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

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

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

Author: Gerritsen, Roos
Title: Fandom on display : intimate visualities and the politics of spectacle
Date: 2012-11-08

PART III .

6

CHENNAI BEAUTIFUL

SHIFTING URBAN LANDSCAPES
AND THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE

In 2009, in the wake of extensive criticism about the defacing of public and private walls by political parties and others, the Chennai city administration attempted to intervene in the elaborate visual encroachment on its streets and initiated campaigns to regulate the "pollution" caused by unauthorized forms of pictorial displays within the city.[1] From mid-2009 onwards, the city decided to enforce a ban on posters, murals and hoardings on two of the main roads running through the city. Billboards were pulled down and walls cleaned of posters and whitewashed, covering up the remains of the once ubiquitous murals. To beautify these roads, artists were commissioned to cover the walls with images of Tamil cultural heritage and natural scenery. Chennai's mayor, M. Subramanian, declared, "images of various cultural symbols would be painted on compound walls of government property on the two roads. …This is intended to keep those who paste posters away and improve aesthetics. Posters are an eyesore" (*The Hindu*, Chennai edition May 29 2009). Anna Salai and another road in the city were chosen to launch pilot projects for a larger beautification initiative. The success of the pilot led to the project being extended to the entire Chennai Corporation limits a year later. Today, more than 3000 public walls are prohibited from being used for posters and the like.[2] Moreover, Chennai is being more and more "embellished" with beautification murals: main roads, junctions, and flyovers are being decorated with images of cultural and natural settings, providing parts of the city with a new look.

As can be understood from the Mayor's words, the reason given by the city authorities for having the beautification murals painted is the rising agitation regarding an alleged absence of what is deemed to be aesthetic and the excessive display of hoardings and other public imagery. In this last chapter I argue that the needs of Chennai's growing neoliberal economy have been the catalyst for this "beautification" plan. The once ubiquitous images of political supporters, fans and others have now been removed. Instead walls are now beautified by means of images showing a neo-classicist, touristic version of cultural heritage and natural scenes in the local government's attempt at a "world-class" makeover of Chennai.

In Part I and even more so in Part II of this dissertation, I illustrated the ways in which fan club images are part of the public spectacle of politics. In the previous chapter I explored a number of ways in which publics form around cinematic and political imagery. This chapter takes up another shift in preventing imagery such as that made by fans, this time by the Chennai city administration. I situate the new beautification initiative as a debate over space, thereby symbolizing a broader discursive field of distinction and shifting public and political practice. I explore how the new beautification murals can be linked to three interrelated processes that are part of this "neoliberal turn," putting aside grassroots political supporters and organizations such as fans who make use of public culture. This chapter therefore gives an insight into the ways in which neoliberalization and world class take shape in Chennai. This shift identifies a sidelining of the lower classes which are being replaced by the increasingly present middle class. In this chapter I situate this shift in the realm of images. The epilogue looks briefly at the wider consequences of this shift for fans.

The first context of change is Chennai's positioning as a "world-class" city that wants to attract capital investors, and, related to this, the emergence of increasingly affluent neoliber-

---

[1] The photo on the title page shows an artist working on a beautification mural. The series he is working on depicts the story of Kannagi and is copied from the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. Chennai 2010.

[2] Public walls are compound walls of government property.

al middle-class publics. "World class" can be understood as a global imaginary expressed, for instance, in architecture and the built environment, in spectacular and exclusive public spaces such as shopping malls as well as in the aspirations towards cosmopolitan lifestyles or globalized consumption (see Brosius 2010). The world-class vision seems to have become the incentive for many beautification and urban renewal projects. This has led to the new middle classes becoming more visible in urban space, as well as the elimination of selected parts of the city, such as slums, or the dispersal of inhabitants such as street vendors, who pose a problem for such an image. The gentrification of the city is part of new "spatial strategies" in the urban environment that create or reinforce social distinctions (Deshpande 1998).

Secondly, following Abidin Kusno (2010), I propose that the new beautification images seem to constitute social and political identities as well as reinforce old political ideologies. The particular history of image display in Tamil Nadu, in which urban space has been used extensively for political and cinematic publicity purposes, is strongly bound up with the conventional political practices of the state. Now, just as public space demands gentrification and beautification in order to attract foreign investors, the political system demands an image clean-up as well, as populist politics are deemed inappropriate in a neoliberal environment. Therefore, the visual environment as backdrop for conventional political practices has to be cleansed to brush away suggestions of populist politics. At the same time, however, the beautification murals with their focus on Tamil or Dravidian history and their mural form seem to reinforce the parties' focus on ideological Dravidian origins and identity, only now more focused on a generic "Tamilness".[3]

This brings me to the third process. The murals are aimed at rebuilding present-day Chennai and its image for an aspired future. At the same time, they embody nostalgia for the past rooted in the image of a collective history and identity. As the city aspires to become world class through urban renewal and innovative architecture, the beautification murals mostly refer to the "traditional" past. I suggest that the murals stand as testament to an allegedly collective identity and memory (Rowlands and Tilley 2006) through which a uniform, idealized, and consumable history and future can be (re)installed or (re)created. As hyperreal objects (Baudrillard 1994; Eco 1990), the murals seem to cater for the desires of the new, affluent middle classes who want to consume "tradition" in a simplified "postcard" history, a process which is embedded in neoliberal discourses and nostalgic references and which I therefore refer to, following Hancock (2008) and Ivy (1988), as neoliberal nostalgia or neo-nostalgia. As consumable historic narratives they become more potent than that to which they actually refer. Moreover, this history, assembled from fragments of cultural values and moralities, is deemed lost by the city authorities in urban lifestyles, and thus in need of being relearned.

Taking these three processes together, the production of murals indicates a move on the part of the city authorities to embrace neoliberal economic investments and the class of publics associated with neoliberalism by placing an emphasis on the aesthetic and the traditional while sidelining conventional political practices and loyalties. The murals turn the city into a picture postcard spectacle of aspirations, nostalgia, beauty, tradition, and moral pedagogy. They show a shift from more common uses of public space and taste to elitist visualities. In the meantime, unauthorized or "spontaneous" uses of public space are being replaced not only by sanitized,

---

[3] See Introduction for more information on Dravidian and Tamil history, ideology and politics.

59. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting a rural scene of the harvesting cropping of rice and an ayyanar shrine. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

60. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting two tourists looking at the Mamallapuram heritage site. Chennai 2010. Photograph by McKay Savage.

beautified images, but also by new, different imaginings and desires regarding what the future, history, culture and beauty should be.

One thing that does not change is the idea of displaying one's vision in the public arena. While political parties were, and in many places still are, omnipresent in Tamil Nadu's public spaces, it seems these parties are now shifting their attention to a new public and new vision of the city. The murals are part of this shift. But the fact that images are used in this shift indicates that, although the practice changes in content, its canvas remains the same. This chapter traces this shift in content and focus. In previous chapters I showed how fans are increasingly encountering difficulties in displaying their images in public spaces because of regulations and competition with political parties. This chapter prefigures a further decline in display possibilities for ordinary people such as fans and local political supporters set aside by government discourses on the city. This shows once more how images are part of politics as well as displaying political competition.

Reflecting the essence of Tamil culture?

The renowned former hoarding artist J.P. Krishna was the first to be commissioned by the Chennai Corporation[4] to paint several walls as part of the beautification initiative. The images that he

[4] The civic body that governs the city. Its responsibilities include the infrastructure and planning of the city.

61. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting the Thiruvalluvar statue at Kanyakumari. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

62. Beautification mural made by artist J.P. Krishna depicting a musician. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

painted on Anna Salai all refer to Tamil culture and heritage, village life and the natural beauty of the state (figures 59-62). Most of the murals follow the realistic style of painting initiated by Raja Ravi Varma in the late 19th century, and later on adapted, popularized, and commercialized in calendar art and cinematic and political hoardings. Among other subjects, the first images that were painted include village life, the UNESCO heritage site of Mamallapuram (figure 60), the statue of the classical Tamil poet and saint Thiruvalluvar at India's southernmost tip, Kanyakumari, several temples and temple sculptures, and performers of Carnatic music (figure 62). Another stretch of paintings on one of the large intersections in the southern part of the city depicts the mythological story of Kannagi, the heroic woman character of the epic *Silapathikaram* (figure title page chapter). The artist commissioned to paint the story used the version that appeared in the popular *Amar Chitra Katha* comics as his model.[5] He made slight changes to the images of the cartoon (leaving out speech bubbles), and the last image of this series is a copy of the Kannagi statue on Marina Beach.[6] Figure 63 shows the artist using a page copied from the *Amar Chitra Katha* cartoon with a picture of Kannagi that he used as a model to paint one of the scenes.

The Corporation selected these images to use for the murals and carefully monitored the painting process. For the first few stretches of wall, they authorized the use of a book containing paintings by Tamil artists that depict scenes of Tamil heritage and nature. Initially the Corpora-

[5] *Amar Chitra Katha* ("immortal illustrated story") comics have, since the 1980s, become very popular in India and with Indian migrants abroad. The stories often serve an educational purpose as they are about Indian history, religion, and mythology.

[6] Ironically, the statue depicts a fiery Kannagi placing the city (of Madurai, in the story) under a curse and then destroying it. The statue on Marina beach was the source of various rumors, controversies and agitation as it was suddenly removed for a while (Pandian 2005b).
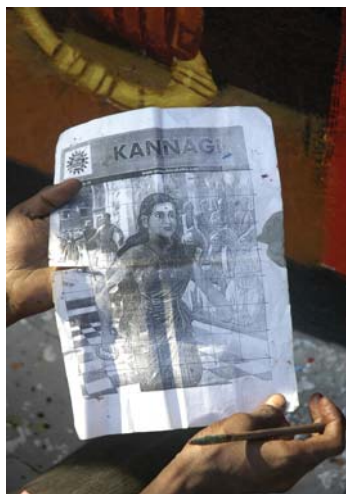
Figure 63. Copied page of the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* comics the artist used to paint the story of *Kannagi*. Chennai 2010.

tion planned to commission students from the Government College of Arts and Crafts; it was they who actually suggested this plan to the government.[7] They suggested heritage images with which the city could be beautified and stripped of its ubiquitous political murals and posters. Ironically, however, the city ended up commissioning former hoarding artists to paint the scenes. I think this is ironic because the same artists who previously flourished within the "cutout culture" and benefited from the commissioning of numerous political murals have subsequently seen their income disappear as political parties fought each other by imposing restrictions on cutouts. Within the current context of beautification, these former hoarding artists are now being commissioned to replace their own work on city walls.

In fact, the artists receive a relatively good salary for the beautification murals (around rs 35 per square foot), a sum that is much higher than what they were receiving (around rs 10 per square foot) for political murals over the past few years.[8] The artists I spoke to actually appreciated the work, not only because of the money they were earning with the murals but also because of the positive reception they get for their work. Passers-by often stop at the place where they are working and praise them for their efforts. This is a new experience for the artists. Even though artists rely on the public visibility of murals to gain new customers, they were previously only approached by fan clubs, political supporters and some other customers. Now ordinary people who like the images approach them and think they would beautify their own home as well. Moreover, several artists indicated that they enjoy painting a new kind of imagery instead of endlessly reproducing the faces of the same politicians. I will come back to this point below.

According to the Corporation, the images should reflect Tamil culture. However, one of the artists who was commissioned to paint the new murals found that not everything is considered to be Tamil culture in the view of the Corporation. Along with some colleagues, Raj was commissioned to paint a public wall of around 270 meters in length on Rajaji Salai, close to the seat of the government in Fort St. George. He explained to me how he and his colleagues often sketched scenes from daily life in their own environment: a sunrise at Marina beach, a street vendor selling ice cream to a young boy, or a rag picker picking recyclable garbage off the streets. For Raj and

---

[7] My thanks to K. Gandhirajan, a teacher at the Government College of Arts and Crafts, who alerted me to this.

[8] With the advent of vinyl banners and digital printing, this amount has decreased over the years. When the banner business was still in its heyday, an artist could earn around rs 125 per square foot.

his colleagues, these scenes express the real and typical Chennai. He suggested to the Corporation officer who was in charge of the project that he would like to paint these kinds of scenes from everyday life, but the officer refused such a commission because in his view such images did not correspond to what they regarded as "Tamil culture".

Remarkably, however, in the light of the emphasis on "traditional" culture, the Corporation permitted the inclusion of a man playing golf on one of the city walls (figure 64). Even though this painting was commissioned by the local golf course, it was sanctioned by the Corporation and integrated into the series of paintings commissioned for this road. Later, when I asked about this particular image, the Corporation officers in charge appeared slightly embarrassed regarding what they now deem a "mistake". Such "mistakes" cannot be explained merely in terms of a distinction between images of the "traditional" and the "modern" as various other industries or technologies have been showcased on public walls.

The compound wall of a government hospital, for example, shows us images of doctors looking at X-rays (figure 65) and an operating theater; these images are placed next to a panel in which healers are shown using Ayurveda (a health care technique with growing popularity across India, and in particular in the southern states) (figure 66). Another interesting new image that I noticed a year later is actually an everyday scene (figure 67). Behind vendors selling vegetables and the neighboring cobbler on the pavement, the city has painted a view of market. The real life scene merges completely with its backdrop. But again, what is important to note here is that the vendors which are depicted here are not street vendors – they are selling their wares in what is meant to be the Koyambedu Wholesale Market Complex in Chennai. This market, a huge complex, was developed in 1996 by the government in order to relieve heavy congestion in the trade area of George Town (Muthiah 2004).

How should we understand the image of the golf player? How does it relate to Tamil culture as observed by the city authorities? The image of golf play was privately commissioned by the golf course. My suggestion is that, whereas doctors and X-rays reflect contemporary icons of the state, a golf player is an image of affluent consumption and urban spatial aesthetics and therefore does not fit into the range of themes that express the achievements and highlights of the state. It does however fit naturally into world-class imaginaries. The golf course is an almost symbolic part of world-class visions and is notorious for displacing slums and peasants.

Shifting publics: new images of world class imaginations

"Beautification" is nothing new and specific to Chennai. Other Indian cities are working on their appearance in similar ways, also commissioning new paintings depicting regional cultural scenes.[9] What is happening in Chennai, however, is somewhat different, as this is not merely an attempt to beautify the city by means of wall paintings, it also involves a rigorous – and almost iconoclastic – prohibition of every kind of billboard, even commercial ones, along these

[9] Of course, also outside India there are many examples of cities and towns in which murals have become part of beautification projects.
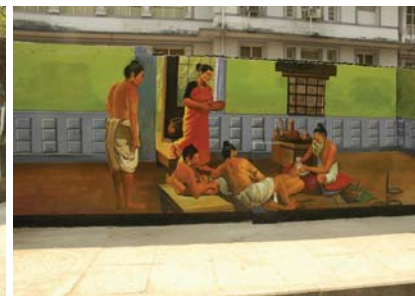
64. Mural of golf players that has been incorporated into the series of beautification paintings made by the artist J.P. Krishna. According to the Corporation officials this mural should not have been included as it does not represent Tamil culture. Chennai 2009. Photograph by McKay Savage.

65. Man lighting his cigarette in front of a beautification mural of a doctor looking at an X-ray. This mural is on the compound wall in front of the government hospital on Poonamallee High Road. Chennai 2010.

66. Beautification mural depicting an ayurvedic healing scene. Chennai 2010.

67. Vendor in front of a painted scene depicting a market. Chennai 2011.

"corridors" in the city. Chennai's new look indicates that the city is claiming and restructuring forms and appropriations of public space, firstly in the form of beautifying the city through murals, and thus aligning it with a different form of aesthetic experience and urban imaginary, and secondly through the bureaucratic interpretation of culture that embraces capital investments. In this way, a distinct and selective image of the city is imposed, but whose image of the city is it? The following quote is instructive for what it reveals of the ambiguity inherent in the idea of reflecting Tamil culture. The author aptly pinpoints the ubiquitous presence of political imagery in Tamil Nadu's visual culture.

> *…Thiruvalluvar, Mamallapuram and Bharatanatyam do contribute to the culture of the state, thus how can you call it the essence of Tamil culture without the colourful politicians? Always on the walls of Mount Road, they were the friendly neighbourhood Spidermen of Chennai. I miss Kalaignar [respectful artist] Muthuvel Karunanidhi in his trademark dark glasses smiling down from vinyl billboards at the Thousand Lights traffic jam. I feel mother-less as I stare into the void left behind by the cut-outs of Amma [mother] alias J Jayalalithaa on Mount Road. When my boss says I lack aggression, how do I convince him it is because they have removed all the posters of Vaiko whose roar for the dead tigers of Lanka used to instil a revolutionary zeal in me on my way to edit meetings? 'Karuppu [black] MGR' Vi-jaykanth has been whitewashed; S Ramadoss has been shredded. On the smaller roads and bylanes, however, they all thrive in myriad forms.*

> (Blog post from Arun Ram, *Times of India* website *August 03 2009*)

Because of Tamil Nadu's specific historic background, of which political imagery has been an essential part, the restrictions on it today raise questions about how the political landscape is changing. Until now, it has always been argued that political parties triumph because of their ubiquitous presence in the public realm. It is striking therefore that it is politicians who have been trying to curb these images in the city; indeed, some of them are the politicians who initiat-ed this visual regime of representation. Chennai is the only city that went as far as to completely ban all billboards from its urban milieu. It seems contradictory that politicians are now in favor of replacing their own images with those of postcard images of historic and natural scenery. This is even more surprising since in imagery issued higher up in the party the images of the Chief Minister Karunanidhi and his successor Stalin appear almost everywhere. The streets of Tam-il Nadu are swamped with their pictures during party rallies, inaugurations or state-organized events. Their location and duration of display are more restricted and are in the hands of the gov-ernment but still the message of less publicity does not correspond with what parties do higher up. The contradiction here is that the people who vote for Karunanidhi's party are rejected or by-passed by the restrictions on their use of images of adulation and publicity, whereas the city administration continues to use the same kind of images within the context of "official" politics. This contradiction is reflected in the following quote taken from a website that has to do with the city of Chennai:

> *There was a time when the Chennai Corporation, having deluded itself into believing that 'from Chennai to Singai' (Singapore that is) was but a step, laid down the diktat that posters were banned along certain important thoroughfares of the city. But none had contended with the fact that elections*

would one day come round for the councillor seats (Oh, the curse of democracy! If only those in power could remain indefinitely so or till death did them part!) and what better way to canvas for votes than to indulge in poster wars? How else can you highlight achievements or failures in making a world-class city? (mmm, madras musings Vol. XXI No. , November 1-15, 2011).

Political parties in the state are still largely dependent on support from lower socio-economic classes and this makes the politics of visibility necessary after all. The rejection of grassroots images by political rulers, however, suggests an act of distancing from the political praise and linkages that these images symbolize and sustain. In fact, this kind of political practice is deemed populist and does not fit into the neoliberal economy that the city is also aspiring to adopt.

The beautification murals, as part of a larger gentrification project taken up by the city, can be situated in Chennai's aspirations to become an attractive, world-class city.[10] Such aspirations started with the former Mayor, M.K. Stalin, son of current Chief Minister Karunanidhi, initiating the *Singara* [beautiful] Chennai plan, in which parts of the city were to be beautified and made attractive to economic investors. Chennai realizes its economic and global aspirations with conspicuous initiatives that selectively refurbish the city: IT corridors, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and beautification schemes involving the renovation and planning of roads and parks, the erection of large statues, and, as I show here, the embellishment of public walls.

The aspiration to become a world-class city is informed by an envisioning of the future and other city models that appeal to the imagination. In India, cities such as Shanghai, Dubai, and particularly Singapore feed the imagination of what this ideal city looks like (see also Brosius 2010).[11] Politicians realize that the image of a place is important in attracting economic capital investors – and particularly international ones (Arabindoo 2007, 2). Partha Chatterjee and others have already observed the tendency over the last decades to clean up and gentrify Indian cities and reclaim their spaces for what Chatterjee suggestively describes as "proper citizens" (2004, 131–132). Foucault has mapped out how in the emergence of Europe legitimacy has been based on the claim to provide wellbeing for the population using simplified models of the world (Foucault in Chatterjee 1998; Scott 1998). This discourse on developing the city for the wellbeing of the population is linked to the idea of rationalizing city space with proper infrastructure and a healthy environment (Nigam 2001, 42).

Chennai is using the large beautification project to emphasize its own attractiveness and to root out unplanned encroachments that are seen as unsolicited uses of the city. Local authorities in Chennai are actively erasing images of the city that do not belong in this cosmopolitan view of being attractive or "world class". Publicity and visualizations are put into play in order to pursue imaginations and transformations of public spaces, and they have become crucial tools for changing the image of the city and the ways in which belonging to the city is defined (Zukin 1995). In this regard, the city selectively attempts to push back the encroachment on public space by restricting its use.

Whereas on the one hand a certain segment of and practice in the city is being curbed and

---

[10] Chennai is not the only Indian city searching for world-class stature. Other big cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi actively try to position themselves on the world map.

[11] In Tamil Nadu, Singapore is often evoked as a model of a clean, efficient and attractive city. The long relationship with the Tamil diaspora in Singapore has played an important role in conveying the image of Singapore as a city of progress as well as in reinforcing cultural and historic roots (Beelen, Gerritsen and Srivathsan 2010).

set aside, on the other hand, the beautification images point to a shift in attention towards another public. By becoming an attractive city for affluent investors and citizens, Chennai seeks to reach an audience of middle-class professionals aspiring to join the ranks of a global class of similar professionals. The middle class in India is now not only much more visible, there are also more people belonging to this group. As slum dwellers are removed from sight within the city, the neoliberal middle classes are becoming much more visible instead. In the conclusion I will show how this visibility is situated in public space related to the cinema. Here I want to highlight the increase of middle-class publics and governments catering for their alleged needs and discourses of world class.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s brought a rise in lucrative businesses and consequently an increase in the number of affluent middle-class Indians. Several authors have indicated that the notion of middle class is used as a marker by means of practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), the wish to be visible and of belonging to a "world class" (Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006; Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008). This public visibility of the middle class expresses itself in conspicuous consumption (Brosius 2010, 23), but also in a political culture shifting from "older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class-based culture of consumption" (Fernandes 2006, XV). In this light, the golf player who has been inserted into the series of images would actually not be an anomaly after all. This becomes more and more evident in the material form of the city, as Chennai is increasingly becoming a city selectively made up of malls, multiplexes, exclusive housing estates and IT corridors. Satish Despande highlights the "spatial strategies" of social processes, indicating that "[a] spatial strategy not only unfolds *in* space, it is also *about* space—its appropriation, deployment, and control" (1998, 250).

The way in which the built environment is structured within the city indicates a symbolic landscape just as during colonialism the power of public images came to a fore through architecture, parks and statues as important markers of imperial virtue and power (Hancock 2008; Srivathsan 2000; Tartakov 2000). The commemoration of heroes as portrayed in colonial sculptures has also become a common factor in post-independent political contests. The DMK, which emerged from the DK – the former self-respect movement –initiated the use of icons in urban spaces to make Chennai a city with a Tamil identity. These icons came in the form of statues as well as more ephemeral forms such as murals or cutouts.[12] Chennai, as well as other places in Tamil Nadu, was the location of statues of several leaders. Arterial roads such as Anna Salai, Marina Beach and Rajaji Salai were chosen as the main locations for the statues.[13]

Benedict Anderson, in his well-known work on nationalism, argues that the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion was through three institutions: the museum, the census and the map (Anderson 1991). He suggests that by placing them in a museum, monuments become repositioned as regalia of the *secular* colonial state (Anderson 1991, 182–185 emphasis by the author). Mechanical reproduction resulted in a pictorial census and logoization of monuments. And it is precisely in this reproducibility of regalia that the power of the state lies. The

---

[12] See Hancock 2008; Pandian 2005b; Srivathsan 2000 for detailed accounts of the use of statues and architecture by the DMK.

[13] In 1986 the DMK erected several statues of Tamil literary scholars and mythical figures (Kannagi) on Marina Beach. Annadurai and MGR are commemorated with a memorial here as well. Their memorials are popular tourist destinations in Chennai for Tamil Nadu tourists.

politicization of monuments through reproducibility can be pursued in the field of wall paintings. The postcard images of monuments emphasize the state's connection to these monuments through their endless reproducibility on images.

Of late, the Tamil identity constructed in and embodied through these icons has not been as rooted in Dravidian nationalism as before, but a glorification of the Tamil past has continued to play a role in politics throughout the years as a sign of a shared Tamil identity. The recent beautification initiative, consisting of the wall paintings but also several statues displaying scenes of Tamil culture and leaders made by artists from the College of Arts and Crafts, highlights the new focus on this shared Tamil identity.

In this regard, when we look more closely at the spatial politics of the new interventions we find that the city administration is really only concerned with that section of the city that relates to a shift in the public. Several areas, or corridors of the city, are being reorganized, sanitized and beautified partly to realize the global aspirations of this new public.[14] On the fringes of these corridors, as Arun Ram has already observed, political and commercial imagery thrives in myriad forms.

Aspirations for the future, nostalgia for the past

The aspiration to become a world-class city and to attract a middle-class audience is oriented towards a prosperous future and informed by a reproduction and evocation of the past through the revival of postcard images of vernacular architecture, ritualized commemoration and "traditional" practices (Brosius 2010; Hancock 2008). As Christiane Brosius points out, the heterogeneous group of the middle class negotiates concepts such as national identity and "worldliness," or tradition and modernity (Brosius 2010, 12) in which heritage and nostalgia can be utilized as markers of "having tradition". Brosius convincingly shows how being world class is a "rooted" cosmopolitanism, i.e. rooted in locality, heritage and moral instruction and consumption.

In Tamil Nadu, the evocation of the past is more specifically directed at the politics of the Dravidian or Tamil linguistic heritage of the region. Although today Dravidianism has become a generic sign of "Tamilness," in the past it was much more closely tied to nationalist and linguistic projects in which Tamil Nadu distinguished itself from the north of India in religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions (Ramaswamy 1998). Political parties, particularly the DMK in its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, gained political capital by promoting itself as the guardian of the Tamil language and the Tamil cause (Ramaswamy 1998, 73). The placement of ephemeral yet spectacular cutouts of cinematic and political figures and more permanent monuments of historic figures has played an important role in the construction of Chennai as a Tamil city as well as in establishing the political face and identity of these parties.[15] Then and now, the politicization and reproduction of monuments or, as discussed here, beautification murals, actually reinforce the state's connection to what it wants to represent and hence reinforce its power (Anderson

---

[14] I would like to thank A. Srivathsan for alerting me to the "corridorization" of Chennai's beautification.

[15] See Hancock 2008; Jacob 2009; Pandian 2005b; Srivathsan 2000 for detailed accounts of the use of cutouts, statues and architecture by political parties.

1991, 182–185; Kusno 2010). Just as with monuments, the beautification murals are a type of symbolic speech (Anderson 1978) in which the authorities convey a common past and future. At first, we could argue, this was done through the symbolic language of films and the spectacular, whereas now the state relies on its alleged historic cultural past.

According to the Corporation officials I interviewed[16] the murals have two main objectives. First of all, as I already suggested above, the murals are intended to deter people from using these walls for political or commercial purposes; hoardings or billboards with this function are considered unsightly and walls should now be pleasant to look at. The second argument put forward by the Corporation is one of cultural promotion and education. The beautification murals aim to show the rich cultural tradition of the state in the form of consumable heritage sites and cultural traditions.

What is interesting is that none of the murals shows explicitly religious sites or ritual interaction. Many sites or practices are associated with religious or ritual interaction, but in their representation on the walls they seem removed from this embeddedness. As postcard images, temples merely become heritage sites and Carnatic musicians are shown performing with their shoes on (figure 62).[17] Instead of the importance of the tradition as lived, the images emphasize the (touristic) importance of the state's heritage in a universal language of heritage. Just as with museums, heightening and isolating images turns cultural materials into (art) objects (Alpers 1991). Now the city itself has become a tourist brochure or a selection of postcards, a spectacle from which tradition can be selectively picked and consumed. The incorporation of the touristic present in some images (figure 60) reinforces the relevance of the monuments as heritage sites.

Besides turning Tamil Nadu into a site of spectacle and cultural promotion, the Corporation indicates that cultural traditions should also be kept alive within the city. The murals should teach the young about the State's culture and historic past, something people supposedly forget when growing up in the city. The depiction of those aspects of culture that are believed to pass into oblivion in the city and consequently have to be revived, highlights a nostalgic imagination of the past and the village. In the light of the booming economy for which Chennai is selectively refurbishing its city, the pedagogical aim of the murals, I suggest, is not necessarily directed only at the younger generation but also at a wider middle-class audience. This may explain the ease with which the mural of the golf player was incorporated into the series of "traditional" settings, despite the exceptionality of the mural within the series as a whole. Moreover, by addressing a wider middle-class audience, the murals are not just educational but speak to a form of Tamil world class.

Since the envisioning of the village as the repository of Indian culture by orientalist scholars and figures such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, it has become a privileged trope in the imagining of the "original" and "real" India. Following on from this vision, cities are deemed to be degraded places that seem to have lost the wisdom, morality and harmonious lifestyle of the

---

[16] Personal conversations with several Corporation officials that are responsible for the selection or supervision of the new murals, i.e. the PRO, the deputy Commissioner, the Superintending Engineer (Bridges) and the chief engineer of Corporation zone 10. Chennai, 2010.

[17] My thanks to Sumathi Ramaswamy for alerting me to the odd fact of the shoes on this mural. A musician wearing shoes would normally not be appropriate firstly because gods do not wear shoes and secondly because Carnatic music itself is considered as having divine origins and it is usually the goddess Saraswati who is depicted with the musical instrument the *veena*, just as in this picture.

countryside. This rural lifestyle is believed to have disappeared with the mass movement to the city and should be passed on again to individualistic and materialistic city dwellers.

These ideas about the new middle classes are reflected in stereotypes, fuelled by media coverage, stating that the rapidly growing young middle class made up of IT professionals is leading this individualistic and materialistic lifestyle with all its negative connotations of materialism, sexual affairs and an active nightlife (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006). I am not interested in tracing these stories but I do think that the omnipresence of such rumors and opinions actually reinforces the ideas about the middle-class lifestyle and the city as a place of decay that is rapidly losing its traditional values and morals.

As a moral-pedagogical tool, the beautification murals fit in with the nostalgia for the idealized, harmonious village and traditional way of life. This nostalgia has come to be envisaged and articulated in consumption patterns and lifestyles, and by themed sites that noticeably refer to the past or rural life in films, theme parks, handicraft exhibitions, heritage hotels, museums, craft villages, or ethnic chic (Brosius 2010; Hancock 2008; Srivastava 2009; Tarlo 1996).

Mary Hancock has coined the term "neoliberal nostalgia" to indicate how, under the banner of neoliberal globalization, heritage-themed sites rearticulate rural life for the cosmopolitan elites (2008, 148–149). These sites, she argues, have come to epitomize what modernity has displaced; they serve as sanitized reproductions of rural life and the past. Hence, heritage is something arising within capitalism and not against it; it is a counter-narrative of the city, taking place within the landscape of urban life. By showing images of Tamil heritage, rural life and the past, the new murals are part of this counter-narrative of neoliberal nostalgia. The patchwork of images from different periods, themes and genres indicates that this is not nostalgia for a specific period or past but for an arbitrary and assembled past which was not experienced as such by its referents themselves (Appadurai 1996; Ivy 1988). History and tradition have become postcard images drawing on stereotypical images and "memories" that evoke "neo-nostalgia" (Ivy 1988). Marilyn Ivy has similarly developed the concept of "neo-nostalgia" in relation to tourism ads in Japan which do not refer to a specific period but to a free-floating past in which "[t]he idea of the neo is a literal displacement from any original referent" (Ivy 1988, 28). The ad hoc assemblage and ubiquitous repetition of images, reinforced by similar genres such as calendars, postcards or movies, underpins this feeling of "postcard" or "neo" nostalgia.

Conclusion

Who actually looks at these murals? Even though, as I hope to have shown in this chapter, the city authorities seem to be aiming at the emerging neoliberal middle-class publics, this does not necessarily mean that the murals only appeal to them and not to others. Many middle-class people I spoke to were in fact dismissive of the "badly painted" or "kitschy images" and some people were not even aware of the new murals and often noticed them only after I drew their attention to them. In contrast, many poor urban city dwellers, such as the artists themselves, were quite happy to finally see something else instead of the endless iconic faces of the state's two major political leaders. I showed in Chapter 4 how, unlike those of movie stars, the images of politicians cannot deviate from their iconic appearance. The images of movie stars change

and remain attractive whereas those of politicians remain the same for many years.[18] Therefore many people in Tamil Nadu can enjoy looking at a poster for a new film and imagining for instance what the film would be like, whereas they are not attracted by the faces of politicians. People can appreciate the way an image is painted or the skill of an artist; they can acknowledge the scale of the images but many expressed their feelings of weariness about the faces themselves. With the new images popping up everywhere, I noticed that many of those traveling by bicycle or on foot paused for a while to have a closer look at the newly painted images.

68. Flooded underpass during the monsoon. The beautified wall is showing the first signs of degradation. The temple is covered with the remains of posters. Their bright colors indicate that they were most likely cinema posters. Chennai August 2011. *The Hindu*: S.S. Kumar and B. Jothi Ramalingam

So although the city authorities in Chennai and several other cities in Tamil Nadu (and other parts of India) clearly referred to the cutout culture of cinema and personality politics as an eyesore marring the urban environment, they actually re-used that urban canvas to cater to a middle-class public. They sought to brush away one practice of political display and replace it with another. But now, as before, this brings with it new economies of production and new publics that form around these visual economies; they are probably evoking the same lively engagements as the ones they replaced: as with the previous ones, people continue to like them, hate them, ignore them or even contest them.

Now it remains to be seen when the murals will disappear again, when they will be replaced by or even defaced by new images. In 2011 I came across the first signs of defacement. The picture above, for instance, (figure 68) shows a flooded underpass after heavy rain in Chennai. The beautified wall behind the scene of people struggling to navigate the flooded passageway is beginning to show signs of degradation. The temple shown in the painting is covered in the remains of posters whose bright colors betray their probable origin as cinema posters. The posters were removed, probably by the city authorities or the rain may have washed them away. Nonetheless their traces remain.

As postcard images the new murals have contributed to the reinforcement of the iconic, standardized status of history, tradition and the beauty of the state, but is their repetition not creating indifference once again? I think we can be almost sure that after the novelty of the mural form has worn off, the depicted scenes will descend from their short-lived presence in hyperreality into the sphere of clichéd, everyday manifestations that go largely unnoticed. In the meantime, the city authorities steadily continue to embellish yet more public walls.

---

[18]   But even in the murals and other images of politicians a new trend has arrived in which artists use new, bright colors and recycle older cinematic images, particularly of movie hero-cum-politician MGR and his co-star and political successor Jayalalitha. The ways in which politicians seek new images for renewed attention is beyond the scope of this chapter but the changing images do highlight the constant desire to attract attention to and with images.