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PUBLIC INTIMACIES AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Publicizing fandom

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³ Often alcoholic drinks, cigarettes and the like.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Artistic creations

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

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



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

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





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

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



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

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

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

A history of gigantism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Banner artists and the rise of fan imagery

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

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

Once Kamal's movie Sakala kala vallavan⁵ and Rajini's Enkeyo ketta kural⁶ were released at the same theater complex. At the time I was not a fan of any actor, but I just did a painting of Kamal and displayed it at the theater. I wanted to see the movie Sakala kala vallavan, it was hit movie and I was able to get a ticket for it. My friend had tickets for Rajini's Enkeyo ketta kural so we decided to go the Rajini movie. After I had seen the film I became a fan of Rajini. So when I returned from seeing the film I took Kamal's painting with me back home.

⁵ Muthuraman 1982a.

⁶ Muthuraman 1982b.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Artistry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The advent of the digital

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

The changed appearance and use of the public arena brings questions to the fore on the efficacy of photography vis-à-vis painted images. In the remaining part of this chapter I will recount the transformation from hand-painted to digitally designed images and the consequences this has had on how these images are used by fans. These days fan clubs make virtually no hand-painted signboards or cutouts anymore. Yet many fans, as with the banner artists, consider the disappearance of hand-painted drawings to be a loss. Just like Ranjit, they do not appreciate the digital portraits, seeing it as a flat-toned medium, incapable of expressing anything. Looking back with nostalgia on the hand-painted images, the artists I worked with explained that painted images have the capacity of showing the expressions of the character depicted, whereas photos merely show a person’s appearance. In Chapter 2 I referred to the unproblematic use of paint applied to photos because in India people do not assume the presence of any “inner” character translated via physiognomy (Pinney 1997). It seems that on these paintings the expression of the person depicted could be conveyed with colors, expressions and the quality of painting. The specific corporeal aura of painted images is said to be enlivened by the use of colors, props and expressions, revealing and articulating the character played by a movie star (see also MacDougall 1992). What is worthy of note here is that the mimetic capacity of photography is said by most consumers to be problematic in digital designs: hand-painted images can display emotions whereas photography is flat-toned and realistic, even though most billboard artists that paint billboards do not have much freedom to experiment with different ways of painting (see also Jacob 2009). The loss reveals itself in the flatness that people ascribe to photography. Painted work is deemed to be art whereas digital design is just a technical job. Muthu, as an artist, finds a difference in his audiences as well:

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Public intimacies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With the multitude of hoardings in the public arena conspicuous imagery is required. For the same reason fans also question the sincerity of other fans if their hoarding is just a simple

compilation made with no effort. Selvam, for example, is always on the lookout for original images of his hero. He collects magazines and stickers and receives stills from the internet from a friend. When I met Selvam just before he was getting married, he was proud to tell me that he had found a unique still of Rajinikanth which he was going to use for his wedding invitation. Unfortunately, the image turned out to be less original than it had seemed at first when a former fan club leader of Pondicherry, Rajini Shankar, used a similar still for a piece of his personal publicity just before Selvam's wedding. Selvam decided to use the image anyway because he possessed this rare still as an "ordinary" fan, which made it unique after all, he thought.

Figure 51 shows the sixteen meter banner made by a local fan club in Vannur. They tried to produce a hoarding with rare images of Rajinikanth's long acting career. Rare images or special combinations of images from old and new movies and popular poses are ways to distinguish a hoarding from others. Fans of Vijay and Ajith, who are by and large younger than Rajinikanth fans, are especially well-known for the elaborate use of digital manipulation software⁹ to produce images that go beyond using photos and editing colors. They are known for inserting themselves posing in the same style as and alongside their movie hero (see figure 52).

However, many Rajinikanth fans I worked with deemed this to be disrespectful towards their hero. There are limits to the creativity of fans. Rajini Shankar commented as follows in response to my question on what he thought of this kind of editing:

No. We don't like that. We only like the original. That type of modification will create a bad impression among the people and also among fan club members. That bad name will spoil Rajini's name as well. If he gets a bad name, we will suffer. So personally we don't like that.

Most of the conventions for the use of images or opinions on wrongly used images relate to the photos of fans that are inserted and not on the photos of the star.

Fan publicity

Whereas the hand-painted boards and cutouts merely mentioned fan club members' names, except for one or two images, digital hoardings offer the possibility of inserting their photos easily. And this turned out to be a crucial advantage of vinyl. Perhaps the most important design potential of vinyl lies in the insertion of fans' photos. It resulted in fans' attaching greater importance to being visible or realizing that in political terms.

But one has to hold on to certain hierarchical rules. In the choice of their own photos on public hoardings, fans uphold club hierarchies; for instance, fan club presidents and district leaders will always be shown closest to the star, and larger than the others. The size and arrangement of the contributors' images also express both internal fan club hierarchies of importance and the size of the fans' financial contributions. Hierarchy inside the fan club is more important than a fan's monetary contribution. A fan's position within the fan club determines the importance given to placing banners. But this differs from fan club to fan club, region to region, etc. For example, a *talaimai manram* is obliged to exhibit more banners and spend more money on them

⁹ Corelpaint and Photoshop are the most commonly used digital editing programs by banner designers.



51. Rajinikanth birthday hoarding by a fan club on Koot Road, a main district junction in Villupuram, 2002 (collection Saktivel).

than a local fan club. And local fan clubs always place images of their *talaimai manram* on their banner. It validates the fan club leaders and upholds and generates their status (Mines 1994). Fan club member Tharagai Raja confirms this:

[On the banners] *the local fan clubs mention Rajini, the name of the movie, their manram's [fan club's] name and us [the talaimai manram]. Mentioning us is not necessary, they can decide if they want to, but it is a plus point if they do. If they place my photo on the banner, everyone that comes to watch the movie will see the banners with my face. Whenever I visit a certain place, they know me: "he is a man from the Rajini manram." So I will have some popularity.*

Tharagai Raja's comments illustrate how mentioning his name is advantageous for him, as it gives him recognition, as well as being valuable for the local fan club that mentions local leaders' names. These connections also link back to the relationships fan establish with local big men. Showing important people on your banner, from Rajinikanth, higher up fan club leaders to politicians, does not merely honor those people, their status also rubs off on the local fans that produced the banner.

The production of hoardings, posters and murals is well documented by local fans and is followed closely by other fans since it is one of the most significant ways of measuring a fan's seriousness. As I suggested earlier, banners, posters, and other imagery made for events are recorded carefully and afterwards sent to the All India Rajinikanth Fan Club, based in Chennai. The "evidence" on which the All India Rajinikanth Club bases its decision to appoint new local leaders is the archive of images that fans send of their activities. The AIRFC receives entire photo albums, DVDs, posters and other proof of activities and stores these in order to keep track of what local



52. Banner design for Vijay fans. The man in the front is Vijay, all the other men are the fans that have had this banner made. Interestingly, in the left and right top corners, images of both MGR and Rajinikanth have been added. Many fans of Vijay and Ajith add images of earlier heroes out of respect. Collection of Yuvaraj, Pondicherry 2006.

fan clubs do. The documentation that one develops should show that a fan is a hard worker. A person's power can also be affirmed by political means, but not by simply using the fan club network; one has to work for one's status. This work is captured by documenting banners, which was quite literally the case with Saktivel's video, half of which was dedicated to the banners made for the event. If we recall Mines and Gourishankar, who suggested that leadership requires skill and charisma and is not merely hereditary, a fan's reputation within the fan club is not simply based upon his relationship with his star, it also has to be acquired and demonstrated. Images therefore not only articulate these relationships, they actually engender them.

After the arrival of flex banners, the number of fan club banners increased at fan events as well as at other events such as birthdays and the like. By saying this, I do not want to argue that distinguishing oneself as a fan club member or fan club was not important before the arrival of digital technology. Indeed, choosing an artist and images for the cutouts and signboards was a meticulous process whereby one tried to create a hoarding that was different from those of others. Competition among fans and fan clubs is reflected in the activities carried out for a particular event and the images displayed. By means of imagery, whether it be having the biggest or unique hoardings, fans try to attract the attention of others. With hand-painted images, distinctions were emphasized by choosing a well-known artist that could make something unique and conspicuous every time. Ibrahim, the secretary of the *talaimai manram* in Villupuram commented as follows on the change from paintings to vinyl banners:

It is good for us. Before we couldn't use many images. Now we can. We welcome this kind of change. Nowadays everyone can see their image with Rajini's images because of the digital images. Some of the fans contribute a minimal amount of cash to make banners. But they

can also see their images with Rajini. In Villupuram they use images of Rajini, an image of Sathyaranayanan, an image of the head of the fan club, and an image of the union leader so there is a system of ranking.

Ibrahim highlights two important advantages of vinyl here. One is the closeness of a person's image to that of his hero. Seeing the two physically together is, just as with the more mundane images I discussed in Chapter 2, a way of confirming a person's fondness for the star. But besides this personal significance, fan clubs also want to confirm their strength and fandom to their surroundings. A Rajini fan in Vannur:

Posters and banners are used to show Rajinikanth's fame but with a photo of ourselves we have some recognition. In the village many people have the same name, but with photos they know who we are.

The desire to be recognized needs to be understood in the aspirations for power and prestige as I argued in Chapter 3. Fans feel a certain power by being a member of the fan club and this power is transferred more easily if a person's image is widely displayed. This is particularly the case for fans that are also politically active, as members of a political party use banners to mark their presence in the neighborhood. Their connections to local big men are also displayed on banners, as they often include them with their image.

Figure 53 shows a hoarding that was put up for the occasion of the ear-piercing function of children of a Rajinikanth fan club member residing in the city of Gingee. I attended this event with Saktivel and some fellow fan club members from his area, Thiruchitrabalam. The Gingee access road, adjacent to the marriage hall in which the ceremony took place, was decorated with flags and hoardings for about five hundred meters and centered on the hall. One type consisted of hoardings and flags related to the DMK party of which this fan club member was a member; the others depicted Rajinikanth and important leaders of the Rajinikanth fan club (figure 54).

As you can see in figure 53, two men are still working on covering part of the hoarding containing the text of the previous event for which this hoarding was used. Above where they are pasting this piece of paper, another piece has already been replaced; it currently portrays the family that organized this function, consisting of the parents and their children. Additionally, the hoarding portrays four images of Rajinikanth in close up and photos of local fan club members (in the middle) and direct fan club leaders (top right). By showing images of Rajinikanth and the DMK, the father of this family showed his affiliation to both the Rajinikanth fan club and the DMK party. He reused the banner, which is not common, as he did not have the financial means to celebrate this function grandly. However, to establish himself, several fans that attended the function told me, he wanted to make the celebration impressive. The images were not signs to the unknown passers-by who take this access road to enter Gingee but were more aimed at other fans and party members. In this way, the man showed his dedication towards these groups.

When the car in which Saktivel, his fellow club members and I were driving towards the function approached the scene, Saktivel immediately commented upon the obvious combination of a fan club banner and political paraphernalia: the entire road was decorated with DMK flags and the large banner: "Ibrahim will not like this," was his response. He was referring to the combination of DMK and fan club imagery which Ibrahim, the leader of Villupuram district, would not like. Both Ibrahim and Saktivel are also active in politics and as Panchayat president,

53. Hoarding for the ear-piercing ceremony of the son of a Rajinikanth fan club member. The hoarding is reused for this occasion as you can see by the two men pasting a new piece of paper on top of the previous text. Gingee 2008



54. Two banners for the ear-piercing ceremony. The left-hand one depicts Rajinikanth (left), district fan club leader Ibrahim (top right), the parents (below) and their children. The right-hand banner shows the same family but now with their DMK connections. In the top right corner we see Karunanidhi, below his son Stalin and three local DMK leaders. Gingee 2008.



but they have never made these two coalesce in a problematic fashion. This person had. Showing a fan's political affiliation is not accepted in relation to the fan club but it is commonly done. Even though politics is an apparent part of being a fan club member, using Rajinikanth for your own benefit is not accepted. Much of the conversation I had with fans or which I encountered between fans was about the image practices of other fans. They commented upon others and how they had or hadn't used Rajinikanth or their own image appropriately. See for example the following message that was placed on the discussion board of the rajinifans.com website:

Hi ss [Superstar] fans,

iam from thiruvannamalai ,i did a special archana for superstar on its birthday on arunachala temple here but my blood are boling due to ss [superstar] thiruvannamalai fans club activities ,they did not did anyting on our ss birthday they simply kept banners ,the banners also have lots of fans photos only in big size they have minimized our ss images they kept banner as 56 th birthday in most of the places ,all the politicians are here using our superstar songs for the birthday ads ,etc.etc but nobody is asking about this,last leader of thiruvannamalai fans club(name-arulkanth) used our ss name and songs and entered to politics ,somebody take this matter to satyanarayana [All India Rajinikanth Fan Club leader] immediatly!!¹⁰

Message written by KING, rajinifans.com YahooGroup. Thursday, December 14, 2006.

¹⁰ Because of the many mistakes made in this message I have chosen to keep to the writer's own original spelling without indicating errors.

The author of this message complains about the self-centered banners on which photos of fans are larger than the ones of Rajinikanth. This links up with Selvam and Annamalai feeling somewhat awkward about their manipulation of the framed images of themselves with Rajinikanth they display at home (Chapter 2). Moreover, KING complains about using Rajinikanth's image for one's own political career. According to KING, politicians use songs from Rajinikanth's movies for their birthday and the leader of the fan club in Thiruvannamalai used Rajinikanth to enter politics. As I observed in Chapter 3, politicking is not meant to be part of the fan club but at the same time, most fans, once they are older, use their fan network for political patronage and sometimes their own careers. Images facilitate these relationships. Ram, a Rajini fan:

We never used Rajini's images with politician's images. But there are people who are very close to politicians and they used both Rajini and the politician's image. He for example is a member of the DMK party. For his marriage we put up two banners, one with Rajini and the other with the politician. We cannot do anything without the support of political parties, so we make banners for them for these kinds of functions. Putting up these banners will earn us a good name among the government officials.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, having these connections with local government officials is necessary if one needs to get through government procedures. By inviting local big men to events and by showing them on personal imagery, these relationships are established and displayed to a larger public. There is a very narrow line separating proving fandom and a fan club's strength from using the fan club for political ends. Annamalai, who made the double portrait of himself and Rajinikanth (figures 24 and 25, Chapter 2) related Rajini Shankar's particular use of Rajinikanth's images to his political moves:

Rajini Shankar earned a lot and he is like a politician now. Since he has earned a lot of money from this fan association he doesn't care about Rajini nowadays. He is with Latha Rajinikanth [Rajinikanth's wife]. Nowadays in every banner he makes Latha Rajini's image big and Rajini's images small. After MGR's death in all AIADMK banners Jayalalitha made her images big and MGR's images small. Rajini Shankar is doing the same. We have to give importance to Rajinikanth because we are fans of Rajini and not Latha. We all expected Rajini to enter politics but nothing happened. Rajini Shankar expected the same from Rajini, but since nothing has happened the last two times [elections] he now relies on Latha. We have always been with Rajini.

Why Shankar would rely on Latha Rajinikanth is too long a story to explain here. Instead I want to use Annamalai's words to illustrate how often fans and especially leaders like Shankar are commented on for their political ambitions. Proof is always found in the (lack of) display of banners and what is shown on these banners. Remember the criticism AIADMK party leader Jayalalitha received when MGR almost entirely disappeared from party banners. For fans as well, smaller images of Rajinikanth can be seen as proof that someone is not a dedicated fan anymore.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this chapter that fan clubs and individual fans display hoardings, murals and posters extensively in public spaces. Fan club members experience a certain strength and pride when thinking of or seeing the ubiquitous hoardings made for their hero all over Tamil Nadu. This makes fans imagine the widespread dissemination of fandom for and importance of their star. But it also creates a sense of prestige for the fan club network itself. It is here that I want to invoke the sense of an imagined community again. Firstly, fan publicity enables fans to see the reach and power of their community and secondly, it enables individual fans to prove their own power within and beyond their fan community. A powerful motivation to display images is the sense that Rajinikanth or his extensions – first of all the All India Fan Club in Chennai but also local fan club leaders – are able to observe these hoardings. Being in the eye of other fans, fan club officials and a wider audience could enable recognition by and alliances with one's own vicinity, the neighborhood, the fan clubs, the political field, and lastly Rajinikanth himself.

This evidence of being active in the fan club is important in the establishment of relationships with local politicians as well. These relationships are established and also reinforced by the display of these connections in the form of imagery. The exhibition of hoardings in this regard, could be understood as “an attempt to install and monumentalize a source of recognition...” (Spyer 2008b, 32) for individual fans and fan clubs alike.

Recognition has been enhanced by new material forms that started to become popular around 2000. Today, the replacement of the earlier painted cutouts and hoardings with digitally designed and printed ones has created the possibility of adding one's personal photos onto hoardings easily. This in turn has resulted in new forms of visibility, recognition and attempts to nurture identities. Fans feel that this new visibility and their involvement in political networks has given them respect. However, various fans also indicated that respect only comes when a person works for a political party. In that sense, merely making yourself visible via a fan club is not sufficient. But too much political ambition is not supposed to belong to fan activity. This paradox comes to the fore particularly in the display of images.

The indifference or excitement of non-fan club audiences with which I started this chapter have remained untouched until now. The grandeur and ubiquity of images in public spaces are meant to impress; they demand engagement from their onlookers. As I suggested in the introductory part of this section, however, the ubiquity of signposts in the public realm seems to cause as much indifference as it does engagement from passersby. But indifference towards particular objects is not equivalent to having no impact; perhaps even the opposite could be the case. Miller, following Gombrich, states that “objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we don't “see” them” (2005, 5). Indeed many ordinary objects in our lives are not “seen” yet they play an important role. Most images in



55. Abandoned cutout piece showing the actor Vijay. Pondicherry 2008.

public space are just there; yet they are a common sight in the urban landscapes of cities in Tamil Nadu. Only when they disappear or stand out because of their size or content do people realize their presence. In the next part I will address the ways in which these images are actually seen and commented upon by a wider public. We will see how populist politics and the image of film as an influential medium is often based on the images that present them. The next chapter discusses these images and the debates that revolve around them.

