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CUT THE CUTOUT CULTURE

IMAGERY
AND PUBLIC SPACE

An area meant for preserving greenery by the Agricultural Department opposite to the Gemini fly-over has been completely blocked from the view of the public by huge advertisement hoardings.... Just opposite to the High Court in front of the Bar Council Office there is an advertisement board which is placed across the pavement, causing nuisance to the traffic and the pedestrians. If one goes down the Nungambakkam Bridge towards Poonamalle High road, one can see a long advertisement board which must be about 300 feet in the length....

We are not even worried about the obscene advertisements, mostly by film producers and Cinema theatres, which can be taken care of by appropriate existing legislation. But we are worried about the size and location of the innumerable hoardings simply spoiling the aesthetic beauty of the City and some of the modern buildings which have (been) built artistically with the help of architectural experts.

(Excerpt from High Court Document 2006. Cited from Note 2007, 139)

What is your research about, madam?

Roos: It is about fan clubs.

About what?

Roos: About fan clubs.

Oooh, fan clubs, the masses!

(Conversation in Chennai, 2010)

Street culture and the everyday city

The cities of Tamil Nadu are the location of a vibrant street culture of publicity of which fan imagery makes up only a part.¹ Until recently commercial ads promoting consumer products, political parties, and movies prevailed and towered above the main thoroughfares in major cities. What stands out is the scale and ubiquity of political hoardings, posters, and murals commissioned by political parties and their supporters. Common for most passers-by, a nuisance and embarrassment for some and a pleasure for others, continuous lines of political hoardings mark the landscape of urban and rural Tamil Nadu. Near main roads and junctions, party meetings and party leaders' birthdays are publicized and celebrated by dozens of hoardings covering the adjacent buildings, shops, and traffic signs. Each one bigger than the next; political parties and local politicians seem to compete with each other on the vinyl "screen". Their overwhelming physical presence makes them difficult to ignore; their size and quantity make them "monumental and assertive" (Spyer 2008b, 11).

Urban spaces are mediated environments (Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008; Spitulnik 1993; Sundaram 2009). Images, sounds, cinema theaters form the everyday experiences of cities. The

¹ The photo on the title page depicts a political banner on a piece of land belonging to the adjacent temple. The land is used as a market place and every few weeks a different political party uses the space above the stalls to publicize its banners (Chennai 2011).

visible and material urban reality also informs an invisible space of imaginations, anxieties, and aspirations (see also de Boeck and Plissart 2004). It is in this sense that I understand the interplay between spaces and the publics that are sometimes formed in them. I have already described the ways in which fans use images to visualize their fandom, networks and personal aspirations, but I have not yet said much about the ways in which this is part of the urban everyday. The images made by fans, supporters or corporate companies that publicize their various projects have been an essential part of public spaces; their very publicness is crucial for their efficacy. Images need their surroundings to be seen and people have to see them for the images to be effective. The main function of the “repertoire of visual excitement”, one could say, is to be looked at, to engage onlookers (Holland 2004, 1). It can be taken for granted and become clichéd² or stand out and provoke. Its omnipresence seems to normalize its own presence, making it such a common sight that we almost seem to forget it is partly made to be looked at. Its overproduction or excess of the signifier seems to lead to a crisis of meaningfulness (de Boeck and Plissart 2004, 58) or an inflation of the value of representation per se (Gamboni 2005).

But who actually engages with these images? Publicity, as defined by Merriam Webster, concerns “an act or device designed to attract public interest; specifically: information with news value issued as a means of gaining public attention or support”.³ But who is actually the public here? Can we speak of a public when passers-by cannot ignore the images that impose themselves upon them with their size and ubiquitous presence? And how can we consider a public that does not think of itself as a public? What do profusion and ephemerality actually engender in relation to their supposed publics? Are the banners, posters and murals in that respect different from statues or monuments that seem to be much more permanent? Does profusion not also create a lack of interest on the part of its onlookers? In comparison to the ubiquity of these images and the effort put into them, the participation of onlookers seems extremely low – at least direct participation between the image and the onlooker. It would be their absence that is swiftly noticed. In this chapter I want to deal with the questions posed here, not in order to provide answers but rather to explore what reactions images as objects and representations evoke and what their publicness does in terms of the publics that form around images.

The monumental scale of public imagery and the fact that it is so openly visible for everyone passing by leads at least to a certain interaction and reaction, whether it is indifference, admiration, amusement or annoyance. Obviously, the “meanings” or “messages” publicity materials communicate are not univocal and, as Michael Warner emphasizes, do not exist without their audience (2002a). Images produce various audiences and their implications can be as varied as the formation of the publics out of which they arise. Using the term “public” demands a note of caution here as publics are naturally not fixed entities in a certain place and time. Instead, as Warner argues, “[t]hey recognize themselves only as already being the persons they are addressed as being, and as already belonging to the world that is condensed in their discourse” (2002b, 82). A public exists because it feels addressed. In previous chapters I have shown how images give fans the sense of a community of fans within their fan club and between clubs of different actors. In this chapter, I explore a wider public engagement with public imagery. In other words,

² Overly familiar or commonplace.

³ Definition of publicity in Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. Accessed 14 October 2010. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/publicity>.

I investigate the publics that form around images as people feel addressed, whether by admiration or opposition.

Describing or getting to know a person's opinion of or experience of imagery in public space is a difficult arena to set foot in. How can one describe a person's lack of interest or subtle noticing of a new billboard without really being interested in what it shows? What should one think about the standardized images of politicians and movie stars that one cannot completely ignore in public spaces? I therefore suggest that debates are useful heightened moments that could bring to light opinions and feelings regarding the use of public space. Latour has argued that:

It is clear that each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinions, but there is a hidden continuity and a hidden coherence in what we are attached to. Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of “the political” (Latour 2005, 4–5).

Latour's acknowledgement of an object as assembling around it all kinds of engagements shows us how images can be central to defining public spaces. In the context of confrontational encounters such as debates, ambiguities in attitude vis-à-vis images become underscored. It is at such moments that discourses about publicity, public space, morality, or aesthetics become explicitly articulated. The debates around public imagery, therefore, determine the meaning or function of images just as much as their production does (Jain 2007; Mazzarella 2003).

Just as images have been an essential part of the city, debates have always revolved around them and there have always been attempts to restrain them. Public images such as those exhibited by the movie industry and fans as well as by politicians have been the subject of impassioned emotions and disagreements since they came into existence. And it is precisely in the transformations of debates throughout the years that one can discover continuity in the stamp they put on the city's public space. The content of the debates may have changed, but keeping to Latour's terms, these images have shaped a public space in which the political is permeated in intricate ways. In other words, a sense of what the public should or should not be is articulated through debates. It is a public that feels remoteness and opposition to these images but yet in their opposition they are actually relating to them and at least acknowledging them.

This chapter takes up the history of debate to situate fan imagery in a broader discourse of street culture and the reactions to it. Below I will address the resonance, amazement, worries and fears evoked by the display of public imagery in urban space, feelings that manifest themselves in debates and reflections on the city. These arenas of discussion can be situated in newspapers and daily conversations but they are also often directed towards the authorities that are held responsible for the condition of the city. These debates are often closely related to responses by authorities as they often resonate and respond to public debate. I may seem to be taking a different direction here, turning away from fan clubs and their visual practices towards a more general approach to urban space, imagery and debate, but I make this substantial shift on purpose. It allows me to come back to my earlier argument that situates fandom in a larger social world in Tamil Nadu. Not only because debates reemphasize social distinctions which are articulated in more elitist



56. Woman walking by a poster for the film *Uyir* (Samy 2006). Pondicherry 2006.

spheres but also because they identify a more general tension around film, politics and the power of images. This tension will be explored further in the next chapter *Chennai Beautiful*. There I discuss a beautification initiative by the city authorities in Chennai that suggests a shift to neo-liberalism from a certain kind of populist politics to catering for an increasingly visible middle class. The tensions between the vernacular production of images, the opposition to images and the shifts away from grassroots support and political brokerage to neoliberal imaginations will be the subject of these two chapters in Part III.

Cinematic fears

Film has an ambivalent position in Tamil Nadu. On the one hand it is a popular medium loved by many, but on the other it is often a cause of worry as well. Many in Tamil Nadu see its exposure of violence, romance and sexuality as a risk. Even though films are widely watched, many people in Tamil Nadu worry about the influence of movies, especially regarding the influence they could have on the youth. These vary from common worries about the appeal of the film's content to the spaces where films are screened. The popularity that film has gained throughout the years among the lower socio-economic classes in particular has created anxiety among upper

caste or class elites (Hughes 1996; Hughes 2000; Nandy 1998b; Pandian 1996; S. V. Srinivas 2007).

Elsewhere I have shown how, despite the popular use of (romantic) cinematic imagery in personal souvenirs such as wedding videos and photo albums, the same kind of scenes are considered obscene and offensive and deemed to have dangerous effects on adolescents (2006). Newspapers regularly carry reports of criminal acts or lovers running away from home, and in both cases it is often explicitly mentioned that the culprits or lovers were inspired by popular films. This alleged influence of film is not specific to Tamil Nadu; in media studies and psychology several strands of research are trying to find relationships between media and all kinds of (mostly deviant) behavior. Authorities regulate film through censorship and warning systems that should prevent people from seeing the “wrong” imagery.

Brian Larkin, in his eloquent ethnography of cinema and media technologies in northern Nigeria, shows how it was not the content or form of films that was subject to censorship by local authorities (2008). Rather it was the combination of built space, film and social practice that has grown up around the theater that caused anxiety: men and women together, the dark space of the theater hall and rowdy men, for instance. This uncertainty or anxiety is produced by the notions of technology’s social and political possibilities and its challenging hierarchies in public space and social life (*Op. cit.* 131). Larkin also demonstrates how governments aimed to educate or modernize their citizens through media technologies. So being motivated by fear of the effect of media, educational and modernization projects also inform the regulation or implementation of media. We will see how this educational objective comes to the fore in imagery in the next chapter where I will discuss the Chennai government’s attempt to beautify the city with new images. What I do think is particularly important here is to take up Larkin’s (*ibid.*) emphasis that cinema is a social space which produces all kinds of everyday practices as well as pleasures, desires or anxieties (see also M. B. Hansen 1994; Kuhn 1988). Content as well as film as object become the focus of objections and anxieties.

Several authors have emphasized the publicness of cinema and have explored the ways in which it makes or made public life or the urban experience (e.g. Mazumdar 2007b). Both Lawrence Liang and Ravi Sundaram have worked on cinema within a larger experience of the urban – for example in the form of illegal commodities (L. Liang 2005; Sundaram 2009). The presence of fan clubs in and around movie theaters also indicates the importance of urban space in understanding the social experience of fandom (see Srinivas 2005). The visceral experiences of city life remind us of the shock-like experience that has been described by Walter Benjamin in relation to modern city life (Buck-Morss 1989). He describes the stimuli of modern city life and relates these to the stimuli of technology. Referring to the shock that Walter Benjamin described, Ravi Sundaram points out that at present the experience of contemporary media images also disperses space and as such bring new fears and worries with it (2009, 31). The stimuli of urban life as they have been described by these authors highlight the anxieties that media technologies can bring with them.

Films have always been ambivalent. During colonial rule, film censorship in India was concerned with the transmission of messages of nationalism and communism and the representation of colonial rulers (Hughes 2000; Sharma 2009). Before the national Indian administration imposed regulations on film theaters, the Madras presidency had already started to provide cer-

tificates for film theaters. Moral and political threats were dealt with through the regulation of theater space (Hughes 2000, 47).⁴ The Madras administration worried about safety issues in film theaters, immorality and the presumed ideological effects that cinema would have. In 1918 the Indian government announced its first national legislation, which dealt with safety issues and the objectionable content of films in the form of the Cinematographic Act of 1918. Morality and safety were now officially judged separately (*Op. cit.* 52-53). After independence the act was replaced by the Cinematographic Act of 1952 and since then various parts have been revised or added.

Nowadays, films and their publicity have to be approved by the Central Board of Film Certification before they can be screened. Despite regulation, the content of films is regularly contested by opponents through protests. It is often the alleged inaccurate display of historical facts or social relations that is opposed.⁵ The publicness of cinema means that in India films are frequently at the center of moral, political, or religious debates. Films come to epitomize certain viewpoints in these debates which are often played out in public spaces. The protests against films, even though directed at the content of films, mainly take place at the core spaces of movie watching, i.e. in front of the movie theaters in which these films are being screened. Theaters and their personnel have been attacked from time to time, and film hoardings and posters targeted and pulled down. In film's history in India, an issue that has regularly been raised and debated is the misrepresentation of (caste- or religion-based) communities (S. V. Srinivas 1999, 17–18). For this reason, films are sometimes boycotted by people that oppose certain scenes, depictions or other messages conveyed in the film.

The danger of film

Besides films themselves, the publicness of film posters and other film imagery causes various reactions. They may attract cinema audiences, evoke memories of movies, actors, scenes or songs; they may upset or amuse some and be completely ignored by others, or they may stimulate discussions on morality and vulgarity (Pandian 2005a, 60). As Sara Dickey puts it, film posters “engender discourses on what is right and what is wrong with the contemporary social and political world” (2005, 70). Here I want to explore various ways in which imagery has become the subject of worry and debate. These debates concern the material presence of the images as well as their content.

The High Court document briefly touches upon indecent film advertisements, which they label *obscene*. People look at these banners and allegedly get distracted by the images they encounter. These images, it is commonly believed, attract attention because of their inappropriateness or indecency, which is deemed a bad influence on the youth and an impediment to the development of a tasteful public culture (Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2007, 95). Repeatedly,

⁴ See Steve Hughes' work on the policing of film exhibition during colonial times for a detailed account of censorship and film exhibition in South India (2000).

⁵ For example the trilogy *Water*, *Fire* and *Earth* by Deepa Mehta which depict among others the outcast position of widows, prostitution and a lesbian relationship have been strongly opposed by Hindu nationalist parties that claim that such a depiction does not do any justice to what they see as Hindu culture in India.

people I conversed with expressed their opinion about the harmful influence of movie hoardings. Almost always someone was able to describe a particular instance in which a hoarding had caused dangerous situations or uproar. For example, a young woman immediately recalled one occasion when a hoarding caused trouble. She was referring to a huge publicity hoarding on Chennai's main thoroughfare, Anna Salai, for the movie *Vallavan* (T.R. Silambarasan, 2006) on which one could see the actor Simbu biting the lips of the actress Nayan. She said, and I quote:

Even on the first day, the banner caused accidents so it was removed immediately. Can you imagine – a huge banner on which Simbu is biting someone's lips! Of course it would cause accidents! It distracted the youngsters who kept staring at it. But it also influenced these youngsters. You know how people get influenced by these things. Hoardings are very bad.

The huge advertisement was removed within a day. Once in a while, in Chennai and in other places as well there is uproar in a neighborhood when posters show allegedly indecent content.⁶ Particularly near schools or major junctions in the city they are seen as dangerous for the youth passing by. These are instances in which some people – e.g. local residents – feel that the imagery displayed is objectionable as it influences or distracts people. What is striking is that these opponents object because *others* are influenced, not because they themselves would object per se.

Fans as well as non-fans often speak in terms of a distinction between lower-class fans and other fans and between fans and the ordinary public. As I suggested earlier, I do not want to reinforce these distinctions but rather understand them in the context of how they are experienced by some. If we now take into account this wider audience of fan imagery and other public imagery which relates to film, we can try to understand how this distinction is produced.

In many of the conversations I had throughout my fieldwork I was asked what brought me to Tamil Nadu. My answer usually evoked surprise. Particularly in a city such as Chennai and even Pondicherry where people from abroad come to study and practice classical Tamil, dance, or music; my explanation that I was working on fan clubs and street culture often evoked a reply such as the one quoted above. Working with “the masses” – as my topic was frequently described – provoked various reactions which were often accompanied by extensive descriptions of the embodied “behavior” of fans and of the lower-class masses that are crazy about film and let themselves be easily influenced (see also Chapter 1).

The distinction that is articulated by some of my conversation partners between them and “the masses” reminds us of Bourdieu's stance on taste, aesthetic value and distinction (1984). Based on his study of French society Bourdieu framed taste as embedded in one's habitus, relating to a person's social, economic and cultural capital. The aesthetic taste of the upper class elite influences middle classes in their taste. The working classes, however, according to Bourdieu, do not have the necessary skills to make aesthetic judgments themselves and therefore have a more embodied taste for “vulgar” artifacts meaning that it is the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption. The distinction between appreciation of pure aesthetics and embodied ways of consumption where seeing is central asserts itself in an educational tendency

⁶ Anandan, whose nickname is “film news” Anandan, recounted several instances in Chennai when local residents opposed the hoardings in their surroundings. Interview with “film news” Anandan, Chennai 2008.



57. India's omnipresent "stick no bills" sign that is often used on the compound walls of government buildings to keep them free from posters or murals. Mumbai 2010.

taken up by more elitist groups and authorities to educate the "masses". This is apparent in the censorship of abusive content in films. But it has also become an issue of cleaning urban spaces of certain content.

Cut the cutout culture!

The condemnation of hoardings does not only concern movie imagery. Imagery in public spaces is under discussion across the board in Tamil Nadu: politically, administratively but also in the public domain of discussion which engages with this imagery more generally. Although the content of movies is controlled under the Cinematographic Act of 1952, posters and hoardings are not covered by this act. The Central Board of Film Certification considers this a problem and complains on its website about the fact that theaters display obscene film posters.⁷ However, In Tamil Nadu the government passed the Tamil Nadu Compulsory Censorship of Film Publicity Materials Act in 1987 to deal with obscene and indecent posters (Pandian 2005a, 60).⁸ The display of other kinds of public imagery falls under the Tamil Nadu Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act 1959.⁹ This act defines advertisements as "any effigy or any bill, notice, document, paper or other thing containing any words, signs or visible presentations" (quoted from Pandian, Srivathsan, and Radakrishnan, 77). Moreover, for political imagery, the Election Commission has issued a code of conduct for political parties in order to prevent the defacement of public and private places. In this code of conduct it is stated exactly how cutouts, hoardings, banners and flags should be displayed in order to comply with the law. The fact that different acts and codes exist suggests the desire or felt need for this kind of regulation but it also indicates that the practice is widespread and therefore needs to be regulated.

Besides the comment regarding obscene film posters, the other worry that the High Court expresses in the document quoted at the outset of this chapter is the lack of regulation of the excessive presence of commercial advertisements. The Court's concerns could be situated in a larger debate on what should be part of a city and what not. It is not the content of these images that the Court is worried about, it is their mere presence that they find contaminating. Government authorities are increasingly trying to prevent pollution of public spaces and to discipline their citizens. Municipal signs such as the omnipresent "stick no bills" signs (figure 57), or "do not spit or urinate" signs have, since colonial times, become weapons against spontaneous "indiscipline" (Kaviraj 1997, 85). But the owners of private buildings also attempt to aesthetize their environ-

⁷ http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/uniquepage.aspx?unique_page_id=4.htm, July 11 2012.

⁸ See also www.cbfcindia.tn.nic.in

⁹ Its equivalent in Pondicherry is the Pondicherry Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act 2000.



5. Prohibition mural put up by a compound owner in order to prevent illicit posters and wall paintings. Pondicherry 2008.

ment with signs and images to prevent defacement of their property. Figure 58 shows such a sign: an elaborate text listing prohibitions on this wall. Another growing development is the use of religious images on walls to prevent people from urinating against them.¹⁰

Ever since their first appearance, political, cinematic and commercial hoardings and cutouts in the public realm have been under scrutiny. The first recorded protests that manifested themselves around indecent publicity were against the huge ads produced by S.S. Vasan, the developer of the famous Gemini pictures in Chennai in the 1960s (Willemen in Jacob 2009, 49). The fact that Vasan was using public spaces to exhibit his ads and not merely theater compounds made his publicity much more effective. They were visible in more public spaces and he could select the space that he thought would be most effective. Yet at the same time their publicness also caused opposition (Jacob 2009).

Citizens and local authorities object to hoardings, considering them to be ugly, dangerous objects. They blight the urban landscape and force pedestrians and traffic into dangerous situations. The first move against billboards by the city's authorities took place in 1979 when they were removed from public spaces (Note 2007, 135). The following decades witnessed a rise in opposition against commercial hoardings. In contributions to *The Hindu* newspaper in 2007, several readers reacted to the increasing trend in Tamil Nadu's neighboring state of Kerala to put up political hoardings and arches on roads. In all reactions, readers mentioned the danger or bottlenecks posed by these structures to pedestrians and road users. Let me present some excerpts:

¹⁰ See Madheshiya and Abraham 2008 for an account of these "tiled gods" in Mumbai.

In fact, time has come to make a comprehensive study on road accidents caused by such glitzy advertisements. There should not be anything on or by the road side of the road that will divert the attention of the driver.

These [arches and structures] are a nuisance, especially during the monsoon. Some of these structures collapse in heavy rain, endangering lives of road-users.

For every occasion, hoardings are erected near roads, resulting in serious traffic bottlenecks. Authorities must ensure that they are removed once the function is over.

(Excerpts taken from *The Hindu*, September 08 2007).

As can be read from these excerpts, the readers are concerned with the danger that large structures on the road can cause. Banners as part of the urban landscape of daily life can indeed also turn into a danger. Newspapers regularly report about blown down, collapsed structures that injured passersby. But behind the arguments on their danger lies an implicit acknowledgment of their appeal as well.

In 2008 the Madras High Court, following a request by the ruling DMK party, banned unauthorized and dangerously positioned hoardings in Chennai. Within several days the skyline of Chennai had changed radically as the city pulled down its gigantic commercial, political and cinematic hoardings. Around 4,100 unlicensed hoardings were removed from the city center (*The Hindu*, April 14 2008). Newspapers carried stories of delighted Chennaiites who could finally see their green city again; pavements and footpaths were said to be in use again as pedestrians did not have to navigate their way around metal scaffolding and motorists could finally see traffic signals again that had previously been hidden behind the gigantic objects (for instance *The Hindu*, April 14 2008).

In Pondicherry hoardings were also banned from the historic center of the city and restricted in other parts. Throughout the Union Territory the city has allotted particular spots where hoardings are allowed, however now subject to permission from the municipality. Again, the reason given by the local authorities for the ban on hoardings is the possible danger of the sometimes immense structures which are often not properly constructed or attached and which extend over parts of the roads and easily attract the passer-by's attention, causing accidents. These debates are therefore part of a wider discourse on urban elitist spheres attempting to beautify and sanitize the city and seeking to reduce its inevitable ambiguity. I return to this point in the next chapter.

Even though most hoardings are placed illegally, they will not be removed that fast, especially if they are exhibited in the name of the ruling political party. Political supporters generally feel less restricted in placing their hoardings, as local authorities will not easily go against a party's power. Even in zones of the city in which hoardings are completely banned, such as the colonial, heritage area of Pondicherry, influential politicians and their supporters place hoardings for special occasions, usually without any consequences. The party in power is commonly also the one whose images are the most pervasive in the public realm. During the DMK's last term in power, AIADMK supporters accused the party of preventing them from using certain walls. This is part of a common practice whereby, during the rule of one party, the opposition parties, and particularly the second largest party, is blocked from using public space to promote itself and its events. In 2010 this resulted in agitations in the state capital Chennai when AIADMK supporters were blocked from painting a mural to honour their leader Jayalalitha on the occasion of her birthday.

Take for example this excerpt from a Chennai Court Order in 2006:

The grievance of the petitioners is that thousands of hoardings are erected on public lands, on the road sides, on the pavements and platforms, and these hoardings are not only hazardous to traffic but also to public, since the pedestrians are compelled to walk on the roads facing risk to their lives. The state Exchequer is also losing revenue, since the owners of those hoardings are not paying any ground rent or advertisement tax.... It is also highlighted that almost all political parties in and around the city of Chennai are erecting innumerable hoardings all around the city. There are number of specifications for the erection of such hoardings within the limits of the Corporation, but none of the political parties seem to follow the rules and regulations and Corporation of Chennai is also not taking any measures either to regulate such hoardings or to collect the fees (cited from Note 2007: 135).

Political hoardings, which make up the vast majority, are notorious for being placed illegally. Posters of the Chief Minister of Pondicherry and other prominent politicians appear in places where they are not allowed to be exhibited. Sizable hoardings depicting the Chief Ministers of Pondicherry are regularly set up in front of the assembly hall in the historic center of the city and events are without exception celebrated with one or more hoardings put up there as well. This causes frustration among fans who are not able to exhibit all their images everywhere anymore. Selvam, for example, commented how in Pondicherry only the ruling party is able to display its imagery; the posters of other parties and fans are forcibly removed. For ordinary people, fans or less powerful political supporters the display of imagery is liable to the same kinds of rules.

But the opposition and the rules applied to curb publicity in all its forms did not seem to eradicate commercial imagery from the skylines. Owners skirted the rules and the city received – official or unofficial – revenue from putting up hoardings.

In the introduction I touched on the image politics of Jayalalitha after she took over power of the AIADMK. After she was elected Chief Minister in 1991 a huge number of cutouts and hoardings displaying her sprouted like mushrooms in the streets of Tamil Nadu, particularly in Chennai. At the same time, cutouts that were made for films also displayed the main hero in larger than life images. This excessive use of public imagery by the AIADMK party prompted the opposition DMK, during its next period in office (1996-2002) to restrain Jayalalitha's colossal presence with the slogan “*cut the cutout culture!*” Instead, the DMK began to assert itself by using murals and only occasionally putting up cutouts during party rallies. This was the beginning of the decline of the “cutout culture”. In concert with the increasing popularity of vinyl, the urban spaces of Tamil Nadu started to undergo a huge transformation.

The popularity of vinyl banners and their increasing presence has caused more legislation. Now everyone is able to exhibit a banner for party support or other occasions. But this democratization of the use of public spaces for displaying images has resulted in a shift in audience that political parties are now addressing. The DMK, many of whose members had their roots in the movie industry, has recently started to criticize the use of popular imagery related to film and the use of imagery for political publicity. This was partly a reaction to PMK leader Ramadoss, who is a strong critic of hoardings which are made by political supporters and fans. Ramadoss is the most prominent opponent of the use of hoardings. He has given his party members strict instructions not to employ this kind of publicity. If, in spite of his appeal, they do exhibit hoardings, they are immediately suspended or expelled from the party. Let me quote Ramadoss in a

personal interview in 2008:¹¹

Wherever you are on the roadside, you can see amma's [Jayalalitha] and anna's [Vijayakanth] [images]. Every political party uses banners. Does this happen in any other country or state? Wherever you look, it is this birthday, that birthday etc. On any given morning when you get up and go into the street, you can see a hundred banners and cutouts within five kilometers. The people on the banners may be people you like or not. When you look at these banners, it will mentally disturb you. It has become part of a culture. But there is also danger in this because of the traffic, and so many other problems. So we don't need such things.

In public, Ramadoss reveals his objections less fervently but he does unmistakably fight against this practice. For Ramadoss, who fiercely opposes fan clubs in Tamil Nadu, public hoardings by fans as well as political supporters are evidence of the populist political style of parties in the state. Remember the fights the Rajinikanth fan club in Vannur had with local PMK members as their hoardings were pulled down regularly. The larger than life and ubiquitous faces of Ramadoss' opponents annoy him, particularly as they are evidence of their worship by supporters. His expression of annoyance relates to a larger discourse on the criticism of personality politics and the close relationship between cinema and politics in the state. This is most likely the reason why Karunanidhi has also openly started to refrain from political imagery in public.

DMK leader Karunanidhi has, probably in a reaction to Ramadoss, criticized the excessive use of hoardings by his party members and supporters and has called on them not to use his image for DMK promotion. A former scriptwriter who used movies as a propaganda vehicle for his party in the past and is currently widely portrayed on hoardings throughout the state, this same Karunanidhi now called for a constraint on the number of hoardings and the use of his image by his party. He instructed his party members to avoid using publicity and in particular his own image. So far his party members seem unwilling to comply with his request and Tamil Nadu is still saturated with DMK imagery. I will have more to say about this shift in the next chapter. I want to point out here how the public presence of politicians and movie stars results in anxieties and irritation, as verbalized by Ramadoss. Moreover, it has given momentum to establishing a shift in perception from populist politics towards another public.

The extensive use of hoardings by political parties and fan clubs remains frowned upon by the more elitist spheres of public opinion. From the words of Ramadoss to the statements of the public administration of Chennai and Pondicherry, it is clear that even though it is the danger posed by hoardings that is put forward, moral, aesthetic and political reasons lie behind the motivations as well. It is above all in newspapers that these otherwise not greatly discussed opinions are aired and hoardings are described as polluting and disfiguring the city. The fact that these articles are written in English language newspapers already indicates the "publics" they want to address and that journalists or commentators feel they belong to. The people who object are not the ones that actually display these hoardings. So the choice for newspapers here, is an act of disassociating oneself from another public. In an opinion article in *Outlook India*, the author ends his article with the following critical note:

¹¹ Interview March 25 2008.

MGR might be dead for 22 years but put up a poster of him and you can be certain votes will come in. ... But no matter how many posters the parties put up, the Corporation's job is to prevent defacing of public and private walls. It has now set up 155 teams -- one for each of the wards in Chennai -- to oversee the removal of poll graffiti. "Three hundred digital banners were removed since the date of the Lok Sabha polls was announced," says Corporation commissioner Rajesh Lakhoni. Many more will be put up -- after all the election here is almost two months away on May 13 -- and as many will come down because as Lakhoni pointed out the Election Commission had directed that the rules of the Tamil Nadu Open Places (Prevention of Disfigurement) Act, 1959, which prevented disfigurement of places open to public view by objectionable or unauthorised advertisement and pasting of posters in such places, must be strictly adhered to. And advertisements include any bill, notice, document, paper or any substance containing words, signs or visible representation. Basically, whatever! But then, who's listening? All are all busy with the dance of democracy. (Iyengar 2009)

This quote shows how comments on the disfigurement of the city can be juxtaposed with discussions on populist politics. So although the author criticizes the disfigurement of urban spaces, this relates directly to popular politics which are closely bound up with the production of imagery. This connection between disfigurement and refraining from populist politics has taken a new direction lately. Tamil Nadu's former Chief Minister Karunanidhi and the city authorities of Chennai have taken measures against the omnipresent veneration of politicians and movie stars by being stricter in the regulation of images. What's more, they have tried to introduce other measures, making it harder for fans and political supporters alike to use public spaces for their own publicity. The next chapter is dedicated to this recent shift.

Conclusion

Whereas the first two parts of this dissertation revolved around fan clubs and visibility, in this last part I aim to situate public images in a larger visual economy (Poole 1997; see also Introduction). In this chapter, I have shown how the publicness of images creates publics that are influenced by the images they see around them. The anxieties that public imagery evoke bring about a distance between the audience at large that is displaying and consuming imagery and individuals that comment on it (Pandian 1996; S. V. Srinivas 2007). The debates around aesthetic value or the notion of the mass or crowd that are articulated in spheres of opinion such as newspapers or that are mentioned to me in reply to my topic of research indicate a certain *experienced* social distinction in everyday practices.

By looking at the anxieties and debates that have been caused by public imagery I aimed to show how it is not the content per se but its social and spatial presence that evokes these anxieties. They do not merely highlight the dangers of obscene images or the material danger of a cutout that could fall on you, they also highlight the clear relationship between politics and cinema in Tamil Nadu and how this can be perceived.

The next chapter will go a step further again and show how a recent beautification initiative in Tamil Nadu has meant a shift in attention from populist political support to another kind of

imagination: world-class. It marks a shift in which the populist politics directed towards supporters of lower socio-economic classes seems to be replaced by other publics. The material space of urban life will now articulate the world-class imaginaries of the political elite.