Digitized Theses   Digitized Special Collections

2011

CINEMA OF THE SOCIAL: STARS, FANS AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF GENRE IN TAMIL CINEMA

Ganga Rudraiah

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/digitizedtheses

CINEMA OF THE SOCIAL:

STARS, FANS AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF GENRE IN TAMIL CINEMA

(Spine title: CINEMA OF THE SOCIAL)

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

Ganga Rudraiah

Graduate Program in Film Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

The University of Western Ontario

London, Ontario, Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

<u>Supervisor</u>   <u>Examiners</u>

_____   _____

Dr. Christopher E. Gittings   Dr. James Prakash Younger

<u>Supervisory Committee</u>   _____

                                     Dr. Constanza Burucúa

_____

Dr. Chris Holmlund

The thesis by

Ganga <u>Rudraiah</u>

entitled:

Cinema of the Social: Stars, Fans and the Standardization of Genre in Tamil Cinema

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Date_____   _____

                                     Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

ii

Abstract

The star machinery of Tamil cinema presents itself as a nearly unfathomable system that produces stars and politicians out of actors and fans out of audiences in an organized fashion. This study is invested in determining a specific mode of star films in Tamil cinema as a unique genre by itself. These films from the southern state of Tamil Nadu in India typically frame and deify the male actor as a star. I argue that the stars in Tamil cinema are not icons for a genre; rather they are the genre themselves. The assimilation of fans into the process of genre formation is based on an established partnership between the industry and the audiences. This research study diagnoses star-centric cinema as cinema of the social in terms of genre, cinematic populism, mythification, identification, star spectacles, melodramatic masculinity and fan-driven organized spectatorship.

Keywords: Tamil Cinema, Stars, Fans, Spectatorship, Genre.

For Amma and Nana

Acknowledgements

My brother and I were deprived children – deprived of cinema. It was not that difficult for us to see the irony in such a parental restriction. A filmmaker himself, my father had conveniently weaned us away from the 'evil of cinema'. During the years I grew up in Madras, with little or no exposure to television and cinema, I had missed out on a significant part of popular culture. While we got short lectures after watching films of Godard or Bergman and were taken to film screenings at the American Library, Tamil films were a taboo subject. I was once scolded for gossiping about Tamil stars with friends in the neighbourhood. I would like to think this research study on the popular stream of films in Tamil Nadu as my own little protest against the opinionated palate my parents had instilled in me – a humble attempt to retrace my belonging to the fervent culture of cinema in Madras. I have to confess that I have not lost sight of the sense of disgust my father held for Tamil film spectacles. Needless to say, his perspective motivated me to objectively understand the function of the 'popular,' and its meanings dispersed through Tamil films. In many ways, I am here because of my father's incessant pushing to think 'differently' from the 'mainstream.' I thank him for all the love, care and freedom.

This project would not have been possible without the constant guidance and incredible patience of my supervisor and mentor Prof. Chris Gittings. My learning process with him has been the most enriching experience in my academic life. Much of my thesis was formulated as answers to the difficult and pertinent questions that were posed by Chris relating to Tamil cinema and its currency with theory, and domestic and global media discourses. I am extremely grateful for his kind criticism of my writing style, helping my work sound more scholarly. I owe all my future scholarly accomplishments to his training.

thank him for all the sweet distractions that kept me in good health and peace during the course

of writing the thesis.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

In compliance with the murky and draconian state of current Canadian copyright policy most images have, necessarily, been stripped from this dissertation. However, as 'quoting' images is essential for substantive and cogent close readings of visual materials, I have left blank frames to indicate where the images appeared in the copy of the dissertation submitted to my examination committee in the interests of foregrounding the need to develop a more nuanced and balanced approach to fair usage of copyrighted images for scholars.

List of Abbreviations

ADMK   Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam

AIADMK   All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam

FEFSI   Film Employees Federation of South India

DMK   Dravida Munetra Kazhagam

MGR   Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran

NRI   Non-Resident Indian

NTR   N.T. Rama Rao

SIFAA   The South Indian Film Artistes' Association

TNTOA   Tamil Nadu Theatre Owners' Association

Chapter I

Introduction: Star, Genre and Tamil Cinema: Connotations with Theory and Context

> As in Hollywood, the power of the Indian star developed gradually but the position stars command today – both economically and in the popular imagination – is the result of an idiosyncratic economic system that has accorded them more absolute power than even their Hollywood contemporaries. (Gandhy and Thomas 107)

Before stars from the sky became metaphoric for earthly wonders of fantastical existence or divinity, stars were first mythologized as celestial entities in fascination for their luminance, particularly by the great distance between the looker and the looked-at – the distance between reality and a mythical, yet a visible possibility. The same fascination for brilliance of the other dictates the distance between spectator and screen, between the fan and the star. The distance is also marked by the difference of positional power distributed through social and cinematic hierarchies. Inquiries into how film actors become stars, who makes them stars, how star images function, why are stars commodities (Dyer 1979; 2004) and how stars are the result of a "sociological evolution" (Morin 25) have imparted a gamut of insight on the working of star systems. With theory as a point of departure, the questions leading to my research are: How does stardom act as a rudder in genre formation? How do the on-screen and off-screen worlds merge to render stardom as mutually determined genre?

The star system, operational in different cinemas of India has continuously evoked academic and public curiosity under the premise of 'non-western' stardom which demonstrate deviances from familiar speculations about stardom in Hollywood and other cinemas of the world, self-accredited as the 'First world'.[1] To delineate and study star trends outside this elite

---

[1] The Indian film scene comprises of twelve regional film industries - the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) or simply Bollywood, is only one of them.

circle, I believe a research project need not take the form of a vendetta to challenge western theory; rather it should contribute to the expanding base of globalised cinematic knowledge. Such a study will move beyond identifying difference as exceptionality and instead provide theoretical addenda fostering old and new dialogues. Moreover, the collective term of 'western' is as dogmatic a notion like 'non-western.' Taking the case of Richard Dyer and Edgar Morin as axiomatic, the distinction in their treatment of the subject of stars complicates the conception of the theory as 'western'. So I have attempted to read each theoretical piece with its notional extensions, and intersect them with observations on Tamil cinema with no geographical bias, although with required cultural paradigms. That said it is difficult to refrain from exploring crevices that develop in the meeting of cinematic texts having originated from different cultural spaces. The convening of diametric theories and contexts can open new venues for polemic inquiry into the perception of stardom. Stars are ubiquitous phenomena that traverse different "historical and cultural variations," nevertheless as Morin observes, they serve "anthropological" functions (qtd. in Mortimer: viii). My study on the development of a sub-genre within the Indian film industry's popular 'masala' situates in a transnational and transregional channel. Its aim is to investigate the composition of a series of films in Tamil that act as "star vehicles" while conforming to a format that is not particularly unique or original from one star to the other (Dyer 1998: 62). The objectives for theorizing popular cinema in Tamil Nadu as star cinema are two-fold; primarily to determine *star as genre* by studying the genre repertoire, and secondly, to extrapolate star genre as *cinema of the social*.

A set of films have emerged as a specific 'sub-genre' or a specific 'mode' within the Tamil popular cinema where the male actor who plays the alpha male is deified and framed as a star. I will use post-1990 films of 'Super Star' Rajinikanth and post-2000 films of *'Ilaya*

Thalapathi' (Young Commander) Vijay as case studies.[2] The theme of performance of the star (not the actor) is consciously generated in every film, and therefore the genre is also a site for politics of gender, caste and class. The recurring motif of constructing stardom in these films occurs within the 'masala' scheme and yet comes forth as an individual, dominant genre -- the *star genre,* a theoretical appellation denominated for the purposes of this study. My thesis will highlight how film narratives in popular Tamil Cinema are constructed solely around star images. While the traditional cinematic apparatus invites suspension of disbelief, the star genres thrive on the audience's external knowledge of the star, his/her stature and its operation in a given narrative. It is expected to carry over from one film to another, with the film experience constantly invoking that awareness. Tamil film stars such as Rajinikanth and Vijay take it further by bringing in external excesses – such as their apparent political aspirations, philanthropy etc. – that are, in a way, traditional to Tamil cinema. In some cases, especially in remakes, the films are re-adapted to assimilate a star's known idiosyncrasies -- even if it is at the expense of the narrative's flow.

---

[2] 'Superstar' is Rajinikanth's venerated screen title. As a vernacular tradition, it is very common in South Indian cinema for actors to have prefixed honorary titles. For example, 'Victory' Venkatesh, Megastar Chiranjeevi, 'Ultimate Star' Ajith, 'Young Commander' Vijay, 'Revolutionary leader' MGR, 'Revolutionary Scholar' Vijaykanth, 'Supreme Star' Sarath Kumar, 'Little Superstar' Simbhu, 'Revolutionary Commander' Vishal etc.
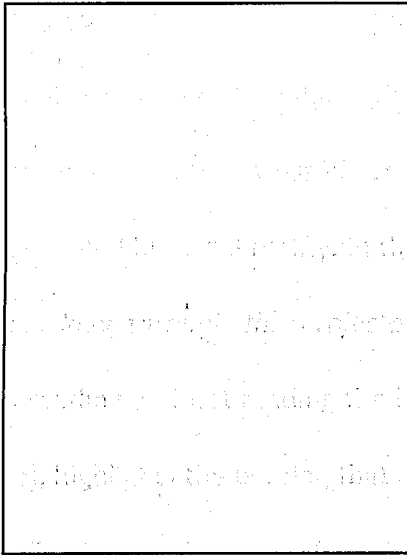
Fig. 1. Rajni in *Sivaji* (2007) – Film Poster   Fig. 2. Vijay in *Villu* (*Bow*) (2010) – Film poster
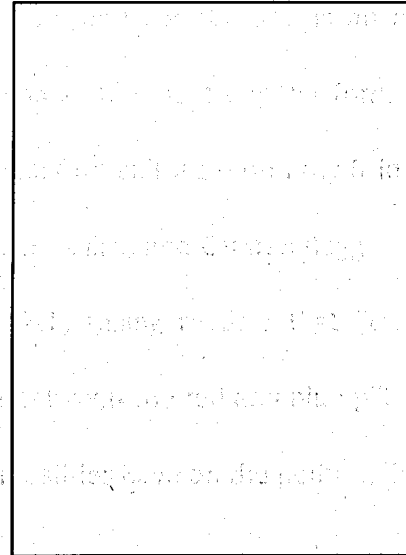
Films of Tamil stars act as vehicles for the enhancement of their star power and mass appeal; the causative historical and cultural conditions whilst rooted in the film world are also effectively reproduced as extra-textual film reality, reorganizing fan sphere as primary space of the star. Owing to a tradition of performatory politics and networking between actors and politicians leading to the historical precedent of the late actor-turned-politician, M.G. Ramachandran's cine-politico fandom, sociality of the medium has become more than secondary in Tamil productions. Social materiality presides over star cinema in its production and reception, arranging the *social* as cinema. To negotiate with its multiple forms, a contextual description of the 'social' is in order.

Terminological investigations of the 'social' have continued to be one of the foremost theoretical concerns in sociology and social theory (Pyhttinen 2010: 22). The relation between the entities 'human' and 'social' is increasingly diversified leading to questions like: "To what extent can relations between humans that are mediated through new communications, technologies and virtual environments be designated *social* in the traditional sense?" (Gane

2004: 3) According to Simmelian thought, the social is beyond society, and is an effect or finished product of social relations (Pyhttinen 27). Cinema as the most popular form of mass communication is often discussed for its sociological impact on culture – on how it influences and is influenced by social reality. In the foreword to Büllent Diken and Carsten Bagge Lausten's book, *Sociology through the Projector* (2007), Slavoj Žižek, telling readers that "the choice between reading and not reading the book is the choice between the red and blue pill" (*Matrix* reference), highlights the bearing that cinematized social realities have on the political life of the word, feeling, expression and reflection. He states:

> .. [F]ilms are never 'just films'. Lightweight fiction destined to amuse us and thus distract us from the core problems and struggles of our social reality. Even when films lie, they tell the lie which dwells in the very heart of our social edifice. This is why this book should be read not only by those who are interested in how films reflect or legitimize social reality, but also by those who want to get an idea of how our societies themselves can only reproduce themselves through films. (2007: xi)

In making such a persuasion, Žižek not only commends the value of Diken and Lausten's work, but also directs readers to re-evaluate the dynamic between cinema and the social. What is the social? Why is this question resurfacing? How does the changing social interact with the medium of film? For Karl Marx, the social is the coming together of individuals denoted by "cooperation" invariably linked to class and modes of production; the social may disappear with reaching the utopian high of production levels, and with the decline in revolutionary politics. Extending this critique on the "death of the social," Jean Baudrillard pronounces the social as non-existent or disappearing; "he treats the social as an effect of second-order simulacra – the order of mass productions and class relations -- that disappears with the emergence of digitalized forms of simulation and the mass circulation of signs. ...The social only exists in the perspective space, it dies in the space of simulation" (qtd in. Gane 2004: 4-7). But as Nicholas Gane points out, the social has not disappeared, but actually survives as a mutated form, now establishing hybrid

methods of and spaces for human interaction. Returning to Diken and Lausten, to understand

the increasingly cinematized formulations of society, they cite Baudrillard who declares: "this is

no doubt why cinema is disappearing: because it has passed into reality. Reality is disappearing

at the hands of cinema and cinema is disappearing at the hands of reality. A lethal transfusion in

which each loses its specificity" (2007: 5). It is in this transfusion that cinema of the social

emerges in South India. Instead of resorting to neologisms, I want to retain the over-determined

term 'social' because a classical sense of social in South India exists in relation to its cinema. Star

cinema in Tamil Nadu seeks the social (masses), appeals to the social (popular ideology) with the

illusion that it creates the social on and off screen (the concept of mass as people power;

fandom as social condition). Star cinema holds the social as a point of convergence for the

cinematic, cultural, economic and even the historical. The translation of cinematized social

interactions with/within cinematic products marks the erasure of borders between filmic and

afilmic worlds.

> The relationship between cinema and sociality must be seen as a two-way
> relationship based on virtualization (producing images of the social) and
> actualization ('socialization' of the image, inclusion of the symbolic element or
> image within 'reality'). In this sense, cinema offers us a transcendental analysis
> of the social, an analysis in which one is not only interested in actual 'social
> facts' but also virtual entities that transcend the domain of the empirical. (Diken
> and Lausten 3 - 4)

The star genre's explicit and implicit modes of interaction with Tamil spectators, with fans of

Tamil stars, with social imagination of nationhood and communities, and ultimately with the

cultural aesthetics of social engagement imbibed by the masses, all together configure as

cinema of the social. The "hyper-social" is the new social wherein representation and

communication are projections of an interdependent network between masses, structures and

the shifting codes of participation between them (Gane 8). As Diken and Lausten indicate, the

transcendent nature of virtual entities travelling back and forth through the projector, blurring

the lines between reality and cinema, explains why "social reality sometimes appears as a fallout effect of cinematic virtualities, producing an uncanny impression that reality mirrors cinema and not the other way around" (1). The films of Rajnikanth and Vijay invite audiences to participate with its social regime that is rarely seen as separate from its off-screen alternative, instead, they are unified under an idealized social conscience across differences of class, caste and wealth.

While the descriptive category 'cinema of the social' effectively represents star cinema's hyper-sociality, how do other scholarly denominations like social cinema and social film, work in the Tamilian context? In a lecture titled "Towards a Social Cinema," the French filmmaker Jean Vigo describes attributes political resistive character to social cinema, films that subvert traditional paradigms and employ "documented point of view" (1977: 21). The social films or "socials" in India first laid emphasis on criticism of social events and representation of society pertinent to pre-colonial and post-colonial India. However, as Ravi Vasudevan points out, by the 1950s, "the industry reformulated its understanding of genre and audience appeal... and encouraged the induction of the sensational attractions of action, spectacle and dance into the social film, a process explained as a lure for the mass audience" (1994: 311-312). What began as a body of social critique, social films were later commercialized to mobilize the masses for larger profits. The social tag remained the same, only now referring to the social expansiveness wielded through the narrative devices of the popular. Therefore, the conjunction of cinema and social, with the former preceding the latter, incorporates the history of social narratives, addresses popular visuals of the social landscape, and assimilates fandom and mass reception into its fabric. To reiterate, cinema of the social as a category does not just offer social discourses, it is the very discourse collaboratively disseminated by the film collective which now

includes active spectators (as opposed to the passivity of the 'spectator-in-text' formulation).[3]

Ultimately, since "intertextuality" is fundamental to genre practice, generic organisation of film

texts and extended textual elements in parallel spaces of consumption brings together the

different cinematic agents of the social (Turner 2006: 92, 146). Tamil film stars' close

relationship with Tamil politics has been discussed extensively in the social sciences. The

literature focuses on some of the most recurrent elements in these films and their socio-political

appeal to the audience. I would like to apply that literature along with genre studies to frame a

deconstructive study of films that explores the recursive influence of stars and stardom in

forging genres unique to 'mass' heroes.[4] I will begin by entering into dialogues with existing

genre theory, leading to a structural investigation of the star genre. The later chapters will

explore how the textual nature of fandom plays a role in shaping genre trends, concluding with

a prognosis for star-centric Tamil cinema.

'Indian' Masala and Tamil Masala

Indian *masala* films named after the mixture of spices tend to have assorted elements

such as song and dance, action, comedy and melodrama, all in a single film. Masala films have

traditionally been organized along binary oppositions, whose guiding discourses include kinship,

duty, social obligation, destiny and human powerlessness under the purview of God, justice or

simply, fate (Thomas 24). Within the universe of the masala genre, the characters exist in an

ideal order where their respect for social obligations and familial and friendship ties maintains

social equilibrium. Disruptions to the social order-in the form of excessive greed; human

meddling in fate, and uncurbed heterosexual desire -- typically advance the plots of masala

---

[3]Some other deliberations on aspects of social in cinema studies useful here are Barbara Klinger's "social spectator" and Zizek's "social fantasy".

[4] 'Mass hero' is a term used by fans and film critics to identify male film stars who are known for acting in films that enjoy popular, mass appeal from the people. The concept of mass also has multiple other meanings in Tamil film vocabulary (see chapter 3).

films. Goodness, morality, and tradition are identified as 'Indian' or 'Tamil', while evil, decadence (generally represented as uncontrolled sexuality), and 'non-tradition' are associated with the 'west.' Seeking to establish the social by the narrative's conclusion, masala films often valorize marriage and the patriarchal family.

The masala genre has acquired regional flavours – in Tamil films, for instance – and some have branched off from the broader template significantly in recent years. But the most important departures happened several decades ago when the Dravidian movement discovered cinema as a potent platform to stage their ideological campaigns against the ruling Congress government.[5] Many of the lead actors of the 1950s and 60s were members of the political party DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kalagam – Dravidian Progressive Federation). While the actors changed from one film to another, the narratives remained closely tied to ideological sermons of atheism, rationalism and anti-northern sentiments drawing upon the Dravidian consciousness. Star phenomenon in Tamil Nadu, though similar to Bollywood's dialogue with its actors, is significantly different. Tamil stars are not just mere entertainment figures; the tendency for film actors to be active in electoral politics has persisted since the 1950s. Sara Dickey (2008) observes aptly that a significant multi-dimensional aspect of Tamil Cinema is the marriage between film stars and politics what Madhava Prasad calls "cine-politics" (1999).

> Cinema and politics have a long, multi-sided history in Tamil Nadu,
> more so than in any other Indian state or film industry. Films have
> been used to make socio-political critiques and to advance political
> ideologies, stars have campaigned for parties and film personnel
> have entered electoral politics. (Dickey 78)

---

[5] The Dravidian movement is Tamil Nadu's defining cultural and politicalmovement that changed the social fabric of the Tamils by cultivating Dravidian ethno-nationalism and language-based separatism. Revolutionary Dravidian ideology was scripted by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) under the auspices of the Dravdian Kazhagam (Dravidian Federation). The movement's ideals opposed Hindi nationalism, Brahmin dominance, and religious institutionalization. Under the concept of self-respect, Periyar infused an ideology of rationalism, women's empowerment, and abolition of caste system (Hardgrave 1969).

Over a period one of the actors, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) proved to be more charismatic than others in carrying out DMK's off-screen objectives. As Hardgrave states, MGR developed a symbiotic relationship with DMK through his roles on screen. While his stature as a star grew manifold by playing the 'true Tamilian' who embodied self-righteousness, unfaltering morality and an ideological beacon, DMK benefitted greatly from his physical presence in their campaign rallies. So the masala that went into making Tamil popular cinema was altered with cultural and more importantly ideological material to better suit and shape the political climate of the state. David Pratt on DMK films reiterates that "the masala mixture is unique to Tamil Nadu" because of "its heavy dose of political content that is grounded in the factional realities of South Indian politics" (1994: 12). Tamil masala thereafter has conscientiously evolved into a contemporized form that includes and excludes political acts from the past, eschewing Tamil nationalism but holding onto populist agenda and linguistic patronage. Although to differentiate Tamil masala from Bollywood masala, the component of performance emerges as a distinguishing element between cinematic cultures of North and South. The perception of Tamilness for the Hindi speaking population of India is by the way of Tamil films – plots, fight sequences, music and dance and 'kuthu' demeanour etc.[6] I will ruminate over this aspect again in detail when discussing the notion of 'Tamilness' mandatorily inscribed in star narratives. For now, it is important to understand that Tamil masala is unique to its cultural context and what is possibly understood as Tamil culture by the North Indian masses is done so with a condescending outlook.

Indian popular cinema has its roots in Indian mythology and ancient traditions of theatre and art. The visual spectacle in Indian films dates back to the tradition of folk drama

---

[6] Kuthu is a shortening of the word dappan'kuthu. Dappan'kuthu is dappa + kuthu. The kind of dance the the poor (or the 'masses') engaged in impromptu mostly beating some 'dappa' or box, a cheap drum at best.

where music, dance, and extravagant costumes were popular. Indian audiences are supposed to know their films – what to expect and what to appreciate. As Manjunath Pendakur explains, they are predisposed to watch the same story in every film, and they go to the cinemas to "see how the [same] formula unfolds, how clever the director is in coming up with twists and turns to the plot, and how good the songs, dances, and fights are." The spectators are attentive to "not the tale," but more importantly, "the telling of the tale" (1993: 11). While this assessment could well be empirically supported, its veritability is debatable, as it could reflect an elitist perception of the masses' consumption of popular cinema. In this regard, Pratt makes a noteworthy point that Indian popular cinema is neglected for the films of Ritwik Ghatak or Satyajit Ray because they are/were advertised as "worthy of attention by the Indian upper classes." The acts of presuming 'masala' to be the only source of escapist entertainment for the poor, or that MGR's followers are so dim-witted as to not see through his duplicitous leadership, borders on orientalist views where the West considered East as indulgent in unmitigated pleasures like drugs, paganism etc that took them far from reality (1994:13). Since my study will also cover star fandom, a later chapter will deal with the ethical issue of speaking for the masses and the difference between fans and general spectator groups. In line with Pratt's argument, I contend that academic preferences for studying Bollywood over 'other' equally important regional cinemas could also be due to a similar elitist thrust apart from causatives like Hindi nationalism, regionalism and the economic dominance by Northern India in terms of film distribution.

The masala genre openly caters to primarily a family market. Film producers attempt to make films that appeal to all age groups within the family, by *mixing* all kinds of ingredients suitable for different sectors. Genre films like horror and thriller are rarely made because of their inability to cater to a large variety of audiences. Variety and hybridity are underscored in the origins and causal factors of the masala narratives. The masala genre of popular cinema is

manufactured as "an industrial product that aims to please the large masses and their changing tastes" (Pendakur 12). The basic arrangement of masala films is closely tied to the expectations of the spectators. Steve Neale enumerates that "genres do not consist of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the viewing process" (1990: 46). Therefore, the masala category is not a mere collective of films, but the organising genre for audience expectations. The mass appeal of this genre links with star appeal, and thereby promotes the use of the cinematic medium to achieve, maintain and enhances one's stardom. Like other genre films, masala genre films are a hotbed of moral and mythical tales that reinforce dominant ideologies. The masala genre matrix is best suitable for the propulsion of the star image. Star films clearly dictate consumption of star texts by adopting the masala genre. The structure of narrative in these films projects the male star as the 'one', assimilating the star's idiosyncrasies. The ordinary man as a hero with 'superhuman' powers leads the people away from misery to joy. Every aspect of the narrative revolves around the hero's life – actions, reactions and solutions. The incredibility of the star's characterisation raises questions about the kind of verisimilitude established by the star genre. It is safe to conclude that the masala genre acts a platform for other genres, with at least strong emphasis on a single element or theme. For example, Vijay's *Kaavalan* (*Bodyguard* 2011) was released after a series of moderate hits, pushing the star to try 'new genres.' Of course, breaking way from the old is only a pretext, as Vijay himself confesses that despite the fact that romance was script's central subject, he had to add some "Vijay elements" like action, dialogues and mass heroism ("Vijay on Kaavalan's").

The Genre Question

I have coined the term 'star film' for the purpose of this study, however, industrial references include 'mass film', action film' or just the star's name as the film's label. *Star films*

refer to films which are distinctly identified by the film star acting in them. While it would be appropriate to call them a Rajinikanth or Vijay starrer, as is commonly expressed in English language, *Rajini padam (Rajni film)* or *Vijay padam (Vijay film)* is how they are referred to in the regional language, Tamil. Vernacular references are important for this study -- for instance, some ardent fans of Rajinikanth would colloquially refer to his films as *thalaivar padam*, which translates to leader's film. So when one mentions *thalaiva* (usually enunciated as an endearing call to the star), it is understood they are referring to 'Superstar' Rajinikanth. So the generic labels like Rajini film or a Vijay film suggests the star as the film's constituent element. This feature recalls Neale's argument on the need to examine generic dominants and avoid linear focus on whole genres; genres have common elements, but it is the dominant element's presence in a collection of films that group them under a specific genre. Similarly, though MGR, Rajinikanth and Vijay films share many narrative and ideological markers, their films are still unique from each other. A Rajini film and Vijay film will not be exact copies, but they share congenial influences and intertextual references with the dominant star model. Neale's call for emphasis on a revised approach in genre studies focuses more on individual generic elements than individual genres - what makes a genre are its generic dominants. The star genre precisely fits this criterion. The over-arching presence of the star is the generic dominant of the star genre. Additionally, I wish to nuance my own argument about the identified generic label - Rajinikanth film or Vijay film. Tamil films in general are commonly recognised by the actor, for instance, Ajith film, Simbhu film or Vijaykanth film etc, which means the practice is not limited to stars of the highest stellar base, but to other actors as well. I believe that the factual usage does not necessarily nullify my thesis, for the reason that the trend of labelling films after actors, up and coming stars and super stars reveals the larger trend of proclivity towards star centric films - the star genre. So actors who have become stars have acted in films devoid of the star

formula, nevertheless, stars like Rajinikanth and Vijay, after reaching a certain milestone in their stardom curve, have chosen to stick to formulaic performances and vehicles. The newer actors frequently test the star film mode in spite of having started out with different filmographies. For example, Surya, another popular actor, who was performing 'character' roles that supposedly demanded superior acting skills, in stories that have 'realist' and reduced masala inputs, made a film titled *Singam* (*The Lion*) (2010) which subscribed to the star film template from punch dialogues to hyperbolic heroism closely resembling Vijay films. The generic tag of star/actor film as a general practice exposes the cultural framework in which actors are always recognized as potential stars and even future 'leaders' with great mass following. Keeping in mind that cultural dispositions and particularities are closely tied to this study, it is worthwhile to get introduced to some associated with cinema.

Tamil cinema, even among other South Indian film industries, is notorious for following a unique tradition of pitching stories. Usually, it is the director with a prepared script/story who either seeks a producer or a star (actor).[7] In the first case, if the director's script impresses the producer by showing promising signs of profit, then, with the legitimate standing of the producer, stars are sought. This practice is unique to the Indian film industry whose production system is mainly run by a number of individual financiers (Pendakur 33). In the case where a director's script proves successful in attracting a star to a project, the star's call sheet can then be deployed to secure funds for film production. In both cases, the director goes through repeated story-telling sessions with different interested parties. Of these sessions, the most crucial is with the star himself. This practice is widely known and has also been mocked and reproduced in many Tamil films. A scene from Satyaraj's film, *Mahanadigan* (*Great Actor*, 2004),

---

[7] In this example, I talk about a first-time director to elaborate industry procedures. An established director with a bag of few successful films will not have issues in seeking producers. Stars are usually the hardest employees to secure for both directors and producers.

illustrates the terms in use that are recognised by the audiences.[8] The film, on a broader level, is a satire of the nexus between Tamil cinema and politics. The scene has Satyaraj playing an 'established,' sought after actor, listening to two different directors who pitch their stories, competing against each other to capture his interest. The first director comes up with a tragic story (mocking 'realist' films in Tamil), and the star loses even the little interest he had when he learns the 'hero' would be cast as a 40 year old. The second director pitches a 'masala' story, and tries to encapsulate the film's entire theme with a few specific details: the actor will be cast as a 16 year old school student who is introduced with a fight sequence to save the 17 year old heroine from miscreants, immediately followed by a 'duet' song in Dubai. When the actor is very impressed because of its 'youth orientedness' the first director interrupts to pitch another story. He tells a story of a mother in labour who gives birth to a child with thunderous music and wailing to a supernova effect, only to find the baby born is the hero himself in full adult size. Immediately, the actor changes his decision and approves the first director's story. This scene brings out many important points with regard to the star genre.[9] Firstly, the actor's star status is the governing factor in films; secondly, the last two stories are star conscious and not narrative conscious i.e., the story-in-narration is tailor-made to the star's massive persona (young and strong). The "generic dominant" in these stories is the star (Neale 66), and therefore this practice alludes to the genre theory principle that genre conscious story execution governs genre film-making (Altman 14). The directors in the scene do not use labels like romance, comedy or thriller, they only employ terms like story or subject, implying that the masala formula works without standardized genre boundaries. The scene also highlights the assumed relationship between the industry and the film audience - especially, when the second director

---

[8] Satyaraj is a star in his own right. He has emerged as a star in the 'revisionist masala genre' films.
[9] The particular scene also discusses relationship between stars and directors, commenting on the concomitance of "cinéma d'*auteur*" genre.

overtly plans to surprise the audience by introducing a song where he claims the audience would not expect one. Revisionist casting of the star genre indicates that its descriptive tags are caught in a delusion of words are collaborative with institutional and public discourses. According to Rick Altman "If it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically construed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared" (1999: 16). A film made for the public directly comments on the genre and its politics. The production is conscious of the consumer's awareness signalling shared recognition of the star genre between the producers and the consumers.

Defining Genre

In interrogating the aesthetics and ideological components of popular genres, Steve Neale engages with the terminological significance of the word 'genre', and its application to films in "Questions of Genre" (1990:62). His last inquiry will be my first in this chapter to understand the different definitions of genre, and then to delineate its meanings in concordance with the proposed star genre in Tamil film texts. Genres function as systematic mechanisms assorting films into different types or categories. So where does the 'star genre' fit in the classificatory norm? How does the chosen group of films qualify under a genre? Since an entire body of work in genre theory and film, so far, has located itself around Hollywood genres, Tamil films to be scrutinised under the framework of the *star genre* will require a genre definition that will have to transcend, first, cultural specificities and later historical and contemporary relevance of Western theoretical corpus. Jim Kitses' defines genre as "a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux" (qtd in Tudor 2003: 4). A combination of

meta-narratives and meta-memes of film marketing works with the changing world of different media to bring about and maintain (universal) genres.

Garin Dowd (2006) in his introduction to *Genre Matters in Theory and Criticism* begins his investigation of origins of genre by invoking Jaques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Aristotle among many others. If Foucault attributes the tendency towards classification as a part of our human "history of order" or human response to differentiate things by kind and to catalogue them into categories, Derrida understands the genre gesture as the "assumption of a hermeneutic right and competence," which Deleuze further draws out as the "symptomatology" of genre and that which calls for a new direction in genre studies – to trace "singular symptoms or signs rather than general forms. Dowd, then, affirms Aristotle's exemplarity as 'exemption or exclusion" that which includes an 'extraordinary' (11-12). This shift in focus from 'plural to singular' also reflects changes in approaches used in genre studies. How do we determine a genre? Do we identify its signs or its whole form? Is there a movement from plurality to singularity, and then a different plurality – structural plurality to conceptual singularity to interactional plurality?

"Generic qualifications": How does Star become Genre?

For Rick Altman generic qualifications follow a set of rules. With the understanding that these qualifications are not the law and that "genre designations are imposed retrospectively," I will analyze the star genre (Dowd 14). Star genre satisfies the first criterion that each film is made with a "recognizable generic blueprint." A good-willed hero, usually with a rags-to-riches story, defeats the villains, saves the day for the people and wins the love of the heroine. This basic blue-print is 'innovatively' varied in scores of films produced in Tamil Nadu. The second criterion is a "genre structure." The male star is the basic structure of the star genre films. He is the super-central protagonist of the film, and most of the films are titled after the characters'

names. The audience not only recognize the film as a Rajinikanth film, the "generic label," they also raise expectations according to the established norms of the genre, thereby acknowledging the "genre contract." The star genre qualifies as a legitimate film genre in accordance to the dimensions enumerated by Altman (1999: 17). But it is not enough that I draw straight comparisons to imposed criteria and leave it at that. The genre question is a complex one that requires an open-ended answer addressing the intricate process involved in the making of a genre.

Star genre is best described as being involved in multiple levels of interaction (Neale 1990: 56). Neale puts forth three levels: the level of expectation, the level of the generic corpus, and the level of 'rules' or 'norms' that govern both. In addition to these levels, star genre establishes few more: the level of audiences' knowledge of the star's off-screen stature, and the level of the star's political inspirations. The thin line between the on-screen and off-screen images of the stars in Tamil Nadu affects the overall fertilization of what comes to be recognized as the star breed. The actor-to-star upward movement is largely determined by the kind of political profile an actor builds for himself, which is most commonly influenced by trends set by stars and political leaders, and the vital component connecting these two fields is the masses: cinema and politics organise the people. Tamil cinema is a concerted public exercise. Thus we can locate star genre as a generic regime that is "both inside, and outside, the cinema"; the kind of genres Neale invites genre analysts to identify (66).

Genre as a process: Repetition and Variation of the Star Formula

Altman (1999) states that genres tend to have "clear, stable identities and borders," and that the "individual films belong wholly and permanently to "single genre" (18). This is applicable if Indian cinema's most popular genre – the masala genre – is considered as the "single genre" that encompasses other self-contained diversions and foci; the star genre will

then 'belong to' or 'be a member of' its collective. In the same book, Altman re-examines and alters some of his arguments from his earlier essay *A Semantic/Syntactic approach to Genre* (207: 215). It is here that Altman's acknowledgement of diversified audiences for genres brings him closer to Steve Neale's integral idea that "genres are not systems: they are processes of systematisation" (Neale 1980: 51). Though Altman's acceptance of genre as a process is initially reserved and limits the 'process' to two kinds - categorisation of types and consolidation of cycles, later on he identifies genre as "multidiscursive" and "multicoded" allowing some kind of processual culmination of different viewers (Altman 65). This fortifies Steve Neale's conceptualization of the genres "as processes that are marked by repetition and by difference, variation and change" (1990: 56). Though M.G. Ramachandran's, films were narrativised differently and belonged to a different *cycle* in Tamil cinema, they are significantly tied to the current *mode* of star genre films of Rajinikanth and Vijay. Furthermore, it can be argued that Rajinikanth films and Vijay films are sub-genres to an established genre, considering that the star genre is star-specific as well. One star's films are different from the other; variations in star images utilise different forms of narrative, in spite of common industrial and ideological strategies and goals. Therefore, MGR's films could easily qualify as Thomas Schatz's "generic prototype" which Altman explains as "genres [that] were typically set in place on an industrial model: create a prototype, put into production, and continue to produce the new product as long as it sells" (1999: 20). The present cycle of star films seem to follow this production model. With every box-office hit, a similar film is set to scripting and filming in less than a month of the successful film's release – the guaranteed by the masala formula.

Spectatorship, Verisimilitude and Identification

Critics and scholars have argued that the mixture of elements from different genres is aimed at providing a sense of fulfillment, of experiencing all emotions and letting him/her

escape 'reality' in the process. The film industry manipulates spectator-text dynamics by maintaining cinema as an illusion simultaneously projecting it with the 'real'. This interspersing of oppositions is said to provide the 'best form of entertainment'. Verisimilitude, as Neale puts it, involves probability wherein a narrative's likelihood is sustained by the "systems of expectation and hypothesis" (46). Producers of star genre films constantly push the boundaries of credibility. In *Sura* (2010), a Vijay film, the hero is from the fishermen community. After a cyclone in Chennai fishermen who went missing are rescued and brought back to the shore by the government. All are rescued but one. A large crowd of people gather around the rescue workers, demanding that they find the missing man - Sura (Vijay's character name in the film meaning 'shark'). The crowd goes on to sermonise about Sura's deeds and power, and proclaims that his survival alone is tantamount to everyone else's, because he is vital for the survival of all people – the hero is the God incarnate the masses cannot live without. The district collector pacifies the desperate people: "if all of you with such a good intention want that good person [Sura] to live, he will definitely come to life". Immediately, a cut is made to the sea. We see two hands joined together like a spear-jutting out of the water, followed by the rest of Vijay's body. He literally flies out from mid-sea, and swims the last stretch to reach a shore of people rushing towards their hero. A fan video recorded during the film's screening shows how keenly the audience reacts to the patronising dialogues (). They go hysterical watching their star do the flying-fish stunt. What is the audience really doing here? Do its members really believe Vijay can do that or are they celebrating the possibility of a superman like their screen hero?

Neale emphasises that Tzvetan Todorov's two kinds of verisimilitude - generic and social/cultural verisimilitudes, overlap and in most cases sidestep each other. He makes two important points with regard to the tension created due to the transgression of regimes of verisimilitude and their impact on the public. First, he points out that, generic regimes of

verisimilitude are already public in nature in the form of "public opinion." When the two regimes blend, they do so in "public discourse," therefore becoming a combined form of knowledge available as public opinion again. Also, he remarks that the ingredients that make up these regimes have served the purpose of attracting audiences, again, taking recourse to the public space (1990: 48). From the recorded response for the introduction scene in *Sura,* it can be inferred that audience as consumers have their palettes conditioned by circulatory 'public opinion' on star films. They could be consuming the presented verisimilitude in a state of double awareness of: 'reality' and 'cinematic reality'. In the state of the 'real', the audience are conscious of watching a Vijay film. In a parallel state, they move away from the role of the spectator to becoming Vijay's fans, more importantly, they become the 'mass' that pleads with the rescue workers to search for Sura. By becoming characters themselves, they facilitate incredible star narratives or fictions. The transformation here, I contend is different and perhaps more nuanced from identification as some spectatorship theorists suggest (Metz 1975; Mulvey 1975). Star film spectatorship does not rest with viewers identifying themselves as the hero, alone. As Judith Mayne (1993) argues, cinematic identification based on shifting positions is "fragile and unstable as identity itself" (27). The spectator-star (textual) relations in Tamil cinema (also Telugu and Kannada cinema) are not confined to the assumption that the spectator would identify most closely with a character like him or herself. Whether or not there is a to and fro or inward/outward movement of the screen, the viewers are playing the role of fans, who are, in actuality *realised* into the cinematic space. This process of *realisation* explains why heroes choose to break the fourth wall and talk directly to the audience in the middle of the film; often asking questions such as, "Who's your loyal friend?" the cinema audience generally responds with "you are". Even though the film's main plot, Sura as the chosen leader of the fishing hamlet is allegorical of Vijay's political ambitions (to govern the state of Tamil Nadu), the

crowd and the audience are cast as the star's cause – the Tamil people. This is done even more so – more emphatically and directly – in song sequences. Audience as abstraction materialises as narrative components. The audiences accumulate an 'identity' by way of being star fans. Identification for Diana Fuss (1995) is: "a process that keeps identity at a distance that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable" (2). From the *Sura* example, it can be deduced that the 'process' involves the audience first being addressed as fans and later realised into becoming the *masses*. It is plausible to see the star authorizing a process of conversion where the audience move towards a desirable 'illusion' that might have no real basis. Fuss's idea of "identity at a distance" has limited application only up until the film's end. The newly formed fans enjoy their star perform for them but they are also highly aware of the physical and psychical distances between them and the screen. I believe that they consciously allow for the identification process as they might be holding two identities simultaneously – one of the fan and the other being one of the mass beneficiaries of the star's deeds. The identity formed at a distance is no longer deceptive for the reason that the fans engage in actual fan identification process by becoming active members of fan organisations. Hypothetically, they become fans inside the cinema hall and once outside function as fans, consequently moving the identification process outside the cinematic space.

Star Genre and Gender

> ... [W]e look at the world through the ideas of male sexuality. Even when not looking at male sexuality, we are looking at the world within its terms of reference. (Dyer 1993: 89)

A large amount of gender discussion in genre discourse has been discussed in terms of reading styles that pertain to reading literature/novels (Gerhart 1992; Russett 2009). In film studies, I have recognised the use of two approaches to genre/gender discussion. First, certain

genres have ingredients that have gendered the films' reception (e.g. melodrama movies as the 'woman's film') and secondly, that of gender politics surrounding the central protagonist(s) of the film (e.g. *Thelma and Louise, The Terminator*). Patriarchal narratives are normative to most films in Tamil or Indian cinemas. The male hero is an important character in almost all Indian films. Masculinity and its underpinned male sexuality are pronounced variables of the star genre because the films heavily revolve around the male star. The celebration of masculinity in these films differs slightly from the 'hypermasculine' market of Hollywood, especially from the stardom shared by stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. Although they mimic Arnold's attitude and replicate Bruce Lee stunts, the masculinity of MGR, Rajinikanth and Vijay, very rarely involves musculature, and is more to do with displays of manly courage. Barry Keith Grant explains that some film genres like action and adventure films offer fast-paced narratives with physical action such as chases, fights, stunts, crashes and explosions, and in most cases at the expense of the narrative flow and character development (Grant 2007: 83). Star films display such male power as they don the role of the protector who redeems innocent people (his own family or his love interest) from social evil. In order to bring out a sensationalist effect, the star genre allows for action heroism to intersect with melodramatic elements of the family. Linda Williams explains that melodrama can embody different kinds of films that are "marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile, emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (2003: 143). This explains how masculinity on show goes hand in hand with sentimentality, challenging assumed gender typing of audiences with regard to melodramatic attributes. Also, the star genre narrative presents social problems that the hero tackles and triumphs over. Williams' proposition that "each deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is a cultural form of problem solving; each draws upon related sensations to address its problems" directly applies to the star films' form (152).

Returning to Dyer's idea that we tend to use male sexuality as a frame of reference in reading all discourses, he also identifies the syntax of storytelling (as before the discourse on the camera's voyeuristic position) as inherently masculine (118). Film texts of male stars do not even avoid explicit sexist overtones. Women who are the rewards, along with evil-doers of the society, provide the occasion for male sexuality in star films. The hero is pitted against all the oppressive elements of Indian society – industrialists, smugglers, politicians, gangsters, rogue police officials and so on. In this process of excessive display of masculinity, women are dolls or sex-objects. The hero might advise the heroine on her immoral ways (e.g. seeing skimpily clad as 'slutty'), but, in the same film, rules of morality set forth earlier do not apply in songs. Pendakur describes this aspect of Indian cinema – suppressed sexuality, as akin to erotic foreplay. The star genre ends up reinforcing patriarchal traditions that assign a particular space to male, female, and other members of Indian society (169). All these dimensions of the male-centered narrative, and benefits reaped for stardom will be explored in the next chapter.

Meta-myth: Star and Genre

In *Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell (1991) comes up with a 'spiritual' definition of myth as clues to experience life (4). Myth, all over the world tells us stories about experiencing life. Roland Barthes describes myth as a "system of communication" that mediates between the message and the way the message is delivered. He emphasises that "myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (1972: 109-110). Myth does not represent facts but rather human history through motivation, purpose and analogy. Like literature, films are mythological systems, inhabited by people-made myths about man and other entities. Genre films are "prime instances of mass-mediated contemporary truth." Like cultural myths, "genre movies tend to be read as ritualized endorsements of dominant ideology" (Grant 2007: 29). Likewise, the star genre propagates capitalist ideology funnelled through

populist fiction where an individual backed by the 'right' motivations and intentions could overcome any difficulty or obstacle posed by the enemy who is a hindrance to the society at large. As mentioned earlier, star films maintain the status-quo of the powerful and powerless, instructing the latter to wait for the 'one' (the hero) to solve their problems. The presence of the multi-faceted, ultimate hero is the nucleus of any mythical tale. This is summarised in Campbell's description of the hero:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory won: the hero comes back from the mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (1972: 30)

It cannot be denied that the mythical status of the hero in star films contributes to the mythical status of the star. Edgar Morin explains that the star is born when the actor and his character converge to construct one and other; the process of "divinization" occurs on the "same mythic level" (2005: 29-30). So where do 'genre' and 'star' locate themselves individually? Is genre a myth? Is star a myth? Myth, as a body of work, is considered as a "narrative genre" (Coats 1983: 10). Genre film-making is compared to "cultural myth-making" (McConnell 1979), and the concept of genre as a filmic system is characterised like that of myth (Schatz 97). Genre, then, is an organising mythic structure that emulates mythical tenets. The idea of genre as a *discourse* that is (mutually) exchanged between the producers and the consumers, classifies as a myth. Barthes believes myth is a speech act that is

> .. made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials myth (whether pictorial or written) presupposes a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. (110)

Genres are identified and transmitted through the spoken and written word, and go through a continual process of signification. Especially in the world of new age transmission of

information, there is bound to be unprecedented reduction of text. Information has become cryptic by the way of microcosmic communication. The meaning of genre and the way it relates to a film is used much more liberally in communication where there is little space for qualification or correction. Film genre is a similar textual system that is set to an order and purpose of "specific communicative function." While on one hand it is a commercial product enjoying popularity nurtured by the audience and the cinema's agents, on the other hand genre film "represents a distinct manifestation of contemporary society's basic mythic impulse, its desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture while at same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-image" (Schatz 100). Genre is the result of an innate mythic impulse that governed/governs ancient and modern societies. How does the star configure in this mythical system? We will turn to Barthes' conception of myth as a semiological system.

Barthes explains that myth also consists of the triad: signifier, signified and the sign (112). So if we are to consider the film star as semiological myth, the hero character in the film and his righteous deeds would form the meaning and concept (signifier); the hero's identity as the protector and larger-than-life star image would be the signified; and the together, the hero status and cinematic identity forms the sign of the star. He also identifies myth as a peculiar system that works on top of another semiological thread – "a second-order semiological system." This meta-level interaction ties in with my debate around genre and star as myth, and how it creates "double function" for the star genre (114-115). If genre and star are signs (myths), the star genre as a product of signification, becomes the meta-myth – myth about a myth. As Susan Weiner (2007) rightly observes, "myth was an effect of the human imagination as it was lived in the world, and the star system was its ideal contemporary illustration" (33).

Star phenomena are not rare occurrences and their partnership with myth organising genres is no coincidence either.

Star Image and Genre

John Ellis argues that the star image tends to be thought of as a static unit like a photo image. It comes to life with cinematic performance. The cinema effect enhances the photo effect and keeps it in constant resonance (1992: 91). For Richard Dyer too, the star image is a culmination of multiple media texts – "promotion, publicity, films and criticism and commentaries" (1998: 60). Though Dyer acknowledges that "films have a distinct and privileged place in star's image," he dissects each of these texts separately (60-63). For Neale and Ellis films form the foundational material on which the star image is built and circulated through (1990: 48). Ellis describes the "narrative image" as "an idea of the film [that] is widely circulated and promoted," which is also a suitable answer to the question – "What is the film like?" If the narrative image is associated with the film performance which brings to life the star image, and as Neale points out "genre is an important ingredient in any film's narrative image," then, a collective of narrative images help form the star image (1990:49). In the case of the star genre, we understand that an established star image helps form the narrative image. Vijay's films are promoted and publicised as *his* films, i.e., all promotional materials focus on the star – his cut-outs, close-ups, action trailers and TV interviews. The star image collapses into the narrative image and vice-versa to produce the star genre. Contrary to Ellis' theorization, the star image of Tamil stars is not "incomplete or paradoxical"; they do not depend on "film performance" alone to become icons for the narrative image (93). It can well be said that Tamil stars are not icons for a genre, but they are the genre themselves.

Star Vehicles as Genre

In all of Dyer's critical dissemination on star theory, the concept of "star vehicle" is pertinent to the cinematic (after)life of Tamil stars. He takes into account films that are built around specific star images and suggests that:

> In certain respects *a set of star vehicles* is rather like a *film genre* such as the Western, the musical, the gangster film. As with genres proper, one can discern across a star's vehicles continuities of iconography, visual style and structure (62) (emphasis added).

By recognizing the potential for star vehicles to be received as a distinguishable film genre, Dyer predicts logically and industrially sound trends that could be a result of star-genre market affiliations. Clearly, Tamil stars like Rajni and Vijay feature in films that excavate the narrative image-star image combination, carefully to create a series of films incorporated with consistent star schemes that are similar in design. To Dyer's preliminary citing of star genre, Andrew Britton's scathing opposition is of importance here (1991). Calling it an erroneous proposition, in his essay "Stars and Genre" Britton argues that "the existence of a genre, and *a relation between genres*, is a prior condition of the [star] vehicle." He further criticizes Dyer's observation as "misleading" and "reductive" to perceive genre separable from its narrative content and accuses Dyer of approaching genre studies incorrectly (198 -199). Much like his style of aggressive arguing against established theoretical positions, the vocabulary used in this essay limits the scope of the genre system to biases of industry, ideology and film theory alone (Zborowski 2009: 1). Britton uses Hollywood cinema as his only study sample in ways not practiced by other film theorists. Neale and Dyer, in spite of basing their theories on Hollywood, are conscious not to present essentialist discourses in film studies (Neale 1990: 45-46; Dyer 2004: 5). Whereas Britton liberally extrapolates his selective observations from Hollywood and overlooks the possibility for extraneous star imagery to govern genre in film cultures outside American and British cinemas. Instead, he suggests the inverse: "star's work [does not]

constitute a new generic entity, but demonstrates again the historical interpenetration of genres" (203). His arguments are only partially valid since he discounts the aftermath of stardom – its consequences on public spheres arranged through cinema. The inclusive nature of star genre in South Indian cinemas put Britton's theses in a quandary. The star film mode is a phenomenon about two decades long considered as a tradition after MGR's success. Rajinikanth and Vijay's star images have governed a majority of their films; and their off-screen and on-screen personae are not entirely different. "Their political personae are extensions of their cinematic selves" (Das Gupta 1991: 199). In films they are portrayed as men for whom people's welfare is their foremost concern, and in reality too, they, their families and fan associations engage in philanthropic activities for the underprivileged. They perform the role of the ideal citizen in cinema and in real life. In spite of having acted in films with variations in treatment of the star formula, the film rarely alters their distinct star images (reiteration of the 'repetition and variation' principle of genres). In fact, in the last ten years Vijay has refused many directors with scripts that are likely to show him in new light or lacked elements of a star film ("Vijay on Kaavalan's").

Britton, however, does not realise that in countering Dyer, he invariably conflates genre with star. Though he assigns the former with structural power to influence, what he actually does is repeatedly indicate that texts of star and genre enter affective relationships redistributing powers of iconicity and commercial viability. So the contradictions in his arguments inadvertently support Dyer's original observation and this study's thesis. Britton recognises "genre as the film's commodity form," and that the star vehicle configures as a "sub-section of genre" adding to the film's status as commodity (201). When stars themselves are commoditized labels for films, predictably then, genre can appropriate star motifs as its

determinants. Simply put, star genre practice in South India is a theoretically and practically conceivable industrial phenomenon.

Locating the Old in New (and vice-versa): Relocating Genres in Tamil and Telugu Cinemas

More recent star and genre studies closely relevant to the star genre findings articulated above in relation to Tamil cinema are those of S.V. Srinivas' 'mass films' (2009) and Kumuthan Maderya's (2010) 'Angry Young Man' genre. Srinivas' book titled *MEGASTAR: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao* explores the high voltage relationship between stars and fans, and cinema in the lives of people habiting the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, north of Tamil Nadu with the actor-turned politician Chiranjeevi as a case study. Nandamuru Taraka Rama Rao, popularly known as NTR, a veteran actor in Telugu Film industry, best known for playing mythological characters is the founder of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP – Telugu National Party) and was the second film star to hold the post of Chief Minister of a State in India (for three terms from 1983 to 1996). In 2008, Chiranjeevi launched his own political party, the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP – People's Power Party). While analogies can be drawn between the statures and careers of MGR and NTR, Rajinikanth and Chiranjeevi (Chiru) respectively, the political and cinematic history of these two regions differ significantly; however, a crossing over of film cultures was inevitable.
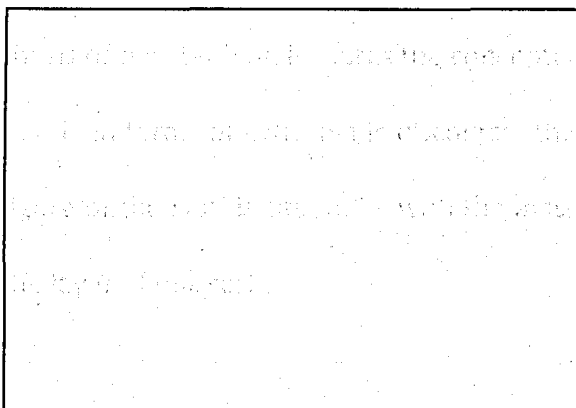
Fig. 3. N.T. Rama Rao
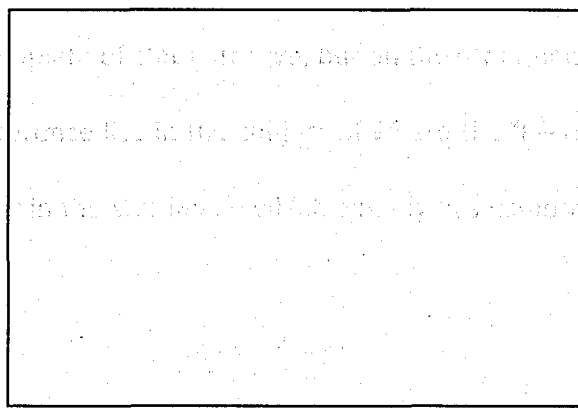
Fig. 4. 'Megastar' Chiranjeevi

Srinivas' pivotal star study is an extensive analysis of Chiranjeevi's film career from 1978, in a build up to his political launch in 2008. In perusing cinematic populism in Telugu films, he also diagnoses a new genre called the *mass film*. The mass film according to him has "major stars playing the roles of common people who [are] representative of the masses." Mass films have underscored themes of "spectatorial address and political mandates." The chief aspect of the mass film is the "absolute centrality of the star to the narrative, as well as, to the business model of the film" (2009: 77-78). There is close resemblance between Srinivas' Telugu 'mass film' and the Tamil 'star film' that I propose. Srinivas admits mass films' affinity to "the vehicles of Rajinikanth" (78). Regardless, by default, the striking difference between these two proposed genres are its labels – 'mass' and 'star'. There arises a nominological conflict where 'mass' might refer to the power of the people (primary consumers of Telugu cinema) and additionally the sole purpose of the films, while 'star' refers to the actor with mammoth-sized stardom which axiomatically includes his mass following. I will not point to 'mass film' as lexically lacking as it is part of the industrial vocabulary, rather it only suggests the difference in stellar power of the actors in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Srinivas himself mentions that Rajinikanth is "more famous and successful of two" even though Chiranjeevi was the first (out of this elite cohort) to make a foray into electoral politics. Vijay has been known for acting in Telugu remakes like *Gilli*, *Adi* and *Pokkirri* – for cashing in on the mass-oriented scripts. So the mass film is not an antithesis of the star film; it shares the conceptual template of star narrative, but on the other hand, purely in terms of extra-filmic discourse, the difference lies in the subject of where the 'I – the figure of the star' is situated – with the masses or in the star image which already has osmosed the layer of masses.

Kumuthan Maderya's article titled "Rage against the State: Historicizing the "Angry Young Man" in Tamil cinema," as he describes it, is a 'historizing film' project. He places under observation a chunk of Rajinikanth's early films (from 1978 -1996) that have had very little or no academic attention. He sets on the task of tracing this neglected dimension of Tamil popular cinema in establishing the Angry Young Man (AYM) genre:

> I have found that the films in Tamil cinema's "AYM" genre enunciate a sustained indictment of the Indian state by valorizing unconstitutional, vigilante approaches to justice. By privileging verisimilitude over allegory, these films blatantly visualize state failure in a kind of social commentary. Yet ideologically these films appropriate the same brand of rabid populism that crippled the state in the first place, perpetuating a cycle where the reel and the real reinforce each other (2010: 1).

Maderya makes a key point in accusing the film industry and the stars for running a continuous loop of filmic and non-filmic rhetoric on state politics. In these films, heroes run parallel governments or systems of justice as a struggle against the corrupt government, mystifying the star as someone who is always politically conscious and opposes injustices. By way of critiquing stereotyped villainous governments, stars claim eligibility to run for elections outside the cinematic regime. This finds mention in Telugu cinema's mass films as well, pointed out under discussion of "Remaking the star to make a politician," where Srinivas examines the films of Chiranjeevi from the late 90s in which he played roles that boosted his image as a person who can run the state (2009: 228 - 229). Maderya also describes the interconnectivity of aspects like rage, populism and violent masculinity which have endured up to recent cycle of star films. I recognize in Maderya's argument of AYM genre, the trope of the anti-hero that has continued in films from the new millennium. Star films are thus an alternative label that encompasses many aspects outlined under the mass film and AYM genre. Srinivas and Maderya have authored important investigations in unexplored areas of Tamil and Telugu cinema. In the subsequent chapters, we will see how the star genre assimilates some of their observations on film

narratives and also why there needs to be an academic acknowledgement of the amalgamation of star and genre as an industrial reality. An analysis of the narrative elements of star films, which we will turn to next, will give insight in to the genre's structural lattice vital for determining its generic tendencies.

Chapter II

Design, Drama, Discourse, and the Star: Anatomy of Star Films in Tamil Cinema

> When a film industry streamlines its star system, instantly recognizable, iconic screen actors produce a highly stylized performance enhanced by an equally highly stylized star-focused cinema. Star performance is, not inevitably but very often, the source of screen movement, concentrating the spectator's eye, localizing the development of the story and providing its latent energy. (Mulvey 162)

In most film cultures worldwide that are commercially dependent on stars, scripts are made to suit an actor's screen history and public persona. The textual dimensions of the excessively star-centric films in South India rely on culturally-specific masculine ultimatums for political and economic success. A star's overindulgent on-screen heroism is also validated through the tradition of hero glorification in Indian mythology and folklore, and cyclically through current film trends as well. In the previous chapter, the prominent trend of star-centric Tamil films was adumbrated as a film genre -- as a body of films dictated by stars, which is theoretically feasible and culturally sustained. Like other genre films, star films possess discernible ingredients and codes that qualify as its generic components. The defining elements of the star genre also help distinguish itself from its parent, Indian popular cinema's masala genre. In ascertaining genre conventions on a set of star films in Tamil cinema, it is also important to observe the distinct connotations attached to the word 'star' in the proposed star film and star genre. This chapter is concerned with the particular nature of stardom constructed by the elements in a star film. The key guiding research questions are: What kind of star is manufactured? How does such stardom govern cinematic expression? I will argue that the 'star' in the star film signifies new definition(s) of stardom peculiar to Tamil and other South Indian film industries. Alongside a structural analysis of the star narrative, a critical scrutiny of the embedded politics of populism, religion, morality, masculinity, femininity and Tamil nationalism will be undertaken. The star image is formulated and manufactured through three devices of the

star narrative: the star's introduction, punch dialogues and action sequences. The star's extraordinary self, fixed by a polyvocal patronage operates through performative exercises of dialogue, song, dance and action. Since much of star-oriented cinema is cinema of anticipation, intricately tied to expectations of the audience and the fans, this chapter will also discuss spectatorial relations with star film texts.

Star film Schemata

The mixture in masala genre is not always balanced, the masala is only the principle base on which one or two genres may be emphasized depending on the main plot – love subject or family subject etc. Star films are masala films where the hero is the main carrier of the masala ingredients. The films are excessively hero-oriented and referred to as "hero subjects" in the industry (Perarasu). The main focus of the film is the hero and his superhuman role, notwithstanding elements of family melodrama, romance, comedy, action and socio-political themes. The hierarchy in Vijay's *Kaavalan* (*Bodyguard,* 2011) would be star/hero – romance – action and other masala features. Similarly, Rajni's *Sivaji* would be star – action – melodrama and rest of the popular genre(s) elements. Since heroism of the star is primary to these plots, masala becomes, if you will, star masala. The basic blueprint of the star film has the hero on a quest to resolve the chief problem of the Tamil people: victimization by the powerful. He sets out on this quest either intentionally or by an event accidentally triggering his Tamil morals. In most films the hero sets out to protect his family, girlfriend or a community of people by exterminating social miscreants and/or politicians. In other plots, the hero is already a social messiah that is out on the prowl for hooligans and crooked politicians. Nonetheless, the star emerges as the 'Tamil hero.'

Stuart H. Blackburn (1978) traces the importance of heroism in Tamil culture to early Tamil literature of the first centuries A.D. He asserts that a majority of Tamil ballads contained

the "heroic mode" that exposed "an extraordinary preoccupation with honor and the intrinsic value of the warrior's death" (134). With such historic inheritance for hero-essentialism, Tamil cinema has rarely steered away from tradition of glorifying the 'one'. Other characters—family members, friends or villains—are transcribed as powerless, weak and dependent beside the star. The heroic characterization of the star also constitutes a commitment to leadership. This invites the question: whose hero is the star? From MGR to Vijay, in order to win the hearts of the masses these stars have played two kinds of heroes, differentiated by class membership – the subaltern hero (playing working class characters like Auto rickshaw driver, car mechanic, farmer etc,) and the charitable hero from a rich or well-to-do background (NRI return, feudal lord, etc). Between these two classes, the lower class and upper class portraitures, cinema goers fall prey to both kinds of heroism. If the subaltern hero feeds the fantasy of male spectators to become powerful, the upper class hero is worshipped for his sacrifice and charitable deeds. Class consciousness has always inflected constructions of the hero in Tamil literature. Blackburn differentiates between the Tamil "local hero" and the Indian "puranic hero": the former is grounded in local issues concerning the daily sustenance of the people, while the puranic hero protects the king and gets involved in magical and divine situations.[10] "While the puranic hero challenges forces that threaten to upset the status quo of the kingdom, the local hero opposes casteism and social injustice" (134). The local hero or the folk hero is Tamil, that is, he is one among the masses. MGR, Rajni and Vijay, and other actors have banked upon the trope of belonging to the people. Audiences are believed to recognize the hero as a phantasmical mirror image of themselves, representing their desires and addressing their problems (Babusivan). It is of no surprise that stardom in Tamil cinema has escalated to newer heights of phenomenality. Of course, the subaltern hero is more predominant than the other, nevertheless, the potentially

---

[10] Puranic as derived from'Puranas', which are ancient Hindu texts that retold stories of gods, noblemen and kingly warriors.

puranic hero is assigned the tasks of the local hero. Without bending the class system, heroes emerge not only from the people but for the people as well. The imaginary merging of class borders is instrumental in maintaining vertical power – between the rich and poor, upper class and lower class and upper castes and lower castes. The characterization of Tamil hero could also be traced back to the fairly recent history of Dravidian politics in the state. The preoccupation with preservation and cultivation of the Dravidian identity (Tamil self) centered from the heroic body, argues Nimmi Rangasamy (2004) from reading the Dravidian propaganda texts.

> The concepts of *thondu* (selfless work) and *veeram* (courage) were deployed to construct a politicized 'Tamil' ethos. A thondan was the quintessential 'self-respecter', willing to lay down his life for the cause. He was the hero who entered the society 'wading against the tide', withstood the floods and the spears of opposition, his selfless work making the organization grow from a drop to a flood.. The body was not just to be means of liberation through work and war, it was to be the site at which the commitment of the Tamil was to be most severely tested. (139)

Therefore, heroism shaded by themes of sacrifice, service and valour are intrinsic to Tamil cultural expressions. Rangaswamy's scrutiny of the Dravidian hero draws direct links to the cinematic empowerment of MGR and the current successful modes of star cinema. It suggests the staticality of the Tamil conscience through time, and the continual processes of mimesis of history embedded in Tamil media productions. The following sections will explore the dimensions in the iterations of deep-rooted Tamil heroism developed throughout the star narrative.

Introducing the Star

Integral to the star film is the opening introduction of the hero. A star's presence in the film warrants some kind of special introduction to inaugurate the film in his conspicuity. The hero's illustrious entry into the screen space occurs in the shared conscious space between the star and the audience establishing the hero in the visual field of diegetic stardom. The star accessorized by the creative team (director, screenwriter, production designer etc) presents

himself to audiences who are already anticipating his screen performance that is directly dedicated to their own visual pleasure. Upon the star entering the frame, members of the audience, his fans, partake in ritualized celebration in the cinema hall. South India cinemas have traditionally sustained a viewing culture of *cinema hall hysteria*, where the star is not only cheered on but there occurs some kind of meta-participatory communication with the star and the film. Fans cheer, whistle, and throw flowers and confetti at their screen hero who also directly addresses them.

Cinematic excess being normative for star films, the star discourse commences even before the star is seen on-screen or the actual film begins. Through this practice that is not exclusive to Tamil films, the star is announced in the opening credits. The stars' names preceded by their star titles fly out as letters on to the screen. The embellished graphic display appears in full frames dedicated to their names before the title of the film revealing star hegemony over the film medium. Pre-introduction of the star also reiterates that the actor's star stature prior to and while playing the film's lead character. For Laura Mulvey (2006), the film industry's practice of merging fiction and reality involves branding the star with screen names. Therefore, the name of the star becomes a symbol for "instant recognizability, of the star within the world of their films and national cinemas" (162). In the case of Rajni and Vijay, their screen names along with titles are labels that refer to Tamil cinema, its star system and also to the genre.
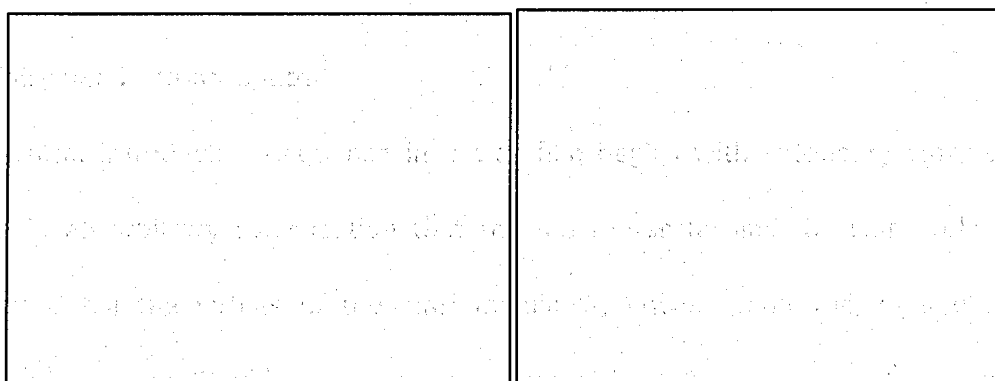
Fig. 5. 'Young Commander' Vijay - Introduction titles for Vijay in *Vettaikaran* (2010).
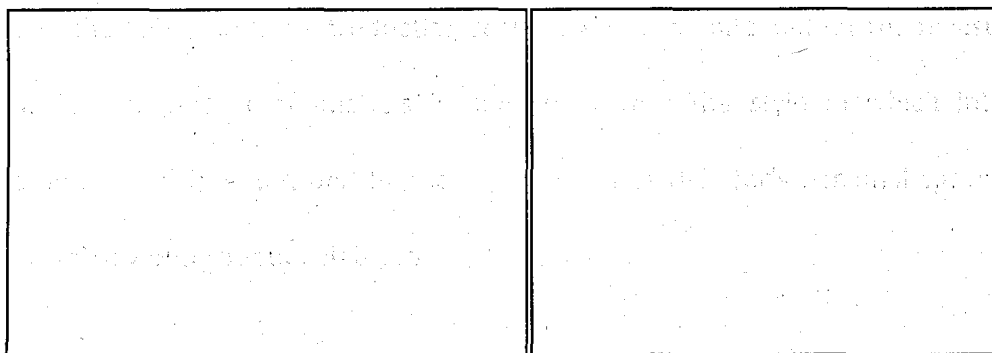
Fig. 6. Introduction titles for Rajnikanth in *Chandramukhi* (2005).

In most films, the introduction involves a short scene establishing the hero, followed by a song and dance routine; in some other films, fight scenes are included as well. The heroes mostly do not appear in the establishing shots and the few scenes leading to his dramatic entry are intended to create some "hype". The delay in revealing the star is deliberately placed to indicate the extraordinary nature of the star and his persona (Babusivan). To understand the structure of star introductions, I will organize my argument into two sections – one parsing the first set of scenes featuring secondary characters establishing the star's stature within the film, followed by the second section considering the introductory song. Among other devices in the film that invite the audience into the profilmic space, the introduction sequence is the first to engage them in a dialogue with the star. With lyrics that summon 'electrifying' mise-en-scène and camera movements, introduction scenes serve as a platform for star performativity.

Public Voice and Personal Space

A typical introduction sequence in a star film begins with secondary stock characters engaging in an arbitrary conversation that sets up the scene and the star's role in it. The characters detail the virtues of the star: manliness, power, good will, righteousness and sometimes his charm. These spiraling announcements lead to the hero's entry are marked by

striking music, aggrandizing camera language, and special effects. The star's introduction brings

him closer to the 'masses.' The introduction scene is purely architected for the pleasure of the

spectators. So this section of analysis is concerned with the style in which introduction

sequences 'introduce' the star, and how the proxemics of the star's personal space with the

'masses' effectively bring about celebratory spectatorship.

Introduction sequences are always found in the first reel, and in most cases the film begins

with it. *Baasha,* released in 1995, is one of the biggest block busters for Rajni ("Baasha is Back").

With a gripping screenplay the film functioned as true entertainment. With themes of parallel

government and law in the hands of the people, the film stirred the cultural and political climate

of Tamil Nadu (Maderya 6). The film is considered to be an evergreen hit, and every time it was

telecast on TV, the channels were confirmed to receive high ratings (Pillai). In February 2009,

the film was re-released in theatres in the wait period between the Rajni-Shankar super hit

collaboration *Sivaji* (2009) and their next film together *Endhiran* that released in October 2010

("Baasha is Back"). *Baasha* is a story of Manickam (Rajnikanth), who, in the first half of the film is

an auto-rickshaw driver portrayed as a benign soul who helps the needy and practices non-

violence. He is determined to earn a living and support the dreams of his family, of one brother,

two sisters and the mother. The story takes a twist at intermission, when Manickam's past is

revealed. He was once Baasha, the most dangerous and powerful underworld don in Bombay

(now Mumbai). The film unfolds to explain Manickam's story of becoming a mafia don and how

he was forced into exile. The flashback serves as a setup for an impending resurrection that the

audience is lead to expect.[11] To complete his 'rebirth', his old nemesis from Bombay is also

brought into the proverbial climax that unfolds as a duel between the hero and the villain.

---

[11] Flashbacks serve as reintroductions abiding by rules of star excess. These double introductions of the stars are also scripted in the form the character's unknown past. For example, in films like *Arunachalam*

The film opens with a scene at a wedding. The bridegrooms' father demands the remaining amount of money agreed upon as the dowry from the bride's family. When the bride's father pleads with him to understand his modest monetary situation being an auto-driver, the bridegroom's father creates a commotion and asks his son to leave the ceremonial place to cancel the wedding. About the same time, 'like a god-send', Moorthy (Janakaraj), Manickam's friend arrives with the money and tells him:

> Manickam asked me to give you this money, because he believes a fellow auto driver's suffering is shared by all of us.

Turning to the bridegroom's father, he adds in an assertive tone:

> Manickam also asked me to tell you that, by taking dowry you are selling your son, like how we sell cows.

The next scene cuts to a hospital room. A doctor is advising a patient's wife that her husband can be saved with an immediate surgery, but she would need to pay Rs 20,000 ($500) for it. The distraught wife weeps about her helplessness since her husband is the only earning family member as an auto driver. As before, timely help arrives in the form Manickam's aide, Moorthy.

> Moorthy: You needn't go anywhere for the money. Manickam asked me to give you this (handing over the money to the doctor).
>
> Wife (blessing gesture): I wish him (Manickam) well!
>
> Moorthy interjects: Why should we say it, Amma? The whole nation wishes well for him.

To the doctor's enquiry of Manickam's whereabouts, Moorthy replies zestfully that by now Manickam should be 'rocking' the *Ayudha pujai*.[12] The next scene opens as prelude to the introduction song with close-up shots of drums and pictures of Hindu deities, followed by the

---

and *Sivakasi*, Rajni and Vijay are reintroduced to the audience with newly found information about their past – usually they were once prosperous in contrast to their current orphaned status.

[12] Ayudha pujai ('*ayudha*' meaning 'tool' and '*pujai*' meaning 'rites') is a Hindu festival where tools of one's profession are worshipped under the auspices of goddesses of wisdom, wealth and power. In the shot that follows in *Baasha*, auto-rickshaw drivers are seen venerating their vehicles.

ceremonial pumpkin breaking ritual, where Rajnikanth arrives. The camera tracks his legs first,

cuts to show the pumpkin thrown in to air, again in an aerial shot, we see Rajnikanth break the

pumpkin with his head. It is only after such tight preview that the audience gets a first glimpse

of Rajnikanth as he looks into the camera and salutes the audience with folded hands. This

scene is followed by the introduction song whose mechanics I shall discuss in detail later in this

chapter. In *Sivaji* too, the mobile framing and editing of the introduction scene has the camera

providing tight close-ups of different parts of Rajni's body. Interspersed with shots of different

groups of people praising his philanthropies and others accusing him of corruption, the audience

learns that he is being taken into state prison. Once he is locked up in a prison cell, the camera

continues to show only parts of Sivaji's body excluding his face. When a prison mate from a

neighboring cell quizzes him about his crime and finds out that Sivaji has committed no big a

crime to be in jail, Sivaji replies: "I did good for the country," and the prison mate teasingly

affirms that as a definite reason to be imprisoned. Rajni (Sivaji) responds with his characteristic

laughter. On this audio cue, the camera pans up to reveal his full face (see fig. 7).
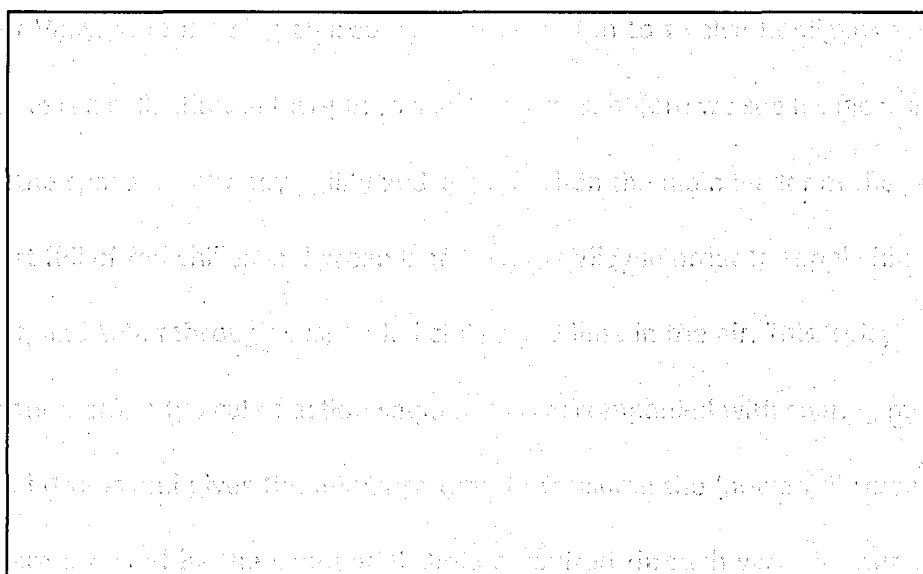

Fig. 7. Rajni in close-up, *Sivaji*

In Vijay's *Sura* (2009), as discussed in the previous chapter, Vijay's flying-fish like entry from the water is preceded by a scene in which a group of people who claim to have their lives indebted to Sura (Vijay) worry about his well-being. In *Pokkiri* (2008), beside a railway track, a ruffian meets with three other thug-like men (friends of 'Tamil', the character Vijay plays, who is not revealed yet) and discusses a deal about killing someone in his own area. When he enquires who will do the job, a swift reply comes in the form of non-diegetic voiceover announcing the name 'Tamil' punctuated by an echo-effect and Vijay is shown from an under angle shot, jumping over pieces of paper lit on fire. A cut is then made back to the friend who adds: "His blows are not just painful," he pauses and looks into the camera to say "but paralyzing like a thunderbolt", thereby breaking the fourth wall here. The audience when spoken to are enthralled and made aware of their role in acknowledging Vijay's 'power'. Vijay is both the star and character, and his friend, the figure in front of the camera talks to the audience, implying that by the way of being his fans (even as friends) they are entitled to be acknowledged too. The next shot presents special effect simulating thunder with camera shake, and revealing, partially, the figure of Vijay, who is being chased by a group of ten to twelve hooligans assigned to kill him. The scene is a collection of fast-paced shots and cuts; before we see his face, spectators are invited into the space of his body agility and speed. When the main leader of the group decides to push a cart full of red chilies and green lime towards Vijay in order to topple him, Vijay jumps over the cart, and soars through suspended chilies and lime in the air. This 'spicy' entry created in a slow-motion effect typical of action sequences is accompanied with soaring music of Indian trumpets and drums and gives the audience time to consume the 'powerful' screen imagery of Vijay. They are arrested by the sequential shots organized through variable framing of actions and events.

Such introduction scenes in star films merge important aspects of screen dynamics. Through the placement of other person(s) alluding to the character played by the star, the film brings into the screen space multiple voices that represent and make references to the general public or the star's *mass*.[13] A collection of such voices situates desirable public discourse within the profilmic space making an off-screen audience active participants in this discourse around the star. A star's introduction in a film is expected to be punctuated by an 'I' but it so happens that the eye of the 'I' is also located within the space of the other. Rajnikanth and Vijay's 'self' is already present before they even make a full physical appearance in the film. The star exists only if others are conscious of his presence and in turn validate his stature. Only through others, can the star be constructed. Michael Holquist interprets Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism:

> In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism, consciousness is *otherness*. More accurately it is the differential relation between the center and all that is not that center. (18)

The multiple diegetic voices enacted in the introduction scenes are openly in dialogue with the star's persona. In presenting the aspect of the star, his self, the narrative bends to bring in *others* first. The lives of the people are intricately connected to the actions of the hero. In an elementary sense, the star's project of protecting the masses, may symbolize as the *otherness* laden in the dialogue about the star. From this point onwards, the meeting of the private and the public is taken to another level of audio-visual engagement in introductory songs, where the star is the lyrical subject.

---

[13] Mass as a term in popular usage refers to the large following of stars. Mass is also representative of the power a star is able to churn out. The third chapter will deal with the terminological details of the term 'mass' in Tamil cinema.

The Introduction Song

Indian popular music is mainly derived from its films. The lack of an alternate scene of flourishing independent pop music heightened the importance of music scored for films. The "Tamil music boom" that occurred during the late 1930s was chiefly dominated by film songs (Hughes 2002: 469). Songs in Tamil cinema continue to dominate the music scene, and also occupy significant screen time. With a minimum of six songs per film, every turn in the story is punctuated with a song. The first number in star films is the introduction song also known as the opening song during which the hero is established as the main subject of the film. The introduction song is a key component of the star vehicle since the hero's star image is symbolically emphasized through song lyrics, mise-en-scène and visual presentation. The star is the central theme of the song; it advertises his socio-political ideology, and his loyalty towards his fans and by extension, the common people. So the song primarily acts as a propaganda tool reiterating the stars' supposed beliefs, values and principles that meshes his real and reel lives. As a political figure it was pertinent for MGR to publicize himself and represent the political party's ideology.[14] Through lyrics and dialogues, he transcribed political ideology into "songs of hope, optimism and reassurance" that suggested even the oppressed can elevate to heroes (Pandian 54). As mentioned earlier, the star's portrayal of the subaltern hero, or the charitable hero from a well-to-do family appeals to the subaltern classes in Tamil Nadu from whom MGR had the largest support (32). MGR's path to political stardom through cinema is the best-known strategy in all of cinematic history. After the success of the song "*How long will they fool us in this land of ours?*" in *Mallaikallan* (*Mountain Dacoit*, 1954) MGR chose to include populist songs in all his films. They became so popular that anthologies of song lyrics are sold in the form of mass-produced low priced books under the title *MGR Kolgai Paadalgal* (MGR's Ideological

---

[14] MGR was first a member of the Congress party in 1953. The same year he joined DMK. In 1972, he split from DMK to form ADMK (Anna Dravidian Progressive Federation) under the auspices of late Annadurai.

Songs) (Pandian 54 - 55). It became natural for Rajnikanth (and later Vijay) to superscribe MGR's

(and Rajnikanth's) addressing of cinema going audiences' thirst for vicarious heroism. Therefore

star films have been involved in an organized myth-making process that sustains the illusion of a

superhuman hero for the subaltern.

'I' in relation to Others

Normative for introduction songs, the hero sings to describe himself and also preaches

of general goodness, moral and social values. I will use excerpts from a few songs to enumerate

the semiotics of interpellation and identification in the lyrics. The lyrics of these songs also

contain critique-worthy Tamil nationalist emphases, populist rhetoric and gender politics. While

these other dimensions will be discussed later in the context of the star narrative as a whole, for

now, it is important to sustain enquiry into the cinematic adaptation of the individual across the

texts concerning the star and his fans. With example from *Baasha*, I shall illustrate Rajni's vocal

self.

> I'm an auto-rickshaw driver. I know all routes and fair rates.
> I'm friend of good people. I'm a musician who sings well.
> I'm from the country where Gandhi was born.
> If I take the spear, I'm a hunter.
> The elderly are my kin.
> I have a sympathetic heart.
> I belong to the poor people. I always belong to the poor.

It is noticeable that through these lines, the character of Manickam in *Baasha*, who is a former

mafia don under the cover as an auto-rickshaw driver introduces himself through the star's

extended image of benevolence and philanthropy. The ordinary character becomes special as

the hero because it is the star playing his role. The star's virtuous image is matted upon the

character. The film character then is simply a signifier for the star. Rajni finishes the rhyme with

the line "I always belong to the poor", typically ushering in populist agenda of falsely dedicating

oneself to a community to gather their undying support. Since this is performed on a cinematic platform, the distance between the audience and the screen is bridged. Watching MGR on-screen or on stage campaigning as a politician converged into one reality for the people. Thus the actor ordains a selfhood that is externally defined – he exists in relation to others. His stardom is determined with voices of the fictional, non-fictional and quasi-fictional, and songs readily present those multiple voices in lyrics and visual imagery. Bakhtin's differentiation of the novel from lyrical poem in terms of voice(s) is relevant here. As Jacob Blevins points out, for Bakhtin the author's voice in a poem is singularly dominant, whereas novels are dialogical (2008: 15).

> Perhaps for Bakhtin the lyric subject seems too isolated, too "private"; however, the private voice of the lyric subject is often constructed *from and directed to public discourse*, and the subject's self-discovery, his or her self-fashioning, is validated and understood only through what simultaneously is and is not: the *speech of others* (Blevins 16) (emphasis added).

Blevins makes a logical observation that the voice of the lyrical subject is not detached from the lyrics' intended audience. The star in a star film uses his *private voice* to make public his image which originally is construed by public imagination. In introduction songs, the stars self-fashion themselves in tune with popular expectations and conventions about a Tamil hero. Therefore, the introduction song is better understood as an answer to the question "Who are you?" rather than "Who am I?" A question is imagined to come from third person 'they' and is answered with the first person pronoun 'I' with the assumption that for the audience it is a dialogue between 'we' and 'him'. In fact, in *Padayaapa*, the film goes as far as to insert the question "Who are you man?" in the script through another character's line prompting the Rajni's introduction song.

Vijay's lyrical proclamations also deal with building himself a righteous image, as an empathetic leader for the poor. However, amidst increasing speculations, Vijay at a special press meet in September 2009 confirmed that he would join politics soon when the political climate is

suitable. He also clarified that his fan clubs were being reorganized as a *Makkal Iyakkam* (People's Movement) in preparation to act as his political force ("Building Foundation"). Since this announcement, Vijay's films (*Vettaikaran* and *Sura*) have vigorously re-constructed his cinema-politico figure. One interesting observation on his recent films is from the critical shift from the *I-them* status-quo to *I-us*. Although this focus is not entirely new or unexpected because of the MGR film model, a textual analysis of Vijay's strategic cinema is significant towards mapping the star genre's topographical extensions binding mass politics. In the last chapter, Vijay's introduction in *Sura*, where he comes out of the sea like a flying fish after a fatal storm was reviewed under hyperbolic star introductions and star emphases.
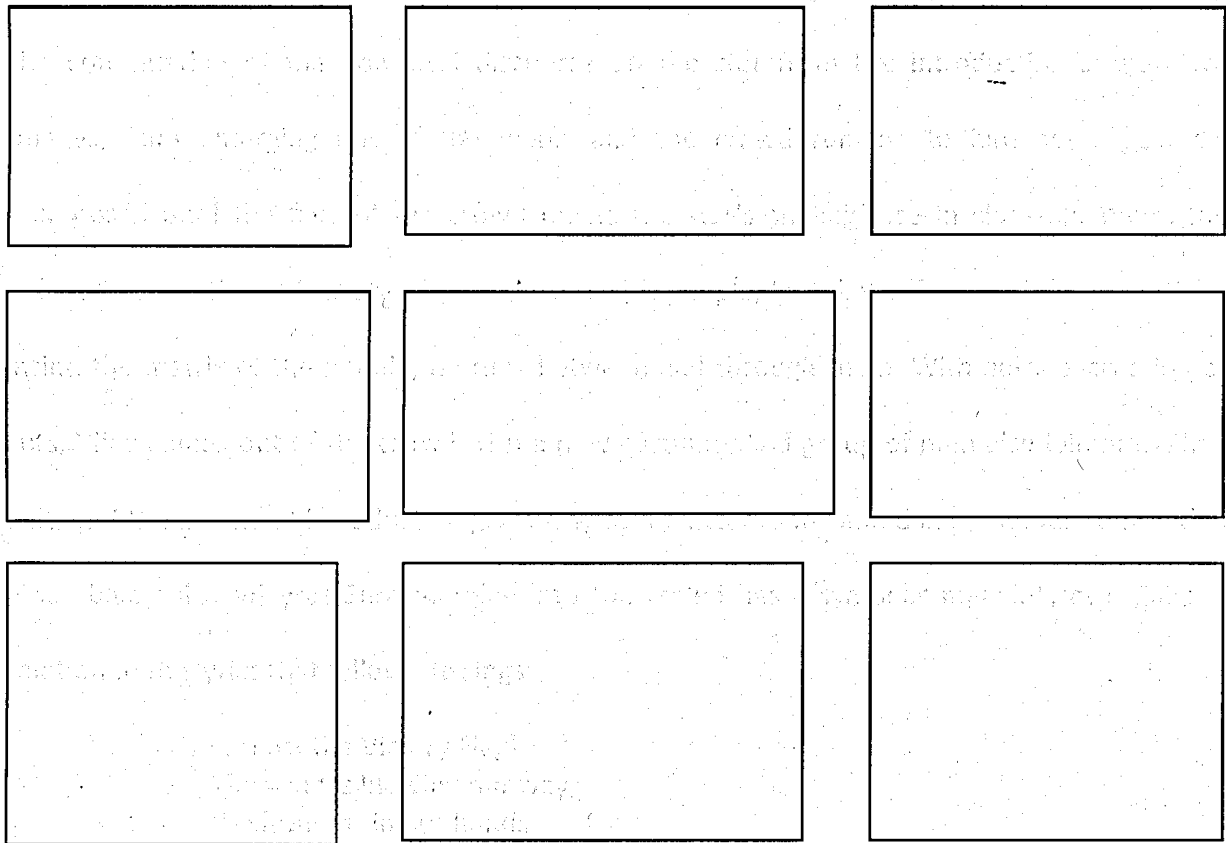
Fig. 8. Vijay's introduction in *Sura* (*Shark*) (2010) (Sequence left to right, clock-wise from top).

We shall return to this introduction scene as it immediately becomes part of the introduction song titled 'Vetri Kodi kattu' (Hoist the victory flag) (see above). As Sura (Vijay) swims towards the shore, non-diegetic music setting a triumphant mood begins, accompanied with multiple voices singing these lines:

> This guy swimming towards us is our son.
> He has never failed; he always returns victorious.
> His heart is made of both cold mountains and erupting volcanoes.
> He is the dawn in our dark, poverty-stricken lives.

After the brief overture, the song changes tempo to a happy note visualized by people of the fishing village rushing towards their 'son', their demi-god. The regular self-introduction in the first stanza of the song is substituted with other voices opening the song for the star, indicating the continuation of the polyvocal discourse on the star from the introduction scene. Two images, Sura emerging out of the water and the crowd running to him are repeatedly juxtaposed until the face of the crowd meets the star's smiling face in close-up. When the beloved son of the soil (the star) gets closer to his people, he takes off to run *into* them. Once inside the matrix of the people, he runs between and through them. With quick succession of cuts, Vijay comes out of the crowd with a new costume, and group of men also join him. They halt, and the extended introduction gives way to the actual song and dance routine. Adorned in a sea blue shirt, Vijay as Sura merging into the crowd has a symbolic meaning, especially in relation to the lyrics that follow. He sings:

> ... Hoist the Victory Flag!
> The wind is blowing our way,
> the future is in our hands

The star surfacing from the sea moves into the crowd to become one of them. Sura, however is not just a fisherman like the others, he is the revered leader of the entire community. The convergence with the crowd comes across as a symbolic process of 'becoming the Other'. So Vijay makes a joint reference with the word 'our' rather than regular references like 'you/your'

or 'them/their'. Again, it is not rare for the word *namma* (we) to appear in star lyrics, nevertheless, it's usage in this song is the all the more relevant with these lines:

> ... Even crows have nests when the poor do not have homes.
> Ask the blowing wind, it will tell you our story of daily struggle and pain.

Vijay speaks about subaltern suffering as though it were his. He speaks for the Other by wearing the mask of the Other, and star cinema openly thrives on such cultural appropriations. Although Sura as a film character belongs to the fishing community, it is Vijay who stands out even as he transforms into the Other. Between the star and the actor-character, the star profile emerges prominent. The character is overshadowed by the star, "acting out his myth" in on-screen and off-screen lives (Morin 130). With leadership conferred on him, Vijay is still the One, even while he mimics the Other; his transformation into the Other is only partial. Therefore, the performed mimicry is a façade; it maintains the coexistence of the fiction and non-fiction. If the star completely transforms into the Other, he will not be recognized as the star figure; therein lies the difference between realist cinema and star cinema. While the star genre does not require post-colonial considerations, the idea of mimicry in creating an accepted cinematic reality is significant. Theoretical discourse on mimicry for the large part has deliberated on colonial repercussion on cultures – colonized trying mimic the colonizer. I would like to, however, weigh class relations and formations of identity between the oppressor and the oppressed. Slavoj Žižek provides an appropriate revelation on Otherness in this case.

> ... This is where theories which advocate the subversive character of mimicry get it wrong; according to these theories, the properly subversive attitude of the Other – say, of a colonized subject who lives under the domination of the colonizing culture – is to mimic the dominant discourse, but at a distance, so that what he or she does and says is like what the colonizers themselves do. ... almost, with an unfathomable difference which makes his or her Otherness all the more tangible. I am tempted to turn this thesis around: it is the foreigner who faithfully abides by the rules of the dominant culture he or she wants to penetrate and identify with who is condemned forever to remain an outsider, because he or she fails to practice, to participate in, the self-distance of the dominant culture, the unwritten rules of this culture. We are "in", integrated

> into the culture, perceived by members as "one of us", only when we succeed in practicing this unfathomable distance from the symbolic rules – ultimately, it is, only this distance which proclaims our identity, our belonging to the culture in question. (2008: lxi)

The underlying argument in Žižek's observation is that becoming the Other never fully materializes. As in this case, the underprivileged might ape the star, might even want to be like him, but are constantly working within the realm of difference, as identifiable imitations, never the real thing. Consequently, the privileged classes also try to maintain the distance of "unfathomable difference" in order to safeguard their identity. Both these operations maintain the dominant ideology's status-quo. Be that as it may, what is evident in star films are that, the privileged subject (in this case, the star) apes the underprivileged, in order to assimilate into the culture of the Other. The assimilation, notwithstanding, is questionable as the star's "self-distance" is still intact. So what exactly is the method and function of Vijay's transformation? Returning to the Lacanian understanding of mimicry:

> Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare (qtd. in Bhabha 121).

The assembled group of people waiting for Sura is a "mottled" crowd of Others. Vijay's mutation, as he runs through the alien fabric is deliberately unfinished as he emerges in a comparatively stylized costume and is also graphically marked as the central protagonist of the song. It can be argued that the "camouflage" is superficial, since the people are made to accept Vijay as a mottled version of himself – between the star, his political motives and the quasi-fictional role in the film. Perhaps, the filmic masses would want see the star as a star even when he's trying to identify with their lives. Society's desire for a hero, fetishism for a star, and collective fantasy for the Tamil nation may all be fostering such dialogues between the star and the audience. The last shot of the song where Vijay's distant silhouette on the beach is

foregrounded by a group of fishermen as though they were awaiting their leader, surmises the tension between Otherness and Oneness – Vijay becomes both 'one among us' and their generous Other, their hero.
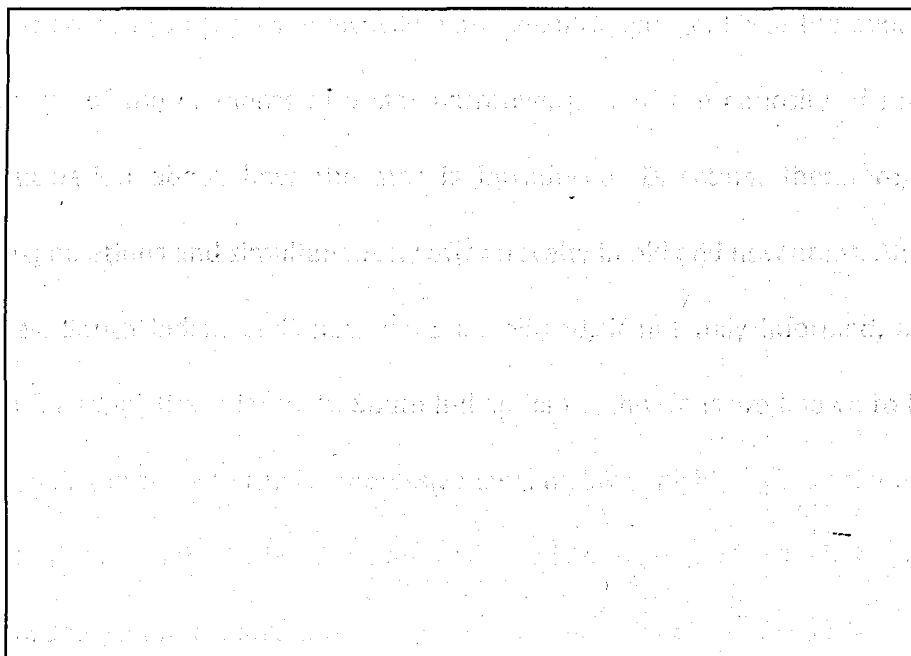
Fig.4: Vijay as the One in *Sura*

Through these textually rich introduction songs, Rajni and Vijay's directed speech to the fans and the masses also evolve into distinct versions – star-specific texts achieving the same goal. Most of the lyrics may not display poeticism, especially when translated in English, nevertheless, they are written in lyrical form that follows certain basic tenets of rhyme, composition and symmetry. Lyricists for introduction songs write songs *for* the star, so the lyrical subject is the star, not the poet in this case. As discussed earlier, it is inevitable for the 'I' in introduction songs to form an intertext between the hero's character in the film and the star. Then, it can be deduced that the introduction songs play out to three different sets of audience expectations:

1) *Getting to know* the star/hero in the context of a particular film's storyline

2) Expectations about the message in these songs that are directly addressed to the audience.

3) Expectations for novelty in cinematography, choreography and miscellaneous 'surprise'

elements.

A star film is the original and ultimate space to consume or relish star performance. It is in these films, the star speaks to his fans in visually extravagant language. Since the audiences already have knowledge of the elements of a star narrative, part of the curiosity of seeing the star, involves anticipation about how the star is introduced. Directors, therefore, play to the audiences' expectations and simultaneously offer novelty in old and new areas. Along with lyrics and dialogues, South Indian audiences have developed, if not fully informed, a rudimentary appreciation for sophisticated visuals. South Indian film technicians are known to be masters of the craft providing excellent visuals, impressive cuts, making "highly stylized cinema" accessible to the people (Mulvey 2006: 173). Such an audience is preconditioned to fast cuts, frame rate manipulation, special effects and close-ups, and in general the visual spectacle of star imagery. Of course, these are distributed over the entire film, not limited to introduction sequences and songs. In this account of star visuals and their accessibility to the audience powered by specific designs of cinematography, mise-en-scène and choreography, I will begin with Laura Mulvey's conception of star performance as *delayed cinema* which is arguably the most applicable film theory for star cinema in South India (2006). Delayed cinema according to Mulvey exists in the implicit freeze-frames of stars within the film reel, also reproduced as film stills for pre-production promotions and post-production circulation. She explains how delayed cinema is a kind of extended/embedded track in cinema specially made for the "possessive spectators":

> .. [T]he film industry produced, from the very earliest moments of fandom, a panoply of still images that could supplement the movie itself: production stills, posters and, above all, pin-ups. All these secondary images are designed to give the film fan the illusion of possession, making a bridge between the irretrievable spectacle and the individual's imagination ....With electronic or digital viewing, the nature of cinematic repetition compulsion changes. As the film is delayed and thus fragmented from linear narrative into favorite moments or scenes, the spectator is able to hold on to, possess, the previously elusive image. From a

theoretical point of view, this new stillness exaggerates the star's iconic status. (161)

Songs in star films, apart from punch dialogue scenes and fight sequences, accommodate many "favorite moments" – full figure poses, silhouettes, direct speech, and stylish gazes. There is access to delayed cinema before the film release, during the film, and post-viewing, although it is during the film's running time that the images are registered. So in the hurriedness of the frames, star iconicity transpires through suspended images. As we can see in introduction dance still used for film poster readily renders itself for translation into pre- and post-cinema spaces (see fig. 9). Even as these images move in the film, they are etched in the visual memory of the spectator as special images of the star.

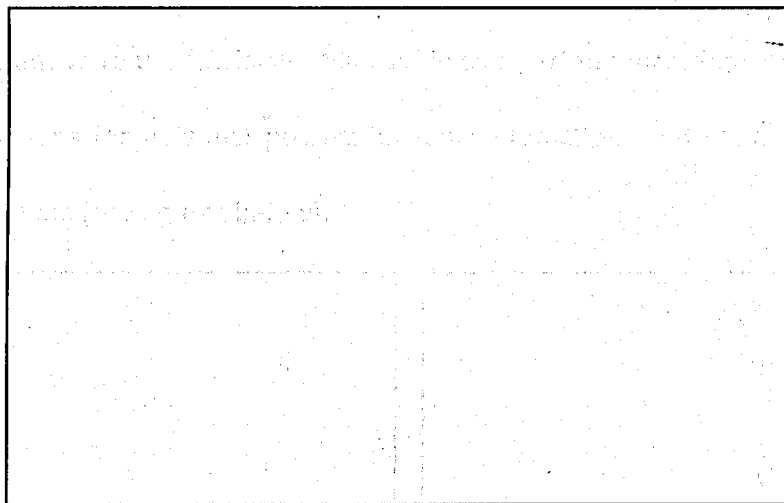Fig. 9. Vijay's dance still incorporated as film poster for *Pokkiri*.

The quality of stillness in these images slows down cinema irrespective of the narrative flow or the frame rate. These images are "extracted" from the screen during the spectator's moment of possession (164). Star cinema directs its stars to engage in performative body language and movements that are filled with poses attracting attention.
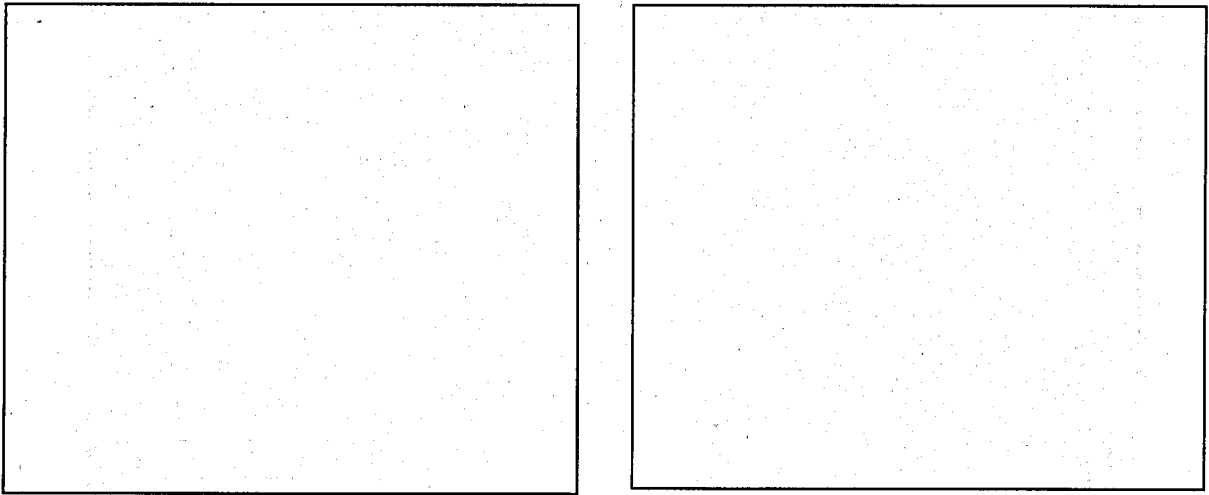
Fig. 10. Invisible stillness of Rajnikanth in a song from *Sivaji*

The star is alive in the stillness of the image, regardless of the image's animate or inanimate

existence on film or on promotional material. Finally, fan productions reaffirm the fact that

audiences are attentive to the "invisible stillness" in star performance. Screenshots and stills are

reworked by the fans for personal possession (and interaction) and social use, like fan club

meetings and banners (see figures below).
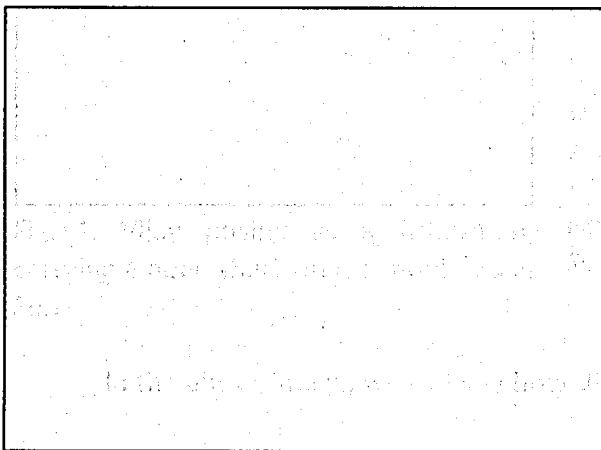
Fig.11. Rajnikanth delaying cinema in
Chandramukhi
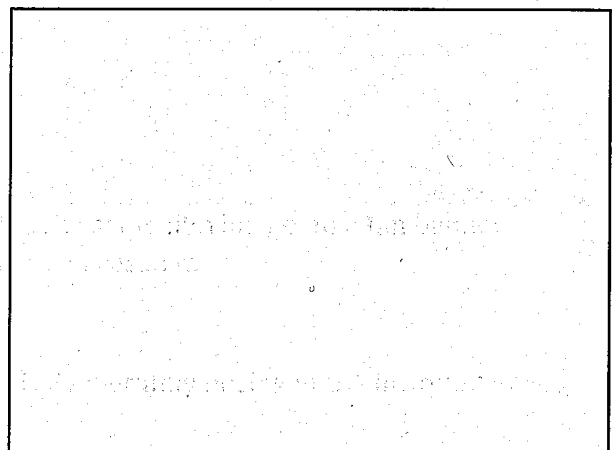
Fig. 12. Fan re-productions of film's stillness

Fig. 13. Poster of Rajni's fans wishing him on his good health, returning from Singapore after getting medical treatment. The film still of Rajni from *Sivaji* outlines the real Rajni's airport arrival. Source: Srinivasan R.
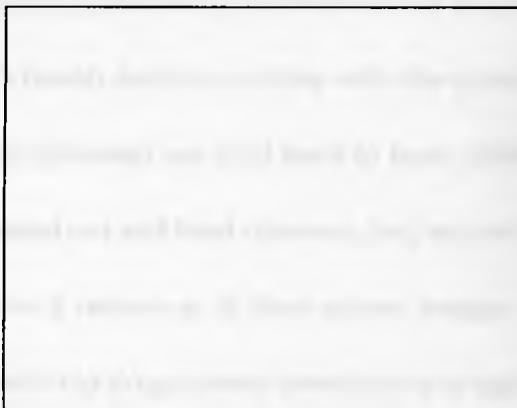
Fig.14. Vijay posing as a fisherman, carrying a dead shark on his shoulders in *Sura*

Fig. 15. The same film image on a fan banner. *Source*: Srinivasan R.

In the above image, we can see how Vijay is deliberately posing in the introduction song as the fisherman, painting himself as a labourer belonging to the community. The characteristic image, where Vijay identifies himself with the subaltern is reproduced in fan banners outside a cinema hall in Tamil Nadu (see fig. 15). The star genre is truly symptomatic of Mulvey's delayed cinema and may even propose extended critical dimensions about cinema in abeyance beyond the discussed practice of remote controlled viewing (using the pause button).

Suspended cinema also deals with one of the basic units of image -- colour. Usually star frames are brightly lit and sometimes shadow play is effected to create full or half silhouettes. No one colour but many colours define the star. The colours around them and the ones they adorn are multiple. Despite noisy backdrops, the star is prominent, his stillness is intact. Given that context, Paul Coates' deliberation on "colour and/as monochrome" has an interesting appeal with the multiplicity mode in star visuals (2010). Drawing upon Seigfried Kracauer and Gerald Mast, Coates engages with the role of colour and monochrome in mythologization (52 - 53). Though a cursory analysis, after weighing colour or monochrome in presenting refined stardom, Coates suggests that colour may seem to "replace stars with figures who alternate between celebrities and actors. The stars tumble to earth, limp away from the site of their fall" (53). Coates insinuates the death of the star, the myth; the star is diminished when earthly (non-fictional) activities collide with the screen illusion. I agree that colour (be it monochrome or polychrome) can lend itself to form cluttered constellations of star's on-screen and off-screen, acted out and lived schemes. But, stars in Tamil cinema meticulously build their public images in direct relevance to their screen images. While there are smaller stars who tarnish by falling victim to drugs, sexual promiscuity or significantly reconstruct their images by turning into a film director, and unlike Hollywood or Bollywood celebrities, Rajnikanth and Vijay dexterously craft their popular image, unpolluted by banal celebrity culture. Aesthetically, every frame aims to make the star standout, although colours do co-exist with unilateral focus on the star.

Metaphorically a colourful film, *Sivaji* is a special film in Rajni's career, also a characteristic film in the star genre bracket. The film is a revivalist Rajni film that revamps and revitalizes Rajni's star image. Throughout the film, the director Shankar enhances Rajni's already colossal persona. *Sivaji* successfully removed all speculations around chances for Rajni's star power to deteriorate because of his old age. In that regard, the film is replete with the Rajni

brand. In terms of colour and mise-en-scène, the introduction song constructs meta-texts on Rajni's stardom through visual inputs. Throughout the song, Rajni is always surrounded by visual noise, what could be considered as a 'Tamil nationalist landscape'. Although Shankar is known for extravagant 'song picturization,' in the context of Rajni film, the song's mise-en-scène is devoted to Rajni's image. The Tamil landscape is characteristically marked by the set -- the location of the song is one of the fertile regions in Tamil Nadu, its green fields, mountains. Along with traditional costumes, the props occupying the screen space are primarily representative of Tamil folk culture – statues of indigenous Tamil gods, terracotta horses, and folk dancers in traditional dance costumes.
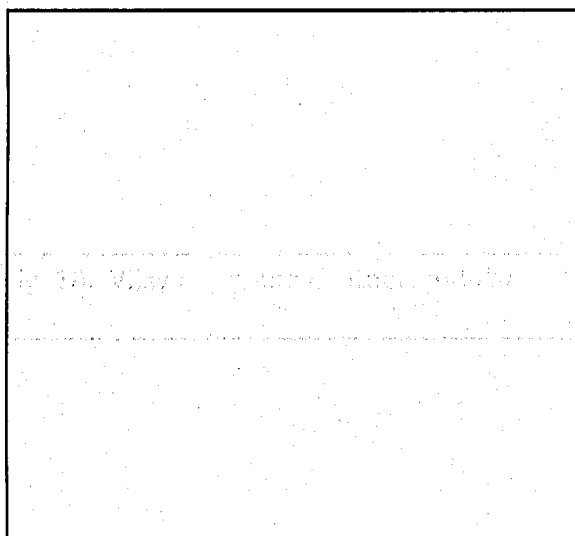
Fig. 16. Still from Rajni's introduction song in *Sivaji*
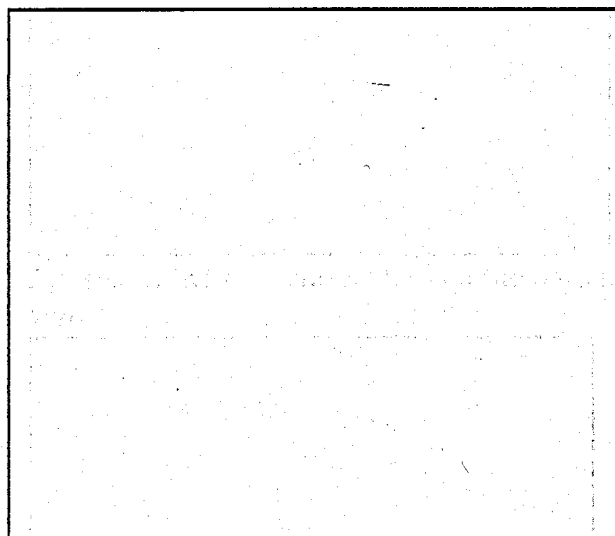
Fig. 17. The all Rajni mise-en-scène

An unusual prop(s) that only Rajni's stardom can warrant are the group of burly men with large round-sized paunches. Three images are painted on their pronounced belly tops – the decorated earthen pot used during Tamil harvest festival, the tiger face, and finally with tiger print on their hands, a lion mask over their faces, the painted tiger face is replaced by Rajni's face. These men jiggle their painted bodies, calling attention to signifiers attached to these images. In the final scene of the song, Rajni is surrounded by a backdrop of his own face on multiple bodies. The

star's grand image cannot be emphasized more. To the string of Tamil images, Rajni's face is added, signaling his membership in Tamil cultural memory – a Tamil icon.

The group dance routines in introduction songs are fairly common in Indian cinemas. The style and the overall choreography, however, are unique to hero-oriented films alone. An army of men dance with the star; the dance moves along with camera work are careful to not let the star get lost in the crowd (see figures below).[15]
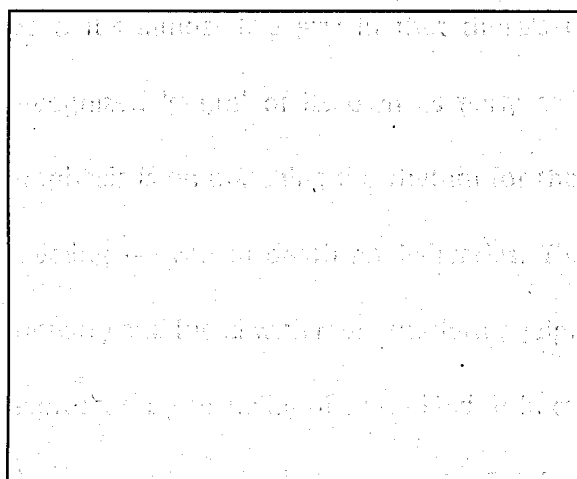
Fig. 18. Vijay rising above others in *Villu*

Fig. 19. Always the centre: Star and the hero in *Sura*

Fig.20. Rajni and his league of followers in *Chandramukhi*

Fig.21. Rajni, victorious with mass power in *Arunachalam.*

---

[15] Two songs, one from *Pokkiri* and another from *Sivaji* have instead an 'army of women' dancing around the stars. I want to discuss these in relation to masculinity, female desire and fight sequences later.

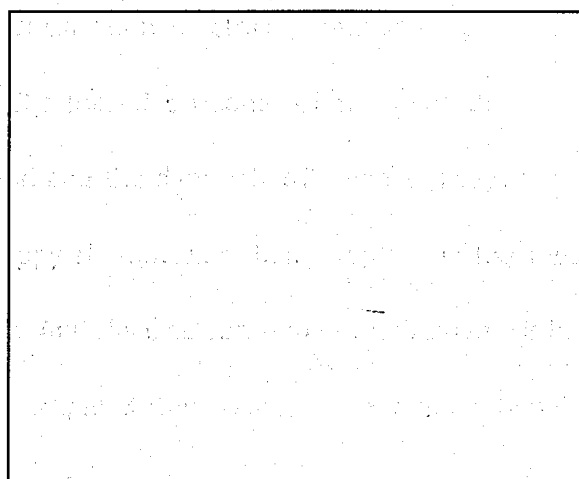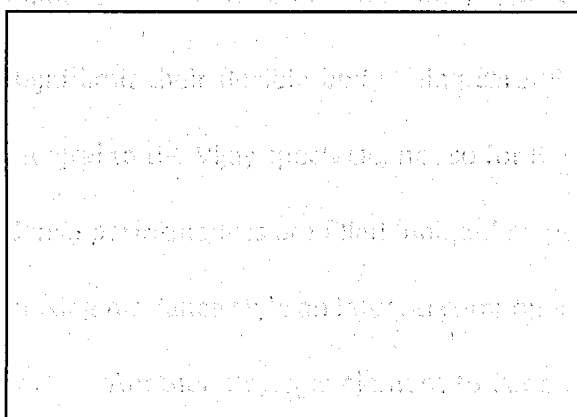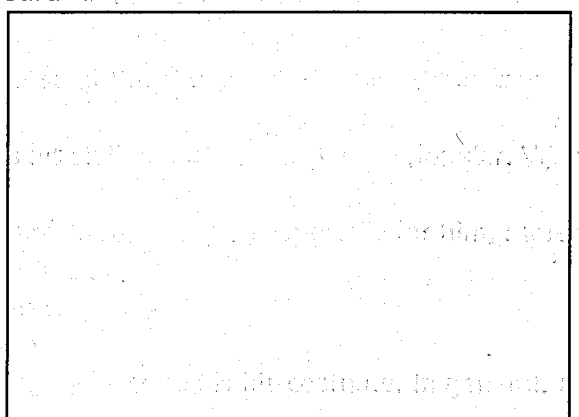The star is either in an elevated position, or the camera angles are low, either way, the identities of the hero and the star fold unto each other.[16] In the area of choreography, Rajni and Vijay's dance skills are largely different. Vijay, the younger and better dancer, is given sophisticated dance routines, that also resonate with the Tamil *kuthu* flavour. *Kuthu* is a shortening of the word *dappan'kuthu* -- dappa + kuthu. The kind of dance the poor (or the 'masses') engaged in impromptu dance mostly beating some 'dappa' or box, a cheap drum at best. It's almost like jazz in that there's no orchestration or strict grammar. It was a well recognized 'genre' of its own as early as the 50s (based on some of the films then). The emphasis is on matching the rhythm for the mood and the dance that is almost always one of reveling -- even in death anniversaries. That peppy rhythm was then adopted by the music industry and fused with more modern equipments. And since celebration in Tamil cinema is best expressed by sexuality of some kind, it became a staple. Kuthu steps are predominantly pelvic thrusts and jerky body movements. Rajni, for the last ten years has been performing robotic movements, restricted to the upper part of his body alone. Easily noticeable, dancers around Rajni limit their flexible body being careful not to steal the thunder from him. While dance is integral to the Vijay spectacle, not so for Rajni, it's his style mannerisms that are popular. Vijay's dance performances are filled 'unique' steps that are choreographed especially for him, thereby making his dance style an integral component of his star image.

Another strategic element to keep the star conspicuous is his costume. In general, the dress designs are flamboyant, but in narratives where they play the role of ordinary laborers like rickshaw driver, milkman, or fisherman, for instance, there is a conflict in dressing the star as a everyman and yet make him look special. Costume designers for star films, fully aware of the

---

[16] The dancers also represent the *star's mass*. An awkward word combination, but it widely used in the industry. In the third chapter, I will speak about the *star's mass* in the context what the phrase referred to the directors and fans.

demands set by the star's persona, strike a balance between authenticity and extravagance to create cinema's duplicitous subaltern hero. Minor details like double-shirts, difference in how the star's scarf is worn or white shoes for the star while the dancers are barefoot etcetera, help create the desired hero image (see figures below).
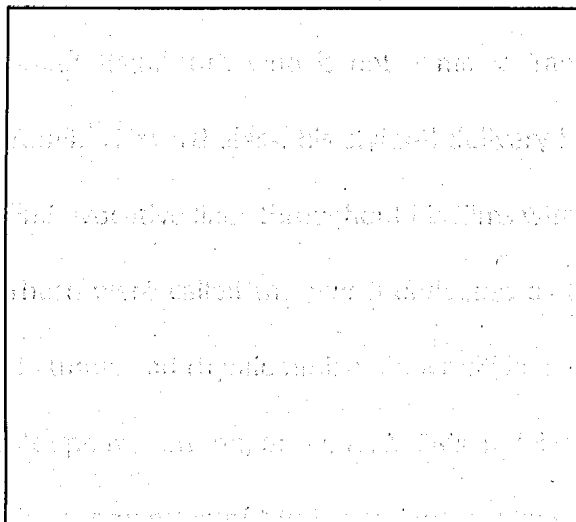
Fig. 22. Rajni in *Baasha* as an autorickshaw driver with fellow workers.
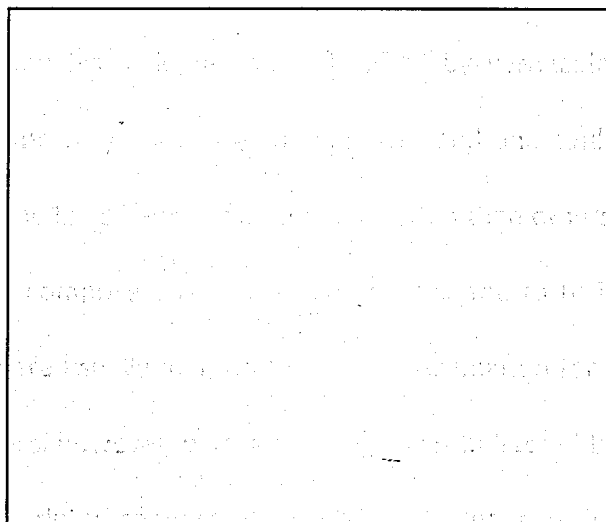
Fig.23. Rajni in *Annamalai* as a milkman.
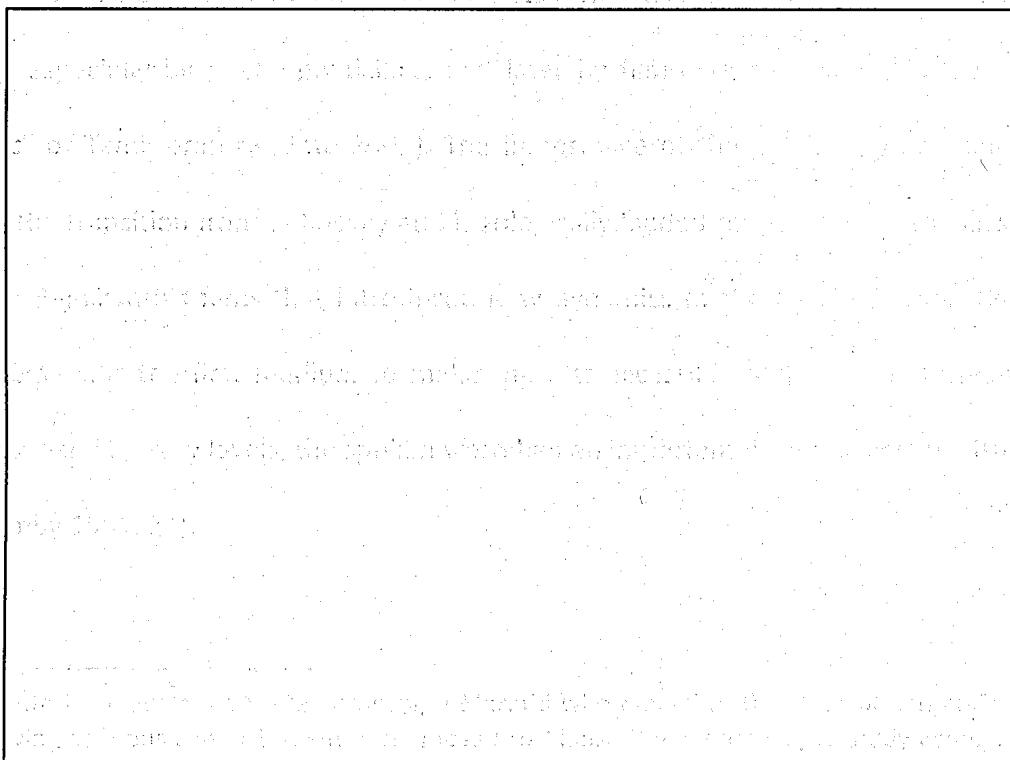
Fig. 24. Vijay standing out as the leader in sea blue shirt in *Sura*

Star Oratory: The Punch Effect

Next to introduction songs, punch dialogues are crucial in the production of star texts. MGR's success was rooted in his eloquence, and his ability to deliver lengthy, complex and poetic dialogues in Tamil commonly seen in films of the fifties and sixties. The same cannot be said about Rajnikanth who is not a native Tamil and his dialogues were inspired by vernacular Tamil.[17] Nevertheless, his stylized delivery became very popular among his fans and one could find evocative lines throughout his films with some lines being repeated more often than others. These were called the *punch dialogues* as they comprise crisp lines that go back and forth in rhythmic and rhymic timing. Punch dialogues were usually meant to serve as exclamation for a plot point, sermon, or scene. MGR's initial success, however, was not all his. It was bolstered by the penmanship of Muthuvel Karunanidhi who scripted some of the most flowery speeches for MGR's characters.[18] Karunanidhi's script writing is rooted in Tamil Nadu's historical appeal for *'adukku moli'* (speaking in rhymes and snippets). This textual tradition enhanced further in delivery, especially by poets, politicians, and later by film actors emerging as the "Dravidian aesthetic" of Tamil oratory (Bate 2009). The importance of the 'word' in Tamil cinema went through the transition from politically and ideologically loaded scripts of MGR to mass-oriented scripts in Rajnikanth's films that introduced new dynamics to the lead character. Considering how cinema was the first medium to make the arts accessible to the masses irrespective of class, caste and literacy levels, the spoken word had an important partnership with visual images (Sivathamby 1981: 21).

---

[17] Rajnikanth is originally from Maharashtra, a Marathi who moved to the state of Karnataka where he made a living as a bus conductor. Later, he moved to Madras (now Chennai) to study acting at the Film Institute. MGR, too, is not a native Tamil. He's a Malayalee (from the southern state of Kerala) born in Sri Lanka. Both stars sought acting as a profession in the Tamil language.

[18] Karunanidhi, the leader of the DMK party, is also the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

Rajnikanth's punches: Vijay's reference

Shivaji Rao Gaekwad under the screen name of Rajnikanth made his debut in a supporting role in *Apoorva Raagangal* (*Magical Musical Notes*) (1975). In a short span of three years and thirteen Tamil films, Rajnikanth rose to the status of a star and was ordained a *Superstar* in the 1978 film *Bairavi.*[19] He played a series of uncharacteristic villain roles before being cast as a hero. But even in those seemingly minor roles, he managed to share equal screen time with the heroes. His stylized delivery of dialogues and mannerisms caught the attention of the audiences and the industry. He developed his distinctive screen persona though such signature actions as: how he shot his head up, moving his hair covering his forehead with his fingers to give a deep gaze (before a dialogue), flipping his cigarettes from hand to the mouth, laughing with a dash of arrogance and walking briskly. Combining his trademark panache with the old tradition of political oratory, script writers and directors engineered his screen image through dialogues that had a powerful choice of words and rhyme. Not until *Annamalai* (1992) and in films thereafter, were punch dialogues clearly marked by repetition within the film. These recurrent lines served to reinforce the star effect — special lines marking him as extra-ordinary and worldly. Punch dialogues are usually meant to serve as exclamation for a plot point, sermon, or scene that simply establishes that very characteristic. The lines themselves are brief, sharp and rhythmic. They add the final 'punch' to the dialogues with variations in intonation and pace of delivery.

Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar is a relatively younger star, only 50 films old. He began to work on his own formulaic punch dialogues only in the last ten films or so. He does not have too many to his credit, with many being oversimplified versions of Rajni's dialogues. Despite being star-specific, punch dialogues house common themes that have been consistently repeated in a

---

[19] Rajnikanth had also acted in films of other regional languages — especially in Telugu, Kannada and later in Hindi. His career curve turned out be successful in Tamil cinema where he became its 'greatest' star.

number of films. Self-aggrandizement has been the recurring motif in these dialogues. 'I' becomes important to convey the message of the film and the persona of the star. Let us look some of Rajni's punch dialogues:

> I will do what I say; I will also do what I don't say (*Annamalai*. 1992).
>
> If I say it once, it's akin to have said it a hundred times (*Baasha*, 1995).
>
> I make my own way. Do not interject. You will die (*Padaiyappa*, 1999)

As it is evident, the lines are mere boosters to the star's persona. These dialogues are not necessarily profound philosophical revelations, nevertheless, they reflect masculine culture's prerequisite for oral assertion of what, in the end, is empty heroism. Vijay's dialogues, in my opinion, are prosaic, and one can say that they are in forced compliance to the genre grammar:

> If I've decided once, I will not heed to my own words (*Pokkiri*).
>
> Before you lay a finger on me, think about it once or twice and then hit me. After you've touched me, you'll never be able to think (*Sura*)

The importance of the self to the star genre as a point of audience identification with constant allusions to one's capability and power can be deduced from these lines. Andrew Kennedy (1975) in his work on dramatic language explains the use of theatrical rhetoric in the public realm as characteristic of politics and propaganda. He argues that "public languages are pre-fabricated, and that such languages in turn fabricate roles" (31). Tamil performativity achieved its glamourized tradition in theatre. Dialogue writing in Tamil cinema irrevocably followed in the footsteps of ancient theatrics since the period of Silapathikaram. DMK's use of cinema for political propaganda further induced the theatrical form to bolster external, socio-political realities from outside the screen. So "prefabrication" through these piquant dialogues impact "roles" – the external images of stars. Kennedy rightly incorporates Carl Jung's concept of persona - the mask one wears (false self): "one could say, with little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is" (32).

Punch dialogues work under the same principle – they help fabricate a larger outer self for the actor. If Rajnikanth's popular persona is manufactured by the film, these dialogues act as pieces of the machine that are portable, transferrable and hence, circulated almost as a synecdoche. Punch dialogues also indulge in classic double entendres – as political punches. All the dialogues indirectly refer to Rajnikanth's political motives and stance especially with regard to his wish to not support already existing political parties. Since the early nineties, from politicians to media persons, from friends to fans, everyone has been instigating Rajnikanth to take up politics. His reluctance is well-grounded in the actual risks of becoming a political figure in the complex structure of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian politics. However, Rajnikanth has not refrained from hinting at a foray into politics, and that is because his films (up until *Endhiran* (Robot, 2010)) have capitalized on populist codes integrated into star cinema. As always, even recently in a televised interview on NDTV news channel, he chose to answer speculations 'diplomatically' by stating that "If it's God's wish that I enter politics, then that is my destiny. Right now, he has asked me to play the role of an actor" ("No one can compel me"). His punch dialogue "Nobody knows about how and when I will arrive, but I will arrive when the time is right" from (*Muthu*) directly addresses these issues in his public life.

Problematic representations and interpretations of gender roles figure throughout the star narrative. Punch dialogues, too, uphold popular misogyny. The stars are usually portrayed as "good woman" evangelists – propagating dos and don'ts of how women should conduct themselves in Tamil society. The hero is often seen offering counsel to women who 'misbehave' as seen in these examples:

> I honour, respect and worship women, but vile women like you can do nothing to a strand of my hair, let alone me (*Mannan*).

> A man who's too greedy and a woman who's too angry have never lived a good life (*Padayappa*).

> A woman has to show patience not unleash anger; humility not greed; should
> act peaceful not authoritative; should have control, not be cathartic; must show
> devotion not be boisterous. In total, a woman needs to behave like a woman
> (ibid.)

> God created man for woman, and woman for man, to each for their needs.
> We have to discipline ourselves - one woman for one man.
> Reveal your body to that one man, not to the entire town. Otherwise, all the
> men in town will want to sleep with you (*Sivakasi*).

It is not surprising that theses punch lines receive much applause, as they appeal to the dominant sexist discourse. Male stars not only police a woman's conduct but also exercise their masculine authority to support dependable roles of the mother, the pregnant woman or the chastity of women in general, most importantly in the role of the protective brother. The stars advocate a pseudo critique of patriarchy also tempered with masculinist ideals. The above set of dialogues place Rajnikanth and Vijay as alpha males and the females in their films are objectified either as love interests or ruthless women who later reform or are taught a lesson by the male stars. Rajnikanth's punch dialogues allow subversive alliteration of masculinity. The presence of femme fatales, women deviating norms (psychic powers,) or dainty darlings in his films acts as catalysts for obscene performances of masculinity.[20] Many critics believe some of these dialogues were targeted against current Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Jayalalitha Jayaram – MGR's female co-star who later became his political heir. Nevertheless, in order to avoid emasculation, the hero is often bestowed intrusive authority over women.

Punch Dialogue Mechanics

Rajnikanth over the years has consistently worked on a unique style of dialogue delivery. The lines themselves are brief, sharp and rhythmic. He adds the final 'punch' to the dialogues with variations in intonation, pauses and speed. In doing so, Rajnikanth abides by the 'art of

---

[20] *Mannan* (1992), *Padaiyappa* (1999), *Chandramukhi* (2008), *Muthu* (1995) are some of the few films among many.

rhetoric'. Michael Hawcroft in *Word as Action: Racine, Rhetoric and Theatrical Language* lists the different, traditional parts of the rhetoric as: "(a) *inventio*, (b) *dispositio*, (c) *elocutio*, (d) *memoria*, and (e) *actio* or *pronuntiato*" (1992: 4). The first three parts – invention, disposition and elocution are concerned with the composition of speech or structure of the written text, clearly, script writers pen it down with persuasive power of words in mind. Hawcroft recognizes memory and action as skills that are particularly required for "perfomance of speech". The "persuasive speaker" then does the following: [R]emember the words, adopt a suitable tone of voice, supply appropriate bodily and facial gestures (ibid.) That is why Rajnikanth is rarely discussed in terms of his acting skills after the nineties (Rangan 2007). Rather, film critics have always recognised his style of suave persuasiveness. His convincing execution of the rhetoric makes him a master of that art, commonly rationalised as his 'mass appeal'. This can also be considered one of the significant "performance signs" in the star's constituted "performance style" (Dyer 1998: 134, 142). His rendition of these dialogues is complemented with calculated cinematography and special sound effects. Low-angled, canted shots of his full profile and several close-ups of his face, eyes and mouth increase his stature.
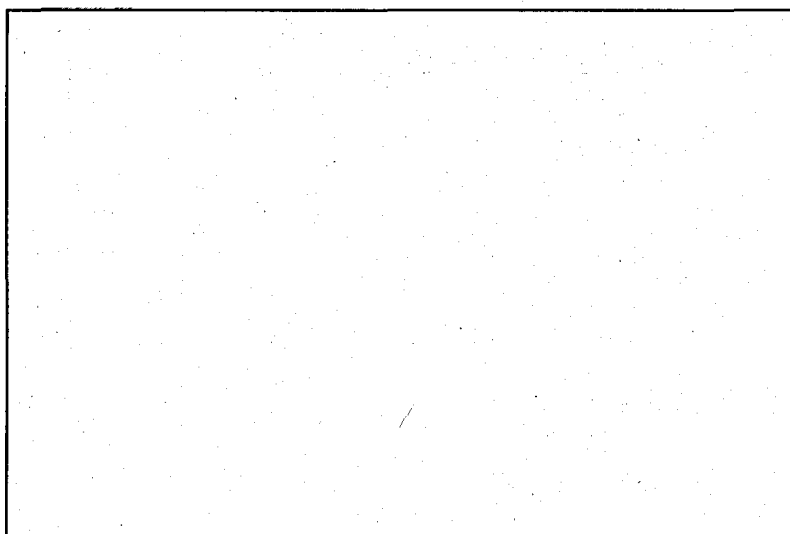
Fig.25. Rajnikanth's style antics for punch dialogues in *Padaiyappa* (1999)
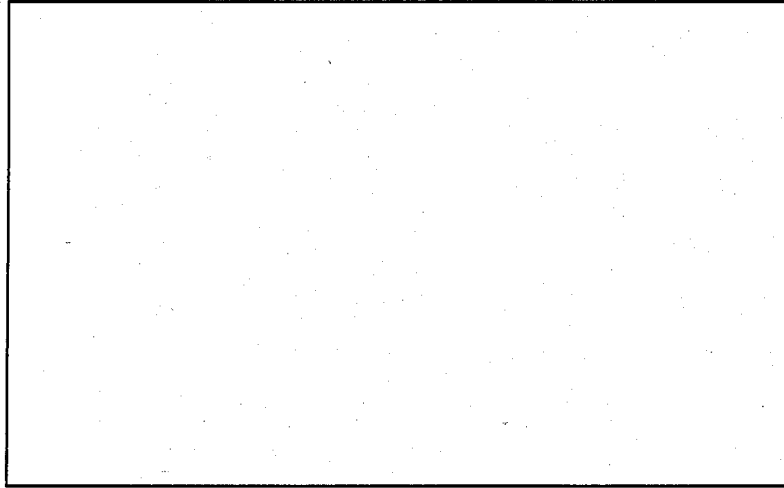
Fig. 26. Punch dialogue Still from *Arunachalam* (1997)

Apart from the dramatic background score that boost his 'powerful presence', every bodily

motion is accompanied by a 'whooshing' sound effect common in action films, but here, they

are accompaniments for stylistic movements as well, along with fist punches and kicks that mark

the star as invincible. No one else in the diegetic frame is given these audio punctuations to

locate the star as a superhuman above the ordinary. These sound histrionics make his body

language appear gallant and give him the superhero persona, although unlike Hollywood

superheroes, Rajnikanth and Vijay can be referred to as quasi-digital superheroes.[21]

---

[21] The absence of comic superheroes can be ascribed to the overwhelming superhero narratives of film stars. Tamil stars may even have currency as Tamilian fictional superheroes .
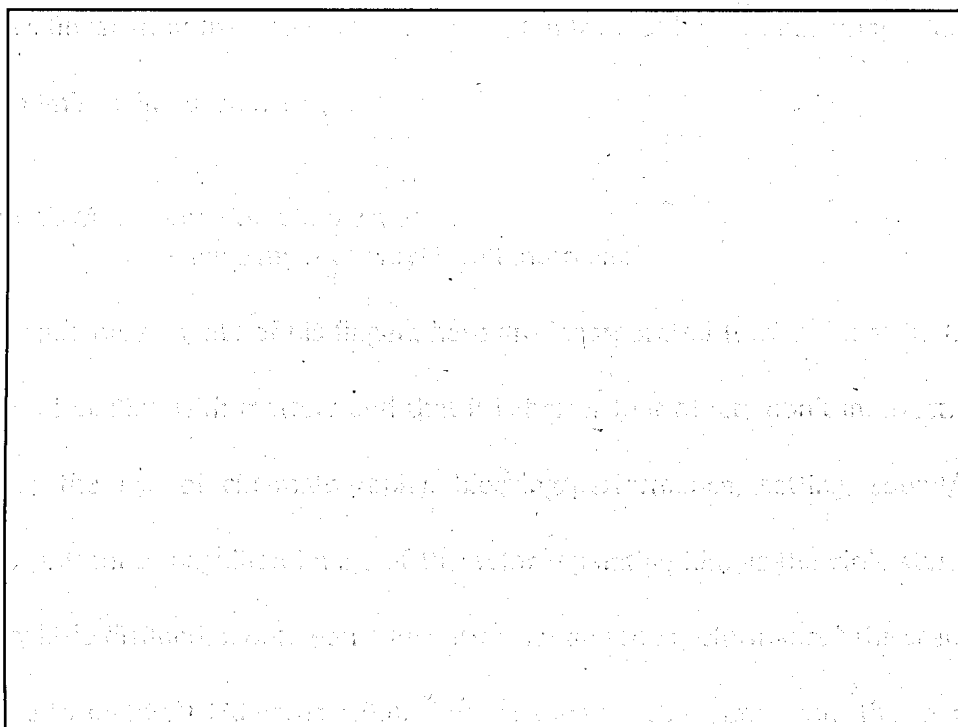
Fig. 27. 'Vixen' and the 'Lion' -- Ramya Krishnan and Rajnikanth in *Padaiyappa*

To elucidate this melding of performance, cinematography and sound effects, I shall analyse a scene from *Padayappa* (see fig. 27). The film has a female antagonist, Neelambari (Ramya Krishnan) a rich, arrogant girl who desires Padaiyappa (Rajnikanth). In this scene she challenges to marry him even if he's not interested in her. Rajnikanth retorts:

> PADAIYAPPA: Child... You mentioned that you admire five things about me. But, you haven't seen my sixth face yet.

At this moment, he flings his wrist and points his index finger and runs it down pointing from his face through the torso. The swift hand movements are made with soaring, threatening sound effects as he cautions: "Don't confront this sixth face. You cannot bear the consequences. It will agonize you!" With this intimidating line, he turns his back on Neelambari. She raises her voice to stop him. He cuts her short again by a prompt movement of the right hand towards the right hand-side of his body, with the index finger facing down. The wide, low and titled camera angle now frames Rajnikanth standing tall and mighty against a backdrop of the vast, blue sky. He

oscillates his finger from front to back and brings it in front of his face gesturing a 'no', when he

recites the film's main punch dialogue:

> PADAIYAPPA: You don't know me!
> I make my own way! Don't intervene!

The sharp, agile movements of his fingers here are incorporated to signal that he has his own

unique way of dealing with matters and that it is better that others don't interject. This scene

encapsulates the use of cinematography, blocking/performance, setting, sound/music and

dialogue to present a magnified image of the actor – painting him as the virile star. Therefore,

making very little distinction between "the performer and the performance" the scene becomes

entirely "performative" (Edwards 100). The character, the story and the narrative are

synthesized into constructing the star image becoming a perfomative excess of male stardom.

Reception and Reproduction of Punch Dialogues

The reception of punch dialogues has been the vital driving force for their currency in

popular culture. Circulation of the star image is facilitated through reworking of texts by viewers

into the economy of fan culture. Fans have their own systems of productions and distribution in

the overlapping zone between pop culture and sub-cultures that form outside but from within

its site. In this regard, the consumption and production of punch lines follow John Fiske's mode

of *enunciative productivity* – which "occurs only within immediate social relationships and exists

only for its moment of speaking" (1992: 30, 39). The oral deliverance of punch dialogues and its

aural reception are transmitted orally affirming the power of the *punch* – speaking for itself, the

punch line is an effective pronouncement of the star hegemony. Moreover, Fiske says that the

"popular cultural capital" generated by enunciation is "limited to restricted circulation, a very

localized economy" (ibid). It is at this juncture that fan culture in India deviates to exhibit 'profit'

on a different plane. Fans of Rajnikanth are not restricted to small communities. They are

innumerous as organised fan clubs, internet forums and as families of fans. While one fan might contribute to the fan websites on Rajnikanth, another will organise charity events in the star's name. On the other hand, I have seen a family of Rajnikanth fans fighting to watch the first-day-first-show of his film and another fan would repeat a punch dialogue aptly during a game of cricket with friends. Thus, the fan community is not concentrated in pockets and the star effect is extensive even reaching Japan in the case of Rajnikanth.[22] S.V. Srinivas (2009) maps similar kind of fandom of Rajnikanth's peer Megastar Chiranjeevi from the Telugu film industry. He points out that fans of film stars in South Indian cinema invariably defy existing reception patterns (theorised/adapted from Western audience samples - audiences) (1 – 6). Tamil Nadu has nurtured a "folk culture of cinema" where fans circumvent the invisible wall between reality and cinema, and allow cinematic presence to dominate their daily lives – leisure, family, friends, work, social activities and political ideologies (Hardgrave 2008). One of the aspects evidenced by star cinema spectatorship is that cinema has transfused with social, with culture and community. In that sense, the Tamil audiences' daily life interaction with and reproduction of punch lines has been instrumental for determining the power of punch lines in serving stardom.

In many ways, the sequences that involve punch dialogues unfold like an infomercial structured by a tripartite introduction: a contrast with the hero's enemy; why the audience needs to identify with the hero; and finally a tag line that keeps the audience reminded of who the winning star product (or star commodity) is; not just for the rest of the film but for other films too. Therefore punch lines are part of the set of conventions that compose the star genre; they "seem to exist precisely to organize, determine, or otherwise channel the audience's potentially varied responses into a homogenous, single point of view" (Turner 164). In

---

[22] After the release of the film *Muthu* (1995) in Tokyo, considerable reports have been documented on rising fan following for the star in Japan (The Hindu 2002). However, I share the same apprehension as Ashish Rajadaksya who suggests that media and Rajni's PR team exaggerate international fandom with obvious vested interests in commercial expansion(2009).

accordance with audience expectations, the "repetitive and variant" characteristic of these dialogues within a film and across multiple films supports the fundamental logic of genre (Neale 56). Punch dialogues deliver and sustain the 'punch' of the star genre almost like a promotional trailer. The relationship between dialogues and the star image has helped mediate the genre process at large. To put it in a nutshell (with a 'punch'), punch dialogues not only create the star, but also maintain a constant supply of star dust.

Of Praying and Preaching: Hinduism and Populism

Common to all star films, the hero engages in orations that personify him as a leader with inspiring qualities and great wisdom. He counsels others on how to lead 'good' lives. These sermonic spiels on moral goodness are supplemented with the star's populist ideas. The term populism is the philosophy that arises out the association between the word 'people' and adjectives like 'common' and 'ordinary'. It is also related to idea of people as a "mass of common people" belonging to the lower strata of the society, with little access to resources that are largely and easily available to the elite (Harris 2). This imbalanced verticality of power provides the basis for populism or rather different formations of populism. While *empowerment populism* aims to awaken ordinary people to see "the alien and privileged elite" as the source of all their problems and prepare them to 'fight' against the perpetrators, *protection populism* relocates blame on certain isolated selfish interests/ individuals alone and that the elite or the righteous guardians of law will protect them (Swamy 1996). Narendra Subramanian identifies *paternalist populism* as that which advocates a father figure working for the welfare of his people, like of that of MGR, and *assertive populism* as that which emerged out of competition between different political parties in the state, vying for authority over Dravidian consciousness (11 – 12). All of Rajni and Vijay's films under the star film banner overtly employ *protection populism*. The stars are the entrusted saviors of victims suffering from social conditions like

poverty, corruption or crime. They act as self-appointed leaders and spokespersons for the Tamil people. Song lyrics and dialogues emphatically address these themes. With examples from Rajni and Vijay's star songs, I shall examine how moral, political and religious endorsements for mass appeal are deftly integrated into the star discourse. In the song *Oruvan Oruvan* (The One, The One) from *Muthu,* Rajni first asserts the concept of god, and then continues to preach general truisms about life. The same rings true with Vijay's songs, for example, he first invokes God in a song from *Kaavalan*.

> God is the boss; and all others in the world are mere workers.
> One who wonders about his fate is a fool; the one who conquers it is wise.
> (*Muthu*)

> The guardian of the heaven and earth,
> the one who saves you and me is no one else but god
> (*Kaavalan*)

In *Villu*'s introduction song, Vijay sings in detail about the boons he would ask from Hindu gods and mythical figures. Recalling the Hindu parables, the trope of gods granting saints and ardent devotees special powers, Vijay mimics similar saintly devotion and closeness with god.

> I asked Rama for a bow
> I asked Bheema for a mace
> I asked Muruga for a peacock
> I asked for your love and affection (*Villu*)

Later in the same song, Vijay adds, "If god asks me what I would want? I would ask for peaceful land for refugees." The obvious referents here are the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. The star also becomes the intermediary between the people and god. It is almost as though stars were substitutes for gods – earthly gods who make up for the invisibility or even illogical absence of any actual godly entity. By acknowledging 'divine supremacy', Rajni and Vijay pledge allegiance to the hegemonic discourse on theism, yielding to popular consensus. With god beside, the star is now qualified to act as the guiding light for the masses.

When MGR began his acting career, he canvassed atheist and anti-Brahmin ideals of the DMK party. After he branched off as ADMK (Anna Dravidian Progressive Federation), like Anna he strategically acknowledged the presence of an external power as god, quoting Anna – "One race, one god".[23] Rajnikanth, who is known as a pious individual off-screen, manages to bring "god with him" into his film narratives. Typically, god as someone that is at his side; even when all is lost, Rajni's character is undeterred with the power of god. In his trademark style, he points his finger or looks upward, meaning 'god will guide me' but also equating himself to god by insinuating a special relationship between them. Vijay, too, often embraces the omnipotence of god, derived from the Rajni formula. It is important to re-emphasize here that the concept of god alludes to Hindu gods. There is extensive presence of Hindu iconography in star films. They play Hindu characters, wear holy vermillion marks on their foreheads, and the films construct a mise-en-scène that clearly integrates temple bells, lighting of lamps and idols of Hindu gods as props. There is seldom a film without a temple scene. Of course, religious tokenism is pervasive; for example: a mention of Jesus Christ when describing Rajni's patience in song from *Baasha* or placement of at least one dancer behind Vijay who recognizable as a Muslim (for wearing the skull cap) This sort of practice only reflects the accepted methods of problem solving in the Indian scenario of religious diversity;

---

[23] ADMK was named after the founder DMK Annadurai, who was the former chief minister of Tamil Nadu and well-known as writer and speaker.
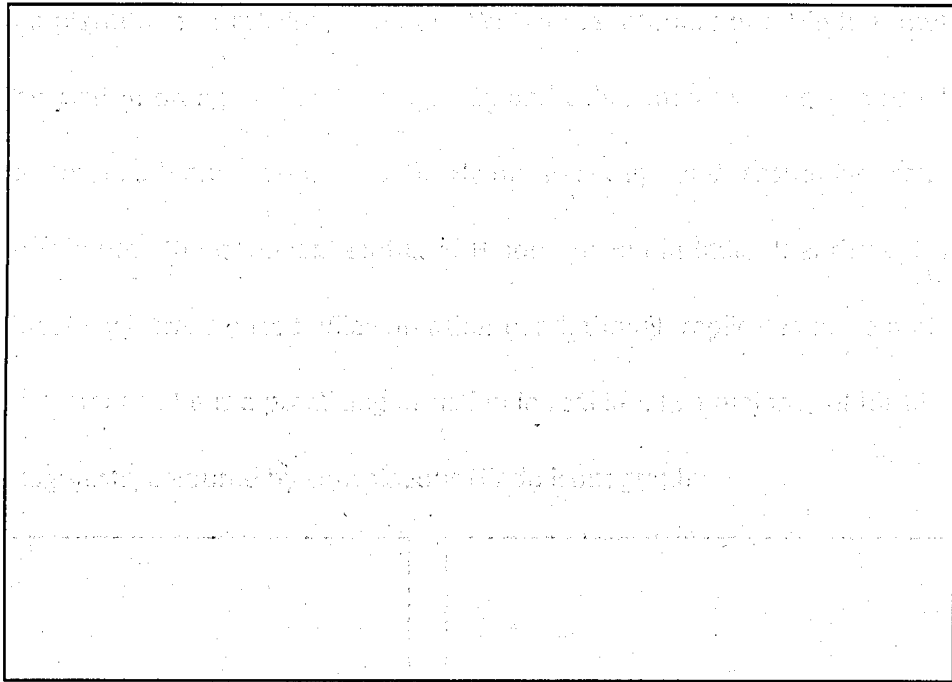
Fig. 28. Rajni 'framed' as god under a temple dome in *Chandramukhi*
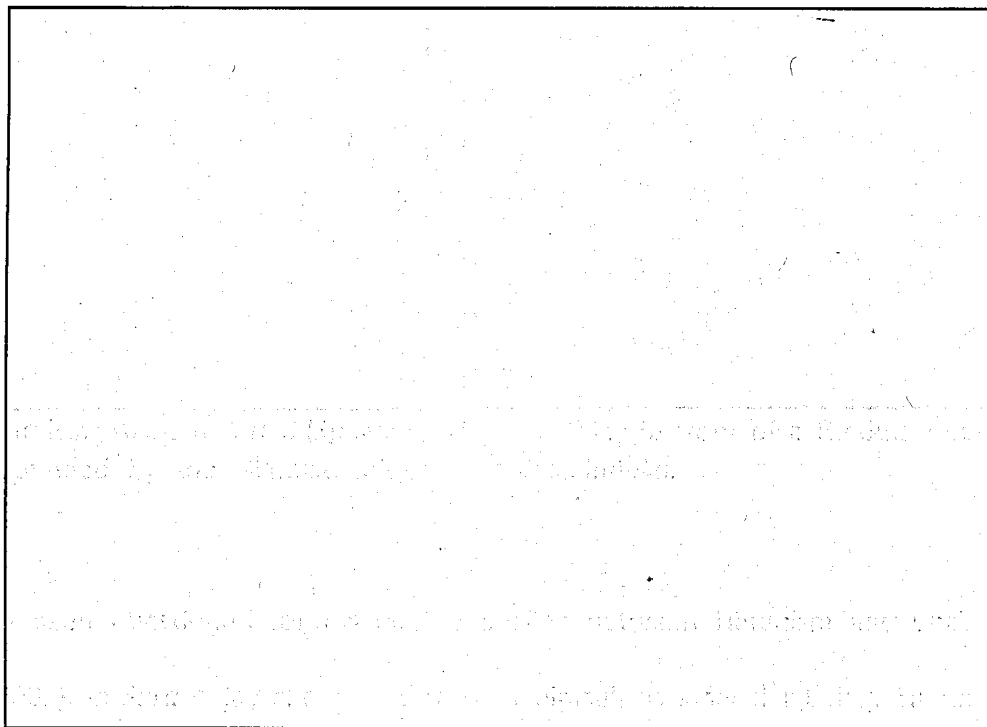
Fig. 29 Rajni with 'Hindu' dancers in *Chandramukhi*

Almost all introduction songs and opening scenes adhere to Hindu traditions by auspiciously commencing of the event of cinema or narrative in the supposed 'presence' of god, which in terms of colour, is an orange-filled mise-en-scène. The visual imagery in songs like 'Devuda Devuda' (God God) from *Chandramukhi* and 'Hey Rama Rama' from *Villu* have cluttered

backdrops with a plentitude of religious symbols. Within the interiors of a Hindu temple, Rajni

dances with men clad in orange robes (see fig. 28), and other men wearing sacred white-red

marks on their forehead and (see fig. 29). Hindu make-up and costuming causes star

introductions to reinforce the dominant status of Hindu religion in India. It is through the star

that dominant ideology is transmitted. Vijay on other hand, though replicates these motifs, he is

caught in a predicament as he is a practicing Christian in real life. In a majority of his films, Vijay

plays Hindu protagonists, coloured by conspicuous Hindu iconography.
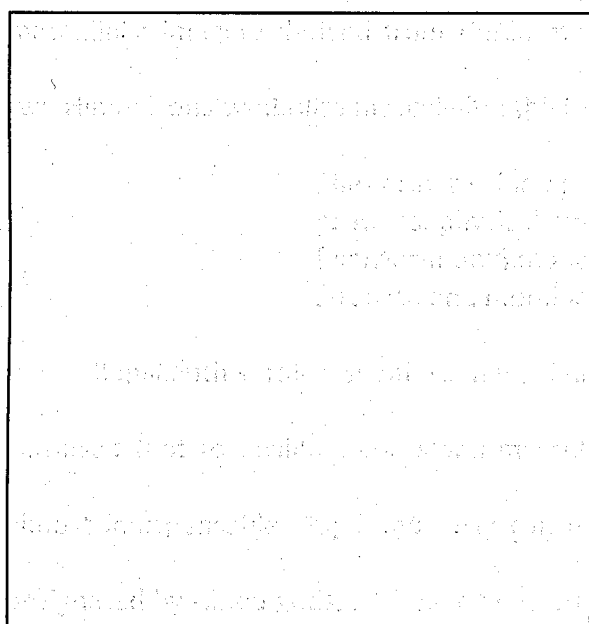
Fig. 30. Vijay praising Allah in *Kuruvi* (*Sparrow*)
(2008) foregrounded by the islamist colour
and symbol
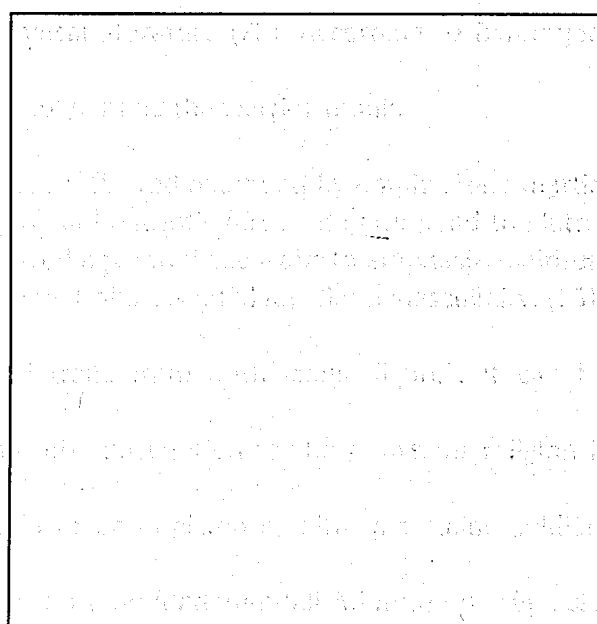
Fig. 31. Vijay in front of a Hinduism-coloured
backdrop in *Villu.*

He has often been questioned for his double dealing between Hinduism and Christianity

(Narayanan 2009). In *Sura*, Vijay chooses to present himself as a secular being. The scene is

inside a church and Vijay prostrates before the cross, laying flat on the floor and kneeling

performing the postures for both Hindu and Christian worship. A priest walks in and is amused

by Vijay's action. Vijay explains that all religions and all gods are the same for him. Vijay in an

effort to attract support from the Muslim community inserted lyrical references to Allah in a

song from *Kuruvi*. He stands front of the Islamic symbol and colour when he sings the words "Allah Allah" (see figure 9.3). However, the excessive presence of Hinduism in star films may supersede the issue of Hinduism being the dominant religion in India. Heroic tales of Hindu gods do present a subliminal cultural context for characterizations of heroism in Indian cinema. Sikata Bannerjee (2005), however, invents the term "masculine Hinduism" and traces its emergence as nationalist response to the masculinity crisis triggered by British colonialism in India. She argues that resistance to the castrating project of colonialism was shaped through a revival of masculinist imagery derived from Hindu mythological literature (72). According to Bannerjee, two Hindu icons symbolize masculinity: the Hindu soldier and the warrior-monk.

> The former [Hindu soldier] configured manhood by emphasizing martial prowess, physical strength, and patriotic fervor in battle; and the latter [warrior-monk] model moved beyond these traits to emphasize spiritual strength and moral fortitude, traits essential for Hindu masculinity. (73)

Rajnikanth's roles seem to have imbibed traits from both iconic figures. It can be surmised that to facilitate the star's masculinity, his subscription to the dominant religion is almost indispensable. Rajni and Vijay can be said to be depicted as ultra masculine soldiers designated by Hindu gods, and the explicit *Hindutva* (Hindu fundamentalism) mise-en-scène can be seen as only a vehicle for the masculinity spectacle. At other times, stars also remain loyal to the popular 'comedic' trope in Indian films where the hero talks to an idol as though god were his best pal, mostly with Pillaiyar, the elephant god (see fig. 32).
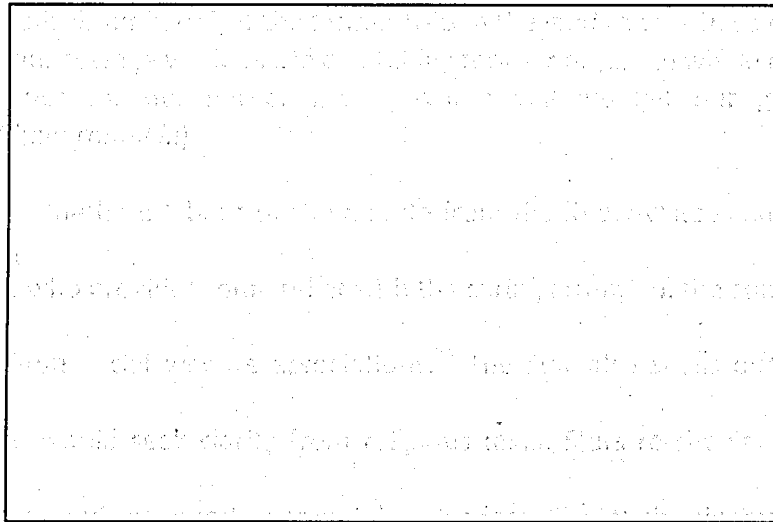
Fig. 32. Vijay as pals with Pillaiyar in *Kaavalan*

As an isolated case, in *Baba* (2002), Rajni significantly leans toward the warrior-monk type, because, the film tells the story of a non-believer with alleged 'bad habits' like drinking and eating meat, transforming into a theist saint with combat and mystical powers. Rajnikanth is believed to have invested himself personally in the making of the film with his own ideas about god and spiritual enlightenment. The film, therefore, takes an important place in the history of Tamil cinema, considering DMK films advocated strong anti-Hindi and atheist views during what was the most significant period for Tamil nationalism. Noteworthy of these sermons is the artful integration of religious do-goodness with strong populist themes. Stars' political speeches appeal to the working-class sentiments in the Tamil society. They instruct about morals, ethics and some simple axioms common to all religious and moralistic philosophies. The references they make to the ordinary man are most important, as the tone used endears the star with the masses. Some excerpts from Rajni's populist elocution:

> Why do you need weapons to win in this world?
> Why do you need a sickle to pluck a flower?
> To gain riches or treasures, why do you turn to a battlefield?
> Control your desire and everything will be yours.
> If you have some money in your hand, you will own it; if you are buried neck-deep in money, it will own you (*Muthu*).

> Think about it, only if the farmer toils in the land can we have rice to eat.
> If our sewage workers are on holiday for four days, the whole city will stink
> If not for our barber friend, where will we get our good looks from?
> (*Chandramukhi*)

Rajni acknowledges the hard labour of the people from the lower classes and castes. The star becomes someone who provides some relief with the caring attention, the continuance of which is effected by fan-run social welfare associations.[24] The star also spells out virtues for good living, just like one would seek clarity from religious texts. Stars re-circulate popular vices in order to be considered as good, dependable leaders like their cinematic and political predecessors and contemporaries. The following lines from Vijay's populist script exhibit such notions:

> If women read Bharathiyar[25], they will gain courage
> If you think of Karl Marx, his eyes will turn red
> If you respect Periyar[26], rationality will come to you
> Try worshipping your parents,
> Everyone will receive all they want!
> ..Like school-going children, let's be together without caste prejudices
> Like tigers let us live without fear (*Villu*) (*Bow*, 2009).

> Don't disobey your mother.
> Don't heed to advice from bad people.
> .. Live and let live.
> Try to reach the sky during this life.
> If anybody troubles, take out your knife.
> If they bow at you, give your shoulder as a friend (Vettaikaran) (*Hunter*, 2009).

Vijay's lyrics are evidently simplified from Rajni's. The difference, again, may lead to the kind of audience age groups sought, and also indicative of an evolving feature of diglossia in star

---

[24] Stars for the most part are reported give funds for fan activities. While Rajni does not encourage it, other younger stars are believed to actively monitor and build their fandom through direct distribution of funds (Vangal).

[25] Subramani Bharathiyar (1882 - 1921), revolutionary Tamil poet who took part in the Indian Independence movement, also strongly supported women's liberation.

[26] Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879 - 1973), founder of the Dravidar Kazhagam (Dravidian Federation) and pioneer of the Self-respect and Dravidian movement. M.S.S Pandian rightly describes him as "an irrepressible iconoclast" (1991:30). He is the true leader of the Dravidian movement who had no vested interests in state power. Karunanidhi, Anna and MGR are all known for corrupt governance (Pratt 16).

language. Just as star-specific texts emerge, the language used to appeal to the people also varies from Rajnikanth to Vijay. While Rajni's lines display certain poetic meaning, Vijay offers a more plebian language, like elementary lessons in value education. Though there are independent lyricists, like MGR, Rajni and Vijay monitored most of the writing (including direction). Vijay's fan/PR team again belongs to relatively a younger generation, and seems to attract the urban youth for the same reason. Interestingly, populist emphases extend to the visual register serving as lyrical enhancements. How are these themes incorporated in song performance?
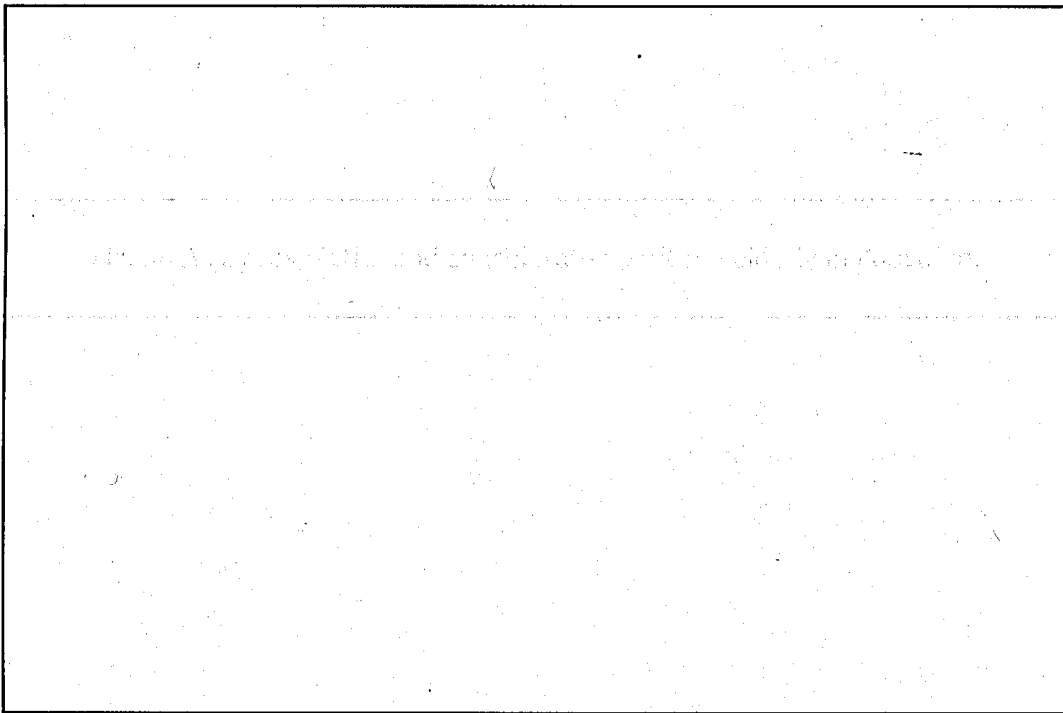
Fig 33. Vijay in *Vettaikaran*, singing about the plight of the poor

In the above image, Vijay and his men, dance beside a populist prop, a destitute woman with a child. He sings: "A child sleeps on her lap, a cat naps on the stove; no one has done much to prevent poverty." By dancing beside a symbolic figure of dire poverty, Vijay loosely suggests that he would like to reform these social discrepancies if he enters politics. His dual motive is to entertain fans in the cinema and to create an off-screen context for the launching of a political career. Such human props act as signifiers for his political interest are found in introduction

songs (see fig. 34 and fig. 35), propagating the star as the darling of the masses – brand ambassadors of empathy.
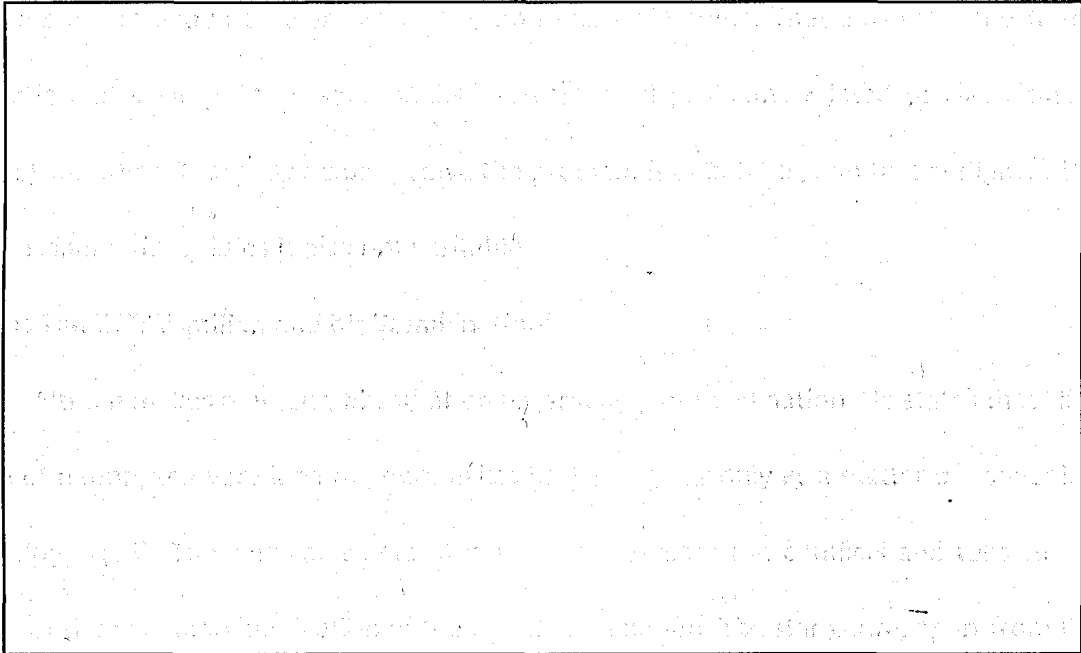
Fig. 34. Vijay respectful and considerate about the elderly in *Kaavalan*.
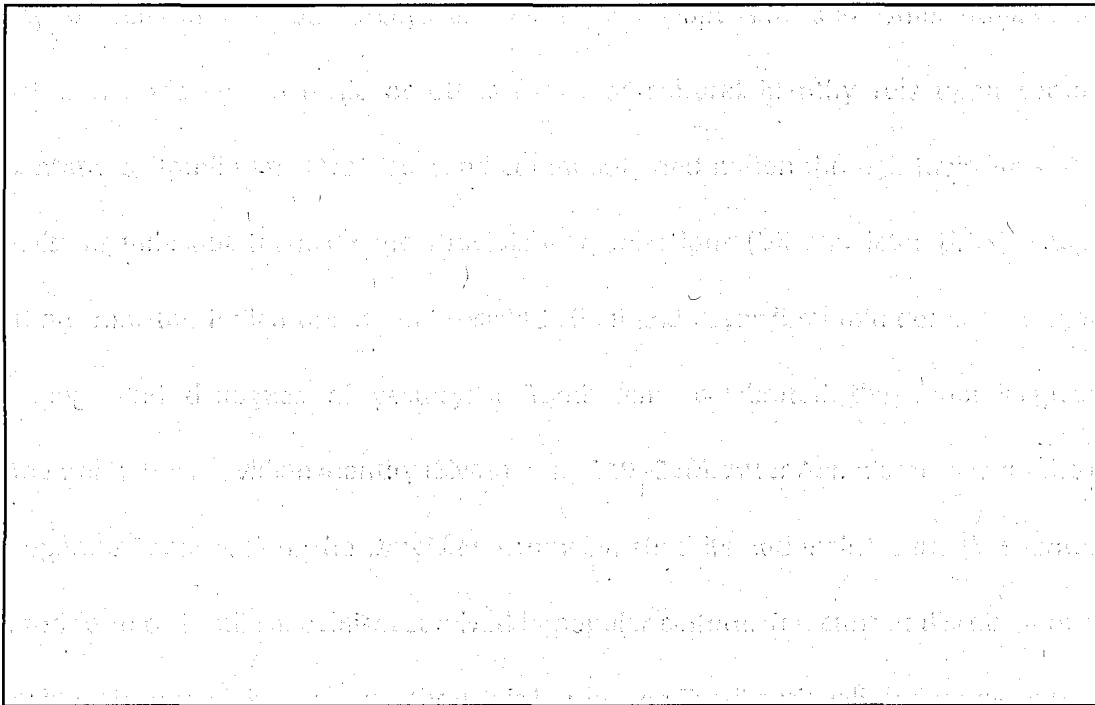
Fig.35. Sewage workers with arms folded, saluting Rajni in *Chandramukhi*

A combination of images and words that act as mirrors for the subaltern are soothing counter-realities. There is an evident social angle to cinematic fantasy offered by these films. In this way, star films are intended to work as wholesome entertainments. The films offer the hero as a cinematic and socio-political solution to address social problems related to class, caste and regional identities. That they actually solve the problem is debatable, and that audiences believe in these cinematic realities is also not veritable.

"Who is Tamil?": Tamilian and his Tamil 'nation'

Altman makes a precise observation regarding genre and nation. He states that "like the notion of nation, the very idea of genre exists in the singular only as a matter of convenience – or ideology" (86). The singular whole of genre may recreate the conflicts and tensions of the nation, or the imaginary unification of the people as a nation. The star genre, apart from its own distinctiveness, the star is an embedded singular whole constantly attracting to its core, the ideology of nationhood, patriarchy, capitalism and populism, and other fundamentalist ideologies. Historically, linguistic or other forms of cultural identity rely upon community representatives; Tamil film stars transcend community and nation through their films. A Tamil nationalist agenda put forth by the Dravidian organizations (DK and later DMK) sought for separation from the Indian union, and resisted Hindi and Aryan/Brahmin dominance (Pandian 30).[27] Songs and dialogues of yesteryear Tamil films celebrated the Tamil language as instrumental to the Dravidian identity (Sivathamby 219 -220). After Annadurai gave up the quest for a separate Tamil nation, the Dravidian campaign shed its nationalist outlook. Eventually a dissipated form of Tamil chauvinism survived in popular culture. The current discourse on Tamil identity in mainstream cinema, even though it borders on Tamil nationalism does not partake of

---

[27] *Dravida Kazhagam* (DK) (Dravidian Federation) was a party with no interest in electoral politics, as Periyar. DMK was an off-shoot as a result of a clash between Periyar's disinterest and Annadurai's desire to contest in politics.

original fervor that governed Tamil Nadu politics in the early fifties. It is loosely based on reminiscent ideological trends and current political issues like the Tamil Eelam conflict in Sri Lanka. Dialogues of the star that speak devotion to the Tamil life and culture are concerned mainly with one's Tamilness or being a Tamil, not a Tamil nationalist anymore. Here are a few examples of lyrics and dialogues that affirm a star's *Tamilness*:

Vijay:
> For a school under the banyan tree to evolve into Oxford University, you should get educated in your mother tongue [Tamil] and emancipate Tamil Nadu (*Vettaikaran*).

Rajni:
> I'm a good brother to all. I'm a grateful person. I was cradled and brought up by Tamil soil.
> .... Don't garland me
> Don't give me golden crowns
> The love from Tamil motherland is enough for me
> For every drop of my sweat, Tamil gave me one pound of gold coin
> To give my body, spirit and soul to Tamil, isn't that only fair? (*Padayappa*).
>
> While my mother's milk nurtured by body, it was Tamil milk that gave me life (*Annamalai*).

Stars like Rajnikanth and Vijay speak such lines to prove their 'Tamilness.' There is no accurate measure for Tamilness, cinema and politics have created a stage for the performative Tamil identity. The public who are constantly girdled by agents of dominant ideology, experience their Tamilness through the star's enunciation. Their participation fixes the star as their representative -- their voice and their leader. The masses participate in the collective self-aggrandizement feeding ideas of belongingness and nationhood. The stars are sites for the formation and restoration of a distinctly defined Tamil identity. The main agenda in making proclamations like "For every drop of my sweat, Tamil gave me one pound of gold coin," is to gain popular appeal. Star cinema in South India therefore is, an open system of populism – making no effort to hide its method of branding the star. It is for this cinematic openness that

these films qualify as star films. In 'becoming' Tamil, the stars also want to appear as patrons of the Tamil language which as mentioned earlier was the original, unifying principle for the Dravidian and Tamil puritan movements. As suggested by the political modes in their film texts, stars who are soon-to-be politicians are also required to comment on current concerns of the Tamil land on-screen and off-screen. In general the film industry is also involved in the state politics. It is an onus on the stars to disclose their responsible opinions or take actions for the benefit of the people. Rajnikanth's token fast for pressurizing the neighboring Karnataka state government to share water resources (from the river Cauvery that runs through both states) with Tamil Nadu ("Rajni takes on"), or Vijay's one day hunger-strike with his fans for people dying in Sri Lanka are publicized actions that abide by a peculiar tradition of the film industry's participation in state politics ("Actor Vijay observes"). The South Indian Film Artistes' Association (SIFAA) and Tamil Film Directors' Council, along with other associations are affiliated to the main union, the Film Employees Federation of South India (FEFSI). FEFSI undertakes various activities such as unionizing Tamil cinema, and working for employee rights all in close collaboration with the state government, and therefore has a strong lobby. Amidst such a politicized cinema production environment, films situate as another platform for affirming stars as the socially responsible individuals, maintaining a cordial relationship with the ruling political party. On the other end of these public image construction efforts are also efforts to maintain respectful relationships with fans; very often actors acknowledge their fans in helping build their stardom. References of gratitude figure in dialogues and lyrics, for example, Rajni confirms the fact that Tamilians were the architects of his celluloid success in spite of being a non-Tamil: "for every drop of my sweat, Tamil gave me one pound of gold coin. To give my body, spirit and soul to Tamil, isn't that only fair?" Rajni's character here or his star persona is referencing his offscreen

life as a film star celebrity. In *Sura*, Vijay voices 'his' opinion on the genocide that was waged against Tamils in Sri Lanka in 2009:

> Tamils are the first ones to cry for injustice against anyone in the world. But when they needed someone's help the most, nobody came.
> ..One day this will all change. There's hope (*Sura*).

Referring to the lack of any international intervention during the 2008 Tamil genocide in Sri Lanka, Vijay appeased the Tamil Diaspora in UK, Canada and other countries who boycotted his earlier film *Vettaikaran* for reasons such as Vijay's meeting with Rahul Gandhi and also for the music director Vijay Antony's collaboration with Sinhala artistes (Narayanan 2009).[28] Like MGR, Rajnikanth is not a native Tamil; nevertheless, to reign in Tamil Cinema one cannot detach himself from its history of Tamil consciousness. C.S. Lakshmi provides crucial views on the conception of 'Tamil man' – the *Tamilan*. The performance of Tamilness is also associated with a culturally specific masculinity. The Tamil being is by default derivative of the normative cultural references from Sangam literature to modern registers of the linguistic identity. Tamil language came to be genderized, as the mother who bore great Tamil sons. Lakshmi argues:

> By feeling towards a language and nation as he [Tamil man] would feel towards a mother, the Tamil man is comfortable in what he thinks is his manliness. His 'manliness' lies in protecting his women; he feels humiliated when his women are oppressed or humiliated. Nation and language belong to him in the sense his women do. In other words, nation and language become his responsibility; his domain. (1990: 73)

The ideal 'Tamil man' was indebted to his mother, the Tamil language. To render a Tamilian masculine, womanhood (importantly, only the patriarchal role of a mother) is appropriated the highest honour in the order of the Tamil language's esteemed importance in regional identity and expression. It was MGR who simulated the most successful image of a 'Tamil man' in his

---

[28] Rahul Gandhi was the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee. He was also the son of deceased Former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. He was assassinated in a suicide bomb attack carried out by the LTTE (Liberation Tamils of Tamil Eelam) in 1991 as retaliation against Indian troops for the destruction of Tamil lives in 1987.

films. He plotted the 'true Tamil man' as a valorous citizen of the Tamil nation, who was also a "devoted son and a virile lover" (81). A combination of Tamilness, sonhood, and subaltern heroism helped form the ideal 'Tamil man.' Thus a strong sense of masculinity is attached to the Tamil state of being. Exaggerated masculinity as integral as it is to male stardom vis-à-vis the Tamil self is also emphasized through more conventional methods of display in action sequences.

Performance and Production of 'Melodramatic Masculinity'

Heteronormative masculinity and its exhibition as a prescriptive requirement in the male spectacles, also finds currency in the larger system of cinematic and political stardom in South India. *Maleness* of the Tamil star is the primary source of authority and appeal for the star image, and is interestingly derived from the star's participation with the melodramatic frames of the star genre narrative. So what emerges is one of 'melodramatic masculinity' where the emphasis of male star's masculinity is realized through various diegetic motivators from the family melodrama core. The audiences access the star's display of masculine power through the preceding scenes of family or social tragedy. Along with pronouncements of linguistic fidelity and culturally appropriated manhood, the star image of an actor is guided by standardized patriarchy carving an iconic spectacle of "exemplary masculinity" – one that is ascribed as a popular model just because it is the star who propagates it (Connell 214). The female body is not the only subject of erotic spectacle in a film; the masculinity of the male protagonist is also presented as spectacle (Neale 1983). Yvonne Tasker (1993) recognizes stardom as an entry point to discuss the performance of masculinity (76). The excess in star performance allows for heightened awareness of performing sexual identity. The "awareness of masculinity as performance" raises the possibility for "meta-manhood" which is in function while the star

performs the "being the man" act (*Screening the Male* 230 -243). In this layered actualization of masculinity, the Tamil star's image, of physical and stellar body, utilize action sequences in similar and dissimilar ways to Hollywood action cinema.

Star films are also action films. Tamil stars are inevitably action heroes, too. Their masculinities, however, are not singularly defined by action sequences. Essentially a male-centred narrative, the star film is interspersed with the elements of comedy, romance and family melodrama to privilege the masculine order. Fight scenes have been a vital source of entertainment in hero-centric films of Indian cinemas. Star masculinities prevail throughout the narrative, in all scenes whether action or drama, alluding towards an all-round masculinity. The star is the man *in/of* action; the star-driven plot seeks to explore the hero's virility in wide spectrum provided by the "heterogeneous" narrative (Vasudevan 2011: 39).[29] In the following pages, I will try to answer some questions that might determine specific masculinity/ies emulated by the stars: What kind of exhibition do Tamil stars indulge in? How do these masculinities differ from Hollywood and Hong Kong film texts? What kind of allegoric end does the Tamil star's performance satisfy? How is melodrama related to the star's exhibition of masculinity? What kind of man is the Tamil star?

Let us begin with this last question. Who is the star? The star is a man who is manufactured by public discourse(s). Patrick Philips argues that "a star is an image and a cultural signifier" for society's popular beliefs, codes and practices. He or she is also a "public performer of *roles*" (1999: 181). Through public performances, the stars form "particular types" – in the case of Tamil stars, types of leadership, types of public figures and even types of Tamil man

---

[29] In *The Melodramatic Public*, Ravi Vasudevan describes the popular format in Indian cinema (discussed the masala formula in this paper) as a heterogeneous "assemblage of attractions", not only with elements like action, romance and comedy, but cuts across through multiple fractions of fictional storytelling. In the context of this paper, I think masala or heterogeneous can be used interchangeably.

(Tasker 1993: 76). But the star's image is not only constructed *publicly*, his image is altered according to established public norms – which R.W.Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity" and is defined "as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 214). The patriarchal assertions in their films are bound to this public order – the malestream. Steve Derné observes that through such representation, Indian men find "a sense of power and control in their relationship with women" (2000: 164). Ideologies concerning the stars' public selves are in turn reproduced by the male audiences as cultural performance. The translation process for filmgoing audiences also involves the look – looking at women, looking at the male star, and looking at themselves. Star cinema's audiences comprise of no ordinary men; of course they represent the lower classes, nevertheless, they also strongly identify themselves as fans of a particular star. They come into the theatre with additional 'looking glasses'. Drawing on Mulvey's (1975) male gaze and Sara Dickey's research on Tamil cinema's fandom (1995), Derné's thinking on masculinity and identification parallels my own argument:

> While on-screen male figures may be the object of filmgoing men's gaze they may also prompt an identification that leads filmgoers to see themselves as objects of the gaze. Filmgoing is a time for many men to promenade about, displaying themselves. Around cinema halls, men often groom their hair in the rear-view mirrors of motor scooters or in the glitzy mirrors that are prominent in cinema hall lobbies or flashy hair salons that surround cinema halls. (450)

Although Derne's account of filmgoing audiences is specific to North India, it is more or less the same down south as well, except, fan-based identities are also on display.

The audiences are public men, and are also fans of the ideal Tamil men, their stars. Regardless of the star's own views (say on discrimination of women), star cinema requires him to behave as dominant male consuming women for pleasure or like MGR, feigning devotion to

all-womanhood for their 'motherly benevolence.' The opportunistic use of patriarchal codes creates a double-bind; the male star is at once romancing a modest, "authentic Tamil woman", and a sex bomb who is the object of pleasure in songs, and some other scenes as well. On one hand, the female figure is a source of cultural integrity, while on the other she is certainly the object of the male gaze. This is a "paradox" common to Indian cinema and Indian life in general, "that the woman is, on the one hand, victimized as a wife and, on the other, venerated as the mother" (Vasudev 1988: 09). The women who play the love interest of the hero are commonly seen in traditional Indian costumes, with the submissive manner of a "cultured" woman – the subjugate woman. Heroines who are dressed in western clothes, usually the rich girl in love with the poor boy, are tamed through a series of dramatic confrontations (also comedic and romantic sometimes) and are made to reform; they are made to realize the role of being a "true" Tamil woman. The communion of the hero and heroine does not happen until the woman is fully conscious of Tamil ethos. While it can be argued that Indian popular cinema in general employs such double standards, in regional cinemas, especially in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the women continue to embody masculine desire for cultural preservation. While the male star is the protector of Tamil culture, the female stars are personifications of Tamil culture's high points like chastity, fidelity and hospitality.[30] In the popular imagination of the Tamil society exists imaginary categories of women, each allotted respect according to their publicly assessed levels of adherence to Tamil traditions. In what is a discriminatory practice, women under the lineage of mothers, like sisters and pregnant women, in Tamil Nadu are treated with reverence. An inheritance from classical Tamil literature, the romanticized "Tamil

---

[30] Public images of female stars are under a lot of pressure due to the same reasons, and at the same time, are marred by overpowering images of their male co-stars. The public discourses that female stars participate and create, are particularly interesting in relation to gendered production of star images. While a separate study should deal with female stardom in Tamil Nadu, it is important to note that filmic and extra-filmic discourses are mutually determinant for female stars as well.

mother became the central element as guarantor of purity of progeny and authenticator of historical continuity. The mother's body becomes a metaphor for anything considered sacred and pure like land or language" (Lakshmi 73).

All women are bestowed with a venerable status because of their ability to reproduce ensuring "historical continuity" of Tamil heritage, and therefore the preservation of Tamil culture. The community of Tamil women is commonly referred to by the word 'thaikulam'. Lakshmi states: "In public speeches in Tamil Nadu, men are addressed as friends, elders or youths but women are always 'mothers'. The term thai (mother) and thai-kulam (Mother community) are used alternatively to refer to women" (73). By equating women as mothers, Tamil women become worthy of the Tamil man's respect, protection and love. It is through reverence for the opposite gender, does the Tamil man's masculinity realized. The thaikulam discourse was most effectively used by MGR. He often claimed allegiance to women and the Tamil language lending them both each other's qualities and values.[31] Eventually, the mainstay of his support came from women and it also served as a launching pad to the political career of Jayalalitha, his co-star, who was to be the propaganda secretary of the party, and later the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu after his death. The cinematic incorporation of the thaikulam discourse continues to gather female audiences not only as potential voters, but as fans too, ensuring commercial success for star films. For directors and producers, films that can cater to the female demographic, as they put it "ladies sentiment" or "family sentiment", guarantee safe profits.

---

[31] In 1977, when he became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, he devised an entirely different way of making the women feel that their welfare was his primary concern. Almost all his films had one song on mother's love or allusion to a mother and gestures and dialogues revealing his tenderness towards them (Lakshmi 81).

Therefore emotional narratives about the hero's relationship with his mother, sister and friends are important to the star film formula (Perarasu).[32]

The vernacular reference, *ladies sentiment*, could then be an equivalent of the Western label 'weepies' commonly recognized as the melodrama genre. Melodrama in Tamil cinema functions to affirm the Tamil man's superior status. Not limited to family drama scenes, melodrama prevails throughout the progressive action of a narrative. Secondary characters construct a narrative that is morally and ethically demanding of the Tamil hero. What definition of melodrama is then pertinent here? Given its history of mutational meanings, the melodrama genre has come to be pejoratively understood as a body of work that deals with "heightened emotionalism and sentimentality" (Singer 2001: 37). Peter Brooks' enlists common indexes of melodrama as: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression, dark plotting, suspense, breathtaking peripety" (1976: 11). This description of melodrama evinces that a majority of popular entertainment ascribe to sensational dramatization, be it action, romance or even India's masala genre. Brooks' description of melodrama as a "mode of excess" that is determined to "express it all" (188), possibly draws close to Linda Williams' broader assessment of melodrama as including a wide range of films that feature "'lapses' in realism; 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (1991: 3).[33] The Tamil films in question are star spectacles; the cinematic excess in these films are instrumented for the star. Since all excess may not be melodramatic, I am interested in the

---

[32] Though he is often made fun of in public media, Perarasu is one of the important directors in Tamil cinema who is responsible for recovering the star genre. The star excess more formally took shape in his films with clearly designated elements of "*Amma* or *Thangatchi*" (mother or sister) sentiments.

[33] As Williams also examines genres based on bodily excesses, the star genre might viscerally deal with the body in terms of representation and spectatorship, it is enough for now to consider the star's body as the centre of "attractions".

narrative currency for emotionally charged scenes with the family as the source for the hero's power. Thomas Elsaesser demonstrates that the dominant voice of the victim in melodramas works analogical to real social conflicts, portraying binaries between "psychology, morality and class-consciousness" (86). This is one of the reasons why star masculinities rooted in family melodrama may vicariously uplift "marginalized masculinities" of male viewers that are inflicted by one's membership in the subordinate classes (Connell 80).

Star cinema, in fact, permits excess under the rule of star enhancement. Therefore, it should be rightly referred to as star excess – the excess being the star and not of single components like in other genres. In line with Kristin Thomspon, the star device is by far the key aspect of excess in these films providing "counterunity" that at once contributes to and distracts from the narrative (1986: 134). More specifically, Thompson also insinuates the link between excess and genre caused by repetition: "the device may far outweigh its original motivation and take on an importance greater than its narrative or compositional function would seem to warrant" (136). The repetition of star-trionics is what formalizes the genre. So it is safe to infer that the melodrama put to use in the star films is not subversive, and is instead directly negotiating the star's screen presence, public image, and the hegemonic discourses. Ravi Vasudevan, in his recent work on melodrama in Indian cinemas, argues that melodrama is a "generalized mechanism of address" in Indian films. Linda Williams (1991) and Christine Gledhill (2000) also argue that melodrama performs as a universal mode of address adaptable over many genres. I do not aim to determine how star genre operates covertly as melodrama, on the contrary, I believe that melodrama is a medium through which star performance is activated. There are at least three ways in which the Tamil star participates in melodrama:

- The basic plot of a star film always involves a exaggerated conflict between good and evil;

- The hero's family, friends and the general masses (who are his extended family in filmic reality) engage the star/character in emotional situations

- The first two points act as melodramatic triggers for fight/action sequences and climaxes – inducing sensational star performances.

Melodrama specifically provokes the hero to resolve situations and assert his power over evil – in other words, melodrama's moralistic universe allows for the performance of virtuous masculinity. Widely accepted, action cinema is melodramatic for construing climactic "situations" and fight "spectacles" together throughout the narrative (Higgins 2008). The thread of narrative action in a star film could be illustrated as: the individual Tamil hero – ladies and family sentiment – social villainy -- tragic pathos -- violent action -- closure with the righteous hero emerging as the winner. This sequence is in no particular order, since each element is repeated more than once and mixed up in the timeline of the plot. With examples from Rajni's *Baasha* and Vijay's *Sivakasi*, I would like to further demonstrate the link between masculinity and melodrama in star cinema.

In *Baasha*, Rajni's character Manikkam lives a double life; in the first half of the film, Manikkam is the simple, hardworking labourer, who works as an auto-rickshaw driver to support his family of four. At intermission, it is revealed that Manikkam was once Manik Baasha, the mafia don in Mumbai. Manikkam is said to have taken the path of a gangster to avenge his friend Anwar's death. He acts as a social vigilante, the 'good gangster' trying to save innocent lives from the ill-doings of the 'bad gangsters.' When Manikkam's father is killed, Manikkam promises to abstain from all violence, to take care of his family. He is specifically set goals for

each of his siblings as per his father's wishes: to help his youngest sister become a doctor, younger brother to join the police force and to get his other sister married into nice family.[34] Perceiving his family's future as a mission, Manikkam leaves Mumbai to settle down in Chennai. Manikkam is portrayed as a straight but timid family/man who painstakingly avoids violent confrontations in his everyday life. His chosen life as a pacifist is highlighted in a sequence where he offers himself to be 'punished' by the local thug in place of his brother. He embodies the family head who would literally shed blood to keep his kin safe and secure. But when the same thug at a later point roughs up his sister and pushes her down -- only to be held by Manikkam who is shocked and enraged by the blood on her face -- he explodes out as Manik Baasha. The assault on his family, who he vowed to protect and provide for, resurrects his former self and he shows no mercy in beating up the thug and his henchmen. The scene resonates with popular tropes of Indian melodrama in which obligations within the family often dictate the individual's moral thought and action. The dénouement of the *Sivakasi* exemplifies melodrama in even more explicit terms.

In the first half of the film, Vijay's character Sivakasi plays an orphan. Through a series of events, Sivakasi meets the arch villain who later turns out to be his brother. The climax brings the two brothers against each other. After some initial chaos, Sivakasi's brother Udayappa is held down by the rival gang and the gang leader threatens to behead him. Sivakasi's mother alarmed by this, pleads with Sivakasi to save his brother. Sivakasi who seems unnerved by the fate awaiting his brother, is finally moved when she reminds him that he too shares his father's blood – his motivation and zeal are reflected in his "burning" eyes.

---

[34] Marriage is portrayed as something of an achievement for women in Indian societies, and the film abides by these social perceptions, conservative or not, they are specific to Tamil culture.
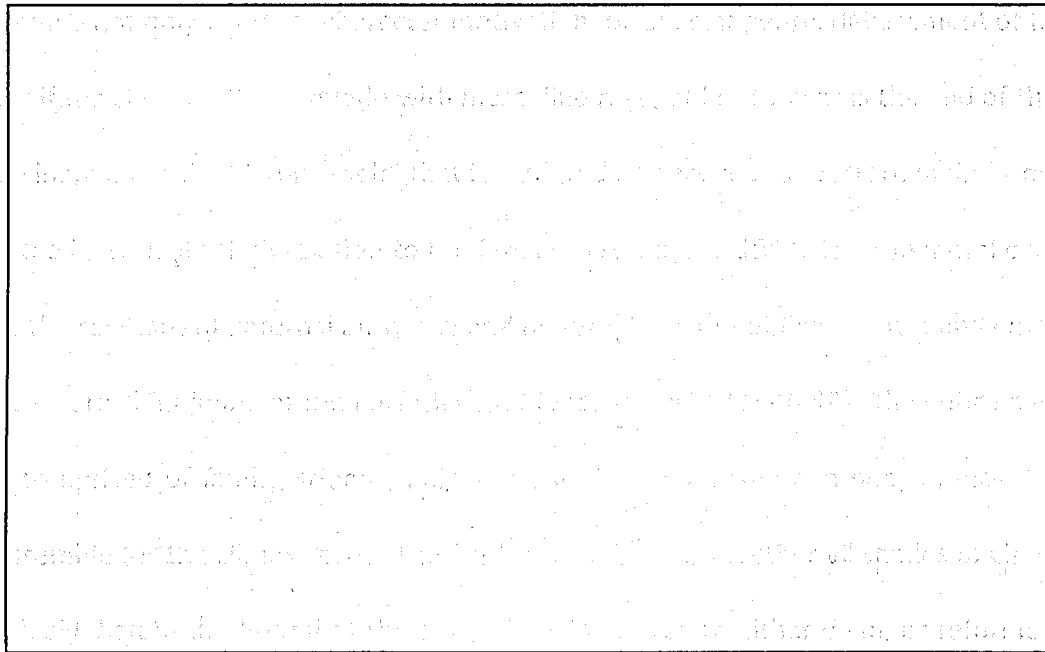
Fig.36. Sivakasi's mother reminding him of his filial duty.
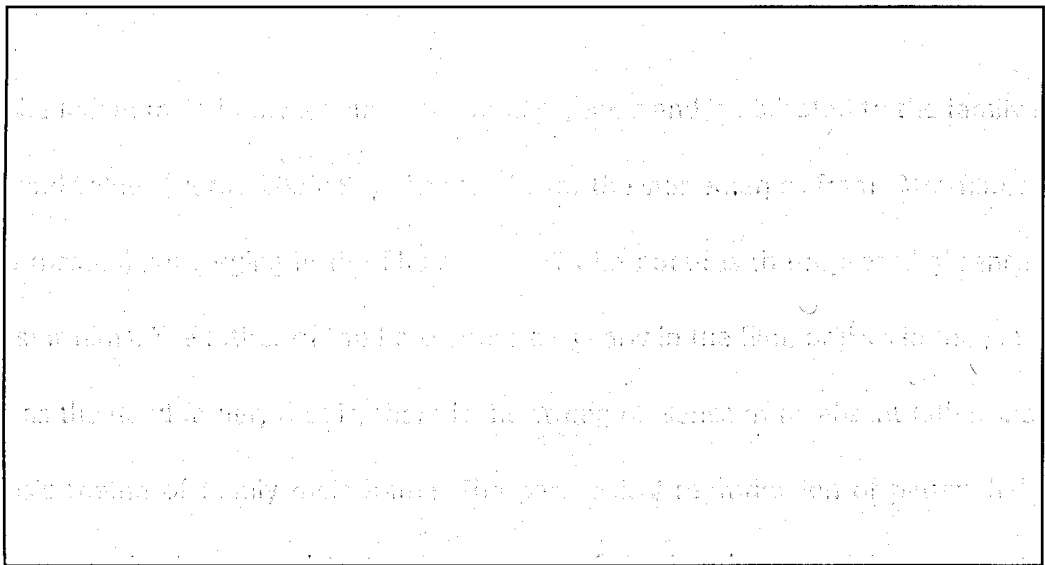
Fig. 37. Sivakasi's eyes redden in reaction to his mother's plea

The now infuriated Sivakasi fights the new set of villains to rescue his brother. Udayappa

is moved by this gesture, and immediately reforms in the wake of the paternal connection

between the brothers. The hero's masculine heroism is aroused by his family. Family melodrama

is directly causative of the action sequences, as opposed to Elsaesser's argument that domestic

melodrama limits the range of 'strong' actions only resulting in "self-annihilating action" (56).

Family trauma not only works as character motivation for the star genre, debasement of the self is a threat if the star does not explode with masculine rage, at least towards the end of the film. In Indian cinema, it is the "familial self" that is explored as opposed to Western melodramas the focus on the individual self in relation to the family (Dissanayake 1988: 4). "The moral economy of family, the relations of paternal authority and maternal nurture of filial respect and emotional attachment" are chief joints of the narrative grid (Vasudevan 2011: 46-48). The entire narrative universe comprised of family, friends, neighbors, well-wishers, common people, including the villains assemble for the climax scene. The film's closure brings together all shades of characters to predictably dictate the 'moral of the story'. The bad guys are either dead, or reformed. The family of the hero, secondary and tertiary characters rejoices in the new-found joy of togetherness and the hero's victory over evil.

The Indian male is always guided by family groups and is obligated to the family system of ethics and values (Derné 2000: 90). The family for the star emerges from extra-filmic worlds (fans and masses) converging in the filmic space. To be noted is the repeated absence of the father in star films. The father of the hero either dies early in the film, or lives in the paternalist narrative as the dead father, that is, there is the strong presence of an absent father indicating the intrinsic theme of family melodrama. The paradoxical reproduction of patriarchal power through absence is also related to the importance of the hero's masculinity formed through sonhood. The hero's male companions are also strikingly ordinary in comparison to the hero. The emasculated environment helps to increase the visibility of the star. The hero stands out as the only male capable of masculine feats becoming the ideal Tamil male, as he now becomes the father figure in the narrative.

The fight sequences are largely influenced by Hollywood and Hong Kong action cinema. The influences can be seen in the fast-paced choreography of fight moves, editing and action cinematography. The fight routines achieve a hybrid form, mixed with indigenous styles of martial arts, along with the contemporary styles authored by fight masters of Tamil Cinema. Indian films endow themselves the liberty to grant their heroes, and sometimes villains, super human powers to accentuate the plot device – rescue or endangering. In star-oriented cinema from Tamil and Telugu regions, however, additional visual and audio special effects are employed to underscore the protagonist's super-human capabilities. When Manikam is enraged by his sister's blood, his first punch is 'electrocutes', throwing a man up to an electric pole. As the star is preparing to fight, his nerves tighten and eyes turn red before he performs unrealistic stunts (see figures below).
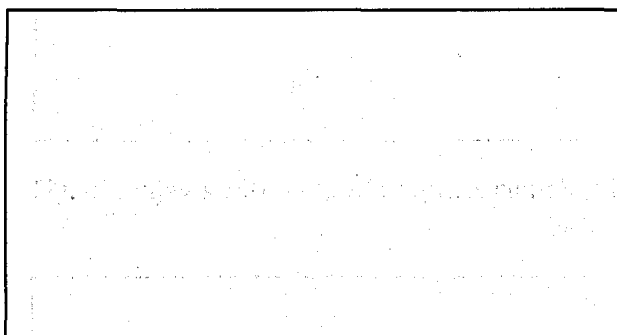
Fig. 38. Rajni is shaken at the sight of sister's blood from an injury caused by the villain
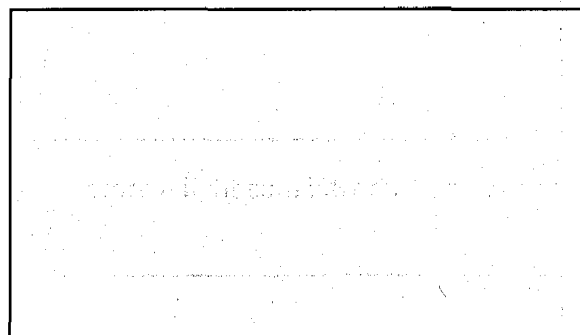
Fig.39. A 'melodramatic' shot of Rajni slowly being agitated at the sight of his kin's blood.
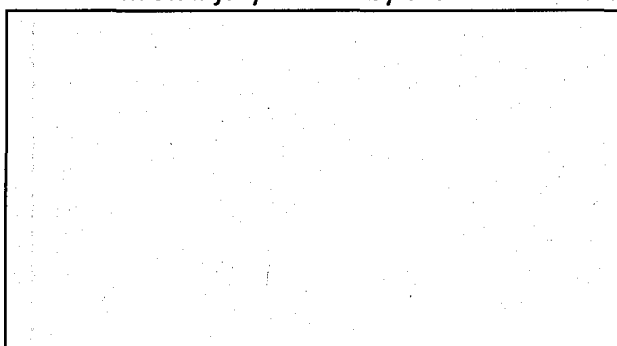
Fig. 40. The hero's eyes communicate anger
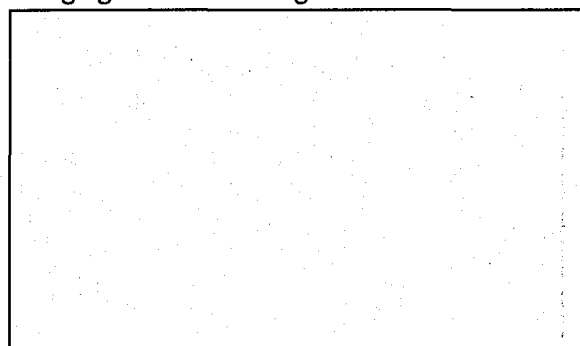
Fig. 41. Rajni clenches his fist.
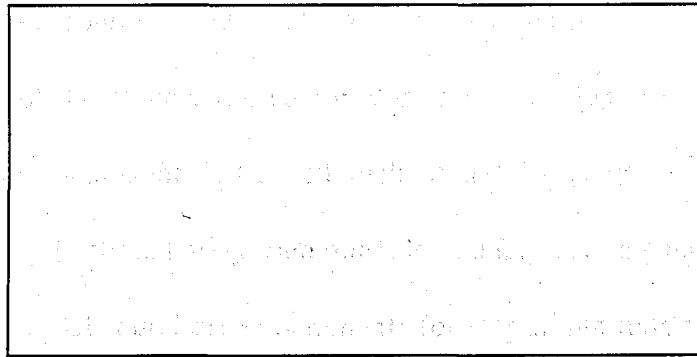
Fig. 42. To everyone's disbelief, Manikam's punch throws a man up in the air
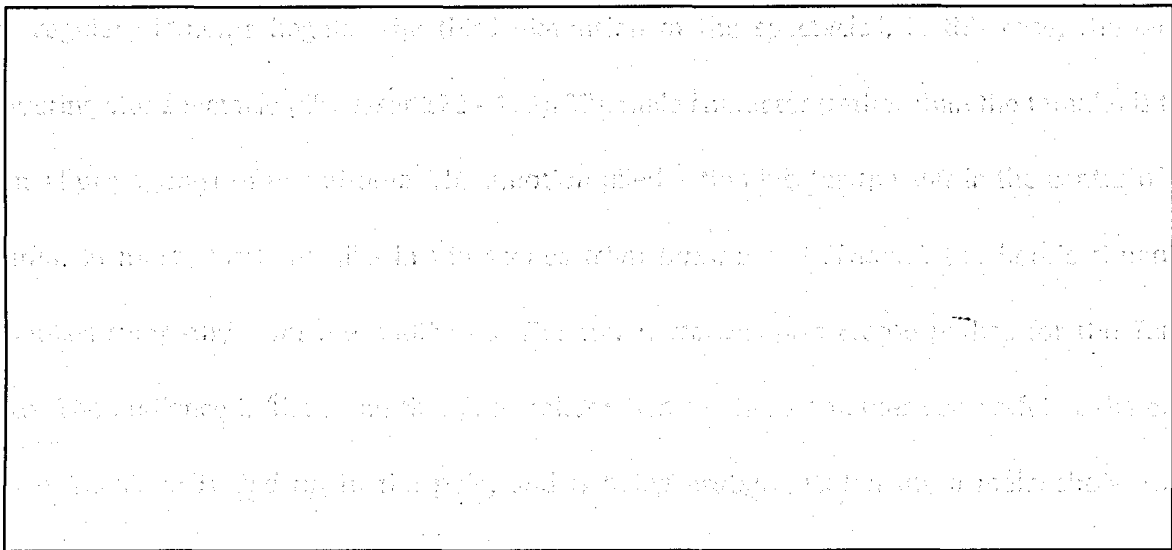
Fig. 43. Vijay's with help of graphics clenches his arm before a fight cum introduction song in *Vettaikaran*
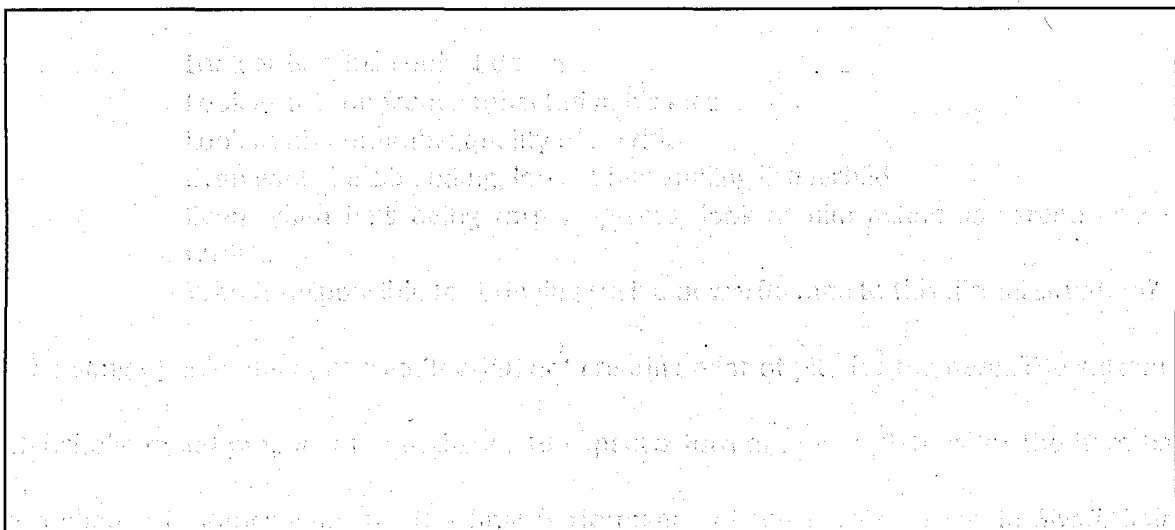
Fig. 44. Rajnikanth performing super-human stunts styled after Hong Kong films.

The visual tricks and sound effects aid the narrative excess also contributing to the melodramatic effect of the scenes. The cuts in this scene reveal strategic editing in arranging these shots together to present fast-paced melodramatic triggers leading to explosion of masculinity through fight action. Background music is vital for providing melodrama scenes with 'emotional effects', special sound accompaniments for star stunts tune the fight scenes in to dramatic action. The "mise-en-scène of melodrama" which includes music, dialogue, along with the regular elements begets "the third dimension of the spectacle", in this case, the over-powering star spectacle (Elsaesser 172 - 173). The male character (rather than the female) is the central protagonist of melodrama. The emotion filled action locates the star in the centre of all drama. In most star films, like in the scenes from *Baasha* and *Sivakasi*, the hero's situation provokes sympathy from the audiences. The star narratives also create pathos for the Tamil hero. The audience in the same film finds relief when the hero emerges successful at the end. While Manikam is tied up to the pole, and is being brutally beaten up, a melancholic song accompanies shots of Rajni's figure, his sacrificial body that is bleeding and bearing the pain. The lyrics of the song specifically asks spectators to *look at to him*.

> Look at Baasha. Look at Baasha.
> Look at the innocence reflected in his face
> Look at his admirable quality of sacrifice.
> Even while he's bleeding, look at him smiling like a child.
> Even when he's being torn in pieces, look at him acting as serene as Jesus Christ..
> Who is responsible for bringing such a powerful man to this dismal situation?

So the song openly functions as a 'tearjerker,' creating a lot of pity for the hero. The extremely melancholic mood prepares the audience to expect a turn of power. Pathos for the hero baits the audience in anticipation for the final performance of the hero's power. In *Sivaji*, Rajni's character is forced into bankruptcy, and all chances to get back his wealth through legal means

are thwarted by the villain. Scenes that trace his tragic situation continuously invoke powerful

sympathy for the star (see figures below).
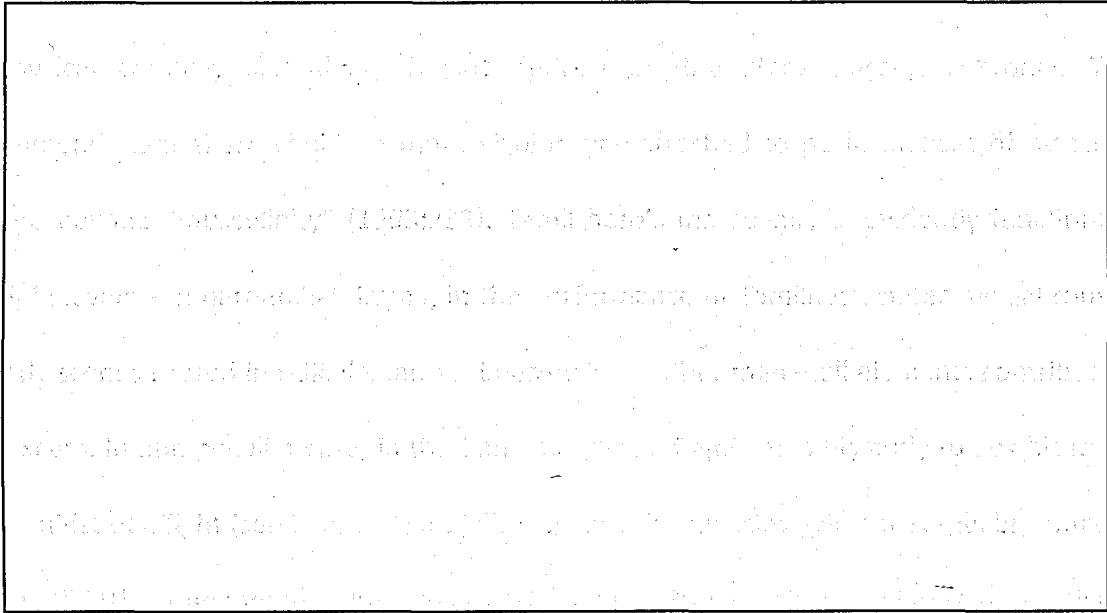
Fig. 45. Sivaji after losing all his wealth, leaves his mansion walking through a metaphorically lonely path
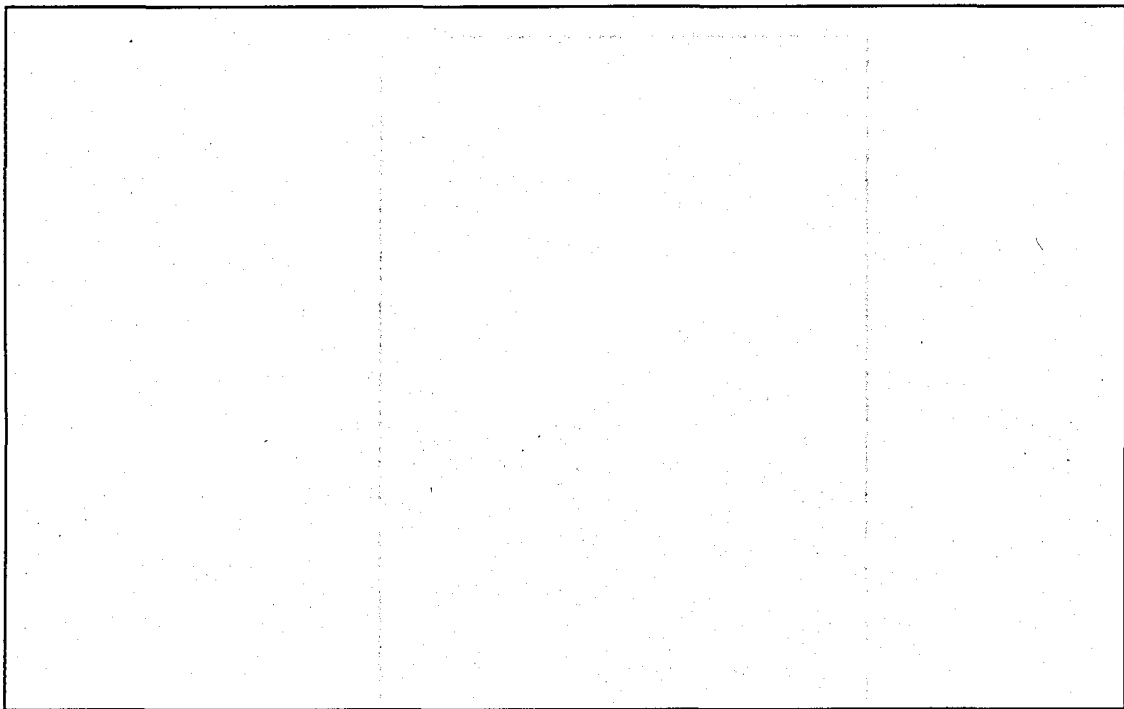
Fig. 46. Sivaji and the 'family backdrop' are brought to tears when he is humiliated by the villain outside the courthouse.

The fight sequences that follow have action stunts focus on the "power" of a punch or kick, rather than visible, muscular power. Hollywood's emphasis on musculature in action cinema is negligible in Tamil cinema. Though there is elaborate discourse on the hero's strength in physical combat, masculinity is not defined by the star's physique. Yvonne Tasker recommends that there could be more significance attached to performances of masculinity that go beyond "musculinity" (1993:233). Tamil hero's masculinity is evidently functioning at multiple levels – in patriarchal drama, in the performance of Tamilness, heterosexual romance, comedy scenes rooted in ridicule and at times bullying other men – all elements contributing to star excess. In one peculiar case, in the film *Padayyapa*, Rajni bares his body to flex his muscles in the midst of a fight (see figure 14). Rajni's display of his muscles, what are arguably emaciated arms with little or no musculature is role-modeled after Bruce Lee's musculature rather than the steroid induced bulky musculature of Stallone and Arnold.
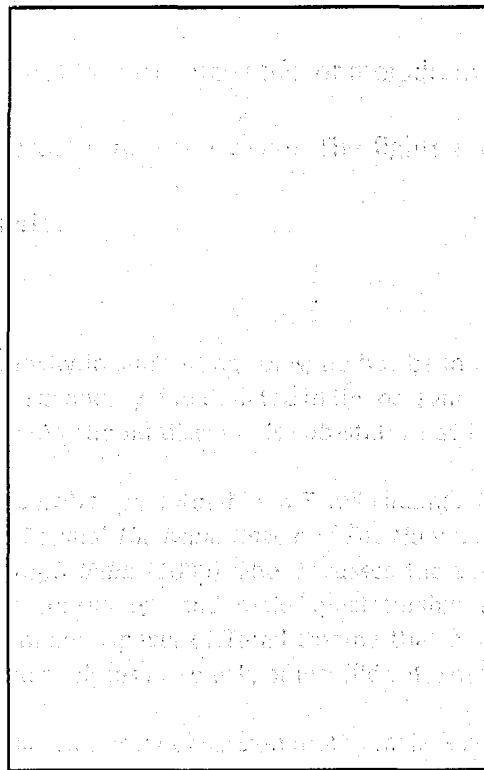
Fig. 47. Padayappa's uncharacteristic display of "muscles"

Within the film's timeline, Rajni grows old as a good-willed business tycoon who is also the official guardian of traditions specific to his native village deity. In this particular scene, the older Padayappa fights villains to save the life of his future son-in-law Chandru (Abbas), who is clearly a younger male.[35] As Padayyapa fights the villains, to contrast the masculine display, effeminate Chandru watches from inside the car, amazed at Padayyapa's skills.[36] He even speaks in awe: "What a man! He has defied aging." The exhibition of Rajni's physique was almost a desperate, yet cursory attempt to refurbish Rajni's star image in the context of the actor's ageing.[37] Fight scenes are also part of introduction sequences and songs in a film. For example, the number 'Pokkiri Pongal' from Pokkiri, follows after the action sequence part of Vijay's introduction. The song uniquely captures Vijay dancing and fighting, surrounded by numerous female dancers. The attention is centred on Vijay performing masculinity through his introduction in front of a diegetic female audience (see fig. 48). Similarly, in Sivaji, a song that is motivated by a romantic scene between the hero and heroine is titled "Action man", where Rajni is eroticized for his super-human capabilities (see fig. 49). A micro-narrative of melodrama and action runs through the song where Rajni saves his heroine from the villain. The fights are choreographed into the dance steps, complimenting the lyrics

---

[35] Abbas, an actor has been acting mostly in supporting roles; he has been teased quite often about his 'gay' looks. His roles in most films are secondary and deflated in the presence of the star. An independent study on homoeroticism in Tamil cinema should discuss his sub-stature as the homoerotic icon in Tamil cinema.

[36] This scene also gives clues to homoerotic spectatorship in Tamil cinema. The only study exploring this fringe area in Tamil cinema is Martyn Rogers' *The Male Gaze and The Homoerotic Aesthetics of Tamil film: The Gendering of Visual Culture in South India* (2009). She discusses the spectacle of Tamil masculinity using dimensions of "hetereosexual sensibility" and male spectatorship to identify the homoerotic aesthetic. I think her essay outlines many aspects of Tamil cinema that haven't been analyzed before. Nevertheless, her case studies and film analyses are weak, or insufficient. She also overlooks the Rajni and Vijay's stardom.

[37] Younger stars are giving in to the contemporary obsession on the male 'six-pack'. This is also related to "changing India", globalization, the average Indian's access to resources through higher incomes and the information explosion. One of the reasons for the de-emphasis on musculature in older films could also be the realistic standards set by men in India society, due to race-related body structure and problems of nutritional demand and supply in India.
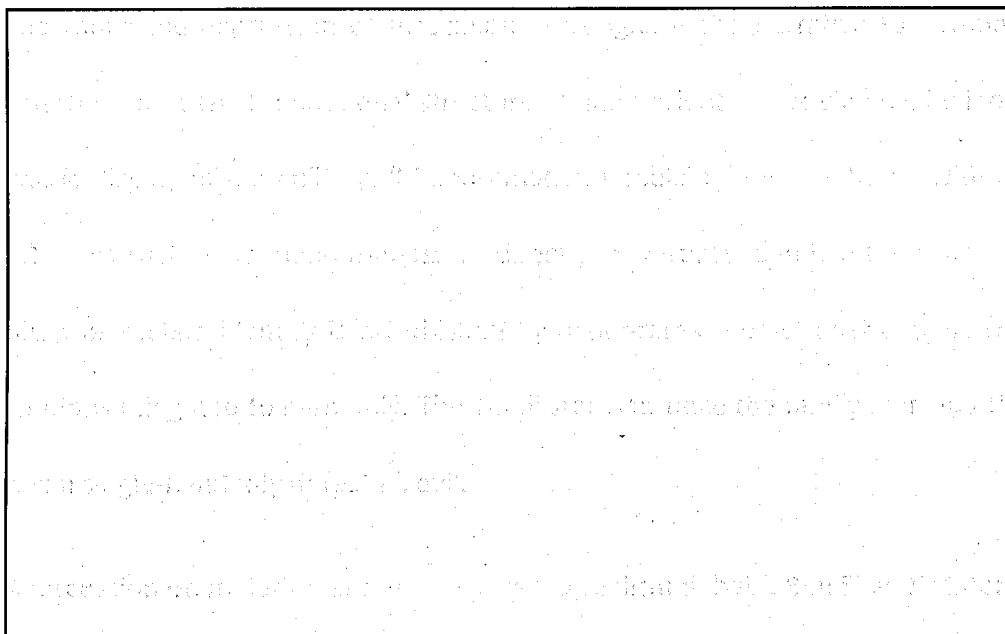
Fig. 48. Vijay beating up ruffians during the song, while girls around him beat the drums to celebrate his masculinity
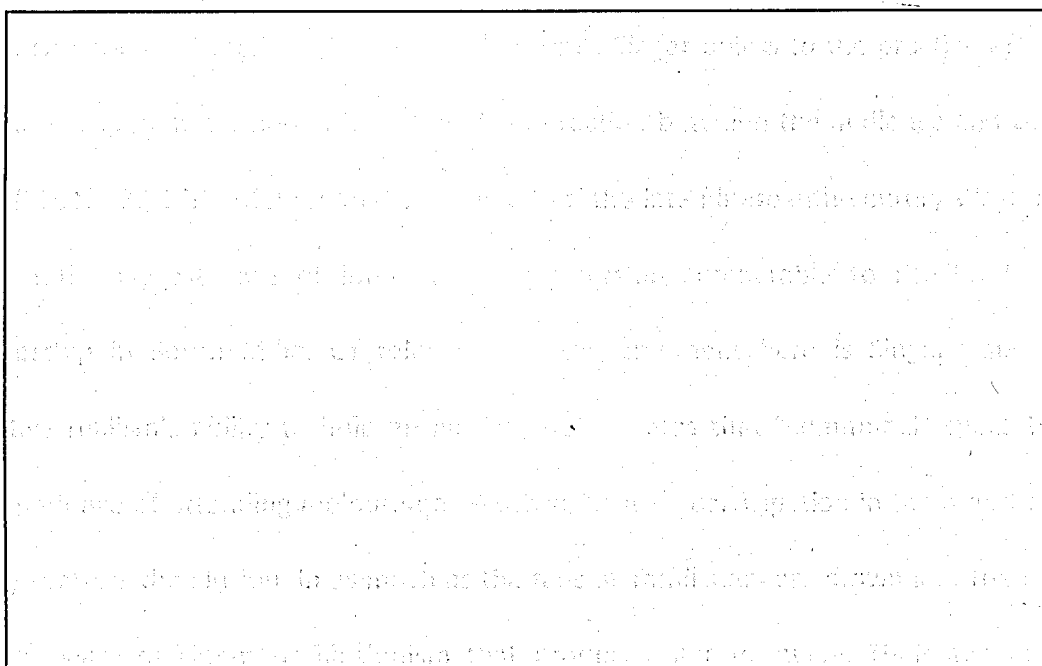
Fig. 49. Rajni stops a bullet, forcing it to retrace its path in a song from *Sivaji*.

So star cinema as a blend of many generic elements is hybridized further for stars. Melodrama found in family action, fight scenes, romantic encounters, in comedy, and climax scenes is adjusted to suit the most integral part of the star's image – his masculinity. The studied strategy of star cinema in dramatizing its heroic moments, allows us to believe that

melodrama tones the expression of masculinity throughout the narrative to sustain the star focus. With the star as the foundational structure of mass-oriented star cinema, he indulges in a melodramatic display of masculinity. 'Melodramatic masculinity' does not deal with masculine anxiety or construct male melodramas; it directly advertises dominant norms. The male protagonist's masculine identity is refurbished by melodrama – emotional triggers that kindle primal emotions relegated to men only. The Tamil star is at once the family man and the ascetic hero who can single-handedly defeat all evil.

A discussion on melodrama must engage the realism debate. Ben Singer's interest in the association between "melodrama and illusionism or absorptive realism" relates to Tamil cinema's fan-based spectatorship. Absorptive realism draws the audience into a world of illusion, suspending disbelief – "diegetic illusionism". Singer points to the practice of the stage melodrama experience wherein heightened "interaction between the audience and the actor" occurs (2001: 177-179). Melodramatic audiences of the late nineteenth-century Western world could be the closest case of interactive spectatorship comparable to ritualized star film spectatorship in South India. Of relevance to the argument here is Singer's suspicion of absorptive realism's ability to hold an illusion; he indicates that "communal" spectatorship – "the experience of attending melodrama" – the audience's participation in the realist narrative actually shatters the illusion. In as much as the fans of Tamil stars are drawn into the film, they are also aware of cinematic illusionism that produces star formulae. Their awareness and expectations permit excessive illusions in constructing the star's image, more like a premeditated seeking of their informed consent for consuming contrived representations of reality. While that remains, melodrama as a genre is successful for it "provides audience[s] with situations analogous to those commonly experienced in family and personal life" (Kleihans 1991: 201). The minimal amount of narrative truth, rather, verisimilitude that is offered in star films in

a way equips audiences to not accept everything as an illusion, and instead evaluate scenes of melodrama as justified, because they work as "plausible alternative version[s] of their lives"(Coates 2010: 133). All this only highlights the importance of star vehicles to build on the masala genre, the principle of mixture, since the melodrama ingredient almost balances out the different kinds of excess, allowing audiences to be "entertained" by these versions of realism. This directly leads to questions about the fans' role in shaping star films. How is their participation almost equivalent to a genre component in star films? An investigation of such questions will be discussed in the next chapter on fan-based star-oriented cinema.

Chapter III

The Genre System and Fans

Film genres are not isolated social phenomena. They are products of institutions cinematic and cultural. As mythic structures, genre categories assist the corporate machine of film industries by processing and selling film brands for profit (Schatz 1981). Genres are also systems that operate in public spheres registering contracts between the producers, consumers and the films (Tudor 1974; Neale 1990; Altman 1999). The conventions for each genre are ratified in this triangular accord between industrial motives, spectatorial expectations, and the resultant market trends. Whether popular film genres are products of systems or systemic processes, they are certainly star-oriented in India. The commodity modeled after the individual self is most productive, because its unitary iconicity accelerates commercial growth. South Indian films, then, with their dependence on stardom and fan networks pave the way for commodity (star) to transcend text, apparatus and discourses of cinema. In this chapter, I will begin by examining the supporting systems of the star genre – who and what comprise these systems; why and how the genre sustains itself. In all the foregoing chapters I argue for spectatorship as an important strand in the overall framework of genre criticism. The extended cinematic space occupied by fans forms a significant part of the genre canvas, becoming a distinct generic component by itself. Fans of Tamil stars, as historical subjects of Tamil cinema, have acquired tangible power over the cinematic institution to construct stars and govern genre modes; their participation in cinema's business of mass culture has become indispensable. The induction of the social as its filmic landscape and mise-en-scène exteriori (constituted by the fans), the star as a filmic signifier for social power, and the inscription of common people in the medium's circulation and consumption are all explicit in star genre films. So far, the cinematic

has been explored where the social is contained in its textual units of star and narrative sequence. Consequently, the sociality of star cinema also exists in the extra-cinematic, where fans have a functional, semi-directive relationship with the film, its producers and the star. The study was initially concerned with how cinema constructed star reality; now, the trajectory of investigation leads to an assessment of how the extended cinematic reality of spectators affects cinema's form and content.

To this end, the cinematic institution of Tamil Nadu needs to be parsed. How does it breed the star genre? Why is Tamil Cinema more 'social' than others? Why is fans' participation important for the genre? To gain clear ideas of the industrial structure and operations in Tamil cinema, I had gathered field data from Chennai, the centre of production for Tamil films, involving interviews with directors, producers, public relation agents, journalists and fan club members. In the following pages, I have organized arguments around the information gathered from these interviews in relation to both existing discourses, and critical discussions that have developed during the course of this study on genre production and spectatorship. This pilot ethnography of the film culture based on star cinema in Tamil Nadu helps fill and "explore the gaps and tensions among the different levels, the diverse ways of text, apparatus, history, and discourse [that] construct the spectator" and determines "the ways [in which] the spectator as subject-interlocutor also shapes the encounter" – the process of genre standardization (Stam 2000: 231). The narratives from interviews provide empirical grounds for theorizing cinematic texts that are so closely written with texts outside the diegetic world. This chapter outlines the institutional structure, genre practice, star-fan relations, and mediality instrumental in canonizing popular Tamil cinema, with particular focus on star films of Rajnikanth and Vijay.

Cinematic Institution

It is possible that the star system in Tamil cinema can be assayed as two time periods –

the pre-MGR and post-MGR. The actor's political success gradually encouraged star

'dictatorships' in film industries of South India. The Tamil cinema industry became heavily

regulated by its actors/stars. Stars began to acquire studios, some owned theatres, and the

leading majority signed deals that included film distribution rights (Das Gupta 1991: 215, 232).

They had a "whip hand" over the Tamil film industry and were able to control its financial

prospects by cancelling or postponing call sheet dates (Sivathamby 1981: 51-52). As glamorous

proprietors of their images, stars presided over all aspects of their films – story, character,

dialogues, scenes and songs – some of them carefully masquerading themselves as heroes of

the working class. The actors' involvement in the films' textual signification, their active roles

behind and in front of cameras, on and off the production sets and public stages may indicate

that stars are at the top of the pyramid in the industry. But the truth is Tamil cinema's structure

is one that is circuitously evolved into a simultaneously hierarchical/linear and

centralized/decentralized environment. Actors, producers, directors, technicians, laborers and

audiences are tied together in a circular, flat plane like a statistical scatter diagram where each

member is in continual partnership with the others. It is the muscle of the capital that erects

temporary hierarchical conditions of production and reception (which is always already

collaborative, like any other film industry), contributing to the dynamic nature of the cinematic

institution in Tamil Nadu. For example, when Rajni's films *Baba* (2002) failed miserably at the

box-office, he personally paid pay financial compensations to distributors who lost a fortune by

buying the 'trusted' Rajni brand. However, in the subsequent years Rajni rose back to super

stardom through the films *Chandramukhi* (2005), *Sivaji* (2009) and *Endhiran* (2010).

Vijay's own line of flops in the last two years -- *Aadhi (2006)*, *Azhagiya Tamil Magan* (2007), *Kuruvi* (2008), *Villu* (2009) and *Vettaikaran* (2009) -- incurred losses with distributors and theatre exhibitors. In fact, when Vijay's fiftieth film *Sura* did not bring expected returns, the Tamil Nadu Theatre Owners' Association (TNTOA) demanded compensation (40% of the minimum guarantee investment) from Vijay, asking him to follow the footsteps of other stars (*After Sura Flop* 2010). In early 2011, Vijay's *Kaavalan (Bodyguard)* faced problems with Sun Pictures (who also owned most theatres in the state), and TNTOA delayed the film's release by refusing to screen the film on the specified date boycotting Vijay films. Interestingly, the Tamil Nadu Distributors Association stepped in to support Vijay, and asked theatre owners to withdraw their protest (Prasad 2007). Distributors for Vijay films are also known to invest in Vijay's fan club activities, disclosing an industrialized investment in fan culture.[38]

So it is safe to conclude that star value can always be revived based on the conviction held by distributors and producers that there is an audience for revivalist star products. Dharani, the director of Vijay's hit movie *Pokkiri* claims that Rajni or Vijay have steady market values, and that there is always minimum profit, even if the film fails at box-office -- "they are heroes, because they have markets" (2011). No matter what, the stars are bestowed with inimitable dormant power for resurgence. The commercially viable model of star centrism in Tamil film industry has been successful for the reason that it has arrested its target audiences into the medium and its institution. To properly understand how audiences were scripted into film texts or how the culture of star devotion developed, we need to return to the case of MGR's deification through cinema.

---

[38]After MGR, there has been a suspicion of how it was the film industry that funded star fan associations. Fans were an important part of cinema's commercial culture helping boost ticket sales. Telugu stars like NTR and Nageswara Rao were supported by the industry in encouraging and managing their fandom (Srinivas 1993: 1-2).

Annadurai and Karunanidhi, leaders of the DMK were the architects of Tamil nationalist storytelling, responsible for a visual conception of the Tamil national. MGR could not have achieved stardom without the political voice organ of their scripts. His transformation from actor to statesman happened within the confines of cinema. His films methodically erased all borders between reality and cinema qualifying his screen life as befitting experience to become the political leader of the state. Though the MGR phenomenon had altered the cinematic fabric of Tamil Nadu enforcing the tradition of cine-politics, the most significant outcome of his successful reel-to-real transfiguration was the *cinematization of spectatorship*. His audiences performed spectatorship as devotional fandom enacting cinematized participation with the film texts and its subject, the star. One of the commonly reported incidents of MGR's mythic existence is as a household deity for many poor families in Tamil Nadu's urban and rural areas (Pandian 1992: 131-132). In this sense, Rajnikanth is a symptom of MGR's stardom. In the period between 1977 -1987, when MGR moved to Fort St. George to preside as the state's Chief Minister, he acted in fewer films and only re-runs of his older films did well at box-office. Meanwhile, new actors Rajnikanth and Kamal Hassan emerged as stars. For his popularity Rajni was considered as a potential MGR, and owing to his acting skills, Kamal was compared to the thespian, Sivaji Ganesan.
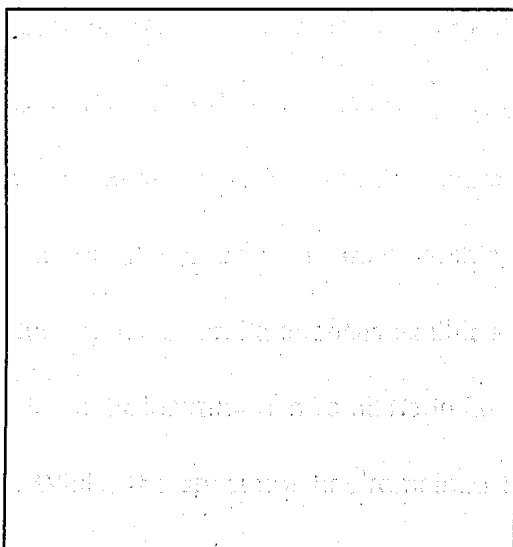
Fig. 50. Rajni and Kamal in Bharathiraja's
Pathinaaru Vayathinale (*When I was 16 years
old,* 1977).
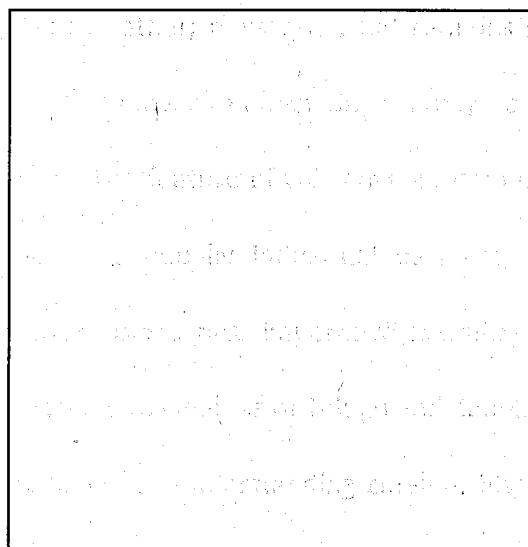
Fig. 51. MGR's colleague and arch-competitor,
Sivaji Ganesan in *Parasakthi* (1952)

MGR's accumulation of fan base through populist cinema and his later entry into electoral politics is not a precedent only for Tamil actors, but for contemporary fans as well. With historicized subjectivities, fans of new actors engage in star-politics to increase their prospects for economic empowerment. Directors often blame the audiences for their inability to consume "serious" cinema, forcing the artists to produce plebeian cinematic expressions that provide them with holistic pleasure -- masala films (Dharani; Vinavu). Some groups of audiences bemoan the 'indecent' excess in these entertainment products (Dickey 1993: 5 -6). Stars openly confess their primary motive is to please the fans ("Vijay on Kaavalan's"). Fans' self-awareness as addressees, their ritualized performances of consecration, and the general awareness amongst audiences that they can make or break a film through reception is well-ingrained in the social consciousness of consumers of Tamil Cinema. I am interested in this collective agency that the audiences seem to exercise through viewership. Firstly, while the films dedicate their 'attractions' to social desire the audiences are also selective consumers in that they selectively choose how to participate with cinema's commoditized offerings. Secondly, in this cyclical line of

perceptions and expectations, no one entity precedes the other; however, what remains is a critical impression that cinema is a social game. Monolithic power to affect cinema may not lie with any one member alone in the cinematic institution. The feature of collective conscious in cinema simultaneously has membership in the social. As equally influential partners, the producers, actors and audiences exhibit a *shared genre consciousness* imperative to stabilizing the cinematic institution in Tamil Nadu (and can be extended to cinemas of Telugu and Kannada, too). Whilst the spectator has remained the primary locus for understanding cinema, his/her heightened participation with the Tamil extra-cinematic space(s) promotes the spectator to higher level of communication and representation. How unique or special is the Tamil spectator? By parsing previous research on spectatorship in India, I wish to formalize the specialness or extra-participative aspect of spectatorship demanded and supplied for star cinema in Tamil Nadu.

The "Indian" Spectator

A majority of scholarship on Indian cinema using diverse approaches ranging from historical to textual have had to invariably make inroads into spectatorship studies. The 'Indian' spectator has been valued and observed for his/her role in determining the popular in Indian cinematic works. The interrelation between audience pleasure and popularity has largely been the premise for understanding cinematic implosion of the daily lives of spectators (Thomas 1985). The cinema hall in India is considered to be the first public space where people of different classes and castes assembled under one roof. While class-based demarcations with ticket prices from low to high, from floor seating to balcony seating were instituted, symbolically, moving pictures had become the "first social equalizer" in congregating the masses (Sivathamby 1981: 18-19). Patrons of the classical art forms -- the 'original' artistic expressions

of culture -- regarded cinema with condescendence for its 'non-traditionalist,' 'impure' art, as a

gimmickry that only appealed to the uneducated and poor. The egalitarian aspect of cinema,

'entertainment for all' requiring no special knowledge in consuming its art made upper class

members denounce Indian films for their unrefined entertainment (Pandian 1996: 950;

Baskaran 2006: 247).[39] The dominant discourse about cinema as entertainment for the masses is

based on the economy of class (and caste structures within India) and is notably crucial in

shaping the relationship between India's multilingual cinemas and its audiences. Since a greater

number of India's population are stratified in the lower classes, the concomitant class-specific

sensibilities of audiences presumed and prescribed by the producers are intrinsic to Indian

cinema narratives. This "socially, culturally, and economically subordinate position of the urban

poor" is the source for defining thematic and commercial semantics of India's cinematic corpus,

and therefore class-driven power relations are "central to understanding the relationship of

viewers to the medium" (Dickey 1993: 141). Judith Mayne's seminal review of spectatorship as

beyond identification and signification is also relevant here because spectatorial agency over the

apparatus is considerably intensified in the Indian context (1993).

The difference between cinema's champion industry Hollywood and popular cinemas in

India lies in the amount of direct address. Popular narratives openly assimilate audience

expectations and quite often the film's characters acknowledge the audience seated on the

other side of the screen by 'looking at them' – looking into the camera, delivering lines that

invite the audience on the *inside*. Elsewhere, theorizing Indian audiences as a "melodramatic

public," Ravi Vasudevan argues that direct address binds "the spectator into a hermetic universe

onscreen [and] heightens the individual psychic address and sidelines the space of the

---

[39] Karthigesu Sivathamby first, and later MSS Pandian and Theodore Baskaran discuss the cinema hall as a unifying public space in the context of Tamil Nadu, nevertheless, their inferences are deducible from the pan-Indian scenario of early cinema.

auditorium as a social and collective viewing space." (134) Citing the processional conscription

of citizen-subjects through myths distributed by the nation-state, Ashish Rajadhyaksha famously

argues that Indian cinema much like the capitalist system recruits *subject-viewers* into its

democratic regime of citizenship. The "narrative contract" registered between participants and

producers, is para-textual and transparent for the *cinematic citizen* throughout the course of a

film (1998: 9, 12). So spectators are "habituated" to preset modes of storytelling, instigating

them to employ culturally conditioned "styles of active spectating" (L Srinivas 2002: 165).[40] My

main argument is that active spectatorship practiced by 'Indian' audiences intensifies as we

move south in India. The culture of spectatorship is also specific to regional public spheres. The

'active' in active spectating enters the dimension of fan organizations. The narrative contract in

Tamil films is open for consensus and regularly amended to communicate with fans. Particularly,

the Tamil spectator's active participation with films operates at seemingly higher levels of

induction in to diegetic and non-diegetic realms of cinema (in comparison to 'Bollywood' and

Hollywood).

The Tamil Spectator

Popular consciousness in Tamil Nadu is dominated by performative and intertwining

cultures of cinema and electoral politics encompassed under the aegis of language – the

celebrated feeling of Tamil *patru* (allegiance or devotion). Apart from observing how Tamil films

functioned as social glue in the cinema hall, Sivathamby highlights another important role of

Tamil cinema: "... in the Tamilian context the film has a very significant place in that it is the *first*

---

[40] Active spectatorship as the distinguishing characteristic of Indian cinema is described by Lakshmi Srinivas as a form of spectating that 'constructs a particular relationship with the film – for instance, the film is not accepted as an entirety or finished product. Audiences use the film as raw material with which to construct their own experience, in the process reconstructing the film. Four such practices adopted by audience members are identifiable as: 'selective viewing', 'participatory' and 'performative viewing', and what those in the film industry refer to as 'repeat viewing.' (2002: 165)

aesthetic expression of the Tamils that had the entire Tamils as its patrons" (1981: 17) (emphasis

added). Films have been instrumental in vocalizing and visualizing the culturally and politically

determined Tamilness for the state's citizens. Along with the birth of Tamil aesthetics, what

evolved is the symptomatic Tamil citizen, a self-conscious subject of the region's cinematic

discourse simultaneously belonging to the concept of the Tamil nation's masses.[41] Then, the

question to be asked is: what kind of subject-spectator does star cinema create? Historically

constituted, viewers of Tamil cinema partake in the industry's commoditized entertainment, and

constructing their own extra-filmic worlds of interaction. How unique is the fan? How different

is the fan from audience? Does the star have different kinds of audiences? Andrew Tudor (1995)

argues that "'audience' is not a satisfactory term," and goes on to resituate movie audiences in

relation to their fostered relationships with the stars (74). He states:

> The star system provided basic leverage for audience involvement. .. Particular
> star figures often developed an affinity for particular story-types. .. [Stars]
> formed recognizable 'signals' through which an audience could easily re-enter
> the familiar terrain. (77)

The "familiar terrain" for the Tamil star fan is both an internally and externally defined project,

with their personal contribution and involvement as essential for the construction of star's

visual terrains of public and screen images. Among the variegated audiences available for the

Tamil market, for example 'youth', 'family' or 'ladies', fans are another set of specialized

audiences, who are evidently the most cherished market demographic for the film industry. The

sociological 'extremity' in Tamil fan culture has piqued much interest in the West resulting in

significant political and ethnographic studies in the region (mainly in the cities, Chennai,

Madurai and Puducherry) (Hardgrave 1973, 1975; Dickey 1993, 1995, 2001; Gerritsen 2009;

Rogers 2009, 2010, 2011; Nakassis 2007, 2010, 2011). This dissertation disperses from these

---

[41] Consciousness of belonging to the masses, is also more specifically the subaltern consciousness that
was carried through MGR's screen image (Pandian 1989).

anthropological inquiries (as context) to include fan as cinematic text, considering that fans are more than sociological units, their involvement in genre formation appoint them as cinematic bodies. After briefly outlining the history of fandom culture in Tamil Nadu, the following pages will present a textual analysis of the fan system – club activities, directorial supervision, media partners, and the foundational fan-star psychosocial enactments through and in cinema. The Tamil spectator is then a cinematically mediated subject who is invited to make associations of the personal with the social through the capitalist icon, the star. The crux of this chapter is to understand the genre process by answering why and how fans extend their reality into cinema.

The Genre Spectacle

The coexistence of the star and the fan in the same medium of cinema, simultaneously located within the film body and outside, makes the star genre system remarkable for its assimilation of fan texts onto the screen. Developing themes that repatriate fans to the star and vice-versa means that the spectacle is not just about the star, but more importantly about THEIR spectacular fandom. The genre spectacle is inclusive of stars and their fans. Over the last two years, fan culture in Tamil Nadu regained significance in an industrialized attempt to revive the star genre's commercial value. Vijay has made many explicit overtures to his fans on regarding his dependency on their loyalty, and their bearing on his success in cinema and politics. On July 15 2010, Vijay's soon to be released film *Velayutham* was launched amidst scores of fans in an auditorium in Chennai (the programme was also broadcasted on television), breaking the tradition of high profile attendance from film personnel alone. An open invitation was sent to fan clubs across the state and country to attend the special occasion. The star-fan affiliation is bi-directional requiring stars in turn to affiliate with the fans. This kind of interaction is a staple for genre stability. Moreover, genres are "rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and

social exigence; [genre] motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with

the recurrent" (Miller 1984: 163). A visual allegory of this relationship between the apparatus

and the commodity (and its extensions) featured in the promotional trailer released as part of

the movie launch celebrations. The most conspicuous part of the trailer is a live animated

illustration of Vijay's face, whose contours are formed by black dots. With loud cheers the black

dots flock together to form Vijay's face and symbolize as his fans (see below).
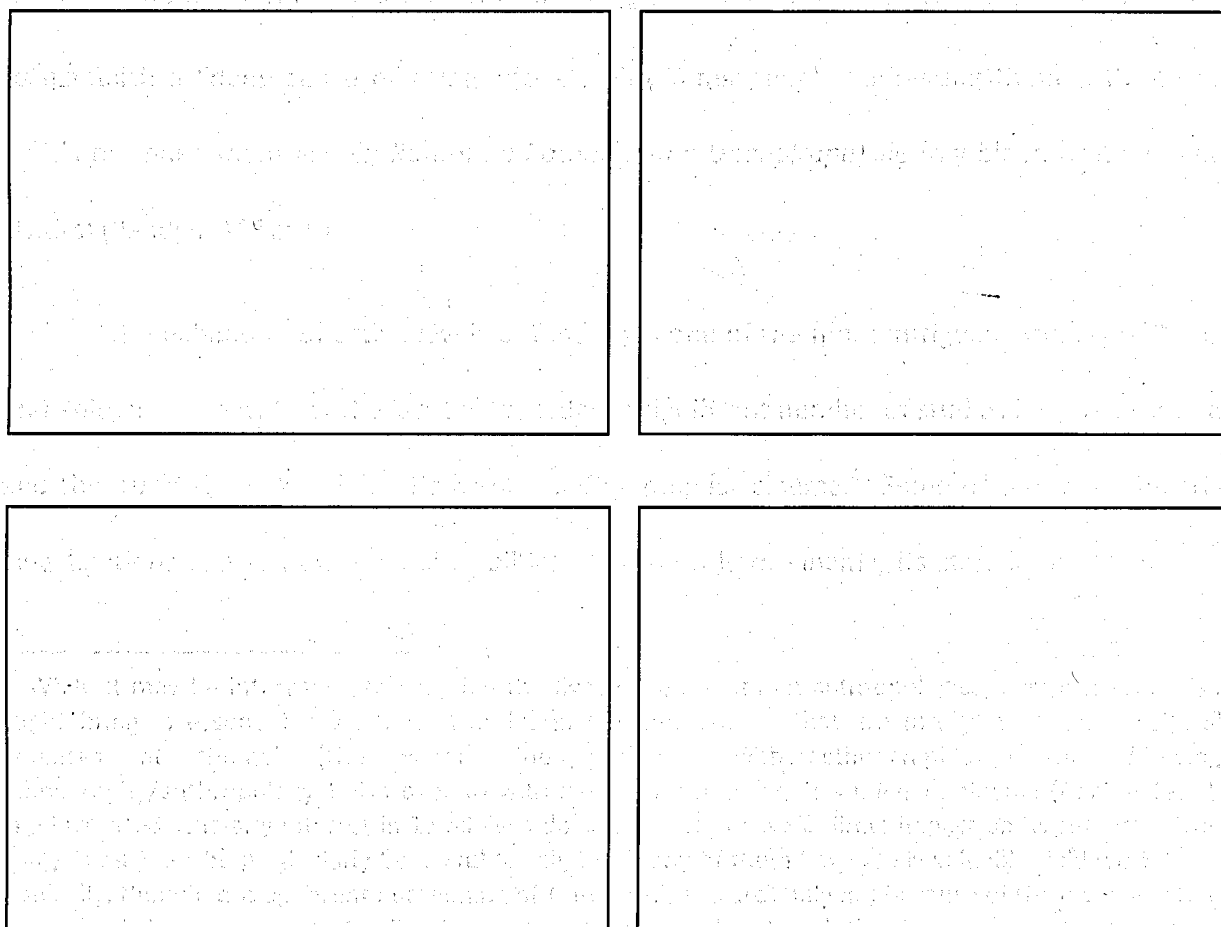
Fig. 52. Vijay's face constructed by fans in the trailer for *Velayutham*

The thronging noise of fans increases as the face finally forms in to a whole, and the text that

appears below the image reads: *rasigargalin peradharavudan -- with the overwhelming support

of the fans* (see fig. 52). Since the promo begins with this sequence, what originally looks like

baiting Vijay fans to pump up the pre-release hype also has symbolic meanings that are probably

new. Movie launches in vernacular reference are called *pada poojai* (*movie poojai*: auspicious ceremony that involves conducting brief rituals to Hindu gods before the first take of a film), so invoking fans instead of god for the *poojai*, reconfigures or elevates the position of fans in relation to the star, symbolically, placing the fans as the film trade's preferred good omen. The face of Vijay also works as a meta-face containing faces/voices of all the fans. Again, it is important to remember that these strategies are not entirely new; they are what may be called 'MGR visitations' -- contemporary forms of star-fan affinity. After all, MGR was the first film star to establish a "deep sense of camaraderie" with Tamil people addressing them with strong words of endearment like *En Rathathin Rathammana Undapirapugale* (my blood brothers and sisters) (Pandian 1992: 100).

The exhibition of active levels of fandom is one of the more intriguing aspects of Tamil and Telugu cinemas. Over the last two decades, a significant number of studies have researched and theorized the cultural practices surrounding popular cinema.[42] Some of the first scholarly investigations focused on the state politics, and the role of cinema, its stars in advancing the

---

[42] While it may be interesting to examine the lives of fans from an anthropological perspective, it also might bring in essentialist western attitudes in studying culture that are foreign to familiar cultural practices at 'home' (the west). The problems with ethnographic cinema ("seeing ethnography/anthropology") also overlap with issues in ethnographic studies of cinema (Roning 1996). The increased scholarly interest in Tamil lives does not always have a direct impact on its subjects. "The analysis may not be particularly be useful for all, but many of them have really valuable field work data. Ironically, though, this apparent burgeoning of Tamil studies is probably not because of the diversification of academic interests among Tamils who are travelling abroad (although they have contributed to it quite a bit). Because, most of the research is actually done by non-Tamil scholars abroad. They probably feel like Darwin when he landed on the Galapagos Islands -- full of peculiar animals with unique behaviour. They had to be 'understood' and explained" (Kumar 2011). Alternatively, I believe that the call for authenticity is a farce; nevertheless, works of Nakassis and Gerritsen (in comparison to seasoned works of Bernard Bate, David Pratt and even Martyn Rogers), struggle to denounce their Western lens. While a full critique is due for each one of these studies, it goes beyond the purpose of this dissertation. "[Edward] Said makes the point that the study of the Orient (through anthropology, linguistics etc.) permits a fixing – in homogenizing 'scientist' discourses -- of the already constructed other" (qtd, in Hayward 259). At the same time it is prudent to acknowledge that this study may be susceptible to similar criticisms in spite of my careful efforts. I have tried within my capacity to not spectacularize the lives of the concerned human subjects. I also want to acknowledge the possible devaluing of this research work for not having been articulated in the Tamil language.

political state of affairs for Tamil citizenry (Sivathamby 1971, 1981; Hardgrave 1973, 1975).

India's veteran film critic and historian Chidananda Das Gupta's book *The Painted Face: Studies in India's popular cinema* offers a critical chapter on the history of South Indian popular cinema and its stars (1991). In 1992, M.S.S. Pandian's *The Image Trap* presented a groundbreaking study on the politics of MGR's star image through a comprehensive analysis of his films and their impact on the socio-political imagination of the people of Tamil Nadu. On a progressive curve of theorizing the nexus between cinema and politics, Sarah Dickey's research *Cinema and the Urban Poor in India*, filled the genealogical void with the first anthropological investigation of fan cultures in Tamil Nadu (1993). The works of Sivathamby, Das Gupta, Pandian and Dickey offer important foundational research frameworks for South India cinema studies.[43]

Given the amount of research done in this field, this study builds upon and departs from their multiple approaches to examine the textual quality of fandom, and fans' membership in filmic processes moving within but also beyond the extra-cinematic sphere of reception. About his expectations for Vijay films, one fan said: "As far as we are concerned, we have united (*aikiyam*) with Vijay. Both fan club members and common people would like to see films mixed with action and romance (*athiradi kalanda kaadhal*)" (Balu). This unification with the star screen performance, with the dominant element of the genre suggests a unification of texts from inside and outside the cinematic regime. The unification with film medium, whatever it has to offer, affirms fans as texts and not separate entities. Fans also made their subjectivities clear by describing to me how directors produced texts, some specific for fans, and some specific for the general audiences, speaking of themselves as different from the general category of viewers.

---

[43] Some of the significant works in this research area also include: Madhava M. Prasad (1999, 2004) and S.V.Srinivas (1996, 2006, 2010) on South Indian stardom; on the visual culture of Tamil film banners (2009); on the organizational aspects of Tamil star fan clubs (Martyn Rogers 2007), about the social and linguistic landscape of Tamil youth and cinema (Nakassis 2009), and research on the imagerial cityscapes of fan subjectivities in fan banners and photographs. (Roos Gerristen 2009).

The observation of this "self-reflective interaction between fan and fan object [star] in which the latter comes to function as an extension of the former" should extend meaning into realizing that such self-reflexivity permits fans to be featured in film texts in more than explicit ways (Sandvoss 2005: 100). How or why have Tamil star fans achieved a strong sense of involvement in the process of genre and informed participation in stars' public lives?

The mobilization of fans for MGR's political aides and vote bank in the sixties and seventies has its basis in fan club activities. Established at the state, city and district levels with head offices in Madras, fan associations of MGR, Rajni and Vijay ultimately resided power with the star.[44] The head offices for Rajni and Vijay are located in respective wedding halls owned by the stars. Weekly meetings are held at these locations for secretaries of all clubs, and the stars occasionally preside over the proceedings. The main activities of fan clubs include film release day and the star's birthday celebrations during which fans erect huge cut-outs and banners of stars near theatres, and engage in garlanding, milk cleansing and other 'devotional' rituals for the cut-outs, and processions through the city from temples to theaters with the film reel boxes. Aditionally, the fans burst crackers, distribute sweets to the general public and the neighbourhood, and throw confetti at the screen on cue with the star's introduction scene. Of course, social welfare activities also underscore the intended 'social responsibility' in these film-related celebrations.

The welfare initiatives include blood donation camps, planting trees, free distribution of books to school children, wheelchairs to the physically challenged, gold chains for district heads, raincoats for rickshaw pullers, rice bags for victims of natural disasters, and other charitable

---

[44] S.A. Chandrasekar, father of Vijay and 'honorary' president of All India Vijay Fans' Club executes control of all the activities, and is known to have much influence on all of Vijay's decisions in cinema and politics. This is one of the reasons why Vijay's stardom has shown signs of instability in the recent past. The insatiable desire of fans for identification and association with their screen hero keeps him in popular demand.

activities common in Tamil Nadu. For most of these functions, stars are rarely in attendance, nevertheless, activities continue all year round and intensify in the three months before the scheduled film release dates. Uma Vangal, film-maker and professor at LV Prasad Film and TV Academy, has observed in her documentary film on Rajni fans (editing-in-progress) that Rajni is never too far away, for fans indulge in wearing the Rajni brand on watches, pens, books, phones, key chains and wall papers. The stars are active myths that continue to remain a part of fans' daily lives including family spaces.

My Friend, the Star: Distance between the Star and the Fan

> Hey come here my friend
> Let's live this life together
> You and I are one
> If we stand together, the world will be under us (Lyrics from 'Vaada Vaada',
> *Sivakasi*)

> No matter where you and I come from, we don't need introductions
> We don't need to be related
> Even though we are born to different mothers we are brothers (Lyrics from 'Nee
> Entha Ooru', *Tirupachi*)

These lyrics penned by the director himself (Perarasu) give important insights into directorial insertions of star-fan texts and the tone of star-fan address. Both these operations are informed by the genre scheme. Spectatorship is intrinsic to the genre and lyrical calls like these demand specific kind of fans for mass heroes. Introduction songs are filled with so many fan referents that sometimes they have no diegetic purpose, revealing that fans are not just viewers. Simply put, the Tamil star fan is a participatory spectator, whose participation is performative, informed by historical and cultural references to their on-screen and off-screen lives. Not only are the fans now acknowledged and represented in the film (see figure 53), they are addressed by the star as friends and brothers. The method of public and fan address has not gone through drastic mutations.
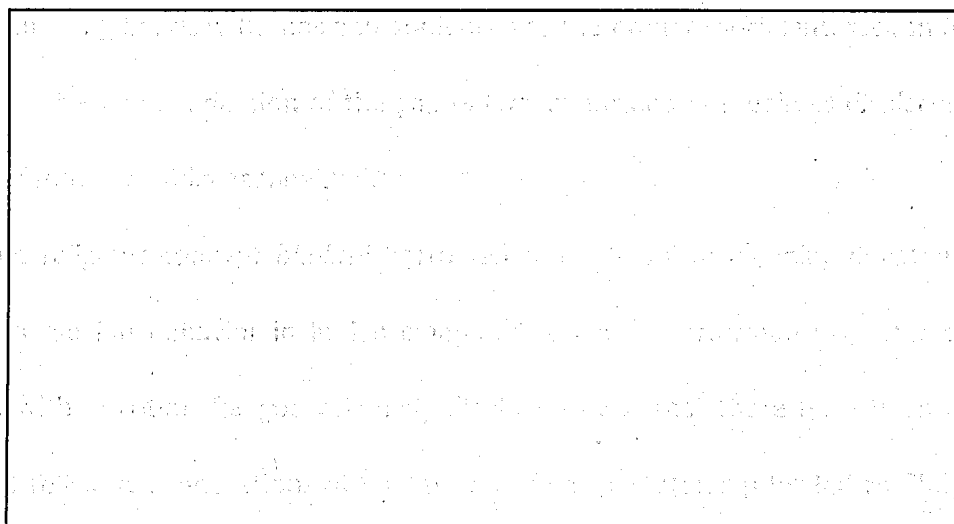
Fig. 53. Vijay in *vaada vaada* (Come on, come on) song from *Sivakasi:* The Star inviting fans of all social backgrounds to join him: dancers costumed as auto-rickshaw drivers, garbage disposers and other working class types.

From MGR to Vijay, stars have sought themes of brotherhood, friendship, class and caste unity and communal oneness albeit with tonal differences that have affected the perceptual distance between the star and fan. While MGR's star persona demanded apotheosis, and Rajni earned a combination of respect and comradeship, Vijay's vehicles diluted the address further, sometimes closing the distance between the star and the fan. The age difference between Rajni and Vijay, and subsequently their fans is partly responsible for differential addresses on the collective spirit. Whereas Rajni's fans are older, Vijay's fans are younger, influencing the language deployed by the stars. This difference in linguistic expression is connected to the fact that the Tamil language is diglossic – of two strands, spoken Tamil (*Kochaitamil*) and literary Tamil (*centamil*) (Sciffman 1978; Bate 2009). The movement from "Dravidianist oratory" to Tamil speech forms like "standard colloquial" to "substandard colloquial" coincides with the growth of the three stars; Rajini's dialogues and song lyrics are generally more poetic and possibly profound especially when contrasted with Vijay's that are generally pedestrian (2009: 10). Like the Tamil language, a star's cinematic language is also

diglossic renewing bonds with fans and audiences as the primary social interaction for fans. The cinematized sealing or reduction of the gap between star and fan realities displaces traditional analysis of fandom in India as 'bhakthi'.

The religious concept *bhakthi* borrowed from Hinduism meaning devotion, has been used to explain fan behavior in Indian cinema. The rituals performed over star cut-outs are paralleled with devotion for god originally displayed by saints. There have been attempts to circumvent religious connotations of bhakti to explain spectatorship for Indian films. One such negotiation initiated by Prasad redefines bhakthi in relation to cinema as *enthusiasm*, but not quite enough to bridge the star-fan distance, as he clarifies that the screen "retains its separateness" and that the spectator perceives the screen to be intact. In another study titled "From the Sacred to the Performative: Tamil Film Star Fan Clubs, Religious Devotion and the Material Culture of Film Star Portraits," Martyn Rogers (2011) argues that beyond the religious subtexts involved in fan devotion, fans are motivated only by monetary benefits of star worship. I believe that both these studies do set on the right path in deconstructing the concept of bhakthi but could have moved further to trouble its relevance. Fan activities that mimic religious rituals are completely devoid of religiosity; acts of consecration have become more cultural than religious. As Rogers indicates, fans' investments in star phenomenon are simulations of devotion orchestrated by the partnership between film producers and film consumers, ultimately benefiting both, albeit in varying scales. Therefore, the terms devotion and worship need to be used as though they are already removed from its sacrosanct origins, suggesting the annulment of bhakthi and its meanings. By exercising their right to political power, fans are active participants in the business of fandom. There is a section of Rajni fans that voiced their discontent against Rajni's deception on entering politics. Newly formed party wings of younger stars like Vijaykanth instigate embarrassment and shame for Rajni fans (Kodanur 'Rajni'

Anandan) (Valasu M. "Rajni' Anandan). Vijay's fans too, on hearing the ambivalent response

(about floating a party or supporting AIADMK or DMK) from Vijay during the May 2011

elections, annulled their membership from Vijay's fan association and joined existing political

parties ("Fans join DMK"). When fans exhibit a clear agenda, their devotion for stars is

secondary to self-promotion; fans may even be said to use star discourse as vehicles to further

their lives (which happened to many of MGR's followers as they came to occupy lucrative

positions in his government (Pandian 1992)). These observations also undermine theoretical

explanations that Tamil cinemagoers watch popular films to escape reality and "consume

utopia" (Dickey 1995). Fans need to be assigned more agency in consuming entertainment as it

is, because they are "actual – rather than implied – readers." Moreover, "fans' fantasies and

daydreams are no simple form of escapism or withdrawal from 'reality', but a meaningful

engagement and balancing of conflicting sources between self, fantasy and culture" (Sandvoss

2005: 73, 78).

The Star's *Mass*: Articulating Spectatorship in South India

In the indexicality of Vijay's face seen in the trailer for *Velayutham*, lies the star's *mass*.

The word 'mass' is used at multiple levels of communication in South Indian film praxis. The

exactitudes of its origin are not known, however, the word and its derivative usages have been

part of the industrial language since the early 2000s and became popular with films of Vijay and

trends thereafter.[45] In all the differently communicated forms, class is the common factor

---

[45] With similar film cultures, Telugu and Tamil cinema shared common industrial practices. S.V.Srinivas states that the 'mass film' came into use during mid and late 1980s. I believe that the expression 'mass' was prioritized and re-designated to specific aspects of star films in the 21st century. The popular circulation of this relatively new term also indicates a possible analysis of Rajni and Vijay films separately under different periods. Although a majority of Rajni films under the star genre mode are from the 90s, the main body of Vijay films is a continuing genre tradition that acquired star-specific meanings. Therefore, differences between star texts can best be analyzed first as products of star specificities rather than temporal periods.

characterizing mass as: people from lower classes, or the collective lower class sensibilities for social pleasure or the subaltern celebration of the screen heroes inside theatre premises, and mass as also a class-based market division.[46] John Fiske explains that even though "popular culture appeals to a far wider audience than the traditional working class, ... that wider audience is still drawn from what we have called the subordinate class in itself" (2003: 106). The term mass is deployed for and/or from a permanent class position, that of the proletariat. Semantic notions of the word 'mass' can be better understood with excerpts from actual exchanges of/between spectators, fans, producers, directors and film critics.[47]

To extract a specimen from public forums, I wish to analyze a particular comment on Youtube video showing audiences inside a theatre celebrating Vijay's 'flying fish' entry in *Sura*. The comment:

> unrealistic intro.. swimming is ok.. but jumping from water??? *tamil makkals* [people]are that innocent? I dont think so.. may be the *other* part or segment of people whom they call – *mass* (my emphasis).

I have identified three important strands in this comment. First, the comment's author speaks for the 'Tamil people' by questioning the credibility of the scene and the spectators' celebratory reaction. Second, he/she also answers the question by condescendingly suggesting that a particular section of the society might enjoy such 'cheap' spectacles. By stereotyping a group of people, the comment, brings caste/class politics into film appreciation. M.S.S. Pandian (1996) argues that by the 1940s "the boundaries between the so-called high culture and the low culture were already well-affirmed in specific ways in the Tamil social milieu. On the side of high culture, one had Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music" largely patronized the by the upper castes

---

[46] Star films are often publicized as film products for the populated masses and they are denominated as "B" and "C" centers in market terms – theatres that are located in town and villages. (Mazumdar 2007: 225).

[47] Most interviewees struggled with the mass question, and could not articulate a clear answer, thus reflecting the volatile nature of the concept itself.

(especially Brahmins) and cinema on the other (950). We could extend his argument to say that film consumption evolved to subsume that divide within its terms. There exists an explicit assumption that some films could not even be understood by certain sections of the audience among both film-makers and the audiences themselves. The comment I have cited above is one such example. Regardless of the commenter's actual identity, it closely resembles what an elite (probably an upper caste individual) perception of the 'mass' is likely to be. It is also worth noting that even the elites, for instance, do not find it unrealistic to have illogical song sequences in the middle of a narrative. Even their definition of excess is governed by the mainstream Indian cinematic sensibilities. Fans on the other hand, have more specific designs for the star's mass.

Chinnamalai Balu, who holds office as the Honorary Secretary of South Chennai's Vijay Fan Association speaking about Vijay's popularity in comparison to other stars states that while Kamal is known for his "versatile" acting kills, like Rajni's growth to stardom, "Vijay has mass!" (*Vijay'ku oru mass irukku*). He continues: "from little children to adults everyone goes 'Vijay Vijay Vijay', so he has been conferred upon with a mass like that." In the same conversation Balu adds that fans also expect mass through songs, dance and fight scenes. Fifty-seven- year-old Ramadas, who has been a member of the South India Rajnikanth Fan Association since 1979 ardently defends Rajni's specially long career by stating that "Rajni still has mass", that's why he could do a film like *Endhiran* equaling "Hollywood standards". A sense of the star's pervasive cultural power dominates these expressions of mass. Adulated by people from "six year olds to sixty years olds", the star's mass is a measure of his likeability, and not just popularity (Ramadas). Additionally, mass also refers to how the star translates his appeal as performance in the film, the original measurement of a star's talent. MGR's song and fight sequences were key attractions of his vehicles making audiences believe in his charismatic invincibility (Pandian

1992). Similarly, for Rajni and Vijay, fan and audience pleasure is derived out of the stars'. idiosyncratic performances within the masala scheme of entertainment. According to fans perspective, the star's mass, is the star's on-screen and off-screen glorious stature something to which they are bound to.

From the perspective of directors and producers, mass translates into a guarantee of success, certainty in appealing to lower classes. Of course, it is also not that black and white. For example, in his attempt to describe mass, Babusivan the director of *Vettaikaran*, spells out some commonly accepted ideas:

> The educated watch cinema, they don't like masala films and look only for script-oriented subjects. Whereas, mass are people who applaud when they enjoy a scene (*Oru scene-a paathu kai thatravanga mass*). People who like masala elements in a film are called mass... The crowd that celebrates the victory of the poor hero and downfall of a rich villain is mass. We need to represent screen heroes as one among them, someone who can achieve what they cannot.

Evidently, Babusivan comments that mass represents audiences from the lower strata, and because of their lack of, or poor access to education, they enjoy masala products. He also suggests that mass represents the fractions of society who are ardent fans of cinema who demonstrate their interest by standing in long queues for tickets to star films, the ones who sit in the first row, for those whom watching the latest releases is top priority (*cinema paithyam*). While a stereotypical portraiture of working class behavior is described, the fact that directors incorporate mass elements inside the films comes through clearly. Another director, Perarasu, clarified the textualization of mass in films:

> When Vijay's call sheet was confirmed, I had to make changes to the script. *I had to add more mass for the climax scene.* I added more powerful dialogues for Vijay, and structured the last scene like a grand fight with all rowdies from Chennai assembling in one spot.

Therefore, mass are also cinematic elements that typically give them audio-visual pleasure. Punch dialogues, action sequences, dance performances and introduction scenes work as mass as they attract the masses. Perarasu comments further that not all actors have mass, and scenes where Rajni flips cigarettes, or walks and stylishly turns to look, draw a lot of whistles (*whistle parakum*), however, the same actions is likely to draw widespread disapproval if performed by a different actor. Like Rajni, Vijay has earned the status of mass hero – with more action, more mass. Mass is drawn from fans who have crossed into higher levels of fandom, and affection for the star where they enjoy anything the star does. There is a continuous movement between how mass is constructed, represented and symbolized as pleasure and power. Star cinema's non-politicized discourse on the mass may lead to a theory of mass. I propose a non-classificatory system of descriptive units to delineate the various productions of mass:

1. Filmic mass: film elements unique to genre and prerequisite for its success (applause as mass, dance as mass); and filmic masses : diegetic crowds signifiers for masses or the nation.

2. Profilmic mass: film publicity that profiles fandom as star phenonmenon; and profilmic masses (actual members of fan clubs)

3. Afilmic masses: the general population who inspire cinematic representations of 'reality'

Despite having multiple meanings with multiple locations in and around film texts, mass works as a signifier for the genre's assimilation of audience expectations and fan involvement. Mass appeal for the popular is integrated into cinema as a genre ingredient signaling the fans-in-text formulations of spectatorship.

There is one other aspect of star cinema that attracts fans and audiences interpret the screen texts – intertextuality. The already established openness in star film scripts is also generated by the references to internal myths and external facts outside the immediate diegesis. Directors consciously capitalize on the cultural consciousness to garner appeal to such scenes, to incite more participation with the entertainment.

The Intertextual Star

Cinema and other different forms of mass media has been a fertile ground for hosting and creating intertexts; active members of the cinema circulate intertextual references about themselves and the films. And stars are the epitome of intertextuality. Keith A. Reader asserts that "the very concept of film star is an intertextual one, relying as it does on correspondences of similarity and difference from one film to the next, and sometimes too on supposed resemblances between on-screen and off-screen personae"(qtd. in Allen 175). In view of the continual flow of intertextual relationships between Tamil cinema and politics, and phenomenal stardom and fandom, I have identified two kinds of star intertexts that have percolated out of the system of star films: self-reflexive references to their films, off-screen persona or their stardom; and references to MGR as progenitor. These types of intertextuality are a melding of Fiske's "horizontal and vertical" textualties (87). I will elaborate on these two references with some examples.

Rajnikanth and his co-star Khusboo in *Annamalai*, sing and dance to a duet in which they refer to each other's real life screen names. The song titled 'Khusboo Khusboo' also has both of stars looking into a bioscope to watch a montage of clips from each of their filmographies. The song has an interesting opening because, the music pauses when Rajnikanth first asks the dance team and then gestures at the audience to guess what kind of flower was his girlfriend's name (see figure). This is done because the script trusts that audience are aware that actress Khusboo

has the word 'poo,' Tamil word for flower, in her name. Assuming that the audience guessed right in the given time, the song resumes play. The actors take turns to sing about each other – interspersing romantic lines with references to each other's star appeal – evocatively reflected by these lines: "You are forever the king, you are Rajni, you are the leader of ten million men" and "You are Khusboo ... There's no woman like you, you are the talk of the town..." The odd interruption of diegetic flow with what can be attested as a fully intertextual song, does not necessarily distanciate the spectators from the film, rather it invites their participation with star texts.
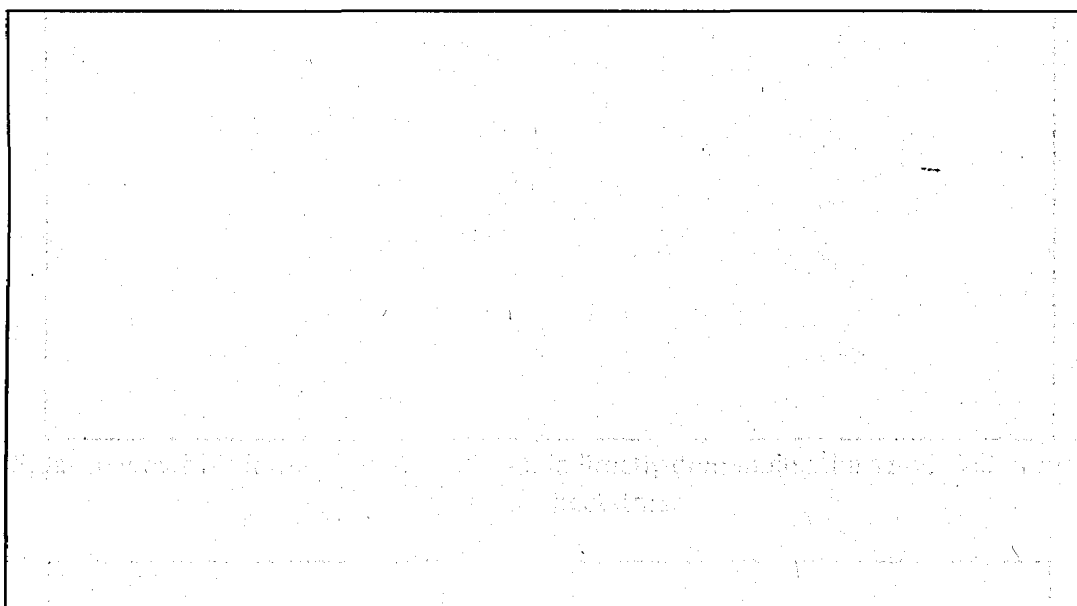
Fig.54. Rajni asking the rhetorical question to the audience

The self-reflexive-metacinematic aesthetic organizes intertextual elements for the genre's open partnership with its audiences. The audience experiences the film in the company of the stars; the shared screen space permits reception for intertextual material only furthering the actor's stardom. Like Rajni, Vijay has made references to himself. In *Villu*, Vijay makes the introductory entry dressed up as superman like figure covered in different pieces of colourful sarees flying in to the center of a fight scene at a market place. Female bystanders remark in awe and speculate about him being the '*Pokkiri* man' and later to belittle the villains, Vijay says: "I'm neither Bruce

Lee or Jet Li.. I'm *Ghilli*."[48] In the introduction of song *Vettaikaran*, Vijay's 10 year old son Jason

Sanjay makes a cameo appearance towards the end of the song. Jason enters wearing the exact

same costume as his father, walks stylishly towards the camera shifting his scarf from one side

of the neck to other, just as his father a few frames ago. That he is the star's son is established in

the next shot, where both their figures walking toward the audience is shown in split-screen
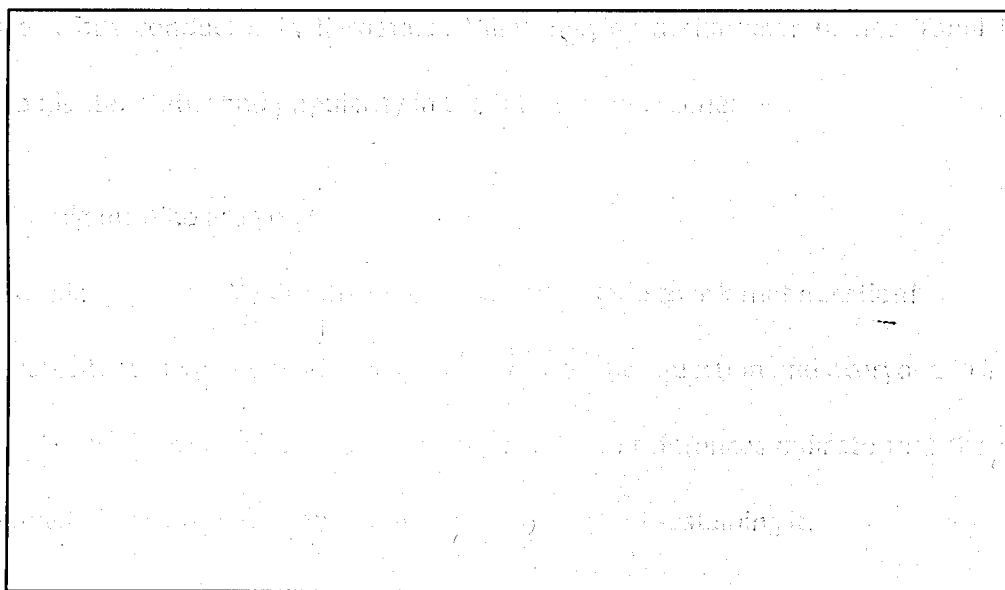
frames.

Fig. 55. Jason wows his father and the dancers, indirectly demanding the same kind of response from the spectators.
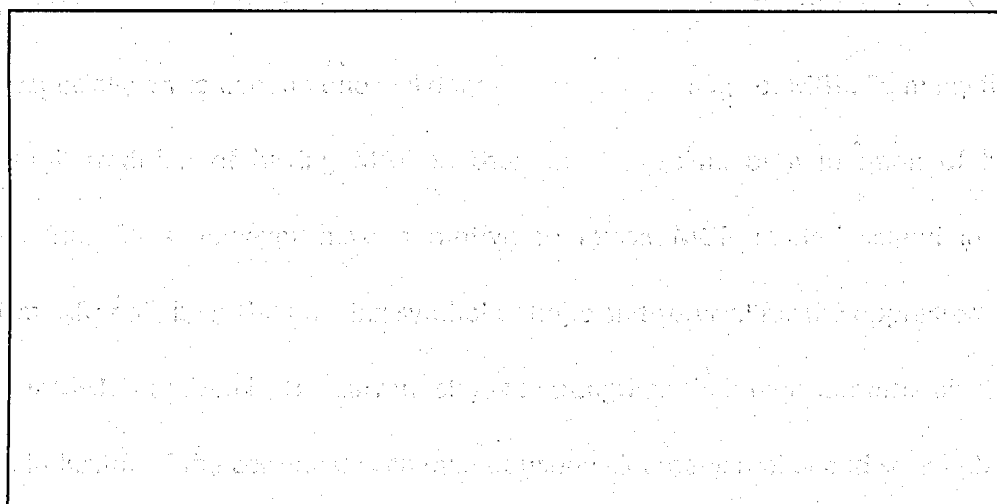
Fig. 56. The closing shot of Vijay's introduction: Publicness of the star

---

[48] *Ghilli (Bull's Eye)*, 2004 is another super hit film of Vijay.

These insertions are taken for granted, although excessive, they are not identified as excess. Similarly, Rajni too makes plenty of reference to his personal life. In the song 'Azhagu' (Beauty) from Baasha, the heroine Nagma fantasizes Rajni to be every person she sees like the bartender, traffic policeman, security guard etc. In that daydream-like sequence, Rajni appears as a bus conductor on a public transport bus. He walks out of the bus and salutes at the audience, by which he refers to his personal life - a publicly known fact that before films, Rajni was once a bus conductor in Karnataka. Vijay, playing a character named Tamil in Pokkiri, alludes to his star status and popularity in the introduction scene:

Hooligan: Who are you?

Tamil: You're the first guy in Tamil Nadu to ask that question!

He insinuates that anyone would know the answer to that question and everyone in Tamil Nadu will know 'Young Commander' Vijay, the film star. Such references indicate that the star is not only acknowledging his popularity but also reaffirming and sustaining it.

MGR can easily be the most popular film star from South of India. It will not be difficult to find his portraits and statues in every village, town and city in Tamil Nadu. In the world of cinema, especially on screen, no one will dare to tarnish the image of MGR. So many films follow the 'natural' tradition of having MGR in their mise-en-scène or a mention of him in the narrative. Star films however have a motive to revisit MGR related screen imagery and symbolism. After all, he is the undying symbol of hope and survival for the oppressed. The social valency for MGR is utilized by the current stars to strengthen their own star discourses. This may act as an indicator of the continual exchange between cinematic reality and social reality that is characteristic of star cinema. Cinema space invades off-screen space inserting itself as a marker

of social reality or lived experience to the point where later films must reference visual and oral signs of MGR as the coordinates of verisimilitude.

Sometimes, these references are written into the script by the producers and directors who, apart from the stars, are more interested in sustaining the commercially viable genre. In *Baasha*, R. M. Veerapan, producer of the film was an ADMK minister, therefore his loyalties to MGR translated in to the film and on to Rajnikanth. The parking spot for an auto-rickshaw has a board titled MGR auto stand, which is not uncommon to see even in real life. Rajni also venerates MGR before the film begins by showering flowers on his picture. Though Rajni shows mature detachment from overtly alluding to MGR, in *Sivaji* when his character comes alive after a simulated death, Sivaji returns under the name of MGR -- "M.G. Ravichandran not Ramachandran". So when the villains recognize him as Sivaji, they raise doubts about his identity for which Rajni replies -- "I am both Sivaji and MGR". This line makes reference to the two greatest stars of Tamil Cinema – Sivaji and MGR.[49] In spite of this dialogue's lack of any concrete subtext, it is inserted into the script for the audience to join the dots and enjoy their beloved star making self-exalting references to other older stars. In the glory of the past, or rather in the ghostly presence of older myths, stars of today aggrandize their star power, just by making cinematic comparisons.

Vijay makes excessive references to MGR in his films, through dialogues, songs and sometimes he mimics popular mannerisms of MGR like famous rubbing the nose, swinging walk, and head turns, which are already standard cultural references. Vijay's introduction in *Villu* is again another completely intertextual scene. A TV anchor for a special program on "heroes" interviews random people on the streets to find their favorite hero (screen hero implicit). Auto-

---

[49]Sivaji Ganesan, a thespian, came around the same time as MGR in to Tamil Cinema. He debuted in *Parasakthi* (1952), the controversial anti-Brahmin DMK film. Unlike MGR, Sivaji took a different path and joined the Congress party. MGR got his title *Makkal Thiklagam* (Crown jewel of the people) while Sivaji known for acting skills, was given the title *Nadigar Thilagam* (Crown jewel of performance).

rickshaw drivers mimic Rajni's dialogue from *Sivaji*. A few others mention Kamal Hassan. An old female flower vendor describes her favorite hero as MGR. For every actor, the frame splits to show clips from their films. When the anchor moves away, the old lady stops him to tell him, that she likes one more hero. She recalls an incident where Vijay as the diegetic character fights some bad guys with panache. So Vijay is not only the screen hero who should have figured next in the list, but now he is introduced from within the narrative, blurring boundaries between fiction and reality. A "romantic" scene in the same film has Vijay and MGR (from *Anbe Vaa*, 1966) on parallel frames romancing Nayantara and late actress Saroja Devi respectively. The scene has Vijay reenact every dialogue and expressions of MGR in seducing the woman beside him. Though the original scene from *Anbe Vaa* is genuinely humorous, its forced screening in *Villu* seems unnecessary. Vijay is also made to refer to Rajnikanth. For example, in *Pokkiri*, Vijay watching *Chandramukhi* in the theatre is inspired by Rajni's reaction to Nayantara's kiss. Ultimately surpassing all these minor filmic references is MGR's active mythical influence that has undeniably mentored the stardom of Rajni and Vijay; theirs is a stardom that is not independent of the MGR phenomenon, quite possibly it is even dependent on the kind of fandom MGR originally inspired and still generates among old and new generations.

In 1984 the famed 'art film' maker Balumahendra's *Neengal kettavai* (what you asked for) was released to much surprise for the audiences and critics. *Neengal kettavai* was a film with more of the most common masala elements of the time. Balumahendra had previously made some of the most critically acclaimed films of Tamil cinema such as *Moondram pirai* (1983). Yet he made a conscious and an almost tongue in cheek departure from what he was known for. It was supposed to be a response to all the producers and press articles that criticized Balumahendra for making 'slow paced' films without any of the 'entertaining' elements that the people enjoyed. The notion of what the people enjoyed and the responsibility

of films as a business to cater to their 'needs' has long existed. The 80s and the decades since then have guided the star-fan dialectic to subsume the film making process itself.

Rather than expanding the horizons, the stars and producers preferred to stay within what seemed to be a working formula while reinforcing audience expectations. Directors like Shankar who had already established a style and an authorial flavour hybridized the star genre by elevating its 'consumer quotient'. The star genre was no longer for the mass alone. In fact the mass elements in his films did not preclude any social class. They invited participation into the spectacle that was created around the new augmented star who stood for the working class, shared middle class aspirations, embraced modernity, and engaged in technocracy.

Star Genre: A Prognosis

> A genre abandoned by producers tends to disappear from viewer's vocabulary, while continued production serves as the most common institutional reinforcement of an existing genre... Even when production institutions continue to support genre, exhibition circumstances may destabilize generic identification (Altman 1999: 91).

A genre goes through market fluctuations because of its own institutional make-up, and sometimes influential institutions around the genre. The problems listed by Altman have also challenged the longevity of Tamil cinema's predominant genre. The stability of the star film mode has been tested multiple times during the last fifty decades; the Tamil box office scene is almost always unpredictable. There are two important features of the star genre that have proven to be advantageous to its continued longevity, despite its obsession with star phenomenon. The genre's structure is conceptually laid out like other genres, but the pattern is shaped by the star whose cinematic exploits offer a mix of genre pleasures. As opposed to synchronous themes, the male star is an individual, and an actor with links to multiple discourses that are salient to the genre and its marketing. By drawing attention to the star's solo performance throughout the film, and across a set of films, the genre has a simple plan to focus all its improvisations on the single unit of the star, which all other components are made to endorse. The other aspect of the genre is the plurality of stars, and the subsequent multiplicity of star-specific sub-genres, leading to a vibrant market of variety for large audiences. The formula is universal, but these films are marked by nuances (at least remotely) unique to each actor. The differences, however, are minimal among smaller stars; clear oppositions emerge only with bigger stars.

In the current scene of Tamil cinema, the popular adage "Rajni is Rajni" rings true of Rajnikanth's special stardom that is considered beyond the reach of other actors. That,

however, does not stop them from citing him in their own performances. Some actors like Dhanush and Silambarasan (Simbu) aim to take the place of Rajni. Dhanush is Rajnikanth's son-in-law, and is his de-facto heir at least until Rajni's grandson becomes an adult. Dhanush so far has had relative success with the medium by taking the path of masala films with a large share of 'realism,' and enjoys a lot of popularity because of his filial relations with the superstar.[50] But he too starred in the film *Maapillai* (son-in-law), a remake of Rajni's 1989 film of the same title. Simbu on the other hand, started his career as a child actor and was introduced as a 'star' with the title 'Little Superstar', which has now changed to 'Young Superstar Silambarasan'. Rajni's superstadom and its mythical inscription into Tamil culture constrain others from dethroning him. The accepted dynamic in the industry can be described as 'Rajni films and the rest'. The dichotomy varies and diversifies as we go down the hierarchical list of stars (determined by their market value). The next industrial opposition would be between Vijay films versus vehicles of significant other actors like Surya, Ajith, Dhanush and Simbu to name a few. The variations also reflect upon the genre's mutative form. Actors who begin their career with different profiles are expected to experiment with the star genre at some point, and most of them resign to less risky and time-tested hero-centric films. The Rajni film, then is the contemporary archetype for the genre, and as Perarasu points out "not everyone can do a Rajni film, fans won't like small actors making the same gestures. It will look exaggerated." The perception is that younger stars need to earn substantial amount of fame before becoming a mass hero but, what is also implicit is that Rajni film has its own genre vocabulary. The inference from these extra-textual tensions is: the star genre is the rule; the star film is specific, and fandom for star cinema is an industrially-induced cultural condition. Writing about Rajni's career, social critic and journalist Gnani bemoans the quality of cinematic products manufactured by the Tamil film industry. In the

---

[50] Rajni has two daughters who did not seek acting as a profession, and are involved in film and TV production.

article *Star who killed the Actor*, Gnani laments about the pressure that forces actors to follow commercial pursuits, and forego their acting careers. The star and the actors are different persons and "the business model [of Tamil cinema] has been that it is an arduous task, if not impossible, task for someone to be both" (2010: 214). Rajnikanth, indulging in excessive heroism in *Muratu Kaalai* (*Raging Bull*, 1980), was transformed from an actor to a mass star. Except for Simbhu, most actors have a one or two phase process that executes their screen image conversion. By casting them in superhuman roles, the commercialization of actors takes place through the cinematic language that is devoted to the male actor's corporeal exuberance.

The surprising effect of the star genre in Tamil cinema is its migratory influence. Between Hindi and South Indian industries (mainly Tamil and Telugu), there have been many remakes. But 'Bollywood' recently has turned its attention to commercial success of the mass hero trope. Not completely unfamiliar, vehicles of Rajnikanth have continued to amaze North Indians. The difference in the kind of fandom lured by Hindi and Tamil stars has always been acknowledged, with Tamil star appeal as different and far more powerful for its socialized reception. The significant transition in Bollywood's market from domestic to international, and globalisation's effect of increased consumer power for the urban masses, during the late 1990s modified cinema's core narrative replacing old with the new glamourized India. Today, a majority of Bollywood films are stories about the top five percent of Indian society, many films are also set entirely in abroad. Stars like Akshay Kumar and Salman Khan even with internationalized films still ruled the B and C markets in north India, known as stars with steady market value, unlike other more glamorous Bollywood actors. In 2009, Salman Khan starred in the remake of Vijay's film *Pokkiri*, retitled as *Wanted* under the same direction of Prabhu Deva. The film's big success with the 'masses' motivated him to experiment with more South Indian star-oriented scripts. The experimentation has been refreshing for audiences who until this

point had to consume extremely materialistic narratives about India's rich. Despite bad reviews

from film critics, Salman Khan's star image and the hybridised star genre trend in Bollywood are

continuing to reap profits. Giving the film two out of five stars one review opened on this note:

"*Ready* should have just been called: Salman Khan. The film is essentially a one-man show by an

actor, who doesn't act" (Chopra 2011). The export of the star film mode is apparent from this

review; Bollywood stars are resorting extravagant heroic plots to in a way to rejuvenate their

screen images as heroes, and for a financial uplift in domestic markets.
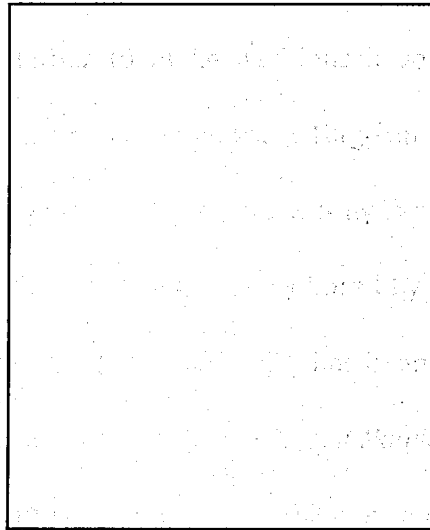
Fig. 57. Salman Khan in Bollywoodized/Hollywood-like remake of an originally Telugu film of the same title.
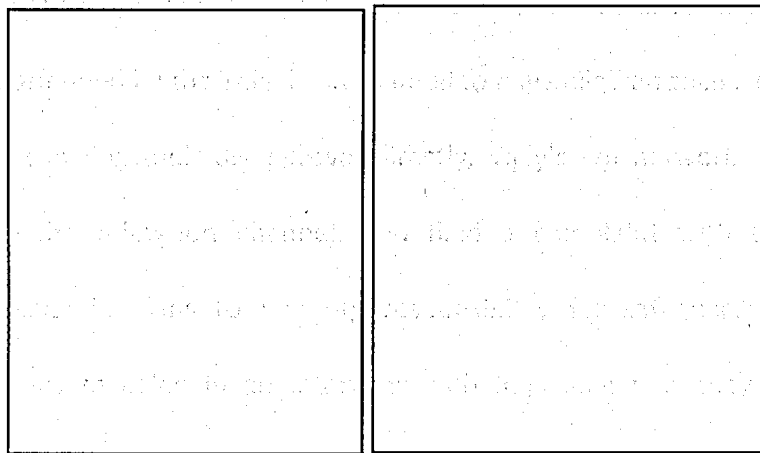
Fig. 58. 'Tamil Lion' Surya in the Tamil superhit film *Singam and* 'Hindi Lion,' Ajay Devgan in the remake.

Returning to Tamil Nadu, after some of Vijay's films failed to make enough profits, and after the success of *Tamil Padam* (*Tamil film*, 2009) (spoof on the star genre) many in the industry predicted the "end of mass films." The brief commercial lull was soon off-set by runaway hits like *Singam* (*Lion*, 2010), *Paiyya* (*Boy*, 2010), *Siruthai* (*Leopard*, 2011) of other actors replicating the mass hero template. Rajni's success is partly because of his discretion to choose strong scripts even if their formulaic. As evidenced in his films, Vijay's questionable judgement of scripts and mediocre acting skills have been his biggest weaknesses. His ineptitude and over-dependency on his father to make decisions have pulled him down; he faces a continued threat of losing his position in the industry. Large anti-Vijay mainstream waves are in operation in urban and rural centres – these are mostly fans of other actors, members of middle-class and youth audiences who are genuinely bored by his repetitive star action. While his fans continue to support all his endeavours, Vijay has been losing ground with the general audiences. Recently on a popular TV show debate *Neeya Naana* (You or Me) which provides a platform for 'common people' to speak out on social issues, a participating member voiced an open message to actor Vijay to stop acting in films that are no different from the other and urged him to take up new scripts and character roles that break the star formula. Vijay and his father were of course offended by the Television channel to have allowed such a comment to be telecasted. Instead of showing their disapproval directly, Vijay's fan network staged protests outside the office of the television channel, and filed a complaint with the city police commissioner. It is usual for fans to take up responsibility for safeguarding their star's popularity, but as it was revealed in an interview with Raja Ravi that they organized the response to the TV channel after consulting with Vijay and his father. The first time Vijay fans staged a protest was when Vijay's films were spoofed for a comedy show *Lollu Sabha* (Mockery

Court). After both incidents, the management of the TV channel released public apology statements for having offended Vijay's fans. Rambhala, the former executive producer of the show reveals that he had to meet S.A.Chandrasekar in person to apologize for tarnishing Vijay's image. In fact, the show was cancelled for constantly running into trouble with star fan associations. A number of Rajni films were parodied, but Rajni or his fans did not raise any problems. Retaliations like these on behalf of Vijay speak about his insecure star image, so fragile that any damage need to be rectified immediately.

Comedy productions in Tamil Nadu have always played it safe, being very careful in openly critiquing political leaders and cinema stars. Although a distinct Tamil humour aesthetic can be detected in its films, parodies are cautiously scripted to not offend any actor. Rambhala mentions that television channels are dependent on discourses of cinema, so they cannot afford to constrain their relationship as there is a constant threat that the film producers union may not provide TV channels with movie clips, the main reason why apologies were publicized. Complaining about restrictive culture of humour in Tamil Nadu in comparison to the West where one can even publicly criticize the president, Rambhala raises a crucial issue of diminutive mainstream space for political criticism of regional cinema. So when the feature-length spoof film *Tamil film* released in 2009, its stupendous box-office success was a good sign. The film contains many sub-plots parodying a large span of Tamil films. Its main critique is of the star dominated narratives. Styled like the *Lollu Sabha* show, the film boldly ridicules every single feature of star films with witty humour, so much so that, the film's success can be attributed to its inclusion of all the star masala elements -- even in mockery, it was packaged as an wholesome entertainer. No star was spared, and every popular filmic reference is parodied. The revisionist discourses produced out of *Lollu Sabha* and *Tamil Film* are important markers of genre-based critique, concomitantly affirming the production of star genre in the industry. The

spoof introduction song in *Tamil Film* replicates the introduction song template to every detail

with a plenty of sarcastic expletives – lyrics, camera angles and movement, the 'mass' mise-en-

scène, caricatured dance steps and direct references to some prop signifiers like that of *Sivaji*'s

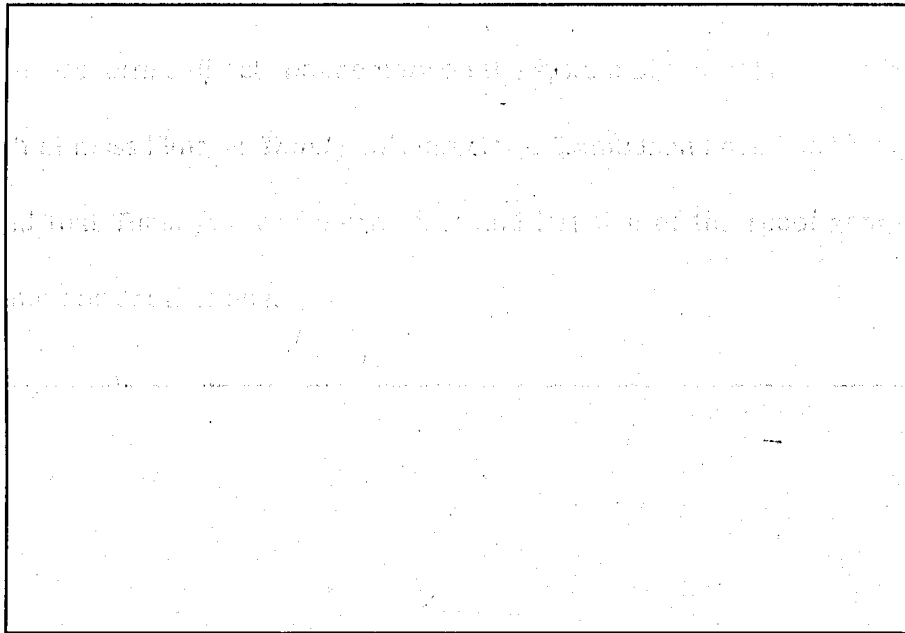painted bodies (see figure 60).

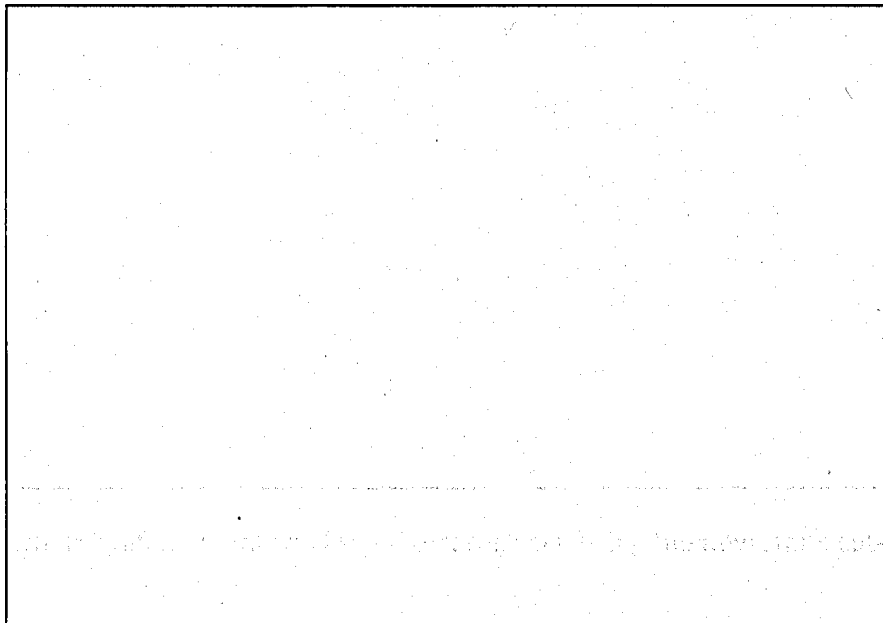Fig. 60. Star signifiers: Actor Shiva becoming a star through parody

Fig. 61. Worshipping the cut-out of a star on screen

A compelling statement in the song is the inclusion of star devotion activities inside the diegetic premise. The songs show scenes of fans performing rituals for the star's cut-outs. This has never featured in any of the star introductions. For the first time, and for the sake of comedy and critique, external signifiers of stardom are used as internal signifiers, insinuating that the extra-cinematic text is very much part of the genre constitution, as discussed in the last chapter. These images form a direct commentary on the system of star politics, and could have marked the death of mass films, as *Tamil film*'s director C.S.Amudhan hoped. In the same vein, he also expressed that *Tamil film* can be the first and last film of the spoof genre in Tamil cinema, there cannot be another one.
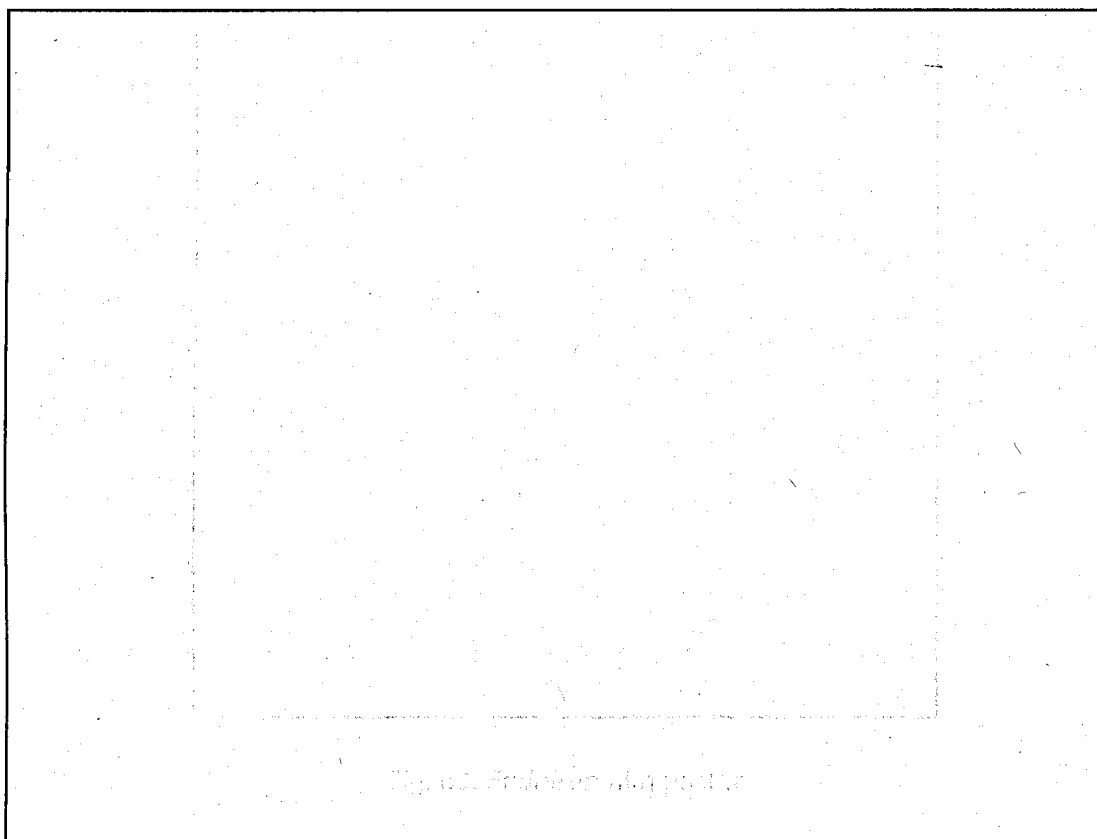

Fig. 62. External signifiers as internal signifiers: Milk cleansing the new star's cut-out

On that conclusive note about Tamil cinema's tendencies, there are some final questions that rise out of this study. What is the future of the star genre? What kinds of

mutations can be predicted? Are star films going to survive new movements emerging in Tamil cinema? Rajni's success with the medium, and Vijay's struggle with continuing the mode, may only encourage innovations within the same format. Other kinds of film modes will always be seen as deviating from the dominant stream of a dynamic star cinema. Any genre reinvents itself as part of the process of commercialization. Since the commodity value of the star will always be indispensable for the all films, it is more likely that the nature of spectacle might change. Some signs of this metamorphosis have already emerged.

Fig. 63. *Endhiran* film poster
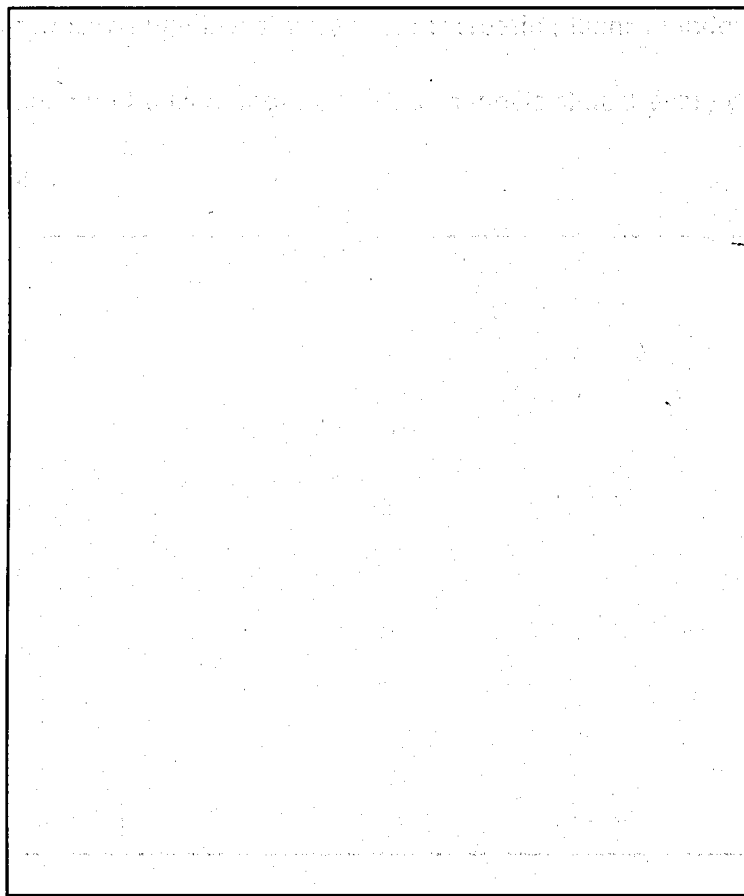
Director Shankar's spectacle *Endhiran* (*Robot*) starring Rajnikanth is India's most expensive and most profitable film that blends sci-fi elements on the base of the masala genre. The futuristic film portayed Rajn in two roles – one as a scientist, another android he invents. The film's highlight was the reduced amount of star antics – no introductions songs, no punch dialogues

and no star-fan conversations – but an intensive star performance throughout the film. In actuality, the film is essentially a star film, masked as sci-fi melodrama. Shankar's craft is evident in the finesse with which he refines the star spectacle. There are many dialogues in the film that have the punch effect, but are not overtly signaled as punch dialogues (no exaggerated camera movements, no grand sound effects). They were written specifically for pre-existing practices of consuming the Rajni spectacle (Sabu Cyril). The script, in fact, gave a lot of scope for Rajni's action heroism. While the film had no direct references to Rajni's superstardom, the publicity campaign for Endhiran saw huge investments into recreating Rajni's fandom – the "madness" was televised, published and talked about on news channels almost every day until six months after the film's release.
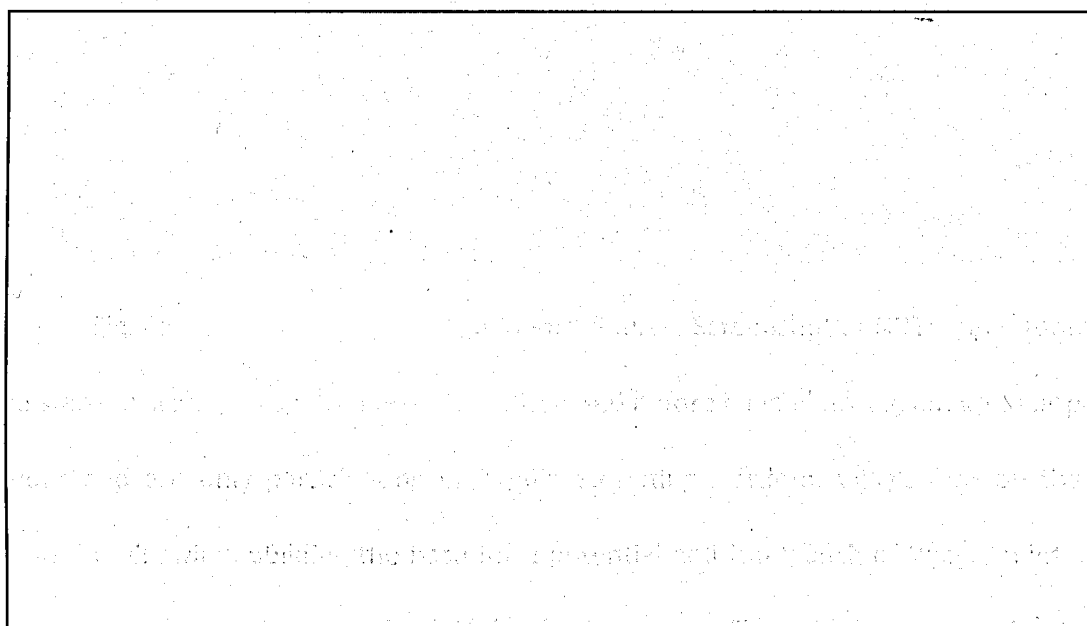
Fig. 64. Rajni's cut-out garlanded as part of the pre-release celebrations in Chennai. Source: Srinivasan R.

After attempting to blend his old image of the romantic hero with the mass-ness of his films in Kaavalan, Vijay may be breaking the mold, and acting in Shankar's film Nanban (Friend) to be released later this year. Anticipations are high for this film, as Vijay is sharing screen space

with two other actors, and Shankar is expected to revamp his image, just like he boosted Rajni's.

Vijay's other film to release before *Nanban* is *Velayutham*, where he plays the role of a Zorro-like social vigilante. The film is reported to be completely loyal to his star formula.

Rajinikanth's 'Robot' biggest grosser of all time

Pratibha Parmeshwaran |

BRAND RAJINI NETS 375 CR

IBNLive.com

Fig. 65. News channels on Rajni Mania. Source: Screenshot of NDTV news footage

On the star-fan scene, fans of Rajnikanth as discussed before have almost given up their political ambitions and are only participating in Rajni's escalating stardom. Vijay's fans on the other hand, are in full swing, building the base for a potential political launch of Vijay. An interesting development is that of 'Ultimate Star' Ajith who is next to Vijay with having sizeable fandom. Fondly known as *'Thala'* (shortened version of Thalaiva), on his birthday, on May 1st 2011 dissolved his fan clubs, and announced that he did not want to use fans any more for the advancement of his career. Previously, he made news for dropping his title 'Ultimate star,' and recently in a commemoration event organized by the film industry for the DMK leader Karunanidhi, Ajith in his speech, revealing that he was forced to attend the event, made bold

statements about how film stars were pressurized to foster political personae and affiliate with political parties. He made a public request to the Chief Minister asking for him to issue a directive to allow actors to exercise the right for personal freedom. The speech became controversial especially because of straightforward questions like these: "If we don't attend the protest [against the Tamil genocide], we are portrayed as anti-Tamils. On the one hand, they want us to participate in political events and on the other hand they threaten us not to enter politics. What is wrong in our entering politics if we are expected to participate in political and social events?". Rajnikanth was the only star who immediately supported Ajith's speech by giving him a standing ovation on stage ("CM against mixing").

All these events and discourses give multi-directional suggestions for Tamil cinema's future with star trends. Be that as it may, star fetishism is integral to the commoditized spectacle of cinema and life (as Debord argues (1977)), and pa thetterns of transformation will sustain star genre. I predict that star excess will become more implicit and indirect in its delivery, masqueraded by some refined masala. Audiences will continue to derive pleasure from a changing variety of star performances. Depending on Vijay's future, if he turns into a politician, then, fans will continue to idolize stars as their vehicle to a sustainable future.

Works Cited

"Actor Vijay observes fast." *The Hindu*. 17 Nov. 2008. Web. 31 Mar. 2011.

"After 'Sura' flops, theatre owners ask Vijay to pay up." *The Times of India*. 23 May. 2010. Web.
24 June. 2011.

Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999.

Annamalai. Dir. Suresh Krishna. Perf. Rajnikanth, Sarath Babu. Khusboo. Kavithalaya
Productions. 1992.

Anandan, Kodanur 'Rajni'. Personal Interview. 4 Feb. 2011.

Anandan, Valasu M. 'Rajni'. Personal Interview. 4 Feb. 2011.

Arunachalam. Dir. Sundar C. Perf. Rajnikanth, Soundarya. 1997. AVM Productions.

Baasha. Dir. Suresh Krishna. Perf. Rajnikanth. Nagma. Raghuvaran. 1995. Satya Movies.

"Baasha is Back." *The New Indian Express*. Feb 19. 2009 Web. July 14 2010.

Babusivan, B. Telephone Interview. 1 Feb. 2011.

Balu, Chinnamalai. Phone interview. 3 Feb. 2011.

Banerjee, Sikata. *Make me a Man! : Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*. Albany,
N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Baskaran, Theodore. "Discourse on Tamil Cinema." *Folklore as Discourse*. Ed. M.D.
Muthukumaraswamy. Chennai : National Folklore Support Centre, 2006.

Barthes, Roland (1957). "Myth Today." *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: The

    Noonday Press, 1989.

Bate, Bernard. *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India*.

    New York : Columbia University Press, 2009.

Bhaskaran, Gautaman. "Rajnikanth casts spell on Japanese viewers." *The Hindu*. 6 Jan. 2002. 20

    March. 2010 <http://www.thehindu.com/2002/01/06/stories/2002010601320900.htm>

Blackburn, Stuart H. "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads." *Asian Folklore*

    Studies. 37:1 (1978). 131-149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1177587>

Blevins, Jacob. Introduction. *Dialogism and lyric self-fashioning: Bakhtin and the voices of a*

    genre. Ed. Jacob Blevins.Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2008.

Britton, Andrew. "Stars and Genre." *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. New

    York: Routledge, 1991.

Brooks, Peter. "The Melodramatic Imagination." *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry*

    James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

Brown, Blain. *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Image Making for Cinematographers,*

    Directors, and Videographers. New York: Focal Press, 2002.

"Building foundation for politics, says Vijay." *Deccan Chronicle*. Apr 9. 2010. 3 Feb. 2011. <

    http://www.deccanchronicle.com/chennai/building-foundation-politics-says-vijay-619>

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 2nd ed.Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University

    Press, 1972.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.

Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press,

    1996.

<u>Chandramukhi. Dir. P. Vasu. Perf. Rajnikanth, Prabhu, Joythika, Nayantar. Sivaji Productions.</u>

    <u>2005</u>

Chopra, Anupama. "Review: Ready." *NDTV*. 2 June. 2011. Web. 25 July. 2011

"CM against mixing politics with film world." *The Hindu*. 8 Feb. 2010. Web. 29 July. 2011.

Coates, Paul. *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image*. London: BFI Publishing. 2010. 51 – 53.

Coats, George W. *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI:

    Eerdmans Publishing, 1983.

Cyril, Sabu. Personal Interview. 23 June. 2011.

Das Gupta, Chidananda. *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema*. New Delhi: Roli

    Books, 1991.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith. New York: Zone

    Books, 1994.

Derné, Steve. *Movies, Masculinity, and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men's Filmgoing in India*.

    Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 2000.

Dharani. Personal Interview. 29 Jan. 2011.

Dickey, Sara. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. New York, NY, USA : Cambridge

    University Press, 1993.

---. "The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India." The

    Journal of Asian Studies. 52: 2 (1993). 340-372.

---. "Consuming Utopia: Film watching in Tamil Nadu." Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a

    South Asian World. Ed. Carol A. Breckenridge. Minneapolis:University of Minnesota

    Press, 1995.

---. "Opposing Faces: Film Star Fan Clubs and the Construction of Class Identity in South India,"

    Ed. Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer. *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics*

    and Consumption of Popular Culture in India. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Diken, Bülent and Carsten Bagge Laustsen. "Introduction: Cinema and Social theory." *Sociology*

    through the Projector. London; New York: Routledge. 2007.

Dissanayake, Wimal. Introduction. *Cinema and Cultural Identity : Reflections on Films from*

    Japan, India, and China. Ed. Wimal Dissanayake. Lanham, MD: University Press of

    America. 1988.

Dowd, Garin. Introduction. *Genre Matters : Essays in Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Garin Dowd,

    Lesley Stevenson, & Jeremy Strong. Bristol, UK ; Portland, OR : Intellect, 2006.

Dyer, Richard. "Male Sexuality in the Media." *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*.

    London ; New York : Routledge, 1993.

---. *Stars*. London: BFI Publishing, 1998.

---. Introduction. *Heavenly bodies: Film Stars and Society*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004. 1-16.

Edwards, Tim. "What are you looking at? : Masculinity, Performativity and Fashion." *Cultures of Masculinity*. London; New York: Routledge, 2006.

Ellis, John. "Stars as Cinematic Phenomenon." *Visible fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. London; New York: Routledge, 1992. 91-108.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Meodrmama." *Imitations of Life: a Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*. Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit : Wayne State University Press. 1991.

"Fans join DMK." *The Hindu*. 31 Mar 2011. Web. Apr 22. 2011

'Film News' Anandan. Personal Interview. 19 Jan. 2011

Fiske, John. *Reading Television*. London ; New York : Routledge, 2003.

Fuss, Diana. "Introduction: Figuring Identification." *Identification papers*. New York : Routledge. 1995.

Fiske, John. "Intertextuality." *Television culture*. London ; New York : Methuen, 1987.

---. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom." *The Adoring audience: fan culture and popular media*. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. Publisher London; New York : Routledge, 1992.

Freese, John Henry. *Aristotle with an English translation: the "Art" of rhetoric*. London: W. Heinemann ; New York ; G.P. Putnam, 1926.

Gandhy, Behroze and Rosie Thomas. "The Three Indian Film Stars." *Stardom : Industry of Desire.*

    Ed. Christine Gledhill. New York : Routledge, 1991.

Gane, Nicholas. Introduction. *The Future of Social Theory.* London; New York: Continuum. 2004.

Gerritsen, Roos. "Cine-Addictions: Image Trails Running from the Intimate Sphere to the Public

    Eye." *South Asian Visual Culture Series.* SavifaDok, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg. 2009

Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre: from Iconography to Ideology.* London; New York : Wallflower,

    2007.

---, Introduction. *Film genre reader III.* Ed.Barry Keith Grant. 1st ed. Austin : University of Texas

    Press, 2003.

Gledhill, Christine. "The Meldoramatic Field: An Investigation." *Home is where the Heart is:*

    Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's film. Ed. Christine Gledhill. London : British Film

    Institute, 1987.

---. "Rethinking Genre." *Reinventing Film Studies.* Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams.

    London: Arnold ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2000

Gnani. "Star who killed the Actor." *'O' Pakkangal : Collection of Essays from Kumudham.*

    Chennai: Sekar Offset, 2010.

Hardgrave, Robert L. *The Dravidian movement.* Bombay : Popular Prakashan, 1965.

---. "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK." *Asian Survey* 13: 3 (1973) 288.

Harriss, John. "Populism, Tamil Style. Is it really a Success?" *Working Paper Series.* London

    School of Economics and Political Science. 1:15 (2001)

Hawcroft, Michael. Introduction. *Word as action: Racine, Rhetoric, and Theatrical.* Oxford:

Clarendon Press ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1992.

Hearn, Jeff. *Men in the Public Eye: The Construction and Deconstruction of Public men and Public

Patriarchies.* London ; New York, NY : Routledge. 1992.

Hughes, Stephen. "The 'Music Boom' in Tamil South India: gramophone, radio and the making of

mass culture." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television.* 22:4 (2002). 444 – 472.

Jinnaa, Girija. "Yesterday I was a conductor, today I'm a star." *The Indian Express June 15 2007

20 March 2010* <http://www.expressindia.com/news/fullstory.php?newsid=88218>.

Kasbekar, Asha. *Pop culture India! : Media, arts, and lifestyle.* Santa Barbara, California : ABC-

CLIO, 2006.

Kennedy, Andrew K. *Six dramatists in search of a language: studies in dramatic language.*

London; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Kleihans, Chuck. "Notes on Melodrama and the Famil under Capitalism." *Imitations of Life: a

Reader on Film & Television Melodrama.* Ed. Marcia Landy. Detroit : Wayne State

University Press, 1991.

Kumar, Ashok S.R. "T. Nagar visits Kodambakkam." *The Hindu.* Aug 5. 2005. Web. July 14. 2010.

Kumar, Shiva S. "Reverie turns real." *The Hindu.* Apr 6. 2007. Web. July 14. 2010

Kumar, Suresh. "Tamil Research: Vocabulary of Tamil Humour." *English-Tamil: Binary Tools for

Deconstruction.* Blogspot.com. 10 Jan 2011. Web. 25 April 2011.

<http://englishtamil.blogspot.com/2010/12/tamil-research.html>

Maderya, Kumuthan. "Rage against the state: historicizing the 'angry young man' in Tamil cinema." *Jump Cut.* 52 (2010).

Mahanadigan. Dir.Shakthi. Perf. Satyaraj, Namitha. 2004.

Mathew, Suresh and Pratibha. "Rajnikanth rules at Rs 15 cr a film." *IBN News* June 22 2006. 20 March 2010 <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/Rajnikanth-rules-at-rs-15-cr-a-film/13623-8.html>.

Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and Spectatorship.* London ; New York : Routledge, 1993.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. *Bombay Cinema : an Archive of the City.* Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

McConnell, Frank D. *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature.* New York : Oxford University Press, 1979.

Miller,Carolyn R. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70:2 (1984): 151–167.

Morin, Edgar.*The Stars.* Trans. Richard Howard. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Moss, Donald. "Masculinity as Masquerade." *Journal of American Psychoanalytical Association.* 54 (2006). 1187-1194.

Mulvey, Laura. "The Possesive Spectator." *Death 24x a second: Stillness and the Moving Image.* London : Reaktion Books. 2006.

Narayanan, Shraddha. "Vettaikaran Rides Past Protests." *The New Indian Express.* Dec 18. 2009. Web.July 14. 2010.

<http://expressbuzz.com/entertainment/Tamil/vettaikaaran%20rides%20past%20prote

sts/131625.html>

Nakassis, Constanine. "Youth and Status in Tamil Nadu." PhD thesis. University of Pennsylvania,

2010

---, The Aesthetics of Realisms in Tamil Cinema: Between the 'New Face' and the 'Super Star'."

Tamil Studies Conference 2011. University of Toronto. May 7. 2011.

Nakassis, Constantine and Melanie Dean. "Desire, Youth, and Realism in Tamil Cinema." Journal

of Linguistic Anthropology. 17:1 (2007). 77-104.

Neale, Steve. "Questions of Genre," Screen 31:1 (1990). 56.

---, "Masculinity as spectacle." Screen 24:6 (1983). 2.

"No one can compel me to enter politics." The Hindu October 14 2008. 20 March 2010

<http://www.thehindu.com/2008/10/14/stories/2008101457960100.htm>.

Lakshmi, C.S. "Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu." Economic and

Political Weekly. 25: 42/43 (1990). 72-83

"Official Press Release: Ajith Dissolves His Fan Clubs." Ajithfans.com. 1 May 2011. Web. 1 May.

2011.

Padayappa. Dir. Ravikumar K.S. Perf. Rajnikanth, Soundarya, Ramya Krishnan. 1999. A.M.

Rathnam productions.

Pandian, M.S.S. "Culture and Subaltern Consciousness: An Aspect of MGR Phenomenon."

Economic and Political Weekly. 24: 20 (1989) < http://www.jstor.org/stable/4395134>.

---. The MGR Phenomenon. Economic and Political Weekly. 21.34 (1986): 1488—1489.

---. *The Image Trap : M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. New Delhi ; Newbury Park : Sage, 1992.

---. "Tamil Cultural Elites and Cinema: Outline of an Argument." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 13 April 1996, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4404028>.

Pendakur, Manjunath. *Indian popular cinema: industry, ideology, and consciousness*. Cresskill, N.J. : Hampton Press, 2003.

Perarasu. Personal Interview. 4 Feb. 2011.

Phillips, Patrick. "Genre, Star and Auteur - Critical approaches to Hollywood cinema." *An Introduction to Film Studies*. Ed. Jill Nelmes. 2nd ed. London ; New York : Routledge, 1999.

Pillai, Sreedhar. "It's Tamil Films all the way." *The Hindu*. May 14. 2005. Web. July 14 2010.

< http://www.hindu.com/mp/2005/05/14/stories/2005051400240100.htm>

Pokkiri. Dir. Prabhu Deva. Perf. Vijay, Asin. Kanakaratna Movies. 2007.

Prasad G. "Hard work earned me success: Vijay." *The Hindu*. Apr 9. 2007. *Hinduonline.com*. Web. 24 June 2011. <http://www.hindu.com/2007/04/09/stories/2007040917310200.htm>

Prasad, M. Madhava. "Cine-Politics: On the Political Significance of Cinema in South India". *Journal of Moving Image*, 1999.

---, "Reigning Stars: The Political Career of South Indian Cinema." *Stars : the film reader*. Ed. Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy. New York ; London : Routledge. 2004.

---, "Fan Bhakti and Subaltern Sovereignty: Enthusiasm as a Political Factor." The Indian

Postcolonial : a critical reader. Ed. Rosinka Chaudhuri and Elleke Boehmer. London ;

New York : Routledge. 2011

Pratt, David B., "Popular National Cinema: 'We Must Make the Government Tremble': Political

Filmmaking in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu." *The Velvet Light Trap - A Critical*

Journal of Film and Television. 34 (1994): 10.

Pyyhtinen, Olli. *The Social in Social theory? Simmel and 'the social'.* Basingstoke; New York:

Palgrave Macmillan. 2010.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. *Indian Cinema in the time of Celluloid: from Bollywood to the Emergency.*

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press ; Chesham : Combined Academic. 2009.

"Rajini takes on Tamil 'cause', to fast for water." IBN Live India. April 4, 2008. 30 March 2011.

<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/rajini-takes-on-tamil-cause-to-fast-for-water/62639-

3.html>

Rangan, Baradwaj "Review: Sivaji." *Blogical Conclusion.* Wordpress.com. 7 June. 2007 Web. 20

Mar. 2010.< http://www.desipundit.com/baradwajrangan/2007/06/17/review-sivaji/>.

Rogers, Martyn. "The Male Gaze and the Homoerotic Aesthetics of Tamil Film: The Gendering of

Visual Culture in South India." Taking a hard look: gender and visual culture. Ed. Amanda

du Preez. Newcastle : Cambridge Scholars, 2009. 203 – 219.

---. "Between Fantasy and 'Reality': Tamil Film Star Fan Club Networks and the Political Economy

of Film Fandom." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 32: 1 (2009): 63 — 85. Web.

16 July. 2010.

---, "From the Sacred to the Performative: Tamil Film Star Fan Clubs, Religious Devotion and the

    Material Culture of Film Star Portraits." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 23:

    1 (2011).

Rony, Fatimah Tobing. "Seeing Anthropolgy. "*The Third eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic*

    spectacle. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1996.

Sandvoss, Cornel. *Fans: the Mirror of Consumption*. Oxford : Polity, 2005.

Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres : Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Philadelphia :

    Temple University Press, 1981.

---. "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre study." *Film Genre Reader III*.

    Ed.Barry Keith Grant. 1st ed. Austin : University of Texas Press, 2003.

Schiffman, Harold. "Diglossia and Purity/Pollution in Tamil." *Contributions to Asian studies*. 11

    (1978). 98 – 110.

Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity : Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*. New York :

    Columbia University Press. 2001.

Singh, Ruma. "Even more acclaim will come his way." *The Times of India* July 6 2007. 20 March

    2010

        <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Cities/Bangalore/Even_more_acclaim_will_come_

    his_way/articleshow/2178985.cms>.

Sivaji. Dir. Shankar. Perf. Rajnikanth, Shriya. 2007. AVM Productions.

Sivathamby, Karthigesu. *Drama in ancient Tamil society*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham

    Press, 1970.

---, "Politicians as Players." *The Drama Review: TDR*. 15:2 (Spring, 1971). 212-220

    <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144641>

---, *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*. Madras: New Century

Printers, 1981.

Srinivas, Lakshmi. "The Active Audience: Spectatorship, Social Relations and the Experience of

    Cinema in India." *Media, Culture & Society*. 24: 2 (). 155–173

Srinivas, S.V. Devotion and defiance in fan activity. "Journal of Arts and Ideas." 29 (1996): 67 -83

---, "Stars and Mobilization in South India: What Have Films Got to Do with It?" *Post Script -*

    Essays in Film and the Humanities 25:3 (2006): 30-47.

---, *Megastar : Chiranjeevi and Telugu cinema after N.T. Rama Rao*. New Delhi: Oxford University

    Press. 2009.

Stam, Robert. Introduction. *Film theory: an Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers,

    2000.

Sura. Dir. S.P.Rajkumar. Perf. Vijay, Tammanah. Sun Pictures. 2010.

Tasker, Yvonne. "Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the body, and the voice in

    contemporary action cinema." *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood*

    Cinema. Ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. London ; New York : Routledge. 1993.

---, "Tough Guys and Wise-Guys: Masculinities and Star images in the Action Cinema."

    Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema. London; New York:

    Routledge. 1993.

Thomas, Rosie. "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and popularity – an introduction." *Screen* 26. 3-4

    (1985): 116 – 31

---. "Indian cinema: pleasures and popularity." *The Bollywood reader.* Ed. Rajinder Dudrah and

    Jigna Desai. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England ; New York : McGraw-Hill : Open University

    Press. 2008.

Thompson, Kristin. "The Concept of Cinematic Excess." *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology : A Film*

    Theory reader. Ed. Philip Rosen.New York : Columbia University Press, 1986.

Tudor, Andrew. *Theories of Film.* London : Secker & Warburg [for] the British Film Institute,

    1974.

---, *Image and influence: Studies in the Sociology of film.* London : Allen & Unwin, 1974

---. "Genre." *Film genre reader III.* Ed.Barry Keith Grant. 1st ed. Austin : University of Texas Press,

    2003.

Turner, Graeme. "Film audiences." *Film as Social Practice.* 4th ed. London; New York: Routledge,

    2006.

"Vaanam: Indiyavin Eindhuvagai Asal mugam (India's Five Real Faces)." *Vinavu.* 20 May. 2011.

    Web. 20 May. 2011.

Vangal, Uma. Personal Interview. 3 Feb. 2011

Vasudev, Aruna. "The Woman: Myth and Reality in the Indian Cinema." *Cinema and Cultural*

    Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China. Ed. Wimal Dissanayake.

    Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988. Print.

Vasudevan, Ravi. Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: the Bombay 'Social' film of the 1940s and 1950s. *Screen*. 36: 4 (1995). 305-324.

---. The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian cinem.New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Vettaikaran. Dir Babu Sivan. Perf. Vijay, Anushka. Sun Pictures. 2009.

Vigo, Jean. "Toward a Social Cinema." *Millennium Film Journal*. 1.1 (1977): 21.

"Vijay on Kaavalan's release, joining politics." *NDTV*. 28 Jan. 2011. Web. 30 June. 2011.

Villu. Dir. Prabhu Deva. Perf. Vijay, Nayanthara. Ayngaran International. 2009.

Weiner, Susan. "1950s Popular Culture: Star-Gazing and Myth-Making with Roland Barthes and Edgar Morin." *Stardom in Postwar France*. Ed. John Gaffney and Diana Holmes. New York : Berghahn Books, 2007.

Williams, Linda. "Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Genre Reader III*. Ed.Barry Keith Grant. 1st ed. Austin : University of Texas Press, 2003.

Zborowski, James. "Review: Britton on Film." *Screen* 50:4 (2009).

Žižek, Slavoj. "Foreword: Projector in the Heart of the Social." *Sociology through the Projector*. London; New York: Routledge, 2007. Print

---. "Foreword to Second Edition: Enjoyment within the Limits of Reason Alone." *For they know not what they do : Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. 2nd ed. London: Verso, 2008. Print