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# Youth and Status in Tamil Nadu, India

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# Youth and Status in Tamil Nadu, India

## **Abstract**

This sociocultural anthropological study looks at youth culture in Tamil Nadu, India, focusing on college-age youth in Madurai and Chennai. The dissertation first shows how youth experience their position in the larger Tamil society as “being outside of.” This exteriority is manifest in youth concepts of status and gender, the signs and activities which express such status and gender, and the social spaces in which such signs and activities are played out. In particular, the dissertation focuses on how the youth peer group is dually shaped as an exterior space of youth status negotiation—as exterior to adult norms of authority (and thus a space of status-raising qua transgression) and as exterior to norms of hierarchical ranking (and thus an egalitarian space of status-leveling, intimacy, and reciprocity). It is this tension between status-raising and -lowering which the dissertation shows to be crucially at play in how youth engage with and deploy various status-ful signs. In particular, the dissertation focuses on youth’s engagement with English and Tamil-English hybridized slang, commercial hero-centered Tamil films and their heroes, and (counterfeit) Western brands and fashion. In addition to focusing on youth engagement with such forms, the dissertation also looks at the production and circulation of youth-oriented Tamil film and (counterfeit) branded garments. The dissertation argues that we can only make sense of such cultural forms and their production and circulation by situating them with respect to youth concepts of status and their negotiation in the peer group. Based on this discussion the dissertation offers critical commentary on academic literatures of globalization, film reception, and the semiotics of the brand.

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Asif Agha

## **Second Advisor**

Greg Urban

## **Third Advisor**

Ritty Lukose

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YOUTH AND STATUS IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

Constantine Valenzuela Nakassis

A DISSERTATION

in Anthropology

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2010

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YOUTH AND STATUS IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

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Constantine Valenzuela Nakassis

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmothers,  
Victoria Ahrensdorf and Paraskevi Nakassis.

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## ABSTRACT

### YOUTH AND STATUS IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

Constantine V. Nakassis

Asif Agha (supervisor)

This sociocultural anthropological study looks at youth culture in Tamil Nadu, India, focusing on college-age youth in Madurai and Chennai. The dissertation first shows how youth experience their position in the larger Tamil society as “being outside of.” This exteriority is manifest in youth concepts of status and gender, the signs and activities which express such status and gender, and the social spaces in which such signs and activities are played out. In particular, the dissertation focuses on how the youth peer group is dually shaped as an exterior space of youth status negotiation—as exterior to adult norms of authority (and thus a space of status-raising *qua* transgression) and as exterior to norms of hierarchical ranking (and thus an egalitarian space of status-leveling, intimacy, and reciprocity). It is this tension between status-raising and -lowering which the dissertation shows to be crucially at play in how youth engage with and deploy various status-ful signs. In particular, the dissertation focuses on youth’s engagement with English and Tamil-English hybridized slang, commercial hero-centered Tamil films and their heroes, and (counterfeit) Western brands and fashion. In addition to focusing on youth engagement with such forms, the dissertation also looks at the production and circulation of youth-oriented Tamil film and (counterfeit) branded garments. The dissertation argues that we can only make sense of such cultural forms and their production and circulation by situating them with respect to youth concepts of status and

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### Note on transliteration, transcription conventions, and abbreviations

The following transliteration conventions are followed for Tamil.

#### Vowels

அ	<i>a</i>
ஆ	<i>aa</i>
இ	<i>i</i>
ஈ	<i>ii</i>
உ	<i>u</i>
ஊ	<i>uu</i>
எ	<i>e</i>
ஏ	<i>ee</i>
ஓ	<i>o</i>
ஔ	<i>oo</i>
ஔள	<i>au</i>
ஐ	<i>ai</i>

#### Consonants

க்	<i>k, g</i>	ய்	<i>y</i>
ங்	<i>ng</i>	ர	<i>r</i>
ச்	<i>ch, s</i>	ல்	<i>l</i>
ஞ்	<i>nj</i>	வ்	<i>v</i>
ட்	<i>d, t</i>	ழ்	<i>zh</i>
த்	<i>th</i>	ள்	<i>L</i>
ப்	<i>p, b</i>	ஸ்	<i>s</i>
ற்	<i>R</i>	ஷ்	<i>sh</i>
ந்/ன்	<i>n</i>	ஹ்	<i>h</i>
ண்	<i>N</i>	ஜ்	<i>j</i>
ம்	<i>m</i>	ஸ்ரீ	<i>srii</i>

A note on pronunciation: *th* = dental stop த்; *d, t* = alveolar retroflex stop ட்; *ch* = palatal stop ச்; *nj* = palatal nasal ஞ்; *ng* = velar nasal ங்; *n* = dental/alveolar nasal ன்/ன்; *N* = retroflex nasal ண்; *zh* = retroflex frictionless continuant ங்; *l* = alveolar lateral ல்; *L* = retroflex lateral ள்; *r* = flapped fricative ற்; *R* = trilled fricative ற்; Tamil has long vowels and short vowels. Long vowels are represented by doubling the Roman letter (e.g., *a* = அ; *aa* = ஆ).

To keep transcripts as close to the original as possible, I use spellings for spoken Tamil words rather than their written counterparts. I use *italics* for words used by my informants when speaking in Tamil. Otherwise *italics* are used for emphasis or for titles of books, films, etc. ‘Single quotes’ are used for English glosses of other languages (Tamil, unless otherwise indicated). “Double quotes” are used for reported speech, either in Tamil or English. In transcripts, [square brackets] indicate anaphoric referents; (parentheses) indicate elided constituents or grammatical category; and <angle brackets> indicate kinesic movement, types of film shots, or other editorial notes.

I use the following abbreviations: *adv.* = adverbial suffix; *+/-hon.* = presence/absence of honorification; *lit.* = literally; *n.* = noun; *nom.* = nominalization (verbal noun); *pers.* = grammatical category of person; *Vrb* = verb; *Vrb<sub>AVP</sub>* = adverbial form of the verb (*Vrb* + past tense marker + *u*); *b.* = born; *dir.* = director.

### **Note on names**

All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my informants, except for major places (e.g., Chennai, Madurai, Erode, Tiruppur, etc.), public figures (e.g., Rajinikanth, Vijay, etc.), or films. For such proper names I use the standardized transliterations rather than the transliteration system used in the dissertation (e.g., *Tiruppur* instead of

*Thiruppuur, Madurai* instead of *Mathurai, Paruthiveeran* instead of *Paruththiviiran*).

Similarly I maintain the spellings of words commonly used in the English language literature rather than use the transliteration system of the dissertation (e.g., *dharmā* instead of *tharma*).

## Chapter 1 – Introduction: Youth and Status in Tamil Nadu, India

### 1. Introduction

When I arrived in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu to conduct my fieldwork, I originally thought I would be working on the dynamics of college students' engagement with films about college students. Instead I found myself drawn to other questions, particularly related to issues of classification. Indeed, to make sense of the social world of the youth around me required me to delve into and understand how various classifications made the social realities at hand pragmatically intelligible for them. I found myself wondering “what do goatee beards, sunglasses, English, motorcycles, love, Western brands, earrings, smoking, drinking, long and dyed hair, riding the bus from the outside while hanging onto the window with one hand, casually combing one's hair, whistling in the cinema hall, music television video jockeys (VJs), (college) *rowdies* ('thugs'), and film heroes like Super Star Rajinikanth have in common? Why and how are these commodity signs, grooming habits, leisure activities, interpersonal emotions, and mass-mediated personae seen as similar and talked about in similar ways? Why do they populate youth's social reality and imagination? And what are the entailments to such classifications?” In small part, through its discussion of youth peer groups, concepts of gender and status, film representations and their re-animation in the peer group, and the production and consumption of (counterfeit) brands this dissertation speaks to my own fascination with the contingencies and necessities of classification and their imbrication in the (meta-)pragmatics of Tamil youth's everyday lives.



One way to frame the materials dealt with in the dissertation is as consisting of a shifting terrain of register formations centered around ‘youth’ (as per Agha’s work on registers: 2003, 2005, 2007a, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> When we speak of a register we speak of a repertoire of signs linked to a particular model of conduct and the performable figures of personhood characteristic of (or that emblemize) such conduct, relative to some social domain of individuals. The register, then, describes a regularity of meta-pragmatic construal (or stereotype) linked to some classification of signs.<sup>2</sup> This classification is often multi-modal, including, for example, speech, dress, and bodily comportment. Under the register’s meta-pragmatic regimentation all such signs are seen as (by degrees) iconic with each other, belying a meta-semiotic leakage across sign forms, so that, for example, speech forms seem like (and similarly act as indexes like) dress forms. The register, however, is *a model* of conduct; that is, a regularity (or we might say, a *genre* following Bakhtin [1986]) of meta-pragmatic activity regimenting instances of sign use vis-à-vis their socially normative construal (and thus, if felicitous, pragmatic efficaciousness) *in context*. This means that registers, as a normative principle (the *norm* of the register), are subject to, and in fact live through, their (re-)contextualization; that is to say, through *tropic* reformulations of the register. It is the dialectic between norm and trope (and their relative volatility) which accounts for *both* the maintenance of register formations socio-historically and the emergence of new registers. If so meta-semiotically reanalyzed and construed, the normalization (or *enregisterment*) of such tropic textualities leads to new

---

<sup>1</sup> When talking about youth *qua* young people I don’t use single quotes. When talking about the age category ‘youth’ I use single quotes.

<sup>2</sup> *Meta-pragmatic* refers to that which is about the pragmatics of some other thing. A *meta-pragmatic construal*, then, is a construal of the pragmatics of some sign (e.g., that the pronunciation of a certain word sounds ‘dumb,’ ‘smart,’ ‘beautiful,’ etc.). *Meta-pragmatic regimentation*, then, is the ability/attempt to control (or regiment) the pragmatics of some set of other (object) signs.

register formations, which too may be troped upon (and re-normalized) *ad infinitum*. We can see, then, that the register is simply the most robust and salient case of a larger semiotic dynamic between the creativity of signs in context and their canalization into socially perdurable social facts (with respect to their intelligibility and construal) through reflexive semiotic acts.

In short, the notion of the register is a way to understand *difference*—between types of signs, types of construals, types of users, and types of meta-semiosis—and thus a way to theorize classification *as it is imbricated in contexts of reflexive semiosis*. It is in its sensitivity to and theorization of the contextual embeddedness and socio-historical volatility that the register concept differs from accounts of classification that are familiar to us from the history of social thought: from Kant’s (1998[1789]) attempts to ground secure knowledge in transcendent cognitive classifications; Morgan’s (1970[1870]) work on kinship structures; Durkheim and Mauss’ (1963) and Levi-Strauss’ (1963[1962]) interest in totemism and kinship; Saussure’s (1986[1915]) exploration of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign; Foucault’s (1984[1966]) “order of things”; Bakhtin’s (1986) heteroglossia of speech genres and chronotopes; to classic linguistic anthropological discussions on the relationship between language and culture (Boas [1974(1889)] and Sapir [1949(1925)] on the phoneme; Whorf [1956] on grammatical classifications). All such authors treat classifications as pre-given objects for analysis. As the above discussion shows, however, the register concept is nothing without the specification of the semiotic principles upon which classifications come into being and change (trope, reanalysis, meta-pragmatic regimentation, etc.) and how the social life of registers is the

life of its classifications (rather than somehow exterior to it) as they act as conditions of possibility for semiosis in context.

I have suggested, then, that we may see male youth culture in Tamil Nadu as organized by a terrain of register formations whereby the “*college hero*,” “*college rowdy*,” “*matured youth*,” “*chinna paiyan*” (‘small boy’), TV VJs, and film heroes like Rajinikanth are performable figures of personhood linked to semiotic repertoires (ripped jeans, Tamil-English hybridized slang, motorcycles, etc.) for a social domain (young men) that enable particular pragmatic effects in context, and thus serve as inputs for other sorts of social activities (e.g., status-raising in the peer group, impressing a girl, etc.).

That said, however, I have not organized the dissertation according to named (or unnamed) registers of ‘youth.’ Instead I have posed the question as such: what is the logic which makes all of these semiotic forms enregisterable in similar ways, such that there is a meta-semiotic leakage between the sub-registers that fall under the (enregistered) age-set ‘youth’ (i.e., that the *college rowdy* [‘thug’], *the matured youth*, Rajinikanth all fractionally function in the same way)? I treat ‘youth,’ then, as a kind of meta-register which organizes a number of sub-registers or “voices” (Agha 2005) that center around personae which themselves are variously indexed by the semiotic forms mentioned above. Rather than focusing on the differences between these semiotic repertoires, I have instead looked at the leakage of these forms into each other—that is, their commonality across sub-registers—and thus organized my discussion around the logic of these partial and overlapping register formations. What is the overall logic of this classification, its semiotic repertoires and their indexical values, and their enmeshment in the social contexts of youth interaction?

The short answer is that it is tropes of exteriority—themselves reanalysed off of the “objective” age structure/hierarchy in Tamil Nadu which youth are by degrees exterior to—which motivate the construal of different sign forms as indexically linked to different social types: that is, the semiotic repertoire of signs linked to ‘youth’ (and its various sub-registers) are all seen as ‘exterior to’ ‘society’ (‘society’ being an equally enregistered set of alter [sub-]registers: the *periya aaL* [‘big man,’ ‘adult’], the actual *rowdy*, the white-collar office worker). Further, as the dissertation shows, this logic of ‘youth,’ or ‘exteriority,’ only has traction in the lives of youth insofar as it is able to speak to their concerns—which themselves are organized by the same logic of exteriority—as they play out in the peer group—itsself constituted by such activity as an exterior space. The caveat, then, is that classifications live through their ability to be contextualized and recontextualized, regularized over multiple moments of semiosis and troped upon, by degrees, in various contexts and for various goals.

Indeed, youth culture is, like all social terrain, a constantly shifting ground. The assumption of the dissertation, then, is not only that there is a particular kind of coherence to Tamil youth cultural forms, but to unpack this is to understand that social life is reflexively built upon signs in use (object-signs in context) and typifications of signs in use (meta-signs in context). We see this in chapters 2 and 3 through youth’s meta-semiotic troping upon signs from (adult) ‘society’ to achieve pragmatic aims in the peer group (status-raising and -leveling). In chapters 4 and 5 we look at how filmic representations are meta-pragmatically prefigured so as to be re-animated (and thus recontextualized) in the kinds of interactional work described in chapters 2 and 3. In chapters 6–8 we take up the consumption and production of branded forms, looking at

how particular semiotic objects like brands come to be meta-semiotically imbued with particular indexical valences so as to achieve the kinds of status work discussed throughout the dissertation.

## **2. Liberalization in India**

This dissertation is not about liberalization or globalization in India *per se*, though economic liberalization and the changes wrought by it are a crucial backdrop to my discussion. Since independence, the official ideology of national development (a projection of the imagination of the [old] middle classes) was entrenched within the Nehruvian nationalist vision of a “gradual” or “passive” revolution (Frankel 1978). With time the linkage between the interests of the middle classes and this Nehruvian vision was loosened and governmental policy was increasingly reoriented toward this new, splintering middle-class imaginary (Kaviraj 1997; Khilnani 1999; Brass 2000; Deshpande 2003). This began at the policy level in the 1980s under Rajiv Gandhi with the mild liberalization of certain economic sectors (e.g., electronics, especially as linked to television). Such changes were expanded with the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the early 1990s which began with the 1991 Union Budget. This was necessitated by the crisis of balance of payment and the increasing pressure, post-USSR breakup, from the United States, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank to liberalize the economy (Pendakur and Kapur 1997; Pathania 1998; Jenkins 1999; Rajagopal 2001). India’s debt had reached an all-time high and the NEP aimed at stabilizing the foreign exchange deficit. More than that, however, it also aimed at a fundamental break with the Nehruvian discourse of the “socialistic” pattern of society (Rajagopal 2001).

The NEP decreased the number of restrictions and controls on state monopolies, liberalized industrial licensing, lessened controls on manufacturing consumer goods and their prices, lowered taxes, reduced customs duty on electronics, increased foreign exchange allowance, and made remittances from non-resident Indians easier. In short, this meant opening up the Indian economy to global capital. Foreigners were allowed to raise their equity to 51 percent in Indian companies and increasing amounts of money were approved for foreign investment (Jenkins 1999: ch. 2). In effect, this reversed the Nehruvian economic policies of import substitution and emphasis on heavy industries toward export-oriented production, on the one hand, and a service-sector economy and consumerism on the other (Pendakur 1991; Rajagopal 1999; Jenkins 1999; Fernandes, 2000a, b, 2001; Mazzarella 2003, 2005; Lukose 2009).

This change in economic focus was accompanied by a number of other changes which form the context for my study. First, there was an increased availability of consumer goods on the market, both from imports and from domestic production. The latter can be divided into two types: goods made for domestic consumption and goods made for export (which inevitably leak into the local market via export surplus and counterfeiting; chapter 7). The effect, in short, was the increased proliferation of consumables and Western branded forms. It is precisely these which have been taken up by youth in their own activities, as I discuss in chapters 3 and 6.

This went along with the explosion of media—especially (satellite) television, home entertainment, and later the internet—and thus advertising as well (Mazzarella 2003). This was itself spurred by the presence of more players (global or otherwise), cheaper hardware and investment by the government in infrastructure. A number of authors have

linked this expansion of media to the increased presence in mass-media representations of the “new” middle classes as modern, global, urban, and conspicuously consuming (Ninan 1995; Brosius and Butcher 1999; Mankekar 1999; Chaudhuri 2004[2000]; Fernandes, 2000a, b; Butcher 2003; Mazzarella 2003, 2005). I would point out that such a changing media landscape, in addition to being class-specified, is marked by *age* as well, foregrounding ‘youth’ as a particularly vibrant, if vulnerable, part of this new aspirational atmosphere (Butcher 1999, 2003, 2004; Juluri 2002; Lukose, 2005a, 2009).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the expansion of television, internet, and print media, after liberalization film—the dominant medium in Tamil Nadu, then and today—became reoriented toward youth. The increase in television watching went along with a shift in film theater audiences. With the increased time available for broadcasting, there was a large increase in time for programming without an equal increase in original programming content, leading to films and film-related shows crowding the air (Agrawal 1998; Pendakur 2003; Page and Crawley 2001; Butcher 2003). This has contributed to older people going to the theater less and less (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Nakassis and Dean 2007). Moreover, the increasing availability of relatively inexpensive VCD and DVD technology (itself made possible by liberalization), piracy, and the lack of renting have meant that profits must be recouped in theaters (or at least are so perceived by film producers). As the family as cinema-watching unit has receded, youth have become the main component of the audience (Derne 2000; Osella and Osella 2004; Nakassis and Dean 2007). And because moviegoing is problematic for young women

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<sup>3</sup> This also played into the figurement of higher education as central to such projects of social mobility, and increasingly as a commodity itself to be consumed so as to further the nation and better the self (Lukose 2009). See below for more discussion.

given norms of female modesty in public (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Lukose 2009) this has meant that movies, even more than before, are increasingly tailored to young men and their peer groups (chapters 4–5).

Liberalization has also resulted in changes to colleges. In Tamil Nadu, the privatization of college education and the increase in engineering colleges (Fuller and Narasimha 2006), semi-private “autonomous” colleges and self-financing programs,<sup>4</sup> and “parallel colleges” and private tutoring centers (of which spoken English learning centers are a huge part) (Lukose 2009) has catered to and created an increase in the demand for higher education across social community, sex, and region (urban, rural) (Chitnis 2003).<sup>5</sup> The linkage of higher education to social mobility (Beteille 1993[1991]; Osella and Osella 2000b; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Lukose 2009), both in terms of getting jobs (especially for men) and in terms of marrying up (especially for women) (Vatuk 1972, 1982, 1994; Sharma 1986; Dube 1988; Uberoi 1993; Jeffrey and Jeffrey 1994; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994; Mukhopadhyay 1994; Seymour 1994, 2002; Ullrich 1994; Singh 1996; Ahmad 2003) is an important reason for the increase in the number of people going to college. This has expanded ‘youth’ both in terms of age and social domain, due to the

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<sup>4</sup> An autonomous college is a college whose administration and funding structure is left relatively free from governmental direction. Such colleges have, thus, more scope for changing syllabi, creating departments, and disciplining students. *Self-financing* refers to courses where the costs of the instructors, classrooms, etc. are borne by students’ tuitions rather than government subsidies. Self-financing courses are linked to the privatization of higher education whereby the government decided not to provide funding for courses not already in the educational curriculum. In contrast to *self-financing*, *aided* means that the government subsidizes the college for such courses, both in terms of instructors’ salaries and students’ tuitions.

<sup>5</sup> The Government of India reports 9,954,000 students (40 percent women) in 16,885 colleges, a growth in number of students of thirty-three times since Independence (Government of India, Dept. of Education 2006; Visaria, 1998: 37). In Tamil Nadu, there are twenty-two universities, over four hundred colleges and over three hundred technical institutes (Pillay 2004), with over 480,000 students (Government of India, Dept. of Education 2006), though the numbers were certainly larger when I did my fieldwork from 2007 to 2009.



extended time spent in education as well as the increased pressures on young people to earn (and recuperate capital spent on education) before marriage (Jeffrey et al. 2008).

The privatization of education has also had other effects on colleges (Sebastian n.d.). The growth of the Information Technologies (IT) sector (itself made possible by liberalization) has led to the demand for more engineering courses to funnel labor into such high-paying sectors (Fernandes 2000b; Fuller and Narasimha 2006). This has led to decreased interest among the “creamy layer” (those with the highest marks or the most money) in liberal arts colleges and the civil service employment that liberal arts colleges traditionally served as a means to; within liberal arts education, this has led to increased interest in computer science, commerce, and science courses (that can lead to Masters degrees in IT) and English (that can lead to call center jobs) to the detriment of other disciplines.<sup>6</sup> Privatization has also resulted in many colleges instituting self-financing courses to meet the demands for such new courses, which has led to increased numbers of women on traditionally all-male campuses.<sup>7</sup> There has emerged, then, a division between types of colleges (engineering versus liberal arts) and within liberal arts colleges between departments linked to speculative future income and thus (economic) status. Aided government colleges are the most affected by this, and their student bodies—like

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<sup>6</sup> Departments have clear rankings within the colleges. These are mapped onto perceived status of profession, which itself is a speculative calque from the economic opportunities afforded by various jobs. Hence commerce positions (which allow the possibility of MBA positions) and computer science positions (which allow entrance to the IT sector) are more valued than physics and mathematics. Physics and mathematics allow a student to study a Masters of Computer Applications, and thus are more valued than English. English, however, allows increased access to call center jobs, and thus are more valuable than the other sciences (chemistry, botany) which in turn are more valued than the humanities. The lowest departments in this hierarchy are economics, history, and Tamil. Such departments have, in recent years since the emergence of engineering colleges, suffered increasingly lower enrollments and decreased quality of students (as reckoned by administrators and teachers at least) (see chapter 3, section 3.3).

<sup>7</sup> This is because administrators want to have a maximum-sized applicant pool. By only having men apply that pool is cut in half. Further, self-financed courses are subject to the decisions of the administration more directly and less tied to (conservative) bureaucratic structures which control decisions for aided courses.

those of liberal arts colleges in general—increasingly come from more working-class (and thus presumably lower-caste) and rural backgrounds. This means that many college students have likely not gone to English-medium schooling. While colleges are supposed to be mainly conducted in English, this tension between English level and expectation produces a particular kind of dynamic surrounding English use involving the simultaneous desire and necessity to speak in English coupled with an anxiety about not speaking it well enough or speaking it too well (discussed in chapters 2 and 3).

In short, liberalization has resulted in the availability to youth of new commodity signs, media programming, and institutions that increasingly appellate them. This has itself changed the contours of the category ‘youth’ and how it is engaged with, performed, and troped upon by young people. While my discussion in the dissertation does not specifically focus on liberalization *per se* it will be clear in the discussions of youth peer groups and social spaces (chapter 2), concepts of status (chapter 3) and their extensions in film (chapters 4 and 5) and branded forms (chapters 6–8) that liberalization is the most general context in which all such activities unfold.

### **3. Where, what, and with whom I studied**

My fieldwork was situated in three areas of study in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu (figure 1.1) from June 2007 to May 2009: (1) among (college-going) youth in Madurai and Chennai (section 3.1 below); (2) in youth-targeting media: primarily, music television channels (in Madurai and Chennai) and commercial film (in Chennai) (section 3.2 below); and (3) the production and distribution of branded garments, authentic and counterfeit (in Madurai, Chennai, Erode, and Tiruppur) (section 3.3).



*Figure 1.1 Map of Tamil Nadu*

### *3.1. College students and other youth*

#### *3.1.1 Madurai*

The first city I did my research in was Madurai, a (r)urban center (population of roughly one million people) in the largely rural south of Tamil Nadu, India. Madurai is often described as a ‘large village’ due to its reputation as a relatively conservative place where “Tamil culture” is still followed and ‘pure’ Tamil is still spoken; its close ties with agricultural production in the city peripheries; and the constant influx of migrants from rural areas. I picked Madurai because: (1) I had previously conducted research there; (2) it is presumably more conservative and less cosmopolitan than other cities in the state like Chennai or Coimbatour but is undergoing rapid change; and (3) it has a large number of colleges of repute and age which attract a highly mixed population (by location, class, caste/community, etc.).

In Madurai I worked in three colleges over the span of an academic year: a Christian liberal arts men's college (though its graduate departments are coed and its self-financing undergraduate departments went coed in 2007); a Christian women's liberal arts college; and a (Hindu) coed liberal arts college. The Christian colleges are of high repute in the city and cater to relatively higher-income families, though the recent changes described above have entailed a sizable rural and working-class population. Both Christian colleges are highly mixed by caste, religion, class, region and language. The Hindu college caters to a slightly more working-class and rural-commuting population, though it is also a college of repute in the city. All three colleges have both aided and self-financing programs.

I lived in two undergraduate (*UG*) hostels in the Christian men's college during my time in Madurai (a self-financing hostel for four months, an aided hostel for five months; the first hostel with two third-year roommates, the second with two first-year roommates). I attended classes in multiple departments, aided and self-financed, undergraduate and postgraduate (*PG*). I participated in youth activities inside and outside of the college: sitting on campus chatting and people-watching; going to restaurants, tea shops, bars, parks, and temples; shopping trips; roaming the city; cinema outings; watching television; going to concerts and other functions; playing sports, etc. I also conducted a series of film screenings and targeted television-watching sessions with the hostel students followed by group discussions. I did interviews with *day scholars* ('commuting students') and hostel students individually and in groups, both male and female, *UG* and *PG*. I also did interviews with college administrators and teachers.

In the Hindu men's college I went to *UG* and *PG* classes in multiple departments (aided and self-financed); interviewed male and female *UG* (aided, self-financed) and *PG* students, administrators and teachers; went to college functions (including an overnight trip to an intercollegiate competition in Coimbatour); and generally hung out and participated in college social life.

In the women's college I conducted interviews with administrators, teachers, and *UG* and *PG* students; screened films for the hostel students followed by group discussion; and hung out with the students on campus as described above.

In addition to my work with college youth, I also kept a residence in north Madurai where I interacted regularly with a group of local youth (in their mid to late twenties) some of whom had gone to college, but most of whom had not. This peer group was mixed by caste/community (Dalit, Thevar, Pillaimar, Brahmin, and Muslim) and class, but mainly lower(-middle) class. They were engaged in semi-permanent work. I also did some research (interviews and participant observation) with a branch of the Rajinikanth fan club in Madurai.

### 3.1.2 *Chennai*

I picked Chennai as a site because: (1) It is the state capital and the most cosmopolitan city in the state; and (2) it is the center of film production and much of television and print production.

In Chennai I did research in two colleges: a Christian college of elite standing (though also undergoing the same processes detailed above) and a government college of historic repute but much affected by the changes in student body detailed above. Both colleges

have aided and self-financing programs. Both were all-male at the *UG* and coed at the *PG* level, though the Christian college had two coed departments at the *UG* level.

At the elite college I stayed in one of the hostels for approximately four months with a single first-year *UG* roommate who was part of the coed department in which I spent most of my time. I attended classes in various departments (*UG*, aided and self-financed); interviewed hostel students and *day scholars* (male and female, aided and self-financed), administrators, and teachers; and generally hung out (as described above). I focused most of my time on one particular coed department, and attended college functions and *culturals* competitions with them, as well as went on a week-long college *tour* ('excursion'; discussed in chapter 2, section 3.3.5).

In the government college I attended *UG* (aided and self-financed) and *PG* classes in a number of departments; interviewed hostel students and *day scholars*, administrators, and teachers; and generally hung out on campus. I spent most of my time, however, among students of a particular *bus route* (students who ride the same bus route to college), hanging out with them both inside and outside of the college (e.g., at their bus stand, on the bus). I attended and participated in their annual *bus day*, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 3, section 2.3.1. While in the elite college I interviewed and hung out with both men and women, in the government college I mainly spent time with men.

As I did in Madurai, in Chennai I kept a nearby residence. There I spent time with a group of middle-class bachelors working in low-level IT industries, as well as young working-class men who lived in the area. Both groups informed my research.

In the dissertation I often simply speak of "youth." I do this when my observations of college youth are consonant with the non-college-going youth that I spent time with.

Otherwise I explicitly specify college-going youth. Similarly, for observations that apply to both male and female youth, I do not qualify “youth” (see chapter 2, section 2.1 for discussion of this).

### 3.2. *Mass-media production*

#### 3.2.1 *Television*

While in Madurai I did participant observation at a local music television station for over two months. Here I was particularly interested in *compering* (‘television hosting,’ ‘VJ-ing’), fashion, and the use of Tamil and English on air. I became interested in this because youth often cited music television comperes as exemplary users of Tamil-English hybridized slang (“Tanglish”) and fashion, both of which they typified as statusful (“*style*”). To investigate this I spent time at the studio, interviewed comperes, technicians, and program directors. I even hosted a couple of shows myself, including a Valentine’s Day special where I fielded live calls in Tamil about love with my wife (fiancée at the time). (No other Madurai couple was willing to appear on camera to share their love experiences!)

In Chennai I worked at Southern Spice (SS) Music, a music television station of regional (and national) repute. While founded as a south Indian multilingual station (it boasted VJs who spoke in the south Indian languages of Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam; as well as Hindi and English), it was mainly an English and Tamil-language station when I worked there (itself a recent change in the history of the channel). SS Music was something like the MTV of south India, and at one point was in talks with Viacom to become their face in south India. This station was very popular among urban youth and college-going Madurai youth. Here I interviewed producers, technicians

(editors, camera men, stylists), the VJs, program directors, and marketers. I did work for the station on shoots, writing scripts and web content, as well as hosting one show and being a reality-television participant in another. While in Chennai I also interviewed producers and comperes from a Tamil-language music television station popular among youth across the state.

### 3.2.2 *Film*

While in Chennai I did extensive work on the production of youth cinema. This included interviews with producers, directors, actors, cameramen, editors, music directors, fight choreographers, dance choreographers, costumers, and stylists. I also did participant observation on one particular movie (for a total of four months), doing script copyediting, location scouting, working on film and photo shoots, and attending editing sessions and meetings with producers. I also attended film industry functions (film *puujas*,<sup>8</sup> audio releases, film releases, 100 day ceremonies) and industry social events (birthday parties, release parties). I also did library research in Chennai on film reviews of past youth-oriented films.

### 3.2.3 *Print and radio*

In Chennai I conducted interviews with those involved in the English- and Tamil-language print press that focused on youth. I also did a set of interviews with youth-oriented radio programmers and radio jockeys in Madurai.

## 3.3 *Textiles*

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<sup>8</sup> A *puuja* is a Hindu worship ceremony; in this case to ensure the successful undertaking of the film.



The third part of my research focused on the production of branded garments and accessories that were popular among the youth I worked with. This work took place in Madurai (where I interviewed retailers of export-surplus and counterfeit brands); Chennai (where I interviewed retailers, distributors/wholesalers, a sourcing agent for Western brands, and producers and designers of counterfeit brands and quasi-brands); and Erode and Tiruppur (where I interviewed distributors, wholesalers, and producers of authentic branded goods for export and counterfeit branded goods for the local market; as well as with factory owners and owners of retail outlets [for both authentic and counterfeit goods]). I spent time in the districts for wholesale counterfeit and export-surplus sales in Chennai, Tiruppur and Erode, as well as visited a number of factories and workshops in Tiruppur, Erode, and Chennai.

#### **4. Overview of the chapters**

I have divided the dissertation into three parts:

Part I. Age, Status, and Gender (chapters 2–3),

Part II. *Style* and Film (chapters 4–5),

Part III. *Style* and the Brand (chapters 6–8).

In chapter 2 I look at the age category ‘youth’ in Tamil Nadu as the intersection between (understandings of) the life cycle, institutions of schooling and marriage, and mediatized discourses such as fashion and film. I show how central to this age category is a trope of exteriority; that is, youth are figured as exterior to ‘society’ (i.e., kin and caste hierarchy), as liminally situated between and constantly distancing themselves from the age categories ‘child’ (*chinna paiyan*, lit. ‘small child/boy’) and ‘adult’ (*periya aaL*, lit.

‘big man’). I then look at how this trope organizes youth spaces, youth peer groups, youth activities and their associated semiotic registers.

In particular, I show how youth peer groups—the main site of youth activity and status negotiation—are constructed through two inflections of exteriority: exteriority from norms of ‘society’ and its authority structures *and* exteriority from age and caste hierarchies. Thus, the peer group is simultaneously a space that motivates *status-raising* acts through transgression *and* a space marked by intimacy, egalitarianism (or at least the idea of it), and constant *status-leveling* and peer pressure. The main aim of chapter 2 is to show how the construction of ‘youth’ is diagrammatic, or indexically iconic, of (a) youth’s positionality vis-à-vis ‘society’ and (b) their concepts of status as they are played out in various contexts. In later chapters I explore how this diagrammaticity is mapped onto various semiotic registers such as youth film (part II) and branded apparel and accessories worn by youth (part III).

In chapter 3 I examine youth concepts of status, in particular, *style* and *geththu* (akin to ‘cool’ and ‘badass,’ respectively, in the U.S.). I show how these are iconic with ‘youth’ in their logic (both diagram exteriority) while at the same time reinscribing the diacritics of ‘adult’ ‘society’ that they eschew through troping on them, whereby ‘child’ and ‘adult’ are re-signified as *relative* terms for deficient and valorized youth masculinity. I compare and contrast *style* and *geththu* with regards to the semiotic registers of which they are typifications, as well as to the meta-pragmatic stereotypes of (class-linked) personhood such terms invoke. I then situate these concepts in the dynamics of the peer group; in particular, I look at how status-raising typified as *style* or *geththu* is mediated in the peer group through genres of status-leveling (teasing, *ragging*, humor, gift giving, fighting).

This is an extension of the discussion in chapter 2 where I argue that the dialectically linked forces of the youth peer group—status-raising and -leveling—are the result of the construction of ‘youth’ and the zones of its deployment (youth peer groups) as simultaneously exterior (and thus status-transgressive) and highly intimate (and thus status-conservative). I show how these forces produce highly hybridized and negotiated youth cultural forms, thus revealing the ambivalence of youth status. I then return to the question of gender and why doing *style* is so problematic for women. I conclude with reflections on globalization and the idea that youth “negotiate” globalization in their activities.

If in chapters 2 and 3 I am concerned with how particular signs are taken as iconic of ‘youth’ and thus are capable of indexically entailing status in face-to-face activity, in chapters 4 and 5 I am concerned with the mass-mediation of ‘youth’ and how youth engage with such mass-mediated representations of youth status. In chapter 4 I analyze commercial Tamil hero-oriented cinema as the narrativization of youth status as played out in the peer group. I give particular attention to the popular actor Rajinikanth, looking at the representation of status and *style* in his oeuvre. I then turn to the villain and comedian as characters who are constructed as inverse images of the hero, and thus as deficient models of status (the villain as excessive status; the comedian as mismatched status). What I show is that the image of status portrayed in such films is completely intelligible within the logic of the youth peer group (both in terms of the semiotic repertoires involved, the meta-pragmatic typifications of such repertoires, and the dynamics of status negotiation), thus articulating a critique of approaches to Tamil cinema which discuss such films through notions of realism/fantasy and (in)coherence. I

conclude with comments on the effects of liberalization on such cinema, arguing that they have intensified the logic of ‘youth’ already present in such films, thus making youth status even more central to Tamil film and its social life.

In chapter 5 I look at how youth engage with and re-animate the images of status presented in the kinds of film discussed in chapter 4. First I look at how film acts as a source register for youth’s own status work. Next I look at the commonsensical hypothesis that youth *imitate* their *favorite* film heroes as an explanation for the fit between film images and youth performances of status. I argue that this hypothesis is flawed in a number of ways. Instead I argue that youth *use* film images because they are pragmatically efficacious in their own status and identity work (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3) and that this use is independent of ‘liking’ or identifying with a film or its hero. Moreover, I show that hero-oriented films are designed with such active use and recontextualization in mind; that is, filmic forms presuppose a particular model of spectatorship so as to increase their own circulation (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009). I further go on to show that film heroes themselves must negotiate their own status on- and off- screen according to the same logic of the youth peer group, and that this is the case because youth engage with heroes’ status-raising performances as they would with their own peers’ status-raising. I then go on to show how the construction of a status-ful filmic persona is done in and outside of the filmic text. I conclude the chapter arguing that the paradigm of “reception” is a flawed way of understanding Tamil youth’s engagement with filmic representations, arguing for the analytic frame of “re-animation” instead.

In part III I look at the consumption (chapter 6) and the production and circulation (chapter 7) of branded forms on garments worn by Tamil young men. Chapter 6 looks at how and why youth use branded forms in their efforts at status-raising in the peer group. I focus on youth's interest in branded forms in general without a concomitant interest in particular brands as brands. I investigate this *willful* ignorance of brands under what I call the "aesthetics of brandedness" and link this to the concept of *style*. Over and above the brand concept, I argue that youth's aesthetics of brandedness explain how and why youth are both interested and ignorant of branded forms, whether they be authentic, duplicate, fictive, or only loosely linked to existing branded forms. I conclude my discussion of chapter 6 by arguing that what is at stake for youth are not brands at all, but rather an alternative ontology (that of *style*), and thus that concepts like glocalization, while correct in highlighting the complexities of semiotic forms in the era of globalization, ultimately misunderstand the issue through assuming that we are talking about the "same" thing (of such-and-such a type) circulating from one place to another.

In chapter 7 I look at how such branded forms are produced and circulated in south India. First I look at the role of export surplus in circulating particular brands and in providing particular models to be copied by small-time garment producers. I argue that it is because export surplus is calibrated with respect to markets *outside* of India that it can serve as a source register for the production and circulation of branded garments *within* India, both through providing cheap materials and through providing designs that are assumed by producers to be inherently attractive (and thus viable commodities for their target market: youth). I then look at how duplicates and the various deviations from branded designs get produced. I show that, just as in youth's use and consumption of

branded forms, the production of such branded forms operates according to a willful ignorance of brands under an aesthetic of brandedness. It is this logic that explains both the variability of branded forms and their formulaic-ness. I conclude by arguing that some of the main assumptions of work on counterfeit brands—that they induce “confusion”; that they “dilute” brand image; or that they leach off of the “demand” for authentic brands—are only intelligible under the ontology of the BRAND as understood in brand meta-discourses of advertising and marketing, as well as intellectual property law; an ontology that I demonstrate *not* to be in play among the Tamil consumers or producers of such branded forms.

The discussion of chapters 6 and 7 returns us to the question of classification, though ultimately as I have shown, the issue of how different semiotic forms are classified (e.g., as authentic, fictive, or counterfeit) cannot be understood outside of, on the one hand, the meta-semiotic discourses which imbue them with intelligibility and indexical value and, on the other hand, their situatedness in actual contexts of use (i.e., status-raising in the peer group). I theorize this in chapter 8 by relating my discussion of Tamil youth’s use of branded forms to work on brands in the social science and marketing literatures. I argue that ultimately the brand is a meta-semiotically regimented relationship between a set of tokens with respect to a brand type; and that such a type–token regularity holds under the larger ontology BRAND. I argue that this meta-semiotic organization of the brand is crucial to understand how and why it is that the brand concept holds little traction among Tamil youth. As I show, this raises serious questions for how we are to understand the brand in the West, if only because all analysis to date has essentialized and naturalized this category.

Having theorized the brand from the perspective of its ontological reanalysis by Tamil youth, I go on to look at the brand from the perspective of the duplicate or counterfeit. I do this by discussing Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and simulacrum. I show that such concepts ultimately are of the same sign–meta-sign organization that I explicate earlier in the chapter, though of a special type. I apply this to the concept of the brand showing how, while the counterfeit under the ontology of BRAND is a Baudrillardian simulacrum (and thus ultimately reinvests the BRAND ontology with its reality), the Tamil youth usage of branded forms counts as a simulation of the BRAND ontology. This, however, forces us to reevaluate the implications of simulation as it is understood by Baudrillard. I argue, in fact, that we can use the concepts of simulation and simulacra as semiotic configurations that can and must be empirically investigated and that have no necessary entailments about the liquidation of reality or history, and thus need not be accompanied by the burdensome and normative anxieties about the creeping shadow of capitalism.

In addition to being a contribution to the literatures on youth culture, mass media, and brands, one of the goals of the dissertation is to understand how the construction of 'youth' as an age category among others (and thus, in a sense, as a sociohistorically located fact of "social structure") is diagrammatic of a particular tropic logic of 'exteriority' from 'society' (a reanalysis of that "social structure") that recruits a range of signs in multiple media to perform a range of social personae linked to 'youth' that have regularity in their indexical entailments (e.g., of status-raising) and meta-pragmatic typification (e.g., as *style*, *geththu*).

Methodologically this dissertation demonstrates the necessity of studying social processes (and the signs through which they live) by articulating how their contexts of production, circulation, and consumption (or re-animation and use) are coordinated (or not). This often requires us to link otherwise disparate social contexts. For example, to understand the brand or film representations I argue that we must have a firm grasp on the dynamics of the youth peer group, insofar as the logic of the latter is a condition of possibility on the social life of the former. Further, as I argue in parts II and III this often requires us to attend not only to discourses about youth, film, and brands, but also to how these metasemiotic discourses are taken up (or not) in everyday life. It is this movement between micro- and macro-, between object- and meta-sign that I show to be essential if we ever want to get a firm understanding of the social reality of Tamil youth.



## **Part I. Age, Status, and Gender**

### **Chapter 2 – Youth as Exteriority**

#### **1. Introduction**

In this chapter I look at how age, status, and gender are articulated in the concept of ‘youth’ in Tamil Nadu. In particular, I show how the construction of ‘youth’ vis-à-vis the life cycle and age hierarchy (i.e., “social structure”) as ‘in between’ and ‘outside of’ is reanalyzed by youth through a trope of exteriority from the reified agent ‘society.’ I show how this is the central logic of youth culture, a theme that I build on variously throughout the dissertation. I then go on to analyze the constitution of youth spaces and the youth peer group as ‘exterior’ spaces that make the performance and experimentation with ‘youth’ and its forms possible. In particular I show how the youth peer group is constituted *both* as a space of status-raising and -leveling, a theme that I take up in chapter 3.

#### **2. Age, status, and gender in Tamil Nadu**

##### *2.1 ‘Youth,’ diagrammaticity, and gender*

In this section I look at the conceptualization of age set in Tamil society, focusing on the category of ‘youth.’ The literature on youth in Tamil Nadu is scant (Cormack 1961; Rogers 2008, 2009, forthcoming are exceptions), though a number of authors have focused on youth in Kerala (Osella and Osella, 1998, 1999, 2000a, b: ch. 7, 2002, 2004; Lukose 2005a, b, 2009) and Karnataka (partly among Tamil youth; Nisbett 2006, 2007), both neighboring south Indian states. Work on age in other areas of India and South Asia is more common: for example, on youth (Liechty 1995, 2003; Derne 1995, 2000;

Saraswathi 1999; Parameswaran 2001, 2002; Juluri 2002; Verma and Saraswathi 2003; Verma and Sharma 2003; Abraham 2004; Butcher 2004; Chopra 2004; Mathur and Parameswaran 2004; Srivastava 2004a, b; Jeffrey et al. 2008), adulthood (Madan 1965, 1981; cf. Osella and Osella 2000b, 2006: ch. 2–3), and old age (Lamb 2000, 2002; Dumont 1960; Madan 1965, 1981).

This chapter contributes to this literature by looking at the construction of ‘youth’ in Tamil Nadu. My specific interest is how the construction of ‘youth’ diagrams concepts of status and gender as they extend into social space and interaction. By *diagram* I draw on Peirce’s (1992) notion of iconicity.<sup>1</sup> The diagram is an internally complex icon whereby the internal relations of one semiotic object—in this case, the construction of ‘youth’ as an age set—is similar to, is projected onto, and acts as a condition of intelligibility for some other set of phenomena (e.g., concepts of status, social spaces, socially desirable figures of personhood, commodity forms) as socially meaningful and thus pragmatically efficacious.

My interest in the diagrammaticity of youth culture resonates with early work in British Cultural Studies. What British Cultural Studies pointed out clearly and effectively is that youth cultural forms diagram the liminal positionality of youth; in their case, of post–World War II British youth subcultures’ positionality vis-à-vis the “parent culture” (as both oppositional to and reproductive of its parents’ class position), the mainstream culture (as selectively appropriating its forms and troping on them), and social class relations more generally (Willis 1981[1977]; P. Cohen 1993[1972]; Clarke et al.

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<sup>1</sup> The icon is the semiotic configuration wherein two objects are similar to each other in some regard such that one of them (the *representamen*) can stand in for, or represent, the other (the *object*) to the extent that they are seen to fulfill such roles (i.e., produce an *interpretant*).

1997[1975]; Hebdige 1979). While their analysis of this diagrammaticity as necessarily instantiating the dualism of ideology and resistance (or individual and society [Williams 2001]) is highly problematic,<sup>2</sup> the more general idea that the conditions under which ‘youth’ is constructed are recursively diagrammed in the cultural forms which make up that youth culture is analytically useful.

In this dissertation I focus mainly on male youth and often use the elliptical, or unqualified, term *youth*. I do this because the concept of ‘youth’ as used by Tamils themselves implicitly assumes that ‘youth’ and youth culture are prototypically, or tendentiously, male (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 307). Engaging with youth culture and being a ‘youth’ for women is, as I discuss variously in the dissertation, problematic for a number of reasons. Young women—more specifically, their chastity (*kaRpu*)—are assumed to be metonyms for the honor of the family, kin group, caste group, and “Tamil culture” writ large (David 1980; Reynolds 1980; Ram 2000; Ramaswamy 1997; Niranjana 2001: 48–55; Anandhi 2005; Seizer 2005; Rogers 2008: 90; on other areas of South Asia see Vatuk 1972; Bennett 1983; Das 1988; Dube 1988; Tarlo 1996; A. Kumar 2002; Ahmad 2003; Sodhi and Manish 2003: 124; Abraham 2004; Lukose 2009). As such, controls on young women tend to be more stringent, and thus their participation in youth culture—which, for both young men and women, is proportional to the extent that they are disengaged from the control of the older generations—is limited and often problematic (Liechty 1996, 2003: 233; Saraswathi 1999; Verma and Sharma 2003;

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<sup>2</sup> One recurrent critique is the overfocusing on class, and hence the insistence on reading resistance into every act (McRobbie 1991; Straiger 2005; S. Cohen 2002[1972]). This is something that follows from the generally thin ethnography (see S. Cohen 2002[1980]; Murdock 1993[1989]; Griffiths 1996; Peterson 2003 on this point). Nevertheless, even in Hebdige’s (1979: 88–89) discussion there are brief discussions of youth subcultures which are tangential to class, but instead, for example, take up issues of gender.

Abraham 2004; Chopra 2004; Lukose 2009). This isn't to say that young women don't have an experience of 'youth' that is comparable with that of young men. They do. What it is to say, however, is that youth culture in Tamil Nadu is masculinized by its very construction. My discussion, then, focuses on male youth, though I discuss women's participation in, and experience of, youth cultural forms and practices where relevant.

## 2.2. 'Youth' as exteriority

'Youth'—*iLainjar*, *pasangka*, *valiban*, *teenager*, *youngster*, or *youth*—as it is understood in Tamil Nadu today is a relatively new age category (see Liechty 1995, 2003; Saraswathi 1999; Nandy 2004[1987] for discussion on the emergence of 'youth' in other areas of South Asia). 'Youth' is located at the intersection of (understandings of) the life cycle and age hierarchy; institutions of schooling and marriage; the home; and, since liberalization, particular kinds of mediatized discourses (e.g., youth-oriented marketing, mass media, commodity addressivity).<sup>3</sup>

First I show how the organization of the life cycle into hierarchically graded age categories mingles 'youth.' Then I argue that it is this liminality that youth reanalyze through tropes of exteriority, which form an organizing logic for a number of youth practices, concepts of status, and social spaces, most important of which is the peer group.

### 2.2.1 'Youth' as social category

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar understanding of 'youth' in Kerala see Lukose 2009: 13 and Osella and Osella 1998: 191. On youth as an appellated addressee of mass-mediated discourse in South Asia see Liechty 2003; Mazzarella 2003; Osella and Osella 2000; Lukose 2005a, 2009 (cf. Frank 1997, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1997[1975] for discussion in the contemporary West).

Within the life cycle ‘youth’ is negatively defined as in between the age sets *kuzhanthaikaL* (‘children’) and *periyavarkaL* (‘adults’; lit. ‘big/important people’); for men the more colloquial terms are *chinna paiyan* (lit. ‘small boy’) and *periya aaL* (lit. ‘big/important person/man’).

While children are contained within the school and the home, adults head households and institutions (e.g., of schooling). Children are dependents and adults have dependents. Children and youth are (expected to be) unemployed or do part-time, non-permanent work (Jeffrey et al. 2008), while male adults as householders are expected to engage in permanent full-time work. In short, children’s and adults’ place is linked to the household. Children and adults are within the fold of what youth refer to as the reified agent ‘society’ (*samuugam, samuthaayam, society*). ‘Society’ in such Tamil youth usage refers to, proximally, the kin and caste group and more abstractly to those who set the rules for legitimate social interaction (i.e., status-ful male adults or their proxies).<sup>4</sup>

Where does this leave ‘youth’ then? In this scheme, ‘youth’ is located in between the objective age categories ‘child’ and ‘adult,’ and thus outside of the kin and caste group (literally and figuratively).<sup>5</sup> As non-adults, they are excluded from participating in particular kinds of social activities and decision making (e.g., kin group decisions, caste politics, financial decisions), as well as from economies of status negotiation involving *mariyaathai* (‘respect’) and *gauravam* (‘prestige’) and their associated indexes (e.g.,

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<sup>4</sup> In my discussion of ‘adult’ ‘society,’ neither ‘adult’ nor ‘society’ should be taken as descriptions of how such entities work in the world, but how they must be taken to work by youth so that youth’s own activities and experiences (which rely on such reifications) are intelligible to them and pragmatically efficacious. Indeed, I do little to unpack what one could possibly mean by ‘society’ as an analytical construct useful for describing social life. Instead I use it as a placeholder (as youth themselves use it) to explicate youth sociality.

<sup>5</sup> I mean “objective” here in the sense of being relatively perduring social facts that exist trans-subjectively such that they can be presupposed across many social contexts. I don’t mean “objective” in the sense of “natural” or “universal.”

having dependents [wife, children], patronage, owning land, sartorial codes [e.g., wearing a *veeshdi*]). (For discussion of the Tamil concept of *mariyaathai* see D. Mines 2005: ch. 4). These are the concerns of adults, while young men don't have, and aren't entitled to, any of these things (cf. Osella and Osella 1998: 191; 2000b: ch. 7).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, youth are explicitly ranked below adults hierarchically, as reflected in prescribed honorific address and related deference behavior. On the other hand, youth are exempt in large part from the responsibilities and duties linked to the maintenance of kin/caste honor and the household, and thus afforded a modicum of independence from 'society.'

As non-children, young men, while dependents, are given an increased amount of freedom in terms of moving through public space; usage of their free time; and their access to small amounts of spending money. This independence is amplified by educational institutions—which create age-equal peer groups in a space (supposedly) relatively unmarked by caste and kin—and by assumptions by both parents and administrators that young men naturally will exert their independence at this age (and this isn't necessarily a bad thing).

Indeed, young men are assumed to flaunt and transgress 'society' and its norms of authority (e.g., they will love, drink, smoke, cut class, fight, 'do' fashion, etc.). And while such transgressive 'youth' activities are explicitly disapproved of, implicitly they are expected and condoned and thus encouraged for young men (but not women). The double standard of 'youth' and its 'boys will be boys' attitude is reflected in the following proverb that one youth's grandmother used to justify his transgressions:

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as per D. Mines (2005: ch. 4) discussion of *mariyaathai* (also see Dickey 2009a), being excluded from status economies that accrue *mariyaathai* places young men exterior to the reference group of adult men, i.e., 'society,' and thus without (or outside of) *mariyaathai*.

*“pasangka viiddukkuLLee irunthaa kedduppooyiduvaangka.  
poNNungka viidde viddu veLiye poonaa kedduppooyiduvaangka.”*

‘If boys are kept inside the house, they’ll get spoiled.

If girls are allowed outside of the house, they’ll get spoiled.’

In addition to mapping youth masculinity vis-à-vis notions of interior and exterior space, this proverb highlights why ‘youth’ culture problematically applies to young women.

Young women are treated as extensions, and thus emblems, of a hierarchically nested set of social groupings: HOME < KIN GROUP < CASTE GROUP < “TAMIL CULTURE.” The home is a feminized space for youth. The imperative for young men, then, is to be in public space, outside of the gaze of the kin group, and thus by implication to roam around and do ‘mischief’ (see Jeffrey et al. 2008: 94, 179 on youth in Uttar Pradesh; Osella and Osella 1998, 2000b; Lukose 2009 on Kerala; Nisbett 2006: 132 on Tamil youth in Bangalore).

Indeed, one friend’s older sister complained to me that her son wasn’t getting good marks at his technical college. I asked if he was cutting class and going to the movies instead (a stereotypical youth activity). No, she replied, at least if he were doing that there would be some “*viiram*” (‘heroism,’ ‘masculinity’) in it. He would be doing what other kids his age do (i.e., getting more mature through bucking authority). As it is, she worries because he stays inside the home instead.

In short, transgressive youth forms are, while exterior and often anathema to adults, condoned by them *as long as* they are contained by the gendered age set. For young men, they are expected to transgress because that is what boys do. More importantly, such transgressions further maturation, they don’t spoil it. They don’t ruin the honor of the family because young men are always already expected to be exterior to it. Compare this to transgressions by women, considered interior to the family/kin group/caste

group/culture. Transgressions are likely, in many households, to warrant a beating (if minor) and even death (if major).

As located in between, young men are assumed to be, by degrees, exterior from both the objective age categories ‘child’ and ‘adult.’ More than this, below I show that youth themselves understand their position in ‘society’ as exterior; that is, youth reanalyze the “social structure” in which they are imbricated via a trope of exteriority.

### 2.2.2 ‘Youth’ as reanalysis

If schooling (in particular, *plus 2* exams<sup>7</sup>) and eventually college inaugurate the gradual withdrawal of youth from the spaces of the home and kin group (and thus the age category ‘child’), marriage is its upper limit. Thus, the (normal) age of ‘youth’ for a man goes all the way up to 35 years old, the normative upper boundary of marriageable age (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008: 31; Osella and Osella 1998: 191; Verma and Saraswathi 2003). This marks the beginning of serious filial responsibility and duties (and more importantly, being held to such responsibilities by one’s family). For our purposes here, more important than the question of when youth are inducted into adult society is how youth themselves understand this social fact. Youth talked about their experience of this age before marriage as a time of freedom, before which ‘real’ responsibilities and duties begin. Before that, they are ‘outside’ of the strictures and censure of the kin and caste group. This was pithily explained to me by one friend, Vignesh, in a conversation we had about the observance of caste. Vignesh explained that in the college, and in the peer

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<sup>7</sup> *Plus 2* exams are taken in order to continue studying up to the 11th and 12th standards. Parents often push for their children to study very hard for these exams. As it takes months for the results to be posted, after the *plus 2* exams youth are generally given a respite for pressures to study. Many youth told me that they picked up their stereotyped ‘youth’ practices (drinking, smoking, using affinal kin terms with friends, etc.) only *after* these exams.



group in particular, caste was bracketed. Without missing a beat and with an air of regret, he went on to say that he fully expected to have to increasingly orient himself to caste after marriage. There was no choice, he noted matter of factly, ‘because that is how society is here. It makes you observe caste.’ As he put it: ‘After marriage we (all) have to go inside society/caste’ (“*kalyaaNaththukku appuRam samugaththukkuLLee poogaNum*”).

At the same time that youth figure themselves as ‘exterior’ to the hierarchies and logics that govern adult life and ‘society’, youth also figure themselves as exterior to childhood as an age category marked by dependence upon adults and containment within the home. They reject the idea that like children they are immature and without the faculty and ability to fend for themselves, as students would often complain about the excessive rules of the college.

This double distancing from childhood and adulthood is expressed in youth’s own reflexive understanding of what being a ‘youth’ is all about. As they explained, ‘youth’ is about playing, being free, not being tied down, being without responsibility, and transgressing boundaries. Young men are assumed to be quick-tempered and unreflective; direct and crude in their speech; bold, careless, and callous to the demands of family and ‘society’ and thus self-centered (also see Jeffrey et al. 2008: 191). They indulge themselves: they go to the movies, smoke cigarettes, drink, roam the town, do *style*, love, fight, and do other ‘mischief’ (*cheeddai*). They are the inverse image of the *periya aaL* ‘adult/big man,’ the responsible adult who upholds and enforces ‘society’ and ‘culture,’ who thinks before he speaks, who speaks indirectly and wisely with *mariyaathai* (‘respect’), who is responsible not just for himself but for his dependents,

and is thus fully entwined in ‘society’ (M. Mines 1994; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990; cf. Osella and Osella 1998, 2000b; D. Mines 2005; Lukose 2009). They are also the inverse image of the *chinna paiyan* ‘child’ who cowers before and aligns with the authority of adults and ‘society.’

As such, youth feel themselves to be placed in a double bind: to obey *and* be independent. As I show below through the example of facial-hair grooming, young men’s reflexive response to their exterior position in social structure is the refusal of the forms and diacritics of both childhood and adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.2.3 Example: *The mustache*

In Tamil Nadu the mustache is *the* sign of masculinity (see Hall 2009: 155–156 on the mustache in north India). As a commonly cited proverb states: *ambiLLaikki miisai thaan azhaku*, ‘it is a mustache that is beauty for a man.’ Asking young men about the social indexical values of the mustache, I would often get answers like *aNmai* (‘masculinity’), *kalaachchaaram* (‘culture’) or “Tamil culture”; and even *panjchaayaththu thalaivar* (‘headman of the village council’; often the leader of the dominant caste in the village).<sup>9</sup> The mustache is traditionally linked to various kinds of masculinity—often iconic with social status and aggression (the bigger the better) and

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<sup>8</sup> Note that this response is, as far as the youth that I spent my time with, a silent transgression behind the back of, or outside of, ‘society.’ It isn’t rebellion in the face of authority (Juluri 2002). Youth cultural forms aren’t about generational strife, then, but about exteriorized alterity (*qua* life stage). This is why the concept of ‘youth’ in Tamil Nadu largely isn’t that of liberation of a generation *per se* (which is how it is conceived of in the West, cf. Bucholtz 2002; Brown and Larson 2003), but of biding one’s time in a liminal life stage until one is authorized to join the next age set.

<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, related to the notion that the mustache is an index not only of individual status and masculinity, but that of the caste group in general. Thus, historically, only the dominant (and martial) castes of the village could sport large, beautiful mustaches. Within that, the leader of such castes would have the rights to the biggest and most beautiful mustache. Lower castes would be required to either be clean-shaven or to maintain smaller mustaches. Among Hindus, the exception would be religiously oriented castes—e.g., Brahmins—whose purchase on status does not hinge on displays of (hyper-)masculinity.

thus with particular martial castes and professions (police officers, army men, etc.)—and is identified by most youth as indexical of the *periya aaL*, the adult man of status, property, respect. In short, the mustache is an emblem of the male adult world, particularly of the rural man, the man who inhabits the space of ‘traditional’ “Tamil culture,” the space maximally interior to ‘society.’<sup>10</sup>

My interest in mustaches was piqued by my viewing of the film *Mustaches Unlimited*, a documentary screened at the *peNthirai* festival (Women’s Film festival) in Madurai (August 3, 2007). While there, I asked a male college student sitting next to me why he had never shaved his valiant, but ultimately rather sad attempt at facial hair. His answer was that not having any facial hair would make him look like a *chinna paiyan* and by implication he would be teased by his peers as a deficient youth.

Intrigued, in the following weeks I asked youth about their facial hair. Of those who *could* grow full mustaches, few did. In fact, having a(n adult-looking) mustache could equally draw teasing from one’s peers. Why? The mustache indexes a semi-stigmatized rural identity (to an urban youth sensibility at least), and to this extent was considered outdated and old-fashioned. But more importantly, such teasing worked off of the assumption that an adult-looking mustache on a young man is status-inappropriate and thus absurd. It associates the young man with an age set to which he does not belong, presupposing status to which he has no access because by definition youth are excluded from semiotic gestures that accrue *mariyaathai* (‘respect’). As another college student noted, ‘at this age one shouldn’t look like a *periya aaL*,’ like authority incarnate. ‘We are

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the rural *qua* ‘interior’ is infused with a cluster of meanings: ‘traditional,’ following “Tamil culture,” hyper-masculine; but also backwards, ignorant/uneducated, superstitious, poor, caste-oriented, hierarchical, and patriarchal.

youth. What does a college kid need a mustache for? You can't expect us to act like serious people (or take on such a persona).' While facial hair of some kind may make you look older and mature (i.e., not like a child, which is a good thing), sporting a mustache makes you look *too* old which is both 'ugly' (*asingkam*) and embarrassing.<sup>11</sup>

Not only is the mustache age inappropriate, it's often seen as a direct challenge to adult authority. Indeed, having an impressive mustache would cause trouble with the school/college administration and parents. It would be an inappropriate sign of (traditional) authority, an arrogant and threatening gesture to adults who, within the age hierarchy, are superior to students (cf. Bastian 1996: 119–123 on Nigerian youth fashion). Such facial hair would also not be tolerated by the college administration because it indexes modes of masculinity (e.g., the *rowdy* 'thug';<sup>12</sup> or rural caste-linked identities) antithetical to the socialization task of the college to produce middle-class, "decent" citizens (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Lukose 2009; cf. Dickey 2009a on "decency" in Tamil Nadu). Indeed, many students before they went on interviews for jobs or higher education admission would make sure to—among other things like putting on a tie, getting a short hair cut, and wearing cologne—shave their facial hair, conforming to their idea of what a young professional should look like.<sup>13</sup>

'To shave or not to shave?' became the question for those with the option. A number of young men opted to shave. When I asked them about this, they indicated that being clean shaven was a "*fashion*" ('trend') among young men. But why? The answer was

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<sup>11</sup> After marriage, though, almost all conceded that they would probably (have to) grow a mustache, something I observed in older friends after their marriages.

<sup>12</sup> See Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996) for discussion of the *rowdy* as a legal category in India. See Rogers (2008) on the *college rowdy* persona in the Chennai city college that he worked at; cf. Weiss (2002: 103ff.) on the persona of the *wahuni* ('thug') among Tanzanian youth.

<sup>13</sup> Compare this with Jeffrey et al.'s (2008: ch. 3) discussion of the stereotyped comportment of the 'educated' in Uttar Pradesh.

invariably “*style*,” “*banthaa*,” or “*geththu*” (‘cool’ or ‘badass’ in the parlance of American youth status, see chapter 3 for discussion). Being clean shaven is “*different*” from adults, ‘society,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘culture,’ and the village. As one Madurai student from a village put it,

‘In a village people ask you why you don’t have a mustache, thinking you look like a woman. In Madurai and other cities they’ll think it’s your *style*, or a “*fashion*.” They’ll think you look like a north Indian.’

The lack of mustache indexes how ‘foreigners’ look, in this case either north Indians or, as students often commented with confusion and delight when I sported a healthy mustache, white foreigners.<sup>14</sup>

If youth did grow facial hair, they preferred alternative kinds: the *goatee* (just the chin); the *French beard* (what Americans call the goatee); *trim* (a five o’clock shadow); a pencil-thin sculpted beard (inspired by urban American facial hair fashion);<sup>15</sup> or just simply a beard.<sup>16</sup> Such alternative kinds of facial hair were seen as *style*, as youthful and playful tropes on traditional norms of grooming.

Note that facial grooming, then, is diagrammatic of the construction and experience of ‘youth’ vis-à-vis adult and child age sets as ‘different from’ and thus ‘exterior to’ via grooming styles that index exterior fashions and places. Facial hair diagrams the move

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<sup>14</sup> My own mustache would often draw quizzical looks and laughs from students. Students got a kick out of it telling me my mustache was *bayangkaram* (‘frightening’), *thooraNai* (‘badass’), but not appropriate for the college or my age. Indeed, before one visit to a women’s college, my hostel-mates very seriously told me to push down the ends of my upwardly curling mustache. It would literally be too aggressive and rough for the college girls; it would intimidate them and thus impede my attempts at research. My shaving of the mustache, on the other hand, drew comments like: positively, ‘you look like us now, a “youth”’; ‘you now look like a “real” foreigner’; ‘you look like a “hero”’ (i.e., a film star); negatively, ‘you look ugly,’ or like a ‘small child’ (*chinna paiyan*).

<sup>15</sup> The pencil-thin mustache can be added as a youth fashion from yesteryear, associated with the urban, “*decent*,” suave masculinity of older youth film icons like Gemini Ganesan, MGR, and Ravichandiran.

<sup>16</sup> Beards themselves are highly communicative; either of ‘love failure’ (*kaathal thoolvi*) (an association solidified by the representation of failed love in the film *Devdas* [1953]) or depression more generally; alternatively, the beard is seen as reflecting the rough masculinity of the *rowdy* (‘thug’).

away from ‘society,’ reconverting alternate and exterior norms of grooming as emblematic youth forms of status (cf. Weiss 2002 on urban Tanzanian youth’s hair grooming and tropes of exteriority; Bastian 1996: 111ff. on tropes of masculinity in urban Nigerian youth fashion).

### **3. Youth spaces**

Youth spaces are those which are exterior to the family and the kin group, either spatially or virtually through speech chains (i.e., word getting back to your family). They are spaces where youth can congregate and operate without the censure of ‘society,’ where they can establish alternative norms and forms of status, where ‘youth’ is performed, played with, and negotiated. As such, ‘youth’ activity constitutes these spaces *as youth* social spaces through performances of exteriority (cf. Weiss 2002: 106; Nisbett 2006, 2007). These spaces form a topography of youth activity for college students, often on route to or from the college campus. Below I give a brief discussion of some of these spaces, looking at them as spaces whose (literal) exteriority is iconic and generative of, as a condition of possibility, the enactment of ‘youth.’ I focus primarily on young men’s spaces.

#### *3.1 From tea stall to theater to college*

Youth’s movement across public space maps out youth space (cf. Lukose 2009: 69, 81). One of the prototypical activities of young men is *uur suRRathu* ‘roaming about’: on motorcycles (for those lucky enough to afford access to them), on buses, or on foot. The rhythms of traversal and loitering define youth spaces, as a kind of destination-less pilgrimage with temporary respites: the tea stall (Cody 2009) or café (for the urban

elites); internet cafés (Nisbett 2006, 2007); the cinema hall; roadsides; parks (or in Chennai the beach); temples; the bus stop and the bus itself; shopping complexes and malls in large urban areas; and the college campus.

Such youth spaces are where youth congregate in their peer groups and form their territories, their islands of authority. In Madurai such territorial hangout spots are known by the local youth slang *top*; in Chennai as *addi*. In such spaces youth feel empowered: they can tease and intimidate outsiders and each other; they can engage in *jolly* and horse around; they can chat, smoke, and *time-pass* (n. 'hanging out') by listening to film songs, smoking, and reading magazines. Such spaces are relatively anonymous spaces that maximize human traffic, and thus the ability to look at other individuals, especially to *sight adi* ('ogle,' 'look at') and *comment adi* ('pass comments about') girls. Such spaces also maximize youth's own visibility, allowing them to be foregrounded against the background of the crowd.

The irony, of course, is that such spaces are visible and yet tend to occlude exposure to those who are in, or who are connected to, one's kin and caste network; that is, hierarchical structures of authority to which youth are answerable.<sup>17</sup> Such spaces are doubly-inflected in that they allow one to evade (known) authority *and* transgress (unknown) authority via public acts of non-normativity. Thus, such spaces get co-opted and turned into zones of *jolly* and entertainment, of transgression and youth status (*style*), of the expression of autonomy and youth authority.

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<sup>17</sup> In general, youth spaces are unmarked for age and caste hierarchy; for example, for hanging out youth tend not to go to small temples linked to particular caste deities, but large ones like the Meenakshi or Azhagar temples in Madurai.

The cinema hall is one such youth space *par excellence*, largely because film and film watching as ritual practice are largely linked with ‘youth’ and exteriority. The film theater is historically one of the first non-caste marked spaces in Tamil Nadu (Rajanayakam 2002: ch. 5). Youth easily turn the cinema hall, with their loud, attention-grabbing chanting, clapping, dancing, and singing into a space of youth exteriority, where norms of society can be turned on their head in a carnivalesque inversion (cf. Osella and Osella 1998: 191, 2004: 290). In the dark anonymous cinema hall one can scream and yell, whistle, dance and shake, and lose oneself in the collective effervescence of youth.

Cinema in Tamil Nadu is itself, like ‘youth,’ *exterior* to ‘society’ and ‘culture.’ In addition to the cinema hall (the physical space of consumption); the diegetic world (the representational object of consumption) with its transgressive representations of love, sexuality, and vigilant justice *and* the cinema industry, perceived as a morally corrupt world without *muRai* (‘proper conduct’) (Seizer 2005),<sup>18</sup> are zones of transgression, of experimentation with alternative cultural forms and normativities, and—especially since the arrival of television and the receding of the family audience (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995)—zones of young men’s imaginative activity (Osella and Osella 1998: 191, 2004: 245; cf. Armsbrust 1998 on Egyptian cinema and youth). Indeed, going to the cinema in the peer group is one of the first (and most emblematic) behaviors young men do when they begin to disengage from

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<sup>18</sup> Cinema in Tamil Nadu has always been seen as pornographic, obscene, debased, culture-less, mindless mass entertainment (Sivathamby 1981: 20; Dickey 1993b: 130–133, 2009b; Rajadhyaksha 1993; Vasudevan 1995: 2812; Srinivas 1999: 12–13; Derne 2000; Lukose 2009: 51; Mazzarella forthcoming). Indeed within traditional conceptions of status cinema actors aren’t afforded ‘respect’ (*mariyaathai*). Even great actors like Sivaji Ganesan were referred to with non-honorificating forms like *cinemakkaaran* or *avan* (“Film News” Anand 2008). As many Tamils explained to me, ‘we can watch and enjoy such actors, but nobody wants them in their family or wants people (especially women) in their family to be associated with them/cinema.’ While this is changing, it is still highly relevant.



the home. One of the first thrills of young men's lives in establishing their maturity, their distance from childhood and exteriority from adult life, is skipping school and furtively going to the cinema show with one's peer group. While children, women, and adults largely only see films with the family, young men see cinema with other young men (Osella and Osella 2004: 245; Lukose 2009: ch. 2). It's no surprise, then, as I discuss in part II, that film is one of *the* central source registers for youth expressive culture.

### 3.2 *College as youth space*

Like cinema, college is a youth space *par excellence*. This isn't because it's more important as a youth space in terms of frequency or specificity of youth activities but rather because, like cinema, it holds a particular place in the Tamil imaginary of what 'youth' is all about, as can be seen in the copious numbers of college-based films and television programming of recent years (Nakassis and Dean 2007; cf. Lukose 2009: 49–51; Osella and Osella 1998: 191 on "college culture" cum "cinema culture"). Indeed, to the question 'what did you expect college to be like before you came,' most students answered 'like it's shown in films.' College is a chronotopic space–time where prototypical 'youth' activities are supposed to take place: it's a place for falling in love; skipping class to go to the movies; doing *galaadda* ('fighting,' 'creating trouble'); drinking alcohol and smoking surreptitiously; doing fashion and *style*; and generally being *jolly* and carefree.

College makes this experience of 'youth' maximally robust for a number of reasons. First, college is thought to be, and in many ways is, a place outside of kinship, caste, and thus 'society.' Its historical non-association with caste (as absolute criterion for

admission) and its association with merit and achieved status (even if strongly ideological notions) (Beteille 1993[1991]; Sharma 1986) make college a space where objective hierarchical differentiation based on caste and kin group are partially bracketed; at least, this was the case in the colleges where I worked (though see Jeffrey et al. 2008; Premi 2004; Rogers 2008; Lukose 2009).

Second, college is literally an exterior space.<sup>19</sup> While parents may ultimately condone the transgression of its sons in anonymous exterior spaces, they certainly don't allow such transgression to take place in the physical space of the home or neighborhood (cf. Osella and Osella 2000b: 230; Nisbett 2006, 2007). Like other exterior spaces, then, the college campus affords new possibilities of relatively anonymous and transgressive 'youth' activities where society and its forms of hierarchy are deferred or bracketed.

Third, college is a place where everyone arrives relatively anonymous, as opposed to the school where everyone knows you from a young age. It's thus a space for the creation of, and experimentation with, new identities (Parameswaran 2001, 2002; Lukose 2009).

Fourth, college is a space-time where new freedoms are allowed (e.g., of dress, of how and with whom to spend one's free time, of how to spend pocket money), but that is still regulated by an adult-run administration. It thus provides a space for experimentation and transgression precisely because there is a loosening of restriction but still the presence of authority. Like the age category 'youth' itself, the college constructs youth experience as a dialectic of freedom from and transgression of rules (largely linked to administrators' attempts to socialize students to a middle-class *decent* persona).

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<sup>19</sup> The college itself is made up of social spaces of relatively more or less exteriority: for example, classrooms as interior spaces (populated largely by women) versus benches on walkways, the canteen, the sports ground, and the front gate as relatively visible and exterior spaces populated mainly by young men.

Finally, like schools, college brings together a large number of youth and organizes them in ways that encourages peer group socialization (e.g., in hostels, in class cohorts, in sports groups). Importantly, college organizes youth by department *and* year, thus creating cohorts where age difference is suspended. In college, with few exceptions, one does not take classes with students of other years or other departments. And because age is one of the primary modes of reckoning hierarchical difference in Tamil Nadu, such an organization creates (relatively) egalitarian groups (with respect to objective status differentiation by age).

For these reasons college assembles youth outside of ‘society’ such that egalitarian peer groups can be formed, creating new sets of possibility for engaging in youth culture and establishing novel forms of status and authority. Below I discuss the different ways that college is constructed and used as a space of transgression and exteriority, as well as the attempts by the administration of the college to control that transgression and channel it into the socialization of students to “*decency*” and individual self-control.

### 3.3. *College and registers of exteriority*

#### 3.3.1 *College, dress, fashion, and body grooming*

College enables the experimentation with new forms of dress, fashion, and body grooming that aren’t possible at school. Youth engaged in such forms precisely because they were restricted at home and school.

For example, while the school system has uniforms, the colleges I worked at give relatively more sartorial freedom. As one of my Madurai hostel roommates Stephen explained to me, ‘kids feel like they can do whatever in college. No restrictions,

especially with dress.’ When they get to college they often buy new clothing—fashionable shirts, jeans, hats, rings, earrings, bracelets, etc.—and get new hair cuts, often re-animating mass-mediated images of youth personae (music television VJs and popular film stars). Many students who came in tailored slacks and checkered button-down shirts within their first year had undergone total transformations, donning (duplicate) branded shirts, ripped and embroidered jeans, sunglasses, earrings, bracelets, and hats.

Many students in my Madurai hostel grew out their thumb or pinky nails for no other reason than the fact that in school you are required to keep your nails shortly clipped. Similarly, one female Chennai college student explained that girls in college often get new haircuts when getting to college. While potentially fashionable and aesthetically pleasing, the main motivation is simply to *not* look like a little schoolgirl or an adult woman with long plaited hair. (Compare this to the story of a school girl who was beaten by her teacher and had her ponytail cut off in front of the class for not coming to school with her hair plaited [Deccan Chronicle 2007].) In general, college students make every effort to avoid seeming like school children.

At the same time, such college clothing, fashion, and body grooming couldn’t be done at home. This was especially true for students who come from rural areas. In our discussions of college life, youth often returned to the things that could be worn or done at college but not at home. At home youth are less able to transgress and distance themselves from adult ‘society’ and ‘culture.’ They are less able to express such exteriority to the extent that in their *native place* (or *sontha uur*) their ascribed identities of family background, caste and community are in play. The clothes that students would wear in college would attract different looks (*viththiyaasamaa paappaangka*), scolding,

and vicious teasing by adults and peers at home (cf. Tarlo 1996: ch. 6). When going home male students would often remove their jewelry (especially earrings), cut their hair, and change into more appropriate clothing. While fashionable in college, their college attire would be interpreted as arrogance or *rowdyism* in their hometowns. Similarly, it was not unheard of to see girls come to and leave college in one dress, but move within the college in another (Tarlo 1996: 201).

### 3.3.2 *College and language*

College is also a place where in addition to new commodity registers, new linguistic register competencies are learned and used. In addition to acquiring familiarity with English in classrooms (the exterior language *par excellence*), college also provides casual spaces for peer group interaction that facilitate adopting other forms of speech. For many students (especially from lower-class and rural backgrounds) college affords the opportunity to be exposed to and adopt new kinds of class-linked registers: *decent* (urban) standardized Tamil; English-hybridized Tamil; and youth slang (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008; Lukose 2009: ch. 5; Smith-Hefner 2007).

In addition, while in the college (but outside of the classroom) students can deploy highly intimate and colloquial speech styles that are otherwise reserved for in-kin-group usage. In particular, the use of non-honorific forms, curse words, and fictive (status-equal) affinal kin terms abound in peer groups in the college (and, more generally, outside of the home). Students explained that at home one has to be more in control of one's speech. For example, addressing a close friend with tropic affinal kin terms while one's family was around would invite scolding and embarrassment from elders.

Such censure of language at home, in contrast with the college, is especially true for young women. In public (and sometimes even at home) young women are expected to be calm and silent, while on campus they can selectively engage in teasing and boisterous joking that is impossible otherwise.<sup>20</sup> Even within the college there are more or less problematic spaces: interior spaces like the women's hostel, empty classrooms, and the library are freer, while public walkways and the college gate are more subject to censure (see Lukose 2009: 54, 57, 147 on gender and space among young women in Kerala).

### 3.3.3 *College and leisure: Love and other bad habits*

The case is similar with leisure activity. As one student told me, college is the time when a young man can learn 'bad' (but manly and thus valorized) habits. It's a place where one smokes with his peers on tea breaks; drinks with his peers after college (or sometimes during college); skips class to go to the movies with friends; roams the campus (or outside of it) looking at girls; spends money with relative abandon; teases women and loves truly for the first time. At home, such social activity is likely to earn you a bad reputation and a beating from your family.

Love is one of the most extreme 'youth' expressions of exteriority. Love is highly transgressive, with respect to parents (and to their authority to dictate marriage and control sexuality), to the kin and caste group (for it represents a break in the patriarchal

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<sup>20</sup> The disjuncture between home and college is acutely experienced by young women. A number of young women complained to me that the things that colleges allow them to do are often inapplicable in their own homes. One particularly intelligent and bold, lower-caste and -class Madurai girl explained to me how at college they teach you to question, to be equal, and to speak freely with people of the opposite sex. But when she comes home she isn't even allowed to sit down when a man of an older generation is present (e.g., her father, uncles, etc.). As she explained, to do so isn't considered 'respect(ful)' (*mariyaathai*) to them. She voiced frustration with her inability to enact the non-hierarchical relationships and different gender roles that she learned in college. She explained that there is a "gap" because her parents can't understand such non-hierarchical relationships and non-traditional gender roles. College (and sometimes the workplace) is one of the only places where such behavior is possible.

chain of authority, as well as the possibility for unions with members of other castes), and even the “culture” at large (which, in such discourses, is represented as one where children respect elders’ prerogative to choose marriage partners).

And college is love’s chronotope. It’s a space–time where love is made possible, where members of the opposite sex are given opportunity to see each other and to get to know each other relatively freely. It’s no surprise, then, that college is the time and place when most youth expect to ‘do love’ (*lav paNRathu*), something that largely isn’t possible for ‘small boys’ (*chinna pasangka*) in school. To love, then, is to move out of childhood, to cease to think about the opposite sex as one’s parents do, as a ‘bad word’ (*kedda vaarththai*). Indeed, for this reason college is seen by parents as an inherently dangerous place because it’s a place where women’s honor and chastity is likely to be damaged, and where young men make ‘mistakes’ (*thappukaL*) (cf. Dube 1988; Karlekar 1988: 159; Mukhopadhyay 1994; Derne 1994; Tarlo 1996: ch. 6; Parameswaran 2001; Seymour 2002; Jeffrey et al. 2008).

In this section I have highlighted the ways that college is a space that allows youth culture to flourish. I have stressed that it is college’s status as an exterior space, as a space between the home and the school—and their associated signs and typification as ‘childish’—that makes it able to function as such a space. Below I look at how the administrative and institutional organization of Tamil colleges also function to make college a particular robust site for the expression and performance of ‘youth’ vis-à-vis transgression.

### 3.3.4 *Channeling transgression*

College functions as a youth space *par excellence* to the extent that it motivates transgression *through* imposing a set of rules and the expectation that such rules will be broken. Much of the ‘youth’ activity that college students engage in centers on breaking the rules, either of ‘society’ more generally, or of the college authority more proximately. Indeed, the colleges that I worked at had explicit rules which attempted to control youth *qua* ‘youth.’ For example, for men long hair, dyed hair, earrings, jeans, tee-shirts, loud colored clothing, ripped clothing, and too many pockets on pants were actively discouraged or banned on campuses. This regulation of youth fashion is even more extreme for women (especially in coed institutions) where wearing jeans, tee-shirts, blouses, sleeveless kurtas, and not using the dupatta are often banned (see Lukose 2009: 86 for a similar case in Kerala). Cross-sex interaction is also often discouraged by faculty, outright banned by certain departments and in certain colleges. Language spoken in front of teachers is also highly regimented. Speech in Tamil should be devoid of bad words, colloquial phrases, and regionalisms, or it should be in English (the academic language of most colleges).

Such rules are meant to socialize youth to an upper-middle-class, professional habitus: to be *decent, modern* subjects, and not *local*, lower-class, or rural (cf. Lukose 2009: ch. 5). To this end many departments have “*formals*” day when students are required to dress the part of a white-collar professional. And indeed, many poorer and rural students answered the question ‘what have you learned in college’ by saying that, in addition to ‘youth’ habits like smoking, drinking, fashion, they had learned how to inhabit a particular kind of valorized persona—the middle-class professional—while shedding the *local* and crass habits from their (rural/low-class) background.



At the same time, however, more often than not youth activity and dress attempts to distance itself from such rules and from adult ‘society,’ either through pushing their boundaries or by their transgression. Youth expressive culture in college, in addition to troping on the indexes of childhood and adulthood in its negotiation between them, also tropes on the class-based vision of masculinity imposed by administrators and parents. Instead of dress slacks and button-down shirts with muted colors, youth prefer patterned bell-bottom slacks and printed button-down shirts in bright colors. Instead of ‘proper English’ or high-standard Tamil, youth prefer to pepper their colloquial Tamil with English loan words and slang re-animated from cinema dialogues (cf. Smith-Hefner 2007).

A common point of view of college administrators is that students need rules and discipline to be controlled. Without this surrogate patriarch students would go “berserk,” one hostel warden explained, smoking cigarettes until their lungs burst, drinking alcohol until they poisoned themselves, watching cinema until they went blind, and beating each other in fights until thoroughly black and blue. However, as the assumption is that it’s natural that students will break such rules (and thus expected), administrators often turn a blind eye to students’ transgressions.<sup>21</sup>

Hostel wardens, teachers, and other administrators are constantly engaged in a tug of war with students, a cycle of rule enforcement and transgression. The rules *produce* the transgression, as many students cogently explained. The rules make the thrill of exerting

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<sup>21</sup> There is variety by college, of course. In addition, as colleges have become increasingly privatized, the level of control and restriction of students has increased. This is ironical because as the image of college as space of total freedom was spread via the glut of commercial films about colleges in the 1990s the de-politicization and privatization of colleges (both due to liberalization, see chapter 1) has resulted in the increased control by the administration over student unions and the student body more generally (cf. Lukose 2009: ch. 4 on colleges and politicization in Kerala).

one's own agency and authority possible. Jumping over the walls after curfew; smoking, drinking, playing cards in one's hostel room; cutting class to go to the movies or the local government bar; the collective ritual of making noise in the classroom or during silent study period in order to provoke disciplining by teachers are all quintessential 'youth' moments in the college.

Ironically, this is precisely the reason why many students thought of school life as better or more fun than college life. While college had more freedom, the presence of freedom and the menacing implications of responsibility meant that rule breaking had less thrill attached to it. This, of course, is one of the principles for why youth forms become even more exaggerated in the college. Not only do increased freedoms allow for more frequent expression of the forms, the forms must be even more extreme so as to count as transgression.

### 3.3.5 *Outside the outside: Cultural and the college tour*

Among college students, youth cultural forms are expressed in their most extreme form in college activities where college authority itself is bracketed. For example, college functions like inter-college *culturals* competitions or hostel functions often afford youth the opportunity to go wild, dance with abandon, and put on their best fashion. The college rituals where this bracketing is the most robust are those that take place outside of the college, physically and cognitively. Below I discuss one such example: the college-sponsored fieldtrip or *tour*. (In chapter 3 I discuss another such event from the working-class government college in Chennai that I worked in: *bus day*.) Note that "taking place outside of" does not mean the college is negated or erased. Rather it's precisely because the

college is constantly in mind—one is outside the college but with one’s college peers on a college-sponsored trip—that it is necessary to continually transgress and eclipse the rules and authority structures of the college. Note that this relationship between the *tour* and the college is the same as between youth activity and ‘society’ more generally. The exteriority of youth does not in any way negate or erase ‘society,’ but rather keeps it constantly in play, reinscribing it through transgressing and troping on it.

I went on a *tour* with the third-year class of a coed department from an autonomous Chennai college to the neighboring states of Kerala and Karnataka for roughly one week. As one student from the group explained, ‘the college *tour* is about doing all the things students do secretly (*maraimugamaa*) with respect to teachers: smoke, drink, roam, dance, sing, do fashion, tease, and ogle and romance girls.’ On *tour* one can do such things at a fever pitch in new and exterior places in the comfort of one’s peer group. This is because on *tour* one is outside of (the rules of) the college, the hometown, and even of the “culture.” The *tour* is a safe space for the quasi-ritualistic and orgiastic experience of ‘youth.’ It’s a space for possibility, a space where authority is lenient/absent, but present (there were only four professors for roughly 120 students on the *tour* I went on) and one is left to one’s own devices in the peer group.

This is most revealing for women. On *tour* young women are expected to, and do, dress qualitatively different. All the clothes they aren’t allowed to wear in the home and at college are worn on *tour*: jeans, tee-shirts, skirts, sneakers, and sunglasses. They let their hair down (literally) and wear makeup. While normally a woman’s dress is an index not just of her person, but of the family group, the kin/caste group, the culture, and the

nation, in the exteriority and anonymity provided by the *tour* such indexicality is neutralized.

Even youth who typically avoided stereotypical ‘youth’ expressions (and transgressions) engaged with them while on the *tour*. This was most salient in youth’s obsessive self-spectacularization in their almost compulsive photo-taking. In such photos, students put on *style*-ish sunglasses, made muscles or crossed their arms, wrapped bandannas around their heads or hands, put on their baddest look, and struck a pose like a film star. *Tour* provides the opportunity—as does college more generally—to experiment with, embellish, and exaggerate youth identity.

And as this was students’ own understanding of what the college *tour* was all about, they worked hard at making it happen. There was always the anxiety that the reality of the *tour* was not living up their expectations: “*bore adikkuthu*” ‘it’s boring’ was a common complaint on the *tour* during the lulls between hyper-kinetic dancing on the bus, singing film songs, ritualized teasing sessions among students, and drinking and smoking in the hotel rooms and in the back of the bus.

In sum, youth spaces such as the college provide a literal and tropic exteriority that enables youth activity, a playing field or stage on which certain semiotic forms can embody and enact ‘youth’ through the transgression of norms of ‘society’ (or, as proxy, the college). Just as important as the exteriority that such youth cultural forms index, is the egalitarian peer group wherein such youth activity is put to use in the negotiation of status (Osella and Osella 1998: 191, 2004: 245; Nisbett 2006, 2007 on the role of the peer group as rite of youth passage; also see Kyrtzis 2004: 626). Below I look at how peer

groups as exterior interactional zones are both spaces of status-raising and of intimacy and peer pressure. While I focus on the college because of its rich institutional elaboration of egalitarian peer groups, the dynamics I describe also apply to the non-college going youth with whom I did research (see Osella and Osella 1998: 191; Nisbett 2006, 2007).

#### **4. Peer groups**

##### *4.1. Peer group as space of status-raising and -leveling*

If youth spaces are ‘exterior’ spaces that license the experimentation and performance of ‘youth,’ the peer group is the interactional unit that colonizes such spaces. And like ‘youth’ and the spaces the peer group inhabits, the peer group is constructed as exterior to ‘society’ and its perduring status hierarchies based on age. But what goes on in the peer group? As we have seen, one of the major aspects of youth activity is the reflexive distancing from childhood and adulthood. And importantly, such non-alignment to and transgression of ‘society’ constitute status-raising acts. That is, to transgress authority is to assert one’s own authority, and thereby constitute oneself as a status-ful individual, if only through presupposing the status necessary to make the rules. In short, by virtue of its exteriority to ‘society’ *qua* norms of adult authority the peer group is a space where youth are continually engaging in status-raising acts. I take up such status-raising in chapter 3.

At the same time, by virtue of it being exterior to age hierarchy, the peer group is a space of relatively egalitarian and reciprocal interaction, and thus a space of peer pressure and intimacy. By *egalitarian peer groups* I mean peer groups where forms of status that are ascribed and hierarchical are (relatively) neutralized (see Flanagan 1989). I am

interested, here, mainly in same-sex peer groups. In mixed-sex peer groups gender is not neutralized in the same way, and still functions as an axis of hierarchical differentiation (though still less than it does outside of the peer group) (cf. Flanagan 1989: 213; Osella and Osella 2000b: ch. 7). Such peer groups are egalitarian not in the sense of being equalitarian—that is, where all individuals are necessarily equal—but in that (a) institutionally perduring and ascribed forms of hierarchical status are (temporarily) bracketed (cf. Osella and Osella 1998, 2000b: ch. 7; Nisbett 2007; see Flanagan 1989: 261 on “egalitarian” as always elliptically modified by “relatively,” following Fried 1967: 28) and (b) the group abides by an ideology of egalitarianism (see Flanagan 1989: 248). Below I look at how the college, in particular, functions to construct the peer group as egalitarian.

#### 4.1.1 *Age hierarchy and negation in the college*

One general feature of all colleges I have seen in Tamil Nadu is the *senior–junior* division, though the extent to which it is elaborated varies according to the institutional control over students (e.g., colleges where academics are stronger have more elaborate *senior–junior* divisions because of the focus on departmental unity) and the presence of competing modes of student organization (e.g., *bus route* or *area*).

*Senior–junior* is a relative hierarchical relation (cf. ‘older than X’ or ‘younger than X’). Hence a third-year undergraduate (*UG*) student is a *senior* to a second year and a first year, and a second year is *junior* to third years and *senior* to first years. Postgraduate (*PG*) students and alumni are *super seniors* to *UG* students (or *mighty seniors* in some college slangs).

This hierarchy is indexed in a number of ways. In address terms, at the beginning of the year *seniors* demand asymmetrical honorification: through 2nd person pronouns, verb agreement (*seniors* receive 2nd pers. pl. and give 2nd pers. sing.) and verb-final markers (*seniors* give but do not receive *daa* [for men] and *di* [for women]),<sup>22</sup> as well as in the usage of fictive consanguineal kinship terms like *aNNan* ('older brother') for *seniors* and, less frequently, *thambi* ('younger brother') for *juniors*.

Within the college age is bracketed and thus less important than year. Hence a *junior* who is older than his *senior* is still required to treat him as a *senior*. For some students this created a cognitive dissonance and anxiety. Take, for example, Senthil who had discontinued his studies at one college and then came to another college a year later, making him one year older than his cohort members. Over the course of the two years of my fieldwork he increasingly began to withdraw from the social life of the hostel precisely because his self-image was hurt by the fact that his same-year cohort members addressed and referred to him in ways that were dissonant with their age-differential but consonant with their year equality. On top of that, his *seniors*, who were of the same age as he, addressed and referred to him as a *junior* (and by implication, one of lower status).

Other respect forms, transplanted from "traditional" discourses of status, also apply between *juniors* and *seniors*: *juniors* shouldn't talk too loudly around *seniors*; shouldn't do too much fashion and *style* in front of *seniors*; shouldn't smoke (or drink) in front of *seniors* unless given permission; and shouldn't be allowed to get away with breaking the

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<sup>22</sup> *di* is a less common usage, as it is considered more intimate/rude than *daa* which is used quite generally between intimates. *daa* is the (relatively) unmarked category, while *di* is marked for feminine gender of addressee. Youth in their peer groups use *daa* easily and commonly (to the extent of it being emblemized in the youth-oriented music channel, SS Music's show "College *da* [sic]"). *di* is also occasionally used tropically between two men when one is putting the other down or teasing him, figuratively treating him as a woman.

college rules (e.g., using cell phones, wearing tee-shirts, etc.). *Seniors* are allowed to scold their *juniors*, but the opposite would be grounds for a physical confrontation, as I saw on multiple occasions. *Seniors* can question a *junior* and inquire about whatever information he pleases, though this can't be reciprocated. The property of *juniors* is the public property of *seniors*, though *juniors* can't use *seniors'* property without permission. In the hostels, the control of the television remote—always a contentious form of public property—always rests in the hands of the *seniors*.

When I asked why all of these restrictions exist, students answered that it's the *seniors* way of showing their *geththu* (lit. 'prestige,' 'power'), of figuratively showing that they are the *periya aaL* in the college or hostel. Changes to this inter-year hierarchy (e.g., democratizing access to the television remote), one third-year student explained to me, would result in a fight, both between *seniors* and *juniors* and between *seniors* and the administration. To cede their rights to *juniors* would create a *gauravam* ('honor,' 'prestige') problem.

At the same time, *seniors* have duties toward *juniors*. They are supposed to help them and give them advice in their college life, in their studies, and in their own intra-group problems. Like a higher-status adult (*periya aaL*) it is the *seniors'* duty to resolve disputes among *juniors* and mete out judgment. There is also an element of affection (if developed over time) mixed with the sense of distance, fear (of *juniors* toward their *seniors*), and duty (cf. the *aNNan-thambi* 'older-younger brother' relationship).

#### 4.1.2 Ragging



As we noted above, *juniors* are made to be less free than their *seniors*. This is institutionalized in the ritual of *ragging* (something like hazing in U.S. fraternities).<sup>23</sup> While *ragging* in India in recent years has gotten much negative press (CURE 2007; Indiaedunews.net 2009; Jesudasan 2009; Oneindia.in 2009; Saqaf 2009; Sharma and Bodh 2009; Vijay Kumar 2009; *The Hindu* 2010) and has been deemed illegal due to the extreme cases of sadism licensed by it, *ragging* in a mild or *light* form was practiced as a ritualized expression of the *senior–junior* relationship during my fieldwork. *Ragging* is one of the processes by which *seniors* ‘control’ *freshers* (‘first-year students’). It usually lasts from the beginning of the year until the first department or hostel function (for intra-departmental or intra-hostel *ragging* respectively), usually three months into the academic year.

During this period *freshers* are forced by *seniors* to be figurative *chinna pasangka* to their *periya aaL*. Through *ragging*, *juniors* are forced to give respect to *seniors* in exaggerated rituals of status hierarchy. *Ragging* is a way to put *freshers* in their place, to socialize them to the year hierarchy (and by implication to within-year egalitarianism), and to the college rules. Indeed, it is really only during the *ragging* period that hostel and department rules are made to be followed to the letter by *freshers*.

*Ragging* practices range from *seniors*, most often in a group (i.e., for an audience), ‘calling’ (*kuuppiduRathu*) *juniors* to where they are sitting (thus already instituting

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<sup>23</sup> Rogers (2008) wrongly glosses *ragging* as “bullying.” While *ragging* could be understood as a kind of bullying, this term does not capture the cultural meanings associated with *ragging* insofar as *ragging* is something particular to colleges (and only by extension to other organizational cultures); further, *ragging* acts *not* as literal dominance but as diagrammatic of larger social and symbolic configurations. Moreover, bullying imputes a particular kind of intentionality and outcome (dominance/submission) which isn’t what *ragging* is always about. As I argue in this section, it is as much about the formation of intra-year cohorts through the diagramming of social difference by year. Further, while one can bully someone of the same year (or higher), one can’t rag someone of the same year (or higher).

hierarchical difference) and asking them, roughly and directly, often invading the physical space of the *fresher*, their name, their hometown, etc. A typical question–answer turn-taking structure would be like this:

Senior: *eey, ingkee vaa daa.*  
*nee entha uur?*

Senior: ‘Hey, come (-hon.) here man (-hon.).  
Where are you (2nd pers. sing., -hon.) from?’  
<direct eye gaze>

Junior: *chennai.*

Junior: ‘Chennai.’ <eyes downward>

S: *avan chennai NNu sonnaan!*

S: <To overhearers:> ‘He (-hon.) said (-hon.)  
he’s from Chennai!’

Through asymmetrical address and question initiation, as well as repetition via reported speech constructions a diagram of hierarchy between years is created. While third years have the right to question, to comment, and to speak about another’s words, *juniors* are expected to only talk when questioned (and only to the questioner), and to give concise answers with eye gaze downward and body comportment consonant with submission.

Other kinds of *ragging* take the form of ritualized teasing, forcing a *junior* to do something embarrassing; for example, hugging and kissing a tree; standing in one place and repeating whatever the *senior* says while doing some other attention-requiring task; singing a song (e.g., a film song, the college song, or at one Chennai Hindu college, the college’s Sanskrit prayer) or, as in one Madurai college, doing the *college salute* (where the *junior* is forced to put his hands on his crotch, gyrate his hips erotically, stamp his right foot and then salute to his *seniors*); flirting with female strangers, professing their love, or singing them love songs (something highly embarrassing for young students). I have even seen a professor who, during class in an ice-breaking exercise, ragged a first-year student by making him stand in front of the class and sing and dance. Then the

student was ordered to pretend he was directing the current sexy-girl of Tamil cinema, Namitha. In the name of *ragging juniors* are often forced to take *seniors* to the movies, to restaurants, to go on errands for them (e.g., getting them cigarettes, food, or other items), or to just straight-up give them money.

But *ragging* at these colleges isn't just about lowering the status of *juniors*, embarrassing and humiliating them (though it does this). *Ragging* is also about minimizing status-difference *between juniors*. Thus, anything that typically raises the status of the *juniors* is forbidden. For example, one of my Madurai hostel roommates at the beginning of his first year was forced to *only* wear lungis in the hostel and not the more *style-ish* tracks shorts that he was used to.<sup>24</sup> Nathan, a friend studying in Coimbatour, told me over SMS that “one guy [a *senior*] physically forced me to remove my Livestrong [bracelet].”<sup>25</sup> Nathan was also forced to stop wearing his hip-hop inspired clothing, and instead switch to more dowdy “*formals*” (slacks and button-down shirts). In a Chennai college that another friend studied at, first years are only allowed to wear formal clothes (no tee-shirts, jeans) but always had to look “*shabby*”: their shirt couldn't be tucked in and they could only wear plastic bathroom slippers (i.e., no leather slippers, no sneakers). Students are also often not allowed to do other typical ‘youth’ activities like going to common hangout spots like the movies, the mall, or the beach. In short, *freshers* are banned from activity which status-raises or performs ‘youth.’

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<sup>24</sup> A *lungi* is a stitched piece of patterned cloth worn by men that is wrapped around the body. In Tamil Nadu, it is considered an informal kind of clothing, worn by many at home, but only by the low-class in public.

<sup>25</sup> The Livestrong bracelet is a rubber bracelet that, through purchase, supports cancer treatment. It was started by Lance Armstrong, the famous cyclist. Such bracelets were considered ‘cool’ (“*style*”), and were popular among young hip guys at the time.

In effect, *ragging* attempts to make everyone in the age cohort equal. This gets reflected in who gets ragged. Indeed, it's those who status-raise or are viewed as higher-status (e.g., the English fluent, the fashionable, the rich); those who do not acquiesce to status-equalization and insist on their right to status(-raise) (cf. Lukose 2009: 190); and those who stand out or stand up for themselves who get ragged most intensely. The intensity of the *ragging*, thus, is proportional to the response to the *ragging*. One who does not play along—a sign of resistance to the year hierarchy—gets ragged more. (One can see how this can easily end up in runaway *ragging* that ends up hurting people, physically and emotionally.)

In an interesting example that highlights how gender works into this, consider the example of a female, first-year student in an predominantly male college. Only her department and one other had female *UG* students. Because she speaks English fluently and confidently; is visibly well-off and wears stylish clothes; was often visible in the public spaces of the college campus; and speaks comfortably with members of the opposite sex in public (all of which are considered 'bold' for women and presuppose some level of status), the *seniors* of her department saw her as showing off, and thus in need of being ragged (cf. Rogers 2008: 90; Lukose 2009: 193–194). Calling her to them, they made her sing for them and then made her ask for their forgiveness. By contrast, her classmate who is quiet and demure received little to no attention from the *seniors* in the department, except for comments praising her 'character.'

When *ragging* breaks down, that is, when a student will not participate to the point that it becomes a showdown between *senior* and *junior*, drastic measures are taken. A student who is defiant in the face of *ragging* risks physical beating. More interestingly, in

colleges where hostel or department identity is taken very seriously, resistance to *ragging* risks ostracization *from the same-year group*. Students who don't share the experience of *ragging*, who opt out of it, are intentionally excluded from the peer group throughout their three years of college.

The hostel or department function which signals the end of *ragging*—a welcome function for the first years—spectacularizes *ragging* in a public *culturals* event where *freshers* are expected to take the stage and perform irrespective of their talent (and often, in inverse relationship to it). Here public *ragging* in front of everyone, including professors, is performed. Students are forced to perform under non-ideal conditions: *seniors* will play the wrong song for them to sing; will force them to dance embarrassing steps to songs they weren't planning on dancing to; and will boo and heckle them if they make mistakes (and sometimes even if they don't). Here being on stage—where visibility and display of talent presupposes status—entails being ragged. For those who don't take the stage, they are made to do funny things during other people's performance (e.g., dance behind the performers on stage, walk in front of them and give the traditional greeting gesture *vaNakkam* to the crowd, or go and “hold up” the trees which are “falling”).

*Ragging* has two effects. First, it fosters inter-year familiarity. *Juniors* and *seniors* learn each others names through the interactional ice being violently broken. Moreover, forms of affection through common rites of passage are developed. Second, and more importantly, it creates intra-year solidarity.<sup>26</sup> Egalitarian peer groups within years are

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<sup>26</sup> In one Chennai college I that worked in there was an attempt to stop *ragging* by having an orientation function at the beginning of the year. The point of the orientation was to replicate the function of *ragging* in

formed through the creation of hierarchical classes between years. *Ragging* is the time when strong bonds among first years are formed and where their in-peer-group nicknames are often generated (the embarrassing *ragging* event as baptismal event). Such egalitarian groups are—just as with youth’s relationship to ‘society’ more generally—formed in distinction to, and ‘outside of,’ the hierarchical organization of social groups by year.

Indeed, at the Madurai and Chennai colleges that I lived in, many students, *juniors and seniors*, lamented that not *enough ragging* was going on in their colleges. The evidence for this, they said, was that there were too many divisions within year cohorts because *ragging* had not forced solidarity among the students. This had resulted in unnecessary fights *among* first years (who didn’t know each other) which had gotten out of control (because *seniors* were not involved enough to regulate such “*groupism*”). Moreover, many students expected and looked forward to the thrill of being ragged. Light *ragging* was seen as *jolly*, as a necessary part of the college experience, by both students and administrators.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.1.3 *Intimacy and the peer group*

As an interactional space, as we have seen, the peer group is constructed as exterior to ‘society’; in particular, to perduring modes of hierarchical status-differentiation by age (and within the college, year), and thus as a kind of egalitarian space. While on the one hand such ‘exteriority’ motivates status-raising vis-à-vis transgression as central to the

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another form (friendly, egalitarian socializing). Students were forced to meet each other, learn each others’ names, and speak. *Ragging* continued on anyway, though under the radar and in attenuated form.

<sup>27</sup> As one hostel warden noted, “I’m not supposed to say this, but *ragging* is necessary in the college.”

peer group, it also motivates intimacy, reciprocity, and peer pressure toward conformity, as I discuss below.

The peer group is an extremely tightly knit space of intimacy. Within the peer group, everyone has rights over everyone else; property is common and youth share clothes, beds, cell phones, notes, and food. The peer group is also a space of reciprocity. For example, one mode of phatic communication among peers is the *forward SMS*. The *forward SMS* is a text message not authored by the sender and not addressed particularly to the addressee. It's usually a poem, a joke, or a saying. Like the gift (Mauss 1954), youth sent such messages not because they had denotational content relevant to anything in particular, but because they established and maintained social relationships. Youth sent such messages compulsively. They also complained if you didn't respond in the form of another *forward SMS*, as I found out when one student confronted me questioning my commitment to our friendship because I was not reciprocating by sending *forward SMSs* to him.

The reciprocity and commonness of property and space of the peer group assumes and creates intense intimacy among youth, linguistically, emotionally, and physically. Linguistically, in the age-equal peer group youth do not use honorific forms (in the verb: *-iingka*, *-aar*, *-aangka*; pronominally: *niingka*, *avar*, *avangka*) in address or reference, except ironically. Instead they address and refer to each other using intimate/impolite pronouns (*nee*, *avan*, *avaL*), verb endings (*-e*, *-aan*, *-aaL*), address markers (*daa*, *di*), and insult/curse words. The most common address forms in the male peer group are fictive

kinship terms for affinal kin,<sup>28</sup> either of the same generation—*maappiLLai* (variants: *maapps*, *maappu*), predominantly in Madurai; *machchaan* (variant: *machchi*), predominantly in Chennai—or of an older generation—*maamaa* (variant: *maamu*, *maams*).<sup>29</sup>

Bracketing their literal kin meanings such address terms index equality, solidarity, and intimacy among youth in the peer group, something like ‘dude’ or ‘brother’ in the U.S. (Kiesling 2004; cf. Smith-Hefner 2007 on Indonesian youth slang). The tropic usage of such forms begins for most youth around the same time they begin to go to the movies, to smoke, to drink, and to love; that is, when they move outside of the home into their peer groups. Note, again, how youth cultural forms reinscribe larger social relations from

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<sup>28</sup> Other fictive kin terms were also used—*pangaaLi* or *pangu* (lit., ‘men who share a stake in the property of the patriline’); *baavaa* (equivalent to *maamaa* in Telugu)—though with less frequency. The term *pangaaLi* is used primarily in Madurai and Theeni. Its fictive usage is slightly out-of-fashion in Madurai (but not in Theeni as I observed), dated to the mid-1990s (Bernard Bate, personal communication, 9.15.08). Women’s age-equal in-group usages didn’t, to my knowledge, use female affinal kin terms. Rather, English words (e.g., *girl*, *loose-u* ‘crazy person’) and insult words (e.g., *panni* ‘pig’) were used. Or, among the urban affluent (or in women’s colleges) men’s tropic affinal kin terms like *machchaan* or *machchi* were reappropriated and used between women (cf. the higher usage of *daa* among women than *di*). Note the masculinization here of women’s youth cultural forms.

<sup>29</sup> The first two are literally terms for one’s male cross-cousin or sister’s husband, both kin positions being the same under preferred cross-cousin arranged marriage in Tamil Nadu (Trautmann 1981). *Maamaa* literally refers to classificatory mother’s brother. In northern Tamil Nadu *maamaa* is also used to refer to mother’s brother’s son who is older than ego, while in southern Tamil Nadu *machchaan* is used for mother’s brother’s son who is older than ego. In northern Tamil Nadu *machchaan* refers to mother’s brother’s son who is younger than ego while in Madurai *maappiLLai* is used for this relation. In northern Tamil Nadu *maappiLLai* is only used for the ‘groom’ (as it also is in southern Tamil Nadu). Such fictive in-group meanings are a projection from Tamil kinship structures where one is more emotionally close with one’s affines. Indeed, *maamaa* gives ego a daughter (Trautmann 1981; Kapadia 1995). Such cross-cousin terms, then, trope on this kin intimacy and generalize it to intimacy among equal peers. Interestingly, such terms are the most egalitarian in the kinship structure. While the relations of the patriline are fraught with hierarchy, distance, and respect, cross-kin relations are marked with informality, fun, and intimacy. Hence terms like (*periya/chiththa-*)*appaa* ‘(older/younger-)father’ (father or uncles) or *aNNan/thambi* ‘older/younger brother’ are avoided within the peer group. (The only exceptions to this are: [a] the joking usage of *chiththappu*, a formation from *chiththappaa* [father’s younger brother], to refer to a member of the class who is either older than everyone else [and hence is like an uncle] or who acts too much like an adult, who is too responsible, etc.; and [b] *pangkaaLi*, though note that this is the only consanguineal kin-related term which is symmetrical and thus age-neutralized in its semantics.) Within the cross-cousin terms those used the most fictively among young men—*maappiLLai* in Madurai, *machchaan* in Chennai—in their kin-literal usages specify ego as of the same age or younger than addressee; that is, the terms where age-linked status is neutralized in their literal semantic content are precisely the ones used tropically by young men in their peer groups.



‘society’ by tropically figuring themselves as exterior to, or transgressive of, those very social relations.

Similarly, there is a high degree of physical intimacy among young men: for example, sleeping in the same bed, holding hands, and sharing food. At this stage in life the peer group, youth explained, is the substitute for the kin group, and the ‘attachment’ (*paRRu*) between kin members is transferred to one’s peers. Indeed, within the peer group young men actively distanced themselves from kin, tropically erasing kin relations by re-signifying kin terms as in-peer-group usage. Moreover, amongst friends there was an active avoidance of discussing actual kin relations.

Note that with the exception of youth peer groups, all such intimate acts are contained within the caste (e.g., sharing the same plate is reserved for caste-mates) and kin group (e.g., sharing property, using kin terms, feeding each other, sleeping in the same space). While the institutions of caste and kin attempt to regiment such intimacy and contain it within the group, youth peer group intimacy is highly transgressive of the hierarchical norms implicit in the regulation of intimacy. Adults often find such physical and linguistic intimacy disturbing precisely because they cross the lines of social grouping drawn by ‘society’ (Osella and Osella 1998: 191, 2000b: ch. 7; Nisbett 2007). Youth peer groups defer and bracket these lines and replicate them tropically within the youth peer group.

Moreover, much of this intimate youth activity can’t be done outside of the peer group as it is insulting to the (adult) onlooker.<sup>30</sup> Projecting the norms of the peer group

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<sup>30</sup> As one of Rogers’ (2008: 91) informants puts it (though Rogers’ gloss as “rebellion” is misleading): “Explaining his [the informant’s] moral inconsistency toward female students, he noted that he had ‘two personalities, one for the home and another for college life.’ At home in front of his parents, he had to

outside of it is the quickest way to get taken down a peg (verbally or physically), and is thus avoided.

#### 4.1.4 *Peer pressure and the peer group*

Because peer groups are so closely knit, because there is no pretence of maintaining a polite distance (to allow the other to maintain face), peers can be incredibly blunt and critical of each other. As I found out, my increased acceptance within the hostel was revealed when students began to stop holding back their criticisms of me. As I noted at the time:

“One stage in the increase of intimacy here is the boldface statement of one’s dislike for something about the person with whom intimacy has increased. E.g., 2 weeks have passed and now people I’ve become more comfortable with have no hesitation in saying what they think: your arms are flaccid, you’re glasses don’t look good, you looked better without a mustache, you don’t know anything about Tamil, your Tamil has gotten worse, you’d look better with a haircut, etc.” (Field notes, 7.26.07).

Such intimacy opens the doors to constant status-leveling and peer pressure to act or be a particular way, thus creating status-sensitivity, an anxiety to keep up with and be constrained by the peer group. Students often commented that when they came to college, whether or not they looked forward to their ability to engage in youth fashion, they were obliged to. Students explained, if everyone around you is doing X and you are doing Y (where X is of equal or higher value than Y), you will naturally feel that you should do X. Students felt the compulsion to dress a particular way—for example, switch from wearing a *lungi* to wearing track pants; to get a nice cell phone, fashionable shirts, and

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appear meek and studious; however, if his college cohorts were to take him seriously, he had to be seen as being rebellious and nonchalant.”

jeans—and to speak a particular way—for example, to lose their regional dialects. Youth are constantly monitoring, borrowing and redeploying what others do. And they are explicit about this logic: ‘everyone else is doing it, so I figured so should I.’

As the above discussion shows, then, there is an inherent tension in the youth peer group. On the one hand, the peer group licenses the performance of ‘youth’ and the transgression of adult authority as status-ful. The peer group, then, is a space of status-raising. On the other hand, as constructed based on the trope of exteriority from ‘society’ *qua* hierarchy, the peer group is a space of intimacy, egalitarianism, and reciprocity. Thus, attempts to status-raise excessively (i.e., reintroduce hierarchical ranking within the peer group), to project oneself as better than the rest of the group are met with status-leveling, as I discuss in chapter 3. There is, then, a tension between status-raising and peer pressure to conform (status-leveling) which is inherent in the peer group and resolved in interactions between youth in various sways (see chapter 3).

#### *4.2. Note: Axes of peer group formation*

Above I have discussed some features of peer groups in general. Peer groups, of course, also form based on various interests and sociological factors within which they are (relatively) egalitarian, as described above: for example, economic class and community (caste, religion, ethnicity/language); department or bus route/area; performance in academics; interests and leisure (e.g., music, film, sports, etc.); and youth status (i.e., the more transgressive youth tend to hang out more together, versus the more conventional; see chapter 3, section 2.1 for discussion). Below I describe caste and

community; ethnicity, language, and social class; department and bus route; and performance in academics.

#### 4.2.1 *Caste and community*

Social grouping by caste and community is a touchy subject among (college-going) youth because of the politicization of these categories (cf. Lukose 2009: 177 on the unspeakability of caste in the college she worked in). While I was doing my field work, serious caste conflicts taking place in Tamil Nadu's law colleges (Vannan 2008; Viswanathan 2008) and Christian-missionary targeting attacks in northern India (*Frontline* 2008) heightened this sensitivity.

While in many government colleges in southern Tamil Nadu peer groups *are* explicitly defined by caste affiliation—more precisely, perhaps, on the binary axis “scheduled castes” (SC or Dalits) versus other castes (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008; Rogers 2008; Lukose 2009)—in the colleges I worked at neither caste nor religion were explicit ways that students organized themselves. Or at least, so they said. Indeed, *some* students did orient themselves, sometimes unintentionally, by community. On learning that an acquaintance was of the same caste, some individuals found themselves more at ease and more comfortable, as youth explained.<sup>31</sup> Caste would emerge most saliently in the college if a conflict took on a caste element (e.g., if one person insulted another based on caste; or in an *ad hoc* way when one conflict—e.g., departmental or personal—escalated

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<sup>31</sup> In Jeffrey et al.'s (2008: 93) discussion of caste among young men in Uttar Pradesh, one of their informants voiced an opinion that echoed how my own informants explained it to me: on meeting a castemate one feels “a strange feeling of happiness welling up from inside,” and feels obliged to help that person.

by mobilizing fellow caste-mates), or, as students alleged, during student elections where candidates would use caste as a word-of-mouth campaign mobilizer for support.

However, explicit discussion of caste and religion, or even open recognition of an individual's or peer group's caste makeup, was looked down upon (see Lukose 2009: ch. 5 on a similar situation in Kerala; Nisbett 2007 among Bangalorean youth). Students disavowed caste. Caste, they opined, was something that adults observed, either in the home (or hometown/village) or by the administration. (For a number of Christian students, coming to college was the first time they actually learned their caste because this was when they had to show their caste-affiliation document to the college administration in order to be admitted.) One's peer group was not about caste or religion, or at least shouldn't be, students proclaimed. Indeed, one third-year student in my hostel in Madurai told me that he was excluded by members of his hostel age cohort in his first year because when he came to the college he chose to spend his time with older members of his (SC) caste. This was offensive to the other students (including other first-year SC students) both because it distanced him from them by year, but also because it explicitly prioritized caste as the basis for social relations. That said, during my research time I did not observe any peer groups that were totally caste homogeneous. This was largely because there were more important identities within the college: ethnicity/language, social class, department, and *area/bus route*.

While there are a number of reasons that might account for why my analysis diverges from other's work regarding caste in colleges (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Rogers 2008; Lukose

2009),<sup>32</sup> one important reason is that I am concerned to draw out a particular age-based logic that, at least according to my observations, was common across all peer groups, be they caste mixed or homogeneous. I discuss this further in section 5.2.

#### 4.2.2 *Ethnicity, language, and social class*

Ethnicity and language were clear divisions in all the colleges I went to, and students often appealed to such divisions, either simply noting them or in disparaging members of other groups. Hindi speakers, Malayalam speakers, and students from northeast India were often self-contained groups. Such groups were relatively spatially separated (in terms of hangout spots in the campus; classroom seating; seating in the mess), interactionally distinct (they did not mingle as much with students of other groups and spoke different languages amongst themselves), and ragged internally.

Social class was less often explicitly spoken of as a division between students, but could be observed as a principle of differentiated peer groups (cf. Nisbett 2007). This was compounded in two ways. First, many upper-class Indians are (semi-)fluent in English due to English-medium schooling. This prestige code choice forced a clear separation between those who could speak English and those who could not (and who could only speak Tamil) (cf. Rogers' 2008 discussion and his telescoping of this difference into a difference of caste; Lukose 2009: ch. 5). Second, many richer students tended to be in self-financing courses held at a totally different time of the day. For such students there

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<sup>32</sup> Some possible reasons are: four out of the five colleges I worked in were non-governmental, autonomous colleges; three of them had substantial middle-class student populations (or, at least, such a reputation, thereby providing a normative force for students of other backgrounds); three of the colleges were Christian institutions; *area* was largely coterminous with caste in the Chennai government college (and thus perhaps obfuscated by *bus route/area*); perhaps I simply was not looking for it in the right way; or perhaps it simply was not in play during my fieldwork.

was little overlap with their *aided* counterparts. This difference was often reanalyzed by poorer students not as class *per se* but as the difference between students who showed off (“*scene pooduRathu*”) with their *style*-ish clothes and English and those who did not. That is, in cases where the egalitarian peer group could not sustain itself due to perduring group-internal hierarchy rankings, students reorganized themselves into relatively status-equal peer groups (see Nisbett 2007 on a nice discussion of this). Sometimes, but not always, this involved class. In chapter 3, section 2.4 I discuss differences between concepts of status and social class in more detail; in chapter 6, section 2.4 I discuss social class and use of branded forms *qua* status-ful objects.

#### 4.2.3 *Department versus bus route*

In this section I compare the two colleges in Chennai where I worked. Both are longstanding institutions in Tamil Nadu with very different student populations. One is an elite college which draws heavily but not exclusively from an upper-middle-class student body from all over Tamil Nadu and the other is a very affordable government college whose student population is decidedly lower-middle-class from Chennai and its surrounding (rural) areas. These two colleges embody very different kinds of masculinity and peer group formation, as I discuss in chapter 3. While the elite college is typified by its students and those of the other college as “*style*” and “*decent*” (i.e., fashionable and [upper-]middle-class), the government college is a “*geththaana*” and “*rowdy college*” (i.e., tough and working-class) (cf. Rogers’ 2008 discussion of the Chennai city college that he worked at).

In the elite college, one of the main principles of group formation and identity is department. Students organize themselves based on their department and department rivalry is common. *Ragging* takes place within the department; functions are by department; *tours* are by department; and the spatial organization of peer groups on the college campus is based on department. This is because students' classes are assigned by department and year (only language classes in the first year are cross-departmental). Thus students spend almost all of their time with people from their own department-year cohort with little chance to meet students from other departments or years. This is compounded because, as this college is "autonomous"—in effect meaning that there is no appealing administration decisions to discipline students—attendance regulation is rigorous. Moreover, *area* ('neighborhood') is not a primary axis for peer group formation because students come from all over the city, state, and country and thus neighborhood concentrations of students are low. Further, the wide range of social classes of students mean that transportation to the college is distributed: some come in car, some on bike, some by bus, some on foot. As such, besides department-year at this college there is no unified institutional principle to organize students' peer groups.

This was *not* the case at the Chennai government college where I researched. Here (1) many groups of students do come from the same *area*; (2) their socio-economic background is relatively homogeneous and thus they mainly come to the college by bus; (3) attendance is lax as administration control of students is weak and thus students spend a lot of their time outside of the classroom in their (*area* based) peer groups. In addition, (4) this college had been a training ground for political parties pre-1990s. As students'



political identity was eroded in the 1990s by administrative and government action and an identity vacuum was left in its wake.

The result is that department is not a founding principle of peer group formation. Rather, it is the *bus route*; that is, the group of students who ride the same bus route to the college. The *bus route* is a named entity based on the name of the bus route, either as number or name: for example, Route 99, T. Nagar Route, or Velachery Route.

In this college *area* and *bus route* are so dominant that the *junior–senior* divide is not rigorously maintained, instead being subsumed by the *route*. (*Ragging* a member of another *route* is a provocation for a confrontation between *routes*.) *Ragging* itself is highly attenuated and not institutionalized through department functions. Instead there exist powerful rituals and activities to socialize the students to *route* solidarity. The daily ritual of riding the *route* everyday (*route pooduRathu*)—including, for many students, when they were school children—is one such form of socialization.

*Route pooduRathu* is not just being on the bus, but hanging out and socializing on the bus with one's *route*-mates, even without the intention of going anywhere in particular (including the college; indeed, even when there was college leave students would *route pooduRathu*). *Route pooduRathu* also has its own expressive culture (see chapter 3, section 2.3.1). *Route pooduRathu* involves singing the *route*'s song—a song which extols that particular *route* as being the most status-ful and dominant—along with drum beats created by students banging on the bus frame, and dancing. A second ritual of *route*

solidarity is *bus day*, a day to celebrate the *route* where everyone on the *route* rides the bus to the college at the same time (see chapter 3, section 2.3.1).<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.2.4 *Those who study and those who don't*

Another division between students is their alignment to the goal of getting good marks ('grades') in their classes: that is, 'kids who study' *padikkiRa pasangka* (or *nalla pasangka* 'good kids') and those who fail in their studies or coolly shrug them off, *kedda pasangka* 'bad kids.' In the classroom such students self-segregate spatially to some extent. Stereotypically, the *toppers*—those with the top grades—sit in the front row while those whose studies lack, the *maappiLLai bench*, sit in the back; hence their other moniker, *back bench boys*.<sup>34</sup>

What is interesting is that doing well in the college—which is seen as *the* institution *par excellence* for class mobility (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008; Lukose 2009; Osella and Osella 2000b)—is not associated with concepts of youth status *per se* (at least not as I have discussed it). Students who study well are neither idolized as a status-superior nor reviled as 'uncool' (see Jeffrey et al. 2008: 21 for a similar point). (Students told me this type of division was more salient in school.) I was surprised that students' performance in college was not much of a strong predictor of the kind of company they kept or the status they were afforded by their peers. Rather, the issue was the degree to which they aligned

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<sup>33</sup> Note that this isn't to say that the elite college didn't have peer groups that were made up of *route*-buddies—for it did—or that department was not one reason why students of the government college were friends—for it was. Rather, these aren't the dominant organization principles of these colleges. Further, it is possible, as in one of the Madurai colleges that I worked in, to have department and *area/route* mixed peer groups (e.g., "The Swarm," a self-named peer group of students all in the Economics department and from the same neighborhood).

<sup>34</sup> Immediately after marriage the 'bride groom,' or *maappiLLai*, is treated with extra care by his wife and in-laws. He is expected to do nothing but rest, eat, sleep, and enjoy the attention of his new family. In this way, students who take their studies lightly are like the groom, relaxing and taking life easily, as nothing excessively important.

with adult authority. This was, however, linked to grades to the extent that *back bench boys* tended to be those who did other kinds of transgression in and outside of the classroom. However, it isn't their academics *per se* that figures them in this way, but the notion that they don't align with adult norms of authority.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 *Note on diagrammaticity*

In this chapter I have traced the lines of articulation between youth's institutional, or objective, placement within the life cycle and their experience of that positionality to the semiotic forms and spaces which make possible and indexically instantiate 'youth.' I have argued that central to the logic of 'youth' in its various extensions is its diagrammatic quality of being exterior to and transgressive of what youth figure as 'society' (the kin group, caste group). As I have shown, this diagrammaticity simultaneously distances itself from 'society' while at the same time reinscribing its social and cultural forms (often in tropic ways). What we see among youth, then, is an ironic oscillation between replicating more general (or "traditional") cultural logics *while at the same time* motivating the use of non-traditional (or "modern") cultural forms (e.g., sartorial fashion, linguistic forms). I explore this theme in chapters 3 and 6.

### 5.2 *Beyond the Venn diagram approach to Indian society*

In framing youth culture as reflexively constructed *against* age and caste hierarchies I have attempted to sidestep a particular way of viewing Indian society as a sociological Venn diagram, common in contemporary discourse about India.

In an older Orientalist view, India was only and ever about caste (Dumont's [1970] *Homo Hierarchicus* being its anthropological apotheosis). As a redress, anthropologists and sociologists rightly pointed out that there were other rubrics through which to think about Indian society (Appadurai 1986b; Inden 2000[1990]: ch. 2): for example, class (Beteille 1993[1991]; Caplan 1987), personhood (Daniel 1984), psychology (Nandy 1983), emotion and kinship (Trawick 1996[1990]), gender, urban–rural divisions (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995), or individuality (M. Mines 1994; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990). Appadurai's (1986b: 75) formulation of the changing of the guard was a call “against holism.”

At the same time, the causal link between the idea and reality of caste posited by Dumont was pointed out to be empirically problematic (Dirks 1987, 2001; Inden 2000[1990]; Cohn 1996; Berreman 1972, 1979; Fuller 1977; Raheja 1988; Fuller and Spencer 1990) and was shown to be the essentialization of an otherwise more complex and volatile social history. Dumont had confused the (relatively new colonial) map for the (supposed timeless Indian) territory.

In the contemporary moment, the dictum is still “against holism,” though the specter of caste has transformed itself in academic discourse from an ideational (or cognitive) category to a placeholder of identity, demography, and political mobilization. Today we formulate statements about India as the intersection of overlapping sociological categories, as in a Venn diagram: caste, class, gender, region, language, religion, age, etc. And rightly so, India is a diverse place and statements often require such qualification. The result, then, attempts to reconcile the political (i.e., secularized) existence of caste as basis for claims to the state (i.e., as a pure diacritic of difference) with the repudiation of

it having ‘positive’ and thus natural content (either at the normative or descriptive level).<sup>35</sup> Caste largely becomes a demographic category (ironically reproducing the state’s own statistical understanding of caste), and its status as a reflexive category relegated only to those political interests vying for dispensation from the state or in inter-caste conflict.

Yet what I have tried to do in this chapter brackets this will to qualify and asks a different question: how does the construction of ‘youth’ as an age set itself reflexively figure caste and hierarchy as exterior to it in order to make itself intelligible? And what are the consequences of this? Rather than the question, how is ‘youth’ differentially experienced because of the existence of various hierarchies? (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Rogers 2008; Lukose 2009), how can we understand ‘youth’ and hierarchy as mutually and reflexively constituted categories? As I have argued, the construction of ‘youth’ operates precisely through differentiating itself from the logic of age and caste hierarchy (‘society’) not in order to erase ‘society’ but to attempt to create a space exterior to it whereby new forms of status negotiation and pleasure are created (cf. Osella and Osella 2000b: 242, 245). In order for ‘youth’ to be intelligible as exterior, representations of ‘society,’ whether they be true or ideologically distorted, must be assumed to exist. This isn’t to say, then, that ‘youth’ and caste are non-overlapping categories (for clearly they aren’t), but rather to say that the experience of each is made possible by keeping them apart, like two magnetic poles create a field of attraction and repulsion. To do this,

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<sup>35</sup> This takes place largely within the debate about “substantialisation” of caste (Dumont 1980[1966]; Fuller 1996; Deliege 1996; Beteille 1996b; Dirks 1996a; cf. Sheth 1999: 2504 “classisation” of caste). In this understanding caste is largely decoupled from overt hierarchies (Kolena 2003), leading a muted existence in face-to-face public discourse, though being largely translated into euphemistic language of class and cultivation (Fuller 1996; Beteille 1996b) and living on in marriage practices (Beteille 1996b; Vatuk 1972), as well as becoming the grounds for caste-based political mobilization (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998; Sheth 1999). See Osella and Osella (2000b: ch. 7) for a discussion and critique.

however, we must be able to conceive of caste not only as a sociological dimension to be crossed in a matrix with other variables but also as a category available to youth's reflexive awareness as part of their own identity and status work, in this case, through (temporary) exclusion or deferral.

## Chapter 3 – Youth Status: *Style*, *Geththu*, and Other Status Concepts

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter I expand the discussion of chapter 2 by looking at particular models of status among young men and how these play out in their peer groups. I begin by looking at how youth concepts of status, while figured as exterior to the objective age categories *periya aaL* and *chinna paiyan*, reinscribed them as relative terms within the peer group. Having unpacked the terms *style* and *geththu* as class-linked models of youth status, I show how both concepts are diagrammatic of the construction of ‘youth’ more generally, as well as with young men’s experience of their positionality as exterior. I then go on to look at how such concepts work in the economy of status negotiation in the peer group. In the penultimate section, I come back to the question of *style* and gender, looking at how women engage with concepts of youth status. I conclude with some comment on globalization, arguing that the idea that youth “negotiate” globalization, “tradition,” or “modernity” is problematically formulated.

### 2. Concepts of status and exteriority

#### 2.1 *Reinscribing the periya aaL and chinna paiyan*

In chapter 2 I showed that the youth peer group is an exterior interactional zone that licenses status-raising. Among the youth that I worked with such status-raising was operationalized vis-à-vis the concept of being “*mature*.” To be status-fully independent, to transgress authority is to be a *mature youth*. Interestingly, in youth’s own explicit

discourse the “*mature youth*” figuratively approximates the *periya aaL*.<sup>1</sup> His alter, then, is the “*chinna paiyan*.”<sup>2</sup> To call someone a *chinna paiyan*, as one youth explained, is to not give that person value (*mathippu*). It’s to treat them as if they are an ‘ordinary person’ (*saathaaraNamaana aaL*), while the speaker is like a *periya aaL* or ‘big man.’<sup>3</sup> Here, then, youth concepts of status and masculinity are rearticulated through the terms *mature youth/periya aaL* and *chinna paiyan*.

Unlike their homophonic objective categories, *chinna paiyan* and *periya aaL* in peer group usages are *relative* terms: one is *like* a *chinna paiyan* to another, who is figured *like* a *periya aaL*. Recalling the mustache example in chapter 2, section 2.2.3, while having a mustache is avoided because it makes one look like a *periya aaL* and being unable to grow facial hair might elicit the teasing designation *chinna paiyan*, having *no* facial hair but being able to grow it is often described as an attempt to raise one’s *relative* status in the peer group, showing how one is like the *periya aaL* of the group, an important and ‘cool’ person, thus inverting the default (i.e., adult) indexical value of the mustache while calquing objective age categories as *relative* designators of status-ful individuals.

‘Maturity’ is most importantly mapped onto transgression of ‘society.’ The *mature youth* cuts class and goes to the cinema; he *sight adi-s* (‘ogles’) girls; he does (outlandish) fashion; he loves, and perhaps even has sex; he fights (and wins); he smokes, plays cards, and drinks alcohol (and when he drinks, he drinks the more powerful and mainly *hot*

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<sup>1</sup> Note that “*periya aaL*” most often is used by youth in the peer group to refer to *others* doing status-raising (with a slightly negative connotation) while *mature* is used to refer to status-ful youth (including speaker) positively.

<sup>2</sup> While normative youth masculinity is at times defined negatively with respect to women or alternative masculinities (the “third gender” *thirunangkai*, or more derogatorily *onbathu* [lit. ‘nine’]; but interestingly *not* the homosexual) it was most commonly defined negatively as not the *chinna paiyan* (‘little boy’).

<sup>3</sup> It was also used to denigrate other social groups, as I learned when students from the government Chennai college referred to the elite college as a bunch of “*school kids*.” And vice versa, the elite college students described the rough masculinity of the government college as ‘childish’ (*chinna puLLeththanam*).



drinks [‘spirits’] rather than beer); and he uses bad words and talks to others without using ‘respect’ (*mariyaathai*) (cf. Rogers 2008: 86; Lukose 2005a: 925–926, 2009: 66–71 on *chethu*). Instead of being inside (the home, the hostel) he moves through public space, loitering in cinema halls, tea stalls, and on the road. Here spatial, temporal, and normative distance acts as an icon of maturity: the further, the later, the more transgressively he wanders the more mature he is. In the Madurai hostels I stayed at, jumping over the college wall after curfew in the middle of the night and wandering the streets looking for cigarettes and mischief was, in some students’ eyes, the height of maturity and cool. The *mature youth* shows courage and ‘boldness’ (*thairiyam*) in breaking the rules, of which the college provides many opportunities.

On the other hand, the *chinna paiyan* is afraid to do all of these things. He prefers, instead, to align with the norms of authority, content to be contained within ‘society,’ within the home and other spaces which make one childlike and dependent (cf. the concept of “mama’s boy” in the U.S.). Hostel students who went home at every possible chance, who never roamed outside of the campus, were teased by other students as *chinna pasangka*. Similarly, students who refused to drink, to smoke, to play cards, to love, to fight—in short, to break the rules—were labeled as *chinna pasangka*.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the *mature youth* is, like the *periya aaL*, a leader, one who can make decisions, who can guide others, who dominates a conversation, and who bends others to his will (cf. M. Mines 1994: ch. 2; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990). But, of

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<sup>4</sup> Remember from chapter 2, section 4.2 that being seen as “*mature*” or like a “*chinna paiyan*” is also a principle of peer group formation. Thus, for example, one of the major divisions between the third-year hostel students at the Madurai hostel that I stayed at was typified based on this axis (in both directions). It was operationalized by pointing to different interests and leisure patterns (i.e., one group liked to play cards, smoke, drink, and ogle girls while the other group didn’t).

course, he isn't a *periya aaL* literally and actively attempts to distance himself from this figure of personhood by bucking the rules and forming his own. This is unlike the *chinna paiyan* who is skittish, afraid, uncertain, indecisive, passive, and whom no one listens to. As one of my roommates in Madurai explained to me, the *chinna paiyan* requires guidance, is afraid of authority, and thus is dependent on others to tell him what to do. While this is appropriate for children in school, for college youth it isn't. 'Youth,' he explained, 'don't like authority, don't want to be told what to do, they can and should be able to make their own decisions.'

While such designations are perspectival—those labeled *chinna pasangka* call the so-called *mature* students undisciplined, without control, and morally questionable—the axis of differentiation—legitimate disengagement from 'society' and attempts to establish one's own authority—is the same. Do you align with 'society' or to your own authority? More importantly, can you pull off staking off a space of authority? Will others ratify it as legitimate or not?

As is clear, the fluidity and relativity of such designations, and by extension the concepts of status they presuppose, are subject to negotiation, revision, and change in the peer group. For example, while drinking, smoking, fighting, loving, and doing fashion are all associated with *mature youth*, doing them too much makes one like a *chinna paiyan* who is unable to make responsible decisions. Note that what counts as *mature* and statusful, then, is never fixed precisely because 'youth' itself is a shifter defined by its exteriority from the normative, perduring, and static, and thus is always capable of being reformulated and troped upon. In contrast to youth's understandings and experiences of

adult authority structures, youth spaces of status negotiation are (made to be) emergent, relative, and fluid.

What is most important to note here is that that even as youth distance themselves from the diacritics of ‘society’ and its objective age ranking through their transgression, the age statuses of ‘child’ (*chinna paiyan*) and ‘adult’ (*periya aaL*) are reinscribed within the peer group as relative designators through, on the one hand, typifying excessive obedience to (adult) authority as ‘childish’ and, on the other hand, valorizing norm-flouting as status-ful. Here what would otherwise be typified as ‘childishness’ or irresponsibility by adults is inverted *as status* through transgression and irreverence among youth. Simultaneously, alignment with the adult world is denigrated as *non-status*, as indexing weak-mindedness and being afraid (of the Law). In this way, by the very logic of its exteriority the activity of the peer group is diagrammatic of social relations and concepts of status in Tamil society more generally and while differentiated from it, replicates it tropically in the peer group (see Kyratzis 2004: 626 on this point more generally; note the fractal organization of status, cf. Gal 2002).

In short, youth status involves the creation of islands of authority among one’s peers. In such islands of authority traditional norms are bracketed while youth attempt to become a tropic *periya aaL* (of the group), to accrue enough interactional status to be able to be seen as status-ful, get other people’s attention, to be valued (*mathippu*). Table 3.1 schematically charts this.

Table 3.1 Adult versus youth status<sup>5</sup>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| - Hierarchical   | - Egalitarian   |
| - Institutional/ascribed (viz. objective<br><i>periya aaL, chinna paiyan</i> ) | - Non-institutional/achieved (viz. the<br>relative <i>periya aaL, chinna paiyan</i> ) |
| - Interior   | - Exterior  |
| - Alignment to norm  | - Non-alignment to norm (transgression)   |

Examples of forms

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| - <i>veeshdi, saree, formals</i>  | - Fashionable clothes, jeans, tee-shirts  |
| - (High) Tamil  | - English-hybridized Tamil  |
| - (Tropic) patriline kin term usage<br>( <i>aNNan, thambi, appaa, ammaa</i> ) (+hon.) | - Tropic affinal kin term usage<br>( <i>maappiLLai, machchaan, maamaa</i> );<br>English address terms (dude, bro) (-hon.) |
| - Honorification (e.g., in 2nd pers.<br>pronoun/verb forms <i>niingka, -iingka</i> )  | - Non-honorification (e.g., in 2nd pers.<br>pronoun/verb forms <i>nee, -e</i> ; curse words as<br>address terms)          |
| - Arranged marriage   | - Love  |

Typified (by youth) as:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| - <i>mariyaathai</i> ('respect'), <i>saathaaraNam</i><br>(‘normal,’ ‘ordinary’) | - <i>style, geththu, thooraNai</i> (‘cool,’<br>‘badass’) |
| - For ‘adults’ ( <i>periyavangka</i> )  | - For ‘youth’  |

Below I discuss the concepts of youth status that instantiate such “*maturity*”: *style*, *geththu*, and *thooraNai*. These concepts are used by youth with overlapping meanings— insofar as each embodies the relative notions of the *periya aaL* and status-raising— though they have slightly different meanings by region and class.

## 2.2. Style

### 2.2.1 Introduction

Among youth, the question ‘what is *style*?’ (*style NNaa enna?*) elicits two types of answers. One is the enumeration of the kinds of objects and actions which count as doing

<sup>5</sup> Note that these distinctions aren’t absolute but overlapping and relative; they sketch particular tendencies between these two notions of status. Pace Gal (2002), we can see this as the logic of fractally re-embedding the shifters youth–adult. Moreover, this isn’t supposed to count as a description of how adult ‘society’ works, but how it’s taken to work *by* youth so as to make their own actions intelligible.

*style*. The second invokes personae that emblemize *style*; most commonly, film heroes, and in particular, Super Star Rajinikanth. In this chapter I look at the first answer. In chapters 4 and 5 I look at the second answer.

When I got to Tamil Nadu for my fieldwork I was struck by youth's flashy clothing, their branded apparel, their tee-shirts in bright colors with English words written on them, and other tokens of fashion. I often inquired why they wore such clothing and accessories, to which I almost always got a single word answer: "*style*."<sup>6</sup>

Why are your jeans ripped? *Style*.

Why are you wearing a (fake) Nike wristband? *Style*.

Why are you wearing sneakers today, it's over 40 centigrade?! *Style*.

Why do your shirts have wild colors and English writing on them? *Style*.

What is with your giant 50 Cent belt buckle spins around? *Style*.

Why the new cell phone with a million different functions? *Style*.

I also found that *style* could also be used for body grooming:

Why the long hair? Why no hair? *Style*.

Why the hair coloring? *Style*.

Why the goatee beard? Why no facial hair? *Style*.

It could also be used to typify behavioral repertoires, leisure activities, and linguistic code choices:

Why did you start smoking? Why did you start drinking? *Style*.

Why is he riding the bus on the footboard/roof? *Style*.

Why do you knock knuckles as a greeting instead of just shaking hands? *Style*.

Why did you use that English word in your Tamil? *Style*.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lukose's (2005a: 925–926, 2009: 66–71) discussion of the concept of *chethu*. She glosses this as "commodified masculinity" (p. 66). While I cannot speak for her materials, *style* can't be reduced to just a commodity register. While it is the case that *style* includes commoditized signs (like brands, English, etc.), it also includes other things like whistling at the theater, loving girls, wearing the same shirt as your friends, or riding on the roof of the bus. These are all *style* because, as I show, they are exterior, they individuate and foreground the user, they are transgressive, etc. And while commodities can perform this function, they aren't the only way that such interactional work can be done.

Why did he stop talking to us and go over to talk to those girls? *Style*.  
What is the logic that makes all such semiotic displays typifiable as *style*?

### 2.2.2 *Style and visuality*

*Style* is showing oneself to be different and unique, an individual foregrounded from the background of the peer group: “*style NNaa thaniyaa theriyaNum*” ‘to be/do *style* you have to be individuated/visible.’ *Style* is about getting attention from others. It is about ‘attracting’ others (*kavarkkiRathu*). Anything *style* is an ego-focal index, ‘Look here!’ As youth explained, ‘when you walk by, people should turn their heads and look at you.’

Note that being visible and individuated is a kind of status in Tamil Nadu more generally (M. Mines 1994; Dean n.d., 2009; Dickey 2009a), partially because to be visible is to subject oneself to the dangers of other’s envy and the power of vision. Only one who is strong enough to withstand the deleterious effects of *kaN thrishdi* (‘the evil eye’) would want to willingly attract such kinds of attention. To this extent, then, making oneself visible is understood as status-raising, as Melanie Dean (n.d., 2009) has shown in her work. As such, youth’s visibility practices implicitly transgress norms of avoiding envious attention and ostentation.

‘Whistling and yelling’ (*alappare pooduRathu*, also a term for status-ful activity), group chants, dancing and singing, ‘teasing’ others (*kalaaykkiRathu*), *sight adi*-ing (‘ogling’) girls, graffiti, getting in fights, and doing fashion all appropriate space literally, aurally, and especially visually.<sup>7</sup> Getting attention by its very definition attempts to control space, and to set the terms under which interaction unfolds. To be visible is to be

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, common slang terms for status-raising are explicitly visual (and filmic): *scene pooduRathu/kaadduRathu* (‘showing/putting on a scene’), *film/padam kaamikkiRathu* (‘showing a film/image’).

status-ful, and to be invisible, to be unseen and unnoticed by others is to be without status (Dickey 2009a). As one Madurai student noted regarding English as a *style*-ish form, ‘if you don’t know it, even a dog won’t *turn to look at you*’ (cf. Rogers 2008; Lukose 2009: ch. 5).

### 2.2.3 Style and exterior space

Forms which are *style* derive their value from alternative (i.e., non-“traditional”) and exterior frameworks of status and value: from the upper-class elites (figured by the working and middle classes as so rich that they are outside of ‘society’), from foreign and Tamil media (music television VJs, Hollywood films, Rajinikanth), and from the underground or marginalized (the criminal world, the *rowdy*). Fashions from north India, from America, from Singapore are *style*. English (spoken or written on clothing) is *style*. Western brands (real or duplicate) are *style*. Acting like a cinema hero (or a villain) is *style*.

Youth status is also about projecting class and spatial mobility (also see Lukose 2009: ch. 5). Among lower- and middle-class youth, to do *style* through English and Western brands is to index social spaces outside the neighborhood, hometown, state, and thus figuratively invoke higher social strata and utopic exterior lands. This is revealed by the fact that one salient concept of non-status is the term *local*.<sup>8</sup> The term *local* has multiple indexical values, contrasting both with *decent*—a middle-class notion (Dickey 2009a)—and *style*—a youth notion. A shoddily made product, a product of no value is *local*. Language that is crass, ugly, and marked by colloquialisms is *local*. Behavior which is

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tarlo (1996: ch. 7) on the similar indexical valence and use of the term *deshi* in rural Gujarat.

without any status is *local*. The *local* as non-status projects space in several ways. Objectively, it refers to the slums. Relatively, it refers to the peripheries of value. Thus things from Madurai are *local* with respect to things from Chennai; things from south India are *local* with respect to things from north India; and things from India are *local* with respect to things from abroad.

In contrast to the *local*, *style* tropically figures exterior space. Thus, to not do *style*, to always stay within the ‘society’ and ‘culture’ of the region, is to be stuck without possibility of betterment. Youth sometimes understood this quite literally, particularly with regard to English and Tamil (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008; Lukose 2009: 189). While one could easily elicit Tamil pride out of students, their spontaneous discourse about their mother tongue was often one of regret. As one student put it: “*ippa yaarum thamizh like paN Namaaddaangka*” ‘today no one likes Tamil.’ He continued to explain that with Tamil you can’t *go* anywhere; you can’t leave the state; you can’t get ahead.<sup>9</sup> There was a kind of claustrophobia among youth: without transgressing ‘society’ and embracing forms that index exteriority one can never escape.

In this sense, *style*, even if a playful non-serious realm of youth fun, is linked with serious anxieties surrounding mobility and escape. As I noted in chapter 2, youth culture in urban Tamil Nadu, like the British subcultures of the 1960s (Willis 1981[1977]; P. Cohen 1993[1972]; Clarke et al. 1997[1975]; Hebdige 1979), projects the contradictory experience of youth and diagrams it in its expressive culture. While for post–World War

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<sup>9</sup> One of Rogers’ (2008: 85) informants puts it thusly: “But if you know only Tamil, you can go nowhere. If you go out of Tamil Nadu, then you are empty; you are like a newly born baby. If I went to Andhra [Pradesh], I would be expected to speak in English; or at least in another Indian language like Hindi. Even here, if you go to a company, they will expect you to speak English. At RPG Cellular or SKYCELL [Indian mobile phone network providers] they will not speak Tamil. If you struggle to speak English, they will say: shut up and go away. They will not respect you.”



II British youth, status expressions and their aesthetics diagrammed age and class contradictions (among other things), for post-liberalization Tamil youth, *style* diagrams age relations (YOUTH : CHILDREN :: YOUTH: ADULT) and spatial (inside–outside) relations (VILLAGE : CITY :: CITY :: NATION :: NATION : GLOBAL). For many young men, the West was imagined to be a youth utopia: self-centered without kinship, abounding with money and job potential, egalitarian and equalitarian, everything *style*, everything *modern*,<sup>10</sup> sexualized but without marriage or children (cf. Yurchak 2006: ch. 5 regarding Soviet Russia).

In addition to the figurative notion of space implicit in the concept of style is a literal one: *style* is something that is done in exterior (youth) spaces, but not something that can be done at home. When one goes out on the town (e.g., to the cinema, to the beach, to college) and when one goes out of town (e.g., on college *tour*) one performs *style*.

#### 2.2.4 Style and transgression

In addition to being beyond the pale of ‘society’ and ‘culture,’ *style* is often seen as explicitly transgressing norms of ‘society’ and ‘culture.’ As one of my Madurai roommates Sebastian stated, he does not do *style* because he follows the ‘culture of adults’ (“*periyavangkaLoodd kalaachchaaram*”). Moreover, he does not do *style* because

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<sup>10</sup> As my Chennai roommate put it: ‘*modern* doesn’t mean *style* but this how “we use it.”’ The lexical item *modern* as used by Tamil youth means something akin to ‘newness’ (*puthumuRai*). In short, *style* is that which makes the user seem different and unique. Things that are *modern*, by contrast, are used by many people and don’t necessarily individuate the user. While things from the West are often considered *style* and *modern*, they aren’t synonymous. There can also be non-Western *style* and non-Western *modern*. Compare this with *fashion* as a Tamil lexical item. Something that is *fashion* is a fad, or a trend, while *style* is a status-raising behavior. Something can be a *style* without being a *fashion*, and vice versa. However, insofar as *fashion* is often valorized the two are linked. Similarly, there are examples of *style* which may draw on something old or timeless in order to differentiate the user: for example, talking loudly as a way to attract attention. That said, the emblematic kinds of *style* tend to be *modern* precisely because that which is *modern* often embodies exteriority, uniqueness, attention-getting, and transgression, themselves iconic with the construction of ‘youth’ *qua* status.

he is from a village and thus is “traditional.” *Style*, by implication, then, is neither of these. It is exterior to and deviant from “Tamil culture.” As such, *style* is seen as an explicit challenge by youth to established authority structures. Thus, *style* is harder to do in front of people of (traditional) status as it elicits disapproval and censure.

More than simple transgression, *style* attempts to create new norms and authoritative anchorings. Thus, for example, ‘bad’ habits like whistling, smoking, drinking, fighting, ogling, teasing and loving girls are *style* because they transgress the norms of ‘society’ and because they attempt to stake out—for one’s peers at least—a space of authority in distinction to that of adults and other youth.

Sartorially, *style*’s aesthetics are shocking and disturbing to the sensibility of others (especially adults). Gaudy colors, ripped fabric, and extra pockets are all *style*. In short, *style*-ish clothes are non-functional (except in their attention-getting quality) (cf. Blumer 1969: 288). As one student explained to me using the example of pants:

‘Pants usually have four pockets. Typically pants are tailored. That is “normal,” “ordinary.” So pants which have more pockets, pockets which are visible (even though, perhaps because, they are functionless) are “*style*.” Pants which are “ready-made” are “*style*.” At first there was the “six pocket” [sic]—pants with six pockets. When that got ordinary, the fashion increased into twelve pockets, twelve pockets being more than six pockets, even more unnecessary. That was “*style*.”

Then we came to know them as “*cargoes*.” The more pockets, the more “*style*.” In fact, anything that cannot be understood through functionality or “tradition” is potentially *style*. I learned this on my first visit to India. I was wearing a tee-shirt inside out. A number of young men who were talking to me noticed and pointed out that my shirt was inside out. ‘Why?’ they inquired. When I shrugged and hesitated to come up with some sort of face-saving answer, one of them answered for me: ‘Oh, it’s *style*!’ The

anomaly explained, the conversation moved on (cf. Tarlo's [1996: ch. 5] experience of her dress's [un]intelligibility among her Gujarati informants).

As a Madurai college professor bemoaned after scolding a student for entering his office with ripped jeans, long hair, and an earring, 'everything and anything today is *style*: there is no rhyme or reason to it.' *Style* verges on the absurd, on the comic. It is playful.<sup>11</sup> Under the concept of *style*, deviation from norm is contained and made sensible. As function does not and cannot ground *style*, youth status and authority must. *Style* is about stretching norms as far as possible, going to the edge of reason, verging on madness (*kiRukku*), to attempt to make the non- and the extra-normative one's own. To own transgression, to create one's own authority, or co-opt the authority of something else, where only nonsense and unintelligibility existed before is *style*. As such *style* presents itself as all form, no substance; all surface, no meaning. Hence the irrelevance of the meanings of the English wordings on students' clothing; on knowing who or what Eminem, 50 Cent, Diesel, Tommy Hilfiger actually are ('are they rock bands or brands?' my Madurai roommate Stephen asked me) (see chapter 6 for more discussion).

#### 2.2.5 *Style for love, love as style*

But why do *style*? Besides its self-evidence as status-ful, students often justified *style* thusly: *style* was not just to impress one's peers, but more importantly to impress the opposite sex. Suresh, a second-year college student in Madurai, explained to me that he likes brands like Nike because girls like Nike because it is *style*.

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Susan Seizer for pushing me to emphasize *style* as a kind of play.

And indeed, young men do *style* in contexts when they are visible to women: for example, at the bus stop; when going outside for a stroll to *sight adi* ('ogle') girls; at the park, beach, or temple; at the movies or a college function; or when going to a girls college. When a girl would walk by, guys would adjust their clothing, push their hair back, lean against a motorcycle, put on sunglasses, etc. When a young man falls in (one-sided) love, guys explained, he naturally starts to do *style* to "impress" her. One common question that peers ask to a youth performing new kinds of *style* is "*enna daa, lav paNRyaa?* 'what's the deal man, are you in love?'"

However, young men don't only do *style* for girls. Indeed, young men's interactions with women are rare, and most of their status negotiation is same-sex. Even when the goal is attracting women through *style*, youth's strategic displays of *style* are mediated by same-sex status negotiation: 'among ten guys, I should be the one the girls notice,' Suresh explained. In effect, over and above the question of impressing girls (or rather, precisely because of the inability to interact with girls except through the visual displays of *style*) *style* was part of the negotiation of young men's relationships with each other (cf. Osella and Osella 1998: 193).

At the same time, while *style* is for love, 'doing love' (*lav paNRathu*) is itself a kind of *style* to impress one's same-sex peers (cf. Liechty 2003: 29 on 'fashion' and 'doing love' among Nepali youth). As my Chennai roommate pointed out (somewhat nostalgically for a time he never experienced), echoing a common discourse about the state of contemporary "Tamil culture" and love: 'Today love is just a *fashion*, just for *time-pass*. Today, a college guy will have a bike, cool clothes, and a girlfriend <all emblems of *style*>. They will love for three years <the duration of college>, *finish up*

*everything* <i.e., have sexual relations> and then breakup and marry whom their parents tell them to.’ In short, being in a romantic relationship with a girl makes you stand out (visually through transgressive public displays of affection like sitting next to each other, speaking to each other, or holding hands; or virtually as a topic of gossip) and it hints at transgression of caste patriarchy’s and the kin group’s demand for arranged marriage (as an index of obedience to their authority) (cf. Osella and Osella 1998, 2000b: ch. 7). Ultimately, however, this is temporary, only for show, my roommate lamented. In short, the desire to love was a desire for *style*, for exteriority, for status. This is reflected in films that narrate the *style*-ish, darker-skinned, working-class youth hero loving the rich, north Indian college girl (e.g., the films of Dhanush or an early Rajinikanth; cf. Dhareshwar and Niranjana [1996] on *Kaathalan* [1994]). To love such a woman is to desire the exterior, to conquer it, hybridize it with the self, and to extend oneself as status-ful. It is to be ‘youth,’ to co-opt alternative cultural forms, to own them in efforts to create alternative models of status to the hierarchical kin-, caste-, and age-based ‘society’ of adults.

#### 2.2.6 *Style and individuality*

We might be tempted to think of *style* as a kind of self-expression, a proclamation of the unique individual against a society-oriented culture (cf. Williams 2001). And yet, it isn’t. *Style* is about being visible, getting attention, accruing status. It isn’t about interiority or the perduring authentic self, but about projecting a “public face” (M. Mines 1994). It is a kind of garment.<sup>12</sup> Youth make no bones about the fact that they do *style* not

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Asif Agha for suggesting this trope.

because of their own personal tastes, but because they think that such forms can accrue them appreciation and status from their peers and the opposite sex.<sup>13</sup> ‘It’s only about what others think,’ one youth noted. Thus, doing *style* isn’t linked to any discourse of authenticity (e.g., of the subculture, of the brand, of understanding the English words printed on one’s clothing).<sup>14</sup> In addition, *style* is something which need not be an individual quality; it can also be a property of the group. Hence, for example, youth would often all wear the same outfit when going out. They explained that when you see a bunch of people all wearing the same thing you’ll notice them, and thus this is *style*.

### 2.3. Geth(thu), thooraNai, and other concepts of the figurative periya aaL

Youth use a number of other words similar to *style* to typify that which is status-ful. In Madurai youth use the word *thooraNai* (lit. 1. ‘posture,’ ‘pose’; 2. ‘a kind of wedding decoration’). In Chennai (and Madurai to some extent), they use the word *geththu* (lit. ‘prestige,’ ‘haughtiness,’ ‘influence/intimidation’). In other parts of Tamil Nadu (e.g., Paramagudi), one would hear simply (*yaaru*) *periya aaL* ‘(who is) the big man.’

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<sup>13</sup> This isn’t to say that students don’t develop their own individual expressive forms over time. In talking to a third-year student at the elite Chennai college I did research in, he explained that there aren’t discrete identities for students vis-à-vis dress except that some dress more *style*-ishly and others more “ordinary” (which itself contains a number of other categories by proxy: rich/poor, urban/rural, *local*/formal, etc.). However, over the three years some students in his class had developed distinctive looks, though unnamed. For example, when they were out shopping on *tour* he suggested that his friend buy a particular kind of jewelry because it would “*suit*” his look. But even here this isn’t because it was seen as an expression of some inner self, but rather that it was consistent with a particular outer image. Such “*looks*” aren’t institutionalized, certainly not to the extent that they are in the West (vis-à-vis a rock style, a punk style, a metal style, a hip-hop style, a frat style, etc.), and thus can’t be invoked through particular emblematic sartorial forms. Rather, in this case they are only possible in the context of having gone to college with someone everyday for the past three years.

<sup>14</sup> What is interesting is that the pragmatic function of *style* as status-raising doesn’t exist at the level of explicit awareness when it’s internalized as an individual, authentic expression, as it is in the United States or among Indian elites. Indeed, the concept of personal style in U.S. disavows that one would ever imitate or copy someone else. This would invalidate such style. In the Western notion of style, then, individuals are atomic units that aren’t comparable *per se* and thus dressing in one way or the other doesn’t have status implication, but expresses the true self (at least that is the ideology). Yet this was certainly not how Tamil youth thought of *style*.

Like *style*, questions such as, ‘Why did he buy those new branded sneakers?’, ‘Why did he get new, embroidered jeans with Suzuki written on the side?’, ‘Why is he speaking in English?’ receive answers like “*geththu maintain paNRathukku*” ‘to maintain (his) *geththu*,’ “*thooraNai kaamikkiRathukku*” ‘to show (his) *thooraNai*,’ “*periya aaL kaamikkirathukku*” ‘to show that he is the *periya aaL*.’ However, such terms are slightly different in meaning/use and in the figures of personhood they invoke. While similar to *style* in that they refer to youth status, they invoke different modes of masculinity and project the *periya aaL–chinna paiyan* dynamic differently, depending on who is using them and in what contexts.

As opposed to *style* which is mainly about getting attention through doing something different and thus figuratively projecting the *periya aaL*, *geththu* invokes a rougher kind of masculinity, something closer to ‘badass’ than ‘cool’ (cf. Rogers’ 2008 discussion of masculinity in the Chennai college he worked in). It is used more often to typify literal transgression (like smoking, drinking, fighting, *rowdyism*). Objects or behaviors which presuppose such a tough and status-ful persona, like rolled-up sleeves, a pulled back shirt collar, and flashy jewelry emblemize *geththu*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Unlike *style* which is hardly ever used by youth to describe adults (it struck youth as un-felicitous), *geththu* and *thooraNai* can be used to describe status-ful adults and the signs which index them as such. For example, one close unmarried friend in Madurai explained to me that he didn’t like wearing *veeshdis*, because “*veeshdi periya aaLooda thooraNai*” ‘the *veeshdi* is the *thooraNai* of the big man.’ It’s the sign of his prestige/status as a man of age and repute (a status which he was excluded from). In usages to describe adults, however, both *geththu* and *thooraNai* generally describe status with respect to the individual and not with respect to his societal responsibilities (to the kin or caste group), as is the case with *mariyaathai* ‘respect’ or *gauravam* ‘honor.’ One’s *geththu* or *thooraNai* can’t be impugned, though one’s *mariyaathai* or *gauravam* can be. Indeed, unlike *mariyaathai* or *gauravam* which are institutionally perduring, like *style*, *thooraNai* and *geththu* reflect the relative status relations between a group of peers in interaction. Between *thooraNai* and *geththu*, one difference is that *thooraNai* is explicitly linked to the notion of putting on a face, and in derisive contexts, as pretending. While *geththu* is a characteristic of a person (the outward expression of his being a *periya aaL*, literally or figuratively), *thooraNai* is a kind of pretence, it is something on the surface, an (*over*) *action*. It is exaggerated masculinity.

While *thooraNai* and *style* figuratively invoke the relative *periya aaL* through ego-focal status-ful signs, *geththu* is, in addition to this usage, also used to more literally describe the dominance relationships between individuals. As youth explained to me, *geththu* is at core a description of the relative power relationship between two individuals (or groups). If you are ‘below’ me (*kiizhee*), if you have to do or listen to what I say, then when I exercise my power I am ‘showing *geththu*’ (*geththu kaadduRathu*). This resonates with the idea that a status-ful youth in a time of need should have his peers ‘standing behind’ him (*pinnadi nikRathu*), just as followers stand behind their leader. But this is recursive: those below the relative *periya aaL* have people below them, and so on. As one young man explained to me, the regress is that any man will have younger relatives with respect to which he has *geththu*. When he exercises his relative status over them, that is his *geththu*. *Geththu*, then, is a term of relative status, capturing the *periya aaL–chinna paiyan* dynamic in a literalistic and recursively embedded idiom. Indeed, this more closely approximates the “traditional” notion of status implicit in the concept of the *periyar* ‘big man’ of eminence as discussed by M. Mines (1994: ch. 2; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990). It’s “*naan thaan*” (‘just me’), “*top*” (‘he who is at the top’), the notion that ‘there is no one above/beyond me’ (“*enne minchi yaarum kedeyaathu*”).

In colleges, especially in Chennai, *geththu* (with this particular interpretation) is the reason that young men form cliques. As one student from the elite college in Chennai that I worked in explained, ‘college isn’t like in school where everyone is together, where everyone has studied since they were little kids. In college, you have to be part of a group. In college, you have to maintain some *geththu*, right?’ (“*oru geththu maintain paNNaNum, le?*”) He meant this both in terms of having a group of friends and in the



sense of having a gang of guys to support you in status-raising activities, including fights with rival groups. Indeed, while *geththu* was used to describe objects, behaviors, and individuals, it was also commonly used to describe groups of students.

### 2.3.1 Geththu *and the* bus route

This usage is most clearly seen in the organization of students in the government college in Chennai in which I did research. As a whole, this college is renowned in Chennai as a “*geththaana college*” ‘a badass, tough college.’ Students from this college often boast about this: their college is the toughest college, the “*top*” college, and thus they are the “Kings of Chennai.”

This college’s peer groups are based around the bus *route* (see chapter 2, section 4.2.3). I first came across these bus *routes* through their graffiti, written all over the insides of the buses they rode and the college walls. Such *routes* boasted with epithets invoking the most ‘biggest’ of the ‘big men,’ the king: “Route ##: Kings of the City,” “Route ##: Kings of the [College name],” “City King ## Route: King of the King Maker’s [sic]” (photo 3.1).

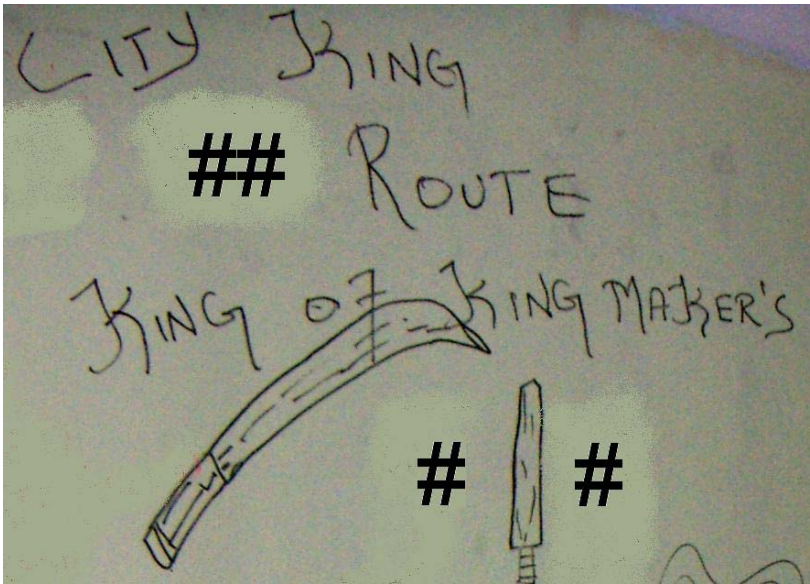


Photo 3.1 Bus route graffiti: “King of the King Maker’s [sic]”

These *routes* imagine themselves as gangs involved in bloody warfare with other gangs to establish dominance relations. Being the *top route* means having the most *getthuh*, winning the most number of fights. Thus other *routes* are their *adimaikaL* ‘slaves.’ Next to one of the epithets on the college wall (“## ROUTE SINGKANGKAL” ‘## route lions’) was a picture of a bloody machete and the caption “*raththa buumi engkaL* [name of the college], ‘Bloody earth, our [name of the college]’ (photo 3.2). Students would boast about their scars, their police cases, the battles of the *route* with other routes, and the fact that instead of security guards the college had a permanent detail of police on campus.

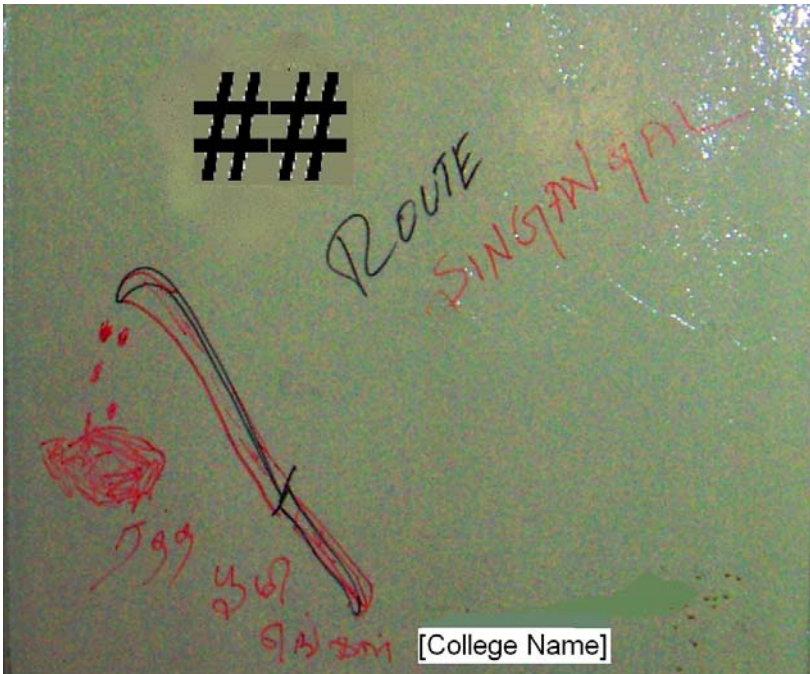


Photo 3.2 Bus route graffiti: “raththa buumi engkaL [college name]”

Such fights were, though real, mainly symbolic. The aims were not to annihilate the other *routes*, but were about “*ego*,” establishing dominance relationships: who was the *periya aaL*, which *route* had the most *geththu* in the college and in the city (they had rivalries with *routes* of other colleges). Indeed, when *routes* were not jockeying for dominance, they were friendly. Students openly admitted that such *rowdiness* was just for *jolly*, *viLaiyaaddu*, ‘play/a game.’ While violent, showing *geththu* in this idiom is like doing *style*. It is a form of status negotiation *within the peer group*, variously extended in social and spatial scale, in order to project the relative *periya aaL*.

The *route* is also organized internally by the concept of *geththu*. The *route* has as its leader the *head* or *thala* (short for *thalaivar*, ‘chief’; lit. ‘headman’). The *thala* of the *route* is the student who is the fiercest (the *terror* of the *route*), who is able to dominate all. One becomes *head* through beating all others who would vie for leadership, through

either fighting or through support from one's peers. The *head*, like the *top route*, is looked up to and inspires fear. The *thala* is the figurative *periya aaL* of the *route*.

The tropes surrounding the *route* and the *thala* explicitly draw from traditional conceptions of status. In particular, they are drawn from tropes of royalty. (Students were even able to give me lineages of their *routes*, quasi-origin myths tracing the emergence of the *route* into positions of dominance in the college through political intrigue, alliances, and battles.) The *head* should be silent in the sense of not singing, dancing, teasing, whistling, yelling, standing on top of the bus (all things that characterize the activity of *route pooduRathu*, 'riding the bus route'; see chapter 2, section 4.2.3) (cf. Irvine 1974). Unlike other students who must be visible in order to accrue status, like the 'headman' or king, the *route* leader need not, as presumably everyone knows who he is. To do so would be beneath his status. Such is his *geththu*. Indeed, it took me a while to actually meet the *route heads*. They were always present in our group conversations, but didn't speak or make themselves visible to me.

This is the only instance within peer groups where I found status being institutionalized in a relatively hierarchical and static manner akin to adult 'society' while still outside of its authority structures (cf. student government, hostel government, department organization).<sup>16</sup> This is partly because the *route* is an inter-year peer group and thus age hierarchy is relatively less neutralized than in the department-year based peer groups of other colleges where everyone is the same age.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The film fan club might be another possible exception (Dickey 2001; Rogers 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there is a category difference between the *route* and the peer group as such. The *route* is a super-peer group akin to the department. Within the *route* youth do organize themselves into age-equal peer groups, though this sub-division is less pronounced than in colleges where the department (with its year cohort division) is the main criterion of peer group formation, as is the *senior-junior* divide. Departments, however, don't usually have student *heads* per se.

The *route* is highly organized. It perdures over years (though the *route head* usually changes every year); it has its own songs (modified *gaanaappaaddu* [Chennai fisherman’s folk songs] which are passed on and modified year by year), epithets, and its own rituals. For example, every year each *route* picks a day to celebrate the *route* in what is called “*bus day*.”

*Bus day* is organized by the *heads* each year. The *route head* collects dues from *route* members, *route* alumni, sympathetic citizens, and local politicians (photo 3.3).

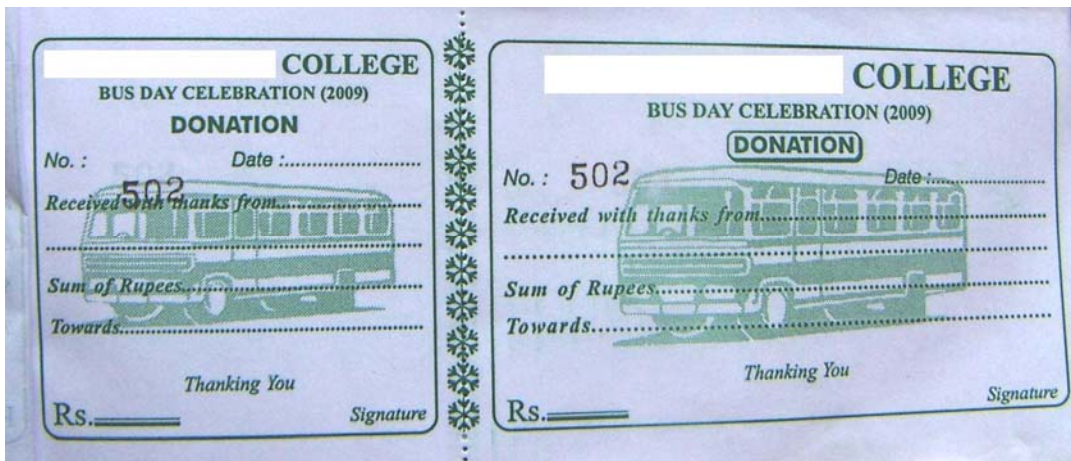


Photo 3.3 Bus day donations receipt

With the money the *route head* buys alcohol (for *route* members), decorations for the bus (minimally a garland), posters (to advertise the day), and rental charges/bribes for transportation officials and bus drivers to get government buses. With these buses the *route* members and their friends and only them (which may easily total into the hundreds) slowly ride from the beginning of the *route* to the college. En route the students engage in extreme *route pooduRathu*: singing the *route*’s song to the rhythms played by *route* members by hitting the bus with their hands; dancing to frenetic *kuuththu* beats provided by a rented band or by students’ songs; riding on the side of the bus (hanging on by the

side windows) or on the top of the bus (photos 3.4, 3.5); whistling; yelling insults at students from other colleges; teasing (*kalaaykkiRathu*) onlookers (especially girls); getting dressed up in *style*-ish clothes; and drinking alcohol. Like the college *tour* (chapter 2, section 3.3.5), *bus day* is a particular ritual of youth exteriority where ‘youth’ is performed to its maximum.



*Photo 3.4 Bus day celebrations 1*





Photo 3.5 Bus day celebrations 2

Having a big *bus day* with lots of people, making the most amount of noise and being the most visible all express the *route's geththu*, as does having the first *bus day* of the season. *Bus day* is a celebration of, and demonstration of, a *route's geththu*; hence the exaggerated displays of youth status, youth transgression, and youth exteriority. It also traces out the *route's* territory via the buses' traversal of space, co-opting such space as the space of the *route*, if only temporarily.

*Geththu* in the *route* means more than fighting and domination, as the discussion above shows. It's about status-raising more generally. *Geththu* is also about entertainment (*jolly*), but through creating temporary islands of alternative authority. Expressions of *geththu*, by either the *route* or an individual youth, attempt to bend the

rules of existing authority and get away with it. The amount of someone's or some route's *geththu* is reflected by the degree that existing rules can be bent and alternative authority can be established by their extra-normative acts.

In sum, *geththu* is linked to a particular kind of rough, *rowdy* masculinity that projects the *periya aaL–chinna paiyan* dynamic quite literally, often operationalizing status as physical dominance or tropes of it. Below I compare *geththu* and *style*, looking in particular at the issue of social class and status.

#### 2.4 Status and social class: Geththu versus style

While both *geththu* and *style* are about getting attention, raising status, projecting exteriority, and transgressing, they tend to do so differently. Relative to *geththu*, *style* expresses status through figuratively indexing elite social class—for example, via English and (duplicate) branded clothes—while *geththu* does so through hyper-masculine displays—for example, fighting, riding the footboard of the bus, teasing (*kalaaykkiRathu*) and intimidating other.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the forms involved, the meta-pragmatic stereotypes invoked by such forms differ. For example, when I asked students in the elite Chennai college about *geththu*, the name of the government college that I worked at came up. If I asked students at the government college about *style*, the name of the elite college would come up. Students at the government college would explain, ‘if you really want to see *style* go over to that *royal* (‘rich’) college. There the students are really *style*-ish. They can afford to do

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<sup>18</sup> For similar concepts of youth masculinity, see Lukose (2005a: 925–926, 2009: 66–71) on *chethu* among Malayali youth; Schoss (1996) on “shine” among male Kenyan youth involved in tourism (especially the contrast between the “smart” professionalized tour guides and the flamboyant “beachboys”); and Bastian (1996) on young Nigerian men.



a lot of *style* through clothing, jewelry, cell phones, bikes. They have access to *modern* fashions. Here, we are all relatively poor guys, and hence it isn't so much *style* as *geththu* that concerns us.' Students, of course, *do* do *style* at the government college. However, their identity-linked typifications diverge as per their reflexive awareness of their class position. Like youth's relationship to adult status they can't access, students at the government college figure themselves as more-or-less exterior to *style*, which for them is a class-linked register that they are partially excluded from.<sup>19</sup>

Besides the forms and the class-linked persona invoked through them, different groups use these terms slightly differently. Students from the elite college (who tend to be more affluent) use *geththu* and *style* with more overlap (thus eliding class from their conceptions of status) than the government college students (who tend to be from working-class backgrounds), who differentiate *style* and *geththu* to a greater extent. As one government college student put it, middle- and upper-class youth don't worry that much about *geththu* because of their *kudumba gauravam* ('family honor/prestige'). Because of such *gauravam* their families exert more control over them. Thus, they (are made to) exert more self-control because there is more objective status at risk. That is, because they are closer to 'society' (they have more invested in the status economy of adult society) they are less transgressive (they are more controlled), and thus they have less *geththu* and are like *chinna pasangka*. Naturally they value it less, he reasoned.

Inversely, the discourse from the elite college's students about the government college's students' mode of masculinity is that it is not *decent*, it is *local*. They typify the

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<sup>19</sup> The difference between these two colleges isn't only social class, but also the stereotyped identities of the two colleges. The elite college has long been linked with producing civil servants and white-collar professionals, while the government college has historically been linked to political agitations, student politics (which is hyper-masculinized in Tamil Nadu), and producing police men and politicians.

hyper-masculinity embodied in this government college as ‘childishness’ (*chinna puLLeththanam*): they fight too much, they fight for silly reasons, they drink too much, and they aren’t serious enough. As such, the elite college students projected the students of the government college as *chinna pasangka* (i.e., deficient youth) to their more “mature” status.

As for (super-)elite youth, those who speak fluent English at home, wear authentic brands, who travel and study abroad, forms which perform *style* for the lower- and middle-classes are so presupposed as part of their peer groups that *style* is erased from their discourse altogether. Such students are above the status concerns of the more economically challenged. As such, *style* is replaced with a notion of “taste” or inner-expression similar to concepts of self-expression *qua* individual “style” in the U.S. (Bourdieu 1984). To such youth, the lower- and middle-class notions of doing *style* and *geththu* are crude; they betray an inability to think independently and thus show the childishness of the lower- and middle-classes with their herd mentality. For them, the word “style” is used to describe a way of expressing one’s inner self through unique affectations. For them the issue is individuality, not individuation.

Moreover, even when the core meaning of *style* is the same, its extensions and its source registers differ by social class. For example, for the upper-middle classes *style* is embodied in authentic branded items but not duplicates; for working- and middle- class youth the distinction is irrelevant. They don’t have enough money for authentic brands (see chapter 6). For the upper-middle classes, words like “dude” and “brother” were *style*-ish speech, while working-class students may not even be familiar with such terms.

One important difference to note is that forms typified and used as *style* by upper-middle class youth, like authentic brands and English, are themselves a mode of socialization to individual mobility within the global economy. Indeed, most of the jobs available to the students of elite colleges (where *style* is presumably done maximally) are call center positions and multi-national jobs in metropolitan cities, or jobs abroad. On the other hand, *geththu* in the government college I worked in typifies forms and activities which have no cultural capital in the white-collar job market, and thus provide no foothold from which to enter the globalizing economy.

In my discussion I have exaggerated the differences between the uses of the terms *geththu* and *style* so as to highlight two different kinds of transgression and exteriority from ‘society’ that are differentially associated to social class: an aesthetic of exteriority via tropes of wealth and mobility and an aesthetic of exteriority via tropes of rough masculinity. Both are exterior, but only one facilitates economic mobility.

### *2.5 Youth status as life stage*

Doing *style*, maintaining *geththu*, showing *thooraNai* are considered, by both youth and parents, as part of the youth life stage. As one gets older one ‘naturally’ does less *style* and transgresses less. The responsibilities of life begin to weigh heavier, one’s attention and energies are steadied, and one’s duties multiply. Youth eventually ‘have to slow down’ (*veekam kuRaikkaNum*), become less self-centered, and start thinking about the family, its *gauravam* (‘honor’), and one’s *mariyaathai* (‘respect’): one has to ‘move inside society/caste’ (“*samuugaththukkuLLee poogaNum*”) and grow up (cf. Osella and Osella 1998: 201, 2000b: 245).

An exchange with a *UG* student Shankar from the Chennai government college that I worked in illustrates this. He sent me a forward SMS that had the name of his college with a machete dripping with blood from it. I jokingly asked him, what's with all the "muradduththanam" ('rowdy-ness,' 'intimidation,' 'aggression')?

S: Chumma! Rody colg la tats y

S: Just cause! (Ours is a) rowdy college, right? That's why.

C: enna, ithellaam college-ukku maddumthaanaa?

C: What, so all this is just for college?

S : S. Costes silent ta job ku poganum!

S: Yes Costas, (after this) I have to go to work silently!

C: Haha. Appa rowdy thanam mudnchirukkum!

C: Haha. After that your rowdiness will be finished!

S: YeS. Mams Silentu irukanum college. pogura varaikum than Rowdy thanam ellam.

S: Yes *maams* <variant on *maamaa*, cf. 'bro'>, (then) I have to be silent. All this rowdiness is just while I am going to college.

As we can see, college offers a particular zone for youth to transgress, to indulge their exterior liminality; in this case as a *college rowdy* (cf. Rogers 2008). And this is figured not as a perduring generational difference, but as a transient phase, as an age set.

As one recently married friend explained: 'Before marriage you spend most of your free time with your friends. There is a freedom there. At that age, one doesn't care as much about listening to family. After marriage, the only people you spend your time with are family. Life becomes family. One moves into family.' He continued by explaining that when he was younger he would only see his kin relations at special occasions once a year. But now that is all he sees. And with family, you can't be however you want. There

is no freedom. You have to be like this or that, how they want or expect you to be. There is a pressure to be a certain way, to start thinking about your future and your kin/caste responsibilities.

For the girls with whom I spoke with in Madurai and Chennai, the experience was similar. All the egalitarian relations, all the *modern, style-ish* clothes, all the independence afforded by college (or the workplace) are a phase. They last as long as they are in college (or working). After that comes marriage, and all the adult responsibilities that entails, from changes in dress, speech, leisure activities, to the company they kept.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Status-raising and -leveling in the peer group

In this section I look at how concepts of youth status play out in peer groups through status-raising and -leveling activities and rituals which act to reconstitute the peer group as an egalitarian and exterior youth space.

#### 3.1 Over style

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<sup>20</sup> This, of course, begs the question, what is generation and what is age set? Of course, the two are dialectically related to each other. And this is one of the problems with work on youth culture (e.g., Liechty 2003: 37): there is a projection from age set to generational change, which itself is simply the naturalization of our own belief in the history of society as successive waves of generations. Yet it's precisely through age set that generational changes become possible. To take a simple example, more and more students were wearing track pants instead of *lungis*. While the reason given was *style* and *style* itself is a transient life stage, through the socialization to a particular middle-class, urban habitus (itself motivated by concepts of *decency* in the college) such changes in dress were likely to perdure beyond the age set if only because such changes were unrelated to (i.e., had no implications regarding) adult concepts of *mariyaathai*. Similarly while the avoidance of high Tamil among youth speakers and the valorization of English isn't leading to language shift in Tamil Nadu *per se*, it does seem to be leading to register shift. Many students were not particularly well socialized to higher registers of Tamil, though they were perfectly fluent in spoken Tamil (though perhaps not literate) and (less than) proficient in English. While they expected that when they would become *periya aaLungka* they would acquire and perhaps have occasion to use higher registers of Tamil (cf. Meek 2008), it's unknown to whether they will be able to speak such registers when they get older. Ultimately, of course, to tease apart generation and age set requires multi-generational study. It's enough to note, however, that Tamil youth understand their predicament as *both* age set and generation, and that the importance of age set with respect to status behavior must be noted.

If *style* is status-raising, it is constantly haunted by its own excess. As I argued earlier, this is inherent in the construction of the peer group, youth's own understandings of their place in 'society,' and their concepts of status.

What are the boundaries of *style*? If *style* and the peer group are about transgression, does such transgression itself have limits? One of my first fieldwork experiences went straight to this question. I asked Ajith, a third-year student in Madurai, 'what is *style*?' 'It depends,' he explained, because *style* is relative. 'What is *style* for one person will be "over" ('excessive') for another.' That is, the boundary is negotiable. And indeed, much of students' casual conversation, gossip, and teasing is about whose *style* is acceptable and whose is excessive or *kiRukku* ('crazy'); who is status-ful and who is showing off or trying too hard.

*Style* is defined as much by its deviation from norms of propriety as it is by its own tendencies toward excessiveness and (unwarranted) deviation from the *norms of the peer group*. *Style* is always troubled by the possibility of it being too much, and thus is constantly being negotiated in the peer group through status-leveling. This is reflected in the elaboration of the concept of *style* in terms of its excess, as reflected in terms like: *over style*, *over acting/action*, *banthaa* ('excessive showing off,' 'prestige'), *scene pooduRathu* (lit. 'putting on a scene [from a film]'), *film kaadduRathu* (lit., 'showing a film'), *padam pooduRathu* (lit., 'putting on a film/picture'), *build up paNRathu* ('building [oneself] up'; a reference to the 'build up' sequences preceding the hero's appearance in a

film), *bigu paNRathu* ('to condescend,' 'act better than [s.o. else]), *thalai ganam* (lit., 'head weight'), *head weight* ('arrogance').<sup>21</sup>

Ajith illuminated *over style* with the following example. Leaning over, he said, 'look at my watch. It's nice, right? It's shiny, it's steel, it has the name of a brand on it. But look closer: it isn't running! It's broken. It's a fake. The watch is *style*, but it is "over" because it's broken.' This disjunct reveals that he in fact does not have the status (in this case, access to authentic, working branded commodities) to back up his status-raising move in wearing the watch. While the watch implies a kind of middle-class commodity consumption, this status-ful presupposition is infelicitous because the watch is broken: his wearing it is "*over action*" and is vulnerable to the claim that he is trying too hard to impress. (Hence his quick move toward self-status-leveling by laughingly revealing his watch as broken.) And indeed, as I observed many times over, attempts at excessive status-raising always elicit status-leveling from one's peers. As one female Madurai student told me using a youth proverb: "*over banthaa udambukku aagathu*" ('too much showing off/status-raising is bad for the body'); that is, excessive *style* results in "fetching some nice slaps," as she glossed it, from one's peers.

Because status expressions are always relative to the uptake of the peer group, *over style* is always defined relative to the *style* of one's peers. If everyone is wearing 'normal' clothes and one comes with ripped jeans and a branded tee-shirt, one will inevitably be labeled as showing off. Such status expressions, however, won't be considered excessive

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<sup>21</sup> Note how the figuration of excessive *style* is linked to the notion of re-animating filmic images and thus to tropes of visibility. This is because filmic representations of *style* are inevitably exaggerated as film heroes are figured as higher status individuals than fans. They are also linked because the imitation of film is often associated with the madness of film fanaticism and the childishness of the fan (see chapter 5 for more discussion).

within a group of peers who dress similarly. *Over style* is also relative to the activity/location at hand. While an outing to the girls' college, a college function, or the cinema may call for one level of *style*, the same level of *style* for going to the hostel mess or one's home village will invite teasing and scolding. In short, *style* and *over style* are context dependent. They are also dependent on particular ideologies about personhood and appropriateness.

### 3.2 Ideologies of personhood and style

Particular ideologies of personhood are often invoked to legitimate who can do *style* and who can't. When I asked a group of students why they were teasing one particular student for doing *style* but not others who were engaging in similar status practices they would note that the *style*-ish displays in question 'suited' (*suit-aa, match-aa*) the one guy, but not the other. That is, some people are more equipped to do *style* than others. This might be justified aesthetically: for example, a student with a rough looking face might be able to pull off certain kinds of *style* (e.g., an earring), while on someone with a baby face it might seem inappropriate (e.g., 'he looks too much like a *chinna paiyan* to have an earring'). At the same time, too much *style* for a tough looking guy (e.g., long hair, a beard) might make him look too much like a *periya aaL* or a *rowdy* and thus be excessive.

Similarly, youth often assume that particular people can(not) do *style* based where they come from, their "culture" or 'native place' (cf. Daniel 1984: ch. 2); that is, based on some notion of appropriateness (Tarlo 1996: 246; Dean 2009; Dickey 2009a). My roommate Stephen in Madurai came from Kodaikkanal, a place associated with Christian



missionaries, colonial vacationers, and a famous American private school. Students often explained Stephen's forays into sartorial *style*, which they appreciated and ratified, as due to the fact that he is from Kodaikkanal. Similarly, students from north India were seen as more likely to do *style*. *Style* was okay for such youth, it didn't "*disturb*" others because it was part of their "culture." Similarly, my deviations from the norms of Tamil society (sartorial or other) were always rendered intelligible by the idea that in my "culture" we did *style* naturally. Most confusing for youth, in fact, was why I didn't do *more style*: why didn't I have more *style-ish* clothes, why was my cell phone so ordinary, why didn't I always wear sneakers, why was my bag so 'normal'? Their assumption was that I could do whatever *style* to whatever level of absurdity I wanted to. So why didn't I (cf. Lukose 2009: 77)?

Note, of course, that what grounds *style* is, again, a trope of exteriority. Places which are exterior, and thus status-ful, license *style*: WESTERN > OTHER-FOREIGN (e.g., African, Southeast Asian) > NORTH INDIAN > MALAYALEE (and other Southern states) > TAMIL URBAN > TAMIL RURAL. Those who come from interior places most closely aligned to 'society' and 'culture' (i.e., caste and "tradition," the 'real' Tamil "culture") are least likely to be given the benefit of the doubt vis-à-vis *style* (cf. Tarlo 1996).

Similarly, students from certain departments are assumed to be more *style-ish* and thus are not questioned as much if they performed *style*. This too has a hierarchy (see chapter 1, section 2): VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS, COMMERCE > COMPUTER SCIENCE, ENGLISH, PHYSICS > CHEMISTRY, BOTANY, MATHEMATICS > HISTORY, ECONOMICS, TAMIL.

The *style* departments are, of course, those where the rich study with more frequency.<sup>22</sup>

The person from Kodaikkanal, from America, from Commerce, from Visual Communications is used to dressing with *style* because that is their norm, their culture. It is the (mis-)match between projected status and status-licensing background which makes one person *style* and another *over style*.

While ideologies of personhood certainly set particular defaults for the evaluation of performances of *style*, such ideologies are more often than not after-the-fact rationalizations. Such ideologies can be defeated, and poor guys from the village can just as well be ratified as *style pasangka* ('stylish guys') and rich urban students as un-*style*-ish. Such work takes place in the centrifugal and centripetal forces of the peer group, pushing youth toward difference and pulling them toward sameness, as I discuss below. What is interesting is that for those whose status is secured—that is, they are accepted by their peers as status-ful—*style* is a property of their person and thus their status-raising moves are *performative of style*. For those who are not necessarily seen as status-ful, who occupied the grey area, *style* is a tenuous performance, an external surface or show. For such individuals such semiotic displays aren't seen as a property of the person, but a function of the form: he got that haircut *for style*, he used that English word *for style*, etc. Such performances of *style* are only sometimes entailing of status, depending on the attending co-text and uptake by one's peers.

### 3.3. *Strategies of status-leveling*

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<sup>22</sup> This is due to how, on the one hand, fees and corruption involved in buying seats makes placement in such departments function as an index of economic status, and, on the other, the association of schooling and money. (The rich can study at better English-medium schools, etc., and thus get into better departments on merit.)

Below I discuss a more general set of interactional practices and genres that function to status-level and maintain the egalitarian space of the peer group *qua* intimate space of peer pressure and coercion: gossip, teasing and status-linked humor, rituals of status-inversion, the *treat*, and fighting (cf. Osella and Osella 1998: 195ff.; Nisbett 2007; see Kyratzis 2004: 631–635 for a review). Such practices speak to the ambivalence of youth status and the appreciation and envy it potentially engenders. As we see, it is also a principle of the hybridization and negotiation of status-ful youth cultural forms.

### 3.3.1 *Gossip*

Gossip is a common mechanism for social control in many societies (Briggs 1998; Besnier 2009; on youth peer groups see Kyratzis 2004: 632). Among youth, talking about others whose behavior transgresses the bounds of reasonable status-raising; or whose status-raising can't be licensed by their status is one way that: a) those who gossip reset the status level of the peer group, and b) those who are seen as showoffs are encouraged to tone down their status-raising. As a Chennai student put it while describing his departmental peers, guys who *scene pooduRathu* ('put on a scene,' i.e., act like they are on screen, like film heroes), who show off too much with their branded clothes, who are always trying to show what a *periya aaL* they are, inevitably get torn down by their peers behind their backs and interactionally kept at a distance. A female student who moved from Chennai to Madurai told me that when she got to college, her overly *style-ish* clothing (jeans, sleeveless kurtas) and English speech kept the rumor mill about her going. Only when she started speaking in Tamil and dressing more modestly would other

girls even interact with her. In her case, gossip about her made her socially peripheral until she changed her behavior to be more in line with the group.

The fear of gossip and the fear of being seen as showing off are potent forces among youth. Strong enough, for example, to cause students to hide status-ful aspects about themselves that others might not ratify: for example, covering up a romantic relationship; or lying about their high marks.

### 3.3.2 *Teasing and English*

Much of the face-to-face status regulation in the peer group is done through teasing. Students often experience teasing as entertainment. It's taken lightly most of the time and everyone is usually a good sport (see section 3.3.3 below). You have to be a good sport, in fact, because teasing is highly ritualized and institutionalized in forms like *ragging* (chapter 2, section 4.1.2) and *culturals*. But teasing is also serious business and functions as a force demanding conformity to the peer group. In general, youth only get teased about things that are considered status-ful.<sup>23</sup>

The most common kind of teasing among college students regards English use. English use is considered *style*, indexing the speaker as one who has command over a language that affords job opportunity, global mobility, and the impression of education and upper-class background. English use also projects exteriority and contrasts with high register Tamil—which commands *mariyaathai* ('respect') among 'big men' (*periya aaLungka*), emblemized in the Dravidian politician speaking about protecting "Tamil

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<sup>23</sup> Rarely in peer groups did I find examples where youth teased someone about their low status. Such teasing quickly turns into insults and results in fights or breaking off of social relations. The kinds of teasing I am interested in here are forms of status-leveling (not status-lowering/ranking) which function to maintain social relations in the peer group and not sever them.

culture”—and colloquial *local* (or regional) Tamil—which is seen as ‘normal’ or crude (cf. Smith-Hefner 2007). Students’ use of high Tamil is almost nil, only invoked as parodic humor, and colloquial Tamil is unmarked for status.

But using English to index exteriority and ego’s status is precarious. Youth often deride individuals who use a “*foreign*” accent (American or British) when speaking in English *or* in Tamil (cf. Lo and Kim 2009). Such individuals act like they were ‘born in London,’ or had ‘just gotten off the plane from America.’ Such a student is a “*peter*.” Here the Christian name *Peter* is a metonym for the absurd English persona invoked through such speech. Such a youth “*peter (v)uduraan*,” meaning that they ‘show off’ (*banthaa kaamikkiRathu*) through English. In fact, English usage is such a pervasive mode of status-raising that youth often used *peter (v)udurathu* to simply mean ‘showing off’ in any semiotic register.

In addition to accent, using English words in one’s speech is grounds for teasing. Thus, in a peer group where no one speaks English fluently, code-switching or code-mixing is immediately greeted with teasing; and if such English usage is seen as excessive (that is, more than the others in the group can [under]stand) it is met with explicit meta-pragmatic discourse. For example, at functions where a (youth) speaker is speaking in ‘too much’ English audience members will invariably yell out “*thamizhle peesu!*” (‘Speak in Tamil!’) (cf. Lukose 2009: 187).

My English-fluent roommate in Madurai, Stephen almost never spoke English in the hostel except to me. This was precisely for the reason that speaking in English, even when comprehensible to his peers, would lead to him getting teased (and certainly to their annoyance), and eventually to exclusion from the group. One common rejoinder to a

student who uses too much English is: “A, B, C, D, E, F, G...*engkaLukkum theriyum*” ‘We also know our A, B, Cs (so no need to show off).’ Inversely, in a group where everyone speaks English at a particular level, someone who speaks English but at a lower competency will also be teased, not only as ignorant, but also as trying to project a level of status that he can’t sustain.

What one finds, then, is a desire, in fact an obsession, with speaking English accompanied by a paralyzing insecurity, a shyness/fear that one’s English will either be too good or not good enough (also see Rogers 2008: 85; Lukose 2009: ch. 5). To not know any English is a sign of ignorance. But even more than this, to be exposed as ignorant or deficient in English in moments of status-raising through English (of which every token utterance of English is a possibility) is humiliating for students and thus studiously avoided.

This dialectic has a number of effects on how English is used. First, because everyone wants to speak in English but can’t, within peer group interaction there is a motivating force to use English words when speaking Tamil (code-mixing) and the avoidance of clause and sentence level constructions (code-switching).<sup>24</sup> Students pepper their Tamil with English words, and much of youth slang is derived from English. As one student explained after trying to initiate in English with me in vain as everyone else told him to stop:

‘There isn’t anything wrong with the sentence “Scissors-*e kodu*. Paper cut *paNNaNum*.” It conveys some knowledge of English and is thus status-raising.

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<sup>24</sup> Moreover, full English speech is associated, for most students, with their encounters with adults in the college: classroom lectures, the speeches of college officials, job interviews in the placement cell, etc. (cf. Lukose 2009: 186). Thus, while English is usable as status-ful behavior at the word/phrase level, its full-blown use is indexical of formal contexts associated with adult authority.

Further, its use won't exclude one's peers. But saying "Give the scissors, I want to cut paper" will elicit teasing because it's *banthaa*, because it's trying to show that you are the *periya aaL*.'

Second, as using English words that are unknown by most of the populace runs the risk of teasing, there is a push toward using English words that have a social domain that is neither nil nor all of the peer group. Words known by all cease to have status-raising potential while words known by none will invite censure.

Third, there is an incessant glossing activity or cross-code semantic redundancy in youth's Tamil whereby English words will be accompanied by their Tamil glosses. This is a longstanding pattern in Tamil Nadu and one can find a large number of such cross-code reduplications where a Tamil word and English word of same denotation are combined into a single lexical item that has the same denotation as its components (e.g., *but-anaal*, *so-athanaale*, *varisai-queue*, *gate-vaasal*). Such cross-code reduplication and glossing diagram the dialectic between status-raising and -leveling in a manner that parallels the pragmatics of use-mention (Fleming n.d.). In effect, one 'mentions' the English word, hesitantly status-raising, while at the same time 'using' the Tamil gloss of the English, thus preemptively countering any possibility of teasing. By doing this one can status-raise without leaving anyone out.

Fourth, words that contribute minimally to the denotational text and maximally to the interactional text are favored: greetings and departures ("Hi," "What's up?," "Good morning," "Bye," "We'll meet tomorrow"); ritualized interactional moves and phatic communications ("How are you?," "Did you eat?," "Ok[-vaa?]," "Isn't it?," "Yeah, I know"); and discourse linkage words ("but," "suppose," "so"). Such words are status-raising (i.e., are ego-focal) but don't exclude anyone from the conversation (i.e., aren't

addressee-focal). This is because their denotational content is minimal but their interactional content is maximal and easily recoverable from context without knowledge of English. Such usage manages the double bind to status-raise by speaking English but not status-raise too much by not speaking too much English.

### 3.3.3 *Teasing as humor*

Above we saw how excessive status-raising—where attributed status differs from perceived/desired status—can produce jealousy, gossip, and teasing. In addition to being a form of control, teasing is also a genre of humor and entertainment (cf. Lukose 2009: 82–84 on *chammal* in Kerala; Nisbett 2007 among Bangalore Tamil youth).

Among youth teasing as humor takes a number of recurrent formulae, all of which inversely diagram youth status. In such genres of teasing a person is attributed a level of status (explicitly, or implicitly via presupposition) that is incommensurate with the perceived status of that person. Such teasing figures the status-raising behavior as something to be questioned because it can't be backed up by the status of that person. Thus, for example, in my Madurai hostel two roommates Vignesh and Danavel sparred back and forth, trading teases. Vignesh initiated saying that Danavel was loving a girl, causing everyone in the room to laugh. Danavel shot back that Vignesh looked like the popular and handsome film star Ajith. Here the tease that Danavel is loving a girl—something which is good and which guys want to be doing—is met with another otherwise status-raising statement that Vignesh looks like the light-skinned film hero



Ajith. Of course, he doesn't, nor was Danavel loving, thus creating a tropic dissonance whose construal is status-leveling *qua* teasing.<sup>25</sup>

I often encountered this kind of humor when a new person was introduced to me. The form of the joke is the following: 'This is my friend X. He is Y' where X is the person's name and Y is filled by some status-raising or status-presupposing predicate: for example, 'loving a girl,' 'the top of the class,' the "college hero," 'the best chess player in the college,' 'the biggest rowdy in the college,' the "college terror," the "#1 accused," etc.

Such explicit linguistic boasts for another, negatively valorized through irony, are largely embarrassing for the person being introduced and always get good laughs from all around. Ventriloquating attributed status playfully pokes fun through ironically creating a status mismatch: the target of the teasing is attributed some kind of status which is either perceived to be excessive or impossible/untrue. Through third-person attributions, such humor navigates sarcastic insult (2nd pers.) and boasting (1st pers.).<sup>26</sup>

As age is a salient axis of status-differentiation in Tamil society, much status-humor revolves around age. For example, a common joke among youth is to say that someone is older than he really is; for example, 'Vivek is 31 years old!'<sup>27</sup> Relatedly, mismatch of

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<sup>25</sup> Young men almost always denied being in love except as a kind of confession, saying that such information if mismanaged would eventually lead to gossip about both the guy and the girl, and thus spoil their reputations (especially the girl's). Indeed, one of the common sources of envy among college guys is that another guy has a girlfriend while they don't. Such a situation causes the girlfriend-less person's 'stomach to burn' (*vayiRu eriyuthu*).

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, during *cultural*s performances clapping, while usually a form of praise, is often used by youth to ironically tease someone on stage who they want to take down a peg. They do this by excessive and premature clapping. Here the ordinary form is troped upon in order to attribute a level of status-raising to another that all recognize as excessive.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the term *chiththappu* (see chapter 2, section 4.1.3).

cross-generational fictive consanguineal kinship was often perceived as humorous.<sup>28</sup> For example, male students would often playfully joke with their female classmates by calling them *akkaa* ‘older sister.’<sup>29</sup> For example, in a light ragging session in the elite Chennai college that I worked in, a group of *style-ish* third-year students were questioning a first-year girl, asking her name, where she is from, and what classes she is taking. The girl was, appropriate to the genre, part embarrassed, part demure, part submissive as expressed in her body language, tone of voice, eye gaze, and terse answers. When the girl, presumably by accident due to being so nervous, answered one of the third-year’s questions “Yes, uncle” everyone broke out laughing. This was compounded when the other third years seized on this status-mismatch and reversed it, saying that no, actually his birthday is in 1992, making him younger than the girls. They shouldn’t call him “uncle,” he should be calling them *akkaa*! This got a wide round of laughs from all the students (and a blush from the target of the teasing).

Similarly, parodic uses of status-raising behaviors often functioned as humor in the peer group. For example, trying to speak English but failing at it was always good for a laugh (cf. the famous Rajnikanth comedy dialogue in the film *Veelaikkaaran* [1987] discussed in chapter 4). Youth often speak in humorous, exaggerated broken English as a joke, demonstrating familiarity with English and thus status-raising, even while distancing themselves from the enregistered figure of status-ful personhood associated with it, and thus self-status-leveling.

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<sup>28</sup> Kin terms from the patriline tend to be humorously used precisely because (age-)status and hierarchy is more salient for one’s consanguineal kin than for one’s affinal kin.

<sup>29</sup> Note that the participial noun for a woman who shows off with English (*peter vudravaL*) is *peter akkaa*, thus compounding the tease by ironic attribution of foreign background and older age.

### 3.3.4 *The treat*

Another youth cultural ritual that reflects and redistributes status is the *treat*. When something good happens to an individual (s)he is expected, and often times forced, to give a “*treat*” to the peer group; for example, take them out to the movies, buy them dinner (or sweets), or for men, buy them alcoholic drinks (also see Nisbett 2007). Here “something good” means something which raises one’s status in the peer group. Having a birthday (in Tamil Nadu, on your birthday you have to bring the cake), getting a job, winning a game, securing someone’s love, getting married, or passing an exam, for instance, all require giving a *treat* to one’s peers. Not giving a treat is seen as selfish, as arrogant, and is grounds for breaking social relations.

While youth will often state that one treats because one wants to share the happiness due to the status-raising event, this isn’t its only function.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, as with the other youth cultural forms describe above, the *treat* is a mechanism of advertising status-raising (one treats because one has had his status raised) coupled with status-leveling through redistribution of status, thus recreating egalitarian relations out of status-differentiation. This tropically replicates the model of patronage that one finds in adult society (M. Mines 1994; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990) through youth rituals of transgression (smoking, drinking, cinema). Through the circulating treat (Mauss 1954) the peer group is reconstituted as status-level.

### 3.3.5 *Fighting*

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<sup>30</sup> This necessity to treat is so strong that one of my close friends upon getting engaged studiously avoided walking in his neighborhood, instead taking auto-rickshaws or bikes in circuitous routes. He was afraid of being stopped and asked for a *treat* (in this case, sixty rupees for a quarter of spirits) from any and everyone. I myself was unknowingly stuck with the rather large bill at my own going away party.

Most of the time peer group activity works smoothly and status-leveling of the kinds I described above regulate youth affairs. However, physical fighting is always a resort that exists among youth to negotiate status.

One night in the first Madurai hostel that I lived in, during an interview with two second-year students we heard a commotion in an adjacent room. Going over there we learned that a fight had broken out between two first years. The first years had been told by the third years to put away the cricket equipment, a legitimate expression of hierarchical difference. One upper-middle class, urban first-year, Bradley, told Venkatesh, a working-class rural first-year, to put it away. Venkatesh, in turn, told Bradley he could do it if he wanted to, but he wouldn't. Both turns were un-ratified expressions of hierarchical difference. Because there was no principle to determine who had the right to tell the other what to do, a verbal fight broke out. The moment, however, when it escalated into physical confrontation involving a mirror used as a weapon is when Bradley, proficient in English, code-switched into English. Venkatesh, insecurely ignorant of English took this as a direct insult that he was an ignorant bumpkin, unable to speak in or understand English, and thus attacked Bradley. As this example shows, once status negotiation through ego-focal tropic displays of *style* breaks down, the negotiation of status takes on a more literal semiotic mode of status-leveling: physical blows.

In general, if status-raising becomes too much for the peer group to handle, if it implicates one's peers as lower status, thereby hierarchically ranking them and impugning their self-image, a physical fight to literally establish dominance is always a

possibility; as is the dissolution of the peer group and the severing of social relations (see Nisbett 2007 for a nice description of this).<sup>31</sup>

Status-raising objects/behaviors are dangerous cultural forms: while they have the power to elevate the user, they risk making the user the object of derision. Hence the multiform hybrid and partial strategies at play in the peer group. As we saw, youth's activities in the youth peer group are highly ambivalent about status, and thus almost always offer a kind of deniability prefigured in their use. This is itself a reaction to the anxieties and insecurities of being a youth, of being in the double bind to obey (the peer group) and transgress (through status-raising). With respect to English use we saw how youth's own practices hybridize status-ful signs so as to negotiate the problematics of the peer group (also see chapter 6, section 3.3 on how the consumption of brands works through a similar dialectic). I take this up in the conclusion of the chapter.

Status-raising also enables particular kinds of pleasure. We saw how genres of humor status-level through ironical status-raising, lowering status through attributing status. While such practices are otherwise aggressive gestures (teasing outside of the peer group can lead to fighting) in the peer group they are converted into signs of intimacy/solidarity through their double-voicedness. Thus, at the same time that youth status invokes the specter of its excess, it also makes particular forms of humor and play possible through status-mismatch, status-inversion, and performance of other's *styles* (e.g., film stars) by

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<sup>31</sup> While I didn't observed incidents of the kind described by Rogers (2008), we might also add "*eve teasing*" ('sexually harassing') women of an adversarial group as a way to status-lower other men. I did observe cases of this on an individual level, though the groups in the colleges I worked at didn't explicit organize around caste and thus such events didn't become caste-mobilizing conflicts as Rogers describes.

parodic distance (see chapter 4 on the film comedian) that ultimately reconstitute the peer group as a space of intimacy and egalitarian reciprocity.

### 3.4 *Status licenses transgression, transgression begets status, status begets status*

As we have seen, there is a thin and shifting line between acceptable and excessive status-raising. There is no clear and fixed line precisely because youth status is largely defined by its exteriority from perduring modes of institutionalized status. Rather than being anchored in unambiguous and perduring forms of status, youth status is a *shifter* (Silverstein 1995[1976]), interactionally grounded, ephemeral, and in constant need of renewal. And as I have argued, this is inherent in the tension of the peer group as a space of status-raising/transgression and -leveling/peer pressure.

Youth status exists in the circular logic of transgression and grounding of transgression. Status presupposes and entails the ability to deviate from norms of authority ('society'). And yet to have such transgression ratified by your peers, one must have established an alternative authority which grounds such transgression. The irony here, then, is that those with status can have their *style* be easily ratified by the group, while those who don't can't. And this is a bootstrapping project. One can't out of the blue start doing *style*. It will certainly draw teasing from one's peers. One has to piecemeal engage in status-raising negotiation in the peer group.

Not only can youth who are viewed as status-ful pull off status-ful displays, but they can also set norms of status-ful transgression. To this extent, *mature youth* become the islands of the authority they desire. While a youth considered as a *chinna paiyan* with a mohawk hairstyle might come off as absurd, a status-ful youth with the same haircut

would be *style*. And having gotten such an outlandish haircut (and having it ratified by the peer group), such a status-ful youth becomes the baptismal event from which other less status-ful youth can replicate such *style* with less chance of being made fun of. I return to this issue in chapter 5 in considering how film can function as source register for youth's status work.

#### **4. Women and status: Why doing *style* is so difficult for women**

##### *4.1 Introduction*

So far we have been looking at youth status from the perspective of men. I justified this because the construction of 'youth' as exteriority makes being a female youth problematic insofar as women are: (a) figured as interior to home, family, kin, caste, and culture, because (b) their behaviors, clothing, and status work are taken as indexes of the status of the groups to which they belong. The emblem of this is the woman's *kaRpu* 'chastity.' The woman's chastity *is* the honor of her kin group, her caste group, "Tamil culture," the Indian nation (Chatterji 1993; Mankekar 1999), and even divinity itself (Ramaswamy 1997). Because of this, after puberty young women's behaviors are much more regulated than during their childhood (Vatuk 1972, 1982b; Kakar 1978; Daniels 1980; David 1980; Reynolds 1980; Bennett 1983; Das 1988; Dube 1988; Tarlo 1996; Ram 2000; A. Kumar 2002). Whereas young boys are given more freedoms as 'youth,' women are given less. They are expected and made to be more mature, more controlled (*kadduppaadu*), more like adults.

Nevertheless, there are, as we have had occasion to point out, zones where such expectations and controls are partially lifted for young women. College is one such place,

and women's colleges are exceptional social spaces for the social processes I have been discussing in this chapter (cf. Tarlo 1996: ch. 6). While *geththu* and *thooraNai* are hardly ever used to describe women, their behaviors, or their possessions (except perhaps in teasing them through tropes of masculinization), they can and do do *style*. *Style* is, however, highly problematic for women. But what exactly is so unladylike about 'youth' and *style*?

#### 4.2 *Visibility*

First, as we noted, *style* is about being seen, about being visible. Even more than this, it is about wanting to be seen, as *desiring* attention. In Tamil Nadu, however, the woman as agent of her own desire is in most contexts stigmatized (Nakassis and Dean 2007). To have desire is to invoke the awful power of the sexually voracious woman, the out-of-control female *sakthi* ('power') that can destroy social relations and even physical matter (cf. the Kannagi myth<sup>32</sup>) (Wadley 1980a, b; Daniel 1984). Female *style* is often described simultaneously as showing off, as seductive, and as (demonically) threatening (cf. Lukose 2005a: 925 on *gema* in Kerala; Tarlo's [1996: ch. 6] discussion of the cardigan). One college girl in Madurai whose *chudithar* hem revealed the top half of her back was described by onlooking young men as 'doing *style*,' as "*scene pooduRathu*" ('showing off'), and as "*puuchchaaNdi kaamikkiRathu*" ('showing *puuchchaaNdi*,' the demonic boogeyman). To take another example, going out in public with *free hair* (i.e., not in a braid, the emblem of the control of female power) is thought to make a woman look like

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<sup>32</sup> The Kannagi myth is the story of Kannagi, the wife of a wealthy merchant. Having lost their fortune, they travelled to Madurai where her husband pawned her jewelry so as to raise money and start afresh. Unfortunately the jewelry is mistaken for the Queen's recently stolen jewelry and her husband is falsely accused, convicted, and executed. Kannagi's anger at the injustice was enough to set all of Madurai on fire. Her anger had this power because of her purity of character and chastity.



a demon or ghost, but also makes people think that the woman has an *abaasamaana guNam*, ‘a bad (i.e., loose) character.’

Second, to have desire is to (potentially) compromise one’s *kaRpu*, and thus to threaten the honor of the patriarchal kin and caste group. Recalling the proverb from chapter 2, section 2.2.1, while letting a man out of the house makes him a man, letting a woman out of the house spoils her. The quite real fear here is that to be seen in public will lead to the assumption by others of agentive desire, and this to the assumption of immodesty, and thus to the destruction of reputation and the possibility of (upward mobility in) marriage.

*Style* threatens a woman’s reputation precisely because *style* inevitably invokes *over style* and thus teasing. Teasing by boys, or by the reified agent ‘society,’ is the first step to gossip, and gossip to a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963). Young women, indeed, fear teasing and gossip, and this largely shapes how they act and dress in public (Lukose 2009; Tarlo 1996). For a man, however, there is no such threat. In fact, not doing *style* is likely to ruin one’s reputation. (It certainly won’t aid it.) *Style* for a man is status, it attracts; for a woman it attracts too much, it is *glamour*. For a man, *over style* is at most absurd; for a woman it is immoral. By this logic, knowing all this, what kind of girl would do *style* but a bad one?

This was made clear to me in discussions with male youth about why jeans and tee-shirts are considered so transgressive for women while track pants and short sleeve jerseys of the same cut and fit worn by female athletes are not. But why? Young men explained that it is because sports dress is a uniform. It is required. Thus, the interpretation that the girl is trying to get attention is neutralized. On the other hand, one

wears jeans/top to get noticed. Thus, as one student reasoned, one can infer that the girl who wears jeans is easier to talk to, and by implication, easier to sleep with. And while young men enjoyed looking at women dressed as such, it was highly disturbing for them as well, as too attractive, too seductive. But wearing track pants/jersey is for sports, not for looks. It is obligatory, not a choice. Hence it is not *style*, not agentive, not sexualized, not problematic.

While transgression from adult gender norms for men are expected, for women they are dangerous. For all these reasons, to do *style*, to be visible, to try to get attention is a sexualizing act and thus to be avoided.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.3 *Status-raising*

*Style* is about status-raising. It's a kind of boast. While for men this is fine, for most women boasting is highly problematic. This is because the general assumption in Tamil Nadu is that between a man and a woman of the same age or younger the man should always be higher status.<sup>34</sup> And yet a status-raising woman puts this into question, and thus presents a challenge to men.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, this is a major reason why many Tamil women aren't allowed to act in television or film. To be on screen is to be visible, and this is in and of itself enough to question a woman's modesty and the honor of her kin group (caste, culture, nation). While in rural Theeni on the set of *Goa* (2010), getting the husbands of interested local women to be extras was difficult for precisely this reason.

<sup>34</sup> This is the explicit logic why in a relationship between a man and a woman the man should be older and taller. Otherwise, the woman will see him as a *chinna paiyan*, and thus will never respect him. The man will lose control (cf. Lukose 2009: 193–194).

<sup>35</sup> We might cite examples of powerful women in Tamil politics. I would argue, however, that such women are the exceptions that prove the rule. Moreover, in such cases the relationship between the dominant woman and subordinate men are often reframed within socially sanctioned kin relationships of mother to children.

The woman who does *style* makes men uncomfortable because she questions the masculinity of those around her by participating in their economy of status work.<sup>36</sup> While men have *geththu*, women are ‘caught’ by ‘arrogance,’ “*thimiru pidichcha poNNu*.”<sup>37</sup> In the college a girl who talks ‘too much’ (i.e., jokes around with the guys and isn’t shy and reserved), who projects status, who does *style*, or who speaks in English is arrogant, is a *rowdy poNNu* (‘rowdy girl’) who has *head weight* (chapter 2, section 4.1.2).<sup>38</sup> Such a young woman is derided, isolated, teased.

Among young men there is a palpable anxiety about today’s “*modern*” women. The common refrain from young men about such women is that they “*scene pooduRathu*” (‘show off’), they act like they are better than men, and this is why young men avoid socializing with them. Male insecurity often gets played out in avoidance behavior which only exacerbates the problem because channels of communication and understanding are severed (cf. Osella and Osella 2004: 243; Nisbett 2006: 139; Weiss 2002: 110–113 on masculinity as predicated on female exclusion).<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.4 Patriarchy

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<sup>36</sup> Similarly, being teased by a woman is doubly status-lowering, and guys often noted that when girls were around they were extra careful not to try to show off and fail (e.g., make a mistake while speaking English). College professors explained that this was one of the drawbacks of coed education: boys are more hesitant to answer questions in class for fear of being wrong in front of their female classmates, and thus teased by them (or their male peers).

<sup>37</sup> We can note the obvious parallels with the double standards in the U.S. vis-à-vis derogatory terms like “bitch” applied to women whose actions would receive laudation if done by men.

<sup>38</sup> For example, the idea that women would use men’s language (e.g., terms like *machchaan*) in their own peer groups is seen as a kind of arrogance (*thimiru*), as strange and incongruous, as gutsy (*thuNichchal*), and unfeminine.

<sup>39</sup> Such insecurity also abounds in youth film (thanks to Dr. Uma Vangal, personal communication 9.30.08, for pointing this out regarding Dhanush’s oeuvre). See, for example, the film *Manmathan* (2004) which centers on the condoning of the hero killing English-speaking, rich, *style*-ish women who sleep around.

A woman doing *style* is a challenge not just to the concept of masculinity but to patriarchy itself.<sup>40</sup> *Style* is about the transgression of ‘society’ (i.e., patriarchy); about being bold and challenging authority. While for young men transgressing patriarchy isn’t itself a challenge to patriarchy as such (it’s a challenge to specific authorities, or an attempt to figuratively insert oneself into the larger political organization of ‘society’), for a woman to transgress through *style* is to undermine the patriarchal order in general. If to do *style* is to be exterior to the authority of patriarchy, and if patriarchy is predicated on the control of its women as chaste, a woman doing *style* threatens ‘society’ itself. For a woman, then, *style* is doubly transgressive. It puts the honor of the patriarchal group (the caste, patriline) at risk, and questions the ability of ‘society’ to carry any authority at all.

*Style* is also about status work which is ego-focal, about being self-centered. Young men can do fashion because they don’t have to care what others think (chapter 2, section 2.2.2). As we saw, this isn’t true for women. Thus, while self-centeredness is neutral/good for men, it’s a dangerous quality in a woman (M. Mines 1994). This is because a woman’s actions are never simply ego-focal but radiate in all directions from her. Self-centered-ness for a woman is unacceptable because to be self-centered is to forsake the home, the family, ‘society,’ ‘culture,’ the nation. Women who do *style*, youth explained, are “very bold,” “independent,” and most importantly ‘don’t care about others.’ And under the belief that women are the *baakkiyam* (‘auspicious gift’) of the patriarchal group to which they belong, and thus literally cause the success or ruin of the

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<sup>40</sup> See Tarlo’s (1996: ch. 6) discussion of the modern, stylish cardigan as a medium of resistance to patriarchy in the Gujarati village in which she did her fieldwork. Also compare with Bastian’s (1996: 100–111) discussion of the kinds of tropes of masculinity in Nigerian women’s fashion circa the 1980s and men’s reactions to it.

family, a woman who does *style* can literally cause the ruin of the family and the patriarchal social order more generally.

To be a young woman, then, is to be caught between ego-focal youth status and concern for others. This mediates young women's relationship to youth culture more generally, making *style* highly problematic. This is precisely why women's fashion often provokes violent reaction: women's behavior and dress are never simply ego-focal but always alter-focal, indexical of the kin group, the 'society,' the 'culture.' When they transgress, then, they transgress for everyone, all onlookers, all addressees. (See Lukose [2009: intro., ch. 2] on the complexities of women's fashion among Indian youth; also Tarlo 1996.) As some young women of a Madurai college explained, 'young women [i.e., we] may like jeans, but insofar as they offend the sentiments of others, they are taboo. When the principal burned a pair of jeans on the campus as part of the symbolic banning of jeans on the campus, few protested. We came in *chudithars*' (cf. Lukose 2009: 86).

#### 4.5 *Women do style*

Yet, as I noted earlier, women do do *style*, though often in a more muted fashion than men. Women's *style* in fashion tends to be less conspicuous. In general, women's fashion eschews the marks of exteriority. For example, while the male body is covered in brands, women's clothing remains largely unbranded. Women's clothing also downplays exteriority through negotiated forms: for example, the north Indian *chudithar* instead of Western jeans; or hair clipped but not braided (see Lukose 2009: ch. 2 on what she calls the "demure modern"; Tarlo 1996). Instead, status in clothing is expressed through materials, fabric quality, color matching, and embellishments (metal work, embroidery,

etc.). In fact, it is often not even called *style*, but *fashion*, meaning a current trend, thereby negating the problematic associations of *style*.<sup>41</sup>

While *style* in women's fashion is more controlled, its full expression in speech is possible. Indeed, the stereotype among youth is that it is young middle-class women who *peter (v)uduRathu* ('show off with English') the most. Young men stated that such girls speak as if they are from a foreign land, often code-switching just at the moment when their speech becomes audible to others. As such *style* is relatively unrelated to women's sexuality *per se*, it is less controlled and easier for women to engage with.

Finally, for many young women *style* is something one appreciates from a distance, but not something that one does. While they may not be able to re-animate those who do *style*—TV VJs, film actresses, rich-urban women—they can enjoy the fashion from a distance: unrequited *style*.

#### 4.6 *Who, where, and when female youth do style*

As it is for boys, women's engagement with *style* in fashion is licensed in circumstances where the chance of such actions getting back to anyone who knows the girl is minimized. Thus, for example, in all-girls colleges, girls might come to the college in one outfit, but then change into another more *style*-ish outfit once inside (cf. Tarlo 1996: 201). And as discussed in chapter 2, the *tour* (especially outside of Tamil Nadu) is always a good time to break out *style*-ish forms.

For women the concept of *style* is even more class-linked than it is for men precisely for the reasons stated above. Because *style* is linked to public space and visibility, young

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<sup>41</sup> Thanks to Melanie Dean for pointing this out to me.

working- and middle-class women almost always link *style* to the rich, as something that *only* rich girls did. This is because only rich girls can afford access to the kinds of exterior spaces where it is possible to do *style* and avoid teasing and harassment from men. Rich girls go to college and hang out in spaces of wealth (malls, restaurants, foreign countries) where they won't get bothered for doing *style*. Further, they get to such exterior spaces by taking their motorbikes or cars, and not by walking or riding on the bus.

Given the luxury of exteriority, the rich are seen to literally inhabit a different world. In this sense young rich/elite women are doubly outside of 'society,' and thus are able to do *style* without threat to their reputation. Hence the stereotype about rich women is that they don't care what others think, of what 'society' says about their behavior. They live in a different 'society' and thus they are free. Their status is so high, as it were, that it's un-impugnable. They can afford, literally and figuratively, to do *style*. And while this is clearly a lower-/middle-class linked perspective, unlike boys' fashion where forms and designs are continuous across a class spectrum, women fashions and *style* are discontinuous across social classes. In general, rich urban women dress qualitatively differently than middle-class and poor women: they wear pants, jeans, tee-shirts, and blouses, rather than *thavanis*, *chudithars*, and *sarees* (cf. Tarlo 1996: ch. 5–8).

## **5. Conclusions**

### *5.1 Summary*

In this chapter and the last I have laid out a particular logic that organizes youth cultural activity in Tamil Nadu. In chapter 2 I showed how the construction of 'youth' as

an age set in an otherwise age hierarchical ‘society’ motivates youth’s experience of their own positionality in that ‘society’ as exterior. I examined how this exteriority is taken up in youth’s own activities and forms the central trope that organizes the peer group and its social spaces *and* the activities and semiotic registers that unfold in them. In particular, I showed how much of the activity in the peer group is about status, and that meta-pragmatic typifications like *style* and *geththu* are themselves diagrammatic of ‘youth’ (as exteriority to hierarchy) while at the same time reinscribing the categories of ‘society’ that youth attempt to distance themselves from. One entailment of the peer group constructed as exterior space is its highly intimate and coercive nature, creating a contradiction between the peer group as a space for status-raising and transgression and the peer group as space of constant status-leveling and peer pressure. In this chapter I explored how the forces of status-raising and -leveling inherent in the youth peer group shape the negotiation of status-ful signs via their hybridization and double-voiced structure (e.g., in humor, jokes, English use).

While I mainly looked at young men’s experience, I noted how gender and class crucially mediate these dynamics. Indeed, we can think of *style* and *geththu* as two concepts of class- and gender- linked genres of meta-pragmatic typification that are enregistered with respect to different models of ‘youth.’ In the coming chapters I explore the mediation of these genres of status vis-à-vis film (chapters 4–5) and branded forms (chapters 6–8).

## 5.2 Globalization, “tradition,” age, and style



Ritty Lukose (2009: 62; cf. Brown and Larson 2003: 12–13) writes in her ethnography of college-going youth in post-liberalization Kerala that political discourses about youth

“have a theory of globalization and youth embedded within them: youth is a consuming social group, the first to bend to what is understood to be the homogenizing pressures of globalization, a globalization fundamentally tied to Americanization. Youth consumption practices index the presence and reach of globalization.”

I have said little explicitly about globalization or the presence of American cultural forms among Tamil youth, though we have had occasion to note them. This is perhaps because of the implicit and seemingly unresolvable tension that Lukose identifies in debates about globalization, a tension between globalization/homogenization and resistance to it/heterogenization (Robertson 1995, 2001; Appadurai 1990; Tomlinson 1997; Bauman 1998).

This tension, what Mazzarella (2004: 348ff.) has dubbed “the Formula,” is presumably resolved through the notion of “negotiation,” following British Cultural Studies’ attempt to understand hegemony and move beyond the staid dualism of power/ideology and agency/resistance (cf. Mosse 2003). Hybridized cultural forms are the supposed evidence for such negotiation of globalization. For example, Jeffrey et al. (2008: 16) note that young men’s masculinities in many societies are played out through the hybridization, or partial engagement and appropriation, of signs that indexically invoke “tradition,” “modernity,” and “globalization.” Thus, such youth practices can be

read as either negotiated acceptance or resistance to hegemonic masculinities/ ideologies.<sup>42</sup>

What I would like to suggest is that the issue shouldn't be formulated in terms of alignment of youth toward preexisting ideologies or not (i.e., as a model of "reception" of discourses handed down to local "targets" from global "sources"). Rather, we should ask how do youth use particular signs, taken from a variety of source registers, to do their interactional work? As we have seen, Tamil youth's concerns with status in the peer group recruit semiotic forms from various source registers: from Western branded forms and English, the accoutrement of the *rowdy*, and tropes on the objective *periya aaL*. While we might see this as a mix of the "traditional" and "modern" and thus the negotiation of "globalization" what I pointed out in this chapter is that all such semiotic forms, irrespective of their traditional-ness or modernity, are *functionally the same* vis-à-vis the logic of 'youth.' Youth use such forms not because they are "modern," "global," or "traditional" *per se* but because such forms can be made to do interactional work in the peer group (i.e., status-raising and -leveling).<sup>43</sup> From this point of view, youth are not negotiating "globalization," "modernity," or "tradition" but are negotiating the

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<sup>42</sup> Tarlo (1996: ch. 2) gives a similar argument in her discussion of male fashion in colonial India. For her, the problem of what to wear, and the kinds of hybrid compromises it created, was caught in the double bind of desires for civilization/status ("modernity") and cultural loyalty ("tradition"). Interestingly, even in the examples she discusses (e.g., on pp. 53, 57) we see precisely the status dynamics discussed in this chapter. Further, her argument regarding how Gujarati villagers engage such national debates (pp. 332–335) resonates with the argument that I present in this section. Bastian (1996) provides a rich set of examples showing a similar dynamic in young Nigerian men and women's fashion practices. Here we see how concerns about local status negotiations within and across generations motivates into use both "traditional" and "modern" sartorial signs, thereby creating hybrid fashion forms. Similarly Schoss (1996) provides a number of examples of how young Kenyan men involved in the tourism trade draw on exterior source registers of value in their dress in order to negotiate their places in larger kin networks, even if she ultimately argues that what is being done through such dress is consuming "cosmopolitanism" itself (pp. 184).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Tobin (1992: 4) and Stanlaw (1992) on a similar argument regarding the "domestication of the West" through Japanese consumption activities and English use, respectively.

contradictions of the youth peer group: the injunction toward exteriority and status-raising and the peer pressure and anxieties of conformity inherent to the peer group.

Because of the contradictions of the peer group, itself a result of youth's own reanalysis of their position in the life cycle, youth cultural forms are hybridized so as to simultaneously status-raise and -level at the same time, to raise one's esteem but avoid censure from the peer group.

To read such youth peer group activity as a negotiation of "tradition," "modernity," or "globalization" is to, I would argue, read youth culture allegorically against anxieties that analysts often feel acutely (for various reasons). I do not deny that in some instances youth themselves may reanalyze their own experience in this way. Certainly some do some of the time. But this is an empirical question and must be posed as such rather than as a *pregiven* from which analysis follows (cf. Mosse 2003). In my observations, most of the time most male youth were unconcerned with globalization, tradition, or modernity as such. When they were, it was in moments of reflection (or secondary rationalization) on what they were already doing (which abides by a different logic than the question of negotiating globalization *per se*, as I argued above).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The approaches to globalization that I have discussed, then, observe that: (a) youth use "modern" forms, "traditional" forms, and "global" forms; (b) youth are involved in "negotiation" projects via (a); and (c) youth cultural forms hybridize (a) while doing (b). I showed how this view mistakenly attributes this as the "negotiation" of "globalization" because it doesn't take into account the on-the-ground logic of the youth peer group. What is interesting is that there is a systematic motivation of (a), (b), and (c) from the logic of the construction of the age category 'youth' and how it plays out *vis-à-vis* tropes of exteriority. As I have discussed in this chapter and the last the middling of 'youth' in the life cycle is reanalyzed by youth via trope of exteriority; this trope constructs youth spaces, concepts of status, and the peer group as a space of status-raising and -leveling and thus produces the observables (a), (b), and (c). I would argue, then, that this process of reanalysis and status negotiation *systematically* motivates the globalization story as an ideological misunderstanding. It is a classic Whorfian projection/Boasian secondary rationalization/Marxian fetish where the logic of some social process motivates a partial awareness of that process, and thus through reanalysis, a distorted ideological formulation of it. It would seem to do this for *both* globalization theorists *and* for Tamil youth who, on occasion (re)analyze the experience of Tamil youth as the negotiation of "globalization."

Seen from this light, the question of “negotiation” is a false solution to the problem posed by ambivalences of youth culture; false not because it is necessarily untrue, but because it doesn’t allow us to pose certain kinds of questions given its assumptions. Given its assumption—there exist discourses or ideologies, what are the possible ways of engaging with them?—the conclusion—one can either accept, reject, or negotiate them—seems self-evident. But rather than framing the issue in terms of how individuals “receive” or engage with preexisting and static entities (denoted by abstract nouns like “ideology,” “culture,” “power,” “globalization”) I have asked how youth variously use and re-animate signs which have various indexical values (like “modernity,” “the West,” “tradition”) to do some (often mundane) interactional work (e.g., status-raising in the peer group, impressing a girl). Just as a carpenter doesn’t negotiate with a hammer (except under the most strained readings) but uses it to do his work, youth use signs of modernity, tradition, and globalization to do their own work.

This is not to say that globalization, modernity, and tradition are irrelevant to youth’s social reality, for clearly they are, as source registers for youth’s status work. Indeed, one of the ironies of Tamil youth culture is the motivation and recruitment of particular youth cultural forms *from* the global exterior in order to play out particular understandings of status which are distinctly Tamil (e.g., the status differential of *periya aaL–chinna paiyan*) while bracketing the larger institutional meta-pragmatic discourses (caste, kin group) which attempt to locate ‘youth’ with respect to those discourses (as hierarchically ranked below adults). The issue, then, isn’t just the mutual constitution of the modern/traditional or global/local, but that this mutuality is asymmetrical precisely because of its multi-tiered semiotic structure of sign–metasign: [‘youth’ is a trope [on

“traditional” concepts of status via [modern forms and traditional forms]]].<sup>45</sup> That is, it isn’t only a question of the kinds of cultural signs recruited by youth in their activity (i.e., are they “traditional,” are they “modern”?) but also an issue of their diagrammaticity, or higher order logic (and tropic possibilities) (cf. Gal 2002 on fractal recursivity). In short, then, rather than seeing youth engagement with “tradition” and “modernity” as semiotically flat, or one dimensional (that is, taking place only at the level of cultural forms with such-and-such indexical values), we must also be able to understand how such youth engagements are always already figured within a more complex semiotic configuration of a two-tiered structure (minimally of the sign–metasign order), imbricated in particular on-the-ground interactional work (cf. Mosse 2003).

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Mazzarella (2003: 263ff.) on a similar but inverted situation among India advertising elites: [‘consumerism’ is a trope [on globalization via [“Indian-ness” and signs of elite status]]] whereby the simulacrum of indigeneity is reproduced through a globally-aware sensibility, thereby producing a consumerist structure *and* (reified) “tradition” in an asymmetric relation of tradition mobilized *for* consumerism.

## **Part II. *Style* and Film**

### **Chapter 4 – Film as *Style*, *Style* in Film: Hero, Villain, Comedian**

#### **1. Introduction**

In chapters 2 and 3 I showed how the construction of the age category ‘youth’ and concepts of youth status diagram youth’s relationship to their reified notions of ‘society.’ The focus was on status at the level of face-to-face interaction in the peer group. As was clear, however, youth status is informed by and re-animates mass-mediated images of youth masculinity and status; in particular, film (Rogers 2009, forthcoming; see Osella and Osella 2004; Derne 2000; Lukose 2009). In this chapter I look at *style* in hero-oriented, Tamil commercial action films, with particular attention given to the *style* of Rajinikanth. In chapters 2 and 3 I bracketed the importance of film precisely because, as I argue in chapter 5, while film is an important source register for youth status (a) it is more general notions of status and age (as discussed in chapters 2 and 3) that inform both youth peer group activity *and* film representations of masculinity; and (b) it is the dynamics of the peer group that directly inform how youth engage with and re-animate filmic representations.

#### **2. Filmic representations of status: *Style*, *geththu*, and status inversion**

In this chapter I argue that the best way to understand commercial cinema is as the negotiation of status in the peer group put in narrated form. I discuss this with respect to the hero (as positive representation of status), the villain or *rowdy* (as excessive representation of status), and the comedian (as inverted representation of status). I make this strategic move for two reasons: first, to recenter the analysis of such film from being

text to audience focal (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009); second, to move from the notion of reception to the notion of re-animation or use, and thus from a focus on media to mediation, or how meaningful social activity is enabled and coordinated with respect to mass-mediated representations (see Agha 2007b; Mazzarella 2004).

Reading commercial film through the lens of youth status is justifiable, I argue, for the following reasons: (1) the main audience of Tamil films, especially of the hero-oriented films discussed in this chapter, is (male) youth (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Rajanayakam 2002); (2) such films are about youth in terms of their protagonists, social worlds, and concerns; and (3) cinema as an institution is figured as exterior and transgressive to ‘society’ and ‘culture’ and thus is, by degrees, iconic with the construction of ‘youth’ and its forms of status (chapter 2, section 3.1).

While Indian film has been read through the lens of religion and mythology (as a projection from, or as drawing on) (Mishra et. al 1989; Dwyer and Patel 2002; Osella and Osella 2004: 224; Lutgendorff 2006); political image and (quasi-)propaganda (Hardgrave 1971, 1973, 1979; Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975; Sivathambi 1981; Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993b; Rajanayakam 2002); political economy and ideology (Prasad 1998; Lukose 2009: 49–51); caste politics (Dhareshwar and Niranjana 1996); fan devotion (Srinivas 1996; Dickey 2001; Osella and Osella 2004; Rogers 2009, forthcoming); or the moral frameworks, fantasies, and desires of the makers or audience (Thomas 1985, 1995; Mishra et al. 1989; Kakar 1990: ch. 3; Dickey 1993b, 1995; Derne 2000; Osella and Osella 2004: 224–225; Dickey 2009b), it has not been read from the perspective of

concepts of youth status, and certainly not of *style*.<sup>1</sup> And yet, as we will see, Tamil film is rife with representations of status, both in and out of the film text.

Why has film not been so investigated with respect to status? I argue that this is because most work on Indian cinema operates with a highly partial view of film as communicative process. In such work, the audience is passive (as the semantics of term *reception* implies; Asif Agha personal communication, February 9, 2010). They are the communicative end point, the telos of the text. The film is consumed by the act of viewing, used up, completed (cf. the notion of commodity “consumption,” Marx 1976: ch. 1).

In this chapter and the next I take another line of inquiry: how can we see film as imbricated in the pragmatic goings-on of everyday life, as a resource for pragmatic interactional work by viewers (versus simply iconic with the viewer, producer, myth, “culture,” ideology, or psyche, etc.). I argue that this iconic indexicality—the re-animation of film by youth (iconism) to achieve pragmatic ends in peer groups (indexicality)—explains (a) what aspects of film youth engage with; (b) the reproducibility and hence recirculatability of hero-centered films outside of film (peer groups, TV, other films, political campaigns, etc.); (c) how youth talk about film stars and their selective deployment of filmic images of status (chapter 5); and (d) why the hero-centered film can produce what I call “hero-stars”<sup>2</sup> through their inter-discursivity (chapter 5).

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<sup>1</sup> Rajanayakam’s (2002: 97, 231) dissertation, while it deals extensively with the image of Rajinikanth, relegates *style* as a mere “gimmick” which youth like but which is of ultimately no real consequence besides endearing Rajinikanth to his fans.

<sup>2</sup> What I mean by “hero-star,” as discussion will make clear, is a popular and status-ful actor whose on-screen and off-screen personae overlap to such a degree that there is a trans-textual coherence to his heroic characters such it that transfers to his extra-textual persona *qua* “star.” Examples from Tamil cinema



### 3. *Style*: Super Star Rajinikanth and the hero

#### 3.1 *Rajinikanth as style*

As noted in chapter 3, if you ask youth in Tamil Nadu ‘What is *style*?’ you will often get a one word answer: Rajinikanth. Indeed, *style* as a lexical item is something historically particular to Rajinikanth (b. 1950). While M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) (1917–1987)—the most popular Tamil actor-politician of all time, active from the 1950s to the 1970s—certainly did something akin to *style* (e.g., his fashionable clothes; his oratorical dialogues; his signature crossing of his index and middle finger, placing them on the tip of his nose and then untwisting them in a motion that left his index finger pointing up in the air), this was not called *style*, but *paddaiya kiLappaRathu* (lit. ‘strip off wood/bark/skin’; roughly, ‘doing something in an impressive manner’; cf. English ‘rip it up’). The word *style*, as far as I know (and my informants knew), was first used to talk about Rajinikanth (who rose to prominence as MGR was retiring to full-time politics) and is fused with him. Rajini is *style*. *Style* is Rajini. This isn’t to say that *style* isn’t used or usable with reference to other individuals (new stars, older stars in retrospect, non-film-related individuals), but that to invoke *style* is to invoke, at some level, Rajinikanth.

Rajinikanth is, and has been since the seventies, the biggest hero-star in the Tamil industry.<sup>3</sup> He began as a character actor in 1970s, often playing the villain or negative

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include MGR, Rajinikanth, Vijay, and Ajith. The hero-star is associated with a particular type of film, the commercial hero-oriented action film.

<sup>3</sup> He is certainly the best paid. Apparently in all of Asia Rajinikanth, even in his late fifties, is the second highest-paid actor today only after Jackie Chan (Eapan 2009). This is telling as the Tamil-speaking audience is at least seven times smaller than the size of the Hindi-understanding audience, not to mention the pan-Asian audience of Jackie Chan’s films. Further, the economics of the Tamil film industry, unlike the Hindi film industry, relies mainly on the theatergoing audience, instead of on ancillary markets and diaspora audiences, as the Hindi cinema does, making his per film salary all the more impressive.

hero in K. Balachandar's family-oriented melodramas. Even in his early films—for example, Bharathiraja's realist film *Pathinaaru Vayathilee* (1977) where he plays the village villain—his speedy delivery and oft-repeated dialogues (“*ithu eppadi irukku?*” ‘how is it?’) made him popular among viewers. This villainy paid off and he made the transition into being a(n anti)hero in his own right in the late 1970s and early 1980s, through the craft of director S. P. Muthuraman. From the 1980s on he played the “angry young man” (often remaking Amitabh Bachchan films from Hindi) (Kazmi 1998), an antihero who works on the peripheries of society as a vigilante meting out his own justice. It is in this period that (a) his image as the “Super Star” of Tamil cinema congealed and that he became the biggest action hero in Tamil Nadu; and (b) *style* became his signature trademark.

His image reached its apotheosis in the 1990s with super-blockbusters like *Thalapathi* (1991), *Annamalai* (1992), *Muthu* (1995), *Baadshaa* (1995), *Arunaachalam* (1997), and *Padaiyappa* (1999). The new century has seen as a slowdown in Rajini's films both in number of films and box-office revenue; indeed *Baba* (2002) and the more recent *Kuseelan* (2008) were flops. Nevertheless, *Chandiramukhi* (2005) and *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007) were big successes. Currently in production, his *Enthiran* (dir. Shankar) promises to be even bigger (if its budget is any indication).

### 3.2 Why Rajinikanth?

If the supposition of this chapter is that youth's concepts of status are central to film, why take the hero of yesteryear when there are contenders for the throne from today's generation: Vijay, Ajith, Dhanush, or Simbu?

First, youth in Madurai and Chennai cite Rajinikanth as what *style* means. Second, many are still Rajinikanth fans, either informally or in fan clubs. Third, all are well versed with, and enjoy, his films. Fourth, they see other film stars like Vijay as simply newer versions of Rajinikanth. One Madurai student put it thusly: ‘If you want to understand *style* there is no one better than Rajini. No one does *style* like Rajini.’ When I then asked, ‘If you like Vijay for his *style* but Rajini’s is better, why do you say you are a Vijay fan?’, he answered ‘because Vijay is for today’s youth only, while everyone loves Rajini, from a little child to an old man. Vijay is the new generation.’ Fifth, *Chandrimukhi* (2005) and *Sivaji* (2007) were hits and were re-animated by many youth while I was in the field. Their dialogues, *styles*, and comedy sequences were taken up in youth’s own peer groups. Finally, from my own viewings of Vijay, Ajith, Dhanush, and Simbu films, the conclusions from my analysis of Rajini’s films are applicable (certainly enough for the purposes of my argument) to these heroes.

### 3.3 Note on heroism and style

There is a slight difference in what Tamil youth mean by *style* when they are talking about the *style* of Rajinikanth versus the performance of *style* in the peer group, though ultimately the two are the same. When one asks what is *style* vis-à-vis Rajinikanth, youth will inevitably point out a set of stereotyped mannerisms or actions performed by Rajini in the course of the film: for example, the way he twirls his finger; the way he throws a cigarette into his mouth from a distance; his gait; or his so-called “*punch dialogues*” (akin to the one-liner in Western action films). These are the most localizable, most detachable, and most framed as *style* by the film text itself (through slow motion shots, double takes,

sound effects explicitly typified as *style*), and the most repeated elements of *style* (both within the film and across films).

These elements are considered different from, though are obviously related to, the more general notion of *heroism* ('the quality of being a hero'). Stereotypically, *heroism* includes things like fighting off bad guys, jumping across buildings, and saving the damsel in distress.

By contrast, *style* is used by youth in their peer groups more often than not as the *explanation* for some behavior, mannerism, or status-ful object (e.g., apparel, motorcycle). It explains the function of some form, its reason for use: it singles out the user and his attempts to raise his status. As such, *style* gets applied to much more mundane forms (e.g., a tee-shirt) and for more diffuse phenomenon (one's total image can be queried: 'what's the deal with all the *style daa*'?). Indeed, even acting like a film hero, *heroism*, is reanalyzed as *style* in the peer group.

In my analysis of Rajini's *style* I treat both notions of *style* as part of the same phenomenon. The first (Rajini's formulaic repertoire) is a subset of the second (the logic of differential status-raising that 'builds up' the persona of the status-ful individual). Ultimately it's the second more general category which youth end up drawing upon more heavily. This is because it's broader in scope and thus affords more opportunity for re-animation in the peer group.

Below I analyze *style* in one emblematic Rajini film, *Baadshaa* (1995), which I watched with a group of Madurai students in the second college hostel that I stayed in. After the film I did several group interviews with them about the film which I use to

ground my analysis and discussion. This method allowed me to highlight which moments resonated with students (by their comments, their talking back to the screen, their whistles, claps, boos, laughs, and dancing), as well as which moments they considered to be emblematic of Rajini's *style*.

### 3.4. *Baadshaa as a story of youth status*

*Baadshaa* (lit. [Urdu/Hindu] 'king,' 'leader') (1995; dir. Suresh Krishnan) is the Rajinikanth action film *par excellence*. The Tamil youth with whom I spent my time cited this film as their favorite Rajinikanth film (and one of their favorite films in general), as the film which encapsulates Rajini's *style* and performs it to maximum effect and pleasure. As I show below, *Baadshaa* is a story about *style*.

#### 3.4.1 *Individuating the hero-star*

Like his other films (e.g., *Annamalai* [1992], *Padaiyappa* [1999], *Sivaji* [2007]), *Baadshaa* (1995) begins by announcing itself to be a Rajinikanth film. The first images are tiny lights appearing one by one, accompanied by what we could perhaps call Rajini's "theme music" (it's the same in many films). Cumulatively the lights spell "Super Star." Then, in succession the letters R-A-J-N-I fly toward the audience. Having spelt "RAJNI" [sic], his name comes to rest in between between the words "Super" and "Star," first in English, then in Tamil (photo 4.1). This tells us what we already know: this film is, first and foremost, a Rajinikanth film.



Photo 4.1 “Super Star Rajni” [sic] intro

### 3.4.2 Deferring darshan

The diegesis opens with a number of scenes where the hero’s (comic) sidekick is giving money to the needy (someone who needs dowry, someone who needs hospital bills paid) on behalf of Manikkam (an auto-rickshaw driver played by Rajinikanth).<sup>4</sup> Manikkam is praised by others—as a great man, a good guy, as our *aNNan* (‘older brother’)—but our experience of *seeing* him on-screen is deferred. We only hear about him from others.<sup>5</sup> Note that in commercial Tamil cinema the hero’s entrance is one of the major events of the film-viewing experience. It’s the moment when the fans throw the confetti into the air; the whistling and dancing begins; when the film is officially on its way. All this deferral, then, functions to increase the anticipation of the audience.

We learn that today is *ayutha puuja* (the worship ritual for the tools/machines through which one earns), so Manikkam is at the auto-stand ‘tearing it up’ (“*paddaiya kiLambikkiddiruppaaru*”). This is an inter-discursive allusion to MGR. (His auto-stand is also called “MGR auto-stand.”)

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the auto-rickshaw driver is a stereotypical working-class profession in urban areas. A populist image, but also a figure of low status.

<sup>5</sup> See Rajanayakam (2002: 88–92) on the trope of speaking for the hero more generally.

Cut to the first song. A large crowd of auto-drivers and neighborhood people have gathered at the auto-stand for the *puuja*. The camera focuses on a pumpkin thrown into the air to commence the ritual. Cut to the pumpkin flying in the air, then cut to white sneakers running toward the camera. Cut to Manikkam jumping in the air and smashing the pumpkin with his head. (It's crucial in the ritual that the pumpkin be smashed [Dean 2009] so as to release the negative energy, or *thrishdi*, that is absorbed by the pumpkin. That Manikkam breaks it with his head is, presumably, an index that he is so powerful that nothing will happen to him. Indeed, touching such a pumpkin after it's broken is believed to cause bodily harm [Melanie Dean, personal communication, February 1, 2010], which it certainly doesn't do to Manikkam.) The next shot is of Manikkam landing on the ground and smiling at the camera in a fully frontal bust shot. He is looking directly at the camera and in slow motion he gives the *vaNakkam* gesture (the traditional greeting of folding the hands in front of the chest) to the audience/camera.

Cut back to his fellow auto-drivers dancing in front of a cinema hall (showing *Jurassic Park* [1993], a huge hit in Tamil Nadu). In the dance sequence he is differentiated, made visible, and centered: while all the other auto-drivers have colored shirts and shoes (in addition to the auto-driver's olive-brown jacket/pant uniform), Manikkam wears a bright white shirt and sneakers; he is always in the middle of the shot; he is in the front (foreground) of the group (background); he is the only man dancing with the women; and he is the only one singing the song.

Lyrically, he is portrayed as a man of status—for example, he sings that he will come to name your child (a role reserved for the high status)—but decidedly part of the (peer) group. As the lyrics state, everyone trusts him. This status-raising is ratified by the

onlookers. For example, his female family members come to see him dance, expressing approval and appreciation in their faces. The final shot is a trick shot where two Manikkams face the camera with an open hand extended. This trope of status is akin to the linguistic trope of honorification through pluralization, while also invoking the image of the Hindu deity whose iconic representation is as that of multiple body parts (heads, arms, legs) (Havell 1980[1928]: 44–45; Stutley 1985: x; Dehejia 1997: 140, 242).

### 3.4.3 *Introducing the egalitarian, progressive, down-to-earth hero*

As the song finishes, the diegesis begins with sketches of Manikkam as an older brother, not a success in career or studies (in this he like most people), but as the enabler of his siblings' successes: in education (his sister has the marks to get into a medical college, a very difficult and prestigious achievement) and in work (his brother has become a police officer). As it turns out, Manikkam is fulfilling the dying wish of his father to give his siblings a better life. He is a consummate progressive, pushing for his sister to study, and thus eschews “bad” tradition (as indexed by their mother’s desire for her daughter to stay with traditional gender roles and not study). With his younger brother he refuses to allow him to get the traditional blessings from him (a status diagram where the receiver of blessings falls to the feet of the giver). Instead he hugs him, a sign of equality. In short, he isn’t only against the old habits of ‘society’ and “tradition,” he also values egalitarianism over hierarchy.

### 3.4.4 *Maximizing status by status-lowering*

A common trope in many Rajinikanth films is to show him as someone who is uninterested in status-raising. In general, at first his characters are simple people that



embody a submissive and hyper-polite demeanor. They avoid fights, symbolic displays of domination, and showing off.

The opening scenes of *Baadshaa* show just this through a series of episodes where Manikkam actively avoids conflicts. For example, a fellow auto-driver warns him about an area where there is unrest: 'I thought I would tell you,' he says, 'since I know you don't like fights.' Manikkam agrees, 'I definitely don't.' This has a comic feel, for the audience knows that he—that is, all of Rajini's characters, past, present, and future—is a consummate fighter.

This is a rhetorical strategy to maximize Manikkam's status-raising, however, because ultimately through the instigation of others (most often the villains who challenge him or hurt his women) he rises to the occasion to show his true self/potential, that of the indestructible hero, the man of power, action, and *style*. Such a strategy also functions to create anticipation (When will he reveal his true self?) and light comedy. To take another example, in a later scene while driving the heroine in his auto-rickshaw they come across a fight. He immediately turns around and drives off. She asks if he is afraid. 'Yes, very much so,' he says.<sup>6</sup> She then asks him if he has ever loved anyone and been loved by them, to which he replies in hyper-polite speech that there are no girls who have pursued him. He even goes so far as to say a boy shouldn't even pursue girls. Note that this diagrams an image of anti-status which is, given that we know Rajinikanth to be the Super Star and desired by many women, a status-inversion/mismatch. To this extent it functions as comedy or irony. (This scene evinced laughs from the students that I

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the participant framework—poor youth—beautiful young rich girl—would typically evince hyper-masculine displays of *style*. Knowing this, Manikkam admitting his fear is unexpected, and thus is humorous. Additionally, it projects Manikkam as an innocent and good person.

watched the film with.) Even more than diagramming anti-status, it diagrams anti-youth: he disavows romance, he avoids fights, his speech is hyper-polite, and he is considerate and respectful of others. He acts the *chinna paiyan*, recognizing the authority of others, as well as ‘society’ and ‘culture.’

Even as the plot develops this artifice of Manikkam the ordinary auto-driver, the *chinna paiyan*, starts to unravel. When his younger brother goes for his police interview, the police inspector notices his older brother’s name is Manikkam, son of Rangasaami, born in Bombay. Suspecting that perhaps he is Manik Baadshaa—the infamous Robin Hood smuggler and gangster from Bombay who supposedly died four years ago in a fire—he calls Manikkam to the office.

In this scene, Manikkam walks into the room, full frontal bust shot. Mutual recognition seems to pass over the faces of the police inspector and Manikkam. The police inspector rises, a sign of respect and surprise. Close up pan of Manikkam’s face. He walks into the room with a scowl, his upper lip cocked to one side, his head slightly down, eyes looking up (photo 4.2, left). As we will have occasion to see, this is his preferred posture (and that of the next in line for Super Star status Vijay as well) when revealing himself as a status-ful individual. There is a flash cut to (Manikkam as) Baadshaa, the gangster in Bombay walking with sunglasses and a beard. This is indexed as a flashback film through a film-negative effect (photo 4.2, right). There are then a series of cuts of Baadshaa’s henchmen shooting off guns with the film-negative effect; Baadshaa doing his *style* walk (also with film-negative effect); and newspaper articles about how Baadshaa, the famed smuggler, died in a bomb blast. Here we have the first instance of *style* bleeding into the diegesis.



Photo 4.2 Manikkam–Baadshaa, positive–negative, ‘small boy’–‘big man’

We come back to the present (presumably this flashback is the mental interpretant of the police officer who thinks he recognizes Baadshaa in Manikkam) and are returned to the ordinary Manikkam. In contrast to this literally inverse image of *style* (Baadshaa), Manikkam is humbleness incarnate. He refuses to sit; he greets the police officer first with the *vaNakkam* gesture; his arms are folded and his body is comported as a man of lower status. He strives to convince the police officer that he is just a simple auto-driver, Manikkam. As he leaves and walks out, the music kicks in, a hint that perhaps the police officer’s hallucinatory, in-the-present flashback is the truth after all.

When the police officer asks his subordinates for Baadshaa’s file, they get scared just hearing the name, “Bombay Baadshaa.” Again, speaking for the hero begins the process of the hero’s status-raising, while allowing him to maintain his humble demeanor, thereby negotiating the dictates of status-raising and -lowering in the peer group, as discussed in chapter 3.

#### 3.4.5 Style as attracting women

A major part of the construction of the status-ful hero is his ratification as status-ful by others. One of the primary functions of the heroine in Rajinikanth’s films is, I argue,

to ratify the status of the hero. This is either through providing a reason for the hero to fight and struggle against patriarchy (as in the love story) or villainy (in the action film); or, more directly, through her approving gaze and dialogue about him.

As in his other films, it is the heroine's romantic attraction to the hero which first ratifies his *style* in the film. In *Baadshaa*, the song sequences for “*Azhagu*” (‘Beauty’) and “*Style Style*” function to this effect. In “*Azhagu*,” a love song for Manikkam from the perspective of the heroine, *Baadshaa*'s *style* begins to be revealed. As the students with whom I watched the film noted, ‘in this song everything Rajini does is *style*, plus comedy.’

The song is a daydream of the heroine Priya who sees Manikkam wherever she goes, in every man she sees. She sees (who she thinks is) Manikkam doing *style*, but it's then revealed not be Manikkam, but some non-status-ful individual (usually whom she has ended up in an amorous position with). The *style* inversion/mismatch creates the comic effect. In this song Manikkam comes in a number of avatars: as a man in a tuxedo serving her a drink; as a man in a track suit exercising next to her in a state-of-the-art gym; as a business man in a suit surrounded by beautiful women working for him; as the doorman for a five-star hotel in regal clothing; as a Nagaswaram player; as a traffic cop; as a Vaishnavite Brahmin on a motorcycle; as a driver of a car (a sign of status); as a debonaire man in a purple blazer and pink cummerbund; as a gangster in all white with a big mustache; as a bus conductor in a bus that passes her by;<sup>7</sup> as a man in a luxurious bathrobe who watches her bathe; and finally as the ordinary Manikkam sitting on her porch in his auto-driver outfit.

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<sup>7</sup> In Rajini's 'real life' parallel text he is extolled as coming from the modest background of a bus conductor. This, then, is an extra-textual reference to his past career.

Each avatar performs some *style*. As the man with the car, he puts on his sunglasses by twirling them and rotating them around his hands first. As the bus conductor he *style*-ishly descends and ascends from the bus while it's moving. As the Brahmin, he sits on top of his motorbike decked out in Puma brand sneakers and round fashionable sunglasses. Lyrically the song revolves around his beauty and his *style*; as it's put in the lyrics: 'his beautiful smile, his physical beauty, his beautiful speech.' (These three are recurrent features of praise in many Rajini films.) The lyrics voice her desire for him, and the cause of this desire is his *style*.

The *style* portrayed in this fantastical song sequence eventually begins to bleed into the diegetic reality. In a later romance scene, Manikkam drops Priya off at her house. Getting out of the auto, he pushes back his jacket and puts his hands on his hips in a single deft motion, leaving him standing with his body maximally enlarged. (His arms and chest are extended by the posture of having the hands on the hips, and his legs slightly spread. This is a common *style* in many Rajini films.) She clicks seductively with her mouth, looking up at him, rocking back and forth on her heels, "*nee seyRathule ellaam style-aa irukkiyaa?*" 'Are you *style*-ish in whatever you do?' Embarrassed, he switches his posture. The implication here is that he can't help but be *style*; he does it without knowing it. Not knowing where to put his hands, he points in her face (another diagram of status-difference) and mildly scolds her saying that he isn't in love with her. She smiles, "*oh ho, nee peesuRa thamizh kuuda style-aa irukkiyaa?!*" 'Oh ho, you're *style*-ish even in the Tamil you speak (it seems)?!' When he tries to leave, she grabs him, turns him, and kisses him on the mouth: 'whatever you say, "I love you. I love you." See you later dear.'

After this scene comes the song “*Style Style*” where the love proposition is transformed into a platform for Rajini to perform his *style* and to be praised by the heroine. He enters as James Bond, twirling a pistol around his finger in silhouette against a black and white target. He jumps through the target to a female chorus yelling “Super Star!” In this song his sartorial *style* is emphasized. In his first *getup* he wears a bright, shiny silver blazer with matching cowboy boots, leather black pants, a huge belt, and sunglasses. The sleeves of his blazer are pushed back, with the cuffs of his shirt revealed. (This is a common *style* across many of his Rajini’s films.) He puts on his sunglasses in his signature *style* while smiling at the camera and singing. In this song he is surrounded by cars and airplanes (signs of status and mobility). His costume changes: now he is the captain of the airplane and she the head stewardess. It changes again: he is in all leather with metal studs across his pants and vest (an outfit reminiscent of Mad Max); pieces of leather hang off in strips from his clothes; he has on a large metal belt, a bright red bunyan, and lots of jewelry.

Lyrically, the song constructs the character Manikkam as *Rajini the actor* that inter-discursively blends the hero with the star. It opens by appealing him by his epithet “Hey! Super Star! *Style style super style, ithu style style thaan super style-thaan*” ‘Hey Super Star! *Style, this is your style, this is (your) super style!*’ The heroine sings, “*karuppum oru azhaku enRu kaNdukoNdeen unnaalee*” ‘Because of you I have found that black is also beautiful’ in reference to Rajini’s dark complexion.<sup>8</sup> In the final verse she praises his ‘beautiful, milky smile’ and ‘the beautiful hair that falls on his forehead.’ (Another characteristic *style* of Rajini’s is longish hair where the bangs fall on his forehead, thus

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<sup>8</sup> Rajini’s dark complexion is one of his distinctive traits, especially given that he took over the mantle of hero-star from the famously light-skinned MGR (Rajanayakam 2002).

requiring him to flip his head back to move the bangs, or to run his hands through his hair to push back the bangs.) She finishes by saying “*unnai paarkkum pozhuthil pootha peNgaLil naan oru thinusu*” ‘I am one of the girls who admired you when they saw you.’<sup>9</sup>

### 3.4.6 *Revealing style*

So far in the film, Manikkam’s true identity as Baadshaa, a man of status and *style*, has only been hinted at in flashbacks, non-diegetically grounded song sequences, and obliquely in his interactions with the heroine. It fully erupts into the diegesis when the chastity of his sister is questioned by a corrupt medical college principal attempting to force her into sexual favors. He approaches the principal as Manikkam, attempting to be polite and deferential. The principal says, ‘Have you come to threaten me? Because I am a big *rowdy*. Only after being a criminal did I come to be a principal!’ Manikkam then asks his sister to leave the room. From a posture of submission he then puts his hands on the principal’s desk (invading his private space), leaning in with a big smile and says, ‘I have another name.’ Cut to the negative flashback shot of Baadshaa walking. Cue Baadshaa’s theme music with a crowd chanting “Baadshaa! Baadshaa!” Cut to a shot from outside the room (the point of view of his sister). We see the principal scared, acting submissively, and then standing up in deference. We see Manikkam/Baadshaa talking animatedly (versus his submissive comportment earlier), touching his uniform (as if

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<sup>9</sup> We can find similar scenes in films like *Padaiyappa* (1999) where the villain-cum-heroine praises his boldness (*thairiyam*), his anger (*koobam*), his valour (*viiram*), his speech (*peechchu*), and ‘more than anything else his *style*’ (“*ellaatheyum vida, un style-u*”). Similarly, in *Sivaji* (2007) the heroine says to him, ‘What I like about you is your *style* and your thunderous action.’ See Rajanayakam (2002: ch. 4) for discussion of this in other films.

saying that all this is just a disguise). Cut to inside the room, Baadshaa saying ‘Don’t say anything to anyone outside.’

Next comes what viewers take as the introduction of *the emblematic style* of the film: smiling, Manikkam/Baadshaa flips his hand in the air and twirls it with the index finger pointing up. This is accompanied by a swoosh sound effect. His smile fades, his eyes intense as he intones: “*naan oru thadave sonnaa nuuRu thadave sonna maathiri*” ‘If I say it one time, it’s as if I said it one hundred times.’ (Again note the trope of plurality as status.) The smile returns and he claps his hands twice. The principal raises his hands in a *vaNakkam* gesture. When leaving, his sister asks what he said to the principal to change his mind. He laughs and says, ‘the truth’! That is, that he is a status-ful individual; that all his humbleness is a veneer of this real *style-ish* self, Baadshaa.

So far Rajini’s status as super-hero has been revealed slowly and sporadically, as has his *style* as index of that status. It’s explicitly revealed by way of the final status-lowering event of the film: his ruthless beating and the subsequent abduction of his sister. In an encounter with a local *rowdy*, Manikkam tries to defuse a showdown between his brother and the *rowdy*. Rather than let his brother suffer at the hands of the *rowdy*, Manikkam allows himself to be taken for punishment. His fellow auto-drivers try to stop him. He *style-ishly* points his finger in the air with a swoosh sound to silence them. In this scene, tied to a lamp post, he takes a vicious beating.<sup>10</sup> The mood is dramatic, intense. With every blow he takes, there is a cut to lightning striking and shots of his smiling face. A mini-song praises his patience and tolerance, comparing him to Jesus, but indicating at core he is the super-hero we know him to be: ‘Look at his innocent face, his calm face,

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<sup>10</sup> The students with whom I watched said that when they saw this scene as children they would cry on seeing Rajini receive such a thrashing.



his infant smile while bleeding, his patience like Lord Jesus as he is beat. He is a candle giving light while his body burns. What sinner switched his horoscope, who put a *wet cloth on this volcano?* (my emphasis) As they take him down from the lamppost, Manikkam simply walks away. His brother angered, he reports the *rowdy* to the police. In retaliation the *rowdy* abducts their sister and brings her back bloodied (and possibly raped as well). On seeing this challenge to his status, Manikkam becomes Baadshaa, the superhero.

The next scene is a fight scene. There are close ups of Manikkam/Baadshaa's eyes staring in anger. Cut to a shot of his hand closing into a fist. A henchman of the *rowdy* charges him. He unleashes a single punch which sends the henchman flying all the way across the road, hitting a lamp post. Cut to shots of the shocked onlookers. Slow motion shot of Manikkam/Baadshaa looking up with a scowl, his head tilted down, eyes looking forward. He pushes back the unbuttoned shirt that is on top of his tee-shirt, putting his hands on his hips (accompanied by a swoosh sound). Edited together by jump cuts, there are increasingly closer shots of his face in anger, looking up and scowling. His theme music/chant "Baadshaa! Baadshaa!" kicks in, along with the flute motif from the Western film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. He single handedly beats all the henchman. In the middle of the fight, he tells his brother to go inside. His brother, shocked, doesn't move. In an uncharacteristic (as far as his brother is concerned) display of authority and power, he turns around and repeats it yelling with intensity and deliberation: *uLLe poo!* 'Go inside! (-hon.)'. He then rips out a water pump out of the ground with his bare hands. Turning in slow motion, his hair flying back and the water behind him spouting up in the air, in a single spectacular blow he knocks down all the henchmen who are surrounding

him. He then throws the pump across the battlefield to knock the main *rowdy*'s gun out of his hand.

Finally, he ties the head *rowdy* to the lamppost. The light of the post is flickering on and off as he beats the *rowdy* with the same wood log that he was beaten with. All you can hear are the blows and the wind howling. As more reinforcements of the *rowdy* come, it's revealed that Manikkam/Baadshaa's neighborhood friends and fellow auto-drivers are members of Baadshaa's old Mumbai gang. They intercept and beat the reinforcements. The fight is over. Manikkam/Baadshaa is victorious. Cut to a shot of Baadshaa with his hair flowing behind him, blown by the wind. Baadshaa's men come up to him one by one, kneel, kiss his hand in obeisance, and walk behind him. He is the *don* ('head gangster') and they are his henchmen.

The scene finishes with the film's signature *punch dialogue*. His voice has a heavy reverb effect, the pitch of his voice is low. He warns the *rowdy*: "*innoru thadave intha pakkam naan unne paaththaa, paaththa idathileyee kuzhi thoNdi puthaichchuduveen*" 'If I see you around here another time, I'll bury you right there and then.' He throws the log into the air and it knocks out the light. All goes to black. Cut and fade in to Baadshaa standing before the camera, lit from behind, glowing. His hand *style*-ishly twirls and flips around until his index finger is pointing up. His voice reverberates with a heavy echo effect: "*oru thadave sonnaa nuuRu thadave sonna maathiri*" 'If I say it once, it's as if I said it a hundred times.' We hear the lightning crack, and in slow motion he puts his hands on his hips flinging back his unbuttoned shirt along with a swoosh sound effect. Baadshaa is fully revealed: *style* has gone public.

His brother confronts him: 'Who are you? What happened in Bombay?' Interval.

### 3.4.7 *From style to periya aaL*

In the first half of the film Rajini's *style/status* has been covered, revealed, confirmed, and proven. The second half of the film goes into his backstory to explain how the ordinary youth Manik became the terrifying gangster Baadshaa, and then how Baadshaa became Manikkam the auto-driver. In doing so we are introduced to the principal villain, the (almost) equally *style-ish* Marc Anthony.<sup>11</sup> The rest of the story revolves around their conflict, and how Baadshaa becomes the *periya aaL* to the subordinated villain. Here *style* becomes the symbolic battlefield for the status negotiation between the hero and the villain.

The flashback begins with Baadshaa's chant accompanied by his walking down a hallway, then down the stairs of a huge mansion (in multiple shots). He is in a *style-ish* suit (no tie); his blazer is a colorful blend of fabrics with the sleeves rolled up; he is wearing sunglasses that have no arms; and he is sporting a beard.<sup>12</sup> Walking behind him are his men. For the students this moment, his revelation as Baadshaa, is the consummation of his *style*. This scene provoked the loudest reaction among the students. They yelled, stood up, clapped, and turned the volume of the TV to the maximum, the praising music blaring distortedly through the speakers:

<i>eey! Baadshaa paaru Baadshaa paaru!</i>	Eey! Look at Baadshaa! Look at Baadshaa!
<i>paddaaLathu nadaiya paaru!</i>	Look at the gait of the army man!
<i>pagai nadungkum padayai paaru!</i>	Look at the army that makes the enemy

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<sup>11</sup> Marc Anthony is played by Raghuvaran, one of the recurrent villain's in Rajini's films.

<sup>12</sup> Here the beard has multiple indexicalities: one, as a diacritic of difference with respect to Manikkam; two, as an index of him being a *rowdy*; three, as an index of *style*; four, as an ambiguous marker of community affiliation. (This is because the beard is associated with Islam, and as we see below, it is the murder of his Muslim friend Anwar which transforms the simple Manik to Baadshaa.)

	tremble!
<i>coat-u suit-u reNdum eduththu pooddu</i>	Look at the tiger walking who has put on
<i>nadakkum puliya paaru!</i>	both coat and suit!
<i>paRReriyum neruppu poola sudderikkum</i>	Look at the eyes that scorch like a fire that
<i>vizhiya paaru!</i>	burns with heavy flames!
<i>raththam veervai reNdum koNda</i>	He's the emperor among kings, made up of
<i>raajaangkaLin mannan thaanadaa!</i>	sweat and blood!
<i>ivan peerukuLLe kaantham uNdu uNmai</i>	It's true, there is a magnet in his name! <sup>13</sup>
<i>thaanadaa!</i>	

The backstory of Baadshaa revolves around a tale of revenge and lost innocence in Bombay. As young men, Manik and his childhood friend Anwar are the only ones who stand up to the villain Marc Anthony when he attempts to illegally evacuate their slum. The death of these young men is called for, but because Manik's father works for Anthony, Manik's life is spared. Anwar, however, isn't. Anwar's death radicalizes Manik, and he becomes a *rowdy* (Manik Baadshaa) to destroy *rowdyism* (Anthony).

A montage of explosions and news articles inform us that Baadshaa has become a big *rowdy* criminal, only rivaled by Marc Anthony, the target of his revenge and a rival emblem of *style* and status. The rest of the flashback centers on the rivalry between Baadshaa and Anthony which culminates in Anthony's imprisonment, Baadshaa's father's death, and Baadshaa's promise to give up the life of crime and become Manikkam. This takes place through a series of confrontations where the relative status of the two *rowdies*, Baadshaa and Anthony, are negotiated. The negotiation proceeds through two intertwined idioms: one is *style*, or the symbolic diagramming of relative status; the other is through physical fights and the literal determination of status.

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<sup>13</sup> One of the common refrain's about Rajinikanth among his fans is that he is a 'magnet' (*kaantham*), a (super)natural attractive force. This is also a trope on the ending of his name *-kanth*.

### 3.4.8 Building up the periya aaL: Speaking and style

Anthony receives news that Baadshaa was able to foil his plan to bomb a religious function. After shooting the messenger of the “bad news,” as Anthony puts it in his *style*-ish low drawl, he gets a phone call. He answers, slowly, deliberately, with *style*: “Anthony, Marc Anthony. <pause> *solReen*. Hmmm. Good news” (‘Anthony, Marc Anthony. <pause> I’ll let you know. Hmmm. Good news’). Baadshaa has called to set up a meet. The next scene’s showdown gives a first approximation of the battle of status between these two powerhouses (photo 4.3):



Photo 4.3 Baadshaa and Marc Anthony showdown

Anthony: *enna Manik? nalla irukkeyaa?*

Anthony: What Manik? Are you (-hon. throughout) doing well?

Baadshaa: *Baadshaa. Manik Baadshaa.*

Baadshaa: Baadshaa. Manik Baadshaa.

A: Ah, yes, *Manik Baadshaa. enna vishayam thambi? enkidde ethoo peesaNum NNu sonneyaame. ethoo uthavi theevaiyaa? sollu. enna veeNaalum seyveen. nee engka*

A: Ah, yes. Manik Baadshaa. What is the problem little brother? They said you wanted to speak to me about something. Do you need some help? Tell me.

*Raangasaami puLLe, ache. sollu.*

*B: Che, eh, eh, eh. ithu paaru. enakkum unakkum than saNdai. intha Baadshavukkum Anthonykkum saNdai. nee saagaNum. ille naan saagaNum. unooda aLungka saagaNum. ille enooda aLungka saagaNum. pothu makkaL ille. appaavi makkaL ille. ippa therinjchu poochchu. nee oru koozhe. oru koozhe saNdai pooduRathu. ithe pudikkaathu. intha Baadshaa, intha Manik Baadshaa pudikkaathu. mudichchiduReen. mudichchiduReen.*

*ini, ini eezhu naaLukkuLLe un kathai muduchchidureen.*

*Raangasaami: Hey! yaarkidde peesuRe NNu unaku theriyumaa?*

*B: theriyum paa. oru ayoogiyakkidde peesuReen.*

*R: Eey!*

*A: Ah, ah ah ah. chinna puLLe. aamaa Manik Baadshaa, nee thozhilukku puthusu. kuzhanthe. enna sonne? eezhu naaLle enne mudikkiReyaa? unne eezhu secondkkuLLe naan mudikkiReen.*

*illaiya? konjcham paaru.*

Whatever you want I'll do. You are our Raangasaami's son (after all). Tell me.

*B: Che, eh, eh, eh. Look here (-hon. throughout). The fight is between you and me. A fight between this Baadshaa and Anthony. You have to die or I have to die. Your men have die or my my men have to die. But not common people. Not innocent people. Now I finally know. You are a coward, fighting a coward's battle. I don't like this. This Baadhsa, this Manik Baadshaa doesn't like it. I'll finish you. Finish you.*

*<B. snaps.>*

I'll finish you in seven days from now.

*Raangasaami: Hey! Do you know who you're talking to?*

*B: I know, father. I'm talking to a fraud.*

*R: Eey!*

*<A. gestures for R. to cool down.>*

*A: Ah, ah ah ah. Small boy. That's right Manik Baadshaa, you're new to the field (of crime). A child. What do you say? In seven days you'll finish me? In seven seconds I'll finish you.*

*<takes off his sunglasses>*

No? Take a look.

B: *angkee konjcham paaru kaNNaa.*

*Baadshaa. Manik Baadshaa.*

*Eh hey hey. onnu solReen. nalla  
therinjchukoo. nallavan aaNdavan  
soothippaan. kai udamaaddaan.  
keddavanukku niraiya koduppaan. aanaa  
kai vidduduvaan. Ah!*

<Glances to his right at some sharpshooters with Baadshaa in their sites. Baadshaa removes his sunglasses. He looks to his right.>

B: Look over there dear.

<laughs>

Baadshaa. Manik Baadshaa.

<Begins to leave. Turns back around suddenly.>

Eh hey hey. I'll tell you one thing. Learn it well. God tests good people. But he won't abandon them. He gives a lot to bad people. But he'll abandon them. Ah!

<Puts on his sunglasses and walks off; music kicks in. Cut to scenes of him in his luxurious car alone, sitting with his legs crossed.<sup>14</sup>>

This last dialogue is given by Baadshaa with Rajini's characteristic rhetorical flourish, the rhyme scheme (underlined in the Tamil above) embellished through his delivery and punctuated by his behavioral *style*, putting on his sunglasses, pointing his finger, and getting the last word and walking off to music.

In this dialogue both Baadshaa and Anthony vie to determine who is the *periyaa aal* through their use of address and reference terms: Anthony diminutizes Baadshaa and treats him as a *chinna paiyan*; Baadshaa instead status-raises through third-person reference—DEMONSTRATIVE + PROPER NAME (this is a common strategy in Rajini

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<sup>14</sup> Note that sitting with one's legs crossed in repose is a trope of status in Tamil Nadu.

films<sup>15</sup>)—and aggressive tropes of intimacy (e.g., “*kaNNaa*” ‘dear’). They also vie in their oratory (mostly cool, though Baadshaa flares at the right times to reveal his superior status) through tropes of intimidation and philosophical position statements. In these, Baadshaa is more coherent and, ultimately, successful.

Their fashion also diagrams this as a battle of *style*. Both come with their fashionable haircuts (Baadshaa with his slight shag; Anthony with his *rowdy-ish funk* [‘mullet’]), their sunglasses (both use the sunglasses to punctuate their status moves by taking them off and putting them on at key moments), and their clothes (Anthony is in a swank business suit, Baadshaa in a blue velour track suit).

After a similar second encounter the film then moves through a series of montages (accompanied by Baadshaa’s theme song) of Baadshaa as the *periya aaL* of the Bombay underworld. All other gangsters come to kneel at his feet and kiss his hand while he sits in his throne with a huge dog at his side. (This image is one of the more memorable and circulated images from the film.) He is shown beating people, surrounded by money, screaming orders on the phone, and handing out money to married couples (i.e., redistributive wealth cum social service cum patronage).

The next episode that demonstrates Baadshaa’s dominance and *style* is the trap set by Kesavan (the father of Priya, the heroine, and a minion of Anthony) at Baadshaa’s birthday party. Again, Baadshaa is *style* embodied. At the party he enters at the top of the staircase with the crowd below him. He is in a white suit with a red cumberbum, matching scarf, and his armless sunglasses. He pushes back his jacket and puts his hands

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Pandian* (1992) where Rajini’s *punch dialogue* is as follows: “*intha paaNdiyan, eppoovum, engkeeyum, ethilum right*” ‘This Pandian is always right everywhere in all things’ (with hand pointing toward his chest/the check on his shirt).



in his pockets. He walks down the stairs as flowers are thrown on him, greeted by a giant group of singers and dancers. He takes over the drum beat and starts into a faster song (“*Raa Raa Ramayah*”), playing various instruments and dancing. The song is an outline of what youth life is about and, of course, about praising Baadshaa as status-ful: ‘just as there is only one moon for the night, and one sun for the day, there is only one Baadshaa for the world.’ His henchmen are shown stopping someone from taking his photo (as a diagram of his importance: he is an object of visual desire, and thus he has to police his own image).

At the end of the song Baadshaa goes back up the stairs to sit in his throne above all. At that point Kesavan springs his trap and gunfire opens on Baadshaa. It seems that Baadshaa is shot, but no sooner than we fear his death does the chair spin around 180 degrees, revealing that it was not Baadshaa sitting in the chair at all but a dummy (how did he make the switch?!). He is alive and well sitting in an identical chair on the opposite side. He then deliberately crosses his legs, a repeated gesture of status in Tamil films. This shot is repeated three times in rapid succession, a trope of status and itself a cinematic *style*. Baadshaa opens fire and kills all the bad guys with the exception of Kesavan. To the begging Kesavan who has fallen at his feet, he points his finger (with a swoosh sound effect):

Baadshaa: *eppa nee enakku jalra adikka arambichcheyoo, appavee purinjchupoochchu daa nee muthale kuththa pooRe NNu. intha Baadshaa adi paadi eppoovaavathu paaththirikkeeyaa daa? appavee purinjchukka veeNdaam un*

Baadshaa: When you (-hon. throughout) started to kiss my ass (lit. hitting the “jalra” drum) I first realized that you were going to backstab me. Have you ever seen this Baadshaa playing and singing? You didn’t need to know that I knew your plan

*thiddam therinjchupoochchu NNu.*

*poo. Anthonykidde ethaavathu neermaiye iru.*

Keesavan: Sir, *enne, enne onnum senjchirukkamaaddiingka, le?*

B: *poo!*

K: *saththiyaamaa . . .*

B: *intha Baadshaa oru thadave sonnaa nuuRu thadave sonna maathiri.*

K: *theriyum sir. theriyum. sariingka sir. Sariingka.*

then.

<B.'s left hand flashes up and rotates.>

Get out of here. At least be true to Anthony.

<Keesavan with folded hands>

Keesavan: Sir, so you won't do anything to me, will you (+ hon.)?

B: Get out!

K: I promise . . .

<B.'s right hand flips up with a swoosh, index finger pointing up, interrupting K.>

B: If this Baadshaa says it once, it's as if he says it a hundred times.

K: I know sir. I know. Okay (+hon.) sir. Ok (+ hon.).

Rajini's *style* is performed not only through high-status fancy clothing, his *punch dialogue* with its related body language (the pointing index finger, crossing legs, sitting in his throne above all others), and his differentiation from other characters (dress wise, placement in the screen, editing tropes of status), but also through his reality-defying acts: how can he switch bodies without anyone seeing, only to spin around when all the villains' bullets are spent, not mention his amazing accuracy with a gun? His *style* is also indexed in his access to speech. In contrast to the dialogues with Anthony which are relatively equal in turn-taking (though Baadshaa ultimately gets the last word), here we see Kesavan, a man of little status, silenced into simply begging for his life.

### 3.4.9 *Besting the villain, part I*

The final push by Anthony takes place. He bombs everything Baadshaa owns. Baadshaa takes it all very coolly, playing the piano as his empire seems to be crumbling. Cut to Baadshaa calling Anthony. Anthony answers with his characteristic *style*: “Anthony” <in low drawl>. Baadshaa simply says, with equal *style*, “Baadshaa.” Baadshaa reveals that he gathered evidence against Anthony for the bombings. Anthony breaks from his cool register of *style* and screams “Baadshaa!” Baadshaa begins to laugh and says in his characteristic quickfire delivery “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” (Note here how linguistic *style* and Anthony’s loss of cool, as a kind of register break, diagrams Baadshaa’s superior status and victory.) He then flips his jacket backwards with a flourish, puts his hands on his hips, first on the left, then the right in a slow motion frontal shot accompanied by a swoosh sound effect: “Baadshaa. Manik Baadshaa.” His name rings with a heavy echo effect. He continues:

*enna sonne? kuuddam seeththu ellam  
jeeykkamudiyaathu NNu sonne, le? uNmai  
thaan.*

*aanaa enkidda irukkiRa kuuddam naan  
seeththa kuuddam ille. anbaale seeththa  
kuuddam. entha thani saamraajiyam.  
anbaa saamraajiyam. yaaraalee  
azhikkamudiyaathu.*

What did you (-hon. throughout) say? You said that I couldn’t gather a group and win everything, right? It’s true.

<He walks forward, his steps echoing. He takes off his sunglasses; full frontal view>

But the group that surrounds me isn’t a group I gathered. It’s a group that joined together (on their own) because of love. A unique/separate empire. An empire of love. No one can destroy it.

<He puts his sunglasses back on and laughs.>

Cut to the police deciding to arrest Anthony. Cut to a later conversation between Baadshaa and Anthony. Baadshaa is talking into a clear-plastic futurist looking speaker phone (something unique at the time). Anthony, on the other hand, has his own *style*-ish cordless phone. ‘This is the greatest day in Manik Baadshaa’s life,’ Baadshaa declares. Anthony laughs, conceding that he indeed is a *periya aaL*, but also revealing that he still has a trick up his sleeve: ‘You made a mistake in leaving your father with me.’ When Baadshaa rushes to the house to save his father, his father gets between him and the bullet meant for Baadshaa. His father dies to save him. Cut to a shot of Baadshaa. His glasses fly off as he turns his head in slow motion, his hair flying across his face. He literally dodges the bullets fired at him, climbs the wall in an impossibly fast movement and beats Anthony. Anthony is saved at Baadshaa’s father’s request, but arrested by the police. The flashback ends.

#### 3.4.10 *Besting the villain, part II*

Flashing forward to the original timeline, Kesavan learns that Baadshaa is still alive when Baadshaa comes to save Priya from her arranged marriage. Baadshaa takes Priya away as his own. The next song has Rajini in *getups* from all kinds of status-ful masculinities including a sheik, a king, and a *rowdy*. He co-opts every form of masculine status, putting his stamp of *style* on it, recombining it in a bizarre pastiche celebrating his attainment of the heroine.

Learning that Baadshaa is still alive, Anthony escapes to exact his revenge on Baadshaa. He kidnaps the female members of his family. Baadshaa infiltrates Anthony’s camp and starts killing his henchmen one by one, each in an amazing display of valor and

power. When Baadshaa finally makes it to Anthony's room, Anthony claps in mock applause. He circles around Baadshaa and greets him: "*asalam alakkam.*" Anthony tries to blow the bombs that he has rigged, but none go off. Baadshaa's men have disabled them. Baadshaa leans in and says 'I got rid of all the bombs' <smiling>, "*valaikkum salam!*" Unfortunately, Anthony has a backup: he has the family tied up with bombs ready to go off. With the remote control (and the upper hand) Anthony begins to beat Baadshaa. They exchange blows. Unable to set off the bomb, Anthony lights the floor on fire to burn Baadshaa's family and makes an escape. Baadshaa rolls over the flames with his body to put them out. Freeing his family he chases after Anthony by jumping down two stories. He then hits Anthony's moving car with a log which causes it to wreck and explode! Anthony is cornered by the auto-drivers on one side, the community on the other, and Baadshaa emerging from the flames of the car. He begins to walk toward the camera in a frontal shot, his head tilted slightly down with his eyes looking up/straight ahead (i.e., his *style* walk). As he walks through the flames the camera cuts between Manikkam the auto-driver and Baadshaa the *don* (i.e., as Anthony remembers him).

Anthony does a double take and wipes his eyes. Baadshaa/Manikkam's demonstration of physical dominance and *style* have literally superimposed the images and sutured the two identities. Both time and perception have been reversed through the status-ful actions of Baadshaa/Manikkam. The theme music with its "Baadshaa Baadshaa" chant begins as he walks toward Anthony. When he gets there *The Good, Bad, and the Ugly* flute motif punctuates his arrival. Cut to a close up shot of Baadshaa's face, looking up with one lip cocked, head slight turned down. Flashback to Anwar getting stabbed (past), cut to Baadshaa punching Anthony (present). Cut to Anthony shooting his

father (past), cut to Baadshaa hitting Anthony (present). This second hit is doubled: one hit as auto-driver Manikkam, one as the *don* of Bombay Baadshaa, a tropic fusing of identity and statuses. Repeat. Finally Baadshaa picks Anthony up over his shoulder and walks while the crowd cheers him on to dump him into the flames of the car, his own funeral pyre. The inspector comes on the scene (too late of course to actually enforce the law) and tries to stop Baadshaa from exacting his own alternative justice based on his own norms of authority. He appeals to him as Manikkam, the auto-driver, the man of compassion and ‘society.’ Manikkam lets Anthony fall onto the ground and walks away. However, Anthony has grabbed the gun from the cop and pulls it out. Before Anthony can shoot he gets shot in the head by Manikkam’s younger police officer brother. Family, Priya, and Manikkam are reunited and the song that begins the film (“*Autokkaaran*”) finishes it. Baadshaa has again become the ordinary *style*-less Manikkam.

### 3.5. *Summary of analysis of style*

Above I have told the story of *Baadshaa* (1995) as the story of status. In particular, as the narrativization of how *style* as iconic index of status is acquired, hidden, negated, inverted, deployed, revealed, and (of particular interest to fans) developed and changed in comparison to other films. I have shown that *style*, in addition to punctuating all moments of the hero-oriented film, is the agent moving it forward: who has *style*, who is licensed to use it, and whose *style* wins out (hero’s or villain’s)? In the following sections, I synthesize and abstract the elements of *style* that characterize the hero-star.

#### 3.5.1 *Individuation of the hero-star: Style and visuality*

The emblemization of *style* in the image of Rajinikanth is all about visuality and standing out. The hero-centric text is thusly constructed. Rajini is always differentiated and foregrounded from his surroundings. In the opening song of *Annamalai* (1992), while Rajini plays a simple milkman, he is always presented as different from his peers. While all other milkmen are in clothes colored by powder from the celebration of *maaddu pongaL* (a harvest holiday celebrating cows), he is sparkling white. He is the only one with brand new, white Diadora branded sneakers (itself totally anomalous with his image as a milkman).<sup>16</sup> In *Padaiyappa* (1999), during a festival the village youth are dressed in red pants and yellow shirts and the elders in white shirts and *veeshdis*. Only Rajini is dressed in *modern* costume (pants, button-down shirt unbuttoned, tee-shirt underneath, shoes). In general, throughout Rajinikanth's films, the hero-star's clothing tends to be shiny, colorful, and fashionable (see more below), foregrounding him against the background of other more drab and less status-ful characters.

The hero takes up most of the objective time on the screen. He is in the most number of scenes. The hero also takes up most of the objective space of the screen. The shot structure of such films continually individuates and foregrounds the hero: hence the ubiquity of fully frontal shots; closeups of the face and the eyes; and well lit shots where the hero is centrally positioned in sharp focus.

More than this the camera is itself used *style*-ishly to meta-communicate the hero's *style*. Hence the visual tropes that status-raise the hero: for example, shooting the same image multiple times and using jump cuts to move between them; the trick shot of multiplying the image of the hero-star on the screen; rewinding an action and playing it

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<sup>16</sup> To query this inconsistency with viewers is to elicit the self-evident response: 'it's his *style*.'

again (e.g., in Vijay's *Pookkiri* [2006]). Such tropes of multiplicity function like linguistic tropes of plurality for honorification through a visual medium. It's *as if* Rajini is more than a single man, it's *as if* his *style*-ish actions exceed their own diegetic status as singular events. If he does it once, their impact is *as if*, as Rajini puts it in *Baadshaa* (1995), "*nuuRu thadave maathiri*" 'he has done it a hundred times.'<sup>17</sup>

### 3.5.2 Style as set of idiosyncratic mannerisms

Rajini's *style* is most usually emblemized for viewers in the aspects of the film text which are most visually salient, most localizable, most repeated, most differentiated from their surrounding co-text, and most recontextualizable (across and outside of films). These are also the aspects that are most transparently presented to viewers' awareness *as style*. Most notable are Rajini's unique mannerisms and *punch dialogues*. The two reinforce each other, as well, because they are often part of the same performance. In general, his *punch dialogues* and his signature mannerisms function in the narrative to punctuate his attempts and successes at status-raising. And since this happens repeatedly throughout the narrative (as the narrative is about such status-raising), this kind of *style* is the most transparent *qua style*.

As we saw in *Baadshaa* (1995) he twirls and contorts his fingers in elaborate pointing gestures before delivering *punch dialogues* ('If this Baadshaa says it once, it's as if he said it a hundred times!'). Similarly, in *Baadshaa* (1995), *Annamalai* (1992), *Padaiyappa* (1999), and *Sivaji* (2007) he flips back his shirt while putting his hands on his hips during moments of status-assertion. The signature move of *Padaiyappa* (1999) is the physically

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<sup>17</sup> We can also note the use of echo and reverb effects to similarly tropically augment the status-ful-ness of his voice and words.



impossible twirling of a cigar around his finger and then throwing it into his mouth from his hip. This goes along with his low voiced, reverbed out *punch dialogue* ‘my way is a unique way’ (“*en vazhi thani vazhi*”). With the last line of the dialogue he snaps his fingers to produce a flame for his cigar, one of his signature *styles*. (He does a similar *style* in *Annamalai* [1992].)

As of late, as cigarette smoking in films has come under fire from the government, Rajini’s *style* in more recent films like *Sivaji* (2007) has replaced cigar(rette)s with chewing gum. Thus, instead of flipping a cigar(rette) into his mouth and smoking, in *Sivaji* he throws a piece of gum from one hand, bounces it off of his palm (and later in the film off of the villain’s forehead) into his mouth. He punctuates this with his *style*-ish dialogues: “cool” or “*summa athirthu, le?*” (‘it makes you tremble, doesn’t it?’).<sup>18</sup>

Another signature *style* is how Rajini puts on his sunglasses. While in older films he did so by rotating and flipping the glasses around his hands while putting them on, in *Sivaji*, in his incarnation as MGR the glasses are flipped around to the back of his head without the use of his hands!

As we have had occasion to note, such various *styles* are also accompanied by other repeated moves: the head tilt (head tilted down, eyes looking slightly up with a smirk on his face, photo 4.2), the brushing of his hair, and the crossing of his legs. All such *style*-ish mannerisms inevitably are accompanied with other meta-signs of difference:

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<sup>18</sup> In other (comedy) scenes, this *style* is troped upon by using notionally hot things instead of gum: in one scene he throws chilies into his mouth, in another he flips a firecracker in his mouth and lights it, punctuating it with one of his older *style*-ish dialogue—“*ithu eppadi irukku?*” (‘How is it?’)—from the 1977 breakout film *Pathinaaru Vayathilee*. Other *styles* from *Sivaji* (2007) include: flipping a coin (and later car keys) from one hand to another (his hands are stretched at full length across his body), then back to the original hand, and then flicking it up into the air, catching it in his pocket; later as M. G. Ravichandiran his *style* is to tap his bald head with all his fingers (as if playing a miridangam drum).

fashionable clothes, shots of onlooker's amazement, the swoosh sound effect (connoting the rapidity of his motion), as well as *punch dialogues* (see below).

In all such cases, such actions are *style* because: (a) they draw attention to themselves as actions that exceed their functionality (one can simply put one's sunglasses on, or put gum in one's mouth); and (b) they are presumably difficult to do, if not impossible without the aid of camera tricks. In this sense through the performance of some skill they both draw attention to themselves and the user as "*different*" and thus status-raising.

### 3.5.3 Style and dialogue

Rajini's dialogues, as we have seen, are delivered in a way that marks them off from everyday speech. They are poetic (rhyme, alliteration, meter); they are monologic; they are delivered with either blazing speed or very deliberately; they are often heavily affected with echo or reverb; they are delivered in a lower pitch than his normal speaking voice (especially when the delivery is deliberate); they are framed by *style-ish* mannerisms (as discussed above).

Take, for example, the following example from *Padaiyappa* (1999). On the left-hand column I have put the dialogue (with gloss below it) and in the right-hand column the use of kinesics and sound effects. Note the syllabic parallelism and its iconicity with the paralinguistic use of his fingers.

*en vazhi*  
(‘My way . . . )

*thani vazhi*

<swoosh sound effect as he moves his left hand across his body from right hip to left; thumb and middle finger touching, his index finger pointing up>

<With the words "*thani-vazhi*" his index

(. . . is a unique way. . . .)

*thadukkaathee/ kuRukkidaathee/*

*siiNdaathee / Better don't come in my way."*

(. . . 'don't try to interfere/cross it.')

finger/hand moves up-down.>

<While saying the last phrase his index

finger/hand moves from left to right.>

In terms of their denotational content, such dialogues status-raise Rajini by projecting him as more than a normal man. They also often encapsulate his philosophy, figuring him as a kind of leader, politically and spiritually. Take, for example, another variant of the *punch dialogue* from *Padaiyappa* (1999):

*arasan anRu kolluvaan. theevam inRu kollum. athu antha kaalam. arasan inRu kolluvaan. theevam anRee kollum. athu intha kaalam. intha jenmaththil senjcha paavam intha jenmaththile anupavikkaNum.*

The king kills on that day (then), while God kills on this day (today). That was at that time. The king kills on this day (today) while God kills on that day (then). That is this time. (Today) we experience the sins of this lifetime in our lifetime.

<Up to now his hands are only punctuating the deictics ('that/this day'). He is looking at the villain, head tilted, eyes looking straight ahead/up. After the last word of the line his index finger pops up to point at the face of the villain with a swoosh sound.>

*niingka anupavippiingka. naan yaareyum kuRukkidamaaddeen. en vazhi yaaravathu kuRukkiddaa . . .*

You will experience (your sins). I don't cross anyone. If anyone crosses my path . . .

<He then raises his hand and spinning on his finger is a cigarette, accompanied by a fast, twirling sound effect. He then throws the cigarette into his mouth, lighting a match off

*purinjchathu, le?*

*en vazhi thani vazhi.  
maRakkaathiingka !*

of the villain's shoulder.>

You understand, right?

<He starts to walk away, and then turns back accompanied by a swoosh sound effect. Cut to a low angle shot looking up at him>

My way is a unique way. Don't forget it!

<His voice is low, reverb and chorus effected. Wide shot of him walking away twirling a chain, accompanied by the swooshing sound of the chain. As he gets near the camera he wraps the chain around his waist and walks off camera.>

Through his cosmological philosophy of sin he here locates the wrongdoers and by implication figures himself as just. He then threatens anyone who gets in his 'way' (*vazhi*). *Vazhi* ('path,' 'way') here stands in as his statement of difference: he walks a unique path; he is outside of convention, normalcy, the ordinary, and authority as he is, in fact, his own authority.

Consider another example from the film *Annamalai* (1992). In this scene Rajini (whose character's name is Annamalai) has goaded the villain—a rich man corrupted by greed—into spending an exorbitant amount of money at an auction. Annamalai has done this in order to bankrupt him, to turn his own avarice against him.

*muuNu koodi mathippu soththu panneNdu  
koodi koduththu vaangkina buththisaali  
paaththirukkeyaa nee? naan innikki thaan*

<with a normal, conversational pace>

Have you ever seen a smart person spend twelve crores<sup>19</sup> for property only worth three crores? Today I saw just that. They

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<sup>19</sup> The Indian counting system proceeds from thousands to lakhs (100,000) to crores (10,000,000).

*paaththeen. ethoo peesa kaNakku kaNakku  
Nnu peesuraangka. intha Annamalai  
kaNakku konjcham keedkaddum:*

*ambillai pooduthu inRu kaNakku,  
pomble pooduthu naaLaiya kaNakku.  
paiyanunga pooduthu mana kaNakku,  
poNNunga pooduthu thirumaNa kaNakku.  
ezhai pooduthu naaLai kaNakku,  
paNakkaaran pooduthu paNa kaNakku.  
arasiyalvaathi pooduthu ooddu kaNakku,  
janangka pooduthu nambikkai kaNakku.  
manushan poodda thappu kaNakku,  
aaNdavan pooduthu paava kaNakku.  
intha Annamalai pooduthu eppoomee  
niyaayamaana kaNakku.*

*kuudi kalichchu kaNakku sariyaa irukkum.  
enkidde kaNakku peesuRaangka?!*

[the villain and his son] are always talking about some calculation or another. Let's hear the accounting/calculations of this Annamalai:

<with a brisk metered delivery>

Men put the calculations of today,  
Women put the calculations of tomorrow.  
Boys put the calculations of the heart,  
Girls put the calculations of marriage.  
The poor put the calculations of tomorrow,  
The rich put the calculations of money.  
The politicians put the calculation of votes,  
The people put calculations of trust.  
Man puts the calculation of mistakes,  
God puts the calculations of sins.  
This Annamalai always puts the calculation of justice.

<From here on his speech is super fast>

Add it, subtract it, the calculation will come correctly. What are they talking to me about calculations?!

In this dialogue Annamalai co-opts the villain's own oft-repeated *style*-ish dialogue (“*kuudi kalichchu kaNakku sariyaa irukkum*”). He elaborates and improves it, making it more poetic than the villain ever did (note the phonological, semantic, and grammatic parallelisms). But Annamalai also makes fun of the dialogue and by extension the villain as he demonstrates his mastery over the villain's *style* by bending it to his own ideology of justice, framing it in a his reported speech construction ‘what are they talking to me about calculations?!’

Just like his mannerisms, then, Rajini's dialogues both individuate and status-raise him. Moreover, they articulate Rajini's extra-societal justice philosophy. Such dialogues articulate a discourse of exteriority—from the rich in *Annamalai* (1992), the political system in *Padaiyappa* (1999), and India itself in *Sivaji* (2007)—and figure Rajini as a man who is extra-ordinary, who stands apart from the crowd. He says in *Sivaji* (2007) to a group of *rowdies* who laugh at him for coming alone without any help: “*kaNNaa, panni thaana kuuddamaa varum*” ‘Dear, only pigs come in groups.’ Knocking them back with a single blow, the sound of a lion growling in the background reverberates as the theme music starts up. He *style*-ishly flips his collar back and finishes the dialogue with his index finger pointing up: “*singkam single-aa varum!*” (‘The lion comes alone!).

#### 3.5.4 Style and fights

Such *style* in dialogues and mannerisms are often the prelude to fights where the symbolic diagramming of status as *style* is literalized in actual physical domination. Here *style* becomes *geththu* as the hero beats the *rowdies* to a pulp. In the filmic idiom, however, *geththu* and *style* are fused in heavily *style*-ized fight sequences, often in a kung fu idiom (and more recently, e.g. in *Sivaji* [2007], in the idiom of Hollywood action films like the *Matrix* [1999] and video games like *Mortal Kombat* [1992]). Common tropes include the slowing down or speeding up of a blow and the use of fans to blow back the hair of the hero, the dust on the ground (the step of the hero makes the ground itself tremble), or ripple the skin of a foe who has been struck (a trope of strength).

For example, in *Padaiyappa* (1999), after beating a number of *rowdies*, Rajini literally knocks one *rowdy* down by simply blowing in his face. In *Sivaji* (2007) he plays

the piano facing away from the keys as he beats off the *rowdies* with his legs. In a song *qua sex qua* fight scene in *Sivaji* he enters riding a motorcycle lying down with his feet on the handlebars and a hat over his face. The bike flies forward propelling him into the air. He hovers in the air in slow motion. Electricity buzzes and a lion's roar echoes as he flies through the air demolishing legions of enemies. At one point in the fight he dodges a bullet, and then throws his gun so that it flies around a fountain (like a boomerang), shoots a villain in the face, and then returns to him. Later he literally stares down a bullet until it stops and drops into his drink.

### 3.5.5 *Style as the impossible, as the ridiculous*

One of the aspects of *style* is that it tends towardness excess. As we have seen, this is both true in its diagramming of social relations—to do *style* is to transgress 'society'—and in its diagramming of the hero's relationship to physical laws of the universe—his *style* can bend the laws of reality as we know it. As such, *style* borders on the implausible and impossible. For example, in *Sivaji* (2007), Rajini's first character Sivaji Arumugam actually cheats fate by being reincarnated as M. G. Ravichandiran, thus defying his astrology that if he marries the heroine he will die. This fulfills *his own* prophesizing, as he tells the heroine: 'The love that I have for you is more powerful than any horoscope.' And while ostensibly it's the cliché of love that defies death, in fact it's *style*, for he comes back not to love her (the love story is a mere tangent) but to vanquish the statusful villain through his reincarnation in an even more *style*-ish avatar. He is too statusful to die. Note only would his fans not allow it, but neither would his own image (cf. Pandian 1992).

This aspect of *style* as defying of reality itself takes two tones in the hero-centered film, as it also does in youth peer groups: (1) as ridiculous, and thus as a form of ironic comedy; and (2) as serious: the hero really is that powerful. The two often blend: *style* is taken seriously and yet it's also absurd. Indeed, Rajini's whole image, as Rajanayakam (2002) has pointed out, is based on both *style* and comedy. I would alter this by saying *style* as appropriate status-raising and *style* as excessive/absurd status-raising (see section 3.5.5 below).

For example, in *Sivaji* (2007) there is a scene where Rajini's character is rapidly signing two documents with two different hands at the same time, *style*-ishly flipping and twirling the pens backwards and forwards each time he finishes a set of documents. The scenes are both serious and comic, because such acts *do* perform *style*, but do so in a playful self-reflexively parodic way.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.5.6 Style as fashion

In addition to the signature *styles* of Rajinikanth, *style* also inheres in his appropriation of signs from alternative frameworks of value; in particular, those associated with social class (versus caste) and exteriority (versus the autochthonous). Below I discuss his use of status-ful commodities of exterior origin: fashion and English (section 3.5.7).

Rajini's dress ranges the gamut: from (simulacra of the) "traditional" to hyper-modern. However, in all his hero-centric films, in moments where his status is in

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<sup>20</sup> We can also mention more mundane discrepancies in Rajini's films which abide by the same logic. For example, why is Annamalai, a simple milkman always wearing expensive branded sneakers with his otherwise rustic, traditional outfits? Because Rajini's status is so high and established that such *style qua* deviation from norm is licensed: he can bend social convention to his own will, just as he can bend the laws of the universe. (See chapter 5 for more discussion.)



question, his dress is always *style-ishly modern*. Thus, in *Baadshaa* (1995), while as Manikkam he is dressed relatively ordinarily, as Baadshaa his fashion is hyper-*style*. In *Annamalai* (1992) he starts off as a relatively normal milkman, but ends up a successful business man who embodies a formal *style* (e.g., suits, tuxedos). In *Sivaji* (2007), as MGR, the reincarnation of Sivaji, he is even *more* stylish with his large diamond earrings and leather jacket. In short, Rajini's dress in his films diagrams the narrative as a tale of status: from the hiding of status to its revealing to its deployment in the aims of domination.

The most stereotypical elements of Rajini's *style* in fashion are: his sunglasses, his pierced ears, his wearing of a button-down shirt over a tee-shirt, his jeans or cargo pants, his sneakers, his long-ish hair feathered and hanging over his face, and his use of branded apparel in his dress (e.g., Diadora, Nike, Diesel, Puma). In addition to dress, in such status-elevated states Rajini is always surrounded by fashionable status symbols: cars, motorcycles, huge mansions. Here *style* is an appropriation of wealth by the sub-altern youth. He takes that which is reserved for the rich, for men of traditional status, and makes it his own via tropes of youth status.

Rajinikanth's own relationship to fashion and body modification *qua style* is diagrammed most clearly in the song "Style" from the recent film *Sivaji* (2007). Before the song, the heroine tells Sivaji (Rajini's first incarnation) that she can't marry him because of he is too dark for her. (It's a false reason: she doesn't want to marry him because the astrology predicts his death if they marry.) In response, Sivaji declares that he will become white for her. After a number of comical therapies to become white, he returns to her successfully. The first shot shows him pulling up in his Mercedes Benz. In

a deferment of the moment of visual pleasure, we only see his white leg (revealed because of his *style*-ish three-fourth length cargo pants). He walks into her store and throws her a rose. We get our first look at this new, white Rajini. The song begins.

Hero and heroine are dancing in front of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain. In this song, Rajini comes, one by one, in eight different "*getups*" which span a range of hip fashion including a variety of wigs (blond, light brown, dark brown, but notably not black, the stereotyped hair color of Tamils), jeans, blazers and jackets, button-down shirts in bold colors, scarves, sunglasses, and leather shoes (photo 4.4).<sup>21</sup>

The dancers and the heroine (played by Shreya) are in hip-hop inspired clothing.



Photo 4.4 Seven of the eight Rajinikants in "Style" (Sivaji: The Boss [2007])

<sup>21</sup> Below is a description of the various Rajini *getups* in this song sequence (though note that some of the items are swapped in and out across shots). In his first *getup* Rajini is in jeans, a black button-down shirt with white trim, a pink leather blazer, aviator sunglasses, and a blond wig with straight hair. The second *getup* has Rajini in black shoes, dark blue jeans, black tee-shirt with print design, a black blazer with red scarf, black sunglasses, and a brown straight-haired wig with blond streaks. The next *getup* has Rajini in black shoes, an all white suit, black sunglasses, and straight-haired blond wig (with brown roots). The fourth costume is brown shoes, brown cargo pants with wallet chain, light pink shirt and matching scarf, brown camouflage jacket with patches, and dark brown, curly wig. Next comes light brown shoes, turquoise pants, white button-down shirt with orange sweater on top, sky blue leather jacket, light purple scarf, silver sunglasses, and a blond wig. Sixth is blue jeans, pink belt, green tee-shirt with print design, navy blue jacket with patches on it, pink scarf, and wavy brown wig and strip of facial hair running from his lower lip to his chin. Seventh, we have Rajini in light brown shoes, khaki pants, red shirt, orange cowboy style jacket, red-pinkish scarf, sunglasses, and a brown hair wig. The eight Rajini is in black shoes, dark bluejeans, white synthetic tee-shirt with star print, Formula 1 style racing jacket, blond wig, and sunglasses.

The hero and heroine dance in front of two groups of dancers: Caucasian dancers and dancers of African descent. Notably there are no Indians in either dance troupe. While the symbolism of black to white transition represented through black and white dancers is clearly, if not crudely, represented there is a more important point: the iconism of the transition operates *outside of* India. Both black and white represent exteriorities that Rajini dually has the status to appropriate. Indeed, it isn't a dark south Indian that represents blackness (a ripe reservoir for cultural meaning in Tamil cinema), but an African. And it isn't a light-skinned Indian (remember, the light-skinned heroine cited a lack of *matching* of skin color as the problem) but hyper-light skinned blond dancers that symbolizes the white. It isn't that he has moved from being darker to lighter, but that in the process he has appropriated the exterior, he has become an object of desire through co-opting that which is beyond India.

Indeed, the whole song's visuality operates on this principle. All the outfits are Western, *modern style* outfits (which also index the West through the brands displayed on the clothing: e.g., brand logos on the Formula 1 racecar style jacket) that have no indexical trace of India. The hyper-modern, almost surreal, architecture of the background is downright alien. It is a stark, empty, cold landscape of inorganic geometry, devoid of any signs of sociality: no people, no nature, only technology. (This technoaesthetic is itself reflected in one pair of sunglasses Rajini wears which have windshield wipers on them moving back and forth!)

This is compounded musically and lyrically. The song is a sluggish hip-hop beat of the down-South U.S. variety popular in the U.S. at the time of the film's release. Its angular samples of horn stabs, synthesized bass, programmed drums, and a call and

response introduction echoes contemporary rap music. The lyrics construct Rajini as the embodiment of *style*, and thus as an object of attraction: ‘your gait’s *style*, your smile is *style*, your speech is *style*’; ‘your *style* stirs it up, it attracts, it’s victorious’; ‘your *style* is hot to the touch, it’s thunderous action, it’s (your) often disheveled hair’; ‘everything you do is *style*’; ‘your *style* is for the children, for the youth, for the old.’

The song ends with an English rap: “Am I black or white? Does it really matter if I am black or white? This is me. This is you. This is what I’m telling you.” As the rap begins—questioning whether it matters if he is black or white (indeed, it doesn’t, it only matters if he is *style* and if this can justify his changing skin colors)—the different *getups* assemble together in the same frame in a frontal shot. Seven of his eight *getups* (minus the racing jacket Rajini) are lined up left to right facing the camera. The heroine is on the far right of the screen (photo 4.5). All of a sudden, all seven collapse from left to right and implode into the Rajini closest to the heroine. This trope of multiplicity-in-singularity diagrams not only status (as ‘more than’) but also Rajini’s ability to tie together so many diverse *styles* together coherently.



Photo 4.5 Seven Rajinikanths becoming one (“Style,” Sivaji: The Boss [2007])

At the end of the song, a ninth avatar approaches the hero and heroine. It is Rajinikanth in blackface, in all black clothing with long dreadlocks and sunglasses. It is a *style*-ized image of anti-status, of ugliness (photo 4.6).



Photo 4.6 Rajinikanth as style-ish anti-style (“Style,” Sivaji: The Boss [2007])

He has come to (comically) ogle the heroine and challenges Rajini, this white Tamilian in English, “Who do you think you are (doing such status-ful *style*)?” He is summarily sent off by the white Rajini in a *style*-ishly delivered and non-honorificating “*poo daa*” (‘get lost’). The white Rajini has successfully embodied the image of *style*. He has appropriated the image of the status-ful Other, he has sent off the image of the status-less Other, and has secured the attraction/love of the heroine. Note that this is appropriation and not an attempt to pass (hence his use of Tamil to send off the English-using impostor). It isn’t that he is a white person; but rather, as the lyrics state, that he is a ‘white Tamilian’ (*veLLai thamizhan*). No matter what his color is, he is ‘always completely Tamil’ (*eppoothum pachchai thamizhan*).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> He sings: “*appa than vechcha karuppee. ippoo than sekka sevappee. eppoothum pachchai thamizhan. ippoo naan veLLai thamizhan*” ‘I was black then. Now I am bright white. I am always completely Tamil. Now I am (just) a white Tamilian.’

Rajini is *style* insofar as he is the agent who co-opts and instantiates this alternative scheme of value through fashion. This formulation is precisely how Rajini’s Madurai fans interpreted the song: ‘Rajinikanth can do all such *styles* because of his status and popularity (remember, the young and old alike love his *style*). Everything he does is *style*,’ no matter its source, its extravagance, its absurdity, its authenticity. As his fans explained, ‘he can do foreign *style* even better than foreigners. He is conversant in English, Tamil, Spanish, any language. Rajini can perform any kind of *style* because Rajini is (performatively) *style*. If he does it, it’s *style*.’ And yet he is still authentically a Tamil. He exists in both worlds. And again, this is possible because his *style* is underwritten by a more fundamental status such that any particular *style* can be done and then discarded after use without threatening his true being, his true identity as a Tamil, as a modest man of the people/peer group.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.5.7 Style as English

Rajini’s co-optation of the exterior and the status-ful extends beyond the body into his speech as well. Taking again the song “*Style*” from *Sivaji* (2007), we can easily see how the lyrics diagram Rajini’s appropriation of exteriority through code-mixing between English and Tamil, and code-switching between Tamil and English. For example, consider the introduction to the song:<sup>24</sup>

Give me one time style yeah . . .

Give me one time style yeah . . .

Give me two time style yeah . . .

Give me two time style yeah . . .

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, that Rajinikanth is neither ethnically Tamil nor from Tamil Nadu isn’t a problem for audiences who have come to accept him as a Tamil (see Rajanayakam 2002: 241 for discussion).

<sup>24</sup> I have *italicized* the Tamil words in the quotation and left the English words unitalicized; in the gloss I have underlined the Tamil words that are glossed and the glosses of those words.

Give me three time somethin' . . .

Give me three time somethin' . . .

<Music kicks in.>

oru koodai sunlight

A pot of sunlight

oru koodai moonlight

A pot of moonlight

onRaaga seeththa color thaanee en white.

My white is the color of them combined.

Here we see code-switching—from English to Tamil—followed by code-mixing English noun phrases into Tamil sentence structures.

Rajini's relationship to English, however, is ambivalent. As far as English is concerned, he plays both sides: *style* for status-ful effect and *over style* for comic effect. Indeed, broken English is sometimes termed "Rajini English" by youth due to Rajini's successful comedic use of English disfluency in depicting (failed) status-raising. Such comedy is perhaps best captured by the following scene from *Veelaikkaaran* (1987). In this famous scene Rajini is a recent arrival from the countryside to the big city. At a job interview he is asked if he can managed in English. His comic sidekick jumps in (in Tamil): 'how can you expect him to speak in English when he just arrived from the village?' At this point Rajini begins his memorable dialogue (the first line was often quoted to me by students, or deployed by students to tease each other):

<to the sidekick:> "Shut up! I can talk English, I can walk English, I can laugh English you bloody fellow! <to the interviewer:> Waya puri in Tamil becomes vaay puri in English and bhel puri in Hindi. Sir, English is a very funny <pronounced "punny"> language sir. But fine and the Tamil language as well, you know how? English is the passion of the nation. It's a consideration, a conjunction become injunction and injunction become irritations. Frustration and temptations come up for all nations. Because conditions become corporations become premonitions. That's why fiction deserves in collusion, diffusion,

destruction, demonstration, declaration, desolation, depression, deliberation, and decoction.”

What is interesting about this clip is that while it pokes fun at the (rural) upwardly mobile and parodies Rajini as a status impostor through his schizophrenic word salad, it still demonstrates him as a successful candidate as he gets the job. English here is a kind of mystic tongue (the audience would understand only a fraction of what he is saying; indeed, it took me many attempts to understand his super fast delivery). But it is wielded successfully by Rajini nonetheless.

Rajini’s *style* dialogues also deploy English as a serious marker of status. Such usages tend to be, just as they are with young men’s use of English as *style* in their peer groups, at the beginning or ends of his dialogues, in greetings or departures, as glosses of something said immediately before or after in Tamil, or in single lexical items deployed without any denotational content (e.g., “cool” from *Sivaji* [2007]).

For example, in *Baadshaa* (1995) Baadshaa confronts the police for their inability and unwillingness, due to their fear, to confront Anthony. When he arrives the police ask him to sit. He replies in English, “No no no, thank you very much . . . .” He then switches into Tamil to explain how bad Anthony is, how the police have done nothing, and how he, Baadshaa, has only tried to do good. He switches gears into a *punch dialogue* in Tamil. Before leaving he again switches to English: <with an echo effect to the English> “Okay? Bye <waves>. Bye!” Here we see the use of English for the interactional moves at the beginning and the end of the dialogue.

In *Padaiyappa* (1999) Rajini goes into a long lecture in Tamil, scolding the female villain for her arrogance and quick temper. Having given his philosophy on gender



relations, he tilts head and menacingly smiles with raised eyebrows. He then switches into a rapidfire delivery English, demonstrating his mastery over the language of status and exteriority: “You know one thing? Anger is the cause of all miseries. One should know how to control it. Otherwise, life will become miserable. Try to understand that.” He starts to walk off, but then comes back and roughly glosses his philosophy in Tamil: “Last but not least: *athika aasai paNRa ambilleyum athika koobappadRa pombleyum nalla vaazhnthathaa sariththanam kedeyaathu.*” (“There is no instance of a man who desires too much and a woman who gets too angry living happily”). Having glossed his philosophy, he raises his hand and gives a *style* salute along with the swoosh sound effect. He says “Bye” and walks off to horn fanfare, in slow motion walking toward the camera, head down in his *style* gait.

### 3.5.8 *Status-raising and -leveling*

In this section, I show how the construction of Rajini’s *style* also iconically reflects the peer group dynamics of status-raising and -leveling. We noted in the discussion of *Baadshaa* (1995) that Rajini’s films often increase the tension and excitement in *seeing* him initially perform his *style* through prior moments of status-lowering. His characters are often constructed at first as humble, respectful, even afraid. It’s only through others that his inherent status is made to come out. This, of course, is an indication of his modesty: he takes no pleasure in status-raising, but it must be done. It isn’t under his own agency, and thus he can’t be accused of boasting.

This is compounded in that before Rajini’s characters begin their performances of *style* (in particular, self-status-raising *punch dialogues*) they have already been

constructed as men of status and *style* by those around them. To take an example from *Sivaji* (2007), the heroine’s neighbor extols him as a humble man: ‘Look at his eyes, man!’ (“*avanooda kaNNu paaru ayyaa*”). Cut to Sivaji looking at the camera smiling. The neighbor says: ‘Look at his skin color, man’ (“*avanooda color-a paaru ayya*”). Cut to Sivaji flipping a piece of gum into his mouth, cut to onlookers looking amazed. The neighbor says: ‘Look at his *style*, man! . . . Who in Tamil Nadu would say that they don’t like him having seen him?’ (“*avanooda style-e paaru ayyaa. . . . avane paaththu thamizh naaddile pidikkale NNu evanoo soluvaar ayya?*”). At this moment Sivaji protests that he is lauding him too much. The neighbor replies: ‘Look at that, man, he’s a person who doesn’t even like being praised!’ (“*paaru ayya, pukazhchchi pudikkaathavan ayya!*”)

There are at least three functions at play here: the first is to maximize Rajini’s status-raising through leveling it. The trope of humble origins, as well as comedy segments which poke fun at Rajini’s status, act to lower his status, only to raise it later with greater effect. Second, such a construction—in particular, the exteriorization of his own status-raising through testimonials and the reactions of others to him—acts to preemptively ratify his *style* as authentic, as legitimate, as acceptable and not to be derided as *over* or absurd.<sup>25</sup> It paves the way, as it were, for accepting Rajini as someone who has enough status to perform such *style* and (pre-)ratifies such performance once it’s done. Through these mechanisms Rajini’s status becomes an undisputed fact within the diegesis. Third, this construction reaches outside of the text to construct Rajini himself as a humble person, as a man of the people, as an ordinary person. Indeed, Rajini’s popularity partially hinges on the fact that in terms of ascribed status markers he is deficient: he isn’t

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<sup>25</sup> Rajanayakam’s (2002: ch. 4) discussion of this provides many more examples of this more general point: Rajini’s status is raised before he even raises it himself.

white skinned, proportionally built, or conventionally beautiful (like MGR) (see Rajanayakam 2002 for a thorough discussion of this). Moreover, he comes from the modest background of being a former bus conductor. (I return to this point later in chapter 5.)

In short, Rajini's characters are always presented as both ordinary and extra-ordinary, as part of the community of peers, but somehow apart from it (see Rajanayakam 2002: 144–173). However, his being superior to his peers is never presented in a way that is excessive to his status, never more than necessary, never showing off, never arrogant. One interesting phenomenon that Rajanayakam (2002) points out in his notion of “liminal spurts” is that Rajini's status-raising (what he calls “elitising”<sup>26</sup>) is often coterminous with his status-leveling (what he calls “sub-alternising”). For example, Rajini often does his *style* with a beedi (a cheaper cigarette smoked by the working class) or a cigar (associated with rural areas) rather than the relatively more costly cigarette; or, while dressed as an ordinary milkman in *Annamalai* (1992), he wears a pair of sneakers (a sign of status). That is, there is a compulsive performance of difference through sameness (and vice versa) through co-occurring signs of status-raising and -leveling. This is, as we saw in our discussion of peer groups, precisely the double motion of the peer group toward individuation and inclusion, of status-raising and status-leveling.

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<sup>26</sup> One issue with Rajanayakam's (2002) account is that he wants to exclusively associate *style* with the elites. Thus, doing *style* isn't only status-raising, but “elitising.” There are a number of limitations to this. First, Rajanayakam has no clear account of *style* precisely because he explains it away as “gimmicks” which somehow attract viewers (presumably due to its inherent attractiveness). Second, it isn't clear that *style* is necessarily something only linked to elites, though it certainly often is. This exposes a more general telescoping in Rajanayakam's discussion: he is only interested in MGR and Rajini's image construction as emblems of class-relations as they play out in the political realm, and takes no consideration of *age* as a relevant factor (cf. the critique of Prasad 1998 in Nakassis and Dean 2007, fn. 21).

### 3.5.9 *Style as a life stage, as temporary*

In Rajini's films, while reality has itself been altered by his *style* (the villains vanquished, *dharma* restored), at the end of the film he either returns to his previous state of non-*style* or becomes a literal *periya aaL* (e.g., he finishes *Padaiyappa* [1999] and *Annamalai* [1992] as an old man; in the latter he returns to his lowly milkman status at the end of the film; he gets married at the end of *Baadshaa* [1995] as the ordinary Manikkam; he finishes *Muththu* [1995], where he plays a double role, just as he started: as a lowly servant and an elderly renouncer). While the hero-star is exterior and transgressive, he ultimately moves beyond, renounces, or suspends his youth status.

That is, Rajini's characters' construction as antihero vis-à-vis his bad habits (e.g., he smokes, he drinks, he filanders, he loves), vigilantism (i.e., he works against and above the law), occupation (e.g., as a *rowdy*), and his social background (e.g., as poor, as an immigrant; Rajanayakam 2002: 241) places him outside of 'society.' However, Rajini doesn't only inhabit the periphery. His characters move back into 'society' at the ends of his films. What is important to note, however, is that such moves back into 'society' are from a position of exteriority where Rajini's return is to a 'society' changed because of his intervention. In effect, 'society' and its authority have been reappropriated as his island of authority. Further, whenever he moves back into 'society' his expressions of *style* are diminished and muted.

One reason for the suspension of *style* at the end of Rajini's films—especially his older films—is that the Rajini audience is mixed and includes adults. A second reason is that it constructs Rajini as humble, modest, and one of the people. *Style* is inside him always, but need not be expressed unless there is a foe to be vanquished. Otherwise he is

a man of the people, a commoner just like you and me. The third issue evoked by this renouncement of *style* is the idea that *style* is a kind of disguise, something ephemeral, a temporary artifice to raise status for someone who is liminal. The hero-star is a vehicle to change the world through efficacious status-raising. At the end of this, however, *style* is used up and made unnecessary. It can be stored away until the next film. Thus, for example, at the end of *Annamalai* (1992) Rajini sings the first song from the film about being a milkman and tells everyone that being a millionaire (which he only became to get revenge on the rich villains) was a ‘disguise.’ At the core he was always the same guy, a milkman: “*ithu thaan permanent. maththellaam temporary*” ‘This [being a milkman] is what is permanent. Everything else is temporary.’ Similarly, recall the song “*Style*” from *Sivaji* (2007) where Rajini becomes a white man as the ultimate expression of his *style*. When he finds out, however, that the heroine doesn’t want him to be white at all, he immediately washes off his “*veesham*” (‘disguise’).

Note, then, that the filmic concept of *style* is just like youth’s own understandings of their age as temporally transitional and in between. For both Rajini and youth more generally, *style* is a surface to be played with, a tool of temporary appropriation, and itself must be negated at the correct time. With age one moves on from relative youth status to objective adult status: going ‘into’ ‘society’ and becoming a *periya aaL* with adult responsibilities, duties, and signs of status. And indeed, in Rajini’s films the characters never really overthrow the social system. Rather, they co-opt authority, move up the social ladder, and displace evil (Rajanayakam 2002: 180). This parallels, in fact, youth’s own experience of youth *not* as rebellion but as transgression; not as overthrowing social relations, but as creating spaces exterior to them.

### 3.5.10 Summary

I have argued that Rajinikanth's filmic image *qua* hero-star and the narratives that construct that image are, at core, stories about youth status negotiation, and need not be read as only political vehicles (*pace* Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993a, b; Rajanayakam 2002). In particular, they are about *style* as the outward expression of status. I showed that while, on the one hand, *style* is something particular to Rajinikanth (as a set of mannerisms, dialogues, stereotyped signs associated with him alone), *style* is also iconic with the more general notion of status among youth which is itself an icon of 'youth' itself, and thus not particular to Rajinikanth at all. I argued this by showing how Rajini's *style* is constructed as: (a) visual and individuating; (b) exterior to 'society' and 'culture'; (c) transgressive of established norms in content (Rajini's characters break the rules), in form (the conventions of the Rajini film themselves are a deviation from those established by MGR [see Rajanayakam 2002: 124–125]), and in 'real' life (Rajini's early "parallel text" was of a deviant youth); (d) co-opting signs of wealth and status; (e) diagramming the relative relationship of *periya aaL–chinna paiyan* figuratively through *style* and literally through fights (*geththu*); (f) caught up in the youth peer group dialectic of status-raising and -leveling; and (g) replicating the transitory status of 'youth' in the narrative's construction. In short, Rajini's *style* presents us with a hyperbolic image of 'youth' and its concepts of status. As we see below, this status construction contrasts with both the villain (as excessive status) and the comedian (as inappropriate status).

## 4. The villain and the comedian: Excessive and deficient status

### 4.1 Introduction

As I have argued, the hero-centered film moves through representations of status and its negotiation. But while the hero is the main emblem of status, he isn't the only one. The status negotiation and the *build up* of the hero's status require that other characters engage in status work as well. As I show in this section and the next, other main characters in the film—villains and comedians—are also emblems of status, though of a deformed sort.

In the case of the villain, this is because he is defined by and defines the hero through conflict. The narratological function of such conflict is to determine who is the *periyaaL* among them. For the comedian, there are two reasons why status and *style* are central to his character: (a) the comedian is often the sidekick, and thus his status work (status-mismatching or -lowering) serves to highlight and foreground the hero's status-raising; and (b) status-inversion and -mismatch in Tamil Nadu is itself a form of comedy entertainment (chapter 3, section 3.3.3).

## 4.2. *The villain*

### 4.2.1 *The villain as (not) status-ful (enough)*

In the hero-centric film the villain is a mirror image, if distorted, of the hero. Indeed, the construction of the villain is the same as that of the hero in all the films discussed so far, though not as elaborated. The villain dresses fashionably *style-ish*, grooms himself *style-ishly*, and is surrounded by *style-ish* objects.

For example, Marc Anthony in *Baadshaa* (1995) wears sunglasses, an earring, dresses in chic business suits, and has a hip mullet hair cut (*funk*). The female villain of *Padaiyappa* (1999), Neelambari, is often shown in *modern* dress: jeans, miniskirts,

leather boots, and sunglasses. One of the villains from *Annamalai* (1992) has a sculpted beard, bejeweled jacket (with matching pants), sunglasses, and cut-off leather gloves. More recently, the villain of Vijay's hit film *Pookkiri* (2006), Ali Bhai, is shown in fancy, shiny black suits, sunglasses, and leather jackets. Similarly, the remake of Rajini's *Billa* (2007) is all about the *style* of the villains (think the *Sivaji* [2007] song "Style" taken as a whole film): gangsters dressed in expensive, shimmering suits and reflective sunglasses living in the hyper-modern Kuala Lumpur with its sleek steel and glass aesthetics, shot in a cool blue color scheme.<sup>27</sup>

The villain is also transgressive of established norms and authority structures. He commits crimes and does evil malicious things as we saw with the scheming Marc Anthony of *Baadshah* (1995). He also partakes in youth status-raising rituals: he smokes, he drinks, and he loves (although illicitly, *kaLLaa kaathal*). The introduction of the villain of *Pookkiri* (2006) Ali Bhai shows him smoking a cigar and taking shots of tequila in a discothèque surrounded by beautiful and scantily clad women. The villain occupies exterior spaces: industrial hideouts, huge *modern* mansions, bars, and clubs.

In general, then, the villain's *style* rivals that of the hero in its exteriority, its transgressiveness, its visuality, its attractiveness to women, and its diagramming of difference. Indeed, his *style* verges on the extreme and excessive: *over style*. Remember that the most common reaction to youths who do too much *style*, especially by adults, is that they look like, or act like, *rowdies* (i.e., villains).

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<sup>27</sup> This was an intentional move by the filmmakers in order to create a hyper-modern *style*-ish backdrop that Tamil viewers never had seen before (Shah 2009). The filmmakers wanted the film itself to be *style* (it was a Rajini remake after all), but in a contemporary idiom.



The villains in hero-oriented Tamil cinema also have their own *style*-ish dialogues accompanied by individuating status-raising mannerisms (finger pointing, removing/putting on sunglasses, crossing the legs). Above we saw some of the dialogues of Marc Anthony from *Baadshaa* (1995) and his characteristic *styles*: his low voice, his third-person introductions (“Anthony, Marc Anthony”), and his taunts. Similarly as we saw above, the villain of *Annamalai* (1992) has his own *punch dialogue* that he deploys: “*kuuddi kalichchu kaNakku sariyaa irukkum/varum*” ‘If you add and subtract (it), the calculations will be right/correct.’ Pragmatically, the villain’s dialogues are used in the same ways and places as the hero’s: before some status-raising activity (e.g., fighting or embarking on some status-raising project) or after it succeeds.

Similar tropes of status-raising are also deployed. Swearing revenge, the female villain of *Padaiyappa* (1992) status-raises through the same DEMONSTRATIVE + PROPER NAME construction as the hero: “*intha Neelambari nenechcaa, nichchiyamaa mudiyum*” (‘If this Neelambari thinks it, it’s definitely possible’). She snaps her fingers, swearing not to take off her anklets until she gets her revenge. She says ‘This is definite, man’ (“*ithu saththiyam daa*”), and then slams her hand into a glass table and breaks it. Her hand bleeding, she repeats: “*ithu saththiyam,*” closing her fist on the glass. Villains also speak English in their dialogues. For example, in *Annamalai* (1992), one of sub-villain’s only dialogues is the English sentence “I am a bad man.”

Like the hero’s *style*, the villain’s *style* moves between the serious and the ridiculous. Marc Anthony’s character straddles this line. His unique mannerisms evinced laughs from students, but also were part of the serious construction of him as a foe to be reckoned with. Fighting is also central to the villain’s *style*, and the villain’s fighting skill

rivals the hero's. He can vanquish his foes with a single blow, causing them to fly off into the distance, at times even the gaining the upper hand on the hero. He is a strong, dangerous, masculine man, ruthless and fierce in his fighting abilities.

In terms of the camera treatment of the villain and sound effects, it is the same as the hero: swoosh sound effects emphasize the villain's *style*; multiple camera shots of the same action act as tropes of status; slow motion and sped up shots act as tropes of strength and speed; and frontal bust shots and closeups of the eyes and face individuate and make the villain visible. Like the hero, the villain is *style*.

#### 4.2.2 *Excessive status: Villain is never humble, only humbled*

As we have seen, the hero and the villain's status is similarly constructed and represented. So what is the difference, then, between the hero and the villain?

First, in an earlier filmic idiom which still carries weight today (though less and less; see section 4.4 for more discussion), the hero occupies a higher moral ground than the villain. The villain is ruthless and sadistic, while the hero is righteous and just.

Second, the villain is never humble until humbled. He is arrogant. He engages in none of the status-leveling which the hero does. While status-ful, he inspires no hope in those around him, he isn't liked or admired because he is arrogant. For example, while speaking-for-the villain is a common trope of status-raising, such speech never valorizes the villain except to highlight his power and strength. Indeed, it often casts the villain as unjust or arrogant. For example, in *Padaiyappa* (1999), the hero's friends comment on the female villain. Saying that she studied abroad, they categorize her thusly: "*enna thimiru, enna banthaa, enna style-u*" 'what arrogance, what showing off, what *style*.'

They continue to say, 'Didn't you see her come in car? She came from studying abroad in a plane, and the car came in a boat.' Here speaking-for-the-villain status-raises, but figures such status not as appropriate but excessive and arrogant. She has *style* (and its commodity trappings), but it's too much. She is arrogant, her *style* is *over*.

Third, the villain is an obstacle to the hero. By definition, then, the villain's status and *style* must be made subservient to the hero's. While the villain is the hero's double, (s)he must be outdone in *style*, his/her status must be appropriated, and finally (s)he must be vanquished physically (or made to reform and repent). Ultimately the issue of the villain and the hero comes down the question of *style* and *geththu*: who is the *periya aaL*, symbolically and literally? It's the play between dominance through *style* and dominance through fighting that characterizes the narrativization of status in such films. Indeed, it's the bombastic villain which gives the hero an occasion to rise to, and thus brings out his status. It's only the status-ful villain that can reveal the true strength and *style* of the hero. Moreover, without such provocation, the hero's displays of status would smack of arrogance. It is, in fact, the figurement of the hero as modest and reluctant to status-raise coupled with the excessively status-raising villain who elicits the hero's extreme status-ful acts that makes the hero an appropriate emblem for youth status.

#### 4.2.3 Example: Symbolic status negotiation in *Padaiyappa* (1999)

Take the hero-villain encounters in the film *Padaiyappa* (1999). In *Padaiyappa*, the main villain, Neelambari, is an arrogant, Western educated woman who initially wants Padaiyappa (played by Rajinikanth) romantically. (She is also his cross-cousin and thus a potential/preferred marriage candidate.) When she can't have him and he marries her

servant (a doubly humiliating situation for her), she swears revenge. This quest is expressed in the film through negotiations of status between Padaiyappa and Neelambari, through a back and forth to determine who the *periya aaL* is.

In one famous scene Padaiyappa goes to her wealthy home. She has taken out all of the furniture from the house. Padaiyappa enters. Cut to a low shot of her coming down the stairs (a common trope of status difference, as we saw in *Baadshaa* [1995]). She snaps her finger and a servant brings her a chair. She sits in front of Rajini, another diagram of status difference, forcing him to stand in front of her. She crosses her legs slowly, the sole of her foot passing right in front of the camera, taking up most of the screen.<sup>28</sup> She then gives him a *style* salute with a flourish of the hand (accompanied by a swoosh sound effect). Her head is cocked to one side, slightly pointed down, her eye gaze slightly looking up in a similar posture of *style* assumed by Rajini in many films. Her first moves of *style* have diagrammed her symbolic domination of Padaiyappa through co-opting his *style*.

Padaiyappa replies by pulling off his scarf and flipping it up into the air with a swoosh sound effect (throwing the scarf onto the shoulder is a recurrent *style* of the film), then grabbing a swing as if out of nowhere (it's out of the frame, presumably tied up to the ceiling) and pulls it down in a slow motion shot. The scarf lands on his shoulder and he takes a seat across from her. His theme music kicks in. He crosses his legs slowly, deliberately. He puts his hand on his knee, assuming the most circulated image from this film, sitting majestically like a king. He then gives his *style* salute. She ratifies his *style*,

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<sup>28</sup> Note that not only is sitting down while others stand indicative of higher status, but the foot, and the sole of the foot in particular, is extremely status-lowering to others: thus, for example, one throws one's shoe to humiliate another and one worships God by falling at his feet.

saying ‘my electric dear, you know why everyone likes you? Even though you have aged, your *style* and beauty haven’t left you’ (“*minsara kaNNaa. ellaarukkum een pidichchu irukku NNu unakku theriyumaa? vayasu aanaalum un styleyum azhakum innum unne viddu poogale*”). He replies: “‘Thank you, thank you.’ It was with me when I was born. It will never leave me’ (“Thank you, thank you. *kuudavee poRanthathu. ennikkum poogathee*”). Padaiyappa 1, Neelambari 0.

And yet, it does leave him, as well see in a later encounter. The villain has pulled off her first victory: she reveals that she has gotten his daughter to fall in love with her nephew, only to force her nephew to stand her up at the alter, breaking her heart. She rubs it in Padaiyappa’s face through the co-opting of his *punch dialogue* and his *style*. She says to him: ‘You often say, my way is a unique way (“*en vazhi thani vazhi*”). Neelambari’s way is also unique. From now on your activities won’t cross me.’ While repeating his words back to him, Neelambari holds out her hand in a fist, with the thumb pointing up moving from left to right in Rajini’s characteristic *style*. When Padaiyappa tries to *style*-ishly throw his scarf onto his shoulder he misses. She says, ‘this is the first time in your life it’s slipped off, huh’? Here the failure of *style* diagrams her victory, her superior status, her (temporarily) being the *periya aaL*. He is unable to do *style* in front of her. Padaiyappa 1, Neelambari 1.

In the final showdown, however, Padaiyappa’s *style* comes out on top. Padaiyappa has determined that her nephew was only pretending not to love his daughter. He didn’t say anything out of fear of his aunt and politician father. Padaiyappa shows up at the nephew’s wedding day (the aunt has arranged for him to marry someone else) with literally thousands of people as support. Padaiyappa and his army and Neelambari and the

wedding party stand opposite each other. The nephew reveals that he does love Padaiyappa's daughter. Padaiyappa walks across the divide to take him to marry his daughter and starts to leave. Then, he dramatically turns around (with swoosh sound effect). Standing next to the villain, Rajini looks at her with head tilted down and eyes up, while she stares forward. He has won, and his eye gaze is direct, while hers is defeated, in avoidance. He gives a dialogue: 'I think that now you are remembering the drama that you conducted when you cheated my daughter right at the moment that that the *thaali*<sup>29</sup> was supposed to be tied. You won once. It's a good thing it happened. I woke up. Now I think you understand' ("*thaali kaddi veeNdiya neeraththile en magaLe eemaaththi nee nadaththina naadagam ippoo unakku njaabagam varum NNu nenekkiReen. oru thadave nee jeeychchidde. nalla than poochchu. naan muzhichchiddeen. ippaavathu unakku purinjchi irukkum NNu nenekkiReen*"). That is, she understands that he is superior to her, he is the *periya aaL*. She understands this not only because he was able to conduct the marriage as he had planned, but because his *style* is back. Grave sounding strings enter. The camera cuts to a low shot of just the villain and Padaiyappa. Her arms are crossed, her eyes finally looking at him, ratifying what she knows will now happen, he will symbolically diagram his return to dominance through his *style*. His hand flashes up, cocked and ready to deliver his *punch dialogue*: 'My way is a unique way' <his index finger moves up and down>. Better don't come in my way' <his finger moves from left and right> ("*en vazhi, thani vazhi. Better don't come in my way*"). He gives a *style* salute, smiles at the applauding crowd behind him and walks off toward the camera. Padaiyappa is back, and so is his *style*.

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<sup>29</sup> Tamil marriage ceremonies center on the tying of the thali (a string) around the bride's neck.

#### 4.2.4 Summary

The filmic image of the villain, and the *rowdy* more generally, is as that of excessive *style* plus *geththu* (itself expressed in acts of *style*). The villain's *style*, however, is not commensurate with his/her status, and this is revealed when the hero puts the villain in his/her place. This reflects, again, the status-economy of the youth peer group: those who transgress too much, who boast too much, who attempt to dominate too much, must be taken down a peg. There is a pleasure, then, in seeing the hero (who, remember, always partakes as a member of the peer group as well as apart from it) put the villain (the individual who pays no heed to the peer group and purely attempts to status-raise) in his/her place.<sup>30</sup>

In short, *style* is the *raison d'être* of the villain insofar as the hero is defined by the economy of *style*. A villain who does no *style* gives no pleasure to the audience. (S)he isn't a villain at all. As it became clear from talking with youth about film, they expect that the villain will project his/her status via *style* to the maximum, because only then can the expression of pure *style* sans society's norms of morality be relished as an object of pleasure in its own right. Moreover, only then can it provoke the hero into even more over-the-top expressions of *style*. The villain's excessive *style* makes it necessary for the hero to engage in even more extreme expressions of *style* while allowing the hero to maintain his status as justified and not arrogant.

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<sup>30</sup> This is also why the other alternate fate of the villain is to reform and recognize the authority of the hero (i.e., self-figure him/herself as a *chinna paiyan*). It is not enough for the hero to achieve his goal and resolve the film's conflict. The villain must be explicitly ranked as subservient to the hero and his norms of authority.

While the hero diagrams the experience of youth status as a push and pull of status-raising and -leveling, the villain diagrams the individual who only attempts to status-raise. This is why the villain is simultaneously an object of pleasure for audiences *and* an object of derision.

#### 4.3. *The comedian*

##### 4.3.1 *The comedian as mismatched status*

If the hero is the emblem of reasonable *style* (*style* backed up by status and acceptable to others) and the villain is the emblem of excessive *style* (too much *style* for his/her status and unacceptable to others), then the comedian in hero-centered films presents us with an emblem of inverted or mismatched status. Like the villain, when the comedian does *style* it's too much for his status. But unlike the villain whose status inevitably does not quite get to the level of the hero (in fact, it is *post hoc*, in contrast to the hero that the villain's status is ratified as excessive), the comedian's status-raising attempts don't even pass muster as status-ful in the first instance. Thus, often the comedian's status-raising attempts reflexively meta-communicate their deficiency in the acts themselves. As such, the comedian's performances of status do not entail status. Rather, they diagram anti-status, often by merely 'reporting' or tropically re-presenting emblems of status.

The comedian—more precisely, the buffoon (cf. Seizer 2005)—has little to no *style*, he has no masculinity, he has no *geththu*. In this he differs from the villain who does have status and *geththu*, just not as much as the hero. Thus, when the comedian performs *style*, when he projects masculinity and status, it is ridiculous and absurd. For example, the popular comedian Vadiveelu's ridiculous mustache in films like *Maruthamalai* (2007)



and *Imsai Aran 23-am Pulikeesi* (2006) are a clear diagram of this absurd masculinity as comedy (photo 4.7). In the photo from *Maruthamalai* (2007, right) compare the mustaches of the hero, which is appropriately masculine, to Vadiveelu's hyperbolic and comic mustache (not to mention fake looking, thereby meta-communicating that this is comedy).



Photo 4.7 Vadiveelu's humorous mustaches: *Pulikeesi* (2006, left) and *Maruthamalai* (2007, right)

The comedian's status-raising is comic because it is a status-mismatch. We know that the comedian doesn't have the status to back up his status-raising moves. And when he gets put in his place, often by those of low status (women, children, average working-class people on the street), the comic effect is produced. The comedian, then, offers us an image of deficient status. This isn't to say that the comedian has no other comic appeal. Physical comedy, double entendre and word play, satire, and situational comedy are all aspects of comedy in Tamil films. What is most interesting from the point of view of this chapter, however, is that comedy in hero-centered Tamil films largely does its work through status-mismatches in failed performances of *style*.

As we see below, the comedian is largely defined through his relationship with the hero. This happens in two ways: through situations where the comedian acts like a hero, a

man of *style* but is revealed not to be; or through parodying the image of the hero. In the latter case there is a double voicing: there is the mismatch of status—we know that the comedian is no hero and to see him act like one is ridiculous—and layered on top of that the voice of parody—his status-mismatch is a reflexive and inter-discursive performance (and thus there is a knowing wink involved). In such comedy it is the image of the hero, and status itself, that is being made fun of as ridiculous even as such comedy more often than not acts to *build up* the status of the hero.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4.3.2 *Revealing the buffoon*

In *Annamalai* (1992) much of the comedy is created through the character Panju's use of English. We know it to be anomalous given his status within the narrative—he isn't the hero Annamalai and he is the owner of the local tea shop (a low-status job)—and outside the narrative—Janagaraj is a well-known comedian in many films. Panju's recurrent comedy is his insistence on using English even though he isn't fluent and even though it is interactionally unnecessary. In an early scene in the film Panju is sitting at the tea stall reading the English newspaper and explaining it, wrongly, to the guys hanging out. He sits in the middle of the group, and his manner (e.g., his pedantic hand gestures and his use of rhetorical questions 'do you know what X means?') indexes him as a kind of *vaaththiyaar* 'teacher,' a position of high status in rural Tamil Nadu. His tone of voice is patronizing and exaggerated and slow in delivery, ambiguous between his inability to read and his perception of his interlocutors' inability to parse English.

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<sup>31</sup> It is, of course, debatable whether these two categories are different in kind. Indeed, the first case only works through the implicit image of the hero as status-ful and the construction of the comedian as not (cf. the villain). The second case, then, is the case where the image of the hero is more explicitly inter-discursive and thus viewers have more grounds to impute a level of reflexive awareness to the comedian as part of their interpretation.

Panju: Today's News. Minister files complain(t).

Minister files complain(t) *NNaa enna arththam theriyumaa?* Minister-ukku *muule viyaathi NNu arththam. muule viyaathiye vechchukkiddu ivanungka velaikki een poogaNum NNu keekReen. aduthathu padikkiReen.*

Following of the railway concession.

Concessions *NNaa*, church-*le* father *irukkaan. udkaarnthu mannippu koduppaangkoo.*

*vaa Annamalai!* Good morning Brother Mountain!

Annamalai: *vaNakkam.*

P: It's okay.

Cricket news *padikkiReen. keeLu. Gavaskar* clean bowl. Clean bowled *NNaa vanthu appadiyee panthu paaru. gup NNu pudikkiRaan. athu thaan*

<reading the headline:>

Panju: Today's News. Minister files complain(t).

<He doesn't pronounce the final "t" sound.>

<to the overhearers:>

Do you know what "minister files complain(t)" means? It means the minister has piles. What I'm asking is, why should these guys go to work if they have got piles? I'll read the next one.

<reading the headline:>

Following of the railway concession.

<to the overhearers:>

Concessions means in the church there is the father. You sit down and they give forgiveness.

<Annamalai comes and sits. To Annamalai:>

Come Annamalai! Good morning Brother Mountain!

<Annamalai stands up.>

Annamalai: Greetings.

<Hands folded at chest in *vaNakkam* gesture.>

P: It's okay. <laughs>

<Annamalai sits back down.>

I'm gonna read the cricket news. Listen. Gavaskar clean bowl. Clean bowled means, he comes and catches the ball just like that. That is why it's called clean bowled.

cleaned bowled *NNu peeru*.

While the comedian is ostensibly status-raising through his *style*-ish language use, which also figures him as the teacher to his listeners (thus figured as students and *chinna pasangka*), there are clear signs that he doesn't know English well. His reading is slow and verging on stuttering. Second, his translations and pronunciation are wrong. He confuses "files" with "piles" (Tamil doesn't distinguish /f/ and /p/.). He confuses "confessions" with "concessions." And he gets "bowled clean" backwards (it has to do with pitching the ball, not catching it.) Moreover, his translation of the proper name Annamalai into its literal gloss 'Brother Mountain' is ridiculous.

There are other ways that he is (comically) status-raised. When Annamalai first comes he sits down. When Panju greets him, Annamalai rises from his seated position and comports his body to deferentially greet Panju. Panju ratifies this diagram of status with his "It's okay," that is, 'you do not have to stand for me,' exercising his right as the presumed higher status person to dispense with the formalities. This diagramming of unequal status is comic because it's a status-mismatch; the audience recognizes Annamalai (and Rajini) as a higher status character (and person in real life) than Panju.

The comedy continues when a white tourist (as indexed by the camera around his neck) comes and sits.

Panju: Hiii!

Tea worker: *veLLaikkaara saami, enna saapiduReyee?*

P.: *Eey! unakku avankidde peesuRathukku*

Panju: Hiii! <in singsong prosody; waves>

Tea worker: White 'guy' (*saami*, lit. 'god'; address term for priest), what are you (-hon.) eating?

P: <to the tea worker:>Hey! You don't

*thaguthiyee kedeyaathu.*  
*naayee! nee poo uLLoo!*

*Eey! nee enna udkaarntukkiRe?*  
*naaLaikki sappida vaa. pooyyaa!*

Disgruntled customer: *aamaa uurleyee tea*  
*vechchirukkaan.*

P: Hi. Hello. My name is Mr. Panj.

White guy: Nice to meet you. I'm Mr. Pim.

P: Hi Mr. Pim. And now I am going to  
explain you what are all the foods we are  
having. Rice cake. And spicy vada.

And big sauce. In these what you like to  
have?

White guy: *oru masaala vada, oru chaiya,*  
*suudaana chaiya.*

Annamalai: uh, uh, Good morning.

P: uh, *vaNakkam.*

have the status/qualifications to even speak  
to him. You (-hon.) dog! Go inside!

<to the customer sitting next to the white  
guy:>

eey! And what are you (-hon.) doing sitting  
here? Come back tomorrow to eat. Get lost!

Disgruntled customer: <muttering> Right,  
only he has tea in the whole town.

P: Hi. Hello. My name is Mr. Panj.

White guy: Nice to meet you. I'm Mr. Pim.

Panju: Hi Mr. Pim. And now I am going to  
explain you what are all the foods we are  
having. Rice cake. And spicy vada.

<cut to Annamalai looking dubious>

And big sauce. In these what you like to  
have?

White guy: <in Tamil to the tea worker:>  
One masala vada, one tea, a hot tea.

<Comedy sound effect. Cut to Panju  
looking annoyed/angry. Annamalai comes  
over and sits next to him.>

Annamalai: uh, uh, Good morning.

P: uh, *vaNakkam.* <P.'s deportment is  
smaller. Rajini grabs him by the neck and  
shakes him.>

Panju, as the (supposed) *periyaa* of the group, attempts to monopolize  
conversation with this high-status individual (indexed by his race and his dress [a full  
suit]). When his midget tea worker asks the white tourist in non-honorificating, colloquial  
Tamil what he wants, Panju insults the worker. He doesn't have enough status to speak

with him. Moreover, the customer sitting next to the white tourist doesn't have enough status to sit next to him. This status differential is diagrammed by the code-switching from English (with the white man) to informal Tamil (with the worker and the customer). Panju begins to show off his English, only to be shocked that Mr. Pim speaks in fluid, colloquial Tamil. Moreover, Mr. Pim bypasses address to Panju and directly addresses the tea worker. That this is the punchline is indexed by the sound effect (a detuned harmonica) alongside a shot of Panju's annoyed/angry/shamed face. Here the comic effect is dual: first our expectations are broken, a white person speaking Tamil! (This mismatch provides no end of comic effect or wonderment to Tamils, as I found in my fieldwork.) Second, as someone who knows English and Tamil well, his Tamil shames Panju for his *excessive* use of English: it was unnecessary, exposing his vain attempts to status-raise. That his attempts to status-raise were never taken seriously by anyone is already indicated by the grumblings of the disgruntled customer and Annamalai's dubious looks. This is confirmed when Annamalai comes to sit next to Panju. Making fun of him, he says "Good morning" in English, reversing the earlier status differential with Rajini paying deference to Panju in Tamil, thereby lampooning his use of English. Panju ratifies being put in his place by his response in Tamil "*vaNakkam*," preceded by a tentative "uh" spoken with a shrunken body comportment indicating low status. Annamalai grabs him around the neck in a playful show of teasing dominance.

#### 4.3.3 *Parodying* geththu

Much of the comedy of Vadiveelu—one of the most popular comedians today—hinges on acting the buffoon through unwarranted status-raising (plus physical comedy).

In the film *Pookkiri* (2006) Vadiveelu has the ridiculous costume of a martial arts fight master, complete with hair knot on the top of his head. In his introductory scene Vadiveelu is conducting a martial arts class for the neighborhood children. From the get-go we know that Vadiveelu will project some *style* or *geththu* which he can't back up, as he does so in almost all his films. This is ratified by one of the kids who comments regarding Vadiveelu preparing to break a set of flaming wood blocks with his hands, 'He's been giving us a build up for the past three years' ("*muuNu varushamaa build up kodukkiRaaru*") 'but he still hasn't done anything.' Indeed, instead of breaking the blocks, he changes his mind and calls the heroine Shruthi to come, so that he may flirt with her and impress her with his status-raising masculinity. Shruthi's doesn't want to go, but also doesn't want him to come to her. This tells us that, indeed, he is somewhat of a pest, not the cool guy he thinks he is. 'I'll teach you martial arts,' he proclaims to the class. He calls for his assistant to bring him logs of wood, and gives one to Shruthi and one each to two young students. Cut to the mother of the family complaining about how annoying he is. (Note speaking-for-another as status-lowering the comedian.) He says to Shruthi and the students: 'immediately after I say "ready" attack me in any direction you want. Watch how I block the blows' ("*naan ready NNu sonna udanee entha direction veeNaalum attack paNNungka. athu eppadi thadukkiReen NNu watch paNNungka*"). He says "ready?" (i.e., are you ready for me to say "ready"?) and they all hit him in the head at the same time. He blocks nothing. Comic music kicks in as the camera cuts to a head shot of him in pain alongside bird and cuckoo sound effects. He says, 'This is what happens when you do something without a plan. You have to plan. OK <sounds like "Hookay">' ("*entha oru vishayaththeyum plan paNNaame paNNinaa ippadi thaan. plan*")

*paNNi paNNaNum*. OK”). As if it was not bad enough, upon his exit a bucket falls on his head. Here his attempts to show his *geththu* fail. His status-raising is ridiculed, and this no less by low-status women and children.

#### 4.3.4 *Building up the hero through mismatched status*

What is interesting is how the comedian’s failed attempts to act the *periya aaL* diagram a form of anti-status, or anti-*style*. And the more ridiculous and absurd the mismatch between actual and projected status the more the comic effect is. While this kind of comedy provides its own pleasure, more often than not it functions to *build up* the hero (or the villain).

Take a comedy sequence out of *Padaiyappa* (1999) for example. In this sequence the fat, dark-skinned comedian is going along with his friends to meet his future wife. For this important day, he is supposed to be the center of attention, and thus he makes everyone walk behind him (including the hero Padaiyappa). The other guys say that it’s embarrassing to have to walk behind him, thus status-leveling him as he attempts to project his status-differential. Padaiyappa defends him (thus status-leveling himself in ratifying the comedian’s status-raising): ‘today he is going to see his fiancée (for the marriage fixing). It’s his day to be the “hero,” so leave him be.’ Dressed in all-white traditional clothing, the comic says, ‘If Padaiyappa is the man of power, then Azhegesan [the comic] is the man of beauty’ (“Padaiyappa man of the power *NNaa*, Azhegesan man of the beauty”).<sup>32</sup> Using the same third-person trope of status, as well as English (the only

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<sup>32</sup> The name Padaiyappa has as its root *padai* ‘army,’ and Azhagesan *azhagu* ‘beauty.’



Tamil lexical item, besides the proper names is the conditional marker *NNaa*), the comic again status-raises.

Immediately after this status-raising, the comic trips and falls into the mud, status-leveling him. His clothes sullied, everyone starts laughing at him. Though Padaiyappa doesn't want to, he is guilted into switching dress with the comic. Now the friend is dressed in very *style*-ish clothes and Padaiyappa in traditionally status-ful clothing. The punchline of the comedy is how villagers repeatedly come up to them and treat Padaiyappa as if he is the groom (remember, now he is wearing the traditional garb). In each instance, Padaiyappa retorts, 'No, he is the groom, but he is wearing my clothes.' Each villager in turn says, 'oh, that's why he looks good.' The comedy revolves around: (a) the fact that the comedian's attempts to status-raise are thwarted; and (b) the fact that everyone—even old, uneducated country women—find the *style*-ish dress more appropriate for Padaiyappa but anomalous for the comedian. In both interpretations Padaiyappa is figured as a high-status individual (as the groom, as a person befitting *style*). In the end it's the hero's *style* which is ratified as authentic and appropriate and the comedian's attempts to status-raise through *style* which are repeatedly questioned and then explained away. Here the comedy functions to ratify the hero's status and to provide entertainment.

#### 4.3.5 *Parodying the hero*

Another comic usage of *style* by the comedian is the self-conscious parody of the hero. This is done through inter-discursive re-animation of the hero. This usage can be found in an increasing number of youth-oriented films (e.g., *Chennai-600028* [2007];

*Saroja* [2008]; *Padikkaathavan* [2009]; *Goa* [2010], *Thamizh Padam* [2010]). Here the comedy stems from: (a) the performance of hero-esque *style* by someone who isn't a hero; and more importantly (b) through the parody of particular heroes (by replicating their distinctive *styles*) and thus by making light of hero-oriented cinema more generally.

In the non-hero oriented cinema of director Venkat Prabhu we can find such spoofing in its most sophisticated (and popular) form.<sup>33</sup> In his films, his younger brother, the comedian Premji's comedy is based almost entirely on the re-animation of the hero through parody. Such parody works in two ways. First, through the reappropriation of dialogues from Rajini and Vijay films; for example, the popular "*enna kodumai Saravannan sir?!?*" ('What cruelty is this, Saravannan sir?!?') from Rajini's *Chandiramukhi* (2005), used in *Chennai-600028* (2007), *Saroja* (2008), and *Goa* (2010); the repetition of the address term "sir" between the characters in *Saroja* (2008) as a lampoon of such usage in *Sivaji* (2007) (and in the film industry more generally; Venkat Prabhu 2008); the dialogue "*evvaLavoo paNRoom, ithe paN>Namaaddoomaa?*" ('we've done this much, we won't do that as well?') from Vijay's *Azhakiya Thamizh Magan* (2007) used in *Saroja* (2008) and *Goa* (2010); or "*oru vaaththi mudivu eduththaa naanee en peechchu keedkamaaddeen*" ('If I make a decision once, even I won't listen to what I say') from *Pookkiri* (2006) in *Goa* (2010). Second, through the reappropriation of mannerisms and tropes of *heroism/style*; for example, Rajini's hand gesture in *Padaiyappa* (1999) with the hand held to the face, palm facing inwards, bottom fingers slightly curled inwards, the index finger pointing up is used by Premji in *Chennai-600028*

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<sup>33</sup> While all of Venkat Prabhu's films "take the piss" (as he puts it) out of the Tamil hero-stars (Venkat Prabhu 2008), his latest film *Goa's* (2010) first half is totally based on the premise of making fun of Tamil films from the 1980s and 1990s.

(2007), *Saroja* (2008), and *Goa* (2010); or the extended fight scene in the second half of *Goa* (2010) parodying Rajini’s fight scenes in general (and in particular, of *Baadshaa* [1995] and *Sivaji* [2007]). Interestingly, Premji’s form of comedy parallels how young men—as well as Premji and his brother, director Venkat Prabhu, interact with each other and in their peer group—also re-animate film dialogues in order to create comic effects in the peer group, a kind of playful acting as if one were the hero. Indeed, the phrase “*enna kodumai Saravannan sir?!?*” was a common phrase used by youth in their own peer groups during my time in the field.

This parodying also happens within hero-oriented cinema itself. Rajini’s *Sivaji* (2007) moves deftly between projecting actual *style* and comic *style*. In the prelude to a comic fight scene from *Sivaji* (2007), after a minor *rowdy* finishes a status-raising dialogue Sivaji’s index finger flips up along with a swoosh sound effect. But before he can begin his *punch dialogue*, his comic sidekick (played by Vivek) stops him, saying that ‘these days all sorts of unimportant guys are giving *punch dialogues* and twirling their fingers. It’s not worth it.’ (Here he is simultaneously making fun of the *rowdy*, other hero-stars who are vying for Rajini’s position as “*style king*,” and also presumably Rajini himself.) Sivaji concedes: ‘So you give the dialogue then.’ Vivek says:

*Eey! Chittor thaaNdinnaa Katpadi.*  
*Sivaji siiNdinnaa dead body.*

Eey! After you cross Chittor comes Katpadi.  
 If you mess with Sivaji (you’re a) dead  
 body.

<finger points up to punctuate each line>

*Chinna pasangka paakkiRathu PoGo.*

Little kids watch PoGo [a children’s TV  
 station].

<slides over to the other side of the *rowdy*

*Sivajikidde veendam, go go.*

*Six-ukku appuram, seven.*

*Sivajikku appuram, evan?*

*ithu eppadi irukku?*

and points at him>

(If) Sivaji doesn't want it, go go.

<slides back toward Sivaji>

After six comes seven.

After Sivaji, who (comes)? <with 'who' his finger is pointing up toward the heavens>

How is it? <looking at the camera>

Here Vivek re-animates Rajini in two ways. First he speaks for Rajini in a hyperbolic, exaggeratedly comic *style*, performing a Rajini-esque dialogue (note the rhyme scheme). Second, he uses one of Rajini's first one-liners from *Pathinaaru Vayathilee* (1977) "*ithu eppadi irukku?*" 'how is it?,' gently poking fun at Rajini's own image. In a later faux *punch dialogue*, Vivek both parodies the *punch dialogue* genre and his deficient status to give one by providing his own echo effect at the end of the dialogue by repeating the last syllable.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.4 *Blurry moral lines, hybrid characterization*

If one looks at the changes in Tamil cinema post-liberalization—with the entrance of cheap electronics to duplicate and view VCDs and DVDs (and thus piracy) and with the arrival of satellite television and the internet (Pendakur 1991; Pendakur and Kapur 1997; Shields 1998; Agrawal 1998; Page and Crawley 2001)—one sees that the audience for Tamil film has largely shifted from the family as unit of film watching to the youth peer

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<sup>34</sup> The whole film *Sivaji* (2007) can be, in fact, seen as one hypertrophy of *style* to the point of comic absurdity. Later in the film, when trying to break the audio-password that Rajini has set up for his laptop, the police bring in a series of mimicry experts. Tellingly, the comedy here revolves around each mimicry artist attempting to break into Sivaji's computer by delivering lines from past Rajini films: "*oru thadave sonna, nuuRu thadave maathiri*" from *Baadhsaa* (1995), "*Lakalalakalalakalaka*" from *Chandiramukhi* (2005), "*cool*" from *Sivaji* (2007). As in all of these cases, *style* in the wrong hands evinces comedy. Also not the inter-discursivity and auto-referentially as part of the pleasure of the scene (chapter 5).

group (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Kathir 2005; Ratnam 2005; Nakassis and Dean 2007). Concerns of morality, *sentiment*, and kin relations as they have been traditionally treated in Tamil cinema have increasingly been bracketed in contemporary films and relegated to specific genres (in particular, the ‘family film’ *kudumba padam*). Since liberalization, in hero-oriented cinema, the heroes are more like villains, there are fewer scenes of family-oriented *sentiment* (but more scenes of related to youth love and ‘love failure’), and kin relations are often unremarked upon or themselves deficient.<sup>35</sup>

Yet what has filled the vacuum? I would argue that status, violence (fights), comedy, and love have filled the vacuum. Action films are less and less about establishing a particular moral order (Thomas 1995) and are more centered on the relative status-relationships between the characters: of the hero to the villain, of the hero to the comedian, of the villain to the comedian. It’s in this light that we can begin to understand the displacement of the hero as a morally-centered character, and the blurring of the lines between the hero, the villain, and the comedian (as noted by Rajanayakam [2002: 370] without explanation).<sup>36</sup>

This isn’t to say that current hero-centered films don’t retain a fixed moral compass, or that older films didn’t at times blur the hero, the villain, and the comedian. Rather, it’s that such blurring is more possible (and thus more common) given the changing structure

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<sup>35</sup> This is the case unless the film is explicitly about the youth’s engagement with family as in, for example, *Kaathal* (2005) and *7G Rainbow Colony* (2004). Such films are, notably, not hero-centric films (see Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009).

<sup>36</sup> The flipside to this is the emergence of more specific genres post-liberalization carved out of elements of the older commercial-action film: sentiment hypertrophied in the ‘family film’ (*kudumba padam*), comedy track hypertrophied in the parody/comedy film, and plot-coherence and romance hypertrophied in realist youth-oriented (love) films (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009). Note that the last three types of films mentioned are explicitly oriented to youth (and young men in particular).

of the audience and the economics of film from the producer's point of view (Ratnam 2005; Nakassis and Dean 2007).

This trend, in fact, begins with Rajinikanth's "angry young man" where the do-gooder image of MGR was denaturalized by the grittier antihero, a hero who can be ruthless and who feels no guilt (Rajanayakam 2002: ch. 4). If in the earlier films of MGR, the villain stands in for pure evil to the hero's pure goodness (Rajanayakam 2002: ch. 4–5), since Rajinikanth's inauguration of the *rowdy* antihero the villain has increasingly stood apart from the hero not by 'morality,' or at least not primarily by occupying a separate moral space, but because he is simply an obstacle to be overcome through *style* and *geththu*. This trend has continued with heroes such as Vijay in films like *Pookkiri* (2006).<sup>37</sup> We may also cite films like *Puthuppeddai* (2006), *Paruthiveeran* (2007), *Subramaniyapuram* (2008), and *Naan KadavuL* (2009) which, while not hero-centered films, figure the protagonists as attractive precisely because of their violent, anti-social nature. We can also note films where the hero is the villain. In *Manmathan* (2004), Simbu plays two twins, one who is cheated by love and the other who kills women who cheat men (cf. Bharathiraja's *Sivappu RoajakkaL* [1978]). The film's ambiguous moral compass ends with the villain-hero admitting, 'I don't know if what I do is right or wrong, but I won't stop doing it. Only God can judge me.' Here the hero is so far exterior

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<sup>37</sup> Take for example, how in *Pookkiri* (2006) the hero's ruthlessness and cruelty equals, and even exceeds, that of the villain. While there is ultimately an attempt to put the hero back into the moral order through a late-in-the-game flashback/twist, the construction of the hero as a *pookkiri* ('rogue') makes him no different from the villains he fights. Indeed, he works with them to kill politicians and other *rowdies*! It's only when their egos clash (ostensibly it's because the hero doesn't believe in killing children and women), that the villain becomes an obstacle. This prompts the hero to rise to the challenge. What is interesting is that one gets the impression that this display of humanity from the hero functions simply to provide a ground for opposition, rather than the articulation of a particular moral position. Vijay doesn't show moral outrage. He explains it coolly, as a matter of fact. Indeed, the whole film revolves around the fact that he has no conscience, no mercy, that he is a *pookkiri*. In any case, it's on this point that the hero–villain ego clash begins, which then blossoms into all-out war where the status-differential negotiated through *style* is resolved in *style*-ized fighting independent of the moral order.

to ‘society’ that morality becomes a moot subject until the afterlife. Similarly, comedy blurs with the villain in the Vijay film *Ghilli* (2004) where the villain enacts both an image of excessively arrogant status and a comic image of the insane *rowdy*. And with Rajini, as we have already noted, comedy blends with *heroism* and *style*.

In short, status in general, and *style* in particular, forms the core of hero-centered action film. In contrast to older films where *style* was, at least narratively, subordinate to the reestablishment of the moral universe through the abolishment of evil, in newer films morality takes a less important role and, as a result, the villain–hero dynamic revolves increasingly around their relative ranking: who is the *periya aaL*? In such status negotiation the lines between hero and villain blur and become unimportant. Increasingly, the hero becomes defined as he who is left standing, the villain as he who is vanquished. Note here that discourses which link increased violence in film as the degradation of morality in general miss that what has changed in Tamil film and society is not morality *per se*, but the economics of film and its related foregrounding and elaborating of already existing filmic motifs and features (i.e., the narrativization of status).

## **5. Conclusions**

In this chapter I have: (1) argued that commercial hero-oriented film can be usefully seen through the lens of youth status, both in terms of characterization and narration; (2) further, that representations of masculinity and status in the film abide by the same logic of status of the youth peer group, albeit hypertrophied; and finally (3) that such representations of status are distributed variously among characters, creating a set of figures of (non-)status-ful personhood: the ratified status-ful hero, the excessively status-

ful villain or *rowdy*, and the deficiently status-ful comedian. Film presents, in this sense, mediatized versions of youth concepts of status and masculinity, themselves an inflection of common cultural discourses on status.

Implicit in my discussion is that Tamil film can't be understood outside of 'youth' and youth notions of status. As I show in the next chapter this is because youth engage film based on the same logic of status negotiation in the peer group that in this chapter I argued makes Tamil film intelligible in the first place.



## Chapter 5 – Using Filmic *Style* to Status-Raise: The Parallel Cases of Youth and Hero-Stars

### 1. Introduction

In chapter 4 I looked at how hero-oriented Tamil commercial film can be read via the lens of concepts of youth status and status negotiation, as outlined in chapters 2 and 3. In this chapter I extend this analysis, arguing that the felicity of this interpretation is a result of (a) how youth audiences engage with Tamil film and their hero-stars and (b) how hero-stars construct their own images. I argue that audiences evaluate heroes/actors based upon the same logic of youth status in the peer group and thus heroes' image construction abides by the same principles.

First I look at how film serves as a source register for young men's status work. I then ask why this should be the case. In doing so I argue against the idea that young men *imitate* their *favorite* film stars. Instead I argue that young men's engagement with filmic images is tied up in their non-filmic concerns with status negotiation in the peer group and not about liking or identifying with a hero *per se*. I show how such status dynamics also apply to aspiring and established stars. I look at how the image construction of hero-stars abides by the logic of the youth peer group, analyzing the various ways that hero-stars status-raise and -level. I then conclude with a more general discussion of the concept of reception and its problematic assumptions about communicative practice.

### 2. Film as source register for *style*

#### 2.1 Introduction

Mass media like film, television, the internet, radio, and print are all source registers for youth's status work.<sup>1</sup> I focus on film, however, because film is the most salient medium for youth, both in terms of their engagement with it (they consume more film than other media) and their re-animation of it (their status work draws more heavily on film than other media).

## 2.2 *The two protagonists of youth film: Hero and non-hero*

For the purposes of this chapter it is useful to schematize the protagonists of Tamil youth cinema into two kinds: what I call the *hero* and *non-hero protagonist* (or simply,

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<sup>1</sup> In Tamil-language television youth slang terms are circulated and standardized through youth-oriented serials like *KaNaa KaNum Kaalangal*—for example, the group address term *makkaa, gaaNdu aaku* 'to get angry'—as well as through popular dance shows. In the English-language, but Tamil-oriented television station SS MUSIC and to an extent Tamil channels like SUN MUSIC, English slang terms are circulated to (middle-class) youth through their VJs (cf. Smith-Hefner 2007). Youth characterized such speech as *style* because of its English fluency—which they found attractive—and *over style* because of its (perceived) performance of Tamil disfluency. English slang like “What’s up?,” “No probs,” “dude,” “brother,” and “okies” were taken up by youth through such stations. “Tanglish” constructions such as *kalaaychi-fy* ('making fun of'), *adich-ify* ('beating')—[Vrb<sub>AVP</sub> + -ify], a verb when used in English, a noun when used in Tamil—are circulated through VJ speech (cf. Lukose 2009: 88 on “*chethu-fying*”). In addition, new fashions were circulated through TV, especially through VJs' *style*-ish dress. More important, however, is how television, especially English-language television is able to make youth familiar with, and thus popularize to an extent, certain musical genres whose distinctive dress youth sometimes borrow from in performing *style*. Hip-hop style, for example, both in terms of fashion (low-rise baggy pants, 50 Cent and Eminem tee-shirts), language (“what’s up,” “bro”), and dance steps are made available to many students through channels like SS MUSIC, VH1, and MTV. Tamil-English rap and its related *style* also have been popularized through such stations (and the recent cross-over efforts in Tamil film) via artists such as Malaysian rapper Yogi B. and the group Natchatirangkal. Such channels, however, are more important for upper-class, urban audiences' engagement with fashion, though not exclusively. Another interesting source of *style*, particularly in the form of body management is American wrestling programs which are very popular among youth. The *styles* of wrestlers, the dialogues, the fights, the grand entrances, the melodrama—all reminiscent of the hero-oriented action film—are thoroughly enjoyed by youth and form another image of embodied *style*. The internet and its extension into cell phones are increasingly a source register for youth's performances of *style*, in terms of the display of knowledge (e.g., knowing about the most recent films, pop artists, world news, general knowledge, slang terms); as a place to learn about and reenact certain *styles*; and as an activity unto itself that is *style* (e.g., using social networking sites like Orkut, going “browsing,” having a computer with an internet connection as *style*). Indeed, the internet is a ripe space for youth enactments of *style* insofar as it emblemizes ‘youth’ virtually: it is an exterior space, a foreign space, a space outside of ‘society’ and the norms of the everyday (via its anonymity), a space where image can be manipulated and changed according to one's own desires. American pop and hip-hop styles and music are made available to many youth through their internet browsing and downloads, and file sharing through cell phones. Youth's cell phones abound with pictures of what they consider *style*: brand logos, the weed symbol, photos of Che Guevara, pictures of actors, pop stars, and popular Western and Tamil songs.

*non-hero*).<sup>2</sup> This isn't only an analytical distinction but one that youth viewers also make in distinguishing films that are for 'pure entertainment' and *time-pass* and those which attempt to do something *different*, and by implication 'serious,' in their cinema (see Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009). The non-hero is a protagonist who is supposed to be a character out of 'real life,' either as the 'typical young man' (e.g., in films like *Oru Thalai Raagam* [1980], *Kaathal Theesam* [1996], *Kaathalar Thinam* [1999], *ThuLLavathoo Ilamai* [2002], *Boys* [2003], *Kaathal Kondeen* [2003], *4 Students* [2004], *7G Rainbow Colony* [2004], *Autograph* [2004], *Kaathal* [2004], *Chennai-600028* [2007], *Kalloori* [2007], *Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu* [2009]) or as some 'real' type of person from a different walk of life (*Seethu* [1999], *Pithamagan* [2003], *Puthuppedddai* [2006], *KaRRathu Thamizh* [2007], *Ooram Poo* [2007], *Paruthiveeran* [2007], *Subramaniyapuram* [2008], *Naan KadavuL* [2009]). He is made in the image of actual individuals. He is of this world or of some possible world.

The hero, on the other hand, can be seen as a kind of ideal type. In many ways he isn't of this world, or perhaps of any possible real world. He is larger than life. Akin to the epic hero, he projects and embodies particular qualities present in the world, but in an exaggerated and hyperbolic way, bleached of the gritty specificity of the non-hero. The hero is the protagonist of the commercial films discussed in chapter 4. Such films are often typified by both audiences and academic critics as unrealistic, fantastical, and

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<sup>2</sup> This division of hero/non-hero is roughly related to the star division of labor in Tamil cinema, from actors who play the *hero*—Thyagaraja Bhagavathar, M. G. Ramachandiran, Rajinikanth, Vijay—to those who play characters—P. U. Chinnappa, Sivaji Ganesan, Kamal Hassan, Ajith. My distinction is slightly different however. For even for those actors who play characters, they do so because this is part of their perduring image, their *style* if you will. Such actors are seen as different and talented because they do not always play the same type of character (the "hero") in the same type of movie (the "commercial film"). They are character-stars, but not hero-stars. The distinction of hero/non-hero, then, is broader and includes actors who may never become stars through the characters they play.

escapist (Dickey 1993b; Prasad 1998; Thomas 1985; Nandy 1987–1988; Kakar 1990: ch. 3; Derne 2000; Osella and Osella 2004; Srinivas 2010; see Dickey 2009b for a review), though we will have occasion to problematize this later in the chapter. The hero is a super man: he can fight a hundred men and win; time and space are no limitation for him, and thus are of no import to the plot (hence, presumably, the suspension of criteria of coherence and rationality in such films). The hero doesn't just speak dialogues *qua* conversations, but also delivers *punch dialogues qua* oratory. As many have pointed out, while the non-hero lives to serve the film and its story, in commercial action cinema the film and its story live to serve the hero (Pandian 1992; Rajanayakam 2002); more precisely, the hero-star. Much of the literature on Tamil film has focused on such films as vehicles for the creation of fan worship, and thus of political mobilization, as in the cases of MGR and Vijaykanth in Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave 1971, 1973, 1979; Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975; Sivathambi 1981; Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993b; Rajanayakam 2002; cf. Rogers 2009).

What is interesting is that such hero-stars in Tamil cinema are never what are referred to in Tamil Nadu as “*new faces*.” They are always established names in the industry who have been around for a long time. When such current hero-stars entered the field, however, they entered like all other actors: playing the non-hero character. And vice versa, the non-hero protagonist is often played by the *new face*. If successful in such films, such young actors get the chance to accrue status over time in the eyes of audiences and film industry insiders through being cast in hero-driven commercial films. With a string of such successes in such hero-oriented films, they may become hero-stars.

### 2.3 *The (non-)hero and style*

There are two points to note. First, the non-hero isn't a status-ful actor. The hero-star is. Second, the non-hero is rarely a source register for youth status work and *style*. While non-hero films may be source registers for slang or comedy dialogues, they aren't generally for *style qua* fashion or behavioral repertoires. Hero-oriented films, however, are. Indeed, as we will see, the whole spectatorship of hero-star driven commercial film is organized around the replication of fractions of the hero-star through repeat viewing, other media (TV, radio, print), fashion trends, re-animated film dialogue, and fan activity more generally (e.g., putting up sign boards, social service in the name of the hero-star). In contrast, so-called realist, "experimental" commercial film's spectatorship grounds itself in a different ontology: that of the 'real' world, of the coherent and plausible story (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009). Such films attempt to reflect 'reality' and in this fetish there is little in the way of performable status to be mined by viewers. One identifies or empathizes with the non-hero protagonist as an equal (or even someone of lower status) from a (fractionally) common social world. By contrast, the hero-centered film exists to be re-animated, in the theater (through whistling, dancing, and singing to the songs; by speaking the dialogues; and conversing with the hero on-screen) and outside of it. As such, the hero presents, by degrees, a usable figure of status-ful personhood. To watch the hero on-screen is to watch status, to watch *style*; to ratify that status and *style* is to make such *style* doable in everyday life. Through such spectatorship, the *style* of the hero-star becomes usable for viewers.

This is revealed by how youth use the terms *hero* and *heroism* in their peer groups. Such terms are used by youth to describe *both* the hero and his heroic actions on the

screen *and* to describe the youth who does *style*; in particular, who status-raises in an idiom resonant with that of the hero-star.<sup>3</sup> To successfully perform such *style* in the college peer group is to be the *college hero*. The *over style of heroism* (and *style* in general) is captured in phrases like *scene pooduRathu* ('to put on a scene' [from a film]), *film kaadduRathu* ('to show a film'), *padam pooduRathu* ('to put on a film'), *over acting* ('excessive acting'), and *build up paNRathu* ('to build up excessively' [cf. the building up of the hero's character on-screen]). These phrases are used to describe (s)he who shows off too much, who acts absurdly like a film hero(ine). As we saw in chapter 3, teasing often invokes actors' names, 'who does he think he is, Vijay?' or 'look at her acting like some kind of Jyothika/Simran!'

#### 2.4. Using film for style

Youth's re-animation of film ranged from the direct and literal to the more vague and impressionistic (i.e., as noted above, acting 'like' the *hero*). An exhaustive list of borrowings and inter-discursive moments between film and peer group activity would be near impossible both because of the sheer numbers of borrowings and recontextualizations, and because with each new movie new borrowings emerge. The cycling of fashion among youth is incredibly fast and the *styles*, teases, and jokes discussed herein will likely be out of circulation before long (cf. Eble 1996 on American college slang). Below I give an idea of how film is used by youth through discussion of some examples.

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<sup>3</sup> While *heroism* is inclusive of *style*, the reverse isn't necessarily the case. *Heroism* includes things not narrowly understood as *style* (but can be reanalyzed as 'doing *style*'): for example, fighting or being a good Samaritan. (See chapter 4, section 3.3 for discussion.)

### 2.4.1 *Speech*

Youth speech, both male and female, borrows heavily from film. Film circulates particular lexical items: for example, “*jilfonse*” ‘illicit romance’ from the film *Ithayam* (1991); “*pedde rowdy*” ‘local rowdy’ from the film *Kaathalan* (1996); “*omlete poodu*” ‘to vomit’ from the film *Boys* (2003); “*meedi*” ‘playboy’ from *Manmathan* (2004); “*free-udu*” ‘let it go’ from the film *AaRu* (2005); the English word “cool” in *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007).

Film also circulates phrases and larger swatches of dialogue. For example, the phrase “*Thirunelveeli halwa daa!*” comes from the chorus of a popular song from the film *Saami* (2003) and is used to index speaker’s knowledge of some task (contrary to interlocutor’s expectations).<sup>4</sup> The Vadiveel dialogue, “*appadi shock aayiddeen*” (‘I got shocked like that’) is used humorously to feign surprise or shock. Similarly “*oh poodu!*” (‘put an “oh!”’) is a phrase from the eponymous song in Vikram’s hit film *ThuuL* (2003). By commanding one’s friends to shout “oh!,” this phrase is used draw attention to a youth who is engaged in something he doesn’t want attention for, thereby teasing him.

Even whole speech registers are circulated through film: for example, Chennai slum speech is familiar to, and used by, Madurai youth from films as early on as *Maharaasan* (1993), a Kamal Hassan film where he plays a slum youth; while I was in the field, rural Madurai speech styles were made more familiar to and deployed by Chennai youth through films like *Paruthiveeran* (2007) and *Subramaniyapuram* (2008).

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<sup>4</sup> The logic is that just as the dessert halwa is a metonym for Tirunelveli, the speaker is an exemplar of the activity at hand. For example, person B is on the computer opening a program. Person A says, ‘You have to do it like this.’ B responds with *Thirunelveeli halwa daa!* ‘I know that quite well man!’

Such linguistic forms, especially film dialogues, are often used by youth as inside jokes or like proverbs. Rajinikanth’s *punch dialogues* (see chapter 4) are often recontextualized by students to punctuate some point they might be making, often with a touch of humor. For example, dialogues like “*oru thadave sonnaa nuuRu thadave maathiri*” (‘if I say it once it’s like I said it a hundred times’) from *Baadshaa* (1995) are used to jokingly drive home the speaker’s point. Or just as commonly, phrases like “*summa athirthuvu, le?*” (‘it makes you tremble, doesn’t it?’ from *Sivaji* [2007]) are used to jokingly justify one’s excursions into *style* by invoking Rajini’s image as a *style-ish* actor.

In addition to heroes, the comedian is a common source register for youth speech; for example, Vivek’s neologism, “S.I.” short for “*summa irukkeen*” (‘just hanging out,’ or euphemistically, ‘I’m unemployed’); the address term *goyyaale*, the exclamation *gokka makkaa* from Vadiveel;<sup>5</sup> or *puNam thiNi* from the film *Paruthiveeran*’s (2007) comedian Kanja Karuppu. Comedy dialogues form a core set of inside jokes common among youth all over Tamil Nadu. Vivek’s comedy, “pick up, drop, escape!” is used by youth to humorously describe their entries and exits from romantic interactions. Shouting out “*thoppi!*” (lit., ‘hat’) from Rajinikanth’s *Chandiramukhi* (2005)—a reference to the character Senthilnathan (played by Prabhu) which youth found so funny—at someone who had failed at something, or had gotten caught doing something wrong, is enough to tease that person. Similarly, “*enna kodumai, (Saravanan) sir!*” from the same film (and

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<sup>5</sup> Some of Vadiveel’s comic phrases that were often used by youth include: “*vanthuddayyaa vanthuddayyaaaaaa*” (‘they’ve come man, [I cannot believe that] they’ve come maaaaaaan’); “*entha oru vishayaththe plan paNNaame paNNinaa ippadi than. plan paNNi paNNaNum. Hookay*” (from *Pookkiri* [2006]), “*enne vechchu comedy kimidy ethuvum paNNaleye?*” ‘You’re aren’t doing any comedy schmometry at my expense, are you?’; this is used when one feels that people are ironically praising them; *biffa bifa biplack*, an allusion to the earlier onomatopoeic slang *jing jing jack* to refer to the three grades of women: beautiful, average, ugly.



replicated in Rajinikanth's next film *Sivaji* [2007], and by the comedian Premji in Venkat Prabhu's films *Chennai-600028* [2007], *Saroja* [2008], and *Goa* [2010]) is used by youth to humorously exclaim about something they found unjust or absurd. Such dialogues are often used to punctuate teasing sessions. In teasing peers for using too much English, youth might invoke the classic Rajinikanth comedy dialogue from *Veelaikkaaran* (1987): "I can talk English, I can walk English, I can laugh English . . . ." (see chapter 4, section 3.5.7, cf. chapter 4, section 4.3.2)

Youth also use names of characters from films, often the comic characters, to tease their peers; for example *Taaklas* from *Paruthiveeran* (2007), a name used to refer to someone who has a childish face but cheats others (as per the character in the film); or *SorNakkaa* from *ThuuL* (2003) for a bold woman (based on the female rowdy character in the film). Such names most often referred to characters of anti-status (a childish looking cheat) or status-mismatches (a female rowdy) precisely because they humorously diagram failed status-raising attempts.

Such reenactments have multiple uses. First, they provide a pleasure in simply repeating the form. Second, as inside jokes such reenactments provide solidarity among peers. Third, such forms take on their own lives in their reenactments, becoming objects of pleasure unto themselves through acquiring new meanings and indexical values. Fourth, such dialogues can be used rhetorically to bring home a point, to (ironically) point to oneself as status-ful through status provided by the actor, or to status-lower another through teasing.

#### 2.4.2 Behavioral repertoires, the body, and style

Youth also derived behavioral repertoires for *style* from films. For example, pushing the hair back, smoking cigarettes, throwing the cigarette into the mouth, spinning around one's sunglasses before putting them on, punctuating speech with a twirling of the index finger and then pointing it into the air, are all forms of *style* introduced by Rajinikanth and which youth explicitly point to as the source register. Similarly, greeting a peer by bumping the knuckles of the fist was introduced in the S. J. Surya film *New* (2004).

Enacting the *hero* or *style* are the common typifications of such behaviors. Such behavior, unsurprisingly, is exaggerated when visibility itself is salient: for example, in performance settings (e.g., *culturals* competitions), in highly public places (classrooms, buses, parks), and when cameras are present. Indeed, when a camera comes out, especially when students are on their college *tour* (see chapter 2, section 3.3.5), male students inevitably end up posing like various hero-stars: expanding their bodies to look bigger by making muscles, putting on cool sunglasses, and crossing their arms in hip-hop inspired, but film circulated poses. Such reenactment was *jolly*, a fun expression of youth subjectivity as well as part of youth's own aesthetics of *style*.

We can also briefly note changing norms of beauty regarding men's body type. The spectacularization of the male physique has increased as of late, from the fetish of the big bicep to, most recently, the *six-pack*. Shortly after Dhanush's *six-pack* in *Pollaathavan* (2007), Vishal's in *Satyam* (2008), Suriya's in *Vaarinam Aaiyram* (2008) (see chapter 6, photo 6.5), and most recently Aravind Akash's in *Goa* (2010), many students (like other

film stars [Buzz18.com 2008]<sup>6</sup>) became keen on having a *six-pack*. To have such a body was *style* or *geththu*.

#### 2.4.3 *Film as source register for college rituals*

Like performances of self in the peer group, when students have to do any kind of stage performance they utilize film as a source register. Students sing film songs, perform film songs in their live bands, dance to film songs, do mimicry of actors, and perform skits which utilize the characters and dialogues of films. Film is also often the common touchstone from which *ragging* happens at various college functions. Students might have to act like a film character, sing or dance to a film song, or propose to an imagined film actress. During one function, for example, the emcee ragged the students performing by playing film comedy dialogues that he had saved on his cell phone into the microphone. For example, to punctuate the onstage teasing one student, he played Vadiveelu's "*enne vechchu comedy kimidy ethuvum paNNaleyey?*" ('You're aren't doing any comedy schmometry at my expense, are you?'). Here some swatch of the film is reproduced in a larger text segment as a typifying meta-commentary on the performance. The voice of the comedian is made to stand in for that of the emcee in a complex ventriloquation, thereby recontextualizing both the film text-segment and the current event (*ragging* the student, getting some laughs).

The bus *route* songs of the government college in Chennai that I discussed in chapters 2 and 3 also borrow heavily from film. The melodies of such songs are often film

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, while in pre-production for *Goa* (2010) Aravind Akash was on a special regimen to prepare his *six-pack*. It provided endless conversation among the assistant directors and other crew about who had a *six-pack*, how cool it looked, and how to get one.

melodies with the lyrics of the song playfully reappropriated and changed to exhort the *geththu* of the bus *route* and the college.

#### 2.4.4 Fashion

Fashion is the most visible and important arena where youth utilize film as a mine for new *styles*. Paralleling our discussion in chapters 2 and 3, many examples of *style* in fashion find their way to youth via film representations.

For example, from slum barbershops to high-end fashion salons, customers use film star haircuts as their frame of reference, either through film name or photos. ‘Cut my hair like Suriya in *Veel* (2007)’ or ‘perm and color my hair like Vikram in *Anniyan* (2005)’ could be heard in barbershops and salons in the late 2000s, as would have cuts from films of yesteryear be heard in their heyday (e.g., the *attack* hair style from the film *Thil* [2001]). ‘Shave your mustache like Ajith’ or ‘grow a beard like Suriya’ were common advice given among students. “*Virumandhi*” (the name of a 2004 Kamal Hassan film) was a common teasing epithet for me when I had a mustache. This usage is interesting because such a mustache has many more salient resonances: associations with rural masculinity, martial caste groups, protection deities, police officers, (low-level) politicians, or just simply the *periya aaL*. Students bypassed those and went directly for the film as reference point, even though my mustache looked very different from Kamal’s actual *Virumandi* mustache (photo 5.1).<sup>7</sup> This was because making such connections was itself a pleasurable activity, re-remembering the film to mildly tease me for my age/status/culturally-inappropriate mustache.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that this comparison was based on the mustache alone, for I never received any comparisons to looking like Kamal Hassan except when I sported such a mustache.

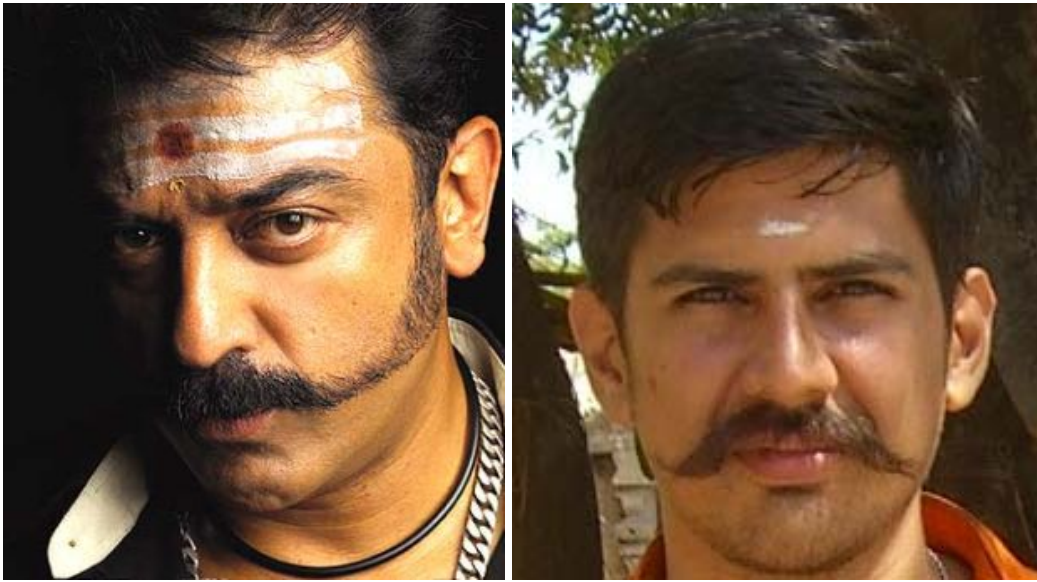


Photo 5.1 The real Virumandhi (Kamal Hassan) and the tropic Virumandhi (Constantine Nakassis)

Similarly, clothing fashions are often first introduced by a particular film hero, and then taken up among youth until their cache are used up. The history of fashionable pant *styles* reads as the history of popular actors—from the bell bottoms (1970s) and then later the tapered pants of Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan (1980s); the MC Hammer inspired pants of Prabhu Deva (1990s); the “6 pocket” pants of Rajini to its new avatar “cargoes” and jeans (2000s) as popularized by Vijay.

When I arrived in Madurai in 2007 Vijay’s film *Sachin* (2007) had introduced the tee-shirt sewed onto the button-down shirt as a fashion. The handkerchief wrapped around the hand across the palm and in front of the thumb, a popular *style* among youth, had come from Vijay’s *Pookkiri* (2006) (photo 5.2). Vikram’s *Bheema* (2008) made popular the short-sleeve button-down shirt with sleeves which could be folded up and buttoned.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fashion *styles* are not only about the hero-star of Tamil cinema. Fashions just as easily came from Hollywood cinema. For example, more than a few youth in 2007 still sported hair *styles* like the hero of the 1997 super hit *Titanic*, Jack.



Photo 5.2 Vijay-style handkerchief wrap

Interestingly, while dressing like the hero is acceptable to most all students, shirts with the hero's face or most recent film on it (see, e.g., chapter 6, photo 6.16), are considered *local*, or low class, as something associated with slum dwellers, villagers, and the uneducated. Such shirts, as one college student explained, are "*chillaRai thanam*" 'childish.' One looks like a "*chinna paiyan*." He meant this literally, because school children tend to be the most enthusiastic film fans; and figuratively, as one of low status. In his (lower-)middle-class social circle, wearing such shirts will make your friends laugh at you and tease you. Here a class-linked discourse is deployed to rank status by alignment to film, redeploing common discourses (from adult 'society') about the childishness of cinema and the childishness of cinema fans as pathologically devoted to the hero-stars. To look *like* a film star is *style* (*qua tropic periya aaL*) while to signal fan devotion is childish insofar as it marks one explicitly as subordinate.

Western brands, too, circulate through Tamil cinema (though this was not the only way, see chapters 6–8). Below I discuss one particularly interesting example of a brand in cinema *qua style*: the Nike “swoosh.” (I return to this example again in chapter 6, section 3.2 as well.)

The Nike swoosh can be seen all over Tamil Nadu. On tee-shirts, earrings, shoes, shorts, wristbands, hats, jackets, cell phone wallpapers, and the sides and backs of cars, motorcycles, buses, and auto-rickshaws (cf. Bick and Chiper 2007). What is interesting is that when I asked youth why they liked and used this brand symbol I got a range of answers. For the most informed, youngest and affluent, the swoosh is a symbol of a brand, Nike, which they had some idea about. As such it was *style*, it was aesthetically pleasing. However, many other youth provided a different answer: the swoosh means that ‘I am always right,’ ‘Whatever I do is correct,’ ‘I know what I am doing.’ I was perplexed. What I learned was that this meaning comes directly from the Rajinikanth film *Pandiyan* (1992) where the Rajinikanth *style* of the film is to punctuate his *punch dialogues* (wherein he says that everything he does is “right”) by ripping open his shirt and exposing a tee-shirt with a checkmark or *tick* on it. Hence in the film he is “Mr. Right” (photo 5.3).

Mediated by the filmic *style* there is an iconism between Rajini’s *tick* and the brand logo of Nike, an indexically hybrid sign which indexes fashion through a Western branded form because of its presence in the film as *style*.



Photo 5.3 One of Rajini's style getups (with tick) in *Pandiyan* (1992)

More recently, in the 2004 hit film *Manmathan*, the hero-cum-villain's ability to bed loose women (who he later kills) is punctuated with a stamp on the screen. The stamp is a circle where around the circumference is written "*corrected machchi*" (*correct paNRathu* is the slang term 'to pick up,' or 'initiate a love relationship with someone of the opposite sex'; *machchi* is a slang variant of the ingroup fictive afinal kin term *machchaan*) with a Nike swoosh and the Playboy bunny in the middle of it. Photo 5.4 is taken from one such episode where we can see the hero's face kissing a girl who he then goes on to kill. There is a triple allusion: (1) to Rajinikanth in *Pandiyan* and thus as a *tick* or checkmark ('to be right, to being correct'); (2) to the Nike brand and thus as the swoosh; and (3) to Playboy ('playboy' is roughly a gloss of *Manmathan*, the Hindu god of love) and thus to the sexual prowess of the hero to *correct* girls. These allusions point to the status-ful hero, first by co-opting the status of Rajinikanth; second, through co-opting the status of the Western brand; and third, through co-opting female virtue.





Photo 5.4 “Corrected machchi” stamp from the film *Manmathan* (2004)

In 2007 I came across this symbol re-animated by a group of students from an engineering college near Madurai. They had printed a status-raising tee-shirt which utilized the *Manmathan* stamp with their own caption: “Beware of the B<sup>3</sup> - Back Bench Boys.”<sup>9</sup> In this example we see how older film (*Pandiyan*) serves as source register for the status work of newer films (and younger stars)<sup>10</sup> which in turn serves as a source register for youth’s own status work.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “*Back Bench*” is a reference to students who sit in the back of the classroom and make mischief (chapter 2, section 4.2.4). The shirt is status-raising both in its denotational and allusional content, but also because such shirts were all matching and meant to be worn at the same time by the students, thus creating a visual effect, foregrounding them from the background of other students (see chapter 3, section 2.2.6).

<sup>10</sup> Venkat Prabhu’s 2010 film *Goa* has re-animated this scenario from *Manmathan* in a parody scene starring the *Manmathan* hero Simbu using the same stamp. Here the reference is simply to *Manmathan* and the references to *Pandiyan* and Nike are subsumed to the playful re-animation of Simbu’s role in this youth comedy film.

<sup>11</sup> Film is also a source register for brand marketing. For example, a 2007 television advertisement for a candy company appellates youth customers by showing a child reenacting a famous Rajinikanth *style* where he throws a candy in the air, bounces it off his body, catches it in his mouth, and says “*namma style*” ([it’s] our *style*). The ad then cuts to Rajinikanth in a soccer and volleyball game doing even more excessive and impressive *style* with the candy (cf. the *styles* in *Sivaji* [2007]). Here film becomes the source register to market a particular product in other media through representations of *style* aimed at youth.

## 2.5 Women and film as a source register for status work

The use of film as a source register is more common among young men than women, though young women do borrow from cinema heroines. Moreover, even if they don't practice such aesthetics in their everyday lives, their aesthetic tastes (i.e., what they like and think is beautiful) are articulated through film. When they *can*, though, they often do (e.g., on *tour*, when on the college campus). Many hair styles, accessories (e.g., Trisha's hair clips), color schemes, prints (e.g., Jyothika's saree in *Chandiramukhi* [2005]), and ways of wearing clothing (e.g., Sonia Agrawal's wearing of the dupatta in *7G Rainbow Colony* [2004]), were re-animated from film.

Women, however, borrow less comprehensively and with less frequently than men. This is due to the problematics of *style* for young women in general (see chapter 3, section 4). It is also due, however, to the fact that youth film favors the hero, constructing him as emulatable, while the heroine of the film is often relegated to a very minor role; as we saw in chapter 4, to the ratifier and appreciator of the hero's *style*, or as eye candy, and not an emblem of *style* itself (except perhaps as a negative image of *style*, as in Neelambari, the villain of *Padaiyappa* [1999]).

I asked many young women what they thought of the fact that the female characters in Tamil films are minimal and their dress is totally impractical to everyday life. They noted that while indeed this was the case, it didn't impede their viewing experience because they themselves watch like boys. They also watch for the hero, who is the focus of their experience of the film. They are used to it, they explained. Reflecting this fact, women's slang speech as far as film as source register was concerned, used many of the same kinds of constructions and borrowings as men's (except, to my knowledge at least,

the use of sexual double entendres). And note that most of the speech that makes its way into youth usage comes from male characters, the heroines' speech being much less replicated. (They have, after all, much less dialogue.) Again we see how 'youth culture' in Tamil Nadu is highly gender skewed, in this case with respect to mass-mediated representations and their re-animation.

### **3. Received wisdom: Engaging representations of *style***

#### *3.1 Imitating favorite film heroes?*

In chapters 2 and 3 I showed how youth talk about, engage with, and negotiate *style* and status in their peer groups. In chapter 4 I analyzed the image of *style* in film and demonstrated how this image of *style* is iconic with that of 'youth,' both in the forms used and in the dynamics of representation/negotiation. In this chapter I have discussed how film provides a source register for youth performances of *style*, providing usable signs for youth in their own status and identity work.

Why are filmic representations of *style* and youth modes of status and identity work through *style* iconic? What is the relationship between these two representational orders; between these two modes of youth activity (film viewing and film re-animation)? A common answer in lay and academic discourses (e.g., Rajanayakam 2002; Verma and Saraswathi 2003: 115; Osella and Osella 2004) is that youth *imitate* their *favorite* film stars, and thus youth *style* and film *style* are iconic to some significant degree. This is often attributed to youth's obsession with film. Hence "fan worship" or "devotion" become dominant paradigms in understanding the relationship between film and its viewers (e.g., Rajanayakam 2002; Dickey 1993b, 2001; Srinivas 1996; Osella and Osella

2004; Rogers 2009, forthcoming). Through these paradigms engagement with film is reduced to (unreflected upon) mimesis (implicitly, then, a kind of influence or brainwashing), a result of film satisfying viewers' fantasies and desires (see Dickey 2009b for a discussion).<sup>12</sup> While cases of youth imitating their favorite film stars can be demonstrated, thusly formulating youth's relationship to film in general misses out on what I argue is a major part of what is going on in youth's engagement with film. As I show, both the notion of *imitation* as well as the notion that imitation is conditioned by *liking* a film star are problematic.

First, it isn't clear how representative the film fan club member is of youth in general. Indeed, most of the youth who use film as a source register aren't fans *per se*. Many are simply casual viewers. Second, what they use from film may not be from their favorite film actor, or even a film actor whom they like. For example, many Vijay *styles* were replicated (knowing they were Vijay *styles*) by youth who actively disliked Vijay. This isn't to say that some of the time some fans do not imitate because they like the star, but that this isn't sufficient to explain the relationship of youth to film in general. Third, viewers don't imitate everything that their favorite film stars do. Indeed, they are highly selective and they react strongly when their favorite film stars do things on-screen that they don't like. They will boo, boycott films, or tear up the screen or the theater seats with razorblades. Moreover, a fan of a star like Kamal Hassan may not imitate him precisely because Kamal Hassan's image itself eschews *style*. Fourth, the imitation view

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<sup>12</sup> For example, "The individual's emotional and blind identification with the hero and the total loss of self-identity make him/her effectively dysfunctional and lost in the world of simulations" (Rajanayakam 2002: 224). "The phenomenon of hero worship is most prevalent among the *youth*, who are by and large unemployed or underemployed with a vast majority of them coming from poorer socio-economic backgrounds" (ibid.).

assumes that popularity of film is somehow linked to the amount of imitation by viewers. Yet even a cursory analysis shows that film popularity is no guarantee of acceptance of, for example, *style* in fashion. A flop like Vijay's *Sachin* (2005) may generate a trend like the tee-shirt stitched on top of a button-down shirt, while a very popular film like *Ghilli* (2004) may not generate much in the way of fashion. Fifth, this view implicitly imputes a top-down view of film-mediated communication: fashions *come* from film and *go* to youth viewers.

In short, the notions "imitation" and "favorite film star" aren't relevant for most of the youth population. And even for fans such notions are insufficient to explain their engagement with film.

### 3.2 *Why youth use film for style*

We are presented with two questions. Why are youth interested in *style* in film? What is the relationship between *style* on-screen and off-screen? At a first pass we need to bracket the question "what about *style* and the hero-centered film gives pleasure to youth viewers?" if only because of the assumed link between pleasure as self-evident reason for why film is a source register for youth's status work (cf. Thomas 1985; see Dickey 2009b: 10).

I argue that the link between film and youth activity is about how film can be made to speak to youth's own status and identity work in their peer groups. Rather than film influencing youth, rather than youth imitating film, youth *use* film, youth *re-animate* film (cf. Pandian's 2008 discussion of realist "nativity" films in rural Tamil Nadu). From this point of view, the use of film in peer groups doesn't necessarily have anything at all to do

with film *qua* film at all. One very important reason why youth are interested in film is that it offers neat solutions for how to solve the problem of status-raising via *style* in contexts where status-raising is likely to breed jealousy and prompt teasing and other modes of status-leveling. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, to do *style* requires its ratification by peers. Because youth's status negotiation is fluid and ephemeral, finding a solid ground from which to project oneself as status-ful through *style* without falling prey to teasing or accusations of being boastful or arrogant is fraught with problems. Ratification, then, either requires the user of *style* to be already seen as status-ful (i.e., he is able to pull it off) or that the particular *style*-ish form in question is usable by all. In the latter case, it is easier to do a *style* which has already been done by someone else of higher status. Thus, using (prefigured) *style* from film is always easier, always safer, and yet still status-raises. This is precisely because it tenuously maintains the distance between the act as re-animation and the act *qua* act—that is, the act as performance versus as performative (Fleming n.d.)—and thus always maintains the possibility of citing the status of the source of the borrowing (the film star) as justification; or in the case of ambiguous irony, the possibility of deniability, i.e., as mention instead of use. The fact that *style* in the film conforms to *style* among youth is an indicator that film is a treasure trove of possible status-raising devices. Things which do *style* in film are easily recontextualizable within the peer group.

*And this is by design.* Films present imminently reusable models of personhood to youth in such an idiom because they are intentionally designed by filmmakers to be replicable, recontextualizable, and recirculatable in media other than film. As the actor Sriman (the sidekick to Vijay in *Pookkiri* [2006]) (Sriman 2008) explains, 'a youth film

needs dialogues and fashions that youth themselves can use. For example, in *Pookkiri* (2006) Vijay's dialogue "*oru vaaththi mudivu eduththaa naanee en peechchu keedkamaaddeen*" ('If I make a decision once, even I won't listen to what I say') is one such usable part of the film hero. From the perspective of fashion, film stylist Vasuki Baskar explains that the hero-star's outfits, from the clothes to the accessories to the hair styles, must always be a bit "different," but still fit within the paradigm of *style* and the overall image of the hero-star (Baskar 2008). It should be a bit out of the ordinary and "dramatic," but not bizarre. The ultimate reason is that the hero's fashion should be *style* that fans can use in their own self-presentation. Dance choreographer, film hero, and director Laurence Raghavendra makes the same point regarding dance steps (Raghavendra 2009). Dance steps are choreographed with the idea of fan replicability in mind.

In short, the *style* of the hero (dialogues, fashion, dance, etc.) should always be changing, have its own unique permutation in each film so that: (a) such differences in *style* (which youth viewers look forward to seeing on the screen) act as a draw to get youth in the theaters; and (b) such *styles* recirculate fractions of the film and its hero-star. Such recirculation creates a kind of advertisement for the film. Such *style* fractions make the film visible, hype it, and thus contribute to the popularity of the film and thereby profits. They also contribute to status-raising the hero-star himself—insofar as being re-animated by others for status-raising itself constitutes status-raising for the person being re-animated—and thus making him capable of further status-raising in future films.

Second, film as a social institution, heroes' characterization in film, 'youth' as an age set, and *style* as a type of status and repertoire of semiotic forms are all iconic with each

other. They all diagram exteriority from ‘society’ and ‘culture.’ They are all transgressive of norms of authority (chapter 2, section 2.2). They are all characterizable as visible, *different* (ab-normal, extra-ordinary), *modern*, and linked to the foreign. And because they share a fractionally similar diagrammaticity, diacritics from one realm are easily transportable to another. Just like youth, then, actors and the characters they play are seen as exterior to ‘society.’ They are defined by their visibility. Their status is non-traditional, transgressive, and *modern*.<sup>13</sup> As such, film is made for youth; film is about youth; *style* is done by youth and ‘youth’ (status) is *style*; film *style* is re-animated by youth as status-ful among one’s peers (but not in the adult world where cinephilia is childish) and youth *style* is the grist for filmic representations of *style*. For all these reasons, then, youth *style* lives on and off the screen.

### 3.3 Principles of using film for style

If youth are selective in how they engage with filmic images, what are the principles upon which they select? I have already in part answered this question. Youth use images from film which can be status-raising in the peer group. But which images are potentially status-raising? I argue that the forms which are used by youth to status-raise in the peer group are precisely those that, on the one hand, are status-raising in the film diagesis, and, on the other, are performed by actors who themselves are seen as status-ful off-screen. Thus, for example, comedians rarely provide a source register from which youth

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<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps one reason why Tamil audiences, while particularly Tamil-oriented in their politics and protective of their “culture,” have no problem accepting non-Tamil cinema actors. MGR, Jayalalitha, and Rajinikanth aren’t Tamil as typically reckoned by Tamils. Moreover, rhetorical attempts to sideline such politically-minded actors from Tamil politics based on their non-Tamil-ness have had little traction with the Tamil population. This is because the whole ontology of status for such individuals is always already different, alternative, and exterior.



borrow *style* insofar as comedians emblemize anti-status through failed *style*. Youth will, however, re-animate comedians in their status-leveling, as we saw. Or, they will self-status-level by re-animating the comedian('s dialogues) as a kind of self-deprecating humor (itself potentially a tropic form of status-raising, though not *style per se*).

So from whom, then, does *style* get borrowed? Who are seen as status-ful enough to license their own and others' status work? Heroes and to some extent villains are the most commonly re-animated figures in youth's status work. Earlier I argued against the proposition that the link between youth peer group activity and film was constituted on the basis of simply "liking" a film star. So what is the principle? Do youth borrow randomly from any hero? No. Rather, hero-stars who are seen as status-ful by a critical mass of one's peer group, who are seen as being able to pull off some *style* by virtue of their status serve as source registers for *style* re-animation by youth. Note that this is different from the issue of "liking" a star. Even if a Vijay fan dislikes Ajith, he will recognize that Ajith is status-ful (or at least that many people recognize Ajith as status-ful) and thus to borrow from Ajith is to do *style*. In this sense, then, "liking" a film star is related to youth engagement with film, but not at an individual level. Ultimately the re-animation of *style* is contingent on the perception of popularity, as manifested (or reanalyzed from) bodies in the theater seats, peers' appreciation of the hero-star's performed *style*, and widely circulating evaluations that some hero-star has the status necessary to pull off *style*. In short, the issue isn't individual mental states ("liking") but reflexive calculi of sociological facts ("popularity" *qua* status).

Note how the issue of popularity, then, is as much an issue of how re-animatable and how re-animated certain forms linked to the hero-star are. And, of course, such forms are

constantly being cycled, both because of the constant arrival of new films in theaters and because forms which are too replicated, too re-animated begin to lose their cache as status-ful. The dialectic, then, is between forms whose status can't be backed up (one will get teased otherwise), borrowed forms (which raise status through association with status-ful individuals), and overused forms (which no longer raise status because of their ubiquity).

If the perceived status of the hero-actor determines the probability that what he does on-screen can be used by others, then what counts as status for film actors? How does a film actor become status-ful enough to license his own *style*, not to mention license the *style* of others?

### 3.4 *Films stars negotiate status like youth negotiate status*

Youth apply the *same* logic of status negotiation in the peer group to their engagement with film stars. They watch a hero on-screen doing *style* as they might watch and evaluate a peer doing *style*. Further, youth judge the hero of hero-oriented cinema against his status both as a hero-character (intra-textually) *and*, more importantly, as an actor (extra-textually). They judge representations of him status-raising on-screen against their perceptions of his achieved status (across films and off-screen) and not just based on the story's construction of the hero alone. This is because for such viewers, doing *style* on-screen is a move of status-raising of the *actor*. Is he an established star or a *new face*? This was explained thusly by my Madurai informants: 'if Rajini or Vijay lights a cigarette by shooting it with a gun, or if they come back to life (by pure force of will) people will clap and appreciate it. They will take it as a serious act (of status-raising). However, if a

*new face* does the same thing, they won't accept it. They will boo at the screen. They will laugh at it as ridiculous, absurd, and unrealistic. Who are such young actors to try and project such a status through such extreme *style*? They are just "*chinna pasangka*" (as compared to the *periya aaLungka* that established hero-stars are).<sup>14</sup> This is also related to popularity. For example, as another youth explained, if the very popular Rajinikanth catches a bullet with his teeth and spits it back at the villain to kill him viewers will clap in appreciation. If Vijaykanth—a film hero who is unpopular with urban youth and who is seen as a kind of a joke, an emblem of the absurdity of an older kind of cinema—does something similar—for example, stares a bullet down so that the bullet turns around in fear—they will laugh.<sup>14</sup>

Note that this is why young actors and filmmakers, as they pointed out to me, opt for 'realistic' roles and films (Chantanu 2009; Kumarappa 2008). They can't pull off such *heroism* and *style* in their films. Viewers will reject it, and their films will be flops (Selvaraghavan 2005, interview in Nakassis and Dean 2007: 89–90). As the actor Sriman (2008) put it regarding the extreme *heroism* of Tamil hero-stars like Rajinikanth and Vijay: "Only Superman can fly."

The ability to perform *style* is also related to the overall image that the actor has. Take, for example, Kamal Hassan (or Sivaji Ganeshan from his generation). He is a highly regarded actor (versus Rajinikanth or MGR who are not regarded as particularly good actors, but as consummate *heroes*). Seen as the genius of Tamil cinema, in each film Kamal plays a different type of character from all walks of life. Each

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<sup>14</sup> Obviously, this is highly perspectival. Vijaykanth fans would give different answers of course (see Rogers 2009).

character looks and sounds different.<sup>15</sup> His films attempt to work outside of *heroism* often through notions of realism and coherency of narrative that the hero-centered cinema often brackets. And as youth explained, if Kamal tries to do Rajini-esque *style*, even though Kamal is a highly regarded and established actor whom many viewers like, they won't accept it. It will seem odd, absurd, and stilted.

What is interesting, then, is that for *both* hero-stars and youth when one's status isn't established as a perduring social fact, acts of status-raising are fraught with the possibility of going wrong, of being excessive, and thus being rejected by the peer group/audience. In such contexts, *style* is seen as a kind of *performance* and is evaluated functionally. Individual A did action B or used form B because *it is style*: individual A is trying to status-raise through B; (s)he is trying to show that (s)he can do that. For individuals whose status is sedimented—either by virtue of the history of his films (e.g., for a Rajinikanth, Vijay) or by some ideology of *style* (e.g., my roommate Stephen from Kodaikkanal, see chapter 3, section 3.2)—*style* is *performative*. A did B because that is his *style*, because A is *style*. Here *style* is seen as an externalization of an inner quality, a perduring aspect of that person (his status).

In short, there is a double articulation of status that is held in tension through the screen: *style* on the screen can only be licensed through the ratification of status off (or across) the screen. Further, off-screen status isn't reckoned independently of film. Rather, it is reckoned by the image of the hero projected in and *across* his films. This seems to be a paradox. How can one get status off-screen if status is only able to be built up on-

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<sup>15</sup> His recent *Dasaavathaaram* (2009) was his attempt, in fact, to establish his status as *the* premiere actor of Tamil cinema, past and present. In this film he plays ten roles (*das* 'ten' + *aavathaaram* 'avatars'), thus breaking Sivaji Ganeshan's previous record of nine roles in *Navarathiri* (1964) (lit., 'nine nights') (Ranganjan 2007).

screen? And how can one do status on-screen if it can only be done if backed up by off-screen status? How can a hero bootstrap his way into *style* and *heroism*?

It is important to note that: (a) no actor starts off doing *heroism*. Rajinikanth started as a villainous character actor in (relatively) realist films (*Abuurva RaagangkaL* [1976], *Pathinaaru Vayathile* [1977]). Vijay started off as a “soft hero” in romantic films (*Love Today* [1997], *Kaathalukku Mariyaathai* [1997]), as did Ajith (*Kaathal Kooddai* [1996], *Kaathal Mannan* [1998]). Dhanush’s early films are all within a realist idiom (*ThuLLavathoo Ilamai* [2002], *Kaathal KoNdeen* [2003], *Dreams* [2004], *Puthuppeeddai* [2006]). For all these actors, it is only after a *number* of their depictions as non-hero protagonists clicked with audiences that they could even be taken seriously as hero-stars who can do *style*. Thus (b): building up such an image is *never* a single-film affair. Rather, building up a status-ful image as hero-star who can perform *style* in his films and have it ratified by audiences is something that happens over many films. And as the case of Kamal Hassan shows, it isn’t just being acceptable as a star that counts. One’s films must consistently construct an image as status-ful which is greater than any one of the roles one plays. That is, one’s oeuvre of films must construct a status-ful *hero-star*, a kind of “parallel text” (Mishra et. al 1989) or trans-textual image: a fusion of the actor with all the roles that he plays. Note that this notion of status-building over a set of films is precisely the same issue that confronts youth in the peer group: one has to consistently status-raise so as to create a perduring image or reputation as status-ful. It isn’t one single act of status-raising that can entail such an image. It is a cumulative effect that depends on image management and negotiation with those who, ultimately, must ratify such status-ful acts.

As I show below, just as the youth peer group works through the centripetal and centrifugal forces of status-raising and -leveling, the sedimentation of the hero-star's status also works through the same dynamic. Those who are successful at building up an image of status, like Rajinikanth, Vijay, and Ajith, are precisely those actors who are able to status-raise—project *style*—while also status-leveling. They are enmeshed within the same economy of status negotiation that their viewers are. It is the multi-voiced-ness of actors' status-acts—they articulate to inter-discursive histories of status-raising within an economy of status negotiation; they simultaneously engage in both status-raising and -leveling (implicitly or otherwise)—that make them so useful to youth, whose own status negotiation also crucially depends on such multi-voicedness, as we saw in chapter 3.

### *3.5. How film stars accrue status within, across, and outside the film text*

In this section I discuss the ways that film actors attempt to bootstrap their status through their image management. I differentiate three different textualities which, through the process of becoming a status-ful hero-star, get articulated in different ways, and in their apotheosis blurred completely: (1) the intra-textual image of the film hero (on a roll of film); (2) the trans-textual image of the hero-star (on many rolls of films and in non-filmic meta-discourses about that image); and (3) the extra-textual image of the actor *qua* 'real' life human being (not on film).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The trans-text is what Rogers (forthcoming, p. 22 of the manuscript) calls the “idiolect” of the hero's stardom. Compare my tripartite distinction with Rajanayakam's (2002: 253) distinction of the explicitly “public realm,” the publicly known side of the “private” realm, and the self-reflexive “screen realm”: “The public realm includes any reference that is directly political, such as icons . . . , critical comments, ideological statements and culturally rooted motifs and archetypes. The frequently recurring ‘politicisable’ references to the private life invariably consist of the past experience. . . . The self-reflexive references *within* the screen realm but laden with the potential to be politicised include repeated usage of honorifics . . . , certain motifs . . . , and mere titles of films by the same star” (ibid.). This set of distinctions is designed to deal with the particular problem of how particular texts can come to influence politics, be seen as

In chapter 4 we saw how Rajinikanth's films project his intra-textual image as both above and part of the peer group (i.e., the community of film viewers). However, how does an actor like Rajinikanth connect this intra-textual image as legitimately status-ful individual to his extra-textual image as a status-ful actor who can play such roles? As noted above, it is through the construction of a trans-textual image of the hero-star. How is this done? Below I answer this question by focusing on the films of Rajinikanth and Vijay.

### 3.5.1 *Inter-discursivity*

The intra-textual image of the film hero in any particular film is made to be similar to all other images of him, either in other films or outside of film.<sup>17</sup> That is, the sedimentation of status of the hero-star is only possible through a kind of inter-discursivity where each film builds off of the last.<sup>18</sup> This inter-discursivity is both implicit in the iconism between the roles of the characters—Vijay's and Rajini's heroes are more or less of the same type (see Rajanayakam 2002 for an indepth description of this iconism across all roles)—and explicit in alluding to previous characters, the

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political statements themselves, and translate the hero-star into a political figure. As such, it conflates various indexical *targets* which may be relevant in differing ways to the images of the hero. Do filmic signs index the actor, the image of the trans-textual hero-star, or another organization [e.g., a political party]? Or “culturally rooted motifs and archetypes”? Thus, even from the beginning (since Rajanayakam is interested in already fully status-ful hero-stars like MGR and Rajinikanth) Rajanayakam collapses the various kinds of images of the hero-star and the materiality in which they adhere (a single film, many films, the construction of the hero-star's “parallel text”) into the singular image of the politicized hero-star. Rajanayakam also doesn't differentiate between the internal textuality of a particular film and the cumulative image over many films, instead carving out the category of the “public realm” which is a heterogeneous set of semiotic forms which index the extra-textual political realm.

<sup>17</sup> Note that this tendency also applies to villains to some extent. For example, Raghuvaran was a popular villain who played across from Rajinikanth in many films. Similarly, Prakash Raj's villain in *Ghilli* (2004) is rehashed in *Pookkiri* (2006) (e.g., through the explicit inter-discursive use of “*chellam*” ‘dear’ in both films). Hence we can also talk about the villain-star.

<sup>18</sup> This is what Rajanayakam (2002) calls “snow-balling.”

cumulative trans-textual image of the hero-star, and the extra-textual image of the actor himself.

For example, the signature *styles* of older films are repeated in later films, thus creating a trans-text of *style*. Rajini does the same *style*-ish salute accompanied by the same sound effect, the same twirling around his sunglasses, the same pushing back his shirt to put his hands on his hips, the same throwing of a cigar(ette) or gum into his mouth, and the same *style*-ish gait in all his films. This goes along with the repetition of songs (e.g., the theme song of *Annamalai* [1992] redeployed in *Baadshaa* [1995]) and particular shots across films (e.g., explicitly referencing *Baadshaa* [1995] in *Sivaji* [2007] through a similar shot of Rajini walking toward the camera with flames behind him).

In general, in Rajini's films his characters are similarly praised for having so much "style," thus explicitly foregrounding his trans-textual image as the king of *style*. Take, for example, the songs "Style Style" in *Baadshaa* (1995) and "Style" in *Sivaji* (2007). Similarly, the constant praising of his "style" by other characters serves to connect "Super Star" Rajinikanth to the lexical item *style*. As we saw in chapter 4, the heroines in *Annamalai* (1992), *Baadshaa* (1995), and *Padaiyappa* (1999) all voice their attraction to Rajinikanth through their attraction to his "style." Similarly, the father in *Padaiyappa* (1999), played by Sivaji Ganeshan, makes Rajini perform his signature *style*-ish salute for him, referred to explicitly as "style," and then praises him for it.

Rajini's older dialogues are also re-animated in his later films. This is most transparent in *Sivaji* (2007), a retrospective inter-discursive smorgasbord of *style*. This is done both by Rajini—for example, when he says "*ithu eppadi irukku?*," the dialogue from *Pathinaaru Vayathilee* (1977) after flipping a firecracker into his mouth; or when he



(parodically) reenacts his role from *Chandiramukhi* (2005) as the king clapping the thalam (“*lakalakalalaka*”) for Jyothika (in *Sivaji* played by a male police inspector)—or by other characters, as when Vivek references Rajini’s “*thani vazhi*” and “*ithu eppadi irukku?*” dialogues when giving *punch dialogues* on Rajini’s behalf, or when the police use mimicry artists to try and crack the password of Rajini’s computer (each artist does a different dialogue from a Rajini film).

In general, hero-centered films reflexively position the hero *as* a hero in the film text. For example, in Vijay’s *Pookkiri* (2006), a female villain addresses him as “Hey hero.” Often this takes the form of referencing the hero with the name of another character played by the actor from an older film. For example, in the song “*Athirathee*” in *Sivaji* (2007) Rajini is referenced as *Thalapathi* (‘general,’ the name of his 1991 film), *Billa* (the name and character of his 1980 film), and *Baadshaa* (‘king,’ the name of his 1995 film).<sup>19</sup>

More explicitly, Rajini is constantly referred to in his films by his epithet “Super Star.” In chapter 4 we noted this with respect to the display of the epithet of the hero-star at the beginning of every Rajini film (photo 4.1). This acts to suture together all his roles as “Super Star” (or, in Vijay’s case, as “*Ilaiya Thalapathi Vijay*” ‘Vijay, general of the youth’). In *Sivaji* (2007), the song “*Style*” begins “Hero Hero, You are the Hero. Staro Staro, *nee* Super Staro” ‘You are the hero! You are the Super Star!’ Later in the film the bad guys have assembled to bemoan *Sivaji*’s rise. A minister says, ‘All he wanted was to open a college, but [through your challenging of him] you made him into “Super Star.”’

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, as Rajanayakam (2002: 253) points out, the song “*Kaalai Kaalai*” from the film *Manithan* (1987) variously refers to Rajini’s previous films *Murattu Kaalai* (1980), *Pookkiri Raajaa* (1982), *Paayum Puli* (1983), and *Nallavanukku Nallavan* (1984).

Alternatively, Rajini is often indirectly referred to by his name; for example, in *Baadshaa* (1995) Rajini's character is referred to as the one who has a *kaantham* ('magnet') in his name, referring to the '-kanth' in Rajinikanth and to Rajini's magnetic attractiveness to audiences (see Rajanayakam 2002: 295).

Besides simply referring, older roles are actually reenacted in many films. For example, in *Pookkiri* (2006), the hero from Vijay's previous blockbuster *Ghilli* (2004) makes an appearance (in the same exact outfit) singing the song "Appadi Poodu" from *Ghilli*. Most amazing is *Annamalai* (1992) where during a song sequence we are shown a montage of scenes from different Rajinikanth films. This is diegetically framed by the hero and heroine looking into a moving image-finder with eye holes on either side (one for Rajini, the other for the heroine played by Khusbhoo). They look into it and what do they see but various shots of Rajini doing *style* in as many as twelve *getups* from other films! The film characters are bizarrely watching themselves in other roles. The song goes even further in its lyrics when it references Rajinikanth explicitly as "Rajini" and the heroine as "Khushboo." Here the division between extra-, trans-, and intra-textual is blurred. Of course it causes no dissonance because, as I have been arguing, the immanent film text is always already part of the larger trans-textual construction of the hero-star. At any moment, Rajini or Vijay is a particular film hero, all of his film heroes, and himself. Every character is a token of the type.

### 3.5.2 *Borrowing status*

The hero-star is also constructed based on the same relationship that youth have to film stars. That is, the status of the hero-star is constructed by re-animating status-ful

forms from other high-status individuals, notably other film stars. Thus, for example, in the film *Baadshaa* (1995), the name of the hero's autostand is "MGR Auto-stand."<sup>20</sup> We can also note the co-opting of MGR by Vijaykanth in his epithet "*Karuppu MGR*," 'The Black MGR.'

*Sivaji* (2007) revolves precisely around Rajini's co-optation of the two great actors of the previous generation: Sivaji Ganeshan and M. G. Ramachandiran (Sivaji and MGR for short, respectively).<sup>21</sup> The first incarnation of the hero is as Sivaji Arumugam, but in the film called "Sivaji" for short. Later he comes as M. G. Ravichandiran, but called in the film "MGR" for short. Here the naming co-opts Sivaji Ganeshan's and M. G. Ramachandiran's status-ful images but marks Rajinikanth (as the animator of these characters) as different: he is Sivaji *Arumugam*, M. G. *Ravichandiran*. In addition to positioning Rajinikanth within the dual lineages of Sivaji Ganeshan and MGR, the film is rife with other references, where Rajini re-animates the 1948 S. S. Vasan super-hit *Chandralekha*; his contemporary Kamal Hassan; younger generation actors like Prakash Raj in *Ghilli* (2004) and Vadiveel in *Imsai Aran 23am Pulikeesi* (2006); Hollywood films and video games: Roger Moore and James Bond, Eddie Murphy, Robert Rodriguez's *Desperado*, *The Matrix*, *Mortal Kombat* (and the Sega video game system), Superman, Spiderman, and even Fidel Castro.

On the first night of marriage with his wife Rajini asks her how they should celebrate (i.e., have sexual intercourse). Should they celebrate "*soft-aa, vegetarian-aa*" ('softly,

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<sup>20</sup> See Rajanayakam (2002: 259ff.) for descriptions of how Rajini used MGR's image increasingly after his death; and how other actors use MGR's image (ibid.: 307–308).

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Rajini's earlier film *Raajaa Chinna Rooja* (1989) explicitly connects Rajini with past greats of the Tamil film world. He states "I can sing like Bagavathar. I can wield sword like MGR. I can act like Sivaji. I can speak Thamizh like Kalaignar" (quoted in Rajanayakam 2002: 290). We can compare this with Simbu's recent co-optation of Ajith and Vijay at the end of his recent film *Silampaaddam* (2008).

vegetarian-like,’ i.e., gently)—cut to a parody of the song sequence of the first night in Sivaji Ganeshan’s 1972 film *Vasantha Maligai*—or dreamy and “*suRu suRu NNu*” (‘vigorously’)—cut to a psychedelic song sequence of the first night from the 1971 MGR film *Rickshawkaaran*—or “romantically” (i.e., sexily, lustily)—cut to a song sequence from Kamal Hassan’s 1982 super-hit *Sakalakkalavallavan*. She then praises his *style* and says, ‘how would it be like that [according to your *style*]’? Cut to the actual song sequence from the film where a *style*-ized representation of the first night *qua* phallic fight scene is presented to the audience. Here Rajini borrows status from other greats, co-opts them, and then transcends them.<sup>22</sup>

And just as actors of Rajinikanth’s and Vijaykanth’s generation calque their status off of already established artists of yesteryear like MGR, current aspirants use Rajinikanth’s *style*-ish trans-text to try to ground their own status work. A survey of recent film titles shows this. Dhanush’s *Pollaathavan* (2007) and *Padikkaathavan* (2009), Laurence’s *Raajaathi Raaja* (2009), Ajith’s *Billa* (2007), and Sundar C.’s *Thee* (2009) all take their names from past Rajinikanth hits.<sup>23</sup> In the film *Pookkiri* (2006) Vijay does a *style*, twirling the gun around his finger over and over, pops the trigger, and loads it back up. When a female character asks him in amazement how he is able to do that, he replies: ‘How many Rajini films I must have seen . . .’ (“*naan eththane Rajini padam paaththirukkeen . . .*”). Here, lesser status actors are able to use Rajini’s status to

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<sup>22</sup> The extreme auto-referentiality of Rajini’s films (especially in *Sivaji* [2007]) represents the regress of this logic of status borrowing. Indeed, there are few who have more status than Rajinikanth, and certainly no one whose status is such that it can license *style* to the extent that it does for Rajini. As one’s status increases, then, the citationality of status-grounding moves turns inwards to one’s own trans-text rather than externally to others’.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly with MGR films: *Marmayogi* (Kamal’s recently shelved project), *Aayirathil Oruvan* (director Selvaraghavan’s 2010 film), and *Raama Thediya Siithai* (Cheran’s 2008 film).

(ironically and seriously) justify their own *style*, in the process constituting and ratifying Rajini's trans-text as status-ful hero capable of doing *style* to the extreme.<sup>24</sup>

Here, then, the hero-star is placed within a lineage of other status-ful individuals where, through a semiotic chain, status from one's status-superiors licenses one's own status work. And note that status works up the chain as well. Being so used itself indexes the status of the person being used. Hence the recirculatability of fractions of the hero-star (e.g., of Rajini's *style* in youth peer groups, of Rajini's *style* by other film stars) itself constitutes status-raising of the hero-star (cf. voicing by another, as discussed in chapter 4), and grounds his further status-raising in other domains (e.g., his future films).

Note that of all the strategies discussed, borrowing as status-raising is one of the safest, and hence one of the most common strategies for younger, aspiring heroes and youth, precisely because it can equivocate between being an act of reporting (and thus simply a performance) and an act of performativity (as an actual raising of status). It is this ironical, but serious distancing which can be utilized to status-raise but maintain an escape hatch of deniability while still constituting an act of status-raising. This is what differentiates the comedian's use of status-ful images from the hero's. The comedian's use simply attempts to *perform* an image of status (it is reportative, ironic, parodic) while the hero attempts to performatively diagram status (it constitutes status). Given humor as the comedian's functional end, it is the self-reflexive distance of the performance from its performativity that differentiates the comedian from the villain. The villain's *style* act is infelicitous, while the comedian brackets the illocutionary force of *style* within a larger reportative frame. The hero's use of *style* attempts to minimize the gap between

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<sup>24</sup> Also see Rajanayakam (2002: 302) who notes the reference to Vijay as "*chinna Rajini*" 'small Rajini,' in the song "*Priyamudan*," as well as the actor Sarath Kumar's use of Rajini's image.

performance and performativity so that the former constitutes the latter, while the comedian attempts to maximize the gap so as to create a status-mismatch or -inversion, and thus humor.

### 3.5.3 Summary of the hero-star's trans-textual status work

The total effect of such trans-textual status work is that all instances of the actor as a film hero are equated with each other, constantly referring to each other, collapsing one hero-character into the next, creating a coherent and formulaic trans-textual image, a crystallization of the textualized hero-star, a blurring and implosion of the intra- and trans-textual that is grounded not only in the intra- and trans-textual construction of the hero, but also in his alignment with other status-ful hero-stars (i.e., in a trans-hero trans-text: the Tamil archetype “*hero*”). What is important here is that the similarity or equation of roles is crosscut by the sedimentation of status. With each successful film the hero's *style* can increase, can become more magnificent, more capable of transgressing. There is an accumulation of status which felicitously licenses more and more *style*. With such a pattern established, viewers *expect* this kind of hyperbolic *style* from the hero-star, and fans are disappointed when he doesn't deliver on it. As with youth peer group dynamics, status begets status.

Further, because *style* is tightly regulated by the formulaic image necessary to generate the status essential to perform such *style* successfully in the first place, extremity of *style* (its intensity, the degree of its transgression) becomes another dimension of differentiating previous and future status-raising *style*. That is, the fetish of difference produced by the regularity of sameness increases the quantity of *style* as difference within

the same qualitative category. Indeed, in every film that a veritable hero-star like Rajinikanth does, his *style* grows in intensity while maintaining the same basic formula. It becomes more and more extreme, more and more developed, more and more powerful to the point where the hero-star is able to bend the laws of reality and society to his own wishes without it seeming silly or absurd to the audience. In fact, quite the opposite: it becomes natural and necessary.

Such status work in films is only possible, as I have argued, because the relevant text being constructed and engaged with isn't a particular film but a set of films that are seen as contributing to a larger trans-text. That is, the *build up*, to use a Tamil youth phrase, of an authenticated trans-textual hero-star conserves the status work done in any particular film, allowing it to be used as the ground zero of *style* for the next film. And because every intra-textual representation (token) is an icon of the trans-text (an emergent type level phenomenon), every next film doesn't lose the momentum gained in the previous film. Here the history of Rajini's films are organized around the construction of the Rajini trans-text: Super Star, the king of *style* and all their associated meanings. This kind of bootstrapping project of building up an image of *style* isn't engaged with by actors like Kamal Hassan, whose characters are different in every film. His trans-textual image, rather, is of the consummate actor, capable of putting on any disguise and making you believe it isn't him or any of his previous characters. Through non-iconism, or dis-identification, of his roles he is seen as a great artist, but not a performer of *style*.

#### 3.5.4 *Trans-text to extra-text*

As I have been arguing, the hero-centered text constructs the hero as status-ful, and thus licensable to do *style*. And such texts situate themselves within lineages of texts/heroes to construct larger trans-textual images of status. The successes of particular actors to create coherent images that presuppose and entail status license the performance of *style* in later films. At the same time, such (trans-)textual images of status are explicitly connected to the extra-textual image of the actor, his 'real' life person.

For instance, Rajini's films often refer to his 'real life.'<sup>25</sup> In the fictional film *AnbuLLa Rajinikanth* (1984) he plays himself. In the more recent *Kuseelan* (2008) he plays a famous hero-star that is, in everything but name, Rajinikanth. In *Sri Raghavendra* (1985) and *Muthu* (1995) he plays spiritually oriented characters, which are taken by audiences to reflect how he is spiritual in real life. More interesting, and common in his films, are the references to his lowly origins; in particular, to his having been a bus conductor before coming to film. In *Baadshaa* (1995) he is pictured as a bus conductor in the song sequence *Azhaku*, accompanied by a self-reflexive moment where he stares into the camera and smiles a knowing smile to the audience. In *Sivaji* (2007), after having suffered a setback at the hands of the villain, his comedian sidekick Vivek asks him, 'What will you do? Will you become an auto-driver (his role in *Baadshaa* [1995]), a milkman (his role in *Annamalai* [1992]), a bus conductor (his role before coming to film)?' Later in the film when he gets off a bus, Vivek says 'You get down *style*-ishly like a conductor' ("*conductor maathiri style-aa iRangkuRe!*") doubly referencing his real-life past and his filmic image. Similarly, in *Nallavanukku Nallavan* (1984), Rajini's

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<sup>25</sup> The issue of course isn't whether or not Rajinikanth's life is really like this, but that the allusion in such films isn't to his trans-textual or intra-textual images but to his extra-textual image, whether this be true or not.



employer asks him: “Have you heard of the one who was initially a bus conductor, but later turned out, because of sheer hard work, to be ‘Super Star?’” (quoted in Rajanayakam 2002: 288)

In short, the trans-textual image of the hero-star is explicitly connected to, or anchored in, his extra-textual image.<sup>26</sup> But why? For what purpose? As I argue below, this is because the ability of the trans-textual image of the status-ful hero-star only holds traction to the extent that the extra-textual image functions as a status-leveling alibi of the hero-star’s status-raising. In effect, the extra- and trans-/intra- textual images engage in a status division of labor that attempts to guarantee the audience’s acceptance of the hero-star’s status-raising and allows such status-raising to become hypertrophied in successive films.

### 3.5.5 *Extra-text as alibi: Status-leveling*

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to being a feature of hero-centered films, this tacking between the inter-, trans-, and extra-textual is itself part of spectatorship practices in Tamil Nadu. There is an assumption among many Tamil viewers that the role an actor plays reflects who he is as a person. This peculiar kind of realist spectatorship among Tamil viewers (perhaps more relevant at an earlier period of time) has been misunderstood by many as the ignorance of an audience that is so charmed by film that it cannot tell the difference between the screen and real life (see Rogers 2009; Dickey 2009b for discussion). This misapprehends the issue however. Many Tamil viewers assume that an actor wouldn’t agree to play a role that didn’t reflect who he was in real life. That is, the assumption is that one picks roles that project who one really is. For example, with MGR the logic was that he only played ‘good’ characters because he was a ‘good’ man. Conversely, on this logic women only act in films as heroines because they are actually morally corrupt in real life. For Rajini’s early image, there is also a confluence of his extra-textual image—as a man of vices—and his antihero image as deviant youth. From the get-go, then, the Tamil culture of film viewing is wont to connect the images of film characters with film actors through the notion of similarly constructed roles (i.e., that the extra-, intra-, and trans-textual images will or should align). Secondly, there is a long history of films diagramming extra-textual political situations. MGR’s films, and Rajini’s films to an extent, as Pandian (1992) and Rajanayakam (2002) have clearly shown, are supposed to be read against non-filmic scenarios, often quite literally. We can compare this kind of realist spectatorship with American assumptions about the truthfulness of documentary or news images. We accept that the news may lie to us, but we *assume* that what the news says should be evaluated by its truthfulness, or the commitment of its authors/animations to such truth. While we know that news images are simply images that can and often are false, nonetheless, the default assumption is that, by convention/genre, they are, or should be, true.

So far we have noted that youth viewers judge the expression of *style* in hero-centric films based on their evaluation of the hero-star as status-ful or not, following the logic of the peer group. One who is status-ful can express *style* successfully, while one who isn't is ridiculed. We have linked the ability to ground status by film actors as part of the inter-discursive construction of trans-textual images which, if ratified by audiences, license more and more status-ful expression in the form of *style*. What is interesting is that the grounding of such status is ultimately based on the extra-textual image of the hero-star, evaluated by the same logic of the peer group: the more he status-raises on-screen the more he must status-level in 'real life.' Just as someone who status-raises too much threatens to alienate the group, film stars who do not status-level themselves are viewed as immodest and arrogant. Indeed, when I talked to youth about film stars, it is this fact which they mention as much as the on-screen image of the hero-star. They like film stars such as Vijay, Ajith, and Rajinikanth because they are good people, they do social service, and they are humble and modest. (See Rogers forthcoming on Vijay's extra-textual construction as modest and ordinary).

The common stereotype about Rajinikanth is that while on-screen his *style* is extreme, in real life he is (now) very simple and humble (also see Rajanayakam 2002: 249ff., 299). As it was often explained to me, 'in contrast to other film actors and politicians who act in real life and on-screen, Rajini doesn't act in real life. He is so simple. He doesn't wear makeup when you see him in real life, or in television appearances. He comes as he is: balding, dark-skinned, unshaven, with white hair (photo 5.5). If there is a function he doesn't come late and make everyone wait (a demonstration of higher status); rather he'll

be the first one to come (a demonstration of equal status). He never acts like he is better than anyone else. He acts on-screen, but not in real life.’

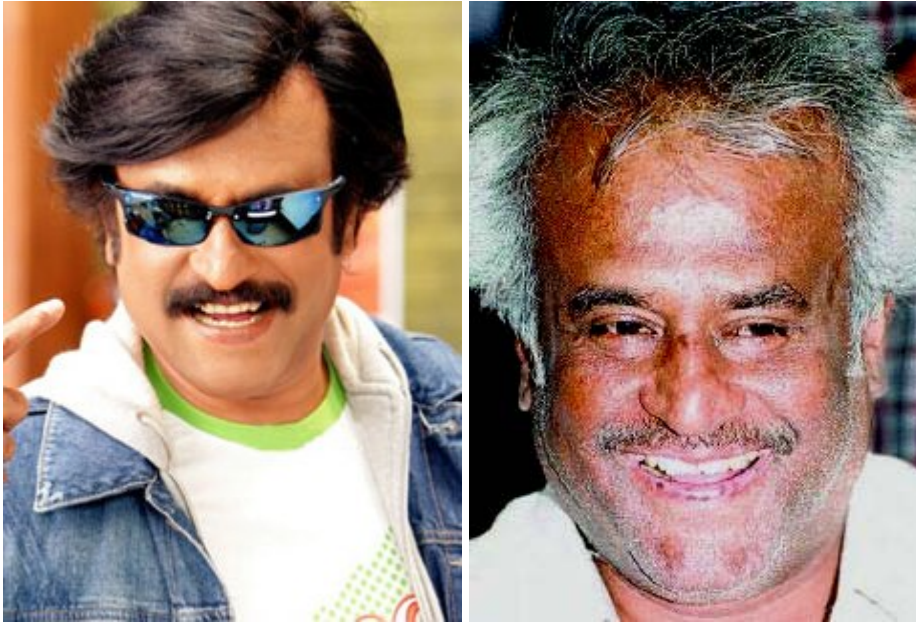


Photo 5.5 Rajinikanth: On-screen and off-screen

Indeed, this is part of Rajini’s self-presentation. For example, consider an interview on the Indian news channel NDTV (NDTV 2007) about the release of the film *Sivaji* (2007):

“Interviewer: <to the camera> It’s not everyday that you get to meet and interview the God of Indian cinema. With me is the one and only Rajinikanth <turns to Rajini>. Sir, thank you very much for talking to us. We know that you do not give interviews normally. There’s a lot of expectation and hype around *Sivaji*. And people have been talking about the Rajinikanth *style*, the Rajinikanth *style*. Let’s hear it from you. What is the Rajini *style*?

Rajini: <laughs embarrassedly; rubbing his neck; looking down> See, actually, it’s only the media who have made it so big to be frank with you. Now they are comparing Rajinikanth with Amitabh Bachchan.<sup>27</sup> To be frank with you, in the

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<sup>27</sup> Amitabh Bachchan was the biggest actor in Hindi cinema from the 1970s to the late 1980s, and is still a popular actor today. Many of Rajini’s hits were remakes of Amitabh Bachchan’s films.

cinema world Rajinikanth is only a king, probably a king. But Amitabh Bachchan is an emperor.

I: Don't be very modest.

R: No, it's a fact. So don't compare emperor to a king, right? *Ami-ji* is my inspiration, he is my role model. Okay? And this hype, see whatever, this is Shanker's [the director's] picture, AVM's [the producers'] (picture). Whole credit goes to Shankar. He's the master, master director. Hats off to him for everything. We should congratulate, we should appreciate everything to Shankar. I am only an actor, just like a puppet.

I: That is typical Rajini modesty. People say Rajinikanth doesn't do stylish stuff, what Rajini does becomes *style*.

R: Maybe, I don't know about that <laughs embarrassedly>. I don't know about that, maybe. It's a God's grace [sic].”

Rajini's comportment in this interview ranges from the submissive to the embarrassed: his nervous laughter, his swaying back and forth, his compacting posture, his nervous rubbing of his neck, his downward avoiding eye gaze, and his soft voice. At every move he status-lowers himself and praises others: saying that “*Ami-ji*” (+hon.) is his superior and role model; saying that the director Shankar is his master; attributing his success to “God's grace” or the media hype. He even makes the unbelievable assertion that he is “only an actor, just like a puppet.” He lets the interviewer praise him, and explicitly status-lowers himself to the point where the interviewer interrupts him by saying “That is typical Rajini modesty,” a dismissal of his status-avoiding manner (yet ironically itself ratifying Rajini's self-status-lowering moves through interruption). Even when he self-attributes status he hedges: “probably a king,” “Maybe, I don't know about that.”

This necessity to perform modesty in proportion to one's own on-screen *style* is *de rigueur* for film stars. Hence the necessity of sponsoring social functions like giving to

charity and celebrating one's birthday by performing social service for the poor (e.g., Vijay's 2007 celebration of his birthday with poor, sick children at the Egmore hospital in Chennai [*Indiaglitz* 2007]; cf. Rogers forthcoming). It is also *de rigueur* for fan clubs of film stars to engage primarily in acts of social service (Dickey 2001; Osella and Osella 2004: 242)—for example, giving away food, pens, notebooks, or clothing to the poor during celebrations of the hero-star's birthday or recent film releases. And this is encouraged directly by film stars. The idea here, as Rajini fan club members in Madurai explained to me, is to spread the good name, the humbleness, the “of the people”-ness *qua* patronage (i.e., status-raising through lowering, cf. the *treat*) of the hero-star (Osella and Osella 2004: 242; cf. M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990; M. Mines 1994 on the *periya aaL*).

To not status-lower is to risk peril at the hands of audiences. Indeed, while youth accept stars as status-ful who project sameness with the community of viewers *qua* peer group, they explicitly dislike other stars, and often reject their status-raising moves *in films*, because of their perceived arrogance in real life. This is common discourse regarding actors like Simbu and, to an extent, Kamal Hassan. While everyone agrees they are talented, their *head weight* (*thalai gaNam*, ‘arrogance’), their *banthaa*, their *over* speech praising themselves as talented individuals *outside of film* is a turnoff, and thus a reason to dismiss them/their films and their attempts at status-raising.<sup>28</sup>

What we see, then, is that while the intra-textual film hero performs unimaginable acts of *style*, projecting unmeasurable amounts of status, the extra-textual image of the

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<sup>28</sup> Note that for comedians and villains the necessity to be authenticated *outside of film* as users of *style* doesn't exist. Their filmic *style* is always already deficient in some way, and thus the necessity for their grounding and status-leveling in the extra-textual is moot.

film actor acts as a kind of alibi, grounding film *style* through extra-textual status-leveling.<sup>29</sup> Just as with youth peer groups, status negotiation is always twofold: one can perform status to the extent that one has status; one's performances of status should never exceed the peer group. The most popular hero-stars are consummate humble men of the people, constantly status-lowering off-screen while constantly status-raising on-screen. Interestingly, as a hero-star like Rajinikanth's status is ratified by audiences, he increasingly disavows *style* off-screen. This itself is an act of status-raising through inversion for only the man who has something to downplay can downplay it. Fans assume, then, that just as Rajini's characters become normal men after the villain is vanquished and the film plot finishes (see chapter 4, section 3.5.9), when Rajini steps off of the set he is a humble, normal person, but with a caveat: just like Rajini on-screen, the lion within him is always there waiting to be unleashed, contained within himself as an act of solidarity with and deference to the 'people.'

Note that for any one hero-star the figures of status in play are multiple; that is, there are multiple embodied surrogates of the actor circulating at any one time: his actual physical body; images of him in particular films; and commentaries on him (as a hero or person) in conversation and in other media. Further, each of these images are engaging in status-raising or -leveling to various degrees. Precisely because of this simultaneous multiplicity, the hero-star's status work can tack between these various images so as to

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<sup>29</sup> When understood outside of the context of the dynamics of status negotiation in youth peer groups, this feature of hero-star presents itself as a contradiction or ambiguity. For example, Rogers (forthcoming: 24–25 in manuscript) notes this ambiguity/contradiction regarding Vijay. However, because he doesn't take into account the larger underpinning of the hero-star's construction (as regulated by the logic of the peer group), he can only make sense of this contradiction by appealing to the essentialized Cartesian and Darshanik modes of seeing that are presumably at play, thereby reintroducing the mind–body dualism he strives to avoid in the first place. Once we realize, however, that film star images are constructed out of the same logic of the peer group the contradiction becomes a non-problem.

*both* project equality *and* difference from the peer group at the same time. Thus he can both voice status and deny/defer it, and each act can play off of the other, thereby hypertrophying the intensity of status-raising. It is precisely this representational disjuncture that makes it possible for the hero-star to make incredible status expressions in his films and have it ratified by audiences.

And note, recalling Rajini films like *Annamalai* (1992) and *Padaiyappa* (1999), how the hero-star's tacking between multiple surrogate images of himself (the extra-, the trans-, the intra-textual) parallels the structure of the hero-oriented text: *style* and status-raising only come after a 'building up' of the hero (through the voices of others) coupled with status-leveling images of the hero both before (he is just a normal guy who avoids status negotiation) *and* after the main status work of the film (he returns to his ordinary status-less self). *Style* is liminally situated between two moments of non-status (or rather, hidden or deferred status). Similarly, the extra-textual image of the hero-star functions to buffer moments of status-raising in films, deferring the articulation of his status to others (e.g., his fans), by being situated *outside* of the film text.

Note how this parallels youth's 'solving for' the inherent tension of the peer group through the hybridization or negotiation of their status-raising performances (chapter 3, section 3). Of course, the problem is slightly more difficult for youth because: (a) in general they do not have such surrogates to status-raise (though images circulated in graffiti, on sign boards [for friends' weddings, fan clubs, political parties], gossip, or in other media function in this way to this end); and relatedly (b) the feedback of status-leveling from peers is often coterminous with their acts of status-raising, making the kind of tacking back and forth done by hero-stars difficult for youth. This explains why

youth's status tends toward hybridity while the hero-star's on-screen status tends toward hyperbolic extremity. The main task, however, of creating a perduring image of statusfulness that can thus license *style qua* status-raising is the same. We can see, then, why youth status and film representations of status are so iconic: the logic of hero-stars' performances of status (on- and off-screen) and that of youth's performances of status *and* the evaluation of both kinds of performances are based on the same logic. And moreover, each interpenetrates the other: film images require their extra-filmic recirculation for popularity and profits; youth utilize filmic images to successfully navigate the youth peer group.

#### **4. Conclusions: From reception to re-animation**

In this chapter I have shown that film is a central source register for youth's status work. Further, I argued that the engagement of youth with filmic images of *style* is the same as their engagement with images of *style* in their peer groups. To this extent, film hero-stars abide by the same logic of status negotiation that applies to the youth peer group. I argued that the iconism between youth peer groups and filmic representations holds because films are re-animated by youth to do their own status work and thus the same forms circulate in both representational orders. Second, they are re-animated because film offers a solution to the problematics of status negotiation in the peer group. Further, this ease of re-animation and recontextualization is part of the design of such films.

In this section, based on the above discussion, I problematize the notion of reception in media studies. Within Indian film studies the typical framing of the commercial hero-



oriented film has attempted to locate it within a larger dichotomy of realism versus its others: melodrama, escapism, and fantasy (Thomas 1985; Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993b; Rajadhyaksha 1993; Vasudevan 1995; Dickey 1993a; Rajanayakam 2002; Srinivas 2010; see Dickey 2009b for a discussion). Implicitly, then, most approaches to the hero-oriented commercial film have attempted to read it against the question of how it relates to the extra-textual as representational or not (where representation is understood in the classical sense of mirroring, or true reference). The theoretical and methodological fallout of this is that the study of such film is largely textual (e.g., Prasad 1998; Niranjana and Dhareshwar 1996; cf. Srinivas 2010 who even while attempting to locate her analysis of the social life of film outside of the text inevitably falls back into this trap by “reading” film posters).

More anthropologically oriented approaches to film have attempted to move from the text to the audience’s reception.<sup>30</sup> However, the representational assumptions of such work still remain, except now, instead of the question being how do film texts relate to the (un-)reality of (ideological) representations, the question becomes how do film texts map onto the audiences that apprehend them? That is, how do viewers *interpret* film images and make meaning out of them (cf. Bordwell 1989 in the film theory literature)? How do viewers process filmic images, how/what do they *think* about particular films (cf. cognitive approaches in the film theory literature: Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Carroll 1996; Currie 1996; Holland 1992; Hochenberg and Brooks 1996; Prince 1996)? What do

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<sup>30</sup> For this discipline shift in anthropology see Davis 1989; Hirsh 1992; Dickey 1993a, b, 1995, 2001; Spitulnik 1993; Armsbrust 1996; Crawford and Hafsteinsson 1996; Barber 1997; Larkin 1997; Derne 2000; Liechty 2003. On the turn to reception in cultural studies (with respect to television and other media) see Morley 1980, 1992[1980]; Hobson 1982, 1992[1980]; Ang 1985[1982]; Radway 1984; see Ross and Nightingale 2003 and Straiger 2005 for discussion.

they *learn* from film images (Rajanayakam 2002: 227)? Do they reject, do they accept, or do they “negotiate” film images *qua* instances of ideology (Hall 1993[1974])? In short, ultimately for this approach to media the question still is, how do audiences engage with filmic texts as representational objects?

In all such questions the viewer is taken as a kind of end point of communication, of meaning, of consumption, of ideology. The film is extinguished at the moment of being seen and processed by the viewer; it influences or not, just as a mirror can reflect back only what stands across from it. Film is always already about watching, processing, comprehending, thinking, and feeling at the moment of sensing the filmic image.<sup>31</sup> This is the moment of its (mental/sensual) contact (cf. Benjamin 1935 and Kracauer’s 1960 notion of film’s tactility).

But why *only* view film from the perspective of the mental interpretants that it immediately produces (what Peirce 1992 referred to as the *dynamical interpretant*)? Certainly this is part of the social life of film. But is it only that? In this chapter I have framed film as a particular kind of semiosis that can be interrogated—and is interrogated on a daily basis by Tamil youth—according to its pragmatic utility. Further, I argued that film meta-pragmatically (pre)figures itself as re-animatable based on precisely such pragmatic utility (Agha 2007b). It isn’t only the case, then, that film representations of status abide by the norms of the youth peer group, but that this is so because film design explicitly links re-animatability to popularity and profits (often under the rhetoric of

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<sup>31</sup> Hence the high degree of cognitivism in film theory, from Kracauer (1960) and Bazin’s (2004) psychologistic, Screen theory’s psychoanalytic (Baudry 1986[1970], 1986[1975]; Fargier 1980; Comolli 1986[1971]; MacCabe 1985; see Carroll 1998a, Allen 1995 for discussion), to current cognitive psychological (Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Carroll 1996; Currie 1996; Holland 1992; Prince 1996) approaches to film.

giving the fans ‘what they want’). Films are designed to live on beyond being “received” through presupposing youth’s active modes of spectatorship and post-filmic engagement with and use of film (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009).

In short, then, to understand the hero-oriented film—and to understand any film, I would argue—it is necessary to look at the re-animatability of filmic representations as pragmatically efficacious and meta-pragmatically prefigured for such efficacy (cf. Agha 2009). To do this requires us to attend to contexts and activities often far removed from events of film reception (cf. Ram 2008: 56 on religious film). I demonstrated this for Tamil commercial cinema by situating film with respect to youth notions of status and the dynamics of status negotiation, and linking these realms to film production.

The problem with the reception approach to film can be demonstrated with analogy to another semiotic phenomenon (see Agha n.d.: 9 on a similar line of critique regarding classical political economy). It is as if we reduced fashion and its consumption to the showroom and the moment of purchase, and ignored the fact that people actually wear the clothes they buy to do interactional work outside the showroom. And further that this is central to fashion and its social life. I think analogies of this kind aren’t often drawn with regards to film because of the particular biases introduced by the denotational transparency of film. Film has a seemingly self-contained “meaning” and can be analyzed solely from this point of view without any seeming residue (see Nakassis 2009 for a critique). Because of this robust semanticity the pragmatic and meta-pragmatic conditions of possibility for such meaningfulness are easily ignored in favor of textual analogies or analyses of audiences’ textual analyses. But ignoring such conditions is neither justified nor advisable, as I have argued in this chapter.

The ground for status work, for the work that youth make film do, is the peer group. And as I have argued in this dissertation, this extends far beyond the theater. From this perspective we can start to think about film engagement not as reception (and thus the question, does film influence or not?) but as re-animation (how is film used and to what ends?). To recall the metaphor from chapter 3, just as the carpenter isn't influenced by his hammer but uses it, youth use film; they re-animate it for other purposes: to status-raise, to status-level others, to entertain, to *time-pass*. Film theory misses this to the extent that it thinks that films are objects whose *sole* or most important aim is to represent (and thus that its sole value is its representational and denotational self-contained content, or apperception thereof), to create a world for us to be able to think and feel. It is this attempt to reduce film as surrogate mental object—that film is a projection of, or iconic with, thought or the senses—that reduces engagement with film to a mental act and that then projects this back on films and classifies them based on whether they abide by the ontological and epistemological categories presupposed by this mental act, viz. “reality” or “fantasy.”

An approach to Tamil cinema which takes the story and not the hero-star, which takes the logic of coherence/realism and not the logic of status in the peer group, is unable to understand such film except as escapist, fantastical, ridiculous, unreal (cf. Ram 2008 on a similar take on religious films). And yet, as I have argued, such a view misapprehends that such films are primarily about status and not about reality or fantasy *per se*. They must be read as such. This is precisely because this is how film viewers engage with hero-stars. We might offer a different, albeit culturally specific, classification of films than the real–fantasy dualism: films which are designed to be re-animated for status

negotiation in peer groups and those which aren't (cf. the hero versus the non-hero, discussed in section 2.3).

This mode of reckoning film also allows us to theorize engagement with film without having to fall back on the psychologism inherent in the notion of *identification*. In analyses which do not place the youth peer group as the relevant model for understanding Tamil hero-centric cinema, the notion is that youth *imitate* film heroes because they *identify* with them in the *fantasy* created by the film (Rajanayakam 2002; cf. Osella and Osella 2004: 257; in Western film theory: Allen 1995; Smith 1995). While perhaps not untrue in some cases, this formulation mischaracterizes the issue by reductively psychologizing it. As I have shown, the issue of film engagement is independent of psychological identification by viewers insofar as it rests, in the first instance, on the pragmatic usability of particular forms. It doesn't matter whether viewers identify with Rajinikanth or Vijay, or that they feel that they are like him, but that the images presented on-screen are iconic with the kinds of images that they themselves can perform for ego-focal indexical effect. Indeed, feeling closer to the character is no guarantee that viewers will use such images more in their lives, as a comparison of the frequency and fidelity of youth's re-animation of Rajinikanth with a new faces like Dhanush—with whom youth may identify with but not re-animate—shows.

There are other issues which are still unexplained by approaches to Tamil film which relegate it (knowingly or unknowingly) as the opposite of realist cinema: why do viewers accept the ridiculous unreality of such cinema, its illogicity, its schizophrenia (as seen by such theorists)? The only fall back is to say that either: (a) viewers are brainwashed, confused, or ignorant, as per a common lay discourse; (b) that they just want some easy

entertainment, nothing too heavy (Dickey 1993b); or (c) that the film conforms to a larger moral/ideological vision of the social world (Thomas 1995; Prasad 1998). Such views, however, are unable to explain why some films are rejected, derided, and made fun of for their illogicity, their in(s)anity, and their stupidity but others aren't. Such views also fail to explain why such distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable illogicity do not map onto fans versus non-fans (i.e., the idea that fans accept anything and non-fans can see through the veil). Non-fans may accept the illusion in films of an actor as status-ful, while fans may reject that illusion (e.g., if it contradicts their expectations). Further, they are unable to explain the most salient fact about Indian commercial cinema: its ubiquitous recirculation and re-animation by highly discriminating viewers in all domains of social life for multiform purposes often unrelated to pure entertainment or moral cosmologies (cf. Srinivas 2010).

What I have shown in this chapter is that if we view film from the perspective of status negotiation in youth peer groups these issues become non-problems. For example, the logic of status is clear and rational in the film and thus the issue of representation and reality (and the masses' illogicity) becomes irrelevant because the pragmatics of status negotiation work not on concepts of truth or reference but on performance and performative felicity.

This interpretation of the hero-centered film also explains a number of otherwise curiosities about hero-oriented Tamil cinema. For example, (a) how to reconcile that the hero-star has unbelievable fighting ability despite not that great a physique; (b) his uncontrollable charisma despite average looks; (c) films whose plot lines are incoherent

but that aren't evaluated negatively because of it; (d) the ability (indeed, necessity) of hero-stars acting as young characters well into old-age.

A hero-star like Rajinikanth or Vijay commands so much status that he can literally bend screen reality to his will. Viewers accept this with relish because the hero-stars' status is built up and ratified across a filmic history of status-raising and -leveling.<sup>32</sup> Thus, after seeing MGR or Rajini hundreds of times playing the same youth character, fighting off hundreds of *rowdies*, loving and being lusted after by young beautiful girls, we expect—no, we demand!—that the hero-star still play a character that age because, more than his actual age (which everyone knows), the age of the hero-star is fixed. Similarly for his physique and looks. It causes no dissonance that the hero-star is average looking or flabby in real life or on-screen, because the main issue is the hero's status and the extent to which that can license what would otherwise be anomalies in this characterization.

Yet note that no *new face* can do this. Indeed, the *new face* in Tamil cinema inevitably plays the role inscribed in his actuality. Thus, Dhanush's, Bharat's, Vijay's, and Arya's first films were as average, young men. It is also no surprise, then, why it is *smaller* aspiring stars like Vishal, Dhanush, and Suriya (rather than Ajith, Vijay, and Rajinikanth) whose actual physique first began to match the figurative and filmically constructed hyper-masculine displays that have always been part of Tamil cinema but never displayed on the actor's body as they are today in toned biceps and *six-pack* abs. For *new faces* and less-established stars there is no other principle to ground their characters or their status except for their "reality" (and the coherence and realism of the

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<sup>32</sup> This is what Rajanayakam (2002: 140) refers to as the hero's "transcendental narrative status."

story); for to break with reality presupposes status that they do not have enough of. It is this status—built up over a history of texts—that licenses such breaks from reality: from the reality of looks, of physique, of age, and of logic.

In short, we have to be able to break the assumption that film should be judged from its representational content and audiences' reception of such content. This is an understandable assumption given that the form of film motivates such a reading. Indeed, film is denotationally and referentially rich. Moreover, much film is made to be engaged with in precisely that way. And yet not all film is so constructed, and not all film is so used. If we hope to fully understand how film works in many different places and in many different ways, the concept of reception itself has to be displaced, just as the notion of the film image as *only* having (true/false) referential content.



### Part III. *Style* and the Brand

## Chapter 6 – Consuming Branded Forms

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter I look at the consumption of branded forms by Tamil youth.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I am interested in apparel and accessories that index Western brands like Nike, Reebok, Diesel, Armani, etc., either explicitly or implicitly. As I will argue, the consumption and display of such garments is understood by youth as *style*. This is because the branded form itself is understood as *style*. Moreover, such garments are understood as *style* at the expense of the “brand images” and “meanings” typically associated (in the West) with branded forms—that is, as regimented by brand meta-discourses. As I show, youth are largely ignorant of brands *qua* specific brands. Moreover, they are *willfully* ignorant. I conclude with discussion about why youth are willfully ignorant of brands as such *but* invested in branded forms; how this changes how we theorize the brand (which I take up in chapter 8 in more detail); and what the implications are for how we think about globalization and doing ethnographic research.

### 2. Consuming the branded form

#### 2.1 Introduction

When I came to Tamil Nadu for the first time, of all the things that grabbed my attention, one which always gave me pause and brought a perplexed smile to my lips was the ubiquity of foreign branded forms in public space. On sign boards, the backs of cars

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “branded form” to refer to objects which have the form of branded goods, whether or not they are legitimate or counterfeit. This includes brands, counterfeits, and quasi- and non-brands. “Branded form” refers to that which has the *qualia* of brand tokens *qua* tokens of the brand type.

and auto-rickshaws, the sides of buses, the fronts of motorcycles, and especially on the clothes and accessories of young men, public space in Tamil Nadu was teeming with brands. I became increasingly interested in how and why such branded forms were so present, so visible in youth male fashion. Why and how were brands consumed by young men?<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 Brands in India

While foreign brands have been present in India for a long time, their ubiquity has grown since the mid-1980s when the Indian economy began to be liberalized (Rajagopalan 1999; Mazzarella 2003: 256; Tarlo 1996: 337–341; cf. Lukose 2009). The liberalization of the Indian economy has contributed to the presence of brands in at least three ways. First, it contributed to the rise of brands in public life through making branded commodities more available for consumption. Second, with liberalization, discourses of the nation have themselves shifted from Nehruvian productivism to an explicit consumerist stance, thereby valorizing consumption (and thus the consuming of brands) as part of the nationalist project (Rajagopal 1999; Fernandes 2000a: 614, 2000b; Deshpande 2003; Mazzarella 2005; Lukose 2009: introduction, ch. 1). Third, with liberalization came increased foreign capital ready to invest in the production of branded goods for export to foreign markets (Chari 2000, 2004; cf. Cawthorne 1995). This production inevitably leaks into domestic markets, creating a supply-side reason for the

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<sup>2</sup> What was just as conspicuous as the use of brands among young men was their near total absence among women. As discussed in chapter 3, section 4, women's engagement with branded forms is problematic insofar as branded forms in Tamil Nadu are linked to the notion of *style* and visibility, both of which have moral implications for women. Because of this, it is rare to find women's clothing with visible brand logos or names among the lower and middle classes. Elite women can and do use brands on their bodies, much like they might be used abroad. In this chapter I am mainly concerned with male fashion.

increase in branded forms through export-surplus overruns, defects, and counterfeiting operations. I look at the production side of the branded form, in particular duplicate commodities (or *dummy pieces*) in chapter 7. If liberalization made the circulation of branded forms, authentic and counterfeit, possible on the supply side, what is the logic which makes such commodities objects of desire? What fuels their consumption?

### 2.3. “Brand illa NNaa style ille”: *No brand, no style*

— Zeiss brand eyeglasses advertisement; Chennai, Tamil Nadu (2008)

What is the allure of the branded form for Tamil youth? In particular, what is the role of the branded form as part of the visible assemblage that young men construct around themselves? First let’s consider some examples. It’s common to find the branded form featured prominently on vehicles—a Bacardi logo on the trunk top, a Jaguar sticker on the side door, a Nike decal on the back window (photo 6.1), a Suzuki sticker on the motorcycle’s headlight—or on the display of one’s cell phone or computer monitor—an Adidas or Nike logo as the screensaver or display background.

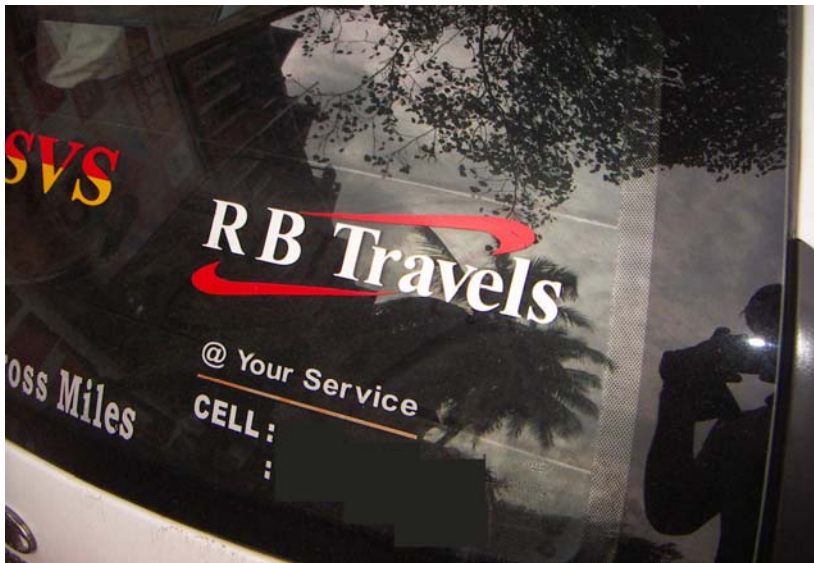


Photo 6.1 Nike swooshes on car

Most conspicuous and common is the presence of branded forms on the body: a Tommy Hilfiger tee-shirt, Ferrari button-down shirt (photo 6.2), Harley Davidson jacket, Diesel jeans, G Star shoes, a Nike swoosh stud earring, a Reebok ring, a Levi's backpack, a Marlboro belt, or an Adidas bracelet (photo 6.3).



*Photo 6.2 Ferrari button-down shirt*



*Photo 6.3 Marlboro belt buckle and Adidas bracelet*

As the range of examples above shows, the branded form has its own attraction over and above the commodity form (cf. Halstead 2002; Hoe et al. 2003; Yurchak 2006). Indeed, as seen above, the branded form often is appended to commodities where the extension of the brand in question doesn't apply: for example, the name and logo from Mercedes Benz on a pair of cargo pants (photo 6.4).



Photo 6.4 Brand use (Mercedes) on novel commodities (cargo pants)

In the above cases, such brand–commodity mismatches aren't produced by the brand companies in question. They are counterfeits. Even if the authentic brand has its own “aura” (see chapter 8) and is seen as being higher quality and more trustworthy than its copies, the branded form is attractive beyond the question of its authenticity or its originality, as we will have occasion to see in this chapter and the next (cf. Halstead 2002; Vann 2006; Yurchak 2006: ch. 5). Indeed, most if not all of the examples of objects youth used which have branded forms on them aren't *originals*, but *local duplicates* (or *dummy pieces*), and this is common knowledge.

### 2.3.1 *Brands as style, duplicates as style*

If brands are seen as higher quality, then why consume duplicates which are clearly not original items and which often bear no resemblance to the ‘real’ brand commodities except for the presence of brand logo or name (and even then, often in a distorted form)?<sup>3</sup>

Why the branded form more generally?

Besides the obvious answer that fake and export-surplus branded goods are cheap and easily available (a necessary condition of possibility for youth consumption), the more interesting and important answer is that the branded form is seen by youth as *style*, as being able to status-raise in the peer group.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the most common answer to the question of why did you buy, or why are you wearing, this piece of branded apparel was that the branded form was “*style*” or “*geththu*.” This explains why, as one Madurai youth pointed out, ‘even if some good is fake, youth will prefer the fake branded good over a non-branded [but authentic] good because it has *style*.’ As a prominent ad in Chennai put it circa 2008 “*Brand illa NNaa, style ille*” ‘If/when there is no brand, there is no *style*.’

And as far as youth are concerned, this is true of both authentic and duplicate items.

Indeed, when I would ask youth to describe what someone who was *style*-ish was like,

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<sup>3</sup> From my own observations it seems that the brand-as-quality discourse is also a kind of alibi, a way of deflecting too much status-raising. (This isn’t to say that people didn’t believe it or that it wasn’t true; indeed, *local duplicates* are of much lower quality.) That is, fetishizing the functionality of the product is a way of reducing the status element of its use, and thus is a kind of self-status-leveling. To claim that one bought a Nike shirt because it is of higher quality is to implicitly deny, or deflect, the proposition that one bought it in order to status-raise (see section 3.3 for more discussion).

<sup>4</sup> Yurchak’s (2006: ch. 5) discussion of the use of “empty” indexicals of (former) Western commodities (labels, empty bottles, boxes, bags) in the construction of the “Imaginary West” is a useful comparison. The use of such goods to construct an internal exteriority—an exterior space confined within the youth peer group—is similar to the Tamil case discussed in this chapter (also see Mazarella 2003: 256ff.). Different, however, is the Soviet fetish of “real contact” and the eschewing of the duplicate, something that isn’t the case among working- and middle-class young Tamil men. Without knowing the Russian case well, it is difficult to conclude the reason for the difference, but one possibility is the force, in the Tamil case, of peer pressure to status-level within the peer group, thus creating the compromise formation of Western brands in inauthentic forms (see section 3.3 for more discussion). The role of class is another possible difference.

inevitably branded clothing would figure in the description, branded clothing being an index of the youth status of that individual (Lukose 2009: 66–69 on Kerala; cf. Halstead 2002 on Guyana). What makes such forms status-ful among youth? As I show below, branded forms are *style* because: (a) they foreground the individual who adorns himself with them because of their visibility; (b) they index exteriority; (c) they are associated with status-ful figures of personhood in media representations; and (d) they co-opt alternative schemata of value.

### 2.3.2 *Visibility and foregrounding*

Branded forms are *style* because they are highly visible. They attract attention. As one particularly *style*-ish Madurai youth explained to me, because *style* is about getting people to notice you, things which aren't usually worn tend to get attention from one's peers. And Western branded forms do just that; they attract attention because they are seen as neither *ordinary* nor *normal* (*saathaaraNam*). They are *different*.<sup>5</sup>

But different from what? Here 'ordinary' non-branded clothing implicitly means, on the one hand, traditional 'adult' clothing (*veeshdi*, *lungi*, cotton shirt) and, on the other, tailored clothing. The latter is considered ordinary and regular largely because of the availability of cheap, low quality fabrics and labor. In distinction to tailored clothing are "*ready-mades*," which is a stand-in for branded clothing. (Branded shirts are also known as "*company shirts*.") Such clothing is generally more expensive and is connected with

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<sup>5</sup> This visibility is important both for one's peers and for the opposite sex. Young men often justified their use of brands because they claimed that women liked brands (cf. chapter 3, section 2.2.5). One student explained (obviously hyperbolically) that in Chennai meeting girls and initiating romance with them (*correct paNRathu*) was easy; you just have to have on branded clothes, like Reebok or Puma shoes, and just pretend that you are important person, for example, by talking in front of them on your iphone with a headset. Girls will instantly fall for you.

the market changes associated with liberalization. In this way *ready-mades*, and by their conflation branded clothing, are historically and sartorially more ‘different.’<sup>6</sup>

As *style*, branded forms are caught up in the peer pressure and constant surveillance of youth peer groups. Youth adorn themselves with brands because such brands are “famous” among youth. As one Chennai student put it, ‘wherever you go you can see (*paakka mudiyum*) Reebok, so that is why I also have it.’ Another student noted that when he first came from Madurai to Chennai for college, he saw that everyone on campus had Diesel bags. He had never heard of it, but reasoned that it must be popular, so he picked one up himself so not to be left out, not to seem like a country bumpkin. To *not* participate in the economy of status-raising at some minimal level and be unable to visually monitor its associated forms is to be left out, to be invisible, and thus is productive of a number of anxieties and studiously avoided (cf. Dickey 2009a).

### 2.3.3 Indexing exteriority

The branded form is *style* because it indexes exteriority.<sup>7</sup> It indexes exteriority in a number of ways. First, branded forms index foreignness in terms of fashion in general insofar as youth see brands as fashionable in foreign countries. Youth were often surprised that I didn’t have more branded clothing, thinking it odd that I would go out of my way to get tailored clothes while they were trying to get ill-fitting *ready-mades* (cf.

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<sup>6</sup> To an American, it is ironic that: (a) tailors claim that the fashions that they have to sew today are calqued from *ready-mades*; that is, people come to ask them to make their clothes fit more like *ready-mades*, which largely means not as well fitted to their body (the index of wealth in the West); and (b) youth claim that tailors can’t quite get the same fit that one can get with *ready-made* clothes, and thus *ready-mades* are more popular.

<sup>7</sup> For similar indexical valences of branded commodities see Tobin 1992 and Creighton 1992 on Japan; Gondola 1999 on Congo; Halstead 2002 on Guyana; Vann 2005, 2006 on Vietnam; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007 and Manning 2009 on Georgia; and Yurchak 2006: ch. 5 on Russia. See Tarlo 1996: ch. 2 on a similar dynamic in colonial Indian fashion in the 19th and 20th centuries.



Lukose 2009: 77). This spatiality is also linked to a particular temporality as well; brands index the ‘new’ epochal shift of post-liberalization, of a modern India that has ‘caught up’ with the West (cf. Manning 2009).

Second, brands are associated with specific forms and fashions which come from ‘outside’ of India. For example, the rage among Madurai and Chennai youth in 2007–2009 was “*anti-fit*” clothing, which youth associated with American hip-hop music and artists like 50 Cent and Eminem.<sup>8</sup> Further, such clothing is associated with exterior media. Such fashions are visually consumed via non-local television channels like MTV, VH1, V Music and the internet.

Third, specific brands index exteriority because all such brands that are popular among youth are all “*foreign*” brands. Here *foreign* is often collapsed into “Western,” which itself often simply means “American,” even if the branded forms are neither (e.g., Honda, Suzuki are from East Asia; Puma, Pepe Jeans, Diesel, Gucci, Armani, Dolce and Gabanna are from Europe). Whatever their actual national origin—as we see below, youth don’t particularly care—what is important is that such brands are seen as coming from *outside* of India (cf. Mazzarella 2003: 256; Tarlo 1996). The irony here is that: (a) most branded forms are duplicates and thus locally produced; (b) even if authentic, they are most likely made in India under contract with a Western company for export (chapter 7). And while branded forms which actually come from outside of India *are* considered to have an aura of *style* by virtue of being literally exterior,<sup>9</sup> branded forms that aren’t

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<sup>8</sup> Such artists themselves are popular because they embody a particular kind of exterior *geththu* that youth find resonant with the Tamil *rowdy*, himself an emblem of status-raising (cf. Weiss’ 2002 discussion of “thug realism” in Tanzania and their re-animation of American hip-hop artists).

<sup>9</sup> I found this out when going on a trip back home for a month. Before I left I was barraged by requests for anything foreign and branded: from liquor to tea to clothing items.

literally from outside still retained something of that aura because of the *aesthetic* quality that they project by indexing exteriority (see sections 2.5 and 2.6). Indeed, because the branded form is also an *aesthetic form*, even when it is clearly not *foreign* it can still index exteriority and function as *style*.

This is also the reason why Tamil youth find the concept of *style-ish* Indian brands contradictory (at least as far as clothing is concerned). One Chennai youth pointed out that the phrase “Indian brand” is a contradiction insofar as “Indian” means *local*, second-rate, and un-status-ful (with respect to Western commodities) while “brand” means international (and thus not Indian), quality, and *style*. To combine the two, then, is oxymoronic (see Halstead 2002 and Vann 2005 for something similar in Guyana and Vietnam respectively).

This indexical value of exteriority is also the logic of the linkage of the brand with English.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the brand, though crucially related to it as we will see, English on clothing (even if nonsense) is seen as *style* among youth (see chapter 7, section 2.4.4.9 for more discussion). This link is so strong that apparel brands which *are* Indian almost always project themselves as foreign (e.g., Viking, Jansons, Viduka). As one informant pointed out, ‘it’s hip to have an English name on your shirt. If the brand name on your shirt is “Chandru Shekar” no one will see it as *style*, but if it’s “Charlie Nichols,” or some other foreign sounding name, they will.’

Fourth, the branded form indexes exteriority because it is transgressive and non-traditional. Insofar as the aesthetics of the branded form is a figuration of its foreign

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the exteriority of branded forms can’t be reduced to English as designs and logos also function in this way. More accurately, we should say Roman script, for written languages other than English (e.g., Spanish, German) also function in this way. For youth, however, all such languages were functionally equivalent, not to mention likely to be seen, in any case, as “English.”

origin, or its being part of foreign fashion, brands symbolically diagram exteriority not only from the ordinary tailored clothes of the everyday, but also from the clothing associated with ‘society’ and ‘culture,’ the “traditional” clothes of adults (*veeshdi*, bunyan, white cotton shirt, matching *thuuNdu* ‘towel,’ *chappals* ‘sandals’) which are plain and externally unbranded. In short, the branded form is a way to show one’s ‘difference’ (*viththiyaasam kaamikkiRathu*), both from one’s peers and from adults. Branded forms as *style*, then, also potentially figure as a kind of challenge and transgression to adult authority (see chapter 3, section 2.2.4).

#### 2.3.4 Brands and mass media

Brands are also linked to *style* via the mass media, as noted above. This is both through the linkage of brands to figures of personhood in foreign mass media—VJs on foreign music station like MTV and VH1; characters on syndicated television programming (e.g., shows like *Friends*) and in “English” films; athletes (e.g., the brands on Formula 1 racing cars and jackets; on cricket and soccer jerseys, etc.)—and in Tamil mass media, both television and film. In particular, since liberalization brands are *de rigeur* for Tamil film hero-stars’ *style-ish* dress (photo 6.5).



*Photo 6.5 Actor Suriya sporting Diesel brand underwear*

Here it is the link of the branded form to the film star which propagates the branded form among youth insofar as such branded forms are detachable and (re-)performable by youth in their own peer groups. As the Nike swoosh/“tick” example discussed in chapter 5, section 2.4.4 and in section 3.2 below interestingly shows, often it is the hero-star which is more important to the “meaning” or the pragmatic usability of the branded form than the brand *qua* brand.

### *2.3.5 Co-opting wealth*

Authentic branded items perform *style* or *getthi* through their literal and conspicuous display of wealth. This type of usage is rare for most lower- and middle-class youth, however, insofar as few can afford such goods. However, even cheap *local*

duplicates are able to index wealth *qua style* through simulating such goods. As discussed above, this isn't because youth confuse such goods with the foreign originals from which they were calqued. Rather, such duplicates count as status-raising through their figurative co-opting of wealth and elite fashion (itself an exterior realm of normativity; see section 2.3.3 above on exteriority). That is, such forms take on the aesthetics of elite fashion, and to this extent imagine themselves as participating in the social realms of wealth and elite status. This is possible because branded forms are also *aesthetic* objects, objects which diagram exteriority and status symbolically; by appropriating elite fashion in one's own duplicate garments one can do *style* (cf. Hebdige 1979).

#### 2.3.6 *Summary*

So why consume branded forms? Youth consume branded forms because branded forms are *style*; they diagram exteriority and difference through co-opting elite and foreign fashions via forms which index exterior places (and languages) and are associated with status-ful figures of mediatized personhood; as such they are transgressive of reified notions of (adult) 'society' and 'culture' and thus they foreground those who used them from the background, making them visible and status-ful.

#### 2.4 *Branded forms and social class*

As mentioned above, whether an item is duplicate or real is not something most lower- and middle-class youth particularly worry about. Most youth don't get teased or made fun of for wearing duplicates. And they certainly don't avoid buying duplicates. As

I noted, one reason for this (but not the only one, as we'll see) is that authentic branded commodities are priced out of most youth's spending range.<sup>11</sup>

For elite youth, however, authentic branded commodities (be they clothes, motorcycles, or cell phones) are part of the presupposed ground of participation. Not having brands, among other things, is a mark of poverty or rural background, and insofar as social class is partly predictive of peer group formation (see chapter 2, section 4.2.2), brand use is, to some degree, a line of social difference. As such, elite youth have a different experience of branded forms than other youth. Their engagement with brands (it is more active); their knowledge (they are brand conscious and aware largely due to their English mass-media consumption, trips abroad, etc.); the kinds they buy and where they buy them (at authorized stores; getting them from abroad from their own travels or those of their families) make their usage in some ways closer to that of American youth than of their lower-class peers. Such youth's overall appearance and sense of style (see chapter 3, section 2.4) is also qualitatively different, both in terms of the quality of the clothing they wear and their general aesthetics. Such students look more like representations of Western fashion from Western media (e.g., an "authentic" hip-hop look), while their lower-class peers' aesthetics conform to something closer to representations from Tamil cinema. For elite students, then, authenticity and brand knowledge as indexes of

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<sup>11</sup> On rare occasions when one does get something authentically branded, however, it is a point of pride and joy. As my upwardly-mobile, middle-class Chennai roommate noted when he got his first (Adidas) branded pair of shoes as a gift from his father, he felt "*semma jolly, romba happy*" 'extremely jolly, really happy.' He explained that he had the feeling, but he didn't know why, that he had completed or accomplished something important; that this moment was some sort of landmark for him. However, for most working- and middle-class youth, authentic branded items are a luxury and not particularly common. Moreover, authenticity of brands while something that individuals care about is not something that is particularly important *at the peer group level* (see section 3.3 for more discussion). This was changing as I was in the field, however, as companies like Nike and Reebok had priced down certain goods—hats, shirts, shorts—to a price range that more youth could access. It is telling, as we see below, that it is these brands that are seen *as brands* more than other brands.

socialization to “Western” fashion are key for fitting in, while not knowing about brands constitutes a sign of backwardness.

And indeed, as one moves down the social ladder brand knowledge is less, as is concern with authenticity *in the peer group*. Even if they did know, and did have the money, youth wouldn’t necessarily buy authentic branded commodities. As Yuvaraj, one of my brand-knowledgeable Madurai hostel roommates, explained, ‘if in the college no one cares about brand authenticity, why would I spend 900 Rs. (about \$20 at the time) on one “*company*” piece of clothing when I can get three or four (*local*) shirts? Among friends, everyone knows that no one has ‘real’ brands.’ Note that this logic also applied to elite youth when their peer group mainly included friends whose buying power was lower than theirs. In such contexts, they would dress down (see section 3.3 for more discussion).

### *2.5 Brand ignorance: From brands to the aesthetics of brandedness*

While working- and middle-class young men adorn their bodies with branded forms, while in the field it was curious to me that they largely didn’t know or care, with a few exceptions, about the brands they were wearing (cf. Halstead 2002; Yurchak 2006: ch. 5). The exceptions included brands like Reebok, Nike, and Adidas, which youth were exposed to *as Reebok, as Nike, as Adidas* through cricket jerseys on TV, prominent brand meta-discourses (advertisements on television, billboards, print publications), authorized stores, and priced-down authorized brand products. However, these brands weren’t the most popular or frequently encountered among youth during my time in Tamil Nadu. Rather, brands like Diesel, Ferrari, and Tommy Hilfiger which didn’t have

priced-down products on the market, which didn't have authorized stores, and which didn't advertise in India were more popular. Diesel, the brand most ubiquitous among Tamil youth between 2007–2009, didn't even have an official retail market in India at all. There were *no* authorized Diesel products in India, except those imported in *ad hoc* ways from abroad for boutiques. It was a bit of a puzzle, then, why brands like Diesel were so common among youth. Even more so because no youth that I met (with the exception of elite youth who had traveled abroad) even knew what Diesel was. My Madurai roommate Stephen, who owned a Diesel tee-shirt, canvas bag, and pair of jeans, asked me after my grilling him about Diesel and other brands, 'is Diesel a clothing brand or is it a rock band?' Similarly for Ferrari, a company that most youth didn't know about, but readily adorned their bodies with. Even youth generally curious about the West weren't particularly interested to know about such brands, where they were from, what kinds of companies they were, or what kind of a "brand image" they had.

However, youth did have the access to information to learn about what such brands were about, either through the internet or by asking me. But with only a couple of exceptions, they didn't. That is, non-elite youth were not simply ignorant of brands *qua* brands, they were *willfully ignorant* (both in the sense of ignoring brands *qua* brands and in the sense of lacking knowledge about brands).<sup>12</sup> It didn't matter to them. But how could it not? This is because, as I discuss below, brands were not construed or consumed

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rajagopal (1999: 136) on the "pseudo-brand's" consumption as indicating a lack of "brand literacy" or a sole focus of consumers on "affordable value."



as brands *per se*. That is, the ontology of such objects wasn't as BRAND, but as something else.<sup>13</sup>

But if not as Ferrari, D & G, Diesel, etc., then as what? Such proper names were empty indexicals, they pointed to something, but no one knew what. Youth weren't part of the brand "speech chain" (Agha 2007a); they knew of no baptismal event that linked *this* Levi's bag to a particular company (the trademark owners of Levi Strauss), a particular image, or a range of spokespersons and products. But if their status as proper names, or even as metonyms for larger brand identities, was empty for youth, what were branded items indexing?

As argued above, branded forms are *style*. And importantly, because of this, branded forms are also *aesthetic objects*. As one youth put it, when he shops he asks himself: "look-aa irukkaa? style-aa irukkaa?," 'does it have that *look* (does it look good)? Is it *style-ish*?' Such forms are aesthetically attractive to youth: the form of the logo (e.g., the Nike swoosh, the Ferrari horse, the Diesel "D," the Adidas stripes), the color combinations of the branded form (e.g., the red and black of Ferrari), and the English names, words, and letters are all seen as visually captivating and beautiful. Thus, for example, it wasn't uncommon to find the use of brand names or logos in novel designs *qua* decoration.

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<sup>13</sup> I use the small caps BRAND to designate this larger ontological category. See chapter 8, section 3.1 for more discussion.



*Photo 6.6 Nike swoosh as design element*

In photo 6.6 we see how one car driver used the Nike logo to create a novel design by inverting two Nike swooshes by flipping them vertically. When I asked him why he had used the Nike symbol, he indicated that it wasn't because it was the Nike swoosh *per se* (it hadn't even seemed to occur to him), though he was familiar with the Nike logo. He explained that he liked the curves of the form, that it was *style*, and thus he had used them to re-author his own design. The swoosh here isn't a brand logo at all, but rather a design element, like a circle or a line, used to create a larger aesthetic design.

In short, by virtue of their status-raising potential branded forms are *aestheticized*; they are seen as beautiful because of their connection with some (vague) notion of exteriority and visual attractiveness. What is interesting here, and what I discuss below, is that it is their status as *aesthetic objects* that can entail pragmatic effects (*style*) and not as brands *per se* that is relevant to youth's experience and use of branded forms.

## *2.6 Aesthetics of brandedness*

By "aesthetics of brandedness" I am referring to what Tamil youth call the "*look*" of some object as having a branded form, as seeming foreign/Western, as seeming

expensive even if the object isn't branded, foreign, or expensive. This isn't an issue of dissimulating or passing (off), but of conforming to, or co-opting, a set of aesthetic conventions and forms seen as visually attractive. (Indeed, insofar as they participate in this aesthetics, rather than dis-simulating brands, branded forms among youth come to iconize 'youth' instead.) We might also call this an aesthetic of exteriority, or an aesthetic of *style*. I use the phrase "aesthetics of brandedness" because—as will become clearer in chapter 7—the structure of all the objects that are part of this aesthetics is calqued off of, though not reducible to, the brand. Indeed, brands aren't the only kinds of objects which are part of this aesthetics, which can be made to perform *style* via this aesthetics. For example, youth also used garments that had musicians' or other pop culture figures' names and faces on them, or the names or symbols of foreign countries (e.g., an American flag, the proper name "New Zealand"). Further, many forms that participated in this aesthetics were pseudo-, fictive-, or non-brands, though they had the *look* of a branded good (section 2.7).

Such objects—brands, duplicates, pseudo- or non-brands—are all functionally the same to youth. Projecting exteriority, they are all linked to the *not*-here and by virtue of this they function as *style*. But this doesn't entail any necessity of knowing positively what *there* is. This is why the duplicate in the non-elite peer group isn't seen as a decrepit form of the original, the distorted form of the 'real': the ontology of the brand among Tamil youth isn't founded on notions of authenticity, but on the aesthetics of brandedness. It is this aesthetics which makes even the cheapest brand duplicates able to perform exteriority and diagram social difference. It is this which allows the branded

form to be transported across commodity forms: why a Microsoft logo makes sense on a pair of pants, or the name 50 Cent on a belt buckle.

It also explains to some degree which brands matter to youth: those that are maximally exterior and maximally visible. It is branded forms that self-reflexively point to themselves as exterior, as foreign, as part of this aesthetics that are taken up by youth. Thus, one doesn't find shirts with Van Heusen or Peter England<sup>14</sup>—brands that make formal dress shirts where the brand identifier is found inconspicuously inside the shirt—but those that are visible and eye-catching: the Nike swoosh, the Ferrari horse, etc.

Noting that the ontology of the branded form among Tamil youth is rooted in an alternative organization that includes the brand, as well as many other types of commodity images, we can also make sense of a number of other facts about youth fashion: (a) the tendency toward distorting and hybridizing branded forms; (b) the flexibility in iconism between what we would consider the 'original' and its copies; and (c) the fetish of English in youth fashion. Below I discuss the range of objects that fall under this aesthetics of brandedness in order to show how this aesthetics abides to the form of the brand but not to the BRAND as ontological category.

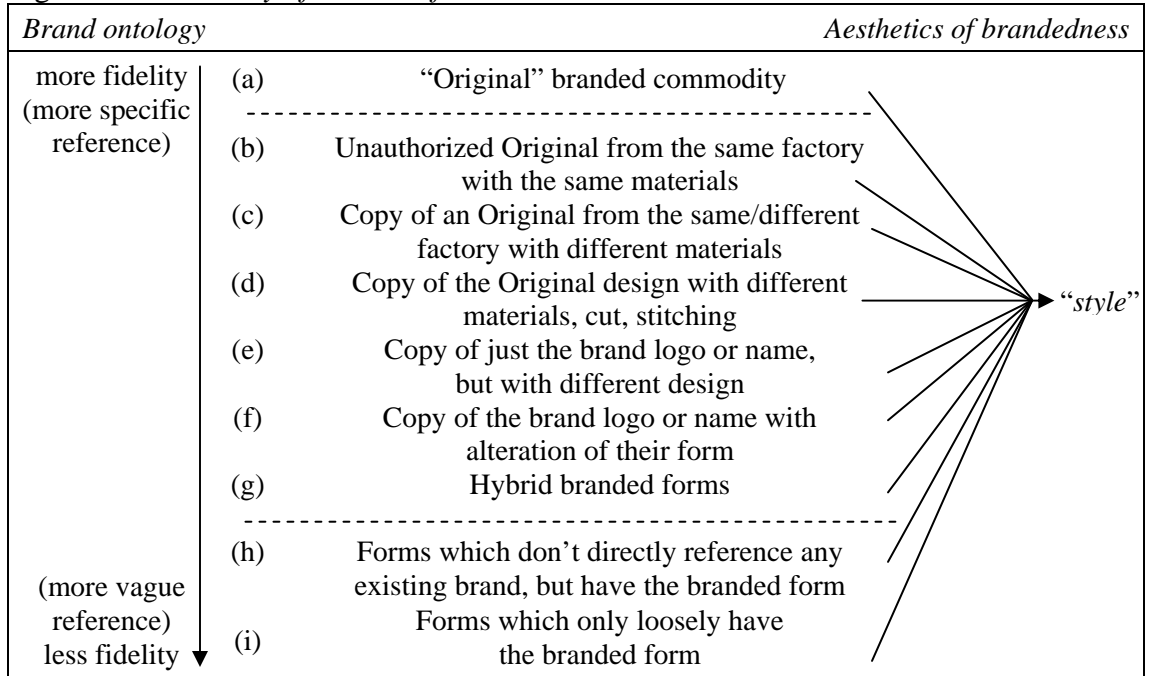
## 2.7 *Hierarchy of copies*

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, if you ask youth who does care about brand authenticity, they will reply 'older people who are working (white-collar jobs).' Why? First, because unmarried people who work have money to spend on real brands, so it is actually a possibility for them. Hence, rich kids also care about brands. Second, because brands are used by young men for peer group status negotiation, which is outside of 'society' and fluid, youth have no objective status or 'honor' to defend or maintain in the form of *gauravam* ('prestige,' 'honor') or *mariyaathai* ('respect'). For working people (whom they conflated with adults), however, concepts of status like *gauravam* and *mariyaathai* are important, youth reasoned. Older people are concerned with prestige, as inherent and perduring, and thus with the brand as 'authentic,' as an expression of actual capital accumulation *qua* status. Plus, as such people are usually (upper-)middle-class the authentic brand is part of the status negotiation of their work place with its Westernized and middle-classed aesthetics. Young men aren't so concerned with this at this point in their lives, and hence the authentic brand as such is largely irrelevant for them.

Figure 6.1 schematizes the range of forms that are included under this aesthetics of brandedness.

Figure 6.1 *Hierarchy of branded forms*



I have organized the forms as degrees of deviation from the ‘original’ branded commodity, thus intersecting the two ontologies. The fit isn’t perfect, however. While (a)–(i) are equivalent under the aesthetics of brandedness, only (a) falls under the ontology of the BRAND proper (as quasi-legal category); while (b)–(g) fall under the “counterfeit” category (i.e., forms which pass off the intellectual property of the brand owner, possibly dilute or tarnish the brand, or are “grey market”); finally, (h) and (i) wouldn’t be considered as part of the BRAND(–COUNTERFEIT) ontology *per se* as they are unrelated to actual specific brands, though “inspired” by particular brand aesthetics. I have indicated these three divisions (authentic / inauthentic / seemingly un-related, though “inspired”) with dotted lines.

As we see above, the kinds of objects which function like branded forms—that is to say, participate in an aesthetic of brandedness—are various. From the perspective of the BRAND and (Western) intellectual property (IP) law, there are many deviations from the authentic branded good (a). The closest in form are those that are produced with the same materials and stitches on the same machines by the same people in the same factory (b). These often circulate in local markets because they are export surplus (“overruns”) or have slight defects. Alternatively, they may be made by an authorized factory producer but outside of the stipulated contract. Such items are counterfeit in the sense that they have not been authorized to be sold/exist, as well as because of the fact that the profits don’t go back to the company that owns the brand’s intellectual property. In form, however, they are identical to the original.

Often to increase profits or because of a lack of materials or time, duplicates may be produced by the authorized factory producer with slightly different stitches or materials (c). These are, depending on the changes, often the same as the original to the undetecting eye. In a further deviation, such branded commodities may be reverse engineered (or the designs gotten in some other manner) and made by other producers with alterations, either in the materials, stitching patterns, the cut of the materials, or some other feature (d).

Cases (b)–(d) are knock-offs of the branded commodity. (e) presents us with a further deviation. Here it is just the brand name or logo which is duplicated in what is otherwise a novel commodity or design.

In photo 6.7 the logo and name of a brand, Ferrari, is attached to a wallet in a design the brand company doesn’t make (not to mention its misspelling). Even more extreme is

the example of shirt with the Ferrari name and logo faithfully replicated on the back, while the front has the nonsense concatenation of words: “cross storm: Freedom, Athletic Cost, when f u scrat ur brain. blazo!”



*Photo 6.7 Branded form (Ferrari) in novel form*

Similarly, sometimes the logo survives while the brand name disappears. Photo 6.8 shows a tee-shirt with the Ferrari logo prominently in the center. Instead of “Ferrari,” “Fashion” has been substituted, and the red and black color scheme has been replaced by blue and black/white. Here a proper name indexing exteriority (“Ferrari”) is replaced by an noun whose denotation indexes exteriority but isn’t a brand name *per se* (“Fashion”).



*Photo 6.8 Ferrari logo with brand name substituted for*

In a further deviation (f) the brand logo or name is altered in its spelling. Hence, for example, Diesel becomes Diesal or Chiesel; Levi's becomes Eevi's, Live's, Levie's, or Livie; Dolce & Gabanna becomes Dolce & Cabana or Bglce & Gabana; Adidas becomes Adihas; Reebok becomes Reebek, Peekok, Reebor, or Rerock (photo 6.9); or Lotto becomes Lottoo (photo 6.10) (cf. Tarlo 1996: 242–243).



*Photo 6.9 Distorted brand names (Reebok)*





*Photo 6.10 Distorted brand names (Lotto)*

Alternatively the font or design of the branded form is lost and simply the lexical form is retained (and possibly distorted; e.g., the “Reebek” shorts in photo 6.9 above). Consider photo 6.11 which shows a “Levi’s” shirt devoid of logo and distinctive font; only the brand name remains.



*Photo 6.11 Just the brand name (Levi's) remains*

Related to (e)–(f) are hybrid forms which recombine different brand names and logos (real and imagined) in a heteroglossia of exteriority (g).<sup>15</sup> For example, the Reebok logo and brand name combined with the “Ferrari” brand name and logo (photo 6.12). Or, in a three way hybrid, the TVS brand name and logo crossed with the Nokia brand name (altered with a different font) and the Nike swoosh (slightly altered in curvature) (photo 6.13).



*Photo 6.12 Brand hybrids (Ferrari and Reebok)*

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<sup>15</sup> Such hybrids perhaps fall into two categories: (g1) hybrids which recombine and arrange logos and brand names to create novel combinations; (g2) hybrids which draw from the aesthetics of the sports jersey or the racing car, where sponsorship of companies on the body of the athlete/his vehicle creates a pastiche of branded forms. I only heard this latter interpretation once however, and not in reference to clothing but to a motor vehicle.



*Photo 6.13 Brand hybrids (TVS, Nokia, Nike)*

The brands invoked might not even exist. For example, it wasn't uncommon to find brand-hybrid shirts with a Nike swoosh on the top left breast, a Ferrari logo on the collar, and the word "Next" written in the middle. Or on a bag the fictive brand "Ziya" accompanied by a (slightly distorted) Nike swoosh (photo 6.14).



*Photo 6.14 Brand logo (Nike swoosh) plus fictive brand (Ziya) hybrid*



With (h) the indexical link to actual brands is broken, and we start to find forms which only have the iconic diagrammaticity of branded forms: PROPER NAME + LOGO (+ WORDINGS/SLOGAN). Here the form is replicated without any brand content. At one store I saw a whole line of jeans where the back pocket had a sun design as a brand logo and the front leg had a proper name, some of which were brands (Suzuki, Honda, McLaren) while others were American pop stars (Eminem, 50 Cent), famous personalities (Che Guevara), and even an older Hollywood film name plus the coming year (Titanic 2010). Tamil films from hit stars were also often presented in the form of branded garments with a logo plus the film name paired together (photo 6.15).



*Photo 6.15 Film name (Villu), actor name (Vijay), and face qua branded form*

Items in (h) also begin to shade off into local “*original*” brands, quasi-brands created by producers (but often not backed by any kind of meta-discursive regimentation vis-à-vis marketing, advertising, or trademark registration) (photos 6.16, 6.17).



Photo 6.16 Fictive brand: "Cargo"



Photo 6.17 Fictive brand: "Force"

With (i) the aesthetics of brandedness further devolves into garments where there is only a vague iconism with branded forms. Such clothing shades off from the proper name into simple noun phrases or strings of English words as quasi-names or -logos for non-existent brands. A pair of cargoes might have the brand-esque name "cargobluegear,"

both indexing a fictive brand and the type of clothing (also photo 6.16 above). Words which index *style* or fashion (i.e., index exteriority in their denotational content) often stand in for the brand. For example, a bag might have the word “Jeans”—an emblem of Western fashion—or a shirt may simply have “Fashion World” written across it with a logo. Photo 6.18 shows a shirt with a concatenation of phrases and numbers loosely related to the chronotope of urban youth fashion: City, 005, C Point, Wear, 04, Next, Style, Generation.



*Photo 6.18 Noun phrases and numbers as aesthetic design*

In addition to being reflexive about their pragmatics and their target audience (i.e., a *style-ish* shirt having the word “style” or “youth” printed on it), this reflexivity also extends to the branded form itself. For example, a shirt with the quasi-brand wording “LETTERING” invokes the fact that branded forms do indeed involve lettering as part of the aesthetics of brandedness. Consider photo 6.19 where the tee-shirt pattern is simply the denotational placeholder “Premium Quality”: “Name and Brand.”

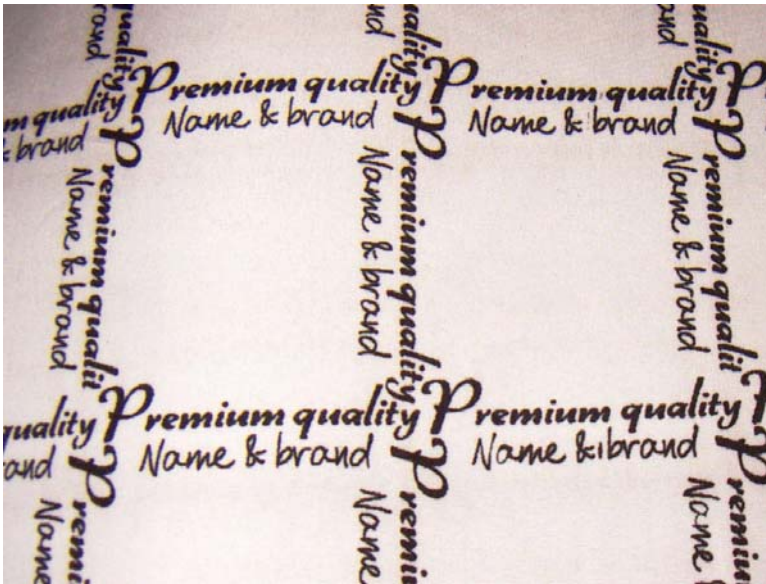


Photo 6.19 Denotation as branded form

At the end of this hierarchy—after the indexical proper name gives way to the fictive proper name which gives way to the fashion-indexing noun phrase—are garments which simply have noun phrases not particularly connected to anything related to fashion or youth. For example, shirts might simply have common English nouns like “Gladiator” or “Sports.” The wordings on such quasi-branded forms may involve nonsense as part of the design. For example, a shirt might combine a proper name and quasi-reference to a brand (“Tony Tony Chopper”) with what vaguely looks like English words (“Disquerd,” “Everinhu Canglong”) and finally simply a string of letters (“asiohdngy”). Consider photo 6.20 where the design is a series of words (“fresh,” “with,” “mine,” “so,” “BOY”), quasi-words (“chun,” “toybar,” “de”), and strings of letters and numbers (“c,21,” “u&s,” “cotalll”) along with the fictive brand “Us 395”:





Photo 6.20 Nonsense English as design

From specific reference (the rigid designators of brand proper names) to abstract and common nouns we come to the English language/Roman script as pure aesthetic object devoid of any denotational or referential content. In this “nonsense” it becomes clear, in fact, that across all categories of this hierarchy English is always already an aesthetic object independent of its denotational content, even for actual brand names and slogans. Like the willful ignorance of the brand, youth’s aesthetic of brandedness turns the English language into an aesthetic object independent of its grammatico-semantic regularity (i.e., as capable of creating semantically meaningful content), or even its morphological regularity (i.e., as capable of creating word-like lexemes). Youth weren’t concerned with what was written on their shirts as such. It didn’t matter. English cum design is *style* via its connection to exteriority and fashion; and this is sufficient for youth’s purposes.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tarlo’s (1996: 242–243) discussion of the aestheticization of English among Gujarati women in their embroidery practices and the proliferation of different spellings of English words like “Welcome.”



Note that using English on clothing as status-raising—not as code, but as aesthetic design—makes it possible to get around certain problematics involved with English in the peer group, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Remember that using English as communicative code can be seen as alter-focal and thus as implicating others' competency in English. As such, using English in interaction can be interpreted as a statement about someone else—for example, that they don't know English—and thus grounds for strife within the peer group. Second, using English requires one to actually have some level of competence in English. On the other hand, treating English as an aesthetic design in another semiotic medium (clothing) avoids both of these problems: it is ego-focal and doesn't implicate others' English abilities and it doesn't require actually knowing any English to appreciate or use it. I would further argue that this is also logic of actual English use in the peer group. As we saw in chapter 3, section 3.3.2, the tendency of English use within the peer group is to avoid English that has denotational content, preferring forms rich in interactional content. Such use of English is purely pragmatic (versus semantic) and, I would argue, *aesthetic*.

And note that precisely because brands are part of a larger aesthetics of exteriority, specific brands are not the basis for social grouping or regularities in consumption or identity work. There was no brand identity, loyalty, or community. How could you be loyal to or identify with a brand when it wasn't a brand in the first place? Rather than seeing the issue as 'youth consume and use brands' we might put it this way: youth do *style* and *style* includes a heterogeneous set of things, only one of which is the branded form. This makes sense of the apathy of most youth toward brands as particular brands,

but their obsessions with branded forms more generally as *style*.<sup>17</sup> Rather than identity emblems that indicate devotion or group membership (compare, e.g., with the use of a picture of a politician or deity on shirt or a vehicle), brands and English letters are status-raising signs of *style* and, as such, aesthetic objects empty of the denotational-referential content often associated with them.

### **3. The alternative ontology of the brand in south India**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the brand *qua* BRAND is bracketed among youth in Tamil Nadu. While the BRAND is one of the competing ontologies that youth acknowledge in their engagement with the world of commodities around them, it isn't the only one, nor often the most important one (cf. Halstead 2002; Vann 2006; Bick and Chipper 2007). On the surface of things (i.e., from the visibility of their displays of branded forms), it would seem that Tamil youth are highly brand aware. And yet, as I have shown, brand consciousness is highly selective among working- and middle-class youth. Rather than interest in brands as rigid designators regimented by brand meta-discourses constituting branded commodities as tokens of some brand type (figure 6.2), for Tamil youth branded forms are regimented by a meta-discourse of exteriority and thus are part of a larger set of commodity tokens (figure 6.3).

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<sup>17</sup> A relevant parallel is color. Youth *style* often involved garish and bright colors designed to attract attention. However, youth were uninterested in colors *qua* colors; one found no “fans” of red or “followers” of sky blue, nor were youth interested in the optics of color or the cultural histories of various colors.

Figure 6.2 Brand as BRAND

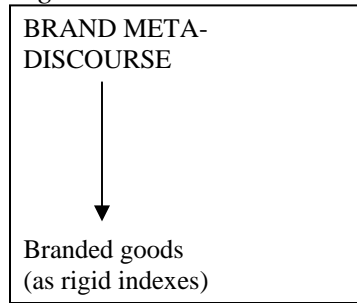
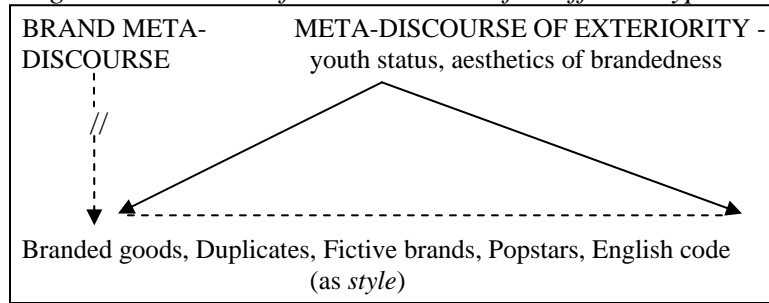


Figure 6.3 Branded forms as tokens of a different type



Under this alternative ontology the category BRAND competes with a number of other modes of understanding—which is to say, a number of other meta-discourses—which reorganize the world of objects according to different logics. For example, the *ready-made* as opposed to the tailored (as a discourse of production); Western fashion as opposed to “traditional” clothing (as a discourse of age, alignment with ‘culture,’ and distance from ‘society’); youth fashion and status (*style*) as opposed to forms of status associated with the adult world of white-collar work (“*formals*”) (as a discourse of liminal suspension across age sets). In these meta-discourses the branded form is distributed according to a logic different from branded/unbranded, or authentic/inauthentic. Hence the flexibility of iconism (with respect to the BRAND) as to what even counts as a branded form, and the reorganization of such forms understood not as brands *qua* branded objects, but as aesthetic objects that have a particular *functionality*, that are defined by their ability to status-raise in the peer group and be typified as *style*.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Example: The Nike swoosh

<sup>18</sup> Note that this happens in brand aware societies as well (see Craciun’s 2008 on Romania; Vann 2006 on Vietnam). We can note, for example, the reappropriation of branded goods for other purposes (e.g., Luvaas 2009 on “remixing” brands in Indonesia), or simply ignoring the brand identity of some product in everyday use (Agha n.d.). See chapter 8, section 2.4.5.3 for more discussion.

Here I return to an example from chapter 5, section 2.4.4—the Nike swoosh logo—that highlights how branded forms among youth in Tamil Nadu are imbued with value through alternative discourses that formulate branded forms as part of an ontology totally different from that of the brand *qua* BRAND.

As we saw in chapter 5, of all the branded logos in Tamil Nadu, the Nike swoosh is perhaps the most ubiquitous. And yet what I found so confusing was that when I asked people why they had a Nike logo on their body, or on their vehicle, I was greeted by a range of answers that seemed incommensurable. Those who were in the know about brands and fashion would refer back to the brand, Nike, taking the logo as an index of the company as well as *style*, invoking the aesthetics of brandedness discussed above. Others would simply say “*style*,” thereby bracketing the brand identity.

The most confusing response to the question was: ‘because I’m correct,’ ‘because whatever I do is right’ (cf. photo 6.21). Because I was attempting to read the branded form as somehow connected to brands directly or indirectly (how could it not be?) I was oblivious to the fact, which I eventually learned through my prodding, that for many individuals the swoosh isn’t the Nike swoosh, as it were, but a check mark (or “*tick*”) popularized by the *style* of Super Star Rajinikanth in his film *Pandiyam* (1992) (cf. Bick and Chiper 2007).



Photo 6.21 Nike swoosh as the “Right” tick

In this film Rajinikanth punctuates his *punch dialogues*, which themselves punctuate his victories over his adversaries, by ripping open his button-down shirt, revealing a tee-shirt which has a check mark (or “*tick*”) on it (photo 6.22).



Photo 6.22 One of Rajini’s style getups (with tick) in Pandiyan (1992)

His *punch dialogue* is “This Pandiyan is right in everything, everywhere, always” (“*intha paaNdiyan eppoovum, engkeeyum, ethilum right*”). Hence being “Mr. Right” in the film. For these individuals, it is film as a meta-discourse which creates a usable and

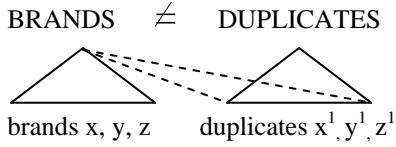
detachable form, the *tick/swoosh*, which can be redeployed in various contexts as status-raising among one's peers and count as *style*. It is under this meta-pragmatic discourse that both the *tick* and the swoosh are seen as tokens of the same type, similarly imbued pragmatically as *style*.

Of course, Nike has made serious inroads in Tamil Nadu to create brand awareness. And it has been, to some degree, successful. Indeed, the youngest youth (many who are unfamiliar with this film) make no such explicit connection of the swoosh to *Pandiyam* (1992), though they did to *style*. And even those who do know the film (mis)remember the film in two ways: (a) by misremembering that Rajini is wearing a Nike tee-shirt and not just a shirt with a check; and (b) by attributing their learning of what Nike was to watching the film, thus merging a personalized brand history with the filmic imbuing of the check with *style*. Such individuals explained that Rajini made Nike popular by wearing the *tick/swoosh* shirt. But note that even if Nike has made inroads in Tamil Nadu, the meaning of the swoosh as Nike symbol is still only taken as a token of the larger discourse of *style*, emblemized in the persona of Rajinikanth.

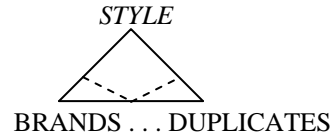
As this example shows, the use of the branded form, its “demand,” is often governed *not* by the brand as a particular kind of brand type, but through a detachment of a branded form from its brand meta-discourse and its reanalysis under a different meta-discourse (figure 6.4). (See chapter 7, section 3.2 for more discussion.) It is this novel sign–meta-sign relation which grounds the branded form among youth in Tamil Nadu in a different *ontology* altogether. Thus, while we can easily observe an almost compulsive use and circulation of the branded form among youth, it is impossible to conclude anything without understanding the ontology of objects under an aesthetics of brandedness.

*Figure 6.4 Alternate ontologies*

(1) The world of branded forms under the ontology of the BRAND



(2) The world of branded forms under ontology of *STYLE* (aesthetics of brandedness)



### 3.3 Willful ignorance and status negotiation in the peer group

Remember that the male peer group in Tamil Nadu is based on ‘youth’ as exterior to ‘society.’ Thus, youth use semiotic registers that index exteriority—film representations, signs associated with the *rowdy*, English, branded forms—in order to diagram that difference with the aims of creating alternative islands of authority that reinscribe the objective statuses *periya aaL–chinna paiyan* (‘big man’–‘little boy’) as relative status designators within the peer group. Such signs are typified as *style*. And *style* is always played out within the economy of status-raising and -leveling of the peer group, with its centrifugal and centripetal pressures toward differentiation and conformity. In chapter 3 we noted how the tension of these forces tend to lead to the negotiation and hybridization of status-ful youth cultural forms like English.

It is in this context that we can similarly understand why Tamil youth are motivated toward a willful ignorance of brands. While branded forms are *style*, trying to pass off a duplicate as ‘real’ or consuming brands too conspicuously is *over style*. That is, evaluating branded forms under the ontology BRAND—as authentic/inauthentic—is to potentially convert ego-focal indexes of status-raising (as aesthetic signs) into alter-focal indexes of status-lowering (as class-ranking, hierarchical signs). It is to be seen as uppity

or showing off, as pretending that you are the *periya aaL* when you aren't. It risks transgressing the peer group and thus inviting envy, jealousy, and possible ostracization. This is also why the lower- and middle-class youth that I spent my time with generally didn't tease each other about having duplicate brands except if one tried to pass it off for real, thereby mismatching one's status and attempts at *style*. Thus, in peer groups of lower- and middle-class youth, branded forms *figuratively* diagram *style* through duplicates. Literally diagramming social difference through authentic brands risks exceeding the boundaries of the peer group, and thus potentially calls for status-leveling or expulsion from the peer group (cf. Nisbett 2007).

This isn't to say that youth don't want, or don't use, authentic branded items as such. But rather that status-leveling within the peer group functions as a counterforce which reanalyzes branded forms as part of a larger aesthetics of brandedness and *not* as instances of brands *qua* BRAND; it thus defers the issue of 'real' versus 'fake' while still allowing branded forms to function as *style*. Hence brand indifference with respect to authenticity is a kind of deference to one's peers. Analyzing branded forms under the aesthetic of brandedness allows one to do *style* without doing it too much (being *over*); it allows one to perform difference through sameness, to differentiate one's self while still being part of the group.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> We can note the same process at work in the West. Consider Hoe et al.'s (2003) discussion of attitudes of consumers toward counterfeit goods. They see no problem in the use of counterfeit goods *per se*. This is especially true if one doesn't know it is a counterfeit. They also don't see a problem with "passive" deception. That is, one knows it is a counterfeit, but wears it because of the connotations of the brand. However, one makes no commitment to it being a "real" branded good. However, respondents did feel strongly negative toward individuals who "actively" used fake brands to deceive; that is, who tried to pass off goods they knew as fake. Such individuals were themselves seen as fake, inauthentic liars or showoffs. Hence the tendency to admit that one's goods are fakes (see Philips 2005 on the knowing wink of a good knock-off), to avoid the issue, or to feign ignorance. To do otherwise is to not show enough deference to the peer group, to project oneself as better than what other's see one as, and thus to risk ostracization. In the



In this way, under an aesthetic of brandedness the branded form among Tamil youth as a diagram of exterior status (whether it be the foreign, the rich)—and thus a simulacrum of it—is detached from the objectivity of that simulated status and denuded purposively so as to convert it into a relative, and thus egalitarian, sign of status. The branded form *qua* simulacrum intentionally marks itself as such so as to voice itself doubly: as a sign of *style* but not too much *style*; as status-raising but not too much status-raising.

#### **4. Conclusions**

##### *4.1 Summary*

I have argued that the construction of youth status and its negotiation in the peer group motivates the use of branded forms as *style*. However, this functionality as *style* is not derived from particular brand meta-discourses (youth are willfully ignorant of brands as such), but rather to a more general aesthetics of brandedness. This aesthetics includes a number of objects, all of which are related to the brand in form, but not in content. I argued that seeing things from this point of view foregrounds that what is at issue isn't brands *per se* at all. That is, branded forms are part of a different ontological configuration among Tamil youth.

##### *4.2 A note on the global and the local*

From seeing all the branded forms displayed visibly and proudly by Tamil youth, we might draw conclusions about the state of globalization, the erasure of cultural difference,

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Tamil case, because peer groups are priced out of branded goods the push isn't toward admitting fakes, but toward the negation of the concept of authenticity itself.

the growing of cultural homogeneity, the encroachment of cultural imperialism, or the rise and dominance of the brand. Obviously, from my discussion in this chapter such conclusions would be misinformed. And yet the branded forms remain.

On the other hand, we might note that while the branded forms circulate, the brand doesn't. That is, the brand as the brand would like to be understood, the brand as presented in its self-reflexive meta-discourses of advertising and marketing. We might be tempted, then, to argue that there is a kind of localization of the form, brands are made to serve local interests and purposes, and their deformation in their duplication and tropic usage reflects that.

I argue, however, that to frame the issue in this way equally misunderstands cultural globalization because it assumes that particular forms like brands are stable across contexts. That is, while they may have "global" or "local" meanings, they are still "brands" in both contexts. Such a view privileges particular forms, inevitably the forms with which analysts are familiar with, as stable and fixed (i.e., treating them as natural kinds) in their movement around the world, only to be recombined, slightly altered or tailored to some other "local" (read: non-natural) context (see Robertson 1995: 38, 2001: 462, 464; Appadurai 1990: 516–517; Pieterse 1995: 53–54; Kearney 1995: 554; Tomlinson 1997: 181ff., Reger 1997; Watson 1997; Bauman 1998: 42–43; see Stanlaw 1992: 73–75 on a similar argument regarding the concept of language borrowing).<sup>20</sup>

This paradigm, then, says for any sign-vehicle  $X$  of class  $U$  with meaning  $Y$  in place/social domain  $Z$  we can enumerate its variants  $\{X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n\}$  and their meanings  $\{Y_1, Y_2, \dots, Y_n\}$  in various places  $\{Z_1, Z_2, \dots, Z_n\}$ . Thus, for example, in this paradigm

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<sup>20</sup> This is, in fact, the same model of engagement with ideological discourses posted in *British Cultural Studies* that I critiqued in chapter 3, section 5.2 and chapter 5, section 4.

the word ( $U_1$ ) “scent” ( $X_1$ ) in America ( $Z_1$ ) means ‘a smell’ ( $Y_1$ ) while in Tamil Nadu ( $Z_2$ ) the word ( $U_1$ ) “*scent(-u)*” ( $X_2$ ) means ‘perfume’ ( $Y_2$ ). In this example the ontological forms to be compared, both words ( $U_1$ ), remains constant.

Indeed, it is because this paradigm is deficient in its semiotic analysis of social forms that it is unable to theorize that not only forms and their meanings may differ in various places and for various communities, but more importantly that the semiotic configuration of such forms is: (a) internally complex, and thus (b) may be of a totally different ontology. For example, with regards to youth fashion, while English in the U.S. may be a code for communication of denotation and referential meanings (in addition to indexical ones), for Tamil youth it is simply a tool, among many, for status-raising in the peer group, independently of its denotational-referential capability. This is clear in how English is used, for example, in clothing (though also in peer group communication, see chapter 3, section 3.3.2): English words on Tamil youth’s clothing aren’t words ( $U_1$ ) at all, in either grammatical form or construal. Rather, they are aesthetic design elements ( $U_2$ ). In the same way, the issue isn’t that things like brands have different meanings in different places, but that they may not even be the same thing at all. Branded forms in Tamil clothing aren’t brands as the brand meta-discourses would have them to be. They are aesthetic objects; they are forms imbued not by brand meta-discourses, but by the meta-discourse of exteriority, of ‘youth,’ of *style*. Yet this sign–meta-sign relationship is un-theorizable in a flat semiotic structure whereby only forms and meanings exist, each stable and unitary unto itself but endlessly re-combinable.

#### 4.3 *Ethnographic lesson*

In this is an ethnographic lesson. Indeed, the branded form and the use of English in garments were most perplexing phenomena to me. Why so many brands? Why so much English? Why so little knowledge of brands? Why so little concern for meaning in English? Because I approached such objects as one might in the United States—Nike is a brand, English is a communicative code, and both of these are stable and inherently meaningful as such—I tried to make such forms speak to me in ways that they were being actively silenced by the Tamil youth users of such forms. Operating under the wrong ontology, such forms were (artificially) foregrounded to me, causing a kind of confusion.<sup>21</sup> And yet it was only by revealing the larger meta-discursive framework which make such forms speak *style* in the peer group that I was able to silence the ontology of BRAND and code that were so naturalized for me. Again, it isn't that things mean different things in different places. It is that they may not even be the same thing at all. And why that should be the case, and why this should have any kind of (social) regularity, are questions which can only be answered by linking moments of production and consumption together in a semiotically-informed, ethnographic analysis. In the next chapter I look at the production and circulation of such branded forms as a continuation of the discussion of this chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Consider Craciun's (2008: section 2, paragraph 2) discussion of one informant's reaction to her research regarding fake brands: "Nobody is going to openly admit they wear fakes if you ask bluntly. People don't really use these words anyway. We just hear them on TV." Here we see the presence of an alternate ontology of objects independent of their brandedness as it butts against the meta-pragmatic frame BRAND as put into play by the researcher and mass-media discourses.

## Chapter 7 – Circulating and Producing (Counterfeit) Branded Forms

### 1. Introduction

In chapter 6 we saw how youth's consumption and use of branded forms brackets the brand *qua* BRAND. But if consumption, and thus "demand," is non-specific to brands, what is the principle of their production and circulation in Tamil Nadu? Why are certain brands produced and circulated, and others not? Further, why are certain brands which have no "authentic" presence in India (e.g., Diesel) highly circulated as duplicates and consumed by youth who have no idea what such brands are all about? To answer these questions I did research with youth-targeting shop owners in Madurai, Erode, Tiruppur, and Chennai who sold authentic branded garments (either as authorized brand goods or as export surplus); with shop owners who sold duplicate garments and/or garments that participated in the aesthetic of brandedness but without any direct connection to particular brands as such; with distributors and wholesalers of such goods in Madurai, Erode, Tiruppur, and Chennai; producers of such goods in Tiruppur, Erode, and Chennai; a second-hand buying agent in Tiruppur; and a sourcing agent of a portfolio of Western designer brands in Chennai (including Diesel).

In this chapter I look at the logic of the circulation of branded forms in Tamil Nadu, specifically garment production and distribution with respect to lower- and middle-class youth. First I look at export surplus and then at brand duplicates and other variations on the branded form. I focus on how the aesthetics of brandedness and willful ignorance of youth consumers relates to production. I conclude with discussion about the concepts of "counterfeiting" and "demand" as highly problematic assumptions implicit in the BRAND

ontology. I argue that such concepts lose their meaning in the Tamil context, thereby canceling out a host of (Western legal) assumptions about what brands are and how they work.

## **2. The circulation of branded forms in Tamil Nadu**

### *2.1 Introduction*

In this section I first look at the export trade of authentic branded goods as one circulatory path through which branded forms reach Tamil youth. I then look at the duplicate garment sector as another way that branded forms circulate. I argue that the duplicate garment sector is coordinated with respect to brands both by global trade vis-à-vis the export-surplus sector (which is partly governed by the BRAND ontology) *and* by an aesthetics of exteriority (and its bracketing of the BRAND ontology). It is this dual link which organizes the supply side of branded forms with respect to Tamil youth. It is also the reason for the creative deviation and formulaic sameness of (counterfeit) branded forms within a more general aesthetic of brandedness.

### *2.2 Retail and branded forms*

Branded forms present themselves to youth through various kinds of stores which segment the market by price. From platform merchants, traveling and (semi-)permanent bazaars, small shops, large outlet-style showrooms, and authorized brand showrooms, youth can peruse and purchase branded forms. In such stores, authentic branded forms and duplicates are intermixed to varying degrees. In an authorized showroom presumably all the commodities are “real,” though of course counterfeits work their way in, usually by the dissimulation of authentic branded items with identical counterfeits. In

showrooms, the forms are relatively evenly intermixed, some goods dissimulating the brand, others loosely borrowing from it but clearly not original. Unlike the authorized brand showroom, in such stores price meta-communicates the (in)authenticity of the branded form (Bloch et al. 1993; Phau et al. 2001). From small shops, traveling bazaars, and platform merchants, low quality garments which loosely borrow from the brand and make no pretensions to authentic brandedness dominate (here, location meta-communicates [in-]authenticity, Brandtstädter 2009; Hansen and Moeller forthcoming), though authentic items in the form of export-surplus or defect items are also mixed in. Some shops specialize only in export surplus, some only in counterfeit or brand-inspired garments.<sup>1</sup>

### *2.3 Export surplus: From factory to market*

While the increase of authentic branded garments in India is linked in the public imaginary to a glut of imported foreign commodities, the availability of such goods is still limited to a small minority. And yet liberalization has caused the increased circulation of Western branded forms beyond that small minority. One reason for this is that liberalization opened up Indian labor to increased foreign capital, and thus the increase of export-oriented garment factories producing Western brands (Chari 2000, 2004; cf. Cawthorne 1995 on pre-liberalization Tiruppur; see Vann 2005; Luvaas 2009; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Thomas 2009; Phau et al. 2001 for discussion of this process in other contexts). It is this export sector that is ultimately linked to the expansion

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<sup>1</sup> This points to another axis of difference: between goods that are imported from abroad and those locally produced in India. While high quality duplicates are imported on occasion from Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and China, most all duplicate garments are produced within India. Authentic items sold in authorized showrooms are often imported from abroad, while authentic branded items from export surplus are made in India.

and circulation of branded forms in India more generally through: (a) supplying local markets with export-surplus goods; and (b) providing materials and designs for local duplicate production (section 2.4; see Phillips 2005; Pang 2008; Craciun 2008, 2009 for discussion in other contexts).

Different areas of India have different specialties in export-oriented production: for example, Ludhiana and Bombay in north India make sweat-shirt, denim, and tee-shirt materials, as well as do garment construction; Delhi does baseball hats; Bellari does jeans; Bangalore produces tee-shirts, jeans, labels, and does garment construction; in Tamil Nadu, Tiruppur specializes in tee-shirt materials, dyeing, and garment construction (Chari 2000; Cawthorne 1995); Erode specializes in cotton materials, yarn production, and dyeing; Sivakasi specializes in cardboard tags and boxes; Ambuur specializes in leather and shoe production; and Chennai specializes in producing cotton materials, embroidery, and garment construction.

As each stage of the process takes place in India—knitting, dyeing, cutting, stitching, compacting, cleaning, embroidery, finishing, checking—there are export-surplus materials available at each stage of the production process. One can buy export-surplus tee-shirt material, shirt labels, cardboard tags, yarn, labels, or finished products (with or without brand logos, tags, labels). And as the industry is relatively decentralized, each of these export-surplus goods circulates relatively independently (Cawthorne 1995; Chari 2000; cf. Reinach 2005: 45), thus serving as inputs into other local productions. For example, a producer might buy brand labels to append to shirts that he produced; or buy cloth which he then puts his design and tags on.



Importantly, export-surplus goods are sold at prices low enough to cater to markets that foreign brand apparel companies cannot access for significant profit. This is for a number of reasons. First, the export-oriented producer has already been paid for the overage through his contract with the brand company (or the company that contracted him). The brand company will typically allot for an overage of 5–10 percent, for example, on the assumption that the production process operates with a 3–10 percent error rate. Such surplus, then, is already accounted for and the sale of surplus is simply extra money for the producer. Further, because the amount of export surplus is relatively small compared to the total size of the contracts and because the opportunity costs of selling them are relatively high, not to mention sometimes illegal through breach of contract, buyers of export-surplus goods are in a position to ask for rock bottom prices (sometimes less than the production cost). Third, the producer may not have independent access to a market where he can sell such goods, or one may not exist. For example, trying to sell XXXL winter jackets in south India, even if branded, is exceedingly difficult. Even if it does exist, often the market cannot bear the full cost of the garment, so items are sold for whatever local distributors and wholesalers can pay. Fourth, export overruns often lack the sufficient quantity or “spread”<sup>2</sup> demanded by wholesalers. Thus, the producer has little flexibility in dictating prices. Fifth, as the brand company has the right to refuse a shipment if it is late, if the brand company goes bankrupt, or if the quality isn’t up to standard rejected products often end up getting resold to another company for export (e.g., by simply attaching a new label and repackaging the good) or

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<sup>2</sup> “Spread” refers to the distribution of some product by size, color, or other variation. Often the spread of export surplus, as it is linked to contingencies in the production process, is uneven. There may, for example, not be enough medium sizes for a wholesaler to be interested in buying some product.

they are sold on the local market. In both cases the goods are sold at a heavy loss to the producer. Finally, producers' contracts with brand companies often require that the export-surplus goods be marked as export-surplus/damaged, thus not allowing them to function as authenticated branded commodities in the local market (photos 7.1, 7.2).<sup>3</sup> This further lowers the price of export-surplus garments on the local market and circumscribes their circulation.



*Photo 7.1 Marked tag on export-surplus good*

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<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, they are required to be burned or otherwise destroyed. Sometimes the brand company only excludes exporting the export surplus, and thus allows sales within India. This is especially true for companies who have no sizable market in India. Of course, it isn't uncommon for such contracts to be broken and goods may be exported either to the intended market (at a significant risk to the parties involved) or to another market. I was told by "seconds" wholesalers, for example, that Nigeria and Russia are popular destinations for goods produced in Tiruppur. I saw groups of Nigerian exporters combing the streets of Tiruppur looking for good "seconds" deals for export.



*Photo 7.2 Mark on export-surplus defect good*

Such export-surplus and defect garment sales are brokered by “seconds” agents who buy export-surplus and defect goods from a number of producers and then distribute them to wholesalers for sale as such, or to other producers who use them to create products of their own. From “seconds” agents finished branded forms move within India via distributors to showrooms, clothing shops, and traveling bazaars, either as “stock lots” (hodgepodes of garments which are unsorted by brand) or “fresh stock” (a single type of branded garment). In the stores I visited, “stock lot” was the most common way that garments came to them (photo 7.3).



*Photo 7.3 Stock lot of export surplus*

In short, because export surplus provides (a) a large profit margin for store owners due to the low price of purchase (up to 100–150 percent profit, as compared to about 20 percent profit from selling authentic brands and 30–40 percent profit from duplicates) and (b) often comes in unsorted “stock lots” there is a lack of selectivity about which branded products make it into retail. While store owners may be aware of which brands are popular or not (locally and sometimes abroad), because of how the products get to them when buying one’s stock there is no *de facto* principle of sorting out brands vis-à-vis popularity or “demand.” And because the cost of such goods is so low and youth are open-minded with respect to branded forms (i.e., there is little to no brand loyalty as such), there is little risk to indiscriminate brand retailing. The result is that most if not all brands produced in India for export end up on the local market. In short, as a result of the vagaries and contingencies of global capital’s involvement in textile production for

export, independently of “demand” and customer and distributor knowledge about brands, branded forms end up willy-nilly circulating in shops, presenting themselves to youth and local producers, as I discuss below.

## 2.4. *Brand duplicates and brand-inspired garments*

### 2.4.1 *Introduction*

In addition to circulating original, though perhaps not authenticated, branded forms, export surplus is important to the circulation of branded forms in general because export surplus is the condition of possibility for the production and circulation of duplicate branded forms and garments which have the branded form without any clear reference to actual brands (what I call “brand-inspired” garments). Here I am mainly concerned with garments which are most popular among lower- and middle-class youth, as discussed in chapter 6. These are produced largely in Tiruppur (tee-shirts) and Chennai (embroidered cotton button-down shirts, embroidered jeans, cargo pants).

There are a number of reasons why both duplicate branded garments and brand-inspired garments depend upon export surplus: (a) export-surplus fabrics, tags, yarn, labels, and other materials provide inexpensive, but quality materials for duplicate production; (b) producers of duplicates share the same aesthetics of brandedness as their youth consumers; or, at least, they recognize consumers’ willful ignorance and produce accordingly. Such producers, then, also think of branded forms as *style*, and to that extent as aesthetically pleasing and economically viable/valuable. Rather than coming up with designs *de novo*, for such producers copying existing designs, which they get through export-surplus models, is a safer bet; and (c) the design of such garments is heavily influenced by what is already circulating in the market. Producers, as they put it, ‘follow

the market.’ That is, they copy what others are doing so as to stay competitive, just as consumers copy what others are wearing so as to stay current. And as the market has as a significant portion of export surplus and copies of it, they too copy such forms. This results in the further recycling and recirculation of export-oriented branded forms.<sup>4</sup>

#### 2.4.2 *Producing a duplicate*

If export surplus provides the models and the materials, the form and substance, from which counterfeit brands are produced, why is there such a diversity of branded forms that circulate? Why is it not simply an endless repetition of designs identical to authentic branded forms? What are the principles that regulate the production and design of branded forms that aren’t made for export? What are the forces that regiment difference from and similarity to brand originals?

In the following sections I look at the production process of brand duplicates and brand-inspired garments. I am particularly interested in creative deviations from export-surplus brand models, rather than to-the-tee knock-off brand garments, both because they are more ubiquitous among youth and because they reveal the dynamics of the production and circulation of branded forms in Tamil Nadu more clearly.

#### 2.4.3 *Production cycle*

In this section I briefly look at the production cycle of embroidered cotton, button-down shirts in Chennai of either duplicate-, fictive-, or quasi- brand type. From 2007–

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<sup>4</sup> Indian national garment brands: (a) are largely not seen as *style* (and thus less likely to be duplicated for a youth market); (b) compete in the local market (and often at relatively closer prices) and thus have more of a stake in preventing counterfeits; and (c) they are in India and thus are more able to detect and prosecute counterfeiting. In short, duplicate production rests primarily on export surplus for designs.

2009 such embroidery—minimally, NAME + LOGO/DESIGN—was popular among lower- and middle-class Tamil youth, both urban and rural (photo 7.4).



*Photo 7.4 Embroidered shirts (“Rock,” “Ranger Boys,” “Teen Terores [sic]”)*

These garments were produced in relatively small-scale production units in North Chennai. The bigger units control each step of the production process (except for the production of cloth, thread, labels, and tags, which they buy either from export surplus or from local manufacturers), while smaller units tackle one or more parts of the production process.

Local design agencies (often part of the same companies who do the embroidery) provide the embroidery design for the shirts. They do this either by creating designs on their own, which they then pitch to various producers; or they create or copy a design as requested or provided by the producer (often also the wholesaler) who commissions them. Such agencies have the roles of: copywriters (who come up with “wordings”), graphic designers (who come up with design elements), software operators (who translate



the designs into computer files that the embroidery machines can execute), and operators of the embroidery machines. One individual may do one or more of these jobs.

Once the designs are ready and approved, tailors cut the pieces of fabric necessary for the garments. Cuts of fabric which require design are then sent for embroidery (photos 7.5, 7.6). The embroidered pieces are then sent back to the tailors who stitch them together. The pieces are then finished—labels affixed, cleaned, ironed, folded, and packaged—and sold/sent to wholesalers who distribute them to stores. If particular items are successful they are ordered again.



*Photo 7.5 Embroidery machine display*





*Photo 7.6 Embroidery machine at work*

#### *2.4.4. Designing the branded form*

While some duplicate producers do attempt high-fidelity knock-offs of authentic branded items, there are a number of reasons why garments for the local market systematically deviate from export-surplus models. In this section I look at the logic of design of such garments, and the forces that maintain difference from and similarity to brand originals.

##### *2.4.4.1 Exigencies of production and budget*

First, the stitches and cuts of a particular brand design may be too difficult for the tailors given the budget and the time frame of production. Because a majority of

duplicates consumed by youth tend to be low in cost, the economic margin for reproducing difficult and labor-intensive stitches is low. Thus, producers usually take a (brand) “*model*” and alter the stitching to the convenience and skill level of their tailors and their budget. Moreover, even as new *models* arrive, producers tend to be conservative in changes in the cuts and stitching of the garments. New cuts and stitching take time for tailors to learn, and thus there tends to be a force toward conserving forms at the level of garment construction. For this reason, even as the design elements, colors, and brand names vary across such garments, the cuts and stitching of them are relatively consistent. Only if elements of garment production are seen by consumers as constitutive of the “*look*” will producers go through the effort of reverse engineering a new production process (as some did, e.g., for the folding button-up cuffs popularized by the shirt worn by Vikram in the film *Bheema* [2008]).

Similarly, the fabrics, threads, and other materials used for producing the original good may not be available, or may be too expensive for the price range of the product the producer is looking to make.<sup>5</sup> The aspects of the *model* which are least available to consumer consciousness are modified: for example, minute stitching differences or subtle color differences. Aspects which are salient to consumer consciousness, and thus central to the “*look*” of the garment, are more likely to be maintained from the original; for example, the brand name and logo, the brand label, or distinctive color schemes.

With every modification, the form changes and deviates from the original model. The level of flexibility in this iconism—how much can you change it until it is seen as different—is both dependent on producer and consumer consciousness and familiarity

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<sup>5</sup> This is, note, even a principle in high quality knock-offs where shortcuts are taken in dyes, materials, stitches, and cutting in order to lower the production cost and thus increase profits.

with the original. As I discuss below, both are willfully low, and thus the degree of change that accrues over this production process is often great.

Besides the material and economic exigencies of production, what are the creative principles that govern design? How are designs modified for reasons other than economic necessity? Where do new designs come from?

#### 2.4.4.2 *Principles of design: Brand as template*

For producers, one primary principle of design for youth fashion is that the branded garment made for export *is* fashion. The brand for export is, by an act of faith on the part of producers, a guarantee that a duplicate of it can be sold for profit. This is based on a particular assumption about the political economy of brand consumption in India, one that producers often narrated to me: lower- and middle-class people emulate the rich, and the rich emulate the West. Thus, if you duplicate brands from the West you will make sales. Note that the belief that brands guarantee profits isn't held to because there is a "demand" for such and such brands among young men in south India (their primary market); nor is it held because producers closely follow the sales of such and such brands in the West or among the Indian elite, because they don't, except in the most general sense. Rather this belief is grounded in an aesthetic of brandedness that producers (believe that they) share with youth consumers. That is, the brand has that *look*, is *style*, and thus is capable of status-raising the wearer.

Hence, as I noticed in my travels between Tiruppur, Erode, Chennai, and Madurai, any and every product that is being produced for export is being duplicated. Branded forms are selected for, but with no specificity for particular brands. Local producers get a

hold of export-surplus items and use them as the basis from which they make their own products (whether they be faithful to the brand or ultimately original or novel in their designs). Indeed, the capricious appropriation of branded forms independent of knowledge by producers and consumers about the brand image, target audience, and branded product extensions mean that any brand (and even non-brands like pop star names, college names, and place names) can be pulled into the cauldron of production. Brands are willy-nilly selected, and this is not based on any principle that has anything to do with the logic of particular brands as such.

But why, then, are some brands or designs produced more than others? This is difficult to answer, and requires a brand-by-brand or design-by-design analysis.

However, we can note the following:

(A) For brands which *are* recognized by youth as particular brands—for example, Nike, Reebok, Adidas—their own brand meta-discourse is one principle which increases duplicate production; this is not necessarily because such brands are demanded by consumers and this feeds back into production (though this is certainly the case some of the times), but also because producers themselves lift designs from forms which they often see, whether it be magazine advertisements, catalogues, billboards, the internet, textile industry conventions where brands showcase their wares, or authorized showrooms of brands in high-end malls. However, many, perhaps most, of the branded forms consumed by youth are *not* of this kind.

(B) Cinema and television provide design ideas for producers. Mass media, then, is both a principle of brand circulation (see chapter 6, sections 2.3.4., 3.2) and for introduction of new designs for production in the local market.

(C) Feedback from sales gives producers some idea of what designs work and what designs don't work. Such feedback is extremely weak, however, and always has an after-the-fact quality as producers do no prospective research.

(D) In lieu of research producers 'watch' the market. That is, they monitor and copy what others are doing. At one level, then, there is an incessant repetition of the same based on a kind of (peer) pressure not to get left behind in the currency of (cultural) capital in the market. Once one brand becomes popular—as Ferrari and Diesel did in 2007–2009—there is a frenzy of production to duplicate these brands. At the same time, by 'watching the market' producers attempt to inject (small) difference(s) into the forms they produced. There is a tendency, then, toward creating different (enough) forms within the general type of garments that are 'moving' in the market so as to avoid stagnation of sales and to diversify and maximize market saturation (cf. Lury 2002, 2008 on the same principle in brand "innovation"). By 'watching the market,' then, two forces regulate the production of such garments: a centrifugal force toward newness and difference and a centripetal force toward sameness and conformity. It is this compulsive movement toward difference within the formulae of sameness that both introduces and staves off changes in branded forms.

#### 2.4.4.3 *Willful ignorance and the aesthetics of brandedness*

But because consumers are willfully ignorant of brands as such, while some brands are reproduced more than others the liberties that producers take with the branded form are many. They freely change the design of brands and their logos because, as they put it, 'the customer does not know the difference; and if they do, they don't care.' As I found,

producers themselves often didn't know very much about the brands they were copying, except that they were brands (and sometimes not even that).

In addition to ignorance about particular brands *qua* brands, producers are largely (willfully) ignorant of intellectual property (IP) law.<sup>6</sup> Oftentimes producers assume that the brand *qua* protected intellectual property doesn't include the lexical item or the logo but both together (cf. Reinach 2005: 48 on China). Only an *exact* replica would be breaking the law, many reasoned. As such, low-level producers of such duplicates treat branded logos and names as aesthetic objects, freely able to be borrowed the same way one might borrow a color palette or geometrical shape. As one producer put it, echoing the exact same discourse of consumers, 'the question isn't the brand *per se*, but whether the design has that "look"' ("look-aa irukka?"). Branded forms are used because they are well designed. A design should be bright, attention grabbing, and interesting. Brand logos do this because of their attractive visual form and because they are associated with exteriority, wealth, and fashion. As producers and designers explained, it isn't the brand identity that is important, but its aesthetic and functional effects as *style*.

This position, of course, maintains deniability. However, for some producers at least, their willful ignorance (their desire *not* to know, perhaps to avoid the implication that they were intellectual pirates, or that they may become a target for legal action or other forms of coercion at the hands of brand companies) dislocates the branded form from any

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<sup>6</sup> This ignorance may just as well been wishful thinking or feigned. It depends on the producer. Some seemed to have a clear idea of what is infringement and what is not, while others seemed totally clueless. Whatever we may believe about their mental states, producers in general act *as if* they are ignorant. My own impression given my experiences with them is that they are *willfully* ignorant of IP law so as to maintain a stance of deniability. It is important to note, as well, that dilution as a legal paradigm is not itself totally worked out or coherent in Europe or the West (Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008), and that dilution protection in statutory trademark law is itself relatively recent in India (Trademark Act of 1999, put into effect in 2003; see Gangjee 2008 for discussion on the differences in the concept of "dilution" between tort law and the statutory law, the former depending on the notion of "consumer confusion").

particular brand meta-discourse which would attempt to fix the fidelity of the branded form.

#### 2.4.4.4 *Hybrid brand forms and the aesthetics of brandedness*

Disregard for the brand *qua* brand identity and image (i.e., its authenticity) generates the kinds of brand hybridity we saw in chapter 6. One producer, for example, explained why he produced his shirts with one brand on the shirt, but with another brand on the label and another brand on the cardboard tag attached to the garment by saying that without the label, without the tag, it would look ‘bad’ and ‘ugly’ (*asingkam*), the garment would look “*cheap*.” But putting a “Comfort Casuals” label on the collar of a shirt with “Nike” on the breast would make it look more “*royal*” and attractive (“*look-aa irukku*”). The logic revealed here is that it isn’t consistency of brand identity that matters—because largely no one cares—but that branded forms have a particular formal structure and aesthetics, of which the label and tag are a part. Customers expect this structure, though not the consistency of the subparts.

In talking about a garment that had Adidas’ three stripes logo paired with the FILA name, one producer noted that he can recombine logos and wordings with no problem as long as the design elements are aesthetically pleasing, separately and together. And if consumers recognize at least one of the brand elements *qua* brand then this fact is simply a bonus and increases the chances that such an item will be bought. The same producer noted that such hybridization (as well as his “original” designs that utilized fictive brand names) always follows the LOGO/NAME + DESIGN + WORDING formula. It is this formula that is important, not its content as rigid designator of actual brands, he explained. As

producers reiterated to me, ‘we don’t care what the brands are. We make them because they sell (“*move*”) on the market. There is no need to know the brands, because consumers don’t even know the brands.’

In short, using brand design elements participates in the aesthetics of brandedness, even if it does not conform to the coherency and consistency demanded by brand meta-discourses, or the ontology of the brand *qua* BRAND. For producers, then, the brand is a template, a complex aesthetic design whose subparts can be disassembled and reassembled with other brand fractions or with other design elements (e.g., from cinema, from pop culture). While the value that consumers attach to such branded forms as *style* is the principle of their coherence, it is the willful ignorance of such forms as such and such brands that is the principle of their incoherence, which is to say, their re-combinability.

#### 2.4.4.5 *Misspellings, alterations, and the aesthetics of brandedness*

This alternative ontology of the brand common to producers and consumers of duplicates explains why the branded forms that circulate in Tamil Nadu tolerate a surprising level of deviation from their brand source material. The diversity of spellings, alternative designs, hybrids, and creative recontextualizations of designs described in chapter 6 are a direct outgrowth of producers’ not caring about the fidelity (and thus identity) of the brand as such (plus the fact that consumer’s apathy toward brand authenticity makes them economically unaccountable). And producers don’t care because fidelity to brand identity isn’t what makes such garments status-ful for their youth customers, and thus profitable for producers. Rather it’s the capacity to be *style*.



For example, one producer showed me a pair of cargo shorts (photo 7.7). Having found the image of a basketball player on the internet, he downloaded the logo for the NBA and attached some loosely related sports and youth thematic wording.



Photo 7.7 NBA-inspired cargo shorts

He neither knew what the NBA was *per se* (just that it had something to do with basketball), nor what the wordings meant. They too were cut and pasted from the internet and then altered: indoor → evidoor; hoop → boop; winner hero → winner cero. What was important was that the overall design fit a branded aesthetic, looked good, and was seen as *style*. For this producer, as for many others, his lack of English knowledge coupled with the fact that he knew that he most likely wouldn't be held accountable for

English spelling meant that transcription errors or anomalies that entered the design weren't likely to be corrected (see section 2.4.4.9; cf. Tarlo 1996: 242–243).

#### 2.4.4.6 *Legality, the creativity of duplicates, and brand-inspired garments*

Another reason why producers systematically distort the designs of logos and the spellings of brand names is that such alterations are seen to help evade the illegalities of counterfeiting. Indeed, when I began my research in this area of Chennai there was a large amount of suspicion that I was an agent of a brand company out to get duplicate producers (cf. Craciun's 2008 fieldwork experience). Companies which had a stake in retail in India—Adidas, Nike, Reebok—had apparently come down on a local Chennai producer. This had the effect that: (a) producers were wary of me and denied the idea that anyone was producing duplicates (or anything illegal), or downplayed the amount of such production (attributing it to unnamed others); (b) producers switched production to brands that didn't have retail in India (e.g., Diesel, Timberland, Billabong); and (c) producers altered the logos and names of brands in order to make them different enough so as to not count as counterfeiting (to their mind). Thus, as one producer noted, he changed Reebok to Rerock and Timberland to Timber Island. Similarly, the Nike swoosh might be drawn with a more extreme curvature or flipped horizontally; or one of the three parallel Adidas triangles might be reversed in direction (see chapter 6, photos 6.10, 6.11 for examples).

Alternatively, producers might hybridize their designs, in effect “remixing” them (cf. Luvaas 2009). For example, one designer reasoned that if he took the design of a particular brand (which included what he thought was the simple phrase “Pepe Jeans”

and not a brand name) and put his own brand label on it, it meant he was not doing anything illegal. While this is, perhaps, a clear case of illegality, the general principle of deviation from the original as a mode of *both* creativity and legally protecting oneself remains.

Here again we see the dual pressure: toward difference (in order to avoid legal problems) with a coercive pressure toward sameness (in order to maintain the “*look*” or aesthetic attractiveness of the copied branded form). While before we saw these centripetal and centrifugal forces of difference and sameness with respect to market competition, here we see it with respect to legal (dis-)incentivization.

#### 2.4.4.7 Example: Producing “Columbian” shorts

Below I briefly look at how a particular branded form—the Columbia Sportswear Company’s brand and logo—made its way from the blustery ski slopes of Oregon, USA to the blistering heat of the local Chennai market.

During one of my research trips to one of the garment production areas in Chennai, I struck up a conversation with a small-time producer of Bermuda shorts about his production process. He gets his fabrics from export-surplus factories and makes a variety of different kinds of Bermuda shorts utilizing different designs. While the various designs that he embroiders on the shorts change (e.g., brand logos, wordings, graphic designs), the cut and stitching of the shorts is conserved due to the time and money lost in teaching his tailors new designs.

His most current model took the Columbia brand and logo as its inspiration. Fearing legal problems he altered the name by adding an “n,” thus changing the brand name from

“Columbia” to “Columbian.” He left the logo and font of the brand name the same, convinced that this was enough to avoid any legal problems. I inquired as to why he picked Columbia in the first place. Was it the brand image? Was it because it was popular with youth (his main target market)? Was it because it had a definite presence in India?<sup>7</sup> In short, was there a “demand” for Columbia? He replied that he had heard of Columbia and knew it was a legitimate foreign brand, though he had no idea about it beyond that.

Rather, he chose Columbia, he explained, because he was able to acquire 500 kilograms of original Columbia brand cardboard tags (used to affix price tags) for a very low cost. Therefore he decided to start producing Columbia-inspired shorts for the local market to which he appended the authentic, export-surplus tags. Here what is interesting is that the aesthetics of the brand—logo, font, name, label, tag—becomes the operating principle governing duplicate production only given the contingent availability of some export-surplus subcomponent of that brand aesthetic. Production here is totally independent of issues of brand image or recognition, not to mention “demand.” This small-time producer’s fears of legality and the exigencies of production increasingly distorted the original brand form, but loosely maintained its overall aesthetic composition. Moreover, he indicated that it was not uncommon for wholesalers to see his Columbia-inspired shorts but demand a different brand name, like Adidas or Fila, with the same design and logo, thus further distorting and hybridizing the form, causing mismatches between the cardboard tag, the brand name, font, and logo.

#### 2.4.4.8 *Producing your own brand, novel designs*

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<sup>7</sup> While Columbia does not have, to my knowledge, a retail presence in India it does contract manufacture of some of its products in Chennai.

As we saw, while the branded form is often replicated with some level of fidelity by producers, such replication isn't governed by brand meta-discourses *per se* (or by the ontology of branded forms *qua* BRAND) but by a more general aesthetics of brandedness. This aesthetics, discussed in this chapter and the last, governs the creative design practices of producers whether they are copying, distorting, hybridizing, or creating their own brands, thereby maintaining the general structural formula of brand name, logo (or design), plus "wordings" (a slogan or script-based graphic design). In this section I look at how producers come up with novel designs that aren't connected in any direct way to existing brands, but are informed by this aesthetics.

Like duplicate producers, producers who make their own "original" garments are inspired by, or copy, existing designs. They get such designs in the same manner as those who make duplicates. And as with duplicate producers, such inspired designs are also altered from the source of the inspiration due to concerns with legality, exigencies of production, transcription errors, and the desire for the distinctiveness of their product (and thus competitive advantage). In distinction to duplicate producers, however, such producers append either their own brands (which a few had even trademarked in India) or noun phrases which sound like and function like brands but are not trademarked and command no recognition in the market. These are often accompanied by distinctive design elements and/or longer phrases that function as something like brand slogans.

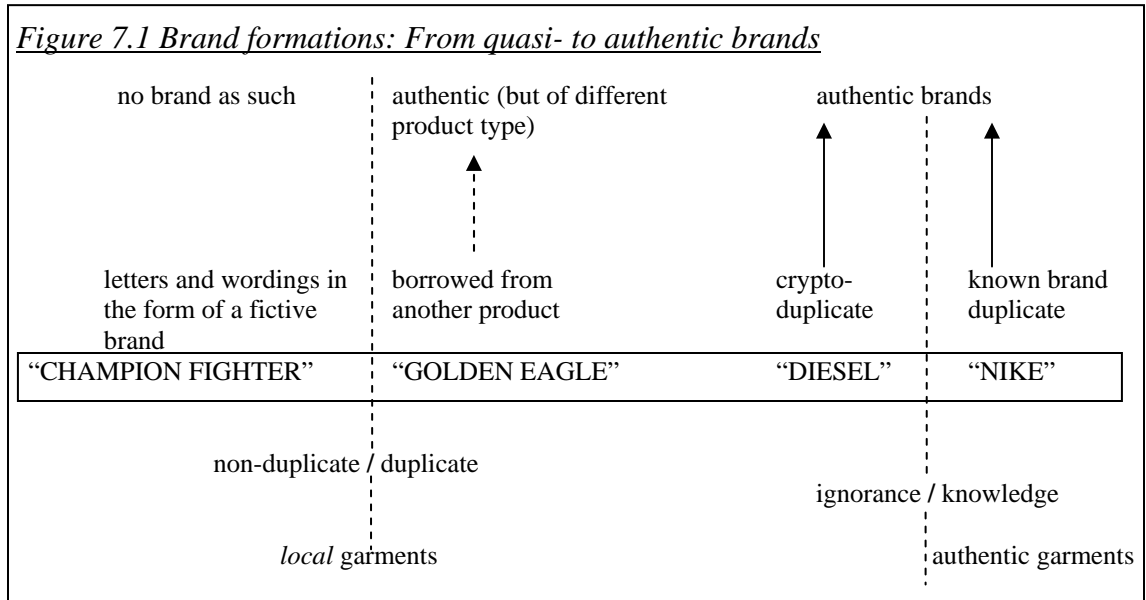
While a few producers I met were concerned with producing their own brands, many producers, especially those catering to lower middle-class youth, produced garments that could only be described as quasi-brands. For example, one producer took the phrase "Golden Eagle" (which it turns out is a company that makes flashes for cameras) and

attached it to an embroidered design of an eagle which he downloaded from the internet. He reasoned that because “Golden Eagle” sounds like a legitimate garment brand, it had a good chance of selling reasonably well.

Such designs are highly modular, taking up to four or five different elements (quasi-brand names, quasi-brand logos, quasi-brand slogans, and general images or designs) which are combined in various permutations, often internally incoherent. Indeed, each of these elements might be borrowed from a different source, altered, distorted, and then recontextualized in a novel pastiche (see chapter 6, section 2.7 for examples). For example, one producer would simply take headlines from English newspaper sports articles at random to generate “wordings”—“Brilliant Win,” “Difficult Struggle,” “Final Race”—and pair them with vaguely thematically related common nouns—“Sports,” “Gladiator,” “Emperor,” “Winner,” “Champion Boys,” “Cowboy.” He would then pair these with loosely thematically related designs (a running body, a ball and bat, a horse, etc.). Another producer generated his fictive brands and slogans through brainstorming semantically related words to clothing: “Youth Fashion,” “Fashion-21,” “Style,” “Jeans,” etc. (see photos 6.12, 6.19 in chapter 6, photo 7.4 in this chapter). As we can see, then, the logic here is that insofar as any lexical item can plausibly function as a brand name (i.e., are intelligible as rigid designators of possible companies), any word-like thing is fair game. For example “Zehewutt,” which to my knowledge is a nonsense concatenation of letters that loosely takes the shape of a word, is one such quasi-brand I encountered during my fieldwork.

In short, the whole logic of production derives from a general aesthetic of brandedness but hinges on the willful ignorance or disregard for particular brands as

such. Hence the seemingly *ad hoc* character of the design process. In Figure 7.1 below I schematize the different kinds of brand formations involved in the aesthetics of brandedness.



#### 2.4.4.9 English as aesthetic object

The most aestheticized aspect of such branded forms—and this is true for high-fidelity duplicates, fictive-, and quasi- brands—is the use of English, or more accurately the Roman script.<sup>8</sup> From the production point of view, why are all branded forms (and slogans) in English (cf. Yurchak 2006: ch. 5 in Soviet Russia; Weiss 2002: 102 on Tanzanian shop names; Stanlaw 1992 on Japanese usage of English)?

I first posed the question to designers and producers as, why not put Tamil words on shirts? Why not have Tamil language brands for youth garments? This idea was almost comical to producers. Writing it Tamil was highly problematic, they explained. First of all, it meant that your garments could only be sold in Tamil Nadu. By contrast, English is

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one producer would borrow proper names from non-English European languages like German and French to generate his fictive brand names.

a common language across India and thus transcends linguistic community and geographical location. More importantly, if you write things in Tamil they have to be semantically meaningful. This is because consumers will evaluate such writing based on its denotational and referential meaning (cf. Thomas 2009 on indigenous Mayan brands in Guatemala). By implication, then, such garments would have an addressivity (i.e., they would be alter-focal); their semantic content would engage the onlooker and thus present a danger. They would present a danger because such meaningful wordings can be more easily rejected as silly, trite, clichéd, offensive, etc. By contrast, English is largely denotationally opaque for producers and consumers. This isn't because producers or consumers don't understand what the phrases mean (though sometimes they don't), but because they don't care. Or rather, it isn't relevant to the pragmatic functionality and aesthetic attractiveness of the signs used (cf. Tarlo 1996: 242–243).

Rather than a communicative code, Roman script is an aesthetic object, and thus does not address *per se* but rather functions ego-focally as *style*. It is precisely because producers disregard branded forms *qua* brands and English *qua* denotational-referential code, and instead reanalyze both as aesthetic objects pragmatically capable of performing *style*, that they make shirts with strings of nonsense English letters without a second thought (see chapter 6, section 2.7 for examples). English is simply another element of design. Even if nonsensical, English, as one producer put it, 'has that look' (i.e., 'looks good') ("*look-aa irukku*"). English is used because it is *style*. As another producer put it, "*English NNaa fashion*" 'If it's (in) English (then) it's fashion.'

Given this, it becomes necessary to realize that (duplicate) brand names are always dually functioning: first, as iconic indexicals of brands; and second, as aesthetic objects,



as design elements (indexes of brandedness). This is one of the reasons why brand names are so elastic in the hands of producers. Like a line that can be curved, elongated, and stretched, English words and brand names can be distorted, letters replaced, dropped, doubled. Just as a zigzag line might enhance the design of a shirt, so too could a brand name *or* equally a string of nonsense letters (cf. Stanlaw 1992: 73–75; Tarlo 1996: 242–243). It also explains the disregard of brands as proprietary rigid designators. As general design elements they are common property, not linked to any one person or company.

## 2.5 Summary

What I have shown in this chapter is that the production and circulation of branded forms in garments consumed by youth—in export surplus, literal duplication, and in inspired moments of copying or novel design—is largely incidental to specific brands as such but highly attuned to brandedness in general. It is determined by particular movements of global capital—the cheap labor of India making possible export surplus of branded forms and materials necessary to copy or be inspired by them—and the seemingly *ad hoc* logic of the local market (also see Pang 2008 for discussion of something similar in China; cf. Craciun 2008, Luvaas 2009). Interestingly, both the vagaries of global capital and local garment production are tangential and insensitive to the consumption of particular brands as brands in local Tamil markets. First, export-surplus goods are calibrated to foreign tastes in foreign markets. Second, production for the local market is calqued off of export surplus. Third, producers for the local market largely assume, with a few notable exceptions, that any old brand or combination of English words/letters can achieve success. As such, there is an unruly proliferation of

brands, seemingly unrelated to consumer knowledge or demand, or the meta-discursive technologies (like marketing, advertising, consumer research) to inculcate either.

However, the exigencies of production and the indexical value of brands as exterior (but not necessarily as brand X, Y, or Z) among both consumers and producers explains why the branded form is central to youth fashion; that is, why *style* in clothing operates under an aesthetic of *brandedness* and not something else. The branded form is central, first, because the designs and materials that make such production possible literally come from the debris of global capital as it produces and circulates brands. Second, brands provide the symbolic materials for such youth forms because the brand is diagrammatic of concepts of youth status (*style*) and ‘youth’ more generally, as I argued in chapter 6. As such, the brand is calqued off of and co-opted, and thus abstracted from and generalized into a more general aesthetic of brandedness.

As I have shown, the production of branded forms, while seemingly *ad hoc* and schizophrenic in relationship to the consumption of particular brands *qua* brands, is totally coherent under the alternative ontology of the branded form *qua style*. Production is *ad hoc* and blind as to what brands are or mean because what is relevant for such production and consumption isn’t the brand *per se*, but an aesthetic of brandedness and its pragmatic entailments as *style*. Under such a meta-discourse, many otherwise unrelated or disparate semiotic elements (authentic brands, fictive brands, celebrity proper names, nouns associated with youth fashion, common noun phrases, words with roughly English morphological shape, strings of Roman letters) are all tokens of the same type: *style*. They all are regimented under the same meta-pragmatic discourse. It is the coordination of moments of production and consumption under this common meta-

pragmatic framework that must be understood in order to make sense of branded forms among youth in Tamil Nadu; and as I argue in chapter 8, to make sense of the brand in general.

### 3. Conclusions

#### 3.1 “Counterfeiting” what?

The social life of the Western branded forms in Tamil Nadu discussed in this chapter cancels out a number of assumptions about brands that are taken as natural in the literature on brands and their counterfeits. For example, understandings of what a brand is and isn't (specifically in Western trademark law) up until the late 20th century primarily revolved around the notion that using another's branded form is counterfeit if consumers *think* that a product of branded form X came from someone other than its authorized producer (i.e., it creates “consumer confusion”) (Lury 2004: ch. 5; Wilkins 1992, 1994; Kriegel 2004 Bently 2008; Higgins 2008; Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008). In the most recent incarnation, the boundary between the brand and its counterfeit increasingly pivots around notions of “dis-association,” “dilution,” or “tarnishment” of brand image (Wilkins 1992, 1994; Coombe 1996; Frow 1996, 2002; Moore 2003; Wang 2003: ch. 2; Lury 2004: ch. 5, 2008; Arvidsson 2005; Pang 2006, 2008; Bently 2008; Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008; Dinwoodie 2008; Ng 2008; Griffiths 2008; Manning 2010; on Indian trademark law and dilution see Gangjee 2008).<sup>9</sup> A product in this newer understanding is counterfeit if its self-reflexive (or at least, so construed) construction as such and such a branded commodity *reminds* customers of the trademark holder's brand

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the law, either in the West or India, is not totally coherent or consistent regarding the legal status of brands, and that both concepts (passing off and dilution) are relevant in contemporary legal understandings of brands.

in a way that interferes with that brand's image, associations, or distinctiveness. Here, the issue isn't confusion or dissimulation, but the extent to which someone else's good can reduce brand equity as it is played out as a set of associations in consumers' minds. In both cases, counterfeiting in the West depends on the *mental states* of consumers and those who apperceive branded forms *qua* brands of such and such a type. And yet, in a situation where there is willful brand ignorance, as we saw among Tamil youth, neither of these cases applies. Youth are not confused as to whether a duplicate is real or fake, and they have no associations attached to particular brands.

To what extent are such garments counterfeit brands then, as opposed to simply garments? Under such an alternative ontology does the notion of "counterfeit" even make sense (cf. Vann 2006, Reinach 2005 on the problematics of the concept of 'authenticity' and 'fake' in Vietnam and China, respectively)? If we abide by the feeling that such garments are still indeed counterfeits, I would argue that neither view of the brand—as reliable source-indexical of producer or as brand equity consisting of "mind share" (see Holt 2004 for discussion and critique of this concept)—is of any help. What is revealed is simply the brute legal reality that the ontological category of BRAND is underwritten by a particular understanding of just profit flow: counterfeiting exists when profits aren't going to the "right" person (i.e., the person who owns the intellectual property). Even here the core of the brand is revealed to be a particular meta-semiotic structure of the law governing particular brand tokens as mediators of profit flow (i.e., as tracing the commodity chain backwards). This is independent of consumer mental states.

More generally, how is it possible to say that form  $X^1$  is a(n illegitimate) copy of form  $X$ , and not simply that we are dealing with two separate forms (cf. Kriegel 2004:

256–262; Johns 2009 on early debates about copyright and piracy)? I have implicitly argued that to understand something as a duplicate of something else—for example, a brand “original”—is to be able to regiment both duplicate and original according to some meta-semiotic principle which reckons duplicate and original as fractionally (dis)similar in such and such ways. That is, only with respect to a common classificatory frame can two such forms be seen as similar or different in the first place. And yet I have argued that the most relevant meta-semiotic principle for Tamil youth consumers and duplicate producers isn’t BRAND—which turns on the distinction between “authentic” and “fake” branded forms (as a truth function)—but the aesthetics of exteriority and *style* which distinguish between objects which can and cannot pragmatically entail status-raising (as a performative function). Under this meta-semiotic principle, then, the function COPY OF (BRAND TYPE) X becomes less meaningful, as do concepts of brand authenticity more generally (see Vann 2006).

This isn’t to say that we cannot evaluate such goods as counterfeits. Indeed, we can. But it isn’t inherent in the forms involved, nor the mental states of consumers or producers. Rather, to view them as deficient copies is simply to align oneself with a particularly interested and normative position (the law, the IP owner). Indeed, a large part of the problem for brand companies in places like India is that many people *don’t* evaluate branded forms under the BRAND ontology that underwrites the brand in the West (or minimally, in Western law) (Vann 2005, 2006; Pang 2008; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Manning 2009; Yurchak 2006: ch. 5). A major task for Western governments and brand companies, then, is the socialization (or coercion as the case may be) of consumers, producers, and governments to this meta-semiotic principle, to the ontology

of the BRAND (Bush et al. 1989: 61, 64; McDonald and Roberts 1994; Wee et al. 1995: 41–42; Cordell et al. 1996: 51; Thomas 2009).

To understand how branded forms work in south India, then, requires that we are able to explicate not simply the forms, but the regimentation of such forms into larger meta-semiotic frameworks and how these meta-discourses inform actual events of interaction involving such forms. As we saw, the meta-semiotic framework relevant for Tamil youth involves brands, but always only as part of a more general classification of branded forms as instances of aestheticized exteriority (rather than as source-index or coherent brand image). This tangential co-opting of the brand is reflected in the input of branded forms into local economies as themselves tangential, integrated into production in ways *ad hoc* to brand identity.

The problem of “counterfeit” or “piracy” as analytical concepts, then, is that they always already recruit such forms to a highly partial and particular (ethnocentric) meta-semiotic framework (Western IP law<sup>10</sup>), one which may or may not actually be in play for the relevant social domain of individuals at hand. But to realize that such, essentially legal, meta-semiotic frameworks are, in many important aspects, irrelevant to understanding the social life of branded forms in Tamil Nadu it is necessary to bring to bear an ethnographic investigation of both the production and consumption of such forms and how they are inter-articulated with respect to each other (cf. Nakassis and Dean 2007; Nakassis 2009 on this methodological point). Moreover, it requires situating such moments of production and consumption with respect to larger issues unrelated to brands

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<sup>10</sup> And within the law, which is itself not necessarily internally coherent, to particular views on trademarks that are historically more recent (i.e., the concept of “dilution”).

as such (e.g., the construction of ‘youth,’ its projection into concepts of youth status, and their negotiation in the peer group).

### 3.2 “Demand” for what?

A similar assumption that we take as natural under the BRAND ontology that is canceled out by the Tamil ontology of branded forms is that the counterfeiting of brand X responds to “demand” for brand X (e.g., Bush et al. 1989: 59; Bloch et al. 1993: 28, 35; McDonald and Roberts 1994; Wee et al. 1995: 19; Phau et al. 2001: 46; Phillips 2005). In this reasoning, the duplicate is insidious and illegal because it poaches the brand identity and image that has, through the brand company’s investment of time and capital in research and development, created demand. The counterfeit, thus, rides off of the demand of the original branded good.

Yet, in Tamil Nadu at least, for most brands that are duplicated there is no such “demand.” Taking the Nike swoosh example from chapters 5 and 6, for a sizable part of the population the consumption of Nike swooshes isn’t driven by “Nike” at all. Rather, it is driven by concepts of youth status as they are embodied and articulated in Rajinikanth’s *style*. If anything, actually, it is Nike which is poaching the brand equity of Rajinikanth, free-riding off his hard work as an iconic actor.

Moreover, the supply of counterfeits isn’t related to *even the idea* of such a demand, either with respect to export surplus (whose supply is totally independent of local demand) or duplicates (whose supply is simply an extension of whatever is being produced for export). In production and consumption, it isn’t this or that brand that people make and consume, but a branded form that conforms to a larger aesthetic of

brandedness. The brand becomes a pure diacritic, one among many that can index *style*, but inscrutable for any specific brand meaning. The branded form in Tamil Nadu, even if faithful to the brand's "authentic" form, is empty outside the BRAND ontology as upheld in Western IP law.

We can see how the concept of "demand" is highly problematic here, precisely because moments of production and consumption (and thus supply and demand) are so highly mediated: by foreign markets; by the requirements of global capital; and by Tamil concepts of status, exteriority, and aesthetics. In such a situation it becomes meaningless to argue that consumption of commodity X analyzable as a token of the brand type Y (either as authentic or duplicate) is a result of demand for Y precisely because what is informing consumption may not be Y at all (i.e., the category that the brand owner is attempting to discipline the consumer to) but some other principle Z (e.g., *style*). The notion of "demand" requires that brand tokens and brand types are tightly regimented and calibrated, such that some commodity can stand in as a token of the type. Yet such regimentation, as we noted, is exactly what is absent among Tamil youth consumers and producers.



## Chapter 8 – Theorizing the Brand: Meta-Semiosis and Simulation

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 *Overview*

In this chapter I theorize the brand as a semiotic object. I do this from two perspectives on the limits of the brand: first, from the perspective of the aesthetics of brandedness discussed in chapters 6 and 7; second, from the perspective of the counterfeit, or brand simulacrum/simulation. First I give a brief literature review on work on brands to indicate lacunae that this chapter addresses. Then I look at the semiotics of the brand, using discussion from chapters 6 and 7 as well as work by others on the brand. In the last section of the chapter I look at the brand as simulacrum and simulation, based on my particular reading of Baudrillard. Throughout, my goal is to develop an ethnographically motivated theory of the brand. I do this, however, by skirting along the boundaries of this category, focusing as much on when a brand is not as when it is.

#### 1.2 *Literature on brands*

Work on brands and trademarks spans many disciplines and audiences, from legal (Bentley 2008; Gangjee 2008; Higgins 2008) and economic history (Wilkins 1992, 1994; Kriegel 2004); legal theory (Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008; Ng 2008); the sociology of brands (Lury 2002, 2004; Moor 2003; Arvidsson 2005); cultural studies (Frow 1996, 2002); anthropologists of cultural (Coombe 1996; Mazzarella 2003; Foster 2005, 2007; Vann 2005, 2006; Wilk 2006; Leach 2008) and linguistic varieties (Moore 2003; Manning 2009, 2010; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Agha n.d.); to the copious

management and marketing literatures (Gardner and Levy 1955; Aaker 1991; Jones 1994; Alexander and Schouten 1998; Sherry 1998, 2005; Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Holt 2002, 2004, 2006; Calkins 2005) and polemical works addressed to a more popular audience (Klein 2000[1999], Quart 2003).<sup>1</sup>

While much empirical work has dealt with brands and some have outlined theoretical accounts of brands (Moore 2003; Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005), there appears a gulf between the two (Holt 2006: 30). It seems, as per the recent turn in marketing toward actual moments of consumption (Holt 2002; Arvidsson 2005; Frank 1997), that by and large the only literatures where the *theorization* of the brand is empirically driven from actual instances of consumption are in the marketing and business history literatures. Ironically, sociologists and anthropologists interested in theorizing the brand have based their accounts on syntheses of the marketing literature or from analysis of brand meta-discourses such as corporation internal communication, trade journals, marketing and advertising campaigns, and product hermeneutics (e.g., Mазzarella 2003: ch. 6; Moore 2003; Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005; Foster 2007; 2008; Manning and Uplisashavili 2007; Manning 2009) rather than focus on actual empirical work on brand consumption/use.<sup>2</sup> This is unfortunate because anthropologists working on brands—often in regions where the brand functions most distinctly from brand meta-discourses—are afforded a unique

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I focus on the notion of the brand with the implicit assumption that the brand subsumes the trademark. We can think of trademark as that semiotic element of the brand that is stably regimented and protected by legal discourses. By contrast the brand includes a host of other features, some of which fall under the purview of the law, and some of which do not (e.g., marketing strategies; corporate cultural identities linked to brand image; untrademarkable elements of brand) (Davis 2008; Gangjee 2008; Ginsburg 2008; Manning 2010).

<sup>2</sup> This is doubly ironic because the business literature cites and follows the methodologies of anthropology, “thick description” and all (Fournier 1998: 344; see Alexander and Schouten 1998; Sherry 1998, 2005, 2008); see Gardner and Levy (1955) for an early cry for qualitative social science research; Sherry’s (2005: 40) “brandthropology”; and Holt’s (2004) symbolic anthropology influenced marketing theory.

perspective on the brand, as works by Halstead (2002), Vann (2005, 2006), Yurchak (2006: ch. 5), Craciun (2008, 2009), and Luvaas (2009) show.

One result of relying on brand meta-discourses as descriptions of brands in the world is a particular kind of apocalyptic anxiety about a fascistic future where the world is overrun by brands (Casson 1994; Klein 2000[1999]; Quart 2003; see Agha n.d.: 8, 39 for a similar point). As we will see, this problem is symptomatic of methodological and epistemological problems, and not necessarily about the social life of brands in the world *per se*. In particular, it results from taking brand meta-discourses at face value, and then literalizing them, projecting their prescriptive meta-pragmatic discourse as descriptive of the world as such.

To steer clear of these problems I offer three starting points for analysis: (1) locating the analysis of branded forms outside of the culture where brand meta-discourses are produced: in Tamil Nadu, India; (2) looking at the actual consumption of brands rather than brand meta-discourses as such; and (3) looking at the brand from the perspective of its illicit twin, the counterfeit or duplicate product.

## **2. Semiotics of the brand**

### *2.1 When is a brand?*

How might we theorize the brand from the perspective of the willful ignorance of Tamil youth and duplicate producers discussed in chapters 6 and 7? What does such willful ignorance of brands coupled with an orientation to branded forms tell us about the semiotic composition of the brand? While the brand is a semiotically multi-form object and thus a heterogeneous category (*vis-à-vis* the type of products or services associated

with it, its historical context, its context of use, how it is marketed), I argue that the key semiotic feature of the brand is its reflexive meta-semiotic structure. Below I develop this argument vis-à-vis debates in social theory about the ontology of the commodity form in Western capitalism and its relationship to brands in late(r) capitalism. This genealogy of the brand in the West is complemented by discussion of contemporary on the ground engagement with branded forms in Tamil Nadu, as discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

## *2.2 From quality to quantity*

For those who have theorized capitalism vis-à-vis the ontological status of the object, the history of capitalism is the history of the increasing abstraction and rationalization of the object (see Mazzarella 2003: ch. 2 for discussion and critique). Marx's (1976) formulation of the commodity and Benjamin's (1935) formulation of the concept of "aura" are perhaps the most cited, though we may also note Simmel's (1978[1907]) concern with the quantification of qualities under capitalism; early Baudrillard's (2001[1968], 2001[1970], 2001[1972], 2001[1976]) work on symbolic exchange and the principle of equivalence; and the situationists on commodification and spectacle (Debord 1967; see Best 1994). For all these authors, capitalism fundamentally changes the ontology of objects.

Marx's (1976) classic formulation of the commodity form is based on the distinction of *use value* and *exchange value* where the former is based on that which is self-evident, universal, and natural in objects: its utility and its ability to satisfy (authentic) needs. Exchange value, by contrast, is historically newer as it is based on particular social relations of capitalist and laborer. These social relations establish the object as part of a

set of equivalences (ultimately with money), thus abstracting exchange value from use value (and in the case of the universal equivalent, converting its use value as value more generally). In this understanding, use value is singular, unique, uncomparable; by contrast, exchange value is abstract, universal, and comparable.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, Simmel's (1978[1907]) philosophy of money focuses on the transformation of the *qualities* of objects into *quantities*. Simmel is concerned with how, in modernity, objects (and subjects) increasingly are quantified, leading to a particular kind of cognitive orientation toward the world. For Baudrillard (2001[1968], 2001[1970], 2001[1972], 2001[1976]), capitalism is a radical rupture wherein symbolic exchange—exemplified in the gift, the potlatch, and ritual prestations (Mauss 1954)—forms an Ur ontology of the object (the substitute for use value, in fact). This ontology is radically changed through the reanalysis of the world of objects under the principle of commodity equivalence (i.e., as a pure Marxist commodity) and the structural law of equivalence more generally (i.e., as a pure Saussurean sign). The history of the object, then, is the history of abstraction, rationalization, and the emptying out, or implosion of, “authentic” and “genuine” “meaning”; it is the transformation of the object as that which is imbricated in social relations of reciprocity (Baudrillard 2001[1976]) to that which mediates exchange between anomic, autonomous individuals (see Frow 1996).

Benjamin (1935) similarly takes up this issue, but shifts the focus to the reproduction of objects in general; in particular, how mechanical reproduction and industrialization

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<sup>3</sup> While the commodity may be fetishized, reintroducing a kind of quantized quality to it (i.e., the seeming agency of commodities *qua* exchange values), this is a mystification covering both the abstract nature of the object and the concrete social relations that are its conditions of possibility. This fetish is not the re-concretization of the abstract, then, but the (seeming) unmediated quality of quantified value embodied in things (i.e., commodities).

have radically altered cultural (or artistic) representations. For him it is the ability to produce exact copies in large quantities that fundamentally changes the object's ontology. In earlier epochs (marked by earlier reproductive technologies), objects had an "aura." They projected this aura through their unique history, the semiotic chain that links each individual with respect to the object in question and the object over time. The object is characterized by its sensuous materiality, indexical origin, and thus its authenticity and authority. (We might say, following Peirce [1992], its irreducible Secondness.) It is this ontology that that gives objects meaning and value (especially highly valorized ritual objects and art). The history of objects is the history of increasingly accurate and exact reproduction: from coin reproduction, terra cotta, bronze, lithography, to finally photography, audio recording, and film (cf. Bazin 2004; Kracauer 1960). With each step the object's history, its authenticity, its authority is displaced under the (more than) perfect copy. This links back up with the concerns of Marx, Simmel, and Baudrillard regarding the quantification of objects and cognition:

"To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (Benjamin 1935: sect. 3, para. 2).

Or as Benjamin later states: "quantity has been transmuted into quality" (ibid., sect. 15, para. 1).

### *2.3 From quantity back to (simulated) quality*

If the history of the object is its increasing quantification, its increasing detachment from "authentic" social relations—that is, its de-indexicalization—and its conversion into

the abstract commodity form, what do we make of the brand? The brand is precisely that semiotic form which attempts to reintroduce “aura” or quality back into the commodity form (Lury 2004; Frow 1996; Mazzarella 2003: 192; Arvidsson 2005; Foster 2005, 2007; Agha n.d.; cf. Callon et al. 2002).<sup>4</sup>

Like the author function (Frow 1996, 2002; Kriegel 2004: 250), and the parallel text of the movie star (Benjamin 1935), the brand attempts to provide an element of authenticity, authority (often provided in the last instance by the law), and meaning to the objects which fall under its umbrella. It figures itself as filling the vacuum of the unique, “real” history of the object, a history presumably liquidated by its mechanical reproduction, and transformed and decontextualized from its embeddedness in social interactions with familiar shop keepers to mere economic transaction among anonymous agents involving goods of relatively unknown origin and quality (except through the presence of the brand label) (Wilkins 1994). It is no surprise, then, that modern brands appear precisely when mass production and distribution emerge (Wilkins 1992; cf. Johns 2009 on copyright).

Through the brand and its reflexive positioning in advertising, marketing, and packaging, commodities in the era of consumerism are projected as more and more personal, singular, and unique; and more and more able to satisfy our inner needs and

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, here “aura” is precisely a function of the *sameness*—the non-uniqueness—of brand tokens with respect to each other, insofar as this non-uniqueness is productive in instantiating a larger unity, the brand type. It is the fact that every brand token is the same (or similar) that makes it capable of functioning as part of the brand type. Rather than the “aura” adhering in the *same* unique object over diachronic history, the brand’s aura adheres over multiple tokens synchronically (as part of the brand type) and diachronically (the brand type over time).

desires, to be integrated into our individual lifestyles and into “authentic” community formations.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate aim, of course, is to reorganize a market which is otherwise presumably organized quantitatively by price (Aaker 1991: x, ch. 1; Jones 1994; Lury 2008) and thus reintroduce a principle of qualitative difference between commodities which, due to mechanical reproduction and technical mastery, are increasingly functionally similar (Rajagopal 1999; Feldwick 1999[1991]: 26; Gardner and Levy 1955; Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Sherry 2005). It is also presumably a principle to preempt skepticism and resistance to consumerism as coercive, inauthentic, and instrumentally rational (Holt 2002, 2004; Moor 2003) and replace such skepticism with (quasi-)reciprocal (and dependent) social relations (Fournier 1998; Mazarella 2003: ch. 6; Holt 2006; Agha n.d.),<sup>6</sup> community (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), and even brand “love” (Foster 2005; Arvidsson 2005). All this is, of course, in order to provide a competitive edge and increase profits and brand equity (Aaker 1991; Jones 1994).

The brand, then, becomes a principle whereby supply and demand can be redirected from functionality or price toward qualitative uniqueness (notionally in the unique “meanings” associated to the brand; legally as a semiotic monopoly of naming and product extension [Davis 2008]), and thus how the market can be both segmented internally and maximized overall (Lury 2008). The brand, then, attempts to direct the tendency of commodities to maximize their circulation, by linking a set of commodified

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of this aspect of brands see: Baudrillard 2001[1968]; Sawchuck 1994; Frow 1996, 2002; Callon et al. 2002; Lury 2002, 2004; Moore 2003; Arvidsson 2005; Foster 2005, 2007; Agha n.d.: 10–26; in the marketing literature see: Fournier 1998; Cowley 1999[1991]; Feldwick 1999[1991]; Holt 2002, 2004; McGracken 2005. On community formations see: Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Klein 2000[1999]; Coombe 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See Leach (2008: 341), Lury (2004), Arvidsson (2005), and Mazarella (2003: 195) for a critique of the notion of brand–consumer reciprocity and its asymmetries.



objects/services under the umbrella of a brand, as a principle of scarcity, in order to generate profits (Frow 1996).

In this section I have argued that the brand figures itself as reinjecting *quality*—aura, authenticity, authority, and meaning—into *quantified* commodity forms. What is the semiotic organization of the brand that allows it breathe life into the empty forms of capitalism from which it is necessarily built up? In section 2.4 I take up the semiotic organization of the brand *qua* BRAND, looking at it as a Peircean sign of a particularly reflexive type.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.4. *Semiotic organization of the brand*

### 2.4.1 *Introduction*

One of the major problems with work on brands is the tendency to focus on the brand as something mysteriously (im)material (e.g., Lury 2004; Shields 2003: 177; Arvidsson 2005; see Feldwick 1999[1991]: 19, 21 on this tendency within marketing discourse). Indeed, what is interesting about brands is that they are composite semiotic objects. This complexity has prompted many a writer on brands to reflect in wonderment—reminiscent of medieval scholastics’ debates on universals and particulars—at how a brand can be both physically material (an “object”) and metaphysically immaterial (a set of associations, concepts, mental states) (see Moore 2003; Manning 2010 for a similar critique). As I will argue, while brands—like other symbolic signs (including the lexical item “brand”)—often designate discrete material objects, the semiotic complexity of

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<sup>7</sup> In my discussion I will be using the Peircean (1992) terms with his technical meanings: *qualisign*, *token/sinsign*; *type/legisign* in discussing types of *sign-vehicles* or *representamina*; *icon*, *index*, *symbol* in discussing the *ground* of signs; *rheme/rhematic sign* and *dicent signs* as constituents of more complex signs like *propositions*; and *interpretant* for the more developed sign (to a mind). For discussion of Peirce’s semiotic see Parmentier (1994) and Lee (1997).

brands has led to a dual tendency by theorists to naturalize and concretize the brand when it should not be (e.g., Lury's [2004] "object-ifying" of the brand<sup>8</sup>) and abstracting from it too much when it should not be (elevating the brand to a mystical metaphysics).

However, if we are clear on the semiotic organization of the brand, the mystification of the brand as material/immaterial and the false problems that follow from it can be avoided.

We need to ask the simple epistemological question: how do we *know* when we are in the presence of a brand? At first glance, there are at least two obvious ways: (1) we come in space–time contiguity with some material thing (e.g., a logo, label, unique form/color combination) which indexes the presence of the brand; (2) the brand is invoked virtually through discourse about the brand or other semiotic activity that typifies the brand. In the first case we are presented with an instance of the brand sensorially. In the second, we are presented with the brand through a representation of it. Both may happen at the same time as well.

The point here is that the presumably immaterial thing called "brand" is only ever knowable and experientiable (and hence has an empirical existence that can be studied) through instances of it, either as tokens of the brand type *or* as virtual representations of either. What are the semiotic features of brands that make it possible to be experientiable in this way?

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, despite her claims otherwise Lury (2004: 16) is guilty of misplaced concreteness. This is revealed by her treatment of the brand as concretized projection off of virtual descriptions of it by brand meta-discourses. It is noteworthy, then, that all her hedges—of not assuming the brand to be a natural unity, a single thing, etc.—are located in the "Coda" sections of each chapter. They are literally afterthoughts, addenda. Moreover, such auto-critiques and qualifications are never taken up in later discussion. They do not change how she theorizes the brand. They are alibis, deniability clauses.

#### 2.4.2 *As type*

The brand is a *type* (or *legisign*). Brands are classificatory principles which categorize some range of signs (objects, services, spaces, experiences, etc.) as *tokens* (or *sinsigns*) of the brand type (what Pang 2008: 128 calls “metonymic displacement”). That is, brands introduce a principle of differentiation between similar things (which may be organized by some other classificatory principle; e.g., functionality) while grouping otherwise distinct things as the same (by the criterion of brand membership), with the hopes of creating competitively advantageous classes of commodities. (Note that there is nothing special about the brand in being a type-level sign. We may ask the same question about any kind of classificatory object: e.g., words in a language, literary genres, or cultural/functional types of objects.)

To this extent, the brand as type is a regulator of similarity, or iconism, between objects, regimenting the range of objects which can be seen to be similar (i.e., members of the type) and excluding others. As we discuss below, it is this regimentation (or [non-]flexibility) of iconism which attempts to: (a) differentiate brands from each other; and (b) ground the authority of the brand through classifications of “authentic” versus “inauthentic” (as fetishized in the form itself). It is this control of iconism that allows tokens of the brand to function as instances of particular brand types, and thus exclude counterfeits and competing brands as not part of the brand type. But how is this classificatory relationship possible?

#### 2.4.3 *As index*

Branded tokens are *indexes* of the brand type. In addition, the brand type—embodied most saliently in the trademark—is itself an index, in particular a rigid designator (Kripke 1980), that points to a presumed origin of production or “good will.” This functions analogously to proper names whereby the brand type and its tokens index its source (or indexical target) by virtue of the apperceiver of the brand token being acquainted with the semiotic chain that radiates from some (presumed) “baptismal event” (Durant 2008). To this extent, any part of the brand type which can be instantiated in tokens of it (e.g., the brand name or logo; a branded event [Moor 2003, Alexander and Schouten 1998] or space [Sherry 1998]; or distinctive and recognizable color combinations [Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008]) can be indexical of this (presumed) origin.<sup>9</sup> In this way, then, brands (and more specifically, trademarks) are distinctive diacritics of source/origin (Coombe 1996; Bently 2008; Ginsburg 2008; Durant 2008).

What is important to note here is that brands are particular kinds of indexes, rigid designators, whose indexicality is a function of *socialization* to them as such. (This is because their contiguity is highly mediated by temporally and spatially dispersed “speech chains” [Agha 2007a].) This is in at least two ways. First, we come to know of particular brands *qua* indexes of such and such an origin through socialization to the ontology of BRAND more generally; that is, the idea that brands exist and have such and such a being (see section 2.4.5). Second, we are socialized to specific brands in particular: Nike is a brand, Reebok is a brand, etc. Such socialization may occur via multiple media: everyday conversation and word of mouth; or experience of brand tokens themselves, though to

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<sup>9</sup> See Gandelman (1985); Frow (1996: 176ff., 2002: 62–63); Coombe (1996); Manning (2010) on the signature as parallel to trademark; as indexical sinsign “I was here”; indexical legisign—the proper name; and as indexical symbol, the figure associated with the proper name, the author/brand; in sum, as a *dicent symbolic legisign*.

even know these to be tokens (e.g., as a logo) and not as something else (e.g., a simple design) requires some meta-discourse that informs us of this connection, such as advertising or the law. It is such socialization which makes the type-level functionality of brands possible, and thus their rigid designation as well.

It has been noted by many that the trademark as index of producer—earlier, a mark of liability or quality assurance—is a historically earlier function of brands (Wilkins 1994; Bently 2008; Higgins 2008), and is less central to the kinds of work that brands do today (Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008; Lury 2008; Ng 2008; Griffiths 2008; Manning 2010).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is the slippage between producers and products that has over time resulted in the shift from brands being attached to producers (as principle of the brand type) to being attached to products (as tokens of the brand type) (Leach 2008) and, through meta-discourses of the brand, to the abstracted “meanings” attached to the brand type (and by extension its tokens), what are called “image” or “personality” in the marketing literature (Gardner and Levy 1955; Aaker 1991; Feldwick 1999[1991]; Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Mazarella 2003: 187–192). This slippage is inherent in trademark law. In trademark law the assumption is that if rigid designating signs that index producer are protected, this will allow consumers (through their experience with trademarked products) to induce the reputation of the producer (as a set of associated symbolic meanings). It is this good will which is ultimately protected and thus what makes the trademark/brand—if successful in the market—valuable unto itself. This is an example of

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, consumers often do not know or care who the actual producer is (Wilkins 1994: 35; Dinwoodie 2008; Ng 2008: 227; Manning 2010) and the brand owner may not even be the producer, or the producers may be multiple (Klein 1999[1991]; Lury 2008).

the more general process where the diacritic of difference that stands in for something of value becomes something of value in and of itself (see Dean 2009, 2010).

Note that this additional layer of indexical meaning—the capacity of the brand token/type to index a host of symbolic meanings—is sedimented on top of the capacity of brands to function as rigid designators (perhaps more accurately, signifiers of pure difference, or diacritics) of the brand type, even if the presumed origin is irrelevant or unknown (see section 2.3.2 below). That is, to the extent that they are rigid designators (which itself hinges on them being type-level signs) they can be reanalyzed and enregistered (Agha 2007a, n.d.) as indexical of a whole set of other (symbolic) values. But how are these values linked to the brand *qua* rigid designating legisign?

#### 2.4.4 *As symbol*

The brand is not simply an index. It does not just designate some company or person—the presumed author (in Goffman’s [1981: 226] sense) of the brand—but invokes a set of “associations” or meanings, often focused or emblemized in a particular figure of personhood, literal or fictive.<sup>11</sup> To this extent a branded token can function as an index of such a persona and the qualities (s)he (and by association, the brand) embodies. What is the basis, or *ground*, of this indexicality? The connection is *symbolic*: the brand is connected to a set of associations or meanings by virtue of a convention, or *law* to use Peirce’s (1992) terminology.

Interestingly, to the extent that such symbolism is ratified and naturalized, brand tokens are seen to be *iconic* with the brand type, the figure of personhood invoked by the

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Nike’s “image” is linked to the general social persona of the athlete and specifically in the figure of Michael Jordan.

brand, and even the consumer him/herself or who (s)he wishes to be (Baudrillard 2001[1968]; Jones 1994; Sawchuck 1994; Frow 2002; Lury 2002, 2004: ch. 4; Moore 2003; Arvidsson 2005; Foster 1995; in the marketing literature see Feldwick 1999[1991], Gordon 1999[1991]: 33; Agha n.d.: 21). This is what Parmentier (1994: 18) calls semiotic “downshifting.”

The brand, however, is never purely symbolic, but always maintains a degree of (rigid) indexicality, or at least is seen to do so. Indeed, the “erosion” of the brand (*qua* rigid designator) into a common noun (i.e., a simple symbol) is the negation of the brand itself, as denoted by the term *genericide* (Moore 2003: 344–346; also see Klein 2000[1999]: 180ff., Manning 2010). Thus, brands are designed so as to minimally describe denotationally the tokens (products, services, spaces, experiences) which fall under their classification (the brand type) (Coombe 1996). Note, then, that the brand type is never isomorphic with other cultural classifications—for if it is, then it risks becoming a generic term—and thus is always a sub-, super-, or overlapping-set of other classifications.

#### 2.4.5. *As meta-semiotic*

But how are such symbolic connections and their related iconic downshiftings made possible? This brings us back to the question, how are some set of perceivable signs regimented to act as tokens of a brand type? In this section I show that it is the meta-semiotic regimentation of the brand that serves as the ground for the hierarchically nested semiotic aspects of the brand discussed above (as token/type < index < [iconically

downshifted] symbol). This meta-semiotic and reflexive aspect of the brand is itself complex and multiple.

#### 2.4.5.1 *Brand meta-discourses*

First, such symbolism is possible through different genres of meta-semiotic discourse produced by the brand company or proxies of it (e.g., public relations firms, advertising firms, street teams). In one kind of marketing practice, for example, marketers attempt to abstract adjectives and phrases which capture the “core” of the “brand essence.”<sup>12</sup> This is an organizational principle to shape marketing strategy which then attempts to fix such rhematic values to the brand so that tokens of the brand can function as pragmatically efficacious signs for consumers.<sup>13</sup> This is accomplished through the meta-pragmatic discourses of advertising, marketing, packaging (Gardner and Levy 1955; Duckworth 1999[1991]; Lewis 1999[1991]), product placement (from strategic insertion in everyday conversation to media placement), and event or experience sponsorship (Moor 2003; Alexander and Schouten 1998). Such brand meta-discourses attempt to prefigure consumer usage (often in the form itself) as a way to project/entail the presumed desires of the consumer onto the branded commodity/brand (Callon et al. 2002; Frow 2002; Lury 2002, 2004: ch. 2; Arvidsson 2005: ch. 2–4; Foster 2007; Agha n.d.: 21). The goal is to alter the experience of branded tokens in particular ways, thus increasing dependency or

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<sup>12</sup> Compare such meta-*rhematic* practices with Callon et al. (2002) on *qualification*. See Holt (2004) on a critique of this marketing practice and an alternative mode of brand meta-discourse in “myth” building.

<sup>13</sup> Thus combining a *dicent* sign [the brand type] to a *rhematic* sign [the brand “meaning,” associations] to form a *proposition* that functions as a proxy for the consumer’s own status or identity work, itself a kind of *meta-proposition*.



recurrence of brand engagement (Agha n.d.: 23ff.) and thereby profits/brand equity.<sup>14</sup> In short, brand meta-discourses attempt to regiment the kinds of symbolic meanings that brand tokens can invoke as socially useful indexes of the brand type.<sup>15</sup>

#### 2.4.5.2 *Consumer meta-discourses*

Of course, brand companies are not the only ones who produce meta-pragmatic discourses about brands. Consumer advocacy literature, newspapers and trade journals, online internet forums, and word of mouth are all meta-pragmatic discourses that typify brands and attempt to affix particular meanings and associations to them, strategically altering their pragmatic values.

Consumers themselves are interested parties that produce meta-discourses about the brand through the reanalysis of their own use and experience of brand tokens. What the marketing literature (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2002, 2004a, b; Vargo and Lusch 2004; see Agha n.d.: 27 on this point) has recently attempted to spell out is the idea that consumer interactions with brands (as a meta-semiotic principle of brand meaning/value) can be exploited and converted into (human) capital via research (Gordon 1999[1991]), feedback (Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005), trend hunting (Quart 2003), and event sponsorship (Moor 2003; Alexander and Schouten 1998), and thereby increase brand equity.

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<sup>14</sup> In the marketing literature (Feldwick 1999[1991]: 24, 25; Calkins 2005) this is demonstrated by “blind” comparison tests of various products versus tests where the brand identity is shown. The latter often has the effect of skewing experience of the brand token toward brand meta-discourses. For example, consumers describe their experience of the same drink placed in various bottle designs in ways that resonate with the packaging of the bottle, or associations with that packaging (Lewis 1999[1991]: 163).

<sup>15</sup> The existence of brands amongst other brands in larger classifications (e.g. “cola”) also lends a principle of value, akin to Saussure’s notion of the value of the sign (Lury 2004; Frow 2002). Thus, being brands of a comparable class (e.g., Pepsi versus Coke) means that the fates of such brands and their pragmatic values are intertwined.

If consumer interactions with brands were prescribed by brand meta-discourses, and thus identical with them, consumers' consumptive labor would be of no value. But they never are. They are not because like all signs, brands' contextualized usage entails pragmatic meanings that are, by degrees, different from (or *trope* on) the *norm* of their usage (see Agha 2007a: 24–27; 295–298 on *norm* and *trope*). It is only also at this interface—actual use in specific contexts—that we can ever broach the question of the “effects” of brands on, or their articulation with, social life. Moreover, it is in actual use in context that the BRAND as an ontological form is itself ratified (and branded forms not constituted as some other type of semiotic object). We noted such radically tropic usages of branded forms among Tamil youth in chapter 6.

Much theoretical work on brands stops precisely at the *norm* of the brand (e.g., Baudrillard 2001[1968], 2001[1970]; Lury 2002, 2004). This is precisely because such work is highly product(ion) centric (e.g., Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005; Wilkins 1994). Indeed, even if there is a nominal lip service to the consumption of brands, the boundaries of such discussion again fall back on brand meta-discourses. This is because works are often only concerned with how brands co-opt consumers' tropic co-optation of brands (Arvidsson 2005: ch. 2; Foster 2005, 2007: 718; Zwick et al. 2008; in the marketing literature, see Fournier 1998; Feldwick 1999[1991]: 21; Holt 2002; Moor 2003).<sup>16</sup> Such work does no empirical work with actual users of brands, and thus is

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<sup>16</sup> Presumably, this turn to the customer as source register of brand meaning is indicative of an increased reflexivity in marketers' own understandings of how consumption works (Arvidsson 2005). Compare this with earlier source registers of brands which, for example, drew on imagery of alterity and exteriority, such as the savage and the frontier; that is, all that the consumer was not or could not access (Coombe 1996; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007).

unable to theorize the brand from the perspective of its actual use.<sup>17</sup> And yet the question of consumption cannot be reduced to brand meta-discourses, as noted above.

This point is even more important because brand meta-discourses always presuppose the BRAND as an ontological form. It is telling, then, that in all discussions of brands and resistance to them, the issue of willful ignorance is never taken as a possibility except in work that involves real consumers in acts of actual consumption (Vann 2006; Yurchak 2006).<sup>18</sup> Not doing actual work with consumers, then, literalizes and projects a particular meta-discourse about a form as a reality in the world. Analytically this is problematic because it systematically misunderstands how brands as signs work. Indeed, while it may be true that signs have norms of use it is by no means true that such norms or tropes on them are derived solely, or even ultimately, from authorized discourses (as Foster 2005: 10 notes).<sup>19</sup> Relying on brand meta-discourses, then, runs the risk of naturalizing them, as well as their presuppositions about brand meaning and ontology (cf. Miller's [2002] critique of Callon's "economy of qualities").

Ironically, recognition of the fact that the brand must be situated in the moment of consumption is the *sine qua non* of contemporary brand marketing. Marketing today is largely about folding consumers' unique, personalized, and idiosyncratic tropic uses in particular contexts back into the brand. This is ironic because while market research as central to the brand is something many theorists repeatedly come back to, such theorists

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Frow (2002: 66ff.) asks why is it that brands have a "non-rational hold" (citing Haigh 1998: 12) on consumer behavior. His next move is revealing: to explain this hold he gives an analysis of brand advertising and marketing.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, even Foster (2007) who looks at how "voicy customers" can disrupt brand value assumes implicitly that the limits of consumption are contained within the BRAND as a stable ontology (also Klein 2000[1999]).

<sup>19</sup> This would be like holding that the meaning of the word is what is in the dictionary; note, an approach Lury (2004) begins her book on brands with.

of the brand are unable to appreciate its real significance. Even more ironic because those involved in brand production and marketing seem to have a better understanding of the importance of actual empirical consumption practices and their necessity to the functioning of brands than theorists (see Agha n.d.: 26 on this point). While marketers constitute their particular brands with respect to market research, theorists like Baudrillard (2001[1980]), Lury (2002, 2004) and Arvidsson (2005) are content to theorize the brand based on analysis of brand meta-discourses, deducing consumption from brand meta-discourses' figuration of consumption, and thus abdicating actual empirical research to brand marketers. Such work mistakes another's highly prescriptive map for the territory. It is in (bad) faith, then, that Lury (2004: 149) writes that "objects (co-)produce the social," because her analysis never actually broaches the social. It is content to stay within the self-reflexive universe of the brand. This is triply ironic because this is presumably the dream of every brand: to create a branded social universe so inclusive one would never have to leave.

#### 2.4.5.3 *As meta-semiotic in ontological form*

So far I have discussed the meta-semiotic principles that govern how particular brand tokens come to be seen as tokens of a brand type with various symbolically indexical values. There is another more fundamental way that the brand is a meta-semiotic object which undergirds and acts as a condition of possibility on particular brand types acting in the world. Just as brand tokens are always reflexively figured, implicitly or explicitly, as members of some brand type, brand types are always reflexively figured as part of the larger ontological category BRAND. Uses like "Lego *brand* products" explicit point to this

meta-level membership, differentiating between Lego as a member of the ontological category BRAND and lego as a generic class of objects (Moore 2003: 245; Manning 2010).

The legal apparatus of intellectual property (IP) is a meta-discourse whose function is to ground BRAND as an ontological category (*vis-à-vis* trademark regulation) distinct from other ontologies (even if the legal concept of what a brand isn't totally clear, Davis 2008): generic objects (i.e., those part of the "commons") and inauthentic and counterfeit objects. It does so by making (aspects of) branded forms a kind of property of the company who owns the brand type, thus allowing the brand both to function as guarantee of quality and origin (i.e., to fix brand identifiers as rigid designators), as well as its unique sets of meanings (to protect brands from dilution) (Wilkins 1992, 1994; Coombe 1996; Frow 1996, 2002; Moore 2003; Wang 2003: ch. 2; Lury 2004: ch. 5; Arvidsson 2005; Pang 2006, 2008; Bently 2008; Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008).

This legal apparatus itself presupposes another order of meta-discourses that work to legitimize the ontological category BRAND: for example, discourses about the individual whose primary right is the (dis-)possession of property; and discourses that ground ideational objects as property and creativity as the source of their value (Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005: ch. 3; Pang 2008; Scott et al. 2008).

What is important to note, here, is that brands are not ontologically independent or natural entities which are then positioned, marketed, imbued with meanings by consumers, marketers, and other interested parties. Historical work (Wilkins 1992, 1994) shows that brands emerge precisely from meta-discourses which presuppose their existence (i.e., performatively bring them into being). Thus the historical coincidence of advertising, packaging, trademark law, and brands: advertising presupposes something to

be advertised, which itself requires a label such that purchase can be directed.<sup>20</sup> In short, brands are semiotic objects which are brought into being precisely through their typification in meta-discourses which presuppose their ontological existence. It is in this more fundamental, though seemingly trivial, sense that the brand is a semiotic form whose internal structure is meta-semiotic.

To return to our genealogy of the commodity and brand in sections 2.2 and 2.3, the notion of “aura” is the notion that objects before mechanical reproduction are somehow unique. But this is still true after mechanical reproduction. Indeed, each copy is always unique in its spatial and temporal dislocation. But why is it, then, that we do not see such objects as unique (even if we often treat them as such, cf. Kopytoff’s 1986 discussion of “singularization”; Agha n.d.: 4), instead seeing them as part of an endless series?

Note that any so-construed “unique” object can be reanalyzed as part of a series with variable classificatory specificity: *THE RIVER* (1868) < WORK BY MONET < PAINTING < ART < OBJECT, etc. If it is that case that any object is always already under a particular meta-sign of identity as of such and such a type, the notion of the Real or aura, then, is that special meta-sign that typifies some object as the *singular* member of a set across all temporal instances. However, it is a type all the same for there is still the need for a

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<sup>20</sup> As Wilkins writes: “Advertising did not make sense if there were not differentiated products—goods with trade names. If the consumer was to buy the advertised product, the consumer had to be able to distinguish that good. The brand—the trade mark—performed that service. Just as advertising carried information, so did the trademark itself. It was what directed the purchaser to a designated product” (Wilkins 1994: 19). Packaging emerges when products are produced from increasingly non-local locations by unknown agents. Packaging removes the product from sensory proximity and it is at this moment that the mark or brand is created to mediate, and functionally replace both the qualisigns of the object *and* the meta-discursive guarantee of the shop-keeper. Finally, the legal protection of trademarks is required precisely because brands emerge at the time when older guarantees of origin and quality—the local shop, locally produced commodities (and earlier trade guilds)—are increasingly replaced by market anonymity and non-local production. The brand as “mark of liability” (Wilkins 1992, 1994) emerges to guarantee quality and origin. But this is impossible if such products and their marks are not systematically differentiated from counterfeits and other brands.

classificatory principle to reckon the differences of the “same” token at different points in time. By this argument, any object intelligible to us (even as purely singular) must be reckoned by this sign–meta-sign relation if only to unite all temporal instances of the object as the “same” thing.<sup>21</sup>

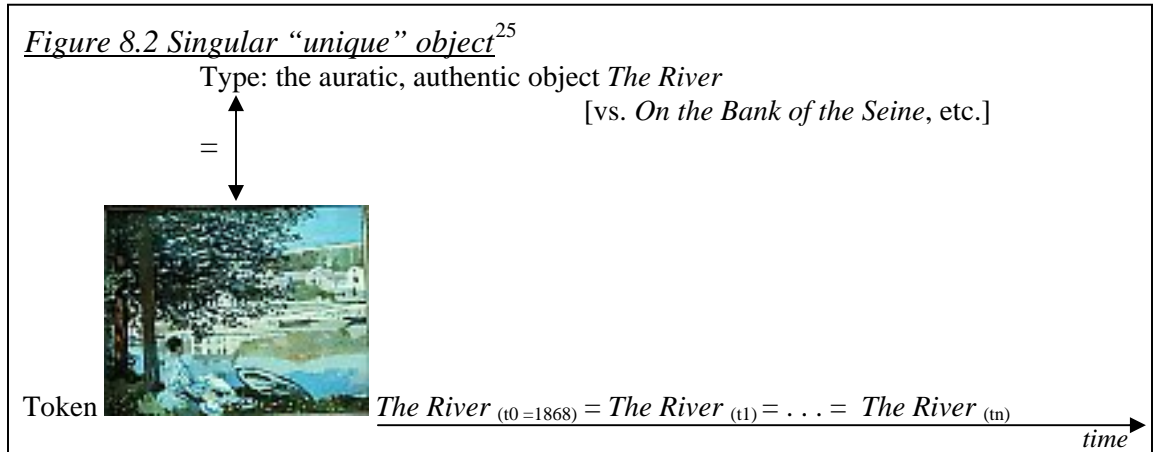
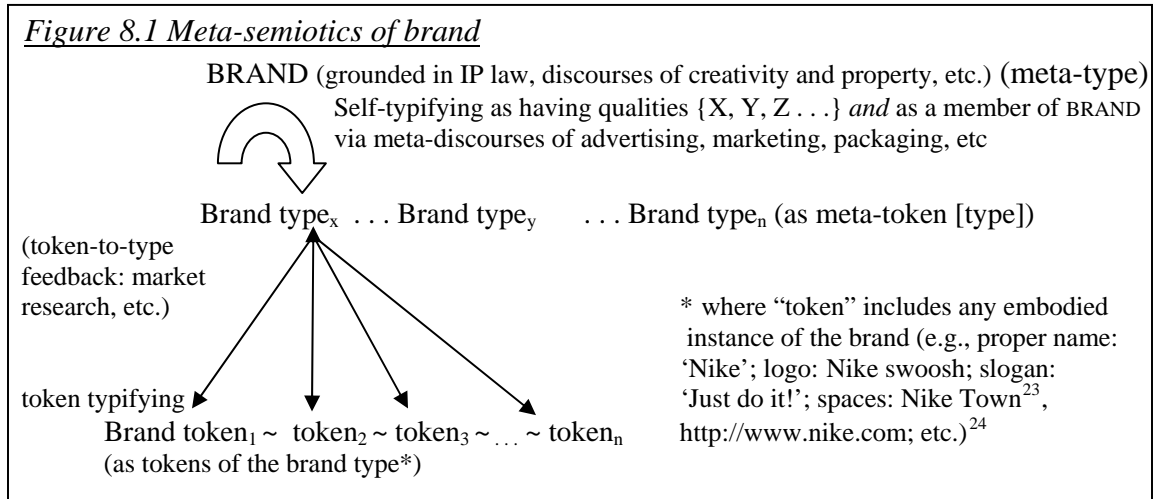
If the Real object that can accrue aura is simply a special instance of a sign–meta-sign relationship reflexively figured *as* unique and authentic, the question becomes what are the other possible meta-semiotic relations where the “same” objects can be seen as meaningful in the full sense of being historically unique and authentic? One important such meta-semiotic relation is the BRAND.<sup>22</sup> The BRAND is an ontological form which attempts to reinvigorate the mechanically reproduced commodity through a synchronic classification of (copies of) objects as instances of a larger type which itself is (potentially experienced as) unique and personal. While “aura” in the Benjaminian formulation is a quality of singular objects (where token = type), the brand reorganizes aura to be a property of many tokens of a unique type (i.e., the “aura” of the type). And it is through its self-reflexive construction (through marketing and advertising, through the “authorized” dealer, through the logo and brand name stamped onto the product) that it attempts to project itself as unique, personal, authentic, trustworthy, etc. Each token of the type, then, invokes the unique, or as Baudrillard might have put it, the simulacrum of

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<sup>21</sup> Frow (2002) discusses this as the paradox of the mark (citing Derrida): for any mark (e.g., a signature) to be seen as the diacritic of some singularity, it must be part of a larger type level, and thus, in principle, repeatable and part of a (virtual) series.

<sup>22</sup> We can note other similar relations. For example, some types of commodities are organized in functionally similar ways to brands but with different participant frameworks (with respect to producer): the quality grade of cloth, meats, eggs, precious stones; or the use of locations to qualify commodities (Vann 2005). In both these cases, like the brand, a range of objects are classified under a particular meta-sign—quality grade, location—but unlike the brand, not linked to a singular producer. These may partially overlap, as in the quality-grading of counterfeit brands in Chinese counterfeit markets (Hansen and Moeller forthcoming). See Jamieson (1999) for a fascinating discussion of different “regimes of value” vis-à-vis record collecting and its counterfeits that explicates how the same objects can, under various meta-signs, be differently regimented with respect to auratic originals.

the aura of the authentic object. I diagram this in figure 8.1, comparing it with the notion of the auratic object as a type which only has one token at any moment in time (figure 8.2).



One issue, of course, is that such meta-semiotic configurations are always relative to some context of use and social domain, as we also argued for particular brand types in section 2.4.5.2. While it happens to be that we often refer back to the brand type (e.g., Nike) as the relevant classification of some object (and thus as an instance of the BRAND),

<sup>23</sup> See Sherry (1998) on Nike Town.

<sup>24</sup> We can see that even here there is another embedded type–token relation as the Nike swoosh, the Nike proper name, the slogan “Just do it!” etc. are type-level signs.

<sup>25</sup> And, indeed, presumably there may be many drafts of any one painting (even on the same canvas), complicating this type–token conflation. I thank Magda Nakassis for pointing this out to me.



we just as often do not, instead employing alternative schemes depending on the context (e.g., like sneaker, leather good, or weapon of capitalist oppression). In the same way, while we often treat objects as instances of the singular “unique” object type, we just as often do not (Agha n.d.: 7). We may, for example, classify *The River* just as easily as a painting, as a Monet, as an instance of the impressionist style, or a commodity. We are prone to treat such singular objects as such because they seem to project their own aura (their essential, Real, historicity) from *within*. But, if indeed it is the case that the meta-semiotic organization of the “singular” object *and* the brand are as I have described them, then it becomes clear that the aura of objects (branded or not) is never internal to them but is supplied externally by meta-discourses which ground *this* object as a token of *this* type and *this* ontology in *this* context for *this* social domain (cf. Notar 2006: 90). In the next section I take up the issue of the BRAND having various social domains; that is, the issue of alternate ontologies.

## 2.5 Alternate ontologies

The literature theorizing the brand has specified its multiple facets (partially as a result of the wide definition of what constitutes a brand, Davis 2008; Manning 2010).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example: as a mode/means of production (via prefiguring consumption); a medium of communication; a frame or interface between producers and customers (and exploitation of consumption to create surplus value); a context for the emergence of the social activities, relations, identities, emotional attachment, communities/(counter-)publics (Rajagopal 1999; Lury 2002, 2004; Arvidsson 2005; Foster 2005, 2007; Coombe 1996; Mazzarella 2003: ch. 6; Holt 2004); a set of conventions of form (brand name, logo, slogan, etc.) (Moore 2003); a guarantee of origin/quality; the reputation or public face of a corporation (or set of products) (Wilkins 1992; Coombe 1996); proprietary property (as trademark; and thus as monetary value, i.e., brand equity) (Wilkins 1992, 1994; Coombe 1996; Aaker 1991; Pang 2008; Bently 2008; Higgins 2008; Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008); the focal point for marketing practices; an organizational identity for employees and non-employees (Klein 2000[1999]; Manning 2010); an organizer of producer markets (Lury 2008); a set of associations, images, figures of personhood (Baudrillard 2001[1968], 2001[1970]; Gardner and Levy 1955; Cowley 1999[1991]; Feldwick 1999[1991]; Gordon 1999[1991]); an emblem for a wider social imaginary (Berlant 1993; Coombe 1996; Halstead 2002; Manning and Uplishashvili 2007; Manning 2009, 2010; Vann 2005, 2006).

However, among all these facets it is the sign–meta-sign relation that is central to the brand, if only because it is at this level that brands can be undone.<sup>27</sup> This is the fundamental semiotic lynchpin of the brand, both for particular brand types (i.e., the ability of a brand type to regiment tokens of it) and for the more general ontological category BRAND (i.e., the ability of brand types to be construed as such). Of course, this is not apparent to most theorists of the brand because they take the brand as a natural kind, something pre-given in its form.<sup>28</sup>

What I have been arguing—through the ethnographic materials in chapters 6 and 7 and theoretically in this chapter—is that the brand is not pre-given in any sense (either as particular brand type, or as ontological form), but can be defeated, as we saw in the case of Tamil youth’s use of branded forms. If branded forms only function to the extent that they are classified as tokens of the brand type, what are the other meta-signs that can stand in for the BRAND?<sup>29</sup> As we saw with Tamil consumers and producers it is precisely

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<sup>27</sup> Moore (2003) breaks the brand down into a brand name and the product, service, and experience. Even if we take “brand name” to be more general and include things like logos, slogans, or any other set of qualities that index the brand type, this formulation is still problematic if only because it fails to note that the brand name/logo and its most immediate object sign (the product, service, experience) are relevantly part of the brand only to extent that such objects signs are regimented *qua* tokens of the brand type and the brand type *qua* BRAND. It is this missing piece, the meta-sign under which particular branded tokens/types stand that is crucial.

<sup>28</sup> Not making this the central axis for analysis runs the risk of incorporating elements as parts of brands which perhaps ought not to be. Indeed, Lury (2004), whose analysis is heavily production-centric, ends up incorporating all sorts of elements into the brand (e.g., market research) which, while central to its constitution, are logically exterior to it. If the brand is simply a list of its related aspects, it becomes analytically unwieldy and ultimately mystifying. There are other problems. For example, Lury (2004: 1) begins her approach to brands with the definition that the brand is a “set of relations between products or services.” But what is the principle that relates such products? How do they form a unity? What is the condition of possibility for the brand to function as such? Precisely because the brand is theorized one-dimensionally there is no coherent answer to this question. The brand is naturalized as a fixed ontological form. This flattening of the brand’s semiotic complexity thus leads Lury to mystify the brand, as I argued in section 2.4.1, because of the inability to reconcile the recursively embedded type–token (i.e., sign–meta-sign) composition of the brand.

<sup>29</sup> We might state this reflexive relation in Lee and LiPuma’s (2002) terminology as a difference in “cultures of circulation.” And indeed, part of what is at issue is the overlapping, though distinct cultures of circulation that link particular branded forms to multiple communities in different ways. However, I prefer

the notions of *style* and exteriority—in short, the aesthetic of brandedness—that stand in for the BRAND. It is not that these are additional meanings attached to particular brand types, but that they substitute in for the BRAND *qua* meta-semiotic regimentation of branded forms. Branded forms in the hands of Tamil youth are not tokens of brand types, but part of a different and more general classificatory scheme (cf. Halstead 2002; Vann 2005, 2006; Bick and Chiper 2007; Sylavnus 2007; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Manning 2009).

This alternative meta-semiotic configuration reorganizes objects which are treated as different under the BRAND ontology (e.g., authentic, duplicate, fictive brands, and non-branded items) as similar. The brand type is bracketed and the branded form re-signified under this alternate ontology. Branded forms are stripped of their rigid designation and their invocation of brand images (their symbolicity). Instead, branded forms invoke the discourse of *style* as embodied in different images: the film hero-star, urban hip youth, the TV VJ, the foreign return/NRI, the foreigner. Within this classification, then, there is a different flexibility of iconism, a different principle of what is the same and what is different: hence the distortion, hybridization, and recontextualization of branded forms with respect to the BRAND ontology.

In this context we can take up Lury's (2002, 2004; also see Pang 2008: 127ff.) idea that the brand is performative: that is, that the brand performatively entails a mode of consumption and being (personal relationship with the brand, loyalty, community, etc.)

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to state the issue in terms of the sign–meta-sign relations that make such particular cultures of circulation different. As they state: “The circulation of such forms . . . always presupposes the existence of their respective interpretive communities, with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation (Lee and LiPuma 2002: 192). But the core of this interpretive difference is the alternative meta-discursive reanalysis of the forms in question to some particular social domain. While Lee and LiPuma are concerned with the performative foundations of such interpretive communities, I am more interested in how such communities operate via the ontological foundations of the objects to which they mutually orient themselves.

by virtue of its composition (via marketing, advertising, the form itself). But as Austin (1986[1962]) himself realized at the outset, we can only talk of performativity with respect to conditions of defeasibility and felicity. It is *never* the case that the performative does anything necessarily, even if it often seems that way. It is only under particular conditions—institutional (for a marriage, the priest is authorized by the Church), form internal (the present-tense, first person, simple aspect of “I do”), and textually (e.g., the groom says “I do” only after repeating his vows)—that the effect is entailed. Moreover, as has been pointed out (Agha 2007a; Lee 1997), to understand performativity requires theorizing how (a) the performative self-reflexively figures itself as an act of such and such a pragmatic type *and* (b) how it is taken up and ratified by others. That is, to make the claim that the brand is performative requires one to locate its socio-cultural embeddedness in particular instances of contextualized interaction among consumers (Moore 2003: 335; Agha n.d.: 7).

Yet we are totally unequipped to do this if the assumption is that the brand is *inherently* performative. This assumption imputes a magical essentialism to the form (hence the wonderment about the brand). Few would consciously subscribe to this assumption. Yet it *is* part of much work on brands, precisely because such analysis is product(ion) centric. Such analysis takes the figurement of branded products as performative *in brand meta-discourses* as evidence that brands are performative in actual contextualized usages. Yet taking brand meta-discourse at face value literalizes and projects the brand as ontologically necessary in the world, and thus leads to essentialism.

It also leads to the assumption that brands are inherently meaningful (or meaningful in the way that brand meta-discourses project them to be). Remember from our

discussion in section 2.3 that the brand emerges historically as a reaction to the seeming meaningless and empty commodity form, the object which only has value because of its exchange value, because of its same-ness, the object purely defined by supply and demand (i.e., price). It is this emptiness that the brand attempts to fill through its meta-semiosis. In the business literature this is manifested as the anxiety that consumers will construe commodities by their materiality (utility, functionality) and price (i.e., that brands will return to simply being “faceless, lifeless” commodities, Aaker 1991: 15; see Mazzarella 2003: 194), and not as the essence or aura bestowed upon them by brand meta-discourses (Frow 1996; Klein 2000[1999]: 12–13; Foster 2007: 716; Wilkins 1994: 16). The anxiety of being seen under a different meta-sign than the BRAND is inherent in the organization of the BRAND itself, both in general—as the 1993 Marlboro Friday crisis and the fear of consumers’ “brand blindness” showed (Klein’s 2000[1999]: 12–13; Jones 1994)—and for particular brand types—as Callon et al.’s (2002: 205–207) discussion of managing consumer “attachment” and “reattachment” to products and as Moore’s (2003) discussion of genericide show (also Manning 2010).

To simply assume, then, that brands are meaningful is to assume that the brand meta-discourse is always successful in socializing consumers to it. But as we saw with Tamil youth there can be no assumption that brand meta-discourses are successful or even present. Thus to assume the meaningfulness of the brand is to miss the semiotic and political work necessary such that brands can even be talked of and thus imputed meaning to. Unfortunately, this fact is lost when one’s methodological approach avoids actual instances of the use of branded forms. Thus, for example, Lury (2004) is unable to account for the condition of possibility on the meaningfulness of brands except by falling

back on brand meta-discourses; or by arguing that brands are auto-poetically organized into a system that produces their meaning/value. Lury, however, has no analysis of how such a cybernetic system might work, or any demonstration that brands in fact work in this way. Because she has eschewed actual empirical work with consumers and because her theorization of the brand is semiotically flat, she is pushed to align (unwillingly) with brand meta-discourses' own reflexive understanding of what they do. The only out (besides just simple complicity) is to posit the self-organization of brands into a system, as a set of self-regulating relations between tokens of the brand:

“the activities of marketers...does not adequately describe the brand. Nor indeed would an account of the practices of designers, or a description of the activities of consumers...They privilege purposive actions, and do not acknowledge the significance of the *self-organizing elements of the brand* as a complex indeterminate or open object.” (Lury 2004: 51; my emphasis)

Yet clearly the auto-poetic organization of brands is a remainder hypothesis. When all forms of external control fail to account for some phenomenon, its internal structure is appealed to. To simply jump to this conclusion as Lury does is suspect, especially as she never looks at the actual “activities of consumers” (ibid.).

As I have shown, whether or not the brand is performative, whether or not the brand is meaningful is relative to the extent that brand meta-discourses can self-reflexively ground themselves. That is, to the extent that they can guarantee their uptake by consumers as brands. And as we have seen, the willful ignorance of Tamil youth toward the brand *qua* BRAND pries apart this meta-semiotic organization so as to reattach branded forms as tokens of a different type, and thus stand under a different ontology altogether.

This implies that the BRANDED-ness of any object is only one among many possible ontologies, dependent on place (Halstead 2002; Vann 2005, 2006; Bick and Chiper 2007; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Manning 2009; Yurchak 2006: ch. 5) and time (see Kriegel 2004 on the emergence of IP in Britain as a debate over the ontological distinctiveness of original and copy); that is, on the social domain of the ontology. This speaks to our common sense notion that a branded object may be seen from many angles: a unique object (of nostalgia or sentimentality), a functional object (a pair of shoes), a cultural object (part of modern Western dress), etc. In fact, there are as many angles as there are meta-discursive classifications of the object. Objects can move in and out of their status as branded, as commodities even, depending on their user and contexts of use and evaluation (Appadurai 1986a; Kopytoff 1986; Frow 1996; Agha n.d.). That is, depending on for whom and under what meta-sign they stand under.<sup>30</sup>

Note that the issue here is not just that some brand meta-discourses are successful in regimenting some set of forms as tokens of a brand type and others are not. Rather, what is problematic in much of the literature is the assumption that brands can be defined independently of their use. Again, what I have been arguing is that to fully theorize the brand it is necessary to start from actual contexts of consumption (cf. Miller 1990: 50, 2002). Moreover, the assumption that the *ontology* of the brand is fixed and stable is highly problematic. It is not enough to say that particular brand types are not fixed,

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<sup>30</sup> A corollary to this is the brand's heterogeneity: there are many different types of brands (product brands, corporate brands, event brands, community brands, national brands, online brands, experience brands, etc.) and functionalities of branded phenomena (as lifestyle accoutrement, as functional objects, as experiences, services, spaces, etc.) as there are meta-discourses which typify particular objects as some kind of brand or another. This is precisely why the brand as a semiotic form is applicable (with more or less success/fit) to numerous non-(traditional-)commodities: for example, self or persona (celebrities, politicians) (Hearn 2008); organizations (NGOs, governmental organizations) (Arvidsson 2005: ch. 4; Klein 2000[1999]: ch. 2; Cowley 1991[1991]: 12); universities, countries, or places (Foster 2005: 8; Arnholt 2004); ethnic groups (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009); and events or experiences (Moor 2003; Alexander and Schouten 1998).

discrete, or unitary, but that the BRAND itself is not a natural category. It is contingent on particular (meta-)semiotic arrangements. In the success–failure paradigm, the assumption is that the form is stable across all contexts. It fails to see that the ontology of the object is itself a site of negotiation, one backed by (the violence of) the law and thus in no way certain. This is why it is crucial to look at cases where the brand is negated, defeated, and erased because it is in such scenarios that the presumed natural link of sign–meta-sign that is central to the brand is taken apart and reattached, as we saw in chapters 6 and 7.

## 2.6 *The irony of fashion in India*

Once we realize that branded forms are semiotically complex we can make sense of one of the ironies of fashion in India: while branded forms in India are contemporary with fashion in the West (because they are produced in India before they hit the shelves in the West), the meta-discourses of brand and fashion are not. Thus, while the contingencies of global capital and the willful ignorance of local markets guarantee that branded forms circulate ubiquitously, meta-discourses of brand identity and “meaning”—advertising, brand events, authorized showrooms, etc.—circulate to a lesser extent. In some cases, they may be totally absent.<sup>31</sup>

This disjuncture of branded form and brand meta-discourse creates a distortion of supply and demand of brands *qua* particular brands, as we saw in chapters 6 and 7. For example, while Diesel may be in low demand as Diesel, objects that index Diesel may still be in high supply. One irony here is that fashion in India among lower- and middle-

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<sup>31</sup> This disproves one of Lury’s (2004: ch. 4) claims that the repetition of logo itself guarantees brand recognition for indeed, in Tamil Nadu the repetition of brand names and logos does not guarantee brand recognition precisely because the ontology of brand *qua* BRAND may not be relevant in the first instance. One may treat the noun phrase “Diesel” as simply a word or graphic design, not a brand *per se*. For repetition to entail brand recognition requires that the BRAND ontology is in play.



class youth is directly linked to brands but ignorant of them precisely because brand meta-discourses and the branded forms circulate according to different logics. The brand company, of course, tries to ensure their fusing so as to coordinate consumption with production, but there is no necessary guarantee that these two moments can be sutured together. Thus, at the same time that branded forms are in India before the West, Indian fashion is ironically *behind* Western fashion.<sup>32</sup>

Further, the branded form and its meta-discourse circulate in different temporalities. Thus, branded forms in Tamil Nadu are cycled with incredible speed. A branded form may appear as export surplus or duplicate only to disappear within months, production having moved on. This cycling is so fast that the possibility for the creation of brand awareness through the forms themselves is relatively low.

A corollary to this is that while it is tempting to think that fashion in India simply moves from the West to Indian elites to the middle classes and finally to the poor, the production of authentic branded products (as export surplus) cycling faster than brand meta-discourses of fashion (as consumed by elites and the upper-middle classes) means that while urban elites may consume Diesel because they have seen the ads abroad (i.e., based on its brand identity), the rural poor consume it because it is *style* and it is cheap and available, and thus consume it independently of elite fashion. While it may seem, then, that both poor and rich are coordinated in their fashion (evidenced by the same forms in both social domains), this is complicated by the fact that the same form is linked

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<sup>32</sup> With regards to the production of duplicates there is also a delay linked to the production process. For example, for duplicate producers to make duplicates they must get a model of the piece, reverse engineer it, get their tailors to learn the cuts and tailoring, and get the relevant materials. They also wait to see if certain forms click in other markets (e.g., producers in Chennai wait to see what gets popular in Bombay). Once a sample is produced it hits the market, but only in small amounts at first. If it catches on then it increases. Hence there is delay.

to different meta-discourses (brand meta-discourses in the case of the elites; *style* and simple availability in the case of lower classes). We can only realize these ironies if we theorize the brand as meta-semiotically organized of de-coupleable parts.

### **3. Brand and simulation: Theorizing the brand from its duplicate**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

While above I looked at the semiotics of the brand and the conditions under which the brand is defeasible, in this section I theorize the brand from the perspective of the duplicate or counterfeit branded item. I argue that the counterfeit brand can be understood as a particular kind of Baudrillardian *simulacrum*, and Tamil youth usage of branded forms as a kind of *simulation*, but only if we understand simulation and simulacra as particular cases of the reflexive sign–meta-sign structure that is central to the brand in general, as discussed above.<sup>33</sup>

#### *3.2 Literature on brand counterfeits*

The category counterfeit is highly heterogeneous.<sup>34</sup> I will be focusing on duplicate Western branded garments and related accessories, of the kinds discussed in chapters 6 and 7. Most of the literature on counterfeiting focuses on the impact of counterfeiting on the economy and “society” (Kays 1990; Wee et al. 1995; Wilke and Zaichkowsky 1996;

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<sup>33</sup> Few have made this move. Pang’s (2008) consideration of Chinese counterfeiting, Craciun’s (2008, 2009) comments on fake brands, and Sylavnuș’ (2007) discussion of “African” wax prints as simulations are exceptions, though neither consider the sign–meta-sign structure of the brand or of simulation as such.

<sup>34</sup> By *counterfeiting* I mean goods which are illicit because of their transgression of intellectual property law or because their selling is in breach of the rights of the producer/brand company by contract (e.g., illegitimately reselling overruns). *Duplicates* are goods which are illegal because they misuse proprietary brand designs (e.g., trademarks), and thus are a subset of counterfeits. See Bamossy and Scammon 1985; Kay 1990; Bloch et al. 1993; McDonald and Roberts 1994; Wilke and Zaichkowsky 1999; Astous and Gargouri 2001; Phau et al. 2001; Hoe et al. 2003; Wang 2003; Phillips 2005; Pang 2006; Vann 2006; Craciun 2008; Chaudhry and Zimmerman 2009 on different kinds of counterfeit, imitation, and “grey” goods, and various terminological distinctions.

Phillips 2005; Rutter and Bryce 2008; Chaudhry and Zimmerman 2009) and on ways to combat counterfeiting in light of that impact (Grossman and Shapiro 1988; Bush et al. 1989; Bloch et al. 1993; Tom et al. 1998; Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000; Phau et al. 2001). While much of the literature is on the supply side of counterfeiting (Bush et al. 1989; Chaudhry and Zimmerman 2009), there is also a large literature on the demand side (Bamossy and Scammon 1985; Grossman and Shapiro 1988; Bloch et al. 1993; Wee et al. 1995; Cordell et al. 1996; Tom et al. 1998; Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000; Astous and Gargouri 2001; Phau et al. 2001; Hoe et al. 2003; Rutter and Joyce 2008). Unfortunately, this work employs a naïve psychological idiom to understand counterfeit consumption, eschewing the larger contexts of consumption outside of the moment of purchase. Such work is also highly normative (one exception is McDonald and Roberts 1994). There are, however, a growing number of anthropologists and sociologists (Halstead 2002; Reinach 2005; Vann 2005, 2006; Bick and Chiper 2007; Pang 2008; Craciun 2008, 2009; Brandtstädter 2009; Thomas 2009; Hansen and Moeller forthcoming) working on brand counterfeits, as well as on digital piracy (Wang 2003; Pang 2006) and other kinds of fakes (Jamieson 1999 on vinyl records; Notar 2006 on souvenirs).

With a few exceptions (Pang 2008; Vann 2006), little work has been done to theorize the brand from its duplicate, or to theorize the duplicate itself. This is ironic because the historical condition of possibility of BRAND (and earlier the trademark) is its legal differentiation from its duplicate (Bently 2008; Higgins 2008; see Kriegel 2004; Johns 2009 on piracy and copyright). Brand and counterfeit are always already co-eval and co-definitional. Below I look at the leaky boundaries of the duplicate and its relationship to

its authentic other, the brand. I approach this via Baudrillard's notions of simulation and simulacrum, treating the brand and its duplicates as species of them.

### 3.3. *Simulation and simulacrum*

#### 3.3.1 *Introduction*

In this section I give a particular reading of Baudrillard's concepts of *simulacrum* and *simulation* and apply them to the case of brands and brand duplicates. Through the discussion of the empirical materials in chapters 6 and 7, and the semiotic discussion of the brand in this chapter, I argue that simulation is a variant on the meta-semiotic organization of BRAND more generally.

For Baudrillard the *simulacrum* is the "alibi," or ideological underpinning, for some system—more often than not, capitalism understood as a Saussurean sign system. *Simulation* is the abstraction of some (older) sign system; thus it is of a higher order type than that which it abstracts from. The notion of abstraction here is the idea that the indexical grounding of the simulated sign system is minimized, and thus appears more disconnected from the "real." These two concepts play off of each other in Baudrillard's periodization of capitalism.

#### 3.3.2 *Capitalism as the history of simulation*

For Baudrillard, the history of capitalism is the increasing de-indexicalification of objects and the social relations they mediate as they are increasingly made to function as arbitrary Saussurean signs in a larger system of value or "code."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, Baudrillard has no theory of indexicality, hence his anxiety surrounding capitalism and simulation.

The first epochal break comes with the commodity form and its abstraction from the contextually grounded and maximally indexical Symbolic Exchange (understood as primitive society's reciprocal exchange relations) into de-contextualized exchange (and sign) values. The functioning of this commodity system (i.e., early capitalism) was based on the simulacrum of the "real" object under symbolic exchange: that is, the naturalization of *use value* as an ideological construct that acts as the "alibi" of exchange value. This is what Baudrillard calls the simulacrum of Natural Law (Baudrillard 2001[1972], [1976]). Thus, Baudrillard argues that early political economy operated on the myth that exchange value was a function of utility as the really "real" of how economies and societies worked. As such, use value's status as simulacrum (or "alibi") grounded the economy to work as a capitalist market driven by circulating exchange values. It is the system of exchange value, Baudrillard argues, that is actually running society, unbeknownst to those at its mercy. Use value as simulacrum makes possible, then, the simulation of symbolic exchange in the new capitalist order of commodity exchange.

The next historical rupture comes in the current era where the functioning of the system is detached from even the concept of the Real. This is the era of *simulation* (Baudrillard 2001[1976], 1994[1981]). Here the differentiation between the real and the unreal is transcended in objects whose ontology blurs copy and original (the era of mechanical reproduction, media implosion). At the same time that the "finalities" of the older order (capitalist productivism, exchange value) are liquidated as functional principles driving the previous system, such finalities are resurrected in the form of simulacra like "production," "history," "labor." Here the previous engines of capitalism

(which were ideologically covered by the simulacrum of use value and functionality) have themselves been turned in simulacra, or “alibis,” for the current system of digital finance capital and computer networks. The role of such simulacra, similarly to the earlier historical period, is to cover the functioning of the current system. Thus, even as our lives are run by databases and statistical calculations we believe in the truisms of production, labor, and work, the previous engines of capitalism and objects of contestation and struggle.

While simulacra previously functioned to cover the artifice of exchange value and to discipline production (i.e., the system of that era) through images of the Real, today simulacra function to hide that the Real no longer exists, that simulation has gone to a higher order of functionality by typifying themselves as unreal.<sup>36</sup> The “hyper real”—like Disneyland, which caricatures or transcends the “real” by its hyper-/un-reality—simply serves to guarantee the reality of everything else (which is increasingly governed by “the simulation machine” of equivalence). This functions to hide that simulation today is totally detached from the Real altogether (i.e., that it has zero indexical content) (Baudrillard 1994[1981]: 12). While it used to be exchange value that governed the economy, today it is the abstract code of finance capital and the media: capital is freed from “the finalities of content” into an “escape in indefinite speculation, beyond any reference to the real” (Baudrillard 2001[1976]: 129). We still think, however, in terms of political economy, though it is no longer the engine of history but a simulacrum of it. Thus concepts like revolution are bound to fail, Baudrillard argues.

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<sup>36</sup> Baudrillard (2001[1976]: 124) writes: “Each configuration of value is resumed by the following in a higher order of simulation. And each phase integrates its own apparatus, the anterior apparatus as a phantom reference, a puppet of simulation reference.”

I summarize Baudrillard’s periodization of simulation in Table 8.1 below.

*Table 8.1 Baudrillard’s periodization of simulation*

	<i>Symbolic Exchange</i> <sup>37</sup>	<i>(Production) Capitalism</i>	<i>Era of Simulation</i>
<i>Principle of semiosis</i>	Natural law of meaning (meaning is produced by reference to Nature/the Divine)	Commodity law of value (value is produced by the exchangeability of objects by reference to the simulacrum of Nature)	Structural law of value (value is the pure play of signs)
<i>Emblematic object</i>	The Gift (Object)	The Commodity (System)	The Pure Sign (Code)
	Quality (analogic)	Quantity (unitized)	Information (digital)
	Maximally indexical (Real)	Symbolic but grounded in the “alibi” of the indexical (the Real), downshifted as icons	Symbolic, not grounded in any Real, but typifications of the “unreal”
<i>Relation to the Real</i>	Nature/the Real	Simulacrum of the Real (to ground exchange value)	Hyper-real (to conceal the volatilization of reality)
<i>Engine of society</i>	Reciprocal exchange (no production/consumption <i>per se</i> )	Political Economy (production/exchange value) via simulating authentic objects ( <i>qua</i> utility)	Digital finance capital, digital media, computer networks via simulating political economy ( <i>qua</i> labor, work, etc.)
	Gift exchange	Production (mode of production)	Consumption (code of production)
<i>Types of simulacra</i>	Counterfeit (dissimulates the object)	Mechanical copy (produced as part of a series)	Model (copies without originals)
<i>Metaphysics</i>	Metaphysics of appearance (reality exists)	Metaphysics of energy and determination (reality is distorted)	Metaphysics of indeterminacy (there is no reality)
<i>Forms of control</i>	Divine/Sovereign power	Discipline and surveillance	Participation and solicitation

### 3.3.3 Simulation, simulacrum, and logical types

While simulation is a process of producing value through pure difference of signifiers (the logic of capital modeled on the pure Saussurean sign), simulacra “dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them” (Baudrillard 1994[1981]: 5), and serve as an ideological screen for the actual workings of capital (the system of signifiers). There is a functional fit between the two: simulacra (the resurrected corpses of the earlier

<sup>37</sup> He also substitutes the “Classical Era” as a transition phase from Symbolic Exchange to Capitalism in Europe that has some of the relevant features of societies of pure Symbolic Exchange (i.e., of “primitive societies”) (Baudrillard 2001[1976]).

simulations) prop up simulation as a system (the abstraction from earlier simulations) by mystification.

For Baudrillard, what is of interest is what happens when simulation operates through signs where the metaphysics of true–false cease to apply. What happens when the original and copy are no longer distinct? This applies, Baudrillard argues, in the current era of simulation where mechanical reproduction, the mass media (and new media like the internet, databases, and computer programs), and the binary code of finance capital operate through copies without originals. What is the ontological status of such signs? As Baudrillard argues, their basic form is *as* codes that produce models immanent in every instance of them. That is, they are always already tokens *qua* types. There is no original computer program, for example, only identical copies of the same binary code. In this sense they are tautologically performative and self-reflexive: the model is its own referent; it is a representation of itself in its totality (cf. the auratic object).<sup>38</sup>

By this reckoning, then, simulation operates at a higher logical type than the simulated, it is a system (or meta-discursive principle of meaning/value imbue ment) that typifies particular (object) signs as tokens of a type. Thus, for example, the concept of exchange value requires for its intelligibility that two objects be taken as equivalent in some respect. In that case, then a third thing of a higher logical type, the exchange value, is brought into existence. Even though Baudrillard doesn't, we can note that this abstraction is dependent on its uptake and ratification as social facts; that is, as Marx

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, though Baudrillard does not discuss this (he takes such simulation as a natural kind), this performativity (of map that creates the territory) only holds to the extent that this re-ontologizing of objects and representations as simulation is regimented—for example, by the law, the violence of the state, banks, etc.—and ratified by those who construe such signs as of such an ontology (or not). I come back to this point in section 3.3.5.



(1976: 139) put it, it is “purely social.” The power of simulation, then, is to act as a higher order *legisign* principle that classifies increasing numbers of things as the “same,” as indistinct<sup>39</sup> tokens of the same type and thus inputs to some kind of calculus or social process, whether it be as exchange value, sign value, or as binary ones and zeros.

By contrast, simulacra (e.g., use value as natural utility satisfying universal desire) are at the same logical type as their object signs (e.g., actual objects imputed some utility). They are symbols that represent themselves as icons of that which they are a simulacrum of. As such, they can be compared with what they purport to be. In this sense they are ideological distortions. As such they differ from simulation which is neither true nor false, but rather, if felicitous, performative. While simulation is a condition of possibility of iconism in general, the simulacrum represents itself under the meta-discourse of (dis-)identity (i.e., iconism). But because it is at the same logical type as that which it is a simulacrum of, it can be logically falsified.

### 3.3.4 *As sign–meta-sign*

The main problem with Baudrillard is that pure Saussurean signs do not exist.<sup>40</sup> No one to my knowledge has found any signs that function without indexicality. Leaving aside Baudrillard’s hypostacized and apocalyptic vision of semiosis gone awry, there are at least two analytical problems: (a) he is fixated on the Saussurean sign as the model of

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<sup>39</sup> The issue is distinctiveness, and not being identical. Baudrillard often confuses the criterial factor of indistinguishability—a concept relative to some *legisign* principle—from identity—a concept fetishized in the thing-in-itself. This is a common mistake by Baudrillard to project epistemological issues as ontological differences. It is also one reason why (along with a tradition from Kant onwards) particular anxieties about the possibility of grounding oneself securely in knowledge are felt acutely by him.

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even if Saussurean signs worked to describe language, which they were designed to do, the analogies he proposes, for example, between exchange value:use value::signifier:signified [Baudrillard 2001(1972)] are disanalogous in that differences in exchange value do not produce analogous differences in signifieds, as the Saussure ratio proposes.

the world *and* as his analytical toolkit (thus always already confounding object- and meta-sign); and (b) he is forced himself to simulate the symbolic exchange of so-called primitive societies as a position from which to launch his normative critique of capitalism *and* thus does not subject it to any analytical investigation vis-à-vis the question of indexicality. Instead he fetishizes symbolic exchange as the “real” and “authentic.”<sup>41</sup> As such, he has neither a theory of indexicality nor of meta-semiosis.

While there are many ways to criticize Baudrillard (see Chen 1987; Huyssen 1989; Gane 1991; Kellner 1994 and chapters within), the question is, how can we reformulate simulation and simulacra to our use? I propose the following distinctions to steer us clear from some of Baudrillard’s problems. Simulation and simulacra both have at their core the sign–meta-sign relationship. Simulation is meta-semiotic in that it involves the regimentation of type–token relationships. Rather than seeing simulation as a Saussurean sign system—which Baudrillard never demonstrates in any convincing detail anyway (he even gives up trying after 1968 with *The System of Objects*)—let us see simulation as the case where objects are regimented by a larger meta-discursive principle which figures them as tokens of a type and, to this extent, the same. Such tokens are members of a paradigmatic or classificatory set which can be acted upon, for example in a computer algorithm, or exchanged for each other, for example in economic transactions. Further, in simulation, the type is historically continuous in some way with the tokens it regulates; for example, the same forms (exchanged objects) are abstracted into a higher order type (exchange value). This captures Baudrillard’s observation that through the historic

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<sup>41</sup> For Baudrillard, primitive “symbols” (not in the Peircean sense) must function as irreducible, because they must be authentic by definition. Thus they are mystified. As he writes, “Of what is outside the sign, of what is other than the sign [i.e., Symbolic Exchange], *we can say nothing*, really except that it is ambivalent” (Baudrillard 2001[1972]: 94). This is Baudrillard’s thing-in-itself.

escalation of logical types (from singular object exchanged in reciprocal gift relations to commodities universally comparable through their exchangeability to operators in a computer equation) objects are increasingly abstracted (their indexical value is elsewhere/negated), rationalized, and made comparable. Thus, through continuities of forms (i.e., that abstraction in simulation is recursively embedded: THINGS < EXCHANGED THINGS/GIFTS < EXCHANGE VALUES/COMMODITIES < FINANCE CAPITAL) the social world is ontologically transformed through simulation.

Simulacra, on the other hand, are objects which are explicitly typified—either by exterior meta-discourses or reflexively by themselves—in some particular way—more often than not, as the really “real”—so as to naturalize the type level phenomena, the simulations, of which they are also tokens (hence motivating the ideological confusion between types and tokens). Use values, for example, under conditions of capitalism are always already regimented under the type exchange value; but they are (falsely) typified as the “real” essence of commodities (e.g., by political economists), and thus function to naturalize or mystify the social relations that underwrite commodity exchange and the reality that exchange value runs society.

### 3.3.5 *Where does the indexicality go?*

What we can see from this reformulation of Baudrillard is that the central issue is what happens to the indexical component of the object (an  $n^{\text{th}}$  order sign) under conditions of simulation (an  $n+1^{\text{th}}$  order abstraction). What happens to the component of the sign’s meaning that is irreducibly linked to its contextual embeddedness, and that seems to be lost via simulation?

As one moves up the logical types of simulation, indexicality is both interiorized and exteriorized. Simulation internalizes indexicality by hypertrophying one aspect of (otherwise contextually situated) objects—for example, their utility *qua* satisfiers of needs; their measurability and exchangeability as unitizable objects; their digitizability as information *qua* binary values—and semanticizing (symbolicizing) it, making it the core default value, or dominant meaning, as specified by the type. Thus, for example, while commodified objects may have the same form of objects under reciprocal exchange (e.g., a hammer is a hammer before and after capitalism), ultimately the commodity is more mediated, asymmetrical, and one-sided because its “value” is increasingly overdetermined by its exchange value (and not its use/utility). Under capitalism, exchange value becomes the object’s core attribute. The regress of this is the fantasy of context-free objects where meanings otherwise indexically grounded in context are interiorized into the logical form of the object *qua* “value.”

At the same time, indexicality is exteriorized in meta-discourses which regiment objects so that they may serve as tokens of the type. Thus, for example, in Baudrillard’s discussion meta-discourses of the individual as property owner and of Human Nature more generally (in philosophy, the law, popular literature, and psychology) naturalize the concept of *use value* so that it in turn naturalizes economic exchange value and capitalism (Baudrillard 2001[1972]). Here external meta-discourse makes possible the increased semanticization of objects under simulation.

Moreover, simulacra and simulation are indexical in their ability to bring to bear on their own intelligibility a meta-discourse of identity. They point to themselves as being of such and such a type, often in ways radically different than their actual form and

function. Thus, as Baudrillard discusses, “work” rather than being part of the struggle of industrial capitalism (as it was at an earlier era) is increasingly (self-)typified in contemporary capitalism as part of one’s “lifestyle,” as a commodity, marketed and designed as such, to be integrated into the self, thereby satisfying needs for creativity and individuality. Thus, labor “enters the general lifestyle; in other words it is encompassed by signs” (Baudrillard 2001[1976]: 133). As a simulacrum of “actual” production/work, then, it functions differently, its *ontology* is fundamentally different—no longer a violent struggle, work is simply another part of the consuming self—but it points to itself as of an older order/ontology. This meta-discourse of identity—the self-typifying “I am Real!”—is made to seem increasingly natural as the iconism between simulation/simulacra and their tokens/what they copy is increasingly accurate (more precisely, the difference is less and less distinct). (This indistinctiveness, of course, must also be regimented by particular meta-semiotic legisigns.)

The point is that the abstraction and reorganization of some set of signs as tokens of a functionally distinct type while at the same time obscuring their newfound functionality by confounding this type–token distinction is only possible given the meta-discourses which are able to regiment that token–type relationship in the first place so that such signs can be put to use in concrete contexts. Thus, the *social* convention of money (exchange value); the *institutional* backing of finance (finance capital); the semiotic division of mass-mediated labor (the imploded media) all must be socially ratified so as to be pragmatically efficacious for buyers, bankers, and audiences in the various kinds of contextually embedded activities that they are engaged in. Thus, every simulation involves not only abstraction and reclassification, but the creation of new indexical

possibilities, pragmatic values, and contexts of use. Baudrillard cannot see this, of course, because he has no theory of indexicality or reflexive sign use. Thus, to him it seems as if signs are simply increasingly abstract, empty, and floating away into an eschatological teleology even while, inexplicably for him, they are (re)imbricated in social life (i.e., have “effects”), troped upon, used, re-animated and recycled.

### 3.3.6. *Simulation and the brand*

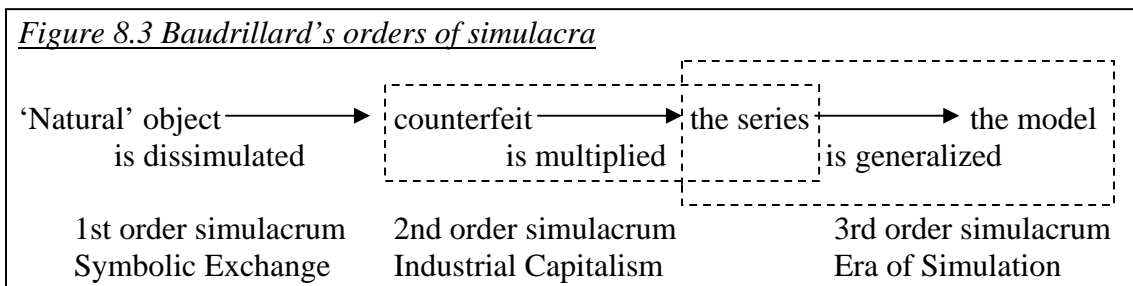
How can we bring this reformulation of Baudrillard to bear on our analysis of brands and their duplicates? I argue the following propositions below: (1) the brand is part of the escalation of logical types under capitalism, and thus is a simulation of the commodity form (section 3.3.6.1); (2) the duplicate forms both a challenge to the brand as a counterfeit, but also acts as a kind of simulacrum reinvesting the brand with the “real” through its typification as “fake” (section 3.3.6.2); (3) the bracketing of the BRAND ontology by Tamil youth points to a higher order simulation of brands for that particular social domain; branded forms are abstracted from, and reorganized under an aesthetic of brandedness (a higher order type) and thus invested with a different ontology and functionality (*style*) (section 3.3.6.3).<sup>42</sup> In making these arguments, however, I am

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<sup>42</sup> We can see something similar in Craciun’s (2009) discussion of the role of fake brands in the self-narrativization of one of her informants, a Turkish producer/distributor of fake brands. Here too the question of the brand (or its fake) is always relative to some larger meta-discursive frame which figures such objects in such and such a way (i.e., with such and such an ontology). For this informant—who saw himself as one who lives dangerously, on the margins of normativity and legality—the duplicate branded object is a “legitimate object,” “another version of a conventional form” insofar as it functions as his “assertion of individuality.” Similarly, Vann’s (2006) discussion of Vietnamese concepts of status, mimicry, and brand duplication indicates that the ontological category of the brand as we know it in the contemporary West—and its concomitant notion of “authenticity”—is not present in Vietnam, or certainly not in the same way (also see Halstead 2002; Notar 2006; Bick and Chiper 2007; cf. Jamieson 1999). Sylvanus’ (2007) discussion of “African” wax prints similarly shows how the same form is variously “requalified” depending on its insertion in various contexts of production and consumption; that is, depending on the meta-sign under which it stands (e.g., “Africanity” in the U.S.; or through association

breaking with Baudrillard’s larger narrative of capitalism. I don’t see this as a new phase in capitalism. I also don’t see the simulation of brands into an aesthetic of brandedness necessarily ideologically propped up by fetishized simulacra (i.e., counterfeits as simulacra), except from the perspective of the BRAND ontology (which in any case Tamil youth don’t necessarily abide by).

In his periodization of types of simulacra Baudrillard notes three kinds: the counterfeit, the object of a series (mechanical reproduction), and the model (where copy and model which produce it are one and the same). The counterfeit dissimulates the real. It presents itself as the authentic and authorized, but it is not. In this way, it assumes that the “real” in order to pass itself off as it. The mechanically reproduced object is the multiplication of the concept of the counterfeit into an infinite series where all members are identical in form (see Chen 1987: 74ff.; Tseïlon 1994; Shoomaher 1994 for discussion). Here the issue is not dissimulation, but the displacement of original and copy. The commodity is the exemplar, the object whose materiality is subsumed by exchangeability. Finally there is the model, as we discussed above, a further transcendence of the ontology of the object to a higher logical type, a purification of the series into the model or code which makes no reference to the “real.” I schematize this in Figure 8.3 below.



with American soaps like *Dallas* in Togo). Kriegel’s (2004: 259) discussion of design pirates’ discourse also shows that this logic was also at play in 19th century Britain as well (also see Johns 2009).

### 3.3.6.1 *Brand as simulation of commodity*

Here I want to recount Benjamin's narrative about the commodity as reinterpreted through my reading of Baudrillard: the commodity is an abstraction of, a simulation of, the singular auratic object whose meaningfulness is grounded in the contextualization inherent in reciprocal exchange, in its unique historicity, its embeddedness is historicized social relations. Through this, meaning is converted into value—i.e., reorganized into a higher logical type of equivalence—and the relationship of the original to the copy is radically altered. The aura of the object (which the counterfeit dissimulates) is extinguished.

As I argued in section 2.3, the brand organizes a set of commodified forms into a higher logical type of brand origin and image, and as such is itself a simulacrum of that lost aura *through* the immanent replicability of brand tokens. While the brand does not project itself as any single unique object, it reformulates itself as the personalization of a set of objects (the series of identical commodity brand tokens) iconic with the consumer (as set of desires, needs, lifestyle choices over time). The brand attempts to restore the meaningfulness of objects, their authority and authenticity, as imbricated in social relations through its simulacrum of sociality. At an earlier historical moment this is through the simulacrum of the guarantor of product quality—the shopkeeper—via the trademark. The brand and its packaging substitute for the face-to-face interaction with the local merchant. More contemporarily, it is the simulacrum of sociality more generally: buying a branded good is purchase to a community, a lifestyle, or a kind of self.



Ironically, it is through the simulacrum of the brand token's singular history or origin that capital circulation is reanalyzed as authenticity. That is, the authentic branded good is that good whose unique commodity path is an inverse icon of (an equally unique) profit flow from point of purchase to the trademark owner. Here the discourse of origin or quality (the "good will" of the brand) acts as a simulacrum, setting the conditions which make branded goods "authentic." Authorized copies of the brand are backed by the law and construed as legitimate because they supposedly have the same origin, and this sets the conditions on how consumers experience branded goods (e.g., as status-ful, as "real," as desirable). In doing so it excludes other goods like counterfeits as "inauthentic."

Through such simulacra the brand is an abstraction from (the mere exchange value of) commodity forms into a higher order type, reorganizing and reclassifying the world of commodities as instances of brands. BRAND, then, is a simulation of the commodity, and does its work through a set of simulacra. And as many have shown, this has entailed a reformulation of how engagement with objects and exchange in and out of the market work. This is the most recent phase in extraction of profit under capitalism: commodification of the right to access types of commodities (Frow 1996, 2002) and the effects of the consumption of tokens of such types (Arvidsson 2005; Foster 2007).

### 3.3.6.2 *Duplicate as simulacrum*

What are we to make, then, of the duplicate *under the BRAND ontology*? The duplicate garment is a counterfeit in Baudrillard's sense. The duplicate is inauthentic. It is not authorized by the social order (i.e., IP law) in an analogous way that the counterfeit of the Classical Era was a simulacrum of the natural, divine order. The duplicate falsely

attributes origin. It is a parasite on brand image and identity, siphoning off profits from the rightful IP owners (Wilkins 1992; Wilke and Zaichkowsky 1999; Vann 2006; Pang 2008). The duplicate is a simulacrum of a meta-discursive mapping of brand types-to-tokens, falsely including itself under a type to which it doesn't belong.

And again, the problem with the duplicate (from the point of view of particular brand types) is not with falsity of form or material. In fact, a piece of clothing is counterfeit even if it is the exact same design, with the same cut, materials, stitching, made in the same factory by the same people as the authentic item, sold to the customer in an authorized store by employees on the company payroll. Rather the problem is with profits. If profits do not go to the brand owners it is counterfeit. In this way, then, the duplicate does not disrupt the law of exchange as made possible by brands, but short circuits it. That is, it is a challenge to particular brands, but not to the larger ontology of the BRAND.

Indeed, it is precisely through legal discourse's labeling as "fake" and "inauthentic" that the duplicate reinvests the branded form with reality and authenticity. Functioning like the hyper-real Disneyland, the duplicate serves to legitimate the reality of the brand, covering the fact that BRAND itself is not a natural category, but one achieved through various brand related meta-discourses which regiment an order of iconism and indexicality so that otherwise similar objects are forced into the categories "authentic" and "inauthentic."

### *3.3.6.3 Aesthetics of brandedness as simulation of the brand*

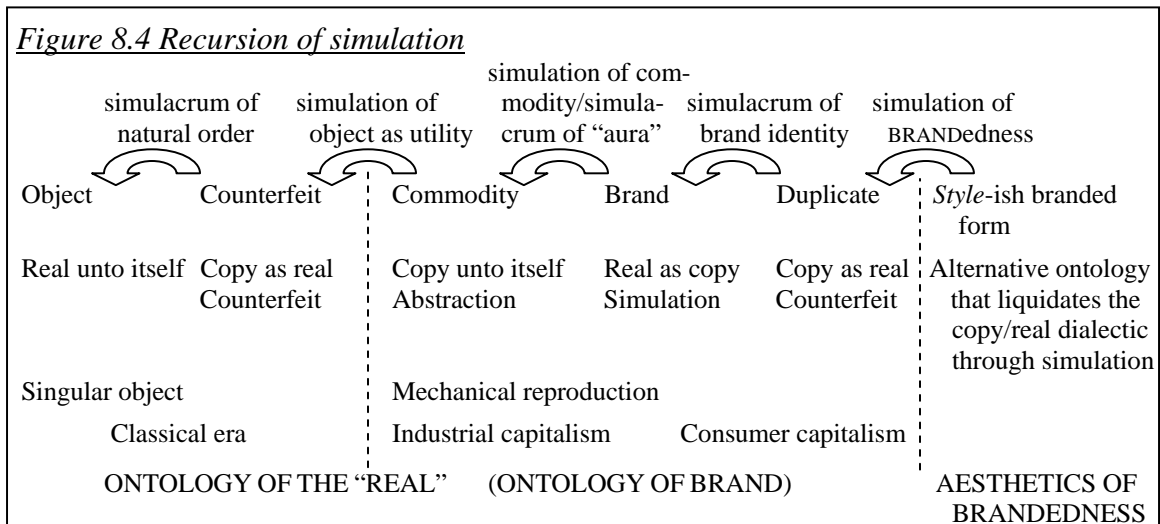
What are we to make of the aesthetic of brandedness discussed in chapters 6 and 7? What exactly is the implicit challenge of the duplicate *in the hands of Tamil youth* (i.e., under the ontology of *style*)? Remember that the brand is founded on its ability to differentiate signs—i.e., regiment iconicity—out of an otherwise homogeneous range of so-construed indistinct objects. The duplicate as used by Tamil youth offers an implicit challenge to that because it blurs the boundaries that brands attempt to regiment. The duplicate threatens to extinguish the simulacrum of aura and authenticity that brands instantiate, and thereby reveal their artificiality (cf. Pang 2008).

This is a challenge, though, only to the extent that branded forms are treated indifferently with respect to their authenticity, that is, to their BRAND ontology. When the duplicate is accepted as just as good, just as functional, as the authentic brand token, the ontology of the BRAND is, to use a Baudrillardian turn of phrase, liquidated. But why is this so? It is precisely because the meta-semiotic basis of the brand as a type that regiments a set of tokens is scrambled when the duplicate (known to be a duplicate) is treated indiscriminately with authentic brand tokens (cf. the process of genericide).

This is precisely what happens among young men in Tamil Nadu in their use of branded forms not as tokens of a brand type, but as part of an aesthetics of brandedness. In this alternative ontology, the brand is simulated at a higher logical type. As such brands become abstracted into a larger classification, and their aura of identity and origin (their “brand image”) is bracketed. Under this new ontology, tokens of the type are able to perform a different kind of functionality, imbued with new indexical connections and entailments: performing *style* in the peer group. Here, under an aesthetic of brandedness the duplicate makes the BRAND (as a set of brand types) irrelevant. It denaturalizes it by

swapping out the brand meta-discourse, its figures of personhood, and its associated meanings with an alternative meta-discourse, figures of personhood, and associated meanings.

Among young Tamil men doing *style*, then, brands are simulated. The indexical connections and images otherwise associated with particular brands are replaced with the *idea* of the brand (or as Baudrillard would put it, the “sign” of the brand). Branded forms are disconnected from questions of authenticity/inauthenticity and true/false and reconnected to questions of social function (status-raising) and aesthetics (i.e., not the aura of brand identity, but the aura of exteriority). The surface form remains but it is re-ontologized within a new functionality and principle of equivalence: can it perform *style*? With respect to the BRAND ontology, the branded form becomes a decontextualized shell of itself, a trope of its older meaning, reinfused with new meaning and recontextualized by an alternate set of meta-discourses. I chart out the recursion of simulation in Figure 8.4 below.



Keeping in mind the conditions of possibility for this alternative ontology—the disconnect of brand meta-discourse from branded form, willful ignorance of brands, the contingencies of global capital and export surplus, the meta-discourses of the film hero and *style*, the peer group dynamic of status-raising as diagrammatic of the experience of ‘youth’ and thus the motivation of the use of brands (among other signs) as *style*—what I want to point out is that this simulation is motivated from the ground up and not by any abstract notion of “system,” or cybernetic, auto-poetic logos of capital or brand (see Sylvanus’ [2007] for another such example of bottom-up simulation). Simulation, even if a decontextualization of an older norm/system, is always contextually grounded both in its genesis and its next turn recontextualization. It is this indexicality that Baudrillard misses as he only focuses on the process of abstraction. But as I have shown, this is only part of a larger semiotic process in which simulation is simply a particular sub-phase. Simulation, while necessarily involving abstraction, always creates new sets of indexical presuppositions and entailments.<sup>43</sup>

One inductive proof that indeed we are dealing with different ontologies (one of which is the simulation of the other) is to look at the range of forms that are included within the notion of “authentic” goods, on the one hand, and within the categories of “inauthentic” duplicates on the other across the two ontologies. When the distinction of true/false brands is relevant, where the duplicate is a simulacrum, there is a cat-and-mouse game between counterfeiters and the brand company where the production of counterfeits and originals are increasingly similar and the diacritics of difference

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<sup>43</sup> Another way to put this is that “abstraction” is itself an indexical shifter. It is always “abstraction with respect to” some semiotic aspect of a form. The de-indexicalification of one aspect of a form opens up new indexical horizons vis-à-vis other aspects.

increasingly minute (see Phillips 2005 for some nice examples; see Bush et al. 1989 on other methods of introducing authentic differences, e.g., bar codes). This is the economy of *exact* duplicates, but where ironically such duplicates do not offer a real challenge to the brand as BRAND, just as to the question of where the profits of particular brand tokens go. When there is no distinction between the true/false brand, where the brand is simulated, we find that counterfeits have very low fidelity. Indeed, there is a push (insofar as differentiation increases market saturation) toward distortion, hybridization, and differentiation from the model, but contained within a more general aesthetics of brandedness. This aesthetics expands the flexibility of brand iconism proportionally to the discerning powers, or lack thereof, of the consumer and producer.<sup>44</sup>

To uncover that Tamil uses of branded forms function as simulations of BRAND however is to move away from the forms themselves to the meta-semiotic conditions of possibility of such forms as they make such forms intelligible and pragmatically efficacious in actual moments of use. In this context it is telling that the economics literature on counterfeits (which is highly production-centric) is fixated on the fidelity of copies rather than on the indexical and meta-indexical aspects of the uses of copies. We can also critique Baudrillard on this point: he is obsessed with the fidelity of copies. This is because he privileges and fetishizes the real and the authentic without any sensitivity to

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<sup>44</sup> We can compare this situation with the various “regimes of value” that Jamieson (1999) discusses regarding collector cultures of vinyl records. He distinguishes between two ontological organizations of counterfeit records, those which fetishize the original object (the records) and those that fetishize access to the recordings (i.e., the songs on the records) as part of DJ performances of exclusive knowledge. This parallels our discussion of the ontologies of BRAND and *STYLE*, whereby in the first “regime” it is fidelity and authenticity that confer authority while in the second it is performance in the peer group that generates authenticity. In this second regime, copies do not extinguish aura but increase it (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 20). In the second regime, the duplicate brackets the question of the object *per se* and reanalyzes it as part of a different ontology. As Jamieson notes, the difference between the first and second regime is that the first is based on the “axiomatic knowledge of the primordial character of particular categories of object” (Jamieson 1999: 9) while the second is not.

the fact that concepts like “fidelity to \_\_\_\_\_,” “copy of \_\_\_\_\_,” and “simulation of \_\_\_\_\_” are indexical concepts that are dependent on particular meta-semiotic discourses put into play in particular contexts of social action. That is, they are not the inherent qualities of the objects in question.

### 3.4 *Summary*

In this section I have shown how the Baudrillardian concepts of simulation and simulacrum can be applied to the study of duplicate branded goods. Further, I have shown how theorizing the duplicate as a kind of simulation is crucial to our theorizing of the brand more generally. This, however, requires us to abstract from Baudrillard’s concepts (to make a simulation of them, in fact). I argued that a semiotic account of simulation and simulacrum as the play between meta-semiosis and indexicality allows us to rescue Baudrillard from a number of problems.

As our discussion shows, the semiotic structure of simulation is not one necessarily linked to an apocalyptic vision of capitalism as an uncontrollable cybernetic or Saussurean system of signs tyrannically and invisibly ruling from the top down. Rather, I argued that simulation (even in the cases discussed by Baudrillard) is always indexically grounded and dependent on particular meta-semiotic discourses, and thus ultimately defeasible or tropically reformulatable from the bottom up. The case of Tamil youth fashion shows how the BRAND ontology is simulatable, and how this principle of value (*style qua exteriority qua youth status*) is of a totally different form than the Saussurean/Baudrillardian system/code of pure equivalences. But to make this move requires an appeal to the indexicality of the sign and its imbrication in meta-discursive

frameworks. It also requires empirical work with actual consumers and users of branded forms in their cultural contexts of use. Otherwise we risk being drawn into the illusory world of the brand and simulation as the creeping shadows of capitalism.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this chapter I have shown that: (a) The brand is a meta-semiotically organized form whereby a set of tokens are taken as instances of a brand type which is indexical of source/producer and symbolic of a brand image. Further, the condition of possibility of brand types is the larger meta-semiotic configuration which grounds and is grounded by the ontological category BRAND. We saw how this ontology can be defeated in the Tamil case of youth fashion and *style*. (b) Simulation and simulacra are also meta-semiotic forms of the same configuration. There are as many kinds/orders of simulation/simulacra as there are meta-discourses which reanalyze and recontextualize some set of forms at a higher logical type vis-à-vis different functionalities and principles of classification. The brand is a further development of simulation within capitalism. (c) The duplicate in Tamil Nadu under the aesthetics of brandedness foregrounds this meta-semiotic component and shows us the conditions under which the brand relationship holds in general. It shows us *when* a brand is and is not.



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