars affiliate themselves to political parties and some movie stars start their own party. When they are young they are usually not connected to any party but once they get older and more established in the film industry their fans and political parties start to push them towards a political affiliation. Movie star Vijayakanth started the DMDK in 2005. Just as with MGR, his fan clubs changed into party cadres. In Chapter 3, however, I will show how fans have not played an important role in his party and have been very disappointed with the failure of their own political careers. In 2007 movie star Sarath Kumar started the AISMK[24] after serving in the DMK and AIADMK respectively. And then we have Rajinikanth, the popular star whom many hoped would start his own party. But, despite waiting since 1996, an announcement fails to appear. He makes just enough remarks or statements of support to parties during elections that fans continue to believe that one day he will enter politics.

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[23] See Ramaswamy for an account of the Tamil language as it is embodied as the essence of Tamil culture (1997).

[24] *Akila India Samatuva Makkal Katchi* or All India Equality People's Party.

Fan clubs as networks

I have described this initial period of Tamil film, film stars and their involvement with politics at length because the initial period in the development of the film industry and the formation of fan clubs cannot be seen separately from political projects at the time.[25] My aim in providing this history was to show how these practices prefigure a more recent period in which fans engage with movie stars and politics. It has been argued that fan clubs and particularly their local leaders employ their membership to attain political power (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009). This is largely explained by the fans' own background, coming from the urban poor. The question remains as to why fans would desire political power through film and fan clubs? And why is the fan following of actors such as Rajinikanth or newer generations of stars as large as for MGR without the political involvement of their stars? In other words, what has film to do with fans' political intentions? What kind of communities do fan clubs give rise to that routinely involve themselves in politicking as well? And how should we define the power that fans are aiming for?

Miriam Hansen has put forward the notion of cinema as an alternative public sphere, "as a medium that allows people to organize their experience on the basis of their own context of living, its specific needs, conflicts, and anxieties"(M. B. Hansen 1994, 108). It seems that fans employ the fan network for their own needs and ambitions in the sense that Hansen suggested, as an alternative public sphere. I want to emphasize, however, that I do not consider fan clubs as countercultural public spheres in contrast to elite political practice as commonly discussed. As most fans are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it seems an easy conclusion that fan clubs and film itself form a counterculture in which fans from their powerless position react to the elite. However, I want to demonstrate that fan clubs are more than simply places to connect to film stars. Fans are engaged in a system of brokerage and patronage relationships for themselves and not in a reaction to an elite. Fan clubs form networks in which fans, as Hansen says, can enhance their network and as such their ambitions and prestige. This is how I define the power that fans seek.

Power is an indistinct notion that covers several experiences and negotiations that fans are engaged in. It is part of the male networks in which patronage relations give access to socio-political networks, making the system work for fans. It opens up domains otherwise closed because of a fan's lower socio-economic background. Yet at the same time the ways in which networks are established are similar to domains outside the fan club. In this way, fans do not see the fan club as distinct from their socio-economic position but rather they use the system to their own benefit. In other words, power reveals itself for fans in the political activities or politicking they engage in. These can range from actual connections to political parties to letting the system work for you where you need it.

Another side of power that fans seek is the increase in visibility and prestige through the fan club. Prestige and the establishment of socio-political networks are interrelated and are closely linked to the ways in which state political parties work. Political practice is personalistic and images play an important role. It shows how politics is in fact embodied and aestheticized (Ben-

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[25] Several authors have already explored Tamil film (Baskaran 1996; Dickey 1995; Rajadhyaksha 2001; Thoraval 2000; Velayutham 2008) and the heyday of MGR, Karunanidhi, Jayalalitha, the DMK and AIADMK and their involvement in politics and film (Cutler 1983; Dickey 1993b; Hardgrave 1973; Irshick 1969; Jacob 2009; Pandian 1992).

jamin 1969a; Meyer 2010; Panagia 2006; Panagia 2009; Rancière 2006). I come back to the role of image below. Here I want to emphasize the role of praise in the idolization of cinematic and political individuals and the ways in which this brings about status for the one who praises. Bernard Bate defines praise as "… an ancient Indian cultural logic that informs the discursive practices whereby one aestheticizes power as an intimate being, such as a family deity or mother, who will grant us the benefits of her presence and respond to our appeals" (2009, 120). This relationship is intimate yet hierarchical (Babb 1983). While seeing the similarities, Bate is also careful not to presume an unmediated continuity from pre-colonial courtly practices to recent political patronage, as he correctly states for instance that the political patronage we observe now appears to be much more recent and the deification of political figures did not occur until the rise of the public figures MGR and Jayalalitha (Bate 2009, 145). The way in which fan clubs now praise their movie stars with the image they display suggests this intimate and hierarchical relationship.

Nevertheless, the hierarchy that is suggested between praiser and praised comes with a less straightforward loyalty towards a movie star. I will show that the praising and politicking that Rajinikanth fans are involved in are much more complicated than a straightforward cine-political relationship would suggest. Following Arjun Appadurai, who argues that the imagination has taken shape in unprecedented ways due to the rise of the media (1996), I would suggest that the media and in particular images have come to play a key role in imagining and articulating the cinematic and political relationships fans establish: with their star, with other fans as well as in the networks that they seek. In other words, the relationships between fan and star have not only created an intimate relationship with a star, they have actually created expectations and possibilities that go beyond cinematic pleasures. A movie star such as Rajinikanth is pressured by his fans to go beyond what they have become a fan of: they want him to start a political career. Praise, in this sense, demands reciprocity.

Style and Power: fans, images and the sensorial

The blockbuster film *Baadsha* (Krishna 1995), starring Rajinikanth, contains a song named *style style thaan* (style style only). The song starts with the theme tune from the famous James Bond films while Rajinikanth enters the stage holding a gun – also a clear reference to Bond. The word "superstar," Rajinikanth's nickname, is sung by Nagma, the film's heroine. On stage Rajinikanth joins Nagma and the fellow dancers that accompany them in the song. "*Style style thaan, supere style thaan*" (style style only, you have simply a super style) sings Nagma, referring to Rajinikanth's superstar image after which she metaphorically describes her love for him. Rajinikanth replies: "*figure, figure thaan, ni super figure thaan*" (figure, figure only, you have simply a super figure) and starts to describe his love for her as well. The song's catchy tune sticks in a person's mind easily and the film, one of Rajinikanth's most popular ever, is often recalled in conversations between fans.

During my fieldwork one word has cropped up time and time again to describe Rajinikanth's success: style. What this style could be or why it makes him attractive will come to the fore in later chapters as I narrate fans' personal stories. Here I purposely call to mind the concept as it

indicates the embodied and verbal ways in which fandom can be conveyed and enacted. While the popularity of Rajinikanth is expressed in generic terms, primarily by drawing attention to his "style" and other *filmi* and personal characteristics, the way in which fandom is lived is a highly personal as well as collective experience. The stories of why an actor appeals almost always express the authenticity of the actor but in contrast the ways in which men become fans and the stories of why they like their actor so much are highly standardized. The difficulty of going beyond generic fandom lies in the analogous ways in which fans convey their fandom. Experience can only be expressed in a "language" a person already knows.[26] The individual, personal relationship with a star remains *real* and *experienced* however.

Fan club membership is personal, as fans have different motivations for becoming a member, and engage in personal ways with their star and fan club environment. Fan club membership is also a collective activity, as fans engage in activities together, share news, stories and feelings, and collectively imagine and experience the excitement of new film releases. I am particularly interested here in the various image practices and how they consolidate and articulate these desires and imaginings. Fans, I argue throughout this dissertation, are involved in various image practices with which they on the one hand affirm their devotion towards the star and on the other hand mediate and articulate their own intentions to see films and get involved in local politics.

But I also refer to style as central to fan activity in its various different manifestations. There have been various works dealing with fandom, particularly in an American context (e.g. Dyer 2004; Hills 2003; Marshall 2001; Marshall 2002; Penfold 2004; Stacey 1994).[27] These works repeatedly address the commonalities of fans. In this way fan clubs as a subculture have repeatedly been described in their unity and not in their differences. James Ferguson, in his evocative ethnography *Expectations of Modernity* on urbanization and economic decline in the Zambian copper belt, criticized the viewpoint of considering style or performances "as a secondary manifestation of a prior or given "identity" or "orientation," which style then "expresses"" (1999, 96).

> *[It] turns "specific shared practices into a posited shared "total way of life," "culture," or "way of thought," a way of converting particular stylistic practices into badges of underlying and essential identities. This amounts to moving much too quickly from what is really and concretely shared (a look, a manner, a way of dressing) toward the often merely imputed or asserted "depths" that are supposedly being "expressed" –alienation, traditional values, or what have you (Op. cit. 97).*

Instead, Ferguson suggests that style is performative and acquired over time. It is a navigational capacity in which, through collective practices, fans can individually move in certain directions. A person can adopt different styles at different times and places but needs skills to perform them. In this way, style is not an expression of fan activity but central to it. Ferguson's argument is also essential in acknowledging that fan activity, though it shows signs of commonality in performance, does not result in a shared "total way of life" or in authentic expressions of

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[26] By referring to language, however, I do not suggest that experience is merely understood in language. On the contrary, following Jackson (1983) and Csordas (2000), I want to emphasize that it is highly problematic to reduce experience or body practice to the symbolic or verbal. Instead, meaning actually resides in the "language" of practice or in doing (Jackson 1983) which consist of more than merely the verbal. The way people see things, for example, is determined by what they already know (Berger 2008) but the way they express affection or fandom is also determined in this way.

[27] I will elaborate on the theoretical considerations that inform this literature on fandom in Chapter 1.

fan identities (Hills 2002). What's more, fan club membership is also competitive; it brings with it hierarchical relationships, different styles and subgroups of fans with common aims (see also Hills 2002, xvii). I want to show that fans do not merely have a style that they deploy at certain times and on certain occasions, I also want to show what fans deem this style to be, how it is ascribed to other fans. It shows what a fine line there is separating what is deemed to be genuine fandom and selfish careers.

Birgit Meyer, inspired by Ferguson's description of style, argues that style "… enables one to discern overlaps and links between different expressive forms and, at the same time, to grasp how a certain stylistic complex differs from other styles. Style thus serves both as a marker of distinction and as a means of including or even absorbing various expressive forms channeled through different registers… In this sense, style crosscuts genres. The possibility of determining key features that make an expressive form identifiable… is what is style all about" (Meyer 2004, 97; see also Bourdieu 1984). Meyer's argument continues from Ferguson's concept of cultural style, as she emphasizes the ways in which it allows an analysis of how expressive forms are signified through various channels. It is this acknowledgement of form and signification that brings me back to where I started this introduction: images as they are collected, displayed and circulated by fans.

Star Imagery

Images of and stories about Rajinikanth circulate widely. Their lifespan exceeds their initial cinematic publicity purpose, triggering new meanings and responses that are channeled through the adulation of Rajinikanth and visualized by an array of images (Dwyer and Patel 2002; Mazumdar 2007a, 92). Film posters are exhibited in houses and shops, vinyl hoardings are reused as covers for trucks, houses, or canopies and a common story in Tamil Nadu, for example, suggests that slumlords in the city of Coimbatore used to pull down billboards of MGR and let them out to women in slums to sleep on overnight.[28] Fan clubs, for their part, reuse commercial images of their star for the murals, posters and hoardings they make for fan events or images they keep as keepsakes at home. The images put up for events do not reflect fan activity, they are actually central to these events and therefore crucial in processes of social construction in which fans are engaged (Morgan 1998, 7). Fans worship the movie actor displayed on the images they produce; fans celebrate his fame and reemphasize their own significance as a fan club. But, I argue, what is most important is that fans engender their own prestige and patronage networks by displaying these images. Although fan club membership starts for many fans as a desire to see films starring their movie hero, in the later stages of a person's fan career, patronage relationships, prestige and respect come to play a crucial role. Images actively *give rise to* these desires; their technologies and materiality enhance their value and power. They create a "community of sentiment," "…a group that begins to imagine and feel things together" (Appadurai 1996, 8) and become active agents in what they consume and desire.

I find Deborah Poole's work (1997) useful in situating the images that I discuss here in larger

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[28] This story was also covered in the magazine *India Today* (Vāsanti 2006, 78).

social and material worlds. Poole, in her work on the global production, consumption and circulation of images of Andes Indians, employs the term "image world" to capture the complexity and multiplicity of the circulation of images (1997, 7). Poole continues by arguing that "the metaphor of an image world through which representations flow from place to place, person to person, culture to culture, and class to class also help us think more critically about the politics of representations. Images have no single agenda defined by class or political hegemony but they occupy a "more troublesome niche at the interstices of different ideological, political and cultural positions" (*Op. cit.* 7-8). Poole goes a step further and suggests that in order to understand the relationships and sentiments that give images meaning the term "visual economy" should be employed. For her, a visual economy, instead of using visual culture, acknowledges that the organization around images has to be situated in shared meanings as well as in social relationships, inequality and power (*ibid.*). In other words, a visual culture implies boundaries, whereas a visual economy implies crossing boundaries. I therefore find the term visual economy particularly useful because of its acknowledgement of the shared meanings, intricacies, political ambitions and conflicts that are articulated through images.

Intervisuality

At the same time, in order to understand the ways in which images are part of social relationships, we should acknowledge the larger visual economy of which they are a part. The circulation of Rajinikanth's image beyond the screen has been crucial in building up his star persona.[29] As Kaza Raja posted his message about the circulation of Rajinikanth fever, the film *Sivaji: The Boss* was being announced, speculated upon and discussed in various magazines and newspapers; the songs had been released some weeks in advance, posters announcing the movie were displayed everywhere, and fans had started to collect and use images of Rajinikanth to prepare their own imagery that would be part of their celebrations. These different interacting media genres create and reinforce modes of seeing and more general sensorial engagements with a movie that has not yet been released. Mirzoeff has coined the terms "interocularity" and "intervisuality" (2000, 7) for these "interacting and interdependent modes of visuality." Appadurai and Breckenridge have identified the influence and reinforcement of linked visualities as the "inter-ocular field" in which "meanings, scripts and symbols transfer from one site to another" (1992, 41). In other words, images' materiality, content and availability influence image practices just as much as they themselves are influenced by the demand for these images.

The ways in which banners, posters and other imagery are displayed by fan clubs in the everyday spaces of the home and publicly are congruent with a larger inter-ocular field in India and Tamil Nadu in particular. Fan clubs exhibit cutouts and banners that are similar to the larger-than-life cutouts put up for movie stars and politicians. The realist style of the cutout and other produced images bears resemblance to the widely circulating cheap mass-produced chromolithograph prints and film images, as well as the myriad banners displayed by the film industry and political supporters.

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[29] See also Rosie Thomas's work on fanzines in which she demonstrates how gossip in fanzines constructs an actress's star persona (1989).

Over the last two decades increasing attention has been paid to the production, circulation and consumption of these kinds of mass-produced images in India. They have received attention particularly in terms of their national aesthetics and ideological constellations (Davis 2007; Inglis 1998; Mitter 1994; Pinney 2004; Ramaswamy 2010; Uberoi 1990; Uberoi 2006) as well as their religious devotion (Babb and Wadley 1995; Jain 2007; Lutgendorf 1994; D. H. Smith 1995).

The mechanical reproduction of these chromolithographs can be traced back to the 19th century and painter Raja Ravi Varma who, with his images displaying mythical themes in realistic settings and his own printing press, initiated a mass production and circulation of cheap images in a particular style, identified as bazaar or calendar art and god posters (*sami padam* in Tamil)(Guha-Thakurta 1991; Jain 2007; Mitter 1994; Pinney 2004; Saeed 2011; Thakurta 1988; Uberoi 1990; Uberoi 1997) (see figure 3 and 4).[30] Their mass production made them widely available irrespective of the social or economic background of their users and as such has democratized their use (Mitter 1994, 174; Pinney 2004). It has enabled audiences to shape what they view by individual consumption and appropriation of mass-produced materials, "in ways simultaneously shared and particularized" (Freitag 2003, 372). Calendars and god posters circulate widely and can be found in virtually every home, shop, or temple where they are worshipped. The style of these images, informed by a strong sense of realism, has branched off into various other types of imagery which can be found across India, for example, in film and film publicity. The films produced by the man who is said to be the first Indian film maker, Phalke, for example, drew on Ravi Varma's mythological imagery (Dwyer and Patel 2002, 111–112). Film publicity also displays a similar realistic style that has many parallels with calendars and other prints (Dwyer and Patel 2002; Jacob 2009; Mazumdar 2003). This is not surprising, as many of the film posters were designed in Sivakasi, a town south of Madurai, the location of most of the companies responsible for printing calendars, school charts and other publicity materials.[31] Banner artists, who make the large painted publicity images of movies and politicians in Tamil Nadu apply a similar style. What's more, as Waghorne has shown, temples in Tamil Nadu are also influenced by styles of the cinema industry and god posters (2004).[32] Even the clothes of the deities, she has shown, are based on a *cine*-style of dressing, imitating celebrities in movie posters.

Cine-political imagery

Although the close relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu has received widespread consideration in terms of the transmission of screen image or public personality to politics, the way in which these relationships have been portrayed in images other than on screen has received surprisingly little attention. Political parties and film have, since their initial fusion, been publicized in similar ways. Jacob, in her book *Celluloid Deities* on banner art in Chennai, argues that the forms of popular art such as films and banners portray the personal lives and public

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[30] Kajri Jain argues, and I agree, that despite Raja Ravi Varma's initial creation of a certain style, we should be careful with concluding that the bazaar prints are copies of Varma's images (2007). They are instead in a continuous interplay between imitation and renewal. See also Chapter 4.

[31] The dry, hot climate of Sivakasi has transformed the dusty town into a hub for the production of publicity materials, calendars, posters and the like as well as the firework and match industry.

[32] See also Sathish (forthcoming) for a description of temple murals based on popular prints.

roles of (cine)-politicians as identical (2009). In other words, the screen image of a hero fighting injustice blurred with his public life as a politician. This in turn convinces audiences of the sincerity of the person and as such augments his or her celebrity status. This is enhanced, one could argue, by the strong emphasis on person-centred politics in Tamil Nadu. In conversations about the political parties in the state, rather than referring to party politics, people will refer to what party leaders such as Karunanidhi or Jayalalitha have said or achieved. If cinematic images of a cine-politician are put forward continuously, it is not surprising that screen and political images blur. Although Jacob's work (2009) identifies the ways in which cinema and politics merge in images outside the realm of the screen, it does so from the point of view of a political party that is deliberately trying to convey a particular image of its leaders.

Jacob (2009) concentrates primarily on the ways in which personality images blur through the exhibition of cutouts and banners by focusing on some of the leading artists of Chennai's banner industry. She describes in detail how these companies work and how screen and political images fuse. This focus, however, neglects the ubiquitous smaller artists that do work for local party members and fans alike. Both grassroots groups commission these banner artists who produce imagery for the political party they belong to and also their favourite movie star. The ways in which they publicize their hero's image and show their loyalty suggest a much more complicated way in which public personae are produced (see Bate 2009). The inter-ocular field of film, political, and fan imagery undermines the unidirectionality from producer to spectator that is often attributed to political and cinematic messages. Political party members and fans, I argue, contribute to the celebrity status of their leader or film hero by their own exhibition of images.

What makes the images discussed in this dissertation different is that they are not merely mass-produced images which are *consumed* by fans but images that fans actually *produce* themselves. Fans collect images, they display them at home in enlarged and enframed form, paste them on their motorbike, put them in their pocket; or, for special fan events, produce posters and banners which they display in public spaces. Fans are actors and agents in the construction of meaning for these images. I am therefore not merely interested in their consumption, but also in their production process. This has also brought me to the banner artists and design studios that produce the posters, cutouts and banners for fans, politicians and the like.

The local scale of the production raises the question of how we situate these images vis-à-vis the alleged grand narratives of personality production of movie stars and politicians. The grassroots production or circulation of images is at times referred to as "small" media as opposed to state-run broadcasting systems, and is often associated with non-mass media frequently used in a revolutionist or anti-political and anti-establishment context (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994, 20). Focusing too much on the binary distinction between oppression and resistance means that phenomena which do not fit into this dichotomy fall out of view (Larkin 1997, 408). Moreover, the imagery discussed in this dissertation is produced to engage with cinematic and political practices and projects and not merely against it and therefore it makes more sense to interpret grassroots media in less revolutionist terms but more in terms of local identity assertion (Manuel 1993, 4; see also Spyer 2008b). In addition, by describing media and media practices in this way, one could easily fall into the trap of placing objects and object practices in categories that merely limit their existence or put them into a hegemonic relationship in which one is always identified as "resistance," or at least a reaction to the other (Starrett 1995, 8).

3. Rickshaw driver with stickers of deities and gurus on his window shield. Pondicherry 2008. Photograph by Rose Perquin.

4. Vendor sitting in front of a wall full of posters of deities. Pondicherry 2006.

In the same way, I want to avoid the often used expression "popular culture." Just as the terms big and small media could indicate a hegemonic difference between media used by the state and by ordinary people respectively, popular or mass culture is often used to identify cultural productions originating from "below" and an expression of inequality or aspiration for improvement of "ordinary" people (Barber 1997, 3; Hall 2006). Even though I argue in this dissertation that the image practices of fans are informed by aspirations of prestige and political power, something that would otherwise not be possible, the term popular is embedded in dichotomies such as high versus low culture, elite versus mass or folk versus classical culture (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, 6).[33] These concepts are overloaded with all kinds of meanings and preconceptions which both Jain (2007) and Hansen (1999, 59) have attempted to overcome by using the notion "vernacular" to emphasize the ordinary or quotidian in relation to media and not the supposed class distinctions that often lie at the root of such terms. I do not suggest that class does not play a role but rather that focusing too much on class distinctions would simplify the practices that fans are involved in.

Appadurai and Breckenridge have coined the expression "public culture," which "articulates the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation state—where different social groups […] constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life" (1995, 4–5). They first used the expression in the first issue of *Public Culture*, to overcome the biased "popular" or "mass culture." Despite not being a neutral alternative, as they acknowledge, it is at least less embedded in dichotomies and debates and therefore allows us to think in zones of debate instead of types of cultural phenomena (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, 6). It therefore allows us to consider visuality and the visual and the ways in which images are imbued with power and value as they "move in and out of contexts of meaning" (Strassler 2003, 33; see also Kopytoff 1988).

The images made by fans are as much about star devotion and constructing and emphasizing a star's fame as they are about exposing fan club activity and individual fans. Not only does their content convey these different desires, the act of collecting, disseminating and exhibiting articulates their efficacy and the affective relationships that they establish. Freitag suggests that "[a]cts of seeing become acts of knowing as viewers/consumers impute new meanings to familiar images" (2002, 366). Fans appropriate all kinds of images of their star, adapt and transform them and make them their own. Commercial images are made personal by framing them, transforming them and engaging with them. The images "embody intentionalities" (Hoskins 2006, 75) of their producers and users. They give material form to the agency of fans (Appadurai 1986 and 1996), as they constitute and are constituted by social relations (Gell 1998). As we will see, the images which fans display in public embody the strength of the fan club as well as reinforcing relationships with people outside the fan club. Public culture, in this sense, contributes to the conception of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991) in which fans imagine the extent of the

[33] The dichotomization of elite and popular common practices risks implicitly understanding "common" practices as monotonous and merely considered from an elite viewpoint (Brown 1981, 18). The popular, in this way, is presented as a diminution or contamination of unpopular elite practices. This leads, Peter Brown argues, to an understanding of (in his case religious) history in which "[t]he views of the potentially enlightened few are thought of as being subject to continuous upward pressure from habitual ways of thinking current among "the vulgar"" (*Op. cit.* 17). Instead of understanding the "democratization of culture" in terms of interaction between these two, Brown proposes considering these practices as part of a greater whole in which all are driven by common preoccupations in a changing world (*Op. cit.* 21-22).

community of fans they are part of through media. In other words, the display of banners and posters during events makes fans realize how big their fan club is. The idea of lots of other fans doing the same strengthens the idea of the influence they have as a fan club.

A/Effective images

In this dissertation I am particularly interested in the efficacy of images and in the affective relations that fans establish with and through them. By efficacy I mean the "capacity to harness our attention, our engagement, and our desire" (Mazzarella 2009, 299). Images kindle, produce and convey desires, ambitions and imaginations through sensory experiences and engagements. Looking not only includes the visual but various sensorial forms mediated through and because of the image. Mitchell suggests that "all media are mixed media. That is, the very notion of a medium and of mediation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements" (2005a, 260). I am interested in how movie stars are central to these desires and worshipping practices but also in how they come to be the focus of political practices. I therefore propose that we understand the embodied ways of looking as engendering affective relationships between worshippers and worshipped as well as constituting socio-political bonds of reciprocity and personal development. These are conveyed through the images that fans produce and consume.

In a south Asian context embodied, reciprocal viewing is enacted in the Hindu mode of visuality called *darshan*. *Darshan* can be translated as seeing and being seen by the divine and implies a more corporeal understanding of seeing (Babb 1981; Eck 1981). It suggests an intimate, reciprocal relationship that is set up through the devotional gaze between viewer and icon. Even though *darshan* is primarily a Hindu religious concept, it is used for a wider practice of viewing in India as well. Images of gods, gurus, deceased family members, politicians or movie stars can be imbued with extraordinary power and exchanging gazes with them empowers the viewer as well (Babb 1981). In these images, the eyes of those portrayed are often looking directly at the viewer, thereby exchanging gazes with him or her. Jacob cites the example of AIADMK leader Jayalalitha who gave regular *darshan* appearances on the balcony of her home in Chennai (Jacob 2009). At regular intervals she appeared on her balcony just to look at people and let people look at her. These appearances, and the way they were announced with a signboard indicating the timings are similar to the temples where these appearances are scheduled as well.

While *darshan*'s contribution to everyday visuality is recognized and emphasized by many scholars of south Asian visual culture, Rachel Dwyer argues that the ways in which *darshan* can help us actually understand visual practices and visuality in a south Asian context still lack in-depth analysis (2006, 284). Investigating other forms of religious and non-religious practices in different contexts or regions shows us that labeling a highly complicated embodied corporeal practice as *darshan* leaves little scope for, and can even impede, in-depth analysis. Sophie Hawkins, in an attempt to rethink *darshan*, argues that "[r]ather than understanding *darshan* to be an end in itself…it becomes merely one aspect in a repertoire of devotional aspirations that seek union with God" (Hawkins 1999, 150). I agree with Hawkins and Dwyer that we should situate the darshanic gaze within in a broader spectrum of visuality and devotion, as the embodied reciprocal vision is not something that exists on its own. Moreover, the mutual gaze of viewer and

viewed is not unique to South Asia or to a Hindu religious way of seeing but rather identifies a widespread way of seeing (Benjamin 1969a; Mitchell 2005b; Morgan 2005; Pinney 2006).

I therefore find Pinney's concept of corpothetics, the embodied and corporeal aesthetics, instead of "'disinterested' representation" helpful to include wider embodied engagements with images (2004, 8). Pinney introduces the concept of corpothetics in order to deal with the embodied, active ways in which images are appropriated in India. He contrasts a Kantian tradition of aesthetics, which separates the image from the beholder and implies a disinterested evaluation of images, with corpothetics, which "entails a desire to fuse image and beholder, and an evaluation of efficacy […] as the central criterion of value" (*Op. cit.* 194). The question then is why this desire is prevalent and how efficacy manifests itself for fans.

Crucial changes in technology have transformed images and shaped novel means of display. These changes have rendered images more effective, according to fans. Whereas fan club imagery was previously hand-painted, nowadays most of it is digitally designed and printed on vinyl. This has not only changed the look of the images; it has also changed their use. Newly available materials such as vinyl, in other words, have brought with them new materialities of efficacy and affect. The possibility of digital design and printing on vinyl banners has resulted in more visibility for fans. For older generations of fans, fan club membership, politicking and patronage have come to play a central role in their everyday lives as fans of Rajinikanth. The worship of movie stars is therefore not merely a way of praising that star, it suggests a mutual benefit, also for the one that praises (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Mines 1994). In this way, showing these relationships and the veneration of powerful men on images consolidates and articulates the political aspirations of fans. In his book *Politics and Popular Culture* John Street asks how political processes shape the form and content of popular culture (1997). Here I want to turn that question around as well and see how public culture also shapes political practices and *is* intrinsic to these practices.

The active deployment of images can be understood as a form of identity politics in which fans position themselves in socio-political networks through which they enhance their visibility and prestige. At the same time however, the imagery fans display also reveals an ambiguity of how political practice can be part of the fan club. Fan clubs are supposed to organize public events which are widely publicized, making clear who is responsible for the organization. The activities that fans organize prove how active they are, yet at the same time publicizing yourself too much, as we will see, is considered to be exploiting the fan club for your own gain. The images that fans produce and display in public spaces articulate the intricate and ambivalent socio-political networks that fan clubs are. This fine balance as exemplified predominantly by images (and their absence) comes to the fore time and again in this dissertation.

Presences and absences: some notes on the field

Images were not only the subject of my research in conversations; they also led me to the people I encountered and got to know well over the last few years. Travelling by motorbike, bicycle or on foot in Pondicherry, Villupuram district and Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai with my camera always at hand, I took countless pictures of the myriad banners, posters and other images that I

came across. It was as if I got to know the lives of particular people in Pondicherry through images; knowing their faces, political colors, deaths in the family, birthdays and the like gave me a first glimpse into people's histories. Fans' banners, murals and posters led me to their fan clubs; they allowed me to recognize relationships between fans and they steered me towards their producers. I photographed murals and cutouts created by artists that I tried to search for later on using their name and phone number which they added as their signature on every mural and banner. I got to know the most popular banner artists by seeing their work exhibited throughout the city. In this way images became my signposts, leading me to being introduced in Pondicherry. They were a topic of research, as I could talk about them, track them, and get to know fans before I even met them. These images made the urban areas of Pondicherry and Chennai spaces in which I got to know its residents through their images. From that point onwards, my network of fans soon expanded to other fans, not only in Pondicherry but also in Tamil Nadu at large.

Capturing the images in the landscapes of Tamil Nadu helped me to trace and identify shifts in image practices. I was in Tamil Nadu when painted billboards started to be replaced by vinyl banners. These changes allowed me to talk with artists and consumers of images about the power of images, their content and materiality at a moment of heightened reflection. But their very presence also helped me to meet fans and artists. I usually started with an interview which sometimes took only thirty minutes but often more like two hours. I interviewed around twenty artists, two hundred fans, politicians, movie theater managers, government officials and various others that had something to do, whether directly or indirectly, with the subject of my research. I did not use a structured list of questions but used open-ended interviews in which I tried to give people the space to express their own preoccupations. However I did use certain themes that I was interested in finding out more about. These themes started with basic questions at the beginning of my research and became increasingly more specific as I tried to understand particular aspects of fan club membership.

Some of the interviews did not have any follow-up. However, out of these many interviews, various people in Pondicherry and the Tamil Nadu district of Villupuram generously opened up their lives to me, spent time telling me their fan club stories and took me to fan club or family events and nationwide celebrations. Of course not everything we discussed was about images, but they did play an important role in how fans conveyed their genuine fandom, in showing me and recounting past events and in proving another person's activities or lack of them.

The events that fans say are the highlights of their activities occurred only occasionally. As Rajinikanth film releases had become less frequent, it was his birthday that was now the big event for which fans organized themselves. These kinds of events did not take place regularly and were brought to life by the stories and photos relating to them and by the fans' desire to engage in networks or to meet Rajinikanth. Throughout my research it started to become increasingly clear that images were a golden thread of how fans dealt with fandom. Images were discussed, looked at, displayed in the everyday spaces of the home, in a person's wallet or exhibited in public spaces. Images provided an opportunity for gossip, criticism or respect.

Despite the omnipresence of images, my fieldwork and the subject of my research was dominated by the absence of Rajinikanth. Despite his absence he was the focal point of the fan club but it was actually the distance to him that made him the subject of hours of conversations: he was the reason I met people and entered their lives. Through these encounters Rajinikanth

entered my life as well: talking about him, thinking about him and writing about him every day until the last letter of this dissertation had been written. Yet he remained an abstract allure for many of his fans and therefore for me as well. Fans have a constant desire to meet him and have a photo taken with him but many do not succeed. Everyone I worked with asked me if I had met Rajinikanth, expecting that I, as a foreign researcher, probably had no difficulty in meeting the superstar. But I felt content with the fact that I could share fans' desires, as it was as difficult for me as it was for them to meet Rajinikanth, the red thread in the lives of my interlocutors as well as in mine now. For many of the fans I got to know well, trying to enable me to meet Rajinikanth became a matter of displaying their influence: various fans in Pondicherry said they could arrange a meeting for me, possibly more as a pretext for arranging a meeting for themselves and showing their direct links than arranging the actual meeting. They called whoever they knew in order to arrange a meeting, usually without result.

In 2010, at the end of my last fieldwork period in Chennai, I received a phone call at 11.30 pm from Sudhakar, the man in charge of the All India Rajinikanth Fan Club. I almost didn't answer the phone, thinking it was another automated commercial call that subscribers of cell phone numbers regularly get. Luckily I did answer. Sudhakar asked me to come to Rajinikanth's headquarters, the *Ragavendra Mandapam*, the next day at noon to meet Rajinikanth. As if inviting me to an illicit encounter, Sudhakar insisted that I should come alone, should not tell anyone of this meeting and that I should bring only my camera. So the next day, I headed to the Mandapam with my camera in my handbag. At last I met Rajinikanth, the absent factor throughout my research. "So you have been here for six months already doing research about me!" he exclaimed with amused wonder. He started talking about his fans and how he had asked them not to spend so much time on him. That had been in vain, as they are still spending too much time and money on him, he said. He explained how he gets tired of always appearing in the same kind of film. As a sixty-year-old he still has to pretend he is a young man, doing the same fighting and dance scenes with actresses that are years younger than him. He suggested that he might stop acting after the films he is still working on are finished. Regarding his own political career he said without any prompting: "I am not interested in politics, but we don't know what comes tomorrow…." At the end of the interview Rajinikanth asked if I wanted to have a photo taken. Just as with the thousands of fans that came before me Rajinikanth poses with me for a snapshot taken with my camera. The next day I headed back to Amsterdam with a satisfying feeling of wonderment – and a photo on my camera: I felt what it was to be his fan.

Besides the structuring character of Rajinikanth's absence, I think it is necessary to reflect briefly on my own presences and absences in the field. How was I to really to comprehend the social space of fandom of dispersed activities in time and space? Even though Pondicherry is a district of almost a million inhabitants, it has a provincial atmosphere where I felt I could grasp the fan networks and relationships more easily. By carrying out research in Pondicherry, I automatically came into contact with several fans just across the Pondicherry border in the area Vannur in the district of Villupuram. And how was I to experience fan activity when events did not take place that often? Besides the highlights of fandom such as movie releases or other celebratory occasions, fan club membership is also about waiting, about boredom and about organized masculine friend networks. Boredom and waiting are not easy experiences to grasp or represent in research or text. But what did become clear is how periods of waiting were actually making fans'

aspirations important topics in the images they produced, the socio-political networks and the conversations I had with them. The importance of images and the focus on networks, despite the long off-moments without cinematic highlights, is something I have attempted to convey.

Another issue of presence and absence that lies at the basis of my research is gender. How to capture and represent the desires, practices and stories of men with whom I could not really "hang out"? Fan clubs are by and large masculine environments that engage in masculine activities. In India, female and male spaces are largely divided in terms of leisure activities and for me, as a young woman, it was not easy to spend time alone with men. Young unmarried men engage in all kinds of masculine activities such as watching films together, hanging around and regularly drink and smoke.[34] For me, as a female researcher it was not easy to "hang around" in such masculine social spaces. For this reason, I worked with a research assistant who could also help me with the nuances of the Tamil language.[35] This collaboration turned out to be very advantageous. Gandhirajan, a friend and research assistant who was an artist and researcher himself, became an intermediary with whom my interlocutors felt at ease. Through him, my presence at occasions where otherwise a woman's presence would not be possible at all became normalized. We were invited to afternoons of drinking in hotel rooms or on the beach; we went on a trip to the south of Tamil Nadu where my host and five other men were invited to the family function of a fellow fan. These trips would not have been possible if I had done this research entirely alone.

Most people I describe are given their real name. In anthropological research it is not always easy as a researcher and person who cooperates in the research to realize what the consequences of identifying places and people might be. Informed consent seems a simple ethos but in fact is not a panacea for correct research. Even though one could argue that using pseudonyms would be the most obvious solution, what do we do if people really want to be named? And how are we to write about people who would be locatable through images anyway? As I demonstrate in this dissertation how image practices are proof of genuine fandom, my dissertation also became a way for the people I worked with to prove their devotion. Most people, therefore, emphasized time and again that they were proud to be mentioned. I have therefore decided to use as many real names as possible, as fans urged me to publicize their stories.

Localities

The fieldwork for this research took place in three main locations: the Union Territory Pondicherry, its border area Vannur and the city of Chennai. For this research I spent a total of twenty months in these locations. Puducherry, commonly known as Pondy, a derivation of its former name. Pondy and Pondicherry are the names used by most residents and which I will use as well throughout this work, is a Union territory surrounded by the state of Tamil Nadu. While all south Indian states have their own official language, Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu share Tamil as their main, administrative language. In many other ways Pondicherry is not distinct from Tamil Nadu: the majority of inhabitants speak Tamil, the same political parties are active (although

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[34] See Derné 2000b; Osella and Osella 1998; R. Chopra, Osella, and Osella 2004; Rogers 2008 for an account of masculinity and masculine cultures in India.

[35] I attended two summer courses in spoken Tamil in Pondicherry before my MA and PhD research periods started. I also had a number of private lessons in Pondicherry and Chennai.

Congress plays a more important role in Pondicherry than it does in Tamil Nadu) and its fan clubs are organized along the same hierarchical structure.

I have been visiting the city of Pondicherry since 2002 when I attended a Tamil language course there. The historic center has an atmosphere unique in India due to its French colonial history. This resulted in the special union territory status (it only merged with India in 1963, much later than India's independence in 1947). The remnants of French colonial history can still be felt in the city, as many of its citizens obtained French passports around the time of separation. Many of Pondy's citizens that I have got to know have one or more family members living in France. In Vanarapet, a poor area just across from the railway station, outside the historic so-called black town where I spent a considerable amount of time, many residents have French names such as Antoine or Tamil names spelled in a French way (for example Kumar is spelled Coumare and Muthu is written Moutou). Furthermore, Pondicherry attracts a lot of French citizens who work at the *Alliance Française*, the French consulate or the *Institut Français* or those who see an attractive climate to start a business in the booming tourist industry. Real-estate prices have exploded in the last few years with prices in the historic French quarters equaling Parisian real estate. Although Pondicherry was already a popular tourist destination when I came to the city for the first time, in the last ten years I have seen the historic city transformed into a tourist "paradise" with luxurious boutique hotels, French restaurants and myriad antique shops. In addition to regular tourism, Pondy's Sri Aurobindo ashram is a landmark in the old city. It attracts many visitors and more permanent residents from India and beyond.

Many of Pondy's residents never visit the quiet, historic parts of Pondy, except for the main bazaar and shopping street in the center of the old "black town." During my stays in Pondy the contrast between my daily research sites and my sporadic visits for a freshly ground coffee or internet access to the "tourist bubble" (see Cohen 1972; V. L. Smith 1977) of the historic center was immense. This was accentuated by the fact that none of the fans or other people that I met in the course of my research were involved in any way in the tourist industry or anything else linked to what many called the white town. The only reason to visit the white town was for a periodic stroll with one's family along the boulevard, which came alive at night with street vendors selling snacks and little toys for children; or when a movie star came to town for a film shoot. Pondy's historic quarter is popular for the shooting of film scenes and especially film songs. Fans usually gather around the area in the hope of seeing their hero, and even better, of taking a picture of him. In Pondy I worked with many fans and their fan clubs. Its relatively small scale made it easy to track the relationships between fans, as well as the competition, arguments and other issues at stake within and between fan clubs. I worked with "ordinary" fans as well as Pondy's fan club leaders, the politicians that they connect to, film theater personnel and city administration officers. Moreover, another important branch of my research, images, connected me to various banner artists and photo studios.

Vannur is a semi-rural area on the border of Pondicherry. Its location and Pondicherry's amenities and economy mean that residents from Vannur are much more likely to visit Pondicherry than the city of Villupuram. This focus means that Vannur fans watch films in Pondicherry and connect to the Pondicherry fans in various ways. In Pondicherry the network of fans I got to know spread across the city, although a couple of areas were singled out.

To reach Vannur, the area just across the border from Pondicherry where I spent a consider-

able amount of time with Rajinikanth's fans, the easiest and fastest way was through the woods of Auroville. The contrast here was also huge. In the lush, quiet area of Auroville western men and women travel around on their scooters or the popular Royal Enfield motorbike wearing prototypical hippy-like outfits. They hang around in the small restaurants in what might be called the center of Auroville, drinking banana lassies and eating healthy salads or pancakes. Once out of Auroville one reaches the main road from Pondicherry to Dindivanam again. Vannur, with its commercial "center" Koot Road, is located around this road and is therefore a major thoroughfare for buses and trucks on their way to the Chennai-Villupuram highway. Vannur itself is an unexciting semi-urbanized rural area relying mostly on cashew plantations. In this area I worked mostly with Saktivel, a highly respected local fan club leader who had recently been elected as Panchayat president in his area.[36] Through him I met many other fans and attended many official national events such as Independence Day which he presided over as Panchayat president and which his fan club colleagues helped to organize. The close connections between the fan club leaders of various districts in Tamil Nadu brought me to other places in Tamil Nadu as well. I made trips with Villupuram's Rajinikanth fan club leader, Ibrahim, throughout Tamil Nadu and through him I met many more fan club members across the area.

A third locality that has become one of my many homes is Chennai, Tamil Nadu's capital. Chennai, as we saw earlier, is the cinematic center of the film industry and therefore also of the main fan club organizations. In contrast to Pondicherry, Chennai is usually completely bypassed by tourists due to its deemed lack of historicity in the way tourists would like to have it presented. It is India's fourth largest city, home to a large automobile industry, IT and BPO companies, hospitals and a large harbor. In Chennai I focused on trying to map out the narratives of the fan club head offices, movie stars and politicians in order to understand fandom from another angle. But most importantly, staying in Chennai made me aware of a new shift on the level of the visual. As city authorities of mega-cities such as Chennai are concerned with their image, the Chennai authorities once in a while rigorously remove all images from its main roads. The restrictions imposed on ordinary people using walls have resulted in new image practices by fans who have given up spending money on something that has a short life span. In Chennai I have been able to track these transformations on the level of city ideologies of world class, of banner artists and fans. They have brought the argument of this dissertation a step further as they indicated a new shift in politics as well as in film consumption.

Chapters

In this dissertation I seek to explore the image practices of fans and situate these in a larger visual economy or inter-ocular field in Tamil Nadu. The production and consumption of movie star images, I argue, convey the collective and individual desires and imaginations of fans of their film hero as well as fans' political ambitions. I try to let fans "speak" as much as possible to convey the subtleties of how fandom is observed. Therefore, I have singled out several life stories which give deeper insights into the motivations, ambitions and desires of some fans. Zooming in on their

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36 A Panchayat is a local administrative body that has been introduced in villages and towns to improve self-government in poor areas. A Panchayat has a certain freedom to spend money on issues that would improve the area.

narratives demonstrates how throughout the years of fan club membership there is a shift from an attraction to film and masculine youth culture to political ambitions and prestige, which for some ends in disappointment due to the failure to enter politics.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. Whereas the first two deal mainly with fan clubs, images and the production of public imagery, the third part brings fandom into a larger debate and process of image production. To disentangle the different stages of fandom mentioned above, the first two parts of this dissertation are structured around these stages, following fans from film watching and political networking to the anticlimax of non-politics. The ways in which fans of Rajinikanth feel their fandom has been to no avail will bring this dissertation to the last part which is an argument on the spectacle and the city and urban space as a canvas for various shifting socio-political projects.

I consider images as the leitmotiv in these various articulations of fandom. I have separated two kinds of image practices: the everyday mundane images that fans collect personally and display personally and the collective banners and posters made in the name of the fan club. Separating these two spheres of consumption, however, is a somewhat artificial distinction since it appears to assume a natural distinction between "private" and "public." Michael Warner has shown how the terms public and private in European thought derive from a spatial concept onto which new layers of meaning were added later (2002a). The concept of space has always remained, but the different, new meanings of the notions result in the categories not always being clear and often intersecting: "Public and private sometimes compete, sometimes complement each other, and sometimes are merely parts of a larger series of classifications that includes, say, local, domestic, personal, political, economic, or intimate" (Warner 2002a, 28). As we will see later on, the images displayed in the public realm are on the one hand public statements in that they are on display for everyone passing by; on the other hand, they are as much about a personal, intimate relationship with the star. Personal collections of star imagery on the other hand are mostly collected from publicly available commercial magazines, newspapers, or as rings or gadgets given away free with other consumer goods and thereafter used in everyday spaces of the home or to decorate the body. The distinction I make here is not to understand these publicly and privately displayed images as separate categories played out in different spaces, rather I attempt to map out the different ways in which fans engage with images and constitute spheres of intimacy and publicity by producing these images. To overcome the distinction in conception of public and private, I suggest it is more useful to use the term "intimate" as it can tell us more about the personal as well as collective effective and affective work of images. By intimate I mean "marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity"[37] and not the opposite of a public association. I am not suggesting that the publicly displayed hoardings do not constitute intimacy. They do, as I will show in Chapter 4. However, I am separating the practices here due to their different purpose in the larger argument of this dissertation.

In Part I, I describe the personal affection for and relationship with a star. I show how fans become fans, their expectations and desires related to film and film stars. Films and circulating

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[37] The full definition of intimate given by the Merriam Webster Encyclopedia is 1: a: intrinsic, essential. b: belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature; 2: marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity; 3: a: marked by a warm friendship developing through long association. b: suggesting informal warmth or privacy; 4: of a very personal or private nature. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimate. Retrieved September 06 2011.

images and narratives play an important role in the construction of affection towards a star. In Chapter 1, I provide an ethnography of the figure of the fan and the relationships and intimacies that fans establish with their star. I situate these ethnographic details in theories on fandom in India and beyond and argue that we cannot single out one "reason" why fans become a member of a fan club or why they feel themselves the fan of a star. I deliberately use the terms figure and ethnography in what seems to be a paradox, a nuanced account of a figure that assumes the generic. But I use the idea of the figure, following Barker and Lindquist, as "creatively constituted subject positions that embody, manifest, and, to some degree, comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms" (2009, 37). In this way the chapter focuses not on what the figure of the fan is but rather on how it is perceived in scholarly accounts and in the realm of public opinion. I move from these accounts to the personal life stories of fans and the cinematic engagements in which fans relate to their star and construct a network of fans.

Chapter 2 focuses on the role of images in the everyday life of fans in the construction of desires and imaginations. Fans collect and display all kinds of images of their star in the everyday spaces of their home. These generic images, often obtained from commercial magazines and the like, articulate personal engagements with the star. I will show various ways in which fans personalize images and as such engender intimacy between them and their hero. This chapter demonstrates how these personal image engagements relate fans to their hero as well as to a larger "imagined community" of fans.

Part II of this dissertation moves on to fan clubs' public activities and political networking. Fans organize social welfare events on special occasions in the name of their star. Chapter 3 explores these activities. The chapter shows how these social welfare activities and the hierarchical relationships within fan clubs generate a political style mediating praise, respect and prestige. This chapter also demonstrates how once fans are older they expect the fan club to be a network in which politicking becomes an essential part. The chapter situates fan politics within a broader perspective of honour, prestige and respect as an essential part of political culture in South India. However, the chapter also shows how, despite the obvious patronage relationships that establish themselves through fan activity and the political activities fans become active in, politicking also reveals a fine balance between being active in political networks and using the fan club for one's own gain.

Chapter 4 pushes this tension further as I discuss how banners, posters and murals are an essential part of the events that fan clubs organize. I explore the many ways in which images of the movie star in question have always been the main focus of this kind of imagery. By highlighting the production of imagery for fan events, I also represent the artists who make these images and consequently evoke themes of efficacy, intimacy and the effect of the painted image. From narratives on the artists and the effective image I go on to describe a technological change that has taken place in Tamil Nadu in the last few years. Fans have started to use digitally designed vinyl banners instead of painted ones. I will show how the advent of vinyl has resulted in reflections on the efficacy of painted and digital images as well as an enhanced visibility for fans. This visibility via images has shown itself to be crucial in the political networking activities of fans: it has enhanced their prestige and their access to socio-political networks.

Whereas the first two parts of this dissertation revolve around fan clubs and visuality, in the

third part I shift my attention to a larger image economy in Tamil Nadu. I show how the publicness of images creates publics that center around the possible effect of images. Chapter 5 takes up a discourse of debate over public imagery to situate fan imagery in a broader discussion of street culture and the reactions to it. It addresses the parallels of fan imagery and a wider practice of public visibility by grassroots political supporters. Whereas on the one hand it is suggested that political parties have always relied on their visual presence in public spaces at the same time we can see how they have often tried to disengage from this deemed "populist" political style.

This brings me to the last chapter, Chapter 6, which deals with a recent beautification initiative in Chennai in which public culture, as displayed by fans and political supporters alike, is abandoned and replaced by new ideological imagery. I argue that these images articulate a shift from a particular political practice in Tamil Nadu towards neoliberal imaginings of a "shining India" that seem to replace the kinds of politics and politicking that is prevalent in Tamil Nadu. Banners are increasingly restricted and in Chennai neoliberal ideologies have been illustrated in a set of murals of a recent "beautification" initiative. Public walls are now beautified by means of images showing a neo-classicist, touristic version of cultural heritage and nature scenes in the local government's attempt at a "world class" makeover of Chennai.

Taken as a whole, I move from the figure of the fan via domestic image production and consumption, the display of images in public spaces, and conflicts to new, neoliberal imaginaries and ideologies of world class. I end this dissertation with a short epilogue in which I prefigure certain changes which may make fan clubs lose ground in the cinematic and political realms in which they circulate.

1
THE
FIGURE
OF THE FAN

Flip that ciggie: Late nights with the Rajini army[1]

Enthiran. Day one. Late night show. An impossible to attain ticket procured after hopping through a warren of dens. Fan clubs have bulk-blocked theaters for almost the next two weeks. Inside the packed auditorium full of die-hard fans in auto-erotic animation, Rajni signals his arrival through digital fracture.

Ra-ja-ni. His name punches the screen alphabet by alphabet. Phatak-phatak-phatak. The alphabets form digitally in the morphology of monolithic architecture. Then the full name repeats in a final smashing crescendo. The acolytes are on their feet, arms extended towards the Holy Name. A collective baying engulfs the hall, drowning the high-decibel ambitions of the Dolby system. By now, the Rajni raanuvam *(army) is jumping in the aisles in the most vivid display of premature ejaculation ever in public. The sighting of the messiah is imminent and the flock is in a state of self-hypnotised hysteria. Rajni reigns.*

However, the audience reaction at the beginning and the end of this Rajnikanth blockbuster is a study in contrast. The audience enters the hall on the crest of a hype that has been sustained over months. At last, on this auspicious Friday, the serious Rajni fan has been active since 3 a.m., decorating the entrances to theaters with flags, festoons and cutouts, performing honey and milk abhishekams on their idol and dancing in the streets. So, when the fans eventually enter the hall on high adrenalin, it makes no difference to them what the film is. Their ecstasy derives from the fact that the deity who was remote and distant in his garbha griha is now manifest as an utsav murti, come out in their midst in a new avatar. It's celebration time.

…

The piled-on techno fads, one more breathless than the other, are psychologically traumatic. You can visibly experience the Castration Complex at work—a sense of emasculatory helplessness in the audience. Fans who came for a joint celebration of shared power sense their agency being appropriated by the merely technical. Which accounts for the dazed silence as the movie concludes. What remains is the overarching human stench in the auditorium.

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[1]   Article in *Outlook India*, October 18 2010 by Sadanand Menon. Original photo caption is "Fire-Proof? A Chennai fan matches his hero's dress code." The photo on the title page depicts images of Rajinikanth that were collected by the late fan and banner artist Ranjit. He used the images as samples to paint his own designs (Pondicherry 2008).

Introduction

On October 1st 2010, the movie Endhiran (Shankar 2010) featuring superstar Rajinikanth was released in more than 2000 theaters around the world, more than 500 of which were in Tamil Nadu alone.[2] As the proclaimed superstar of Kollywood, the 60-year-old film star Rajinikanth is a phenomenon loved by many. His real-life and film character and his distinctive mannerisms are part of his attraction and, together with his film releases, the topic of much conversation throughout the state. He is popular among all strata of society, men and women, young and old and his films are watched time after time on television and in the cinema hall.

As with every film release of a popular Tamil movie hero and particularly one featuring Rajinikanth, the aural and visual presence of the audience in and around movie theaters is noteworthy. But when commentators such as Menon describe the craze during a movie release of a Rajinikanth film, they are not generally referring to this wide-ranging audience but rather to the "fanatic" behavior of a particular type of audience, i.e. young men, many of whom are members of a fan club. Just as Menon is doing in his piece, many journalists write about these festive moments celebrated by fans in terms of amazement, bewilderment, and mockery. Fans are described as rowdies and devotees or, at the very least, as somewhat fanatical and noisy figures worshipping every move their hero makes. With every release, journalists make much of the "behavior" of fans at the movie theater: anointing the superstar's larger-than-life billboards with milk or beer, dancing, whistling in the theater hall and, if really excited, damaging the theater if the manager does not want to replay a song that they want to hear once more.

Besides being part of myriad news items, the stories told here are also symptomatic of almost any account of fan clubs in Tamil Nadu. Almost every person who I told about my research on fan clubs readily recounted these same stereotypical narratives of excessive fan behavior. These narratives are mostly derisive in nature. Yet fan club members recognize themselves or other fan club members in these narratives as well, sometimes expressing this in terms of embarrassment and sometimes with pride or pleasure. Fans and others do not merely express this ambiguity in relation to performance during film releases; film in general has an ambiguous status. Tamizhvanan, a Rajinikanth fan describes this as follows:

> *In Tamil Nadu we are fond of cinema culture, but this is not a good thing. This interest is not a good interest. Now we are sitting here to talk about Rajinikanth and do some work for Rajinikanth. That is bad in itself. But even in Japan you have lots of Rajinikanth fans. The Japanese are smart people and even they like Rajinikanth. In a way it makes us proud but cinema culture is not a good thing.*

We will see throughout this dissertation how fandom is a constant dialogue between intense affinity, affection, and excess versus justification, control and denunciation. The time and energy that goes into fan club membership is above all denounced as sheer pleasurable wasting of time whereas at the same time other fan activities are justified because of their broader social impact.

In the first few paragraphs of his piece Sadanand Menon refers in mocking terms to the typical behavior of fans during movie releases but in the last paragraph he describes the disap-

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2 *The Hindu*. October 01 2010. http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/todays-paper/article1005646.ece?ref=archive. Accessed May 10 2011.

pointment of fans with the technological fireworks of the film *Endhiran*. Many would like to see Rajinikanth in the same roles as he has always played. This film however, marks a new trend in the Tamil film industry in which common themes of social dramas in rural settings are replaced by new visualizations and settings. Fan club members, who are mostly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, identify less with these high-tech images that belong, we could say, to the neoliberal imaginations which have become more prominent in India in the last couple of years. For now, I just want to point out this change to which I will return at the end of this dissertation. Let me first explain why I started this chapter with this prototypical description of the fan.

Taking a cue from Barker and Lindquist (2009), I want to take up the idea of the figure of the fan to help us situate a distinct period in Tamil Nadu's cinematic and political history. Barker and Lindquist describe figures as "creatively constituted subject positions that embody, manifest, and, to some degree, comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are not always easy to grasp in concrete terms—processes of commodification, class formation, globalization, religious change, and political conflict" (*Op. cit.* 37). For me, these historical moments are the grand narratives of the cine-political dovetailing which I described in the Introduction. Instead, I suggest identifying the vernacular ways in which cinema and political ambitions and practices are embedded in the social worlds of ordinary people. These histories, as we will see, run through this and subsequent chapters in various ways.

My aim is twofold. First, I take up the figure of the fan as it has come to feature in collective imaginations that symbolize the prototype of hero worship, and related to that, personality politics in Tamil Nadu. I started this introduction with the release of *Endhiran* and what it evokes in terms of discourses and stereotypes of the figure of the fan because I think fans are very visible and remarkable figures in Tamil Nadu's public sphere and therefore prone to being reduced to such essentializing characterizations. To clarify, I do not aim to scrutinize stereotypes about the figure of the fan, let alone to prove them right or wrong, but rather to point out a phenomenon of recent decades in Tamil Nadu for which the state has become widely known and which has come to figure as a trope in many journalistic, scholarly and public accounts on the conjunction of cinema and politics in the state. The prototypical figure of the fan comes to the surface time and again. By identifying the fan as a figure I actually want to go beyond these essentializations and instead provide an account in this dissertation that situates fan activity in a wider social world in Tamil Nadu. In other words, I employ the figure of the fan not in order to typecast a certain group of people but to situate a period in Tamil Nadu's history that on the one hand has been remarkable but also subject to changes and transformations. Following Ferguson, instead of turning one's back to "myths" of fandom, I consider the figure a productive entry point to explore the various "styles" that fan club members adopt in their life trajectories as fans (1999). These personal trajectories will eventually help me to situate fan clubs in a larger political framework in Tamil Nadu.

These life trajectories identify my second aim, which is to nuance this view of fans, as the relationships fans build up with their star are much more complicated than often suggested and on top of that only partly conveyed through the fan club. Fandom and membership of fan clubs is not one and the same thing but they do come together in a number of ways in the life trajectories of the fans I describe here. What should become clear in this and subsequent chapters is the heterogeneity and complexity of motivations, socialities, and power relations that fan club

membership and fandom bring. These complexities go beyond the typecasting of fans as mere cinephiliac hero worshippers who behave excessively at the theater or who can be put into play in political propaganda. The reasons for becoming a fan of a movie star and a member of a fan club can range from an intense feeling of affection towards the star, access to tickets for movies, information on the star, a peer network of fellow fans, power and strength, to affiliations to political persons and networks. In other words, the star is both an object of desire and a vehicle for aspirations and ambitions (R. Chopra, Osella, and Osella 2004, 190). The mobilizations in vernacular political practices and hierarchies make up Part II of this work. In the two chapters of this first part, I will provide an ethnography of the figure of the fan and the relationships and intimacies that fans establish with their star. In this way I want to take Barker and Lindquist's notion of the figure a step further by not merely considering the figure as arising within a particular social field but also by exploring what it means to be a fan.

Most people in Tamil Nadu love to watch films, know films or film scenes by heart, and have an actor, (music) director and/or singer they like in particular. But this does not explain why someone becomes particularly interested in the filmic and personal life of a movie star, has the urge to see this star and joins a fan club to be close to him. Moreover, it does not explain why fan clubs are entirely masculine environments or why fans routinely get involved in politics. What I want to address here is the particular affection fan club members feel towards their star, which is often more explicitly enacted than in case of "ordinary" audiences. This affection is conveyed through images, stories of the personal and filmic life of the star and fantasies about meeting the star.

Fandom is a reality for a fan; it is something that can be experienced, as well as being considered characteristic of a particular era in Tamil Nadu. In this chapter I will be looking at various ways or styles in which fandom is expressed in the context of film releases and affection towards the star. In the following chapter of this section but also in later chapters I will continue this argument by looking at the ways in which images facilitate and articulate these different engagements with the star. But before I say more about fans and their cinematic desires, I will first give an overview of scholarly interpretations of the fan.

The figure of the fan

The essentializing image of fans as fanatics that is often represented in journalistic accounts is not something specific to descriptions of Tamil film fans. Gray et al. have pointed to the typecasting of various fans in Anglo-American contexts as an undifferentiated and easily manipulated mass put forward by the media, "non-fans" and early communication scholarship (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007). These accounts frequently suggest a certain deviance or excess in the behavior of fans. At the same time, the distinction between who is called a fan and who a collector, an aficionado, or art lover indicates a Bourdieuian distinction in class and taste regarding what is seen as cultured behavior and what not (see Doss 1999; Jenson 1992).

The etymology of the word "fan" as short for fanatic already suggests the enthusiasm and deviance that is ascribed to fans. Merriam Webster defines a fan as 1) an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator and 2) an ardent admirer or enthusiast (as of

a celebrity or a pursuit).[3] By seeing a fan as a reaction to a celebrity, as can be inferred from the definition of the word in the dictionary, a fan is ascribed a certain passivity. In fact fans have often been analyzed as a response to the culture industry or as a result of celebrity. Horkheimer and Adorno for example criticized mass culture or the culture industry for producing celebrities and for making audiences believe in the false promises of a capitalist culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno in Marshall 2001, 9). This system created a mass society in which people were easily deceived and manipulated by these images of false promises, they argued. Moreover, theories on the crowd by among others Le Bon, Tare and Sighele often had a criminologist perspective and have influenced the understanding of mass society and its irrationality and, related to this, popular culture and celebrity (Marshall 2001, 36).[4]

Together, these theories have generated ideas of negativity towards celebrity and popular culture by emphasizing the deviance of fan behavior, the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd (Jenson 1992); or in other words, the fan as something outside of the ordinary. These understandings of crowds and fan behavior are imbued with passivity. Stuart Hall challenged this passivity in his work on popular culture and media reception by assuming that the audience produces and consumes media texts at the same time (1973). Regarding fandom, this passivity was also countered in a first wave of academic analyses of fandom in Anglo-American contexts (Fiske (1989) and Jenkins (1992) in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 2). Fiske, for example, argues that fandom is related to popular culture, something which the dominant value system denigrates (1992). Fans, for their part, create a fan culture with their own systems of production and distribution, something Fiske calls a "shadow cultural economy" which lies outside the cultural industries yet shares features with them (1992, 30). Fiske sees in fans a clear *reaction* to dominant culture.

These analyses have understood popular media and consequently fandom as sites of power struggles between the disadvantaged and dominant powers. Fandom is seen here as a collective strategy to form communities that evade authoritative power. Besides the question of whether fandom is always a countercultural activity, what also remains unacknowledged here is that fandom is not something merely related to what is referred to as popular culture and to the disempowered. Organized fandom exists for writers, music directors and artists, to name but a few (see also Punathambekar 2008).

A second wave of scholarship started to address fandom not as a counterculture against existing social hierarchies but as a replication thereof (Dell, Harris and Jancovich in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 6). But these studies were still concerned with notions of inequality. Now however, they considered the taste hierarchies of fans as a continuation of wider social inequalities. Their Bourdieuian perspectives thus aimed to unmask the false notion of popular culture as a realm of emancipation (*ibid.*). I find Matt Hill's comment on terminology most useful in defining fans, as he argues "that fandom is not simply a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically. It is also always performative; by which I mean that it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work" (Hills 2002, X).

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[3] Fan. (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved July 15 2009, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fan.

[4] See also Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* in which he argues that confinement of the mad or the deviant of society during the Enlightenment derives from ideas of morality (and the lack of it) (Rabinow 1991).

In Tamil, the word for fan, *rasikan* (the feminine form is *rasikai*), is derived from the Sanskrit work *rasika*. It means "man of taste, one who is able to appreciate excellence or beauty in anything."[5] In modern Tamil, it means "an admirer, a connoisseur" and in the film context "a fan." The term *rasikan* is used in all kinds of contexts, and is not restricted to film fans alone. Interestingly, although, for film fans in particular, the *rasigar* (plural of *rasikan*) *manram* (association) does have connotations of fanaticism, just as the English term suggests, the Sanskrit word *rasika* is used in the context of carnatic[6] music, and has no connotation of fanaticism whatsoever.

Most scholarly works on fan activity in South India can be situated between two opposing ideas of fandom. On the one hand it has been understood as a product of the film industry and the political system, i.e. fan activity as the agent of movie stars' political practices, where they are put into play for the political gain of the cine-political elite (Pandian 1992). On the other hand it has been understood as the countercultural activity of fans as a subaltern class, using fan club membership in order to join the political sphere (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009). In these accounts, the relevance of the political movements of the movie star to which the fans are linked has been put forward as a crucial aspect of fan club membership.

Pandian's work *The Image Trap* (1992) analyses how images of movie star-turned-politician MGR in his films or magazines that circulated created an aura that made him successful in politics. MGR's star persona and his image as a hero of the subaltern classes were transferred to his political career and made him extremely popular. Prasad considers a one-sided way of explaining the cine-political relation in Tamil Nadu as too simplistic (1999). According to him, "we must distance ourselves from an approach to the study of the Tamil Nadu instance where the emphasis is laid wholly and entirely on the intentions and strategies of the leading players and, in the process, the logic of cinema's own evolving social presence is rendered neutral and transparent" (Prasad 1999, 39). An approach based on seeing cinema as merely an exploitation medium misses the logic of stars' social position, "which is not always based on the messages they convey" (*ibid.*). This approach is drawn from a more widely adapted analysis of media texts which attributes power to the media text in providing audiences with ways of seeing and creating meaning (Spitulnik 1993). This approach completely neglects the possibility that meaning lies not necessarily in medium production but could also be formed by consumption and the processes of agency and interpretation (*Op. cit.* 295). In other words, even though MGR was a popular hero, people do not mindlessly believe that what MGR portrayed in his films was exactly what he did in real life. Therefore, at the same time the relation between films and actors on the one hand and fans on the other cannot be simplified to a one-sided one.

Sara Dickey's anthropological work on film in South India has been extremely valuable in providing a detailed account of film audiences. Dickey shows how movie audiences in Tamil Nadu recognize connections between what they see on screen and their own personal lives. Films are effective because their balance between fantasy and reality shows the audience's insecurities in life yet with utopian solutions as a means of escape: "While the significance appears to lie largely in an escape constituted through utopian fantasy, the pleasure of that escape derives from its roots in real-life social and psychological stresses and from the soothing of those stresses through

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[5] Madras University Tamil Lexicon, 1924: 307. http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/tamil-lex/. Retrieved December 10 2008.

[6] Carnatic music is a classical music tradition from southern India.

melodramatic crisis resolution" (1993a, 175). Films, Dickey argues, are also successful in their combination of reality and fantasy, in that they show the urban poor that they already possess morality and strength of character (reality) and can easily achieve material wealth (fantasy). Even though Dickey projects the power of film entirely on the urban poor as a means of escaping reality, which can be questioned, her work is most valuable in the close attention paid to how viewers actually react as an audience.

In her article on MGR fan clubs, Dickey argues that cinema provides a space to promote political leaders. Importantly, she does not merely suggest that the political careers of film stars are promoted by cinema and its adoring audiences but also that local fan club leaders attain political authority "by virtue of their adulation for the star" (1993b, 340). Martyn Rogers argues, as does Madhava Prasad, that most works dealing with cinepolitical entanglements focus too much on the propaganda function of film "texts" and therefore miss out on the social relations within the interrelated fields of film and politics (2009). He argues instead, while writing about the Vijayakanth fan club-turned-party cadres, that we should separate the hermeneutics and semiotics of film texts and look separately at the political agency of fans and how fan clubs provide a space to participate in the democratic political process. Even though I agree with Rogers that we should be careful in not understand fan club membership in terms of film texts alone, I also think we should be careful not to downplay cinematic attraction completely and separate these issues.

These top-down and bottom-up accounts of fan activity in Tamil Nadu have focused for the most part on the political mobilization of fans, an aspect of fan clubs that is particularly remarkable in Tamil Nadu. However, these accounts pay little attention to the affective relationship that fandom and fan club membership can bring about for individual fans. Moreover, by explaining fan club membership merely as political agency or as a way of creating a utopian dream world, other media such as music devices, television, ringtones, posters, billboards, etc. are largely ignored in the construction of fandom. S.V. Srinivas has added valuable contributions to the understanding of fan activity in South India by bringing in the concept of cinephilia again (2009). He argues against the works on fan activity in South India that explain it merely as a product of something else: socio-economic background, subalternity, religion, etc.:

> … rather than beginning with the assumption that fandom is politics by other means, I will start with the premise that fandom is a particular form of cinephilia. That it has political consequences is a bonus but this does not transform the phenomenon itself from a manifestation of cinephilia to something else. What distinguishes organized fans of the south Indian variety from others is their tendency to make public their cinephilia, to display it and indeed house it in the public domain (S. V. Srinivas 2009, 30).

According to Srinivas, connections between film cultures and politics also exist when there are no direct links between audience groups and politics. He warns that focusing the debate on fan participation in party politics in Tamil Nadu "has restricted debate on fans being (potential) political cadres, and therefore, reduced political debate itself to its narrow implications" (S. V. Srinivas 2005, 299). He argues instead that fans are not "passive victims of mass-produced images" but rather that "fans constantly negotiate between what is *expected* from them by the industry (and by the stars themselves) and what empowers them" (*ibid*. emphasis by the author). In addition, not all fans get involved in party politics, notes Srinivas. He understands fandom as situated between devotion and deviance or in between a fan's own agency in what they expect

from the star on the one hand and on the other hand the film industry that tries to shape and manage the star and its fans.

I do think that Srinivas' attempt to focus on the love or obsession with film is useful in understanding the enthusiasm shown by fans in the theater and the desires fans have to see their hero in films and in real life. If we understand fan clubs merely as clubs that provide political mobilizations for stars and fans, then the enthusiasm in the theater remains unexplained. But as we will see in more depth below, the life trajectories of fans show that political mobilization and status become crucial factors of fandom in later stages of life. So although Srinivas is right to highlight cinephilia again, something that has often been missing in accounts of Tamil Nadu's fan clubs, we should not forget that often fan activity becomes highly political later on.

Aswin Punathambekar has also questioned the understanding of fan clubs as mere cadres of political mobilization by focusing on an online fan club for the famous Tamil music director A.R. Rahman (2007). Taking cinema away from the cinema hall and movie heroes and looking into music, music directors and the like forces us to look at the subject of cinema's convergence with other media. He argues that the figure of the fan needs to be taken away from the dichotomy of fan-as-rowdy versus fan-as-*rasika*[7] and instead should be located "along a more expansive continuum of participatory culture" (*Op. cit.* 199). This rowdy versus *rasika* dichotomy also links back to the literature on Anglo-American fandom in which fans, who frequently come from lower socio-economic classes, are seen as influenced by the media and show excessive behavior as a person and in a crowd. The rowdy in India has been an evocative figure of inappropriateness in middle class imaginations and has come to be particularly imaginative in relation to cinema, but it is also a focus of anxiety about what they see as the criminalization of politics (Dhareshwar and Srivatsan 2010). The *rasika*, on the other hand, is the alleged cultured person who has knowledge and taste and does not show the excessive behavior of the rowdy but appreciates a musical performance. Punathambekar's work reminds us not to present fan clubs in South India simply as platforms dedicated to movie stars and their political careers or as something popular only among lower socio-economic classes. Another point I want to take up from Punathambekar's argument is his critique on not taking into account that fan activity is "not necessarily "public" in the sense of there being a neighborhood fan club that meets at street corners, at tea shops, or outside the cinema halls" (*Op. cit.* 205). Indeed, as will become clear in this and the following chapters, fan activity, besides its visibility, is also highly personal and works on levels that cannot be neatly subsumed within a dichotomy of public and private.

Both Srinivas' and Punathambekar's work is valuable in showing the participatory cultures that various kinds of fans can be involved in besides the political and the cinema hall. However, what remains unclear is the diversity in fans' motivations regarding why men join these collective structures or why they turn to specific ones. The array of stories I have encountered during my research indicates that it is almost impossible to come up with an unequivocal explanation of "fandom" or fan activity. Trying to define fan activity as merely a political or cinephiliac activity would not do justice to all the nuances of why someone joins a fan club and what a person gets out of it. If fandom is only about politics, why the enthusiasm at the movie theater? Or why would politics automatically become a part of the film fan clubs that I have studied, even though

[7] In this context Punanthambekar uses the explanation of a *rasika* as someone who has knowledge of and likes Carnatic music.

it is not deemed to be part of what official fan activity is said to comprise of? The intense affection some fans express for their actor, in combination with the political practices that many of these fans are involved in would not fit into a monolithic explanation of fan activity. Some fans have indeed clearly emphasized that they started the fan club or joined a fan club for political reasons. But others joined to impress girls in their neighborhood. Others changed from being in the fan club of one actor to another, as they did not get what they expected out of the fan club. Still others feel an intense affection for their star even though they know they spend too much time and money on his account. This results in a rather paradoxical situation: while on the one hand people seem to go as far as to commit suicide in a movie star's name (as we saw after the death of MGR, see Introduction), on the other hand movie stars can be exchanged from one day to the next. This raises questions about the concepts of fandom, star persona and charisma, and how these are created and propagated.

In the remainder of this chapter and in the following chapters I shall provide several narratives on what fan club membership for fans of Rajinikanth can comprise of. I start by showing how for most fans their membership begins with a love of film and affection for a certain actor. But throughout the chapters we will see that the fan club environment also brings with it forms of mobilizations and political practices that become crucial for most fans once they are older and more established in the fan club. I will relate fan activity to several social practices, not to explain fandom as a product of other practices but to situate them in a larger social field. This larger field becomes relevant later on in my argument, as it shows how fans cannot be explained merely by political practices or cinephilia but how their organization and in particular their visual practices in the public realm are part of a wider field in which imagery is put into play. But let me first introduce the Rajinikanth fans and their fan club to show the variety of ways in which fans relate to the star.

How it all started: The All India Rajinikanth Fan Club

In 1976, Shankar had not yet seen *Moondru Mudichu* (Balachander 1976), Rajinikanth's third film, but he already felt deeply attracted to the upcoming actor. Fifteen years old at the time, he had a small corner store and tea stall where he heard customers telling stories about Rajinikanth. These stories were replicated in the film magazines he sold in his shop. This made Shankar admire the actor more and more. After the release of *Moondru Mudichu*, *Bommai*, a film magazine, showed a picture of Rajinikanth on its cover. Shankar kept one copy of the magazine for himself and used it to create a six foot by six foot signboard that he put in front of his shop.[8] Even though cloth banners and cutouts were already made for movies starring popular heroes such as MGR and Sivaji Ganesan, the use of such images for shops was new in Pondicherry. For the film *Moondru Mudichu*, and the subsequent films *16 vayathinile* (Barathiraja 1977) and *Bhuvana Oru Kelvikkuri* (Muthuraman 1977) he made cloth banners to exhibit at the movie theater to welcome the audience and thank them on behalf of Rajinikanth. Shankar recalls that people in

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8 Figure 5 shows a similar signboard that Rajini Shankar made in 1987, just after MGR had died.

5. Shankar's shop. The photo was taken in 1987, just after MGR died. After his death, Shankar redecorated his shop by displaying images of Rajinikanth and MGR to commemorate the latter. From this period onwards Shankar called himself Rajini Shankar, just as many other fans put the word Rajini in front of their name. Pondicherry 1987. (Rajini Shankar's collection).

Pondicherry were somewhat shocked and said: "Who is this man making a lot of big portraits of Rajinikanth?"

Shankar's interest in Rajinikanth continued and in 1977 the popular daily Tamil newspaper *Dina Thanthi* published an article on the Rajinikanth Agila India manram (Rajinikanth All India Club). This was the first time Shankar had heard of the fan club's existence and he instantly decided to start one himself in his home town of Pondicherry. He decided to go to Chennai and ask the fan club secretary Pukkadai Nataraja how to register a fan club.

As Shankar was still young and slightly built he thought they would never allow him to start a fan club on his own, so he took along some of his burlier looking, mustachioed friends who made up for his own lack of physical stature. He paid his friends' expenses which included the bus fare from Pondicherry to Chennai, 75 paisa (three-quarters of a rupee), a huge amount for him at the time. Once in Chennai, the secretary Nataraja asked a lot of questions, remembers Shankar, and they had to pay a registration fee. When Nataraja wrote down the members' different posts, Shankar's friend, who they had selected as the president, walked out of the room. Nataraja was stunned and for a moment it looked as if he did not want to continue the registration process. That is the moment Shankar decided to tell the truth:

I am the only person interested, I brought these guys along because I am small. I only have a milk shop. I paid all the expenses on behalf of these people. So the secretary, having seen my

honesty said, ok, you are the secretary of Pondicherry state as of today. Go back to Pondicherry, gather members and make it strong. Carry out activities on behalf of Rajinikanth, be active.

And that is what Shankar did. The fan club in Pondicherry has grown from that moment in 1977 to an organization of around 650 fan clubs.[9] Every fan club should contain twenty-five members. However, not all members are equally active.

The Rajinikanth fan clubs are organized in a tree-like structure according to Tamil Nadu's and Pondicherry's division into districts, *taluks* or constituencies and blocks or wards.[10] Pondicherry, as I explained in the Introduction, is administratively not part of Tamil Nadu but for fan clubs it is treated as one of its districts. All local fan clubs are united in the Rajinikanth Fan Association in Chennai. Every district has an umbrella organization, named a *talaimai manram* (leader association, or head fan club), consisting of established fans that were once members of a local club. The *talaimai manram* of each district is responsible for the organization of all local fan clubs in neighborhoods, streets or areas. In Chennai, due to the size of the city, the organization is divided into four areas, each with their own *talaimai manram* under which the local *manrams* fall. These local *manrams* also consist of an executive committee, often the men that started the club, and ordinary members. However, it turns out that it is generally the committee members who are most active in the club; the others are non-existent or often not very active. This became clear during my initial search for fan clubs when I started this research. I could hardly find a fan who was "just" a member and without any official position within his own fan club. This has partly to do with the network I was circulating in but it also revealed the lack of active fans within local fan clubs.

All fan clubs have names; usually the name of a movie that came out around the time the fan club was set up or one related to a phrase or notion related to welfare or the Tamil language that Rajinikanth used in his movies, for example. Srinivas has shown how in Andhra Pradesh most fan clubs call themselves Town/City/State/Nationwide organizations despite the fact that they are highly localized (2009). Within all levels of the organization, the fan clubs have an executive board consisting of at least seven members, i.e. the general secretary, vice-general secretary, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer, vice-treasurer, and public relations officer.

The structure is such that local branches ask approval from and report to the district branch they belong to about their activities and expenses. In turn, the district branches report their activities and administration to the head branch, the All India Rajinikanth Fan Club (AIRFC) in Chennai. For fans, this reporting and archiving of their activities is an important way of proving their genuine fan club membership and fandom. When district leaders have to be selected, the AIRFC bases its decision regarding new committee members on their commitment to the fan club. This point becomes crucial in later stages of fan club membership, a subject I will return to in Part II.

Tharagai Raja, ten years younger than the founder of the Pondicherry fan club, Shankar, was attracted by the images of Shankar's shop as a young boy. After school, he and his friends walked to Rajini Shankar's shop and ate something while listening to the stories of Rajinikanth and the

[9] Pondicherry has a population of 946,600 according to the 2011 census. (http://statistics.puducherry.gov.in/pop%20census%202011/data%20%20sheet%20%202011.pdf)

[10] Although I am describing the structure of the Rajinikanth fan club here, clubs for other actors are organized along similar lines.

fan club told by Rajini Shankar and the customers of his shop. The attraction for Rajinikanth slowly grew, not by seeing his films but by seeing his images:

> When Rajini's movie was released fans placed a lot of banners in front of the theaters. So we went to the theaters and counted the number of banners. Then we went to another theater. If it was screening a Kamal Hassan film, we counted the banners there as well. We compared the number of banners and if there were fewer banners for Rajinikanth we bought some greeting cards and collected a Shiva image or something. We walked all the way to a Xerox shop, which were not as widespread as they are now, and copied the images. In this way we increased the number of images displayed. After doing this we went to the movie theater where they screened Kamal Hassan and we told someone: hey, go and see: they have many banners for Rajinikanth's film!

Tharagai Raja, at this young age, was present at many fan club events even though he could not see the movie in the theater yet. He was still too young to be able to get tickets. As soon as he was allowed to open a fan club, he did. At present Tharagai Raja is the public relations officer of the Rajinikanth *talaimai manram* ("executive" committee) in Pondicherry. He is always busy, trying to keep the relationships with newspapers, other fan clubs and politicians running smoothly. He deals with communication and, in order to prevent irregularities, racks his brain with every film release over arranging which local fan club gets tickets for which theater and the day of the so-called "fan show."

Sridhar is the president of the student's block of the fan club. He recounts his attraction to Rajinikanth as follows:

> It started when I was five years old. I am 31 now. When I saw the movie Murattu kaalai (S.P. Muthumaran 1980) I was attracted to him and I started liking him. When I passed by a theater at the time, I noticed the overwhelming response from the audience; they let off fire crackers, I saw the cutouts and the banners. It was impressive, awe- inspiring. Their excitement and activity was huge, they expressed their love in a very grand manner. I was five years old and I was studying first standard. I can still remember everything that happened that day. I was amused when I saw all those things and I started to like Rajini. I didn't have the opportunity to know MGR, but I had the opportunity to see Rajini. I wanted to get to know Rajini, but since I was so young I didn't know anything about Rajini. So I tried to find out more about him. At the time we did not have any media like nowadays, so I used to talk with my friends, and I sang his songs. Gradually I came to know that Rajini is a good man.

I have recounted these narratives by Shankar, Tharagai Raja and Sridhar to show how the attraction these men felt towards Rajinikanth in the beginning was not directly related to seeing his films. Attraction towards him was established through stories and, importantly, through images of Rajinikanth. Of course nowadays, with almost every home having a television of its own,[11] and other media being more widely available, children are exposed much more to films as well as other imagery and media. Images circulate nowadays as they did back then extensively and these

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[11] In recent decades the number of televisions has increased. Basically every home owns a television set. Cable and satellite have resulted in a widespread choice of channels, many screening movies at prime time. In Tamil Nadu the DMK party has gained acclaim throughout the years due to its many welfare or gift schemes. During the last elections (which they won) they promised everyone a free color television or gas stove. The television sets were much more popular and many sold their existing television after being given the free TV. As a result, the DMK tried to make the selling of TVs illegal.

images, as the above narratives demonstrate, play an important role in how fandom started. But nowadays as back then, once a member of a fan club, the release of the film becomes the climax of fan activity, at least during this period of adolescent life. Fan club membership in this sense becomes a part of what young men do at a certain age. So besides the importance I want to emphasize on the role of images in the construction of fandom, it also shows how becoming a fan of a certain actor and becoming a member of a fan club is part of a youth culture that belongs to a certain age and group of young men. Neighbors, friends, or brothers can be fan club members and therefore becoming part of this youth network is something men see around them and just want to be part of. The importance of movie-watching becomes crucial in this period of their life, and fan club membership shows the periodization of fandom, something we will see later, shifts to other interests and concerns.

Movie-watching

Seismoligists[12] have recorded mild tremors in various parts of the world especially media related (TV, Internet etc.) in last couple of days. This tremor lasts exactly for 2 m 36 sec peaking in last few seconds. People residing in vicinity of "certain cinema" theaters too have reported the same. Further studies by "You tube" recorded more than 35000 such tremors during last 72 hrs…Indiaglitz, Gallata,rapidshare and numerous other websites opine the same. Medical practioners say that there is a sudden mass hysteria sweeping the state and is highly Contagious. Heart rate, pulse rate and Blood pressure levels are affected in certain cases. Endocrologists report that there is sudden release of "Adrelin" in human system causing harmonal instability. One common symptom on all victims are "Goosebumps" Milk vendors have called upon the public to ensure sufficent stock of Milk for their Home consumption on June 15th as they fear they will not be available in the market.….There are unconfirmed reports that there has been advance booking at Milk filling stations for "Tankers "….and Milk supply to general Public may get disturbed. Hoteliers have announced that there will be no "PUMPKIN" in their preparations on June 15 as they will not be available in the market. A Vegetable vendor on condition of anonymity confirmed this. CAMPHORS are at a premium now. An emergency meeting of the officials after an extensive study concluded that the cause is "SIVAJI" The Trailor and movie releasing on June 15………. .How is it?? Thanks and Regards, Ramanan, Bangalore[13]

This message was posted on a Rajinikanth fan website two weeks before the long-awaited film *Sivaji: The Boss* (Shankar 2007) was released. It was already two years since the last film starring Rajinikanth had come out so many of his fans felt it was time for a new one. The message aptly reflects the mood that many of Rajini's fans were in and alerts us to the embodied ways in which fandom can be experienced. The release of a film is a highly embodied, celebratory and collective

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[12] Due to the many mistakes in this message I have chosen not to put [sic] after words or sentences. The spelling in this message is the writer's own spelling.

[13] Posted on the Yahoo group of the Rajinifans.com website, 2 June 2007. The items such as milk, camphor and pumpkin Ramanan writes about in his message are used in Hindu religious worshipping rituals.

event. Most fans prefer to see the film on the first day and at the first show, the so-called FDFS[14] (first day, first show) which is sometimes screened as early as six o'clock in the morning. Let me first quote several fans and their way of expressing what the first show means to them.

Saktivel, branch leader of his "block": *From the date of the puja[15] for the movie we keep updating the news about the movie, we are very curious to know what his character will be like, what his message is and what the story of the movie is. So we cannot resist our curiosity to see the movie on the day of its release. Once, in my brother's house they had an ear piercing ceremony for his son.[16] As he is my nephew I had to attend the function and I do some ritual. I said sorry for not attending the function but I had to see the movie Chandramuki first day first show.*

Baba Ganapathi, a fan club member in Saktivel's block, compares the first sight of Rajinikanth in the theater to a prayer in the temple: *It is interesting to see the idol in the temple which is decorated with flowers and other things at the time of aarathi [prayer]. After two days the flowers lose their freshness. Like that it is interesting to see Rajini's film at the first show. Otherwise it will not be effective. We'll try to get tickets in all possible ways. Through the fan club or otherwise we'll take leave from our jobs for three days to enquire about black market tickets.*

Packaraj: *For the movie* Chandramuki *we worked three days and the whole night at the theater to do the decoration. The first show began at 11 am so around 11 am we returned to the Raman Theater. We had a ticket for the film but due to the large crowd or a mistake on the ticket, they had screened the movie at 10:30 am. So the policeman did not allow me to go inside. I tried to go inside but four policemen beat me up badly. But I did not move away from the theater. Along with me there were forty other fans also waiting outside. Then I cried in front of Rajini's banner: "Oh leader, I could not see you, what is this?" Then a higher-ranking police officer came and I told him that the police sent me out even though I had a ticket. I told him that I wanted to go and see his face, and that if I could not see it, I would commit suicide here by burning myself. Then the police officer looked at my ticket and sent me inside along with the other 40 fans.*

Packaraj, Baba Ganapathi and Saktivel refer to the curiosity of seeing Rajinikanth at the first show. If we recall the ritualized way of seeing and being seen by an icon, *darshan*, the curiosity of seeing Rajinikanth has several similarities with the first viewing of the deity. The first glimpse of Rajinikanth on the screen is usually a celebratory moment in a film theater when the audience cheers. However, the first shot in which he directly looks at the audience is the real introduction which is even more celebrated. In this way, the mutual gaze is established collectively in the context of movie-watching. Packaraj needed to see his face, he explained, after building up the desire to see him during the long-term preparations of the fan club. Baba Ganapathi uses the metaphor of the freshness of flowers at the moment of praying to indicate the freshness of seeing

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[14] Acronyms are commonly used in India.

[15] On the first day of the shooting of a film a *puja* is done for the film's success. A *puja* is a Hindu act of offering, mostly performed for Hindu deities but also for distinguished persons, or guests. In addition, *pujas* are often performed for new things: in this case a new film but also when for example a new car or bike is bought.

[16] *Kaadhu Kutthal*, a rite of passage ceremony for young children.

Rajinikanth on the first day. And Saktivel also mentions the ways in which desire is constructed throughout the trajectory of the production of the film. The importance of seeing Rajinikanth is such that he can even miss out on important ritualized family events such as Kaadhu Kutthal, the ear piercing ceremony of a young child at which the uncle of the child plays an important role. Let me give three more quotes by fans.

> Nalini, Saktivel's wife, is a Rajinikanth fan as well. She cannot see the first show as it is deemed a man's environment: *But I still have the desire to see Rajini's movie on the first day with my husband. But he won't take me. My brothers came one week before the release and reserved a ticket. At that time I told my husband with lovable anger "if you get them a ticket on the first day, please get me one as well!" But there are no women on the very first day. Moreover, we can't hear the dialogue because of the noise from the gents. So that's why he doesn't get tickets for me. But we will watch the movie after three days.*

> Vimal: *When Rajini's movie comes, if we don't have money, we will sell our children's jewels such as their bangles.*

> Sathish: *Whenever people went to meet him they would fall at his feet. Rajini used to scold them, saying that we are all humans. He is simple. Whenever we watch his films we cry out of ecstasy. We don't know why. Such is his attractiveness. Even now on seeing some of his photos I cry with joy.*

> Roos: *Why do you love him so much?*

> Sathish: *Don't know. Whenever we see his introductory scene we cry. All his songs and scenes are written based on his fans. In the film Sivaji there is an introductory song. In that he tells his fans to love the Tamil language. In* Baadsha *he insisted on loving and taking care of aged parents. In Arunachalam he thanks his fans for supporting him.*

> Roos: *Why do you want to see the first show?*

> Sathish: *We are hardcore fans of him and it won't be meaningful [if we don't see it].*

> Roos: *Why?*

> Rajini fan: *We Rajini fans are united. In Pondicherry theaters, the owners are afraid to screen Vijay or Ajith films because in the first shows the fans break everything. But we Rajini fans are disciplined. We go and cheer in the theater. We will not be able to hear anything. We will admire his screen presence only.*

In these small vignettes, both Sathish's and Nalini's words suggest the importance of the moment as a celebrative moment in itself. Being a fan, Sathish seems to suggest, is not meaningful if you cannot perform as a fan. Therefore it is essential to be part of the first day show. For Nalini, who sees the preparations secondhand, via her husband's activities, it is the desire to see what it is like. Even though she realizes it is not an environment for women on the first day, she would love to experience it with her husband. And Vimal indicates the sacrifices he makes to see a film.

From the sociability of the screening, the urge to see his face, the media attention generated to the comparison with the newness of a freshly decorated deity; all indicate a certain curiosity.

This curiosity is built up throughout a period of waiting and receiving news about the movie throughout its production. Film songs contribute to the stirring up of curiosity, as they are released before the film is. Some fans celebrate this release with *puja's* and fire crackers (see figure 6). The film songs are an intrinsic part of the film but they also lead their own lives. Most music listened to in Tamil Nadu consists of film songs. They are released a couple of weeks before the film comes out and are sold on cassettes, VCDs and CDs, screened on television and broadcast on the radio. The songs are an important marker for the success of the film. Music directors and singers are known by audiences and appreciated for their style or voice. But the songs are also remembered in connection with the hero and heroine of the movie and appreciated as such as well (Dickey 2005). For fans the songs and the information they have collected about the production of the movie through conversations, magazines, text messages, television, etc. create an image of what the remaining parts of the movie will look like.

After the songs have been released, the movie will be released in the movie theaters several weeks thereafter. Even though it depends on the city and district, tickets for fans are often distributed through the fan club organization. If there are no tickets available through the fan club, fans, as with the "ordinary audience", try to get tickets at the theater itself or on the black market. Tickets for the current movies of the most popular actors such as Rajinikanth are sold for exorbitant prices of up to 3000 rupees (± 47 euros).

The active audience

The day before the release of *Sivaji: The Boss* Shankar organized a motorbike rally in the city of Pondicherry. After the rally, which was attended by around 100 fans with their motorbikes, at around 6.30 pm a van carrying banners and cutouts headed to the movie theater where the film would be released the next morning. A big crowd, accompanied by percussion (*Thappu* and *Thalam*), dancing fans and loud fire crackers followed the van. When the van arrived at Raman Theater, the fans unloaded the banners from the van and started to fix them in their allotted space. Soon the entire theater was decorated with banners, both inside and out. At Balaji Theater, another theater in Pondicherry, fans were also busy tying up their banners. The police were present to watch over the activities and control the crowds. Many of those present were still trying eagerly to obtain tickets at the box office. Fans were busy decorating the theater premises until midnight. The first show started at 7.30 am. At 5 am, the theaters were already full of activity. Fans shouted and railed at the theater personnel as they demanded the gates be opened. "*Open the gates! Look how long we've been waiting! Open the counter! SIVAJI, we are waiting to see you!*" some shouted.

The police were on the alert with their *lathies* (wooden sticks used by police officers) at hand. Another crowd of passersby was watching the scene curiously. Fans still tried to get tickets by any means, running from one counter to the other and calling friends in the hope of obtaining a ticket. A few lucky fans were able to buy a ticket. After all the tickets had been issued, the theater finally opened the doors to the hall. The film could begin.

The interior of the theater was full of police to control the crowds. Some of the fans rushed to sit in front of the screen but they were sent back to their seats by the police. When the film started and Rajini's head (but not his face) appeared on screen there was not a sound to be heard. Only

6. Man doing a *puja* in front of a banner for movie star Kamal Hassan's birthday. Chennai 2010.

when his face was seen and Rajinikanth nodded his head in his particular way, did the audience start to clap. But still not as enthusiastically as earlier. The police were trying to keep control over the audience. But slowly the restraint that was felt in the beginning disappeared completely after seeing more of Rajinikanth's typical mannerisms. Everyone clapped and cheered. The dialogues were almost inaudible because of the noise the audience produced. Three friends commented to each other:

Person 1: *The songs aren't great, are they?*

Person 2: *No, Mapila,[17] but they'll become popular over time. When we heard the* Chandramuki *songs for the first time, they were not at all good. Slowly they became very nice to hear. Our thalaivar's* [leader, name for Rajinikanth] *songs are always like that.*

Person 1: *Anyway, it does not look like* Baadsha *or* Annamalai, *you know.*

Person 2: *No, no, don't say that, we are in the middle of the film. Let the movie finish. Then you say what you think, okay?*

Person 3: *This guy is always like that. Let us see the whole movie and then we will talk about it.*

I started with this description of the release of the movie *Sivaji: The Boss* and the fragment of a conversation overheard in the theater hall to indicate the celebratory atmosphere and expectation of seeing Rajinikanth on screen. Audiences in Indian movie theaters experience the moment of movie-watching actively and collectively. People talk, laugh, shout, give advice to the film characters or, in other words, respond to what happens on screen and in the movie theater. Films are often watched in groups, as a group of friends or as a family but men also go to the theater alone (L. Srinivas 2005). First shows of a movie release are celebratory moments in which fans celebrate the festive moment collectively. For the first couple of days after a movie's release

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17 Term to indicate a maternal uncle's son, a paternal aunt's son or a younger sister's husband.

the cinema hall, normally typified by its rules regarding maintaining order and open to a diverse public, is transformed into the realm of fan clubs. The first day of a film release is a visually and aurally staged event for fans and bystanders alike. Fan clubs celebrate the event by decorating the theater with large billboards dedicated to the release (see above). For the release of a movie or other celebratory occasions every local fan club makes posters, a banner or cutout which they exhibit at the theater where they are going to see the first day first show. On the day of the release, the images will be garlanded and fans perform special *pujas* by lighting camphor and lights in front of images of Rajinikanth and by doing milk (and sometimes beer) *abhishekams* (pouring liquids, usually milk over a deity) on billboards. They also distribute sweets just as is done for other special, ritualized occasions and sometimes they organize special rallies to celebrate the first show.[18]

The experience of collectivity is different from other moments in the movie theater. The craze around a movie release is what S.V. Srinivas identifies as the audience in action (2003).[19] He suggests that while viewing the star is central, the experience of seeing a movie is not an individual experience but a collective one; the fans form part of an audience. Moreover, it is different from the orchestrated ways in which a movie theater space is usually perceived. The movie industry recognizes this organized fan response by accepting "rights of the spectator" (Rajadhyaksha 2001; S. V. Srinivas 2003) inside the theater and, as I will show later, in the content of movies and characters of actors as well. The rights of the spectator, as Rajadhyaksha and Srinivas term it, are the ways in which the first days of movie releases are considered as excessive and violent but at the same time accepted behavior during a film release. Behavior that would otherwise not be accepted now is, and demands by fans for special shows are granted.

Even though the first day first shows are highly collective experiences and activities, watching a film is also an individual experience. Just as seeing fans as mere movie fanatics or political pawns, it is also problematic to consider the audience merely as a collective, uniform entity reduced to figures of fans. In film studies, by going beyond textual analyses of films, scholars have tried to circumvent this uniformity by focusing on audiences instead of spectators (Brooker and Jermyn 2003). The spectator in film studies has previously been framed "as a hypothetical subject position constructed by the filmic text" whereas the recognition of experience has been framed in the audience "as actual, empirical viewers belonging to distinct historical contexts" (*Op. cit.* 127). In cultural and film studies as well as in anthropology an increasing body of work has appeared that deals with various kinds of audiences and their contradictions or differences (M. B. Hansen 1994; Hills 2002; Mankekar 1993; Mulvey 1989; Stacey 1994). Ian Ang spells out the intricacies of the term audience by on the one hand acknowledging the existence of its use by, for example, the television industry and on the other hand by pointing out the non-existence of '*the* audience' (1991 emphasis mine). The social world of actual audiences is multifarious and cannot be considered as a coherent, discursive entity: "…the fixing of meanings of 'television audience' is always by definition unfinished, because the world of actual audiences is too polysemic and polymorphic to be completely articulated in a closed discursive structure. There is thus always a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts the permanent stability and final closure of the 'television audience' as a discursive construct" (Laclau and Mouffe in Ang 1991, 12). To do justice to the

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[18] Chapter 4 is dedicated to this kind of imagery displayed on celebrative fan occasions.

[19] See also Miriam Hansen's pioneering work on the collectivity of movie watching (1994).

irreducibility of reality to an audience, we can only try to represent the different ways in which fans engage in movie-watching. The difficulty then is how to represent people who feel they belong to a collectivity while not describing them as homogeneous or a group of individuals. Even though throughout this dissertation I attempt to show the various ways in which fans relate to their hero, become a fan, experience films and consider their own ambitions, I am aware that by identifying the people I have worked with as fans, I am already reducing their lives to just fan club membership. I hope to show at least how collective and individual experiences related to fan club membership generate meaning in the broader life of fans.

Controlling the crowds

In the days before the release of *Sivaji: The Boss* crowds had gathered at Rajini Shankar's house in the hope of buying a ticket from him. A group waited outside while Shankar and his right-hand man, Tharagai Raja, tried to keep everything under control inside. In the small hall of Shankar's house, which he had furnished as a small office, more than twenty men had gathered. Shankar's phone was ringing continuously while he tried to address the eager fans in his hallway.

> Shankar: *For the release of* Sivaji *we have to do lots of things. We lost the opportunity of doing it for* Chandramuki (P. Vasu 2005) *so now we have to show them our strength.*[20] *You should all help me by doing good activities as we did in the past, okay?*
>
> Man: *Yes definitely, we will give you our support.*
>
> Shankar, with an ironic smile: *Okay, saying this is fine but after you get the tickets* [for the film] *from me, you will not come here anymore, you won't answer the phone and if you pick up the phone, you let your child answer!*

Shankar is referring to the ways in which fans do everything to obtain tickets for the first day first show and then lose interest in carrying out activities once the highlight of their membership is over again, until the next film release. The night before the release, people gather in front of Shankar's house again. Shankar and his family are nowhere to be seen. People are angry and aggressive as they have still not been able to get hold of a ticket. A couple of hours later the compound wall of his house is badly damaged and the men have all left. Only then is peace restored to Shankar's street. I doubt if the men succeeded in getting their tickets.

One of the reasons for many young men becoming members of a fan club is the possibility of getting tickets for the first day shows via the fan club. Until recently fan clubs in Pondicherry had the right to buy tickets for the first day or days' screenings of a movie. Not all theaters organize a fan show though; the new multiplexes do not privilege fan clubs in any way. If a fan show is allowed, the district fan club receives permission from the government – the collector's office – and with this permission they buy the tickets from a local theater to distribute to local fans under their authority. However, there are usually not enough tickets to distribute to all the fans.

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[20] Shankar refers to his own dismissal here. I will say more about the issue later on. In short, Shankar was dismissed from his post as secretary of the Rajinikanth fan club in Pondicherry around the time of the release of the film *Chandramukhi*. He was accused of selling tickets at exorbitant prices to fans. However, he continued acting as secretary and still has a large amount of followers.

Tharagai Raja explains that they also have to distribute tickets to local politicians, the media and the police: "in police stations they do not simply ask "what's the matter, what are you coming for?" They ask: when is *Sivaji* released?" In a euphemistic way Tharagai Raja suggest that police officers expect to receive tickets as well. This results in a detailed division of the remaining tickets which have to be distributed to local clubs. So not every local club gets tickets for all fans. They might receive 10 tickets and then have to decide who uses them. The price of the tickets for these screenings is much higher. The amount covers the price paid for police attendance and the guarantee for the theater in case it is demolished, but most of it should be used for social welfare activities.

The elaborate celebrations during movie releases have regularly caused damage to theaters. Occasionally during fan shows the interiors have been demolished when managers did not agree to screen a song another time as fans demanded; fires broke out when *pujas* were performed in front of the screen or fights broke out between fans of different actors or of different communities sitting in the same theater space. These accidents now generally belong in the past. The fan club now takes much more responsibility for keeping the crowd under control, in cooperation with the theater management and police.

In Pondicherry, as in other cities in the Tamil Nadu area, the fan show has been abolished for some time. The Rajinikanth fan clubs, however, have lobbied to get it reintroduced, which has been successful from time to time. Their connections with local politicians and their availability to canvass for political parties if Rajinikanth expresses his political preferences are put into play by fans in order to get something in return for their loyalty. Tharagai Raja explains why the fan show was banned and how they got it back:

> The government and theater owners thought that fans made too much trouble inside the theaters: they make a big mess, they shout and make lots of noise, they sing and dance and do some immature things. So they abandoned the fan show. In 1996, in Pondicherry, the PMC (Tamil Congress Party) and the DMK made an alliance during the elections and Rajini fans campaigned for the PMC. Not at the forefront but behind the scenes. We told the PMC: "if you win the elections, we demand only one thing, please give us back the fan show in the theater." So this is why we got the fan show permission in 2002. But we did not get the agreement easily. We faced many problems in local politics. We worked very hard for the elections. Our strength and mentality caused the sitting government to resent Rajinikanth and the PMC. AIADMK members and other politicians attacked us. They damaged our vehicles and our houses and politicians put a lot of pressure on the Rajini fans. They beat me. But we won the election so we know about the value of the Rajini fans. We asked the people who won the election, the DMK and PMC, to give us back the fan show and they did. So it is because of us that any actor now has a fan show in Pondicherry.

The return of the fan show was accompanied by several rules, however. Fans have to comply with various conditions laid down by the theater owners: (1) don't stand and dance on the chairs; (2) don't kiss the screen because that can cause damage; (3) don't sprinkle flowers and paper cuts; (4) don't light camphor in front of the screen; (5) don't scream and ask for "once more"; (6) don't perform *abhishekam* over the cutouts using milk or beer. Several of these prohibitions relate to interaction with the screen and its images. This is of course primarily a consequence of the mediation of the star through the screen but, as we already observed in the beginning of the chapter

and shall see in later chapters, images also play an important role in mediating fandom itself.

Nowadays it seems that theaters are becoming less willing to give fan clubs the privilege of the fan show. Soma Sundaram, the manager of Raaman Theater, one of the popular, large theaters in Pondicherry, remarks the following:

The fans get tickets and sell them on the black market. So the government had to put a stop to all these things and therefore abolished all the fan shows. The problem with the fan show is this: we sell tickets for 10, 20, 30 and 40 rupees. What these fellows do: they get an order from the collector and say that they are going to do some social work with the revenue [from the tickets]. They get the tickets, sell them for 100 rupees and the viewers pay 100 rupees for a 10-rupee ticket. And they make all kinds of nonsense, asking for the song to be repeated. If you don't do it, they just break the chairs. So we went to the government and presented all the difficulties we were having by putting on the fan show and they abolished it.

The last fan show was for the movie Sivaji. *We had full police protection. So for* Sivaji *there was no problem. But the problem makers are mainly the Ajith fans. They have damaged the Raaman Theater three times already.*

Roos: *Do they pay a deposit?*

Soma Sundaram: *No, not really. They have to pay for putting on the show. If the show costs around 30,000 rupees for all the tickets, they have to pay another 30,000 rupees for a deposit. So if there is any damage, we can take it off the deposit. Likewise there are many rules, but in practice they don't have the money. In no way does the fan club help towards the success of the movie. They cause damage, make a nuisance and it is a headache for the theater owners. But in no way does it help the success of the movie. If the movie is good, the public will come and see it anyway.*

These prohibitions and opinions, while also based on incidents at film theaters, convey and reinforce the trope and figure of the fan that fans as well as others propagate. Nowadays, only fan clubs of certain younger actors are deemed to behave excessively and violently. Older fans accuse younger fans or fans of younger actors of excessive, aggressive behavior. A lack of education is also deemed to be a reason for behaving this excessively during a release. In every generation of film stars it is said there are two types of actors: one is the educated actor playing various kinds of roles and the other one is popular with the masses because the characters he plays correspond to the social class of his audience. The fans are also often divided along similar lines. For example, regarding the distinction between MGR and Sivaji Ganesan and their fans in earlier times, former Sivaji Ganesan fan club member Napoleon Anthony says:

In those days, those who were watching MGR movies started fights inside the theater; they used to whistle, used to shout when MGR appeared on the screen; MGR movies had lots of fight scenes. Those who watched Sivaji movies were gentlemen; they did not start any fights inside the theater. Families can watch Sivaji movies. In Sivaji movies we did not see any fights; very rarely did we see a fight scene in Sivaji movie…. Sivaji fans were calm but MGR fans were furious. We Sivaji fans behaved well but MGR fans fought inside the theater. So we got a good name with the public, MGR fans did not. MGR fans were from poor families, Sivaji fans were from decent families. In 1971 I became president [of the fan club in Pondi-

cherry] and told my association members to stop fighting with MGR fans, because MGR fans used to start fights with Sivaji fans. If they started a fight I would come and negotiate.

In current fan clubs, people still make the distinction between the lower classes who like Rajinikanth and what Napoleon Anthony calls "decent families" who prefer Rajinikanth's counterpart, Kamal Hassan. Every generation has its own fan figures: those of the lower classes, deemed aggressive and ardent who contrast with the supposedly educated, serious fans falling for an actor who appears in serious films.

The words of Tharagai Raja, Napoleon Anthony and Soma Sundaram show that the figure of the fan stands for excess and immoral behavior. As well as the figure of the fan being typecast as a young man from a lower socioeconomic background,[21] the film theater itself has for some time been seen as a place of decay (M. B. Hansen 1999; L. Srinivas 2005; S. V. Srinivas 2007; Vasudevan 2003; Vasudevan 2004). At the advent of cinema, film-going was popular with a large variety of audiences, the negativity around film theaters only started later on. The cinema hall was considered one of the first democratic spaces in which people from a variety of backgrounds could come together in the same space (Sivathamby 1981, 18). The cinema hall was one of the first spaces that did not restrict admission; everyone could enter as long as he or she paid. We should be careful, however, not to assume that cinema was a mass entertainment form from the beginning (Hughes 1996). Social differentiation persisted, articulated in the use of space in the cinema hall through different class tickets and theaters attracting different publics (K. Hansen 2002; Larkin 2008; S. V. Srinivas 2007; Vasudevan 2003). Steve Hughes (2000) has shown how, in the colonial period in India, censorship not only dealt with film censorship but also with the venues of exhibition through issues of fire hazards, physical safety, geographical location, gathering of film crowds, immorality and ideological effects. After India's independence, this fear of more elite audiences for crowds and audience behavior persisted, as can be seen for example in letters voicing fear and worries written to magazines that S.V. Srinivas analyzed (2007). Through these letters, the writers set themselves up as a public distinct from the rest of the audience.

Although the movie theater was still considered a place of family leisure, the 1970s and 80s initiated a period in which the composition of the audience changed. Ravi Vasudevan shows how, for a neighborhood in Delhi, the changing composition of an area's residents caused a transformation in the theater audiences as well (2003). The theater became a space for young unmarried men and consequently lost its social legitimacy. Mazumdar(2007a) argues that the new cinematic theme of the poor, angry young man such as that characterized by movie stars Amitabh Bachchan and Rajinikanth in the 1970s and 1980s also attracted a particular public – and therefore excluded another – who could relate to these themes (see also Dickey 1993a; Nandy 1998a). Athique (2011) describes how various state governments regulated ticket prices in order to please a large section of society that was perceived as important in economic life and electoral gain. These low ticket prices provided access to the movie theater for the poor but also reduced the theater's revenue. All these factors led to a decline in revenue and consequently a decline in the maintenance of the theaters. The often not well maintained movie theaters in Tamil Nadu's cities and towns are therefore mostly seen as a space for young, unmarried male audiences (Derné 2000). These

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[21] Also in literature on film the notion of, for example, the urban poor (Dickey 1993a) or 'slum's eye view' (Nandy 1998a) has triggered the sense of film as catering solely to a lower class audience.

young men watch films in theaters when they have money and time to spend and make the theater a space in which women do not feel comfortable without male company.

The decreasing audience numbers in film theaters is also caused by the availability of cable television, VHC and later DVDs and VCDs. For families in particular, watching a film in the theater can be an expensive outing. Buying tickets for an entire family, plus the costs of getting to the theater and back, the snacks, etc. is much more expensive than renting or buying a VCD at home. However, this does not mean that families do not watch films in theaters anymore. Despite the negativity surrounding film theater spaces, movie-watching in the movie theater is still popular in India and visitor numbers are still high (L. Srinivas 2005). More elitist audiences have shifted towards the semi-public, comfortable spaces of the multiplexes in which audience behavior is much more restricted. I will return to this shift in the conclusion, where I discuss the decline of ordinary movie theaters and their replacement by multiplexes and a different type of public. Here I wanted to define the movie theater as an ambiguous space, just as fans hold an ambiguous position in relation to the theater. On the one hand they are granted the fan show in Pondicherry and thus acknowledged; on the other hand restrictions try to control them as excessive crowds.

In the first part of this chapter I showed how fan clubs engage with their star through his films in the movie theater. Film releases play a crucial role in fan club membership as fans look forward to this event and can display and therefore prove their fandom. This is articulated in the visual and aural presence of fans at the movie theater. Besides being the climax of fan membership for fans of a certain age group, this presence is also conceived in its excessiveness. Although excess is considered proof of fandom, fans and others also believe that it has to be controlled. In the remaining part of this chapter I want to show further ways of engagement that fans build up with their star.

Keeping in control: narratives of a star

"It started in childhood. We like his style. If you ask for a reason for hating someone I can tell you, but I can't explain the reason why I like him." Quote from a Rajinikanth fan.

Even though film will become of less importance for many fans throughout the years of their membership, the sociability of movie-watching lies for most – particularly younger, unmarried – fans at the root of their fandom. Fan tickets can be an important reason for someone to start a fan club. But films do not come out often, particularly during the last few years Rajinikanth has acted in fewer productions. In between these highlights fan club members engage in several ways with their star's life. They collect and narrate stories and news items about Rajinikanth, they imitate him and they act as vigilantes to protect him. In these engagements, we again observe a constant balance between excess and control.

In the period between movies fans keep up with the news about their hero. In meetings with fellow fan club members, through phone calls, text messages or conversations at the tea stall they exchange news about the star. Particularly in the run-up to a new movie, all news is discussed in detail. Subjects discussed are possible release dates, the songs (once they are out), or news about

shooting locations, to name but a few. Rajinikanth's possible entry into politics is also a widely discussed topic of conversation.

In addition, fan club leaders receive numerous phone calls and other requests for information on the progress of a film. Tharagai Raja, the public relations officer in Pondicherry, mentioned that it is sometimes quite hard to deal with all these requests. To keep fans calm, he says, he just tells them stories to keep them away for a while. The all-India leader of the Vijay fan club, who lives in Chennai, told me he changed his phone number because he received around five hundred calls a day. Most of the phone calls were from fans asking him to arrange an appointment with Vijay or to tell them about his film schedules. When I called him to ask if I could meet him for an interview, he was reserved and hostile over the phone. Once I met him in person this changed completely. It turned out he was afraid that I was another fan trying to meet Vijay. During the first interview I had with him, despite his new phone number, he received several phone calls, from as far away as Sri Lanka, asking him for information about Vijay.

What makes fans so eager to follow news about a star? Almost everyone in Tamil Nadu claims to have a favorite actor, often one corresponding to the person's generation. What is noteworthy is that many people I worked with start by liking the actor their father is a fan of and later on develop their own preferences according to their generation. Within every generation of film stars there are a couple of big stars that are adored: MGR and Sivaji Ganesan belong to the first generation of popular Tamil stars; then you have Rajinikanth, Kamal Hassan and to a lesser extent Vijayakanth; then Vijay, Ajith and Surya; and the youngest popular group is now Danush, Simbu, etc. There are several other film stars, who are popular and sometimes also have fan clubs dedicated to them, but the names mentioned here are those circulating the most. But the choice of an actor is not merely related to one's father's choice. Within families children develop their own preferences for different actors (and discussions or fights in defense of their actor ensue accordingly) and, once they get older, boys that have perhaps followed their father's favorite star, develop their own preference for an actor, which corresponds to their generation.

Being a fan of an actor does not inevitably result in fan club membership. Although many young fans become a member because of the tickets they can obtain, fan tickets alone do not explain the relationship a fan initiates with his star. The consistency in the ways in which people select their favorite movie star and the ways in which men become members of a fan club poses the question of how the fondness for a certain actor is created and what moves people to join a specific actor's fan club.[22] Fans build up a relationship with their star through the stories they collect and the desire they nurse to know about and engage in his personal life as well as his cinematic avatar. Rojek considers the production of celebrity as an individual or collective abstract desire (2001, 186–187). For Rojek, this abstract desire is rooted in capitalism where consumers develop a desire for commodities on the basis of media representations. This desire is abstract as it constantly demands renewal. This is necessary or else economic growth would come to a standstill. Celebrity, he argues, humanizes this capitalist desire. Marshall argues that "[t]he relationship that the audience builds with the film celebrity is configured through a tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the authentic individual. The various mediated constructions of

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[22] Of course, people also favor certain actresses, directors, music composers, singers, etc. but this fandom is usually not shown in the form of fan clubs. Nevertheless, there are a few fan clubs for people who are not male film stars, for example for music composer A.R. Rahman (see Punathambekar 2008) and for the Tamil actress Trisha.

the film celebrity ensure that whatever intimacy is permitted between the audience and the star is purely at the discursive level. Desire and pleasure are derived from this clear separation of the material reality of the star as living being from the fragments of identity that are manifested in films, interviews, magazines, pinup posters, autographs and so on" (Marshall 2002, 234–235).

The constant tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the real Rajinikanth and this desire to get to know him becomes clear from the material presented here. While audiences, and fans in particular, consume the spectacle of celebrity on screen or in other media, fans themselves are part of this spectacle – and thus make it real – by producing stories, fantasies, images and as such, the star himself. Besides magazines, other media – visual and aural, moving and still – are responsible for the construction of familiarity as well (see also Mazumdar 2008: 97) as can be seen from the many images fans collect from sources such as newspapers, magazines, stickers etc. In the following chapter we will see how these images produce fandom in everyday life. Here I want to point out the ways in which fans engage with their star beyond films. Rosie Thomas has shown how the star persona of a film actress is constructed by expectations that audiences have of the film genre and how gossip stories about the actress's life spread through rumors, fanzines and film magazines (1989). These are consumed as ardently as the films in which she acted. In the same way, narratives and information on Rajinikanth circulate and produce his images in the lives of fans.

Desires and aspirations: mimicry

People young and old like Rajinikanth's character in films because of his style and mannerisms. Throughout his career his films have always contained his typical mannerisms of flipping and lighting his cigarette, running his hands through his hair in a particular way and his so-called punch dialogues. In these punch dialogues he shows his power as a hero in the film, makes fun of the bad guys and in 1996 started to react to political leaders and allude to his own political career as well. These punch dialogues have become so common that they are also used for commercial purposes. In 2011 a book was released in Tamil and English with Rajinikanth's most famous punch dialogues and which can be used for management purposes (Balasubramanian and Krishnamoorthy 2010). Fans know many of these punch lines by heart and sometimes use them in conversation or send them as a text message to others.

When I was visiting Napoleon Raja and his friend and fellow fan club member Rajesh, Rajesh started to enumerate all the punch dialogues that he knew and which are used. Let me quote some fragments of his examples:

In the film Padikkathavan *(Rajasekar 1985) Rajinikanth played the part of a car driver. He calls his car Lakshmi. If the car does not start, he says, Lakshmi start. When someone's bike doesn't start, lots of people say "Lakshmi start. Lakshmi start."*

"Naan solrathaiyum seiven, sollathathiyum seiven." [I will do what I say, I will also do what I don't say], from the movie Annamalai *(Krishna 1992). In front of our parents we use this. If they say, hey go to the shop, then we can say, ok I can do what you say but I can also do what you do not say.*

Roos: *Do they get angry when you say this?*

Rajesh: *No, they simply laugh.*

"Laka Laka Laka Laka Laka Laka..." from Chandramukhi *(P. Vasu 2005). It is a style, just fun. It is from a song in the film. It is used often: on the phone, before hanging up the phone with friends, or in theaters when there is a power cut.*

During this conversation with Rajesh, the mother and brother of his friend Napoleon Raja, in whose house we were talking, started to joke about Rajesh repeating these punch lines. When I asked how non-fans react if they use these punch lines, Napoleon's brother says jokingly: "it annoys me. We Kamal Hassan fans don't do this. He [Kamal Hassan] is educated!" At which point everyone starts to laugh. What we see here once more is the class distinction that is repeatedly made to distinguish Rajinikanth fans from Kamal Hassan fans. Even within one family and group of friends, the difference between the serious, "class actor" Kamal Hassan and the actor of the "masses" Rajinikanth is played out in a lighthearted way.

Another popular way of connecting to Rajinikanth is by imitating his style. Sridhar, the student leader, says about mimicry:

When I was studying in 7th standard Rajini wore baggy pants in the movie Raja Chinna Roja *(S.P. Muthumaran 1989) and it became famous. In our school we had to wear normal pants, shirt and tie. We could not wear that kind of baggy pants. But I went to the tailor with friends, gave him some cloth and asked him to make baggy pants for us. We hadn't seen the movie, we couldn't because our family did not take us to the theater, but we had seen stills of the baggy pants. We wore the baggy pants and went to school earlier to avoid being noticed by the teacher during prayer time. We gathered at the prayer hall and the six of us looked different from the others. We had a school uniform in that baggy style! Finally the headmaster caught us, scolded us and punished us. First he asked us to remove the pants, then he asked us to kneel down [to be punished]. In the evening we altered the pants to the normal style again.*

I have heard numerous stories from nostalgic fans about their behavior when they were young. Rajinikanth's style has been copied by many, especially by youngsters. His gimmicks of running his hand through his hair, tapping on his bold head with his fingers, flipping his cigarette and catching it in his mouth but also his hair style, clothes and sunglasses have been imitated regularly. After the release of a film one can find sunglasses, watches and other items on the market sold, for example, as "Rajinikanth sunglasses." When Rajinikanth's hairline started to recede, fans started to shave their hair in a similar way. Particular clothes he used in films have been used by fans as well (see figures 7, 8 and 9).

Copying Rajinikanth's style is a way of showing how serious one's fandom is but it also conveys a sense of fun and style (see also R. Chopra, Osella, and Osella 2004). Imitating Rajinikanth, however, is something that younger fans can do but it is not appropriate for older fans.

Tharagai Raja: *I have children, I take them to school. If I needed to speak to the principal of the school and I wore Rajini clothes, what would he think! What kind of person is this? He is not mature!*

Selvam: *Now we have a family and we have responsibilities. We are now in a position to bring up our children and want to marry them into a good family. So we do not do these*

7,8,9. From top to bottom: Fan at Rajinikanth's birthday puja dressed in a style of clothes Rajinikanth wore in one of his films; Fan in a particular pose Rajinikanth used for one of his punch lines; Napoleon Raja (left) posing for his sister's marriage in white clothes and a Rajinikanth pose. Pondicherry. Napoleon Raja's collection.

things anymore. But we have the feeling in our heart. If I see younger fans in Rajini dress I enjoy seeing that fans are still doing it.

Again we can see a compromise between being a fan and showing one's fandom and justifying it to a larger world. The imitation and commoditization of Rajinikanth's style resulted in an interesting case in which Rajinikanth himself tried to protect and regulate his looks and character in the movie *Baba* (Krishna 2002).[23] By placing public notices in Tamil and English newspapers just after the release Rajinikanth prohibited people from imitating his screen persona for film purposes or his character for commercial gain (Lawrence Liang 2002). Also photos, sketches and head-scarves were not allowed to be used for selling or branding products. Knowing that many rickshaw drivers were fans, he stated that rickshaw drivers were permitted to use his painted image on their vehicles.[24] This attempt seems somewhat remarkable if one considers the subject of public agency that Rajinikanth has become. Shop owners, for example, often use images from new movies to decorate and advertize their shop, something that Rajini Shankar started in Pondicherry with the hoardings at his milk shop (figure 5). He frequently changed the images around his shop, for example when a new movie came out. There is also Selvam, who works as a bicycle repairer on the junction next to the main bus stand in Pondicherry. I had noticed Selvam's spot next to the road years before I actually started this research, from my many bus trips in and out of the city. With only a few repairing tools on the roadside you could easily overlook him, but his board with worn off paintwork displaying Rajinikanth's face indicated that his business had been there for years. Why restrict small shop owners while allowing rickshaw drivers to carry his image? Even though this has now left the headlines and one can only guess why he tried to protect his image, I suspect Rajinikanth's action was intended for the corporate companies on the use of his image as a commodity. I mention these different incidents here as they tell us something about the ways in which a movie star circulates as an image, becoming real to the people that engage with it and at the same time, through its circulation, not controllable by the star himself.

Vigilantes

Another way in which fans feel connected to their star is by the responsibility they feel in defending and protecting him. They defend him when family members or friends mock them by joking about their hero but they also defend their star when public figures comment on him. They also act as vigilantes towards other fans when they do not act according to the rules. A fan club member told me that he once noticed his neighbors watching an illegal copy of the Rajinikanth movie *Baba* which had just been released. He explained how he caught his neighbor and handed him in to the police. When I asked him for more details about pirated copies of Rajinikanth films and how fans deal with these he explained that these copies usually do not circulate because "they" as fans do not allow this. Pirated copies do circulate abundantly but this strong statement highlights

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[23] See Lawrence Liang 2007 and a commons-law discussion on Sarai.net for a discussion on this attempt by Rajinikanth.

[24] Rajinikanth played the part of a rickshaw driver in the super hit movie *Baadsha* (Krishna 1995) which made him extremely popular with rickshaw drivers.

10. Images of
the movie stars
Rajinikanth and
Vijay in front of
a photo studio.
Pondicherry 2002.

the urge fans feel to protect their star. Yet at the same time it contrasts with earlier accounts of how fans use all kinds of "illicit" ways to obtain movie tickets.

Fans defended Rajinikanth when he was criticized by politicians or in conflicts he had with politicians. There have been serious conflicts between Rajinikanth fans and supporters of the PMK and its leader S. Ramadoss. Rajinikanth has regularly been attacked by Ramadoss for his behavior in films. According to Ramadoss, Rajinikanth's smoking and drinking habits displayed in films negatively influence the Tamil youth. This came to a climax with the release of the movie *Baba* in which Rajinikanth played a drinking and smoking saint. PMK cadres went on a rampage, damaging theaters, film reels, and posters, and on top of that, they attacked Rajinikanth fans. Several Rajinikanth fan club members sought police protection afterwards, which they received for some time during and after the hostilities. Ramadoss's appeal to Rajinikanth was effective; since then, Rajinikanth has replaced his cigarette with chewing gum, using the same trick but now to toss the gum into his mouth.

The online community of the rajinifans.com website provides a platform on which to circulate articles or information about new movie productions and releases, or to post personal messages about Rajinikanth. Fans send messages asking Rajinikanth to meet them or they just express how much of a fan they are. In addition, in some of these posts fans criticize articles, magazines or newspapers, and specific journalists for not being positive or for being negative about Rajinikanth. They even take the matter into their own hands by writing emails with combined forces until the content is changed by the magazine or newspaper. This happened for example with an article on news portal Sify.com. They reported something about Rajinikanth that fans considered too critical. Members of the rajinifans.com forum encouraged all fans to write messages to Sify to change the content of the article. After some time they got a reply from Sify:

Dear Phil,

Thank you for your note. We have removed the sentence which you found offensive. Sify.

com strives to bring the best in entertainment and other news to our readers. We are totally objective in our reporting and have no issues whatsoever with any producer, actor or entity involved with the industry.

Thank you once again

With best wishes

Sify Newsdesk

Rajinifans.com also reports about illegal activities such as watching scenes of a yet to be released movie online, listening to songs that have not officially been released yet or downloading songs instead of buying the official CD. They try to keep their fellow fans under control by reprimanding a person if they behave badly. If someone on the forum mentions that he has downloaded songs before the songs have been officially released, other fans immediately respond that the moderator should remove this person from the site. After publishing unofficial photos of the film shooting of *Endhiran* a fan posted the following comment on another online Rajinikanth forum:

> *Please dont put any unofficial potos of Enthiran… !!! thats not good. if we want Enthiran to be success then we must [not] do it. soo please dont publish. we love that pics but we must in control.*[25]

What is interesting about many of these accounts of movie releases, copying style or acting as vigilantes, is the fine line between behaving as a real fan and "keeping in control." On the one hand, one should not behave too much as the ardent figure of the fan; on the other hand one should show one's fandom by promoting and defending the star. By acting as vigilantes fans show authority in what they expect from others – not only other fans but also from their hero. Rajinikanth in particular is said to be shaped by his fans, something he himself thinks is restricting him as well.[26] Most movies that deviated from his usual ones flopped. A fan explained the failure of, for example, the movie *Baba* in the following way: "Tamil people accept spirituality as a pickle; they don't accept spirituality as a meal. In *Baba* he provided the meal, so people did not accept that." With this quote, this fan does not suggest that people in Tamil Nadu do not appreciate mythological films. On the contrary, mythologicals have been extremely popular, and nowadays, even though they are produced less frequently, mythological TV serials are screened regularly.[27] However, what this fan suggests is that for stars such as Rajinikanth, the audience expects a typical masala of themes that together make up his films, just as meals in Tamil Nadu preferably consist of several dishes (including pickles) served with rice. *Baba* was too much about spirituality and not enough masala, hence fans did not appreciate the film.

To return to the ambiguity of devotion and keeping in control I just described, again we can see how people are attracted by an actor such as Rajinikanth because of his individual, authentic

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[25] Comment by SL BOY — May 5, 2009. http://www.rajinilive.com/pics/enthiran-stills-the-real-robo-leaked/ retrieved September 09 2001. Due to the many spelling mistakes I haven't put [sic] after the wrongly spelled words.

[26] Interview with Rajinikanth, May 10 2010. See also Introduction.

[27] See Gillespie's work on the active, devoted audience and the viewing of sacred serials (1995). See also Munshi's work on soap operas (2010).

character and at the same time this character is reinforced by fans, the actor and the industry alike (see also Dyer 2004).

Devotion

Perhaps the most important and hardest to reach goal throughout a fan's life is to meet Rajinikanth. One of the first things fans who have met their hero told me was about this encounter. Selvam, a member of the Rajinikanth fan club in Pondicherry, who we will hear more about in the following chapters, expresses the wish to see Rajinikanth along with the amount of time and energy fans put in the fan club:

> Even though we cannot meet him, we waste our time and energy. But to no benefit. We are his fans, even when I feel I cannot afford it, I cannot stop it, that thought just won't come to me.

Selvam expresses his affection towards Rajinikanth as something he cannot do anything about. He knows he and others are spending money and time. Rationally, he suggests, it is not a good thing but he cannot stop it. Meeting Rajinikanth would make up for much of the effort fans put into their fandom. Meeting the star is an event that fans cherish and speak about with pride. If they haven't met him, some fans try to avoid the subject or express their frustration. Frustration is mostly directed against local fan club leaders who are said to prevent fans from meeting the star. But merely *seeing* a star is not sufficient. One needs indexical proof of the encounter. As we will see in the next chapter, Selvam did meet Rajinikanth but does not have a photo of this meeting. He reconstructed the meeting with a photo of someone else (see Chapter 2). I heard one story of a fan who was said to have killed himself after he met the actor Vijay but was not able to physically touch him. Whether the story is true or not, its circulation indicates the importance of the meeting, not of just *seeing* the star but as a visual and sensory engagement tied up with fantasy and desire for the object (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992, 40).

The way in which fans need to see their star "in reality" shows parallels with the religious seeing of deities. Kannayram, a fan in his forties, told me how he immediately looked down when he met Rajinikanth because of the power of his eyes. Even though fans interact with their star largely through images, just as deities are worshipped as such, a real encounter with a star is just as pilgrimages are part of the religious experience. Fan club member Rajesh:

> Hindus have ambitions to go to holy places like Rameshwaram at least once in their lifetime. Christians would like to go to Bethlehem. Muslims would like to go to Mecca. Likewise, my ambition is to see Rajinikanth once in my lifetime.

This wish to meet Rajinikanth is above all a desire to be physically close to and see Rajinikanth and to receive his blessing, as one often hears fans explain. As well as this corporeal engagement being established, the religious parallel Rajesh makes here also hints at the reciprocal act of the gaze as found in the Hindu religious concept of *darshan*, which denotes seeing and being seen by the divine (Eck 1981). Fans often compare their devotion to Rajinikanth with the way they worship deities. A Rajinikanth fan:

> People in Tamil Nadu have a family god, we offer goats and other things to the family god.

We also worship other gods, but not that much. Rajini is like that [family god], because we don't give importance to other gods, but if it is the family god, we ask many things of him. Rajini is our god. Even though we talk about other actors we give importance to Rajini: Rajini is equal to god.

Kannayram's feeling of the powerful force of the eyes also connotes a religious experience. *Darshan* is not a one-sided way of seeing but it involves interaction between a deity – in its different manifestations – and its devotee. Yet, devotion is clearly not limited to the divine or religious as such but is also directed towards parents, politicians, movie stars and the like (Ramaswamy 1998). The reciprocal gaze creates bonds of intimacy between seer and seen (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992, 46–50). In the case of meeting one's movie hero the mutual gaze is more generally applied to the reciprocal embodied, or corpothetic, visual exchange of gazes creating an intimate relationship with the movie star. The intimacy in this relation also implies a form of *bhakti,* signifying intense devotional love felt for a deity. *Bhakti* developed in the south of India in the seventh century AD in poetry and later on influenced devotional traditions (Flood 1996). *Bhakti*, as with *darshan*, implies a reciprocal, immediate personal experience of the praised and is often centered around a charismatic founder (*ibid.*). Several popular figures had shrines or temples dedicated to them. Just as several shrines have existed for movie star MGR (Pandian 1992, 130) and a temple was constructed (and later demolished) for movie and television actress Kushboo.[28] How these temples are used and if they are really used is beyond the scope of this project but their very existence shows the close parallels between cinematic and religious styles of worship. As far as I know no temple exists for Rajinikanth but fans do worship him in religious terms. Fans often make comparisons such as the ones by Kannayram and Rajesh in which they describe Rajinikanth as their god. As I have shown above, Rajinikanth's images at movie releases are worshipped through ritualized practices, fans worship Rajinikanth's image at home and as we will see in Chapter 2, fan clubs organize grand temple *pujas* for Rajinikanth's birthday. Merely pointing out that the devotional practices that fans conduct for images of their movie star parallel other forms of worship does not mean that we fully understand the ways in which worship actually works and what the role of images is in the exchange of gazes and the power that is conveyed. As we will see in the following chapters, the adulation of Rajinikanth is imbued with ambiguity in several ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed various activities or forms of engagements that fans establish with Rajinikanth. These are experienced individually and collectively and are expressed in part through the fan club. I have attempted to show that fandom for Tamil film fan club members is not stimulated or created by an industry, let alone directed by the star. Rather, fans have a variety of motivations to be a fan and a club member. Attraction towards the star is why many fans became a fan club member. What was noteworthy is that stories about the star produced much of the eagerness to become a fan. However, once a fan, fandom is also about control. Excessiveness surfaces all the time; particularly at movie releases. This excess, even though it confirms and artic-

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[28] In North India, religious worship activities have been observed for movie star Madhuri Dixit (Kakar 2010).

ulates fandom, is not always deemed appropriate. Fans comment about other fans who become violent during film releases, or remember their own youth with nostalgia when they could imitate their hero without holding back. At the same time, it is also excess or abundance that shows fandom: it actually *proves* it.

What fan club membership is about is only partly addressed in this chapter. While film tickets and the attraction towards a certain star are the first incentives to join or start a fan club, for many fans it is a way of creating a network that goes beyond cinema and also of being publicly visible. I will continue to focus on more collective efforts of fan activity and the visibility this implies in Part II. First, in the second chapter of Part I will explore how fans in their everyday lives engage with images of Rajinikanth. I will investigate images that fans collect, produce and exhibit and that facilitate these relationships between fan and star.

2

INTIMACY ON DISPLAY

THE LIVES AND
LOVES OF CELEBRITY IMAGES

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very
close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.

(Benjamin 1969b, 223)

Introduction: On how viewers engage images and how images engage viewers

The photo on the previous page depicts a Rajini fan with a torn out image of Rajinikanth held close to his heart.[1] The fact that he used an image of Rajinikanth to show me and capture his fandom and the way in which he positions it close to his body already points to the ways in which images can be staged as intimate, embodied objects. This embodied proximity of the image of Rajinikanth serves as a starting point for an exploration of several kinds of images produced and staged by fans. In Chapter 1 we saw how fans can feel attracted towards their movie star. I demonstrated that images and stories play an important role in the construction of a movie star's persona. Fan collectivity and individual fandom are channeled through different kinds of movie star images. The images here range from commercial, mass-produced ones encountered in and collected from magazines, stickers or posters to vernacular images such as framed photos, bill-boards and paintings produced by fans themselves. These different images from various sources are often retouched, repainted or cut out to create the narrative that singles out the personal relationship between fan and star.

Fandom involves objects and images replicating and relating to the star. A star such as Rajinikanth has always had a strong presence in commercial and personally appropriated images. Things, as Csikszentmihalyi argues, can play important roles in the lives of individuals (1993, 23; see also Appadurai 1986). He points out how things or objects demonstrate a person's power and place in social hierarchy; they reveal continuity through time by providing the focus for involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals; and they give concrete evidence of a person's place in a social network as symbols of valued relationships. Following Csikszentmihalyi, I acknowledge the role of images as objects in everyday life. Both the material presence and content of an image create meaning in a fan's social world of fandom and fan club membership. Meaning is established, among other ways, through engagement with images. These images can be personal souvenirs and keepsakes of past events and future desires as well as serve as evidence of a fan's status as fan and club member. The ways in which fans show their star, position themselves next to their star or copy their star reveal the fans' desire to be close to their star. Images and their manipulation facilitate these intimate, personal links and corporeal engagements. Yet at the same time, desire and images seem to reinforce each other; just as desire generates images, images also generate desire (Mitchell 2005b). In other words, through the engagement with images of their star fans can come close to their desires but at the same time the circulation of images and the awareness of others engaging with the same kind of images generate

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[1] The photo on the title page is of the fan Shankar (he also calls himself Rajini Shankar but he should not be confused with Rajini Shankar, the Pondicherry fan club secretary).

these desires as well (see Jain 2007. I come back to this point below). I consider the power of images to be this generation of desire. Images are more than mere representation; they are embodied objects that, through their appropriation and reciprocal gaze, constitute power for the beholder.

This chapter focuses on fan images, the manner in which they are manipulated and how they facilitate the creation of identities and narratives as fans. In talking about the photos and other representations of movie stars that fans keep I consciously deploy the term images instead of photos. An image rather than a photo conveys the multiple ways in which images are appropriated and adjusted and are more than mere indexical representations.

The images discussed below belong to individual collections and creations that convey the various personal relationships fans can have with their star. Images which are displayed in everyday settings of the home in Tamil Nadu engender a feeling of familiarity and personal space as they are connected to the people living there (Morgan 1998, 57). These generic or personalized images can range from photos of deceased family members to religious images of family deities (calendar prints), memorabilia, posters depicting all kinds of common poster imagery such as landscapes or babies,[2] or of course a fan's favorite star. Many Rajinikanth fans that I have met have been collecting a whole range of paraphernalia related to the star since they were young. These comprise collected and replicated images from fanzines, film magazines and newspaper articles, to name just a few. Moreover, many of them have photos of the events they have organized and participated in with the fan club they are a member of. These images are documented and stored away, mostly in plastic bags or in a photo album kept at home (see figure 11 and 12). Posters and other images decorate walls and stickers are pasted on motorbikes, refrigerators, and doors. Images holding indexical or iconical signs of the star are carried close to the body, in a person's pocket or wallet, as rings or a necklace.

Movie stars live their lives predominantly as images for fans. To paraphrase Tapati Guha-Thakurta who has written on historical monuments but whose argument is relevant here as well, most fans will never meet the star but through images he survives and resonates in people's minds "as a body of readily available, reproducible imagery" (Guha-Thakurta 2003, 110). In this way, the images come to stand in for the "original." "If the aura…lies in its remoteness, its inaccessibility… the power of the image lies in its "presentness" (*ibid.*). The availability of images constitutes their power as stand-in for the "original" star while at the same time confirming their remoteness. In other words, images collected and appropriated by fans are representations of the star. This star is engaged with through representations which are imbued with power and imbue power on the original. But the image does not stand between what it represents and the beholder; the representation is a thing in its own right (Keane 1997, 8).

The images brought into play are mobile and hence appropriated in new and unintended ways. Even though these images are taken from a collection of generic images from magazines and the like, they are individually appropriated and as such "entangle widely shared visions with affectively charged personal narratives and memories" (Strassler 2010, 23). The individual appropriation of these images creates a unique, personal bond with the star. At the same time, the uniqueness of the relationship seems paradoxical, as the images that are used are often highly

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[2] See Uberoi 2006 for a discussion on the common presence of babies on posters, buses and other spaces of popular culture.

11. Page from a photo album containing commercial stills (left) and photos of a fan meeting Rajinikanth (right). Chennai, date unknown.

12. Display case in Jothi Kumar's home. Besides various statues and framed images of deities and family photos, one can see several enlarged and framed photos of Rajinikanth. Pondicherry 2007.

standardized. Most fans collect the same kind of images and display them in similar ways. The omnipresence and standardization has produced uniformity in aesthetic value, taste, and judgment of fan imagery and its wider fan club culture (see also Poole 1997).[3] As Pandian observes, "[p]aradoxically, it is their condition of stasis and being in a state of freeze, that makes them mobile" (2005a, 59). Pandian refers to the static or unchanging nature of what is displayed on the image, which is inherent to the photograph as a still image, as that which makes appropriation possible. In other words, a poster's still nature, in contrast to moving images for example, makes it easier to adapt in other contexts; it evokes new directions of circulation and meaning precisely

3 Poole argues that the standardization of *cartes de visite* "served to disseminate the particular canon of aesthetic value, moral judgment, taste, and distinction that would come to constitute nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. As a mass-produced and interchangeable commodity form, the cartes' standardized poses, airs and demeanors bridged distances, languages, and national boundaries. As such, the very sameness of the cartes' images helped to shape the specific forms of self-imagining, the personal aesthetics, and the elements of style that would come to characterize bourgeoisies (or "bourgeois cultures") in different parts of the globe" (1997, 122).

because it is a still image. Iconic images are heightened examples of such still images as they are recognizable, undemanding and therefore accessible (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). It is because they are so recognizable that they can easily take new directions. I would like to add that the commercial and generic nature of images contributes to the mobility and accessibility of images as well. Their similar appearance makes images recognizable and therefore familiar (Holland 2004), as they are adapted for individual, intimate use. Fans transform and exhibit these commercial and generic images in the setting of the home and thus engender intimateness to otherwise distant public figures (Strassler 2010, 289). Here again it is the standardization – or stasis – of images that generates a certain inventiveness in the ways in which images can be used.

The wide availability and circulation of images contribute to their own popularity and to the popularity of what is on the image, in this case a movie star. The growth of popularity through the circulation of media is what Michael Warner has called metapopularity, i.e. being popular for being popular (2002a). Warner, following Lefort and Habermas, has shown how public figures derive their power partly from being on display. He uses the example of Ronald Reagan to show how his image "blurs the boundary between the iconicities of the political public and the commodity public" (2002a, 173). It is not his qualities as a politician anymore that are popular but his popularity for the kind of public figure he stands for. Warner calls this popularity of popularity "metapopularity." In response to Warner's metapopularity Kajri Jain argues that the efficacy of images lies in a triangulation between the image, the viewer, and the viewer's sense of what others see, think and feel (2007, 292):[4]

> Similarly, the sense invoked in the arena of mass reproduction that imagined others or an Other are looking at what one is seeing has generative effects over and above what happens to the individual viewer in isolation. In other words, the sense of "imagined community" is not simply engendered through multiple individual recognitions of commonality or simultaneity with others who consume similar mass-produced cultural goods. It is also mediated and intensified by a desire for iconic figures whose "meta-popularity" is actively maintained within economies of power and efficacy. In these economies the value generated by processes occurring in a trans-subjective domain is embodied in objects and images rather than in unitary producing subjects (Jain 2007, 294).

For fans, their iconic hero lives predominantly in images and publicity, and their iconicity as well as their circulation makes them powerful and adjustable. Film stars such as Rajinikanth, as I have already demonstrated in Chapter 1, circulate in stories and images and derive their popularity from them. Their popularity articulated in these images, but also their omnipresent circulation, availability and generic outlook create a kind of meta-popularity. The interest in the personal lives of stars and at the same time the selection of what is expected and accepted from them, once more confirms that popularity is not based on the mere qualities of the star. The efficacy of the images that circulate of a star lies in the notion of an imagined community of others that all share the personal feelings towards Rajinikanth. So even though I discuss individual appropriations of representations of a fan's favorite star, according to Jain, these are empowered by the sense of a third viewer. It creates and mediates an "imagined community" of fans.

[4] This also parallels Nancy Munn's analysis of fame in the case of Gawa in which, she argues, there is a need for a third party to actually construct one's fame (1986).

Collections

Selvam is a coconut seller in his thirties living in a modest house in Thengai Thope, one of the coconut plantations on the outskirts of Pondicherry. Selvam has been a fan of Rajinikanth since his early childhood.

> *After father and mother, he [Rajini] is my breath. I have liked him a lot since I was a child. Even then, we painted on small cloth banners and celebrated [movie releases] at the theater in a grand manner with fire crackers. Also for his birthday we celebrated and distributed milk and chocolate to children. My mother scolded me sometimes but I didn't pay attention to her.*

> *I was a fan of Rajini and my elder brother was a Kamal [Hassan] fan, so we held competitions to collect their images. At the time, when we were going to school, our parents gave us some pocket money. I purchased Rajini photos but my brother found them and he spoiled the images.[5] So we often fought with each other. And when I was in school, I was always thinking about Rajini and his movies.*

For Selvam and his brother images also played an important role in being a fan in early childhood. Selvam is known in Pondicherry as a serious fan who is not interested in personal gain but who works really hard for the fan club. And indeed, throughout the period I got to know Selvam better, he was always very serious in his work as a fan. When I returned to Tamil Nadu after a period of time, most fans I know had changed their cell phone number as many people do all the time. Selvam hadn't. He was afraid that Rajinikanth or the head branch fan club in Chennai may want to call him on the number he once provided. Every time I left Tamil Nadu, it happened to coincide with Selvam having an invitation for Rajinikanth, first an invitation to his marriage and then to his son's first birthday celebrations. He thought that I may have a more direct connection to Rajinikanth so he asked me to send the invitations to his house. Even though he never expressed it in words, I could sense Selvam's hope that Rajinikanth would respond personally to his invitations.

Selvam spends a considerable amount of his modest earnings on collecting and producing images. For Rajinikanth's birthday and movie releases he always spends money on posters and hoardings, for family events he produces extensive invitations that contain Rajinikanth's image. If he cannot afford it himself, he borrows money from others to cover the costs. He keeps most of his images in plastic bags. From this archive Selvam selects images of Rajinikanth for the public hoardings and wall paintings he and his fan club commission for events. He has a particular interest in collecting and using rare images of Rajinikanth for his hoardings and the murals. He made several of these with his friend and artist Ranjit. Ranjit was also a Rajinikanth fan and Selvam recounts: "*Since childhood, both of us, wherever we saw a Rajini image, even if it was small, we collected it and kept it with us.*" Ranjit is dead now; he committed suicide in 2007. I will elaborate on his tragic story in Chapter 4. Selvam repeatedly mentioned, and not without satisfaction, how large his collection of images of Rajinikanth is:

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[5] This story reminds me of a scene in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle and Tandan 2008) in which the protagonist, when he is still a young boy living in a Mumbai slum, is in raptures because of the autograph he received from the celebrated movie star Amitabh Bachchan. In the next scene, to his sorrow and rage, his slightly older brother sells the signature, which leads to a fight between the two.

How many fans have you met? Did you ever see such a collection? You cannot find one. I have collected even the smallest piece of paper with his image …. Did you ever see such a variety of photos of Rajini? See, I have pasted them all over my house, even on the TV and everywhere else. I have only one photo of my mother, the rest are all of Rajini."

Selvam's mother died a couple of months before I met him for the first time in 2007. He felt somewhat guilty since he has spent large amounts of money on the fan club and his collection of Rajinikanth but he has not devoted much attention to his mother's death yet and only has one image of her in his house.

For the events that he is involved in with the fan club, Selvam keeps a photo album that contains photos of fan club activities and photos of the hoardings, cutouts, murals and posters he, Ranjit and his fan club have commissioned for Rajinikanth's birthday and movie releases. The images in the album are primarily for personal use and to show guests what kind of activities the fan club is involved in. These images are also important evidence for the head office of the fan club in Chennai as proof of genuine fandom, something I will have more to say about below. To the photos of activities Selvam has added images of Rajinikanth that he has collected throughout the years. Only the special images of Rajinikanth make it into the album.

The desire to look at and keep images of a fan's hero points towards an animated relationship with these images in which proximity and corporeality are crucial. On the one hand, movie stars remain distant charismatic personae while on the other hand their images evoke intimate relationships (Guha-Thakurta 2004). A distant symbol of a movie star becomes an intimate being through proximity. Likewise, in wedding photography in Tamil Nadu proximity is evoked by locating the wedding couple in different imagined locales and next to movie stars or politicians as if they were present at the wedding (Gerritsen 2006).

The two photos above (figures 13 and 14) depict the interior of Selvam's house. His walls are covered with posters of Rajinikanth alongside a framed portrait of his deceased mother, some other personal photos, and a calendar picturing Ganesh. Shortly after I left Tamil Nadu in 2008, Selvam was about to marry. He stressed that he was not planning to change anything about his activities regarding Rajinikanth. He emphasized that he was planning to keep on spending money on imagery and other activities related to the fan club and would not change the decoration of his house regardless of what his future wife said.

When I visited Selvam two and a half years later, he was married and had a son of more than one year old. His wife, who said she had been a Vijay fan previously, is now also a fan of Rajinikanth, just like her husband. The ways in which she expresses her interest in Rajinikanth are also based on the general characteristics that are attributed to Rajinikanth. This shows once more how personal affection can inform fandom but also how it is exchangeable and based on other selection criteria than merely personal attraction and affection. Even their son, Selvam told me proudly, reacts on hearing or seeing Rajinikanth on television, calling him *taataa*, grandfather.

The interior of Selvam's home had not changed much since his marriage. However, he has given his mother a respectful place on his wall with a framed, enlarged photo in between the images of Rajinikanth. In addition, he had replaced the movie posters of Rajinikanth with a poster of a newer movie, a calendar of Rajinikanth issued by a fellow fan club member and he has added a poster that he personally commissioned for Rajinikanth's sixtieth birthday. The poster says: *Makkal potrum mannane!* (The king who is praised by his people) *Un viral asaivu*

13. Selvam's living room. On the right a Rajinikanth calendar hangs next to a Ganesh calendar. Pondicherry 2007.

14. Selvam's wall. Pondicherry 2010.

15. Selvam holding his photo album. In the background, several of his Rajinikanth posters and the Neyam music channel – run by Rajinikanth fans – playing on TV. Pondicherry 2007.

16. Rajinikanth and Selvam, Pondicherry. Date and photographer unknown. (Selvam's collection).

podhum (it is enough if you just point your fingers) *nattin thalai vidhiye maarum* (the fate of this country would change) *Nee varum naal engalukku thirunaal* (the day you enter is meant to be the day of our delight). The poster refers to Rajinikanth's possible entry into politics that many of his fans have been waiting for since 1996. Up to now, Selvam had not wanted Rajinikanth to be in politics, preferring to see him act in films. What is interesting, is that Selvam is actually more concerned about the splitting up of the fan club in Pondicherry that perhaps could be prevented when Rajinikanth starts a political party than he is in Rajinikanth's entry into politics per se. I have already briefly referred to the split that happened in the Pondicherry Rajinikanth fan club after Rajini Shankar's dismissal as general secretary responsible for the Pondicherry organization. I will elaborate on the political issues within the Pondicherry fan club and the desires and disappointment of Rajinikanth's (non-)political steps at the end of this chapter and in the next two chapters. For now it suffices to say that two groups are trying to take over the fan club organization, leading to friction within the club. Selvam is not happy with these issues and just wants to show Rajinikanth the dedication his fans have for him. Problems in the fan club do not contribute to this commitment. To "read" the poster as a political statement, therefore, would not cover the significance this poster has for Selvam. For him, many more layers are present. For example, he added an image of one of the famous Pondicherry banner artists, Kumar, on the poster. It was in fact the banner artist Muthu, an apprentice of Kumar who made the poster and out of respect for the older artist added his image. For Selvam, who appreciates special and rare images, as I already indicated and who painted murals himself with his friend and artist Ranjit, banner art is an important part of fan activity. Finally, the fact that Rajinikanth is garlanded indicates the celebratory moment for which the poster was made and not the entry into politics. These "meanings" that lie in the poster for Selvam are therefore much more varied and layered than a mere political wish would suggest.

Intimate imaginaries

In figure 15, you can just make out the edge of the portrait Selvam made of Rajinikanth and himself on top of the television set. The best-preserved and most displayed images are the ones recounting fans' meetings with the star. They are often enlarged and framed and figure proudly in the homes or offices of a fan or are stored away in a fan's pocket or wallet. It is a fan's ultimate dream to meet Rajinikanth at least once in his lifetime, even though most will never achieve this. As I argued in the Introduction, tactility and *darshan*, or the reciprocal gaze of this meeting is what feeds this desire. Images, like sculptures, calendars, characters in mythological movies or on posters, are considered representations (*murti*) of the deity that can be worshipped just as images of parents or a movie hero can. By returning the gaze, however, these images do not merely depict or represent a movie star but the star is actually present in them, as if in a sense he is there (Morgan 1998, 57). In other words, images create a space for a fan to encounter and interact with his hero, not as something mediating between image and beholder but as an object in its own right (Keane 1997).

This applies to the images that Selvam has exhibited in his house, as we can see above, and more specifically, as we will see, for the images of meetings with Rajinikanth. Selvam is extremely keen on meeting Rajinikanth, seeing his movies and the images that circulate of him: "*all I want*

is to see him. We have to bring some fans to him, take a picture with him, and that is enough. That is what we are working for." Selvam did meet Rajinikanth but is frustrated that he does not have a photo of this meeting. He still hopes he can meet him again, so he works for it by producing and exhibiting his images. It shows to the outer world how big a fan he is. It shows his dedication or devotion towards Rajinikanth, something that all fans consider crucial in expressing their fandom. As we will see in Chapter four, imagery such as hoardings, posters, and other forms of publicity that individual Rajinikanth fans and fan clubs disseminate serve as a visual record of how good a fan you are, what kind of activities you have done, your personal relationship with and dedication to the star. This record is intended for a wider public of Rajinikanth fans and fan clubs of other actors but also for evidence for the headquarters to see what a dedicated fan you are. The headquarters uses this information to select new local fan club leaders. For Selvam therefore, showing his dedication to Rajinikanth is a way of proving that he is a "real" fan and active fan club member. This would enhance the chance of him joining other, higher-ranking fan club members when they go to Chennai to meet Rajinikanth.

Meeting the star is what all fan club members wish for, but this meeting is not complete without a photographic memento – preferably one that can be enlarged and framed. Selvam indicated this by stating: "*we … take a picture with him, and that is enough.*" Most fans I have worked with, when they talked about their meeting with Rajinikanth or when they expressed their hope to meet him, explained this in the desire to take a photograph with Rajinikanth. Remember my meeting with Rajinikanth in which his manager asked me to come alone and only bring my camera.

However, taking a picture does not always happen for fans. Most fans have never met him personally and if they have, the photograph is not always usable. Several fans showed me photos of their meeting that were badly framed and out of focus due to the hectic moment and the fact that the photographer was as overwhelmed as the others were by seeing Rajinikanth and therefore just pressed the button without paying attention. Nevertheless, in spite of being blurred or badly framed, at least it is evidence and a keepsake of the event. Without a photo, the meeting does not really count, as shown by disappointed fans such as Selvam who did meet Rajinikanth but do not have a photo of the occasion. Since they cannot show "evidence", they do not talk about their meeting in the same way as fans who do have such photos.

Let me now return to the photo I just pointed out on Selvam's television set. A close-up of this photo can be seen in figure 16. Selvam does not have a photo of the moment he met Rajinikanth, so he asked a photo studio to retouch a photo of another fan who did meet Rajinikanth, and replace that person's face with his own. Even though Selvam is at first somewhat reluctant to reveal this transposition, he is also happy to see himself next to his hero.

Selvam's retouching of the photo shows that images do not have to be indexical to be effective. While the photo is not indexical, it *becomes* indexical. And more importantly, it becomes effective after manipulation. At the same time, Selvam's reluctance shows that certain photographic practices are not accepted. This would suggest that a photo actually *should be* indexical and a reliable representation of what is photographed. But as we will see later for fans but also in various other photographic practices, putting the person on the photo in front of all kinds of backdrops is a suggestion of what is desired (Behrend 2003; Gerritsen 2006; MacDougall 1992; Pinney 1997). Selvam's reluctance lies at another level which once more points to the fine balance

I noticed earlier between propagating fandom and exceeding what fandom should be. As this photo is displayed in the more intimate, everyday sphere of the home in which not everyone is able to see it, there is more leeway for displaying these kinds of images that would otherwise be considered inappropriate. This would link up with Bourdieu's proposition that something cannot be photographed if it has not been solemnized (Bourdieu in Pinney 1997). However, here this is not the case. Or at least, not as it is reflected in the photograph. The manipulated image is a construction of something that did take place but does not have an indexical trace, something which would be desirable to have.

Figure 17 shows a meeting with the late Ranjit, who, as I mentioned above, was a friend of Selvam. He met Rajinikanth once, but not alone. Being a painter Ranjit replaced the other person in the photo by continuing the background and added Rajinikanth's arm which was previously around the shoulders of the person he erased. So where Selvam replaced someone else with his image, Ranjit erased someone to make the image entirely his own.

Another way of centering the attention on the individual, personal meeting and which resembles Ranjit's removal of a person is the blurring of other people in a photo. This is a digital retouching trick that equals Ranjit's use of paint. District fan club leader Ibrahim runs an office and telephone booth at the main Wbus stand in Villupuram. The framed and enlarged photos in his office immediately show that Ibrahim has met Rajinikanth (and his wife Latha Rajinikanth) more than once (figure 18). On the right, we see Ibrahim meeting Latha Rajinikanth and on the left, a portrait of Ibrahim and Rajinikanth. The photo in the middle was taken much earlier than the other photos in his office, as we can tell from the young appearance of both Rajinikanth and

17. Rajinikanth and Ranjit, Pondicherry. Date unknown. (Ranjit's family collection).

Ibrahim. The images of the first meeting with Rajinikanth and the one with Latha Rajinikanth depict other people as well. To push them into the background, these people have been blurred which brings the meeting into the foreground and makes it more personal as such.

Figures 19 and 20 display two other examples of retouched photographs of actual and constructed meetings with the star. In figure 19 the people, who haven't met Rajinikanth on this occasion, have added Rajinikanth at either side. The importance of the group photos lies in the fact that former AIRFC leader Sathyanarayanan is present. Figure 20, a photo displayed in a fan's photo album, shows a constructed photo of a fan holding Rajinikanth's hand. What is noteworthy about this photo is that it is not a "natural" still of Rajinikanth but a movie still. By using the term "natural stills" fans are referring to photos of Rajinikanth that are not from movies but are of his off-screen life. A natural still, as used in figure 19, would therefore give the photo a more "realistic" look. As a result, natural stills are mainly used for personal occasions, whereas for movie releases and other fan club events it is more often stills from movies.

These retouching and collage techniques are commonly used for images in Tamil Nadu and India at large. I have written elsewhere of the production of wedding videos and photo albums in Tamil Nadu in which retouching and the adding of backgrounds and objects play an important role in the construction of a future romantic narrative (Gerritsen 2006). Photos and scenes are blurred to put the bride and groom center stage and objects and backgrounds are added to enhance an atmosphere of festivity and romance. But from the beginning personal photographs in India have been more than indexical photographic documentation (Pinney 1997). Whereas in early European photography paint was also used to retouch photos, in Indian photography paint has always been more than simply an additional extra. Entire photos are repainted to show the desired image. In studio photography, which has become popular throughout the years, photo settings and poses are staged and manipulated to signify possible states of being that "leave substantive traces of what otherwise would be mere dreams" (Pinney 1997, 91). People pose in front of backdrops of all kinds of imaginary scenes.

18. Framed photos in Ibrahim's office. Villupuram 2008.

19. Image constructed from the photo of a meeting with the former AIRFC leader Sathyanarayanan with Ibrahim, Saktivel and Murugan. Rajinikanth appears on the left- and right-hand side. Vannur, date unknown. (Saktivel's collection).

20. Constructed image of Rajinikanth and fan in photo album. Cuddalore, date unknown. (Sundar's collection).

21. Framed photo of film star Sivaji Ganesan and a fan. Place and date unknown.

22. Photos in photo album of meeting with Rajinikanth. Chennai, date unknown.

What makes the liberal use of paint unproblematic, Pinney suggests, is the lack of desire in India to capture someone within a temporal and spatial framework. Moreover, photography does not capture the 'inner' character visible by its physiognomic traces. In this way, creating a romantic wedding narrative or positioning yourself next to Rajinikanth in a manipulated image is not problematic, as in this case a photo is merely an indexical trace of the "real." What we see is merely the person's physiognomy in a constructed dream world. The efficacy of the image however, is more than that. Proximity by physically putting objects together, as Pinney has also shown in his work, imbues the image with power (*ibid*.). The use of photos of Rajinikanth works in similar ways. Centering the focus of attention on the meeting between him and the fan in question imbues the photo, whether manipulated or not, with power. It creates a dream world in which the star is put into the desired proximity of fans. For fans, the power of these kinds of images lies, first and foremost, in the joy of seeing yourself with your star. But it also positions you within the fan club, as it shows your efforts in meeting him.

The celebration of these keepsakes in the form of framed and often enlarged and retouched photos invokes the memory. At the same time, photography's more evocative and imaginative qualities constitute and enact proximity. Photos of meetings become souvenirs in which physical presence is central (Strassler 2003). Photos offer the opportunity to come closer to realizing a fan's desire to be physically proximate to Rajinikanth, a potential that is increased by contemporary digital technology through its many cut-and-paste possibilities.

But it is not only images that enact a relationship with a star. Different kinds of traces (tactical, indexical) of the star work to establish this relationship. Indexical connections – physical tokens in the place where the star actually left his mark – can function in a similar way to images. This is exemplified by a youthful memory of Saktivel, who has been an ardent fan of Rajinikanth since childhood. Now Saktivel is the fan club block secretary in Vannur, an area in Villupuram district, in which he lives and has been elected as the Panchayat president with the aid of his fan club support. During a conversation, Saktivel recalls the intensity of his fandom for Rajinikanth when he was young by narrating the following incident. At the age of 13, Saktivel eagerly wanted to see a newly released Rajinikanth movie. He received some money from his parents for his theater ticket but instead of spending it on a ticket, he bought sweets to distribute at the theater. Afterwards, he had no money left for the actual ticket and in the meantime, his parents were out so he could not ask them for more money. He decided to earn some money by collecting and selling firewood. He climbed a tree, fell out, and was severely injured. Even though he could not walk properly, Saktivel was determined to see the film. With a broken leg he stumbled to the theater and saw the film, after which he was hospitalized for six months. His mother knew that nothing would please him more than an image of Rajinikanth, so she went to Chennai and tried to meet Rajinikanth to collect a photo of him, but in vain. Instead, she met Rajinikanth's All India fan club president Sathyanarayanan. Sathyanarayanan agreed to give her his autograph. This autograph pleased Saktivel almost as much as a photo of Rajinikanth would have done. Even now, Saktivel enjoys recalling the story and keeps emphasizing how happy he was with this autograph, even keeping it under his pillow. It was like medicine – he did not need anything else. Just as the dream of many fans is to meet Rajinikanth – to have some physical contiguity with him –the autograph here also seems to work as an index: Sathyanarayanan's autograph became a physical token of Rajinikanth. This indexical connection is almost tactical: it works as medicine here.

23. Photo of fan club member Annamalai (left) and his colleague. Annamalai has two framed photos of Rajinikanth and a Rajinikanth flag attached to the top of his vehicle. Pondicherry. Date unknown. (Annamalai's collection).

"Now equivalence itself has become a fetish"[6]

Annamalai, who works as an auto-rickshaw driver, is proud to be the only person in Pondicherry with a Rajinikanth flag fluttering on top of his vehicle (figure 23). He tries to imitate Rajinikanth in every possible way, admiring him particularly in the highly successful movie *Baadsha* (1995) in which the actor played a rickshaw driver. During a conversation with Annamalai in his rickshaw, he kept emphasizing that nothing is more important to him than waking up and seeing Rajinikanth's image first. It is not his wife or his children he wants to see; it is Rajinikanth. That, he says, is why there is such a huge poster of the actor above their bed. Indeed, in their small one-room house, this poster is visible from every corner of the room. Just in front of it, there are two fascinating images displayed on the television set (figures 24 and 25).

Annamalai, in order to emphasize that he imitates Rajinikanth in every possible way, combined his own photo with Rajinikanth's in two picture frames. One of the frames shows an enlarged portrait of Rajinikanth to which he added a passport-sized photo of himself in a similar pose. In the other frame, he enlarged himself instead and added the original passport-sized photo of Rajinikanth. This mimetic play with images of a star is very unusual. Copying the star's posture, clothes or hairstyle is accepted but it is not considered appropriate if you depict yourself as large as, or larger than the star. On the one hand Annamalai is actively mimicking Rajinikanth, and in this way confirms his genuine devotion to his hero; on the other hand, the way in which he does this – by comparing himself to Rajinikanth – is considered to be inappropriate. As we

6 Horkheimer and Adorno quoted in Taussig 1993, 45.
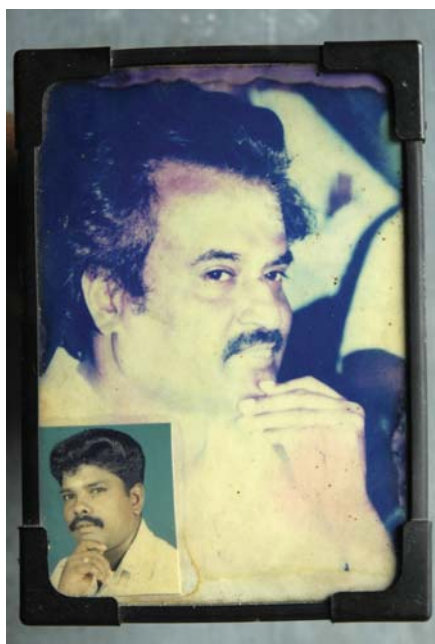
24. Rajinikanth and Annamalai.
(Annamalai's collection). Pondicherry,
date and photographers unknown.

25. Annamalai and Rajinikanth.
(Annamalai's collection).

will see later in reference to hoardings, fans are criticized as being too egocentric if they display such an image for a wider public. Since this photo is only for "personal" display, however, it seems that Annamalai just played around with mimesis and in this way enhanced proximity, and hence intimacy, with Rajinikanth (see also Pinney 2001). In other words, devotional intimacy and mimicry is acceptable but identification can be more problematic. There is clearly a fine line between individual expressions of fandom and "misuse" of your star. This brings me back to emphasizing what I aim to argue in this chapter, i.e. the ways in which fandom is enacted is as much about fandom in relation to a star as it is performance of the self as a fan. The personal, domestic spaces and personal appropriations of a star allow more space for the self than public spaces do. In Chapter four we will see how the publicly displayed billboards can also display personal desires for proximity but at the same time, due to their public nature, they are also subject to many more restrictions. Here, the domesticity of these images brings more leeway to performance of the self.

The efficacy of these images is due in part to the physical proximity and corporeality created by means of mimesis. Drawing on Marxist notions of the commodity fetish, Horkheimer and Adorno have suggested that it is no longer the fetish that is subject to equivalence, rather equivalence itself has become a fetish (Horkheimer and Adorno in Taussig 1993, 45). They refer to the commoditization of life under capitalism in which objects become fetishized. Several scholars have written about the disappearance of reality, the real or the authentic, categories that in modern times are said to be replaced by images, spectacle, or reproductions (Adorno and Horkheimer 2007; Baudrillard 1994; Benjamin 1969b; Boorstin 1992; Debord 1994). Except for Benjamin, who also noted the positive sides of the transformations via mass productions, most of these works are imbued with a feeling of loss of the authentic, of the real. Benjamin referred to the commodity fetish as he described the arcades as places of phantasmagoria in relation

to the objects for sale (Buck-Morss 1989). Looking at the deceitfulness of commodity desires, however, would bypass the nuances of the investment that people put in things (Taussig 1993; see also Spyer 1998). What I am particularly interested in therefore is not the take on capitalism and the (deceitful) commoditization of life, but the ways in which equivalence becomes an object of value and desire.

The fetish is one of those terms with which this desire for objects has been theorized. Pietz (1985; 1987; 1988) has shown how the notion of the fetish derived from the Portuguese bartering on slave routes. The Portuguese, despite their religion and "rational principles" took oaths on fetishes to seal agreements (Pietz in Apter 1993). Later on the notion was used to describe the "primitive other" as the antithesis of Christianity's transcendental, abstract spirituality and Enlightenment itself (Jain 2007, 223). In the 19th century it was used to understand the other within a subject and capitalist society (*ibid.*), which brings us back to the ideas of, among others, Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno about the position of commodities in capitalism.

Instead of the rejection or disapproval of things coming too close and desirable as suggested by authors such as Marx or Adorno and Horkheimer, here I actually want to address the intention of getting things closer by way of their likeness. If we recall Benjamin's definition of the mimetic faculty, he described it as the capacity to copy and to become the other (1986). The mimetic faculty suggests a dual notion of mimesis, i.e. copying or imitation and a sensuous, visceral connection between viewer and viewed (Taussig 1993). Just as fans explained how they liked to dress up as Rajinikanth when they were young, mimicry is a recurrent theme in the images brought into play by fans.

Images of movie stars, as objects and as representations, are imbued with a sense of proximity and affect. Mimicry displays power because the images can perform something that is desired. At the same time they also show the limits of likeness and what can be done to perform it (Strassler 2010). Images and their manipulation facilitate these intimate, personal links to and corporeal engagements with the star. This makes the image practices of fans productive rather than reproductive encounters, which is Michael Taussig's understanding of the mimetic faculty, i.e. "the nature that culture uses to create second nature" (1993, xiii). This complicates the copied images of fans which become objects not merely deriving from an original. Instead, they are productive practices in which the "copy" has a life of its own, partly deriving from and related to the original and partly moving from it independently.

We can distinguish two ways in which the images here draw on mimicry. Firstly, and applicable to photos in general, the image has an actual relationship to the star; i.e. the depiction of Rajinikanth is an indexical sign or a copy of the real Rajinikanth. Secondly, and what makes the retouched and constructed photos of Selvam, Ranjit and in particular Annamalai especially interesting in the further discussion of mimicry, is the men's own active involvement in changing the images. Pinney has described images that perform a mirror effect, allowing viewers to actually see themselves in the same space as the deity. This enhances the power of the religious image and the mutual gaze that is established (2008, 422). In the same way, we could consider the mimicry and the positioning of images of fans and stars in the same frame as customizations that bring these images closer to fans (*ibid.*).

Annamalai is playing with mimicry by copying Rajinikanth's pose, but he is also mimicking Rajinikanth's eminence by both enlarging and reducing his own image and that of Rajinikanth.

But who actually mimics whom here? Can we speak of an original and a copy in this case? With this reversal mimesis "becomes an enactment not merely *of* and [sic] original but *by* an 'original'" (Taussig 1993, 79 author's own emphasis). Originals only exist because copies are made of them. These copies, in turn, have to be recognized as copies in order to acknowledge the existence of an original. The fact that Annamalai knows he is crossing the fine line between devotional intimacy and identification acknowledges the existence of the original; yet as it is an image, it works in both ways for Annamalai.

Literature examining the production of familiarity and intimacy, predominantly in the context of Hollywood celebrities and audiences, suggests that the relationships audiences build up with a celebrity are constituted by the knowing and not knowing unknowing of the *authentic* individual (Dyer 2004; Doss 1999; Gledhill 1991; Marshall 2001; Stacey 1994). Desire is produced through the construction of a celebrity via stories and images found in magazines, posters and the like (Marshall 2002, 234–235; see also Doss 1999). There are two points that I want to elaborate on further here. Firstly, as I have suggested earlier, familiarity and intimacy is created as much through personalized images such as those discussed above as through mass-mediated and produced images as collected and used by fans. The photographic practices shown by Annamalai, Selvam, and Ranjit show how fans actively employ images to create intimacy and invoke a personal relationship between themselves and Rajinikanth. This can be situated in an Indian context in which images are imbued with power (Jain 2007) and can enhance certain imagined or desired identities (Pinney 1997).

Secondly, the *authentic* individual, as Marshall describes it, is what fans are really searching for but is again created through their own practices. Fans are fascinated by the on- and off-screen life of a star which they found out about through magazines, television and circulating stories. This information enables fans to generate an image of their star as well as produce him with their own manipulations and desires. The image here can be understood in a double sense again; firstly, as a mental representation of what their star is; and secondly as an object that represents this idea. In this way, images actually become more engaging than the star himself. As they are individually appropriated and manipulated, these images stand on their own, or in Baudrillard's words, the simulacrum – the copy without an original– is a thing in its own right, or the hyperreal (1994). Baudrillard's work *Simulacra and Simulation* is imbued with a sense of loss of reality and meaning replaced by signs and symbols, something that I do not want to follow here. I want to take up the idea of the copy as a thing in its own right, something that leads its own life.

A special characteristic attributed to images makes them particularly appealing to use: they can provide a much more personalized and attractive image than the original. Images such as postcards or retouched images of deceased relatives always depict a landscape or person that is more attractive than the "original" from which it is derived. I will come back to this point in Chapter four where I discuss the difference artists and viewers observe between painted and digitally designed hoardings. In addition to the possibilities that images provide to make the content personal and more attractive, the images themselves can also be used in spaces in which the original is not available. Fans have become fans because of the images they have encountered of the star and not because they have actually met the star. Fans close the distance between themselves and their star by engaging with his images. But even though the copies have their own lives beyond that of the original, the original, or at least an imaginative creation of what that should

be, is sought after. Fans want to be close to their star too. They want a physical connection and in doing so, they engage with images.

In his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Benjamin puts forward his ideas on the loss of authenticity and aura of cult objects and art works by mechanical reproduction (1969b). In short, Benjamin argues that new methods of mass reproduction mean that a work of art can be easily reproduced and therefore reach a wider audience. This has put an end to the authenticity and aura of cult objects and art works:

> *The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. … The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility. Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis à vis technical reproduction"* (1969b, 220).

In other words, the original – its presence in time and space, its unique existence in the place where it happens to be – becomes of less value through the copies that circulate in other contexts out of reach of the original (*Op. cit.* 220). In this way, the object loses its aura, "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" (*Op. cit.* 222).

> *It [the decay of aura] rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakingly, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye (Op. cit. 223).*

For Benjamin, there is a difference between a reproduced image and an original seen by the "unarmed" eye. Benjamin's thesis has been questioned repeatedly, however. Kajri Jain's work on calendar or bazaar art in India is a strong argument against the idea of the original in calendar art (Jain 2007). She shows how the representations of deities on calendars cannot be seen as having an originary moment or source, as is often claimed by pointing to the influence of the painter Ravi Varma's style and depictions.[7] It should instead be seen as a negotiation between novelty and repetition. The images of deities are copied but at the same time the artists who make them put in their own aesthetic skills and preferences, and regional, temporal and other novelties. The images of movie stars are slightly different in nature, as they appear in photographic representations in magazines and the like but are personally appropriated by fans. The fact that novelty is sought after is exemplified by Selvam and Ranjit's constant search for rare and special images, but at the same time there is not too much leeway in deviating from what the star is. A star should be recognizable as a star, otherwise the efficacy of the image disappears. Just as commercial images can be employed in many ways because of their genericness, repetition reinforces their power. In addition, Annamalai's play with mimicry is deemed not entirely acceptable, yet as it is in the everyday space of the home, it is not condemned either.

Assmann and Assmann have attempted to show that "[m]ore than a similar linear movement of depravation from original to copy, there is a return loop, a cyclical movement of enrichment

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7 See Introduction for more information on Ravi Varma.

from the copy back to the original: the latter triggers the copy; the former, in return, valorizes the original" (2003, 150). Gumbrecht and Marrinan make a similar argument in criticizing Benjamin's authenticity concept as they claim that Benjamin fails to differentiate between "copies that represent themselves as authentified copies, and multiples that want to be originals" (2003, 126). They argue instead that:

> … while it is true that high-quality fakes can make it difficult for the original to prove its privileged status (and thus become a danger for the original), it is also obvious that fakes do not put the category of the authentic into question. The opposite seems to be the case: what would be the point of authenticity if it were not for the danger of fakes – or, more precisely, there is no point to authenticity without copies that are not easily identifiable as copies (ibid.).

Benjamin, the Assmanns and Gumbrecht and Marrinan refer specifically to works of art and their reproductions in particular artistic traditions. There are also the intricacies of when we should use the term art and the fact that the original in this case is a living person, i.e. Rajinikanth. It is not just the original that acquires more power through these images – the power of the copy extracted from the original (Taussig 1993, 59) seems to become as important as or sometimes even more important than the original itself. This also has to do with the fact that these copies are images which, in an ideology of the image in India, are embodied and imbued with power. Therefore the distinction between copy and original falls apart when it comes to images, as cheap mass produced "take offs" representing deities are as valuable as the statue of a deity in a temple. In the same way, images of Rajinikanth are imbued with power for fans, and this is only enhanced by the adaptations that they make to images to come even closer to him.

If I stick up a poster with Rajini's image, it will wash away in the rain. If I wear this ring it will not disappear and everybody can see it; my friends, relatives, and wherever I go, others can see it.

Madhan Mohan.

Spectacle

Having discussed images in the sphere of the domestic, let me now briefly discuss the use of Rajinikanth's image for a larger public to see. Madhan's ring is just such an example. He wears it as it is a more permanent sign that is visible for a larger audience. Less permanent but relevant to this discussion are invitations to fan club members' personal events, on which images of the star are often used. These

invitations also serve as a prelude to the next two chapters where I discuss the public events that fans organize and the accompanying placement of posters, hoardings and cutouts in public spaces. Invitations offer the opportunity to display a person's connection with the star as fan club member or because of affection to a wider, yet familiar, audience. For their own birthdays or weddings or those of their family members, fans include images of their star on the invitation. I have encountered the use of star imagery for marriages, birthdays, ear piercing and coming of age ceremonies and death notices of fans or their family members. This imagery is used on hoardings made for the event (see Chapter 4) and on invitations to the event. Including your favorite movie star is a way of associating yourself with this star, just as party supporters or party members often use images of their party's leader on the front of their invitations. At the same time, just as in the images discussed above and what we see later with the hoardings exhibited in the public realm, displaying your star also indicates his presence instead of

26. Saktivel and Nalini's wedding invitation. Moratandi 1995. Collection of Saktivel and Nalini.

merely representing him (Morgan 1998, 57). But what makes these images different from the ones discussed above, is that they not only show a personal connection with a star but also relate to fan club membership.

Figures 26 to 31 show some examples of what this can look like. Figure 27 is Saktivel and Nalini's wedding invitation. Saktivel is the fan club secretary and Panchayat president I mentioned earlier. I also quoted Nalini, his wife, in Chapter one, regarding her desire to see the first show. Actually, it is officially Nalini who is the Panchayat president, as the position was given to a woman. But as often happens in other positions too, it is the husband who takes over the work. Saktivel was always on the road, trying to mediate in family feuds and other issues within the area. I met Saktivel and Nalini regularly. On our way to Vannur, the area where they live, Saktivel's house was usually our first stop. Perspiring after cycling for an hour in the hot and humid climate of the Tamil Nadu coast, Nalini and Saktivel's house was always a pit stop where we could recover a bit. If Saktivel was at home, or once he had arrived after some time hanging around at their home, we usually had elaborate conversations about the ins and outs of the fan club and the political situation. When Saktivel was not at home, which was usually the case, Nalini would tell us about her position in the fan club and her Rajinikanth fandom. Nalini recounted how, before her wedding, she secretly hoped that her future husband would be a Rajinikanth fan. I asked her when she found out about it:

> I didn't know about it [when the marriage arrangements were made]. One day he came to my home to discuss the design of the [wedding] invitation. He asked permission to put Rajini's photo on it. It was only then that we found out that he was a Rajini fan. In my home we all are Rajini fans, including my father, so we agreed that he could put Rajini's photo on the invitation. Now I am happy that my long-time dream has been fulfilled!

The wedding was in 1995, before today's multi-color, offset design and printing possibilities

27. Wedding invitation of an AIADMK family. The bridal couple is in the middle, the AIADMK leader Jayalalitha on the right and local AIADMK functionaries in white shirts surround the couple. Collection of designer and studio owner Yuvaraaj. Pondicherry 2005.

28. Wedding invitation displaying Rajinikanth and fan club members. Collection of designer and studio owner Yuvaraaj. Pondicherry 2006.

29. Invitation to the first birthday of the daughter of a Rajinikanth fan. Moratandi 2007.

30. Cover of a wedding photo album with the bride and groom in the middle and movie star Kamal Hassan on the left, talking into a microphone. Photo studio Devi, Pondicherry 2002.

31. Hoarding made for a wedding couple, commissioned by Selvam and several other fans. Selvam's photo is next to the two images of Rajinikanth; the other fans are displayed on the right. Pondicherry 2006. Made by artist Ranjit. Selvam's collection.

were available. The prints were mostly two color posters with simple designs, in comparison to the recent invitations that contain several special effects regarding the use of colors, the inclusion of the star, etc. (see figures 28-33).

The use of images of the star is not a prerequisite and family members of fan club members do not always approve of it. Saktivel came to Nalini's house to ask her family's permission to use Rajinikanth's image. As the members of Nalini's family are also Rajinikanth fans, they did not oppose it. But this is not always the case, and using the image of a movie star is not always considered appropriate for momentous events such as a wedding. If the family itself is not using the image, often friends of the groom make a hoarding on which they wish their friend for his marriage, and will include an image of their favorite movie star. However, higher-level fan club members almost always use imagery of the star. Now that Saktivel is the leader of his area he will use Rajinikanth's images for almost all his invitations.

The higher up in the fan club the fan was, the larger the invitations seemed to be, matching his status and aspirations. For the most part these fans were also better off but it was mainly to show their position within the fan club and their ambitions in the networks they established. It was particularly fans that were also politically active that used invitations to their family events to announce their connections and celebrate in a grand manner. If fans stopped using this imagery after having used it in the past, it was seen as proof of not being a dedicated fan anymore. For example, when Jothi Kumar did not use Rajinikanth's image for the coming of age ceremony (*Manjal Neerattu Vizha,* turmeric bathing ceremony) of his daughter in 2010, all the fans that heard about it or noticed it, understood it as an indication that Jothi Kumar had left the fan club.

For members of political parties it is common to refer to the party by inviting local political representatives, using party emblems and displaying party colors and the leader on the invitation to a family function.[8] Movie star invitations are not sold as preprinted cards; they have to be designed by a design or photo studio. The stills of the star which are used are mostly what fans call "natural" stills, i.e. Rajinikanth in an off-screen photo. Natural stills give the suggestion of the star being really present whereas movie stills suggest a more imaginative impression. Besides being natural and therefore real, often images of the star are used that create the impression that he is also blessing the couple (see e.g. figures 28, 30 and 31). Figure 30 shows the wedding album of a Kamal Hassan fan where the cover has an image of the star as if he is giving a speech at the wedding. Figure 33 shows Rajinikanth getting out of a car with his wife Latha. He is being welcomed by Rajini Shankar who organized the function for which this hoarding was made. The scene shows the importance of the guests as they have arrived with several cars, one of which has a flashing light, and security personnel.

There are various reasons for the inclusion of a fan's favorite star in imagery made for familial events. For Nalini it was the showcasing of her, her family's and future husband's fandom; for Selvam it is a sign of affection; for other fans it might be a political statement, or a sign of importance within the fan club and through the actor. These issues are the subject of the next two chapters but let me end this chapter with a final illustration of how personal, familial events can be used as examples of fan club politics and power. It is here that Benjamin's second hypothesis is touched upon, i.e. the politicization of art. The rite of passage of Rajini Shankar's daughter's

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8 The term function is commonly used in India for a formal ceremony or social gathering.

coming of age ceremony was a function in which Shankar showed his fan club leadership and political power by attracting massive crowds in the name of Rajinikanth.

A few years ago, before the release of the film *Chandramukhi* (P. Vasu 2005), Shankar was dismissed from his post as Pondicherry state fan club leader. After a group of higher-level fans got the feeling that Rajini Shankar was earning money by selling the first-day-first-show tickets at a higher price than necessary and that he was using the fan club purely for his own political career, they complained to the All India Rajinikanth Fan Club leader Sathyanarayanan in Chennai. As a result Rajini Shankar was dismissed from his post. Ten members then formed a committee and took charge of the fan club organization in Pondicherry until the selection of a new leader had been made. Rajini Shankar, though, is a well-known man in Pondicherry and had been the face of the Rajinikanth fan club for years. He continued acting as the fan club leader and so two groups came into being, both acting as representatives of the fan club. For each movie release or birthday celebration, both groups made themselves known with murals throughout the city, birthday *pujas*, newspaper ads, etc. In addition, both groups asked the collector's permission to organize the fan show. The collector divided the approvals and allocated different movie theaters to the two groups. Tension between the two groups grew and ordinary fans who just wanted their tickets from Shankar got impatient, as I showed in Chapter one. I described how Shankar's house was attacked over the fight for tickets. Despite the dismissal, the local media still treats Rajini Shankar as the official leader and, even though they cover the activities of the fan club extensively, they have never written about the conflict.

Rajini Shankar, who I introduced in the previous chapter as a long-time fan of Rajinikanth and the initiator of the fan club in Pondicherry, has become a professional involved in all kinds of business, shifting his field often from real estate to scrap iron to movie making in the last few years. He and his family are well-off as a result. Shankar never said much to me about the issue at the start and just ruled the fan club as he had always done. It was only later that he became more open about his frustrations, and these were not directed towards other Pondicherry fans but towards Rajinikanth himself. In the following chapters I will explain how this frustration developed. For now it suffices to explain Rajini Shankar's involvement in fan activity and its combination with politics.

Rajini Shankar is involved in politics by being closely connected to the AIADMK party and the former Chief Minister of Pondicherry, N. Rangasamy, who was a member of Congress but recently started the AINRC (All India N.R. Congress).[9] For his daughter's coming of age, Shankar organized a considerable ceremony and function to which he invited N. Rangasamy, the political strategist M. Natarajan[10] and several local MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) who Shankar knows well. The invitation to the event impressed many, largely due to the importance of the guests and the size of the invitation itself. The front of the invitation displayed large images of Rajinikanth, his wife Latha Rajinikanth and the Chief Minister (figure 32). Shankar's daughter figures in the middle. The other side of the invite displays the CM, M. Natarajan, and

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9 The letters N. R. in the party's abbreviation stand for *Namathu Rajiyam* (our kingdom) but coincidently, they are also Rangasamy's initials.

10 WM. Natarajan is the husband of Sasikala, the woman that lives with AIADMK leader Jayalalitha. All kinds of rumors abound about the alleged lesbian relationship between Jayalalitha and Sasikala. Natarajan is still married to Sasikala but they live apart. Natarajan is described as a political strategist and is a well-known public figure in Tamil Nadu politics.
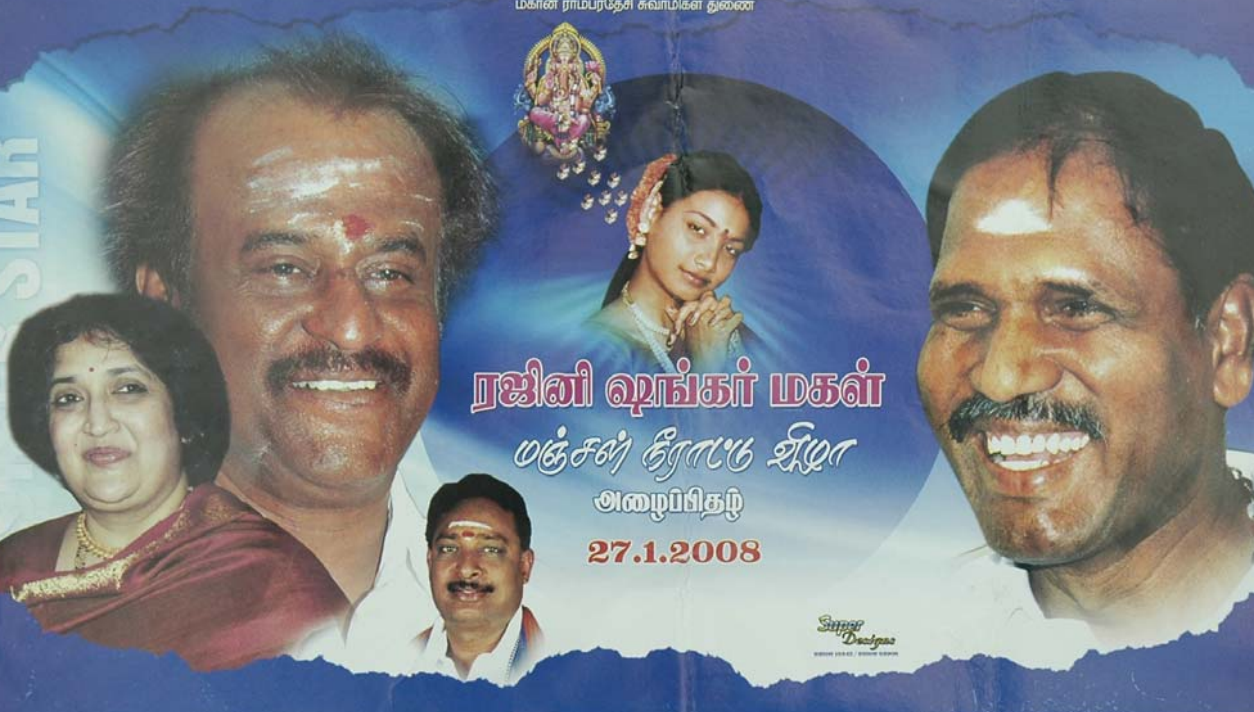
32. Front and back of the invitation to the coming of age ceremony of Rajini Shankar's daughter. The front shows Rajinikanth, Latha and the most important guest, N. Rangasamy, CM of Pondicherry. The back shows the announcement of the event, and photos and names of important guests. The invitation is 45 by 26 cm in size. Pondicherry 2008.

smaller photos of the MLAs. In addition, all the names of important guests (political and from the fan club) are listed. He invited the entire fan club network, even the opposite party that was responsible for removing him from his post. Although Shankar has never been explicit about why he organized this function, it is most likely that he used the occasion to show his power in Pondicherry.

Gandhirajan, my research assistant, and I went to the function relatively early. The location of the event, a *mandapam* (reception hall) which is often used for functions such as marriages, could be seen from afar as it had been transformed with grand decorations. Huge hoardings announced the event in front of the reception hall, an elephant greeted the guests at the entrance and the guests were served freshly made grape juice before entering the hall. The hall was divided in two, with two stages. The guests' chairs were facing each other so that the guests could watch both sides of the *mandapam*. On one side a large stage was set up for the special guests and on the other side, the religious ritual of Shankar's daughter would take place. Various cameramen covered the guests who wait patiently for Shankar's family and the political guests to arrive. A screen broadcast images of the function live so that guests could watch themselves and the event they were participating in from a distance. We waited with the other guests for a long time for Shankar to arrive. Just after Shankar, his wife and their beautifully dressed daughter arrived at the *mandapam*, the highlight of the event in terms of images to shoot for the cameramen, the honorary guest and politician M. Natarajan arrived. Everyone stood up for his arrival; the cameras were now focused on him. After Shankar had taken his daughter inside, the speeches of fan club leaders from other districts and politicians started. On the other side of the large hall, the ritual ceremony for his daughter took place. Only for the photo session after the religious ritual did Shankar go to the other side to pose with his family and the guests. We heard two older

women who sat behind us say that they were disappointed because they expected a more *filmi* function, but now Shankar had gone political. Later that evening, the Chief Minister arrived at the function and now Shankar's guests were complete. The coming of age ritual and guests' congratulations were over relatively quickly but the political part of the event continued for a while. The event bore more resemblance to a political gathering than to a familial rite of passage ceremony. Nevertheless, it had still been the fan club, Shankar's fame and the attraction of Rajinikanth that attracted the crowds. A day later, a local newspaper covered the CM's visit to the function. In the article, Rajini Shankar, despite his dismissal, is cited as the leader of the fan club. Shankar, despite the disappointment of the two women about the lack of a *filmi* character to the event, had succeeded in showing off his network of VIPs from Pondicherry to Chennai and had set his name and fame.

33. Hoarding made by fans for the coming of age ceremony. It displays a constructed image of Rajinikanth and his wife arriving at the scene of the event and Shankar greeting them with flowers. Pondicherry 2008.

Conclusion

Using the icon Rajinikanth for a personal event serves as an apt transition between the genres of images that I have discussed in the above and the cinematic and political images that are displayed by fans in the public realm. In this chapter I have attempted to show various ways in which fans engage with their star. Images as objects and representations and their manipulations facilitate these relationships in various ways. Images are keepsakes of the actual or manipulated souvenirs articulating desires. Images facilitate these personal desires and memories, whether they are based on actual occurrences or imaginary proximity.

These images invoke personal desires as well as displaying them to a wider world; as invitations or announcements and blessings on hoardings they travel outside the realm of their domestic or everyday use. The way Rajini Shankar organized his daughter's coming of age function exemplifies this public display. He used his daughter's coming of age to organize a grand event, not as an official fan club event but under the banner of Rajinikanth's image and his own position within Pondicherry. A couple of days before the function took place the busy road around Pondicherry's bus stand was the site of various hoardings displaying Rajinikanth and his wife Latha and on each hoarding there was a large photo of one of the five most important invitees to the function. Although Rajinikanth was still the main reason for inviting a larger audience, the invited guests meant that the function was more political in nature. Shankar is not the only fan who is involved in politics. The next chapter will deal with the public activities and political practices of fans. Even though these are often not the reason for joining the fan club, once older, it becomes an intrinsic part of fan activity. In the following chapter I will show the different ways in which politics start to play a role in a fan's life trajectory.

3

THE POLITICS OF FANDOM

I ended the previous chapter with Rajini Shankar's efforts to organize a grand spectacle around the coming of age ceremony of his daughter.[1] While certainly an important family event, Shankar clearly also used the occasion to show off his political connections to a wider public. Shankar has been involved in politics for some time now. He has been connected to the AIADMK, has been active in canvassing for parties which Rajinikanth supported during the last few years and he knows the Chief Minister (CM) of Pondicherry well. He has underpinned this latter connection by buying the CM's former Ambassador car,[2] its interior covered with shabby upholstery. The personalized number plate and flashing light on top of the car make its appearance look important.

Shankar has been able to use the fan club environment to establish his political networks. He started his fan club because he enjoyed Rajinikanth's acting and his films. Once leader of the fan club in Pondicherry, he gradually became part of political networks. The way in which he used his daughter's function to demonstrate his political power illustrates the involvement of fans in political practices and the way in which fan clubs, family events and politics go together.

In this chapter we will see more of these occasions which fans use to impress others and establish political relations. Fandom has a wider significance beyond cinema, as fan activity becomes political during a fan's life. When I started my research and spoke to the first fans I met in Pondicherry, the conversations we had were all about political issues: hierarchies among fans, their involvement in local party politics and their connections with influential people to name a few. Thinking that this was not the "real" issue about which I had come to do my research, I tried to change the subject to what I thought was more relevant to fandom: the ways in which fans connect to cinema and a movie star and relate these to their political aspirations once their hero starts his own party. It was only after some time that I realized that these vernacular political issues were intrinsic to fan activity.

Politicking, or political activity, becomes the most important aspect of fan activity in the later stages of many fan careers. Firstly, it brings fans recognition and status. Secondly, it has a practical side as via patronage or broker relationships it opens up domains otherwise not accessible to people of lower socio-economic backgrounds. These brokerage relationships give access to state institutions and provide networks that make the system work for fans. Fan clubs are environments in which these relationships get established more easily, as men work as a group and under the banner of a famous name, i.e. Rajinikanth. But the ways in which these brokerage relationships work are not unique to fan clubs – it is part of the more common men-to-men relationships in Tamil Nadu in general.

What makes fan activity and particularly the close relationships fans establish with political parties exceptional is the ambivalence towards political work that comes to the surface time and again. In Chapter 1 I demonstrated how fans negotiate the fine line between excess and keeping in control in relation to cinema. In the same way, I will demonstrate in this chapter how politicking becomes essential in a fan's life but how at the same time it should not be seen as self-promot-

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[1] The photo on the title page depicts a hoarding in front of the marriage hall in which Rajini Shankar's daughter's coming of age ritual took place. Besides his close fan club associates and various images of Rajinikanth, a large close-up of the CM of Pondicherry was shown (right) (Pondicherry 2008).

[2] Throughout India the Ambassador has been a characteristic car produced by Hindustan Motors. The model hasn't changed much since its first production in 1958. The car is mostly used as a taxi and for government personnel.

ing. Most fans, once they are older, expect to be active in political networks through their actor's fame, the fan club network and public visibility. For many fans with whom I worked, these connections seemed particularly important, with Rajinikanth being simply a common denominator for their network. At the same time, Rajinikanth has clearly expressed his own political preferences which made his fans campaign actively for the party he supported during elections. Fans that did not want to join the fan club were deemed to be disloyal by their fellow fans.

However, political practice is not supposed to be part of fan activity, as fans are dissuaded by the head office and Rajinikanth himself from participating in party politics. Also fans themselves consider an obvious use of the fan network for political gain to be self-centered. In other words, this fine line between misuse and proper fan activity as it is seen by other fans suggests a complicated relationship between politics and fandom, one that will be explored in this chapter and the next.

The ambiguity surrounding fans and politicking brings me back to the common explanations of cine-politics in Tamil Nadu which I addressed in the Introduction and Chapter 1. Film and politics are always bracketed together, with explanations of fan activity being sought in the desire for a political career in the wake of a movie star. Fan clubs have repeatedly been described in terms of their unquestioning devotion and therefore their usability for the political careers of their heroes (Dickey 1993b; Pandian 1992) or for their own political agency (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009).

I will not provide an extensive overview of political practice in India or Tamil Nadu in particular, as several other scholars have already described its many facets extensively (e.g. Chatterjee 2004; V. K. Chopra 1996; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001; Kaviraj 2010; Kohli 1990; Price 1996; Subramanian 1999). Here I am more interested in the vernacular political practices in fan clubs, as they can tell us more about the grassroots ways in which political personae are produced and the ways in which socio-political relationships are reinforced.

In general, I demonstrate in this dissertation that film and politicking cannot be separated in fan club membership. If we look at the life trajectories of fans, film and the politicking networks that they establish, we cannot single out one way of engaging in the fan club, just as we cannot consider fans as one cohesive entity. We therefore cannot simply conclude that fan activity is related to high-level political expectations of movie stars starting their own party. Rather, fan clubs are networks, I argue, which can make the system work for them more easily because of their connection to Rajinikanth and because of their considerable size. This can range from practical advantages such as film tickets, access to school for your children and government access, to more conceptual feelings of respect and prestige. Everyday political and social networks, I suggest, are much more important for most fans than the state-level politics in which their star is or eventually comes to be involved in. However, now that Rajinikanth is reaching an age at which he might stop acting at any time, fans hope he will finally do what they have expected him to do: start his own political party and make them as fan club members part of it. This chapter therefore investigates the intricate ways in which networks, hierarchies and relationships are established and solidified and how slowly but surely fans expect something in return for their devotion: a real political career.

Throughout this chapter I will explore the nature of these forms of mobilization and political constellations, modes of agency, hierarchy and status that fans enact through their public and

political activities. First of all, I will show how fan clubs are involved in social welfare activities which parallel political displays of generosity. Besides the activities that I have described in relation to film watching in previous chapters fan clubs conduct what they describe as social welfare activities. By doing social work, fans say they want to nurture their actor's name and do good for society. Activities are set up around and in honor of an actor. But importantly, fan clubs invite "big men", i.e. politicians or other eminent men, with whom they establish patronage relationships. In addition, by showing their generosity in public, fans establish their own position as genuine fans and nurture their image as big men themselves.

Secondly, I will explore how generosity through welfare is a means of establishing oneself as an individual fan and of maintaining broker or patronage relationships with local big men. Agency and praise are two important markers of these connections. Thirdly, I will address the expectations fans have of their membership. These expectations are fulfilled in a practical way by getting access to networks and ideologically by obtaining power and prestige. A climax to these expectations many fans feel would be Rajinikanth's entry into politics. Why is the expectation of their star's own political party so great if fans can already engage in politics in their own name? As I will show, the level of prestige and recognition as a fan is limited, many fans feel. Even though they engage in social welfare activities and establish connections with local political big men, they are still to receive the benefits they would have as proper politicians. Moreover, fans feel they have put a lot into their devotion to Rajinikanth and want something in return from him.

This chapter also anticipates the next chapter where I address the images that fans produce and exhibit in public spaces for the events that I discuss here. The very presence of the images as

34. People handing in their token in order to receive a bag of rice during a social welfare event on Rajinikanth's birthday. Chennai 2009.

well as their form are part of the imaginations and desires of fans in relation to their film hero (as discussed in Chapter 2) but they also articulate the political aspirations as discussed here.

I end this chapter with two related discussion that reinforce the relevance of visibility and respect. But first I describe the motives of various female fans to start a fan club. Their age and way of being a fan club show that the incentives to start a fan club are, even though inspired by Rajinikanth's cinematic image, mostly related to the achievement of respect and of being heard, though the meaning of respect and visibility is somewhat different for women than for men. I end the chapter with a short discussion of the rise and fall of the Vijayakanth fan clubs. Vijayakanth started the DMDK party in 2005 and his fan clubs automatically became cadres of the party. Fans welcomed his decision and expected a political career. However, this did not happen for most fans due to a lack of financial capital. Vijayakanth launched a new fan club recently in the hope of fulfilling his fans' wishes. But the spirit seems largely to have ebbed away. The rise and fall of his fan clubs tells us something about the political ideal and political requirements that are part of vernacular political practice. The failure of Vijayakanth's fans in "real" politics shows how, despite the aspirations of a political career, the economic and social situation of most fans holds them back from becoming actual politicians.

Public events: social welfare

December 24th 2007. It is Rajinikanth's birthday. Fan clubs all over Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry have prepared themselves for the festive occasion in their neighborhoods. In earlier years, Rajinikanth celebrated his birthday at his home in Chennai and many fans headed to the city to be near him on this special day. That was until one day, when a number of fans died in a traffic accident on their way to Chennai. Rajinikanth decided it was the end of the celebrations and from that year on he has left town to retreat to a pilgrimage in the Himalayas. Many of the fan club members I worked with did not really appreciate this decision as Rajinikanth is now even further out of reach for them. But this frustration is part of other issues and frustrations that have to do with Rajinikanth's staying out of politics, something I will address below in more detail. Even though the number of fans who are actively involved in fan clubs has declined to some extent, fans continue to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday with public events in their neighborhood, with special *pujas*[3] in temples and with posters and hoardings wishing the star a happy birthday.

In 2007, for Rajinikanth's 57th birthday I joined Rajini Shankar, Pondicherry's fan club leader, his district team and their supporters to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday. As they do every year, they started the day with a special *puja* in the Sri Manakula Vinayagar temple which is situated in the historic center of Pondicherry. Television and newspaper journalists were invited to cover the celebrations. I noticed that Shankar was particularly attentive as to the correct positioning of his group for the journalistic attention of the video and photo camera. He made sure that his close friend and committee associate Tharagai Raja posed next to him in the photo. One of these photos was published in the newspaper the next day. The evening before Rajinikanth's birthday,

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3 Act of reverence.

35. Men arranging the packages with bread, fruit and a Rajinikanth image in buckets. They make sure the images of Rajinikanth are visible. Pondicherry 2007.

36. Borrowed buckets and gurneys from the hospital to carry the packages for distribution. Pondicherry 2007.

37. The men around a hospital bed in the female emergency ward of the government hospital. Pondicherry 2007.

38. The press taking pictures of the men distributing their packages in the emergency ward. Pondicherry 2007.

39. Local women and children waiting at the place where Selvan Nathan's fan club will distribute their social welfare items. Pondicherry 2007.

40. A photo opportunity when interim committee leader Jothi Kumar (in the orange *dhoti*) and the local MLA (to the right of Jothi Kumar) hand over saris to women. Pondicherry 2007.

41. Poster made by children in the fan club style hanging near the spot where the event was due to take place. Pondicherry 2007.

42. Banner on the main road, around the corner from Selvan Nathan's fan club event. I will say more about the content of banners like these in the next chapter. Pondicherry 2007.

the interim *talaimai manram* in Pondicherry performed the same kind of *puja*.[4] At their *puja* more members showed up, which suggests that this group had more support. Interestingly however, even though the press was there to cover the event as well, their photo did not end up on the front page of the newspaper. It shows once more Rajini Shankar's eminence and power as a public person in Pondicherry.

After the visit to the temple Rajini Shankar's team headed to the government hospital where they were to distribute food packages on the female emergency ward (figures 35-38). Before they could start their activities they had to wait for a long time for the local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) Jayapal, who they had invited to the event and for the press to arrive. In the meantime, the members of the committee arranged the packages that were to be distributed to the women in the emergency ward. The packages were assembled in large buckets lent by the hospitals and contained two bread slices, an orange and an apple. Some of the packages had a color image of Rajinikanth and Rajini Shankar in them. They made sure that these packages were on top of the others, with the image facing forward. Even though Jayapal arrived after some time, the press was still not present, so they waited a bit longer until everyone was there. Once a group of around ten photographers had gathered, the ceremony began. The group of fans, press, and the MLA Jayapal, a group of around 20 men in total, entered the female emergency ward. The ward was now completely packed with people. The women lying on their beds seemed to be taken by surprise by the amount of people in the room. The MLA and Rajini Shankar started to hand out the packages with a Rajinikanth image and made sure that the image was visible for the photographs that the journalists took. After handing out a package to each of the women, the women were given extra packages to empty the buckets. Within a couple of minutes the men left the ward again and the peace and quiet of the room was restored. Several buckets with packages were left over, though. Some fans suggested that they could distribute these later on to other wards in the hospital.

In the meantime, local neighborhood fan clubs conducted public events in their neighborhoods as well, handing out items such as notebooks and rice to the poor and needy. Selvan Nathan, for example, an auto rickshaw driver and active fan club member in Pondicherry had, along with his branch fan club in Nellithope, organized the distribution of saris and rice to deprived women, packages of biryani to the poor and notebooks and pens to children (figures 39-42). After my visit to the temple and hospital I went to attend Selvan Nathan's celebrations.

The day before the festivities we had met up with Selvan Nathan as well and he was tense and excited about the activities the next day. He tried to plan the event in the utmost detail so that the day would run smoothly; from the flags and other decorations where the events were being held to the invitation of local big men who would attend the function. From early morning on Rajinikanth's birthday loud music from Rajinikanth films blasted out of the loudspeakers that had been set up for the occasion. Selvan Nathan and his club exhibited a hoarding of about six meters in width directly in front of the bus terminal on the main road (figure 42). Its location and the music that could be heard on the main road gave the event maximum visibility. Children

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[4] In Chapter 2 I described how in Pondicherry the fan club leadership of the Rajinikanth fan club is divided into two groups. Rajini Shankar has officially been expelled but is still acting as the leader while an interim-committee, which has already been in charge for several years now, is responsible for the fan clubs. Both were acting as official *talaimai manram* throughout the years of my fieldwork.

had made small posters from photocopied letter-size paper with cuttings of Rajinikanth's images and texts written with pen mimicking their fathers' fan club posters and hoardings (figure 41). In the street where the event was about to take place Selvan Nathan's fan club had set up a table and decorated the street.

The fans and their small audience of children and several older women who were attracted by the *filmi* music and the items that were going to be distributed had to wait patiently for the big men to arrive. The event could only begin once interim committee leader Jothi Kumar and the invited local MLA had arrived at the scene. As the two men had to visit many local fan club events, they were easily held up. At Selvan Nathan's festivities they arrived hours later than planned. Once there, the distribution of items had no sooner started than it was over. With much effort the men tried to keep the eagerly waiting children and old women in line to distribute the items one by one in return for the token that they were to hand in. Fan clubs commonly distribute tokens to the people that they want to distribute items to. Only with a token can people collect what has been designated to them. Again, journalists were present to record the event and the local fan club made sure that the journalists took shots of the MLA, Jothi Kumar, and themselves distributing the items. When the MLA and Jothi Kumar had left again, within thirty minutes, the celebration was over.

At many of the fan club events I attended the local fan clubs used quite some force to keep order during the distribution. They tried to keep the recipients in line with forceful words and gestures and they sent away others who were not designated to receive distributed items. The officiousness and importance shown at the heightened moment of the actual celebration – with the use of tokens, the lines in which people have to stand to collect their items, the strictness with which others without a token are sent away, the presence of local big men and photographers– stand in stark contrast with the relaxed atmosphere after the event when the leaders and big men have gone or when the importance of the moment has passed. Remaining items are randomly distributed and tokens are not necessary anymore to receive an item. The local group of fans that stays behind now shares and enjoys the leftovers and a moment of excitement with neighbors and friends.

Shaping the figure of the fan

Most Tamil film stars have an ambivalent relationship with their fans. Even though the presence of fans has proven useful for several actors, for example in their political careers, most actors have tried to discourage fan clubs from starting in the first place or have emphasized the social role these fan clubs have to fulfill. This ambivalence can be seen in the addition of the word *narpani* (social service) to the name of fan clubs, apparently in an attempt to justify their existence. Now most fan clubs are actually called fan welfare organizations. Rajinikanth regularly instructed his fans to give priority to their family, then to social service and last of all to him. This is also what most fans considered an important reason for becoming a fan: their hero gives preference to charity and not to cinematic leisure activities. Here again fans and the way their actor approaches them suggest that the figure of the ardent movie-loving fan is set aside in favor of the seriousness

and philanthropy of fandom. But this image is not easy to maintain. Sudhakar, the present Rajinikanth All India Fan Club leader, expressed it to me in the following terms:

> *On the one hand you cannot blame fans or forbid them from doing what they do because they are fans after all. But on the other hand fans do crazy things with milk, beer and sweets* [the religious worship of images] *or use politics for self-publicity, so you should bring them into line, reprimand them, but not throw them out of the fan club.*

Sudhakar refers once more to the image of the excessive fan and the use of politics for his own gain. Social work seems to be a way of sending across a different message. By showing the good deeds of the fan club not only do actors justify the existence of fan clubs in their name, fans also justify their devotion to fan clubs. But the image of the excessive fan often occurs in representations of fan clubs, as I have shown earlier and also in narratives by fans if others misuse the fan club environment for personal gain. Even though most fans joined a fan club because of access to tickets and a collective fan community when they were young, young fans nowadays are often tested on their seriousness and willingness to do social work.

Older fans do not attend the first day first show films in the same way as younger fans do, if indeed they watch the first days at all. Film becomes of less importance and older, more established fans disassociate themselves from the younger, ardent fans. Social service becomes a means to see whether younger fans are actually interested in more than movie tickets. Rajini Shankar:

> *If a group asks permission to start a new fan club I give them instructions regarding what kind of social activities they could do. With the opening of a new fan club we do some kind of inauguration, but we only cut the ribbon if the members have an interest in social activities.*

Social welfare has become the most recurrent activity of fan club membership and includes a wide range of activities. These include blood donation camps and the distribution of notebooks for children, dresses such as saris and *dhotis*, or food items such as rice or sweets at fan club events. The fan clubs carry out social work on special occasions, in particular on Rajinikanth's birthday, around movie releases or when a new club is being founded. The way in which items are given away is similar to political events where often the same kind of social welfare is undertaken. For political as well as fan events, a stage is erected or there is a simple demarcation of the space for the event. The area is decorated with flags, posters and banners and often loudspeakers blast music from films. These meetings are further marked by speeches by fan club members and their special guests. These guests are the *talaimai manram*[5] members and local leader figures such as MLAs. After the speeches, the distribution of items begins. The people who are designated to receive something now come forward to be handed their items. The photographers present take photos of particular important people handing over items to the masses. The presence of local fan clubs and political leaders is necessary for the press to cover the activities and often an amount is paid to the reporters to ensure their presence. Tharagai Raja: "Rajini Shankar is at the front and we join him. Only then do the media convey the message. They mention Shankar first and only then do they mention us and we get some recognition."

The recording of these events is an important way to prove fandom. Documentation in the form of photo albums, news clippings and VCDs is kept at home and sent to the local *talaimai*

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5 Leader association, or head fan club.

manrams of the district and the head office in Chennai. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

The recipients of welfare are generally people who live in the neighborhood where the fan club is located. Young children from less affluent homes, a disabled person, people working in the neighborhood as tailors, or poor women from the area are usually the ones who receive tokens for a fan club's welfare event. Most people are known to the fan club members.

Dickey argues that fan clubs identify with the poor with their aid to people from their own area and class (2001). At the same time they distinguish themselves from this group as a whole through their social welfare activities, designating the recipients as "the poor". In this way, Dickey argues, fans are the embodiment of their heroes' ideals (2001, 237). Even though I agree with Dickey that certain fans do nurture a feeling of responsibility to help others we should be careful in defining the wish to do social work as merely an impersonation of a star's ideals. Fan club membership, as I showed in Chapter 1 is also about obtaining movie tickets. And, as I demonstrate in this chapter and the next, social welfare activities are also a way of promoting a fan's own image. Not everyone is keen on organizing activities, and if they do, it is also in large part a celebrative occasion for the neighborhood. For the organizers their own visibility is crucial, even though this visibility is partly established through the attractiveness of Rajinikanth. I will return to this point below.

Fans spend a considerable amount of money on the activities they are involved in. It is commonly said that the money for fan club activities comes directly from the star. Fan clubs and the stars themselves strongly deny this. The fan club books that I have been able to look at in detail make no note at all of money that might come from the star. Most Rajinikanth fans claim that only "little" (*chinna*) actors give money to the fan clubs to attract members. According to the fans, these actors are eager to start fan clubs because they see the strength and political power of Rajinikanth's fans, so they give money to start fan clubs and in this way receive support. While explaining this, Rajini fans always mention that all the members of "little" actors are actually Rajinikanth fans who were not able to start a fan club in his name because of the registration restrictions that Rajinikanth implemented in the late 1990s. In their heart they are Rajinikanth fans, they claim. This is also visible in their banners as they often use Rajinikanth's name or picture.

Fans can spend anything from tens to thousands of rupees on activities, depending on what they can afford and what their position is within the club. Tharagai Raja, the public relations officer of the district fan club in Pondicherry explains:

> *For example in Napoleon Raja's* manram *there are twenty-five members. If they spend approximately a thousand rupees on books, notebooks or food, anything, Napoleon Raja gives five hundred rupees and the other people will make up the remaining five hundred rupees.*

Even though less active fan clubs do not spend much I was amazed by the sums some fans spend on activities and on the accompanying visuals, given their incomes. Selvam, for example, whose images we encountered in Chapters 1 and 2 would sometimes spend two or three times his monthly income on the images he made for Rajinikanth's birthday. In addition to the other occasions on which he spent money (murals for a film release, posters and banners for birthdays of some friends or family members, volunteering for the organization of activities), a large amount of this income was spent on Rajinikanth.

The amount a local fan club decides to give is subject to competition with other clubs. They notify the *talaimai manram* of what they will do in a particular year but the amounts they plan to give are subject to competition. Tharagai Raja: "if another club gives small notebooks, we give big notebooks and on top of that we give a variety of costly saris or *dhotis*." But competition and comparison also occur between the fan clubs of different actors. Remember the story of Tharagai Raja, who when he was young, made Xeroxed posters for Rajinikanth just to make the number of images for his release greater than that for Kamal Hassan. Also in terms of social welfare, fans legitimize their fan club membership with the amount and grandness of social welfare in comparison with fan clubs for other actors. Almost every fan club member I have spoken to claimed that the fan clubs for his actor were the most actively involved in social welfare activities whereas fan clubs for other actors were not active at all. Again, narratives of particularity and "specialness" of an actor are conveyed in generic terms within the landscape of fan clubs that keep an eye on each other.

Within the fan club environment, the amounts spent and the activities that are organized by fan clubs and individual fans are closely observed and discussed by other fans. The harder a fan works for the fan club and the more he spends, the more he is considered a real fan. In this way, a fan club promotes itself as a real fan club but individual fans also promote themselves as genuine fans. Thengai Selvam:

> He [a fan] has to work hard, he has to face difficult things as well as good things within the fan club. Once Rajini supported the DMK and asked fans to support the party. That time many fans followed his words but some of them didn't. So we considered the person [that followed him] as a diehard fan as he worked hard for his fan club. He has to be loyal to his leader and the fan club.

> According to their [a local fan club's] activities we can identify how serious they are. Someone can contribute rs 1000, someone else can contribute rs 5000, another person can contribute rs 500; it varies from person to person according to his financial background. But how he involves himself is the deciding factor in seeing how serious he is. There are some fans who are very calculating; they are always keen to collect tickets from the fan club and wait to make a huge profit. We notice them from the beginning so we can say [who is a hard worker and who isn't].

Fans explain their involvement in social work as a way of helping people. They regularly accuse authorities or individual politicians of lining their own pockets and not working for the people. Through the fan community they have the power to do something, they feel. A Rajini fan:

> If we are alone, we can't do anything. If we are with twenty people as a fan club, we can do anna dhanam [donation of food] or help the poor. We can give help to the village if we are in a group. For that we need the fan club. If we go to an MLA or MP alone it does not work, as a group we get a benefit. So we started an association.

This fan expresses how the formation of a group gives them the power to help others. But he also emphasizes how it helps them as fans. He suggests here something I have seen with many other fans as well, that MLAs and other politicians take you more seriously as a group. Moreover, many politicians know fans of Rajinikanth have been actively supporting their party or their po-

litical opponents. In other words, their size makes people take them seriously. In this way, a local political person such as an MLA will more easily dedicate himself as intermediary to a group of fans than to a mere individual.

Big men and access to the state

Local powerful people with political or government appointments are important intermediaries between ordinary people and authorities. To have access to various institutions, permits, benefits, documents and the like, one often needs to visit a local government official or political person who is in charge or who can mediate one's needs. An MLA for people is most important in his constituency services (V. K. Chopra 1996) as he helps to get access to a person's entitled pension, helps people to participate in one of the available schemes in which they can get money or he secures money for roads, water and other basic infrastructural amenities. MLAs function within a particular area or neighborhood and should be approachable for all kinds of issues that residents have to deal with. As MLAs are always elected from a political party, their relationship with the people from an area is susceptible to selectivity. Being in the same political party or having some kind of patronage link therefore often benefits these relationships.

Access to state institutions is not evenly distributed in India. People belonging to lower socio-economic classes often need connections or have to resort to bribery to get access to state institutional processes (Appadurai 2001; Chatterjee 2004; Jeffrey 2010; L. Liang 2005). The importance of brokerage has been described repeatedly in scholarly work on Indian politics (Bailey 1963; Chatterjee 2004; Fernandes 2006; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; T. B. Hansen 2005; Harriss-White 2003; Jeffrey 2010). Chatterjee speaks of political society to indicate the ways in which the urban poor negotiate with the state (2004). In theory, he suggests, everyone in India belongs to a civil society, as all citizens have equal rights. In reality however this is not always the case. This does not mean that subaltern groups cannot access the state. On the contrary, the activities undertaken by active associations of urban poor bring them into a *political* relationship with the state (2004, 38). Even though I will not use the expression "political society" as Chatterjee does, due to its supposed dichotomy between political and civil society and citizens and the state, I do think the way in which he describes political society as a constant negotiation and shift of allegiances is useful in understanding the brokerage relationship with which fan clubs access state institutions and political groups.

Thomas Blom Hansen (2005) describes how in West India people from the lower classes establish themselves as local "fixers" who form relationships between the local communities and government officials. These men are often motivated by job insecurities and a feeling of having to compete with "outsiders," a feeling exacerbated by the right-wing Hindu nationalist *Shiv Sena* party. The fixers that Hansen describes often resort to violence to establish their position. The way in which these relationships are established parallel other forms of patronage and big men relationships that underlie political life. Jeffrey has written about the unemployed or underemployed lower middle class young men who put themselves forward as local brokers between the state and local communities (2010).

These studies (see also Fuller and Bénéï 2001) show how individual brokers or big men play

an important role in giving people access to state institutions. Big men in turn need to establish and maintain relationships with their community in return for support. Mines (1994) argues that leaders establish and maintain relationships with their community through the display of generosity. Generosity is an important individual attribute of political and other kinds of leaders. Mines uses the term big man (*periyavar* or *periyar* in Tamil) to indicate the preeminence of people within their community. Big-men need to establish their relationship with their supporters by showing generosity and trustworthiness.

In his work on the Melanesian big man Sahlins describes how he derives leadership status from personal attribution and authority in which the big man has no institutional affiliation but indirect influence (1963). In Tamil Nadu we can also see how individual power plays an important role in the construction of an image of a leader figure. One of the ways to achieve popularity is by being an altruistic benefactor by, for example, donating to charities, temples, schools. etc. "It is in these institutions that a would-be big-man undertakes to establish his social credit as a generous and trustworthy individual (*nambagamana manidan*) and to establish publicly his fame (*puhaR*) and honor (*maanam*), attributes that distinguish him as an individual" (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 763). What is important about the argument Mines and Gourishankar make is that they emphasize the individual status that these men establish through their public image as welfare givers. They clearly oppose Dumont's view of India's lack of the individual. According to Dumont the "world-renouncer" is the sole type of socially valued individual in Hindu culture (Dumont 2004). And even here it is only the case because he is an individual-outside-the-world (Dumont in Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 762). Instead, the big man as described by Mines and Gourishankar is framed as an institutional position but "depending on the idiosyncratic charisma of their heads" (*ibid.*).

Big men rely on the relationships with their constituency for building up their support. Political parties show their generosity in highly visible rallies or events in which they always give away items for free to a group of poor people. The display of philanthropy or state largesse is an important feature of political practice in Tamil Nadu and is noticeable at all levels of party politics. Party politics of the DMK and AIADMK in particular have revolved around the giving away of subsidies and gifts in order to gain electoral advantage (Price 1996, 360).

Philanthropy is always staged as if it comes directly from the head of the party. Public events put on by politicians, their supporters or other public figures are almost always accompanied by charity in staged embellished events in public spaces. The events comprise speeches in order of importance of the political guests present for the occasion.[6] One is led to believe that the philanthropy shown during meetings comes directly from the leader or is philanthropy in his name. Government schemes, such as the free television scheme which was promised for the 2006 elections by the DMK, are named after the Chief Minister as if he or she is giving away the items personally.[7] Their generosity in welfare schemes is seen as part of their true character.

Several authors have argued against the over-emphasized role of caste and community relations in Indian politics (e.g. Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Price 2005). In Tamil politics it is

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[6] Bernard Bate has written extensively on the poetics of rhetoric at political events in Madurai (2009).

[7] Corruption and other forms of inappropriate governing and personal behavior for which the Tamil Nadu leaders are well-known and for which they have even been taken to court, on the other hand, become of minor importance (Bate 2009).

commonly said that political people rely simply on their caste and community constituencies. Even though community background plays an important role in political ties, many of the fans I worked with were not loyal to a party just because of their social background. People chose local leaders on the grounds of what they had done or seemed to be doing for the local community. A person will decide whom to vote for based on personal achievements and not the state-wide party.

Leaders therefore need skill and charisma to have sufficient followers (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 762). Skill and charisma depend on what a leader can do for a community, family or person. Thengai Selvam describes this as follows:

> He [the local MLA] has to do what the government scheme has offered us, whether it is a road or drinking water or something else. He has to spend the government money on us. And we invite the local politician to our family functions. He may not attend all functions. If it is a funeral he can come because there is no invitation for it but for other functions the public invites him and he should attend; some politicians will attend only their party members' family functions. We do not encourage that.

A local intermediary of the government, in this case an MLA, has to show his presence and willingness to help not merely his party members but everyone. Family events or other public events are important moments of display. Political leaders use occasions such as temple festivals or family functions "to establish their instrumental role among their fellows and their individual reputations as patrons of the public" (Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 773).

Fan clubs and big men relationships

Local politicians, particularly at the level of MLA, are key figures in the relationship that fans seek with the state. Having connections with such local influential people gives access to authorities and other domains that are otherwise difficult to access because of fans' lower socio-economic background. Many fans feel that as a collectivity they are taken seriously and have this access more easily through their contacts with local big men. Fan clubs could therefore be seen as platforms of agency and participation in the democratic political process (Rogers 2009).

The Rajini fan I quoted above already suggested that relationships with big men are also important for fan clubs. Fans consider the fan network as a means to access these big men and establish relationships with them. Ari Krishnan, the *talaimai manram* leader of the Kamal Hassan fan club, for example, is very explicit in expressing this need:

> If you need a signature from the MLA, or any other work is to be done, there should be a fan club member in a political party, otherwise you will not get the signature for your important document or your work will not be finished by the government officer. Most of the fan club members look after their area or team, so he will be the mediator between the government and the people in his area or his friends and relatives. Our constituency MLA is approachable. You can get his signature easily. Previously when we approached other MLAs, they asked us to bring a party member from our fan club. Whatever we needed help for, for example if someone was disabled, or for elderly people, whatever the problem, they asked us to get a party

member from our fan club. The present MLA is easily approachable and whoever it is he is helping and whatever problem it is he is helping us with, he never asks who belongs to which party. I am not with any political party.

This feeling that Ari Krishnan expresses is central to the political and social constellations that fan clubs are establishing. It suggests the relevance of patronage in everyday life and in the fan club network. The MLA Ari Krishnan describes plays a central role for people to have access to government institutions. One of the most obvious ways to do this is through public events that show the generosity of the fan club as well as that of the big man. Fan clubs commonly try to invite local politicians to preside over their function. Often these leaders sponsor the event to a certain extent, paying for a part of the items that will be given away as charity. The presence of local big men gives the event authority, attracts bigger crowds and as a result (re)-establishes relationships (Mines 1994). The relationships are complementary as fans need influential people to be present to show their own position to the people who attend the events and they need them for the benefits they provide. In return the local big man widens his reach by being present and visible on such occasions and he establishes his position and support in the community where he operates.

The obvious presence of journalists and hired photographers for the events on Rajinikanth's birthday celebration in 2007 with which I introduced this chapter, heightens the importance (see also Gerritsen 2006) and confirms the significance of the display of generosity. The banners and posters which depicted images of Rajinikanth and Rajini Shankar suggested from whom the gifts were coming. The visual and aural presence during events with stages and decorations and the photo opportunities of the fan club leaders handing out their items in front of the camera make these events public markers of power.

Praise

"Social service is a must. Only then do you become familiar and famous."
Rajini Shankar

An important notion with which we can further deepen our understanding of the singularity of the political figure for fans is praise. At events and on the images made for them (see Chapter 4) fans praise their movie hero, fan club leaders and local political figures for their generosity. Several scholars have indicated that praise in India has historically been contextualized in the realm of divinity and sovereignty in which the political and the religious cannot be separated (Appadurai 1990; Bate 2009; Dirks 1993; Mines 1994). Bernard Bate identifies similarities between political practices such as public meetings and practices associated with worship. He argues that people relate to political leaders in a similar way as they do to deities in which praise and *bhakti* (religious devotion) serve to explain the practices of devotion.

The idolization of leaders is not a one-sided activity. Praise also brings visibility to the one who conducts the activity. Here, the emphasis on the "would-be big-man" as described by Mines (1994) is relevant; people, such as Rajini Shankar, who want to establish themselves as leader

figures need a certain interaction with big men in the form of praising them. Fans see the social welfare activities of their fan club as a way to establish their own position in their neighborhood, in politics or in the fan club environment. Therefore, praise should not be considered as simple adoration but also as a form of publicizing oneself. Arjun Appadurai has identified more direct forms of praise that can be related to divinity and indirect forms of praise or flattery that are more concerned with publicizing the one who praises (1990). Praise, or flattery, is not merely a means of marking out hierarchy between the worshipper and worshipped, it is also dependence upon a superior (1990, 97). Appadurai singles out the indirect form of praise for those lacking direct contact with the superior. Praising the good deeds, capabilities, powers, and reputation of the superior sets the speaker him or herself in a privileged relationship with the superior:

The mode of praise here is not direct flattery but publicizing, which is directed not to the emotional satisfaction of the superior but to the increment of his or her own following … But the hope your superior will hear of your praise, and thus think better of you, is not crudely manipulative (as with alternative topographies of the self, which permit both acts and judgments of hypocrisy), but a mixture of adoration and expectation of reward that characterizes Hindu ritual generally. Praise of the superior is, therefore, part of a complex series of acts of mutual benefit that characterize the ethos of Hindu worship itself (op.cit. 98-99).

Both forms of worship are highly personal and praise as publicizing as Arjun Appadurai has described it shows how fans promote their movie hero but also themselves. It authorizes their own power and status (Mines 1994, 11–12). Rajini Shankar's wife explained that even though she doesn't like her husband spending so much money on non-family matters, she does not dislike his activities: "If he does social activities, he has recognition among the people. Sometimes people came and asked for books and sometimes he arranged blood donations. At the time, I felt so much happiness that they came and asked for my husband."

In other words, through praising a movie hero and the presence of local big men at a public event a fan heightens his own visibility. In speeches at events the members venerate their movie hero and name local benefactors who support their activities. The welfare is conducted in the name of a hero and seems to come directly from the actor in person. At the same time it is clear that the welfare is coming from the fans themselves. In this way, local fans establish social credit. It shows their fellow fans and others in their community that they are committed fans. The publicness and visibility of the event is therefore crucial. Events take place in public spaces with visual and aural stimuli that make it hard to overlook the event. In the next chapter I will specifically deal with the ways in which banners are key markers of events.

What fan activity makes clear is that the political is a broad field in which one operates and negotiates. In other words, film has become a crucial mediator that inflects politics and enables one to become more politically powerful. Fans use the fan club to gain visibility in their neighborhood, have access to government institutions otherwise inaccessible, win local elections or pursue personal ambitions. These motivations can all be part of the political motivations of being connected to the fan club.

Public fan events and their accompanying visual displays play a key role in mediating the visibility and political and social agency of fans. The agency or "action" that is displayed here is also subject to transformation and is not a straightforward individual asset but transcends the individual level and the temporal moment in which it acts (Keane 1997, 7). This observation by

Keane is important as it acknowledges that individuals, i.e. individual fans in this case, only have agency because they are part of a collectivity of fans, because of their connections to political people and on top of that, because success is not a univocal process that comes out of the action of a fan.

A fine line

However, a fine line separates selfishness and importance. Generosity suggests "seemingly selfless agency" (Mines 1994, 65) in which people seem to act for others and not merely for themselves. In reality however, competition is fierce in how powerful men try to establish and maintain their position. The fans I worked with constantly commented on other fans and how they were "good workers" or calculating, self-centered individuals. The proof of their dedication or otherwise was found in the ways in which they worked hard (or not) to organize activities and how they presented themselves on images displayed at events. The latter is the subject of the next chapter.

Ari Krishnan, who I quoted above, also described the difficulties with the former MLA for who always requested someone who was a member of the same political party. Ari Krishnan's words articulate one of the ambiguities of fandom: even though on the one hand a fan club membership does help to gain access to the state and other networks of power, at the same time a fan club is not sufficient to be always taken seriously. Even though it is not officially approved within the fan club network, most fans, once they are older, get involved in political parties as well. It shows how the developmental cycle of a fan means that fandom is no longer expressed in terms of cinematic devotion but in terms of prestige and political networking. However, this is articulated via cinematic devotion and through images of the star as fans, stars and politics work together.

Style and the power of fan collectivity

While political networks create a feeling of agency, hierarchies within the fan club are created and reinforced by means of the activities fans organize. Fans who already have the right social or economic capital can climb up the fan club hierarchy more easily and establish political networks. Dickey (1993b) suggests that it is inappropriate for young people or for someone with little social or financial capital to make claims to power and therefore the fan club offers a place to seek this power. However, even though I agree with Dickey that age or social and economic capital can hold people back from establishing themselves as powerful people, political parties in Tamil Nadu attract people from similar socio-economic backgrounds with similar interests in social recognition and power (S. V. Srinivas 2005). Politicians as well as fan club leaders need economic capital to act as a leader. But these leaders also need a particular style. The following description of a trip I made with the Rajinikanth fan club leader of Villupuram district, Ibrahim, shows how style becomes crucial in the experience of being a fan.

In February 2008, my research assistant Gandhirajan and I received an invitation from Ibrahim to join him on a trip to Gudalur, a town situated almost 400 kilometers south of his home town of Villupuram. Ibrahim for his part received an invitation from Stalin, his fellow district

fan club leader of Teni to attend his son's ear-piercing function. Gudalur is a small town in South Tamil Nadu on the border with Kerala, surrounded by a lush landscape of mountains, paddies and rivers so Ibrahim saw this trip as a small vacation as well. He arranged lodging in Teni for the first night after which we headed on to Gudalur the next day to attend the function. Ibrahim's car was packed with the seven travelers, our luggage and a considerable amount of alcohol.

The two lower-level fan club members who sat in the back of the car were particularly cramped, sitting on top of our luggage. As many of the cars in the state carry the flag of the affiliated political party of the owner, the hood of Ibrahim's car was decorated with a Rajinikanth flag. Throughout the journey Ibrahim and Kannayram, his right-hand man, talked primarily about fan club politics: who was doing what, meetings, etc. Jokes were also made about the other fans in the car who were of lower rank within the fan club but also from a lower socio-economic background. There were also jokes about the failure of actors Vijayakanth and Sarath Kumar in movies which had led to them starting political parties instead. No one was really talking about Rajinikanth, let alone about his movies.

We often stopped during the journey to eat, drink, get some snacks or smoke. Ibrahim explained that he smoked the same cigarettes as Rajinikanth: expensive imported Benson and Hedges cigarettes. It was a coincidence that on the day we set off an article had appeared in a popular daily about my research. As is common, highlights of the paper were published on cheap posters displayed around the vendor selling the paper. Even though we noticed the posters everywhere, we were not able to obtain a copy of the paper itself. Once we found it, it became the subject of much fun, surprising people on the streets who were just reading the article with my presence in that small place deep down south in Tamil Nadu.

When we approached Teni, local fan clubs were awaiting us. We stopped in several villages where fan clubs honored Ibrahim and me by garlanding us. After a day-long journey we arrived in Teni, where one of the higher level fan club leaders waited for us in our lodge. After a conversation with the district leader, Ibrahim wanted me to have dinner after which they accompanied me to my room, making sure I was settled and safe. The men, now "free" of their responsibility for this foreign guest, did not eat because they planned a night of drinks – so-called hard drinks. When people, generally men, drink it is common in Tamil Nadu that they usually do not eat in advance but have snacks accompanying the drinks and eat later on.

The next morning the men were up early again, preparing themselves for the next part of the trip. We headed on to Gudalur, where the function was to be held. Before we left however, Ibrahim wanted a photo of Rajinikanth in front of the windshield because the Rajinikanth flag, he thought, looked too much like a flag of the Dalit Panthers. One of the group immediately went to a local photo studio and returned a couple of minutes later with an A4 size photo of Rajinikanth. Ibrahim was not too happy with this photo because it was a "natural" photo instead of a *filmi* one but he placed it in front of the windshield anyway.[8] Ibrahim's shiny white car with tinted windows is not uncommon in Tamil Nadu but does attract attention in more remote areas. In addition, the flag and photo of Rajinikanth enhanced the importance of the car. People noticed it, pointed at it and small children waved at the car when we passed by. Perhaps they thought they had just seen Rajinikanth passing by.

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[8] In Chapter 4 I elaborate on the suitability and categorizations of different images made by fans of Rajinikanth.

Once we had arrived in Gudalur, we paid a short official visit to Stalin, the district leader. But then it was leisure time. All the men changed into comfortable *lungis,* short pants and towels. We went to see famous waterfalls in the area. Normally, visitors have to pay but when the guard saw the Rajinikanth flag and photo, he let us through. The waterfalls are a popular spot for people to bathe and just a bit further downstream we settled with the food and drinks. The two lower-rank fans carried all the alcohol and food that had been made by a fan club member's wife in Gudalur.

After everyone had become sleepy from the alcohol, they dozed off, and Ibrahim and Kannayram got an oil massage from a lower-rank fan club member. When everyone had slept it off and had had his lunch, we headed off to the waterfall. Part of the crowded passage to the waterfall was closed due to construction works. In their slightly drunken state all the fans nevertheless took the closed off but easy steps. A commotion started and a guard tried to prevent them from taking that route but the men continued, stating that they were from the Rajinikanth fan club and therefore had a right to do this. And so it was; people let them take the stairs instead of the detour.

The next morning Ibrahim wanted to wash the car and bathe somewhere. We drove for a few kilometers in the lush landscape of paddies in search of the place where the mother of the famous music composer Ilayaraja is buried. An old watchman opened the gate of the property and Ibrahim told him that we were sent by Ilayaraja. The confused watchman could not refuse us entry after this remark and thus allowed the car inside. The men started washing the car and themselves in the compound.

The ear-piercing function was our last activity of the day. At the event no attention was paid to the ritual itself. The men used the event to speak with their fellow fan club leaders from other areas and I met a lot of local fans who wanted to speak to me. We ate a heavy lunch and after some time we were on the road to Villupuram again. At two in the morning we arrived in Villupuram and Kannayram then gave me a lift home on his motorbike, another forty kilometers away from Villupuram.

The hierarchy amongst the various fan club members in our car and the ones we encountered during this trip was expressed by where they sat, who carried the bottles of alcohol, who washed the car and by how different members addressed each other by their fan club position. Jokes were made about the lower-level fans and Ibrahim was addressed by the others as *thalaivar* (leader) and sometimes even as a future MLA.

Rajinikanth, who brought these fans together, was playing a role in the background. During our journey to Teni, when Gandhirajan and I were waiting for the others who were having a quick drink on the road, Rafiq, Ibrahim's nephew, put on the film *Baatsha* (1995) for us in the car. The film ran for two hours while we drove further south but no one was actually paying attention. Only Kannayram looked at the film once in a while. His eyes twinkled during particular fighting scenes or scenes in which Rajinikanth makes bold statements. Besides that, Rajinikanth seemed to be merely touched upon as an object of status and power. It was through his name and affiliated authority, I would suggest, that Ibrahim was able get access to the memorial place of Ilayaraja's mother. It seemed almost a symbolic act to wash the car – it was not the place per se but the fact that Rajinikanth's fame opened it up that made it Ibrahim's wish to wash his car

there. And of course it must have impressed the others that were present, reemphasizing Ibrahim's status to his close followers.

I have described this trip at some length as it shows how, through the fan club, status is ascribed to local fan club leaders. Moreover, it shows the style of leadership that Ibrahim exercises and the style of obedience of the other fans towards him. This becomes clear for instance in dress, ways of speaking to each other and to outsiders and in the behavior of who carries what, who drinks what, etc.

Ibrahim is the district Rajinikanth fan club leader of Villupuram district. He is a businessman who has an office at the main bus stand in Villupuram. He has been the fan club leader of Villupuram district since the 1980s. He is said to be one of the longest running leaders, liked by many because of his service to the fan club and for keeping fan activity and party politics separate. The emphasis on Ibrahim as one of the few fan club leaders who always clearly separated the fan club and party politics is noteworthy. As I try to show throughout this chapter, politicking is an intrinsic yet unofficial aspect of fan activity. Most fans get involved in politics once they are older. However, using the fan club for one's own political gain is not appreciated. Many leaders throughout Tamil Nadu have already been removed from their post because of their involvement in party politics. Ibrahim is actually engaged in all kinds of political activity but as he is not using the fan club explicitly for his politics, it is considered permissible. Through his long service to the fan club and his position as a money lender he has a large patronage network of fans and others around him. The way in which he is addressed, as a future MLA, by his fellow fans, as an important person who can avoid rules as exemplified in the situation of the waterfall drinking outing and the washing of the car refers to a certain performance that brings him into the political domain. Ibrahim, on holiday and with his lower-level followers around him, clearly needs to perform in a certain way to prove his status. It would be completely different in the context of his meeting politicians with whom he works closely. In that case he is the person who is expected to behave humbly and to praise his superiors.

In order to maintain his role as leader of the fan club, Ibrahim attends many of the kind of functions described above. Just as Selvam sent an invitation to Rajinikanth for his wedding and son's first birthday (see Chapter 2), fans invite their superiors to their family functions. Big men of the fan club or local leaders are supposed to attend the event as well as donate money as a present.

His various roles as businessman, fan club leader and in politics seem to reinforce each other. It is noteworthy that most fan club leaders are usually small businessmen who are more economically well-off than others. They need money to be a leader as they are expected to attend the functions of people from the area and contribute financially, help people in emergencies and celebrate their own functions in a grand manner. They also need a car, in case of fan club or other functions that they have organized or have been invited to. Indeed, several poorer fans and fans from rural areas said that the lack of resources would always mean a lack of power and mobility in political environments. So even though the fan club could be seen as a space for mobility, economic background does play a role in someone's possibilities to climb up the fan club ladder.

Respect: Political practices and mobilization

From the many conversations I had with fans throughout my research, it became clear that a large number felt that the fan club environment and particularly their connection to the star and powerful people provided them with respect. Before being part of the fan club and in particular before involvement in politics, many fans suggested that they were not respected, even by their family members. Several of the wives or parents of fan club members I spoke to complained about the money their husbands or children spent on the fan club. Tamizhvanan's wife:

> He [Tamizhvanan] *spends a lot of money. He doesn't do anything for the children and he does not want to purchase any gold ornaments for them. But he always spends money on Rajinikanth. I asked for a cupboard to keep our clothes in but he will not spend money on that. I asked for a dining table but he won't spend money on it. But if someone calls and says "we're going to Chennai to meet Rajinikanth," he immediately takes money and goes.*

As I argued in the previous chapter, derogatory opinions about fan behavior in journalistic accounts or as commonly heard opinion are connected to the cinematic activities of fan clubs. Feelings of respectability and power by fans themselves, on the other hand, are related to active involvement in social welfare and affiliations to local politicians. Tharagai Raja:

> If you need something from a politician, hospital or doctor, an ordinary person will be rejected. If I belong to the Rajini manram, suddenly they give me what I need, anything. Because they don't only see me but also the strength behind me. That strength will help the politicians in the elections. For that reason alone they give help to us, they do not give any help to a single man. For example, I asked for a place in a school. My second son is going to join a Christian school. They did not give him a place. They only give places to the A category, which means high class people only, not people like me in the middle classes. So we wanted a recommendation. For that recommendation I went to the Pondicherry Education Minister: "Sir, I would like a place for my son." There they asked: "what is your job?" I replied: "I work in real estate, Sir." "And then what else?", "Sir, I am from the Rajini manram, I am Rajini's PRO." Then they simply gave me a letter which said: I know this man very well, could you please give him a place for his child. Just like that he recommended me and gave me his signature. I got the letter and took it to the head of the school, the principal. He said: "oh, you have been to the Education Minister, Okay, I agree to your request." If I hand in an application and try to pressure them I get no response. But when I get a recommendation, they agree to my request. That is because of the Rajini* manram. *It helps us.*

These stories show how the fan club network acts as a powerful tool with which fans can navigate through bureaucratic institutions and class distinctions. Tharagai Raja feels the strength of the *manram* helps him to be taken seriously by politicians and government officials. Tharagai Raja emphasizes the mutual benefit of this relationship. They benefit from being respected and in a practical way by gaining access to domains that otherwise would remain inaccessible. At the same time, he explains how government officials give their support as they understand the mutual benefit. The Pondicherry Rajinikanth fan club has regularly supported local politicians or particular political parties during elections. So the kind of politicking that is at work here provides politicians with votes and support. At the same time it gives fans a way of letting the

system work to their advantage, especially for people who, due to class distinctions, would not be able to access certain domains otherwise. This makes fan clubs a route to power one that preserves hierarchies, patriarchies and male culture.

In Vannur, an area of Villupuram, Saktivel is the popular local fan club leader. In 2006, Saktivel was selected as Panchayat president with the help of the fan club. Before Saktivel became fan club president, the fan club was not very active. Fans complained that the former leader was not trying to unite fans. So when the former president was expelled by the head office in Chennai, Saktivel was appointed and the fan club started to shine. Saktivel is known to be a sincere fan who spends his money on screening films and organizing events in the name of Rajinikanth. A friend of Saktivel described his popularity as follows:

Saktivel used to distribute sweets to the entire village when a Rajinikanth film was released. He also regularly hired a TV and VCR, which were still very costly at the time, and played Rajinikanth and MGR movies for the entire village. He organized this whenever he had the money and sometimes we pushed him to organize it. The TV was put up in the village somewhere and everybody gathered around. First we used black and white TV and later color we used to fan the VCR to cool it down. This was in the early 1990s. The MGR films were screened mainly for elderly people. Later, the temple authorities bought a TV. The shows were screened on special occasions and sometimes even on ordinary days but mostly on Saturday nights as Sunday is a holiday for everyone. We enjoyed those moments. We admired and respected Saktivel a lot. We tried to follow his path. He spent his own money.

Generally, Saktivel is known for his commitment to social issues. In 2006, Saktivel decided not to join the PMK, which draws many members and voters from the Vanniyar community to which both its leader Ramadoss and Saktivel belong. Ramadoss lives a couple of kilometers further north. Tensions between Rajini fans and Ramadoss supporters have been expressed in fights but also, as I will later show in Chapter 4, in the demolition of hoardings on the important Koot Road junction. Saktivel stood as a candidate for the local Panchayat elections and won with the help and support of the fan club. The Rajinikanth fans helped him canvass for the elections and helped in all other ways to accompany Saktivel in his activities. Actually the Panchayat position is allotted to a woman so officially his wife Nalini is registered for the position. But as often happens in India, Saktivel carries out the job. Nalini did not want to stand for the elections as she is afraid of speaking in public. But Saktivel reassured her and promised that she would not have to do anything. Only for official events such as Independence Day does Nalini join Saktivel on a trip around the area to hoist the flags at schools.

Saktivel is extremely busy with his job as local spokesperson for the area. He has a circle of friends who are also fan club members and who always support him to help solve issues in the neighborhood. The acquisition of land to give people ownership of the land they live on, family feuds and fights are some of the issues that Saktivel is involved in. He is always on the road. Almost every time we tried to meet, he was called away to solve an urgent matter and his phone rang constantly. Despite his extremely busy life, Saktivel always tried to make time to talk about his passion, i.e. Rajinikanth: "I would leave my family for Rajinikanth, if he starts a party, I would follow him immediately."

A Panchayat president is not a political position per se so Saktivel could perform his role without clashing with the rules from Chennai that fan club members should not be actively

involved in politics. The way he was elected was clearly with the help of the fan club, his prestige and visibility were shaped by his work as a fan club leader.

Being a member of a party is not problematic but being an active politician is. The main reason why Rajini Shankar got expelled from the fan club was because he crossed the line separating a supportive fan club member and an active political member as I will discuss in more detail below. Different kinds of politicking are differently perceived. Practical benefits and prestige gained through the fan club are accepted but using Rajinikanth's image for a political career is not.

Still, many fans, however, hope that Rajinikanth will start his party. Party politics, many fans think, are more effective; not merely for their own benefit but for what a star such as Rajinikanth can do for society. It would resolve the contradiction of political practice in name of the star and the alleged selfish use of the fan club for a fan's own political career. The problem for most fans however is that Rajinikanth has not started his party. Not yet.

The politics of Rajinikanth

I have now described several ways in which fans engage in politicking. From the reinforcement of patronage relationships to social welfare events and fan club leaders who are actively involved in party politics or Panchayats. It is mostly fans higher up in the fan club who have the right access and social (and economic) capital to engage with local politicians and become active in a political party. Poorer and younger fans or fans of lower hierarchy within the fan club do not have these attributes.

Rajinikanth fans have become restless with Rajinikanth's reluctance to start his own party. For fans, political affiliation with a political party affirms their longtime activities in the name of their movie star. Rajinikanth's hints in films such as "no one knows when and how I will come but I will be there at the right time"[9] have kept his fans hoping that he will finally take the big step but so far nothing has happened or seems to be happening. Once in a while, a fan club somewhere in Tamil Nadu announces the party flag and as such a political party in the name of Rajinikanth after which this fan club is expelled from official fan club membership. Many fans expressed their disappointment with Rajinikanth as he keeps them waiting and hoping but in the meantime does not take the step into politics.

Even though Rajinikanth was displeased that people were joining his fan clubs for political reasons, in recent years he has affiliated himself to political parties and has indicated his political preference in public during elections. At the elections in 2004, Rajinikanth gave a public statement in a speech in favor of the BJP-AIADMK alliance. In the speech, Rajinikanth commented on his dispute with the politician Ramadoss (see Introduction). In the second part, he switched to the water problem in India and especially Tamil Nadu. He said he had offered one crore[10] rupees to link south Indian rivers but politicians were not listening to him. The only party that listened was the BJP. That is the reason he was going to vote for the BJP. At the end of his speech he said:

9   "Naan eppo varuven eppadi varuvennu yarukum theriyathu…aana varavendiya nerathile correctaa varuven…"
10   A crore is a unit used in India to indicate 10 million.

My beloved Tamil people and fans. I want to tell you again: this is not my support for any particular party. It is my vote, that's it. I won't insist that my fans and the Tamil people vote for the same party I voted for. It is not a must that my fans vote for the party. I will not take away your right to vote. But you have to think, think, not only Tamil people, all Indians, especially mothers, youngsters, students and educated people. When you go to the polling booth, don't think that my party has to win or my caste party should win. Think about the water problem and decide: your life is in your hands."[11]

In this part of his speech, Rajinikanth emphatically states that it is his vote and not his support for a party or a command for the people of Tamil Nadu and his fans to vote for that same party. Nevertheless, he states this in such an insistent manner by addressing some groups in particular that it is not a mere expression of his preferences but a personal address. He must be aware of his status as icon in Tamil Nadu and therefore must know that his words have influence, especially considering former elections in which fans followed his vote unquestioningly and campaigned and voted for the party he supported, despite personal preferences or memberships of other parties. And in fact this happened during these elections as well. Local fan clubs even punished various members for not listening to Rajinikanth's words. Tharagai Raja:

For the 2004 elections, Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP. But here, the DMK was against the BJP. Some people in the Rajini fan clubs ignored this and did not give any respect to Rajini's words. They did some shadow campaigning to support the DMK personalities. They did some illegal activities: not obeying Rajini's words. When we got to know about this we took action against these people. We went to Sathyanarayanan and asked: these people are acting like this, what are you going to do? Sathyanarayanan accepted our decision: I do not give my blessing to those supporting the DMK so our association finds it immoral. So Sathyanarayanan put the matter to Rajini and he also gave permission to dismiss the people from the association. So they suspended the people. After the suspension, they gave a us a letter that confirmed that these people were suspended because of immoral activities against the Rajini manram. This man is suspended for two years, temporarily. This man is suspended for five years, etc.

What is interesting in this story is that people can be suspended for supporting another party, even though Rajinikanth has clearly indicated that people should vote the way they want. Tharagai Raja himself was obedient, even to the extent that he supported a Hindu nationalist party, which for him as a Christian was a big step. Tharagai Raja:

Before Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP in 2004, we had a local meeting in Pondicherry to ask everyone's opinion about the election and to discuss who to support. Rajini Shankar chose to support the BJP but some of us had problems with that party. I can't support the BJP as a Christian! So we told Rajini Shankar that all fans have a different background. Then Rajinikanth declared his support for the BJP. For Rajini we never speak about our aversion to voting for something because we like his decision. He never takes a wrong decision. But locally, if I support the BJP I need something. If they give me something, I will work for them. Thalaivar simply mentioned in the media: I am going to support the BJP, I will not

11 Translation by Chakravarthy.

put any pressure on my fans to work for the BJP. If they want to vote for them, they'll work, if they don't like the BJP, they will not work. So whatever they want, they will vote that way. In Pondicherry we decided: we are supporters of thalaivar*, of Rajini, why should we work for another party? So we worked. Another reason to vote for the BJP was our resentment against the PMK. Ramadoss' party was putting a lot of pressure on with the release of* Baba*. They simply took out the film reel, so we became very angry with that party. During the elections we had no opportunity to vote for another party since all parties were in some way related to the PMK, so we supported the BJP. I am a member of the communist party and resigned. I simply mentioned that the communist party is supporting the PMK which I do not agree with. I did not tell them that the reason that I do not want to work for them is because I am a Rajini fan, I simply told them that I am not prepared to work for the PMK.*

After the elections, Tharagai Raja joined the communist party again. As we saw in Tharagai Raja's story, he followed Rajinikanth's choice even though he questioned the same party earlier. He states that his hero "*never takes a wrong decision*" and therefore he followed his choice. What makes people vote for a party they otherwise would never vote for? Why is Rajinikanth's decision never wrong? I will show below how the unconditional loyalty for movie stars as expressed by Tharagai Raja is conditional at the same time (see also S. V. Srinivas 2009).

Most fans I worked with, even those who were not really involved or interested in politics became somewhat frustrated about the situation. For years, they say, they invested in the fan clubs, spent their own money on social welfare and had not really received anything in return. Only fans higher up in the fan club really benefited from their position. Now it was time to get something in return. Otherwise it was useless to continue spending all that money on social work. This has resulted in fans being less active in the fan club, knowing that they will not accomplish what they had slowly started to expect. Many feel that Rajinikanth has missed the right moment for his political entry. At the end of the 1990s, when he hinted about his possible entry into politics in a film, Rajinikanth was in his heyday. Most fans think that if he had started his political party at that time he would be definitely have won the elections. Now, even though they do not want to be unfaithful to their hero, they think that his political heyday is over. First of all Rajinikanth is older but secondly he has too many connections to the ruling leaders of the state. As Rajinikanth is not showing any sign of what he will do in the future, fans are becoming restless and are starting to doubt their investment. Once in a while fans start their own party in his name or rallies are organized by local leaders to show their desires. Other fans become less active and spend less money and time in the organization of events. Gnanavel, a member of the fan club and an AIADMK member:

We are all ready to give our lives but he doesn't understand that yet. Even though he is acting like this we still love him. See, a political party gives power. That's why we are asking him to start a political party. Last year I had a problem and my political party [AIADMK] helped me overcome it. Likewise, the fans who are struggling to get a better life will be helped if Rajini is a politician. He doesn't see what his power is. Lakhs[12] and Lakhs of fans are behind him but he never ever uses them. I think he is frightened of starting a party and managing it. Many film stars start a political party. Look at Vijayakanth, Sarathkumar, Karthik: they

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12 A Lakh is 100,000.

don't have as much power as our Rajini but they have started a political party. These actors give a voice to their fans, to the people who believe in him but Rajini hasn't done this. All his films after Mannan *contain politics; they contain dialogue that refers to his entry into politics. It's so irritating you know. We've lost hope but we still love him. We don't know why he speaks about politics but doesn't do anything. He says that he loves Tamil Nadu and the Tamil people but he doesn't act as if he does. He has a mill in Karnataka where four thousand people work, he owns lorries and much more but everything is in Karnataka. Then how can we believe that he loves Tamil Nadu? Many of the members of his fan clubs will quit if this continues. The day will come when there are no more fan clubs.*

Gnanavel's frustration highlights several issues. First of all, he recognizes the power that many fans want to obtain with Rajini's entry into politics. They want something in return for their efforts and dedication. But he also highlights the fact that despite Rajinikanth's behavior, their love for their hero is unconditional and they continue to love him. But another issue that needs attention is Gnanavel's point about Rajinikanth's loyalty to Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. Rajinikanth is sometimes criticized for his questionable loyalty to the state of Tamil Nadu. This feeling of belonging to a state should be contextualized within the linguistic political paradigm that has developed in Tamil Nadu (see Introduction). Notions of belonging are primarily attached to linguistic background. Even a descendant of a family that settled in Tamil Nadu more than three hundred years ago refers to him or herself as actually being from the state "of origin". Rajinikanth was born and raised in Karnataka after which he settled in Tamil Nadu to study at the Madras Film Institute. His fans always defend him and often the metaphor of marriage is used: when a girl comes to live with her parents-in-law they include her in the family as their own daughter. Likewise, Rajinikanth has chosen Tamil Nadu and we as Tamils should treat him as family. It was surprising for me to hear a fan commenting on Rajinikanth's origins. It seems as if, in difficult times, crucial issues of origin, loyalty and the like are heightened and revealed.

For Rajini Shankar, who started as a dedicated fan of Rajinikanth and who founded the first fan club in Pondicherry, Rajinikanth's attitude towards politics and his own fans has been the limit. Shankar has become a dynamic businessman and active political supporter of the AIADMK over the years. But his fortune and prosperity within and through the fan club has changed as well. In the previous chapter I explained that he was expelled from his post due to the frustrations of other fans about his handling of the fan club and particularly the distribution of cinema tickets. For the head office in Chennai, his political affiliations were the main reason for expelling Shankar from his post. Even though Shankar continued to act as a president because of his long-established position in Pondicherry, he also developed anger and frustration towards Rajinikanth.

Rajini Shankar was frustrated about the investments he had made in the fan club in the name of Rajinikanth and for which he had received nothing in return. In 2007 he was angry with the head office in Chennai in particular:

I met her [Jayalalitha] *because I was thinking of working for the political party. Since the headquarters of the Rajini fans association's administration is not doing anything, I cannot stick with them forever. They never listened to my requests. We [Rajinikanth fan club members] cannot work for a political party, the president of the headquarters of the Rajini fans association does not allow us to get paid by a political party if we work for them. … So how*

will we survive? I have been in the fan club for twenty-eight years, and I have worked hard for him. He is not doing anything for anyone, in the end where will I go for my survival? I have had no direct contact with him while working like this. So I thought of working with a political party directly.

I went to Cuddalore, Chidambaram, Kanyakumari, and Kerala to build up the Rajini fans, but in the end what did I get? In 2001, a popular weekly magazine Kumudam wrote that Rajini fan clubs were not functioning properly. I was upset when that weekly wrote about us. I celebrated his fifty-second birthday in a grand manner to prove that they were wrong. I hired a theater costing me seventy-five thousand rupees. How long can we spend money on him – we also need money for survival. I could have bought a flat or land for myself with that money!

I met her [Jayalalitha] *because I wanted to work with the party to increase my income. I thought of getting some posting in a political party. For instance if I were appointed president of the youth wing in the party, I would get paid for my work. Or for example if I am in the party and somebody calls me to the police station to settle a problem, they will pay the police and they will pay me for acting as a middleman between that person and the police. That's how I can earn money, whereas I don't get any money for working in this fan club. When I joined the fan club I was 15 years old, today I am 43 years old. How many years have I wasted without getting any recognition! If I had worked as government staff or if I had been with a political party I would have achieved more.*

During this period, Rajini Shankar expressed his frustration towards the head office as he was expelled as president because of his political interests. But it was primarily because of his status as fan club leader that his active involvement in party politics made it problematic. As a lower level fan is not so much in the limelight as higher level members, their political activities are less problematic. Shankar is a known person in Pondicherry and has well-known political contacts. His party support would be related too directly to the fan club, something that Rajinikanth would not appreciate.

Although in 2007 Shankar was primarily frustrated with the association, in 2008 his attitude started to change. In one of our many conversations Shankar turned emotional when he spoke about Rajinikanth. He talked of Rajinikanth with disdain and irritation, as someone not helping his fans but rather exploiting them. Therefore, Shankar decided to start his own career with the aim of becoming famous, by, among other things, producing a movie and trying to end up in Pondicherry politics. Shankar likes thinking about the release of his movie. When it is released, he says, he will invite Rajinikanth to the premiere but he will not be allowed to sit next to him. This is Shankar's revenge.

Around the time of his daughter's coming of age ceremony, which I described in the previous chapter, Shankar's father died. Two weeks after the function, Shankar organized another function, this time to distribute saris in Nellithope in commemoration of his father. This was quite exceptional; usually someone's death is commemorated in the family and not with a public function such as Shankar organized, let alone a "political" function. The stage on which the event took place was set up just next to one of the busiest incoming roads in Pondicherry. A four meter long banner showed Shankar's father and mother and in the center the blown up faces

43. Small flyer made for the function commemorating Rajini Shankar's father.

of Rajinikanth and his wife Latha, the CM of Pondicherry and Shankar himself. The speeches during the event were of considerable length but the public present was not really paying attention. Only during one more animated speech did people start to pay attention. Shankar was the last speaker. His speech lasted an hour. He explained how he was not trusted by the fan club and as a result was expelled from his post. Now he has started his own organization, he said. He addressed the area's problems: roads, water facilities etc. about which the government was not doing anything and as a result of which he had decided to take action himself. Later on in the speech he also spoke about more common political themes, invoking the sentiments against "migrants" from North India who are accused of taking away the jobs in Pondicherry. Shankar said openly that these migrants should be sent away. In short, Shankar's speech was clearly political in the sense that it addressed or raised issues and sentiments of an urban poor area. He used images of Rajinikanth and his fan club status to attract attention but at the same time he did not organize the event "in Rajinikanth's name".

In the meantime, Shankar's close friends and fan club colleagues know about his turning away from Rajinikanth. But as Tharagai Raja explains:

> In Tamil Nadu you need Rajinikanth's photo to sell tea. You need Rajinikanth's photo to sell coffee. To sell bed sheets, soap, computers, for everything you need Rajinikanth's photo. But if there is a problem, you also need Rajinikanth? Is that justice? There are people in our fan club, like Rajini Shankar, who do not understand this. On that day, I heard that he [Shankar] spoke harshly. For me, this is not done, but what can we do? … I felt sad. In spite of that he is the secretary of our association and I know that he benefits from him [Rajinikanth]. … If you go and talk about real estate using Shankar's name, who will respect you? If you introduce yourself as a Rajini fan club secretary, then they ask you to sit and talk. We have given you a label. Rajinikanth gave a label to him.

So even though others know about Shankar's move against Rajinikanth, the other fan club members do not say anything about it. As Tharagai Raja explains, they are friends, and as friends, it does not help to criticize Rajini Shankar. But Tharagai Raja also emphasizes that Shankar is not able to go his own way with the support of the fans:

They [other fan club members] are not ready to work with him. The fans only support Rajini not Shankar or Tharagai. The fans just support Rajini. If you always speak badly about Rajini, then how will people accept it? They are only there for Rajini.

With Rajini Shankar turning his back on Rajinikanth, I do not want to suggest that the real Rajinikanth is of no importance to his fans. Shankar is an exception to the rule in his disappointment. But his story does describe how he, from being one of the first fans in Pondicherry to use images to attract customers to his shop, has started to turn against Rajinikanth, still using his images but now far removed from the Rajinikanth he wanted to be close to initially. It shows how fandom starts with a love of film and a particular actor but how during the course of a life political motivations take over. Even though social welfare is said to be about generosity, a fan feels he needs something in return for his dedication. Again it is mutual, praise and dedication do not merely idolize, they give something in return to the one who praises (Appadurai 1990). And when this final gift of a personal political career does not work out, generosity is not worth it anymore. Many fans described how Rajinikanth having his own party would give them political posts. But at the same time, people like Selvam were skeptical about their future careers. Selvam, who also expected Rajinikanth to enter politics as a return for his efforts, also realized that due to his own relatively poor background he could never obtain a political post. But most fans still do hope for this career and the longer this is postponed the less active fans become, as they see that the chance of him entering politics is becoming smaller and smaller every year.

Gendered spaces: female fans

What we have seen in the last two chapters is that fan activity ranges from cinematic devotion towards a movie star to political mobilization in the name of that star. Before I come to the conclusions of this chapter, however, I need to address one important aspect of fan clubs that I have not paid much attention to yet, i.e. gender. Up to now, I have spoken only in terms of male fans because the cinematic activities that fans are involved in are a male dominated space. Fan clubs themselves are also gendered spaces as they consist of men and are usually devoted to male actors. Nevertheless, there are a few fan clubs consisting only of women and there has been fan activity devoted to actresses such as Trisha and Kushboo as well. But even fan clubs for these actresses were mainly joined by men. What I want to address in particular is the virtual absence of women fan clubs in Tamil Nadu. It is less easy for women to join a fan club because of the stigma of the fan club and the male-dominated space of the movie theater and social welfare events. Young women in particular are not supposed to engage in such male behavior and to visit these male spaces. This does not mean that women are not interested in movie heroes. Almost everyone, men and women, have a particular preference for an actor or actress. Women, and particularly young girls, also talk about their favorites and collect images at home. But to join a fan club is not considered normal for young women.

Some female Rajinikanth fans that I know were frustrated that they could not start their own fan club. For the most part they were married to a fan club member and participated actively in the events by preparing food for the occasion. But they did not participate on the same level, as

they did not have a fan club structure and therefore did not operate fully independently as a fan club. They, with a few exceptions, did not join the first day release of a film. It is seen by both men and women as a male space that would be too aggressive for women. The women I worked with were frustrated about not being able to see the first day first show but also about not being able to display themselves on banners and posters. I will elaborate on this last point further in the next chapter. The female fan club I know about that does operate almost entirely as other fan clubs is an exception in this regard.

I met Saroja, a woman in her thirties, for the first time at her neighbor's home. She was eager to tell me about her activities as a female fan. One of the first things she emphasized was that she saw all of Rajinikanth's films within a week of their release. Although seeing a film on the first day is not appropriate as a woman, at least she managed to see it within a week. Saroja:

> I had been thinking about starting a female fan club for a long time. I always cooked for Rajini's birthday and provided meals to the fans and villagers. But no one gave me advice e on how to start a fan club. Later I told my brother [Baba Ganapathi] about it. I told him that I wanted to become a member of the club. Baba Ganapathi replied that to start an association I should gather twenty women. Now women are still joining in the club for Rajini. I can't manage it!

Saroja does not see Rajini's movies on the first day but she does see the film several days later and several times. For her, the fan club was not a means of getting tickets at all. For Saroja the acknowledgment as a fan was the most important thing. Some days later I met Saroja again, now in the context of a group interview which she had organized with many of her fellow female fans. The women were mainly older, the youngest thirty years old and the oldest in her sixties. It was noticeable that, in contrast to their male counterparts, most members were already married and not adolescents anymore. As young girls or recently married women, it would not be appropriate to take part in the same kinds of activities as young masculine fans. Later on, as elder, established women in the village, their help at fan events is not associated with the negativity surrounding young fans which makes it all right for them to call themselves fan club members. During this interview, the women emphasized several times how important it was to be displayed on banners on Koot road. They considered it to be proof of their independent existence as a fan club. The women felt proud that now they were visible to a wider group than merely that in their own area in which they navigate in their everyday lives. Saroja expressed it as follows:

> For the opening ceremony of the fan club we put up a banner at Koot road. And from then onwards we have put up a banner for his birthday every year. When we started there were twenty fans, so twenty photos were displayed. Now I am known in ten to twenty areas, before I was only known in my street! Now everyone says that the chief of the female fans is coming. Now even gents respect me. So, I got all this because of Rajini!

This acknowledgement was emphasized repeatedly and brought with it lots of laughter during the conversation. Their laughter reveals their being unaccustomed to the situation in which they as women are now also taken more seriously outside their everyday spaces. Despite the laughter, Saroja and the others are serious about their feeling of making women more powerful. They gave ample examples of how their fan club membership has helped them take their rights into their own hands. For example, an older woman present explained how her husband

died some time ago. She was entitled to a widow's pension. Even though the amount was small, for her it was a crucial amount to survive. She had all the papers she needed but even so the local MLA kept sending her away with specious arguments. When Saroja and the others heard the story they went along with the woman and told the MLA that they were all from the Rajinikanth fan club and he should do his job. And he did. The name of Rajinikanth and the power of the fan club in the area convinced the man to give this woman what she was entitled to. The women had several other similar examples of how the fan club has given them status, how people, particularly men take them seriously.

What these expressions of power by Saroja and her fellow fans make clear is that the fan club environment provides a space for power relations and agency in various fields, from acknowledgement as a fan to access to government institutions. Rajinikanth is given as the main reason for this power but I would suggest that even though it is indeed his name and fame that brought fans together, is it primarily the local fame of fan club president Saktivel that makes these doors open.

From fan club to party politics and back again: Vijayakanth

October 21, 2006. On *Deepavali,* one of the most important festival days in India, the movie *Dharmapuri* (Perarasu 2006) starring the actor and politician Vijayakanth was released. I was excited at attending a first day show, an event that is a must for fans. Chakravarthy, who worked for me as a research assistant, and I tried to obtain tickets somewhere. I had never been to a film release of a Vijayakanth film and all his fans who I know told me it was a must: "all the fans shout and dance during the show, it is spectacular!" everyone asserted. The first indication that the spectacle would be less electrifying than described was the timing of the film's screening. In Pondicherry, the film was not screened until late morning rather than early morning. Outside the theater a handful of banners made by Vijayakanth party members and fans were displayed in the theater compound, wishing the actor well with his new film. The banners were in the party colors of the DMDK, Vijayakanth's party, and did not suggest any connection to cinema or this specific film at all. To my surprise we were still able to buy tickets for the same day's show, for double the price though. Before the movie started, a crowd assembled at the theater compound. I noticed how diverse it was: young and old, men and women and not the ardent fans wearing party colors that everyone had told me about.

Unfortunately Chakravarthy and I got so-called box-tickets, first class tickets with seats in a glass box with around 20 other spectators. Spiders' webs and dirt on the glass through which we had to watch the movie gave the film a grayish tint. With the sound cut off from the rest of the theater we could only look down upon the rest of the audience as if they were part of the film as well.

Throughout the movie the audience was not the spectacular audience that the Vijayakanth fans had described. Only a handful of young men on the first row danced during two songs and performed *aarti* (burning a light in front of an image) as a way to bless Vijayakanth in his new film. One young man on the front row was completely immersed in the film: he waved his arms frantically as if trying to help Vijayakanth during his battle against the enemies.

The movie made obvious references to Vijayakanth's politics just as the banners outside did. Signs and symbols in the film, such as Vijayakanth's ring, related to the DMDK's party colors and he is described as an honest superhero who knows how to rule. Just after the climax of the film, even before it actually ended, people began to leave the theater hall.[13] After the film was over Chakravarthy and I stayed and talked about it for a while. We were both slightly surprised about the relative tameness of the public in comparison with audiences at other actors' movie releases and the descriptions given by Vijayakanth's fans who urged me to see the enthusiastic audiences. What was the reason for this?

As I learned later, what was going on here was the decline in fan activity for Vijayakanth *because of* his political career. Fans who encouraged Vijayakanth to set up his party have gradually lost interest in the actor due to a lack of prospects for them in the party. Even though film watching was still relevant, the enthusiasm which fan clubs displayed was lost. Even the young fans who usually made their presence felt at the theater had lost their enthusiasm.

The rise, decline and new start of the Vijayakanth fan clubs and party cadres is worthwhile discussing as it tells us something about the trajectory of visibility from the start. It shows how the political success of both movie star and fan club cadres is not a spontaneous process. Fans begin to see an image of a political leader before he becomes one. Vijayakanth started his party in 2005 after consulting his fans to see if they were willing to start a party. The intention to enter politics had been there for some time already, as Vijayakanth's films contained political messages with him as the promising leader and images of a party flag. Vijayakanth's fans and many others expected a lot from the party and even expected him to win elections easily despite the strong presence of the wide-reaching DMK and AIADMK parties.

When he announced his party in 2005, his fan clubs were converted to party cadres in their respective areas. Vijayakanth's DMDK party has not reached the heights to which people might have expected it to rise but it is an important player in Tamil Nadu politics. However, at a grassroots level, its relative success played out unexpectedly for his fans. Many fans did not experience any change in their position. What's more, fans were replaced by politicians from outside the fan club to lead the party in many areas. In Pondicherry in particular this was explained by the dominance of personality politics among local politicians and the large amount of election money that is distributed. Politicians need to adopt a certain style to perform as a politician. They need a white *dhoti*, followers, a car to travel around in and money to give away when invited to family functions within a politician's constituency. The failure of Vijayakanth fans to obtain political positions highlights the issue of economic and social capital that is needed to be a politician. Most Vijayakanth fans are from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and are therefore not able to hold a position in politics. This was a particular problem in Pondicherry where politicians are expected to pay voters money.

Around the time of the elections many parties distribute money to their constituency in the hope that people will stay loyal to their party. The amounts have risen during the last few years. In another context, the chairman of a constituency in Pondicherry told me that politics in Pondicherry is very much based on the person. For politics you need money he said: around 1 crore

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13 This is common with most film screenings.

(10,000,000) rs per constituency. First of all for the votes for which you have to pay, something almost all parties do and secondly for the secondary expenses such as meetings and donations. For unknown and less well-off fans it is impossible to adopt that style and enter the political field.

But Vijayakanth fans are not the only fan clubs that did not succeed in the imagined political career. R.M. Veerappan, politician and movie producer, who was involved in the initial stages of organizing the MGR *manrams* stated that most MGR club members did not receive any political benefit from their membership either. Most *manrams* were converted into youth wings of the party but this did not bring them any political benefit in terms of posts.[14] Sara Dickey has also described how MGR fans never served in high posts in the AIADMK (1993b). Officially they became part of the political structure of the party but in reality they remained a separate group. The most important reason for this is the lack of money that Vijayakanth fans needed to perform the role of politician. As a result, fans who had perhaps hoped for a political career by being converted into party cadres were overlooked because they lacked sufficient funds to be a politician.

To provide fans with a platform for their membership Vijayakanth has reinitiated the fan club. But Vijayakanth has lost his luster. Films are not watched as fervently as they were in the past. Most of the members I spoke to were not keen on seeing his films anymore and only went to see them after a couple of days. The importance of the first day show had completely gone. The number of ever-present billboards put up by fans for movie releases diminished along with the fans' enthusiasm.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the political and social structures that fan clubs are part of. The fan clubs see themselves as important networks of generosity in which they help the poor and needy, mirroring the generosity of their movie hero. The ways in which these activities are staged parallel political forms of generosity and the different forms they take. Social welfare events serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining local patronage relationships. Fans aspire to these relationships as they help them to access authorities and political parties.

But social welfare also brings with it visibility and recognition for fans who aspire to gaining access to socio-political networks and political power themselves. With social welfare events fans make visible to others how active they are. Fans expect the visibility and display of connections at the events they organize to engender prestige and power. But these activities and the political connections that fans establish are also informed by a paradoxical notion of politicking. A fine line separates patronage relationships from taking advantage of the fan network for a person's own political career. Even though political activity does not officially belong to fan activity, most fans are in one way or another involved in party politics or related to political people and parties.

However, after many years spent in the fan club, gradually more and more fans expect political careers via Rajinikanth. As fans cannot be fully immersed in politics while still a fan club member, they hope that Rajinikanth will make the move into politics. This would solve their sense of in-betweenness between political aspirations and loyalty to Rajinikanth.

14 Personal interview with R.M. Veerappan, May 20 2008.

In this and previous chapters I referred to the role of imagery in the enhancement of visibility for individual fans. For fan clubs as collectives as well as for individual fans, public images play an important role in showing their adulation and dedication to a wider world. In the next chapter I will show how cinematic adulation and the politicking of fan clubs plays out in public visibility and how this articulates and engenders power and prestige on the screens and canvasses of public imagery.

4

PUBLIC INTIMACIES AND
COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES

The description of a video is perhaps the best way to introduce this chapter which deals with the ways in which the adulation of a movie star as well as politics are played out in public imagery.[1] It is a video that Saktivel, the fan club block secretary in Vannur, had commissioned to record Rajinikanth's birthday celebrations in his area in 2007. The video shows these celebrations but its final format tells us something crucial about the significance of fan imagery in public spaces. The video begins with the recording of a news item which was broadcast on a local television channel the evening after the celebrations. It shows two localities where fans celebrated Rajinikanth's birthday. One shows Selvan Nathan's events (see Chapter 3) and the other Saktivel's. After the news item which takes a couple of minutes the video continues by showing long shots, zooming in and out on the banners made by several fan clubs in Saktivel's area. Some of the banners are about five meters long and contain images of Rajinikanth. Along the side and bottom of the banners we can see identity photos of the local fan club members, the area secretary Saktivel, district leader Ibrahim and the (former) All India Fan Club leader, Sathyanarayanan. The serious faces in the members' identity photos 'stand in stark contrast to the *filmi* characters used to display Rajinikanth. The higher up the men are positioned in the fan club, the bigger their photo. In the video this hierarchy is reinforced by zooming in for the most part on Saktivel. He is the local *talaimai* leader after all and the person who commissioned the video. After about ten minutes the video shifts to the recording of the event itself. We can see a table behind which several men sit. On the table the usual items such as notebooks, sweets and mats are spread out waiting to be distributed. The remaining part of the twenty-minute video shows Saktivel's speech for the event and the eventual distribution of items. Film music from Rajinikanth's films can be heard throughout the video, except for the point where Saktivel speaks.[2] Saktivel keeps the video at home and once in a while shows it to visitors like me. But more importantly for him, the video serves as proof of his vigor in carrying out activities in the name of the fan club. He sent the video to the All India Fan Club leader in Chennai as evidence of his organizational activities.

The emphasis given in the video to the hoardings that were made indicates the importance of their presence, not only for their content or meaning but also for their actual visual presence (Jain 2005, 9). These images do not merely accompany the events; they are actually part of them or to put it differently: they *are* events. Large numbers of huge hoardings, posters and murals are put up and form an indispensable part of fan activity in Tamil Nadu. Although producers and distributors of films have cut down on publicity at the theater premises, as they deemed wide-reaching media such as television to be more effective (Jacob 1998), fan clubs have continued to publicize their fandom and hero at movie releases or on a star's birthday. Their numbers have increased due to changes in the materials out of which they are made. This has resulted in an easier and cheaper production process and has enhanced the efficacy of the images.

This chapter addresses the efficacy of and affect that is enacted via and on these publicly displayed hoardings, posters, and murals. The images displayed are characterized by their ephemeral status and their power lies precisely in their short-lived presence. The images are made for events such as movie stars' birthdays, movie releases, or fans' own familial events such as weddings or

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[1] The photo on the title page of Chapter 4 depicts fan club banners for the release of *Kuruvi* (Dharani 2008), a film featuring movie star Vijay. Pondicherry 2008.

[2] A similar practice can be found in wedding videos in Tamil Nadu where film music is added throughout the video except for the most important religious moments of the wedding (Gerritsen 2006).

birthdays. During these events myriad images are displayed around movie theaters, in strategic locations or neighborhoods where the events are taking place. As visual markers, hoardings are put on view to engage their onlookers and inform them about events. By exhibiting them in public view (see fig. 1), fan clubs completely "take over public spaces and literally leave their signature" behind (S. V. Srinivas 2005, 308). They commission artists or design studios to produce designs which are effective in attracting a larger audience. These images are screens on which not only is the movie star depicted but also the names and faces of the fans. Images are therefore not merely simulacra or indexical productions; they are spaces in which fans can enact their own desires and aspirations. Banners made for movie releases therefore cannot be merely understood in terms of devotional fandom: they are spaces in which fans' political networks can be played out.

In the first part of this dissertation I wrote about the filmic aspects of fandom and the ways in which fans relate to their movie hero in and via images. The previous chapter focused on the politics of fandom and the political expectations of fans. Although I described them as separate topics, in this chapter I argue that cinematic devotion and political networks coalesce and play out in the production and consumption of imagery. Three themes run through this chapter. First of all, I demonstrate how the production and presence of images convey and confirm the power of individual fans and fan collectives. Secondly, I elaborate on the production of banners in Tamil Nadu by highlighting their history and particularly the artists who produced them. The artists will bring me to the transformations that have profoundly changed the urban landscapes and enhanced the aesthetic qualities and efficacy of images. And thirdly, I return to fan imagery and how flex banners have changed their use. Images have become more effective in making fans visible. But this visibility and the way in which cut-and-paste techniques broadened the possibilities for designs have also heightened the tension between genuine devotion and misuse of a star.

The form and scale of the images is different and so is their sensory perception and use. But we have to be careful nevertheless in thinking that these changes are something radically new. Williams has called for an interpretation of technological change where technology is developed with certain practices, needs and purposes in mind (2003). Technology in this way is not marginal but central to needs that become technically defined. At the same time technical improvements create new needs and new possibilities, their communication systems that have developed being their intrinsic outcomes (*ibid.*). In other words, even though the use of digital design and printing techniques has transformed the idiom, form and its surrounding social practices, it is not novel in the desires and imaginations it expresses. However, its form can introduce or reshape practices, which we can see in tandem with the novel design possibilities. The materiality or fabric of experience changes and reshapes practices but the fact that these techniques are used speaks to a demand that already exists. The quality and low cost of vinyl have accelerated and multiplied the use of personal hoardings.

The display of images is the most obvious and effective way to prove a person's fandom within or via the fan club. It enhances the visibility which I wrote about in the previous chapter. In contrast to the lack of interest that Pinney describes for the cheap mass-produced god posters (2008), the consumers I describe here, that is fans, are interested in the artists who made them. On the one hand this shows an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the images, but it also refers to the importance of the efficacy of the image. By choosing the right artist and images for display, one enhances the efficacy of the image.

The images represent what is important to fans and, at the same time, the repetition and scale of these images become the source of power which makes them imperative (Miller 2005). But what do scale and ubiquity engender with the display of a movie star? Do they engender popularity or is a star's popularity influenced by his larger-than-life and ubiquitous presence? And what does the size and scale of display do for the power of these images? Does it enhance their effect or does it diminish it? And for whom? Morgan argues that the ubiquity, sameness and familiarity of images make them reassuring for those who use and produce them (1998). Their omnipresence and imagining others seeing these images even enhances the desire for these images (Jain 2007, 292).

The use of images in public spaces engenders an "imagined" community of fans and this sense of community produces agency and gives meaning to fan clubs and individual fans alike. Benedict Anderson was the first to point out and acknowledge the role of mass-produced (print) media in the imagination of a public that is the nation state (1991). Since then, scholars have acknowledged the role of the imagination in the creation of imagined communities or public spheres yet understood beyond the nation and print media (Appadurai 1996; Deshpande 1993; M. B. Hansen 1993; Jain 2007; Meyer and Moors 2006; Poole 1997; Rajagopal 2001; Spyer 2002). Mass or electronic media can also stimulate and create what Appadurai has called "communities of sentiment" which "can create sodalities of worship and charisma" (1996, 6–8). These "sodalities of worship and charisma…are communities in themselves but always potentially communities for themselves capable of moving from shared imagination to collective action" (*Op. cit.* 6):

> *The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility (Op. cit. 31).*

Arjun Appadurai argues that in contemporary society the media has created a unprecedented role for the imagination. I want to emphasize that it is not only the mass media that can engender imaginations and generate collective action – various media genres, moving or still, vernacular or commercial could serve as vehicles of the imagination and collectiveness as well (Brosius 2005; see also Hirschkind 2006; Poole 1997; Spyer 2002; Spyer forthcoming; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). Images made by fans and publicized in public spaces articulate the collective imaginaries of fans. At the same time, the aggrandizing of stars and fans is a common metaphor which is used to express hierarchies and importance (Gamboni 2005). Fans aim to stand out by showing a special banner with their personal selection of images, with the size of the image and its ubiquity.

At the turn of the twenty-first century the hand-painted hoardings and cloth banners that were widely used by fans suddenly got competition from digitally designed and printed vinyl productions, which are locally called flex banners. Although flex banners were costly to start off

with, slowly the prices started to drop. Nowadays, vinyl banner material is cheap and easy to process. Moreover, its easy "cut-and-paste" insertion of photographic images gave the material an advantage over painted hoardings: the ability to add a person's own photo. Fans have welcomed this opportunity, despite common opinions about the lack of aesthetic qualities and effect. This transformation from paint to photography has caused painters and fans alike to reflect on materiality and effect. Nevertheless, vinyl is ever-present in the urban landscapes of Tamil Nadu's cities and towns. I conducted my fieldwork in a period just when banner artists were struggling to survive. Some fans felt bad about their preference for vinyl but were persuaded by the ease of use of the material. These feelings of guilt, the power of paint and painters' unemployment made it an interesting period to talk about and let people reflect on these transformations. These reflections tell us something about materiality and the effect of the visual as well as how fan club politics are played out in different regimes of value.

Publicizing fandom

First day first show. The theater compound is hidden under a barrage of billboards competing for attention. In the vicinity of the theater one can find even more hoardings and smaller posters can be found everywhere. For the occasion, myriad local fan clubs create their own image. In the middle of the barrage of images at the theater, the biggest one is produced by the district fan club leaders (*talaimai manram*). Around this hoarding local clubs try to position their own imagery. Local fan clubs, especially when their members are young and do not have a leading position inside the fan club or do not have much money to spend on hoardings, often produce posters instead. Fan club leaders are expected to show their position by producing hoardings which are grander in scale and content than others and cannot afford merely to produce a few posters. In this way, the size and content of the images can reveal what kind of position one has (or aspires to have) within the fan club.

Local leaders have their hands full keeping order during this rush to put up banners around the theater. The theaters have strict rules as to where banners are allowed. They allow the banners despite the often negative opinions they have about the way in which fans display images and the reasons why they do so. But as they can only be placed in the theater grounds, there is often not enough space for all clubs. So some place their banners inside, others put them on top of other banners until every spot in the theater is occupied.

The hoardings and posters are made in design studios and contain images of the movie star and local fan club members and a few words or phrases wishing the star well with his new film. On the night before a film release, after tickets have been distributed to the various fan clubs, all fan clubs head to the theater in search of a good spot for their banners. At the theater fans try to occupy a good spot by marking out the space on which they want to place their banner. It is not just the number of images of a star that is important but each fan club's image of the star. Although most fans I worked with emphasized that the position of a club's banners is based on a first-come-first-served principle and almost never causes any problems, I regularly noticed that frustrations came to the fore about competition and exclusion based on hierarchy within the fan club. The district fan club allots itself the most square meters and thereafter the local fan clubs

stake out their plot by demarcating it with a piece of string.

A Rajinikanth fan from Vannur told me how they encounter problems with what he called local guys, i.e. rowdies, who try to hinder them in placing their banners. Vannur is geographically closer to the city of Pondicherry than to cities and towns in Villupuram district where new releases are screened. For fans, therefore, it is much easier to celebrate the film release at the Pondicherry theaters. But as they do not officially belong to the Pondicherry branch, this could lead to problems:

> Though we had tickets for the first show of [the movie] Shivaji, we went to the theater the previous night. There were lots of problems finding a place for our banner in the theater. The Rajini fans caused a lot of disruption. We had to give money to keep them quiet. We face all these problems just for the sake of Rajini!

> We also had to give money to the people working in the theater to get a spot for our banners. But Rajini fans are the biggest problem. We had to spend a lot to convince them. Since we are from Tamil Nadu [i.e. not from Pondicherry] we have more problems. So we met them and spent the whole night with them providing them with whatever they wanted.[3] They erected banners and gave us space above them. They did not allow us to climb over their banners. So we had to remove their banners, put ours up and then put theirs back.

> The local fan clubs contacted the Rajini talaimai manram to book places and will not allow us to do the same. We had torrid times at Anandha Theater! But once Saktivel became the President of Vannur Rajini Fan Club the problems reduced.

> In order to show our influence, we put up banners in the theaters. But there is no way that everyone can keep banners in theaters. Here in Tindivanam, half of the village fans put up banners. Others put banners in their own villages and distribute sweets. The president [Saktivel] goes and unveils the banners.

This fan emphasized how having a banner on display at the theater is a way of showing influence, or in other words, strength. It will become clear throughout this chapter that what this fan refers to as "influence" differs for fans; from showing Rajinikanth's strength and popularity, the scale of the fan club, to political power and recognition of a person's presence. The importance of being present in a public space acknowledges the power of images and therefore leads to competition and conflict.

Banners that do not fit in the theater compound are placed in strategic locations in public spaces. Placing a hoarding outside the domain of the theater is risky, however, some fans explained, since the banner could be demolished by fans of another actor or could be stolen by another hardcore fan. By destroying images instead of simply ignoring them, they were actually acknowledging in their power (Gamboni 1997; Latour 2002).

The area around Koot Road, the main junction in Vannur on the Tindhivanam-Pondicherry highway is the ideal spot for any kind of celebration because of its central location. For every film release or on Rajinikanth's birthday the Koot Road junction is the scene of numerous banners. Political parties use the same spot for their imagery. In the introduction I described the political

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[3] Often alcoholic drinks, cigarettes and the like.

feud between the PMK party, widely present in the area, and Rajini fans. The enmity and competition between the two groups has primarily been demonstrated by the display of banners. In the past banners made by fans were been destroyed, allegedly by local rowdies ordered by the PMK or by PMK members themselves. Saktivel, the Panchayat president and fan club leader in Vannur told me about the difficulties they encountered with the PMK, especially around the release of the movie *Baba* (2002) after which Ramadoss criticized Rajinikanth's drinking and smoking habits in the film. After Ramadoss' statement PMK members went on a rampage demolishing theaters and film reels and several Rajinikanth fans were violently attacked as well. The hostility between the two groups has become a complicated matter in Vannur because many fans belong to the same Vanniyar caste as Ramadoss. But Ramadoss' strong opposition to the cine-political connection of movie stars and fan activity drove a wedge between the Rajinikanth fan club and PMK members. Saktivel:

> At the time of Baba *and the MP elections in 2002, they [PMK members] destroyed images of Rajini everywhere. Because this area has many PMK members, they didn't leave even a single photo. The fan club members were very afraid at the time. I was not afraid. After I was selected, on Koot Road several members gathered and made several banners up to forty feet [twelve meters] in size and provided free food [*anna dhaanam] with chicken biryani. We packed the food into the five rupee containers with a water pocket, rice, saris, and* dhotis*. We gave these to the people. On that day itself we opened ten branch fan clubs. They [the PMK] didn't ask us for anything after that.*

Before Saktivel was elected Panchayat president, caste and other social stratifications were much more apparent in politics in the area. Caste background made people loyal to certain politicians and parties and between these different clusters frictions grew high. Many believe that since Saktivel has been fan club and Panchayat president, tensions have cooled a bit. The relationship with the PMK in particular has normalized although competition between the two groups is still represented by the display of banners. But they also compete with local DMK members via the display of banners. Banners are no longer demolished but the groups compete in size and quantity. When fans put up a fifty-two-foot banner (sixteen meters), it was Rajinikanth's 52nd birthday at the time), the DMK members replied by displaying an eighty-two-foot banner (25 meters) on DMK leader Karunanidhi's 82nd birthday.

Competition with politicians is also felt on another level. Recently more and more municipalities in Tamil Nadu have restricted the display of banners in public spaces. I will elaborate on this tendency more extensively in Chapters 5 and 6. On top of the recent restrictions, local municipalities demand that everyone who places a banner in public should request official permission. Once this permission is has been granted, the owner of the banner has to pay rent for the days the banner is displayed. But these rules are not strictly complied with. Tharagai Raja explains: "we pay for example for seven days but if we leave the banner there a few days longer, no one will notice or complain."

But lately rules have been observed more strictly and in 2010, the last time I discussed the issue with fans I know well, they were less eager to display imagery because of these rules. What is the use of putting so much effort into banners that only last for a couple of days, they reasoned. The following account of fan club member Tharagai Raja, however, reveals that theaters could also be sites of political positioning. Tharagai Raja told me the story of a conflict around

a billboard that was placed by Rajinikanth fans during the release of the movie *Muthu*. In the theater grounds some fans had placed a banner for Rajinikanth just on top of a banner dedicated to Jayalalitha that was put up by the theater owner. The owner belonged to Jayalalitha's AIADMK party and was irritated at seeing a banner for Rajinikanth on top of his own banner. So he called the fan club officials responsible and requested that they remove the banner immediately and place it somewhere else. The fans said however:

> *No, we are the fans of Rajini. You are screening my* thalaivar*'s [leader's] movie and earning money from it, so why don't you give us space to put up our banner?" Tharagai Raja: "Early morning, 1:30 am, the theater owner came to my house. I asked him what the problem was and he said: "your people placed a banner on top of our leader. If some journalist takes a photo of it and puts it in the newspaper, my party leader will throw me out. Please sir, please remove the banner!" So I said: "No problem, sir, we'll do it with pleasure. We are cooperating, you are cooperating. Don't bother about it. I will take charge of removing the banner, don't worry." I collected five people and we went to the theater. First of all, I asked them to remove the banner. I sent one person to collect the people who put up the banner by saying: "this is an order from the* talaimai manram*, please call those people." We asked them: "why did you put this banner here? If we have a clash, they will not give us a fan show!" So they agreed and removed the banner. When the theater owner came to check whether the banner had been removed, he said: "thank you very much. Whenever another actor's movie is running, we'll give you and all the people that are with you a seat, despite the crowds." So whatever we spend, that is what we get back.*

This incident shows that the theater is not only a space open to cinema-related practices but also a right that fans claim to have on doing something for their star. At first the fans did not want to remove the banner because they felt it was their right to display a banner. If someone is earning money with *their* star, they should be entitled to venerate him properly. But this reasoning was quickly dropped when the entitlement to the fan show was questioned. Politicians are needed as brokers to accommodate the desires of fans to have the fan show.

The display of imagery in public spaces by fans started with the kind of murals that Rajini Shankar made adjacent to his milk shop (see figure 5, Chapter 1) and the cloth banners he and his friends made for movie releases to display at movie theaters. When fan clubs began to flourish, they made more permanent painted metal boards in their neighborhood indicating the name of the fan club and its members. These boards and murals were painted by artists who also made the publicity cutouts for films and political events. The reputations of artists who were already painting shops' signboards grew with commissions to make this type of fan club and political imagery. Figure 44 shows this type of hand-painted metal board commissioned by a Rajinikanth fan club. Its design is similar to that of the board made by the Vijay fan club, shown in figure 45 above. In fact, the two boards were made by the same artist and are also displayed in the same street in Pondicherry. The board in figure 44 shows two images from a Rajinikanth movie with, in the middle, the names of some fan club members. The signboard is decorated with a garland to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday.

By placing a board, local fan clubs identified their presence and marked their allegiance for other fans and neighbors. This also caused enmity, as fan clubs of different actors sometimes demolished the boards of their competitors. Particularly in the heydays of Rajinikanth and Ka-

mal Hassan, fans told me the competition between the fans of these actors was fierce. Regularly, Selvan Nathan recounts, fights broke out after fans of one actor demolished the board of a fan club in the neighborhood. These fights have reduced in number throughout the years but one can still regularly hear rumors about fights between groups and the way images played an important role therein.

The identification of fan clubs through images gave them a certain permanence, formality and identity. These boards were revealed at the opening of a new fan club, indicating their official presence in the neighborhood. Nowadays, the so-called metal boards are disappearing from sight. Many of them are being replaced by digitally designed and printed flex banners. Due to the material out of which these new boards are made and the decreasing interest shown by fans they have also become less permanent. This is regretted by the artists who previously made the paintings and are now trying to keep up with the new digital trend. According to Selvam, the bicycle repairer with his small selling space on the side of one of the busiest junctions in Pondicherry, the transformations indicate a difference in scale.[4] His shop is almost unrecognizable as it contains little more than a bucket of water and some repair tools lying at the side of the road. But his painted face of Rajinikanth has been there for a long time, marking Selvam's repairing spot. But with the heavy traffic at the junction Selvam is perhaps right in his explanation as to why vinyl is gaining popularity. According to Selvam, who remains interested in painted boards, fans choose flex banners because they are much bigger than painted metal boards. The scale is necessary as roads have become larger, he explains. On a small, single-lane road it is easy to notice a small board, whereas roads of four lanes nowadays need the appropriate scale. Speed and scale but also the increasing number of road users (who actually hinder speed!) seem to have created the need for more impressive or larger images. Recently, the solution to this need for new, attractive images has been found in digitally designed flex banners that can be printed in large sizes relatively easily due to its price and flexible material. Before I elaborate on the transformation to flex banners, I will first say more about the banner artists who have until recently decorated Tamil Nadu's public spaces with their painted murals and cutouts.

Artistic creations

In 2006, the Rajinikanth fan Thengai Selvam, who I introduced in Chapter 1, asked the owner of a plot of land on the main thoroughfare heading towards the town of Cuddalore if he could get permission to use the wall that is adjacent to the road for a mural. Selvam's mother knew the owner so he did not have to pay any rent and he got permission to use the wall for a year. Along with his friend Ranjit, who worked as a cutout and hoarding artist, he worked on the thirty-meter-long wall that consisted of several images of Rajinikanth dedicated to the release of the movie *Sivaji: The Boss* (figure 46). Selvam paid his friend Ranjit with a small amount of money but mostly with liquor and cigarettes which they consumed together at Selvam's home. He spent rs. 10,000 in total (around 160 Euros at the time) on the painting, a huge amount considering his modest earnings selling coconuts. It took them 20 days to finish the painting. The monsoon

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[4] This Selvam should not be confused with Thengai Selvam, the coconut seller who I introduced in earlier chapters.

44. Garlanded fan club metal board on Rajnikanth's birthday. Pondicherry 2002.

45. Fan club metal board belonging to the Vijay fan club. The text mentions the fan club's name (Youth, also the title of a movie) and the founding members. The name of the artist (N. Kumar) appears bottom right. Pondicherry 2002.

46. Part of the mural that banner artist Ran-
jit and his friend Selvam made for the film
Sivaji: The Boss. Pondicherry 2008.

47. Cutout commissioned by fans on the
occasion of the release of the Rajinikanth
movie *Maaveeran* (Rajasekar 1986) at the
Anandha Theater. Pondicherry 1986 (collec-
tion N. Kumar, Pondicherry, photographer
unknown).

meant that it was not an easy task to paint. They constructed little shelters to cover themselves and their painting from the rain. The images of Rajinikanth Selvam and Ranjit used were selected from examples they had collected. Selvam was allowed to use the wall for a year. A year later, the mural started to be covered with posters and the beating sun and humidity caused the mural to degrade. But until the wall was occupied by another user, every once in a while Selvam would remove the posters that disfigured his mural.

When I met Selvam again in 2010, he was eager to have a new painting made as the one made with Ranjit had almost entirely faded away. But the up-coming elections discouraged him from putting all his effort and money into something that would not last long anyway. Local supporters would certainly deface his mural with their own political images. Moreover, his friend Ranjit is no longer around so he would have had to commission another artist to do the painting, something he could not afford, especially now that he is a husband and father.

Just as Selvam at this point should have hired an artist for his mural, fans commissioned artists to have their images produced. The plywood hoardings at movie theaters, the murals and metal boards are made by so-called banner artists. Banner art has become a vibrant and flourishing occupation in Tamil Nadu, deriving its existence from the production of cinema ads and political publicity. Below I will provide a brief overview of the history of this kind of publicity in Tamil Nadu.

A history of gigantism

From the arrival of cinema, films have been promoted to lure audiences to the film theater. From the early 20th century onwards, due to a demand in advertising and the emerging cinema, artists that were already designing photo studio backdrops and theater sets started to work in the advertising and film industry as well (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007; Rao, Geetha, and Wolf 2001, 128). Following the example of theater publicity advertisements, the first film screenings in India were advertised with handbills, canvas, cloth banners or paper hand-painted posters, and plaster-cast models of the stars (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 82). Advertising agencies started to set up their business in India and later on, in the 1940s, Indian companies appeared (Lovegrove and Hasson 2003). During this period, artists were increasingly in demand in the expanding printing and packaging industries particularly situated in the south Indian town of Sivakasi. Sivakasi became the center of production for calendars, posters and other printed materials (Inglis 1998; Jain 2007). Although posters, calendars and other printed materials were almost entirely produced in Sivakasi, painted film hoardings and signboards were more locally produced in the area in which they were needed. However, hoardings for Pondicherry for example, were first made in Chennai and only later produced in Pondicherry itself.

New styles and conventions came into existence through this emerging field of public culture and film. Advertising images, for example, focused primarily on the main hero of the film. Before the 1940s, the identity of the studio was the main draw, as they had their own teams of personnel, including their own directors and actors (Dwyer and Patel 2002, 148). As a result it was studio logos rather than actors that took center stage on the film publicity: "Logos helped to associate a particular type of film to a particular studio; they helped to trigger people's memories,

simultaneously reminding them of what the studio stood for as well as the other films made by them" (Dwyer and Patel 2002, 148). In the 1940s, this studio system changed in response to a growing demand for films in which a fixed number of elements – songs, dance, romance, archetypical characters and fighting – were incorporated. These films came to be known as "formula films" (Dwyer and Patel 2002, 149). The stars and not the studio now became the most important force of attraction and this was reflected in film publicity. In the 1960s especially the focus shifted from depicting the entire cast of a movie towards depicting merely the main heroes. This became even more strongly emphasized in Tamil Nadu where movies and movie actors have often been brought into play for the purpose of political promotion.

The most remarkable way in which this was done was through the painted cutouts (literally cut out figures) and hoardings that began to be displayed outside film theaters and in prominent locations from the 1940s. It is said that the first sizable cutout (of around nine meters) was installed for the movie actor Steve Reeves who starred in the film *Hercules* (1958) (*The Hindu*, 15/04/2003). It was made by N.V. Eswar, who had worked in film marketing since the early 1950s (*The Hindu*, 15/04/2003). Eswar also designed mini cutouts showing movie scenes featuring Hollywood heroines and placed them on the front desks of cinema theaters to attract attention.

Besides their work on cinema banners, banner artists also did similar political work. This was initiated by the famous artist K. Madhavan (1907-1979). Madhavan studied at the Madras School for Art and started his career by painting backdrops for theater sets (Jain 2007). In the 1940s, he worked for the renowned Gemini Studios making sets, banners and posters (Jain 2007; Rao, Geetha, and Wolf 2001). Because of his secular world view, Madhavan was involved in the Dravidian movement and started to paint real life scenes and realistic portraits of its leaders. These photographic portraits overlaid with stark painted colors became immensely popular (Rao, Geetha, and Wolf 2001, 131).

Political imagery began to appear in Tamil Nadu's public spaces in the 1950s and continues to do so to this day. The DMK also began to display its leaders on hoardings that were modeled on film hoardings. Publicity for the party came to be largely organized through the popularity of movie stars such as MGR, Sivaji Ganesan, K.R. Ramaswamy and S.S. Rajendran. This was also expressed in the hoardings that were made of the stars. The artists that made the hoardings had to be inventive in an attempt to let the different actors stand out. One way of doing this was to increase the scale of banners as they grew in height (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 84). The artists also depicted the stars in melodramatic or realistic poses and they added provocative texts (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 83). Political publicity had previously been painted in sober colors, usually using two-colored texts. Following the example of film publicity, political publicity came to be depicted in different colors. This resulted in similar pictorial conventions for displaying the main characters of both politics and cinema.

The styles and tropes of public culture in Tamil Nadu, even though transformed and adapted throughout the years, were in large part set in the 1960s and continue to prevail in current painted publicity forms (Rao, Geetha, and Wolf 2001, 131). The style can be situated within a larger genre of popular images, often described as calendar or bazaar art (see Introduction). The banners that were made in Tamil Nadu until recently displayed a similar style. The banner artists in Chennai that Preminda Jacob has worked with actually referred to Ravi Varma, the "founder"

of the popular god images, as someone who has inspired them in their own work (2009).

The hand-painted cutouts and hoardings have, just as with film posters, largely been focused on the main stars or political leaders. Subsidiary characters and plots have faded literally and figuratively more and more into the background. The hoardings have to represent a public persona in its full vigor. During the period in which the cinema/politics connection was at its height, the cine-political hoardings had to portray an actor as a movie star, as a political persona as well as in the cinematic role of the movie he was starring in. The person's face is of crucial importance to its appeal, articulating emotions that are linked to the star and the role he is playing (Dwyer and Patel 2002; Jacob 2009).

Hoarding artists painted in a realistic style using a strong brush technique in combination with bright, saturated colors to dramatize the faces and bring structure to the paintings (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 88). This contributed to the iconic characteristics through which people identified the stars, thus reinforcing a star's charisma (Geetha et.al. 2007, 89). However, as I will show below, the images which are used by fans for their banners have been selected from examples that circulate in newspapers, magazines, posters and the internet. The way in which these images circulate and appear in all kinds of media contributes to their power.

Banner artists and the rise of fan imagery

Not all artists were trained at an art school. In fact, most banner artists belong to a community with a long tradition in art such as wood carving, Tanjore paintings or other religious images, or they were self-taught men with an interest in painting (see also Inglis 1998; Jacob 2009; Jain 2007). They joined senior artists as apprentices to learn banner art. Several so-called banner companies came into being and banner art became a flourishing industry within the state, with the main companies such as J.P. Krishna Arts, Jeyaram Arts and Mohan Arts originating in the capital Chennai.

In Pondicherry, the banner artist N. Kumar was one of the first to turn to movie imagery and was hired by producers, fan clubs and political parties and as such became an established artist. He started by sketching the images of movie actors in 1977. He painted small images of Kamal Hassan and Rajinikanth, put them in plastic sheets and displayed them at provision shops in the market. He was admired for these images and gradually became known for his art in the neighborhood where he lived and still lives. Kumar:

> *Once Kamal's movie* Sakala kala vallavan[5] *and Rajini's* Enkeyo ketta kural[6] *were released at the same theater complex. At the time I was not a fan of any actor, but I just did a painting of Kamal and displayed it at the theater. I wanted to see the movie* Sakala kala vallavan, *it was hit movie and I was able to get a ticket for it. My friend had tickets for Rajini's* Enkeyo ketta kural *so we decided to go the Rajini movie. After I had seen the film I became a fan of Rajini. So when I returned from seeing the film I took Kamal's painting with me back home.*

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5 Muthuraman 1982a.

6 Muthuraman 1982b.

In the beginning, I didn't like Rajini's acting very much but I liked to see the photography and his style.

Many banner artists like Kumar started their painting career by being impressed by a particular actor and practiced their painting skills by meticulously drawing: first at school in their notebook and later on more seriously in images as displayed by Kumar in the movie theater. From that point on, Kumar produced small paintings for movie releases of Rajinikanth's films which established him as an artist. Rajini Shankar, Pondicherry's former fan club secretary, was one of the first to recognize his abilities and commissioned him to produce his own images from then on. Now Kumar is a celebrated artist in Pondicherry, having educated many younger artists whom he took under his wing.[7] He made his name with the cutout for the movie *Maaveeran* (Rajasekar 1986)(figure 47) as a result of which many others were impressed and motivated to become banner artists themselves.

From 1991 onwards producers also hired Kumar and his brother Anbu to make the advertisements for movies. Kumar:

In Pondy, all the theaters brought banners from Chennai. Because the artists in Chennai gave importance to Chennai and not to other places they had juniors doing the work for Pondy. Likewise, when we get an order from outside Pondy, we give it to our juniors: it is the local audience with whom we want to establish our name in particular. The banners that these juniors from Chennai made were colorful but they lacked outlines and sketches; the workmanship was poor.

At that time there were no good realistic painters in Pondy. For movies that had banners from Chennai, my brother and I made banners as well. Our banners had detailed sketches and sharp outlines. My brother also did abstract art so we combined realistic painting with abstract art in one banner. Local people compared the Chennai banners and our banners and they appreciated our work. So we became popular in Pondicherry. Also, the transportation of banners from Chennai to Pondy was expensive and sometimes the banners were damaged in transit so the distributors gave the orders to us.

Kumar and his brother Anbu established their names by always making their personal banners for movie releases of Rajinikanth's films. At the same time, individual fans and the first fan clubs commissioned relatively small hardboard images of sixty by ninety centimeters which were displayed inside the theater. During intervals, the audience was able to see them on display. Once Kumar began to use plywood instead of the less flexible hardboard, they started to produce cutouts up to twenty-five meters high that were displayed outside the theater. To start with, these boards were primarily made for films with Shivaji Ganesan in the lead. In the meantime, the number of fan clubs had grown after the release of another movie and these clubs needed advertisement boards. The images grew and for Rajinikanth and other actors the size of the cutouts also grew larger.

Kumar and his brother Anbu have always painted in front of their house. They do not have

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[7] See for example, Selvam's poster which I described in Chapter 2. The poster was made by Muthu, an apprentice of Kumar. To honor Kumar, Muthu added an image of the artist in his poster design.

much space to keep the cutouts but the long compound wall of the Anglo French Textile Mill factory gives them the opportunity to work outside easily. The public display of banners also gives them a certain visibility as it enables others to come and see their work.

After Kumar several other banner artists started their own banner company in Pondicherry. The banner economy flourished as banner companies and artists started to work for the movie industry, political parties and fan clubs. Kumar:

> There was huge competition among the artists to get space in theater premises during Rajini movie releases, because when an artist displays his work at the theater, he also gets popularity. I was lucky enough to work with Rajini Shankar for a long time, so he organized space for me in the theater premises.

Muthu is an apprentice of Kumar. He has now become one of the most famous artists in Pondicherry. He is a Rajinikanth fan as well and started to practice art with drawings of his favorite star. Being a fan of Rajinikanth he also has many Rajinikanth fan clubs as clients. This brings with it obligations and favors as well. Muthu:

> I have to tell you something important. I have my good qualities only because of Rajini. I have watched lots of Rajini movies ever since I was a child. Hence those good qualities in Rajini's characters have become embedded in me. We watch his movies and learn good qualities, his movies are all cheerful. When I am sad I listen to his songs and become happy. I became an artist only because of him. I started drawing his pictures then slowly I became an artist.

> We get paid less for drawing Rajini's picture. Rajini sir is great; we are here because of him. We put our maximum effort in to draw Rajini's picture. But the leaders pay less. We will be doing 10 rupees' worth of work but we get paid 5 rupees. That is a fact. However, we cannot blame him [Rajini] at all.

> If an artist gets a chance to perform his skill, he is ready to do that. On the other hand the client gives only 50 rupees. The artist accepts it because he got a chance to do his work. We [artists] work very hard and get paid just 50 rupees which is actually an underpayment. The client will give verbal appreciations but what good is that? Not paying us more means you don't appreciate [our work], it's a waste of our handiwork.

In his heyday, Muthu had more than twenty juniors working for him. He had many orders which kept him busy day and night. Most of his orders came from fan clubs, but he made political hoardings and had other orders as well. Artists like Muthu who I have worked with often complained about the lack of payment by their clients. People from their neighborhood or fellow fans were especially known for not being able to bear the costs of the hoarding. So payments were often not made at all. Even though this occurred with many fan clubs, Muthu mostly complained about the lack of payment by political parties. They have the power not to pay and no one can complain because of their power.

Artistry

Banner artists were commissioned on the basis of their location and skills. Fans choose artists in their neighborhood but at the same time, if they want to stand out with their images, they need an artist with special qualities. The art of painting cutouts and signboards lies in the copying skills of the artists. They blow up sample images and copy them. Vinayagam is a younger artist who learned to paint from Muthu. Vinayagam's shop is named Rajini Arts as he is a big fan of Rajinikanth as well. For him, originality lies in meticulous copying:

> I am not criticizing anybody. Muthu is Kumar's student. But if you compare the works of Kumar and Muthu, Muthu is the best, he has his own style. I also wanted to show my originality in my works. The drawing should look like the original image. Only then will people respect your work and recognize you as an artist. If I show originality in my drawing, customers will come to me. Some artists may reproduce the character but they cannot reproduce it as well as the original. I want my drawings to be like what is in the picture. My drawing should look like the photograph and it should be beautiful. When I see the photograph I know which color I need to apply for the drawing. I don't use extra colors; I use the colors which are in the photographs.

Vinayagam argues that an image should be exactly like the photograph from which the painting is copied. Most artists, however, emphasize that artistry lies not only in the ability to copy but also to use colors and techniques that give the image additional strength (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 109; see also Jacob 2009). Another fan, named Ganapathy and who appreciates art work explains the following:

> We can recognize [a good artist] from the way the painting is drawn and how the letters are written. Without a photo no one can produce a painting. But it needs a lot of skill to reproduce a photo as a painting. Our artist just sees a photo once and he paints it in a beautiful manner. Some paintings are natural. Some paintings, if you look from a distance, appear to be Rajini's photo, but when you go closer it will appear distorted. Those are bad paintings. A good painting is one that looks beautiful even close up. See –painting requires a lot of skill. An ordinary person cannot draw a single line clearly. But an artist copies a photo very realistically. So people prefer it.

Preminda Jacob, in her work on banner artists in Chennai, also observes how artistry lies not in the works per se; these are commissioned and have a short life span (2009). Rather, artistry lies in the banners' production process. I explained earlier how the same kind of banners that were made for movies were also made for political parties and particularly their leaders. Most artists that I have worked with do not really get much satisfaction from painting political banners, as they do not have much freedom in giving the painting an artistic touch. Political supporters are very strict about deviating from standard images of their leader and images cannot be too frivolous as politics is a serious issue. This seems paradoxical in a state where film and politics have always been intertwined. Preminda Jacob, in her work on banner art, comes up with an interesting anecdote in which a banner artist cautioned that artists should not use brilliant colors for painting politicians otherwise they will look like movie stars (Jacob 1997, 147)! This strict division between film and politics seems out of place in a state where several movie stars have

entered politics, though it suggests a distinction that some at least find important to respect.

As well as the rigidity artists encounter with political paintings, Muthu is disappointed when fans do not take care of his work properly. He made a banner for a local Vijay fan club but it was not displayed correctly he said. The banner was supposed to be on display at the Rathna Theater for the duration that the film was being screened but it was removed after only two days:

> See the board over there? I drew that board [pointing to a part of a cutout lying opposite his shop in the bushes, figure 57]. It is a waste now. A fan association ordered the banner. They said there was no space to keep this Kuruvi banner. Fans have to reserve space before the movie's release. These fans kept this Kuruvi cutout till the last minute so they couldn't find enough space. The fans should have taken care of this cutout because it represents hard work and time. I am not happy with this because there is lots of work, no recognition, and no money. That's why sometimes I feel like doing banners is a waste. Instead, I could make some real paintings which would stay forever at somebody's house. I wanted to do some paintings so that I could earn more money to keep me happy.

Muthu's words suggest that even though the artistry lies primarily in the production of the works, the ways in they are exhibited also matter.

South India is known for the use of bright, saturated colors, a style which is often looked down upon by other states (see Jain 2007). Regional differences within Tamil Nadu are not obvious. The banners made in Chennai have inspired other banners artists from around the state to make similar banners. The realism that is depicted in these images was simulated by other artists. Kumar:

> We learned about the techniques and art materials from Chennai artists but there wasn't the opportunity to stay and learn from them. We took photos of the work of the Madras artists after which we produced banners with their colors and strokes. In Chennai, when Mohan Arts and Jeyaram Arts made banners they were very colorful and bright. When you look at them close up or from a distance, they look similar. At the same time, J.P. Krishna used multicolor and primarily dark colors. When you look at them close up, they have bold, abstract colors only. When you look from a distance, it looks more realistic. In the beginning, we followed Jeyaram and Mohan Arts. Later we were inspired by J.P. Krishna and we followed his style to get photo realism.

> Searching for photos for banners was a big event. If the full standing figure is good, then the face is usually not clear. In that case we have to find a face from another picture and join the two images together. If the images are very small, we make them bigger by photocopying them and then we make the drawing.

Jeyaram Arts, Mohan Arts and J.P. Krishna were and still are the biggest names in the banner industry in Tamil Nadu. However, most movie banners in smaller cities and banners made by fan clubs are made by local artists such as Kumar, Muthu and Vinayagam. The quality of their work and its presence during movie releases and other celebrations is their showpiece. Kumar deliberately always made his own personal banner in order to gain visibility. Vinayagam told me how, on the first day of a film release, he always left his name off his banners to arouse curiosity. The next day he would write his name on the banner to show people it was a young artist who had produced the work. Another strategy that Kumar told me about was the production of stickers.

As fans only saw the film at one theater, they distributed stickers of all the banners they made for other theaters to auto rickshaws so that the audience could see the others as well.

Just as visibility was important for artists to advertise their work, fans searched for visibility as well. Finding a good and creative artist was important in order to have a banner which was noticed among the myriad others.

The industry flourished until the 1990s and good artists had many orders from movie distributors, fan clubs and political supporters. But then a transformation in materiality changed the cityscapes profoundly. These transformations and what they have meant for artists as well as fans are the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

The advent of the digital

Figure 48 shows a wall painting that the artist Ranjit made for Rajinikanth's birthday, in the street were Ranjit used to live. Not long after he made the mural, Ranjit committed suicide. Dedicated to the memory of Ranjit, two years after his death, his family put several posters and banners on display in town. Ranjit's image now appears above his own artistic work of his movie hero Rajinikanth.

It is said by his friends and relatives that Ranjit committed suicide after finding himself in a desperate situation. As a cutout and hoarding artist losing ground because of the advent of digital design and print technologies, he was not able to make money and therefore felt he was not respected any more. From early childhood, Ranjit had been attracted to Rajinikanth and wanted to paint and make drawings of the star. While pretending to do his homework he had actually been making countless drawings of his hero. After failing school at the age of twelve, he left his parents and headed for Chennai. There he found shelter with the renowned cutout and billboard artist J.P. Krishna and worked with him for a while. His mother recounted how Ranjit had a hard time in Chennai, often going without food, but he did not really mind, he was at least able to paint. When digital designing and printing gained momentum Ranjit lost his job in Chennai. He thought he would be able to pick up his work in Pondicherry, his native town,

48. Wall painting for Rajinikanth's birthday made by the late artist Ranjit. At the top, posters commemorating the first anniversary of the artist's death. Pondicherry 2008.

since he figured that changes would not come in so fast over there. However, back in Pondicherry digital technology caught up with him and soon he was out of work there as well. At first Ranjit firmly refused to change his technique and craft. To him digital designing was not art; everyone could copy and paste images using a computer. Selvam and Ranjit had an argument about it when Selvam once made a digital banner. Selvam:

> I did one digital banner without him knowing about it. It was the rainy season so I couldn't draw. I tried to tell Ranjit about the digital image but I couldn't contact him. When he found out about it he got angry because I had made the digital banner. He told me that if we did not follow our principles who else would? But we talked about it and made up again.

As Ranjit's situation got more and more desperate he gave in and started to learn computer skills and work with digital editing software. However, having additional family problems, he remained depressed, and addressed a highly emotional appeal to the Chief Minister of Pondicherry, asking for help just before he committed suicide. Seeing no future, at the age of 29 Ranjit hanged himself in his family's newly built house. A year after Ranjit's death, his family, neighbors, his friend Selvam and the artists Muthu and Kumar commemorated him with posters, murals and, perhaps somewhat poignantly, with vinyl banners placed in front of the mural that Ranjit made with Selvam just before his death and in several other locations in town (figure 49). Even though he was convinced that the artistic quality of paintings would triumph over the flatness of vinyl Ranjit had lost his battle.

Ranjit's tragic story seems to be representative of the demise of painted cutouts and hoardings. In 2000 the first digitally designed and printed vinyl hoarding was put up in Chennai and others followed soon thereafter (Note 2007, 135). In Pondicherry, the transformations were indeed slower, as Ranjit had hoped. It was only after 2002 that vinyl came into use. From then on, a radical shift in the urban landscape became visible, as all signboards and hoardings that had originally been made by hand were replaced by digitally designed vinyl sheets. The increasing availability and popularity of digital printing technologies was felt sharply by the artists who had previously painted the structures. Most of them were not able to keep pace with the new trend for digital design, and soon lost customers who were attracted by this upcoming fast and cheap medium. As a result, many artists went out of business or were forced to change jobs. Some artists did manage to switch careers and set up their own digital design studios. Yet most experienced difficulties because of this change: fewer customers, the need to contract out their digital orders, and ruthless competition from enterprising people who had cleverly anticipated what was coming. In the meantime digital photo studios appeared everywhere. Numbers change all the time so it is difficult to estimate the figures but it is commonly said that in 2009 there were around five hundred digital studios in Pondicherry. Even though enterprising people found flex banners in great demand, competition is part of their reality as well nowadays.

49. Memorial banner for Ranjit a year after his death. Ranjit's friend Selvam placed it in front of the mural they made together. Pondicherry 2008.

The transformations in materiality have radically changed the appearance of the hoardings where the once realistically painted figures are now displayed as photos. But they have also democratized the use of public imagery. Previously the public realm was mostly reserved for public personae. Not in the production of the images but in who was displayed. Political leaders and movie stars prevailed. But the availability of vinyl hoardings has opened up public space in which ordinary people can now exhibit themselves in the same manner and style as that of well-known people. I noticed how, over the last few years, more and more "ordinary" people actually use this imagery to display personal and family events. Occasions such as birthdays, death anniversaries and marriages of ordinary people to name but a few, are now widely publicized (see figure 50).

The changed appearance and use of the public arena brings questions to the fore on the efficacy of photography vis-à-vis painted images. In the remaining part of this chapter I will recount the transformation from hand-painted to digitally designed images and the consequences this has had on how these images are used by fans. These days fan clubs make virtually no hand-painted signboards or cutouts anymore. Yet many fans, as with the banner artists, consider the disappearance of hand-painted drawings to be a loss. Just like Ranjit, they do not appreciate the digital portraits, seeing it as a flat-toned medium, incapable of expressing anything. Looking back with nostalgia on the hand-painted images, the artists I worked with explained that painted images have the capacity of showing the expressions of the character depicted, whereas photos merely show a person's appearance. In Chapter 2 I referred to the unproblematic use of paint applied to photos because in India people do not assume the presence of any "inner" character translated via physiognomy (Pinney 1997). It seems that on these paintings the expression of the person depicted could be conveyed with colors, expressions and the quality of painting. The specific corpothetic aura of painted images is said to be enlivened by the use of colors, props and expressions, revealing and articulating the character played by a movie star (see also MacDougall 1992). What is worthy of note here is that the mimetic capac-

50. Birthday banner for a young girl's first birthday. Chennai 2009.

ity of photography is said by most consumers to be problematic in digital designs: hand-painted images can display emotions whereas photography is flat-toned and realistic, even though most billboard artists that paint billboards do not have much freedom to experiment with different ways of painting (see also Jacob 2009). The loss reveals itself in the flatness that people ascribe to photography. Painted work is deemed to be art whereas digital design is just a technical job. Muthu, as an artist, finds a difference in his audiences as well:

> Manual work has its own value. It attracts people to stay for a while and look at the banner. People greet me when they see me. On the other hand people never look at a digital banner and greet the digital banner makers.

The use of colors and strokes is deemed to enliven an image. It can be made more beautiful

and lively than the original. In complaining about digital banners, artist Vinayagam regrets the loss of originality. With paintings you can tell a real artist whereas with digital designs it is easy to assemble several photos. This distinction seems paradoxical at first as Vinayagam's definition of a good piece of art lies in the ability of the artist to copy the original photo as precisely as possible. In a painting he is not worried about indexicality. A painting for him conveys more realism than a photo. This difference between paint and photography reminds us of the photographers interviewed in the film *Photowallahs* (MacDougall 1992) who nostalgically recounted the artistic qualities of black and white photography over the new color photography. It seems to be the newness here that evokes these sentiments of nostalgia.

Barthes argues that a photograph is not a copy but proof of a past reality: "the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that is that its testimony bears not on the object but on time" (1981, 88–89). According to Barthes the power of the photograph lies in its ability to refer to the authentic which exceeds the represented. David Morgan argues that this naturalness is not something limited to photographs (1998, 9). Instead, he argues that this naturalization can be found in any image "whose reception involves the magical sense of making the absent present" (*ibid.*). In the paintings made for fan clubs, the painting is ascribed a more natural link with what is represented than photography is.

Despite photography's ascribed status of being linked to what was once there – *ça-a-été* in Barthes' words – paintings are deemed to convey this in a more powerful fashion. A practical reason why paint is seen as more appropriate for being realistic is the fact that an artist can improve upon the photo in his painting. Where a photo is unclear or dark, the painter can enlarge the photo and still work in sharp strokes and tones. Also, it is felt that digital design does not comprise any labor in the making of the image. Artistry lies primarily in the act of producing, so digital design is deemed not really artistic. The term realism as it is used here needs clarification.[8] Earlier I quoted the artist Kumar and how he admired the realism of artists from Chennai. Paintings are said to be successful when the artist uses realism. Realism as used by artists seems to convey what the viewer actually sees. The image should be clear from a distance and close up. It is the art and freedom of painting to make the image more realistic with lines, brushes and colors. Although photography is realistic in that sense, it still lacks the ways in which a painter can add realism to his image. However, computer-based designs can be artistic as well if the designer puts effort into his design. Muthu:

> Even where software like Photoshop is available, one must still have the artistic skills to produce a very good banner. One must have a creative mind.

But computer-based designs can rival hand-painted ones if the artist is able to use variations in his design. Muthu is now also making digital banners to earn some money:

> As I'm an artist at heart, my color selection differs from others. We [artists] know what color to choose for the picture to make our banners more picturesque. All other digital banner artists usually leave the background of the picture blank or white which I will never do. When painting banners we arrange the figures, create backgrounds and more importantly we choose colors that are more common and in this way make the picture more natural. With digital

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8   See also Kajri Jain's discussion on the notion of realism as used in discourses around calendar art (2007).

images we are not able to do this. People choose their own colors and their designs too. Only people who realize that we are artists will ask us to make the designs and choose the colors. For them we will give our best.

The production of hand-painted and digitally designed banners articulates notions of aesthetic quality and taste, as becomes clear from Muthu's words. He mentions that only for people that are aware of the use of colors and design will he do his best to make an artistic, attractive banner. While previously artists like Muthu felt a certain authority in what makes a strong image, digital designs give much more authority to the clients. With paintings, the photographic origin of the images had to be converted into painted images, something only an artist was capable of doing. With digital designs, the photograph can be represented as a photograph which means that clients have their opinions about what they want.

Public intimacies

Although fans prefer the look of painted banners most fan clubs still choose digital ones for their imagery. Considering the loss in value, according to the artists, when using photographs instead of hand-painted images, one would not expect digitally produced hoardings to be so popular. The embracing of vinyl needs to be understood in terms of the enhanced possibilities that the material offers. Putting to one side the notions of loss of artistry, vinyl's advantage lies in sustaining and even enhancing relationships that fans articulate with the production of hoardings. Digital hoardings do have advantages that help to explain their current popularity. Firstly, they are cheaper and can be made within a day instead of the several days it might have taken an artist to paint his assignment. Fans had to visit the artist several times and discuss and select with him the images of the star they wanted to represent. Now, a client can simply hand over or select the images, and a few hours later the hoarding might be ready. The relevance of the speed of finishing the image within a very short period is indicated by fans as well as artists. Velu, an Ajith fan:

The colors and its vividness in the painted banner attract you. If you look at it from a distance it will appear more beautiful than a digital image. In digital design you are seeing a photo which will not appeal. Painted banners are beautiful and I feel content when I see one. Personally I like painted banners. But digital designing saves time. A painted banner takes more time and the cost of the banner is high. A digital banner costs around rs. 900 whereas a painted banner costs rs. 3000. That's why we use the digital banners.

With digital designs studios can produce more designs within the same period than they can with hand-painted commissions. Some fans see the digital hoardings as a medium that offers the opportunity to be more creative and personal.

Fans can contribute to the images and it can be totally up to them which images to use and how to use them. Now, with vinyl hoardings, the point is to try to find rare images or achieve a special, unusual combination of images that makes an attractive picture to look at. For example, one's own image can be combined with images of movie stars or politicians, or one can display rare images found on the internet. These images enable a connection between fans and their star. The producers of the image, usually the ones that contributed to it, are depicted next to

Rajinikanth, which enhances closeness, and as such intimacy and contiguity.

The selection of images is a way of personalizing and distinguishing the hoardings and post-ers. It allows fans to connect to Rajinikanth by choosing or handpicking various stills of the star. It also allows fans to travel imaginatively yet publicly in Rajinikanth's company, in much the same way as an artificial backdrop in a studio portrait, of e.g., the Taj Mahal, would allow you to travel there (Pinney 2003; Strassler 2010). Fantasy and realism merge by combining various kinds of images, creating not merely a desired fantasy but a verisimilitude of possibilities. A re-lated but somewhat reverse practice can be found in wedding videos and wedding photo albums where bridal couples place romantic imagery or movie stars in their wedding souvenirs to invoke an idea of romance or closeness to the star (Gerritsen 2006). Yet again it is the visual proximity in the image that is brought into play to represent intimacy between who or what is shown in the image.

The generic quality of the images means that fans can personalize them. Fans select images of Rajinikanth that they consider suitable for the purpose; for example, they would mostly look for "stylish" images of Rajinikanth when a movie is being released. "Style" is Rajinikanth's trademark: his gimmicks and one-liners have made him incredibly popular and almost everyone mentions his "style" as a reason for his attractiveness. "Stylish" images are frequently used on hoardings and posters made for a movie star's birthday celebrations or movie releases. Such stylish images are not always considered suitable for personal events such as fans' weddings and birthdays though. For fan club members' marriages other fans make a welcome hoarding on which they use images of their movie star. The images employed there have to be more serious, so fans then often use "natural" or off-screen images of a movie star. The invitations and wedding album shown at the end of Chapter 2 (figures 27-33) illustrate this preference for natural and off-screen stills. The images of Rajinikanth display his real appearance, which is very different from how he appears in his movies. Rajinikanth fans say they specifically look for simple images. "Simple" is another characteristic often referred to when describing Rajinikanth. His unpretentious appearance is evidence for his ascetic attitude which has not been "spoiled" by stardom. But his simplicity also refers to his devotional way of living, as Rajinikanth is known for his spirituality. His regular visits to the Himalayas and his visits to the famous Sri Venkateswara temple in Tirupathi before a movie release contribute to this image.

In digital designs fans often highlight the visual importance some fans and the designers place on the selection of images or special effects. There is a hierarchy and classification of images: what kind of images can be used and when they are appropriate, or who can use what kind of images. Fans search for original images in order to mark their superiority and difference vis-à-vis other clubs. Every year, for movie releases and their hero's birthday, fans have to produce a new hoarding. To be original each time fans try to find rare images or specific combinations of movie stills. Fans look at other hoardings carefully and borrow ideas from others. With these ideas they go to studios that produce the designs for these hoardings and ask the designer to use this idea. However, as Yuveraaj of Geja Studio told me that he does not want to produce the same thing twice. So if fans want to copy a certain image, idea or style, he will produce a new design because it should not look like an older design.

With the multitude of hoardings in the public arena conspicuous imagery is required. For the same reason fans also question the sincerity of other fans if their hoarding is just a simple

compilation made with no effort. Selvam, for example, is always on the lookout for original images of his hero. He collects magazines and stickers and receives stills from the internet from a friend. When I met Selvam just before he was getting married, he was proud to tell me that he had found a unique still of Rajinikanth which he was going to use for his wedding invitation. Unfortunately, the image turned out to be less original than it had seemed at first when a former fan club leader of Pondicherry, Rajini Shankar, used a similar still for a piece of his personal publicity just before Selvam's wedding. Selvam decided to use the image anyway because he possessed this rare still as an "ordinary" fan, which made it unique after all, he thought.

Figure 51 shows the sixteen meter banner made by a local fan club in Vannur. They tried to produce a hoarding with rare images of Rajinikanth's long acting career. Rare images or special combinations of images from old and new movies and popular poses are ways to distinguish a hoarding from others. Fans of Vijay and Ajith, who are by and large younger than Rajinikanth fans, are especially well-known for the elaborate use of digital manipulation software[9] to produce images that go beyond using photos and editing colors. They are known for inserting themselves posing in the same style as and alongside their movie hero (see figure 52).

However, many Rajinikanth fans I worked with deemed this to be disrespectful towards their hero. There are limits to the creativity of fans. Rajini Shankar commented as follows in response to my question on what he thought of this kind of editing:

No. We don't like that. We only like the original. That type of modification will create a bad impression among the people and also among fan club members. That bad name will spoil Rajini's name as well. If he gets a bad name, we will suffer. So personally we don't like that.

Most of the conventions for the use of images or opinions on wrongly used images relate to the photos of fans that are inserted and not on the photos of the star.

Fan publicity

Whereas the hand-painted boards and cutouts merely mentioned fan club members' names, except for one or two images, digital hoardings offer the possibility of inserting their photos easily. And this turned out to be a crucial advantage of vinyl. Perhaps the most important design potential of vinyl lies in the insertion of fans' photos. It resulted in fans' attaching greater importance to being visible or realizing that in political terms.

But one has to hold on to certain hierarchical rules. In the choice of their own photos on public hoardings, fans uphold club hierarchies; for instance, fan club presidents and district leaders will always be shown closest to the star, and larger than the others. The size and arrangement of the contributors' images also express both internal fan club hierarchies of importance and the size of the fans' financial contributions. Hierarchy inside the fan club is more important than a fan's monetary contribution. A fan's position within the fan club determines the importance given to placing banners. But this differs from fan club to fan club, region to region, etc. For example, a *talaimai manram* is obliged to exhibit more banners and spend more money on them

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[9] Corelpaint and Photoshop are the most commonly used digital editing programs by banner designers.

51. Rajinikanth birthday hoarding by a fan club on Koot Road, a main district junction in Villupuram, 2002 (collection Saktivel).

than a local fan club. And local fan clubs always place images of their *talaimai manram* on their banner. It validates the fan club leaders and upholds and generates their status (Mines 1994). Fan club member Tharagai Raja confirms this:

> [On the banners] *the local fan clubs mention Rajini, the name of the movie, their* manram's *[fan club's] name and us [the* talaimai manram*]. Mentioning us is not necessary, they can decide if they want to, but it is a plus point if they do. If they place my photo on the banner, everyone that comes to watch the movie will see the banners with my face. Whenever I visit a certain place, they know me: "he is a man from the Rajini* manram.*" So I will have some popularity.*

Tharagai Raja's comments illustrate how mentioning his name is advantageous for him, as it gives him recognition, as well as being valuable for the local fan club that mentions local leaders' names. These connections also link back to the relationships fan establish with local big men. Showing important people on your banner, from Rajinikanth, higher up fan club leaders to politicians, does not merely honor those people, their status also rubs off on the local fans that produced the banner.

The production of hoardings, posters and murals is well documented by local fans and is followed closely by other fans since it is one of the most significant ways of measuring a fan's seriousness. As I suggested earlier, banners, posters, and other imagery made for events are recorded carefully and afterwards sent to the All India Rajinikanth Fan Club, based in Chennai. The "evidence" on which the All India Rajinikanth Club bases its decision to appoint new local leaders is the archive of images that fans send of their activities. The AIRFC receives entire photo albums, DVDs, posters and other proof of activities and stores these in order to keep track of what local

52. Banner design for Vijay fans. The man in the front is Vijay, all the other men are the fans that have had this banner made. Interestingly, in the left and right top corners, images of both MGR and Rajinikanth have been added. Many fans of Vijay and Ajith add images of earlier heroes out of respect. Collection of Yuvaraaj. Pondicherry 2006.

fan clubs do. The documentation that one develops should show that a fan is a hard worker. A person's power can also be affirmed by political means, but not by simply using the fan club network; one has to work for one's status. This work is captured by documenting banners, which was quite literally the case with Saktivel's video, half of which was dedicated to the banners made for the event. If we recall Mines and Gourishankar, who suggested that leadership requires skill and charisma and is not merely hereditary, a fan's reputation within the fan club is not simply based upon his relationship with his star, it also has to be acquired and demonstrated. Images therefore not only articulate these relationships, they actually engender them.

After the arrival of flex banners, the number of fan club banners increased at fan events as well as at other events such as birthdays and the like. By saying this, I do not want to argue that distinguishing oneself as a fan club member or fan club was not important before the arrival of digital technology. Indeed, choosing an artist and images for the cutouts and signboards was a meticulous process whereby one tried to create a hoarding that was different from those of others. Competition among fans and fan clubs is reflected in the activities carried out for a particular event and the images displayed. By means of imagery, whether it be having the biggest or unique hoardings, fans try to attract the attention of others. With hand-painted images, distinctions were emphasized by choosing a well-known artist that could make something unique and conspicuous every time. Ibrahim, the secretary of the *talaimai manram* in Villupuram commented as follows on the change from paintings to vinyl banners:

> It is good for us. Before we couldn't use many images. Now we can. We welcome this kind of change. Nowadays everyone can see their image with Rajini's images because of the digital images. Some of the fans contribute a minimal amount of cash to make banners. But they

can also see their images with Rajini. In Villupuram they use images of Rajini, an image of Sathyanarayanan, an image of the head of the fan club, and an image of the union leader so there is a system of ranking.

Ibrahim highlights two important advantages of vinyl here. One is the closeness of a person's image to that of his hero. Seeing the two physically together is, just as with the more mundane images I discussed in Chapter 2, a way of confirming a person's fondness for the star. But besides this personal significance, fan clubs also want to confirm their strength and fandom to their surroundings. A Rajini fan in Vannur:

Posters and banners are used to show Rajinikanth's fame but with a photo of ourselves we have some recognition. In the village many people have the same name, but with photos they know who we are.

The desire to be recognized needs to be understood in the aspirations for power and prestige as I argued in Chapter 3. Fans feel a certain power by being a member of the fan club and this power is transferred more easily if a person's image is widely displayed. This is particularly the case for fans that are also politically active, as members of a political party use banners to mark their presence in the neighborhood. Their connections to local big men are also displayed on banners, as they often include them with their image.

Figure 53 shows a hoarding that was put up for the occasion of the ear-piercing function of children of a Rajinikanth fan club member residing in the city of Gingee. I attended this event with Saktivel and some fellow fan club members from his area, Thiruchitrambalam. The Gingee access road, adjacent to the marriage hall in which the ceremony took place, was decorated with flags and hoardings for about five hundred meters and centered on the hall. One type consisted of hoardings and flags related to the DMK party of which this fan club member was a member; the others depicted Rajinikanth and important leaders of the Rajinikanth fan club (figure 54).

As you can see in figure 53, two men are still working on covering part of the hoarding containing the text of the previous event for which this hoarding was used. Above where they are pasting this piece of paper, another piece has already been already replaced; it currently portrays the family that organized this function, consisting of the parents and their children. Additionally, the hoarding portrays four images of Rajinikanth in close up and photos of local fan club members (in the middle) and direct fan club leaders (top right). By showing images of Rajinikanth and the DMK, the father of this family showed his affiliation to both the Rajinikanth fan club and the DMK party. He reused the banner, which is not common, as he did not have the financial means to celebrate this function grandly. However, to establish himself, several fans that attended the function told me, he wanted to make the celebration impressive. The images were not signs to the unknown passers-by who take this access road to enter Gingee but were more aimed at other fans and party members. In this way, the man showed his dedication towards these groups.

When the car in which Saktivel, his fellow club members and I were driving towards the function approached the scene, Saktivel immediately commented upon the obvious combination of a fan club banner and political paraphernalia: the entire road was decorated with DMK flags and the large banner: "Ibrahim will not like this," was his response. He was referring to the combination of DMK and fan club imagery which Ibrahim, the leader of Villupuram district, would not like. Both Ibrahim and Saktivel are also active in politics and as Panchayat president,

53. Hoarding for the ear-piercing ceremony of the son of a Rajinikanth fan club member. The hoarding is reused for this occasion as you can see by the two men pasting a new piece of paper on top of the previous text. Gingee 2008

54. Two banners for the ear-piercing ceremony. The left-hand one depicts Rajinikanth (left), district fan club leader Ibrahim (top right), the parents (below) and their children. The right-hand banner shows the same family but now with their DMK connections. In the top right corner we see Karunanidhi, below his son Stalin and three local DMK leaders. Gingee 2008.

but they have never made these two coalesce in a problematic fashion. This person had. Showing a fan's political affiliation is not accepted in relation to the fan club but it is commonly done. Even though politics is an apparent part of being a fan club member, using Rajinikanth for your own benefit is not accepted. Much of the conversation I had with fans or which I encountered between fans was about the image practices of other fans. They commented upon others and how they had or hadn't used Rajinikanth or their own image appropriately. See for example the following message that was placed on the discussion board of the rajinifans.com website:

Hi ss [Superstar] *fans,*

iam from thiruvannamalai ,i did a special archana for superstar on its birthday on arunnachala temple here but my blood are boling due to ss [superstar] thiruvannamalai fans club activities ,they did not did anyting on our ss birthday they simply kept banners ,the banners also have lots of fans photos only in big size they have minimized our ss images they kept banner as 56 th birthday in most of the places ,all the politicians are here using our superstar songs for the birthday ads ,etc.etc but nobody is asking about this,last leader of thiruvannamalai fans club(name-arulkanth) used our ss name and songs and entered to politics ,somebody take this matter to satyanarayana [All India Rajinikanth Fan Club leader] immediatly!! ![10]

Message written by KING, rajinifans.com YahooGroup. Thursday, December 14, 2006.

[10] Because of the many mistakes made in this message I have chosen to keep to the writer's own original spelling without indicating errors.

The author of this message complains about the self-centered banners on which photos of fans are larger than the ones of Rajinikanth. This links up with Selvam and Annamalai feeling somewhat awkward about their manipulation of the framed images of themselves with Rajinikanth they display at home (Chapter 2). Moreover, KING complains about using Rajinikanth's image for one's own political career. According to KING, politicians use songs from Rajinikanth's movies for their birthday and the leader of the fan club in Thiruvannamalai used Rajinikanth to enter politics. As I observed in Chapter 3, politicking is not meant to be part of the fan club but at the same time, most fans, once they are older, use their fan network for political patronage and sometimes their own careers. Images facilitate these relationships. Ram, a Rajini fan:

> We never used Rajini's images with politician's images. But there are people who are very close to politicians and they used both Rajini and the politician's image. He for example is a member of the DMK party. For his marriage we put up two banners, one with Rajini and the other with the politician. We cannot do anything without the support of political parties, so we make banners for them for these kinds of functions. Putting up these banners will earn us a good name among the government officials.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, having these connections with local government officials is necessary if one needs to get through government procedures. By inviting local big men to events and by showing them on personal imagery, these relationships are established and displayed to a larger public. There is a very narrow line separating proving fandom and a fan club's strength from using the fan club for political ends. Annamalai, who made the double portrait of himself and Rajinikanth (figures 24 and 25, Chapter 2) related Rajini Shankar's particular use of Rajinikanth's images to his political moves:

> Rajini Shankar earned a lot and he is like a politician now. Since he has earned a lot of money from this fan association he doesn't care about Rajini nowadays. He is with Latha Rajinikanth [Rajinikanth's wife]. Nowadays in every banner he makes Latha Rajini's image big and Rajini's images small. After MGR's death in all AIADMK banners Jayalalitha made her images big and MGR's images small. Rajini Shankar is doing the same. We have to give importance to Rajinikanth because we are fans of Rajini and not Latha. We all expected Rajini to enter politics but nothing happened. Rajini Shankar expected the same from Rajini, but since nothing has happened the last two times [elections] he now relies on Latha. We have always been with Rajini.

Why Shankar would rely on Latha Rajinikanth is too long a story to explain here. Instead I want to use Annamalai's words to illustrate how often fans and especially leaders like Shankar are commented on for their political ambitions. Proof is always found in the (lack of) display of banners and what is shown on these banners. Remember the criticism AIADMK party leader Jayalalitha received when MGR almost entirely disappeared from party banners. For fans as well, smaller images of Rajinikanth can be seen as proof that someone is not a dedicated fan anymore.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this chapter that fan clubs and individual fans display hoardings, murals and posters extensively in public spaces. Fan club members experience a certain strength and pride when thinking of or seeing the ubiquitous hoardings made for their hero all over Tamil Nadu. This makes fans imagine the widespread dissemination of fandom for and importance of their star. But it also creates a sense of prestige for the fan club network itself. It is here that I want to invoke the sense of an imagined community again. Firstly, fan publicity enables fans to see the reach and power

55. Abandoned cutout piece showing the actor Vijay. Pondicherry 2008.

of their community and secondly, it enables individual fans to prove their own power within and beyond their fan community. A powerful motivation to display images is the sense that Rajinikanth or his extensions – first of all the All India Fan Club in Chennai but also local fan club leaders – are able to observe these hoardings. Being in the eye of other fans, fan club officials and a wider audience could enable recognition by and alliances with one's own vicinity, the neighborhood, the fan clubs, the political field, and lastly Rajinikanth himself.

This evidence of being active in the fan club is important in the establishment of relationships with local politicians as well. These relationships are established and also reinforced by the display of these connections in the form of imagery. The exhibition of hoardings in this regard, could be understood as "an attempt to install and monumentalize a source of recognition…" (Spyer 2008b, 32) for individual fans and fan clubs alike.

Recognition has been enhanced by new material forms that started to become popular around 2000. Today, the replacement of the earlier painted cutouts and hoardings with digitally designed and printed ones has created the possibility of adding one's personal photos onto hoardings easily. This in turn has resulted in new forms of visibility, recognition and attempts to nurture identities. Fans feel that this new visibility and their involvement in political networks has given them respect. However, various fans also indicated that respect only comes when a person works for a political party. In that sense, merely making yourself visible via a fan club is not sufficient. But too much political ambition is not supposed to belong to fan activity. This paradox comes to the fore particularly in the display of images.

The indifference or excitement of non-fan club audiences with which I started this chapter have remained untouched until now. The grandeur and ubiquity of images in public spaces are meant to impress; they demand engagement from their onlookers. As I suggested in the introductory part of this section, however, the ubiquity of signposts in the public realm seems to cause as much indifference as it does engagement from passersby. But indifference towards particular objects is not equivalent to having no impact; perhaps even the opposite could be the case. Miller, following Gombrich, states that "objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we don't "see" them" (2005, 5). Indeed many ordinary objects in our lives are not "seen" yet they play an important role. Most images in

public space are just there; yet they are a common sight in the urban landscapes of cities in Tamil Nadu. Only when they disappear or stand out because of their size or content do people realize their presence. In the next part I will address the ways in which these images are actually seen and commented upon by a wider public. We will see how populist politics and the image of film as an influential medium is often based on the images that present them. The next chapter discusses these images and the debates that revolve around them.

5

CUT THE CUTOUT CULTURE

IMAGERY
AND PUBLIC SPACE

An area meant for preserving greenery by the Agricultural Department opposite to the Gemini fly-over has been completely blocked from the view of the public by huge advertisement hoardings…. Just opposite to the High Court in front of the Bar Council Office there is an advertisement board which is placed across the pavement, causing nuisance to the traffic and the pedestrians. If one goes down the Nungambakkam Bridge towards Poonamalle High road, one can see a long advertisement board which must be about 300 feet in the length….

We are not even worried about the obscene advertisements, mostly by film producers and Cinema theatres, which can be taken care of by appropriate existing legislation. But we are worried about the size and location of the innumerable hoardings simply spoiling the aesthetic beauty of the City and some of the modern buildings which have (been) built artistically with the help of architectural experts.

(Excerpt from High Court Document 2006. Cited from Note 2007, 139)

What is your research about, madam?
Roos: It is about fan clubs.
About what?
Roos: About fan clubs.
Oooh, fan clubs, the masses!
(Conversation in Chennai, 2010)

Street culture and the everyday city

The cities of Tamil Nadu are the location of a vibrant street culture of publicity of which fan imagery makes up only a part.[1] Until recently commercial ads promoting consumer products, political parties, and movies prevailed and towered above the main thoroughfares in major cities. What stands out is the scale and ubiquity of political hoardings, posters, and murals commissioned by political parties and their supporters. Common for most passers-by, a nuisance and embarrassment for some and a pleasure for others, continuous lines of political hoardings mark the landscape of urban and rural Tamil Nadu. Near main roads and junctions, party meetings and party leaders' birthdays are publicized and celebrated by dozens of hoardings covering the adjacent buildings, shops, and traffic signs. Each one bigger than the next; political parties and local politicians seem to compete with each other on the vinyl "screen". Their overwhelming physical presence makes them difficult to ignore; their size and quantity make them "monumental and assertive" (Spyer 2008b, 11).

Urban spaces are mediated environments (Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008; Spitulnik 1993; Sundaram 2009). Images, sounds, cinema theaters form the everyday experiences of cities. The

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[1] The photo on the title page depicts a political banner on a piece of land belonging to the adjacent temple. The land is used as a market place and every few weeks a different political party uses the space above the stalls to publicize its banners (Chennai 2011).

visible and material urban reality also informs an invisible space of imaginations, anxieties, and aspirations (see also de Boeck and Plissart 2004). It is in this sense that I understand the interplay between spaces and the publics that are sometimes formed in them. I have already described the ways in which fans use images to visualize their fandom, networks and personal aspirations, but I have not yet said much about the ways in which this is part of the urban everyday. The images made by fans, supporters or corporate companies that publicize their various projects have been an essential part of public spaces; their very publicness is crucial for their efficacy. Images need their surroundings to be seen and people have to see them for the images to be effective. The main function of the "repertoire of visual excitement", one could say, is to be looked at, to engage onlookers (Holland 2004, 1). It can be taken for granted and become clichéd[2] or stand out and provoke. Its omnipresence seems to normalize its own presence, making it such a common sight that we almost seem to forget it is partly made to be looked at. Its overproduction or excess of the signifier seems to lead to a crisis of meaningfulness (de Boeck and Plissart 2004, 58) or an inflation of the value of representation per se (Gamboni 2005).

But who actually engages with these images? Publicity, as defined by Merriam Webster, concerns "an act or device designed to attract public interest; specifically: information with news value issued as a means of gaining public attention or support".[3] But who is actually the public here? Can we speak of a public when passers-by cannot ignore the images that impose themselves upon them with their size and ubiquitous presence? And how can we consider a public that does not think of itself as a public? What do profusion and ephemerality actually engender in relation to their supposed publics? Are the banners, posters and murals in that respect different from statues or monuments that seem to be much more permanent? Does profusion not also create a lack of interest on the part of its onlookers? In comparison to the ubiquity of these images and the effort put into them, the participation of onlookers seems extremely low – at least direct participation between the image and the onlooker. It would be their absence that is swiftly noticed. In this chapter I want to deal with the questions posed here, not in order to provide answers but rather to explore what reactions images as objects and representations evoke and what their publicness does in terms of the publics that form around images.

The monumental scale of public imagery and the fact that it is so openly visible for everyone passing by leads at least to a certain interaction and reaction, whether it is indifference, admiration, amusement or annoyance. Obviously, the "meanings" or "messages" publicity materials communicate are not univocal and, as Michael Warner emphasizes, do not exist without their audience (2002a). Images produce various audiences and their implications can be as varied as the formation of the publics out of which they arise. Using the term "public" demands a note of caution here as publics are naturally not fixed entities in a certain place and time. Instead, as Warner argues, "[t]hey recognize themselves only as already being the persons they are addressed as being, and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse" (2002b, 82). A public exists because it feels addressed. In previous chapters I have shown how images give fans the sense of a community of fans within their fan club and between clubs of different actors. In this chapter, I explore a wider public engagement with public imagery. In other words,

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2 Overly familiar or commonplace.

3 Definition of publicity in Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. Accessed 14 October 2010. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/publicity.

I investigate the publics that form around images as people feel addressed, whether by admiration or opposition.

Describing or getting to know a person's opinion of or experience of imagery in public space is a difficult arena to set foot in. How can one describe a person's lack of interest or subtle noticing of a new billboard without really being interested in what it shows? What should one think about the standardized images of politicians and movie stars that one cannot completely ignore in public spaces? I therefore suggest that debates are useful heightened moments that could bring to light opinions and feelings regarding the use of public space. Latour has argued that:

> It is clear that each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to. Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of "the political" (Latour 2005, 4–5).

Latour's acknowledgement of an object as assembling around it all kinds of engagements shows us how images can be central to defining public spaces. In the context of confrontational encounters such as debates, ambiguities in attitude vis-à-vis images become underscored. It is at such moments that discourses about publicity, public space, morality, or aesthetics become explicitly articulated. The debates around public imagery, therefore, determine the meaning or function of images just as much as their production does (Jain 2007; Mazzarella 2003).

Just as images have been an essential part of the city, debates have always revolved around them and there have always been attempts to restrain them. Public images such as those exhibited by the movie industry and fans as well as by politicians have been the subject of impassioned emotions and disagreements since they came into existence. And it is precisely in the transformations of debates throughout the years that one can discover continuity in the stamp they put on the city's public space. The content of the debates may have changed, but keeping to Latour's terms, these images have shaped a public space in which the political is permeated in intricate ways. In other words, a sense of what the public should or should not be is articulated through debates. It is a public that feels remoteness and opposition to these images but yet in their opposition they are actually relating to them and at least acknowledging them.

This chapter takes up the history of debate to situate fan imagery in a broader discourse of street culture and the reactions to it. Below I will address the resonance, amazement, worries and fears evoked by the display of public imagery in urban space, feelings that manifest themselves in debates and reflections on the city. These arenas of discussion can be situated in newspapers and daily conversations but they are also often directed towards the authorities that are held responsible for the condition of the city. These debates are often closely related to responses by authorities as they often resonate and respond to public debate. I may seem to be taking a different direction here, turning away from fan clubs and their visual practices towards a more general approach to urban space, imagery and debate, but I make this substantial shift on purpose. It allows me to come back to my earlier argument that situates fandom in a larger social world in Tamil Nadu. Not only because debates reemphasize social distinctions which are articulated in more elitist

56. Woman walking by a poster for the film *Uyir* (Samy 2006). Pondicherry 2006.

spheres but also because they identify a more general tension around film, politics and the power of images. This tension will be explored further in the next chapter *Chennai Beautiful*. There I discuss a beautification initiative by the city authorities in Chennai that suggests a shift to neo-liberalism from a certain kind of populist politics to catering for an increasingly visible middle class. The tensions between the vernacular production of images, the opposition to images and the shifts away from grassroots support and political brokerage to neoliberal imaginations will be the subject of these two chapters in Part III.

Cinematic fears

Film has an ambivalent position in Tamil Nadu. On the one hand it is a popular medium loved by many, but on the other it is often a cause of worry as well. Many in Tamil Nadu see its exposure of violence, romance and sexuality as a risk. Even though films are widely watched, many people in Tamil Nadu worry about the influence of movies, especially regarding the influence they could have on the youth. These vary from common worries about the appeal of the film's content to the spaces where films are screened. The popularity that film has gained throughout the years among the lower socio-economic classes in particular has created anxiety among upper

caste or class elites (Hughes 1996; Hughes 2000; Nandy 1998b; Pandian 1996; S. V. Srinivas 2007).

Elsewhere I have shown how, despite the popular use of (romantic) cinematic imagery in personal souvenirs such as wedding videos and photo albums, the same kind of scenes are considered obscene and offensive and deemed to have dangerous effects on adolescents (2006). Newspapers regularly carry reports of criminal acts or lovers running away from home, and in both cases it is often explicitly mentioned that the culprits or lovers were inspired by popular films. This alleged influence of film is not specific to Tamil Nadu; in media studies and psychology several strands of research are trying to find relationships between media and all kinds of (mostly deviant) behavior. Authorities regulate film through censorship and warning systems that should prevent people from seeing the "wrong" imagery.

Brian Larkin, in his eloquent ethnography of cinema and media technologies in northern Nigeria, shows how it was not the content or form of films that was subject to censorship by local authorities (2008). Rather it was the combination of built space, film and social practice that has grown up around the theater that caused anxiety: men and women together, the dark space of the theater hall and rowdy men, for instance. This uncertainty or anxiety is produced by the notions of technology's social and political possibilities and its challenging hierarchies in public space and social life (*Op. cit.* 131). Larkin also demonstrates how governments aimed to educate or modernize their citizens through media technologies. So being motivated by fear of the effect of media, educational and modernization projects also inform the regulation or implementation of media. We will see how this educational objective comes to the fore in imagery in the next chapter where I will discuss the Chennai government's attempt to beautify the city with new images. What I do think is particularly important here is to take up Larkin's (ibid.) emphasis that cinema is a social space which produces all kinds of everyday practices as well as pleasures, desires or anxieties (see also M. B. Hansen 1994; Kuhn 1988). Content as well as film as object become the focus of objections and anxieties.

Several authors have emphasized the publicness of cinema and have explored the ways in which it makes or made public life or the urban experience (e.g. Mazumdar 2007b). Both Lawrence Liang and Ravi Sundaram have worked on cinema within a larger experience of the urban – for example in the form of illegal commodities (L. Liang 2005; Sundaram 2009). The presence of fan clubs in and around movie theaters also indicates the importance of urban space in understanding the social experience of fandom (see Srinivas 2005). The visceral experiences of city life remind us of the shock-like experience that has been described by Walter Benjamin in relation to modern city life (Buck-Morss 1989). He describes the stimuli of modern city life and relates these to the stimuli of technology. Referring to the shock that Walter Benjamin described, Ravi Sundaram points out that at present the experience of contemporary media images also disperses space and as such bring new fears and worries with it (2009, 31). The stimuli of urban life as they have been described by these authors highlight the anxieties that media technologies can bring with them.

Films have always been ambivalent. During colonial rule, film censorship in India was concerned with the transmission of messages of nationalism and communism and the representation of colonial rulers (Hughes 2000; Sharma 2009). Before the national Indian administration imposed regulations on film theaters, the Madras presidency had already started to provide cer-

tificates for film theaters. Moral and political threats were dealt with through the regulation of theater space (Hughes 2000, 47).[4] The Madras administration worried about safety issues in film theaters, immorality and the presumed ideological effects that cinema would have. In 1918 the Indian government announced its first national legislation, which dealt with safety issues and the objectionable content of films in the form of the Cinematographic Act of 1918. Morality and safety were now officially judged separately (*Op. cit.* 52-53). After independence the act was replaced by the Cinematographic Act of 1952 and since then various parts have been revised or added.

Nowadays, films and their publicity have to be approved by the Central Board of Film Certification before they can be screened. Despite regulation, the content of films is regularly contested by opponents through protests. It is often the alleged inaccurate display of historical facts or social relations that is opposed.[5] The publicness of cinema means that in India films are frequently at the center of moral, political, or religious debates. Films come to epitomize certain viewpoints in these debates which are often played out in public spaces. The protests against films, even though directed at the content of films, mainly take place at the core spaces of movie watching, i.e. in front of the movie theaters in which these films are being screened. Theaters and their personnel have been attacked from time to time, and film hoardings and posters targeted and pulled down. In film's history in India, an issue that has regularly been raised and debated is the misrepresentation of (caste- or religion-based) communities (S. V. Srinivas 1999, 17–18). For this reason, films are sometimes boycotted by people that oppose certain scenes, depictions or other messages conveyed in the film.

The danger of film

Besides films themselves, the publicness of film posters and other film imagery causes various reactions. They may attract cinema audiences, evoke memories of movies, actors, scenes or songs; they may upset or amuse some and be completely ignored by others, or they may stimulate discussions on morality and vulgarity (Pandian 2005a, 60). As Sara Dickey puts it, film posters "engender discourses on what is right and what is wrong with the contemporary social and political world" (2005, 70). Here I want to explore various ways in which imagery has become the subject of worry and debate. These debates concern the material presence of the images as well as their content.

The High Court document briefly touches upon indecent film advertisements, which they label *obscene*. People look at these banners and allegedly get distracted by the images they encounter. These images, it is commonly believed, attract attention because of their inappropriateness or indecency, which is deemed a bad influence on the youth and an impediment to the development of a tasteful public culture (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 95). Repeatedly,

[4] See Steve Hughes' work on the policing of film exhibition during colonial times for a detailed account of censorship and film exhibition in South India (2000).

[5] For example the trilogy *Water*, *Fire* and *Earth* by Deepa Metha which depict among others the outcast position of widows, prostitution and a lesbian relationship have been strongly opposed by Hindu nationalist parties that claim that such a depiction does not do any justice to what they see as Hindu culture in India.

people I conversed with expressed their opinion about the harmful influence of movie hoardings. Almost always someone was able to describe a particular instance in which a hoarding had caused dangerous situations or uproar. For example, a young woman immediately recalled one occasion when a hoarding caused trouble. She was referring to a huge publicity hoarding on Chennai's main thoroughfare, Anna Salai, for the movie *Vallavan* (T.R. Silambarasan, 2006) on which one could see the actor Simbu biting the lips of the actress Nayan. She said, and I quote:

> *Even on the first day, the banner caused accidents so it was removed immediately. Can you imagine – a huge banner on which Simbu is biting someone's lips! Of course it would cause accidents! It distracted the youngsters who kept staring at it. But it also influenced these youngsters. You know how people get influenced by these things. Hoardings are very bad.*

The huge advertisement was removed within a day. Once in a while, in Chennai and in other places as well there is uproar in a neighborhood when posters show allegedly indecent content.[6] Particularly near schools or major junctions in the city they are seen as dangerous for the youth passing by. These are instances in which some people – e.g. local residents – feel that the imagery displayed is objectionable as it influences or distracts people. What is striking is that these opponents object because *others* are influenced, not because they themselves would object per se.

Fans as well as non-fans often speak in terms of a distinction between lower-class fans and other fans and between fans and the ordinary public. As I suggested earlier, I do not want to reinforce these distinctions but rather understand them in the context of how they are experienced by some. If we now take into account this wider audience of fan imagery and other public imagery which relates to film, we can try to understand how this distinction is produced.

In many of the conversations I had throughout my fieldwork I was asked what brought me to Tamil Nadu. My answer usually evoked surprise. Particularly in a city such as Chennai and even Pondicherry where people from abroad come to study and practice classical Tamil, dance, or music; my explanation that I was working on fan clubs and street culture often evoked a reply such as the one quoted above. Working with "the masses" – as my topic was frequently described – provoked various reactions which were often accompanied by extensive descriptions of the embodied "behavior" of fans and of the lower-class masses that are crazy about film and let themselves be easily influenced (see also Chapter 1).

The distinction that is articulated by some of my conversation partners between them and "the masses" reminds us of Bourdieu's stance on taste, aesthetic value and distinction (1984). Based on his study of French society Bourdieu framed taste as embedded in one's habitus, relating to a person's social, economic and cultural capital. The aesthetic taste of the upper class elite influences middle classes in their taste. The working classes, however, according to Bourdieu, do not have the necessary skills to make aesthetic judgments themselves and therefore have a more embodied taste for "vulgar" artifacts meaning that it is the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption. The distinction between appreciation of pure aesthetics and embodied ways of consumption where seeing is central asserts itself in an educational tendency

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6 Anandan, whose nickname is "film news" Anandan, recounted several instances in Chennai when local residents opposed the hoardings in their surroundings. Interview with "film news" Anandan, Chennai 2008.

57. India's omnipresent "stick no bills" sign that is often used on the compound walls of government buildings to keep them free from posters or murals. Mumbai 2010.

taken up by more elitist groups and authorities to educate the "masses". This is apparent in the censorship of abusive content in films. But it has also become an issue of cleaning urban spaces of certain content.

Cut the cutout culture!

The condemnation of hoardings does not only concern movie imagery. Imagery in public spaces is under discussion across the board in Tamil Nadu: politically, administratively but also in the public domain of discussion which engages with this imagery more generally. Although the content of movies is controlled under the Cinematographic Act of 1952, posters and hoardings are not covered by this act. The Central Board of Film Certification considers this a problem and complains on its website about the fact that theaters display obscene film posters.[7] However, In Tamil Nadu the government passed the Tamil Nadu Compulsory Censorship of Film Publicity Materials Act in 1987 to deal with obscene and indecent posters (Pandian 2005a, 60).[8] The display of other kinds of public imagery falls under the Tamil Nadu Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act 1959.[9] This act defines advertisements as "any effigy or any bill, notice, document, paper or other thing containing any words, signs or visible presentations" (quoted from Pandian, Srivathsan, and Radakrishnan, 77). Moreover, for political imagery, the Election Commission has issued a code of conduct for political parties in order to prevent the defacement of public and private places. In this code of conduct it is stated exactly how cutouts, hoardings, banners and flags should be displayed in order to comply with the law. The fact that different acts and codes exist suggests the desire or felt need for this kind of regulation but it also indicates that the practice is widespread and therefore needs to be regulated.

Besides the comment regarding obscene film posters, the other worry that the High Court expresses in the document quoted at the outset of this chapter is the lack of regulation of the excessive presence of commercial advertisements. The Court's concerns could be situated in a larger debate on what should be part of a city and what not. It is not the content of these images that the Court is worried about, it is their mere presence that they find contaminating. Government authorities are increasingly trying to prevent pollution of public spaces and to discipline their citizens. Municipal signs such as the omnipresent "stick no bills" signs (figure 57), or "do not spit or urinate" signs have, since colonial times, become weapons against spontaneous "indiscipline" (Kaviraj 1997, 85). But the owners of private buildings also attempt to aesthetize their environ-

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7 http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/uniquepage.aspx?unique_page_id=4.htm, July 11 2012.

8 See also www.cbfcindia.tn.nic.in

9 Its equivalent in Pondicherry is the Pondicherry Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act 2000.

5. Prohibition mural put up by a compound owner in order to prevent illicit posters and wall paintings. Pondicherry 2008.

ment with signs and images to prevent defacement of their property. Figure 58 shows such a sign: an elaborate text listing prohibitions on this wall. Another growing development is the use of religious images on walls to prevent people from urinating against them.[10]

Ever since their first appearance, political, cinematic and commercial hoardings and cutouts in the public realm have been under scrutiny. The first recorded protests that manifested themselves around indecent publicity were against the huge ads produced by S.S. Vasan, the developer of the famous Gemini pictures in Chennai in the 1960s (Willemen in Jacob 2009, 49). The fact that Vasan was using public spaces to exhibit his ads and not merely theater compounds made his publicity much more effective. They were visible in more public spaces and he could select the space that he thought would be most effective. Yet at the same time their publicness also caused opposition (Jacob 2009).

Citizens and local authorities object to hoardings, considering them to be ugly, dangerous objects. They blight the urban landscape and force pedestrians and traffic into dangerous situations. The first move against billboards by the city's authorities took place in 1979 when they were removed from public spaces (Note 2007, 135). The following decades witnessed a rise in opposition against commercial hoardings. In contributions to *The Hindu* newspaper in 2007, several readers reacted to the increasing trend in Tamil Nadu's neighboring state of Kerala to put up political hoardings and arches on roads. In all reactions, readers mentioned the danger or bottlenecks posed by these structures to pedestrians and road users. Let me present some excerpts:

[10] See Madheshiya and Abraham 2008 for an account of these "tiled gods" in Mumbai.

In fact, time has come to make a comprehensive study on road accidents caused by such glitzy advertisements. There should not be anything on or by the road side of the road that will divert the attention of the driver.

These [arches and structures] are a nuisance, especially during the monsoon. Some of these structures collapse in heavy rain, endangering lives of road-users.

For every occasion, hoardings are erected near roads, resulting in serious traffic bottlenecks. Authorities must ensure that they are removed once the function is over.

(Excerpts taken from The Hindu, September 08 2007).

As can be read from these excerpts, the readers are concerned with the danger that large structures on the road can cause. Banners as part of the urban landscape of daily life can indeed also turn into a danger. Newspapers regularly report about blown down, collapsed structures that injured passersby. But behind the arguments on their danger lies an implicit acknowledgment of their appeal as well.

In 2008 the Madras High Court, following a request by the ruling DMK party, banned unauthorized and dangerously positioned hoardings in Chennai. Within several days the skyline of Chennai had changed radically as the city pulled down its gigantic commercial, political and cinematic hoardings. Around 4,100 unlicensed hoardings were removed from the city center (*The Hindu*, April 14 2008). Newspapers carried stories of delighted Chennaiites who could finally see their green city again; pavements and footpaths were said to be in use again as pedestrians did not have to navigate their way around metal scaffolding and motorists could finally see traffic signals again that had previously been hidden behind the gigantic objects (for instance *The Hindu*, April 14 2008).

In Pondicherry hoardings were also banned from the historic center of the city and restricted in other parts. Throughout the Union Territory the city has allotted particular spots where hoardings are allowed, however now subject to permission from the municipality. Again, the reason given by the local authorities for the ban on hoardings is the possible danger of the sometimes immense structures which are often not properly constructed or attached and which extend over parts of the roads and easily attract the passer-by's attention, causing accidents. These debates are therefore part of a wider discourse on urban elitist spheres attempting to beautify and sanitize the city and seeking to reduce its inevitable ambiguity. I return to this point in the next chapter.

Even though most hoardings are placed illegally, they will not be removed that fast, especially if they are exhibited in the name of the ruling political party. Political supporters generally feel less restricted in placing their hoardings, as local authorities will not easily go against a party's power. Even in zones of the city in which hoardings are completely banned, such as the colonial, heritage area of Pondicherry, influential politicians and their supporters place hoardings for special occasions, usually without any consequences. The party in power is commonly also the one whose images are the most pervasive in the public realm. During the DMK's last term in power, AIADMK supporters accused the party of preventing them from using certain walls. This is part of a common practice whereby, during the rule of one party, the opposition parties, and particularly the second largest party, is blocked from using public space to promote itself and its events. In 2010 this resulted in agitations in the state capital Chennai when AIADMK supporters were blocked from painting a mural to honour their leader Jayalalitha on the occasion of her birthday.

Take for example this excerpt from a Chennai Court Order in 2006:

The grievance of the petitioners is that thousands of hoardings are erected on public lands, on the road sides, on the pavements and platforms, and these hoardings are not only hazardous to traffic but also to public, since the pedestrians are compelled to walk on the roads facing risk to their lives. The state Exchequer is also losing revenue, since the owners of those hoardings are not paying any ground rent or advertisement tax…. It is also highlighted that almost all political parties in and around the city of Chennai are erecting innumerable hoardings all around the city. There are number of specifications for the erection of such hoardings within the limits of the Corporation, but none of the political parties seem to follow the rules and regulations and Corporation of Chennai is also not taking any measures either to regulate such hoardings or to collect the fees (cited from Note 2007: 135).

Political hoardings, which make up the vast majority, are notorious for being placed illegally. Posters of the Chief Minister of Pondicherry and other prominent politicians appear in places where they are not allowed to be exhibited. Sizable hoardings depicting the Chief Ministers of Pondicherry are regularly set up in front of the assembly hall in the historic center of the city and events are without exception celebrated with one or more hoardings put up there as well. This causes frustration among fans who are not able to exhibit all their images everywhere anymore. Selvam, for example, commented how in Pondicherry only the ruling party is able to display its imagery; the posters of other parties and fans are forcibly removed. For ordinary people, fans or less powerful political supporters the display of imagery is liable to the same kinds of rules.

But the opposition and the rules applied to curb publicity in all its forms did not seem to eradicate commercial imagery from the skylines. Owners skirted the rules and the city received – official or unofficial – revenue from putting up hoardings.

In the introduction I touched on the image politics of Jayalalitha after she took over power of the AIADMK. After she was elected Chief Minister in 1991 a huge number of cutouts and hoardings displaying her sprouted like mushrooms in the streets of Tamil Nadu, particularly in Chennai. At the same time, cutouts that were made for films also displayed the main hero in larger than life images. This excessive use of public imagery by the AIADMK party prompted the opposition DMK, during its next period in office (1996-2002) to restrain Jayalalitha's colossal presence with the slogan "*cut the cutout culture!*" Instead, the DMK began to assert itself by using murals and only occasionally putting up cutouts during party rallies. This was the beginning of the decline of the "cutout culture". In concert with the increasing popularity of vinyl, the urban spaces of Tamil Nadu started to undergo a huge transformation.

The popularity of vinyl banners and their increasing presence has caused more legislation. Now everyone is able to exhibit a banner for party support or other occasions. But this democratization of the use of public spaces for displaying images has resulted in a shift in audience that political parties are now addressing. The DMK, many of whose members had their roots in the movie industry, has recently started to criticize the use of popular imagery related to film and the use of imagery for political publicity. This was partly a reaction to PMK leader Ramadoss, who is a strong critic of hoardings which are made by political supporters and fans. Ramadoss is the most prominent opponent of the use of hoardings. He has given his party members strict instructions not to employ this kind of publicity. If, in spite of his appeal, they do exhibit hoardings, they are immediately suspended or expelled from the party. Let me quote Ramadoss in a

personal interview in 2008:[11]

> *Wherever you are on the roadside, you can see amma's [Jayalalitha] and anna's [Vijayakanth] [images]. Every political party uses banners. Does this happen in any other country or state? Wherever you look, it is this birthday, that birthday etc. On any given morning when you get up and go into the street, you can see a hundred banners and cutouts within five kilometers. The people on the banners may be people you like or not. When you look at these banners, it will mentally disturb you. It has become part of a culture. But there is also danger in this because of the traffic, and so many other problems. So we don't need such things.*

In public, Ramadoss reveals his objections less fervently but he does unmistakably fight against this practice. For Ramadoss, who fiercely opposes fan clubs in Tamil Nadu, public hoardings by fans as well as political supporters are evidence of the populist political style of parties in the state. Remember the fights the Rajinikanth fan club in Vannur had with local PMK members as their hoardings were pulled down regularly. The larger than life and ubiquitous faces of Ramadoss' opponents annoy him, particularly as they are evidence of their worship by supporters. His expression of annoyance relates to a larger discourse on the criticism of personality politics and the close relationship between cinema and politics in the state. This is most likely the reason why Karunanidhi has also openly started to refrain from political imagery in public.

DMK leader Karunanidhi has, probably in a reaction to Ramadoss, criticized the excessive use of hoardings by his party members and supporters and has called on them not to use his image for DMK promotion. A former scriptwriter who used movies as a propaganda vehicle for his party in the past and is currently widely portrayed on hoardings throughout the state, this same Karunanidhi now called for a constraint on the number of hoardings and the use of his image by his party. He instructed his party members to avoid using publicity and in particular his own image. So far his party members seem unwilling to comply with his request and Tamil Nadu is still saturated with DMK imagery. I will have more to say about this shift in the next chapter. I want to point out here how the public presence of politicians and movie stars results in anxieties and irritation, as verbalized by Ramadoss. Moreover, it has given momentum to establishing a shift in perception from populist politics towards another public.

The extensive use of hoardings by political parties and fan clubs remains frowned upon by the more elitist spheres of public opinion. From the words of Ramadoss to the statements of the public administration of Chennai and Pondicherry, it is clear that even though it is the danger posed by hoardings that is put forward, moral, aesthetic and political reasons lie behind the motivations as well. It is above all in newspapers that these otherwise not greatly discussed opinions are aired and hoardings are described as polluting and disfiguring the city. The fact that these articles are written in English language newspapers already indicates the "publics" they want to address and that journalists or commentators feel they belong to. The people who object are not the ones that actually display these hoardings. So the choice for newspapers here, is an act of disassociating oneself from another public. In an opinion article in *Outlook India*, the author ends his article with the following critical note:

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[11] Interview March 25 2008.

MGR might be dead for 22 years but put up a poster of him and you can be certain votes will come in. … But no matter how many posters the parties put up, the Corporation's job is to prevent defacing of public and private walls. It has now set up 155 teams -- one for each of the wards in Chennai -- to oversee the removal of poll graffiti. "Three hundred digital banners were removed since the date of the Lok Sabha polls was announced," says Corporation commissioner Rajesh Lakhoni. Many more will be put up -- after all the election here is almost two months away on May 13 -- and as many will come down because as Lakhoni pointed out the Election Commission had directed that the rules of the Tamil Nadu Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act, 1959, which prevented disfigurement of places open to public view by objectionable or unauthorised advertisement and pasting of posters in such places, must be strictly adhered to. And advertisements include any bill, notice, document, paper or any substance containing words, signs or visible representation. Basically, whatever! But then, who's listening? All are all busy with the dance of democracy. (Iyengar 2009)

This quote shows how comments on the disfigurement of the city can be juxtaposed with discussions on populist politics. So although the author criticizes the disfigurement of urban spaces, this relates directly to popular politics which are closely bound up with the production of imagery. This connection between disfigurement and refraining from populist politics has taken a new direction lately. Tamil Nadu's former Chief Minister Karunanidhi and the city authorities of Chennai have taken measures against the omnipresent veneration of politicians and movie stars by being stricter in the regulation of images. What's more, they have tried to introduce other measures, making it harder for fans and political supporters alike to use public spaces for their own publicity. The next chapter is dedicated to this recent shift.

Conclusion

Whereas the first two parts of this dissertation revolved around fan clubs and visuality, in this last part I aim to situate public images in a larger visual economy (Poole 1997; see also Introduction). In this chapter, I have shown how the publicness of images creates publics that are influenced by the images they see around them. The anxieties that public imagery evoke bring about a distance between the audience at large that is displaying and consuming imagery and individuals that comment on it (Pandian 1996; S. V. Srinivas 2007). The debates around aesthetic value or the notion of the mass or crowd that are articulated in spheres of opinion such as newspapers or that are mentioned to me in reply to my topic of research indicate a certain *experienced* social distinction in everyday practices.

By looking at the anxieties and debates that have been caused by public imagery I aimed to show how it is not the content per se but its social and spatial presence that evokes these anxieties. They do not merely highlight the dangers of obscene images or the material danger of a cutout that could fall on you, they also highlight the clear relationship between politics and cinema in Tamil Nadu and how this can be perceived.

The next chapter will go a step further again and show how a recent beautification initiative in Tamil Nadu has meant a shift in attention from populist political support to another kind of

imagination: world-class. It marks a shift in which the populist politics directed towards supporters of lower socio-economic classes seems to be replaced by other publics. The material space of urban life will now articulate the world-class imaginaries of the political elite.

6

CHENNAI BEAUTIFUL

SHIFTING URBAN LANDSCAPES
AND THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE

In 2009, in the wake of extensive criticism about the defacing of public and private walls by political parties and others, the Chennai city administration attempted to intervene in the elaborate visual encroachment on its streets and initiated campaigns to regulate the "pollution" caused by unauthorized forms of pictorial displays within the city.[1] From mid-2009 onwards, the city decided to enforce a ban on posters, murals and hoardings on two of the main roads running through the city. Billboards were pulled down and walls cleaned of posters and whitewashed, covering up the remains of the once ubiquitous murals. To beautify these roads, artists were commissioned to cover the walls with images of Tamil cultural heritage and natural scenery. Chennai's mayor, M. Subramanian, declared, "images of various cultural symbols would be painted on compound walls of government property on the two roads. …This is intended to keep those who paste posters away and improve aesthetics. Posters are an eyesore" (*The Hindu*, Chennai edition May 29 2009). Anna Salai and another road in the city were chosen to launch pilot projects for a larger beautification initiative. The success of the pilot led to the project being extended to the entire Chennai Corporation limits a year later. Today, more than 3000 public walls are prohibited from being used for posters and the like.[2] Moreover, Chennai is being more and more "embellished" with beautification murals: main roads, junctions, and flyovers are being decorated with images of cultural and natural settings, providing parts of the city with a new look.

As can be understood from the Mayor's words, the reason given by the city authorities for having the beautification murals painted is the rising agitation regarding an alleged absence of what is deemed to be aesthetic and the excessive display of hoardings and other public imagery. In this last chapter I argue that the needs of Chennai's growing neoliberal economy have been the catalyst for this "beautification" plan. The once ubiquitous images of political supporters, fans and others have now been removed. Instead walls are now beautified by means of images showing a neo-classicist, touristic version of cultural heritage and natural scenes in the local government's attempt at a "world-class" makeover of Chennai.

In Part I and even more so in Part II of this dissertation, I illustrated the ways in which fan club images are part of the public spectacle of politics. In the previous chapter I explored a number of ways in which publics form around cinematic and political imagery. This chapter takes up another shift in preventing imagery such as that made by fans, this time by the Chennai city administration. I situate the new beautification initiative as a debate over space, thereby symbolizing a broader discursive field of distinction and shifting public and political practice. I explore how the new beautification murals can be linked to three interrelated processes that are part of this "neoliberal turn," putting aside grassroots political supporters and organizations such as fans who make use of public culture. This chapter therefore gives an insight into the ways in which neoliberalization and world class take shape in Chennai. This shift identifies a sidelining of the lower classes which are being replaced by the increasingly present middle class. In this chapter I situate this shift in the realm of images. The epilogue looks briefly at the wider consequences of this shift for fans.

The first context of change is Chennai's positioning as a "world-class" city that wants to attract capital investors, and, related to this, the emergence of increasingly affluent neoliber-

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[1] The photo on the title page shows an artist working on a beautification mural. The series he is working on depicts the story of Kannagi and is copied from the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. Chennai 2010.

[2] Public walls are compound walls of government property.

al middle-class publics. "World class" can be understood as a global imaginary expressed, for instance, in architecture and the built environment, in spectacular and exclusive public spaces such as shopping malls as well as in the aspirations towards cosmopolitan lifestyles or globalized consumption (see Brosius 2010). The world-class vision seems to have become the incentive for many beautification and urban renewal projects. This has led to the new middle classes becoming more visible in urban space, as well as the elimination of selected parts of the city, such as slums, or the dispersal of inhabitants such as street vendors, who pose a problem for such an image. The gentrification of the city is part of new "spatial strategies" in the urban environment that create or reinforce social distinctions (Deshpande 1998).

Secondly, following Abidin Kusno (2010), I propose that the new beautification images seem to constitute social and political identities as well as reinforce old political ideologies. The particular history of image display in Tamil Nadu, in which urban space has been used extensively for political and cinematic publicity purposes, is strongly bound up with the conventional political practices of the state. Now, just as public space demands gentrification and beautification in order to attract foreign investors, the political system demands an image clean-up as well, as populist politics are deemed inappropriate in a neoliberal environment. Therefore, the visual environment as backdrop for conventional political practices has to be cleansed to brush away suggestions of populist politics. At the same time, however, the beautification murals with their focus on Tamil or Dravidian history and their mural form seem to reinforce the parties' focus on ideological Dravidian origins and identity, only now more focused on a generic "Tamilness".[3]

This brings me to the third process. The murals are aimed at rebuilding present-day Chennai and its image for an aspired future. At the same time, they embody nostalgia for the past rooted in the image of a collective history and identity. As the city aspires to become world class through urban renewal and innovative architecture, the beautification murals mostly refer to the "traditional" past. I suggest that the murals stand as testament to an allegedly collective identity and memory (Rowlands and Tilley 2006) through which a uniform, idealized, and consumable history and future can be (re)installed or (re)created. As hyperreal objects (Baudrillard 1994; Eco 1990), the murals seem to cater for the desires of the new, affluent middle classes who want to consume "tradition" in a simplified "postcard" history, a process which is embedded in neoliberal discourses and nostalgic references and which I therefore refer to, following Hancock (2008) and Ivy (1988), as neoliberal nostalgia or neo-nostalgia. As consumable historic narratives they become more potent than that to which they actually refer. Moreover, this history, assembled from fragments of cultural values and moralities, is deemed lost by the city authorities in urban lifestyles, and thus in need of being relearned.

Taking these three processes together, the production of murals indicates a move on the part of the city authorities to embrace neoliberal economic investments and the class of publics associated with neoliberalism by placing an emphasis on the aesthetic and the traditional while sidelining conventional political practices and loyalties. The murals turn the city into a picture postcard spectacle of aspirations, nostalgia, beauty, tradition, and moral pedagogy. They show a shift from more common uses of public space and taste to elitist visualities. In the meantime, unauthorized or "spontaneous" uses of public space are being replaced not only by sanitized,

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[3] See Introduction for more information on Dravidian and Tamil history, ideology and politics.

59. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting a rural scene of the harvesting cropping of rice and an ayyanar shrine. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

60. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting two tourists looking at the Mamallapuram heritage site. Chennai 2010. Photograph by McKay Savage.

beautified images, but also by new, different imaginings and desires regarding what the future, history, culture and beauty should be.

One thing that does not change is the idea of displaying one's vision in the public arena. While political parties were, and in many places still are, omnipresent in Tamil Nadu's public spaces, it seems these parties are now shifting their attention to a new public and new vision of the city. The murals are part of this shift. But the fact that images are used in this shift indicates that, although the practice changes in content, its canvas remains the same. This chapter traces this shift in content and focus. In previous chapters I showed how fans are increasingly encountering difficulties in displaying their images in public spaces because of regulations and competition with political parties. This chapter prefigures a further decline in display possibilities for ordinary people such as fans and local political supporters set aside by government discourses on the city. This shows once more how images are part of politics as well as displaying political competition.

Reflecting the essence of Tamil culture?

The renowned former hoarding artist J.P. Krishna was the first to be commissioned by the Chennai Corporation[4] to paint several walls as part of the beautification initiative. The images that he

[4] The civic body that governs the city. Its responsibilities include the infrastructure and planning of the city.

61. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting the Thiruvalluvar statue at Kanyakumari. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

62. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting a musician. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

painted on Anna Salai all refer to Tamil culture and heritage, village life and the natural beauty of the state (figures 59-62). Most of the murals follow the realistic style of painting initiated by Raja Ravi Varma in the late 19ᵗʰ century, and later on adapted, popularized, and commercialized in calendar art and cinematic and political hoardings. Among other subjects, the first images that were painted include village life, the UNESCO heritage site of Mamallapuram (figure 60), the statue of the classical Tamil poet and saint Thiruvalluvar at India's southernmost tip, Kanyakumari, several temples and temple sculptures, and performers of Carnatic music (figure 62). Another stretch of paintings on one of the large intersections in the southern part of the city depicts the mythological story of Kannagi, the heroic woman character of the epic *Silapathikaram* (figure title page chapter). The artist commissioned to paint the story used the version that appeared in the popular *Amar Chitra Katha* comics as his model.[5] He made slight changes to the images of the cartoon (leaving out speech bubbles), and the last image of this series is a copy of the Kannagi statue on Marina Beach.[6] Figure 63 shows the artist using a page copied from the *Amar Chitra Katha* cartoon with a picture of Kannagi that he used as a model to paint one of the scenes.

The Corporation selected these images to use for the murals and carefully monitored the painting process. For the first few stretches of wall, they authorized the use of a book containing paintings by Tamil artists that depict scenes of Tamil heritage and nature. Initially the Corpora-

[5] *Amar Chitra Katha* ("immortal illustrated story") comics have, since the 1980s, become very popular in India and with Indian migrants abroad. The stories often serve an educational purpose as they are about Indian history, religion, and mythology.

[6] Ironically, the statue depicts a fiery Kannagi placing the city (of Madurai, in the story) under a curse and then destroying it. The statue on Marina beach was the source of various rumors, controversies and agitation as it was suddenly removed for a while (Pandian 2005b).
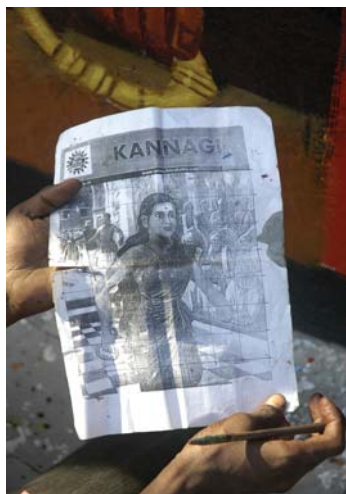
Figure 63. Copied page of the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* comics the artist used to paint the story of *Kannagi*. Chennai 2010.

tion planned to commission students from the Government College of Arts and Crafts; it was they who actually suggested this plan to the government.[7] They suggested heritage images with which the city could be beautified and stripped of its ubiquitous political murals and posters. Ironically, however, the city ended up commissioning former hoarding artists to paint the scenes. I think this is ironic because the same artists who previously flourished within the "cutout culture" and benefited from the commissioning of numerous political murals have subsequently seen their income disappear as political parties fought each other by imposing restrictions on cutouts. Within the current context of beautification, these former hoarding artists are now being commissioned to replace their own work on city walls.

In fact, the artists receive a relatively good salary for the beautification murals (around rs 35 per square foot), a sum that is much higher than what they were receiving (around rs 10 per square foot) for political murals over the past few years.[8] The artists I spoke to actually appreciated the work, not only because of the money they were earning with the murals but also because of the positive reception they get for their work. Passers-by often stop at the place where they are working and praise them for their efforts. This is a new experience for the artists. Even though artists rely on the public visibility of murals to gain new customers, they were previously only approached by fan clubs, political supporters and some other customers. Now ordinary people who like the images approach them and think they would beautify their own home as well. Moreover, several artists indicated that they enjoy painting a new kind of imagery instead of endlessly reproducing the faces of the same politicians. I will come back to this point below.

According to the Corporation, the images should reflect Tamil culture. However, one of the artists who was commissioned to paint the new murals found that not everything is considered to be Tamil culture in the view of the Corporation. Along with some colleagues, Raj was commissioned to paint a public wall of around 270 meters in length on Rajaji Salai, close to the seat of the government in Fort St. George. He explained to me how he and his colleagues often sketched scenes from daily life in their own environment: a sunrise at Marina beach, a street vendor selling ice cream to a young boy, or a rag picker picking recyclable garbage off the streets. For Raj and

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[7] My thanks to K. Gandhirajan, a teacher at the Government College of Arts and Crafts, who alerted me to this.

[8] With the advent of vinyl banners and digital printing, this amount has decreased over the years. When the banner business was still in its heyday, an artist could earn around rs 125 per square foot.

his colleagues, these scenes express the real and typical Chennai. He suggested to the Corporation officer who was in charge of the project that he would like to paint these kinds of scenes from everyday life, but the officer refused such a commission because in his view such images did not correspond to what they regarded as "Tamil culture".

Remarkably, however, in the light of the emphasis on "traditional" culture, the Corporation permitted the inclusion of a man playing golf on one of the city walls (figure 64). Even though this painting was commissioned by the local golf course, it was sanctioned by the Corporation and integrated into the series of paintings commissioned for this road. Later, when I asked about this particular image, the Corporation officers in charge appeared slightly embarrassed regarding what they now deem a "mistake". Such "mistakes" cannot be explained merely in terms of a distinction between images of the "traditional" and the "modern" as various other industries or technologies have been showcased on public walls.

The compound wall of a government hospital, for example, shows us images of doctors looking at X-rays (figure 65) and an operating theater; these images are placed next to a panel in which healers are shown using Ayurveda (a health care technique with growing popularity across India, and in particular in the southern states) (figure 66). Another interesting new image that I noticed a year later is actually an everyday scene (figure 67). Behind vendors selling vegetables and the neighboring cobbler on the pavement, the city has painted a view of market. The real life scene merges completely with its backdrop. But again, what is important to note here is that the vendors which are depicted here are not street vendors – they are selling their wares in what is meant to be the Koyambedu Wholesale Market Complex in Chennai. This market, a huge complex, was developed in 1996 by the government in order to relieve heavy congestion in the trade area of George Town (Muthiah 2004).

How should we understand the image of the golf player? How does it relate to Tamil culture as observed by the city authorities? The image of golf play was privately commissioned by the golf course. My suggestion is that, whereas doctors and X-rays reflect contemporary icons of the state, a golf player is an image of affluent consumption and urban spatial aesthetics and therefore does not fit into the range of themes that express the achievements and highlights of the state. It does however fit naturally into world-class imaginaries. The golf course is an almost symbolic part of world-class visions and is notorious for displacing slums and peasants.

Shifting publics: new images of world class imaginations

"Beautification" is nothing new and specific to Chennai. Other Indian cities are working on their appearance in similar ways, also commissioning new paintings depicting regional cultural scenes.[9] What is happening in Chennai, however, is somewhat different, as this is not merely an attempt to beautify the city by means of wall paintings, it also involves a rigorous – and almost iconoclastic – prohibition of every kind of billboard, even commercial ones, along these

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[9] Of course, also outside India there are many examples of cities and towns in which murals have become part of beautification projects.
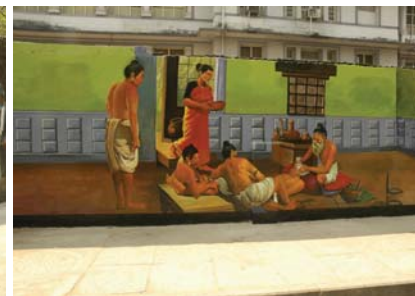
64. Mural of golf players that has been incorporated into the series of beautification paintings made by the artist J.P. Krishna. According to the Corporation officials this mural should not have been included as it does not represent Tamil culture. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

65. Man lighting his cigarette in front of a beautification mural of a doctor looking at an X-ray. This mural is on the compound wall in front of the government hospital on Poonamallee High Road. Chennai 2010.

66. Beautification mural depicting an ayurvedic healing scene. Chennai 2010.

67. Vendor in front of a painted scene depicting a market. Chennai 2011.

"corridors" in the city. Chennai's new look indicates that the city is claiming and restructuring forms and appropriations of public space, firstly in the form of beautifying the city through murals, and thus aligning it with a different form of aesthetic experience and urban imaginary, and secondly through the bureaucratic interpretation of culture that embraces capital investments. In this way, a distinct and selective image of the city is imposed, but whose image of the city is it? The following quote is instructive for what it reveals of the ambiguity inherent in the idea of reflecting Tamil culture. The author aptly pinpoints the ubiquitous presence of political imagery in Tamil Nadu's visual culture.

> …Thiruvalluvar, Mamallapuram and Bharatanatyam do contribute to the culture of the state, thus how can you call it the essence of Tamil culture without the colourful politicians? Always on the walls of Mount Road, they were the friendly neighbourhood Spidermen of Chennai. I miss Kalaignar [respectful artist] Muthuvel Karunanidhi in his trademark dark glasses smiling down from vinyl billboards at the Thousand Lights traffic jam. I feel motherless as I stare into the void left behind by the cut-outs of Amma [mother] alias J Jayalalithaa on Mount Road. When my boss says I lack aggression, how do I convince him it is because they have removed all the posters of Vaiko whose roar for the dead tigers of Lanka used to instil a revolutionary zeal in me on my way to edit meetings? 'Karuppu [black] MGR' Vijaykanth has been whitewashed; S Ramadoss has been shredded. On the smaller roads and bylanes, however, they all thrive in myriad forms.

(Blog post from Arun Ram, *Times of India* website *August 03 2009*)

Because of Tamil Nadu's specific historic background, of which political imagery has been an essential part, the restrictions on it today raise questions about how the political landscape is changing. Until now, it has always been argued that political parties triumph because of their ubiquitous presence in the public realm. It is striking therefore that it is politicians who have been trying to curb these images in the city; indeed, some of them are the politicians who initiated this visual regime of representation. Chennai is the only city that went as far as to completely ban all billboards from its urban milieu. It seems contradictory that politicians are now in favor of replacing their own images with those of postcard images of historic and natural scenery. This is even more surprising since in imagery issued higher up in the party the images of the Chief Minister Karunanidhi and his successor Stalin appear almost everywhere. The streets of Tamil Nadu are swamped with their pictures during party rallies, inaugurations or state-organized events. Their location and duration of display are more restricted and are in the hands of the government but still the message of less publicity does not correspond with what parties do higher up. The contradiction here is that the people who vote for Karunanidhi's party are rejected or by-passed by the restrictions on their use of images of adulation and publicity, whereas the city administration continues to use the same kind of images within the context of "official" politics. This contradiction is reflected in the following quote taken from a website that has to do with the city of Chennai:

> There was a time when the Chennai Corporation, having deluded itself into believing that 'from Chennai to Singai' (Singapore that is) was but a step, laid down the diktat that posters were banned along certain important thoroughfares of the city. But none had contended with the fact that elections

would one day come round for the councillor seats (Oh, the curse of democracy! If only those in power could remain indefinitely so or till death did them part!) and what better way to canvas for votes than to indulge in poster wars? How else can you highlight achievements or failures in making a world-class city? (mmm, madras musings Vol. XXI No. , November 1-15, 2011).

Political parties in the state are still largely dependent on support from lower socio-economic classes and this makes the politics of visibility necessary after all. The rejection of grassroots images by political rulers, however, suggests an act of distancing from the political praise and linkages that these images symbolize and sustain. In fact, this kind of political practice is deemed populist and does not fit into the neoliberal economy that the city is also aspiring to adopt.

The beautification murals, as part of a larger gentrification project taken up by the city, can be situated in Chennai's aspirations to become an attractive, world-class city.[10] Such aspirations started with the former Mayor, M.K. Stalin, son of current Chief Minister Karunanidhi, initiating the *Singara* [beautiful] Chennai plan, in which parts of the city were to be beautified and made attractive to economic investors. Chennai realizes its economic and global aspirations with conspicuous initiatives that selectively refurbish the city: IT corridors, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and beautification schemes involving the renovation and planning of roads and parks, the erection of large statues, and, as I show here, the embellishment of public walls.

The aspiration to become a world-class city is informed by an envisioning of the future and other city models that appeal to the imagination. In India, cities such as Shanghai, Dubai, and particularly Singapore feed the imagination of what this ideal city looks like (see also Brosius 2010).[11] Politicians realize that the image of a place is important in attracting economic capital investors – and particularly international ones (Arabindoo 2007, 2). Partha Chatterjee and others have already observed the tendency over the last decades to clean up and gentrify Indian cities and reclaim their spaces for what Chatterjee suggestively describes as "proper citizens" (2004, 131–132). Foucault has mapped out how in the emergence of Europe legitimacy has been based on the claim to provide wellbeing for the population using simplified models of the world (Foucault in Chatterjee 1998; Scott 1998). This discourse on developing the city for the wellbeing of the population is linked to the idea of rationalizing city space with proper infrastructure and a healthy environment (Nigam 2001, 42).

Chennai is using the large beautification project to emphasize its own attractiveness and to root out unplanned encroachments that are seen as unsolicited uses of the city. Local authorities in Chennai are actively erasing images of the city that do not belong in this cosmopolitan view of being attractive or "world class". Publicity and visualizations are put into play in order to pursue imaginations and transformations of public spaces, and they have become crucial tools for changing the image of the city and the ways in which belonging to the city is defined (Zukin 1995). In this regard, the city selectively attempts to push back the encroachment on public space by restricting its use.

Whereas on the one hand a certain segment of and practice in the city is being curbed and

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[10] Chennai is not the only Indian city searching for world-class stature. Other big cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi actively try to position themselves on the world map.

[11] In Tamil Nadu, Singapore is often evoked as a model of a clean, efficient and attractive city. The long relationship with the Tamil diaspora in Singapore has played an important role in conveying the image of Singapore as a city of progress as well as in reinforcing cultural and historic roots (Beelen, Gerritsen and Srivathsan 2010).

set aside, on the other hand, the beautification images point to a shift in attention towards another public. By becoming an attractive city for affluent investors and citizens, Chennai seeks to reach an audience of middle-class professionals aspiring to join the ranks of a global class of similar professionals. The middle class in India is now not only much more visible, there are also more people belonging to this group. As slum dwellers are removed from sight within the city, the neoliberal middle classes are becoming much more visible instead. In the conclusion I will show how this visibility is situated in public space related to the cinema. Here I want to highlight the increase of middle-class publics and governments catering for their alleged needs and discourses of world class.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s brought a rise in lucrative businesses and consequently an increase in the number of affluent middle-class Indians. Several authors have indicated that the notion of middle class is used as a marker by means of practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), the wish to be visible and of belonging to a "world class" (Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006; Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008). This public visibility of the middle class expresses itself in conspicuous consumption (Brosius 2010, 23), but also in a political culture shifting from "older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class-based culture of consumption" (Fernandes 2006, XV). In this light, the golf player who has been inserted into the series of images would actually not be an anomaly after all. This becomes more and more evident in the material form of the city, as Chennai is increasingly becoming a city selectively made up of malls, multiplexes, exclusive housing estates and IT corridors. Satish Despande highlights the "spatial strategies" of social processes, indicating that "[a] spatial strategy not only unfolds *in* space, it is also *about* space—its appropriation, deployment, and control" (1998, 250).

The way in which the built environment is structured within the city indicates a symbolic landscape just as during colonialism the power of public images came to a fore through architecture, parks and statues as important markers of imperial virtue and power (Hancock 2008; Srivathsan 2000; Tartakov 2000). The commemoration of heroes as portrayed in colonial sculptures has also become a common factor in post-independent political contests. The DMK, which emerged from the DK – the former self-respect movement –initiated the use of icons in urban spaces to make Chennai a city with a Tamil identity. These icons came in the form of statues as well as more ephemeral forms such as murals or cutouts.[12] Chennai, as well as other places in Tamil Nadu, was the location of statues of several leaders. Arterial roads such as Anna Salai, Marina Beach and Rajaji Salai were chosen as the main locations for the statues.[13]

Benedict Anderson, in his well-known work on nationalism, argues that the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion was through three institutions: the museum, the census and the map (Anderson 1991). He suggests that by placing them in a museum, monuments become repositioned as regalia of the *secular* colonial state (Anderson 1991, 182–185 emphasis by the author). Mechanical reproduction resulted in a pictorial census and logoization of monuments. And it is precisely in this reproducibility of regalia that the power of the state lies. The

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[12] See Hancock 2008; Pandian 2005b; Srivathsan 2000 for detailed accounts of the use of statues and architecture by the DMK.

[13] In 1986 the DMK erected several statues of Tamil literary scholars and mythical figures (Kannagi) on Marina Beach. Annadurai and MGR are commemorated with a memorial here as well. Their memorials are popular tourist destinations in Chennai for Tamil Nadu tourists.

politicization of monuments through reproducibility can be pursued in the field of wall paintings. The postcard images of monuments emphasize the state's connection to these monuments through their endless reproducibility on images.

Of late, the Tamil identity constructed in and embodied through these icons has not been as rooted in Dravidian nationalism as before, but a glorification of the Tamil past has continued to play a role in politics throughout the years as a sign of a shared Tamil identity. The recent beautification initiative, consisting of the wall paintings but also several statues displaying scenes of Tamil culture and leaders made by artists from the College of Arts and Crafts, highlights the new focus on this shared Tamil identity.

In this regard, when we look more closely at the spatial politics of the new interventions we find that the city administration is really only concerned with that section of the city that relates to a shift in the public. Several areas, or corridors of the city, are being reorganized, sanitized and beautified partly to realize the global aspirations of this new public.[14] On the fringes of these corridors, as Arun Ram has already observed, political and commercial imagery thrives in myriad forms.

Aspirations for the future, nostalgia for the past

The aspiration to become a world-class city and to attract a middle-class audience is oriented towards a prosperous future and informed by a reproduction and evocation of the past through the revival of postcard images of vernacular architecture, ritualized commemoration and "traditional" practices (Brosius 2010; Hancock 2008). As Christiane Brosius points out, the heterogeneous group of the middle class negotiates concepts such as national identity and "worldliness," or tradition and modernity (Brosius 2010, 12) in which heritage and nostalgia can be utilized as markers of "having tradition". Brosius convincingly shows how being world class is a "rooted" cosmopolitanism, i.e. rooted in locality, heritage and moral instruction and consumption.

In Tamil Nadu, the evocation of the past is more specifically directed at the politics of the Dravidian or Tamil linguistic heritage of the region. Although today Dravidianism has become a generic sign of "Tamilness," in the past it was much more closely tied to nationalist and linguistic projects in which Tamil Nadu distinguished itself from the north of India in religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions (Ramaswamy 1998). Political parties, particularly the DMK in its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, gained political capital by promoting itself as the guardian of the Tamil language and the Tamil cause (Ramaswamy 1998, 73). The placement of ephemeral yet spectacular cutouts of cinematic and political figures and more permanent monuments of historic figures has played an important role in the construction of Chennai as a Tamil city as well as in establishing the political face and identity of these parties.[15] Then and now, the politicization and reproduction of monuments or, as discussed here, beautification murals, actually reinforce the state's connection to what it wants to represent and hence reinforce its power (Anderson

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[14] I would like to thank A. Srivathsan for alerting me to the "corridorization" of Chennai's beautification.

[15] See Hancock 2008; Jacob 2009; Pandian 2005b; Srivathsan 2000 for detailed accounts of the use of cutouts, statues and architecture by political parties.

1991, 182–185; Kusno 2010). Just as with monuments, the beautification murals are a type of symbolic speech (Anderson 1978) in which the authorities convey a common past and future. At first, we could argue, this was done through the symbolic language of films and the spectacular, whereas now the state relies on its alleged historic cultural past.

According to the Corporation officials I interviewed[16] the murals have two main objectives. First of all, as I already suggested above, the murals are intended to deter people from using these walls for political or commercial purposes; hoardings or billboards with this function are considered unsightly and walls should now be pleasant to look at. The second argument put forward by the Corporation is one of cultural promotion and education. The beautification murals aim to show the rich cultural tradition of the state in the form of consumable heritage sites and cultural traditions.

What is interesting is that none of the murals shows explicitly religious sites or ritual interaction. Many sites or practices are associated with religious or ritual interaction, but in their representation on the walls they seem removed from this embeddedness. As postcard images, temples merely become heritage sites and Carnatic musicians are shown performing with their shoes on (figure 62).[17] Instead of the importance of the tradition as lived, the images emphasize the (touristic) importance of the state's heritage in a universal language of heritage. Just as with museums, heightening and isolating images turns cultural materials into (art) objects (Alpers 1991). Now the city itself has become a tourist brochure or a selection of postcards, a spectacle from which tradition can be selectively picked and consumed. The incorporation of the touristic present in some images (figure 60) reinforces the relevance of the monuments as heritage sites.

Besides turning Tamil Nadu into a site of spectacle and cultural promotion, the Corporation indicates that cultural traditions should also be kept alive within the city. The murals should teach the young about the State's culture and historic past, something people supposedly forget when growing up in the city. The depiction of those aspects of culture that are believed to pass into oblivion in the city and consequently have to be revived, highlights a nostalgic imagination of the past and the village. In the light of the booming economy for which Chennai is selectively refurbishing its city, the pedagogical aim of the murals, I suggest, is not necessarily directed only at the younger generation but also at a wider middle-class audience. This may explain the ease with which the mural of the golf player was incorporated into the series of "traditional" settings, despite the exceptionality of the mural within the series as a whole. Moreover, by addressing a wider middle-class audience, the murals are not just educational but speak to a form of Tamil world class.

Since the envisioning of the village as the repository of Indian culture by orientalist scholars and figures such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, it has become a privileged trope in the imagining of the "original" and "real" India. Following on from this vision, cities are deemed to be degraded places that seem to have lost the wisdom, morality and harmonious lifestyle of the

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[16] Personal conversations with several Corporation officials that are responsible for the selection or supervision of the new murals, i.e. the PRO, the deputy Commissioner, the Superintending Engineer (Bridges) and the chief engineer of Corporation zone 10. Chennai, 2010.

[17] My thanks to Sumathi Ramaswamy for alerting me to the odd fact of the shoes on this mural. A musician wearing shoes would normally not be appropriate firstly because gods do not wear shoes and secondly because Carnatic music itself is considered as having divine origins and it is usually the goddess Saraswati who is depicted with the musical instrument the *veena*, just as in this picture.

countryside. This rural lifestyle is believed to have disappeared with the mass movement to the city and should be passed on again to individualistic and materialistic city dwellers.

These ideas about the new middle classes are reflected in stereotypes, fuelled by media coverage, stating that the rapidly growing young middle class made up of IT professionals is leading this individualistic and materialistic lifestyle with all its negative connotations of materialism, sexual affairs and an active nightlife (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006). I am not interested in tracing these stories but I do think that the omnipresence of such rumors and opinions actually reinforces the ideas about the middle-class lifestyle and the city as a place of decay that is rapidly losing its traditional values and morals.

As a moral-pedagogical tool, the beautification murals fit in with the nostalgia for the idealized, harmonious village and traditional way of life. This nostalgia has come to be envisaged and articulated in consumption patterns and lifestyles, and by themed sites that noticeably refer to the past or rural life in films, theme parks, handicraft exhibitions, heritage hotels, museums, craft villages, or ethnic chic (Brosius 2010; Hancock 2008; Srivastava 2009; Tarlo 1996).

Mary Hancock has coined the term "neoliberal nostalgia" to indicate how, under the banner of neoliberal globalization, heritage-themed sites rearticulate rural life for the cosmopolitan elites (2008, 148–149). These sites, she argues, have come to epitomize what modernity has displaced; they serve as sanitized reproductions of rural life and the past. Hence, heritage is something arising within capitalism and not against it; it is a counter-narrative of the city, taking place within the landscape of urban life. By showing images of Tamil heritage, rural life and the past, the new murals are part of this counter-narrative of neoliberal nostalgia. The patchwork of images from different periods, themes and genres indicates that this is not nostalgia for a specific period or past but for an arbitrary and assembled past which was not experienced as such by its referents themselves (Appadurai 1996; Ivy 1988). History and tradition have become postcard images drawing on stereotypical images and "memories" that evoke "neo-nostalgia" (Ivy 1988). Marilyn Ivy has similarly developed the concept of "neo-nostalgia" in relation to tourism ads in Japan which do not refer to a specific period but to a free-floating past in which "[t]he idea of the neo is a literal displacement from any original referent" (Ivy 1988, 28). The ad hoc assemblage and ubiquitous repetition of images, reinforced by similar genres such as calendars, postcards or movies, underpins this feeling of "postcard" or "neo" nostalgia.

Conclusion

Who actually looks at these murals? Even though, as I hope to have shown in this chapter, the city authorities seem to be aiming at the emerging neoliberal middle-class publics, this does not necessarily mean that the murals only appeal to them and not to others. Many middle-class people I spoke to were in fact dismissive of the "badly painted" or "kitschy images" and some people were not even aware of the new murals and often noticed them only after I drew their attention to them. In contrast, many poor urban city dwellers, such as the artists themselves, were quite happy to finally see something else instead of the endless iconic faces of the state's two major political leaders. I showed in Chapter 4 how, unlike those of movie stars, the images of politicians cannot deviate from their iconic appearance. The images of movie stars change

and remain attractive whereas those of politicians remain the same for many years.[18] Therefore many people in Tamil Nadu can enjoy looking at a poster for a new film and imagining for instance what the film would be like, whereas they are not attracted by the faces of politicians. People can appreciate the way an image is painted or the skill of an artist; they can acknowledge the scale of the images but many expressed their feelings of weariness about the faces themselves. With the new images popping up everywhere, I noticed that many of those traveling by bicycle or on foot paused for a while to have a closer look at the newly painted images.

68. Flooded underpass during the monsoon. The beautified wall is showing the first signs of degradation. The temple is covered with the remains of posters. Their bright colors indicate that they were most likely cinema posters. Chennai August 2011. *The Hindu*: S.S. Kumar and B. Jothi Ramalingam

So although the city authorities in Chennai and several other cities in Tamil Nadu (and other parts of India) clearly referred to the cutout culture of cinema and personality politics as an eyesore marring the urban environment, they actually re-used that urban canvas to cater to a middle-class public. They sought to brush away one practice of political display and replace it with another. But now, as before, this brings with it new economies of production and new publics that form around these visual economies; they are probably evoking the same lively engagements as the ones they replaced: as with the previous ones, people continue to like them, hate them, ignore them or even contest them.

Now it remains to be seen when the murals will disappear again, when they will be replaced by or even defaced by new images. In 2011 I came across the first signs of defacement. The picture above, for instance, (figure 68) shows a flooded underpass after heavy rain in Chennai. The beautified wall behind the scene of people struggling to navigate the flooded passageway is beginning to show signs of degradation. The temple shown in the painting is covered in the remains of posters whose bright colors betray their probable origin as cinema posters. The posters were removed, probably by the city authorities or the rain may have washed them away. Nonetheless their traces remain.

As postcard images the new murals have contributed to the reinforcement of the iconic, standardized status of history, tradition and the beauty of the state, but is their repetition not creating indifference once again? I think we can be almost sure that after the novelty of the mural form has worn off, the depicted scenes will descend from their short-lived presence in hyperreality into the sphere of clichéd, everyday manifestations that go largely unnoticed. In the meantime, the city authorities steadily continue to embellish yet more public walls.

[18] But even in the murals and other images of politicians a new trend has arrived in which artists use new, bright colors and recycle older cinematic images, particularly of movie hero-cum-politician MGR and his co-star and political successor Jayalalitha. The ways in which politicians seek new images for renewed attention is beyond the scope of this chapter but the changing images do highlight the constant desire to attract attention to and with images.

EPILOGUE

In 2010, around the time that the film *Endhiran* (Shankar 2010) was to be released, fans in Tamil Nadu read in newspapers, magazines and saw on television how the release was a worldwide phenomenon.[1] In the Introduction and Chapter 1, I have already described the film's worldwide success: it reached the top ten of popular films in the UK and the music release scored high in the i-tunes online music store. In India it was the highest grossing film ever made. The film's technological innovations were impressive. Before the film was released fans proudly linked their superstar Rajinikanth to the innovations. But these same innovations also indicated a fundamental shift.

In the previous two chapters I concentrated on a shift in publics regarding images displayed in public spaces. The removal of imagery from public spaces and its replacement with new beautification images indicates a distancing from a certain kind of populist politics and the embracing of a new middle class. I consider the release of *Endhiran* to be another turning point, in this case for the overall functioning of fan clubs. Is the figure of the fan declining in a state in which ever greater emphasis is being placed on neoliberal politics and imaginations? In this Epilogue I describe some current neoliberal tendencies which seem to indicate that the figure of the fan is indeed losing its currency in the realm of film production and watching.

Saktivel, the fan club leader and Panchayat president from Vannur, was until recently always assured of tickets for himself and at least the fans most close to him. He is in very close contact with both district leaders Rajini Ibrahim of Villupuram and Rajini Shankar of Pondicherry. For the release of *Endhiran*, however, for the first time it turned out to be difficult to get tickets. To Saktivel's humiliation, he, who as a leader it is assumed will get tickets not only for himself but also for his fellow fans could not be sure of seeing the film on the first day. In the end, however, Saktivel and many of his fan club member friends did manage to get tickets at the last minute. But then the next disappointment came. The film did not meet their expectations of a real Rajinikanth movie: it was too high-tech to appreciate the character of Rajinikanth that fans like so much.

The embarrassment of not receiving tickets and the disappointment of the film highlight three issues that I want to take up in this Epilogue. These issues indicate both a shift in publics and priorities at the level of cinema. Firstly, the humiliation that Saktivel felt by not being in a position to distribute tickets to himself and his fellow fan club members we could read as a sign that authorities who give permission for the fan show are increasingly sidelining fans. Secondly, as more and more movie theaters are being transformed into multiplexes they seem to be targeting a different public, at least not the public of relatively less affluent fans. Plush seats, popcorn and more expensive tickets exclude a public of fans that do not feel at home in that environment and often cannot afford such tickets. What's more, these multiplexes do not prioritize fan clubs in any way. Thirdly, Saktivel and other fans were disappointed about the content of the film *Endhiran*. The film suggested that Rajinikanth's typical roles were moving in a new direction: away from his fans towards a more cosmopolitan audience.

As I already pointed out in earlier chapters, the privilege of the fan show has been put to an end to once before. The city administration of Pondicherry and also that of Chennai have

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[1] The photo shows an ad of the Vodafone telephone company. They are put up on the blind walls of cheap government housing estates. Chennai 2010.

sometimes made it harder for fan clubs to buy the first day tickets for film releases starring their favorite movie actor. Whereas previously in Pondicherry local patronage connections and the Rajinikanth fan club's involvement in political canvassing activities had persuaded the city to give the fan show back to fans, in Chennai the city has been less accommodating and there fans have to obtain tickets in the same way as ordinary audiences. But even in Pondicherry there are signs that a fan show is less likely to return. This relates not only to an administrative move away from vernacular support, as I suggest in Chapter 6 with regards to beautification projects but also to a transformation of the movie theaters in which film releases are being screened.[2] Film distributors increasingly sell their films to state-of-the-art multiplex theaters instead of the smaller theaters that are a common sight in Tamil Nadu's towns and cities.

Over the past decades, cinema has gained larger public acclaim. For a long time visitor numbers were decreasing in movie theaters, partly due to its stigma but also because of the increasing availability of cable and satellite television, as well as versions on VHS and VCD. However, the increasing export market of the diaspora has professionalized the industry (Vasudevan 2004). This has resulted, among other things, in the development of comfortable multi-screen, air-conditioned multiplexes (ibid.). Increasingly, older theaters are being transformed into multiplex environments and new multiplexes are appearing regularly. The following quote articulates the ways in which multiplexes situate themselves:

> *Adlabs Cinemas, part of the Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group and India's leading entertainment conglomerate Adlabs Films, opened its first cinema in Pondicherry today.*
>
> *Adlabs Jeeva Rukmani has a total seating capacity of 1178 seats across two screens and is one of the best known locations in the city. Kamal Hassan's mega movie* Dasavatharam *was released in both screens with the first show starting at 6.45am and eager patrons thronged the box office as early as 6am…. The state-of-the-art sound and projection technology comprises of crystal-clear Dolby sound and superior Xenon projection systems, with three food and beverage counters and plush push-back seats in order to provide a world class cinematic experience.* (News post on Reliance website posted on June 13 2008, http://www.rbe.co.in/news-adlabs-8.html)

The text on the Reliance website , owner of the chain of multiplex movie theaters Adlabs, describes the new but also a few traces of what once was. From plush seats to eager fans that throng the box-office as early as 6 am. The new state-of-the-art theater was the first multiplex theater in Pondicherry. Soon Raja Talkies followed suit. The movie theater just a few meters away from Adlabs was renovated and converted into an air-conditioned theater with the latest sound and projection technology. Tickets can be booked online. Another theater, Anandha, which was appreciated among Pondicherry's residents for its quality movies, was razed to the ground a few years ago to make way for a shopping mall.

I am not describing these transformations to evoke a sense of nostalgia. However, the development of multiplexes illustrates a tendency that has been felt by theaters and fan clubs alike. Smaller or older theaters are not able to buy the latest releases anymore and are bypassed by the multiplexes that have the capital to buy the latest releases from distributors. Apart from the diffi-

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[2] See Athique 2009 and Athique 2011 for a discussion on the rise of the multiplex in India.

culties this brings with it for the smaller theaters as far as earning sufficient revenue is concerned, it has also caused fan clubs to lose their fan privileges. As already mentioned, they do not have the privilege of a fan show anymore and multiplexes charge much higher prices for tickets. Even though the first day shows of films like *Endhiran* are always sold for much more than for other shows, multiplexes' basic prices are much higher than those of the b-grade theaters that most fans attend. Where a ticket for a multiplex theater starts at ninety rupees, a ticket at an ordinary theater costs between ten and fifty rupees in Pondicherry, a considerable difference for the less affluent.[3] The price of the ticket therefore excludes audiences who cannot afford such tickets and who also do not feel at ease in such an environment. In multiplexes you pay for the exclusivity. In the words of Reliance, the owner of the Adlab theaters in the quote above: "The state-of-the-art sound and projection technology comprises crystal-clear Dolby sound and superior Xenon projection systems, with three food and beverage counters and plush push-back seats in order to provide a *world class* cinematic experience".[4] The cleanliness, types of snacks, seats, and sound and projection systems contribute to the "world class" experience that Reliance describes.

Although older theaters have introduced rules to regulate audience behavior on the first day shows (see Chapter 1), multiplexes are much stricter in the kind of behavior that is allowed. Phones have to be switched off and "fan behavior" such as dancing and singing is out of the question and completely banned. In addition, banners or posters made by fans are not allowed in the theater compound. Arikrishnan, Pondicherry's Kamal Hassan fan club leader, voiced his disappointment:

> The newly opened Jeeva Rukmani Theater told us not to place any banners or posters inside the theater. The Reliance group is imitating western style [theaters] by not putting up banners, posters or cutouts. Now we have to put up our banners on the road somewhere.

But exhibiting banners in public spaces has also been made much more difficult by city authorities as I described in previous chapters. Fans feel less incentive to put the same effort into imagery as they used to. Before the release of *Endhiran* Rajini Shankar said:

> The expectations for Endhiran are huge because Shankar is the director. He will do well and in addition Sun Pictures are producing it. It has a good music score too. But fan involvement will be less. They'll sell tickets mostly to people from outside [non-fans], only to rich people. […] Only if they cheer up the fans will the fans bring in the crowds to the theater. The fan show is very important but now there is nothing for fans. It goes only to rich people and only they watch the show for the first three days. We used to do decorations which attracted the crowds but now we are not going to do anything for Endhiran.

Both Arikrishnan's and Rajini Shankar's words suggest a feeling of loss. Although Reliance still describes the ardent fans thronging the box office as early as 6 am, Rajini Shankar and Arikrishnan do not feel attracted to such a theater environment. Banners, the once all-important images at celebrative events, are not allowed anymore. Rich people can see the film before fans can and fan involvement will be less. Fans do not feel connected to these new images of world class as they cannot support their hero by attracting crowds to the theater. The responsibility

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[3] These were the average prices in Pondicherry around 2008-2011.

[4] News post on Reliance website posted on June 13 2008, http://www.rbe.co.in/news-adlabs-8.html. Emphasis mine.

they feel to attract crowds to the theater has been sidelined. Even though fans feel the need to protect their hero by trying to prevent piracy (see Chapter 1), they were not happy with the simultaneous screenings of the film. *Endhiran* was screened throughout India in around 3000 film theaters, with at least four to ten shows a day, with an estimated 1.5 million people watching the film on the first day (*India Today* October 2010). This new trend of selling a film to multiplexes and screening it as much as possible on the first day(s) of the release is a way for the producer to earn its revenue before the film enters the pirate market. In this way, the film will most likely be screened for a much shorter time than was the case previously. As fans feel an obligation to keep the film running in the theaters as long as possible, the multiple screenings make it harder for fans to reach their goal of keeping the film in the theater for at least 50 or 100 days.

The third issue I observed deals with a loss of connectedness to the content of film. The film *Endhiran* is a continuous display of technological fireworks comparable to films such as *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002) or *Terminator* (Cameron 1984). This is not the type of film Rajinikanth fans connect with. The story of *Endhiran* features Rajinikanth in a dual role, both as a scientist and as his creation, the robot Chitti. Chitti is a copy of the scientist that has human emotions. When the robot falls into the hands of a competing scientist he implants a chip into the robot and Chitti becomes a destructive force. The second half of the film in particular revolves around Chitti's destructive forces. The film turns into a high-tech sci-fi story with countless visual special effects. The film departs here from a "classical Rajinikanth film" in which he, an outsider and low-profile person, fights the bad guys with his bare hands. In a "typical" Rajinikanth film, he saves the heroine, a family or entire communities from the bad guy's evil and social injustice.

His everyday appearance in films and in real life is what makes Rajinikanth so attractive to his audiences. Any film in which he deviated from this role was unsuccessful. *Endhiran* was hyped so much beforehand that it was almost impossible for it not to be a success. Fans as well as ordinary audiences were curious to see what this new film was like. Friends of mine who have two daughters, one of whom was preparing for her final exams in high school, picked up their daughters from school with the excuse that their grandmother was severely ill and the entire family headed to one of the multiplexes on the ECR road in Chennai. Normally they never watch films in multiplexes and they usually do not allow their children to spend much time at home watching television, particularly not films. But the new Rajinikanth release was an exception. Their daughters would never have forgiven their parents if they had excluded them from this first day glimpse of a new Rajinikanth film. It was not the story that they really cared about but the opportunity of seeing the popular superstar in the collective of other people celebrating.

But even though the film was a box-office hit in India and around the world, Rajinikanth's fan club members were in fact disappointed to meet this new Rajinikanth. Now Rajinikanth was not identifiable as the jovial character or as an angry person fighting injustice with his bare hands: the Rajini fans like so much. Instead the film was a chain of high-tech scenes overloaded with visual effects. Could we understand *Endhiran*'s visual extravaganza as not catering to lower socio-economic or rural audiences as the theme of the film is not something they can relate to? If we follow Dickey's (1993a) argument that film offers a realistic yet utopian world to which the urban poor audiences can connect and dream about, *Endhiran* does not seem to connect with this audience anymore. Even though Tamil movies are increasingly focusing on urban, middle-class environments, Rajinikanth cannot deviate from his particular role (see Introduction

and Chapter 1). Rajinikanth's character in *Endhiran* did show some of his characteristic style and mannerisms but most of the film revolved around the high-tech visual effects that went beyond a standard feel-good Rajinikanth film.

The music in this film, and even more so in Rajinikanth's previous film *Sivaji: The Boss* (Shankar 2007), disappointed many fans. Despite the fact that the music was composed by Tamil Nadu's most celebrated composer A.R. Rahman, most fans could not repress the feeling that the music was a bit too "foreign" as they called it.

Just as images come and go, gain power and lose ground, it seems that fan practice also transforms, adapts and vanishes. Once again, I am not describing these feelings of disconnectedness to end this dissertation with a sense of nostalgia. Rather, they highlight the way in which something that seemed a sustained practice for fans is subject to change. The disappointments described here emphasize the ways in which the navigational capacity of fans in vernacular political networks seems to be losing ground.

In this dissertation I have outlined the practices of Rajinikanth fans that start by relating to film and slowly, throughout a fan's life, involve the establishment of social and political networks. I have made a particular study of the role of images in the engagement of fans with their star as well as their proliferation in a larger social world of fans. In the first two parts I showed how fans become fans and how images produce and articulate a fan's desires, ambitions, and engagements. Images, I argue, are crucial ways of articulating the agency of fans in revering their star. Fans feel the need to see their star, to be close to him. The proximity that they desire is established in the image practice in everyday spaces.

In Part II I explored the politics of fandom. Once fans are older prestige and political networks become an inherent part of fan club membership. Fans consider the fan club a way of opening up domains otherwise difficult to access because of their socio-economic background. In other words, the fan club is an environment through which fans make the system work for them. The benefits, which are often mediated by local influential big men or brokers, range from movie tickets, access to political parties to prestige. Here too images are an important incentive in establishing and nurturing these relationships. These images are made to be visible and displayed in public spaces in towns and cities. The images do not reflect the socio-political networks by which they are somehow produced; they constitute a veritable part of life itself. I have shown however, that the fans' political engagements are subject to a constant sense of ambiguity. All fans expect political success yet one is not supposed to be openly political in the fan club.

In the last part, Part III, I move from the figure of the fan via images to broader issues regarding public space, a larger visual economy and world-class ideologies. Part III reveals a more general debate surrounding public space and image politics. In this way I try to situate fan activity in a larger world of cinema and political practice, frictions around imagery and neoliberal world-class ideologies. I show how a new type of image, now prevalent on Chennai's walls, is part of a shift in political profiling directed at the middle classes of "shining India."

All the chapters have prefigured various shifts and transformations. First of all in the life trajectories of fans from cinematic desires to political aspirations. And secondly in the materiality of images, in technological changes and how these have conveyed and transformed these desires and aspirations. Transformations at the level of the visual have also informed the last two chapters where I show how regulations, opinions and ideologies have resulted in the presence or

absence of images related to film and politics. Regulations have made it harder to put up banners and posters, which make it less worthwhile for fans to spend money and time on publicity. And finally, I end by illustrating the ways in which the entertainment industry itself is approaching another public, seeing new business in an industry that had been marginal for decades. The paths fans have found to create networks that make the system work for them, to open doors which are otherwise closed will become less workable with these shifts in political attention and in the movie industry.

All the chapters describe a shift from how fans employ a political patronage system to how it is slowly being undermined. Yet, I have shown how, even though the canvas of display has remained the same, publics may have started to shift.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roos Gerritsen (Leiderdorp, NL 1979) graduated in 1998 from the *da Vinci* high school in Leiden after which she studied Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University. During her studies, she specialized in the anthropology of media. Her MA research, for example, dealt with the production and consumption of wedding videos and photo albums in the South Indian State Tamil Nadu. Roos was particularly interested in notions of romance in love in cinema, in people's everyday lives and how these intersect in wedding media. This focus on vernacular media and its relation to cinema continued in her PhD research which Roos started in 2006 by working on fan clubs, public culture and images in Tamil Nadu. Since April 2012 Roos is working at the Institute of Anthropology at Heidelberg University teaching courses on media and visual anthropology.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Fanclubs zijn een universeel fenomeen: fans zijn vaak enorm toegewijd of zelfs devoot, maar hun organizaties worden zelden geassocieerd met politiek. In het geval van de Zuid-Indiase deelstaat Tamil Nadu maakt politiek al decennia lang essentieel onderdeel uit van fanclubs en de organizatie en motivaties daaromheen. Via hun individuele toewijding als film fan, vinden Tamil fans toegang tot een sociaal en politiek netwerk dat hun status en invloed vergroot. In dit proefschrift staan deze persoonlijk motivaties en verlangens centraal. Het proefschrift gaat in op de afbeeldingen waarmee deze verlangens publiek worden uitgedragen.

Afbeeldingen staan centraal in de publieke ruimte van Tamil Nadu. Deze kenmerkt zich door levensgrote billboards en talloze posters en muurschilderingen van politieke leiders en filmsterren. Een groot deel van deze afbeeldingen wordt neergezet door fanclubs, waaronder door de fanclubs van de uiterst populaire Tamil acteur Rajinikanth. In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik hoe 'Rajini' fanclubs via geindividualiseerde afbeeldingen een persoonlijke relatie met hun ster tot stand trachten te brengen, maar ook hoe zij met deze afbeeldingen hun eigen politieke ambities in de publieke ruimte uitdragen. Tegelijkertijd plaats ik deze afbeeldingen in de ruimere context van visuele straatcultuur in Tamil Nadu en de (neoliberale) veranderingen die erin plaatsvinden, en onderzoek ik hoe publieke afbeeldingen circuleren alsmede geproduceerd en geconsumeerd worden.

Het proefschrift is opgedeeld in drie delen. De eerste twee delen handelen voornamelijk over fanclubs en de productie van afbeeldingen, verbeeldingen en verwachtingen. Het derde deel plaatst deze afbeeldingen in een breder debat over het proces van beeldproductie en stedelijke ruimte als canvas van verschuivende sociaal-politieke ideologieën.

In de introductie die vooraf gaat aan de drie delen geef ik de politieke en visuele achtergrond weer waarin fanclubs gesitueerd moeten worden. De verwevenheid van film en politiek, zoals deze te zien is bij de fanclubs, is kenmerkend voor de geschiedenis van de deelstaat Tamil Nadu. Sinds de opkomst van de filmindustrie stonden filmsterren vaak aan de basis van politieke partijen. Ook omgekeerd verwierven personen en partijen politieke invloed via deze filmindustrie. Deze nauwe banden kwamen en komen nog steeds tot uitdrukking in een bijzondere, visuele straatcultuur. Deze straatcultuur manifesteert zich onder meer in grote billboards, muurschilderingen en posters, waarop filmsterren en politieke leiders vaak in levensgrote afbeeldingen worden afgebeeld.

Fanclubs, die als fenomeen opkwamen in de jaren zestig, steunden hun favoriete acteurs gedurende hun gehele carrière – zowel in de film als in de politiek. Deze inzet heeft geleid tot een wat eenzijdig beeld waarin fanclubs hoofdzakelijk gezien worden als een groep fanatieke aanhangers die zich ten dienste stellen van hun filmheld en daarmee ook van zijn politieke carrière. In dit proefschrift probeer ik aan te tonen dat de toewijding die aan fans wordt toegeschreven, gecompliceerder ligt. Mannen worden dan wel fan van een acteur vanwege zijn kwaliteiten als acteur en zij mogen inderdaad de indruk geven de politieke carrière van een acteur te ondersteunen, maar mijn onderzoek laat zien dat door de jaren heen het vooral de ambities van de fanclubleden zelf zijn die hun toewijding in de fanclub motiveren. Waar het lidmaatschap allereerst een wijze is om mee te doen aan het collectieve vermaak van films bekijken, wordt naarmate iemand ouder wordt de status en de (politieke) ambitie een belangrijke motor achter de inzet in een fanclub.

Deze inzet uit zich vooral in publieke filantropische activiteiten in naam van de acteur. Maar voor deze inzet en toewijding verwachten fans ook iets terug. Wat fans precies terug verwachten varieert echter enorm van persoon tot persoon: van gratis filmtickets, een foto met de filmheld, toegang tot een school voor hun kinderen, tot een functie binnen een politieke partij. Ik wil juist deze nuances en variaties, maar ook de veranderingen in iemands persoonlijk leven laten zien in dit proefschrift. Door deze veranderingen te tonen, wil ik duidelijk maken dat fans geen passieve pionnen zijn in de politieke carrières van hun filmhelden maar zelf bepalen wat zij uit hun lidmaatschap halen.

Dit doe ik in het bijzonder door in de eerste twee delen van het proefschrift te kijken naar de uitgebreide beeldcultuur waarmee fanclubleden hun inzet en toewijding zichtbaar maken. Hierbij tracht ik aan te tonen hoe een verandering in technologie ook een verandering in gebruik teweeg heeft gebracht. Rondom 2000 is vinyl het nieuwe canvas geworden waarop fans hun afbeeldingen van hun filmheld portretteren. Hoewel de meeste fanclubleden de digitale prints eigenlijk niet mooi vinden, is het gebruik van vinyl bijzonder populair geworden. Dit is te verklaren uit de mogelijkheden die vinyl heeft. Op digitale prints kunnen niet, zoals met geschilderde billboards gebruikelijk was, enkel afbeeldingen van filmhelden worden getoond- ook de foto's van de fanclubleden zelf kunnen nu geportretteerd worden. Dit brengt een hogere mate van zichtbaarheid met zich mee. Deze zichtbaarheid via afbeeldingen is cruciaal in het nastreven van politieke netwerkactiviteiten van fanclubleden: het versterkt hun prestige en hun toegang tot sociaal-politieke netwerken.

In het derde en tevens laatste deel van het proefschrift plaats ik de afbeeldingen die fanclubs maken in een breder medialandschap, waarin politieke partijen en filmproducties zichzelf adverteren met levensgrote billboards, posters en muurschilderingen. De laatste jaren echter, zijn grotere steden zoals Chennai (de hoofdstad van de deelstaat Tamil Nadu) zich steeds meer gaan ontwikkelen in de richting van een neoliberale beleidsvisie, waarbij geprobeerd wordt om de stad om te vormen tot een *world class* stad. Politici trachten de stad aantrekkelijk te maken voor investeerders, maar in het bijzonder ook voor de middenklasse die zich in het beeld van een *world class* elite vertegenwoordigd ziet. Daarbij wordt niet alleen de economische infrastructuur van de stad in die richting aangepast, maar ook de publieke ruimte en commerciële plekken van vermaak zoals bioscopen. Ze lijken zich steeds meer te richten naar deze *world class* ideologie. Dit is zichtbaar in een verandering van afbeeldingen en in een veranderde verbeelding van de publieke ruimte zelf. Dezelfde politieke partijen die oorspronkelijk de typische beeldcultuur van Tamil Nadu in het leven hebben geroepen distantiëren zich nu van deze zelfde beeldcultuur die vervolgens als populistisch gezien wordt om zich daarna vooral te gaan richten op de *world class* elite. Fanclubbeelden en de alom aanwezige politieke billboards worden nu geweerd uit de publieke ruimte. Met andere woorden, publieke ruimte en afbeeldingen zijn het canvas waarop sociale projecten worden verbeeld, ze maken zelf ook fysiek deel uit van deze projecten. Visuele cultuur is, met andere woorden, niet enkel een reflectie van de realiteit, het maakt er deel van uit.

Samengevat begint dit proefschrift als een etnografie van visuele praktijken van fanclubleden, en van de productie en consumptie van beelden in de publieke ruimte, en eindigt het als een etnografie van straatbeelden door middel waarvan en waarop conflicten en neoliberale denkbeelden en ideologieën van wereldklasse worden verbeeld. Ik eindig dit proefschrift met een korte epiloog waarmee ik met de bovengenoemde veranderingen voorspel dat fanclubs terrein verliezen in de filmische en politieke sferen waarin ze figureren.