

Style as ‘Alternative Normativity’

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Constantine Nakassis’ book *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India* is a new addition to the literature on young people, social class and cultural articulation in post-liberalisation India (Brosius 2010; Mankekar 2000, 2015). Alongside Ritty Lukose’s *Liberalization’s Children* (2009) set in Kerala, and Sara Dickey’s *Living Class in Urban India* (2016) set in Tamil Nadu, it is one among a handful of youth studies that situates itself in the Southern states rather than in Bengal, the North, or Central and Western India. While connected by its examination of Southern young men’s performativity in a variety of arenas such as entertainment and educational spaces in Madurai and Chennai, the three sections of the book each deal with distinct subject matter namely, brand, language and film. Since young people are seen to be “in between” and attempting to pass from one stage or class to another, they tend to inhabit what anthropologists have often

Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India by Constantine V Nakassis; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016; pp 352, ₹1,656.

written about as a liminal position or state. Doing *style* in relation to mass mediated products in a liminal space can seem like a rather futile—and ultimately disempowering—endeavour, but Nakassis analyses the creative tribulations of his young interviewees with warmth and sensitivity.

Across the book, Nakassis draws attention to the symbolic markers of dress, grooming, film spectatorship and language. These, he argues, connect *style* (always in italics to indicate its bracketing off as a term with multiple connotations) to issues of masculinity, social class and economic success in five colleges in Tamil Nadu, where he sojourned as a research scholar from 2007–09 and intermittently thereafter. Using a series of traditional ethnographic vignettes—

primarily about young college-going men, but on occasion also about young women in this same milieu—Nakassis fleshes out his argument that the way in which these young people do *style* constitutes an “alternative normativity.” It is “alternate” in that it distinguishes itself from hegemonic normativity which appears to determine young Tamilians’ social class, caste, gender and other status in 21st century Tamil society.

Citationality of Style

A series of opening vignettes identify the moustache, for instance, as a signifier of male pride. It can be used either ritualistically in line with the normative age, caste and success markers of “the big man,” or it can be sported in a more *stylish* way to “cite” and yet unsettle accepted hierarchies of masculinity. In the early chapters, Nakassis deftly revisits stalwarts of the British cultural studies tradition, namely, Hebdige, Cohen and Clarke, whose work on subcultures continues to influence much research in youth studies. He then proceeds to distance his take on culture from theirs, in the sense that what emerges from his study is not a distinctly working-class youth aesthetic,

or a form of clearly resistant youth culture. One example of the manner in which Nakassis regards youth style in this book is his attention to details of *success* and *excess*—and the fine line between these—that has as much resonance with Pierre Bourdieu’s work on habitus and distinction as it does with Raymond Williams’ notions of culture. For instance, a luxuriant and highly groomed moustache that cites the facial hair of prominent film stars, even while it garners awe from some, permanently runs the risk of offending those who think it as excessively stylish, and simply too much showing off for a young man.

The key to many acts of *style*, Nakassis argues, is their citationality. “Citational acts are, to appropriate a term from Judith Butler ... “deformative”” (p 24). But what does this mean? Well, further discussion reveals that the brand rip-offs of major western brands such as Levi’s and Reebok worn by college students are both “deformative” in that they pay little attention to the material qualities of western fashion; and citational because they both reference and disavow the original brands and the connections to fashion, brand awareness and moneyed clothing carried by these. Yet, owning and wearing fake brands is a potent and successful marker of performing *style* in urban and small town Tamil Nadu than wearing real branded goods with their almost unaffordable price-tags. In this same vein, one can speak Tamil mixed with English and perform one’s *style* to the satisfaction of all parties, where speaking more perfect Tamil would be parochial (even if it was classical and pure) and speaking more correct English would be viewed as an act of snobbery, a way of distancing oneself from the crowd. The usual practice of the young people under observation in this quasi-phenomenological study is, of course, to distance themselves as far as possible from those they perceive to be snobbish before those acts of snobbery can challenge their own repertoires of value. To be too stylish then, or too good at something, or even too confident in one’s own skin as a young woman, it appears, is to invite isolation and rumour. In the college world of Nakassis’s young interviewees, one must be seen, one must do *style* and be seen as being *stylish*, but one must not be too visible.

Beyond Performativity

It is tempting to ask what, beyond the performative, can be discovered through such an analysis and bracketing of *style*? What, for instance, does the book tell us about class? Or about gender? The sections on language are resonant with the misery of the lower-middle classes in a non-Hindi speaking state. Here, Nakassis details the precise manner in which the English language is perceived as a way out of the “palpable claustrophobia” of speaking only Tamil. Tamil is, of course, associated both with “national marginalisation” and with “global exclusion.” Despite the pride that some young people take in their Tamil literary and cultural traditions, achieving English is far more than a matter of attitude to studies. As one respondent says: “English is a tool. When you speak in English, no one pays attention to your background.” So, English is a tool for sidestepping caste and class, the deeply scored structures of Tamil society. As far as regimes of value go, English—spoken with just the right hint of docility to Tamil diction, and mixture with dialect—is a currency, a marker of the right kind of *style*. Go too far, however, and anxieties around snobbery can leave English speakers isolated within their own peer groups, the punishment for over-performance, as ever being exclusion and gossip which, it appears, affects young women far more categorically than it does young men.

Youth fashion literalises and materialises the ways in which youth speech attempts to defuse the divisive powers of English’s denotationality, albeit in another medium. (p 119)

So, youth style in colleges in Madurai and Chennai is extremely complex. It has its own set of codes and these codes carry value that changes as they intersect other codes and hierarchies of value.

All in all, *Doing Style* describes much that will appeal to anthropologists working on media and youth, as well as those with an interest in neo-liberal urban India. The book’s refusal to elevate “text” above patterns of contextual engagement and citation is refreshing, and Nakassis makes a valid critique of traditional media and communications’ textual analytic obsession.

A striking gap—acknowledged by Nakassis—is the lack of voice from young women across the five colleges. Gendered

aspects of style are, thus, framed far more in relation to an intimate understanding of masculinity than in relation to feminist consciousness or femininity. Some passing comments on young women and fashion feel second hand and hence, less credible. For sociologists with an interest in class too there are weaknesses in the analysis of youth citizenship through style and consumption. There are moments when the citationality of film heroes sounds curiously like a variant of Althusserian hailing—calling into being and appealing to particular forms of (usually masculine) subjectivity—and yet concepts such as ideology and hegemony are notably absent. Without these, the oppressive civic subjectivity of those who are always having to be in-between, to watch oneself in case one becomes too visible, too vocal, or too bland and parochial always remains slightly off-centre, seemingly inexplicable except with reference to itself, and yet clearly modelled on, or dare I say it “citing,” hierarchies and oppressive (policing) behaviours which exist for other age groups and in the wider world. Surprisingly, *style* is clearly political, but also clearly depoliticised in certain ways by this account, since the world outside the liminality of college remains bitterly structured by the class and caste power (Gorringe 2005, 2006; Mankekar 2015), disavowed, avoided and downplayed by most of the stylish young people in the book.

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