Roos Gerritsen

Intimate Visualities and the Politics of Fandom in India

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Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

Intimate Visualities and the Politics of Fandom in India

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In memory of my father

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Acknowledgements

When I returned to Puducherry in March 2018 for a short visit, I immediately wanted to visit Thengai (coconut) Selvam. Selvam was an important figure during my research. He was a very devoted fan of Rajinikanth and at the same time not someone who would (or could) put himself forward in the view of other fans. He always enjoyed talking about the images he had collected and displayed at home and in his area when my research assistant Gandhirajan and I came to visit him. When I got to know him, his mother had recently passed away and Selvam was still an unmarried man. Later he married, and when I returned to present him with a copy of my dissertation, he had two small children who upon seeing the book with images of Rajinikanth immediately started playing with the pages. This to the joy of Selvam who saw another sign of his children becoming true Rajini fans. So when I returned in 2018, I wanted to see how Selvam was doing. Moreover, I was curious about Selvam's take on the recent events in Tamil Nadu: both Rajinikanth – the background protagonist of this book – and his counterpart Kamalahaasan recently announced their entry into politics. As Selvam never believed that it would be fitting for Rajinikanth to engage in a political career, let alone in the politicking of his fellow fans, I wanted to know the state of affairs for Selvam and his fan-club activities. I rented a bike on a late evening in March to head for Selvam's neighbourhood, expecting him to be home after a day's work in the city selling coconuts. Selvam was always around; if not around his home, I knew where I could find him selling coconuts. But when looking for the right lane in the warren of streets where his house was based, and while asking around for his whereabouts, a passer-by told us that Selvam was no more. He had died three years earlier by falling out of a coconut tree. While writing this word of thanks, Selvam was the first of the people that I had got to know in Puducherry for my research that I thought of, someone who would have liked to have seen this book. But time and a fatal accident made this impossible. Where a certain period of fandom and generational change are central to this book, sometimes explicitly and very often implicitly, Selvam's death made me even more aware of how our interests, pastimes, obsessions, and even lives are subject to the forces of time. Many things have changed throughout my research and afterwards: fan subjectivities, Tamil politics, and image technologies, to name but a few. But also my own life has transformed during these years, as I moved on from being a Master's student, conceiving this project, a PhD student working on it, to a lecturer juggling academic life and a family. Several

years have passed from that first moment of an idea and now, finally, this book is seeing the light.

In the course of this project I encountered numerous persons who contributed to it in one way or another, more than I can mention, remember, or even realize. I am much indebted to the many fan club members who have opened their lives to me, kindly inviting me into their homes and to all kinds of occasions, and patiently answering my numerous questions. Their names would be too many to mention here, but I want to thank a few of them explicitly as they have engaged in my project in very specific ways: Balradj, Ibrahim, Jothi Kumar, Kannayram, Napoleon Raja, Raja, Rajini Shankar, Ramesh, Ravichandran, Sasi Kumar, Saktivel, Selvaraj, Taragai Raja, Thengai Selvam, and Tamizh Vaanan. The banner artists and studio designers Kumar, Muthu, Raja, Yuveraaj, and the family of the late Ranjit were extremely kind and helpful. They have shared their stories with me, but also their collections of images. I am grateful for their wonderful insights into the world of banner art and the changes that they as artists were going through.

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My friends Bharath, Elka, Gandhirajan, Gita, Hari Priya, Kavi and Kathir, Maheswari, Peer & Shuba, Pragathi & Raja, Prince, Rajesh, my landlords the Choudrys, and numerous others transformed Chennai and Puducherry into hospitable places to live in but also places to return to, discussing anthropology, cinema, politics, or just the endless daily matters, whether over lovely dinners or long afternoon chats over milky tea or coffee. A special thanks goes to Maheswari and Satheesh. I cherish the warmth and generosity, the welcoming home, the delicious dinners, as well as the vibrant rooftop parties on consecutive New Year's eves. I have seen their two lovely daughters Nandhini and Malini grow from teenagers into married women.

I do not know how to express my gratitude to my PhD supervisor Patsy Spyer. The positive way in which she commented on my work and encouraged it have always been a great motivator to me. In addition, I will never forget the workshops and scholars she introduced me to, turning academic life into a fantastic experience of which I still reap the benefits. A number of

scholars, too many to mention, have contributed to the content of this manuscript as I presented chapters and papers on different occasions. I owe much to the transvisuality group which was organized by the Cluster of Excellence in Heidelberg. The inspiring discussions in Istanbul, Delhi, and Heidelberg, and the platform they offered me for presenting my work, traced their way into the manuscript as it is now in more than one way. The group has not only provided me this engaging platform, it has also been a good place for 'companionable moments', to paraphrase Ken George (keynote summer school *seeing matters* Heidelberg, 30 July 2012). Within the environment of this group and various other academic encounters I want to thank the following persons in particular for commenting on my work: Bart Barendregt, Christiane Brosius, Wendelmoet Hamelink, Stephen Inglis, Rivke Jaffe, Sabine Luning, Partha Mitter, Britta Ohm, Maarten Onneweer, Martijn Oosterbaan, Chris Pinney, Peter Pels, Katrien Pype, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Annemarie Samuels, Kavita Singh, S.V. Srinivas, A. Srivathsan, the late Mary Steedly, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Paola Zamperini and Dorien Zandbergen. Moreover, I am much indebted to Kajri Jain, Steve Hughes, Pieter ter Keurs, Erik de Maaker, and Nira Wickramasinghe for a careful reading and their critical questions for the dissertation that became this book. Some of their questions and comments have contributed greatly to a renewed critical thinking about the topic.

Working on the book manuscript, while being hospitalized and hoping that our son would not be born too early – which he was – was the beginning also of a struggle with sleep, time, and writers block. It is also in the light of these perpetual sometimes difficult moments of writing that the two reviewers of this book, Lotte Hoek and Constantine V. Nakassis, have done an amazing job in sharpening the arguments, contesting its contradictions, straightening chapters, and what's more. I don't know how to express my gratitude to their attentiveness. Naturally all flaws and shortcomings are entirely my own.

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My mother and father have taught me to be curious and have shared their own passion for literature, music, and the eccentricities of life. My father was an original thinker and I am not sure if I can ever reach that creativity but I know that he would be full of pride seeing the completion of this work. It is to his memory that I dedicate this book. My mother Janneke has seen all the phases of this work while travelling the world in a different way. Moving continuously in-between homes and when occasionally not moving, we were regularly too engrossed in our work. It must have been annoying at times. My mother has always read my publications with great curiosity and posed many questions and comments. These have been invaluable. Fortunately, some family and friends managed to visit us in India. These visits were rewarding as I was able to share my enthusiasm for a place that has become home, to show in reality what has been occupying my mind for so many years now. Others have joined us in our various writing abodes, taking a few days or weeks to jointly write dissertations, papers, or just to de-stress and savour life in the Provence. These visits in the Luberon, its long evening dinners, and extensive walks made writing a dissertation and later a book something to savour and possibly something I could see myself doing again.

Our children Amon and Kirin have brought me the joy of seeing the world differently and in the meantime have become continual visitors of Tamil Nadu. And Karl, thank you for being there with me, in spirit but also in sharing a passion for India. You can't imagine how much your original take on subjects and your interest in my work has formed this book. I know it is wishful thinking, but I truly hope that the rollercoaster life of academia can give me and everyone around me not only more beautiful encounters and inspiration but also instants of slowing down.

Notes on language and figures

To keep this book readable for a broader public I have only used Tamil words where I think they are important to convey their meaning. There exists a major difference between literary (or written) Tamil and spoken Tamil. Also, in spoken Tamil and its transliteration into Roman script, people spell words in a variety of ways. For example, two films that I write about regularly can be spelled *Shivaji* or *Sivaji*, *Endhiran* or *Enthiran*. A name like Satheesh can also be spelled Sathish. The name of the film star Kamal Hassan can also be written Kamal Haasan, Kamalahasan, or Kamalhassan. Also, in newspapers, billboards and the like, whenever Roman script is used, the spelling can vary.

The use of English also changes the ways in which words are spelled in Tamil. Hotels,[1] canteens and street vendors that sell the staple food of Tamil Nadu, a selection of different dishes served with rice (*saappaadu* in Tamil) announce that lunch can be eaten with a signboard saying 'meals ready' written phonetically in Tamil script as மீல்ஸ் ரெடி (transliterated back literally as 'mīls reṭi').

Because this research is about the vernacular, about the everyday, I prefer to stay as close to the everyday experience as possible, even though it is translated. For that reason, whenever I use Tamil words, I have not used one official orthographic way of writing them but have instead used a spelling that comes as close as possible to how the people with whom I worked would have used or encountered them, while also making it readable for a non-Tamil audience.

The conversations I had with most of my interlocutors were in Tamil; the quotations given in the pages that follow are thus my translations and those of my research assistant. The photographs have all been taken by the author unless stated otherwise. Wherever possible I have asked permission to publish photos that depict people. I have archived the work of several banner artists in Puducherry by photographing their archival albums. When I use photos from these collections, I indicate the artists' names as the original source. Their work is published with their permission.

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1   Hotel is a common word for a restaurant in Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

> The things that need saying step out of people, just as people step out of houses and begin to walk the street. Messages find walls, images their imprints, bodies leave traces.
> People and pictures, objects and subjects, machines and meanings, wires, cables, codes, secrets and the things that need saying out loud crowd the streets, become the streets, and move, overwriting old inscriptions, turning in on themselves, making labyrinths and freeways, making connections, conversations and concentrations out of electricity.
>
> *Raqs Media Collective 2002, 93*

Images come and go. They do not just float without direction; there is a logic and resonance in how they move (Larkin 2008). In the words of Raqs Media Collective, images crowd the streets and become the streets. The cityscapes in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry[2] are no different in that respect. Banners, posters, murals, cutouts, and other signboards of diverse styles and formats constellate in its public spaces. In cityscapes such as these, buildings blend in with the billboards in-between. Typically, signboards present a plethora of stimuli displaying the most diverse range of products. Huge billboards may advertise jewellery, saris, underwear, mobile networks, new urban development plots, or the latest film releases. Shopfronts carry all sorts of ads on their shutters. Walls of buildings become vast displays of cement brands, underwear, and all sorts of commercial paraphernalia. Unless clearly

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2   As I will explain further below, my research was conducted in both Tamil Nadu and Union Territory of Puducherry. Before independence in 1947 the region belonged to the Madras Presidency, covering most of South India. The Madras Presidency transformed into the Madras Province after independence in 1947 and became the Madras State in 1950. In 1969, the states were divided according to linguistic lines and Tamil Nadu was formed as separate state. Pondicherry was part of French colonial India. It comprised Chandernagor, Mahé, Yanam, Karaikal, and Masulipatam. From 1954, the French territories were transferred to the Indian republic and a decade later these territories become union territories within India, which means that the administration and governance falls directly under the federal state. Being enclosed by Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry also has Tamil as its main language. While the political parties in power differ from those in Tamil Nadu, there are many overlaps in how parties work, and how the electorate is approached. Also fan clubs were not structured differently within the Union territory. Therefore, for the sake of convenience, I will refer to Tamil Nadu as a region which includes Puducherry instead of always indicating the two formally separate states. The Union Territory of Pondicherry officially changed its name to Puducherry in 2006. Most people, however, still call it Pondicherry or Pondy.

marked otherwise with the typical 'stick no bill' sign, building façades and walls are sure to be painted or pasted with something. Whenever possible, their walls double as commercial advertisements that bear little or no relation to the shops they shelter. Villages in Tamil Nadu are thus sometimes almost literally overshadowed by advertisements. Political imagery is even more pervasive, covering buildings and compound walls in political party symbols and images of their leaders. Cutouts, in their turn, used to tower over cityscapes, displaying larger-than-life images of Tamil Nadu's main political leaders and film stars. Film stars like these present yet another of the city's visual tropes: their faces adorn film posters and billboards but also appear on signboards belonging to photo studios, tailors, or barbers who use them to attract customers.

As I navigated the towns and streets of Tamil Nadu, this whole visual landscape would become part of my everyday experience. I would have stopped noticing it at a certain point, I believe, if it hadn't been such a transient presence as well. Everything in this landscape could look unexpectedly different each time I returned, as if some of its characteristic forms and media had changed, disappearing from sight and trading places on the visual horizon with new ones that were now raising their heads.

When I first arrived in Chennai for an earlier research project in 2002, I experienced an initial disappointment. Sitting in the back of the (then still) inevitable Ambassador car taking me to my hotel in the centre of Chennai, I craned my neck, hoping to finally see the city's legendary cutouts, these huge figures of politicians, popular actors, and cine-politicians which I had heard so much about. The South Indian state of Tamil Nadu and its capital Chennai were legendary for their larger-than-life displays of political and cinematic heroes that materialized the entanglement of politics and cinema in public spaces. But on my way to the hotel and during the next few days while travelling around the city, I could not spot a single one of these structures. Only at cinemas did I manage to locate much smaller versions of the painted cutouts and banners publicizing the most recent film releases. My disappointment almost prevented me from noticing what was now becoming increasingly dominant in the city: vinyl billboards populating walls, junctions, streets, cinemas and the like made for birthdays or religious events, or by fan clubs and political supporters. Even though the spectacular, enormous painted image had diminished in presence, vinyl billboards had replaced it and thereby changed the public realm considerably: not only in outlook but also in the ubiquity of their usage. This portrayal of the visual is not merely a way of describing this cityscape at a certain point, but rather is a statement about visuality in Tamil Nadu in which many phenomena

overlap: film stardom, fan subjectivities, politics, and image practices. The intricate ways in which these intersections come to the fore form the topic of this book.

Film fan clubs actively contribute to the ubiquitous visual culture of Tamil Nadu's cities and towns. For film releases and their stars' birthdays they display billboards, posters, and murals in public spaces. These images portray a selective range of local Tamil stars and contain visual signs that give away the presence of their respective fan clubs. The signs and images that emanate from these fan clubs leave behind an ubiquitous trail of imagery that, despite being rather ephemeral, has a continuous, familiar face and hence one that can have a strong evocative effect (Holland 2004, 2).

It is this ephemeral, yet consistent and resonant trail of images marked out by fan clubs that I seek to analyse in this book, in particular the traces left by Tamil film actor par excellence Rajinikanth. This book is an ethnographic account of the circulation of Rajinikanth in everyday life worlds as well as of the street-level appropriation of this iconic figure into networks of patronage, veneration, and social mobility via billboards, murals, and posters. I focus on the question of how these practices traverse everyday lives, as well as public spaces and public spheres. How do fans relate to their star in daily practices and what do those relations tell us about the broader social phenomena of film audiences and film-going in the context of Tamil film? What do the widely used images tell us about their producers and their social worlds? Images articulate the desires, ambitions, political projects, and agency of their users. They are part of the everyday practices and experiences of their producers and consumers. At the same time images trigger and represent feelings of collectivity and resistance beyond the images themselves. In articulating collectivity and opposition they become central to how individuals and collectivities imagine and recognize themselves (Strassler 2010, 3). In other words, images are not simply reflections of social life; they are actively making it (Pinney 2004; Rajagopal 2001; Ramaswamy 2003; Spyer 2008a; Williams 1974).

The central argument is that the modes of visual proximity that fans aspire to and cultivate, engender advantages of different sorts. It is first of all personally rewarding as well as potentially socially efficacious. The different chapters open up different modes of allowing yourself to be visually proximate to significant others, some appropriate and some inappropriate. The appropriateness of various activities and visual display is not related to the image itself per se but to the social position of those who put it on display. Relating the familial and public display of images attends to what cinephilia is and does. Fandom on display indicates the double sense of

display. The first sense of display involves the publicness of fandom, its need to show its presence to make it meaningful. Being the fan of a star can be a personal feeling, but it needs collectivity to be recognized and cultivated. And second, it refers to the practices of display that come along with fan practices. Such an understanding shifts away from relating fandom exclusively to the cinema and this focus on everyday images practices, enables us to include the embodied, sensuous, visual, and spatial practices related to film, celebrity, and political and fan activity.

The study of cinephilia, especially in India, has been dominated by a film studies paradigm (Dyer 2004; R. Vasudevan 2003; Rajadhyaksha 2009; Nandy 1998). In the last few years there has been a considerable shift in the field of South Asian film studies. Several works have taken the social lives of films from their inception to their screening as subject of investigation, bringing new insights into the ways in which people engage with film in various ways. A few recent works stand out and seem to indicate a new direction in thinking about film in South Asia, from the creative process of bringing film into being to its 'afterlife' and the process of watching and appropriation (A. Pandian 2015; Hoek 2013; L. Srinivas 2016; Ganti 2012). The remarkable South Indian histories of a politics of adulation and blurring of the on/offscreen images of Tamil film star-politicians have received abundant attention, often also from a historical, film, or cultural studies perspective. I will describe this literature in more detail below. I will also nuance the claim that fan subjectivities and producers of the public media produce the personality politics of Tamil Nadu (Dickey 1993b; Jacob 2009). While the basic premise of Dickey's and Jacob's arguments has been confirmed by my research, my exploration of image practices and everyday lives of fans themselves show an ambiguity towards their star, politicking practices and themselves as fans that urges us to understand how these fields blur, disconnect, or cannot be considered altogether. What do fans make of their star, not simply through film, but through the various media that they engage with? Even though the figure of the fan is not neglected in film studies, the focus there remains predominantly focused on fans as exceptions, as fanatics. In this book, I explore the image practices of fans themselves and attempt to show the importance of producing modes of visual proximity in engaging with a star, other fans, and local political networks. What insights do such image practices offer us about cinephilia in Tamil Nadu, India, and perhaps more generally? What do the intimate practices tell us about the ways in which images mediate and cultivate relations with far-away others?

I make two arguments. The first relates to the nature of everyday affects and intimacy and their expression through the image cultures that fans

engage in. While this book is framed around fan clubs, it does not seek to offer an ethnographic account of fan clubs in South India. To paraphrase Geertz (1973), I did not study fan clubs, I studied *in* fan clubs. The focus on image practices of fans brings the topic of this book to be about the ways in which visual technologies have been deployed at the level of grassroots or vernacular politics. The longstanding connections between the film industry and political parties in Tamil Nadu have put fan clubs in a particular position within this relationship, and several works have dealt with the entanglement of politics and film. Some of these works take the perspective of the blurring of the cinematic format, political aesthetics, popular culture, and the charisma of its actor and its hero role to attract a specific audience (Sivathamby 1981; Hardgrave 1973; M.S.S. Pandian 1992; Jacob 2009); others approach the topic from the perspective and agency of fans (Dickey 1993b; Rogers 2009, 2011). These works are particularly important efforts in understanding and analysing the specific history of politics, charisma, and cinema in Tamil Nadu. But while of immense value, these works fail to elucidate what it actually means to be a fan. How can one explain the ambiguity of fandom that becomes apparent in appraising fan image practices time and again? How can one understand fandom without necessarily looking at the political influence of their stars? I suggest that investigating the image practices and fan subjectivities that are not explicitly related to electoral politics help us understand fandom as everyday practice at a specific moment in Tamil Nadu. I argue that the banners and posters fans produce actively shape the social worlds of fan clubs and individual fans, as do the more intimate commonplace images fans keep and exhibit in the everyday space of their homes. With their 'fandom on display' fans pursue aspirations of 'presence' and power that go beyond the affection for celebrities and the fan clubs' cinematic roots. As I will show, while fandom may start for the love of an actor, fan club membership moves to include other regimes of affect and political subjectivities.

The second argument relates to the publicness of images and the mediation of public spaces of the city in which everyday affects as well as negotiations and imaginations of patronage and mobility appear and disappear, are made visible and invisible, conflict or concur. Images in their ability move – in the double sense of the word following Steedly and Spyer (2013) – are formed by being in motion, moving 'in and out of people's everyday lives and frames of value' (K. Jain 2007). These frames of value do not merely change; they also diverge in their potentialities in various places and times and across individuals and publics. The billboards fans made did not last very long; they were modified from being hand-painted

to being digitally designed, and colours and design changed to hold the attention of its possible onlookers. In addition, a counter politics of the image in state-level political squabbling caused selective bans on public images, and fights over images and discussions over their effects dispersed in public spheres. Particularly new imaginations embedded in a 'world-class aesthetic' have become exceedingly visible in the built environment and public spaces of India (Ghertner 2015; Searle 2016; see also Brosius 2010). Whereas Tamil Nadu politics has for a long time crystallized political loyalty and leader veneration in visual display, the same parties seemed to distance themselves from the image of populist personality politics and instead focus on a rising middle-class and world-class Chennai. The ways in which this political visual play in Tamil Nadu materialized in public spaces tells us something about the after-effects, ephemerality, and heterogeneity of images and the ways they are tied up in social practices, public discussions, and larger sociopolitical constellations and histories (see also Strassler 2010). I argue that public spaces have become one of the stages on which political subjectivities, affective regimes, and moralities are being played out. However, instead of considering these as concurring, or one pushing out the other, I propose that we should think in terms of layered articulations that produce a varied array of visual strategies. In addition, there is a range of permissibility for them. They are (un)wanted and (im)possible at different locations. The connecting thread throughout the book is images that circulate and resonate in everyday spaces of the household and the more public spaces of the cinema and street and a shift in visual technologies and ideologies – from painted cutout culture to digitally designed vinyl billboards to competing city government rhetoric and laws promoting a world-class cityscape – as infrastructure to the construction of affective modes of engagement with public figures. It teases out the articulations of the ways in which stars and intimacy with these stars can bring present and future benefits. By looking at the ways in which images are personalized and become part of the interpersonal linkages of family and face-to-face communities, this book provides an instance of how spectacle mediates social mobility via access to the public sphere, and of how images play a part in mundane, familial settings.

   It is through these images practices that come and go, are expected, desired and dismissed, that we can try to understand the ways in which images produce feelings of pleasure and dismissal, of (a lack of) recognition, agency, and power. Images are the tangible form of an intangible connection between fan and star. The latter are presenced *through* the former's images, individualized and therefore owned. The star is also presenced *in* the fan's

images as an embodied being. Yet stars are not merely personas to be adored and adulated; neither are they mere bodies for other aspirations. This book examines not merely a specific moment in time but also changes in time. By looking at the image practices and ideologies we can try to understand how the politics of spectacle for which Tamil Nadu is so infamous, is a rather multifaceted phenomenon that while specific for each generation and star, can help us understand how an image is built, possessed, and dismissed.

Fans – cinema – politics: a concise history

> Dear friends,
> I have officially joined the list of those who have become infected with a virus which affects the senses and spreads to everybody around. The virus has been identified as a seasonal one, that which comes into existence every time that a film of a certain actor called 'SUPERSTAR RAJINI' releases all over the world. The virus induces restlessness, anxiety, sleeplessness, feverish excitement, strange sensations and a nonstop recitation of two words – 'Rajini' and 'Shivaji'. The virus is called 'SHIVAJI' VIRUS.
> – Kaza Raja

This message was posted by Kaza Raja on the Yahoo Group RajinifansDiscussions (at Rajinifans.com) a few weeks before the long awaited release of *Sivaji: The Boss* (Shankar 2007). Kaza Raja uses the metaphor of a virus, 'the causative agent of an infectious disease'[3] to indicate the anxiety experienced by him and others in the run-up to the release of the latest film starring his film hero Rajinikanth. But there is more to it than that. The virus is highly contagious and, as Kaza Raja put it, creates all kinds of sensorial effects. His metaphor of the virus suggests on the one hand a personal and physical experience and on the other it plays up the causative infectiousness of the film release: you cannot help but get infected by it; it spreads in many ways and is thus collectively experienced by a larger group.

The proclaimed 'superstar' of Kollywood,[4] Rajinikanth (1950, born Sivaji Rao Gaekwad in Karnataka) is a phenomenon loved by many. His real-life and

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3   Virus (2009). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved 29 April 2009, from www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virus.
4   Kollywood is named after the neighbourhood Kodambakkam where most film studios are situated. It has more than 80 million potential viewers in India and abroad and an annual film production similar to that of Bollywood.

film character and his distinctive mannerisms are part of his attraction and, together with his film releases, the topic of much conversation throughout the state. He is popular among all strata of society, men and women, young and old, and his films are watched time after time on television and in the cinema. Rajini, or *talaivar* (leader), as he is predominantly called, started acting in the 1970s. His popularity rose to a new level in the 1990s, from which point he became 'a "mass hero", a term used in south India for an actor who is a "hero" to the "masses", and whose "mass" – or power, charisma, and popularity – has a gravitational pull on all those caught in his orbit, be they fans or filmmakers, voters or governments' (Nakassis 2017b; see also M.S.S. Pandian 1992; S.V. Srinivas 2009; Prasad 2014).

Fan clubs of film stars (*rasigar manram*) are widespread throughout Tamil Nadu; their number often runs into the tens of thousands dedicated to one actor alone. Their members consist mostly of men, and they are devoted to male stars, local and Tamil actors, in whose names they organize certain events. Fans go and watch their heroes' films together in local cinemas; they celebrate the stars' birthdays and share the latest news they have picked up about their star. These are leisure activities, but fan club members themselves emphasize their philanthropic outlook by their involvement in social work. In the name of their heroes they donate blood or distribute schoolbooks, saris, and food, especially on the occasion of their star's birthday or on other important occasions. Moreover, once fan club members are a bit older, they become active in local political and patronage networks. In several instances, actors have started their own political parties: when they entered electoral politics, their fan clubs transformed into party cadres. Fan clubs are predominantly all-men environments, but throughout Tamil Nadu several female fan clubs do exist. In Chapter 3, I will describe a female fan club for Rajinikanth to say a bit more on how such a female space fits into what fan clubs 'do'. Fan clubs are organized per neighbourhood and village or town, depending on the local activity of the fans and of how many fan clubs exist. Another dividing factor is location and caste and class (see also S.V. Srinivas 2009). Members were mostly from lower socioeconomic classes, employed as auto rickshaw drivers, bicycle and motorbike mechanics, and lower-grade clerks in government offices; or they run a shop of their own, a tea stall or a small business, and some young men are lower middle-class college students (Dickey 1993a; Jeffrey 2010; Rogers 2009; S.V. Srinivas 2009). Especially in villages I have observed a division of fans in caste-specific fan clubs that are also spatially distinguished: a fan club within the village, made up of the non-Dalits who live within village boundaries, coexists with a separate fan club of Dalits, commonly segregated at the outskirts of villages. Even

though most fans said that everyone could become a member, in reality, the spatio-social hierarchies and divisions defined the membership of a specific fan club (see also S.V. Srinivas 2009).

All major male Tamil film heroes have their own fan clubs. The number of fan clubs devoted to actors corresponds directly to their popularity. The older, established Tamil film stars have a relatively stable base of fan clubs, whereas younger actors depend on their films' success as well as on their fan clubs' activities. There are hardly any fan clubs dedicated to actresses, although there are a few exceptions. The first, which is not really a fan club, is the temple built for actress Kushboo by her fans in the southern city of Trichy. The temple was later demolished by protesters who objected to Kushboo's controversial remarks on premarital sex.[5] In addition, in 2006, a fan club was founded in the name of Tamil actress Trisha. The fan club, consisting of male members, primarily conducted social work in Trisha's name. But besides these instances the number of fan clubs for and activities organized in the name of actresses remains limited.

The number of fan clubs for Tamil male actors is high, although exact figures are difficult to verify. Rajinikanth, for example, put a limit on the number of fan club registrations,[6] restricting the number of fan clubs to about 20,000, with an average of ten to thirty members per club. However, this did not hold his fans back from starting new, unregistered, clubs. When these clubs are considered as well, the number of his fan clubs probably doubles. Some fans[7] estimated the number of official Rajinikanth fan clubs to be around 70,000. Vijayakanth, another contemporary film star who started a political party in 2005, had a fan base of an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 fan clubs (Swaminathan 2004, 13). Younger actors such as Vijay, Ajith, and Surya also had a considerable number of fan clubs dedicated to them. For Surya it is said that there were 25,000 registered clubs in Tamil Nadu and several thousand more if we include Kerala, Mumbai, and some other cities.[8] These numbers are not reliable, though, as fans tended to quote higher numbers and official fan club documents relating to the main organization were not accessible to me at the time.

Fan clubs are not unique to Tamil Nadu, but they do not exist all over India, and especially not in the form and numbers in which they can be

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5   Kushboo advocated the right of women to have premarital sex. This caused a controversy in Tamil Nadu and political groups have accused her of going against Tamil culture.
6   Local fan clubs ask for official permission to start a fan club at their local head fan club which sends the registration to All-India Rajinikanth Manram in Chennai. Below I refer further to the registration in more detail.
7   When speaking about fans, I am referring to fans who are members of a fan club.
8   Stated by the leader of the Surya fan club, Madhavan. Chennai, 10 December 2009.

found there. In Tamil Nadu they stem from a rather specific history in which film and politics have become mutually reinforcing. Since the end of the 1960s, the state has been ruled by Chief Ministers who started their careers in the film industry. The first major film star to become Chief Minister, M.G. Ramachandran, commonly known as MGR, was also the first film star with active fan clubs that supported him, both in his capacity as a film star and as that of a politician. From MGR's era onwards, fan clubs have become a permanent presence with their own aspirations in terms of film-watching as well as politics. The history of Tamil cinema and the links with electoral politics have been described at length by other scholars, so let me only try to pinpoint the most important aspects that help us understand the era of Rajinikanth fans who are the subject of this book.

Chennai is the centre of the Tamil film industry.[9] Together with the other South Indian film industries of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the Tamil film industry is known for its close connections between film and politics. Particularly Tamil Nadu has a long history of film stars entering electoral politics and politicians using film. Madhava Prasad has coined the term 'cine-politics' to recognize such celebrity figures who pull their screen image to electoral politics (Prasad 1999; 2014).

Chennai, formerly Madras, is one of the three centres, together with Mumbai and Kolkata, where cinema arrived and settled in colonial India in the late 1890s.[10] In the early days of film screening in colonial Madras, silent films were not restricted by linguistic or social identification or stratification and hence brought several language groups to the cinema:

> Rather than as a medium of some already existing linguistic group, the silent cinema innovated its own language of address. Compared to other cultural forms of music, literature, drama, the emerging public institution of the cinema in South India worked to allow castes, classes and communities as well as women, children and families to participate and mix in new public ways within a new kind of social space. (Hughes 2006, 34; see also Sivathamby 1981)

9   Baskaran 1996; Dickey 1993a; Forrester 1976; Hardgrave 1973; Hughes 1996; 2000; Irshick 1969; M.S.S. Pandian 1992; A. Pandian 2015; Sivathamby 1981; Velayutham 2008; for more in-depth accounts of Tamil cinema.
10   Chennai's former name is Madras; Mumbai's former name is Bombay, and Kolkata's is Calcutta.

The first screenings were primarily dramas and serials from overseas, starring film actors such as Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln who were extremely popular at the time (Baskaran 1996; Hughes 2006). These stars had a huge fan following in South India (Hughes 2006) and were the first to have fan clubs devoted to them.[11] These fan clubs, however, were completely different in structure, activity, and class formation to what they would later become.

Resistance in India against the colonial regime heralded what appears to be the first link between film and politics. As with theatre productions, films were used to criticize colonial rule and refer to India's independence (Bhatia 2004). Theatre performances in the Tamil-speaking parts of South India were already articulating social reform and conveying political messages. As many theatre actors shifted to the film industry, they implemented their political and social commitment there as well. With a growing desire for independence in India, theatre as well as film was used to convey criticism of colonial rule.

From the first Dravidian movement and party, the DK (*Dravida Kazhagam* or Dravidian Party), led by E.V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973), popularly known as Periyar (meaning great one or great leader in Tamil), that was opposing Brahmin and North Indian hegemony in South India (Bate 2009; Hardgrave 1964; Irshick 1969; M.S.S. Pandian 2007; Price 1996; Ramaswamy 1997; Subramanian 1999), a group of members split and founded the DMK (*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, Dravidian Progress Party). Scriptwriters, directors, film stars and others involved in the cinema industry were drawn to the DMK. As a result, the party attracted massive crowds with its pervasive use of cinema's heroic images and film stars. Many DMK members came from the field of theatre, including its first leader, C.N. Annadurai. Annadurai, a dramatist, writer, director, and producer, was a charismatic rhetorician (Hardgrave 1964, 401; Widlund 1993, 9) who, in combination with the mobilization of film stars to attend party rallies, attracted thousands of people and resulted in a growing electorate (Dickey 1993b, 343; Hardgrave 1964, 400-401). The public was drawn to party rallies by the new popular film stars such as MGR, K.R. Ramaswamy, Sivaji Ganesan, and S.S. Rajendran, whose fame spread with the extension of cinema to rural areas through electrification (Sivathamby 1981). Film actors for their part were drawn towards the DMK because of its position in the film industry as owners of film companies (Widlund 1993, 11) and its generous awards and grants to encourage the cinema industry in the state (Jacob 1997, 152). For artists,

11   Personal conversation with Theodore Baskaran, 23 May 2008.

**Figure 1   Wall painting displaying MGR (left) and Jayalalitha (middle and right)
commissioned by AIADMK party members**

being linked with the DMK was founded on a desire to become famous
(Hardgrave 1964, 401) and by the fact that the DMK sponsored cultural
events on political subjects (Widlund 2000, 65). The DMK for their part
used the artists to attract the public to their party rallies and as such to
enlarge their voting base.

Film from this period until the 1970s addressed moral imperatives with
social realist themes, such as caste discrimination, the struggles of the
poor, and family relations (Velayutham 2008, 4). The emphasis on social
reform in the 1950s and 1960s was increasingly explicitly related to party
propaganda for the DMK. The close involvement of film stars and directors
in politics heralded decades in which films were used for political (par-
ticularly DMK) publicity. Films of all genres, from mythological and social
to melodrama, were infused with political imagery and rhetoric relating
to the political subjects the party was interested in at the time (Thoraval
2000). Annadurai's portrait, the DMK symbol of the rising sun, the party
colours red and black and dialogues and songs referring to the party were
inserted into films (Widlund 1993, 11). In addition, the party's publicity
material started to be modelled on the visual vocabulary of film publicity
by using similar pictorial conventions. In this shared visual language of
film and politics banner artists used similar colours for political as well
as cinematic cutouts, murals, and banners (see Figure 1). In 1972, MGR, a

rising film star who was previously a member of the DMK, founded his own party, the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Party). When still in the DMK, the first fan clubs in his name were formed in 1953 (Hardgrave in S.V. Srinivas 2009, 8). His popularity as a film star made his party win elections and after he passed away, Jayalalitha, a film actress and co-star of MGR, took over the party leadership.[12] Jayalalitha was the leader of the AIADMK until she passed away in 2016. The public culture that developed in Tamil Nadu out of this close relationship between film and politics prefigured the fan club imagery that is the subject of this book.

   This period of cine-politics has attracted a great number of academic accounts explaining the format of films, their tropes and narratives as a foundation of political action in South India (Forrester 1976; Hardgrave 1964; M.S.S. Pandian 1992; Sivathamby 1981; Prasad 1999, 2014; Baskaran 1996; Rajanayagam 2015; Pongiyannan 2015) and in adjacent South Indian states (S.V. Srinivas 2009; Prasad 2014). Instead of looking at film text and star charisma influencing spectators, Sara Dickey has presented how the institutional structure of MGR fan clubs was a base for political action while she also emphasized the agency (and its limits) of fans in the adulation of film star MGR (Dickey 1993b). She argued that fan clubs and particularly their local leaders employ their membership to attain political power motivated by fans' own background, coming from the urban poor (Dickey 1993b; see also Rogers 2009). For Prasad, who coined the term 'cine-politics', films did not only propagate star charisma and political representation, they actually created a specific kind of bottom-up political engagement: 'a virtual political community is forged between a star and his fan following, and [...] this community operates independently of, and need not necessarily culminate in, party politics' (Prasad 2014, 7). For Prasad, this cine-politics refers to the total phenomenon, also before entry into formal electoral politics 'but is crucially centered on the political dimension that is already present before that shift' (ibid., 11). Moreover, he sees cine-politics not as a solution or expansion of democratic ideals but as a symptom of a political order's subjective disorder (ibid., 185). Prasad has argued that the explanations usually given for the enmeshing of film and politics can be roughly divided into two approaches: one explaining the phenomena in terms of cultural and religious factors and the other in

12   This is a very short summary of how the party was led, taken over, and the many disputes that took place. However, these issues have been discussed elsewhere (Baskaran 2008; Sivathamby 1981; Widlund 2000).

terms of cinema as a tool of political communication. He criticizes such
approaches for studying cinema and parliamentary politics as distinct
fields, each with their own logic and rules, that are then brought together
in explanations of the phenomenon, rather than examining the way in
which 'cine-politics' operates as a unique system on its own (Prasad 2014, 12).
This tendency we can also notice in accounts beyond South India. Boorstin
(Boorstin 1992) refers to 'pseudo-events' or 'pseudo-politicians' to describe
the media spectacle, which has become more important or attractive than
the socio-political world itself. With a Baudrillardian feeling of loss of
reality and replacement by spectacle, Boorstin and a number of scholars
that followed him consider celebrity as separate from political culture
and often as something with a lamentable effect on it. As, for example, in
the case of film star-turned-politicians Arnold Schwarzenegger or Ronald
Reagan, scholars and public intellectuals commonly speak of their move
into politics as if they would interrupt the rationality of political practice or
undermine democracy. They criticize the entry of celebrities into politics on
a number of grounds: they claim (1) that celebrities interrupt the rationality
of politics; (2) that they undermine democracy; and (3) that their political
careers depend on the deliberate construction of an image – in other
words, they are running on personality and not policy. The most germane
argument for the purpose of this book is the charge that celebrities turn
otherwise-rational politics into a spectacle: they mobilize voters on the
basis of a carefully constructed image rather than a rational set of policies
(Kellner 2003; Messner 2007; Thimsen 2010; McKernan 2011). The ways in
which spectacle is inherent to political practice and the ways in which 'the
public' lives such images is usually not considered. Another problem is that
seeing cinema as a tool of political communication is not incorrect per se;
people indeed create an image of a star-politician in various ways – through
media, tea-shop talk (Cody 2011) and the various other ways people relate
to a party and its leader (through caste, family conventions, etc.). Rather,
it fails to move away from a type of textual or image analysis, suggesting
a unilinear relation between what is seen on screen and what is believed
to be the true person seen on that screen. But to understand the complex
reality of film-going, of fandom, of politicking in the name of a star, we
need to consider the messiness and fragmentedness as well as the time in
which such presentations take place.

The political dominance in film stories disappeared as, in the 1970s and
1980s, a new generation of film stars, with Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan
as the most popular actors, came to the fore. The films that came into vogue
in this period can be described as melodramatic stories with a strong social

component. The films are often set in rural environments and venerate the innocent, honest, rural populace, and also repeatedly glorify the Tamil language, people, and culture (Velayutham 2008).[13] The film's hero usually fights injustice imposed by an evil person towards the honest but helpless people. A love interest between the hero and heroine runs through the story, their romance being expressed in songs (see e.g. Dwyer 2004; Gopalan 1997; Taylor 2003). From the 1990s onwards, *nativity* became an important leading focus in films. Nativity is a term used by the industry to indicate a film's attention to everyday habits, customs, and spaces (A. Pandian 2017, 12). Moreover, more and more films fall into the category of what can be called blockbusters and have focused increasingly on urban environments and middle-class audiences. I will discuss this shift more elaborately in relation to fans in the epilogue.

Films may be less explicitly political; politics have not disappeared from the film industry. First and foremost, Jayalalitha has been the face of the AIADMK party from 1987 until she passed away in 2016, and Karunanidhi has been the DMK's leader from 1996 until he passed away in 2018. Both were already active in politics years before they became party leaders, indicating the continuing cine-political connections. The main political parties in Tamil Nadu still have links to the movie or media industry and it is alleged that many politicians launder money through film productions. Most films are produced with money supplied by the DMK, and several political parties own television channels and newspapers. Almost the entire film industry, from film production, distribution, and screening to the sale of rights is dominated by a few production houses owned by relatives of Karunanidhi, the late leader of the DMK party. The smaller film production companies have complained in recent years about not being able to enter the market because of a lack of funds for production and lack of places to screen films, among other things.

While MGR, Jayalalitha, and Karunanidhi have been the only actors who served as chief ministers, other film stars were or are politically active. MGR was a chief minister for seventeen consecutive years (1970-1987), and Jayalalitha held the position five times, between 1990 and 2016. Several film stars affiliated themselves to political parties and some film stars started their own party. When they were young, they were usually not connected to any party but once they got older and more established in the film industry, fan clubs and political parties start to push them towards a

13   See Ramaswamy for an account of the Tamil language as it is the embodiment of the essence of Tamil culture (Ramaswamy 1997).

political affiliation. Film star Vijayakanth started the DMDK in 2005. Just as with MGR, his fan clubs changed into party cadres. In Chapter 3, however, I will show how fans and their clubs have not played an important role in his party and have been very disappointed with the failure of their own political careers. In 2007, film star Sarath Kumar started the AISMK[14] after serving in the DMK and AIADMK respectively. And then we have Rajinikanth, the *talaivar* or leader as people and specifically his fans called him, the popular star of whom many hoped that he would start his own party. But, despite waiting since 1996, when Rajinikanth supported the DMK and TMC (Tamil Maanila Congress)[15] alliance for the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu and everyone expected him to become active in electoral politics, and up to when I was doing my research between 2006 and 2011, his announcement didn't come. He made just enough remarks or statements of support to parties during elections for fans to continue to believe that one day he would enter politics. And then, finally he did announce his entry in electoral politics in 2017 and pronounced that he would contest in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly elections in 2021. Throughout my research, however, there was no sign of this announcement and therefore I will address this recent change in the epilogue.

Everyday politics

I have described the initial period of Tamil film, film stars, and their involvement with politics at length because this period in the development of the film industry and the formation of fan clubs cannot be seen separately from political projects at the time. My aim in providing this history was to show how these practices prefigure the first two decades of the 2000s, in which Rajinikanth fans, the fans at the centre of this book, engaged with their star and with politics. It raises questions about what kind of communities fan clubs give rise to which also routinely involve them in politicking. Moreover, it questions the understanding of politics and cinema as distinct fields in the first place. Can we talk about politics as becoming part of cinema or as the cinema as becoming part of politics, or do we need to abandon those categories altogether? Should we rather consider the practices around film – from watching, talking, dreaming, creating visual materials, or politicking,

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14   *Akila India Samatuva Makkal Katchi* or All India Equality People's Party.
15   The election symbol of the TMC was a bicycle and on their posters, they used an image from the film *Annamalai* where Rajinikanth rides a bicycle.

connecting to local politicians, producing a big man status as part of the same subjectivities? While this study has been influenced by nuanced accounts of the ways in which the cinematic field and political regimes blend together, I would take a step back and ask how we could understand the ways in which the political is always part of fan subjectivities, yet, not in an explicitly (electoral) political sense. Several scholars have pointed out how in the Indian context (and I would add this goes beyond India) the distinction between state and citizens is problematic (Chatterjee 2004; Berenschot 2010; Gupta 2012). The state is not only fragmented (T.B. Hansen 2005), but local politicians and mediators control everyday operations of bureaucracy (Berenschot 2010; Fuller et al. 2001, 22). In a similar vein I would argue that the difference between the political field and cinema is problematic. In both, the practices that we would consider to be part of these fields show overlaps, are fragmented, and various mediators cannot be put into straightforward categories as being related to exclusively the 'political' or the 'cinema'. Therefore, setting aside the electoral politics that film stars get involved in, the various fringes of the messier daily everyday politicking by fan clubs shows how such divisions are problematic. Whereas fans do wish for an entry into electoral politics, and we therefore need to consider this as a separate field, the everyday practices by fans, as I will show throughout this book, show how such categories are much more distorted. Why would fans desire or support political practices through a film star and his fan clubs? Are these specific to fan clubs or to stardom or do they relate to other kinds of politicking as well? Rajinikanth was not active in electoral politics at the time even though he did participate in it in a particular way. He has supported political parties at certain times or actively denounced parties at other times. Politicking by fans is not necessarily related to electoral politics, even though it is certainly part of it. One of the initial steps that we must take to understand the intricacies of fan club practices is to unravel the relationship between fan and star and the everyday politicking that these relationships engender. I follow Srinivas in his emphasis on seeing the fan not as a product of everything else (caste, religion, political movement, gender, and economic class) except the cinema (S.V. Srinivas 2009). I also subscribe to Prasad's emphasis on the pre-electoral political moment and the politicking as symptoms of a political system's disarray (Prasad 2014). Where Srinivas shows how the cinema's materiality is crucial to understand fandom, and Prasad considers the democratic, political disorder, I suggest that we must see fans in a specific time-space relation that makes fandom not merely about cinema, not merely about politics, but rather a generational movement of how fans relate to their stars. We need to look at the everyday

politicking practices to understand how this might also give us another nonlinear story of the cine-political phenomenon in Tamil Nadu.

I use the term politicking specifically to indicate the various practices, interaction, and regimes of value that fan activity brings with it. I use the state as a frame of understanding that is the mid-level political unit between local government and national government, in this case the state of Tamil Nadu. For the purposes of this book I see politics or politicking not to be merely about state-level political parties and elections, but as much about everyday activities and subjectivities relating people, state, institutions, and spaces, and producing power and networks.[16] They are about the social activities that are seen as political in some sense. Spencer has argued that to understand political practices it does not help to only see political acts as instrumental political action, rather we need to look at the unpredictability of where they are performed (Spencer 1997).

Everyday politics has been the subject of several works on South Asia (T.B. Hansen 2005; Gupta 2012; Chatterjee 2004; Jeffrey 2010; Fuller and Bénéï 2001). They are part of the 'vernacular' structures of power (Kaviraj 1988) in which ordinary people mediate their access to state resources. Everyday politics may be related to larger networks of political parties and state institutions, but it is also about other kinds of mobilization, small talk, family events, and other less apparent sides of political practice. I would like to turn to Craig Jeffrey's work on uneducated young men and the politics of waiting (Jeffrey 2010) to understand how everyday politicking practices articulate a certain agency in these men's lives. Jeffrey describes the ways in which the everyday politics that young men are involved in can be seen in a Bourdieuian sense of capital and habitus. He draws specifically on the idea of the 'fields' of social competition and the game that has stakes. Another important point he takes from Bourdieu is time and the ways in which subordinate classes 'lack assets that confer advantage in everyday struggles and the spatio-temporal acuity that comes with routine success' (Jeffrey 2010, 20). While seeing the usefulness of Bourdieu, Jeffrey also sees the limits in understanding the everyday politics that young men are involved in as class is not so rigidly and uncreatively formed. His ethnography shows how young, educated, middle-class men engage in various kinds of micro-tactics of everyday politics that are not necessarily bound to class and to the state. Seeing the ways in which class identities can be perpetuated, undermined, or removed from class interests, is also

16   The effect that national-level politics has on the politicking activities are beyond the scope of this book and are therefore not mentioned here.

relevant for this study, as it shows how everyday political activities do not necessarily have to be successful in a clear-cut way, as offering mobility, visibility, or other kinds of social advantage. To the contrary, it is often not clear-cut at all. While politicking is impeded by class and caste boundaries – as lower-class/caste men have lower ranks within the fan club and less chance to gain recognition throughout the fan club – the ways in which smaller interventions, feelings of respect, and moments of belonging do happen, show that politicking is more than the class/caste boundaries suggest. It also calls our attention to the micro-tactics of everyday life and social mobilization.

Besides the ways in which everyday politicking practices are cultivated though micro-tactics, the question remains as to what role a film star plays in this. If we go back to Spencer, we find he suggests that MGR inhabited the space between the fantasy of cinema and the fantasies of the political arena. He brings forth 'a kind of politics in which the force of the idea of "representation" has connected it to other areas of popular culture, other kinds of representation – movies and their heroes and villains' (Spencer 1997, 12). Film stars in Tamil Nadu have used their cinematic image for their political careers and fans have followed them, as Dickey has described for fans of MGR (Dickey 1993b). Yet, as we will see, Rajinikanth fans have expected such an electoral political move from their star but in vain, making some of them unsatisfied.

Before I continue, a word of caution is needed about the specificity and generality of the argument put forward here. This ethnography is about fan club members of the film star Rajinikanth in a specific era of the Tamil film industry and political regime. The ways in which his fans related to him, presenced him, praised him, and rejected him is not necessarily generalizable for all Tamil film fan clubs. However, it does say something about the ways in which politicking and devotion are characterized in Tamil Nadu. I show in this book that fan club membership moves with age and status from cinematic pleasures to politicking practices while constantly balancing excess and moderation. I observed various forms of politicking, which were conceived as such within certain limits. By making visible the fan subjectivities expressed in practices that were enacted through the fan club, I hope to show that politicking is not merely an instrumental social mobilizing act but a way in which fan club members find meaning in different activities, including those linked to democratic politics, the state, and everyday mobilization, but also to the sensuous intensities of delight, wonder, and presence (see also A. Pandian 2017). Being a fan, in other words, is not always explainable in terms of rationality and pragmatism; rather,

it contains a level of attraction and engagement that is about desire and attraction and the sensation of cinema.

Cinematic audiences in South India

Fandom and cinema cannot be explained out of pragmatism and political ambitions as I argued in the previous section. The aim of this book is not to analyse films or the life histories of film stars to understand the ways in which fans relate to cinema and its stars. Obviously, films and life histories matter to fans. I also do not aim to argue that fan clubs are all about politicking and that cinema has nothing to do with fandom. To the contrary, I will show how connecting to a star, cinema, and the fan club is a generational process that builds up with age and socioeconomic background. This helps us explore the different affectivities that fans build up. How do fans differ from the audience at large? And what can we understand from meaning-making of cinema in Tamil Nadu in general that helps us situate fan clubs? In media or film studies audience perception is very often still represented as an abstraction of thought, feeling, and seeing, coming together with assumptions on how a film text and its meanings make audiences have a given experience (L. Srinivas 2016; Dickey 1993a; Mulvey 1989; Ang 1991). Moreover, pleasure and entertainment are often ignored, with seeing popular media, following the Frankfurt School, being regarded as deception of the masses, as engagement with the political and ideological. But as several authors have pointed out, film-going is also about mere pleasure (L. Srinivas 2016; Dickey 1993a; Dyer 2002). In other words, 'the audience' is a problematic term if we want to understand the various engagements individual and collectivities have with the cinema. Throughout this book I will use the term audience occasionally, using it mostly in relation to how people speak of film-goers and the 'masses' as abstractions of those watching films. Moreover, since fan club membership is about more than film-watching alone, many other terms such as 'film-goers' are equally problematic, as they do not necessarily include the extended public that can for example be found at first-day film releases.

One of the first, groundbreaking works that dealt with the place film had in the lives of the urban poor is Sara Dickey's *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Dickey 1993a). This work was not only unique at the time in relation to Indian cinema but generally one of the first studies considering meaning-making by filmmakers, film viewers, and fan clubs. Situated in Madurai, she shows how films matter for those who take popular

film seriously. Cinema is connected, Dickey argues, 'to some of the most poignant concerns of viewers' lives and, far from being divorced from those lives, influences everyday conduct' (1993a, 5). The significance of cinema lies 'in an escape constituted through utopian fantasy, the pleasure of that escape derives from its roots in real-life social and psychological stresses and from the soothing of those stresses through melodramatic crisis resolution' (Dickey 1993a, 175).

Lakshmi Srinivas in her recent work on film-going in Bangalore has attended to the social practices, experiences, and aesthetics of film-going in relation to urban geography and by considering the heterogeneity of audiences in the cinema. Srinivas uses the notion of the 'active audience' to describe improvised, spontaneous, and performative experience in contrast to the silent absorption of films (L. Srinivas 2016, 3). What is relevant in her work is her attention to this mundane reality of cinema: how social relations, individual preferences, spatial embeddedness, and trivia such as buying tickets, make up the film-going experience. This attention to the mundane, to improvisation and fragmentedness is important if we want to understand 'audience' engagement with films. Film-goers are not necessarily always interested in a film as an entirety, and the pleasure of watching already starts before actually watching the film. Media already pay attention to films and songs, and short trailers are released in advance and fans organize their activities around the first days of the film. The collectivity created around such media and practices of this experience is therefore as important as watching the film itself. The agency and activity by film-goers that is acknowledged in such an approach removes us from seeing cinema as something that is only watched and taken in, as something that is merely the effect of something else. This becomes even more obvious if we return to the ways in which cinema and politics have intersected. It has not only been a top-down political entanglement, from film stars to fans who take over their stars' political articulations. Rather, what I will show here is how fandom is expected to be political at a certain point.

The Tamil film industry in the 1990s and 2000s has been fashioned around star celebrity, where personages such as Rajinikanth were built up. By maximizing screen exposure, and presenting a star as Rajinikanth as a powerful personality, the mass hero is reinforced on screen (Nakassis 2017b, 2009). Fans have mostly confirmed the leadership figure of male film stars but also rejected or resisted changes in their star's image (see also Prasad 2014; S.V. Srinivas 2016). The screen appearance of Rajinikanth is not only his screen image but is reinforced by his off-screen image. There exists an ontological identity between screen image and its object: 'Every

avatar-character "played" by Rajinikanth is Rajinikanth, performatively presenced in the moment of the image's apperception' (Nakassis 2017b, 291). Nakassis has emphasized the intertextuality of Rajini's performative and indexical acts, producing a metapragmatics of presence which endorses his cine-political potential (Nakassis 2017b, 209). Richard Dyer, in his study on Hollywood stars, argues that a star's image consists of the complex and contradicting interplay of his or her 'image' made up of screen roles and image of the real person (Dyer 2004, 7). Time is a relevant factor here: a star's image is not static, since different elements of a star's image predominate in different images and in different periods (Dyer 2004). Likewise, a star's image is a constant mediation of the natural person – like us – and the larger-than-life screen image. It is the amalgamation of the real and the reel, of a dream world that appeals because it relates to concerns and issues of ordinary life that makes cinema and their stars attractive (Dickey 1993a; A. Pandian 2008, 2017). This is a different kind of merging of images than has been suggested for the blurring of onscreen messages of stars to their off-screen political promises in Tamil cine-politics. The blurring of images is not a consequential taking over of messages of films but rather of an active presencing of film stars. Fans engage with images outside of the movie screen and therefore construct such screen and real images. Crucial here is to acknowledge the complexity and contradictions characteristic of images of stars. Presencing of a star and the creation of his image goes beyond rational, pragmatic explanations of why fans feel attracted, what attracts, and how such feelings and ideas can also fade away. Following Richard Dyer and Anand Pandian, we should not forget that fandom and the fan-star relation gain their force and intensity from the way these are experienced, 'the sensory textures of this experience, and the circumstances of their crafting' (A. Pandian 2017, xxi; Dyer 2004). This experience cannot always be explained in words. One way in which I believe we come a bit closer to this experience is through a focus on images. It brings to light how fans negotiate and experience the practical as well as the wondrous stuff of fandom. Images are part of this wonder.

Affective images: Intimate publics and public intimacy

Images of film stars circulate widely. By images, I mean the actual, physical image as well as a mental construction. In this book I oscillate between these two meanings, which sometimes blur. The physical image can prompt mental images and vice versa. However, for the most part, this book is about

the physical, material objects. Their lifespan exceeds their initial cinematic publicity purpose, triggering new meanings and responses that are channelled through the adulation of a star and visualized by an array of images (Dwyer and Patel 2002; Mazumdar 2007b, 92). Film posters are exhibited in houses and shops, vinyl banners are reused as covers for trucks, houses, or canopies. A repeatedly appearing story in Tamil Nadu, for example, suggests that slumlords in the city of Coimbatore used to pull down billboards of MGR and let them to women in slums to sleep on overnight.[17] Fan clubs, for their part, reuse commercial images of their star for the murals, posters, and billboards they make for fan events or images they keep as keepsakes at home. Photos of the star and of fan events appear in family albums, and brothers fight over images at home. The circulation of Rajinikanth's image beyond the screen has been crucial in building up his star persona.[18] As Kaza Raja posted his message about the circulation of Rajinikanth fever, the film *Sivaji: The Boss* was being announced, speculated upon, and discussed in various magazines and newspapers; the songs had been released some weeks in advance, posters announcing the movie were displayed everywhere, and fans had started to collect and use images of Rajinikanth to prepare their own imagery that would be part of their film celebrations and their own life-cycle celebrations. These different interacting media genres create and reinforce modes of seeing and more general sensorial engagements with a film that has not yet been released. In this inter-ocular field 'meanings, scripts and symbols transfer from one site to another' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992, 41). The images as made, collected, and displayed by fan club members interconnect in meaning, aesthetics, spaces of display, and the politicking they enact with other imagery in Tamil Nadu. The aim of this book however is not to analyze the images as aesthetic objects, or to restrict their meaning to what they depict. Moreover, the sensory experiences of fandom I just described alert us to thinking about the image as more than just an image.

What images are or do is not clear, as Mitchell has noted:

The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of "spectacle" (Guy Debord), "surveillance" (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers

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17   This story was also covered in the magazine *India Today* (Vāsanti 2006, 78).
18   See also Rosie Thomas's work on fanzines in which she demonstrates how gossip in fanzines constructs an actress's star persona (Thomas 1989).

and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to
be done with or about them. (W.J.T. Mitchell 2007, 13)

What makes images so difficult to theorize is their irreducibility to a visual-
ity mediated exclusively by language (K. Jain 2007, 28; see also Pinney
2006). Images are more than can be said about them. Nevertheless, we can
attempt to grasp the image as representation and material object by looking
at its biography and movement, its enframement, technologies, affect, and
uptake (Spyer and Steedly 2013). Images, in other words, are not merely what
is represented by them but also the material object itself. They are worked
with, touched, looked at, installed, removed, demolished, or reused. Images
are material presences and their meanings are produced by and in their
production, consumption, material form, or various ideological, political,
and cultural positions and conditions (Edwards 2012; Poole 1997, 7-8; Spyer
and Steedly 2013). The biography of things, as Igor Kopytoff has argued,
makes us aware of the social contexts in which images appear and reappear
and shows the move meaning or use of representation and object (Kopytoff
1988). But not only do objects move as individual things, their common
form can also change in mode of production, general outlook, or media in
which they are 'screened'. These technologies and media also shape images,
produce meaning and the practices in which they appear (Edwards 2012).
Technologies contour their capacities: they evoke and limit their possibilities
just as the circuits in which they move (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 8).
    Images, Kajri Jain has argued,

    are bodies that move: they move from sites of production to those of
    circulation and use; they move across the states of commodity, gift, icon,
    ornament, waste; they move in and out of people's everyday lives and
    frames of value. In doing so they also move people in and out of their
    everyday lives, in and out of "history"; they act on bodies and create
    relationships between bodies. (K. Jain 2007, 218-219).

Jain's work acknowledges the different frameworks in which we can try
to understand what images do and are, by looking at their mobility. Or as
Spyer and Steedly have argued: images move and move us, that is, they
are in motion and they affect us (Spyer and Steedly 2013). Where, when,
in which constellations, through which forms and technologies they take
shape tells us something about them. Images need a frame, not merely a
physical frame for representation but also a setting in which to represent,
which all attempt to focus attention and response of the viewer (Davis

1997, 9). While images are intended to be looked at, they are also ignored, intended for a specific public, willingly or unwillingly including some and excluding others. The aesthetic outlook, its location and repetition of something familiar contributes to who feels addressed by these images (Warner 2002).

Recognizing the material presence of images and the desires set in them necessarily also attends us to the affective relations with images that goes beyond the visual (see Pinney 2004; K. Jain 2007; Meyer 2011). Seeing does not only include the visual but also attends to the affective, sensorial forms mediated through the image. Images kindle, produce, and convey desires, ambitions and imaginations through sensory experiences and engage-ments. Looking not only includes the visual but various sensorial forms mediated through and because of the image. 'All media are mixed media' W.J.T. Mitchell suggested, '[t]hat is, the very notion of a medium and of mediation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements' (2005a, 260). One of the questions that this work brings forward is how such affective relations are constructed between fan and star. How are images infused with the presence of a star and how do images mediate or contain such presence?

The many nuanced questions raised by studies of images and media in the West are multiplied in the context of India with its own distinctive history of images and their interpretation. Hindu devotees consider physical objects that represent deities to come to be infused with the presence, life, or power of those deities (Davis 1997, 6). Visuality in India has commonly been discussed in relation to this tactile mode of visuality in Hindu religious practice called *darshan*. Diana Eck's influential work on darshan notes that the term can be translated as seeing and being seen by the divine and implies a direct, corporeal, reciprocal, and affective understanding of seeing (Eck 1981; Babb 1981). The reciprocal gaze and active, repetitive veneration create a relationship or bond of intimacy between image (as material presence and what is depicted) and beholder (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992, 46-50; Meyer 2011). Even though *darshan* is primarily a Hindu religious concept, it is used for a wider practice of viewing in India as well. Images of gods, gurus, deceased family members, politicians, or film stars can be imbued with extraordinary power, and exchanging gazes with them empowers the viewer as well (Babb 1981; Pinney 2001; Ramaswamy 1998; K. Jain 2007; Taylor 2003; Ramaswamy 2010). In these images, the eyes

of those portrayed often look directly at the viewer, thereby exchanging gazes with him or her.[19]

While *darshan*'s contribution to everyday visuality is recognized and emphasized by many scholars of South Asian visual culture, Rachel Dwyer argues that the ways in which *darshan* can help us actually understand visual practices and visuality in a South Asian context still lack in-depth analysis (2006, 284). Investigating other forms of religious and non-religious practices in different contexts or regions shows us that labelling a highly complicated embodied corporeal practice as *darshan* leaves little scope for, and can even impede, in-depth analysis. Sophie Hawkins, in an attempt to rethink *darshan*, argues that '[r]ather than understanding *darshan* to be an end in itself [...] it becomes merely one aspect in a repertoire of devotional aspirations that seek union with God' (Hawkins 1999, 150). Moreover, the mutual gaze of viewer and viewed is not unique to South Asia or to a Hindu religious way of seeing but rather identifies a widespread way of seeing (Benjamin 1969; W.J.T. Mitchell 2005b; Morgan 2005; Pinney 2006; Taylor 2003). Vision is polyscopic and the act of seeing is real beyond darshan as it also includes the inauspicious evil eye, *drishti* (Taylor 2003; Dean 2013).

In other words, we should be careful with defining the inter-ocular visuality and the gaze as deriving merely from a Hindu religious background. It raises the question whether a tactile mode of visuality is fundamentally religious or if the religious and the cinematic share a similar semiotic ideology and phenomenology (Nakassis 2017a, 3 footnote 17). Not all vision is darshanic even if it is transactional, so how do we come to terms with this tactile, religious mode of visuality? A territorial or culturalist understanding or conceptualization of visuality suggests that historical transformation is subordinate to suprahistorical forces such as Hinduism (Bhatti and Pinney 2011, 231). Shaila Bhatti and Christopher Pinney have critically questioned this supposed regionality of visuality and, following Latour, asked what a 'networked' anthropological analysis of Indian modes of visuality might look like. They argued for a historicized account and a 'networked' approach that would attempt to understand current changing idioms 'through which questions of visuality make themselves apparent within India' (Bhatti and Pinney 2011, 231-232). Such an approach is useful as it does not do away

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19   Preminda Jacob cites the example of AIADMK leader Jayalalitha who gave regular *darshan* appearances on the balcony of her home in Chennai (Jacob 2009). At regular intervals she appeared on her balcony just to look at people and let people look at her. These appearances, and the way they were announced with a signboard indicating the hours, are similar to the temples where the appearances of deities are scheduled as well.

phenomenologically with darshanic modes of visuality and the effects of seeing and being seen but attempts to also consider other ways in which current transformations take place.

A similar critique accounts for devotion and how to understand the enthusiasm and energies fans put into their star. A common understanding of popular devotion is through the notion of *bhakti*. Bhakti is a form of devotion directly attending to the deity, unmediated by a Brahmin priest. This denotes that deities can also be worshipped at home and in other locations, mediated among others through popular prints, the so-called calendar or bazaar art (K. Jain 2007; Pinney 2004; Uberoi 1990). We can apply such a notion to the ways fans invest in their star, but need to be careful not to fall into the trap of seeing fan devotion as essentially originating in Indian tradition and civilization while ignoring other sources that explain fan practices (Prasad 2014, 172). Again, as Madhava Prasad argues, the question here would be whether fans merely 'borrow' religious devotional practices when they worship their star in similar ways or if their star worship is an independent site of enthusiasm which derives elements from other sources. Therefore, even though the religious analogy (in the form of darshan and/or bhakti) is useful to take account of, fan practices cannot be seen as simply a secularized form of religious worship.

Therefore, instead of framing such encounters between fan and star in religious terms, I find Pinney's concept of corpothetics, that is, an embodied and corporeal aesthetics, instead of 'disinterested' representation, helpful as including wider embodied engagements with images is much more useful (2004, 8). Pinney introduces the concept of corpothetics in order to deal with the embodied, active ways in which images are appropriated in India. He contrasts a Kantian tradition of aesthetics, which separates the image from the beholder and implies a disinterested evaluation of images, with corpothetics, which 'entails a desire to fuse image and beholder, and an evaluation of efficacy [...] as the central criterion of value' (ibid., 194). This helps us understand the sense of touch that occurs between fans and stars not merely as sites of devotion or worship but as intimate, tactical encounters, mediated through imagery that fans collect, display, change, create, and relate to.

The corpothetics mediated through and present in images contains desires and ambitions that partly craft the experience of fandom. This is, I will show, to some extent about seeking proximity to the star, but is also about staging oneself as a fan. Images become central in the ways in which fandom is articulated as they are produced, used, discussed, and remembered. Images like these do not stand on their own but are embedded in their

social surroundings and act as mediators to access something else, such as establishing personalities or bringing close an absent star (Latour 2002). Birgit Meyer, in discussing religious pictures, has argued that pictures do not have intrinsic power or agency but mediate the imagination and shape belief in particular ways (2011). They are indispensable – as stand-ins for the absent body – to articulate and materialize the religious imagination and its mental images (Meyer 2011, 1037; see also Morgan 1998). In a similar vein, I would suggest that the images put up by fans, by standing in for the absent, shape the cinematic *and* political imagination and the ways in which fandom is enacted and lived. Therefore, the corpothetic sense of engagement with a film star or his image, is not merely an act of devotion but shapes fan communities and subjectivities. It gives material and imaginary form to fandom. Images in that sense are the symbolic and spatial tropes of fandom and indicate their shifting temporalities and subjectivities. While fandom often starts with cinematic pleasure, it often shifts to politicking networks in later stages of fan careers. Publicly exhibited imagery mediates these imaginaries and ambitions. Therefore, while I agree with Meyer that images mediate the imagination, I would see signs and cutouts as active agents that work and do something for their audiences (Gell 1998). Karen Stern, who follows Gell's argument on the agency of art objects, writes on graffiti, and understands it as a type of action and not only a product of action (Stern 2018, 22-23). In this way, graffiti, or Rajinikanth cutouts for that matter, function as social agents that endure as lasting and powerful substitutes for the activities and agencies of their original creators (Stern 2018, 23). Image producers and users respond to each other, cluster together, take over each other's style (within and beyond fan imagery, as also for example temple images have taken over the vibrant colours of film), or ask others to respond. In this way, the social life of the images goes beyond the cutout of Rajini as an active agent.

Spectacular icons, public spaces, visual strategies

Urban spaces are mediated environments (Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008; Spitulnik 1993; Sundaram 2009). Images, sounds, and cinemas form the everyday experiences of cities. The visible and material urban reality also informs an invisible space of imaginations, anxieties, and aspirations (see also de Boeck and Plissart 2004). Images need their surroundings to be seen, and people must see them for the images to be effective. The 'onlookers' can be a specific audience that excludes other potential viewers (Spyer

and Steedly 2013). Images, in that sense, are part of the communities of fans in which they perform and produce the imagined community of fans and star. Tamil Nadu's spectacular display of cinematic and political images is a site of symbolic and territorial claiming of space. Although the close relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu has received widespread consideration in terms of the transmission of screen image or public personality to politics, the way in which these relationships have been portrayed in images other than on screen has received surprisingly little attention. One exception is the work of Preminda Jacob, who in her book *Celluloid Deities* argues that the forms of popular art such as films and banners portray the personal lives and public roles of (cine)-politicians as identical (2009). In other words, the screen image of a hero fighting injustice blurs with his public life as a politician. This in turn convinces audiences of the sincerity of the person and as such augments his or her celebrity status. Although Jacob's work identifies the ways in which cinema and politics merge in images outside the realm of the screen, it does so from the point of view of a political party that is deliberately trying to convey an image of its leaders. Jacob concentrates primarily on the ways in which personality images blur through the exhibition of cutouts and banners by focusing on some of the leading artists of Chennai's banner industry. She describes in detail how these companies work and how screen and political images fuse. Within this context of ubiquitous display, I am interested in the many less well-known artists that do work for local party members and fans alike and how they construct images that may be a fusion of cinema and politics but may also be something else, not necessarily related to this obvious entanglement (Gerritsen 2013). Both fans and political party workers commission banner artists. The ways in which they publicize their hero's image and show their loyalty suggest a much more complicated process in which public personae are produced. Moreover, fans collect images; they display them at home in enlarged and enframed form, paste them on their motorbike, put them in their pocket; or, for special fan events, produce posters and banners which they display in public spaces. Fans are active agents in the construction of meaning for these images: they do not merely *consume* them but *produce* them. I am therefore not merely interested in their consumption, but also in their production process. The local scale of the production raises the question of how we situate these images vis-à-vis the alleged grand narratives of personality production of film stars and politicians. The investment put in images and the corpothetics at play show that such images are more than a confirmation of the blurring of cinematic and political subjectivities. The images made by fans are as much about

star devotion and constructing and emphasizing a star's fame as they are about exposing fan club activity and individual fans. Not only does their content convey these different desires, the act of collecting, disseminating, and exhibiting articulates their efficacy and the affective relationships that they establish. It shows how personal fame is being built up in and through images and how a fan-star relationship is cultivated.

The spectacular quality of the images of film stars, but also of political figures in Tamil Nadu's urban landscapes brings together the imaginaries of communities, politics, and counter-politics. In the last Chapter, I show other forms of uptake and parallel strategies of using urban walls that can tell us something about the symbolical assertion of images and imaginaries. The city government of Chennai has initiated the removal of political and cinematic posters from public walls on some of the major thoroughfares through the city. Educational and 'traditional' images suddenly ornamented walls and the government openly criticized the distraction and de-aesthetization of the city by political imagery. This shift, I argue, fits in a larger discourse in post-liberal India that witnessed several cities aspiring world-class stature, cleaning up strategic parts of the city, enriching it with symbolic markers of world class (Beelen, Gerritsen, and Srivathsan 2010). At the same time, it is a continuation, yet in a different form, of a political competition of the dominant political parties in Tamil Nadu. The images intended to fashion new political and governmental legitimacy to Chennai's rising middle class. They became part of the city as arena for consolidating power and identities (Kusno 2010, 82), adding to the visual strategies that public spaces comprise. I understand public imagery in this sense as part of these arenas where power, aspirations, and desires are played out. Its uptake traverses the publics they are intended for. Occasionally they replace each other but mostly they are different visual strategies competing on Tamil Nadu's walls. And what's more, the lives of the billboards, murals, and posters are of an ephemeral quality, at least in the public display they are intended for. Yet they compose the city spaces that they are exhibited in. In this way, the permissibility of the images depends on the places where and times at which they are displayed. They exhibit claims to space and the city that attend to different audiences. Their size and quantity make them, to paraphrase Raqs Media Collective, become the spaces they inhabit. They appear but also fade, disappear, and reappear in altered forms, for new publics or as distinct strategies.

This book

Images were not only the subject of my research in conversations; they also led me to the people I encountered and got to know well over the last few years. The research was conducted from 2006 to 2011, with three six-month research periods and a few short trips. I used participant observation (about which I have more to say below), media elicitation, and countless of interviews with fan club members, their families, banner artists, cinema owners, politicians, and so forth. The fieldwork has been mostly done in Puducherry and Chennai. As often in anthropology, coincidence, lucky moments, and missed chances were part and parcel of my work. While doing an intensive Tamil-language course in Puducherry, I was introduced to fan club members who informed me about the turbulent times the fan clubs were going through in town. I saw this moment of conflict (which I will spell out in detail in the chapters below) as a unique chance to see what was considered normal and what not, how the fan club should look like and how not. Therefore, instead of moving further after my language course, I decided to stay. Puducherry is a town 150 km south of Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai. Its centre is a gridded town flocked with on the one hand well-kept colourful colonial buildings, and on the other hand many structures painted grey, marking them as being owned by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. As a former French colony, it still houses French research institutions, a Lycée Français, a French consulate, and various other visual, linguistic, and social links that disclose the town's colonial history. This so-called white town is remarkably quiet in comparison to average Indian towns, mostly filled with the foreign inhabitants and tourists that move around on mopeds and bicycles. This is enhanced by the nearby presence of Auroville, an experimental commune founded by Mira Alfassa (known by her followers as the Mother), the collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, who founded the ashram in Puducherry. The universal town, as Auroville is also called, houses people from all over the world – from Bengal to Italy – and attracts numerous visitors who stay there temporarily. Throughout the years that I have spent there, the city boomed as a tourist location, not only for foreign tourists but mostly for Indian tourists, often coming from Bengaluru, as it makes a good weekend trip to charming Puducherry and spiritual Auroville.

But as soon as you divert from the road from Auroville to Puducherry or move outside of the core centre of the town you encounter a different Puducherry. For the people that I worked with Puducherry was another town, far away from the tourist bubble of the centre, far away from the Ashram. None of the fan club members that I have worked with came to

the white town, except for an exceptional evening walk on the beach or for selling their wares on the streets. Several fans worked and lived in an area just bordering Auroville, but for them it was an inaccessible world, they explained.

I also encountered yet another Puducherry. Travelling by motorbike, bicycle, or on foot in Puducherry, Villupuram district, and Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai with my camera always at hand, I took countless pictures of the myriad banners, posters, and other images that I came across. It was as if I got to know the lives of particular people in Puducherry through images; knowing their faces, political colours, deaths in the family, birthdays, and the like gave me a first glimpse into people's histories. Fans' banners, murals, and posters led me to their fan clubs; they allowed me to recognize relationships between fans and they steered me towards the producers of their images. I photographed murals and cutouts created by artists that I tried to search for later using their name and phone number, which they added as their signature on every mural and banner. I got to know the most popular banner artists by seeing their work exhibited throughout the city. In this way images became my signposts, leading me to being introduced in Puducherry. They were a topic of research, as I could talk about them, track them, and get to know fans before I even met them. These images made the urban areas of Puducherry and Chennai spaces in which I got to know its residents through their images. From that point onwards, my network of fans soon expanded to other fans, not only in Puducherry but also in Tamil Nadu at large.

Chennai, the fourth largest city of India, was the second location where I spent large amounts of time. The capital of Tamil Nadu, of the film industry and of the main cutout artists, for me the city offered another view on what I experienced in a smaller scale in Puducherry. Here I could trace the All-India Rajinikanth Fan Club and fan clubs of other stars, and I spoke to various cutout artists and to cinema managers. But something else happened that turned out to be crucial for the development of my argument. In Chennai, the city's walls on main locations got repainted with cultural scenery from the state. Instead of politicians and film stars, cutout artists were painting murals ranging from famous temples to nature scenes. This change allowed me not only to speak with my respondents about the affectivity of public imagery, it also allowed me to see a shift in an era and its related cinematic regimes, publics and modes of political mobilization.

Throughout my research it started to become increasingly clear that images were crucial in how fans practised fandom. Images were discussed, looked at, displayed in the everyday spaces of the home, in a person's wallet,

or exhibited in public spaces. Images provided an opportunity for gossip, criticism, or uttering and gaining respect. Despite the omnipresence of images, my fieldwork and the subject of my research was dominated by the absence of Rajinikanth. Despite this absence he was the focal point of the fan club, but it was the distance to him that made him the subject of hours of conversations: he was the reason I met people and entered their lives. Through these encounters Rajinikanth entered my life as well: talking about him, thinking about him and writing about him every day until the last letter of this book had been written.

Talking about images was also a way to overcome the gap between my interlocutors – mostly men from eighteen to forty years old – and myself, a young, foreign woman. Being a female researcher had certain difficulties for 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998) with a group of men, yet, the idea that someone from outside of India came all the way to Tamil Nadu to study Rajinikanth was what made many fan club members want to spend time with me. Like the images that served as evidence of fandom, the presence of a young foreigner attested to the fans' dedication to Rajinikanth – I had chosen to study them, and not other (inferior) fans. Moreover, my presence, as a foreigner, was significant in that it signalled that their relationship towards Rajinikanth was of international significance. Everyone hoped that I could convey the details of their fandom and their fervour for Rajinikanth. This obviously affected what people told me about their activities.

One way to overcome the gender divide was working with a male research assistant. I have worked mostly with Gandhirajan, a friend, researcher, traveller, and connoisseur of Tamil art, who was also highly interested in the affects produced by the visual aspects of fandom. Besides helping me to overcome my language flaws, he was considered a trustworthy broker between the men I worked with and myself. With him at my side, people could invite me to places and events that were otherwise inappropriate to invite me to. But certainly, my gender also excluded me from some domains that would otherwise have been more accessible. But such in- and exclusions are present in research at large and the phenomenon itself, fandom, in a way is all about presenting an image of oneself as a dedicated fan to others, whether or not those others are actually present (as fellow audience members in a cinema) or only imagined (as passers-by viewing a cutout). Hence, I do realize that the ways fans showed their dedication is partly the result of my own presence. At the same time, I was also a safe outsider to whom some fans and politicians told or showed things that would otherwise not have been made explicit. With this in mind, one must read the account presented here. I have decided not to anonymize my interlocutors. The

decision to keep the real names goes together with the photographs that are displayed. Just as the fans' own fandom was on display and they sought ways to archive their fan commitment, they often considered me as a way to prove their fandom to a larger audience. They eagerly wanted to share their images and see their work published. Likewise, the dissemination of their names was not seen as problematic. While I am aware that people cannot always oversee the consequences of such public presentation of ethnographic work, I believe the public visibility of being present in this book does not harm my interlocutors. Moreover, the public images reveal the names of fans with their photo, and the names of the artists, often also with their phone number as advertisements for their work. Anonymizing these images would not only conceal most of the relevancy of the images; it would also only be partly effective.

Whereas the first four chapters are mainly about fan clubs, images, and the production of public imagery, the last chapter brings fandom into a larger debate about the processes, politics, and effects of image production. To disentangle the different stages of fandom mentioned above, Chapter 1 to 4 are structured around these stages, following fans from film-watching and political networking to the anti-climax of non-politics. The erasure of fandom by citywide beautification schemes brings this book to a close as I examine the nexus of spectacle and city, and the ways in which urban spaces serve as canvases for various shifting sociopolitical projects is the topic of Chapter 5.

I consider images as the leitmotiv in these various articulations of fandom. I have separated two kinds of image practices: the everyday mundane images that fans collect personally and display personally and the collective banners and posters made in the name of the fan club. Separating these two spheres of consumption, however, is somewhat artificial since it appears to assume a natural distinction between 'private' and 'public'. As we will see later, the images displayed in the public realm are on the one hand public statements in that they are on display for everyone passing by; on the other hand, they are as much about a personal, intimate relationship with the star. Personal collections of star imagery on the other hand are mostly collected from publicly available commercial magazines, newspapers, or as rings or gadgets given away free with other consumer goods and thereafter used in everyday spaces of the home or to decorate the body. Even though displayed in the privacy of the home, they do attend to community constraints. The distinction I make here is not to understand these publicly and privately displayed images as separate categories played out in different spaces; rather,

I attempt to map out the different ways in which fans engage with images and constitute spheres of intimacy and publicity by producing these images.

The book opens with a description of the personal affection for and relationship with a star. I show how fans become fans, along with their expectations and desires related to film and film stars. Films and circulating images and narratives play an important role in the construction of affection towards a star. In Chapter 1, I provide an ethnography of the figure of the fan and the relationships and intimacies that fans establish with their star. I situate these ethnographic details in theories on fandom in India and beyond and argue that we cannot single out one 'reason' why fans become a member of a fan club or why they feel themselves the fan of a star. I deliberately use the terms figure and ethnography in what seems to be a paradox, a nuanced account of a figure that assumes the generic. But I use the idea of the figure, following Barker and Lindquist, as an individual who is a creatively constituted subject position that can tell us something about a particular historical moment (2009, 37). In this way the chapter focuses not on what the figure of the fan is but rather on how it is perceived in scholarly accounts and in the realm of public opinion. I move from these accounts to the personal life stories of fans and the cinematic engagements in which fans relate to their star and construct a network of fans.

Chapter 2 focuses on the role of images in the everyday life of fans in the construction of desires and imaginations. Fans collect and display all kinds of images of their star in the everyday spaces of their home. These generic images, often obtained from commercial magazines and the like, articulate personal engagements with the star. I will show various ways in which fans personalize images and as such engender intimacy between them and their hero. This chapter demonstrates how fandom is inflected in familial relationships as well as being informed by them. Moreover, it shows how personalized images of film stars in everyday settings instil a relation with the star.

Chapters 3 and 4, move on to fan clubs' public activities and political networking. Fans organize social welfare events on special occasions in the name of their star. Chapter 3 explores these activities and shows how these social welfare activities and the hierarchical relationships within fan clubs generate a political style mediating praise, respect, and prestige. This chapter also demonstrates how once fans are older, they expect the fan club to be a network in which politicking becomes an essential part. The chapter situates fan politics within a broader perspective of honour, prestige, and respect as an essential part of political culture in South India. However, the chapter also shows how, despite the obvious patronage relationships

that establish themselves through fan practices and the political work fans become involved in, politicking also reveals a fine balance between being active in political networks and using the fan club for one's own gain.

Chapter 4 pushes this tension further as I discuss how banners, posters, and murals are an essential part of the events that fan clubs organize. By highlighting the production of imagery for fan events, I also represent the artists who make these images and consequently evoke themes of efficacy, intimacy, and the effect of the painted image. From narratives on the artists and effective images I go on to describe a technological change that has taken place in Tamil Nadu in the last few years. Fans have started to use digitally designed vinyl banners instead of painted ones. I will show how the advent of vinyl has resulted in reflections on the efficacy of painted and digital images as well as an enhanced visibility for fans. This visibility via images has shown itself to be crucial in the political networking activities of fans: it has enhanced their prestige and their access to sociopolitical networks.

Whereas the first chapters of this book revolve around fan clubs and visuality, in the last chapter I move to the counter-politics of the image. Chapter 5, which deals with a beautification initiative in Chennai in which public culture, as displayed by fans and political supporters alike, is abandoned and replaced by new imagery, one that substitutes images promoting the glory of Tamil history, culture, and land and the Hindu religion for images of individual film star-politicians. I argue that these images articulate a shift from a particular political practice in Tamil Nadu towards neoliberal imaginings of a 'shining India' that seem to indicate competing visual strategies of politics and politicking that is prevalent in Tamil Nadu. Banners are increasingly restricted and in Chennai neoliberal ideologies have been illustrated in a set of murals of a recent 'beautification' initiative. Public walls are now beautified by means of images showing a neo-classicist, touristic version of cultural heritage and nature scenes in the local government's attempt at a 'world-class' makeover of Chennai. Taken as a whole, I move from the figure of the fan via everyday image production and consumption, the display of images in public spaces and conflicts over image media and placement to a counter-politics of new, neoliberal imaginaries and the ideology of promoting a world-class city and Tamil culture. I end this book with a short epilogue in which I prefigure certain changes that may make fan clubs lose ground in the cinematic and political realms in which they circulate.