



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Fandom on display: intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle
Gerritsen, R.

Citation

Gerritsen, R. (2012, November 8). *Fandom on display: intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20107>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20107>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20107> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Gerritsen, Roos

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

Date: 2012-11-08

1 THE
FIGURE
OF THE FAN





Flip that ciggie: Late nights with the Rajini army¹

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

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

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

...

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The figure of the fan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Tamil, the word for fan, *rasikan* (the feminine form is *rasikai*), is derived from the Sanskrit word *rasika*. It means “man of taste, one who is able to appreciate excellence or beauty in anything.”⁵ In modern Tamil, it means “an admirer, a connoisseur” and in the film context “a fan.” The term *rasikan* is used in all kinds of contexts, and is not restricted to film fans alone. Interestingly, although, for film fans in particular, the *rasigar* (plural of *rasikan*) *manram* (association) does have connotations of fanaticism, just as the English term suggests, the Sanskrit word *rasika* is used in the context of Carnatic⁶ music, and has no connotation of fanaticism whatsoever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How it all started: The All India Rajinikanth Fan Club

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Movie-watching

Seismologists¹² have recorded mild tremors in various parts of the world especially media related (TV, Internet etc.) in last couple of days. This tremor lasts exactly for 2 m 36 sec peaking in last few seconds. People residing in vicinity of "certain cinema" theaters too have reported the same. Further studies by "You tube" recorded more than 35000 such tremors during last 72 hrs...Indiaglitz, Gallata,rapidshare and numerous other websites opine the same. Medical practioners say that there is a sudden mass hysteria sweeping the state and is highly Contagious. Heart rate, pulse rate and Blood pressure levels are affected in certain cases. Endocrologists report that there is sudden release of "Adrelin" in human system causing harmonal instability. One common symptom on all victims are "Goosebumps" Milk vendors have called upon the public to ensure sufficient stock of Milk for their Home consumption on June 15th as they fear they will not be available in the market.....There are unconfirmed reports that there has been advance booking at Milk filling stations for "Tankers" "...and Milk supply to general Public may get disturbed. Hoteliers have announced that there will be no "PUMPKIN" in their preparations on June 15 as they will not be available in the market. A Vegetable vendor on condition of anonymity confirmed this. CAMPHORS are at a premium now. An emergency meeting of the officials after an extensive study concluded that the cause is "SIVAJI" The Trailor and movie releasing on June 15..... .How is it?? Thanks and Regards, Ramanan, Bangalore¹³

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

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

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

event. Most fans prefer to see the film on the first day and at the first show, the so-called FDFS¹⁴ (first day, first show) which is sometimes screened as early as six o'clock in the morning. Let me first quote several fans and their way of expressing what the first show means to them.

Saktivel, branch leader of his "block": *From the date of the puja¹⁵ for the movie we keep updating the news about the movie, we are very curious to know what his character will be like, what his message is and what the story of the movie is. So we cannot resist our curiosity to see the movie on the day of its release. Once, in my brother's house they had an ear piercing ceremony for his son.¹⁶ As he is my nephew I had to attend the function and I do some ritual. I said sorry for not attending the function but I had to see the movie Chandramuki first day first show.*

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

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

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

¹⁴ Acronyms are commonly used in India.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roos: *Why?*

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

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

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

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

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

The active audience

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Controlling the crowds

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

Shankar: *For the release of Sivaji we have to do lots of things. We lost the opportunity of doing it for Chandramuki (P. Vasu 2005) so now we have to show them our strength.²⁰ You should all help me by doing good activities as we did in the past, okay?*

Man: *Yes definitely, we will give you our support.*

Shankar, with an ironic smile: *Okay, saying this is fine but after you get the tickets [for the film] from me, you will not come here anymore, you won't answer the phone and if you pick up the phone, you let your child answer!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roos: *Do they pay a deposit?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keeping in control: narratives of a star

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Desires and aspirations: mimicry

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

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

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

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

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

Rajesh: *No, they simply laugh.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

Vigilantes

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Dear Phil,

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

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

Thank you once again

With best wishes

Sify Newsdesk

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Devotion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

