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## **Fandom on display: intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle**

Gerritsen, R.

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**Author:** Gerritsen, Roos

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# INTRODUCTION

GOWRI'S

VELAN'S

Preethi  
Blue Leaf  
PLATINUM  
NEW  
750 Watts  
Super Extractor  
Grind n Store



விஜயா எலக்ட்ரிக் கம்பெனி | புதுச்சேரி

பாத்திமா  
சுரீஸ், கழதார் மெட்டியல்ஸ்

சுரீஸ்

MARGIN FREE SHOP

KIDS CORNER  
THE FAMILY SHOP

Syndicate Bank

VIJAYA

சரவண பவன்

VELAN'S

Prestige

அன்பு  
ஆப்திக் கல்ஸ்

*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).<sup>1</sup> In the words of Raqs Media Collective images crowd the streets and become the streets. Cityscapes in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> The picture on the title page depicts the ubiquitous signboards on the main shopping street in Pondicherry. Pondicherry 2008.

<sup>2</sup> 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*<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> *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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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"<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> These numbers are not reliable, though, as fans tend to

<sup>7</sup> See Derné 2000b; Dickey 1995; Mankekar 2002 for ethnographic accounts of film watching in India.

<sup>8</sup> When speaking about fans, I am referring to fans who are members of a fan club.

<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup> 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](http://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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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-

<sup>14</sup> Chennai’s former name is Madras; Mumbai’s name Bombay and Kolkata’s name Calcutta.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup> Personal conversation with 'film news' Anandan 18 May 2008.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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)

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

<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> After this complaint, MGR's image seems have returned in impressive numbers.

<sup>22</sup> 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).<sup>23</sup> 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<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> See Ramaswamy for an account of the Tamil language as it is embodied as the essence of Tamil culture (1997).

<sup>24</sup> *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.<sup>25</sup> 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-

<sup>25</sup> 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 thaana* (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 thaana, supere style thaana*" (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 thaana, ni super figure thaana*" (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.<sup>26</sup> 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).<sup>27</sup> 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

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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

<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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 visibility.” 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.

<sup>29</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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).<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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).<sup>32</sup> 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

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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).<sup>33</sup> 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 visibility 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

<sup>33</sup> 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 visibility 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 visibility 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 visibility 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 visibility 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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

<sup>36</sup> 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”<sup>37</sup> 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

<sup>37</sup> 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 visibility, 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.