

SITUATING TAMIL CINEMA

By

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ABSTRACT

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Situating Tamil Cinema interrogates contemporary Tamil cinema's relationship with the shifting meanings of world cinema as an emergent organizing principle of film studies. Specifically, the dissertation studies the reconfiguration of the narrative modes of Tamil cinema in the contemporary postglobal moment. It suggests that Tamil cinema is part of a broader global change in marginalized cinemas and is thus one demonstration of the theories of world cinema. "World cinema" is an emerging concept among film theorists, but there is no broad consensus on the heuristic value of the term. If world cinema is simply the sum total of all cinema in the world, it tends to obscure the particularities of minor film industries. It is in response to this that I propose an alternative ontology of world cinema that rests upon the principles of democracy and globalization, but endeavours to create a category of cinema with shared principles that could then allow these movies to be studied, albeit not as an homogenous body. The working definition of world cinema in this project is that: world cinema is, fundamentally, any cinematic endeavour that intentionally attempts and/or succeeds at cultivating a non-native audience. This is achieved through several overlapping and systemic processes within a film industry that I call "worlding."

It is within this framework of world cinema and worlding that I study the peculiarities of contemporary, post-millennial Tamil cinema. Tamil cinema is the film industry of the state of Tamil Nadu, India and is rendered in the Tamil language. It is classified as one of the "regional" film industries of India – where the Hindi film industry is often considered to be interchangeable with "Indian cinema." This identity struggle that manifests as the binary between "Indian" and

“regional” cinema is a cornerstone of Tamil identity and its cinema, which has continually reaffirmed itself as an articulation of a non-Indian space in not-Hindi. The paradigmatic shifts in filmmaking, viewing and circulation of post-millennial Tamil cinema is interesting precisely because of how invested cinema has been in the construction and maintenance of a Tamil identity.

My project begins by drawing up one of the first consolidated histories of Tamil cinema from origin to present, where I place special interest in the relationship between cinema and political identity in Tamil Nadu. The argument is that the Tamil film industry through its insistence on a non-Indian nationalism, seeks to complicate the equation of a politically unified nation-state to a culturally homogenous nationalism. The chapter makes the case for contemporary Tamil cinema being an apt subject for the framework of world cinema and worlding. The next chapter outlines the history of star politics and star practices in Tamil cinema and positions this against contemporary Tamil stardom and argues that the cascading irrelevance of the Tamil male movie star is a crucial manifestation of the processes of worlding. My third chapter looks at the changes in the structures and presentation of comedy in Tamil cinema. In particular, the growing popularity of the black comedy and the spoof genres, and the parallel fall of the comedian sidekick figure can be read as a specific reconfiguration of the local that is breaking its way out of the national-regional binary and engaging with world cinema. The final chapter looks at the song-sequence or the musical interruption, and how the changes in film and song structures speak to the worlding of Tamil cinema. Overall, this dissertation works towards de-westernizing film studies by way of including an autochthonous history of cinema from a region that is outside categories of national cinema and by working outside established modes of film studies scholarship.

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To my father's father, who taught me to take pride in the pursuit of knowledge,
And his eldest son, who supported that pursuit of mine unconditionally.
To my mother's mother, who taught me what it is to be human.
And her eldest daughter, for just about everything good in me.

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Introduction: The Worlding of Tamil Cinema

“All cinemas are equal, but some are more equal than others,” we might say.

Saër M. Bâ and Will Higbee (6)

It was a course on the ontological concept of “world” that inspired the fundamental principle of this dissertation to be “world cinema,” as a way of studying a sub/non-national film industry like Tamil cinema. Film studies has canonically privileged national cinemas, which in the case of India has always presented as Hindi cinema. Non-Hindi cinemas such as those of south India are often subsumed and suppressed under the label “regional”¹ and are thus obscured in the study of “Indian” cinema. Tamil cinema, the focus of this project, is one such film industry that, despite consistently equalling or surpassing Hindi cinema in output in the last two decades, is rarely studied in film studies scholarship. Furthermore, the populist and mainstream nature of these cinemas preclude them being included in the category of “global art cinema,” where one would find the work of Satyajit Ray and other Bengali or diasporic filmmakers. The move to de-westernize film studies and the shift away from the national as organizing principles perfunctorily positions world cinema as a suitable framework to study Tamil cinema.

This project takes the case of Tamil cinema specifically as a way of expanding upon this idea of world cinema. Contemporary Tamil cinema is emphasizing a local, vernacular Tamil identity that is not intelligible in a nation-state framework as a way to participate more fully in the networks of world cinema. Essentially, Tamil cinema is shedding its status as a ‘regional cinema’ by bypassing the binary of regional and national and existing as a part of the network of

¹ In the study of cinemas of India “regional” refers to a geopolitical category smaller than national, as opposed to the use of the term in Latin American, Middle Eastern, Trans-Asian cinema, where “region” is a transnational concept.

world cinema. This dissertation studies Tamil cinema's relationship with the shifting meanings of world cinema as an emergent organizing principle of film studies by focussing on the reconfiguration of the narrative modes of Tamil cinema in the contemporary postglobal moment. However, it is not to say Tamil cinema is singular in its expansion, but part of a broader global change in marginalized cinemas. Tamil cinema is one demonstration of the shifting meanings of world cinema.

As an emergent organizing principle of film and media studies, "world cinema" is gaining currency among film theorists. Films and film cultures that used to occupy the erstwhile categories of global art cinema, Third Cinema, or transnational cinema are now tentatively encroaching and inhabiting the category of "world cinema." Yet, there is no broad consensus on the heuristic value of the term: it had become somewhat a catch-all term for all those films that are not Hollywood – a perspective that was sought to be revised by Nagib, Perrian and Dudrah in their collection, *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*. Using Dennison and Lim's *Remapping World Cinema* as a point of departure, they begin by stating that "the greatest danger of defining world cinema negatively, as 'non-Hollywood cinema', is to perpetuate the patronizing attitude which sees all other cinemas as victims" (xxii). Working with Shohat and Stam's notion of polycentric multiculturalism, Nagib, Perrian and Dudrah's clarion call is to liberate "world cinema" from its Manichean binary shackles of being Hollywood and not Hollywood; a call to which Bâ and Higbee respond. Their collection

[S]eeks to problematize a binary mode of thinking that continues to promote an idea of "the West and the rest" in relation to the questions of production, distribution, reception, and representation within an artistic medium (cinema) that, as part of contemporary

moving image culture, is more globalized and diversified than at any time in its history.

(1)

Scholars have been rigorous in their attempts to make the category as democratic as possible; it is a scholarly attempt to understand all cinemas as equally equal in their access to audiences and publics by privileging the scholarship of all cinemas for what they are without defining them primarily by what they are not. World cinema is then no longer necessarily film cultures that are not Hollywood. Neither are they film cultures that are simply not Western. World Cinema is arguably an all-encompassing, almost tautological ontology -- both in theory and practice -- or attempting to be one that seeks to embrace all cinematic traditions, without necessarily privileging any one. In practice, taking its cue from the de-westernizing impulses of Third Cinema, world cinema (unlike some definitions of transnational cinema²) explores the possibility of constituting a film culture that does not privilege western imports of nationalism.

The framework of world cinema also allows for a mode of scholarship that works outside the distinction between “regional” and “national” in the study of cinemas of India. Aside from constricting frameworks of the national, traditional methods of scholarship within film studies have usually not been very effective in studying Tamil cinema; as Elavarthi Sathya Prakash notes, the theories of film studies often have to be “dramatically stretched” to fit the study of

² In the preface to an edited collection, Natasa Durovicova explain that the term ‘transnational’ has come to denote a phenomenon that’s ‘above national’ but ‘below global’ (ix). She places the term ‘transnational’ “[i]n contradistinction to “global,” a concept bound up with the philosophical category of totality, and in contrast to “international,” predicated on political systems in a latent relationship of parity,” and argues that ‘transnational’ acknowledges the “agency of the state and the legitimizing relationship to the scale of the “the nation””(x). If all previous formulations of the ‘transnational’ presume a (even if only in its ambiguity) relationship with the nation-state and national identity, then there continue to be film traditions that are excluded. They are not transnational cinema, precisely because they do not belong to any national canon. The fact that the nation-state was a product of Western modernity that was then imposed through colonial mechanisms around the world implies a potential incompatibility whereby the national (and thereby global, international, and transnational) could fail as a canon-forming methodology.

non-Hindi cinemas of India (177). The use of what is termed “Grand Theory” – using lenses of postcolonial, Marxist, psychoanalytical theories have usually proven to be safe methods for the study of cinemas of India to find acceptance in western academic cultures. It is a further impediment that film studies scholarship often favours the study of “art” cinema or high culture cinema, which automatically excludes cinemas of south India that are predominantly popular and populist cinemas. As Sathya Prakash asks, it often comes down to the question of whether Western scholarship possesses the experience and awareness to study cinemas that require different reading strategies (“Beyond ‘Bollywood’” 177).

For instance, the concepts of film theory, film history, and film interpretation are often used interchangeably in the study of Tamil or Telugu cinema (Hughes “Madras Cinema Audiences,” Sathya Prakash “Telugu Identity, Tamil Cinema, and Cultural Politics”). Similarly, in the study of cinemas of India, the “story” or plot becomes a crucial site of study, unlike classical film theory or western film history that places pre-eminence on the interpretation of the visual, sonic, and technical aspects of filmmaking and often disregards audience response as worthy of study. And it is because of such discursive restrictions that the majority of Tamil cinema scholarship in English is found in the fields of anthropology (Sara Dickey, Stephen Hughes, Rajan Krishnan, Constantine Nakassis, Anand Pandian etc), sociology (Selvaraj Velayutham, MSS Pandian, Vijay Damodaran), literature (Vasugi Kailasam, C.S. Lakshmi, Sathiavathi Chinniah, Perundevi Srinivasan), and area/culture studies and ethnography (Robert L. Hardgrave, Sundar Kaali, Preeti Mudaliar). With media studies more broadly, there is recent work done in communication studies (Vijay Devdas, Ashwin Punathambekar, Sriram Mohan, Joyojeet Pal). The study of Tamil cinema has rarely found space in film studies proper, with the most substantial work being one monograph on the studio system of the 70s and 80s (Pillai).

Thus, the epistemological freedoms provided by world cinema – by way of working outside traditional modes of film studies scholarship might better support the study of a not-national (but not regional) film industry like Tamil cinema.

This move is a key reason why world cinema is suited to study Tamil cinema, for it is the central medium of representation of *not-national* linguistic identity of Tamil Nadu, India. The not-national position of Tamil Nadu's political history is vital in the formulation of the Tamil subject. Much like the Kashmiri or the Assamese, the Tamil identity is one that is forged under the auspices of – to take from Partha Chatterjee – anti-national nationalism:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain “modular” forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history [...]. (Chatterjee 5)

Chatterjee's insistence on the need to theorize an “antinational nationalism” hits at the core of the inherent problems of constructing a national cinema, or utilizing the nation-state as a fundamental unit of classification. The Indian nation-state in particular was born fragile, an imagined community not necessarily co-opted into by all the regions it encompassed.

Secessionist movements from the South, East and Northern edges of the country, and constant threats from Pakistan continue to haunt the everyday existence of the state. When translated to cinema, it becomes difficult then to speak of an ‘Indian’ cinema; a national cinema of a nation “which is often – uniquely, for a postcolonial state –embarrassed, rather than gratified, at having inherited the world's largest, and most diverse, film production base” (Rajadhyaksha 45). And

yet, national histories of Indian cinema have been compiled (Rajdhyaaksha and Willemen), broad stroke analyses of “Indian” film industries have been published and most scholarship of cinemas from India have sought to theorize Hindi cinema and name it “Indian cinema” (Vasudevan; Hogan; Chakravarthy), leaving the other film industries of India to find their own way into being recognized given that they are excluded from the recognized classification of the “national.” And because cinema is the primary medium of entertainment and politics of the Tamil-ian, Tamil cinema has consistently played to the idea that there is no homogeneous nationalism. They are not “above national” and “below global,” but outside the national and, in the current zeitgeist, tending towards global; and hence, Tamil cinema seems to be leaning towards the title of world cinema.

Yet there are inherent problems with formulation of world cinema that prohibit a holistic study of Tamil cinema within its discourse. World cinema is a category where “notions of a single centre, primacies and diachronicities are discarded, [and] everything can be put on the world cinema map on an equal footing” (Nagib et al xxiii). World cinema then arguably relies, to a great extent, on translatability of language, aesthetics, genres, technology, and a film industry’s ability to co-opt into globally recognized modes of filmmaking. It also implies the inclusion of indigenous scholarship on these films and film industries by the academia. If so, in the case of Tamil cinema, the majority of the productions and publications that are not brought to the attention of the non-Tamil-speaking public must also be considered world cinema, even though they are never viewed or studied outside of native Tamil speakers.

It is in response to this quandary that I propose an alternative category of world cinema that rests upon the principles of democracy and globalization, but endeavours to create a category of cinema with shared principles that could then allow these movies to be studied, albeit

not as an homogenous body. The working definition of world cinema in this project is that: world cinema is, fundamentally, any cinematic endeavour that intentionally attempts and/or succeeds at cultivating a non-native audience.

I think about non-native audience as those audiences outside the originary culture of the film industry in question. It would include Marvel Studios attempting to cultivate a Chinese audience, Senegalese filmmakers finding their niche in European film festivals, Nollywood being watched as fantastic/cult cinema in the US, Tamil cinema being watched by North Indians, or Sri Lankan Tamil cinema finding Indian Tamil audiences. This becomes relevant in the light of there being films from specific film industries that are made for a specific linguistic and cultural audience. In Tamil cinema, the typical mass/*masala* movie rarely finds an audience outside south India, and rarely tries. They are movies that are made for pre-existing fans and audiences who are familiar with the language and conventions of the Tamil film industry. Similarly, thousands of video films in Nigeria and Senegal etc probably never see an outside audience. Presumably, there are films from many industries that neither attempt nor succeed at cultivating an audience outside the original linguistic community, or national configuration. I acknowledge that my configuration of world cinema as a category will exclude these films and film cultures. However, *because* of such exclusion, it reconfigures world cinema as functional heuristic, and not a summation of all films produced across the world. This definition is partly supported by the ideas of Shekar Deshpande and Meta Mazaj who conceive world cinema as a polyvalent, polycentric, and polymorphous study of cinema in which they

(...) maintain the basic tenet of world cinema [is] that films are to be seen in cultural context outside of their own, then the spheres of visibility are fluid for different films.

Each form of cinema, from European art cinema to minor cinema or peripheral cinema, is

caught in this politics of visibility where its capacity to reach wider audiences is a result of intervening forces of economics and institutional and state power. Each of these cinemas needs to be granted a perspective of world cinema from its own vantage point while mapping its relations of power to the larger spheres of influence. (32)

The politics of visibility being a function of institutional and state forces is central to this understanding of world cinema. Further it allows this study of cinema and global networks to be polycentric, i.e., located at multiple centres rather than simply Hollywood and European cinema. Instead, they propose Hollywood, “Indian cinema and Bollywood, Asian cinemas (Japan, Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and South Korean cinema), European cinema, and Nigerian cinema or Nollywood” as the centres of study for world cinema (25). This was decided based on the fact that these films have high cinematic activity, critical mass of indigenous scholarship, and spheres of influence outside their borders (25). However, this form of polycentrism, in its attempt to map “world cinema through these five centres” without “eclips[ing] their internal diversity and complexity” (26), continues to ignore certain power structures within those centres. Centring Nigerian cinema as the sole “hotspot” of cinemas of Africa, for instance, obscures the transnational histories of Ghanaian cinema that operate outside Nollywood and the festival successes of Ousmane Sembène.

Specific to my project is the phrase “Indian cinema and Bollywood.” While better than claiming to be “Indian cinema *or* Bollywood,” the project continues to centre Bollywood as the “popular national cinema of India,” (141) by claiming Hindi to be the national language of India, which it is not.³ The other cinemas of India are labelled “multiple language cinemas” instead of

³ The anti-Hindi riots of the 1960s from South India ensured that Hindi would not be the national language of India. Instead, English and Hindi were instated as the languages for official administrative use.

regional cinemas, which - while definitely dismantling the “national-regional” binary - would not really make visible the politics of access and visibility within the country. While acknowledging that Bollywood has taken over the popular image of Hindi cinema and thus obscures other film industries in India, Deshpande and Mazaj continue to hold to an idea of “Indian cinema,” that presumes an homogenous history and present of cinemas of India. However, as the first chapter will show, Tamil cinema (as with Bengali cinema or south Indian cinemas) has had a distinct trajectory, separate from that of Bollywood. The spheres of influence of Tamil cinema are different, as are the diasporas with which it engages. Unlike Bollywood, whose “old diasporas” were the Caribbean, the Tamil diaspora was located in Singapore, Malaysia, and erstwhile Burma, and received considerable visibility and circulation in South East and East Asia. A revision of Deshpande and Mazaj’s project might allow a study of each film industry as its own unit, allowing each its own historiography.

Situating Tamil Cinema in Cinemas of India

Tamil cinema, as few would know, is the film industry of the state of Tamil Nadu, India,⁴ based out of its capital city, Chennai.⁵ It is rendered in the Tamil language, and is often classified as one of the “regional” film industries of India -- where the Hindi film industry is often considered to be interchangeable with “Indian cinema.” The identity struggle that manifests as the binary between “Indian” and “regional” cinema is a cornerstone of Tamil identity and its cinema. Cinema more so than literature, fine arts, or performance arts, is central to modern Tamil

⁴ The Tamil language cinema industry of Sri Lanka is relatively underdeveloped with less than 100 films produced overall. As such, Tamil cinema most commonly refers to the Tamil language cinema that comes out of Tamil Nadu, India.

⁵ Chennai is the current official name of the city, having changed from the colonial name, Madras, in 1996. However, both names are used in everyday parlance, and this dissertation will reflect my Madras roots in its usage of Madras and Chennai interchangeably.

identity politics. In the twenty-first century, when Tamil cinema is consciously stepping onto the stage of world cinema, cinema is a central platform of Tamil identity's own grapple with globalization and national politics.

Tamil identity, as conceived and constructed during the colonial struggle and later in independent India, is rooted in two interrelated ideas: linguistic difference and Dravidian ideology. Not of the Indo-European tree of languages, Tamil literary and spoken traditions have always sought to differentiate itself from Sanskrit while also elevating the language to the same classical status with claims of an equally long history. Tamil literary history goes back several thousand years and even lays claim to its own version of the Atlantis myth. It is this linguistic pride that has ceaselessly fuelled an anti-Hindi position in Tamil Nadu's modern history and continues to be part of its public discourses well into the twenty first century.

At the same time, the idea of an Indian nation-state as forged by struggles against a colonial power was rejected by Tamil leaders of the mid-twentieth century. They perceived a national imaginary of "India" to be an Aryan conception and built on principles of caste and religious division, placing Sanskrit and Sanskrit-origin languages such as Hindi at the centre. Tamil, on the other hand, was said to be part of a Dravidian identity—different from the European Aryan racial identities. Dravidian is a not-yet-completely-understood racial/genetic identity but is claimed to have origins in West and South Asia. In the aftermath of Indian independence, Tamil political leaders demanded secession from the Indian nation-state, and the rights to form a Dravidian nation-state or *Dravidistan*. This articulation of a non-Indian space in not-Hindi is foundational to the Dravidian movement and Tamil identity in general. It is this set of identity politics that was propagated by and reinforced through cinema, and continually

positioned cinema the site of identity politics, as the vehicle of propaganda of Tamil/Dravidian culture, and the most prolific medium of representation in and of modern Tamil Nadu.

Post-millennial Tamil cinema – the focus of this dissertation – is an interesting set of texts precisely because of how invested cinema has been in the construction and maintenance of a Tamil identity. The film industry is changing the focus of narratives, modes of representation, techniques of filmmaking and narrative, and is being more open to festival circuits and release via OTT platforms as viable modes of circulation in order to garner wider (worldwide) recognition and appreciation. This might partially be because filmmakers are responding to changing tastes of domestic audiences and the presence of a growing diasporic audience, as well as shifts in global film cultures – whether it is festival programming or film studies scholarship.

Specifically in scholarship, Tamil cinema, as with any other “regional” cinema of India, has been often obscured by the behemoth of discourse surrounding Hindi cinema or Bollywood. This has consequently obscured the specifics of formative history and structural politics in non-Hindi film industries. As the first chapter will outline in greater detail, Tamil cinema has historically resisted the Hindu nationalist tendencies of North India and its medium, Hindi cinema. Yet, more so than often, Tamil cinema’s politics are theorized similarly with Hindi cinema.

A pertinent example would be the theorization of the globalization of “Indian” cinema in the wake of the New Economic Policy of 1991, instituted by the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The NEP is commonly seen as the first milestone of India’s globalization. The policy rested on the tenets of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. Foreign Direct Investments in the Indian industrial sector were increased, a greater number of sectors were

privatized and given to these newly formed multinational corporations, and regulations on international trade were loosened. As such, there was a direct correlation between the introduction of the NEP and the rise in transnational cultural transactions. And the Indian state and civil society responded to an identity crisis brought on by increased contact with global capital by seeking to control the narration of the nation. Rupal Oza argues that the loss of national sovereignty following the 1991 economic reforms of India shifted the site of control to national identity and culture (2006). One such transformation was the upsurge of Hindu nationalist politics, or more specifically the idea of India as a Hindu nation which could be prominently seen in the film and television industries, which had been newly freed from the control of the State at the same time.

Liberalization broke down the separation between politics, society, and economics, which was a feature of Nehruvian India (Rajagopal 2001: 2-3). Newly structured television and film industries provided networks of communication that cut across the three categories and, crucially, connected consumption with political stance. Specifically, the consumption of language and symbols of Hindu nationalism through film and television became a manner of political participation. Hindi cinema participated extensively in this agenda, especially by showcasing the Indian diaspora through an heteronormative Hindu lens, in films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra). And Hindi cinema catered to a large audience. Because of this broad audience base that, unlike other Indian film industries, was not restricted to a single state, Hindi cinema was quickly a national cinema, and did not have to contend with retaining a sense of local identity in the face of globalization. The globalization of Hindi cinema was perceived to have been symptomatic and representative of the globalization of the Indian nation.

Tamil cinema, however, followed a different trajectory. Its insistence on Tamil as a non-Indian, non-Hindu language and culture meant Tamil filmmakers and their audiences would not participate in the project of marrying India with a Hindu identity. Apart from a brief dalliance with the idea of integrating the Tamil hero into Indian narratives through the work of a few filmmakers, it continued its longstanding ideological feud with the idea of Hindu nationalism. In fact, in response to growing globalization and Hindu nationalism, Tamil cinema dug deeper into its ethnocentric – or as some would call it, parochial – roots. For instance, this can be seen in the extent to which Tamil male political stardom had peaked in the 1990s: as the second chapter elucidates, male stars were the personification of Dravidian ideals, and thus their stardom did not participate in the India-making project that Hindi cinema championed.

Apart from its reaction to the processes of globalization after the NEP, Tamil cinema has several points of distinction from Hindi cinema, representative of the ways in which Tamil culture has sought to differentiate itself from Indian culture. This has been refuelled by the rise of Hindu nationalism with the reign of Narendra Modi. The 2015 national election in India saw the rise of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power, taking a majority at the centre. At the forefront of the NDA is the BJP, led by Narendra Modi. The election results were divisive from the moment they were announced, as the BJP (with 282 seats out of 543 in the lower house) had secured a popular majority albeit with only a total of five seats (out of 101) from four of the five south Indian states. The nation would be run by a party that was rejected by almost half the country. And the repercussions are evident. With the BJP and its controversial leader in power, right-wing extremists soon took over the news cycle, whether for lynching beef-eaters, burning churches, or pro-Hindu agitations. This prompted undercurrents of ethno-nationalism, visible thus far, but relatively stagnant in the decades leading up to the NEP, to re-appear with vigour.

Anti-national movements and sentiments rose in the South (mostly a Tamil ethno-nationalism, but often expanded to a Dravidian nationalism), the North-East and the Kashmir valley. But unlike the states in the North East and the Kashmir Valley, Tamil Nadu lays claim to one of the two largest film industries in India, both historically and in the present. Tamil cinema thus becomes the most viable space of cinema whereby to gauge cultural politics that could be representative of a broader, “national” perspective.

It must be noted that Tamil cinema is not unique in its ability to break the national cinema illusions of India. Bengali cinema, and other cinemas of south India – which are the other big film industries in the country – also prompt a revision of an homogenous “Indian cinema.” In fact, much like the way the history of Hindi cinema has obscured the varying histories of other cinemas of India, Tamil cinema holds a hegemonic position in common perceptions of the cinemas of south India. This is often because the cinemas of south India – especially the Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada film industries⁶ – centred their production in Madras. This allowed for greater fluidity of labour, technology, talent, and capital across these industries, and films and film stars received comparable reception across state lines in the first few decades of cinema in south India. However, this is not to say they share a similar history or ideological trajectory.

If Telugu cinema gets associated with its fan-phenomena [...], Kannada film is known for its linguistic chauvinism, and though fading, the idea of ‘good’ Kannada film as the ‘art film’ of the 1970s and 1980s still stands strong. Tamil cinema, of course, gets inseparable from its connection to politics, Dravidian or otherwise, and Malayalam cinema to its realist element and to its communist undercurrents. (Dechamma and Sathya Prakash xvii)

⁶ Other minor film industries situated in the south include Konkani, Tulu, and Kodava film industries.

Tamil cinema is often projected to stand-in for south Indian cinema more broadly because these cinemas are all labelled “regional” cinema, and Tamil cinema is the most explicit in voicing resistance against that. Studying Tamil cinema in the framework of world cinema (that breaks away from the “national”) allows us to view these vagaries of nationalism and its prefixes through the lens of cinema as an integral part of public culture in India. This dissertation tracks the changes to Tamil cinema in the twenty first century as they demonstrate a specific navigation between categories of local, regional, and world.

The masala film: the Tamil of Tamil cinema

Stephen Putnam Hughes, a scholar of early Tamil cinema, in an essay titled “What is Tamil about Tamil cinema?” argues that:

(T)he ‘Tamil-ness’ of Tamil cinema was not based on any fixed linguistic identity, but was constructed as a matter of production practice and critical discourse after the introduction of sound film during the 1930s. (...) The Tamil-ness of Tamil film must also be read in relation to an increasing differentiation within the ongoing linguistic division of Indian cinema, the critical discourses of Tamil revival and the cultural politics of caste and class during the 1930s and 1940s. (213)

It is his contention that while it might be easy to understand the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema as, very simply, the language spoken within the film, Tamil-ness is not necessarily a “stable, self-contained, linguistically bounded tradition,” especially in its formative decades (213). Instead, the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema depended on where the film was produced, who was making the film, and what kind of music and theatrical traditions were presented on screen. It is important to note that Hughes identifies this location of production as a point of regional

pride in India. Since Madras was the sole presidency of the South, it became a matter of reputation that Tamil films were produced elsewhere by non-Tamils. With the setting up of production studios in Madras, south India gained a collective foothold and films from several south Indian languages began to be produced in Madras. This fostered a broader regional identity of South Indian cinema that still holds intact to an extent in the twenty-first century. For instance, while Hindi cinema long rid itself of the comedian figure and the comedy track, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada film industries continued to hold that figure in reverence into the early decade of the twenty first century. The Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema was understood as entrenched in a South Indian/ not-North Indian politics as it was being formulated.

Furthermore, with the introduction of sound, the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema was also situated in the songs and musical tradition of the early talkies. The Tamil-nationalist and Tamil-purist politics of the Dravidian movement dominated the debates about what should and should not represent Tamil music on screen. Hughes points specifically to the Dravidian poet, Bharathidasan's critique of Tamil cinema as not being Tamil enough, because it borrowed from too many foreign elements, specifically, "an odd assortment of the costumes and tunes from north India, Telugu songs mixed with Tamil, slokas in Sanskrit, and speeches in English" (Hughes 226). In essence, the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema was situated at the nexus of language, linguistic/regional identity politics, and a call to present an authentic and pure Tamil-ness on screen that was devoid of influences from other cultures.

Bharathidasan's accusations of early Tamil cinema forfeiting its Tamil-ness by borrowing from too many foreign elements presents an interesting problem in the study of contemporary Tamil cinema that is consciously borrowing from foreign elements in order to preserve its Tamil-ness. Filmmaking practices, genre configurations, star processes, and circulation and exhibition

practices have been evolving over the past three decades as a way of being more globally recognizable. It seeks to carve out a place within the epistemological category of ‘world cinema.’ To that end, Tamil cinema has been re-orienting itself to world cinema and digital cinema approaches to filmmaking, production, and circulation. Contemporary Tamil filmmakers consciously acknowledge the influence of East Asian cinema, Latin American cinema, and Hollywood on their work. There are now Tamil films that are released on the internet and use hashtags as a way of publicizing and being heard, and there are others that travel the festival circuit to be noticed – thus targeting both diasporic and unfamiliar audiences. Yet, this process of becoming globally visible, accessible, and recognizable has paradoxically cemented the need to stand out as Tamil. To paraphrase Vetrimaran, a contemporary Tamil filmmaker who is conspicuously intent on being included in world cinema, the more ethnic a film is, the more universal its appeal.⁷

It is in that vein that I look at the masala film – the staple mode of Tamil cinema – and the changes to it (including its growing irrelevance) as a marker of changes to the Tamil of Tamil cinema. I look to these as a marker of the ethnic for, as Hudson and Zimmerman state, “[b]y North Atlantic standards, even the most traditional A-grade *masala* or C-grade “quickie” might appear avant-garde.” They further argue that “these richly textured films” in their peculiarities “make the ways that multiple modernities differ from (a singular) “the modern” apparent” (6). By their argument, the masala film has been a site of an alternative modernity; Tamil masala films are then a site of a, say, a Tamil modernity/postmodernity. They make apparent the “rejection of a strict distinction between modern and postmodern” as they operate within the

⁷ Quoted in Nitya Vasudevans’s “*Ooru Area Pettai: The Terms of the Local in Tamil Cinema of the Twenty-First Century*” (145).

conditions of postcoloniality. However, this project, in its navigation between nation, region, and world in a globalized era, looks at how the quirks and changes of the masala mode can be representative of a postglobal era of Tamil cinema.

The term “masala” movie comes from these films having no specific genre structure (as understood in the west) but have romance, comedy, action, and socially relevant message all mixed in. I also refer to them as the “mass” movie, for these films are made explicitly for a mass, mainstream audience. In Tamil cinema, the mass movie is built around its male lead actor and his politics, as well as the comedian figure.

The standard structure goes like this: the movie begins by introducing the hero with a fight sequence and song sequence that establishes the moral outlook of the male star and his character. We are then introduced to the main villain of the movie, and the politics for which he stands. In parallel, we are also introduced to the heroine of the movie, who, in her portrayal of trying to become “the good Tamil woman,” is presented as a woman in need of reform or rescue by the hero. The plot then becomes a series of challenges that the hero must overcome – with the final challenge being the main villain himself – in order to save his lover, his family, his community, and thereby the state/country. The issue plaguing the society against which he fights can be any number of things from the evils of western modernism in the 60s to political corruption in the 1990s. More recently, the masala movie has dealt with gender equality in sports and society, political agency of the individual, or the importance of family (and that’s just one star’s politics).

The masala film’s most attractive feature, however, is that this main plot is flanked by song sequences and comedy track. The comedy track is a separate section of the plot starring the

comedian of the movie that occasionally intersects with the main plot of the film by way of the comedian's character being part of the hero's primary support system. The song sequences are interstitial spaces that narrate the needs and wants of the hero and heroine and their community outside the moral confines of the diegesis. These two features are central to the promotion and success of the movie itself, and circulate as paratexts (in promotion of the movie) and as extra-texts (on their own, outside of their relationship to the film), and they are a recurring feature of Tamil films (or other films from south India). The fact that the song sequence, comedy, and star politics exist in most films of Tamil cinema, irrespective of genre characteristics is why I think of masala more as a mode than a genre of film.⁸ It is the way filmmakers have structured narratives.

The songs, fights, and comedy scenes of Tamil cinema and south Indian cinemas more broadly, are often studied as “interruptions” in light of Lalita Gopalan's work which theorized that Hindi action cinema, and maybe popular Hindi cinema overall, is characterized by interruptions -- specifically, the fight sequence, the interval, and the song-and-dance sequence. In Tamil and other south Indian cinemas, the same interruptions occur albeit with a few more in tow: the comedy track, and the specificities of star processes. However, as Ravindran Gopalan has argued, conceiving of them as “interruptions” betrays a normative bias from a western perspective from which the song sequence is seen as breaking the narrative continuity and thus moving the movie away from western ideas of “realistic” cinema. Instead, he argues,

⁸ When the mass film takes on extra characteristics of any one genre, it is often categorized as a different kind of movie. For instance, if the film has more action than romance, it might be considered a “curry western” or a gangster film. The movie sometimes may focus more on the romantic side, in which case, it might get characterized as a romantic musical. Then there are films that focus on comedy and centralize it by making the hero the comedian figure and thus becomes a “comedy” movie.

Any commercial Indian film has to be seen in the same manner as the average Indian film viewer sees it – an organic whole, where the stars, their songs, stunts, moments of laughter and tragedies are interwoven more like a tightly knit fabric and less like a curtain of venetian blinds. (19)

In this dissertation, I attempt to look at them as somewhere caught between those two interpretations. They are not “interruptions,” for they are certainly a part of the narrative, without which many nuances and plot points are lost for the average native audience member. However, they are not completely a part of the film. The comedian and his track, the song sequences, and the moments of star politics of any given film can and do exist as individual texts and circulate outside a movie as video clips that are screened on TV channels dedicated to film comedy or songs. More recently, these narrative moments circulate as YouTube videos, memes, GIFs, and TikTok texts (till it was banned in late 2020). They are characteristic of the vernacular film form and they take on a characteristic of Tamil-ness in order to and as they circulate through social media circuits. The gradual change in how they function in Tamil movies in the twenty first century is why they can be studied as a crucial site of Tamil cinema’s attempts at being world cinema.

The three such sites that this dissertation looks at – stardom, comedy, and musical interruptions – have been used by filmmakers and producers, stars and comedians, and musicians and lyricists as a way articulating and presenting Tamil identity politics; they were, figuratively speaking, the “Tamil” of Tamil cinema. The three sites are not discrete units, but inform each other and are part of broader structural changes in the industry. For instance, a major change that has been observed is, as Vasugi Kailasam notes, the emergence of the neo-noir black comedy

film,⁹ made by a new generation of filmmakers like Karthik Subburaj, Nalan Kumarasamy or Vignesh Shvn etc. Their films rarely feature established heroes, comedy tracks, or expensive song sequences. This is partly due to the fact the new generation of filmmakers do not work with expensive budgets of the 1990s.¹⁰ Without a big star at the helm, the need for star processes like the introductory song sequence become unnecessary. Furthermore, the genre characteristics of the neo-noir black comedy de-necessitates constructing the hero as a moral centre, therefore does not require a comedian sidekick to play foil to him. Instead, the genre encourages ensemble casts of characters who are all partially comical. In such ways, the emergence of certain genres ripple across various aspects of filmmaking. These shifts change the make-up of labour and talent in the industry, as well as causing differences in the way the film industry feeds the political conditions in the state. After all, morally infallible heroes being constructed through cinema has been the backbone of the political leadership in post-independence Tamil Nadu.

The genres themselves are a product of, or maybe representative of, changes in the socio-economic make-up of Tamil Nadu.¹¹ Hariharan argues that dark comedy and the filmmakers that make them inherited a legacy “through the critical concerns surrounding the betrayal of a Tamil Dravidian Utopia by corrupt political leaders.” Further, he adds that:

These films in turn resonated with the dysfunctional portrayals of society in the works of Kim Ki Duk (*Coast Guard*), Almodovar (*All About My Mother*), Rodriguez (*Sin City*),

⁹ The emergence of a specific genre that is outside the masala mode is in itself a major shift.

¹⁰ As Hariharan notes, “New generation techies have practised their craft making dozens of short films uploaded on YouTube. They come armed with storyboards, ultra-comfortable with small DSLR cameras and limited lights, edit scenes on location on their laptops, complete their VFX works in tiny home studios, and even mix their 5.1 soundtracks in their backyard. And all this happens for less than Rs 1 crore a film, which would be the cost of making a low-budget documentary in the US. Interestingly, these films have buyers despite the fact that there is none of those songs or endlessly choreographed fights.”

¹¹ Another example would be the beginnings of the “woman-centric” film that centres a female lead and imbues Tamil-ness in a heroine for the first time.

Katia Lund (*City of God*), etcetera. The new anarchic Tamil cinema had gone far too global for the rest of the nation even to imagine.

Postmillennial Tamil cinema, in its form and content, betrays a “world cinema aesthetic” (Kailasam 24) and is product of the informal film school facilitated by the media piracy centred in Burma Bazaar in North Chennai. Appropriately, contemporary Tamil cinema caters to “the eclectic visual consumption tastes of the modern, Tamil spectator” (24). This coming together of various processes of the industry in the service of catering to a globalized (both Tamil and non-Tamil) audience is a holistic process I term, *worlding*.

The “worlding” of Tamil cinema

Worlding, simply put, is the ability and process of becoming more engaged with the world, where “world” is defined as different from “local,” “regional,” and “national”. In literary studies, the term *worlding* has had a long lineage from Hegel to Derrida to Spivak to Cheah, each of whom construct a different aspect of the philosophical concept of world and *worlding*. Pheng Cheah describes its usage in literary theory as “how a world is held together and given unity by the force of time. In giving rise to existence, temporalization worlds a world” (8). Most pertinent to my conception is its usage in postcolonial theory introduced by Gayatri Spivak. Spivak defines *worlding* as “a texting, textualizing, a making into art, a making into an object to be understood” (“Criticism, Feminism and The Institution.”). She acknowledges “worlding” to be imperialist project whereby the colonized were ontologically and epistemologically otherized through colonial discourses of representation. Thus, her conception of *worlding* implies the awareness of something that is open to interpretation as art and its ability to be “understood” and interpreted. Spivak theorized *worlding* at the beginnings of the postcolonial mo(ve)ment, where

she read colonizing forces of having “worlded” cultures and peoples through the discourses of colonialism (art, literature, cartography, naming etc). In other words, the colonized were worlded in order to be understood and interpreted by the western colonial forces. Therefore, to consider worlding is to consider the ways in which things and persons are recognized as objects for study (to be studied by the west).

In her own formulation of the term, she acknowledges that her “notion of the ‘worlding of a world’ upon what must be assumed to be uninscribed earth is a vulgarization of Martin Heidegger's idea” (“Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”). Heidegger’s “worlding” was the gerundive process of making one familiar with the world; to give meaning and significance to an extant world through interaction. It is not however an active process, in the sense that worlding is always happening, with little or no agency in the hands of the subject whose world is in the process of worlding. Spivak took upon this minimal agency and reframed it in the postcolonial lens whereby the Third World was being constructed through the imperialist mission of the Empire. The postcolonial figure was being worlded through otherization, even in the processes of decolonization. Postcolonial worlding was evidence of an imperialist discursive project that showcased the world on a map as drawn by colonial powers.

In the postglobal moment in which I write, I propose to take the term further away from its postcolonial intention by claiming a conscious and agentive role in the hands of the artist or collective of artists in their own worlding. Texts are being created to be present a subject rather than an object, to represent subjecthood, and they are created to be “understood” and interpreted by non-native audiences. In both cases, texts are worlded at the moment they are accessed or made real to an other, but in the postglobal moment, texts from postcolonial countries construct themselves; to make themselves familiar to the world by their own representations of themselves,

rather than an othering – the basis of Solanas and Getino’s manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema.” Where Spivak’s worlding of a world was a necessary formulation in the postcolonial era, in the contemporary post-national era of globalization, the erstwhile postcolonial countries are finding themselves with increasing access to and by the rest of the world. It is part of the discourse on post-nationalism that “replaces the binarisms with a more nuanced spectrum of subtle differentiations in a new global regime where First World and Third World are mutually imbricated” (Stam 32).

In this dissertation, I hope to develop “worlding” as a broad process of providing oneself with a global public discourse through a cognizant crafting of a self-image. It links to contemporary theorization of the “worldliness” of African cinema, which as defined by Nuttall and Mbembe

has to do not only with the capacity to generate one’s own cultural forms, institutions, and lifeways, but also with the ability to foreground, translate, fragment, and disrupt realities and imaginaries originating elsewhere, and in the process place these forms and processes in the service of one’s own making. (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 1)¹²

Working off this definition and borrowing from Ferguson and Achille, Carmela Garritano studies popular African (specifically Ghanaian) cinema:

As modern African cultural articulations, they participate in the “worlding” of Africa (Simone 2001) and the “indigenizing” (McCall 2002) of global technologies, styles, desires, and discourses. As global vernacular forms, they trouble generalizations about an

¹² Quoted in Garritano (14)

African or national identity because they emerge from, are shaped by, and reshape “a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space” (Appadurai 1996, 6). (Garritano 15)

Tamil cinema is caught in a similar process of “worlding” and “indigenizing,” in an attempt to transcend a specific national framework. However, the worlding of Ghanaian cinema (or popular cinema of Africa) is targeted at their growing diasporic communities. Garritano’s study illuminates the cultural ecology of globalization through the circulation of these videos “within the space of the *African* everyday” (15) (my emphasis). In contrast, Tamil cinema’s worlding, and the worlding that this project concerns itself with, has to do with a broader target audience, that is roughly defined as a balance of native and non-native audiences.¹³ This will, to an extent, continue to involve an otherizing; to locate oneself as singular and unique in a certain fashion. Simultaneously however, contemporary worlding will include processes of relatability – situating Tamil cinema as accessible and recognizable. The teleological end of the worlding of Tamil cinema is in its being read, interpreted, and understood as “world cinema.”

In a sense, the post-millennial turn of Tamil cinema i.e. the worlding of Tamil cinema undertakes the principles laid forth by Miriam Hansen in her theorizing of vernacular modernism, but marries it with what Garritano describes African popular video movies to be, a global vernacular. Hansen argues that cinema is always modern; it is created and sustained by technologies of modernity and constantly engages them, thus becoming a self-reflexive function of modernity. Central to her argument is that the dominance or even hegemony of modernist

¹³ For the purposes of Tamil cinema, I define “native” audiences as those members who are based out of south India, and have grown up with the Tamil language and its cinema as a primary language and mode of representation. First generation American citizens whose parents migrated from Tamil Nadu would be considered “non-native” for they usually do not grow up with or participate in the film cultures of Tamil cinema.

aesthetics -- championed by Hollywood as the harbinger of modernity -- allowed for a change in the medium of cinema as a whole. Hollywood's ability to be classical, low-brow, mass produced and therefore replicable and accessible, allowed for it to be reproduced across cultures; it became the vernacular of modernism. In contrast, Tamil cinema's worlding is in the postglobal moment; it is effected by the technologies of globalization (or the scapes of globalization, to borrow from Appadurai). As such, it is not Hollywood that is providing Tamil cinema its language to articulate or effect its globalized status. the processes of Tamil cinema diffuse the centre and find their inspirations and affectations from a myriad of film movements and industries, notably East Asian cinemas, other cinemas from India, Third Cinema, and global art cinema. The ready availability of media from non-Hollywood industries creates an environment of cross-cultural pollination that is wider and more diverse than at the moment of modernity.¹⁴ The lack of an unequivocal centre of influence for contemporary Tamil cinema posits that the *cinema franca* to which Tamil cinema is aspiring is not a Hollywood-dominated American cinema but the more amorphous idea of world cinema. The worlding of Tamil cinema demonstrates a vernacular globalization.

Vital to Tamil cinema's worlding is the consistent effort to mark itself as "not Bollywood," and at times "not Indian." With respect to contemporary mainstream Tamil cinema, the history of non-Indian politics cumulates in the erasure of difference between India and the world: they are the "other," the "outside," and are thus met with similar means of engagement. In other words, both the "rest of the world," and the "rest of the country" exist in a similar state of

¹⁴ There is the further argument of Hudson and Zimmerman that was mentioned earlier that for postcolonial nations like India, there may not have been a distinction between modernism and postmodernism (6). India's nationhood – a sign of modernity – was accorded at the moment of independences – the beginning of the postcolonial era. Arguably, modern nationhood was born at the same time as postmodern postcoloniality.

alterity to Tamil; Tamil cinema circulates similarly within the nation and outside – through diaspora, festivals and subtitles, streaming and piracy, and thus presents a series of questions about the dynamics of film circulation, how that affects world cinema, national cinema, festival programming and to an extent, the relationship between cinema and identity-formation. At its fundamental level, a non-national (at times, anti-national) film industry like Tamil cinema questions the validity of epistemological categories through which one navigates film studies – such as national cinema or in this specific case, “Indian” cinema. In sum, world cinema is that which has spheres of influence from outside its indigenous and vernacular traditions. In the case of Tamil cinema, that would include filmmakers who are influenced by Hindi or Bengali or Marathi cinema, and not just non-Indian cinema. It would expand beyond simply visibility, and account for the use of external influence on narrative modes and forms of cinematic storytelling for Tamil cinema circulating only within a Tamil audience. The worlding of Tamil cinema is then a multifaceted epistemological exploration: it is a curated enunciation of Tamil-ness, a diffusing of Hollywood’s singularity as quintessential “foreign cinema” in the Tamil imaginary, and broadly it is an exploration of the criteria and constraints of world cinema as a category.

The Digital Turn in Tamil Cinema

The digital is especially significant to the process of worlding because it situates Tamil cinema amongst other film cultures that are experiencing a similar shift in their machinations. Worlding through digital cultures is not singular to Tamil cinema but is a global phenomenon where marginalized film cultures are finding non-native exposure and influences. Brian Larkin, for instance, places utmost significance in media technologies as they work to create, sustain, and circulate Nigerian cinema. He argues,

Media technologies are more than transmitters of content, they represent cultural ambitions, political machineries, modes of leisure, relations between technology and the body, and in certain ways, the economy of and spirit of an age. (2)

In the context of Tamil cinema, the emergence of digital technologies, specifically, streaming and social media services, have played a vital role in effecting and sustaining its worlding. Media piracy, for instance, has offered Tamil filmmakers access to world cinema that has influenced their own work.¹⁵ This is not singular to Tamil cinema, of course; Hudson and Zimmerman, in their work on global digital media cultures, draw from the work of Ravi Sundaram, Brian Larkin, Tilman Baumgartel, and Moradewun Adejunmobi to illustrate how media piracy has enabled consumers of media in countries like India, Nigeria, and Philippines to participate more immediately in the consumption of world cinema (13). Piracy is only one aspect of digital technologies that has caused paradigmatic shifts in the production and consumption of popular cinema (and its scholarship). To expand Hudson and Zimmerman's argument, they claim "digital technologies challenge us to redefine media and conventions based on analogue technologies" (4). As such, their scholarship on digital cultures helps us configure world cinema as constructed and curated through digital media, for it is the internet and its technologies and apparati that scaffold the category's existence.

In particular, Hudson and Zimmerman's formulation of cinephilia in the digital era as one that redefines traditional Eurocentric notions of cinephilia comes to light. They expand cinephilia

¹⁵ In my interviews with contemporary filmmakers Ram and Vetrimaran, the role of the pirated movie business centred in Burma Bazaar, Chennai, was repeatedly underscored as a crucial creative influence by giving them access to, say, the work of Akira Kurosawa.

into the subnational love of the Tamil films of Kollywood (Chennai) in south India, the transnational love of Egyptian musical comedies in Palestine, and the love of Hindi films during Israeli bans on Egyptian films. Cinephilia includes the love of Bollywood films by non-Hindi speaking audiences in Nigeria that merges within the rebirth of Nollywood with the success of *Living in Bondage*. (193)

Engaging with and appreciating cinema should no longer be confined to the paradigms of text and author, but situated in what they term “collaborative remix zones,” which allow for the inclusion of amateur films, fan texts, pirated media, trailers, and other extra- and paratexts of cinema in the study of cinema. This particular configuration of film studies praxis is particularly useful given the structural quirks of Tamil cinema and the way they are changing in the process of worlding (such as the extra texts and paratexts, that have renewed existence as GIFs, hashtags, and memes).

In this dissertation, I use the logics of social media, specifically Twitter, to scaffold the reading of Tamil cinema’s paratexts, mostly because it is the platform with which I am most familiar, but also because Twitter is seen as the site that is more suited for discussions of Tamil cinema than other platforms (Venkatraman 51)¹⁶. Other than social media, other digital sites like streaming platforms (predominantly YouTube, but also Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Disney Hotstar) can be read as necessitating the worlding of Tamil cinema circulation and exhibition

¹⁶ In his ethnographic study of the social media cultures of Panchagrami, a peri-urban extension of Chennai, Shriram Venkatraman observes:

One of the most apparent commonalities in social media postings [...] is their devotion to two public genres for which Tamil Nadu is well-known, namely cinema and politics. [...] The upper socioeconomic class constantly share posts on cinema, which they might describe on their pages as ‘intelligent articles on cinema and political news, and sometimes as political satire. The lower middle and lower socio-economic classes tend to be more explicit about their passion for cinema and politics by posting visuals of their favorite actor or actress, or images of the political party they support, on Facebook. (201)

since they require translations and subtitling, and thus affect the content and form of the movies being made. There is also the role of media-upload and sharing sites such as YouTube and SoundCloud in sustaining paratexts and extra-texts like audio-release functions, trailers, teasers, making videos, interviews, and fan texts (both genuine and in spoof).

My focus is on how Tamil nationalism and Tamil globalism recur and are reincarnated across these various platforms very specifically through the changes to Tamil cinema. The digital social scapes of south India became a site of political resistance with calls to #stopHindiImposition and bring back #Dravidanadu. The intervention of digital networks has had a significant impact in the way Tamil cinema has shaped itself to be a vehicle for the propaganda of Tamil identity politics. The worlding of Tamil cinema is certainly a product of the growing digital cultures in Tamil Nadu. Digital media, whether as modes of production, exhibition, or circulation, have engendered digital presences and afterlives for several parts of the Tamil film industry and its agents and commodities. Whether it is the politics of stardom that gain a new platform through social media, or the availability of new releases worldwide through OTT platforms, pirated or otherwise, or digital remasterings of older Tamil films for re-releases, the digital avatars and afterlives of Tamil cinema have come to form a predominant mode of engagement with the industry.

Worlding is a holistic process of film industry and filmmaking culture and I have chosen the “interruptions” of comedy, stardom, and musical sequences as the most convenient sites of studying the changes. Each of these sites has been experiencing modifications that continues to insist upon said Tamil-ness, but this Tamil-ness is no longer situated in a blind rejection of India and the world outside. The ability to integrate itself into world cinema cultures is increasingly seen as a sign of the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema. In fact, the contemporary moment of Tamil

cinema is unique in its history, because it is the first time the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema is being played out on a world cinema stage, outside the ideological confines of “regional” and “national,” with an explicit aim to find global visibility.

This dissertation’s secondary function is the worlding of Tamil cinema scholarship as well; to expand film history and film theory through Tamil cinema’s participation in world cinema. Tamil cinema is commercial film industry that doesn’t have a history of a distinct art cinema scene that could have been included in previous studies of cinemas of India. World cinema, however, allows for a more inclusive scholarship. The scholarship of world cinema takes on the form polycentric multiculturalism, and refused to be rooted in a singular mode of academic writing, or even a monograph form. Ba and Higbee for instance claim that a “[v]ariety of (non-academic) writing styles and forms of expression have been incorporated into *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, and we would claim that this itself to as a form of de-westernizing” (13). This dissertation looks at how the nature of cinema and filmmaking have responded to the ways the “Tamil-ness” of Tamil cinema has been evolving in the twenty-first century. It looks specifically at cinema as a means and mode of production of identities—specifically a global Tamil identity and situates this in the changes to cinematic identities and film genres. *Situating Tamil Cinema* then presents the worlding of Tamil cinema and its scholarship as simultaneous and symbiotic processes.

Chapter 1: The World of Tamil Cinema

Thamizha Thamizha! Naalai nam naale.

Thamizha Thamizha! Naadum nam naade.

En veedu thaai thamizhnaadu endre sollada

Ennaamam indhiyan endre endrum nillada

- “*Thamizha Thamizha!*”, *Roja* (Mani Ratnam 1992)¹⁷

Bhaarith humko jaan se pyaara hai

Sabse nyaara gulistan hamara hai

Sadiyon sein bhaarith bhoomi duniya ki shaan hai

Bhaarat maa ki raksha mein jeevan qurbaan hai

- “*Bhaarith Humko*”, *Roja* (Mani Ratnam 1992)¹⁸

Having just been born at the time of *Roja*’s release, I wasn’t aware first-hand that depending on where you were, you heard only one version of this song as you walked out of the theatre. If you were in Tamil Nadu, it was the Tamil version. Otherwise, it was likely the Hindi version. Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* is about a Tamil decryption analyst for the Indian military stationed in Kashmir, and his *pattikaadu* (rural) bride. As the credits roll in the Tamil version, the lyrics – written by a sympathizer of the Dravidian movement – put forth the Tamil identity ahead of the Indian by first calling out to the Tamilian (“*Thamizha!*”): “Say that your house is of Mother Tamil” precedes the call to proclaim that one shall say that they are Indian. The Hindi version of

¹⁷ All translations are author translations. Trans. (Tamil)– Fellow Tamil-ian! Tomorrow is our day. Fellow Tamil-ian! This country is also our country. Say that your house is of Mother Tamil. Stand by that your name is of an Indian.

¹⁸ Trans. (Hindi) – We love India more than our lives. Ours is a unique garden. Amongst them all, India shines. Our lives can be given in protection of Mother India.

the same song *begins* with the word “*Bhaarith*” – the Sanskritized (and hence in opposition to Tamil) word for India that (supposedly) comes from the Hindu epic *Mahabhaaritham*. In its very first word the Hindi version alienates the *Thamizha* of the Tamil version.

The contemporary filmmaker Mani Ratnam is known for his almost always bilingual films (Tamil and Hindi) and almost always “India-centred” plot lines from *Roja* onward. The rest of Ratnam’s pan-Indian trilogy consists of *Bombay* (1995) and *Uyire/Dil Se..* (1998), which narrate issues of the Babri Masjid riots and the Northeast insurgency movement respectively. As the nuances in the lyrics show, in the Tamil versions of these films and their songs he neither abandons the idea of Tamil nationalism nor abandons the idea of a singular nationalism. Whereas in the Hindi versions, Ratnam often takes an uncompromisingly Indian stance. And maybe that is why he is not considered as a wholly Tamil director. The imagined India in Mani Ratnam’s films is in several ways a direct result of Tamil Nadu’s position in India in the 1990s, and India’s position in the world. His work is one example of how cinema, and the current worlding of Tamil cinema allows one to understand the long political history of Tamil cinema and Tamil identity in the broader Indian cultural context.

The separation between the Tamil nation (translated as தமிழ் நாடு/ *Thamizh Naadu*; which is also the name of the political sub-unit, officially transliterated as Tamil Nadu) and the Indian nation-state is vital to the identity of Tamil cinema. It marked Tamil cinema in its formative years and continues to do so in the twenty first century. To quote contemporary filmmaker Ram, “the identity of Tamil cinema is rooted in an ethos of non-Indian, Dravidian ideology.¹⁹” As the entirety of scholarship on Tamil cinema has at some point or another pointed out, it is one of the

¹⁹ Personal interview

most directly political film industries of India. And it has been a politics of Tamil nationalism that has been placed at the forefront since its beginnings under the British Raj. Tamil cinema has then always been a national cinema. It has not, however, been a cinema with consistent imaginations of the nation-state under whose sovereignty it is included.

If national cinema has been the ideological brainchild of the nation as a conception of Western modernity, it stands to reason that Tamil cinema has not had the legitimacy to call itself a national cinema given that it has not rallied to construct an imaginary of a unified nation-state of India. It has instead sought to break such a perception and replace it with notion of a Tamil – or a broader Dravidian – nationalism. It is not national cinema in the way that the term has conventionally been understood.

We must abandon the rubric of national cinemas if we are to consider the multiple, conjectural pressures applied by decolonization on the political entities of an imperial state and its imperial colony" (Jaikumar 1).

The alternative to Priya Jaikumar's clarion call would be to abandon the notion that a nation-state can only appreciate nationalist mind-set for only one idea of nation, the territorial nation.

To take from Marguerite Barnett's initial exposition on the politics of cultural nationalism in South India, the Dravidian movement rests on the idea that to be a territorial nationalist is not the same as to be a cultural nationalist:

Tamil nationalism is not territorial but cultural nationalism. (...) [W]hile territorial nationalist gives priority to the direct relationship of the individual to the territorially defined

nation state, the cultural nationalist gives priority to the collective cultural realization through nationalism (8).

Albeit a theoretical stretch, it stands to reason that this contention between territorial and cultural nationalism confers upon Tamil cinema its status as a product of postcoloniality. It forces one to question once again the validity of imposing a western model of nationalism upon a “nation” constructed in a rhetoric of anti-colonialism. To quote from the opening paragraph of Madhav Prasad’s *Cine-Politics*

Political life in independent India has been fundamentally defined by conflicts over national identity. India, a political unit brought into being by the combined imaginations of colonial rulers and early nationalists, was sometimes seen as representing a broad civilisational unity among a number of national identities. On the other hand, given the compulsions of inherited colonial form of the state and the sense of insecurity experienced by the new ruling powers, India itself had to be conceived as a nation so as to fall in line with the new global order of nation-states. (1)

In other words, the formation of India as a nation was not an organic coming together of communities, but rather a forced commingling upon which a nation-state and a resultant nationalism was imposed. It is an artificially formed nation-state that was forged on the principle of religious difference and independence from colonialism. This ignored the several ethnic and linguistic differences within itself, including the inability of its citizens to agree upon a vernacular to take up as lingua franca. The nation-state then was always fragile in India, threatened as it was by several nationalisms that erupted from within.

The strongest of these was the call for a *Dravidanadu/Dravidstaan*, or a separate nation of South India that was based on a notion of racial and linguistic difference from the Aryan race and their Indo-European languages. Based primarily out of the Madras presidency, the separatist movement began in the years leading up to independence. Renewed in the 60s and 70s by the anti-Hindi agitations and the emergency imposed by the Congress government at the centre, the movement has found resurgence in the twenty first century, with Twitter seeing a surge of #StopHindiImposition and #DravidaNadu tweets responding to various political and cultural happenings in India and abroad, especially the Narendra Modi administration.

The argument being put forth here is that the Tamil film industry through its insistence on a non-Indian nationalism, seek to complicate the equation of a politically unified nation-state to a culturally homogenous nationalism. With respect to contemporary mainstream Tamil cinema, this history of non-Indian politics becomes significant as the trajectory cumulates in the erasure of difference between India and the world. Both categories – the nation-state and the world – were integral facets of Tamil cinema’s history. They were almost always the “other,” the “outside,” and are thus met with similar means of engagement by twenty first century Tamil cinema filmmakers.

Tamil cinema’s relationship to political events in Tamil Nadu demands a historical narrative that is curated by political events. Scholars such as Meena Gaur have argued that “[P]eriodisation of Indian films in relationship to national events is (...) problematic in understanding films as they often force the more polyphonous readings of films into simple narratives of change the tendency to write films into a teleological narrative of India as a secular democracy" (Pohjonen 11). However, in opposition to Gaur’s stand, it is *because* of cinema’s

intimacy with formal political systems in Tamil Nadu, that a periodisation that simultaneously takes into account changes in politics and cinema *can produce* a polyphonous reading that destabilizes the notion of an Indian cinema.

I focus on two ideas: the politics of regionalism and the dynamics of access as they have played out in the past century and have influenced contemporary mainstream Tamil cinema to balance a tendency towards the global and a movement away from and as opposed to “Indian,” by aligning the rest of India with the world. The negotiation with the national and the international/world was a necessary part of the Tamil cinema’s history in that it eventually set the stage for the worlding of Tamil cinema in the twenty first century. In particular, the account offers a consolidated history of Tamil cinema, and the way it has navigated national and global film cultures, identity politics.

Early Tamil Cinema: The beginnings of worlding

The history of anti-national nationalism can be seen even at the beginnings of Tamil cinema. Cinema in India began and flourished in the presidencies of Bombay and Calcutta before gaining prominence in the South. By the time cinema spread to Madras, Hindu mythology was already one of the leading subjects of Indian cinema. Being the era of silent cinema, the language barrier wasn’t as prominent, and films travelled rather seamlessly across presidencies. In Madras, Nataraja Mudaliar and R. Prakasa were at the forefront of filmmaking from 1916 to 1934, when about 124 films were made. Film historian Theodore Baskaran elucidates that the primary form of entertainment at this time was the tradition of the company drama – early Tamil cinema’s chief source of inspiration. Early film artistes were straight off the theatrical stage and cinema borrowed techniques such as painted backdrops, and camera-facing/frontal monologues from

company drama (Baskaran *History of the Lens*). One of the most important introductions from this era was the interval. A mid-show break, initially meant for stage-hands to change sets, while the audience gathered refreshments, went on to be a built-in feature of story-telling in most South Indian films. As Tamil cinema started becoming itself – with the introduction of sound and thereby spoken language – its company drama background began fading to irrelevance.

With the commercial viability of talkies, more filmmakers entered the scene, seeking to talk about social issues, rather than exclusively mythology. An important issue at this time, not just in Madras, but all over India, was obviously the Indian movement for independence. With the beginnings of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement in 1931 and 1942 respectively, the themes of Indian independence and Gandhian values entered the ideoscapes of Tamil cinema. Films like *Thyaagaboomi* (Subramanyam 1939), *Mathruboomi* (Reddy 1938), *Sevasadanam* (Subramanyam 1938) were made foregrounding the Indian independence movement. “Even in the very first Tamil film, *Kalidas* (Reddy 1931), although a mythological film, there was a song praising Gandhian ideals and the charka” (Baskaran *Eye of the Serpent* 38). This may have been the last moment when Tamil cinema was a consistent and willing collaborator in the project of Indian nation-building.

Outside the domain of film, Dravidian politics of region and caste were already in swing. The Justice Party (originally the South Indian Liberal Federation) had been founded in 1917 to represent non-Brahmin interests in the Madras Presidency and was in power till the Indian National Congress won the 1937 elections. By the 1930s, E.V. Ramswamy Naicker (E.V.R aka *Periyar*) had lain claim to leadership of the party, after his split from Congress, and had called for a separate *Dravidistan*. Having been transformed into a social organization, the primary agenda of the Justice Party was the battle against the caste system, which was considered an

import of the Aryan religious practices. However, the younger members (who had in the meanwhile made the transition from company drama playwrights to screenwriters themselves) soon formed the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK; Dravidian Progressive Federation) under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai (“Anna”), which had more overt political ambitions and would take control of the state in the 1960s.

The introduction of talkies and the advancement of the Dravidian movement also coincided with a renewed interest in the Tamil language and culture from both Indian and European scholars. As such, the thirties marked the beginning of extensive dialogues written and delivered in embellished chaste Tamil as a celebration and construction of a grand literary history. “To a society that had been humiliated by colonial rule and the attendant cultural hegemony, the nostalgic vision of a glorious past was almost like recompense and was zealously embraced” (Baskaran *The Eye of the Serpent* 46). The Tamil in Tamil cinema was thus created.

It must be noted that along with anti-national tendencies, the worlding of Tamil cinema also began in its very inception. A good portion of film screenings during the initial decades of film exhibition in Madras was comprised of *serials* from USA and Europe. Popular until the 1930s, these were episodic melodramas with high entertainment value and easy to follow action plots. “Two of Universal’s star attractions [–] the serial actors Elmo Lincoln and Eddie Polo [– were] the first film personalities to be widely recognized by name, with a loyal fan following in the region” (Hughes 299). However, film exhibition was highly regulated by the British. For instance, after World War I, only British and American films were allowed in India, implying that films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein 1925) were banned in India. As World War II came around, filmmaking took a sharp drop all over India and only war films were commissioned at the time. Tamil films fell to only 10 a year between 1942 and 1946.

Interestingly, early Tamil cinema also lays claim to an American filmmaker who was enthusiastic about working in Tamil cinema. Ellis Dungan, a graduate from the University of Southern California, found initial success in Tamil cinema with *Iru SakodarargaL* (1936). He adapted *Romeo and Juliet* for the Tamil screen in 1937 with *Ambikapathi*, a period drama set in the Chola kingdom. Dungan was also noted for introducing M.G. Ramachandran to the Tamil film scene, thus birthing the biggest star Tamil cinema and Tamil politics would ever see. Dungan was a pioneer in reducing the number of songs in a film, as well as increasing emphasis on actor performances, tuning the more culturally specific aesthetics of Tamil cinema towards a more internationally familiar mode.

These strands of influence worked to construct the socio-political make-up of the Tamil film industry in the 50s and 60s; its most politically radical era. At the same time, these beginnings built a foundation of worlding that would be echoed in the cinema of 1980s and almost cyclically, again in the 21st century. These early global leanings of Tamil cinema allow us to question the novelty of world cinema as a category. The film form, both within India and transnationally, was cross-culturally accessible, visible, and recognizable – or at least tending to be – even at the stages of early cinema.

The DMK Era: The cementing of Tamil-ness

*MGR-u, Sivaji saar-u, NTR-u, Rajkumar-u/ Ivanga nadicha cinema
cinema/ Idhupol idhupol varuma varuma?*²⁰

– “Cinema Cinema”, *Baba* (Krissna 2002)

²⁰ Trans. – MGR, Sivaji, NTR, Rajkumar, can there be cinema again like that in which they acted?

There has been much written on the subject of the DMK's patronage and instrumentalization of Tamil cinema (See Sivathamby; Pandian; Prasad; Hardgrave Jr.; Baskaran). "The founding of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam political party in 1949 was a turning point in the political history of Tamil Nadu, South India, because it ushered in the era of Tamil cultural nationalism" (Barnett 1). And because the members of the DMK were the most active writers in Tamil theatre and film "(t)he discernible impact of the Tamil film on the political behaviour and the conscious use of the medium for political ends start with the emergence of the DMK" (Sivathamby 22). In terms of the Dravidian ideological influence on and of Tamil cinema, the 1950s through the 1970s is the most significant period, in that – with star-politicians like M.G Ramachandran, "Shivaji" Ganesan, N.T. Rama Rao and Rajkumar – it was the most overtly political moment of South Indian cinema. Divisible into two eras – the DMK era and the MGR era – this period comprises of scriptwriters and filmmakers who insisted upon a resistance against Brahminism, the Brahmin-favouring caste system, and a Hindi nationalism driven by a North Indian hegemony.

Scholars have tried to trace the use of cinema for political ends in Tamil Nadu back to the Soviet filmmakers of the first half of the twentieth century "But these [Tamil] revolutionaries did not envisage a new cinema for the masses so much as instituting a way of using the existing popular film melodrama as a vehicle for communicating party propaganda" (Prasad 36). The most studied films from this period are *Velaikkari* ("Servant"; Sami 1949) scripted by Anna and *Parasakthi* (Krishnan-Panju 1952) scripted by Karunanidhi. Both these films, despite certain provocative moral stances and lapses in continuity, were "superhits" and were patronized by Tamil audiences for at least a year each in theatres. They each expressed a violent displeasure with the caste and class systems then prominent in Tamil Nadu. *Velaikkari*

took a stance against the zamindari system, and privileges – both social and economic – claimed by the land-owning class. *Parasakthi*, with its oft-critiqued scene of a priest raping the protagonist's (played by "Shivaji" Ganesan) sister in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple dedicated to the goddess Parasakthi, unabashedly took on Brahminical supremacy, as well as the ruling Congress party's administrative lackings in the state. Taking these two movies as representative of this time, it can be stated that movies of the DMK era sought to construct a secular Tamil existence that resisted a Hindu-centred nation-state, a Brahmin-centric society.

In parallel to the increasing ubiquity of DMK screenwriters, the star power of M.G. Ramachandran and "Shivaji" Ganesan was rising very conspicuously. While Shivaji was a character actor well-known for his oratory eloquence in classical Tamil, MGR – by way of the Robin Hood-esque roles he was playing – soon became the fan-favourite and was preferred by the masses. Scripts were being written not just for the party propaganda, but the stars as well. On screen, MGR was the cowherd, the rickshaw puller, the bandit, the farmhand, and other characters that the masses found relatable. The success and the moral victories of his characters provided hope and inspiration for audiences around the state. He was the main draw at DMK campaign platforms, and his films' successes were commonly celebrated by carrying him around in a procession through the city by the party.²¹

In Tamil Nadu especially, film and politics bled into each other, almost literally at times. Towards the peak of the election campaign of 1967, MGR was shot by his on-screen

²¹ It must be noted at this juncture that this phenomenon was not singular to Tamil cinema. In essence this period in the history of South India saw the parallel rise of film-star politicians who ran on a platform of ethno-linguistic nationalism; an occurrence not all that familiar to the northern states. This becomes significant when trying to unpack the ideology of Dravidism as being one that rests on fundamental cultural and supposedly genetic/racial similarities that are shared by the South Indian people; similarities that would be continually called upon in this history.

villain counterpart M.R Radha (or so the court ruled). Having been almost a fatal hit, MGR conducted the rest of his campaign with simply a photo of his bandaged self on a hospital bed. That election saw a thumping victory of MGR in his constituency and an overall victory for DMK. Annadurai, the then head of the DMK became Chief Minister, although his sudden death gave him but a little more than a year in office. M. Karunanidhi, the second in command, and the other prolific scriptwriters in the industry then, took over office. It was the first time a non-Congress power took control of Tamil Nadu and the situation has not reverted since.

Cinema continued to idealize Tamil values and propagated values of social equality, the face of which would be MGR. These “nativity films”²² grounded ideas of Tamil righteousness in the Tamil Nadu village and were embodied by MGR. Whether because MGR’s popularity inspired jealousy, or there truly were ideological differences, MGR soon left the DMK and launched his own party – the Anna DMK. Songs from his movies doubled up as campaign slogans, while his campaigns would often be used to promote his movies. Eventually, the ADMK won the 1977 state elections. Despite the heavy popularity that he enjoyed, even while he was Chief Minister of the state, MGR’s reign has been described as the darkest period in Tamil Nadu’s political history. The sycophancy and autocracy in and of his time, along with the secrecy and links to the Congress party (then at the Centre) resulted in several political, socio-economic, and cultural failures (Pandian). However, since the

²² The nativity genre is a commonly used phrase in journalistic and common discourse of Tamil cinema. It is an umbrella term that covers a genre of films set in the rural and portray the disturbance caused to the idyllic and ideal village life by the intrusion of modernity.

formation of the ADMK, the two Dravidian parties have been alternating control over Tamil Nadu, briefly interrupted by the President's rule during times of national emergency.

This was the only period when this engagement was as explicit and maybe that is why, as the opening lyrics of this section show, this period of cinema is still held in reverence. However, the DMK era of Tamil cinema, and the '50s and '60s of South Indian cinema broadly set the base for cinema's constant, consistent, and close engagement with formal political systems. It also cemented the links between the film industries of the south, whereby talent and technicians could move fluidly between the states, and dubbing was a fairly common way of marketing across the south. It was a time when a larger "region" of South India was established in opposition to Bollywood and Bengali cinema.

Maybe because the major contributors to the film industry had been subsumed by their political ambition and activities, films grew less overtly political from the early '70s. Alternatively, it is also possible that given the political stability and autonomy achieved by the Dravidian movement at the time, neither the public nor the political parties felt the need to insist upon its ideals through media. An argument could be made that this sense of socio-political comfort gave way to a new direction for the Tamil film industry, appropriately called the Tamil New Wave. Irrespective of why the over-politicisation of Tamil cinema faded, this era makes the case for Tamil cinema to be considered significant when studying the political capabilities of the film form, in conjunction with genres such as the Soviet propaganda films.

The Tamil New Wave (1970s & '80s): The Anomaly of Art Cinema



Figure 1: Opening notes of “How to Name It,” Ilayaraja

In his essay on what he terms the post-classical turn in 1970s Tamil cinema, Eswaran Pillai elaborates that there were several contributing factors to the highly perceptible change in Tamil cinema in that decade.

The 1970s in Tamil cinema marks a unique time when a distinct transition from the old to the new occurs. The studio system, which was on the decline from the mid-1960s, loses its influence over the film industry and in its place emerges a powerful network of independent producers and technicians who redefine Tamil cinema by dictating the form and content of its films. Simultaneous to the fading away of the centrality of the studio system, its biggest stars MGR (Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran) and Sivaji Ganesan too, have lost their preeminence as key players who substantially dictated the economics of the industry through their dominance of the box-office for over two decades. (77)

If the '60s insistence on a Tamil identity set up the industry's dynamics of interaction with the local and the national, the 1970s and '80s looked to grapple with the questionable coexistence of Tamil traditions and global modernity, and thus began the worlding of Tamil cinema. “A sense of complacency was achieved with respect to a Dravidian political cultural identity by the late

'70s. It was either going to be ADMK or DMK in power, so there was longer a necessity felt by artists to insist upon a Dravidian nationalism” (Ram) and thus maybe they looked to the world outside. It can be said that this was the period of Tamil cinema marked by the dictum “art for art’s sake,” more so than any other time in its history, and maybe this is why the Tamil New Wave can be seen as the ideological and artistic predecessor to contemporary Tamil cinema.²³

The New Wave or the Post-Classical Turn²⁴ in the '70s and '80s was one of the first explicitly world-oriented phases of Tamil cinema. Moving outside the studio and the independent nature of the production line were some markers of the European New Wave that lent its title to the Tamil film industry of these decades. Additionally, Tamil films tended away from the social melodramas of the MGR era and found themselves at a more realist standpoint. On one hand, filmmakers like Bharathiraja focussed on the dynamics of interaction between the Tamil rural and the modern urban. The other steward of this movement, K. Balachander, delved into the psychosexualities of the newly modern Tamil urban middle class. In a sense these were films that were starkly worlded and yet deeply Tamil.

It would be unfair to say that this international influence was singular to Tamil cinema in India at that time, but for this particular account of history of Tamil cinema, it would be apropos to state that the Tamil film industry was certainly more worlded than the other film industries of the south. This was also the time when a new batch of stars was yet to replace the vacuum created by the departures of MGR and Shivaji. Future “Superstar” Rajnikanth and yet-to-be

²³ It is also the case that filmmakers of the 70s served as mentors and teachers for the post-millennial filmmakers.

²⁴ Scholars and commentators on Tamil cinema have used either of these descriptors to describe Tamil cinema in the decades of MGR’s reign. Filmmaking moved out of the studios and took up on-location shoots, as well as using non-actors and realistic storylines. These were all reminiscent of the New Wave and Neorealist movements in France and Italy. They also took a sharp turn from narrative and filmmaking norms of Tamil cinema thus far, but retained certain integral characteristics, such as song sequences and were thus not entirely a “new” wave.

“Universal Hero” Kamal Haasan were only just making their way into similar paradigms of stardom. As such the major figures of this time were not on-screen stars, but writers and directors like K. Balachander, Bharathiraja, Komal Swaminathan, J. Mahendran etc. The star system reconfigured itself around story-tellers rather than the performers, a phenomenon that would come to be redone three decades later.

As such, an analysis of this “period of profound crisis for Tamil cinema” (Kaali 168) can be divided into three geo-political categories: the rural, the urban, and a third category that lumps together the politics of region, nation, and world. I choose this particular form of organization as these are the same three elements of cinema that went through a marked transition in the twenty first century existence of Tamil cinema.

The Rural: Neo-nativity films and modernity

In his essay on what he terms “neo-nativity” films, Sundar Kaali outlines the drastic changes to the genre of nativity films in the 1970s. There were two facets of change to the nativity genre that was earlier championed by MGR. On the one hand, there was a change in the representation of modernity and tradition. In the old-nativity films of the MGR era, films imbued the righteousness of Tamil parochialism in the rural male. In *Pattikaada Pattanama* (“Village or Town?”; Madhavan 1972) for instance, the “hero” (in this case, played by Shivaji) is a rural agrarian and upholder of classic Tamil values. The heroine is an educated woman from the city who ends up marrying and subsequently “ruining” the hero. She replaces his ancestral plough with her cactus, and breaks decorum by drinking and dancing with her friends. Through a series of acts of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by the hero, the woman is brought in line and is reconfigured as the *Thamizh thaai* (Mother Tamil), reunited with child and triumphant

husband. In *Rosappoo Ravikaikaari* (“The Woman in the Rose Blouse;” Devraj-Mohan 1979), a similar trajectory is invoked whereby a modern, educated, urban woman comes into the life of a man and his village. However, by this time the genre has recalibrated itself around an infantile (and in other films impotent, infertile, or mentally challenged) male protagonist replacing the rustic hero of the old nativity film. While in this film too the woman ushers in an age of techno-modernity, the gramophone does not replace the phallic masculinity of a plough but the traditions implied in the hero’s vocal skills. Whereas older nativity films would end in resolution brought about by explicit demonstrations of phallic dominance, neo-nativity films rarely reached a cathartic resolution. In the case of *Rosaapoo Ravikaikaari*, after marital, colonial, and physical transgressions, the film ends in simultaneous but separate acts of suicide of both protagonists. The neo-nativity films thus continued but complicated the generic traditions of the nativity film.

Another significant change in the nativity film was the reversal of the gender of modernity. An exemplary film would be Bharathiraja’s *Kallukul Eeram* (Moisture in the Rock 1980). In a metaphorical move, the film depicts the disruptions caused when a film crew taking advantage of the idyllic village setting sets up camp for an extended shoot. This was a rather timely move given that, at a time when filmmakers were moving outside the studio, a common aesthetic marker of the neo-nativity films were panoramic shots of the village, and on-location shoots for the rest of the film. In this film, modernity was engendered in the male. Two female archetypes – Katti, the outspoken and proactive lover, and Cholai, the restrained and shy lover – fall for the star and director of the film respectively. While the star struggles with his existing relationship in the city and the strain caused to it by Katti’s interest, the director enjoys the reticence of Cholai. Through the course of the movie, other men in the village attempt to rape Cholai and are subsequently killed by the village madman. The director of and in the movie,

Bharathiraja has his own character killed for a similar transgression. Of note in this characterization is the shift in how the “other” was portrayed. In the DMK era, that was threatened by issues of national identity, the outsider was presented in the form of a non-Tamil transgressive woman. Within the discourse of the neo-nativity films, the outsider was theorized as the English-speaking worldly man.

In essence, this new iteration of the nativity film repositions the rural not as the strong centre of Tamil morality but as a fragile entity that can be easily threatened by the urban modernity. That the film ends in a tragic lack of resolution became the signature of the new format of this genre. The lack of resolution was part of what defined the realism of this neo-nativity genre. “Movies looked artificial and the studio sets made things artificial. Where are the villages and people I know? I couldn’t see them. And so, I decided to make movies where they did exist,” Bharathiraja has stated in an interview, adding, “normal people don’t look like Kamal Haasan, so I had all sorts of newcomers and unknown faces acting in my movies.” Bharathiraja was only amongst other filmmakers making neo-nativity films with these new ideas of realism (“Interview with Director Bharathiraja: Part 01”). And instead of a victory of the rural over the urban, the new genre finds resolution (or lack thereof) in a playing out of mutual self-destruction.

Alternatively, we had filmmakers like J. Mahendran who revised extant archetypes in the rural genre. His seminal film *UthiripookaL* (“Loose Flowers;” 1979), for instance, starred newcomers, featured on-location principal photography, and centred on a sadistic adulterous protagonist who is a cruel embezzling landlord. The end of the movie, where the villagers have ganged up against him and have given him the liberty to choose his manner of death, finds the protagonist in a tender moment with his children before committing suicide. The nuances of characters and the realism offered by way of location and costume may be why “1979 was the

year of *UthiripookaL*,” is a statement with which many Tamil film enthusiasts agree. An earlier film, *Mullum Malarum* (“The Thorn and The Flower;” 1978) was one of the earliest to feature Rajnikanth in a positive protagonist role and may have lain the path to his stardom. The neo-nativity genre brought to the table very real complications to erstwhile popular tropes and pushed Tamil cinema to be more “class” cinema than “mass” cinema.

Presenting an interesting moment of juxtaposition against this would be the entry and quick rise to popularity of music composer “*Isaignani*”²⁵ Ilayaraja who began to fill Tamil cinema with folk beats and songs of local dance forms such as *mayilaatam*, *uyilaatam*, *karagaatam*, *kaavadiaatam* etc. Instruments moved away from the violins and veenas of classical composers such as M.S. Viswanathan and were replaced by *kuththu* beats from traditional percussion instruments like the *urumi*, *parai*, and *thavil*. Yet, he is the first Asian to compose for London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and noted for bringing in western musical aesthetic to Tamil cinema/music. Easily one of the most recognized and revered musicians in and from India, that Ilayaraja’s music is the constant and resounding soundtrack of these two decades, presents Tamil cinema’s worlding as a comfortable dissociative process. After having spent decades insisting upon an autonomous identity within India, the ’70s and ’80s were a moment of furthering that insistence by ignoring the nation-state and instead placing the world as the other. The process of otherizing, however, required an intimate engagement with the practices of global modernity.

²⁵ Trans. – Music genius

The Urban: K Balachander and Gender

The modernized, educated urban that would transgress the mores of the village was represented as its own dysfunctional microcosm in these decades. Illustrative of this move was K. Balachander (KB), one of the several auteurs that made their way into Tamil cinema. Maybe influenced by his stage background, his films were often set in the domestic interiors of what is usually a Brahmin household and sought to expose the debauchery behind the façade of caste purity that was still being upheld by the upper castes. Along with their increased access to forms of techno-modernity came the increasing acceptance of the cultural values of global modernity. In the case of the '70s, this was a mix of remnants of colonial British values and the cursory beginnings of capitalist American values. It was not simply a reconfiguration of the “other,” but a literal shift in from where this other would come.

In his films, KB often took the underside of these transitions in value systems and embodied them in adulterous wives and incestuous fathers. In the case of *Avargal* (“Them” 1977), the protagonist is a woman who’s supposed to have been in a pre-marital relationship at the outset. Her supporting characters include her jilted and abusive ex-husband Ramanathan, her ventriloquist widowed colleague Janardhan aka Johnny and his dummy, her former mother-in-law, and her once-upon-a-time lover. Hitherto underrepresented characters such as these found themselves protagonists. Divorce, that was still seen as taboo amongst the upper castes in the '70s and '80s, is the opening narrative sequence of the film. We see the Bombay High Court ruling on Anu’s divorce from Ramanathan, and on issues of alimony and child custody. The story continues to follow Anu (narrated in the past tense by Johnny’s dummy) as she travels back to Madras from Bombay and reconnects with her former lover. All three of her love interests – Bharani the boyfriend, Ramanathan the now repentant ex, and Johnny the ever-reticent upholder

of unrequited love found themselves surrounding her. Ramanathan's mother, with whom Anu has never interacted before, decides to atone for her son's sins by taking up work as maid and nanny with Anu and thus supporting her single working mother lifestyle. By the end of the movie, we find Anu on a train saying goodbye to Johnny and his undeclared love. She is leaving her life behind and moving once again. As Johnny exits the frame, she realizes that her child is missing. It is then we find that her former mother-in-law has decided to join Anu and stay with her, take care of her child and support Anu. Maybe because of this ending, *Avargal* was hailed as upholding values of the women's lib movement brought to Chennai by the ideoscapes of global modernity.

The Tamil urban of the late '70s and the '80s is written as a space of women empowerment then. In an article titled "A Ladies Man," film critic Baradwaj Rangan writes of KB that he was a unique blend of his characters, Ramanathan and Johnny. Like the sadistic husband, "he loved to put women under a magnifying glass — to study them, yes, but also to watch them squirm under heated circumstances. He made them shoulder monstrous burdens and made them bear those burdens willingly, and then, as if as a reward, he led them, again and again, to the brink of what looked like a happy ending, only to kick them over the ledge into an abyss." On the flipside, like Johnny, "he adored women, respected them, took care of them, nourished them, groomed them, cheered for them when they turned independent, and, yes, loved them." This new facet of films was daring and bold for the Tamil society.

Avargal was obviously not a one-off film. It was one of several films that worked together to curate a new urban of Chennai (where, incidentally, these films found maximum viewership). Chennai was now painted as a space where it is common to find pre-marital relationship, divorcees, widowed people, and eccentric hobbies like ventriloquism. And although

not explicitly stated in the film, the main characters are inferred to be Brahmins by names and visual cues (Johnny for instance wears a *pattai*, a clear visual marker of the Iyer subcaste of Tamil Brahmins). Maybe to counter the excessive denial of these facts by social elites, KB splashed them on a big screen, where his films would run for anywhere between 25 and 100 days. Operating on a clearly different plane from the problems of the rural, the urban was that space that had yet to make peace with its own liberal nature. On the whole, representations of Tamil culture and Tamil people were breaking new ground; a phenomenon that many attribute to the increased access to the European New Wave in Chennai.

The Region, Nation, and World: Influence and Circulation

Significant political events in the 1970s and 1980s were the rule of MGR (and later, his death) in Tamil Nadu, the state of emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (and later, her assassination), and the Cold War. On some level, all three were ignored by the hitherto highly political film industry. MGR's rise and reign were of little concern to the new wave filmmakers who were clearly a product of the Dravidian movement and found themselves with little need to prove that identity. However, it is of note that MGR's reign also coincided with the first of state government subsidies being granted to Tamil cinema. This would later manifest as price ceilings on movie tickets, and tax cuts for films titled exclusively in Tamil when MGR's protégé and on-screen love interest J. Jayalalitha would continue his political legacy. Having been so consumed with Dravidian politics and being represented by either DMK or ADMK at the centre, the nation-state of India was far from any immediate concern of the Tamil filmmaking or filmgoing public, despite the grand-scale antics of Indira Gandhi.

The only aspect to be then contended with was the world. On one hand, films like *Varumayin Niram Sivappu* (“The Colour of Poverty is Red;” Balachander 1980) and *Thanneer!* *Thanneer!* (“Water!” Balachander 1981) implicitly promoted Socialist values and may have used them as a framework through which to criticize the Congress administration at the centre, as well as rampant corruption among Tamil Nadu state officials. Working off the success of *Thanneer!* *Thanneer!*, KB went on to make *Achchamillai Achchamillai* (“There is No Fear;” 1984) that continued to construct his “jaundiced view” of Tamil Nadu politics and economy (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen 89). While the former revolved around a village’s effort to hide a communist fugitive and his efforts to bring them a local source of water, the latter depicts a freedom fighter’s entry into and subsequent distaste of politics. On the other hand, there were Tamil politicians communicating with the American Government offering to break away from the Non-Alignment movement if, in return, they offered support for Tamil Nadu’s secession from India (Madhava). Despite these tendencies, the Cold War too was only a minor facet of the global engagement of Tamil cinema, the influence of world cinema playing a much more overt role.

It can be strongly argued that Tamil cinema in the 21st century takes after the cinema of the ’70s and ’80’s than it does of any other time. While postmillennial films do continue a legacy set in the DMK era, and are a product of resistance against the modes of filmmaking in the ’90s, they are more likely to be considered a descendant of Tamil movies of the post-classical turn. Clear markers of resemblance include a shift from erstwhile aesthetic and narrative modes, and a definite implicit or explicit patronage being paid to filmmakers/authors/playwrights from other parts of the world. In essence, their stories and characters found their sources in contemporary Tamil literature. The modes of filmmaking come inspired from world cinema, and auteurs

were/are made through their movies. Dynamics of film circulation, I contend, had a lot to do with how these changes presented themselves in both these periods of Tamil cinema.

World Cinema and Tamil Cinema Circulation

The consolidation of smaller schools into the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) which, from 1974, was fully funded by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting offered budding artists exposure to cinema from around the country and the world. The New Indian Cinema movement that began around the 1970s – and known for its homage to the European New Wave – was largely associated with the graduates of FTII. As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, this was a formal passage to world cinema for new filmmakers like K. Hariharan who based his seminal film *Ezhavuthu Manithan* (“The Seventh Man;” 1982) on a real-life incident in a Tamil village as well as Martin Ritt’s 1979 film *Norma Rae*.

Another FTII graduate Balu Mahendra went on to become a critically acclaimed cinematographer, – who is credited with pioneering the use of colour in Tamil cinema – as well as a successful filmmaker. Introduced to cinema by films like *Bicycle Thieves* (de Sica), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (Lean), and *Battleship Potemkin*, he went on to study and be inspired by filmmakers such as Godard, Truffaut and Satyajit Ray while at FTII (Mahendra 2012). His 1988 film *Veedu* (“House”) is reflective of this worldly education. Being his own cinematographer, the movie was shot on a handheld camera, and was narrated through jump cuts and montages. Much like *Ezhavauthu Manithan* and *Thanneer! Thanneer!*, *Veedu* focusses on the shortcomings of local government and the absolute power held by corrupt local officials. Ending with a freeze frame of the protagonist, the film is evocative of the French New Wave. A major shift performed by this film was the complete lack of an original soundtrack. Despite having signed on Ilaiyaraja,

the movie only featured background music taken from the musician's earlier original fusion composition, *How to Name It?* (1986). "Balu Mahendran [...] with [his] exceptional filmmaking skills questioned the legitimacy of the belief that cinema is incomplete without dialogue, music or songs". In other words, his filmmaking was exemplary of this "golden age" (பொற்காலம்/*porkaalam*) of Tamil cinema when Tamil filmmakers began to explore cinema as a visual medium (Arun Mo.), rather than a literary medium, a trait that could be traced to the increasing access to formalized film education.

This was also the time that the International Film Festival of India was starting to make a name for itself on the international stage. In 1974, it became the "only Indian member of FIAPF (*Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films*) and was classified as an "A" grade festival" ("IFFI – Over the Years"). Despite having been inaugurated in 1952, it is only since this fifth edition in 1974, has it become an annual event with a fixed date and venue. It is also since 1974 that IFFI became a competitive event. In 1977, the festival was accompanied by a film market. 1977 was also the inaugural edition of the Indian panorama section of IFFI. Circulation of critically acclaimed films from around the world and country now had a formal, state-regulated space, which acted as a passage to world cinema. This particular formal network of circulation, however, was in operation only once a year and could not sustain a regular demand for non-Indian cinema. It is in response to this that several informal networks and nodes of distribution fortified themselves in this era.

Supporting this venture into world cinema was the newly-flourishing Burma Bazaar (set up in the late 1960s), the primary space of pirated international technology in Tamil Nadu, provided welcome inspiration to filmmakers and film enthusiasts at this juncture. Informal

networks were established between suppliers and the film community in Chennai and availability of copies of critically acclaimed international movies spread through a word-of-mouth wildfire. Godard, Bergman, Truffaut, Kurosawa et al became household names and their techniques and philosophy a subject of informal education for the next generation of Tamil filmmakers. The introduction of VHS technology in the early 1980s offered cheaper, more exhaustive access to cinema for film enthusiasts. “As soon as we heard of a new movie on the market, we would immediately inform our friends and colleagues that a copy was available at Burma Bazaar,” said filmmaker Ram while his contemporary Vetrimaran added that this was how they gained access to the masters of cinema. For filmmakers who were not nurtured through formalized systems such as that of FTII, their film education was made possible and greatly enhanced by VHS technology and its informal circuit for circulation and distribution.

Twenty first century Tamil filmmakers such as Ram and Vetrimaran, whose formative years in filmmaking was in the 80s, owe much of their knowledge of cinema to Burma Bazaar, and that is maybe why Vetrimaran’s recent venture *Vada Chennai* (“North Chennai,” 2018) pays homage to this space. In a very obvious way, contemporary Tamil cinema is influenced by these significant changes of the 80s. It was a time of auteurs of world cinema and worlding Indian cinema and a noticeable shift in modes of filmmaking. Even though the art cinema phase of the Tamil film industry was short-lived, it still was part of a global network of the New Wave in that it was definitely influenced by global art cinema. However, it is a part of the film history of India or of the world that is often ignored because the Tamil films of the post-classical turn were not visible outside India. Moreover, they were eclipsed by the parallel cinema movement of Hindi cinema and Bengali cinema of those decades that did have the required visibility. Tamil cinema’s circulation outside south India did not really begin until the 1990s.

The 1990s – An “Indian” Tamil Cinema

Unakkullae Indhiya Ratham Undaa Illaiya?

Ondraana Bharatham Unnai Kaakkum Illaiya

Thamizha Thamizha Naalai Nam Naalae

Thamizha Thamizha Naadum Nam Naadae

- “*Thamizha Thamizha!*,” *Roja* (Ratnam 1992)²⁶

One of the most significant debates in Tamil cinema scholarship has revolved around the conception of nation presented in Mani Ratnam’s 1992 film, *Roja* (See Niranjana (Jan 1994) (May 1994), Chakravarthy & Pandian (1994), Srinivas (1994), and Bharucha (1995)). This may be because *Roja* represents the first on-screen Tamil engagement with the idea of the post-independence nation-state in a positive sense. Tamil Nadu’s fragile position in the nation-state after the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi just outside the city limits of Chennai, by a suicide bomber belonging to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)²⁷, had to be reconstructed. It is arguably in this vein that a number of Tamil movies in the ’90s sought to work towards the idea of a unified India: India’s problems (such as the war with Pakistan) are Tamil Nadu’s problems, and Tamil Nadu’s problems are so in sync with the larger Indian system, that macro solutions could be designed that would provide a blanket reformation to the whole country. After all, “*naadum nam naadae*.”

²⁶ Trans. – Is there not Indian blood in you? A united India will protect you, will it not? Fellow Tamil-ian! Tomorrow is our day. Fellow Tamil-ian, this country too is ours!

²⁷ The LTTE is a currently inactive Sri Lankan extremist group that fought in the civil war in Sri Lanka trying to secure a separate Tamil state in the north.

In 1994, Tejaswini Niranjana in her initial response to *Roja* titled, “Integrating Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in *Roja*,” discusses how the film tends to exoticize and thus differentiate the Kashmiri Muslim activists –

Except for the dhoti- kurta of his wedding day, Rishi usually appears only in jeans and shirt or sweater. On the other hand, the Kashmiri militants always appear in clothes marked as ethnically Muslim; their ethnicity reveals them as anti-modern (therefore anti-national or anti-Indian), intolerant and fundamentalist, while Hindu ethnicity as displayed by the chief protagonists is merely part of the complexity of being Indian. (94)

Chakravarthy and Pandian add to Niranjana’s reading by arguing that *Roja* aimed to promote the Hindu patriarchal culture by superimposing these desires on the state – who, they argue, is the ultimate victor. Interestingly, in a 1994 interview, Mani Ratnam stated that he “was making it from the Indian point of view, I wasn’t raking up the Hindu-Muslim issue at all” (Mohammad). Whether he had such intentions or not in *Roja*, his 1995 film *Bombay* materialized some of the complexities that various scholars had sought to tease out with *Roja*. Once again, he placed the (same) Tamil hero at the centre of national conflict, set it in a different state, cast a Bollywood actress who would play an exotic Muslim beauty, and shot the *Bombay* simultaneously in two languages. The movie compounded and added to the view that Mani Ratnam was more eager to play to a national audience than a Tamil audience.

Tamil cinema in the 1990s, of which Ratnam is representative, was in many ways a reflection of Indian politics and economics. Three simultaneous but not mutually causative processes – the neoliberal policies of economic reform, the rise of Hindu nationalists, and their combined efforts

to reinforce the consolidation of the middle-class powers and ideas of consumption – are the integral facets to the identity of “India” in the 1990s (Oza). A result of the economic reforms and the rise of Hindu nationalism was the creation and consolidation of a sizeable middle class that was now finding employment in the newly rejuvenated service industry. The formulaic masala films of this time could be the ideal entertainment for this new consumer class and catered to their conservative and “inoffensive” sensibilities. “The celebration of the 'new' middle class [...] has as a focal point the question of national integration. As the Hindutva forces reoccupy the discourses of liberal humanism in India, an anti-colonial bourgeois nationalist project is refigured and the secular subject is reconstituted” (Niranjana, “Integrating Whose Nation” 79). The middle class co-opted the idea of weekend leisure which coincided with the rise of multiplexes and their largely upper-caste demographic was more sympathetic to a national, rather than Dravidian, cause.

Along with Ratnam, other filmmakers who’d been influenced by the zeitgeist pursued similar India-centric storylines, some with very obvious titles like *Indian* (Shankar 1996), where a freedom-fighter is willing to kill his own corrupt son to keep intact the country for whose freedom he fought (albeit on the side of the extremist rebel group the Indian National Army). Unlike in *Roja*, Shankar cast leading stars Kamal Haasan, Sukanya, Manisha Koirala, Urmila Mandotkar, and the star comedy duo Goundamani and Senthil. The song, “*Maaya Machindra*,” was one of the earliest moments of VFX in Tamil cinema. In essence, *Indian* was a big-budget patriotic movie, that had all the fixings of what would come to be called the masala movie. Shankar went on recreate this mode with *Mudhalvan* (“Leader” 1999), *Anniyan* (“Stranger;” 2004), and *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007). Between Mani Ratnam and Shankar, the Indian in Tamil

cinema and the position of the Tamilian in the Indian public discourse were simultaneously constructed.

A parallel aspect of Tamil cinema in this decade is the re-emergence of the star system as a method of organizing the film industry. From the late 1980s till the early 2000s, the industry was dominated by four major stars and their fan clubs – Kamal, Rajnikanth, Vijay and Ajith. While the former two were nurtured into stardom by the filmmakers of the '70s and '80s, the latter were made stars by virtue of the formula film/ masala film genre that developed during this decade. These films would feature a star cast, a leading comedian (who had his own side-track in the movie), a minimum of four songs composed and sung by leading musicians, at least three fight sequences and would narrate more often than not, a love story. It was the family entertainer; a “mass movie” – a genre that would be dominated by filmmakers such as K.S. Ravikumar who delivered some of the biggest entertainers of this decade including Rajnikanth-starrer *Padaiyappa* (1999), and Kamal-starrer *Avvai Shanmugi* (1996).

The 1990s turned out to be a repetitive and highly predictable time for Tamil cinema. An integral part of this formula of repetition was comedy. Apart from the male leads, this was a time for new generations of comedians to gather steam. Comedians are an integral skein of the cinema fabric in South India, with as much a sense of linguistic belonging being placed in the comedian as in the star. Often playing the character of the hero's best friend or close colleague, the comedian gets his own track in the movie that only occasionally overlaps with the main plot. As chapter 3 will explore, this side-track is a space for comedians to provide commentary on the current state of society, whether they be issues of caste, corruption, sexism, or spreading awareness about public welfare campaigns such as family planning, in a light-hearted and humorous manner. Beginning with “*Kalaivanar*” N.S. Krishnan in the DMK era, the tradition

continued through the unparalleled skills of Nagesh, to the stardom of the tom-and-jerry pair – Goundamani and Senthil – who dominated the comedic space of the 1990s. The 1990s was also when the next “*kalaivanar*” of Tamil cinema, Vivek, and the “dark horse” of Tamil comedy, Vadivelu, would find their foothold. It was in the time of formulaic cinema the role of the comedian found its peak.

Over time though, comedy that was aimed at other characters, and at the state and its agents was erased. It was slowly replaced by slapstick/self-deprecative, or hero-worship humour, or with the hero himself being the main comedian of the film. The reactionary comedian, and the comedy side-track as a whole, would witness a gradual decline in Tamil cinema post-2005: decline that could be attributed to filmmakers who sought to break with the generic and formulaic cinema and seek new modes of film narratives. However, it is significant to note that it was this formula of repetition; this “masala” mass films “are a cinematic specialty of south India, and Tamil Nadu in particular, a homegrown film genre whose anomalous aesthetics and reception practices require special explanation” (Nakassis 168). This autochthonous nature of the mass film allowed it to act as a circulatable microcosm of Tamil culture, especially in the first decade of Tamil cinema beginning to travel outside south India.²⁸

Economic reforms such as doing away with the License Raj and scaling back of state regulations was coupled with increased Foreign Direct Investment, and stabilized India’s presence on the global market in the years to come. The privatization of industry resulted in the privatization of the television industry. Satellite channels took away the monopoly of state-owned *Doordarshan* (DD) television in the late 1990s: a move that was prefigured by allowing

²⁸ Rajinikanth films were becoming quite popular in Japan with the unusual success of *Muthu* (Ravikumar 1995). Rajinikanth fan clubs are active in Tokyo and the rest of Japan as recent as 2017 (Aiyar).

private players to make sponsored programmes on the state-owned channels. This had a dual effect on the film industry. On the one hand, they now had a whole new market by way of television rights. On the other hand, the television was a competing form of entertainment. The expansion of the VHS circulation network added to the comfort and convenience of home-viewing. In response to the convenience of television, filmmakers started to integrate the idea of spectacle into film (as espoused by the increased use of VFX) and theatre owners expanded their enterprises to offer a wide myriad of entertainment options by evolving into multiplexes. These offered extra competition to Tamil cinema who shared theatre screens and multiples billboards with cinema from Hollywood and Bollywood.

The 1990s resurgence of war with Pakistan, as well as with the territories in the North-East of India, the identity of “Indian” once became commingled with the Hindu identity and the contemporary version of Hindu nationalism was born. This superimposition of Hindu upon Indian resulted in movie like *Roja* and *Indian* that sought to present Tamil Nadu’s willingness to participate in this idea of a unified India. These films were the most visible of Tamil cinema because of their big budgets, spectacles, and in the case of Mani Ratnam’s work, the bilingual release. However, they were a minority set of films, in that their engagement with the nation was not representative of Tamil cinema in the 1990s. Most masala films of this decade, while catering to the middle-class sensibility, also played on Dravidian star politics, and Tamil Nadu’s internal cultural and political debates. If Tamil cinema in the 21st century has witnessed a gradual decline of the comedy track, an original soundtrack, and an overall step away from the markers of the masala films of the ‘90s, it can be attributed a shift in the cultural politics that informed the patriotism; the socio-economic context that nurtured an urban middle-class conservatism, and a transformation in Tamil Nadu’s position in both India and the world.

The 21st Century – A World Cinema

*Enga oor Madras-u! Ithukku naanga thaana address-u! Ripon building,
high court ellaam senga mannum mattum illai, engaloda raththangalum
sernthurukku/ Kaal pandhu, kuththusandai, carrom board kabadi ellam
engaloda veeram sollum vilayaatu thana*²⁹

In *Madras* (Pa. Ranjith, 2016), this title song speaks volumes about Chennai city's relationship with its past and its present. These lyrics belie a deep association with the city and its colonial past. These characters are the address of Madras. They may not have an address themselves, but because of them, the city does. While the song itself is titled "*Chennai Vada Chennai*" (trans. Chennai, North Chennai), Madras is what is highlighted as their identity. They identify equally with the city's original (and current) name, Chennai, and its colonial name, Madras – which is common amongst most people from Chennai. It is their blood that is a part of British-era constructions like the Ripon Building and the High Court. The games and sports these characters identify with are football, boxing, carrom board and kabadi. While the first two are international sports, kabadi is the game of the masses in Tamil Nadu. One notices that neither the official national sport, hockey, or the unofficial national sport, cricket, is a part of the list. Adding to this is the prominent Bob Marley graffiti in the locality of *Georgetown* in the song, but no mention of other celebrities from within the national borders. *Madras* is part of a larger

²⁹ Trans. - Our city is Madras! We are its address! The Ripon building, the High Court and all are not just mud and bricks but are made with our blood. Football, boxing, carroms and kabadi are the sports that speak of our valour.

trend of cinematic explorations of the city that favour framing it as a space of worlding done in a very Tamil way.

Madras was Pa. Ranjith's second movie after *Attakathi*, when he had made a name for himself as Tamil cinema's first Dalit filmmaker. Ranjith, by not participating in DMK propaganda politics in his films, offers a very distinct perspective in Tamil cinema – that of non-dominant castes presented through the identity politics of B.R Ambedkar. His films explicitly attack the caste system and the Hindu ideology that supports it. They also present less visible spaces of Tamil-ness, whether it is the politics of a wall in North Madras, the lives of Tamil diasporic gangs of Kuala Lumpur, or the Tamil diaspora in the slums of Bombay. In effect, Ranjith is exemplar of the worlding of Tamil cinema. He claims to have been inspired by *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo) and *City of God* (Meirelles & Lund), makes films that are situated in distinctly Tamil spaces, while not always in Tamil Nadu, and he promotes an anti-caste ideology (that is Dravidian-adjacent). Significantly, this is done with the aid of globally popular modes such as hip-hop music, which has been appropriated by Dalit communities to articulate their calls for social justice.

The 21st century, and specifically post-2004 period presents a transition that is significant enough to distinguish this past decade and a half, even without the luxury of hindsight, as an era of its own as one can with the periods listed hitherto. It performs in its content and style a continuation of the Dravidian movement of since the pre-independence era, and the artistic standards of the Tamil New Wave. Simultaneously, contemporary Tamil cinema performs a reactionary estrangement from the spectacle and star system of the decade prior. It is symptomatic and representative of shifts in the film culture as well as the macro cultural politics of Tamil Nadu. It is a transition that is almost cumulative of all the major political and cultural

movements that had influenced and been influenced by Tamil cinema thus far, as well as a mimicking of the nature of Tamil cinema's engagement with the cultural politics surrounding it.

The parts of Tamil cinema that highlight these negotiations most clearly would be the fading processes of stardom and fandom, revamped methods of circulation (now aided by the online streaming option), and changes in the way Tamil stories are being told on-screen. Regional(ist)/Dravidian politics are of course still in play, as can be seen in the conspicuous absence of fidelities to the nation-state. Apart from a few stray instances (often the courtesy of Mani Ratnam or Shankar, but at times, others), India is largely ignored, caricatured, or antagonized. Instead foregrounded were Tamil spaces like the non-descript village/small town, the Americanized Tamil urban and the Tamil diaspora (much like the Tamil New Wave). Tamil cinema's methods of navigation through these various categories take on many facets including nods to world cinema, an increased interest in American culture and the English language, and a reactionary attempt to distinguish and preserve an innate "Tamil-ness." The biggest negotiations in this millennium are between the "region" and "world;" or between the Tamil nation (Tamil *Nadu*) and the rest of the world.

The trend of Tamil films set in the rural countryside came back into prominence sometime in the early years of the twenty first century. The same setting that was the at the centre of the earliest on-location shoots, becomes noteworthy when reverted to in the early 2000s, if for nothing else then because the background is now foregrounded. It is the conscious choice of a non-urban, specifically non-Chennai and thereby "local" setting. It is not the panoramic shots that package the setting, but the cow dung on the walls. Arjun Appadurai argues that globalization has produced more localized threats (real or imaginary) to different cultures and subcultures (1996). As Tamil Nadu to Sri Lankans, Vietnam to Cambodia; so may be the

threat of the urbanized, globalized world of Chennai to the agricultural, indigenous world of the Tamil village life. In conjunction with that thought one turns to Krishnan's argument, in his paper titled *Imaginary Geographies*, that there has been a shift in the setting of Tamil cinema from Chennai to the "South", represented by the very violent towns of Madurai and Thirunelveli. Binaries are being drawn between the caste-based societies of the south and the relatively "free" urban existence of Chennai. Unlike the Tamil New Wave, contemporary representations of the rural are directly in opposition to the urban, and very specifically Chennai, and it is an opposition that is presented by a conscious and clear lack of engagement with the city.

The re-emergence of the rural itself is a curious phenomenon, unparalleled in Bollywood. It can be argued that the trend emerged as a customized Tamil reaction to the forces of globalization that began to manifest in Tamil Nadu in the early twenty first century, playing upon its own history of reacting to external cultural threats, be they national or international. Drawing from a history of ethno-lingual nationalism— typified by the phrase *Vaazhga Thamizh!*³⁰ that is seen on all government buildings – these films obstinately refute the Anglo-globalization of the state's capital.

The discourse on modernity within these films is one of interest, purely by its absence. The markers of modernity such as nationalism, rationalism, capitalism, secularism, individualism etc are often absent from these films or do not play a significant role. The identity of an "Indian" is never given any significance; except while portraying xenophobia. In *Azhagarsaamiyin Kuthirai* (Suseenthiran), there are two *vellakaaranga* (white people) who are suspected of having stolen the deity's wooden horse. However, of equal suspicion are *Hindikaaranga* (Hindi

³⁰ Trans. "Long Live Tamil!" However, the most commonly used English translation is "Long Live Classical Divine Tamil!"

speakers). There is no sense of unified nationalism against a white other. Rather, there is a mutual distrust of any other; be it a person of a different country, language, caste, or village. Moreover, where there is a national consciousness, it is subordinated to the Tamil consciousness. In *Vennila Kabadi Kuzhu* (Suseenthiran) for instance, a school assembly is shown singing the *Thamizh Thaa Vazhthu* (a song in praise of the Tamil Mother) before the national anthem. Set up in opposition to the global or the national is the local and vernacular – characteristic of beings that are often caught in a microcosmic existence.

It is in this inscription of locality that one finds an articulation of the tradition-modernity debate for which the rural has been site in the history of Tamil cinema. For instance, the protagonists of the films in question have no lofty ideal in mind. Their dreams are simple – winning a cockfight, reclaiming his horse, or being held at Chennai Central Jail. They are unkempt, dishevelled, of darker complexion, and in no way resemble the star-protagonists of the '90s cinema. Sweat, dirt, and muscles define the masculinity of these men. It is almost as if it is a way of inscribing “locality onto bodies. Looked at slightly differently, they are ways to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities” (Appadurai 185). The representation of the rural in these films problematizes the sense of global modernity that is prevalent in the state.

There are but few capitalist tendencies portrayed in these films outside the general greed for money. There are no industries nor are their branded goods. The rural has had only skirmishes with capitalism as seen by the naming of Virumaandi as *Singapore Machan*, or sending children off to work in the Thiruppur cloth industry (India's pivotal centre for cotton knitwear export). Not surprisingly, cinema is the one aspect of modernity that has reached all these villages. The Kamal Haasan and Ajith fan clubs puts up a performance in the opening

scenes of *Paruthiveeran* (Sultan). An old Ilayaraaja song plays while he meets his lover. Overall, however, there is a sense that these films contrast the rural with the urban, a globalized urban at that. At a time when the fisher-folk community was getting satellite TV and the ever popular Indian cricket team was being sponsored by Pepsi and Dilmah, a conscious negligence of anything English, American and/or Indian, a deliberate lack of private spaces on screen, an overwhelming narrative of gossip and plurality of voices pointed towards this genre being a reactive force against that of the globalization wave that was sweeping the state – a need to centre culture within the vernacular spaces of the rural, and stand them in contrast to modernity. In a sense, the genre recalls the nativity films by positioning the rural as the safekeeper of traditional Tamil values against modernity. At the same time, it identifies with the neo-nativity films in its choice of protagonist and their realist tendencies.

Chennai, on the other hand, is being treated as metonymic of the post-colonial metropolitan city that is finding its way through the “paradoxical relationships between cultural traditions and cultural modernity” (Vasudevan, 3). This global component has quite recently come to be represented in terms of glocal networks. The weird mix of the international and (what we call) the *padu local* (extremely local/vernacular, often referring to lower-class, untouched by English sensibilities) that has come to define the culture of Chennai, has caught on with filmmakers. English-spouting IT professionals with their biriyani to eat and a *Marlboro* to smoke, or a “no-English” person sporting the latest iPhone and fancy cars are equally present in the cultural and filmic landscape of Chennai. Earlier urban films may have used the lower-class setting, but it wasn’t a foregrounding of lifestyle; it was a space for the “hero” to do good and turn himself into a star. The post-2000s cinematic representations of (Chennai specifically but) the urban more broadly are more interested in the system of networks that constructs the urban.

One could argue that this genre began, somewhat, with the 2007 film, *Chennai 600028* (Venkat Prabhu). A film that revolves around a group of young men from a housing block community in 600028 zip code and their street-cricket rivals from a neighbouring zip code, *Chennai 28* uses the ruse of a locally modified sport to explore the lifestyle of this community. Over the years, films such as *Soodhu Kavvum* (Evil Engulfs; Kumarsamy, 2013), *Neram* (Time; Putharen, 2013), *Naanum Rowdy Thaan* (I Too Am a Rowdy; Shivan, 2015), *Kaaka Muttai* (Crow Egg; Manikandan, 2015), *Maanagaram* (Metropolitan; Kanagaraj 2017), *Taramani* (Ram 2017), *Madras* (Ranjith 2016), *Onaaiyum Aatukuttiyum* (The Wolf and the Lamb; Mysskin 2013) followed.

Whichever the space be the focus of contemporary Tamil cinema – caught in a spectrum between the rural and the urban – it is clearly interested in exploring space through a multitude of characters and plurality of voices. The absence of central characters has taken away from the possibility of the star system continuing. While residual fandom from the star system of the '90s still exists, it is significant that Tamil cinema has once again entered a void of stars, at a time when the major stars of the previous era are competing for political control of the state. The major figures are, once again, the filmmakers, writers, and producers. Furthermore, the focus on the exploration of space i.e., foregrounding the cityscape or the focussing on the vagaries of caste-marked places has lent contemporary Tamil cinema a realist lens. The spectacle is fading into irrelevance (unless you happen to be watching Shankar's Rajnikanth-starrer-science-fiction movie *2.0*) and is being replaced with stark realities. Arguably, postmillennial Tamil cinema is building upon a long-held belief that there is no homogeneous nationalism, and consequently no uniform way of adapting to a foreign cultural influence.

The process of worlding in Tamil cinema goes beyond simply the content of the films themselves, and has influenced the sources, story-telling and circulation, as well. Quintessentially Tamil narratives are being bookended with quotes from Tarantino and a world cinema filmography. The *Rashomon* effect is used to scaffold a story of Tamil caste rivalries. Filmmakers like Vetrimaran are sending their films to Venice and Cannes and Toronto before a Tamil Nadu release. Netflix and Amazon Prime have approached contemporary filmmakers to work with them on original series and movies. There is a conscious move to engage with the world and find oneself within the discourse of world cinema.

This might well be conjunction with already unstable idea of nation and its derivative of national cinema in India, and a culmination of Tamil Nadu and Tamil cinema's relationship with the idea of India. The nation-state that was otherized first, and the world that was otherized next are commingled into an heterogenous alterity. The nation-state of India is reinscribed as part of the rest of the world, thus allowing the process of worlding to encompass and re-articulate the negotiations with the nation-state that have plagued Tamil culture and cinema. It is a sentiment that is being resolved by actively acknowledging the rest of India to have the same restrictions for circulation as the rest of the world: a film would have to be dubbed, subtitled, or marketed exclusively to the Tamil diaspora. However, the defining and intriguing characteristic of Tamil cinema in this era is that despite these tendencies of worlding, and despite the conscious changes to modes of narrative, an oft-made statement by top filmmakers of this time is, "I make movies for the people of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil people are my audience."³¹ The chapters that follow look at three sites of Tamil-ness in the worlding of Tamil cinema – stardom, comedy, and songs. Each of

³¹Separate interviews of Ram, Mysskin, Vetrimaran, Lakshmy Ramakrishnan.

these “interruptions” has been tweaked in the way they can articulate a Tamil-ness to and for an obviously globalized Tamil people.

Chapter 2: Stardom and Worlding of Tamil Cinema

Stardom and star processes are in many ways a unique feature of Tamil cinema and South Indian cinema. The title of Madhav Prasad's seminal work, *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India* underlines one of the more visible and publicized aspects of south Indian stardom: it is the path to political success. However, because of the relative lack of scholarship on Tamil cinema in film studies, the relationship between cinema and politics (as navigated through stardom) is understudied, and the craze surrounding Indian stars is often brushed aside as a symptom of an underdeveloped society (Alberoni). The Tamil on-screen hero, however, "is the centre of a highly organized fan phenomenon, becomes closely identified with contemporary socio-political mobilizations and goes on to establish political parties" (Srinivas 616). The initial ties between the Tamil theatre scene and pre-independence political activists set the base for a deeply political industry where the participants, for the most part, are all innately involved in formal politics. The star dynamics of Tamil Nadu, and south India more broadly, differ from popular conceptions of stardom in that film stars are always directly and overtly political in the most formal sense of the term: film stardom is often seen as the path to political power.

In the case of Tamil cinema, stardom and the presentation of a star (both on- and off-screen) as a political figure has required several narrative asides in a movie, and films have often been structured around or even made for the political agenda of the star. The star politician is the most recognized face of Tamil cinema (and Telugu cinema and Kannada cinema³²), and his slow irrelevance is a crucial manifestation of the processes of worlding. The widening audience base

³² Kannada cinema is included here hypothetically since the biggest star of the Kannada film industry, Rajkumar, refused to stand for elections despite immense mass appeal and popular pressure.

which Tamil cinema has been accessing in the past few decades was created and is sustained by dynamics of stardom and fandom. In a circular move, stars then reformulate their star texts to meet the demands of this globalized fanbase. In parallel, the creative risks taken by star-/producers over the first decade of the twenty first century have primed Tamil audiences all over the world for a gamut of cinematic experiences that are self-aware of their attempts to reach beyond a Tamil audience. In rather broad terms, I'm arguing that the unique make-up of the Tamil star system in a way laid the path to its own irrelevance. It was so steeped in a masculine vernacular (or vernacular masculinities) that its popularity began to fade as Tamil filmmakers and audiences found different avenues of expressing Tamil-ness. As the new generation of filmmakers found success with films of dark comedy and neo-noir cinema, it became evident that the "Dravidian movement which helped to helm Tamil cinema ha[d] lost the strong porous relationship it shared with celluloid heroes to promote its ideologies" (Kailasam 29). Therefore, while the study of the star system in Tamil and Telugu cinemas most certainly prompts a revision of extant star studies theory, it is necessary to acknowledge the crucial place of the star system in comprehending the breadth of change that has come to distinguish contemporary Tamil cinema. Stardom and star processes of the industry are a highly pertinent reflection of how a film industry from south India might attempt a foray into world cinema.

Having grown up in and with Tamil cinema at the turn of the twenty first century and later transitioning into film studies, statements such as "Hollywood has established the dominant paradigm of both mainstream cinema and stardom" were both surprising and seemingly ignorant (Gledhill 1). It is hard to argue against the idea that it was through the import of Hollywood that cinema was mainstreamed in India, and consequently the concept of film stars. However, that the reigning paradigms of stardom had been established by Hollywood begged my disagreement. As

far as I knew, no one lived and died for their Hollywood stars, and there were no registered fan clubs that could be mobilized for political and social causes at the drop of a hat.³³ There were no beliefs in immortality and/or temples built to immortalize, and no extensive mythos of the supernatural constructed for and by cinema. For instance, in the same collection as the statement by Gledhill, Rosie Thomas and Behroze Gandhi begin their essay with the description of Sunday mornings in front of N.T. Rama Rao's house. Returning from a visit to the shrine of Lord Venkateswara, pilgrims would make their way to NTR's house, where he would walk out fully decked in his *Mahavishnu* costume and bless his fans. Having played various gods in Telugu and Tamil cinema in the 50s and 60s, NTR was accepted – rather unproblematically – as the face of God himself and this cinematic *avatar* has adorned the walls of prayer rooms in several households, including my grandmother's. In some ways, the grandest of South Indian stardom is akin to what is termed “cult stardom” in the study of European and American cinemas. Yet, the curiosity of Tamil cinema stardom, and that of Telugu and Kannada cinemas as well, is that cult stardom cannot be differentiated from mainstream stardom.

One of the central arguments that can be made for cult and mainstream stardom being one and the same can be seen in a continuation of the story of N.T. Rama Rao – in line with the common trajectory of movie stars in South India in the 1970s, NTR went on to become the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu, the “cult” nature of stardom is extenuated further. If in Andhra Pradesh, the stars imitated the gods, in Tamil Nadu, the “stars displaced the gods” (Hardgrave). In place of the usual pictures of gods and idols decorating vehicles or lining wallets, one would find pictures of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), who rarely played the roles of

³³ While celebrities are capable of generating social movements now in the age of social media and hypervisibility, the political potential of fan movements in Tamil Nadu in the second half of the twentieth century relied entirely on cinema, print media, and word-of-mouth.

any god in his films. In other words, in Tamil Nadu, “the logic of religiosity is indifferent to the forms of manifestation of divinity” (Prasad 35).

The distinction of Tamil stars is made evident with the theorizing of Hollywood stardom where the political nature of stars was discussed with a certain air of scepticism. The only concession of political potential theoretically allowed to stars was when Richard Dyer, in a critique of Alberoni and Barry King, states that it would be difficult to discount the political aspect of stardom; that by way of the personal always being political, stardom is always already political (“Stars” 81). When compared with the star-politics of Tamil cinema, especially of MGR, the fandom, stardom, and cultdom that Hollywood and its scholars have witnessed and theorized pales quickly.

The political extravagances of stardom provided Tamil cinema with its earliest non-native commentators. MGR, and the use of film stardom for political ends, is still one of the most studied topics in Tamil cinema by Tamil and non-Tamil scholars alike. In the chapter titled “Memory, Mourning, and Politics,” Cultural Studies scholar Mary Hancock describes the streets of Chennai on Christmas Day, 1987 –

Public disorder—looting, riots, assaults, even self-mutilation—follows the news of the popular leader’s death, with incidents in the city limited, mostly, to its major commercial areas. Today, members of MGR’s political party, AIA-DMK, throng Rajaji Hall, where MGR’s body has lain in state, and join the procession that bears him to the gravesite. All this is televised, and I have joined my neighbor’s family to view the spectacle. To no one’s surprise, the funeral has become a melodrama, in which MGR’s lover, party propaganda secretary

Jayalalithaa, is pitted against his widow, Janaki. Today this becomes a literal war of position, when Jayalalithaa, wearing a white sari trimmed with AIA-DMK party colors, tries to take a seat on the vehicle that will carry MGR's corpse to the gravesite. In the camera's eye, one of Janaki's relatives shoves her aside, and, red with shame, Jayalalithaa stalks away from the funeral cortege. These details are savored by Lata's husband, Subramanian, an affluent and well-traveled engineer who has never made a secret of his disdain for MGR. He cracks jokes and laughs at the displays of piety among party officials. The family's servant, Omana, however, is clearly grieved by the loss of MGR. She, like many rural Tamils, reveres MGR—indeed, love may not be too strong a term for her sentiment. She finally begs Subramanian to stop mocking the event and to let her grieve the loss of her beloved “Puratci Talaivar.” (57)

On the other side of the world, MGR's stardom was colourful enough for his death to feature in *The Chicago Sun Times*—

MADRAS, India Troops were out on the streets of this southern Indian port Friday after riots and near-hysterical mourning caused by the death of a charismatic Tamil politician and screen idol left 23 people dead, witnesses said.

The dead included 11 grieving Tamils who committed suicide and two who died of shock on hearing of the death of Maruthur Gopala Ramachandran, chief minister of Tamil Nadu, from a heart attack Thursday at the age of 70.

In other words, the life and death of MGR was quite possibly the earliest narrative of Tamil cinema that found traction in non-Indian media and scholarship. It was the most aggrandized

discourse of stardom in Tamil Nadu; and although almost always exaggerated, was always a justified exaggeration. If the death of MGR's character in a movie could result in a movie theatre being vandalized and burnt down³⁴, the star's death was met with a much more intense hysteria. The stardom, however, did not die with the star and is a phenomenon that affects contemporary Tamil culture and politics.³⁵ For later generations of Tamil cinema, these extravagances of stardom provided a non-native audience for popular, commercial cinema, who were beckoned by the outrageous diegetic narratives that star-myths allowed. In the hands of filmmakers who were aided by the circuits of globalization, the 1990s witnessed the manufacture of star narratives that would appeal (not unconditionally, however) to the non-Tamil/non-South Indian audience, and kicked off the initial worlding of Tamil cinema. These extravagances of stardom, as well as the resultant yet causative exaggerations of fandom, contribute to Tamil cinema's star system as a unique set of star principles.

The peculiarity of the male film star of South India is in the bold regional overtones which paint his character. It is almost exclusively male stars that are given honorifics, sobriquets, or titles³⁶. From “*Puratchi Thalaivar*” MGR and “Sivaji” Ganesan all the way till the most recent stars “*Thala*”³⁷ Ajith and “*Ilaya Thalapathy*”³⁸ Vijay. In everyday conversations these nicknames and their real names are often interchanged. In the case of “Sivaji” Ganesan, he is simply referred to as Sivaji in common parlance. Opening credits, trailers, and posters will

³⁴ The movie *Paasam* where MGR's character dies was badly received, and his characters rarely died after the audience reaction to the film. It got an extremely subpar run in the box office of only 80 days.

³⁵ For example, the 2012 film *Mozhi* (Radhamohan) had an auxiliary character whose quirk was that he was mentally stuck in 1984. Of the two major events of 1984, the professor's reaction is more intense at reliving MGR's hospitalization than at Indira Gandhi's assassination. The height of MGR's star-status is not yet irrelevant for contemporary Tamil audiences and continues to influence Tamil Nadu and its cinema.

³⁶ J. Jayalalitha becomes the first exception, although her title “*Puratchi thalaivi*” is simply the feminine derivative of MGR's title, and accorded after her entry into politics.

³⁷ Literal translation – Head. Used to describe a leader.

³⁸ Trans. Young General

always feature these sobriquets lest producers risk upsetting fans. Every possible extra-diegetic opportunity will be utilised to verbalize and honour these titles for the stars. For example, at least one song in an Ajith or Vijay film will find a character referring to them as “*Thala*” or “*Thalapathy*.” Another unique aspect of nomenclature in Tamil cinema would be the absence of last names. Vijay is simply referred to as Vijay in public discourse, newspaper articles, credits, and even the title for his Wikipedia page. The same goes for any actor, male or female, in the Tamil industry. It could be because last names are often an indicator of religious and caste backgrounds, which are rejected by the Dravidian leanings of the industry, unlike Bollywood which is dominated by the various Khans and the Kapoors. Not just the last names, but any name is given up in favour of a neutral stage name in Tamil cinema. Hence Joseph Vijay became Vijay and Genelia D’Souza initially became Harini. Other times last names are left out because of the patronymic system of naming in Tamil culture. Karthik Sivakumar becomes Karthi, because Sivakumar refers to yesteryear Tamil star and Karthi’s father. For several reasons then, Tamil film stars are referred to by either their mononyms or their titles. All these reasons are, however, are clearly rooted in a cultural history of the Tamil film industry as an exposition of Dravidian politics.

The opening day of a top star’s film resembles everything from a religious ritual to a carnivalesque dance party, writes Constantine Nakassis in his study of youth and film fandom (*Doing Style* 161), a statement to which my experiences of course stand testament. Large cut-outs of the stars are put up in front of theatres that are given elaborate *paal abhishekams* – a Hindu ritual involving bathing idols of gods in milk. Fans make temple processions and firecrackers are the background music for the day. Riots are threatened if the first screening is late, and the streets by the theatres are filled with fans dancing to the beat of traditional drums

and local folk music on loudspeakers. I have never had the fortune of watching a major film first day first show (FDFS) as these are often reserved by the star's registered fan clubs. I have, however, managed to watch two films of Vijay on the first-day-second-show (the night show), each of an unmatched intensity of fanaticism than I had personally experienced. While the first, *Madurey* (Madesh 2004), I watched in a rundown theatre in a small town in northern Tamil Nadu, the second, *Jilla* (Neason 2014), I watched at one of the remaining single screen theatres in Chennai city. At the first film, the lack of sufficient number of chairs seemed to confound no one, man nor stray dog, as we watched the entire movie dancing on our feet anyway. At the second film's viewing, there were several delays. The previous set of patrons refused to leave without a repeat screening of the introductory song, and inebriated fans got into a fistfight thus requiring police presence. When the film finally started to roll, no one could necessarily hear the dialogue over the screams of joy, affection, and excitement. Nor did it matter. This sort of opening day (or in some cases, opening week) behaviour is typical for major stars in Tamil cinema – and maybe Telugu cinema as well.³⁹ And this fandom reinforces certain modes of heroism and stardom in filmmaking such as the introductory song/fight, the catchphrase, and constant nods to the extra-text of the star himself, as well as parallel star texts. Since the times of MGR, such specific moments of star performance on screen (such as the introductory sequence) have worked to contextualize the actor and the movie as very specific socio-political entities.

The mass entertainer film often introduces the hero over several separate shots of various parts of his body, with his face being the final one. His character is introduced through a fight sequence that establishes his moral stance. In the event that it isn't clear, this fight is followed

³⁹ I recall watching *Bahubali 2* (Rajamouli 2017) at a theatre in Lansing, Michigan, and being surprised by the fanfare in the theatre. Confetti was thrown at the screen; there were screams and whistles, and even some dancing in the theatre.

with a quasi-moralizing song sequence that makes explicit the socio-political and cultural investments of the film, its star, and his character. Exemplary of this pattern would be “*Ilaya Thalapathy*” Vijay. Almost all his post-2000 releases begin in recognition of this pattern. Taking *Madurey*, we see that the film begins with him fighting dishonourable characters such as the cruel loan shark, or an “outsider” of sorts. After winning the fight with a series of parkour moves and staged martial arts skills, he breaks into song. As the song begins, it portrays him as virile, desirable, and strong. As the chorus concludes the first time, the figure of Vijay multiplies and the many versions of him perform a confident gait towards the camera (and therefore his audience) (fig 1), inducing a loud cheer and even more dancing in the theatre hall. After a minute of showcasing his famous dance skills and using the extra-diegetic space of the song sequence to let his character flirt with and openly seduce a seductive woman, Vijay looks directly at the audience and brings his palms together in greeting as he says, “it is a good day, things will be great. Ask those 100-crore people about me, and they will tell you” (fig 2). The intro song cheer reaches a crescendo as the fans find themselves referenced in their hero’s song.



Figure 2: Vijay in *Madurey* introduction song



Figure 3: Vijay addressing camera in *Madurey* introduction song

This pattern is observed in almost every introductory song, with some being more moralizing than others and traces its history back to the songs of MGR. In *Pokkiri* (Picaroon; Deva 2007), Vijay (as his character, Tamil) wishes for the eradication of poverty for the future generations. As he accumulates star currency, these songs often start to refer to Vijay's star history. They also liken him to other stars such as MGR or Rajini. "(S)uch introductory sequences, like the films of which they are a part more generally, actively and reflexively bind the extratextual to the already intratextually constituted film world" (Nakassis *Doing Style* 167). In other words, the introductory song functions for all the major male stars in the industry, to locate the star within a Tamil film history, a Tamil cultural milieu, and very clear ideas of masculinity and morality.

Stardom in twenty first century Tamil cinema is understood as a new phase because of its deviations from previous patterns in several ways. Tamil cinema, in its attempts to be recognizable to unfamiliar audiences, has slowly begun to lose its tendencies to exaggerate the male star and his masculine prowess. As Dean and Nakassis argue, "the masala superstar hero has lost his power to inspire identification" (92). While the more popular and established actors, whose quasi-political fan clubs are more visible, continue to indulge in the star practices

discussed in this chapter, they have been gradually disappearing with the actors that have come to be popular after 2005 or so. Instead, there has been a “shift in the conceptualisation of narrative tropes in Tamil cinema” (Kailasam 28): films are no longer constructed around a star’s cult personality, but lie more in genres of the neo-noir gangster film, black comedy and self-reflexive spoofs, and women-centric films that move away from an incorruptible celluloid masculinity and towards multiple, morally shaky gender representations. In other words, to match the multivocal, polycentric narratives of post-millennial Tamil cinema, ensemble casts have started to become the norm, thus diffusing the male, moral centre of earlier decades. At the same time, the burden of morality is also being shared by women characters and women performers – the “lady superstar” was born in the new millennium of Tamil cinema. The two specific changes that have allowed for the reconstructed star system are the move towards pluralist narratives that effectively almost eliminate a lead role/titular role, and the increasing agency taken by the women players in the industry. The lack of one-hero movies has taken away from the political and cultural values that are imposed upon that hero – the moral centre is dispersed and questioned by the multiplicity of narratives.

The New configurations of Stardom

A panel discussion on the peculiarities of Indian stars and transnational stardom was recorded in writing to set the context for an edited collection on transnational stardom. It began with an inquiry about why “Indian” film stars rarely cultivate a fan base outside India. The conversation centred mostly on Bollywood stars Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachchan. The words of Amitabh Bachchan, “why be the brown sidekick, when I can be leading man to a billion fans,” were quoted encapsulating an interesting perspective of stars in Hindi cinema.

The popularity of Hindi cinema and the guarantee of a large audience base gives little need for exchanging the lead role for a wider audience base. Yet, it is something that has started to become desirable; after all, those words were quoted just before pointing out that Bachchan was just about to make a cameo appearance in Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* as a Jewish gambler. There is a sense of the exotic that still shrouds the cult stardom of Shah Rukh Khan or Amitabh Bachchan, which seems to bar an easy path towards transnational stardom. This, however, does seem to be more prominent amongst the men of the industry rather than the women, suggesting maybe that in Hindi cinema too, women performers were more fluid and not beholden to linguistic identity politics.

Priyanka Chopra began her film career in Tamil cinema with the movie *Thamizhan* in 2001 just after being crowned Miss World. She went on to become a leading star of Bollywood, before making the jump to popular American TV where she played the lead character, Alex Parrish on the hit show, *Quantico*, on ABC from 2015-18. The other major transnational female star of Bollywood is Aishwarya Rai Bachchan (née Rai). Much like Priyanka Chopra, Aishwarya Rai was also a former Miss World who made her film debut in Tamil cinema in Mani Ratnam's political thriller, *Iruvar* (1997), and made her debut in Hindi cinema later that year with *Aur Pyaar Ho Gaya*. She was established as the leading actress of Bollywood long before she married into the Bachchan family. Her transnational stardom began by way of her being cast as Lalitha Bakshi, the narrative equivalent of Elizabeth Bennet in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), and in another independent British drama, *Provoked* (Mundhra 2006). Subsequently, Rai found mainstream visibility outside India when she starred as an Indian warrior in Doug Lefler's epic film *The Last Legion*, alongside Ben Kingsley and Colin Firth. Her breakthrough into American media was alongside names like Steve Martin, John Cleese, Emily

Mortimer, and Lily Tomlin in *Pink Panther 2* in 2009. The success of these two women suggests that it is possible to break out of the mould of exoticization and regionality; they have starred in films across the cinemas of India, as well as British and American film and TV industries.

Tamil cinema stars, however, are far more cult in nature; their fan clubs are numerous and organized. MGR's overwhelming success established certain modes of on-screen heroism that dictate the construction of the film star till date. These practices of stardom – naming, introductory sequences, catchphrases, superhuman strength and outlandish fight sequences, moustache masculinity, and subtextual politicisation – are so central to Tamil cinema that they have become markers of its identification. The line of populist cinema that was rooted in a Tamil ethos entrenched MGR as a Tamil star – as a champion of the Tamil people – which was later converted into political clout. Madhav Prasad elucidates that a sense of locality is imbued in the southern male stars. An industry's image is often dictated by them. Female stars on the other hand were far more flexible in their career and travelled across language and film industries fluidly⁴⁰. In the political era of South Indian cinema in the 60s, this helped male actors establish themselves in politics; they could make claims to an ethno-linguistic loyalty. Despite the extremes of stardom and fandom surrounding MGR, he was rarely a figure that was accessible to non-Tamil audiences, let alone be adored by them. His intimate ties to Dravidian politics ensconced him within a certain ideological framework that was not appreciable outside Tamil Nadu. While it negatively affected the accessibility of non-native audiences to their films and resultant politics, it is precisely because of this implied sense of locality and loyalty that the contemporary circulation of male stars implies a circulation of cinema and culture, over both

⁴⁰ See Nakassis ("A Tamil Speaking Heroine")

space and time. They are so rooted in the regional that they are asked to represent Tamil needs on the national political fora.

Stardom in post-millennial cinema has moved away from the exotic and the exaggerated. However, the stars and the characters they play continue to be rooted in the politics of the regional and the local, albeit differently than in the twentieth century. This chapter studies three different manifestations of the shifting configurations of stardom and their relationship to the local, region, and world of Tamil cinema: the change in the star processes of the biggest star of the industry (Rajinikanth), the emergence of the anti-hero (exemplified by Dhanush), and the rise of the “lady superstar.” These three moves demonstrate how filmmakers have been moving away from the exaggerations of Tamil cinema star processes while still presenting very Tamil characters and stories.

Rajinikanth: A case study of change in on-screen politics

Rajinikanth is at the very end of analysis.

- Manu Joseph, “The Revenge of Rajinikanth”

In 2011, if you had used Google Maps to provide you directions from China to Taiwan, you would have been mildly stumped trying to accomplish step 48: swim across the Pacific Ocean. And because of that bug was born the joke, only Rajinikanth can walk from China to Taiwan. To those well-versed with the discourse of humour surrounding Chuck Norris – who has counted to infinity twice – the statements made of Rajinikanth might seem familiar, although the spectrum of Rajinikanth’s abilities and achievements seems to engage with more obscure parts of human knowledge. And if you were to live by social media, Quora would have you believe that the only way to win a fight against Chuck, would be to call Rajinikanth (because Bruce Lee is

dead). After all, Rajinikanth can coerce light to behave as a particle or wave depending on his mood. He can cool his beer to below Absolute Zero. He knows Victoria's secret. He lives vicariously through himself. Rajinikanth gave Mona Lisa that smile. And although seemingly of similar hyperbolic tone, it would not be an exaggeration to state that Rajinikanth is the reason the world started taking notice of Tamil cinema⁴¹.

While there are other nodes of exposure, Rajinikanth was the one Tamil cinematic phenomenon that appealed to crowds of various cultures spread across different time zones and historical trajectories. Talking to Josh Hurtado of Fantastic Fest, the cult-film festival based out of Texas, USA, I learnt that Rajinikanth movies were always big draws. The over-the-top action and larger-than-life personality his characters are allowed quite easily push his films into the realms of magical realism, if not fantasy, thus giving *Baasha* (Krishna 1995) a spot in the FF line-up of 2014. While the fantasy aspect might be the draw for American audiences, Japanese audiences at one point pledged a form of allegiance to Rajinikanth that is far more akin to the cultdom found in Tamil Nadu, and there continue to be several active Rajinikanth fan clubs all over Japan (Aiyar). Bollywood recently presented their own highly confused tribute to Rajinikanth through the persona of Shah Rukh Khan in the form the song, "Lungi Dance." A year later at the International Indian Film Academy Awards 2014, Kevin Spacey would don a *lungi* and dance to that very song in Tampa, Florida. And along with Shah Rukh Khan, Rajinikanth might be one of the bigger cine-exports through the Indian diaspora at the turn of the century. It may not be possible to provide sturdy empirical evidence to this statement within the

⁴¹ This hyperbolic tone even within academic scholarship is not new. S.V. Srinivas, in a discussion of the "Bollywoodization" of Tamil cinema, states that "Rajinikanth single-handedly took on the might of Hollywood."

scope of this project, but I would be comfortable making the claims that it was through Rajinikanth that non-native audiences were exposed to Tamil cinema.

The mythos of Rajinikanth revolves around two central ideas: style and humility, and the improbable nexus between the two that he is. “Style” is the defining aspect of Rajni’s cinematic presence and is inevitably evoked verbally in every film, whether in the diegesis of the movie or in the extra-diegetic song-space. It is the way he says a certain phrase (often the catchphrase of the film), the flipping of his hair, the manner of donning sunglasses, or lighting a cigarette. His walk itself is a product of his trademark “style,” that is then taken on, along with his signature chuckle, by impersonators and mimics. Constantine Nakassis outlines that “style is an ethnographic datum, a term used by Tamil youth to typify a diverse congeries of objects and activities associated with [...] sociality and status, aesthetics and value” (6). Moreover, it is “an irreducibly local phenomenon,” of which Rajinikanth is “definition made performative flesh” (7). As he became a superstar, this style was built into his fighting style, the lyrics of his songs, and the overall presentation of his character. The Tamil identity he insists upon is understood through the ethnographically local dictum of “style,” that is then transported to other cultures. He is the reason the word “style” entered the Tamil lexicon, and what he’s known for in his many travels.

Legend states that Rajinikanth’s style goes back to when he was Shivaji Rao Gaekwad, a humble bus conductor in Bengaluru in the 1960s and 70s. In *Rajinikanth: The Definitive Biography*, Naman Ramachandran quotes the bus driver Gaekwad worked with who said of him, “(h)e would give out tickets with a flourish, return change in style. It was all about style. Passengers would look on in amazement,”. It was also added that “(p)assengers would let earlier buses go empty and wait for the bus where the entertaining conductor was on duty and crowd in.

Sivaji definitely knew how to work a crowd and play to the gallery even then” (23). The presence of this style before he was in cinema creates a narrative of Rajini that’s inextricable from it. He always had style. Gaekwad is still present in Rajni’s accented Tamil. Grounding this superstar’s extraordinariness in a bus conductor backstory allows for Rajnikanth to be constructed as the ideal rags-to-riches story, that then informs a multitude of characters he would go on to play.

The other facet of his persona is humility. Despite his stardom and financial success, whether his or of his characters, Rajini is humble. It is the base of his strong moral core. He makes all public appearances dressed in utmost simplicity, without wigs or shades (unlike MGR). He wears *Hawaii chappal*⁴², plain white clothes, and leaves his bald pate fully exposed. His family is known for their charitable ventures. When his film *Baba* (Krissna) failed at the box office, Rajini personally covered the losses of all the distributors. The people and his fans are his gods. He has never watched a pirated film. He once offered a panhandler all the money he had in his pocket. And the mythos of Rajinikanth’s humility and basic human goodness is so firmly etched into public imaginary that it is irrelevant whether these popular stories surrounding him are based in fact or fiction; it is the truth of Rajinikanth. He manages to conflate the paradoxes of private and public (Dyer, “Heavenly Bodies”) and that of ordinary and extra-ordinary (Ellis) by performing a star-being that is ordinary *and* extra-ordinary in public *and* private realms. He is a unique star text for not just Tamil cinema, but Indian cinema as a whole, and it is this singularity that proffered him up to be the most engaging way to promote Tamil cinema globally.

⁴² Flip-flops in common American parlance

The stardom of Rajinikanth was most certainly not an overnight phenomenon. It was one that was built from scratch, from school-plays to local drama troupes and finally, formal training at the then newly formed Madras Film Institute starting in 1973. It was years of acting as a villain, playing second to Kamal Haasan, and putting out close to fifteen movies a year between 1977 and 1980, in very few of which he was given top-billing despite a major role. His first film was KB's *Apoorva Ragangal* ("Strange Melodies;" 1975), said to be a Tamil adaptation of Milton Katselas' *40 Carats* (1973). It was a movie for which Rajini learned to speak Tamil and the first of his many films in the post-classical turn of Tamil cinema. He went on to star in Bharathiraja's seminal *16 Vayathinile* ("At the Age of 16;" 1977), as well as gaining critical acclaim in Mahendran's *Mullum Malarum* ("The Thorn and the Flower"/ "Even the Thorn Can Flower" 1978). He acted across genres from the critically acclaimed films of the Tamil New Wave to the formulaic "curry" westerns of the 1980s, moving gradually from villain to anti-villain to anti-hero to hero to the current status as a superhero. It took till his twenty fifth film before he was cast as sole and main hero – *Bairavi* (Bhaskar 1978) – which was also when he was dubbed "Superstar."

At the same time, the earlier anti-Hindi riots in Tamil Nadu led to popular demands to ban Hindi cinema in Madras and Tamil Nadu. This meant that the superhit films of Amitabh Bachchan that were ragingly popular in Bollywood may have had to find a new avatar to acquire a Tamil audience. And there was no one better than the stylish, youthful, populist Rajinikanth with his ever-growing fan clubs to take on Bachchan's mantle of the Angry Young Man⁴³.

⁴³ The Angry Young Man is a familiar trope in the discourse of Hindi cinema (Virdi; Mazumdar (2004); Joshi) and was a common journalistic/scholarly sobriquet for Amitabh Bachchan. In a time when the Bollywood hero was a strict romantic, the roles of the rebellious, borderline anti-hero who was deeply dissatisfied with societal and state systems was unique positionality. Rajinikanth's roles in the socially-aware films of the Tamil New Wave, along with the insistence on a ethnolinguistic Tamil belonging rendered him suitable to take on Bachchan's mantle.

Introduced by KB, acting alongside Kamal and Sivaji, dancing to the music of Ilayaraja, and becoming the local face of Hindi cinema cemented Rajinikanth as one of the two stars of Tamil cinema's two-pole star system. Rajinikanth, much like Kamal Haasan, made a Hindi debut in the 1980s but was relegated to side roles in the face of the already legendary Amitabh Bachchan. It was his already acquired stardom and popularity by 1988 that led to Ashok Amritraj suggesting Rajinikanth play the significant part of the cab driver in Dwight Little's *Bloodstone* (1988), thus making him the first Tamil hero to have a substantial role in a Hollywood film. Rajinikanth, because of the cult status he possessed, was availed of to grab a Tamil audience, and his best work was yet to come. Despite his Marathi and Kannadiga beginnings, he was easily accepted and loved as a Tamil superstar, an identity that would be capitalized upon by filmmakers and producers even outside Tamil Nadu.

Rajinikanth's original stardom: *Baasha* the demigod

Baasha (Krishna 1995) is not an easy movie to write about given the cultural weight it carries for the generation that grew up with it. It cemented Rajinikanth as a very specific kind of star and set the tone for how he would be figured from thenceforth. It was when he "crossed an imaginary line and attained demigod status" (Ramachandran 159). It constructed an image that would then go on to appeal to various audiences, albeit at times only as an exotic experience of Tamil cinema.

It begins with Rajini's character Manickam, a mild-mannered autorickshaw driver in Chennai, taking care of his mother, two sisters, and a brother, on his meagre auto earnings. He is respectful and non-violent, despite being an enforcer of the moral good in the neighbourhood. It is only when his brother Shiva is appointed sub-inspector of police, the main conflict of the film is hinted at. On seeing Shiva's file, the commissioner of police asks to meet his brother

Manickam; Manickam hesitates but accedes. As he walks into the commissioner's line of sight, the screen takes on a negative colour palette, and upon the humble khaki-clothed Manickam (fig. 3) is transposed a distinguished, bearded man in an expensive suit (fig. 4). There are then, in the same palette and similarly juxtaposed with images of Manickam, images of rifles letting loose on a crowd of people (fig. 5), and a newspaper clipping stating that the Bombay smuggler king Manik Baasha died in a localized bombing (fig. 6), suggesting that the commissioner seems to know something of Manickam's past that the audience does not. The rest of the film reveals his past as Manik Baasha, don of Bombay, and it catching up to him in the form of his arch nemesis' – Mark Antony – release from prison 25 years after his defeat by Baasha. The reveal of this powerful past, coexisting with his humble auto driver was a large part of the pull of the film, a pull similar to that of Rajinikanth himself – a coexistence of style, power, and humility nonetheless.



Figure 4: Rajinikanth as Manickam in Baasha



Figure 5: Rajinikanth as Manick Baasha in *Baasha*



Figure 6: Baasha's flashback



Figure 7: Newsprint of Baasha's death

The introductory song of the film is titled “*Naan Autokaaran*,” or “I am an auto driver,” The opening lines of the song are specific to Rajini’s character, stating that he is “an auto driver/ one who knows all the routes/ one who charges the right fare/ one who is a friend of the good/ a good singer.”. The last line of the chorus, “*naan eppozhudhum ezhai-kku ellaam sondha kaaran da*,” recalls a sentiment similar to a popular MGR song with which he campaigned. Where MGR sings that as long as he is a man, the poor will never have to swim in a sea of sorrow and tears,

Rajini states that those very people are his family. To demonstrate the same, the rest of the song identifies Rajini with the average autorickshaw driver and paints them as the epitome of kindness, righteous hard work, and good spirit. By attaching himself to and becoming part of one of the more omnipresent groups of people in Tamil Nadu, Rajini in the form of Manickam is easily relatable to the mass audience. By being a noble don of the Bombay crime syndicate, and poised against an evil force such as Mark Antony, he is configured as someone with the power to stand up for the masses – which is what the film culminates in. As this version of an introductory song repeats itself in later films, it becomes clear that Rajinikanth the star is being poised for politics, and that much like MGR, these songs work toward creating political cache in future campaigns.

The other songs in *Baasha* each work towards a hagiography of sorts. In the song, “*Azhagu*,” Rajni/Manickam is sung to, stating that everything he is, is beautiful – his walk, his smile, his Tamil; that he is the only beautiful man. Whereas the song, “*Style*,” says that Rajni has not just style, but “super style,” one that would be apropos of a Superstar. The theme music, however, is out of the Spaghetti Western genre, with a particular refrain closely resembling Morricone’s theme from *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (Leone 1966)⁴⁴. *Baasha* is situated then in both the very local cultural context of Rajinikanth’s stardom and a wider genre of the spaghetti western. The film as a whole is of course a Tamil attempt at the Mafia film, after the success of *Don* (Barot 1978) in Hindi, and its Tamil remake starring Rajinikanth, *Billa* (Krishnamurthy 1980).

⁴⁴ While only of mild significance, this move caters to and appeases those members of Rajini’s audience who are sensitized to the spaghetti western genre and the ways in which the protagonists were configured in those films; it is part of broader genre that is popularly known as the Curry western.

In a 1995 review of the film, the critic writes that the success of the film is partially due to the fact Suresh Krissna made the movie *for* Rajinikanth and the image he had built by then (*The Hindu* 74). *Baasha*, however, didn't find exposure outside South India till 2012 when the Hindi version was released. This exposure was furthered when the 70mm remastered version was exhibited at the Fantastic Fest 2014, and finally when the digital remastering was re-released in Tamil Nadu in 2017. It is a film that has a significant afterlife across space and time, carrying with it a certain mode of Tamil cinema. But what is noteworthy is that it is an afterlife that was granted *only because* of the star status Rajinikanth commands.

Muthu was the other major hit of 1995 for Rajinikanth (he had a total of five releases that year). *Muthu* is a significant film of the Rajini repertoire as it was released in Japan as *Muthu: The Dancing Maharaja* (*Muthu Odoru Maharaja*) in 1995 and completed a 182-day run. The success and cult status back then led to Kavithalayaa Productions re-releasing the 4K remastered version in Tokyo in November 2018. Although hyped up by Rajni fans, *Muthu* was but a one-hit wonder in Japan for Tamil cinema. However, Rajinikanth did become a cult figure in Japan, and there are plenty of testimonies of plane-loads of Rajini fans from Japan travelling to Chennai to watch his movies FDFS for films as recent as *Kaala* (Ranjith 2018). What is significant is that a mass film proper like *Muthu* wasn't considered so in Japan and was instead dubbed by its distributor as "the Titanic of art cinema". While it was a consciously constructed *regionally* political identity that propelled his stardom, and allowed him these fantastical roles, these leanings are often shunned or are irrelevant in international circulation, because it would be extremely difficult to break out of such regionality, unless their stardom is packaged as "exotic". Take the description of *Baasha* at the 2014 Fantastic Fest:

Baasha introduced a new kind of anti-hero to Tamil cinema and helped to cement Rajini as the greatest film star that Tamil Nadu had ever seen. The film reminds one of hazy late '80s Hong Kong action, sparkly Busby Berkeley-style choreography and the kind of scenery chewing that Hollywood abandoned with the demise of '40s adventure serials. From Suresh Krissna, director of the insane identical twin serial killer masterpiece *Aalavandhan*, *Baasha* is a newly remastered Indian crime classic. (Hurtado)

Coded into this description and associated exhibition of the movie are several layers of worlding that Tamil cinema has been experiencing of late. A fundamental aspect of this worlding is of course the fact that a 1995 film that is well-entrenched in the stereotypical masala film genre of Indian cinema is being brought to a film fest in Austin, Texas. On the one hand, it shows a growing interest in the stereotypical/commercial Tamil film, while on the other hand still classing it within a 'fantasy' genre. Locating this movie in the fantastical serves to justify the otherwise outlandish narrative conventions typical to the genre. Adding to this are the descriptors: "'80s Hong Kong action, sparkly Busby Berkeley style of choreography," and pre- '40s Hollywood adventure serials. These simultaneously pull the movie into a globally recognizable mode of 'fantasy,' while pushing it temporally into the past: 80s, 40s and the works of Busby Berkeley. *Baasha* is taken out of its spatio-temporal and cultural context, remastered and repurposed and filtered through globally recognized fantasy-film and retro-Hollywood in order to make it palatable to the western audience, to a "world" audience.

However, it must be noted that of the several tags that the *Baasha* description holds in the website description, a few would be "Face Slapping," "Huge Moustaches," "Dancing," "Mullet"

and “Bollywood.” While the first four tags are certainly a part of the movie, Bollywood becomes an erroneous tag, presumably to place the movie in a type/genre more familiar to a cosmopolitan audience; to mark it as a movie of, from, and about India. While pulling Tamil Cinema onto the world stage, these events de-classify cult Tamil classics and re-classify them as “Bollywood,” as “national,” (even though the Hindi-dubbed version of *Baasha* wasn’t released till 2012, after it had been digitally remastered for an *international* release). The circulation of – and creation of a public discourse around – these films hinges then on two factors: re-inscribing them as “Indian”, and re-reading them through the lens of global popular/prestige cinema. Yet, it is the exaggerations of narrative and performance that were written specifically for the stardom of Rajinikanth that are the centre of attraction: the cult nature of stardom is why the film circulated. It is the reason that, unlike stars of Hindi cinema, Rajinikanth has organized fan clubs in Japan. Along with the other star of that generation of Tamil cinema, Kamal Haasan, he is one of the earliest moments of worlding of Tamil cinema. In other words, the current movement of Tamil cinema is one of worlding, it is because the movement outside Tamil audiences was made possible through their individual star-texts. His more recent films, specifically his work with Pa. Ranjith, rebrand Rajinikanth differently than before. While they still play to Rajini’s style and humility, the films *Kabali* and *Kaala* position Rajinikanth, for the first time, as a Dalit hero and more interestingly, as vulnerable to aging.

Rajinikanth in the New Millennium: *Kabali*’s Dalit politics

Rajinikanth’s films since 2002 have been much fewer and further in between, making them the biggest events of the Tamil cinema calendar those years. He maintained his mass formula, but gradually modified it by working for a variety of auteurs who were seeking a wider audience. *Baba* (2002) was a spiritual film mostly meant to outline Rajinikanth’s own religious

beliefs that aligned him further to the conservative Hindu right of Indian politics. *Chandramukhi* (2005) was a multi-starrer horror movie that was a remake of a Malayalam movie. Because of the popularity imbued through Rajini, the movie had several further remakes in Telugu, Kannada, and Hindi, that the Malayalam version did not. *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007) was the first Rajini film directed by Shankar and combined Shankar's ideas of political and moral utopia with the morality and style already imbued in Rajinikanth. *Enthiran* ("Robot;" 2010) was the next Shankar venture with Rajinikanth and was the first Tamil sci-fi film, with Rajini playing Dr. Vaseegaran *and* his robot, Chitti. It was a major hit and led to his reprisal of both roles in the bilingual *2.0* (2018), the most expensive Indian film as of then. Each of these films, despite being across various genres and directors, continued to feature all the hallmarks of the Rajinikanth movie. All these films also had in common an unwavering commitment to preserve Rajinikanth's physical on-screen image as an ever-youthful, physically strong, moustached, virile man, despite his public appearances as an old, bald man. When confronted with the growing globalization of his fan base, his on-screen appearance changed dramatically to find a balance between expectations of realism and expectations of style.

The first long-awaited anomaly in the presentation of Rajinikanth on screen was in Pa. Ranjith's Rajinikanth debut *Kabali*. Despite having had only two films under his belt, Ranjith had already established himself as notable upcoming filmmaker in the new turn of Tamil cinema. His singularity in Tamil cinema is that he is the first critically acclaimed Dalit filmmaker whose caste and class politics informed all his narratives, thus bringing a newly authentic perspective into the fabric of Tamil cinema. That the figure supreme of Tamil cinema would choose to work with a fledgling director purely for the appreciation of art and caste politics came as a surprise to

the Tamil cinema critics, commentators, and audiences, and has laid the base for many fan and conspiracy theories.

And with the release of the first trailer, the consensus was simply that Ranjith had mastered the art of Rajinikanth but had done so while making an overt political statement on caste, class, and the condition of the Malaysian Tamil diaspora. Rajinikanth played an age-appropriate role, sporting grey all over (fig. 7), and featuring an age-appropriate love interest. It was Rajinikanth as Baasha but having aged twenty years. *Kabali* launched the second coming of Rajinikanth, and their next collaboration, *Kaala* (2017), cemented this new avatar for the new generation of Tamil fans. It was Rajinikanth for the new millennium.



Figure 8: Shooting commencement announcement poster for *Kabali* (2016)

The film begins in anticipation of Kabali (Rajini) being released from prison. From inside his cell in pristine, white, metal, prison, we see the warden accompanied by guards in camouflage-uniforms stop outside. The camera slowly pans right across a pair of worn out *chappal* to an old, bearded man in blue, sitting on the floor with a book in his hand. We see that it's Kabali even without a closeup. We see that he is reading *My Father Baliah*, a story of Dalit migration due to systemic caste oppression; a migration that is alluded to be the reason for

Kabali's migration to Malaysia. Kabali slowly gets up, puts on his slippers, and turns to walk out of the cell. Before he does so, he allows himself one last pull up at the entrance to the cell. There has yet to be a closeup of Rajini, and apart from diegetic sounds, the scene is accompanied by a low whistle and nothing else, thus making it the most subtle, almost underwhelming intro that actor has had. Yet, the audience erupts in ways that the next two minutes do not matter. Almost as if planned, the next two minutes is nothing but Kabali making his way out of prison while his fellow inmates pledge their allegiances to him, much like the fans in the theatre. It was a moment of Ranjith's non-commercial tendencies and Rajini's superstar requirements tempering each other, and set the tone for the film overall.

The film revolves around Kabali's past life as a labourer in colonial Malaysia and the several offshoots into the present. Much like the *Baasha* narrative, *Kabali* becomes a revenge narrative that finds as its point of departure the release of a main character from prison 25 years after a climactic incident. A parallel strand is Kabali's search for his wife, who is alive despite the riots 25 years ago, and their daughter, whom he's never met. And finally, the film wiggles its way into the lives of the various Tamil settlers in Malaysia and the sort of systemic discrimination that they have historically faced and its repercussions.

The setting and characters are a conscious choice on the part of Ranjith who believes that the Tamil diaspora, such as in Bombay or South East Asia have been underrepresented in Tamil cinema. By providing a historical overview of Tamils who were taken to Malaysia during colonial times as agricultural labour and delving into the prevalent inter-caste issues even in the diasporic settings, *Kabali* went further than the average representation of diasporic Tamils. Furthermore, Kabali himself is subtextually inferred to be a Dalit leader, maybe making it the first such Rajini portrayal. An interweaving of diaspora and caste politics in a Rajinikanth film

was a novelty for Tamil audiences and worked more towards situating Rajini in the worlding movement of Tamil cinema.

Kabali and the next collaboration, *Kaala*, both also work towards Rajinikanth's formal political entry. The persona of Rajinikanth constructed over decades of cinema was being viewed by contemporary audiences as misogynistic and overtly religious. While adored and accepted by Tamil audiences, his potential entry into politics was viewed with some scepticism by Tamil citizens. When *Kaala* positioned Rajinikanth as the antihero of the Indian epic *Ramayana* it very consciously situated him in the Dravidian critique of this Hindu epic, in an allegorical tale of the Tamil diaspora in Bombay dealing with the rise in right-wing Hindu activism in that city. Rajinikanth might deny that his film career was political, but his film career gave him an undeniable political footing.⁴⁵

Stardom is always political in a cinema that has always been overtly political. The craze surrounding Tamil film stars is the sign of a politically aware audience that has been familiarized with cinema as a political medium, as much as it is a medium of entertainment. Furthermore, such political stardom is the result of conscious and politically driven filmmakers and screenwriters in the earlier decades of Tamil cinema, who designed such characters and plots, even though they may not have envisaged the long-term implications on politics and cinema.

⁴⁵ While Rajinikanth, both on and off screen, has made statements over the decades that he would never really consider running for any elections, the recent political vacuum in the state has proven fertile for his entry. He has even made the statement that cinema and politics have nothing to do with one another and has refuted the claim that his roles reflect a political leaning. (Interview by Raj Chengappa, *India Today*, 10 Dec 2018.) Despite his claims to an apolitical stardom, we find him consistently feeding into the Tamil cinema process of building politicians through film songs and themes. His stardom, with its pretensions to an apolitical being while playing fiercely politicized characters, positions him as a unique point in the star system of the industry. And maybe this is why critics like Manu Joseph have stated that Rajinikanth is at the very end of analysis. It is difficult to understand the teleology of his stardom as one could with MGR and begs a reconsideration in how star studies could wrap itself around the magnitude of his being.

However, what is clear is that the modifications to Rajinikanth's on-screen cultural and political image showcase a growing awareness of the need to break out of erstwhile ideals of Tamil masculinity as situated in particular images of virility and youth. Furthermore, his on-screen persona moves away from his earlier religious conservatism (as clearly showcased in *Baba*, for instance), towards a more liberal worldview that explicitly acknowledges and resists caste-based oppression. The superhero can be an old, incarcerated, Dalit man, a failed gang-leader who places utmost value in the women in his life, and yet can be a Tamil leader and a paragon of Tamil virtue in the diaspora.

Rajinikanth's stardom was constructed and is sustained by the dynamics of stardom that have dictated Tamil cinema in the twentieth century. In contrast, twenty first century Tamil cinema male heroes are breaking that signature bond between film stardom and formal politics. They have moved away from attempting to present themselves as the epitome of Tamil virtue or political posturing. Instead, they take on the mantle of the anti-villain or the anti-hero, and represent that character as a viable site of Tamil-ness.

Twenty first century Stars: The anti-hero and the Shero

Post-millennial Tamil film stars do not experience comparable levels of stardom, nor do they have such exaggerated presences on screen. But stars are still born, as are their fan clubs. They are still placeholders of the local, but are not the pinnacle of humanity or masculinity. Rather, they are immoral, dishevelled, flawed, and in no way being primed for political success in the way their predecessors were. The heroes of postmillennial Tamil cinema signal the failure to achieve that Dravidian utopia promised and championed by earlier generations of Tamil cinema and politics. Instead, they exist in the generally pessimistic genres of neo-noir and black

comedy. The local hero of Tamil cinema is not invested in presenting the possibilities of Tamil nationalism. Instead, they locate opportunities and possibilities of socio-economic progress in the latent networks of crime, and local value systems. They attempt to redefine Tamil-ness not as a reaction to Indian nationalism, but as a product of globalizing Tamil culture that can break out of the binary of regional versus national.

The biggest male star of postmillennial Tamil cinema (so far) would be Dhanush, whose stardom is encased in his unappealing aesthetic: his scrawny, unimpressive, and lanky appearance suited the roles that made him famous (fig 8 & 9). Being the brother of a slightly offbeat filmmaker by Tamil cinema standards (Selvaraghavan) Dhanush's earlier roles were also offbeat, in films like *Thulluvadho Illamai* and *Kadhal Kondeyn*, where he played coming-of-age disturbed and sullen teenagers. Selvaraghavan was also responsible for Dhanush's breakout role as "Kokki" Kumar in the gangster film, *Pudhupettai* (2006), which follows a traumatized teenager's transformation into an assassin for a local gang, and eventually becoming a member of the legislative assembly for the constituency. The film served "as a prototype of the pioneer noir gangster cinema," and was symptomatic of "a shift in the ideals of masculinity within Tamil Nadu, that lead to the rise of the neo-noir genre in commercial Tamil cinema" (Kailasam 26). Moderately successful when released and attaining cult status later, *Pudhupettai* reinforced Dhanush as an anti-hero, almost a villain, a trope that became starkly visible in films of post-millennial Tamil cinema.

Dhanush's success in the neo-noir genre is symptomatic of the loss of a singular conception of the Tamil hero and "narrate(s) the post-Dravidian moment in Tamil history (a)s inextricably wound up in a crisis of narration where masculinity mirrors the shifts in gendered roles in the wake of globalisation" (Kailasam 36). The anxieties of Tamil masculinity as

understood through the absence of a hero narrative also brings about, as the next chapter outlines, the irrelevance of the comedian figure whose role as the comedic foil reinforces the masculinity of the hero. Instead, the hero-comedian duo is replaced by an ensemble cast of characters wrapped up in an ethos of black comedy which “creates the space for reflection about the precise qualities that can constitute the figures of the hero and villain” (24). It can be argued that the Tamil male hero is not equipped to deal with the changing natures of the Dravidian identity. Hariharan, for instance, argues that

In Tamil Nadu, these films are a commemoration of the shame that the liberal young generation of the 21st century feel about their thoughtless grandparents who had soaked themselves in the fantasy of Tamil nationalism. The disconnected new Tamilian wonders what must have gone wrong with their elders who gave them “authentic” Tamil names and even Russian names like Stalin and Trotsky.

He claims that the male hero of postmillennial Tamil cinema is no longer a personification of a Dravidian utopia, but a representation of the “paradoxes of being Tamilian today”: of being caught between a deeply ingrained Dravidian identity and a failure of the decadent Dravidian political system. While it may be a stretch to claim that the absence of a singular and infallible male hero is a reaction to the failure of Dravidian politics, it is certainly the case that the reconfiguration of the mass hero as one among many in genres such as the neo-noir gangster and the black comedy is a response to the anxiety of Tamil-ness in a globalizing era.

Dhanush is then a new kind of mass hero, configured for a new kind of Tamil mass. Even though his characters are fiercely protective of his local; his “area.” In the case of the neo-noir-

/gangster film “the space of the gangster narrative is relegated to the fringes of the city, usually located in North Chennai, which is the site of a large low caste, fishing communities in which slum settlements are intertwined with modern infrastructure” (Kailasam 26). As such, there is a heavy insistence upon protecting the local. The introductory song of *Pudhupettai* is literally titled, “*Enga Area Ulla Varadhe*” – do not come inside our area. Yet the anti-hero characters also try to modify the nature of that local as well. In *Maari-2*, Dhanush’s character, Maari, plays second-in-command in the local mob (having obstinately refused to head it). The character is an interesting combination of traditional and modern values. He is ridiculed for his inability to speak English, but is praised for his support of women’s equality. Under Maari’s authority, women can be auto drivers too, just as well as the same women auto drivers can be hired (sometimes more successfully) to smuggle contraband across the city.

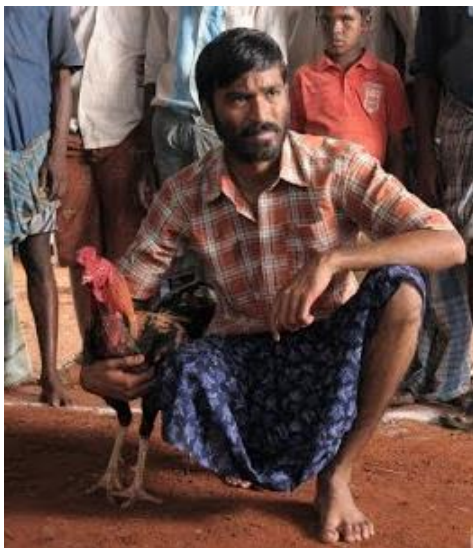


Figure 9: Dhanush in *Aadukalam*

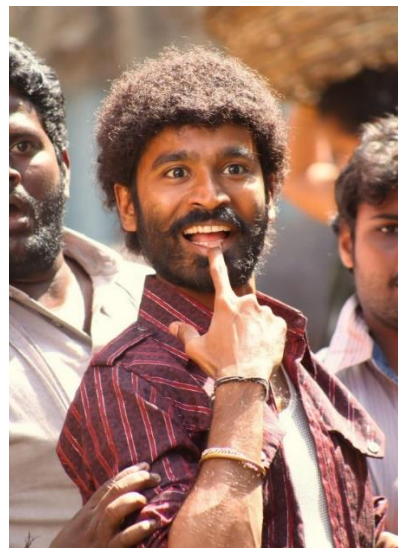


Figure 10: Dhanush in *Anegan*

Dhanush is an interesting nexus between older and newer processes of stardom. He plays the anti-villain in films like *Pudhupettai* and *Aadukalam*, and the anti-hero in masala films like *Maari*. He is the star and producer of the Tamil films that premier at Venice and Toronto (thus

becoming world cinema), while still being the star of remakes of Rajinikanth movies and songs⁴⁶ (that have little significance to those unfamiliar with Rajinikanth). His introductory songs are sung in local, Chennai Tamil (often unintelligible to speakers of several other Tamil dialects), and are named “Local Boys,” and “*Thara Local*,” and yet he is the singer of the most widely (read globally) circulated song of Tamil cinema, “Why This Kolaveri,” (see more in chapter 4). Curiously, he is also at the forefront of Tamil actors finding footholds outside south Indian cinema. While actors with more cosmopolitan images like Siddharth⁴⁷ and Madhavan⁴⁸ had starred in Hindi films, or in Mani Ratnam’s bilingual films, Dhanush was one of the first Tamil actors with an image of “local Tamil” who starred as sole lead in a popular Hindi movie and won several awards for it, as well as the first Tamil actor to have secured a lead in an “English” movie – *The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir* (Scott). The anti-hero/anti-villain nature of the single star of post-millennial Tamil cinema is a stardom that places privilege in non-native recognition, rather than local political success. To aid the anxious hero, however, the burden of constructing Tamil-ness has been taken on by a novel figure of Tamil cinema, “the lady superstar.”

The rise in the Tamil-speaking female star fills the void created by the lack of the male mass hero and thus revises the star systems of the Tamil film industry. Furthermore, the rise in female stars also works toward articulating a new kind of Tamil identity in an age of shifting ideas of Tamil-ness and Tamil femininity. Tamil cinema has historically relied on the trope of the ‘good Tamil woman’ for its narratives.⁴⁹ The ‘good Tamil woman’ is above all, nurturing and places her family above

⁴⁶ This is in part because he is Rajini’s real-life son-in-law, and is thus is considered doubly worthy of carrying on the legacy.

⁴⁷ Siddharth debuted in Mani Ratnam’s *Boys*, produced by S. Shankar, a controversial Tamil movie about a group of young college students fighting for love. He went on to star in Mani Ratnam’s bilingual hit *Aayudha Ezhuthu* in Tamil/ *Yuva* in Hindi. He also played a main role in Aamir Khan’s hit nationalist movie, *Rang De Basanti*.

⁴⁸ Madhavan, much like Siddharth, starred in *Yuva* and *Rang de Basanti*, and other bilingual films like *Yaavarum Nazham* in Tamil/ *13B* in Hindi. He also is the lead in *Breathe*, an Amazon Prime original that premiered in 2019.

⁴⁹ See C.S. Lakshmi

herself. It is maybe why one of the archetypal women in Tamil culture is the *Thamizh thaa* – ‘Mother Tamil.’ The “good Tamil woman” of Tamil cinema, however, is not only an on-screen phenomenon, but is curated off-screen, as seen in the historical absence of Tamil/-speaking heroines. The representation of women in Tamil cinema has historically attempted to construct a prescriptive notion of the Tamil woman through an actress who is clearly coded as *non-Tamil off-screen* (Nakassis “The Tamil Speaking Heroine”). The ‘lady star’ of Tamil cinema warrants study because she resists the binaries of the ‘good Tamil woman’ in the way this stardom is curated and received both on-screen and off-screen.

I think specifically of the rise in popularity of Nayanthara and Jyothika, two veteran women performers of the Tamil film industry, who’ve been made subjects/objects of traditional Tamil cinema practices of stardom and fandom, and as such are signalling a new trend of the industry and its audiences. Jyothika has reconstituted her on-screen star image in alignment with the male mass hero of Tamil cinema, and is the “shero” of Tamil cinema. Nayanthara, on the other hand, participates in the broader industrial trend of black comedy and neo-noir. These two stars are often the sole leads in a film and their characters are imbued with similar levels of agency as the typical Tamil mass hero, which is a paradigmatic shift in the representation of women in Tamil cinema. It is notable then that both stars experienced a clear surge in stardom after they began to dub for themselves, making them the elusive *Tamil-speaking* heroines. Where earlier heroines of Tamil cinema had to be coded as non-Tamil off screen, the popularity of the Tamil speaking heroine speaks to a broader change in Tamil identity in a post-global era, where in confrontation with the changes afforded by globalization and rising Hindu nationalism, there has been an increased emphasis on the local and the vernacular of Tamil culture. Thus, the

heroine who speaks Tamil *and* is coded as the good Tamil woman is the one who is entrusted with the responsibilities of cine-politics.

However, while it might be the case that stardom in Tamil cinema is still linked to questions of ethnocentricity, the feminine nature of this star system has allowed for a flexibility that adapts to global sensibilities. It is a version of stardom that has to walk the line between the “good Tamil woman,” and the progressive ideals of global feminist discourse. This has pushed representations of Tamil women to embrace ideals of womanhood that lay outside the binary confines of the good and bad woman. A newfound independence is asserted, and is reflected in the extra-text of the industry as well, whether in the rise of the #metoo movement or the proliferation of women filmmakers. These moments within and outside the text help posit that the global and the local of contemporary Tamil identity have found a philosophical compromise in the success of female stars. Along with influential women being the subject of biopics⁵⁰, the rising success of women filmmakers is another manifestation of this paradigmatic shift in the gendered nature of the Tamil industry. Sudha Kongara, Lakshmy Ramakrishnan, Divya Bharathi, and Leena Manimekalai are just a few Tamil filmmakers whose success in popular cinema and documentary features speak to the potential of women-directed narratives of Tamil culture.

Essentially, even though the work/public image/status of new female stars adheres closely to the masculine star system of Tamil cinema, the fact that they are lady (super)stars is a marked shift in the industry. They are constructing a new, feminine edition of the two-pole star system. Jyothika and Nayanthara’s star trajectories stand testament to a moment of flux in the

⁵⁰ This need to validate women and women’s narratives in Tamil cinema has also effected cinematic and televisual narratives such as *Mahanati/Nadigai Thilagam* (Ashwin, 2018)⁵⁰ and *Thalaivi/ Leader* (female) (Vijay, 2020). The former presents the life and times of yesteryear actress of Telugu and Tamil cinema, Savitri,⁵⁰ while the latter is an upcoming film that narrates Jayalalitha’s rise to power. Aside from these, there is also *Queen* (2019) which is a web-streaming series that presents a fictionalized account of Jayalalitha’s life.

Tamil film industry that is grappling with a sense of local identity in global times. The fandom surrounding them has finally reached levels comparable to male stars and is soliciting a reconsideration of extant star systems discourse in Tamil cinema. If the star system was considered the pinnacle of Tamil masculinity in decades past, the new star system is focussed on providing a spotlight on women, while leveraging that position to critique practices of stardom and fandom.

Along with the creation of the “*shero*,” another major change has been the shift in practices of fandom. While stardom and fandom do continue traditional forms of adulation, now tending towards gender inclusivity, there has been a shift in how star and fan processes function in the worlding of Tamil cinema. The growing diaspora provides avenues for greater international circulation by way of the regional tones each star has crafted around himself/herself. They become placeholders for a Tamil being: whether in terms of cultural practices represented within or by the film, or because of the cultural practices of film-watching that these movies allow. The male star used to be centre of a Tamil sense of local; they performed a post-colonial resistance to a nation-centric hegemony. Tamil male heroes were crafted to become the politicians that would represent Tamil needs at the national stage; they have now moved towards demonstrating the manifestations of the Tamil society as experiencing a post-global moment, becoming representatives of Tamil engagement with the world, as part of a broader Global South.

Chapter 3: Black Comedies, Self-Reflexivity, and the Local

#PrayForNesamani

In May 2019, an exchange between a Tamilian and a Pakistani about a simple matter of translation set the stage for a worldwide top Twitter trend – one that demonstrated an intertwining of language, cinema, social media, and national politics utilized to cement a sense of local Tamilness on Twitter. In response to a general call for translating the word “hammer” in various languages, a Tamil speaker stated that it was called a *suthiyal*. He also added that it was with what Nesamani had been hit on the head. This was an out-of-context reference to a 2001 Tamil movie *Friends* (Siddique) in which popular comedian Vadivelu plays the role of a down-on-his-luck contractor called Nesamani, who, in one comic routine, gets hit on the head with a hammer. Understanding the reference, another Tamil speaker jumped in enquiring after Nesamani’s health. Eventually Tamil Twitter caught on to this Facebook thread and the fanaticism of the Tamil meme community was brought to the Twitter world’s attention (Perera). Soon there were pictures of the Pope praying, along with the signature #PrayForNesamani. Tweets praying for Nesamani from Donald Trump and Imran Khan were photoshopped. The fact that #PrayForNesamani was the top trend on Twitter worldwide is more interesting because it came in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Parliamentary election results. While the rest of the country was contributing to the popularity of the trend #ModiSarkar (Modi Government), an exclusively Tamil Twitter crowd matched that popularity with #PrayForNesamani. The Tamil Twitter population then reappropriated Nesamani to stand for an anti-Modi Tamil identity. That this gained enough traction for world media outlets like the BBC to feature a story centring on a regular fare Tamil movie from 2001 is significant to understanding cinema’s position – and

specifically film comedy – in constructing and maintaining a Tamilness in the twenty first century.

Unlike other film histories that have tended to work within the discursive divide of art/popular and national/Hollywood with the “art” and “national” being endowed with greater critical currency, Tamil cinema’s history renders it incapable of being studied as either national or art cinema. Moreover, where studies of film comedy have tended to focus on national, or (transnational) regional identities and social practices, a study of comedy in Tamil cinema is automatically an example of an anti-national trajectory in comedy (as evinced most recently by network era reincarnations of Nesamani). Tamil cinema’s avenues of comedy and humour evidence its audiences as a discursive community that has its basis the shared knowledge of Tamil as a language, the history of Tamil cinema, and an unconscious understanding of the workings of comedic performance as they have transformed from stage to screen. It can be argued that the change in the way comedy is facilitated and presented on-screen is symptomatic of the same changes in the industry that brought about the popularity of the neo-noir, and the fall of male stardom. In particular, the growing popularity of the black comedy and the spoof genres, and the parallel fall of the comedian sidekick figure can be read as a specific reconfiguration of the local that is breaking its way out of the national-regional binary and engaging with world cinema.

In the introduction to *Mock Classicism*, Nilo Couret writes, “[i]f regional cinemas often get constructed along political, auteurist, or movement-based axes, then popular genre cinema has forced a reconsideration of how international film history is written” (3). Couret makes this statement in light of Latin American cinema as a regional cinema, whose continental popular genres “complicate the production of a national cinema, often conceived as part of an art cinema

tradition, in that they underscore the discursive divide between art/popular as well as national/Hollywood” (3). Film comedy and comedic practices, Couret maintains, is often sidelined in national film histories and because of the difficulty of translation, rarely find themselves mentioned in international film histories. Through a study of comedy as a popular genre, he understands Latin American cinema’s relationship with classical Hollywood and modernity as a way of thwarting neat understandings of international film histories, and contemporary global media studies’ formulations of world cinema. I contend that Tamil cinema and its comedic practices further complicate these concepts by being a part of a different formulation of “regional,” in its tag of regional cinema, while providing its own unique complications to the understanding of world cinema and its equation with global art cinema.

The #PrayForNesamani trend, for instance, is an exclusively Tamil meme and hashtag that indicates the presence of a linguistic community that shares a knowledge of filmic history and practices: the role of the comedian figure in cinema⁵¹, for instance. It is also simultaneously symptomatic of the increasingly “woke” nature of the Tamil public. Nesamani has become part of the rhetoric of cricket commentary and topical issues like hydrocarbon extraction in TN; he was a goofy spokesperson for the #metoo movement in Tamil cinema, a critique of mainstream Hollywood, a mode of resistance to a Hindu-nation, and the face of technological upgrades in Tamil media circulation, with calls for Nesamani to be on Netflix for mass consumption. #PrayForNesamani is just one representation of the changing nature of Tamil audiences in the twenty first century for whom Tamil cinema has been gradually evolving its modes of narrative and presentation.

⁵¹ The actor who plays Nesamani, Vadivelu, is one of the most popular subjects of Tamil memes.

The phenomenon of film comedy serves the purpose of understanding the twenty first century dynamics of Tamil cinema because Tamil cinema is an ethno-centric cultural industry whose focus has always been a Tamil audience. Comedy, more specifically, is one of the most vernacular genres of such an industry for comedy is a narrative phenomenon that is rooted, in Tamil cinema at least, in the specificities of language and the particularities of local politics. As such, while Couret maintains that the difficulty of translating comedy excludes popular genres from *international* film histories, India's linguistic diversity excludes Tamil cinema comedy from *national* film histories. Furthermore, while acknowledging that comedy is one of the most vernacular genres and thus best suited for locating a study of the current worlding of Tamil cinema, the praxis of comedy in Tamil cinema (and other popular cinemas of South India) is in itself a unique approach to filmic comedy and pushes for a further reconsideration of comedy as a signifier of cinematic identities.

Comedy in Tamil cinema can be understood through two forms: as a lineage or trajectory of the comedian figure or as a distinct genre, the comedy film. The distinction in these two forms of humour is fairly simple: of character and genre. The comedian figure is a standalone character that can be inserted into almost any genre/plot/narrative form, and be expected thrive purely on comic genius. The comedy film, on the other hand, is a dedicated genre of film that has specific characteristics and has no other overarching narrative purpose but to provide a message of social critique through laughter. These two forms have run in parallel and have deeply influenced each other, united by the idea of comedy as an explicit subversion of reigning societal norms. While the genre of the comedy film has parallels in other film industries, the comedian figure is somewhat unique to the cinemas of India, and south India in particular. The comedy track, like the song-sequences and action sequences, can be read as interruptions to the plot, under Lalitha

Gopalan's framework. Comedians and their presence on screen are then similarly extra-diegetic, in that their scenes do not always participate in plot progression; they are a crucial component of the masala film. Thus, the form of film comedy is already a highly localized phenomenon, let alone the content produced by these comedians.

In the twenty first century, the comedian figure and his comedy track are disappearing, while the comedy film moves away from its previous foci of the "family comedy," and takes on the mode of black comedy or *l'humour noir*. The black comedy is the current iteration of Tamil humour on screen. It takes to heart the ensemble cast and language-based humour and brings them together to provide a critical look of contemporary society. However, these films are almost always located in the informal networks of crime and alternative business models (alternative to the formalized capitalist network of the post-global Chennai). Instead of the comically troubled hero, it simply presents a series of characters who have been dealt a weak hand by the gods of fate and/or corporatized Tamil Nadu. These films are no longer the wholesome family viewing that the earlier versions of the comedy film were, but violent and at times graphic dark comedies. It is the comical heir to the "cinema of disgust" of postmillennial Tamil cinema.⁵² There seems to be an underlying belief that failures of the nationalizing and globalising Tamil state have grown too convoluted to be able to be critiqued by a single comedian figure or by a happy-go-lucky ensemble of comedians.

These newly minted comedies focussed on those caught in the nets of capitalism and neo-liberalism and the complicated relationship these phenomena hold with the "local" networks and systems; a focus on the city as a transnational space, as it were. They don't take the side of either

⁵² See Hariharan's "After the Cinema of Disgust".

the global or the local. Rather, they attempt to articulate everyday life in unavoidably glocal terms. For instance, films such as *Soodhu Kavvum* (“Evil Engulfs” Kumarsamy, 2013), *Neram* (“Time” Putharen, 2013), *Naanum Rowdy Thaan* (“I Too Am a Rowdy” Shvn, 2015) are all about alternative systems of finance, law, employment and yet socially accepted in that those engaging in these acts are seen as the protagonists/comic characters. The current crop of comedy films does not condemn or condone any social practices⁵³ but simply allow for the darkness of the film to express a rather dim perspective of current Tamil urban life⁵⁴.

The other mode of comedy films of postmillennial Tamil cinema, and couched somewhat within the black comedy genre, is the self-reflexive comedy. Whether it’s a comical look at formulae and modes of filmmaking in Tamil cinema with films like *Thamizh Padam* (“Tamil Movie” Amudhan 2010), or the anxieties of filmmaking in *Jigarthanda* (Subburaj 2014), the self-reflexive mode is a locus of introspection for the industry, and reflects on practices thus far and changes that are happening and need to happen in years to come. I interpret this new phase of comedy films as a result of the worlding tendencies of twenty first century Tamil cinema; as ways of re-emphasizing a changing local when confronted with its own growing globality. These modes of comedy are participating in more “international” trends of film comedy. The current modes of

⁵³ This lack of moralizing is what effects the irrelevance of the comedian figure who has, for decades been recorded as the arbitrator of how Tamil-ness navigates modernity.

⁵⁴ One could argue that this genre began, somewhat, with the 2007 film, *Chennai 600028* (Prabhu). A film that revolves around a group of young men from a housing block community in 600028 zip code and their street-cricket rivals from a neighbouring zip code, *Chennai 28* uses the ruse of a locally modified sport to explore the lifestyle of this community. Featuring newcomers Premgi Amaren, Shiva, Jai, Nithin Sathya, and other only mildly familiar faces, the film played off the absurdly dramatic rivalries of street cricket. Venkat Prabhu made several more comedy films in the years after like *Saroja*, *Goa*, *Chennai 28-II* featuring a permutation of many of the same cast members, and a few later regulars. *Saroja* follows a group of friends who, while on their way to the ICC Cricket World Cup Finals, accidentally stumble upon an abandoned warehouse and attempt to rescue a kidnapped girl being held there; the entire diegesis takes place in less than forty-eight hours. *Goa* featured the first openly gay protagonists of Tamil cinema, in a film that interlinks crime, romance, and the cosmopolitan Tamil life in Goa. The novelty and innovation in the narrative structures and characterizations of these initial films is why Venkat Prabhu could be considered responsible for the revitalization of the Tamil comedy and anticipated future ensemble cast dark comedies.

comedy become a newly constructed articulation of Tamil's linguistic nationalism that also attempt to speak to and construct/imagine a global(ized) Tamil people as its audience. They are, however, a product of a long trajectory of comedy in Tamil cinema, and its role as an expression of social critique.

Comedy Movies and the Comedian: A Brief History

The comedian figure is crucial to a film's success and can often make or break a its commercial run. As such, much like the music composer of the film, the comedian is also part of the marketing artillery that is used to promote the film, and he (the comedian figure is *almost* exclusively male⁵⁵) is often one of the first names in the opening credits of a film. He is essentially part of the star power of the film. This may be because the comedian does not always work off the same script as the rest of the film. Instead, he comes up with his own script, inserting it into the designated spaces of the film's plot. The comedy track of the film is therefore quite often a standalone unit that interacts with the main plot of the film marginally to provide some external social commentary to the hero's actions⁵⁶. Arguably, the comedic actor is the auteur of the comedy track which, like the song-and-dance and action sequences, is an interruption to the plotline of the film. Over the decades, various comedians who have taken on the mantle have inflected the comedian figure's role with various significances. However, the social critic remained a stable integral part of their role, rendering the content of humour relevant to a "local" crowd who participated in or were subject to the practices being critiqued on screen. In tracing the history of the comedian figure, the growing irrelevance in the twenty first century becomes a point of interest.

⁵⁵ It must be insisted upon that some of the major figures of film comedy have been women such as Mathuram, Manorama, and "Kovai" Sarala. However, the comedienne rarely has a solo role i.e. she's part of an ensemble cast of comedians, whereas the male comedian is often the solo comedy figure in a movie.

⁵⁶ Comedy's presence as a stand-alone unit is partly the justification behind the launch of several TV channels such as Aditya TV and *SirippoLi*, dedicated to round the clock broadcasting of comedy tracks.

The comedian figure has a long history that begins, as with most Tamil cinema, on the village stage. The “special drama,” as opposed to the regular drama, featured actors who specialized in certain roles brought together to improvise a drama for the audience. Susan Seizer in her study of Tamil humour posits that the most popular character in these special dramas was almost always the “buffoon” or the main comedic actor. She also theorizes the comedian or the buffoon character as the personification or expression of Tamil values delivered in jokes veiled in anecdotes of social blasphemy. When this practice translated onto the silver screen, the narratives were mimicked, and a dedicated space was provided in the diegesis for a similar character.

The comedian’s role as a social critic is a practice that began with the first comedian of the Tamil screen: “*Kalaivaanar*⁵⁷” N.S. Krishnan (1908-1957). NSK was brought up in the tradition of *villipattu* (a local form of storytelling that intersperses story with percussion and music) and made the transition to the theatrical stage early. By the time cinema was popular, he was already an established comedian on the theatre scene, which made his jump fairly streamlined: he entered cinema as the leading comedian of that time. Along with his wife, T.A. Mathuram, NSK was the face of silent and early Tamil cinema comedy, known for their “brand of comedy, satire, irony and social relevance” (Guy “Laughter, His Medicine”). His comedic stylings were identified by a combination of fluid prose and social critique.

Having been one of the early members of the Dravidian movement, NSK’s songs, soliloquies, monologues, and verbal spars on screen reflected ideals of the Dravidian movement, and represented the early ideologies of Tamil culture and cinema. For instance, in the Tamil

⁵⁷ Trans. “Lover of arts”

adaptation of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* – *Nallathambi* ("Good Fellow" Krishnan-Panju 1949), NSK plays an average rural man who inherits a dead relative's estate, and the different ways in which people try to cheat him out of it. The film was wildly popular for his songs that are oft cited as NSK's ability to envision the future (Guy, "Message in a Song"). For example, in *Nallathambi*, a particular song talks about the use of nuclear power to enhance quality of life. In other films, his songs have preached messages of gender equality, whereas some songs highlight the importance of science over religion – vaccinations, rather than prayer. The other way in which NSK presents his Dravidian ideals is by portraying caricatures of Brahminical characters, such as in *Uthama Puthiran*⁵⁸ ("Virtuous Son" Sundaram 1940), where he plays a sleazy Brahmin priest.

As the first on-screen comedian, it was with NSK that the practice of comedians working outside the script of the film itself began. On receiving the film in post-production, NSK and his team would sit down and write the comedy track for the film, shoot it, and have it inserted in designated spaces in the film. Hailed as the "king of comedy," NSK was instrumental in shaping the future of Tamil cinema's comedy: whether propagated through a comedian figure, or as a comedy movie, the various ways in which NSK and Mathuram approached comedy influenced Tamil cinema's comedy. It became a way to highlight Dravidian philosophies, present progressive values of gender equality, and shun superstition through irony, satire, and song.

From then, the mantle was passed on to the most prolific male comedian of Tamil cinema, Nagesh (1933-2009). In a career that spans fifty years and over a thousand films, Nagesh played a variety of roles as protagonist, antagonist, and comedian. However, his comic nature

⁵⁸ A Tamil adaptation of James Whale's *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1939)

inflected each of his versatile roles. Heavily inspired by Jerry Lewis, Nagesh changed the nature of Tamil comedy from being reliant purely on dialogue by making full use of his lanky physical appearance and expressive eyes, combined with dialogue and performance. As a comedian, he has been paired along several generations of Tamil heroes, and his conscious tailoring of comedy for these various eras can be seen as he moved from the young vagrant-like friend of the hero to the wise but forgetful/drunken/absent-minded grandfather. As such, one cannot neatly categorize Nagesh's comedic themes. In the 1965 mythological movie *Thiruvilayadal*, Nagesh plays a Brahminical poet with a penchant for unfortunate spoonerisms. In *Kadhalikka Neramillai*, he plays an aspiring filmmaker. And in his seminal *Server Sundaram*, he plays a version of himself, a rags-to-riches story of a young man with no formal education, dreaming of making it in show business. In general, though, it could be said that his younger roles played up the importance of education, and used that to leverage his character's takes on how society might want to function.

Nagesh is an interesting counter-point to the comedian figure because of the star status he achieved, and was one of the early comedians to flow seamlessly between the comedian figure and the comedy movie. He was also one of the comedians who would work within the script of the film itself, as his stardom often earned his characters a major role in the film's plot, and scripts were often written with Nagesh in mind. Furthermore, Nagesh's characters in films were often so crucial to the narrative that they warranted their own love story on the side. This love interest was often played by comic heroine, Manorama. Together, the antics of Nagesh and Manorama anticipated the possibility of a comedy film: a movie that could run entirely on comedic characters and comic genius. Tamil cinema in the 70s and 80s was moving away from formulaic narratives and stereotypical mass heroes. This impacted the presence and role of the comedian figure, who instead found favour in the comedy film.

The Tamil comedy film has a temporally expansive history, but a short lineage compared to the comedian. It begins with an unformulated but common plot structure of a group of characters coming together in a somewhat close-quarters situation, such as the joint family, in the 70s and 80s. The films usually bring together an ensemble cast of comedians and “character actors,” playing on their talents in socially driven humour. These talents are combined with (screen-)writers specializing in comic dialogue and storylines for a film that’s broadly classified as a comedy or a “family comedy.” While present through the history of Tamil cinema, they found full form in the 1980s as a mode to explore the problems of family life in the changing urban of Tamil Nadu. However, the genre of family-comedy film, best exemplified by the films of actor-writer-director Visu, nourished the humorous sensibilities of the Tamil audience. Visu’s films would often take place in the Tamil joint family which would be riddled with its own problems as the family comes to terms with the growing modernity of the 80s in Tamil Nadu⁵⁹. Presented in a comedic manner through punny dialogues and mistaken-identity plot lines, the films use an ensemble cast instead of a monolith comedian figure to deliver messages of social import through humour.

Repeatedly cast and thus fully flourishing in her comedic faculties in this decade and through this genre was Manorama (1937-2015), the most prolific actor of the Tamil film industry (with over 1500 films and 5000 stage performance to her credit). She had a career that, much like Nagesh, spanned the decades from herself as a youthful heroine to the wise but witty grandmother and resulted in her being fondly referred to as *aachi* (grandma). She continued legacy of social critique even within the comedy film. For instance, in *Samsaram Adhu*

⁵⁹ In his themes, you can see Visu’s education under K. Balachander. Visu takes the tropes that KB explored in his films about the urban of Chennai, and showcases them in a comedy with a happy ending instead.

Minsaram (“Family Life is Electric;” Visu 1986) she plays the character of the maid who consistently nudges the protagonist to acknowledge his own patriarchal biases. Manorama’s success also belies the ability of comedy to subvert systems of stardom in Tamil cinema. Unlike other female stars whose popularity was contingent on a relationship with a male star, Manorama’s expertise in comedy afforded her a singular success through the first phase of the comedy film.

This first phase of comedy films was also in anticipation of a whole subgenre of “Kamal Comedies,” with the growing popularity of Kamal Haasan’s comedic talents in the 1980s. This was the initiation of a trend where the star-hero would lead the film as the main comic pull, instead of there being a separate comedian, instigating the comedian figure’s initial collapse. Kamal was an established actor, dancer, and writer by the late ’80s and was given the authority to explore his comic potential to the fullest. From early films like *Michael Madana Kama Rajan* (MMKR) and *Singaravelan* (1992), to the first sequel films of Tamil cinema: *Kalayanaraman* (1979) and *Japan-il Kalyanaraman* (“Kalyanarama in Japan,” 1985), Kamal comedies formed the second phase of the comedy film. In these films, the comical star-hero would be supplemented by other comic elements such as a group of supporting comedians (often featuring Nagesh, Manivannan, Nassar, Ramesh Khanna etc), and punny dialogue. Significant to this history is the fact that the Kamal comedy would focus on diasporic characters, multi-lingual (or multi-dialect) humour, and some version of the buffoon-hero.⁶⁰ While indulging in complex humour, these films would inevitably have simple plot structures. The focus on language and dialects however ensured a predominantly Tamil audience for his films.

⁶⁰ *Michael Madana Kama Rajan* (MMKR) for instance is famous for the “mean/*meen* sequence,” where two of the four titular characters are entangled in a narrative sequence that included misidentification and an elaborate play on the multiple meanings of the English word “mean,” and its Tamil homonym “meen,” (trans. fish).

Take the case of his attempt to remake *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus 1993). It was titled *Avvai Shanmugi* (1995) and featured Kamal in the lead role of the female-nanny-by-day and moustached-choreographer-by-night. With co-stars like Nasser, Nagesh, Manivannan, and “Gemini” Ganesan, the film was a resounding hit in Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (with the Telugu dubbed version.) The film contrasts the lifestyle and language of a non-brahmin, Pandi (Kamal), who lives in a lower-class neighbourhood and works as a “*kooththaadi*” (pejorative for dancer), with the lifestyle and language of his rich Brahmin ex-wife Janaki (Meena) and her business tycoon father (“Gemini” Ganesan). The humour of the film lies in the plot itself, as well as numerous puns across Brahminical, non-Brahminical, and Muslim dialects that the film uses to subtly condemn caste and religious discrimination. That a significant portion of the film exists in language and linguistics allows for fewer options in travel. This may be why the preliminary director of the Hindi version, Shantanu Shorey, thought the film “lacked humour” (Verma)⁶¹. While being an adaptation of a Hollywood film, *Mrs. Doubtfire*’s influence on *Avvai Shanmugi* barely went beyond inspiring the titular character as a divorced man’s attempt to save his family through cross-dressing. The cross-dressing itself is hark back to local theatrical practices that have framed Tamil comedy.

This emphasis on language and local humour conventions is a large part of the Kamal comedy⁶², and is the result of his consistent collaborations with the veteran dramatist and

⁶¹ Eventually Kamal took over direction of the film, and made his Hindi directorial debut as well with *Chachi 420*.

⁶² Amongst his films, *Avvai Shanmugi* is exemplary of the fact that Kamal comedies laid extra focus on language and puns, specifically the confusion that emanates across dialects of caste and region in Tamil Nadu. In *MMKR*, Kamal plays a rich businessman returned from London (Madan), a cook from the Palakkad area (Kameswaran), a firefighter from the urban mires of Chennai (Rajan), and a petty thief (Michael), all differentiated on screen by variations in body language, accent/dialect, and appearance of his moustache (or the lack of it). *Panchathanthiram* centres on the friendship of five men from different parts of the South India being tried by the humorous machinations of the marriage and family of Kamal’s character. Taken together, the comedy in these three films is broadly representative of Kamal’s style: essentialized as the comically troubled hero and the humour that results from cross-cultural interactions in the plot.

dialogue-writer “Crazy” Mohan. Crazy and Kamal have worked together on almost all of his comedies beginning with *Apoorva SagodarargaL* (“Strange Brothers” 1989) and *MMKR*, all the way till *Vasool Raja MBBS* in 2004⁶³. Their collaboration was the second phase of the Tamil comedy that combined the worlding tendencies of Kamal the auteur with the vernacular comic stylings of Crazy Mohan. It anticipated the future stars of Tamil cinema indulging in their own comedy tracks without necessarily relying on the comedian. This second phase echoed the ensemble cast tendencies of the earlier comedy film and brought out a new focus on the comically troubled hero, and used these to continue comedy’s role of social subversion.

With the return to popularity of formulaic films and the mass/masala formula reigning supreme in the 1990s, the exclusive comedy track was brought back into Tamil cinema and made famous several actors such as the “Tom and Jerry” of Tamil cinema - Goundamani and Senthil, “the dark horse”- Vadivelu, and Vivek. Often responsible for their own comedy track, these comedians integrated all the features from previous eras of comedy. They were a culmination and result of the tradition of humour from both the Tamil stage and screen: the vociferous and alliterating – and decidedly Tamil – social critic returned to the screen. A stellar example of this would be the comedian Vivek’s role in the film *Youth* (Selva 2002), in which he played the character of “*Karuththu*”⁶⁴ Kandasamy. In one of the first instances of the comedian and hero sharing the screen, they are out drinking on the eve of Valentine’s Day. They hear a car brake suddenly and find a young man has jumped in front of it to save a wilting rose that he was planning to gift to his girlfriend. Kandasamy then launches into a mini-lecture on the futility of

⁶³ Post 2004, Kamal swerved away from “Crazy” Mohan and began to write his own dialogue, which resulted in the relative commercial failure of *Manmadan Ambu* (Cupid’s Arrow, 2010). One of the most repeated criticisms of the movie was that Kamal Haasan should have left the dialogue writing to Crazy.

⁶⁴ Trans. Advice/tips

the rose, a flower, as a symbol of love. Why not instead gift her banana blossoms or a cauliflower, even if the relationship doesn't work out, the mother has something to cook with, he quips. Said with alliterations and delivered rather poetically, the humour lies in both form and content of Vivek's dialogues. In its content, Kandasamy is making fun of western ideas of romance whereby one gifts roses, and instead harks back to more local/traditional ways of proposals whereby families exchange platters of fruits and nuts as promissory notes of engagement.

Similarly, later in the film, on finding himself in the middle of this novel event known as the food festival, Kandasamy stands confounded. Centred in the frame and in shallow focus, he is flanked on either side by blurry figures in suits and pantsuits on one side (the western), and a couple dressed in Punjabi outfits on the other (signalling the North). Situated thus, he launches into a monologue directed presumably only at the audience about the greatness of Tamil cuisine:

The TAMILIAN first discovered that one can steam rice flour into an *idli*, he then made a more "elaborate" version and called it *dosa*. He stacked one on top of another and made it a *set dosa*, put some potato in it and called it a *masala dosa*. He discovered that yesterday's *idli* could be mashed and made into today's *upma*. The TAMILIAN who discovered all this is precisely the same TAMILIAN for whom today finding food is the festival. But these people (looking around the room), in an air-conditioned room, find new varieties of cuisine and eat plates and plates of food...

At this point, he is angrily interrupted by a woman (whose presence is announced by the sound effect of an elephant trumpeting), dressed in jeans, with food-laden plates in both hands, who figures whatever Kandasamy is on about has something to do with her. He then says,

cowering, that he was simply giving advice to society. “Society? Where is that dish? I want to try it,” she says and is gestured off the screen by Kandasamy and the noise of an elephant trumpeting. This whole monologue, aside from being a philosophical aside, is also tangentially related to the main narrative in which the hero is a chef who specializes in local cuisine. Immediately after Kandasamy’s monologue, we cut to the hero lecturing a chef on the tender process of making a *vazhakka bajji* (raw plantain slices dipped in spicy batter and deep fried). In such ways, the comedian not only is manifestation of certain deeply rooted critiques of contemporary societal problems, but also plays foil/provides context to the main hero to reaffirm a certain sense of Tamil identity.

In effect, the comedian figure, by being foil and sidekick to the Tamil hero takes the space of the subjugated, and sometimes there are hierarchies in place between comedian figures themselves, as with the case of Senthil and Goundamani.⁶⁵ Sundar Kaali and Ravi Srinivas point out that the comedian/side-kick figure is, centrally, an issue of caste representation, and argue that the fundamentally caste-based politics in Tamil Nadu explains the prevalence of the comedian figure in Tamil cinema, despite his decline in Hindi cinema. This, however, is not always the case. As Jananie Kalyanaraman explains in her essay on Vadivelu’s role in *Imsai Arasan 23-am Pulikesi*, the occasional role of comedian-as-hero, or the comedian figure parodying upper caste characters have found success. Moreover, caste in Tamil cinema, unless crucial to plot or comedy, is usually inferred subtextually and is thus often lost on a non-native viewer. In many ways, the decline of the comedian figure speaks to the changing political identities and the shifting definitions of socio-political Tamil Dravidian utopia.

⁶⁵ See Sundar Kaali and Ravi Srinivas’ “On Castes and Comedians: The Language of Power in Recent Tamil Cinema,” for more.

If a set of core ideas about a proper Tamil sense of being are located within the comedian figure, while he also positions himself as a modern critic of these values,⁶⁶ the almost abrupt break in this tradition of the comedian figure in the twenty first century signals a new stage in the structures of Tamil cinema. This is not to say that the comedian figure has been completely exiled from the screen. It is to say that the genre of films that required and glorified the comedian are growing fewer and further in between. Fewer dedicated comedy tracks exist in contemporary Tamil cinema because there are fewer quintessential Tamil masala films. The mass heroes of the 1990s such as Vijay and Ajith still make their signature masala films, but the newer crop of actors and filmmakers have sidestepped the mass appeal and have taken to less formulaic narratives, such as the neo-noir genre that rarely has space for comic relief. As such, the role of the comedian has grown significantly briefer.

Adding to this is the decrease in the average length of the Tamil film. Having shorter overall run time necessitates cutting elements that are not crucial to the plot i.e., song-and-dance sequences, action sequences, and the comedy track. “These days, all films are short films,” Vivek joked while explaining that directors in recent years are less inclined to give comedians the time and space within a film’s narrative required to fulfil their potential (personal interview). The average length of the Tamil film has decreased from well over two hours to just about two hours to attract audiences that are used to Hollywood and other global media now available through a myriad of streaming sites in India, while also making them attractive competitors at

⁶⁶ It is important to note that not all jokes made fun of “modern” thinking, and that not all humour pitted the state against the nation. However, they are all balanced with a sense of the traditional, and the local. Vivek especially is known for his stances favouring birth control, but only in favour of post-marital sex overall. He is known to have extolled the project of the nation of India, but only when Tamil aeroscientist Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam was President of India.

international film festivals. The comedian figure has been one of the primary sacrifices in this transition.

However, the comedian is a placeholder for locality, and Tamil cinema is an ethno-centric mode of representation. In that vein, the comedian cannot completely be banished but simply take a new form. This form has been granted by new age filmmakers who have taken an interest in certain borrowed modes of humour, specifically, black comedies and self-reflexive comedies, that are not facilitated through a monolithic comedian figure but through an ensemble comedy cast, which in turn has reincarnated the genre of the Tamil comedy film.

Post-millennial Tamil cinematic comedy is then heteroglossic, rather than disseminated through a singular comedian figure. Simultaneously, it is pessimistic and nihilistic, rather than moralising and idealistic. Furthermore, the growing popularity of the black comedy genre has anticipated meta-narratives of Tamil cinema that are self-aware and self-reflexive of the comedic processes of the industry. These major changes demonstrate a transformation in the way comedy functions as a signifier of the local, and a transformation in the way the local is understood in Tamil cinema.

Black Comedies

*Indha thozhil pannanum na our kurattuthanam-aana muttaalathanam-um,
murattuthanam-aana buddhisalathanam-um venum*

To survive this, you need cunning stupidity and stubborn intelligence.

- Das in *Soodhu Kavvum* (Kumarasamy 2012)

The black comedy is one of the reigning genres of post-2010 Tamil cinema, evidenced by the huge commercial success of films like *Soodhu Kavvum*, *Neram* (Putharen 2012), *Jil Jung Juk*

(Vaidy 2016), *Jigarthanda* (Subburaj 2014), *Naanum Rowdy Thaan* (Shivn 2012), and *Kolamavu Kokila* (Dilipkumar 2018). The genre of black humour, literary or otherwise, has been notoriously difficult to pin down and define, but there are a few principles that are considered overarching and maybe even fundamental, that would be well applied to an analysis of contemporary Tamil cinema. Max Schultz has described the genre as one that “refuses to treat tragic material tragically,” (qtd in O Neill 25) and instead takes on affects of the comic and grotesque. The de-sensitized, and at times insensitive, portrayal of and reaction to traditionally tragic events, themes, and characters is a central principle of the black comedy. It is a genre that, in many ways, refuses to take itself seriously and instead comfortably inhabits the modes of satire, irony, and parody. Bruce Friedman’s attempt to define black humour, which he claims is as or more futile than “defining an elbow or a corned beef sandwich,” (19) adds to the grotesque and comic, a sense of fantasy. Black comedy, if pushed, can be understood as “an invisible line,” “a fading line between fantasy and reality” (21). It allows for an absurdist space where one can attempt to “take a preposterous world by the throat and say, okay, be preposterous, but make damned sure you explain yourself” (24). This sense of the absurd was initially anticipated by Breton in his anthology of *l’humour noir*, that brought the absurdist like Kafka, Picasso, Dali, and Duchamp under the banner of dark comedy. Broadly and often included along with absurdist within black comedy are the nihilists and the existentialists like Sartre and Camus – all of these centred on one principle, a growingly senseless universe. In other words, black comedy is a mode or genre through which one could come to make peace with the tragedy of absurdity and turn it into a joke.

These several ideas regarding the concept of black comedy are best condensed in Patrick O Neill’s formulation of black humour as a “comedy of entropy.” He takes this formulation from

the Second Law of Thermodynamics: all closed systems automatically move towards the state of maximum entropy unless the processes involved are reversible. In his formulation, he uses “the notion of entropy as a metaphor for the crumbling of ordered systems, the breakdown of traditional perceptions of reality, the erosion of certainty” (8). Entropy is the sense of disorder, “a measure of disorganization, of randomness”(9), and black comedy or the comedy of entropy is understood as either anomic humour or parodic humour (52). It is the mode of humour that rejects order and/or celebrates disorder, and abandons or parodies norms. In contemporary Tamil cinema, the black comedy plays out these various understandings and definitions of black comedy or *l’humour noir*, as a comedy of entropy. The black comedy is a way of rejecting norms of filmmaking and storytelling, either of Tamil cinema’s own past, or of global film industries, as a way of reconstructing and reinforcing a new sense of Tamil-ness in the growing disorder of a globalizing era.

The Tamil black comedy partakes in more widespread conventions of black comedy, such as the incorporation of a “wide array of anti-heroic characters and grotesque figures contrary to the protagonists of [...] mainstream media” (Liu 162).⁶⁷ This particular trope of grotesque figures is a common choice, as seen in the recent fame of actors like Appukutty, Yogi babu, “*Motta*” Rajendran (“Bald” Rajendran), Ramesh Thilak, Premgi Amaren etc, whose characters’ comedy often references their not-so-ideal physical appearance. The physicality of the actors aside, the characters themselves are positioned as morally ambiguous, questionable, and/or fluid. In *Naanum Rowdy Thaan*⁶⁸, the hero introduction sequence is set in the midst of

⁶⁷ Liu’s theorization of the shift to black comedy in contemporary Chinese cinema parallels the shift in Tamil cinema in many ways, the most remarkable of which would be the shift in physical and moral characterizations of the protagonists.

⁶⁸ In the Tamil vernacular, “rowdy” takes a similar cultural meaning to a mob boss or gang leader, and connotes power through violence.

physical trials for the Tamil Nadu Police Force exam. We hear the voice of the protagonist Pandi (Vijay Sethupathi) saying his first lines, “*Rowdy nallavan, boss, manasaatchi ullavan*” (trans. the rowdy is a good man, boss, a man with a conscience). The rest of the film is framed by this dialogue: Pandi is an aspiring rowdy, who ends up channelling his immoral ambitions for moral good. He worships the rowdy archetype, while using his budding rowdy status to help locate and avenge a retired police officer. Morally ambiguous protagonists like Pandi are typical of films that use this frayed morality to help the audience navigate the openly visible underbelly of the city, filled with grotesque and violent characters and spaces. At the heart of the Tamil black comedy writ large is a keen awareness of poor socio-economic status, and the central role of finance and capital in daily sustenance. Money becomes a central plot driver in many of these films such as in *Neram* and *Iraivi*, and the centrality of money in turn becomes a way of critiquing the aspects of global capitalism that inflect the average lower and middle class Tamil livelihoods.

Soodhu Kavvum

An exemplary film from this genre that demonstrates fully the nuances of the black comedy is *Soodhu Kavvum*⁶⁹ (“Evil Engulfs” Kumarasamy 2012). As the directorial debut of Nalan Kumarasamy, the movie saw him becoming a permanent fixture in the black comedy genre and by extension, one of the premier directors of the decade. The movie garnered acclaim from Tamil

⁶⁹ The title itself is taken from classical Tamil poet Bharathiyar’s work *Panjali Sabatham* (The Vow of Panchali). His re-interpretation of the Hindu epic *Mahabharatha* through the eyes of the main female character, Draupadi, is one of several subaltern rewritings of Hindu epics by Tamil writers. *Soodhu Kavvum* is taken from the line “தர்மத்தின் வாழ்வதனை குது கவ்வும் தர்மம் மறுபடி வெல்லும்,” – trans. While on the path of righteousness, evil will engulf you, but righteousness will prevail again. The title of this movie, however, ignores the last clause of this line, choosing instead to state that evil engulfs, and nothing more. In borrowing from Bharathiyar, it remains decidedly Tamil.

cinema critics who hailed it as a new and exciting venture of Tamil cinema. And in the pattern of most critically acclaimed films of the industry, it was also a huge commercial success.

The film follows the antics of four men led by Das (Vijay Sethupathi) who considers himself a professional kidnapper, i.e. a man who has configured kidnapping into an exact infallible process. Their main gig is the kidnapping of the son of a local politician – a politician whose sincerity has earned him the ire of the corrupt bureaucrats and statesmen that otherwise comprise the socio-political makeup of the state. The story follows the paths of the son Arumai (Karunakaran) and the kidnappers, the politician (M.S. Bhaskar) and his family, and a police officer with questionable ethics called Bamma (Yog Japee). These three tales intersect in a narrative mired in methodologies of black comedy to present a story that is centred on quite simply (according to its Wikipedia description at the time of writing) “how silly talk has engulfed people’s day-to-day life and modern society.” Taken together, the characterization of the protagonists, and thereby the antagonists, and the resolution of their character arcs presents an almost nihilistic view of life in twenty first century, but with the sense of a happy ending that the term “comedy” evokes. In other words, the characters bring out the “dark,” the “black” and the “*noir*,” where the plot invokes the “comedy.”

The difficulty of crafting a summary, even a targeted summary, of this film lies in the plurality of characters and the vividly crafted stories for and of each of them. The kidnappers, who are arguably the protagonists of the film warrant most careful attention, as audience identification with them becomes a crucial factor of the movie’s commercial success. In their characterization and incidences of interaction, these four men present a very specific image of the conditions of capitalism and modernity, and isolation and individuality in twenty first century Chennai. The group of four seek recourse in kidnapping each for a distinct reason. Pagalavan

(Bobby Simha) finds himself in Chennai after being run out of town by his neighbourhood after building an altar in honour of leading Tamil heroine, Nayanthara. He seeks refuge in Chennai at the run-down, clearly lower income lodgings of his friend Kesavan (Ashok Selvan) and roommate Sekhar (Ramesh Thilak). Kesavan is on the job market after being fired from his job because of accusations of sexual assault. Even though the accusations are explained to be false (to the audience), their presence on the record renders him virtually unemployable in the white-collar job market. Sekhar was recently fired from his job as a valet at a 5-star hotel, after “borrowing” a customer’s Jaguar for a joy ride, a dream that he has cherished since childhood. Given that the socio-economic conditions of the state would deny him enough upward mobility to ever actually own a Jaguar, he claims he has no regrets. Awareness of the same socio-economic conditions have also stopped him from actively looking for a job, instead setting an alarm in the morning so that he can wake up and start drinking alcohol on time.

The initial interaction between these three members happens in the first five minutes of the film, and set in the interior of Kesavan and Sekhar’s house. The movie itself begins with a panoramic shot of a very particular feature of Chennai’s cityscape: an endless sea of rooftops in a lower middle-class residential area. It is a city that’s presumed to be hot, sweaty, and dirty, accented by a yellowish tint and lens flare. It then cuts to the living room/bedroom of a house that is presumably within that cityscape. The house itself is dusty, mostly unkempt, and dotted with posters and pictures of T. Rajendar⁷⁰: a cult figure of Tamil cinema whose films have largely appealed to the lower income groups. Under the scrutinous eyes of T.R, we see the

⁷⁰ Famous for his alliterative monologues that preach a not-so-subtle ethnocentrism over a growing modernism, it is ironic that a T.Rajendar monologue on the ability of growing global tendencies to “suppress and oppress and depress” Tamil culture was one of the first internet sensations of Tamil cinema. The sensation began as a sound mix by popular indie musician and writer Krish Ashok who put up the track, “ReTRibution to AtTRibution: Our ConTRibution” on his SoundCloud account in 2010. It soon became t-shirts, memes, and gifs.

sleeping figures of three young men strewn about the room: two sharing a twin-size steel bedframe, and one lying on a straw mat on the floor, sheets askew. The dull brown tones add to the sense of despondence that is assumed to be plaguing these men. The lack of mattresses, the peeling paint, minimal furniture, and general shoddiness suggest the unstable financial state of these young tenants.

These three, while gathered at the local TASMAC⁷¹ bar, find themselves instigating a bar fight, which lands them in the company of Das. Das, a former small-time smuggler of perfumes and DVDs, is characterized as the man with an imaginary girlfriend, Shalu (Sanchita Shetty). (With psychiatric help, he had been rid of the hallucination briefly, but brought her back because he was bored and lonely.) Having no other means of employment, he becomes a professional kidnapper who teaches his craft to the unemployed men who come to his aid at the bar fight. Das has specific rules of kidnapping that render it profitable for the kidnappers, while not being so harmful to the families of the victims that they cannot pay their next month's rent. The ethicality with which he approaches kidnapping and the concern he possesses for the abductees and their families allow him to fly under the radar of the law, making him the most financially stable protagonist of the four. Das embodies the critique of formal capitalist structures that have become a central feature of the Tamil black comedy.

Together, these protagonists constitute the *noir* in *l'humour noir*. They are representative of a widely-held opinion of the state of Tamil Nadu, or so the film argues. Captured succinctly by Sekhar in a comic monologue about the state of the city according to the newspapers, it is explained

⁷¹ Liquor shops with lean-to bars that are run exclusively by the Government of Tamil Nadu. TASMAC (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation) shops are the only venue of alcohol retail vending in TN. TASMAC also holds monopoly of distribution of Indian-Made-Foreign-Liquor in the state. The bars that come with a few of the TASMAC shops are minimalist in style, often comprising of a few plastic stools and broken tables, and are generally coded as an exclusively male space.

to Pagalavan that Chennai is a space of immorality, adultery, domestic violence, corruption, cheating, unjustified murders, and extreme mental health issues, and “if you manage to wade through all that crap and get to page 1, it’ll say the heat in Chennai is at 110 degrees.” In other words, it is bleak, run down, peppered with bad luck, and devoid of upward mobility unless obtained through illegal means.

The sense of absurdism that reigns over this movie is at its initial peak as Das explains his profession of “kednapping”⁷² to the Kesavan, Sekhar, and Pagalavan. He prefaces this saying that the world is boring as is the idea of working for money. As mentioned already, he even brings back his hallucination out of boredom and loneliness. Presumably, this state of *ennui* is what pushes him to kidnapping and abduction as a way to survive with passion. As the character who has codified “kednapping” into a definite set of rules, and has successfully lived by them without getting caught, his system of immorality has been passively integrated into the anesthetized society that envelops him. It is a success that can be come by, as he states, with cunning stupidity and stubborn intelligence. If satire “[a]s employed by black humourists [...] is a response to a world grown mechanized and impersonal where even stupidity, viciousness and even anxiety can seem institutionalized,” (“The Black Humourists”) then the boredom that characterizes Das pushes him to become the embodiment of satire in the film. Along with Das, the other characters each becomes a satirical response to the changing scapes of Tamilness. At a point when the fundamental principles and even existence of an essentialized Tamilness are being questioned by national and global ideologies, the black comedy film is a mode that “uses an ironic [...] intelligence to attack sentimentality, social convention [...] and an apparently absurd universe” (Winston 270).

⁷² In his misspelling of a word so central to his survival, Das is portrayed as outside the confines of English-medium school education.

In configuring these characters as the protagonists, the rest of the characters (Gnanodayam, Arumai, and Bamma) are coded as allies or antagonists based on their relationship with the main four. The Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Tamil Nadu, Gnanodayam (M.S. Bhaskar) is a sincere politician, whose introduction scene depicts his participation in a sting operation that arrests two industrialists who attempt to bribe him. One of these two men, in retaliation, hires Das to kidnap the MLA's son. On attempting to kidnap Gnanodayam's son, Arumai, the gang's plans go awry when another group kidnaps him first. It is revealed that Arumai had arranged his own kidnapping to extract money from his morally steadfast father, who doesn't believe Arumai is capable of running a business. The gang and Arumai decide to join forces, and split the ransom, making them unusual allies. The MLA's brother-in-law, the city's commissioner of police, turns out to be one of the main antagonists who uses the police resources at his disposal to catch Das and the gang. In the meanwhile, at the insistence of his brother-in-law, the commissioner brings in Bamma, an enigmatic cop who's known for his absolute silence and frequent suspensions. Introduced through newspaper articles and scuttlebutt, Bamma is painted as the policeman who colours outside the lines and is feared for the success he has experienced with such methods. These relationships are a virtual network of the city, and presents interesting ways to navigate between the formal nodes of corporate, government, administration, and law, and the informal nodes of individuals, gangs, goons, and secrecy.

The progress of the plot on the other hand offers opportunities for resolution, closure, and even success. It bears witness to the greater potential for personal success that the informal networks hold. Arumai winds up winning the political backing of his father's political party, who are more appreciative of Arumai's proclivity for corruption than his father's distaste for it. Sekar and Kesavan find employment as part of his political entourage. Das finds a new quartet to train

as professional kidnappers. Das' brother, an amateur filmmaker, gives Pagalavan his first shot at being a 'hero.' Bamma and the police force in general, along with the systems of formal justice, are shown to be futile in their duty to enforce law and order, and by extension the modern ideals that inform the law. The film finds its (humorous) resolution in subverting conventional expectations of equating morality, modernity, and globality with financial success, and instead rewarding those that possess the ingenuity to bypass these internationally recognized networks with their knowledge of local systems. Arumai's success and Bamma's failure each demonstrates an unexpected plot twist, wherein lies a significant portion of the humour of this film. Their narratives provide the "anarchic violence and utter cynicism which absorbs the film," ("The Black Humorists") that makes it a black comedy. In other words, the comedy of this genre is in the subversion of the expectedly violent or tragic climax with a sense of humour brought out by amusing and even absurd narrative progressions.

The movie, following the lines of black humour, ends in moral resolution that was brought about by an act/multiple acts of coincidence, chaos, or *deus-ex-machina*: a "comedy of entropy." The lack of character agency to bring about any clean resolution is central to the darkness of the humour as their "perception of inseparable complexities and unresolvable antitheses keeps him from advocating or hoping for any reform." (Winston 270). I read this as symptomatic of a decade of socio-cultural unsettlement and political chaos in Tamil Nadu. The long-standing ethos of Tamil ethno-centrism (or parochialism) that informed Tamil politics is currently in a state of flux, caused in part by the consecutive deaths of the two political figures that have ruled the state for over three decades. This transitory political chaos is being capitalized upon by Indian nationalist right-wing political groups who are trying to dilute Tamil nationalism and replace it with an Indian nationalism. In parallel, this moment of flux is in both effected and affected by the growing

popularity of internationally recognized brands such as IMAX, Starbucks, Hard Rock Café, and Netflix. The post-millennial black comedy (whether as a genre, or a mode of humour within a broader mass film) is attempting to declare a failure of the modern systems of capitalism (American more often than not) and law enforcement in Tamil Nadu. In parallel, they indicate a failure of national economic policies of 1991. Black comedy is the dominant mode of humour in postmillennial Tamil cinema, and in its dominance betrays despair and a loss of faith in the possibility of a Dravidian utopia that was promised by decades of Tamil politics. Instead, these films identify the local and the vernacular in individuals and informal systems of power as ways of survival in a globalizing TN.

Structurally, the black comedy of Tamil cinema presents a stark shift from how narratives are constructed. Without a singular hero, the absence of star narratives and practices like catchphrases, and introductory songs and sequences that moralize. Instead, as chapter 4 outlines in detail, the songs in the movie pander to nonsensical and absurdist tastes. The song “Mama Douser,” for instance is an upbeat jazz number with the eponymous refrain that translates to, “my trousers have fallen off.” It does not have dedicated extra-diegetic narrative space but is instead the background music to a comical fight routine set in a TASMAC bar, where the protagonists meet Das. It is not an elegant fight that showcases masculine prowess but a rough and tumble physical disagreement amongst the various groups at that bar, interrupted by the proprietor threatening to dampen the proceedings with a vat of hot oil, and finally the police. The characters are shown through jolted and quick movements, and canted angles, not close-ups and slow-motion. It’s a musical interlude with a comical representation of everyday violence in one of the more ubiquitous spaces of the city, not a song meant to uplift the audience or the fans with promises of a bright future.

The postmillennial Tamil black comedies like *Soodhu Kavvum*, are however, very masculine narratives. The only woman in the movie is Shalu, who is a sexy hallucination. In *Neram*, the female lead has little effect on the film, and spends most of the film's diegetic time in the trunk of a car. In *Naduvula Konjam Pakkathu Kanom*, the heroine is completely absent. In such ways, the black comedy excluded the women in the articulation of despair. However, there have been a series of black comedy films with female-centric narratives, and women stars at the helm, that relocate Dravidian ideals in Tamil women. They recentre morality as under the domain of women who are willing to be engaged in illegal activities like drug smuggling or fraud (in *Kolamavu Kokila* and *Jackpot* respectively) and shows them to be capable of balancing individual success and societal progress, with a feminist agenda. The black comedy, whether the masculine or the feminine version both play on historical gender roles on screen, and situate themselves in absurd narratives to correct the gender imbalance. The self-awareness of such a gender imbalance along with a growing disinterest in the cine-politics of Tamil cinema are important features of contemporary Tamil filmmakers. Instead of continuing to build upon existing fan politics and narrative favourites, they have chosen to critique, explicitly and implicitly, the failures of Tamil cinema and its political aspirations.

Self-reflexive Tamil comedies: Transnational humour and world cinema

The comprehensive parody of the Tamil industry captured in *Thamizh Padam* is the pinnacle of using comedy and cinema to construct a discursive community of Tamil cinema audiences and followers of Tamil politics.⁷³ In the first fifteen minutes of the film, eight different films are parodied, along with four heroes, two villains, as well as traditional tropes of

⁷³ See Nakassis, "The Ontological Politics of the Spoof Image in Tamil Cinema," for an in-depth analysis on *Thamizh Padam*'s self-reflexive politics.

the Tamil film such as signifying the hero's journey to Chennai city with the iconic shot of the Chennai Central Railway Station. Apart from this, the film also comments on practices of stardom and fandom, with new-born infants expected to know dialogues from Rajinikanth films. It also engages with critique of Tamil cinema practices such as having clearly older men play college students, unnecessary melodrama of fight sequences, practices of censorship of the female body are juxtaposed with the glorification of item numbers. Finally, the film uses humour to exhibit and critique the growing globalization of Tamil Nadu. By parodying the excessive rural migration to Chennai in search of jobs in multi-national corporations, *Thamizh Padam* presents the deserted village of Cinema Patti as symbolic of the lost traditions of Tamil culture (to which cinema is integral).

The film also chooses to reflect upon practices of contemporary Tamil cinema and the quirks it has to offer. For instance, the lyrics of the song "Omahasiya" in the film is comprised entirely of "nonsense lyrics" from other songs:

Omahasiya Oh mahasiya [From "Uyirin Uyire," *Kaakka Kaakka*]

Naaka mukka naaka [From "Naaka Mukka," *Kaadhalil Vizhundheyin*]

Oh shakalaka [From "Shakalaka Baby," *Mudhalvan*]

Oh randaka [From "Andankaka Kondakkaari," *Anniyan*]

Before breaking into song, the characters in the film acknowledge that the film has reached a point where the hero and heroine must go to a foreign country and sing a duet, thus acknowledging the absurdity of this diegetic interruption through self-reflexivity. They then go on to sing a song with no meaning whatsoever except to fans of Tamil cinema who gain the referential and reflexive significance of the lyrics. The film also attempts to subvert the

conventions of Tamil cinema by, for example, having a woman villain at the end. That this villain is played by beloved on-screen grandmother “Paravai” Munniyama is a further subversion to which only Tamil cinema audiences would be attuned. Playing with audience expectations by simultaneously appreciating them for their collective memory, while critiquing their comfort with certain tropes and motifs of Tamil cinema is a feature of the self-reflexive comedy of Tamil cinema.

Juan Eaga in his study on dark humour and Spanish national cinema states that,

when it comes to comedy—and especially to dark comedies—who gets the joke and who doesn’t is the benchmark for measuring the possible communal and hence exclusionary properties of film genres. As theoretically unsophisticated as it may seem, “getting the joke” is still an apt expression with which to broach subjects such as the workings of cultural untranslatability or the possible existence of a “national” sense of humor.”

Eaga, of course, is arguing from the perspective of Spanish cinema that possesses a different kind of film history – a clearly national one (or so he attempts to make sense of). Tamil cinema has historically used humour to situate itself outside the confines of nationhood, by disallowing non-Tamil/non-South Indian language speakers to “get the joke.” This becomes especially true in the emerging genre of the self-reflexive comedies.

In the self-reflexive gangster/black comedy movie, *Jigarthanda*, the protagonist Karthik Subramani is an aspiring filmmaker who, in attempts to make a film like *The Godfather* (Coppola) and *Nayakan* (Ratnam); a gangster film about a local rowdy “Assault” Sethu, instead turns his film into a black comedy with the gangster being renamed “*Azhangu*” Kumar (“Cry Baby Kumar”). In the process of showing us this narrative, the movie dives into the problems of

filmmaking for new Tamil filmmakers, and as such becomes a meta-narrative. Despite being classified by some critics as a gangster film, the attempts at a meta-narrative, and self-reflexive commentary on the industry quickly turn this into a comedy that is accessible, once again, only to Tamil audiences – as explained by Josh Hurtado of *Twitch*:

'Jigarthanda' is a worldly film that takes influences from within its own very small cinematic orb and transforms them into something that the discerning film fan can meditate on and enjoy. Will the general non-Tamil film fiend miss a few jokes? Yes, quite a lot actually. However, Jigarthanda manages to make universal that which is culturally specific; it's really quite an accomplishment.

In that sense, the contemporary Tamil comedy films functions less like the national humour of Spanish cinema and more on the lines of ethnic humour in America which Werner Sollors has argued to be a “a form of boundary construction.” It delineates a very clear Tamil audience. However, as Hurtado points out, the post-millennial Tamil comedy film has also become a way to express a Tamil-ness to the world; an avenue through which Tamil cinema could relate to a broader world audience.

This is a movement that has met with partial success for Tamil filmmakers. *Soodhu Kavvum* was the only Tamil film to be screened at the 2013 Zurich Film Festival. *Jigarthanda* was one of the more profitable Tamil films in the US Box Office in 2014. These comedies are produced under the banners of older filmmakers who have already experienced critical international fame such as Vetrimaran and Dhanush. This becomes significant when one understands that the initial changes made by a director like Vetrimaran to Tamil cinema – such as reducing run-time, cutting out the need for extra- and non-diegetic sequences – in order to find themselves more appealing to a non-native audience. However, the fact that these changes are

being applied to comedy films becomes a point of intrigue, since Tamil comedy has historically been vernacular in several senses of the term. The renewed interest in the local that these films exhibit presents a complication to film travel in terms of language and subtitling. Yet, the twenty first century Tamil comedy is part of a broader international pattern of black comedies.

The clear influence of Korean and other East Asian popular cinema on the Tamil comedy film automatically places it on a recognizable network of world cinema. Here, I'm thinking specifically of Nalan Kumarasamy's next feature film directorial venture after *Soodhu Kavvum: Kadhalum Kadandhu Pogum* (Love Too Shall Pass, 2016), which is an official remake of Kim Kwang-sik's 2010 film, *My Dear Desperado*. I also look to Ning Hao's *Crazy* series where we see the revitalization of black comedy in Chinese cinema echoes in many ways the qualities of the post-millennial Tamil black comedy. Hui Liu's study of black comedy in Chinese cinema labels it an "indigenous comedy," where "violence is a manifestation of the grotesque;" a genre that "contradicts the dominant social discourses and often implies that it is money that rules all social relationships." The parallels these descriptors depict between the two (the Tamil and the Chinese black comedy) are striking, and somewhat complicate the "indigenous" nature of comedy.

This, of course, might be attributed, in some part, to the fact that both these industries are likely reacting to the growing accessibility of Hollywood to their domestic audiences. On the one hand, in *Crazy Stone* (Hao 2006), "action" sequences directly reference and comically parody the stunts of say, *Mission Impossible* (1996). On the other hand, in *Soodhu Kavvum*, when Arumai attempts a heroic jump off a multi-storey building in order to catch a falling bag of money, he is stopped by Das, who admonishes him saying, "this is why you shouldn't watch all these Hollywood films, we have men down there to catch it in case it falls." Both these films make fun

of high-spectacle Hollywood action sequences. One uses the tool of parody to discredit the action, while the other questions the very necessity for the spectacle itself. However, it can also be read as to imply that while Hollywood is entertaining, it has no direct value to the Tamil or Mandarin audiences: their solutions are not ours; their films are not our stories. In other words, these are black comedy movements that attempt to “rejuvenate domestic genre film production through subversive copying” of Hollywood cinema (Liu 179). In the case of Tamil cinema, it is including itself in a broader transnational project rallying against the dominance of mainstream Hollywood. Furthermore, Tamil cinema is not simply overshadowed by Hollywood, but by Hindi cinema as well. In aligning itself with transnational rather than national, Tamil cinema uses comedy as a way of assigning itself the tag of world cinema.

The Tamil black comedy offers up a complicated and even somewhat paradoxical entry into the broader categories of comedy and world cinema. Firstly, Tamil cinema finds itself losing a character archetype that was central in its history – the comedian figure. This loss is somewhat effected by the industry’s attempts to compete with forms of global media that have now been made accessible to Tamil audiences through streaming services and improvements in technology. Secondly, Tamil cinema is gravitating towards a genre of representation that is in itself both amicable *and* inimical to Tamil cinema gaining a wider audience. While black comedy is a popular genre and is clearly recognizable across cultures, comedy itself is inherently localized and fairly untranslatable. In the case of Tamil cinema’s shifts in comedy, what is lost with the comedian figure, is gained by the darkness of the humour: the state of the local is in disorder, and here we are to point it out and make you laugh at it. It is impossible to say with complete certainty that the industry gravitated towards this genre in attempts to be better recognized by patrons of world cinema or other non-native audiences. However, it is certainly a move towards

appealing a diasporic audience, and an increasingly globalized local audience. The black comedy is a genre that rewards knowledge of the vernacularities of Tamil comedy and appeases the modern sensibilities of the streaming era that has made a wide cross-section of international comedies available to the average Tamil cinema viewer. It is a genre that succinctly captures the current moment of the industry when Tamil filmmakers are seeking wider and newer forms of circulation; where the new definition of success is to be stream-able on Amazon Prime (Ram, personal interview).

Chapter 4: Interludes and Interruptions

The musical sequence has been a central part of the cinematic form in India since the introduction of sound. It has been labelled the song-picturization, the song sequence, the song-and-dance sequence, the musical number, and many other names for various reasons. But fundamentally, these are musical interludes that are several minutes long, often accompanied by singing and dancing on screen, and are, for the most, part extra-diegetic. That is, the source of the music is outside the spatio-temporal limits of the narrative, but the characters in the song are from the narrative; the song sequence thus “routinely violat[es] the containment of the storyworld as well as cinematic construction in both spatial and temporal registers” (Gopal 808). Its unique narrative function and construction position the song sequence of cinemas of India outside the purview of studies of film music as understood in Hollywood or other western systems.

Studies and classifications of film music in the west, primarily in classical Hollywood systems, has by and large been preoccupied with the concept of the background soundtrack. Claudia Gorbman’s seven rules of film music in fact lay out that film music must be “invisible” and “inaudible,” highlighting the background nature of music in western realist cinema.⁷⁴ Music functions as leitmotifs, to provide interiority, or as neutral sound. It does not create with a break in the narrative—a break that can be considered its own text, that enjoys independent circulation for months before the release of the film. Essentially, song sequences of cinemas of India cannot be understood by the same structures of film music of the west as they are not just *music*, but

⁷⁴ While Gorbman’s rules do specify that film music must or can be used to signify emotion is understood differently than how film music in cinemas of India use songs to signify emotions. In classical Hollywood, the background score is used to heighten or identify subtextual tones and emotions, whereas in cinemas of India use the space of the song sequence to provide interiority to the characters by having them state out loud their otherwise restrained emotional desires.

song sequences. They are not film score that are background elements that add value—to take from Michel Chion—to the visuals on screen. Instead, they are audio-visual sequences, specifically composed and choreographed for characters and plot points. In other words, to study the song sequence is to study film music not as an aural component of cinema, but as a narrative device with its own complexities of the aural and visual.

It is of some merit then to consider the popular Hindi (or Tamil or Telugu etc) movie akin to the “musical,” in that these are narrative films that break into song occasionally. But, as Michael Lawrence argues, “because popular Indian cinema is thoroughly musical, it makes little sense to categorize Indian films as if they belonged to the musical genre that developed in, for example, Hollywood.” This is because of the lack of an equivalent or a western parallel to the masala or mass film. Corey Creekmur has stated that,

[T]hough the pervasive use of songs has led some critics to claim, misleadingly, that all popular Indian films are musicals: one might just as persuasively assert that no Indian films are musicals, since songs are used across genres and thus a distinct category of ‘musicals’ cannot be clearly distinguished from other forms. (194)

The musical is a particular, almost niche, mode of film narrative in the west, whereas in cinemas of India, it is an integral component of the dominant mode of the Indian conception of realist cinema. Furthermore, film music is the primary source of popular music in India. In that sense, the song-and-dance sequence of cinemas of India might be studied or understood as music videos that are a big part of popular music in the west, and how they circulate as self-contained texts while being part of the primary music source for a culture. “Film songs enjoy massive popularity and long-term relevance for audiences, and so frequently exceed their original significance within the films for which they were composed and performed” (Creekmur 193). What is unique

about the song sequence of cinemas of India is that they are simultaneously neither and both film music and self-contained music videos. They are inextricably tied to the movie itself and continue and participate in its storyworld. Parts of songs are indeed carried through the film as leitmotifs. However, the song sequences often contain their own storyworlds, build their own star texts, and circulate independently of the film (in that you do not have to watch the movie to know the entire narrative of a song). The study of the song sequences of popular cinema in India is an interesting intervention in the study of both film music and the musical film because it cannot be neatly studied under either framework and prompts some revision of the concepts. As Creekmur argues for Hindi cine-music, “popular Indian cinema obscures any significant difference between the experience of cinema and of musical entertainment” (194). The cine-music of post-millennial Tamil cinema, as this chapter will reveal, acknowledges the differences in the ways songs and images are integrated and performs a careful navigation between film music, musical film, and music video, thus complicating the study of film music.

Song sequences (for the most part) do not directly affect the flow of the plot but provide context and meaning to the characters and their actions; they are primarily expressions of character interiority. While an added layer of entertainment in the movie, songs often heighten the emotional tone of the moment. They are also often didactic and used to imbibe audiences with certain social moralities. Some songs are understood as ways of expressing latent sexual desires that are disallowed within the moral universe of the diegesis. By being situated outside the diegesis, musical interruptions allowed female characters the space to express desire without it affecting the morality of the character within the film. Song sequences are generally a utopian space for the characters where the narrative blockages of the film’s plot can be ignored for a few minutes—they are musical asides. In the twenty first century, Tamil cinema’s relationship with

its song sequences, and film music overall, is moving outside these established functions of the song sequence. The contemporary song sequence is complicated by questions of genre, narrative function, paratextual and extratextual possibilities (independent circulation), and its political capabilities in an era of waning political film stardom.

The song sequence is not only prolific in India, but is also fairly unique to the film industries of India. Given that India (when combining the output of all its film industries) is one of the largest producers of cinema, it would make sense that the song sequence be given adequate consideration in film theory, and that film studies welcome the narrative frameworks of popular cinemas of India into the fold. Lalitha Gopalan understood the singularity of the song-and-dance sequence and that it did not fit under dominant modes of film theory, and thus pushed for “calibrating film theory through a reading of *interruptions* in Indian films, thus rupturing the provincialism surrounding film theory and, in the process, rejuvenating it” (24; my emphasis). However, understanding them as interruptions betrays a western normative bias. As Valentina Vitali argues,

[Lalitha Gopalan’s] constant references to vague notions of Hollywood films, often gratuitous deployment of the analytical toolboxes of well-known European and American film/cultural theorists, and indeed the assumption that one Indian cinema is very much like another, as if there were no difference between, say, the Hindi and Telegu film industries and their products, further suggest that the paradigms of North American and European film studies remain the lenses through which Indian films are analyzed. (531)

When studied against the Hollywood or western modes of realism, the song sequence does grate, but they “can be conceived as interruptions only to the extent that the expectations of linear narration and realist modes of address are *tacitly* at work (Vitali 531; my emphasis). To

understand song sequences as interruptions to an otherwise realist narrative implies a tacit acceptance of a western normative understanding of realist cinema. To study them as “interruptions,” would be to retroactively classify all cinemas of India as *tangential to* but not *included in* the history of realist film and film theory.

The song sequence of popular Hindi cinema is well documented and studied and is in fact so central to the industry that Gopal and Moorthi insist that “any account of Hindi film as a dominant in Indian public culture or of Bollywood as a transnational phenomenon must grapple with the crucial role that the song-dance sequence has played in such disseminations” (4). It is one of the defining features of Hindi cinema and one of the central locations of its heterogeneity. This chapter explores Tamil cinema’s relationship to its songs within similar paradigms of localness and global heterogeneity. Tamil songs, however, take on the extra function of participating in the construction of politicized star texts (who are themselves complex negotiations of the local). Furthermore, they build star texts of not only the actor (within the film), but also of the composer and singer (outside the film), which influences the organization and focus of this chapter.

The relationship between song sequences and stardom is then a significant investment of this chapter. Songs can be categorized by (and thus contribute to the stardom of) the singer, the composer, or specifically in the cinemas of India, by the actor who is featured in it.⁷⁵ In earlier decades of cinema, the star-singer (who would act and sing) was the central object of fandom.

⁷⁵ On platforms like Spotify or Google Play, film music from India is often categorized by singer or composer. However, on a platform like YouTube that runs on user-generated content, one sees playlists that are curated by actors such as “Vijay Hits,” or “Best of Deepika Padukone.” Songs also contribute to the popularity of lyricists, but they are rarely referred to with auteur status – there are fewer playlists that are purely songs of Vaali or Vairamuthu.

With the introduction of playback singing, which has been the dominant mode of performance, there was a dual on-screen stardom consumed in song sequences. As Neepa Majumdar argues,

Putting together the ideal voice with the ideal body results in a cinematic construct, a composite star who is the visual-aural equivalent of what is frequently the Kuleshovian artificial geography of the song sequence's setting. The two intersecting star texts of the singer and the actor exist in a symbiotic relationship, appealing simultaneously to two sets of pleasures, the aural and the visual. (177)

For instance, the introductory song sequences in Rajinikanth films are most often (in recent times) sung by the prolific S.P. Balasubramanyam (SPB). These songs are watched and listened to for the cumulative stardom of Rajini and SPB that can be consumed at the same time.

However, to expand on Majumdar's foundational argument, aside from the intersecting star-texts of the singer and the actor, the composer is also given star status and films are often marketed as their product. To continue the earlier example then, the introductory songs in Rajinikanth films such as *Sivaji: The Boss* or *Enthiran: Robot* can be labelled Rajini-songs(actor), SPB-songs(singer), or A.R. Rahman songs(composer). Finally, they are also in films made by Shankar, who is known for elaborate spectacles in song sequences. The consumption of a song-sequence like "*Balleilakka*," or "*Pudhiya Manidha*," is a simultaneous consumption of the stardom of Rajinikanth, S.P. Balasubramanyam, A.R. Rahman, and the auteurdom of Shankar. These are star images that can then be mobilized to political ends. The song sequences then bring together several constructs of stardom in Tamil cinema to produce a moment outside the plot of the film where ideals can be propagated, troubles can be bemoaned, love can be declared, and catharsis can be performed. However, with the changing ideals of moral utopia in Tamil cinema contexts, adoption of new popular genres that are not the masala film, and shifting signifiers of stardom,

the song sequence's various interruptive and contextual functions have undergone modifications in how they function within and outside the film.

In the Tamil context, the music in cinema has always been viewed and studied as a site of Tamil-ness. It belies the history of the vernacular stage and theatre upon which the film industry was built. Early Tamil cinema music was also largely of the Carnatic tradition, which is the style of classical music pervasive in south India (as opposed to the Hindustani tradition in the North). Furthermore, as Shankar points out in his genealogy of the Tamil film song, even the use of Carnatic music was contested by the *Tamil Isai Iyakkam* (Tamil Music Movement) for its patronage of Telugu and Sanskrit lyrics rather than Tamil. The songs of Tamil cinema were then a site of anti-national anti-colonial propaganda, of Dravidian political idealism, of Tamil parochialism. At the same time, the song sequence of Tamil cinema is one that was popularized by the growing ubiquity of the gramophone in the early years of the talkies. The song sequence was also where western aesthetics, locations, and languages were initially situated in Tamil cinema, before they were integrated into plots, characters, dialogue, genre, etc. As discussed in the introduction, one of the earliest accusations about the lack of Tamil in Tamil cinema was an attack by the poet Bharathidasan about how Tamil film songs had become “an odd assortment of the costumes and tunes from north India, Telugu songs mixed with Tamil, slokas in Sanskrit, and speeches in English” (Hughes 226). The political nature of Tamil cinema adds to this in that songs from Tamil cinema, especially those of MGR, were always openly used in political propaganda. Film songs were a figurative battleground for propagating or defending Tamil identities, values, and politics, whether by lyrics, composition, origin, function, or political purpose.

The changes in Tamil cine-music (or at least one set of changes) make apparent Tamil filmmakers' and music composers' subscription to the notion of song sequences as an "interruption," in that there are an increasing number of films (predominantly in the black comedy genre) that are distancing themselves from "interruptive" song sequences within cinema. The songs picturized within the films themselves—those that have a dedicated extra-diegetic space with dedicated dance—have grown fewer in number (but have not entirely disappeared), are often featured as background music for montage sequences.⁷⁶ They no longer "interrupt" the narrative as they used to, and thus detract from the (already shortening) run times of contemporary Tamil cinema. As such, it has brought movies in line with dominant (read Hollywood) modes of realism: where musical interruptions are considered to be an exercise in spectacle or absurdity. The song sequences were indeed one of the main sites of spectacle in Tamil cinema; songs would cut to exotic foreign locations (like in the songs of *Jeans*) or they would be the space of novel VFX (as in the songs of *Indian*). In the past two decades however, Tamil cinema has moved towards modes of storytelling that either do not require or cannot accommodate song sequences. Genres like the black comedy, as discussed in chapter 3, feature nihilistic or cynical protagonists who do not indulge in love songs. They are also often low budget and thus do not have the financial capability to create spectacle via song sequences. The gradual disappearance of these spectacular interruptions, when studied in tandem with the other changes in Tamil cinema outlined by previous chapters, demonstrates that interruptive and spectacular song sequences are not suited for the narrative modes of twenty first century Tamil cinema.

⁷⁶ Sangita Gopalan has argued that in twenty first century Bollywood too, there has been a marked decrease of lip-synced songs, and that musical numbers are either diegetically staged or are background music.

Instead, these spectacles have been relocated to the extra-cinematic life of the song instead, aided by new modes of circulation, primarily YouTube. Song sequences, since the introduction of magnetic tape recording and the gramophone, have always been capable of independent circulation. Songs circulated outside the film through records, cassettes, CDs, television, radio, and live performances, and one never needed to actually watch the film to consume the songs. The music track would create an audience for the movie by being released earlier than the film, and function as a marketing tool.⁷⁷ In the age of digital and social media, songs now are more watched as videos on YouTube rather than in the film itself. The audio release functions are offered live to stream on Twitter and Facebook (and in the pandemic, on Twitter Spaces). The “making-video”—a behind the scenes look at the making of the song, whether composition, singing, dance rehearsals etc, set to the song that has thus been made—has become a popularly consumed mode of the musical number. These songs, as we will see, are still attached to the film, and appear in the film as well, but with different sets of visuals in the YouTube video and in the film. Songs are also released with the trailer, the teaser, and the first-look poster of the movie, and centre the movie as the primary text of the system, without which the song has no *raison d'être*. However, in terms of the spectacle, these songs are more closely associated with the alternative visuals provided by the making-video. Moreover, the songs are sung by stars of the industry or feature stars in candid rehearsal moments, and thus the making videos act as voyeuristic opportunities for an otherwise fading star-fan relationship.

While these are the broad changes to film music, it is important to acknowledge their place in the systemic changes of the industry. Technological advancements and interactions with other music industries have affected the importance of sound engineering and the potential

⁷⁷ See Anna Morcom’s work on mass marketing of songs for more.

auteur-status of the sound engineer. In the film's credits, we see different experts listed for the mastering of audio for specific platforms like Apple Music.. Moreover, as the relationship between cinema and stardom has changed, so has the political function of songs and the introductory song as a site of political didactics. For instances, the new mass hero of contemporary Tamil cinema seems to no longer want to position himself for politics through a covert campaign song, which has reduced the spectacular and political nature of the star introduction. Along with these, there have been noticeable changes in the lyrics (language, accent, style), the genres (Carnatic, Hindustani, folk, jazz, operatic, blues, *dabbankuthu*), and the compositions (technology, instruments, studio capabilities). All these changes together present a paradigmatic shift in the function of song sequences, and the way they define the Tamil-ness of Tamil cinema.

This chapter will primarily look at the work of two contemporary music composers – Anirudh Ravichander and Santhosh Narayanan (SaNa) and how their work has functioned within and outside the films in these two ways. SaNa's musical endeavours speak to the fading of extra-diegetic song sequences. He has been the composer for the new era of cinematic genres: the black comedy, the women-centric, and the festival films. Instead of characters breaking out of character to perform a song sequence that does not affect the narrative, his musical compositions are featured in the prominent aural background; they are tending towards being "invisible". The narrative space of the film is not broken, and the songs become a way of contextualizing and punctuating comical fights or montage sequences. They become the soundtrack of the realist movement on screen in Tamil cinema. Anirudh's claim to fame is in the realm of the paratextual, beginning with the worldwide hit "Why this *Kolaveri*," which circulated most ubiquitously in the form of a making-video, a practice that he has utilized several times since then. "Why this

Kolaveri” tapped into the immense potential that “making videos” circulated on YouTube have to act as paratextual tools of publicity. Both these composers are also known for their eclectic styles that mix “local” Tamil beats and lyrics with English slang, and Hindi and international hip-hop artists. Anirudh works consistently with Punjabi rapper, Honey Singh, while SaNa consistently infuses his music with blues and western hip-hop styles, and is known for popularizing the genre of gaana rap. In the circulation of this music, whether within or outside the film, these songs also carry interesting political connotations that speak to the shifting signposts of Tamil identity in the twenty first century. The composition and circulation of the songs of these two composers are one of the more significant sites of worlding of Tamil cinema music, where songs are trying to articulate a Tamil-ness that’s attuned to a new kind of Tamil cinema and Tamil cinema audiences.

Tamil Cine-Music: A Brief History

Just as a study of Tamil cinema is always automatically a study of Tamil Nadu politics, so too is the study of Tamil cinema always automatically a study of popular Tamil music. Film music is the predominant source of music in Tamil Nadu, with classical music and independent musicians forming a small percentage of the total, and has been so since the second half of the twentieth century. This is fairly common in India although the proportion of non-film music might be slightly different in other states/languages. Similarly, the norm is for movies from all regions to contain musical interruptions – the introductory song, the love song, the break-up song, the montage, the comedian’s song etc – and one of the identifying features of non-mainstream cinema would for it be free of song sequences. As Mekala Padmanabhan argues, “(t)he spectacular song and dance sequences in Indian cinema contribute to its uniqueness in a

competitive global market” (337). The relationship between music and cinema in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular is so concrete that one does not exist without the other.

If cine-music is one of the most enduringly unique factors of cinemas of India, then it can be argued that the way music interacts with the narrative and the way it is presented mark what is local/vernacular/indigenous about cinematic narratives. The study of film music in popular cinema of India can be divided into the three parts: the aural, the visual, and the narrative function. And histories can be drawn in all three directions. While the visual and the narrative function histories are dictated by performers and filmmakers (and at times, cinematographers), the history of the sound of film music can be marked by composers, singers, and lyricists. The sonic elements of Tamil cine-music were always already worldly and worlded, having been influenced very early by Hindustani and American musical traditions. Later, in the 1990s, the visual aspects too became more internationally recognizable, and were even shot on location in different countries, with distinctively foreign background dancers lip-syncing to Tamil lyrics. The current process of worlding of Tamil music is in the narrative function of music in cinema, and that is why it is the most significant area of study. The gradual disappearance of the song sequence as an interruption to the narrative is the most explicit and significant form of worlding for it changes the core element of the local narrative form.

The Sonic: Musical and lyrical components

Cine-music, in Tamil Nadu and India, allowed for trans-communal influences within India on music, and even absorbed influences from outside as well. In fact, “one of the fundamental discernible features in Indian film music is the synthesis of ‘native and foreign’ stylistic traits” (Padmanabhan 338). Tamil cine-music, like other film music of India, was always an exercise in cross-cultural interactions. Shankar, in his genealogy of the Tamil film song, notes how in the

early decades of the talkies, film music was a site of confluence between popular and classical – low and high – cultures. He states that the film song was mainstreamed into popular culture because of several dynamic factors including the popularity of musical dramas,⁷⁸ the mediascape of the gramophone,⁷⁹ the changing systems of patronage,⁸⁰ and the synthesis of popular, folk, religious, and classical musical traditions. By bringing together musicians, actors, and singers from various traditions, that was popularized through the gramophone (which was a “lifestyle” artefact), Tamil cine-music became one of the few commodities consumed across class boundaries. Furthermore, with the popularization of classical music through cinema, it was taken outside the confines of Brahminical privilege, and was accessible to all who could consume cinema and cine-music.

Music:

In terms of international and non-Tamil influences, the earliest major proponent was the composer M.S. Viswanathan (MSV) (1928-2015). Including a long partnership with musician T.K. Ramamoorthy (1922-2013), MSV’s career was epitomic of how film music was a constant fusion of various styles –

Western classical music, Western country music, gospel songs, ballads, blues, folk music, soul music, jazz, rock and roll, rumba, flamenco, changui, mambo, danzon, guaracha, cha cha cha, lambada, etc. were all utilised. Modifications of Afro-American, Afro-Cuban,

⁷⁸ He identifies that the narratives played out on stage centred around songs, and how it was normal for a character who has died to perform an encore of his swansong, if so requested.

⁷⁹ One of the major changes effected by the gramophone was the length of songs – technological constraints demanded the length of the song be 5 minutes or less to be able to be adequately recorded, coded, and played.

⁸⁰ Tamil music started to be circulated in mass media like cinema and gramophone, ensuring a wider, non-elite audience for singers and musicians. It allowed for a better integration of popular and folk music with classical music. Furthermore, along with cinema, film music became an important medium that participated in the “transformation of an anti-colonial national awareness into a popular structure of feeling and experience” (Shankar 55).

Cuban, Latin-American and European musical forms were relied upon greatly for musical inspiration by the duo. (Jeyaraj)

Take the song “*AvaLukku Enna*” from the movie *Server Sundaram* (Krishnan-Panju 1964). The song brings together several transnational musical elements; the use of the triple bongos and a clarinet interlude are often noted. Because the film is a metanarrative on the film industry, the picturization of the song allows viewers to see how songs are recorded and picturized.⁸¹ As such, the audience gets glimpses of the orchestra that is used to create this song, and the face of T.M. Soundarrajan (TMS) who sings the male vocals of the song both for the movie and in the movie. The classically trained and recognizable voice of TMS is contrasted with quick beats and an almost Latin American/Caribbean musical style accentuated by the triple bongos.

In the 70s and 80s, the fusion of transnational musical traditions continued in the New Wave, spearheaded by Ilaiyaraja (1943-). As chapter 1 discussed, Ilaiyaraja is considered one of India’s most prolific composers and his work is characterized by its ability to fuse western and Tamil musical traditions. Songs like “*Nee Our Kadhal Sangeetham*,”⁸² or “*Sundari Kannal Our Seidhi*”⁸³ demonstrate his expertise in the extremely technical musical system of Carnatic music⁸⁴ and his proficiency in Western systems of orchestra music. In keeping with the post-classical Tamil cinema’s shift to rural landscapes in the 70s and 80s, Ilaiyaraja also brought back the popularity of Tamil folk beats and folk music traditions like *villupattu*. His work on Balu

⁸¹ *Server Sundaram* is a movie about a man aspiring to become an actor. He eventually makes it in the industry and starts filming a movie. This song shows how that actor during a song shoot.

⁸² From *Nayagan* (Ratnam 1987)

⁸³ From *Thalapathy* (Ratnam 1991)

⁸⁴ Carnatic music is considered to be the most complex of extant musical traditions because of the multitude of structural layers present. It is of great significance that Ilayaraja was the only person to create a new *raaga* or tune, the Panchamukhi raagam, in modern history.

Mahendra's *Veedu* borrowed from his fusion album *How to Name It* – an homage to Carnatic musician Thyagaraja and baroque composer Bach – to provide the background music.

Ilaiyaraja's song "*Rakkamma Kaiya Thattu*" from the movie *Thalapathy* (Ratnam 1991) is presented in the movie as a folk song/item number set against the backdrop of a temple festival. However, the musical draw of the song is the 100-violin symphony that dominates most of the song's soundscape. Apart from a few vocal interludes (where the only "instrument" is the percussion provided by finger snapping), the song relies primarily on the string section – a musical tradition not local to musical cultures of India. The song is also noted however for its song-within-a-song structure in which the major song gives way to a minor song that is focussed on another character. The minor song, unlike the folk style of the major song, is a piece of religious *Saiva* poetry called "*Thevaram*" that is re-tuned with unorthodox percussions for the film. This section is exemplar of Ilaiyaraja's efforts to de-brahmanize Tamil film music by bringing instruments like the parai drums (which at the time were considered to be lower-caste, thus morally polluting instruments) into the mainstream. At the same time, the song overall evidences his ability to fuse classically western music with Tamil folk music, religious poetry, and Carnatic traditions.

However, one of the few criticisms levelled against Ilaiyaraja is that he did not or could not embrace the digital era. It is often cited as the major reason his popularity declined in the late nineties and then the twenty first century. "*Rakkama Kaiyya Thattu*" and the movie in which it features, *Thalapathy*, was the last collaboration between Ilaiyaraja and filmmaker Mani Ratnam after a long partnership. In 1992, Mani Ratnam employed the music of A.R. Rahman in *Roja*, which set the tone for a new era of Tamil cine music.

The nineties are especially known for the influence of American popular music. It was when composers like Deva started to take directly from established tunes in the west. Some musicians and songs pulled beats, bass notes, or interludes from popular American songs - the acoustic guitar riff in “*Pulveli Pulveli*” from *Aasai* is taken straight from a riff in Rod Stewart’s “Maggie May.” This eventually culminated with movies like *Mugavari* (Durai 1990), whose soundtrack was composed by Deva. The song “*Oh Nenje*” from the film is a modified replica of “Get Down,” by the Backstreet Boys, and another song “*Poo Virinjudhu*” is lifted directly from the title track of Tom Hanks’ *That Thing You Do*. Tamil music composers were aware of the growing following of English popular music in Tamil Nadu.

Fittingly, this was also when Tamil cinema music began to influence other industries and compositions through the music of A.R. Rahman (1967-) – arguably the most nationally and globally recognized figure of Tamil cinema. The first film that A.R. Rahman worked on was Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* which was a national hit. As such he was one of the first Tamil composers to gain fame in other film industries of India by working with “national” filmmakers like Mani Ratnam. His stardom was tied to the stardom of Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan as well, for whose movies he scored through the nineties and into the twenty first century. Rahman’s composition for the Rajinikanth film *Muthu* (Ravikumar 1995) brought him recognition in Japan with the rousing success of *Muthu: The Dancing Maharaja*. His score for Mani Ratnam’s *Bombay* was featured in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and Elia Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention* amongst many other films. In the twenty first century, he gained worldwide recognition for the soundtrack of Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*, for which he won an Oscar, a Grammy, a Golden Globe, and a BAFTA. His compositions bring together various global styles, but have leaned towards electronic music in the twenty-first century, to keep in line with global trends. While Rahman,

like MSV and Ilaiyaraja, is also known for his elaborate string sections, he doesn't have the same ties to folk music his predecessors did, but works more with indigenous folk music of non-Tamil cultures and has revived the popularity of Islamic/Sufi musical traditions like Qawwali.

One of the main features of Rahman's music is a layering of these several musical traditions, and the presence of a large orchestra ensemble. The various instruments and instrumental layers are used to highlight different moments in the song, whether to match the lyrics or the tone of the song. For *Indian* (Shankar 1994), the song "Telephone Mani Pol," begins with a percussion section, that is then slowly accompanied by a low bass guitar and is finally joined by a string section. However, when the lyrics accompanying these instruments mention Zakir Hussain's tablas, a quick percussion riff from the tabla is added. Similarly, when the lyrics wonder if the heroine's voice is one that is created digitally, the bass notes take on a synth effect. The stanzas and interludes (non-chorus elements) keep the initial percussion and bass but also make way for longer flute interludes when singers voices are not heard. Traditional Indian percussion instruments like the ghatam are then added. Another popular practice is the use of unconventional sounds to punctuate his songs, such as the sound of glass shattering at the beginning of "*Kadhal Rojave*" from *Roja* or the sound of trains in "*Chikku Bukku Railway*" from *Gentleman* (Shankar 1993).

Lyrics:

The continued eclectic nature of the compositions then placed the burden of Tamil-ness on the lyrics and singing styles: what was said, who said it, and in what language it was said. Lyrics took on much of work of providing characters interiority. It was not only the language, but the use of dialect and slang that would identify characters and their cultural and/or religious/caste backgrounds. Additionally, playback singing was then built into the interiority

and interruptive functions. As Weidman and Nakassis note, L.R Eswari and P. Susheela were often chosen to sing for the vamp and the wife respectively, and the repeated use of their voices to articulate certain desires created a lasting association that lasts well into the 2000s.

In the case of “*Avalukku Enna*,” the voices were distinctively T.M. Soundarrajan and L. R. Eswari, singing in classical Tamil, with occasional English phrases strewn in to depict the characters as part of the modernity of cinema. Part of the chorus goes,

Azhagu oru magic touch

Aasai oru kaadhal switch

In the rendering of these lines, one hears an English that is heavily accented by a south Indian upbringing as would have been the case with TMS. In “*Rakkamma*,” the voices were S.P. Balasubramanyam and Swarnalatha singing in lyrics that were colloquial rural Tamil, unlike the formal “pure” Tamil that prevailed in “*Avalukku Enna*.” In the later song, the characters are rural and thus have no pretensions to English fluency. The informal nature of the lyrics is further highlighted when contrasted with the formal lyrics of the minor song. The difference in lyrical styles sets the context for the lead characters of the film – played by Rajinikanth and Shobhana – by contrasting colloquial Tamil with classical poetic Tamil respectively. The extremely distinct voice of S.P. Balasubramanyam singing for Rajinikanth sets a heroic tenor for the character, for his was the singing voice for the heroes and superstars from the 1980s. In “*Telephone mani pol*,” the Americanization of Tamil cine-music is made evident in the lyrics. The chorus of the song goes,

Telephone mani pol sirippaval ivala?

Melbourne malar pol melliya magal ah?

Digital-il sidhikkiya kural ah?

Elizabeth Taylor *magaL ah?*
Zaakir Hussain tabla *ival thaana?*
Sona, Sona, *ivaL angam thangam thaana?*
Sona Sona *ivaL* latest cellular phone *ah?*
Computer *kondur ivaLai andha Brahman padaithaana?*

Is she the one who laughs like a telephone bell?
Is she the daughter who is as soft as the flowers of Melbourne?
Is her voice tuned digitally?
Is she Elizabeth Taylor's daughter?
Is she Zakir Hussain's tabla?
Sona, Sona, are her limbs made of gold?
Sona, Sona, is she the latest cellular phone?
Did the Lord Brahma create her with a computer?

In general, Tamil lyrics implied traditionalism whereas English lyrics meant modern and western individuality. While in the early days of cinema, an extra layer of morally good and morally bad were layered upon them, since the 90s, there have come to be more progressive morals in song lyrics and presentation. Pusgley argues that, "from the 1990s onward, Tamil film songs began to confront traditional, gendered moralities to provide relevant and contemporary cultural meanings for audiences," through the use of lyrics, specifically metaphors and analogy. Use of the English language implied progressive modern tendencies rather than immoral or illicit tendencies, for instance. The most significant issue of morality and metaphor in lyrics was that of women's sexuality and promiscuity. As stated earlier, the song-scape was the only space in which the good

Tamil woman of Tamil cinema could assume a sexual identity and openly welcome or make sexual advances. “Telephone *Mani pol*” and “*Rakkama*” feature several lines of sexual innuendo and present the women in the song as capable of sexual desire. It was because of this kind of shift in lyrics, precipitated by the incursion of MTV culture, that popular songs did not play on All India Radio because they would not pass the censors. This led to the tremendous popularity of Radio Ceylon in Tamil Nadu, which was more lenient with its censorship, till the air waves were privatized.

In the twenty-first century Tamil cinema, the lyrics betray greater reliance on English lyrics. The most popular songs of the last ten years have featured “Tanglish”, which is the pidgin English spoken in urban Tamil Nadu. The base Tamil is considered “local” Tamil, as opposed to “pure” or “classical” Tamil. It is a lower-class, peri-urban Tamil that borrows from other languages when necessary. This is not to say that purely Tamil songs haven’t come up either. The song “*Fanaa*” from the A.R. Rahman-Mani Ratnam film, *Ayudha Ezhuthu* (*Yuva* in Hindi) is set in a nightclub, and the song itself is an EDM number. The lyrics, however, are in chaste, literary Tamil, and at times, Sanskrit, and end with an extensive exposition of Carnatic *swara* notes. However, as the rest of the chapter will show, contemporary Tamil cine-music’s language/dialect-based meaning-making has moved away from previous understandings of linguistic difference.

The Visual and the Narrative

Through these various changes in musical styles and influences, the one thing that has remained constant is the interruptive and extra-diegetic position of song sequences. Apart from a few experiments like *Veedu* and other films in the 70s and 80s, song sequences in the twentieth century were mostly situated outside the linear narrative, and breached the limits of the

storyworld. “*AvaLukku Enna*” is a song sequence that portrays the making of a song sequence in a movie and is thus one of the few instances where the song sequence is situated within the diegesis. But it is shown that the song sequence being filmed is extra-diegetic from the movie that is being made. “*Rakkama Kaiya Thattu*,” on the other hand, is used as an exposition song to delineate the lead characters through song and set the context for the hero’s masculine sexual prowess; it does not advance the plot.

“Telephone *Mani Pol*” is a standard extra-diegetic cut. In the movie, the hero, Chandru, brings his lover a llama as a gift to ask forgiveness, and when granted, he tries to get her to kiss him. The scene cuts to shots of kangaroos leaping to the sound of the initial beats of the song. The entire song is set in Australia, at times against the Sydney Opera House and other Australian landmarks (figure 10). The lead pair wear various Western costumes and are accompanied by a plethora of white (presumably Australian) background dancers. Once they each profess their desire to each other, the song ends, and the audience is brought back to Tamil Nadu, where the movie’s plot is set. The song is thus not situated in the diegesis of the movie and has no implication on the plot of the movie. Yet, it is a crucial part of the film’s reception and circulation: the spectacle of the Sydney Opera House and sights of Australia are symptomatic of *Indian* being the highest-budget production of Tamil cinema at that time. This budget was generously spent on song sequences such as “Telephone *mani pol*” and “*Maya Machindra*,” the latter of which was especially known for its spectacular visual effects that transmorphed Kamal Haasan into various mythical creatures through the song. The interruption then becomes a site of visual spectacle, along with having the narrative function of providing the audience an insight into the characters.



Figure 11: Iconic shot of the Sydney Opera House from the Harbour bridge in "Telephone *Mani Pol*"

The various types of song sequences function to provide different kinds of spectacles and character insights. The introductory song as discussed in chapter 2 works to situate the male hero within certain ideals of Tamil masculinity and morality. The love song, like "Telephone *Mani Pol*" presents the desires of characters otherwise censored by diegetic moral codes. The love song also often showcases the actors' dancing skills. On several occasions, it also allows for the characters to dress in costumes they would not wear within the diegesis. Thus, in "Telephone," the actress Manisha Koirala can wear short skirts, vintage western dresses, and contemporary *haute couture* in a song even though her character, Aishwarya, would not realistically ever wear such costumes (figure 11). The female body (and sometimes the male body) can be turned into a spectacle itself in the visual landscape of the song sequence.



Figure 12: The lead stars in anachronistic clothing in "Telephone *Mani Pol*"

The most recurrent treatment of the female body as spectacle is in the “item number.” The item number is a song sequence dedicated to showcasing the female body (and very rarely, the dancing male body). Filmmakers hire an actress exclusively for the item number, who is the centre of the song. It is usually a racy, high tempo song with sexually suggestive lyrics sung by the female character at the centre. The actress wears revealing clothes and is framed by the camera as a series of body parts such as the waist, thighs, and lips, rather than a whole. The song is mostly set in nightclubs or at parties. This is an unusual interruption for it has no narrative function – no lead characters are featured in these songs, and thus there is no interiority being explicated for the audience. It is exclusively a site of spectacle and titillation.

In contemporary Tamil cinema, these narrative interruptions do still exist, especially as item numbers. Take Weidman’s reading of the item number, “*En Peru Meenakumari*,” or her co-authored work with Nakassis on the song “*Kalasala*.” In their arguments on sound, image, and textuality of the item number, these two studies demonstrate that the item number is still a significant presence in twenty first century Tamil cinema. However, in accordance with the shifts in characters and heroes, songs too have changed the way they articulate desire. Sangita Gopal observes that songs are often the domain of the morally good characters, and therefore the villain

rarely gets the chance to express interiority. In the song, “*Kalasala*” however, the villain and the hero get singing lines, both conveying similar sexual desires for the same woman. In the space of the song then, the similarly morally ambiguous nature of the hero and the villain is highlighted. The item number is only one kind of spectacle offered in contemporary Tamil cinema. The song, “*Adhiradi*” from *Sivaji: The Boss* brings together the star spectacle of Rajinikanth, the elaborate sets of art director Tharani, and the special effects and grandiose productions of Shankar. The significance of twenty first century cine-music is that the songs seem to interrupt the movie’s narrative only when they are such sites of spectacle, and sometimes even the spectacle is situated within the diegesis. Overall, however, there has been a clear reduction in the number of such extra-diegetic spectacular musical “interruptions.”

The gradual fading of the interruptive nature of the song sequence is what makes the twenty first century film music a more concrete act of worlding than the musical and lyrical styles of decades past. Contemporary filmmakers in their attempts at world cinema have utilized music and songs differently in their narratives, and as such, have performed an unprecedented shift in the way Tamil cinema narratives are constructed. This is being done to be relatable to non-native audiences; to toe the line of recognizable modes of realist cinema. The spectacle has been relocated to the extra-text of the movie, where songs circulate instead as making videos.

The Music of Contemporary Tamil Cinema

It is difficult to study the music of contemporary Tamil cinema without an understanding of the various other systemic changes of the industry that the other chapters have laid out. The stories that are told and the way they are told are so markedly different from previous eras of Tamil cinema, that when music is used, it is used differently. The rise of genres like the neo-noir and

the black comedy required storytelling that could not be interrupted as the standard masala film might. The alternative forms of masculinity, for instance, are not suited for exaggerated fight sequences and the new stars, as chapter 2 demonstrates, do not participate in politicizing their characters. Vasugi Kailasam in her work on the neo-noir of post-millennial Tamil cinema, argues that instead interruptions enter in the mode of plot twists and unreliable omniscient narrators who break the plot flow with moments of suspense and surprise. Thus, the conventional interruptions of the song sequence, the fight, the interval, and interruptive functions of the camera are replaced. As such, song sequences where they do exist in these new genres, take on different functions both politically and aesthetically, as in the case of Santosh Narayanan's work.

The entry of new filmmakers and the popularity of newer narrative styles however does not completely erase the extant traditions. As such the standard masala film continues to exist albeit in a mildly different format especially when it comes to star politics. These movies continue to feature the song sequence as an extra-diegetic musical interruption. However, the song sequence has taken on functions extraneous and completely independent of the film because of revised circulation methods. That is, while one strand of song sequences works with the narrative of the movie and is recentring the movie as the primary text, the other strand – best illustrated by the work of the composer Anirudh Ravichander –is attempting to free the song sequence from the narrative of the movie by circulating them outside the textual limits of the film. This in turn contributes to changing dynamics of star processes, shifting significance of the song sequence, and demonstrates the changing systems of circulation.

Santhosh Narayanan⁸⁵: Politics, Genre, Narrative

Song sequences in the hands of certain postmillennial Tamil filmmakers and their genres do not provide further interiority to characters than already provided by the plot. Instead, songs and music add emotional undertones to montage sequences, or provide a socio-political commentary of the film as a whole excluding the processes of star politics. The songs are often set within the diegesis of the movie – aurally and visually – even when meant to be spectacular. Since the song’s visual and narrative significances are the domain of the filmmaker, in a way, the revised presence of the song sequence in the narrative re-instates the director as the auteur of a movie, and the composer as a collaborator who works with the filmmaker to create a particular tone. Santhosh Narayanan (SaNa) is the most popular composer in this trend as he collaborates with the leading filmmakers of the black comedy genre (Karthik Subburaj, Nalan Kumarasamy) and political filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith to produce music that builds into and subverts the genre expectations of their films. The compositions for these filmmakers reunite the aural and the visual of the movie and recentres the film as the primary text rather than the audio track be its own individual text.

Kabali: Musical Politics

While SaNa’s work is intimately tied to the new genres of contemporary Tamil cinema, significant to his identity as a composer is that his most consistent collaborator has been Pa. Ranjith (PaRa), the first mainstream Dalit filmmaker of Tamil cinema. SaNa and PaRa have worked together for all of PaRa’s directorial work debuting together in 2012 with *Attakathi*.

⁸⁵ Santhosh Narayanan was born in 1983 and is native to Srirangam, Tamil Nadu. He holds a degree in Computer Science and Engineering. He worked as a recording engineer, while being an assistant to Pravin Mani. He eventually began to compose independent music, debuting in Tamil cinema in the 2012 film, *Attakathi* (Pa. Ranjith).

These movies continue to have musical interruptions, but these become moments of articulating resistance against the caste system and its oppressive history. When introductory songs do play into the star persona of the actor, they subvert conventional ideas of the star.

The movie, *Kabali*, with which chapter 2 deals in detail is one of the most exemplar of such collaborations. It was already significant that a Dalit filmmaker was to direct Rajinikanth, but this was also the first Rajinikanth movie in decades without A.R. Rahman providing music. This film, like other PaRa films, featured regular musical interruptions. Yet the soundtrack flouted conventions. Most importantly, the introductory song forced the star-image of Rajinikanth into the background and foregrounded PaRa's anti-caste politics. Further, the song tied Rajinikanth's persona with musical genres such as gaana rap and hiphop which are identified with Dalit politics, suited to the first Dalit character Rajini was to play on screen.

The use of genres like gaana rap and hiphop made the introductory song of *Kabali* one of the more unusual introductory songs for a Rajinikanth character. Gaana rap, a particularly Tamil version of hiphop has gained quite the fan following over the past years, largely due to the patronage of Santosh Narayanan in his work. Gaana is a genre of Tamil, urban, folk music. It features high-tempos, quick beats, and a socially relevant message in the lyrics – often about caste or class discrimination. Gaana was originally popularized in Tamil cinema in the 1990s by the composer Deva, but fell away under the gaze of electronic music. However, in the past decade, there has been a clear resurgence of gaana music paralleled by the rise in popularity of hiphop as a form of expression of Dalit resistance. Gaana rap – the synthesis of these two socially aware genres of music – features frequently in the films of PaRa who consistently uses music and dance styles in his movies as a form of Dalit politics. Gaana rap thus combines the popular “local” Tamil with a more global genre like hiphop. SaNa's consistent use of this genre

suits the contemporary moment of Tamil cinema where films and filmmakers alike are taking on a similar act of worlding.

In the introductory song, Rajinikanth's character does not take part in the diegetic singing.⁸⁶ Thus, he is unable to articulate his personal politics or tie the socio-political theme of the film to his offscreen persona, which is often the central function of the introductory song. Instead, the video of the song features the actual singers of the song who are given equal screen time as Rajinikanth. The genre of the song was a mix of gaana, hiphop, and electronic music, and some crunk by the Malaysian hiphop group K-Town Clan or KTC (figure 12). The KTC are featured prominently and are even mentioned in the lyrics:

Dressed to kill
Call it Kabali swag
Come and get some
Like the K-Town Clan

The lyrics put the K-Town Clan on the same rhetorical pedestal as the Superstar, re-affirming an earlier line in the song,

Naanga enga porandhal ada unakkenna poda
Thamizhanukkaaga vandhu ninnavan thamizhan ya

What does it matter to you where we were born?

He who stands up for a Tamilian is a Tamilian.

⁸⁶ The only line sung by the character is a call to action - *Unai Veliyidu/ Thulir Vidu/ Baliyaadaai Inaiyathe* Trans. – Unleash yourself, grow, do not let yourself become a scapegoat.



Figure 13: Members of the K-Town Clan rapping in "*Ulagam Oruvanukka*"

Thus, the lyrics do not allude to the character's, and thereby Rajinikanth's, morality, but speak to broader issues of Tamil-ness in the diaspora. The other major presence on screen during this song is the singer Gaana Bala (figure 13). The hip-hop portion of the K-Town Clan leads directly into the singing of Gaana Bala dressed in a mix of traditional folk and western attire, singing to the issues of oppression and social activism:

Mettukudiyin koopaadu,

Ini naattukkulla kekkadhu,

Ina, mugavari, adhu ini,

Vizhi thirandhidume.

The commands of the upper caste,
will not bear inside the country,
Our identity arises now,
and opens its eyes to the world.



Figure 14: Gaana Bala in "*Ulagam Oruvanukka*"

An introductory song like this and the one of *Kaala* (the next PaRa-SaNa-Rajini film) brought rap and gaana into the Rajini world and associated him with a caste-based resistance unlike never before. The lyrics even call for Kabali to be welcomed with parai drums⁸⁷ which were earlier thought to be polluting. Santhosh Narayanan's use of diasporic musicians and his affinity for gaana rap moves his compositions outside the conventions of Rajinikanth's stardom, in both *Kabali* and *Kaala*. When paired with the politics of a filmmaker like PaRa, these compositions present a new set of political possibilities for the introductory sequence that are disassociated from the star and are situated instead in the artists that perform them.

Soodhu Kavvum: Genre and Narrative

The work with Pa. Ranjith established SaNa as a composer who could work with narrative and thematic expectations of the filmmaker. This became more evident when working with black comedy/neo-noir filmmakers like Karthik Subburaj and Nalan Kumarasamy whose narratives

⁸⁷ *Kabali vaaraan kaiyathattu/Bambaram pola suthikittu/Paraiyisai adithi ni paatu kattu.*

require certain kinds of music that is unorthodox in the history of Tamil cinema. These new genres of films, as Vasugi Kailasam has argued, are:

usually low-budget endeavours that have found favour within urban centres of Tamil movie consumption and are usually directed by young, urban, middle-class men who have not had formal training in film-making; their professional degrees are usually in engineering-related fields; [...] they are self-confessed cinephiles who take an active interest in world cinema. [...] The background music scores in these movies employ fresh sounds and experimental tunes that are composed by debutant music directors. (30)

One such film, whose soundtrack was composed by SaNa, is *Soodhu Kavvum*. As chapter 3 covers in detail, *Soodhu Kavvum* is a black comedy thriller that demonstrates several aspects of Tamil cinema's twenty first century worlding, but significantly the shifts in the dynamics of film humour. It partakes in the styles of filmmaking theorized by Kailasam – a low budget film made by a self-confessed cinephile, with an engineering background, whose break came at a popular short film contest in Tamil Nadu called *Naalaiya Iyakkunar*. The movie plays with colour as it does with narration and is especially known for comedic twists in plot. Its use of music is exemplary of the new patterns of Tamil cine music and how it participates in the worlding of Tamil cinema. Specifically, the songs in this movie do not participate as single interruptive tracks, but function as background music diffused over the length of the movie. Through the creative use of genre, lyrics, and the juxtaposition of the two, SaNa's compositions for *Soodhu Kavvum* demonstrate the new patterns of Tamil cine-music.

SaNa composed six songs for the film, each with a narrative function outside the standard interruptive function, each with a composition that is somewhat new, and with singers that were

hitherto unknown in popular cinema. The album was released several weeks before the movie and the rights are currently held by Think Music.

#	Name of song	Lyrics	Singer(s)	Length
1.	"Come Na Come"	Ganesh Kumar B	Ganesh Kumar B, Chinna	3:55
2.	"Mama Douser"	Nalan Kumarasamy	Andrea Jeremiah	3:20
3.	"Ellam Kadanthu Pogumada"	Rr	Koavai Jaleel	2:41
4.	"Sudden Delight"	Adhi	Rob Mass	2:37
5.	"Sa Ga"	Muthamil	Divya Ramani	1:43
6.	"Kaasu Panam"	Gaana Bala	Gaana Bala, Anthony Daasan	2:27

Table 1: Songs in *Soodhu Kavvum*

The first song in the narrative is "Mama Douser." "*Douser*" is a Tamil-accented way of saying "trouser;" the main lyrics of the song then being "*Mama, douser avvunduchu*," or "Mama (uncle), my trousers have come loose." The initial part of the song is filmed over a comical fight sequence at a TASMACH bar, where the four protagonists are set to meet. The bar is full of various groups of men ending their day with inebriated commiserations, when a brawl starts over a series of misunderstandings. As the first beer bottle breaks, the upbeat jazz notes of the song begun, accompanied by a bass string instrument. The beats of the song punctuate and add rhythm to various events that follow: as the owner of the bar threatens to drench the crowd with hot oil, his wok sways to a saxophone riff. He is disarmed by a bottle thrown at his head, at which point the saxophone too stops and the titular refrain is sung by the singer, Andrea Jeremiah. Glass shatters in the movie to the rhythm of the non-diegetic music. It eventually ends with the police chasing the patrons out and the protagonists coming forming an alliance to escape them. Because of the positioning of the song, it takes on the functions of comic relief, fight sequence, and musical interlude all at the same time. Moreover, unlike the usual extra-diegetic interruption, this song advances the plot of the film, and features the characters as they are in the diegesis.

The music itself is comical because of the several unique juxtapositions between local and world. It is to take an extremely local space like the TASMAC bar and set the very rough, crass, inelegant fight scene and set it to a “posh” and “cosmopolitan” genre like jazz. The only line in the song – the titular line – is itself a highly local exclamation, meaning that one has come to be at wit’s end, having been taken for a fool. This refrain is sung by the famously Anglo-Indian Tamil singer, whose voice is known for husky bass notes, and an English that is “untarnished” by her Tamil accent. While her voice may have been the natural choice for a jazz number, contrasting her voice and the composition with the lyrics provided the song a standalone comic relief position. Further contrasts were created when this was laid upon the narrative and characters; the exclamations of the characters in the scene in local Tamil jars against the fluid notes of the guitar. The disjuncture created by explicating a space like a TASMAC bar with the language of jazz, in the voice of Andrea Jeremiah creates humour by subverting expectations. This method of humour through songs has become a recurring feature of the black comedy genre.

The album features other songs like “*Mama Douser*” that directly feed into the genre expectations of the movie, but rarely break the diegetic flow of the plot. “*Mama Douser*” is a jazz number with local Tamil lyrics that is dispersed over the narrative and played in the background in times of chaos. “*Come na Come*,” “*Ellam Kadanthu Pogum*,” and “*Sudden Delight*” are background music to montage sequences or action sequences happening on scene and do not play out as an interruption, but rather aid the comedy of the moment. The only two songs that do break the diegesis of the film are “*Kaasu Panam*” and “*Sa Ga*.” “*Kaasu Panam*” plays when one of the characters finally comes into money and the movie cuts to his imagination of himself as a king (figure 14). The song features him in a comical king costume ruling over an

anachronistic court. He is seen wearing sunglasses, his chief spiritual advisor is using a smartphone to capture the dancers on video, and his aide is blowing bubbles at him. The dancers themselves are in modern costumes with a traditional aesthetic, paired with sneakers.



Figure 15: Still from "*Kaasu Panam*"

In a way, the mise-en-scene of this song is a metaphor of the film's own low production value. The lyrics comprise of six lines sung in refrains by the characters of the court poets, played by the writer and singers of the song (the gaana singers from the *Kabali* introductory song), thus making the singing quasi-diegetic. The genre of the song would be gaana rap, while the dance itself a local street/folk form called the *dappankoothu*, which would be both anachronistic and unsuited for a regal character. "*Kaasu Panam*" is then an exercise in postmodern hyperreality that relatively normalizes the plot from which it is breaking.

Similarly, "Sa Ga," is a hallucinatory break from the plot. The movie establishes earlier that the lead character lives with his imaginary girlfriend, Shalu. Towards the end of the film,

when the character is being tortured and almost beaten to death, he sees his hallucination with extreme clarity and engages in a minute-long musical romance with her before being stomped back to reality. It imitates the traditional love song sequence, but its ingenuity is undercut by the fact that it is clearly shown to be a hallucination. Essentially, when the songs in this movie do interrupt the narrative, it is to highlight the black comedy characteristics of absurdity and pessimism – such as the need for the protagonist to find companionship via an imaginary girlfriend. It is not to promote star values or create character interiority, thus exemplifying a shift in the function of the extra-diegetic song sequence.

Apart from these two extra-diegetic interruptions, the other songs are scattered across the narrative in various parts. Thus, they cannot feature the traditional song or lyric structure. Instead of a chorus and 2-3 stanza structure (or the more orthodox *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, *charanam* structure of Carnatic music) songs in this movie have but one or two lines of lyrics (sometimes up to 6) that are repeated over and over again to different rhythms. Much like “Mama Douser” and “*Kaasu Panam*,” the song “Sudden Delight” follows this pattern. When played as a track off the album on a music streaming platform, it’s a 2m37s song, broadly classified as electronic hip-hop that has a 20 second lyrical component. The lyrics of the song in their entirety are:

Dharmam ethu, adharmam ethu

Unnaku seri ena serithaan vidu

Nallathu ethu, kethathu ethu

Kethathuku nallathu kethathu

What is right and what is wrong?

If it is right to you, then it is right, let it be

What is good and what is bad?

That which is good is bad for that which is bad

The title of the song seems out of sync with the composition and lyrics. However, in the movie, this song comes up at points of plot twist; a moment of “sudden delight.” The police set a trap for the protagonists as they come to collect the ransom. Instead, a model helicopter with a luggage rack descends upon the scene to the tune of “Sudden Delight.” The song is celebratory of the protagonist’s wit and ability to overcome systems of law. As they succeed with the plan and collect their money, the lyrics begin, thus commenting on the morality of the audience rooting for the protagonists – who are kidnappers – outwitting the police and getting away with it.

The lyrics of this film’s songs are the product of newer lyricists and writers. Maybe because of the low-budget production, famous lyricists like Vaali or Vairamuthu were not commissioned for this film. Instead, the songs were written by fledgling lyricists who came to be highly lauded for their work on this album. The popular language of choice however is the local Tamil. The informal, mostly urban and peri-urban Tamil has a pidgin base of Tamil layered with a mix of English, Hindi, Malayalam, Telugu, and/or Tamil accented with those native languages. It is often used to represent a lower-class belonging and has in recent times become a source of pride in how inaccessible the lyrics are to those outside that identity.

In commentary to such trends, the genre of “nonsense” lyrics found some traction. Eventually this led to parodies of such nonsense lyric songs in *Thamizh Padam* (see chapter 3), and later audio tracks/movie trailers being released with clear declarations of nonsense:

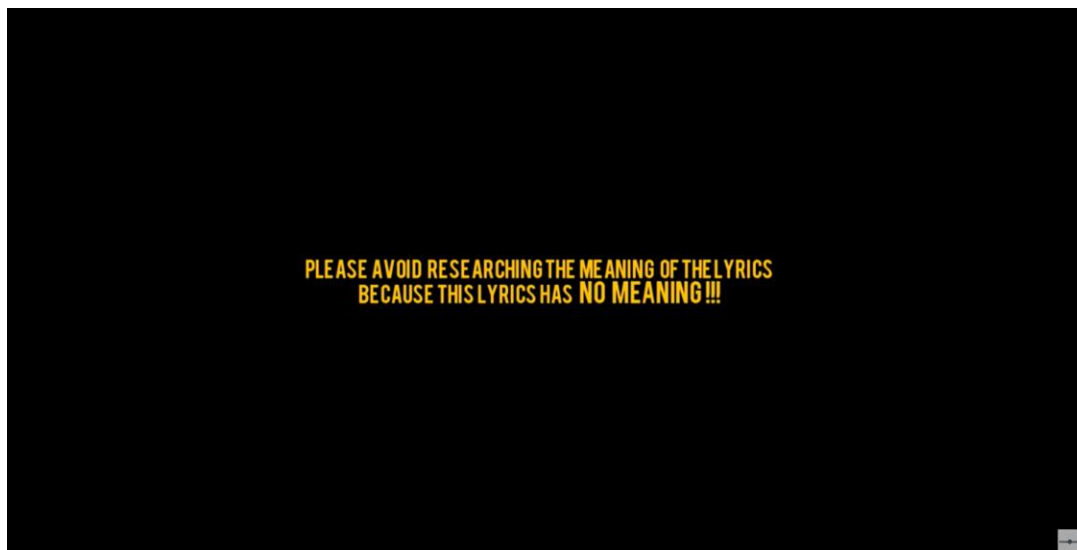


Figure 16: Opening frame from "*Pistah*"

This screenshot is from the publicity track "Pistah" released to promote the film *Neram* (Putharen 2012). As can be seen, the video begins with the declaration that the lyrics are meaningless and should thus be taken at face value.

Essentially, the lyrics of contemporary Tamil music venture to create a sense of inaccessible local but set to recognizable or accessible genres of music. In *Soodhu Kavvum*, the lyrics of songs always tend to juxtapose their style with that of the music. In "Mama Douser" the local Tamil plays with the jazz and blues undertone. In "Sudden Delight," the *suththa* (pure/chaste) Tamil is juxtaposed with the electronic hiphop tones of the song. Compositions like those for *Soodhu Kavvum* demonstrate SaNa's ability to create and work within genres and musical structures that fit the ideals of the worlding of Tamil cinema. These films do not always require music to aid the introduction of a mass hero or his political posturing. Much like how his compositions fit the genre expectations of black comedy and neo noir filmmakers, his compositions for PaRa's films meet the political and aesthetic ideologies of the filmmaker. The worlding exemplified by the genres of black and self-reflexive comedies required a different

kind of musical accompaniment, in that the songs no longer jarringly interrupt the narrative but tag along as context clues. The ideological and aesthetic drive of these contemporary filmmakers is underscored and highlighted by nuanced genres of music, namely, the balance between the local and not-local as exemplified by the gaana rap and the local blues. Santhosh Narayanan is a necessary study because he works with filmmakers who are at the transition stage of Tamil cinema's worlding.

Anirudh Ravichander: YouTube and Local Politics

Songs have always circulated extraneously from films. They circulated either as audio tracks (on records, cassettes, CDs, as .mp3 files, or via streaming services) after the audio release which usually happens a few months before the movie's release. Once the movie is released, the video of the song begins to play on local music TV channels. The videos would be the entire song-sequence portion of the movie. Hence the circulation of the song's video was a circulation of the movie itself.⁸⁸ When YouTube India was launched however, it added further possibilities to the song sequence's paratextual possibilities encapsulated by the work of Anirudh Ravichander,⁸⁹ and his first major hit, "Why this *Kolaveri*." Anirudh is a unique figure to take advantage of a global circulatory mode like YouTube for he is a composer whose work is very clearly situated in the local of Tamil cinema and is even known for songs that outwardly pit Tamil against Hindi culture. His career not only highlights the paratextuality of the song sequence, but his most recent work moves the song-sequence towards existing as a text in its own right, or an extra-text

⁸⁸ Because of this, sometimes certain songs are never played on TV. For instance, the climactic song of *Chandramukhi*, "Ra ra" which revealed the identity of the ghost was not licenced to TV channels until after the first month of the film's run in theatres.

⁸⁹ Anirudh Ravichander (1990-) is a native of Chennai and is from a family of performers. He has a background in Carnatic music and trained in piano at the Trinity College of Music. His film career began composing for short films for Aishwarya R Dhanush, for whose film 3, he debuted as a full-fledged music director.

of the film at best, signalling a new era of Tamil popular music and Tamil cinema circulation where local cultural identities are circulated on global platforms.

Anirudh's reputation is inextricably tied to the release of his first song, "Why this Kolaveri" from the movie, 3 (Aishwarya R. Dhanush 2012). "Why this *Kolaveri*" was released as an exclusive making video by Sony Music on 16 November, 2011 on YouTube, almost 5 months prior to the release of the movie. The song is a light-hearted song about love failure.⁹⁰ The video depicts the lead actors (Dhanush and Shruthi Haasan), the composer (Anirudh Ravichander), and the director (Aishwarya Rajinikanth Dhanush; Rajinikanth's daughter and Dhanush's spouse), in a recording studio. Shots of Dhanush singing are interspersed with candid clips of the four interacting, singing along, or directing Dhanush in his singing. The audience is not given any images from the movie itself, instead given access to images and scenes of an otherwise latent process, which was much of the draw of this video.

The song and its video were an instant viral hit, and within a week had 3.5 million views on YouTube and was India's #1 Twitter trend. It gathered so much traction that the video was aired on CNN worldwide and the BBC. The singer and star of the song, Dhanush, received national fame and was invited to be a guest of the Indian Prime Minister of that time, Manmohan Singh, signalling a "national" audience for this Tamil song. The success of this song was attributed to many factors – the "only English" lyrics, the humour of a light-hearted song about love failure, and the format of a making-video that allowed fans to watch Dhanush sing the song, and see him interact with his co-star, friend, and spouse. Its release as a making-video on

⁹⁰ In interviews, Anirudh has stated he composed the song fairly quickly at the direction of the director. The lyrics were written by Dhanush himself who composed the song with snippets of commonly used English words and phrases in the local Tamil lexicon including "colour," "white," "moon," "I'm dying" etc. They are sung with a Tamil inflection that adds a vowel extender u to each word. Simply put, the song regales the woes of the hero whose heart was broken by a light skinned girl.

YouTube was a big hit and heavily influenced the circulation of music and the use of cine-music as a form of cultural identity.

Kolaveri was an anomaly then in that the song was released as a video prior to the movie's release. Moreover, the video accompanying the song was not part of the movie's principal photography, but footage shot and edited specifically for the video release of the song. This was a unique tactic. While still attempting to be a paratext for the film – in that it was used to create hype for the film, it failed at that. 3 was a huge commercial failure despite the global popularity of the song. What did succeed was the method of circulation and the creation and cementing of Anirudh's identity as a composer in the industry. Since then, almost every movie he works on releases a making video.⁹¹ The making video was stabilised as a medium that could create and preserve the waning stardom and fandom of the Tamil film industry. While earlier editions of such making videos were around, this was the first that was shot exclusively for PR purposes.

Kolaveri was one of the earliest cine-music-videos to capitalize on the growing popularity of YouTube as a media platform in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil diaspora. It performs a move towards independent songs and music videos, whose popularity and circulation are now made possible by platforms like YouTube and TikTok. YouTube's offer of easy and affordable music circulation also layers these independent songs with extratextual meaning that could not have been otherwise achieved. As Ashwin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan argue, YouTube is a considerable force in constructing and maintaining a Tamil identity in the twenty first century. The "localizing" of YouTube through "platformization of splintered infrastructures (of language,

⁹¹ Even when he is not the composer, if only being hired as a singer, even those get recorded and are released as making videos.

network, connectivity etc)” (“Localizing YouTube” 7) made YouTube a suitable site to create and study the “regional” identities of India. This is especially significant in a time when the idea of the region is no longer confined by territorial borders but is performed as “media and cultural regions” which “far from being pre-fixed and pre-given, [are] continually produced and performed (5).” The postmillennial imaginations of the Tamil identity are a product of the popularity of YouTube as a site that can “[produce] south India through online video.” (8).

With *Kolaveri* for instance, because of the popularity of the song, it moved “across media platforms and forged links among audiences constituted along linguistic and regional lines, [and] served as a sound bridge between the popular and the political,” argue Punathambekar and Mohan (“Sound Clouds” 36). They demonstrate through an extensive study of the song and the resultant #kolaveri that the song went on to become a signifier of political and cultural Tamil identities. Tweets linked by #kolaveri were used to comment on several issues of Indian politics by Tamil and non-Tamil speakers. The “redeployment of the sonic cue” over Twitter and Facebook charged it with political intent that was not present in the initial song (34). Moreover, several other versions such as the techno-version or the Indian Premier League version of the song were created to promote other texts, not the original movie.

The popularity of YouTube as a media share platform made it suitable for the circulation of paratexts of cinema – where paratexts are understood as complimentary texts that are often used to build “hype” for the film or primary text at hand (see Johnathan Gray’s *Shows Sold Separately* for more). Whereas earlier paratexts used were the early audio release, airing the trailer on TV, and the videos of songs being circulated while the movie is running in theatre, the popularity of YouTube (and other social media platforms) offered new paratextual possibilities. Now, movies are publicized with the first look and second look posters (released on Twitter and Facebook),

followed with the teaser, the trailer, (maybe a second teaser), and videos of the audio release functions, complemented by the release of “lyric videos” or “making videos” of one or two singles from the album. The circulation offered by YouTube cuts out the middlemen (the TV channels and radio stations) and allow for direct-to-consumer marketing. “Why this *Kolaveri*” was one of the first songs to utilize this marketing tool. Even though it failed at generating viewership for the film, it was a pioneer in the trend of YouTube paratexts.

The lyric videos and making videos have been necessitated by YouTube specifically because it is a platform that encourages, if not requires, a visual component. Since the singles are released on YouTube well before the films are released, they have to be accompanied by a video that is not from the movie itself. In many cases, it is a lyric video – a video where lyrics of the song are overlaid on stills from the shoot. In other cases, like those of Anirudh’s albums, the songs are released with making-videos where the recording of the song and dance rehearsals are captured for the sake of releasing the single on YouTube. While these are not consistent in their ability to create hype for the movie, they certainly create hype for the stars featured in the video. At a time when some composers are using creations to recentre the film as the primary text, composers like Anirudh are (maybe inadvertently) making star-texts of themselves by creating a parallel-media universe of YouTube videos of cine-adjacent-music.

YouTube videos then highlight the possibilities of composers having public star-images as well; Anirudh specifically has constructed an image tied to the local culture politics of Chennai city. Over the second decade of the twenty first century, Anirudh has composed and starred in the making-videos of several songs, as well as composing independent music – outside the film industry – like “Chance-y *illa*,” an anthem celebrating Chennai city on its 350th anniversary or collaborations (mostly about Chennai) with north Indian hiphop artists. He also

stars in the making-videos of songs for which he is the singer and not the composer, often for the compositions of D. Imman who specializes in gaana and *koothu* songs. Anirudh's repertoire is built by songs that are all deeply rooted in a sense of the local. He is associated very dominantly with the cityscape of Chennai and its identities. He sings in local Tamil and composes and features in songs that encapsulate a very Chennai-specific idea of the local. For instance, he also features in the making videos of “*Dandanakka*” composed by D. Imman and written by Rokesh where is shown singing praises about the “local” Tamil culture

Ai-pi vaazhkai thevai illai

Mama enna da illa localalile

Saarpa vazhnthom da Sowcarpettaiyile

We don't need a hi-fi life

What do we want for in the local

We grew up well in Sowacarpet

While situating himself strongly in an appreciation of local culture, he is also known for frequent collaborations with musicians from several backgrounds. The album for the film *Vanakkam Chennai*, for instance, featured “HipHop *Thamizha*” Adhi, British-Punjabi rapper Hard Kaur, popular Hindi singer/composer Vishal Dadlani, and British-Sri Lankan singer Arjun, among others. Anirudh's career and star-image are deeply tied to the message of his songs, the language they are in, and his collaborations. However, the star-image of a composer is made possible by the circulation offered by YouTube as a visual platform, since he appears very regularly and with a consistent image to the audiences of Tamil cinema. His performance in

making-videos highlights the star-processes made possible by YouTube, like in the title song of *Edhir Neechal*.

Anirudh once again teamed up with Dhanush, albeit this time with Dhanush as the producer of the movie, *Edhir Neechal* (Rise against the Tide; Senthilkumar 2013). The title track of the movie was released on YouTube by Sony Music three months ahead of the film's release. The song also acted as a trailer and promo material for the movie, featuring clips from the film's shoot and ending with the words "coming soon to a theatre near you" splashed across the screen in multicolour neon. While this didn't make as big a splash as *Kolaveri*, it was clearly improving on the marketing technique, learning from *Kolaveri*'s success that this could be used to promote the film by providing fans with bloopers and insider views. This proved extremely prophetic because featured prominently in this video was the lyricist Vaali, who has never appeared on screen in the thousands of songs he has written for Tamil cinema. He died a few months after the film's release, making this video unintentionally in memoriam of this prolific poet. It was also of particular significance for fans of Dhanush because it provided fans the opportunity to see him in his preparation to go on the Sabarimala pilgrimage, an otherwise unseen image.⁹² It showed the various collaborators on this song – Dhanush (producer), Vaali (lyricist), Anirudh (composer and singer), Honey Singh (singer) and "Hip hop *Thamizha*" Adhi (singer) – working together and joking together. The song was edited to the rhythm of the song, splicing stills and shots from the movie and the shoot to the beat and in response to the lyrics in a way that established the dominant genres and comical tones of the movie. These various functions of the YouTube paratext culminate in the new format of song sequence of Tamil cinema. The song sequence is

⁹² In a generally atheistic culture of Dravidian ideology, it is rare to see stars aligning themselves with a religious image.

no longer tied to the film, but can circulate as independent music videos, as seen by the making-video for the song, “*Chellamma*” from the yet-to-be released *Doctor*.

In an unprecedented move, the single was announced with a 2-minute video where the composer/singer, Anirudh, the producer/lead actor Sivakarthikeyan, and the director, Nelson stage a conversation about creating the song. The announcement video was released 3 days before the single and depicted a comical conversation between the three, where they deliberate the problems of shooting and recording and promoting a song through a global pandemic that required social distancing and masks, and an era of the TikTok ban during the Sino-Indian aggressions.⁹³ The three people in the video were shown wearing face masks, acknowledging the COVID-19 pandemic. Anirudh is attired in a traditional *dhoti* and they are seated in what seems like an upper middle-class living room. In the conversation, Anirudh pretends to be unaware that he is the composer for this film, but eventually asks the producer and director what kind of song they want him to compose. While the director says it doesn’t matter what they want because Anirudh never listens to them anyway, Sivakarthikeyan states that all they want is a hit song that reaches a “million, billion” views on TikTok. At which point, Anirudh chides him for not knowing that TikTok has been banned in India and walks out of the room saying that if that’s they want then he’ll wait till the ban is lifted. Eventually, he agrees to do it when the producer says that they can write a song about the ban itself. The announcement video thus works within a certain image of Anirudh and his relationship with his close friend, the producer Sivakarthikeyan, as built through other making-videos like that of the *Ethir Neechal* title song. It

⁹³ TikTok, along with 58 other Chinese-owned applications, was banned by the Govt of India in, “view of information available they are engaged in activities which is prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order,” after a border aggression between the two countries in July 2020. (Press Information Bureau, Govt of India)

features all three as capable of dry humour and showcases *candid* conversations that, paradoxically, are *staged* for fans.

The song itself was released 3 days later (also by Sony Music South) with a signature making-video that doubled up as a lyric video as well. The video was clearly produced for the sake of releasing the single and thus functioned as a self-contained music video than a marketing tool for the movie. Featured in the video are Anirudh and Jonita Gandhi, the singers, dressed in an exaggeratedly traditional manner – silk *veshti* and saree, with Jonita Gandhi also sporting a gold *odiyaanam* (metal waistband worn during weddings). Despite this being a making-video – which is known for being candid and informal – they are heavily costumed and thus coded, brought home by both sporting sunglasses despite an interior location. Sivakarthikeyan, who is by now producer, lead actor, and lyricist, is seen also in a *veshti* playing the piano, even though he is not, thus his performance exclusively for the sake of camera, and the music itself is non-diegetic. Along with this, the director of the film (not the director of this video) is seen awkwardly strumming the guitar, despite not being the actual guitarist for the film. The only diegetic music in this video is then the singing of Anirudh and Jonita Gandhi, who were themselves conceived as premeditated images and not the casual performances as seen in previous making videos. It can be argued that then this is not technically a making-video since it does not actually show the process of the song being recorded but an artifice created to go with the release of the single.

The first half of the video focusses exclusively on this staged recording. In the interlude, the video is cut to show limited credits – lyricist and singers, after which it claims “An Anirudh musical” and then moves to show stills from the actual film, *Doctor*. Scenes from “the recording” are interspersed with collaged images from the film that share the frame with lyrics of

the song (which are transliterated in English). The video was released with closed captions in English as well, thus has some aim to reach audiences who don't know Tamil.

The song features standard *kuthu* beats (local Tamil folk/street music) that are synced with electronic music. The lyrics are in informal Tamil and contain references to Chennai/Tamil culture, like the reference to “Captain Cool,” M.S. Dhoni of the Chennai Super Kings cricket team (who regularly feature in the lyrics of songs by Anirudh). After the song is recorded, a thirty second epilogue is centred on a whispered conversation between Nelson and Sivakarthikeyan, the former of whom says, “for one song, he’s made us work so much, who knows how much we’ll have to do to get the other songs,” and ends with Sivakarthikeyan wondering if Nelson was similarly critical of Sivakarthikeyan in his absence. This continues the humour set up by the announcement video and builds a separate storyworld of this song that is detached from the plot of the movie itself. To cement further, the credits at the end of the video (Figure 16) only name the musical and recording credits and not of the film (although a more expanded version is present in the video description): see next page.

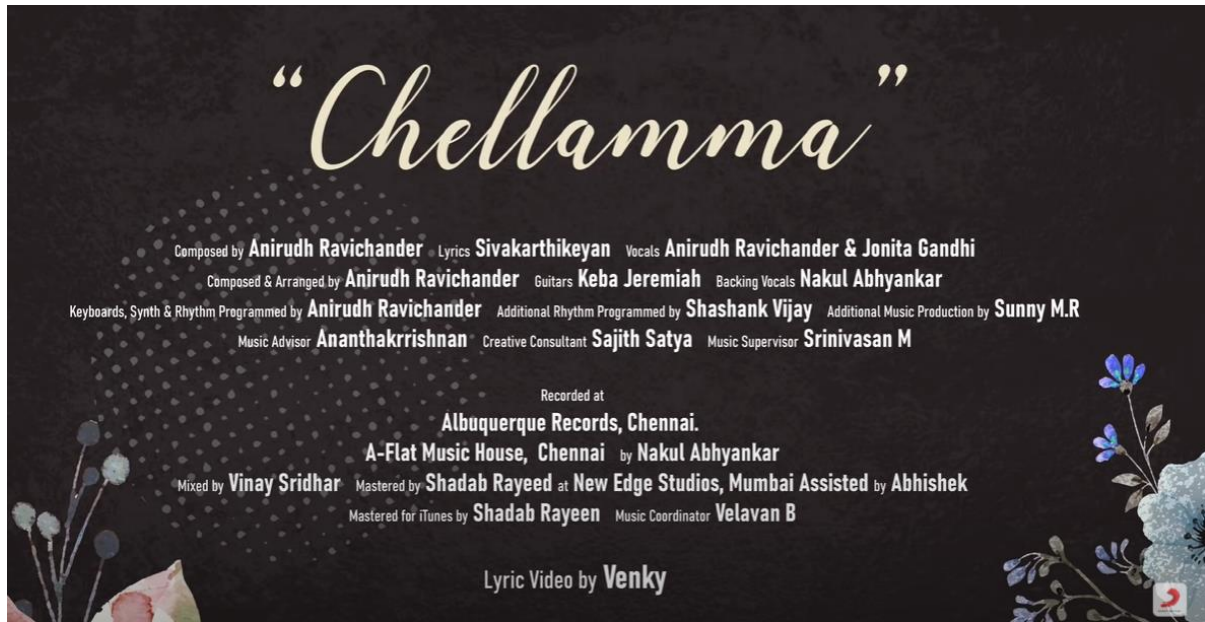


Figure 17: Credits for the song "*Chellama*"

However, these credits are sandwiched between two shots of the title card of the film:

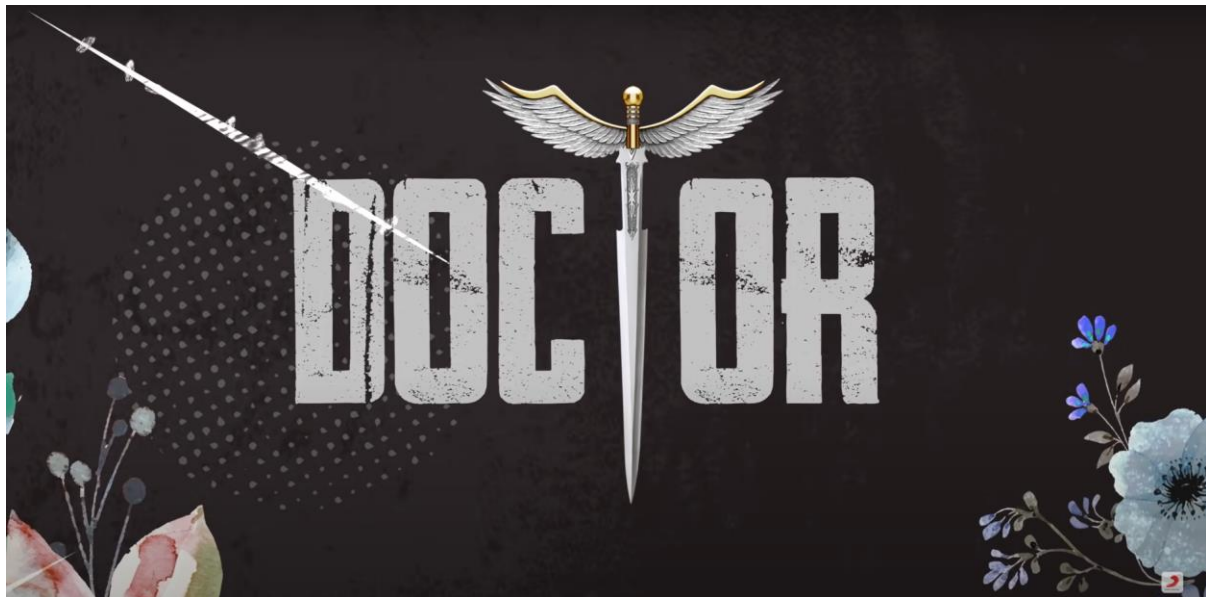


Figure 18: Title card of *Doctor*

Thus, the video is caught between being an independent text, while still being extratextually attached to the movie.

Such detachment of song from its movie could further the trend of music videos being created for the purposes of the song rather than the film. In turn, this could potentially shift the popular music of Tamil Nadu away from being movie-centric and allow for independent musicians to popularize their work. While independent musicians like Krish Ashok did achieve some recognition with earlier platforms like SoundCloud, the popularity of YouTube has surpassed all other platforms in its ability to offer localized platforms with global connectivity.⁹⁴ Anirudh, for instance, has signed a deal with Sony Music to release his independent music and often releases singles that are not attached to any movie. While it might be the case that this is possible only because of the fame he has achieved through cine-music, it presents the possibility that other composers could potentially sign individual contracts with record companies to produce and distribute their music, thus moving the Tamil music industry to a more westernized model of popular music (detached from the film industry).

Changes to circulation methods of the song sequence of Tamil cinema has then fundamentally revamped the song sequence and provided it an existence outside the textual world of the movie. The new format has made stars of composers and singers and provides them with robust on-screen images that previously did not exist. The star-processes that used to be provided by the extra-diegetic song sequences have been moved to outside the diegesis of the film and are featured more prominently in the independent music video. This works in tandem with the other shift of song sequences captured by the albums composed by SaNa that moves the song sequence away from star politics and towards the movie's socio-political and metanarrative

⁹⁴ Unlike other platforms, YouTube India is offered in most major Indian languages, thus removing linguistic obstacles to the platform. But since YouTube India is part of the larger Google network, it is quickly translatable to other languages when viewed in another region/country. Furthermore, YouTube India offers users the option to download videos and watch them offline at a later time. This recognizes the increased use of mobile phones and data capabilities of the Indian user market over the past decade.

commentary instead. These trends are, of course, not exhaustive of contemporary Tamil movie, but present the broad trend and the setting of new norms for the use of the song sequence in Tamil cinema.

The changes to the song sequence demonstrate a fundamental change in the traditional narrative structure of the Tamil movie. The worlding of Tamil cinema is built on the principles of recognizability and accessibility. Each of the interruptions discussed are vernacularized characteristics of the popular Tamil masala film. The changes to each of these various processes work with one another to make popular Tamil cinema similar to global popular cinema. The shifts in the song sequence work in the system of worlding by interacting and promoting the changes to star processes as outline in chapter 2, and working with and towards the changes in comedy and film genres outlined in chapter 3. By making the extra-diegetic song sequence a fading element of the cinematic narrative, contemporary Tamil cinema is losing something intrinsically local about itself. In its stead, the popular Tamil cinema is streamlining further towards dominant modes of realist cinema, that typically do not feature abrupt extra-diegetic musical interruptions to the plot. The changes to the song sequence's circulation similarly move popular Tamil music towards dominant modes of popular music production and circulation that centre on independent music of an artist or a group of artists. As such, the changes to the song-sequence capture the broader changes to the cine-music phenomenon and the film industry as a whole.

Conclusion: De-westernizing film studies through Tamil cinema

Tamil cinema is worlding. It is deliberately modifying modes of filmmaking and star processes to meet the demands of globalizing native audience and to elicit the curiosity of non-native cinephiles. The more indigenous aspects of cinema such as the politicization of cinema to meet star demands, the breaks of songs, action, and comedy—all those that would constitute an “interruption” to the plot by western normative standards in Lalitha Gopalan’s revisionist framework—are being plucked away and replaced by anti-hero and nihilistic protagonists and their darkly comedic lives. The masala movie is disappearing, and genre movies are more visible. To an extent, these changes have made a difference in Tamil cinema’s participation in world cinema. Tamil movies are gaining visibility, with films being picked up by global streaming services. They are being accepted with greater frequency at prestigious international film festivals. It was even recently announced that Dhanush is being cast in the next Russo brothers’ film (*The Gray Man*) alongside Ryan Gosling and Chris Evans (Kroll). The shifts in filmmaking and star processes are however, only one part of a three-pronged approach to the worlding of a film industry. It needs to be complemented by interventions in the methods and networks of circulation of cinema *and* interventions in the creation and circulation of scholarship on that film industry. This dissertation posits Tamil cinema’s revised views on filmmaking, film viewing, circulation, and discourse as a way to underscore the need to de-westernize film studies as an academic discourse. I would like to conclude with a discussion of the politics of circulation of cinema and scholarship that highlights the privileged position of the “west” in popular and scholarly film discourse and postulate that such a discussion is a necessary part of the process of de-westernizing film studies and world cinema so that it might accommodate and let flourish minor and non-national industries like Tamil cinema.

The dissertation began with a citation to Saer-Maty Ba and Will Higbee's acknowledgement that "some cinemas are more equal than others" (6) – which could be realized on several levels. Some cinemas have a larger audience base because of their language or country of origin. Some cinemas have greater prestige because of their presence on festival circuits. Some are privileged through scholarship, and for their translatability into western scholarship. More to the point, the privileging, or the popularity, of some cinemas over others is done from the vantage point of the western world. Integral to being placed on level footing with other cinemas of the world is being viewed, recognized, and appreciated by a wide cross-section of audiences. Alternatively, or complementarily, the scholarship about a film industry must reach a critical mass and be taught and circulated within dominant systems of academia, often those centred in the West. This intentional or inadvertent privileging is a product of historical process of colonialism and modernity that advantaged the nations of the west and their systems of epistemology. Those cinemas that are recognized by cinephiles and scholars in the west are often considered "more equal than the others." In the past two decades, various film industries and the scholars who study them around the world are attempting to break through certain principles of filmmaking and film studies as a way of securing equal footing under the umbrella of world cinema.

While the focus of this dissertation is Tamil cinema, it is simply a case study in the shifting paradigms of world cinema. The concept of world cinema emerged in film discourse in response to certain geo-political systems of privilege. Current definitions of world cinema, as discussed in the introduction, are not adequately constructed as to capture this collective breakthrough of film industries from the global south. And so, this dissertation functions on a

modified understanding of world cinema (to improve upon that of Deshpande and Mazaj) that world cinema might comprise of all cinema produced in the world that attempts to or succeeds at cultivating a non-native audience. The study of those cinemas presents an interesting set of principles regarding recognizability and access; they question categories of the national and transnational and at times render them obsolete. Film industries that work towards a non-native audience are significant because of how consciously they navigate the local and the global, the vernacular and the contemporary “foreign.” In essence, it assumes that in order for films to be able to participate in a world-ness, they would have to adapt to a certain “world cinema” mode of filmmaking. It begs an exploration into the sociological foreignness of the diaspora, and the theoretical modernism of global capitalism. World cinema, as a function of non-native audiences, necessitates that film studies be a transdisciplinary discourse, that moves beyond simply the text at hand and engages with the broader socio-cultural systems of which the film industry is a part.

Such transdisciplinary work is demonstrated by the studies of various film industries tending to world cinema such as Nigeria (Larkin, Haynes, Jedlowski), Ghana (Garritano), China (Xu, Zhou, Liu), Korea (Dal Yong Jin, Choi), or even Spain (Egea; Binimelis et al). These studies present these industries at a moment of change in the twenty first century, in the face of globalization and changes to media technology. Additionally, in their methodologies, they are each questioning the epistemologies of westernized film studies, and the nation as a canon forming principle. They each are worlding in their own specific way. Korean cinema which has undergone several different changes aided by the economic policies of the Korean government and global mediascapes influenced by the United State that have reflected in the *global* visibility of Korean cinema in the past decade. Another perspective of American global media dominance

is offered by Gary Xu, in his study of contemporary Chinese language cinema, *Sinascape*: he argues that the twenty first century is in fact “China’s (cinematic) century” and that China’s rise to global prominence is “media based”. He further complicates this by adding that

If “China’s century” is media-based with a focus on Chinese cinema, and since Chinese cinema is increasingly Hollywoodized and Hollywood has been penetrated by Chinese cinema, we have an interesting corollary: “China’s century” equals “Hollywood’s century.” The two notions, China’s century and Hollywood’s global dominance, complement each other, pointing to the importance of the cinematic mode of production to the new century in the midst of unprecedented globalization. (4)

Xu’s insistence that China and Hollywood might share global media dominance in this century makes apparent a belief in the breaking of the media monopoly held by the United States. While these studies do still engage with Hollywood, they shift their focus to the deconstruction of Hollywood as the media centre. Studies of cinemas of Africa or south India bypass Hollywood to study the effects of globalization (not Hollywoodization) on their media industries. Garritano and Larkin, for instance, study the changes in media and technology as they work towards formalizing circulation of Nigerian and Ghanaian movies and thus extending their accessibility and visibility outside their place of origin. Alessandro Jedloswski moves away from “Nollywood” – a clear derivative of Hollywood – to describe twenty first century Nigerian cinema and instead borrows terminology from popular Hindi cinema scholarship, labelling transnational Nigerian cinema “Nollywood” from Raminder Kaur’s formulization of “Bollywood”. S.V. Srinivas’ continued work on the influence of the East Asian martial arts film on Telugu cinema is another example of a non-Hollywood yet transnational study. The cinema of Spain is also going through interesting transnational/world cinema transition: Binimelis et al look

at the transnational circulation of the contemporary Spanish film, while Egea questions the validity of a Spanish national cinema in a transnational era. These industries collectively come under this dissertation's umbrella of world cinema since each demonstrates a different form of resistance to erstwhile discourse on cinema.

Situating Tamil Cinema does not privilege Hollywood or the US, nor does it ignore it, but simply includes it as another part of the “world” to which Tamil cinema is catering. The worlding of Tamil cinema was necessitated by the privileging of national models of understanding cinema, and the consequent obscuring of non-national cinemas. The study of “regional” cinema like Tamil cinema or Telugu cinema has been long overshadowed and excluded from “national” cinema by decades of scholarship that has privileged Hindi cinema, the equity offered by world cinema is a welcome rhetoric. The chapters thus far have looked to Tamil cinema to understand how a film industry can break out of the binary of national-regional cinemas and position itself as a part of world cinema. The last chapter, for instance, studies the long tradition of song sequences in the various cinemas from India. The narrative interruptions caused by these songs place almost all cinema from India in the “musical” genre, despite these films covering a very broad spectrum of genres. To become more accessible or recognizable to global audiences, Indian filmmakers (across Hindi and non-Hindi cinemas) have moved away from extra-diegetic numbers and fewer songs in an attempt to be taken seriously, heralded early by the successful inclusion of Satyajit Ray in global art cinema.⁹⁵ The prestige accorded to those accepted into the world cinema might see the erasure, or at least the downplay, of a longstanding cinematic tradition of cinemas from India. This became the organizing principle for the chapters

⁹⁵ Satyajit Ray's more “musical” films, for instance, did not find as much visibility as the Apu trilogy with its relatively less music.

of this dissertation; the world-ness of world cinema might then come at the cost of local filmmaking and film-viewing practices. In the case of Tamil cinema, the fading star systems, comedian figure, and extradiegetic song sequence are the primary sacrifices in the attempts at non-native audiences.

Tamil filmmakers, influenced by dominant popular and art cinema, are streamlining Tamil narratives to resemble those cinemas, thus hoping to attract audiences of those modes of cinema. The successful worlding of Tamil cinema, however, hinges on being able to circulate these films. Whether it is popular/commercial or artistic networks of film circulation, Tamil cinema's visibility has been hindered by its relegation to "regional" status, while global networks of circulation favoured national cinemas, in this case, Hindi cinema. Vital to the processes of world cinema, and Tamil cinema's worlding, is the ability to circulate itself outside its native audience in Tamil Nadu, India.

The circulation of Tamil cinema in commercial/popular networks is aided by the increased popularity of streaming platforms like YouTube, Amazon Prime, and Disney Hotstar in Tamil Nadu, fostered by the growing mobile data capabilities in India. The exponential growth in popularity has led to several films being released OTT, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of worlding, OTT releases are quick and easy way of getting pan-national, international, and diasporic audiences. For members of the Tamil diaspora, whether within or outside India, OTT releases are the only option for viewing newer cinema, as local theatres often do not run non-Hindi cinemas of India. Furthermore, it is arguable that streaming service algorithms might hook more new audiences than a poster at a movie theatre, as in the case of Melanie, creator of *Pardesi*, a popular YouTube channel, podcast, letterbox, and blog on cinemas of India. Melanie, as she explains on her various platforms, began her love affairs with cinemas

of India because her Netflix algorithm recommended that she watch *DDLJ*, and since then she has become a self-affirmed “maven⁹⁶” on cinemas of India. The proliferation of international streaming services and the recognition of their potential to pull together a diasporic/non-Tamil audience has been important to the worlding of Tamil cinema.

In turn, global streaming services like Prime, Netflix, or Disney Hotstar, have necessitated subtitles (mostly in English) for movies thus circulated, creating a need for professional subtitlers. An important consequence of the proliferation of subtitlers and the growing recognition of the need for subtitles has allowed for Tamil cinema to be taught in English classrooms and thus very directly create an otherwise impossible audience for these films. Subtitles have also worked to create a non-native audience that further circulates paratexts of cinemas of India through YouTube channels like *Our Stupid Reactions* and *Pardesi*, and critics like Josh Hurtado at *Screen Anarchy*. The commitment to make Tamil cinema accessible through streaming and circulation is an essential part of the worlding process for it directly facilitates a non-native audience. However, the work of subtitlers brings to the fore questions of translations and how that aids the circulation of regional cinemas.

Melanie of *Pardesi* published a three-part interview with the “gold standard” of Tamil subtitling, Rekhs, who detailed the various challenges that subtitlers often face. The various laughs of Rajinikanth, the alliterative and rhyming rhythms of cine-music, region-specific customs (like the ceremony held to announce to society that a girl has attained puberty), and comedy writ large are difficult to translate (Rekhs). The growing recognition of subtitlers also brings to light the politics of subtitling cinemas of India. For instance, producers often forsake

⁹⁶ Maven, as Melanie explains, is a Yiddish word for “expert” which she uses in her social media handles @MovieMavenGal

subtitling because the censor board requires that subtitles be submitted along with the film for certification, and these subtitles will have been written for an initial draft of the recorded soundtrack. Post-certification, this initial set of subtitles will need to be editing to fit the final draft of the recording, thus delaying the release of the film, which producers do not find desirable. Similarly, Rekhs bemoans how digital platforms reformat her subtitles by adding unnecessary punctuation, and then refuse to credit her for the subtitles. The boom in subtitling and subtitlers highlights intricate problems that prohibit free circulation of Tamil cinema in commercial networks.

In terms of artistic (versus commercial) modes of circulation, Tamil cinema's recent affinity to prestige of the festival circuit must be mentioned. It can be argued that 2015 was the year Tamil cinema went "global," in ways it hadn't before: the year Cannes recognized Tamil as a language from which there could be a critical mass of viable films. The film *Radiopetti* (Hariharan 2015), went on to win the KNN award at the Busan International Film Festival that year. 2015 also marked the first ever premier of a Tamil film at the Venice International Film Festival – *Visaranai* (Vetrimaaran 2015) – in the New Horizons section, which won the Amnesty Internationale Italia Award for the year. Simultaneously, Vetrimaaran's earlier production venture, *Kaaka Muttai* (M. Manikandan, 2014), was experiencing commercial success within Tamil Nadu despite having premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and gaining accolades outside the country first, something *Visaranai* would go on to do a year later.

This certainly was not the first time Tamil films were being screened and awarded at international film festivals. However, this was the first time that festival-circuit films were also experiencing commercial success in theatres in Tamil Nadu, thus breaking long held notions that festival films had no commercial viability. For instance, Priyadarshan's *Kanchivaram* (2008)

which, like *Kaaka Muttai*, premiered at TIFF in 2008, had little to no reception in Tamil Nadu, despite being the narrative of a highly local phenomenon – the struggles of those employed in the Kanchivaram silk weaving industry. A similar fate was meted out to Meera Kathiravan's *Aval Peyar Thamizharasi* (2009). A melancholic tale of a rape, redemption and love, the film was selected to be screened at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2009; a fact that the producers chose to keep quiet when distributing within Tamil Nadu.

In his anthropological study on the landscapes of Tamil cinema, Anand Pandian relates how “[d]istributors kept asking [...] the same question, “so it’s gone to a festival?” From their standpoint, such recognition was a problem, implying that the film lacked commercial potential among domestic audiences” (255). Despite being a well-made film using vernacular methods of story-telling – centred on the local leather-puppets industry that’s being overshadowed by cinema and TV – *Aval Peyar Thamizharasi* did poorly at local box offices. “The problem [...] was that theatre owners ha[d] already judged it an “art film”” (Pandian 259). The performance of such films in the past is what leads one to speak of *Kaaka Muttai*’s or *Visaranai*’s commercial success as being *despite* their international festival-circulation.

Essentially, despite being one of the initial film cultures in India, Tamil cinema’s relationship with and presence at international film festivals is in its nascent stages. One could argue that at the heart of Tamil movies having been absent on the festival circuit is an inherent conflict between critical and commercial success. Films were/are made geared towards a specific audience – a Tamil audience – and these sensibilities, one could assume, are very different from the average festival attendee. However, it could also be argued that the very form of film festivals was simply incompatible with the circulation needs and wants of Tamil cinema. Specifically, the classification by nation was an impediment to a “regional” cinema, as were

Tamil cinema's modes of narration being counter to western modes of realist cinema. Aside from the gradual reconfiguration of the festival system, the recent and gradual success of Tamil cinema's circulation in popular and festival networks is effected by and effects the changes in mainstream Tamil cinema to be more ready for circulation. Studied together the paradigmatic shifts in these various aspects: song sequences, comedy, stardom, genre, subtitling, circulation, festival films, constitute the holistic process I term worlding. It is an exhaustively interconnected process the study of which requires a scholar to recognize the anthropological, sociological, technological, political, and historical systems at play in the making and viewing of Tamil cinema. Postmillennial Tamil cinema has sought to carve out a niche in global popular and festival circuits, outside the classification of "Indian regional cinema" by undertaking a number of changes to its conception, production, and circulation.

This worlding of Tamil cinema as a film industry and cultural artefact extends to the creation and practice of scholarship on Tamil cinema. While attempts are being made, exemplified by Ba and Higbee's edited collection, to de-westernize film studies and broaden the acceptable forms of scholarship, there is only to an extent to which this can bring to light histories and theories of non-Western cinema – in that the discourse of film studies, much like its recent brainchild world cinema, is embedded in Western epistemologies and the neo-liberal networks of Western academia. What then of the scholarship of cinema that is written outside recognizable theoretical frameworks, and outside of the academic institution? Tamil cinema, for instance, is constantly being theorized in local Tamil-language magazines like *Vikatan* or *Vinavu* and these articles and reviews are often attributed labels like Marxist or Foucauldian or Deleuzian by their readers. However, such critique is excluded from formal western scholarship. Even if a *Vikatan* or *Vinavu* article contained an insight into the inner workings of politics and

cinema, would it ever be considered critical scholarship unless it's laundered through (translated into the languages and then translated again into the language of) the system of Western academia? Much like the cinema at its core, Tamil cinema scholarship needs to be adapted and translated if it is to gain critical capital.

There are several aspects to how Western academia cannot adequately study an industry like Tamil cinema. The culture of mononyms and the patronymic naming system of Tamil cultures is not suited to a system of formal writing that habituates referring to individuals by their last name. In this dissertation, I have refused to use given names (like “Joseph Vijay”) and instead use the name that they are more familiarly recognized by (“Vijay”). Similarly, the patronymic naming systems of the Tamil language make it difficult to use only last names while writing, especially for women. Aishwarya Dhanush was once Aishwarya Rajinikanth, and has directed both Dhanush and Rajinikanth in films. Avoiding last names also allows the new crop of “lady stars” to be recognized by their mononyms rather than by their father/husband's names, rhetorically liberating them from the patronymic systems of Tamil culture.

Additional difficulties including citational practices: citing song sequences present a unique challenge because of the number of credits involved. It cannot be cited like an audio track because the visual aspect is key. It can also not be simply cited as a video for its link to the movie is vital. How does one then cite a song like *Kolaveri*⁹⁷ that exists as an independent video on YouTube that is linked to a movie, is published on YouTube by Sony Music South, but is created and composed by Anirudh Ravichander, in a movie that is produced and directed by

⁹⁷ There is also the additional rhetorical move that moves *Kolaveri* outside quotation marks to recognize its viability as an independent text, and not a song part of a broader project that will go unnoticed or thought erroneous by the unfamiliar audience.

Aishwarya Dhanush. Current citational practices are not equipped to handle the interconnectedness of texts and their circulatory systems as they currently stand in Tamil cinema (or other cinemas of India).

The introduction cited the problems raised by Telugu cinema scholar Sathya Prakash who argued that cinemas of India often require a mode of film studies scholarship that privileges the study of plot at the expense of cinema-specific elements like cinematography. Film studies has long favoured the close reading of the visual and sonic elements of cinema as a way to ground its historical and theoretical work. The study of Tamil cinema however, as this dissertation demonstrates, is categorically impossible without building on the rich work done on Tamil cinema done by anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists, and in communication studies. This is a project that has relied on interviews, field work, digital exploration, and of course, close reading of theoretical and cinematic texts.

Building from various different disciplines has given this dissertation an anecdotal quality, that often takes away from its film studies rigour. And yet, I propose that this movement away from close reading is one of the fundamental moves of de-westernizing film studies performed by my dissertation. It must also be mentioned that the need to delve into these fields also stems from the fact this dissertation is the first of its kind and hence carries the burden of writing out the first (albeit brief) history of Tamil cinema and its stars, comedians, and song sequences. The first chapter is the only consolidated history of Tamil cinema till date within Film Studies as a discipline, and could potentially be expanded into its own monograph. Each subsequent chapter consists of its own brief history of that particular narrative component – a task made difficult by the absence of previous scholarship. Through this historical work, each chapter attempts to situate Tamil cinema within discourses of film history, and points out ways in

which the current discourse of film history is incomplete without the study of a film industry as explicitly political and anti-national as Tamil cinema. Through the theoretical work and my reading of contemporary cinema, I had hoped to bring Tamil cinema into the cull of western scholarship on film studies, while pulling film studies away from strictly text-based work. My central aim is to *Situate Tamil Cinema* in a productively uncomfortable position in world cinema practice and theory.

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WORKS CITED

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