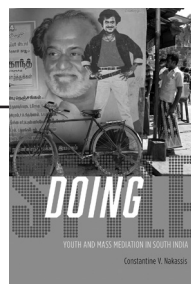


## NEW RELEASE BOOK REVIEW

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Constantine V. Nakassis, *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 336 pp.

In the words of the young Tamil men who populate Constantine Nakassis's engrossing and important new book, and in the title thereof, this is a book about doing *style*. *Style* is italicized throughout the book, marking out the English term as it is deployed by Nakassis's Tamil-speaking subjects: mostly male students attending five semi-elite and elite colleges in Chennai and Madurai, Tamil Nadu. *Style* comes up often in "everyday talk about status, value, and aesthetics" among his friends and subjects (6–7) as they negotiate intimate social hierarchies in college. A central argument and methodological practice of the book is to take this notion of *style* as a social achievement: *style* emerges from semiotic encounters between youth and "cultural producers" of radio, film, and clothing as they provisionally align with one another in producing something *stylish*. This book will be of interest to anthropologists concerned with its major themes of youth culture, branding, language, and mass media. But more broadly, *Doing Style* is a book for those thinking critically about the ways that meaningful cultural particulars travel across space and time. How do global cultural diacritics—visible fractions of brands and audible fractions of English—come to insinuate themselves in Tamil colleges? As Nakassis describes it, *style* is intimately bound up with practices of mass mediation, and troubles categories of "production" and "consumption." Nakassis highlights "the complex *entanglement* that media coordinate between multiple social actors" (8). *Style* must be investigated where it is salient, "on both sides of the screen and commodity chain" (8).

For Nakassis, *style* indicates a "horizon of avoidance and desire" for young college men in Tamil Nadu who are in the liminal social position of

being not quite boys, but not quite grown-up members of “society”—a place that is figured as elsewhere, whose time has not yet come (5). The book breaks with previous works that have figured “style” as aesthetic practices linked to politically distinct working-class youth subcultures (for instance, the social practices of dress articulated through punk in Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* [1979]). *Doing Style* covers a host of aesthetic practices, sartorial choices, grooming practices, and speech patterns. Speaking some English (but not too much) is *style*. Wearing a mustache (but of a certain kind, and not of another) is *style*. Dressing flamboyantly in cheap brand-like clothing (but not necessarily in branded clothing per se) is *style*. Wearing a bandana on one’s hand like a particular Tamil hero—but not repeating that hero’s dance moves exactly—is *style*. *Style* is understood both as an expression of the self and also as a quotation, a citation (in Nakassis’s words) of other moments of *style* performed elsewhere. *Doing Style* is a book, then, about the fraught practices of trying to be cool, of trying to fit in but be different.

*Style* positions its bearer as a member of the peer group, as both similar to and different from other members of the class-year group (i.e., “freshers,” juniors, seniors) who are figured (by the college itself and by its students) as non-hierarchical social peers. But in a pattern that anyone who has ever been (or known) a teenager will recognize, *style* does not stand still, and is instead repeatedly and relationally reconfigured as it is performed. Felicitous performances of *style* must both cite another, external source, re-presenting it, and must also be construable by the peer group as not *too* much, not too different or distinct. *Style*, if done correctly, should demonstrate the correct calibration of individual distinction with similarity to the peer group. In this way, *style* itself shapes the peer group as “a site of sociality marked by a fundamental tension between, on the one hand, the transgression of adult norms through acts of *stylish* individuation and, on the other hand, modes of intimacy and solidarity that problematize those very *stylish* acts” (9).

The book’s opening anecdote sets up the deceptively simple parameters of *style* as understood by the Tamil youth Nakassis works with. As a college student, Anthony is (structurally) liminal, no longer a child but not yet occupying the roles of social responsibility that characterize full entry into Tamil adulthood. Anthony sports a distinctive close-cropped mustache that skirts his upper lip, travels down his face in twin vertical

lines, then follows his jawline before stopping bluntly after a few inches. This facial hair is a visual quotation of the distinctive mustache worn by Tamil film hero Suriya in *Singam* (Hari 2010), a recent popular film. Suriya's mustache, too, was a quotation: it cited the stereotype of the heavily mustachioed rural "big man," a figure of normative, hierarchical masculinity. By wearing such an elaborate, unusual, and specific mustache, Anthony references both the film star and his role as hero, while simultaneously calling to mind the figure of the "big man." This was achieved both by an embodied avowal—the shaving of a particular mustache into his actual face—along with, as Nakassis argues, a simultaneous distancing: "Anthony simultaneously sported and disavowed the very hair on his face, capturing something of value even as he put it in quotes. His mustache was and was not the mustaches he was citing. And thus it was and was not his own" (4–5). Even as Anthony avoided directly citing the "big man" mustache of rural masculinity and the hierarchies such a mustache would visually entail, his large mustache was still seen as too close to this performance of hierarchical gender roles, and thus (in the words of some of his peers), Anthony's mustache was *over style*: too different from others in his peer group, too close to the "big man," and thus *over*. But this was not a permanent or ontological failure: rather, *over style* is always figured as a relational failure of communication. *Style* must cite difference, but it must not be too similar to that difference lest it fall flat or be judged as *over*.

The body of *Doing Style* is divided into three ethnographically distinct sections that center on different objects of *style*. Part I, "Brand," focuses on the *stylish* clothing choices of Tamil college students, particularly as such choices appear to favor *brandlike*, but not legally ratified *branded*, items. Part II, "Language," turns towards negotiations between Tamil (figured, in its "pure" form, as "local" or *unstylish*) and English (overuse of which runs the risk of *over style*), both in a popular television show and among students themselves. Finally, Part III of the book, "Film," examines the relationship between Tamil filmmaking and youth culture. Brand, language, and film are all sites of mass mediation. Branded clothing, English-speaking VJs on a television music channel, and Tamil film stars may seem to have little to do with one another, but they are connected historically, thematically, and theoretically. All of these nodes of aspiration were made possible in their current configuration by the economic and technological shifts of India's economic liberalization in the 1990s. More saliently for the

purposes of this book, all of these are semiotically dense practices from which *style* can be drawn or, more accurately, cited.

Although the book is theoretically dense, it is written clearly and cleverly. Visual examples and descriptions of shirts, films, and well-designed multilingual transcripts of conversations are mobilized often and explained thoroughly (though even more photographs, especially in the chapters on clothing and film, would have been appreciated). Key theoretical insights (discussed more thoroughly below) are helpfully reiterated in each section, and historical, political, and ethnographic analyses are wound together throughout. Each two-chapter section hangs together nicely as its own unit, and one can easily imagine assigning the book's introduction along with any of the sections for use in an undergraduate course on clothing, media, language, or ethnographic theory and methods.

Slightly more than a decade ago, William Mazzarella (2004) wrote in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* that mass mediation was, too often, studied in troubling ways that reified both a substantialist "culture" and a fixed "media" that shifted and moved meaning in predictable ways. Instead, he wrote, "we need, ethnographically speaking, to attend to the places of mediation, the places at which we come to be who we are through the detour of something alien to ourselves..." (2004:356). These places of mediation extend far beyond what we reflexively consider "the mass media" of radio, television, and film. Nakassis's insistence on treating locally produced clothing, language used on campus and in a call-in television show, and popular Tamil cinema equally as mass mediating practices forces a re-thinking of mediation more generally, answering Mazzarella's call to ethnographic action.

Nakassis argues forcefully against studying mass mediation in terms of separable moments of media production (i.e., writing and shooting a film) and media reception (i.e., watching the film). Instead, the book demonstrates the inseparable entanglements of production and consumption: industrial clothing makers keep an eye on the sartorial practices of college students, imagining the preferences of their eventual customers, even as those same college students are constrained in their choice by what is available in the market. In other words, "producers" and "consumers" are brought together in their mutual orientation toward the mass mediated/mediating object itself, as the practices of doing *style* "perforate the media object—shaping its genesis, and hence its very materiality

and textuality—and, in doing so, prefigure and invite its citational use by youth to do *style*” (8).

*Doing Style* is a welcome entry into a growing group of ethnographies that destabilize older paradigms in which mass mediation was understood with an absolute delineation between the authority of “cultural production” and the passivity of “reception.” Anthropologists have recently investigated the contentious social practices interrelating “producers” and “consumers” in the production of mass mediated objects like television (Dornfeld 1998), advertising (Mazzarella 2003), cinema (Caldwell 2008, Ganti 2012), and radio (Kunreuther 2014). The materiality of media forms has driven other analyses that examine colonial histories of media infrastructures (Larkin 2008) and the material instability of filmic objects (Hoek 2014). Anand Pandian’s (2015) very recent ethnography also focuses on the Tamil film industry, but argues for the creative, sensuous qualities of cinematic experience. For Pandian, “production” is decentered in favor of “creativity,” such that cinema can be more than “another object of thought, awaiting its turn in the grist mill of rational decomposition” (2015:15). *Doing Style* treats the creative process of mediation somewhat differently, as a broader set of possibilities through which young Tamil men take up the material signs of style. Mass mediated signs are found to exist as much on the bodies of young men as they sport brandlike t-shirts as they are to be found in the texts of films, emergent only relationally as people throughout chains of production and consumption evaluate, choose, and propagate certain signs of style and reject others. Following the paths of mass mediation, for Nakassis, entails traveling beyond the realm of the traditional “media” of television, radio, and film. Thus, three seemingly disparate objects of inquiry—clothing, language, and film—are brought together as instances of mass mediation, where consumers (here, mostly male students) are figured to be as integral to the production and circulation of *style* as the manufacturers of the *stylish* mediated objects in question.

The three sections also share a common theoretical concern with citationality—the ways in which signs are borrowed knowingly, reconfigured in their recontextualization. Performances of *style*, like brands themselves, can never be entirely one’s own; instead, they are always citing acts done by someone else, somewhere else. This allows *style* to be simultaneously an embodiment (I am like this) and a disavowal (but it is a borrowed “this” that I briefly inhabit) of prestigious forms from outside the self. Borrowing

itself is generally understood to be a key part of cultural shift, as in Tarde's (1903:62) "contagions of imitation" through which ants (and we) grow to be more like one another than different. But citationality is distinct: it is reflexive borrowing, and does not preclude differentiation. As Nakassis elaborates elsewhere, "The citation is a play of sameness and difference, identity and alterity, an interdiscursive calibration of an event of citing and a cited event, and is reflexive about that very fact" (2013:75). That citational acts should be fraught, both allowing (and requiring) closeness *and* distance, should be clear to academics, whose own writing depends so thoroughly on citationally re-animating spatially absent interlocutors. If the reproduction of another's words is too thorough or is not marked clearly (through quotation marks, for instance), then a scholar risks charges of plagiarism. If an article (this book review, for instance) were to be entirely free of the re-presented words of another person, it would run the risk of being cast as mere opinion, unrooted in the dense networks of signs that constitute scholarly debates. Citing Bakhtin (1982), Derrida (1988), and Butler (1993), Nakassis argues that citational acts help his liminal subjects "manage the necessity to speak with two voices in the same breath, to inhabit numerous roles and identities at once, to abide by multiple, potentially contradictory mandates or points of view simultaneously" (23). *Style* is always citational, and it cites promiscuously from global fashion, multilingual television, and mass cinema—among, we come to realize, potentially infinite other sources.

The three parts of this book—"Brand," "Language," and "Film"—each historically situate one site of mediation within the dizzying technological and economic shifts of post-liberalization India. *Doing Style* joins a robust ethnographic literature on liberalizing India that has focused on youth (e.g., Lukose 2009), sartorial distinction (e.g., Tarlo 1996, Srivastava 2007), language (e.g., LaDousa 2014), and audiovisual media (e.g., Mankekar 1999). *Doing Style* goes beyond tracing the well-known changes wrought by liberalization—increased availability of foreign goods, lowering of trade tariffs, and growth of a consumer class, among others. Nakassis instead describes unexpected interactions between global capital and Tamil college students through a granular material analysis of mediation. For instance, as described in Part I, multinational "branded" clothing companies such as Reebok set up production facilities in South India, their marginal overflow of product, along with damaged or rejected goods, is sold to wholesalers, who resell these Indian-made but "foreign" shirts and pants

in consumer markets. But these recirculating licit branded goods are rarely found among Nakassis's *stylish* friends on college campuses. Instead, the circulating items of branded clothing become templates, ideas for local clothing makers to borrow for cheaply-made clothes only sold locally. The actual effects of globalization materially and aesthetically entangle manufacturers, wholesalers, clothing companies, and students in both the "global flows" wrought by the intensification of capital circulation and the friction these flows engender (Appadurai 1996, Tsing 2004).

These clothes are not merely failed "pirated" versions of official brands. Instead, they include unexpectedly juxtaposed brand names or logos, altered or deformed, accompanied by text or numbers, often in places where an official brand name might go. Multibrand or "fictive brand" chimeras thus produced the look of "real" branded clothing with a preponderance of words, logos, and other embellishments. Nakassis does not read the popularity of this aesthetic as a desperate (but ineffective) attempt to reproduce Western fashion. Instead, he shows how "real," ratified brands are bracketed as sites of possible *over* differentiation from the peer group, especially in lower middle class colleges. The aesthetics of brandlike clothing are more appealing to Nakassis's interlocutors: citational aesthetics quote the attractiveness of Western branded clothes without the danger of upsetting the equilibrium of the peer group. The self-evidence of "real" brands, too, comes into question as brand images are decomposed and repeatedly cited in new formations of brandlike aesthetics.

Part II focuses on language, using as its fulcrum a television station in Tamil Nadu that was transitioning to a Tamil/English format. Mediation is clearly not limited to the mass communicative events of televisual broadcast. Here, linguistic interactions at all scales are understood to be moments of mediation that have the potential to shift one's standing in a peer group through *stylish* acts of peppering English phrases into a mostly Tamil communicative register. Too much (just like Anthony's too-large mustache) is as problematic as not enough: using "pure" Tamil with no English marks a speaker as hopelessly *local*, while using too much English marks a speaker as a snob. But these thresholds do not apply to the *stylish* language of the mostly English-speaking VJs who host television call-in programs: away from the peer group and understood to be non-fluent in Tamil, these external originators of English are linguistic resources of audible *stylishness* for college students. In the examples of conversationally-mediated and mass-mediated language, English and Tamil do not stand

opposed as clearly bounded codes that might be “switched” or “mixed,” but are themselves unstable. What constitutes just the right amount of English and Tamil is always under negotiation, even during the course of a given face-to-face interaction, where pragmatic effects (and “language” itself) cannot be assumed to be constant.

Elsewhere this year, Nakassis has argued that, “‘language’ is not an object or an originary point for linguistic anthropology but rather a permanent site of problematization—one that has generated the rich analytic and theoretical developments that characterize the field’s dynamic center of gravity” (2016:340). In Part II of *Doing Style*, Nakassis shows that this analytic of permanent problematization is echoed by college students’ own understanding of language as they negotiate the shifting linguistic sands of *style* and its excess. Language is a clear site that invites what Asif Agha (2011) calls “mediatization,” the mass mediated commoditization of youth cultural practices, as television and film producers borrow from what they understand to be youth language patterns for their own commercial projects.

The final part of the book focuses on cinema, the *ur*-form of Indian—and especially Tamil—mass mediation. It is especially here that Nakassis’s interest in “perforating the screen” is most useful, as so much work on cinema in India has depended on reified notions of text or, more recently, audience. Nakassis traces the ways that young Tamil men use films, and especially the genre of the “mass hero film,” as citational resources from which to draw diacritics of *style*. They citationally repurpose gestures, dance moves, and fragments of fashion, but *stylishly* reanimate them by changing them. But films themselves are citational, too. Filmmakers and heroes cite other films, reaching backward to their own signature moves and the moves of ever more venerable artists. Filmmakers also attempt to make their films citable. They insert quotable dialogue and eye-catching clothing items—for instance, a bandana *stylishly* tied around a hero’s hand—thus producing films that can be reanimated, in part, by young people. As film stylist Vasuki Bhaskar explains, “the only and easiest way to capture an audience is to either capture a step, a movement, a dance step; the kids like the step, they catch it. They like something the guy is wearing, so they want to wear [it] too” (192). This prefiguring of the audience’s re-citation of film fractions drives production choices. Nakassis follows these visually detachable signs of *style* as they emerge from the screen and are reanimated at the college. Here, too, the citational dynamics of *style* demand that when a



hero's dance is used as the basis for an act in a "cultural program," it must be changed somewhat—both embodied and disavowed, like Anthony's mustache. Nakassis argues that the film text is thus "a contact zone and space of encounter" (219) through which audiences and filmmakers mutually orient towards the same types of detachable signs. These cinematic entanglements demonstrate the mutual imbrication of "consumer" and "producer" in the substance of the film itself.

Thus *stylish* fractions of flashy brandedness, English, and film hero dance moves seem to be visibly available for most college students. Yet *style* is not available equally to everyone. Partially this is about adept performance: some people have more resources, or are more careful in their performance of *style*. But there is also a clear gendered component. The process of doing ethnographic research in colleges afforded Nakassis better access to young men, a fact that the author describes as disappointing for a book that was not intended to be entirely about men. Indeed, some young women's practices are described as well—for instance, one college woman, Diya, is excoriated privately among the male students for performing a dance *too* well, which was taken to indicate her arrogance. Women, Nakassis argues, cannot publicly engage in doing *style* because of the interlocking gendered ideologies of publicness, modernity, sexuality, and proper (private, modest, traditional, familial) Tamil womanhood. The question is nonetheless raised: how *do* women "do *style*," or if it is not *style* that they do, how are their own semiotic practices recuperated, if at all, by mass mediation? For that matter, how do the un-*stylish* adults, young professionals, and rural laborers we encounter throughout the book engage in citational mass mediated practices? Who or what are they citing? These are not criticisms of the current work, but rather a set of openings that this book provides for future research. For if categories of brand, language, film, youth culture, and *style* are not pre-given, but are social achievements, and if all of these are instantiations of mass mediation, the study of mass media is only just beginning. ■

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