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The Hero's Mass and the Ontological Politics of the Image

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ontological politics of the image in Tamil cinema. Its focus is a particular scene from the 2011 film *Mankatha* (Venkat Prabhu) in which the protagonist, played by the "mass hero" Ajith Kumar, is slapped by a character played by Vaibhav Reddy. Taking the image not simply as diegetic representation but as performative act, Ajith fans were enraged at Vaibhav. As I show, multiple ontological and political claims on what an image is intersect in and manifest as this performative image-act. This multiplicity provokes rethinking of arguments by André Bazin and others about "the" ontology of the film image.

In early September 2011, I went to a bar in southwest Chennai to meet up with Suresh, a middle-class friend in his early twenties.[1] After a few rounds, we ended up back at his one-room apartment. We ate dinner and watched a television special, *Mankatha Siṟappuk Kaṇṇōṭṭam* (Mankatha: A unique perspective, Sun TV, September 11, 2011), dedicated to the recent release of *Mankatha* (Venkat Prabhu, 2011), the fiftieth film of Ajith Kumar, Suresh's favorite actor and one of the preeminent hero-stars of the Tamil film industry. The show featured discussions with *Mankatha*'s director and writer Venkat Prabhu and its main actors, although not Ajith, who is known to avoid media appearances. Each of the guests were introduced by the host, the comedian-actor Shiva, and invited to the sound stage.

When Shiva introduced the actor Vaibhav Reddy, however, he did so cryptically as the other guests smiled and laughed. With a smirk, Shiva said in Tamil, "Up until the release of this film, from a young age Vaibhav would go to whatever stores

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1   All names of individuals given in this article who are not public figures are pseudonyms.

he wanted to buy things and eat them. But after this film, and after one scene in particular, whenever he goes out, his hands and legs shake with fear. Because in this film they made a scene like that."[2] There's a "justification" for why Vaibhav did it, Shiva continues, "but before that, let's welcome Vaibhav!" Vaibhav doesn't materialize, however, and Shiva and Venkat Prabhu playfully coax him into coming out from backstage: "Come on, dear, be brave and come out, there's no problem at all, come!" With seeming trepidation, Vaibhav appears with a shy smile on his face. Later in the show, Shiva makes good on his promise and turns to the scene that supposedly made, and continued to make, Vaibhav afraid.

The scene that required "justification" occurs around two hours into *Mankatha*. It involves three characters: the protagonist, Vinayak (Ajith Kumar); Sumanth (Vaibhav Reddy); and Ganesh (Ashwin Kakumanu). Vinayak, Sumanth, and Ganesh are part of a gang of five who have robbed Arumuga Chettiar, a local gangster who runs a gambling ring. Discovering the theft, Chettiar kidnaps Sumanth's wife, threatening to kill her unless Sumanth gives Chettiar's money back to him. Fearing for his wife's life, Sumanth reveals where the gang hid the money. Before Chettiar can get to the cash, though, the other two gang members steal it and go on the run. When Vinayak, Sumanth, and Ganesh arrive to retrieve the money, they discover it's gone. Following a run-in with Chettiar's men, who have also come for the money, the three escape to the dusty train yard where the scene in question takes place.

Overhearing Sumanth on the phone with Chettiar, Vinayak discovers Sumanth's betrayal and confronts him. Unhinged by the money's loss, Vinayak tries to get Sumanth to help retrieve it, first by angrily screaming at him (see Figure 1), then by gently placating him and pleading (see Figure 2), and finally by vulgarly suggesting that if they had the money, Sumanth could have not just one but a thousand wives like his wife. At this grave insult, Sumanth grabs and shoves Vinayak, cursing him. A scuffle ensues wherein Sumanth slaps a passive Vinayak twice (see Figure 3). Vinayak finally strikes back, savagely knocking Sumanth to the ground with a single blow. Vinayak then draws a gun and shoots at Sumanth. Ganesh tries to stop Vinayak, and in the confusion Sumanth escapes.[3]

What about this scene had Vaibhav so scared, weeks after the film was released, months after the scene was filmed? He was, after all, simply playing a character in a fiction. In the Sun TV special that Suresh and I watched, Vaibhav explained what the television audience already knew but wanted to hear all the same: that he was terrified of Ajith's legions of fervent fans who were furious with him, a relatively junior actor—just a *cinna paiyan* (little boy) as an Ajith fan in his mid-twenties, Anbu, put it to me—for having dared to slap the face of their *Tala* (chief; literally, head), their leader (*talaivar*; literally, headman). In another television special (*Happy Birthday Ajith*, Vijay TV, May 1, 2012), Vaibhav was again called on to narrate Ajith fans' anger at him. Vaibhav laughingly recounts how he was going to see the late show of the film on the day of its release at the Albert Theatre, a well-known working-class cinema hall in Chennai. Before leaving, he received a call from his friend and the host of the Sun TV special, Shiva (also a guest on the Vijay TV special), warning him not to come to the theater. Right after the slap scene, Shiva recounted, about twenty or thirty people came up to the box seats agitatedly looking for Vaibhav, presumably to confront him.

2   All translations of Tamil materials are my own.
3   For a more in-depth analysis of this scene, see Constantine Nakassis, *Onscreen/Offscreen* (manuscript in preparation).

Figure 1
Vinayak screaming at Sumanth in *Mankatha* (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

Figure 2
Vinayak placating and pleading with Sumanth in *Mankatha* (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

Figure 3
Sumanth/Vaibhav's first slap of Vinayak/Ajith in *Mankatha* (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

In these small-screen narrations, the performativity of Vaibhav's slaps, and the perlocutionary fallout thereof, are framed humorously for those eager to hear about how Vaibhav became the target of credulous, illiberal subaltern fans out to give him a beating.[4] And while such narratives got (nervous) laughs, they were no joke. When Suresh and Anbu saw the film on its opening day, audiences immediately responded to the slaps, booing and screaming obscenities in an overwhelming roar in Tamil: "Hey! How the hell can you [-HON.; Vaibhav] hit our *Tala*?!" Anbu reported, (politely) voicing fans' reactions.[5] Ultimately, however, Vaibhav never received any physical retribution for his slaps, although he told me in 2016 that he was and occasionally continued to be verbally harassed by Ajith fans in public.[6]

What interests me here are the assumed and real politics of the image that center on and emanate from the affecting presence and performative potency of the star, Ajith Kumar. Filmic images involving stars like Ajith are never self-enclosed, fictional representations but open-ended *acts*—in this case, of one actor slapping another. Image-acts such as these exceed the narrative text and its diegetic world, their affective charge performatively spilling out into the theater, television studio, and beyond.[7] As I show, this performativity is constitutive of the kind of images that so-called mass heroes anchor, a fact to which *Mankatha* itself reflexively calls attention. Indeed, the performativity of Ajith's star image and thus of Vaibhav's slaps were already inscribed and anticipated within *Mankatha* as a potential and blockage, as something that it both embraced and resisted. In the end credits of the film, we see on-set documentary materials, mainly bloopers, including what putatively followed the take of the slaps that made it onto the screen. Following a seamless cut from the rushes of the scene, Vaibhav's and Ajith's bodies slip out of their aggressive encounter in the diegetic world to face the camera. Vaibhav clings to a grinning Ajith. With a pleading smile and whimpering voice, Vaibhav says in Tamil to the camera, "I didn't [really] hit him! I didn't [really] hit him!" waving his palm back and forth in negation. They filmed this outtake, Vaibhav told me, just to be on the "safer side."[8]

In this blooper, Vaibhav disavows (and thus acknowledges) the reality of his act. Breaking frame, this apologetic image attempts to defease the slaps' performativity and reframe them as mere representation, a fictional image. On the Sun TV special that Suresh and I watched that night in September, Shiva concludes the segment by asking Vaibhav for an "official announcement." Turning to look at the camera, Vaibhav points to the televisual audience and says in Tamil, "Everyone please stay until the end of the film to see the bloopers. You'll see there that I said I didn't hit him. And *Tala* was smiling, so I didn't hit him." Ultimately, as the outtake and small-screen expiation suggested, it was Ajith and his smile who determined the reality of the profilmic and fictitiousness of the filmic.

What kinds of filmic images are these that slide between the diegetic world of the fiction—wherein one character slaps another—and the profilmic moment of

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4   On the figure of the illiberal fan, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); and William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

5   +/-HON. = honorific/nonhonorific linguistic form.

6   Vaibhav Reddy (actor), interview by the author, July 30, 2016, Chennai, India.

7   On related notions of image-act, see Liza Bakewell, "Image Acts," *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 1 (1998): 22–32, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1998.100.1.22; and Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Clegg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018; first published in German 2010).

8   Vaibhav Reddy, interview.

its recording—wherein one actor slaps another? What is this image that is not only of a past act of slapping recorded by a camera but also an act of offense unto itself in the moment of its exhibition and apperception, an act whose "animator" bears the responsibility or "principalship" (to adapt Erving Goffman's terms) for what is shown, for what subtends the representation: the act of acting itself?[9] And who is the anchoring figure of these images, *Tala* Ajith, whose auratic presence breaks through the bracketing frame of the narrative, the character, and the cinematic apparatus such that to touch his character is to touch *him*, not simply once in front of the camera but with every subsequent presentation of the image onscreen?

In addressing these questions, this article engages with two problematics. The first is André Bazin's discussion of "the ontology of the photographic image." The second is more recent concerns among critical theorists, art historians, and anthropologists regarding the performativity of images—the ways in which images may "want" something from us, as W. J. T. Mitchell has put it, or have their own agency, as Alfred Gell and others have suggested.[10] These two problematics are linked, I suggest, by the question of *presence*.

Presence is central to Bazin's account of the ontology of the filmic image.[11] Bazin writes that "[t]he photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the temporal contingencies that govern it. . . . it shares, by virtue of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model."[12] As Daniel Morgan has stressed, for Bazin there is an ontological identity between the profilmic object and its screen image rather than a relation of mimetic representation. This identity is often posited by Bazin as following from, though not fully reducible to, the causal, physical indexicality inherent to the filmic apparatus.[13] Bazin speaks of the non-subjective "automatic fixing" of photographs and by extension film, a capacity to autonomously inscribe in its material surface the natural world with which the camera was in an existential relation of co-presence.[14] Like a "decal or transfer," a relic, mummy, or death mask, the film image maintains an integral connection with that which it "actually *re*-present[s]."[15] As for Roland Barthes and Stanley Cavell, for whom this relation makes photographic and filmic images not copies but "emanations" of reality, as Barthes puts it, Bazin's ontology of the filmic image turns on its

9   Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). In what follows, I use *animator* and *principal* in Goffman's senses.

10 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1:9–16; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Mazzarella, *Censorium*.

11 Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 32–41, 58–67.

12 Bazin, "Ontology," 14; translation as per Janet Staiger, "Theorist, Yes, But What Of? Bazin and History," *Iris* 2, no. 2 (1984): 99–109; and Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2006): 443–481, https://doi.org/10.1086/505375.

13 Tom Gunning and Daniel Morgan suggest that the term *indexicality* distorts Bazin's position since it refers to a form of representation, whereas Bazin is straining to offer a non-representationalist account. See Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or Faking Photographs," in *Still/Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 23–40; and Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin." This argument, however, rests on a rather narrow notion of indexicality—as Morgan (447–448n18) himself notes—in contrast to how indexicality is defined and discussed by Charles Sanders Peirce and those who have developed his semiotics.

14 Bazin, "Ontology," 12–13, 19.

15 Bazin, 13–14.

ability to put us in the presence of what it "embalms," that is, with itself, or at least with a part or past phase of itself that has been arrested in time and made continuously available to those who apprehend it.[16] According to this view, the filmic image is a "transfer of reality from the thing to its reproduction" and thus, in some respect, it *is* it.[17]

It is precisely the presence of the filmic image and its putative referent that is at issue in Vaibhav's slaps of Ajith and enables the image to performatively act. Yet, as I show, this presence is not and perhaps is never singular or pre-given, nor does it simply follow from the mechanical processes of the filmic apparatus, a point Philip Rosen has made in another context.[18] Rather, in this image-act we find a heterogeneous and ambivalent set of "presencings" in dialogic tension, some of which resonate with Bazin's own political and aesthetic sensibilities (namely, realism) and others which stand in startling indifference, even opposition, to them.[19] Such distinct presencings enact distinct politics for and of the image that intersect, stand in tension, and amplify one another. In what follows, I detail these achievements of presence, showing how they manifest in and as the image, constituting its dynamic being as a fraught intersection of multiple political and aesthetic projects. This analysis reveals the image to be a contact zone, a site of struggle between different claims on the being of images, illuminating the multiplicity of ways that reality, aesthetics, and politics—that is, different ontologies—can be articulated in one and the same image.

An image ontology, for me, then, is the ongoing, tenuous precipitate of the pragmatics of image-acts; it is the historical and institutional outcome of various kinds of semiotic, political labor—central of which are situated ideological claims (-*ologies*) on the being (*ont-*) of images, be they by critics (like Bazin), filmmakers, actors, or fans—as they manifest as and are enacted by images.[20] There is a dialectical loop or reflexive knot at the heart of the being of images, a set of mutually constitutive relations between their material and textual form, their pragmatics, and those reflexive semiotic practices that take images as their object, construing them, making claims on them, and thus mediating their becoming.

This use of the term *ontology* may strike some readers as atypical if not inapt. But rather than hew closer to its canonical usage or use another term, I insist on this catachresis in an effort to shift what we might mean by ontology, theoretically and methodologically. To put the argument strongly, my point is that theoretical questions about the being of images can only be answered through methodological attention—in particular, ethnographic attention—to the (meta)pragmatics of images and the politics that surround them on and off the screen. The Tamil case is well suited to demonstrate this point despite or, rather, precisely because its films and cinematic culture are not typically used to discuss this topic. That is, this Tamil case helps us decenter and (de)provincialize any account of "THE"

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16 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 81, 88; Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); and Gunning, "What's the Point."

17 Bazin, "Ontology," 14.

18 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

19 Feroz Hassan, "Total War, Total History, Total Cinema: André Bazin on the Political Perils of Cinematic Realism," *Screen* 58, no. 1 (2017): 38–58, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjx013.

20 I use the term *ideology* in the sense that linguistic anthropologists have developed. See, for example, Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

ontology of the filmic image—as articulated by Bazin in his famous essay on the topic, for example—so as to open up the complex ways in which images come to be and act.

Such an opening up, however, should not be seen as a simple pluralization, as if the issue was simply to move from ontology to ontologies (parceled out by different types of images, genres, cultures, and historical periods, each with their "own" ontology).[21] Rather, this analysis pushes us to approach images as always bearing multiple ontological potentials and impulses. Such potentials and impulses are not strictly "in" images. Rather, they are distributed across the practices and projects of actors, filmmakers, producers, financiers, audiences, critics, and bureaucrats (among others still) and the film images that mediate each in their articulation to the others. Any ontology, thus, is a dynamic, shifting relation between different practices and projects as it manifests in and as images. Such practices and projects are political. They are an ontological politics.[22]

To begin addressing these issues, I interrogate *why* the image-act of Vaibhav's slaps was so potent, feared by its animator and repudiated and cursed by fans. I begin with the figure of the mass hero, *Tala* Ajith Kumar. As we see, Ajith's auratic, affecting presence serves as a kind of cinematic black hole whose clawing gravity threatens to transform all representational images of him into performative acts involving him. Drawing on fan discourse and discussion with Vaibhav, I show how this presencing is linked to a sociological realism, the way in which the social reality and history of the actor is transferred to his screen image.[23] I then turn to the aesthetic and narrative features of the slap scene. Drawing on interviews with *Mankatha*'s director and cinematographer, I look at how the scene's aesthetic style articulates a representationalist politics of the image that stands in tension with but also curiously amplifies both the mass hero's presence and the fury in seeing that presence profaned. The intercalation of these different aesthetics and claims on the image reveals a complex ontological politics rippling across and beyond the surface of the text.

THE GRAVITY OF THE HERO'S MASS

Within India, the Tamil film industry is infamous for its so-called mass heroes, bombastic and fantastically hyper-masculine celebrities who are larger than life and larger than the screen. In their film worlds, mass heroes are all-powerful—able to dispatch dozens of bad guys with a single blow, stare down a bullet, and fly through the air. They are not superheroes, however, since this implies some supernatural capacity within a world of everyday physics. Rather, the very warp of the worlds the mass hero inhabits is bent around him: to his will, his status, his power, his personage, his *mass*. Moreover, this world is not simply some fiction projected on the screen, standing apart from its viewers in space or time. His world encompasses the space and time of its exhibition. Projected *out* of the screen, the mass hero is always potentially present to us, standing above and in front of the narrative and the film text. He is both onscreen and offscreen, simultaneously hero and star. This contrasts, as discussion below elaborates, with character actors, who are typically englobed within each

21 See Annemarie Mol, "Ontological Politics: A Word and Some Questions," *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 1 (1999): 74–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1999.tb03483.x.

22 Mol.

23 See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (1979; repr., London: British Film Institute, 1998), 16, for discussion of comparable examples in Hollywood cinema.

film's narrative world (or at least, relatively more so), shielded by the characters they animate, the scripts they act out, and the directors who direct them.

A mass hero has gravity. He has *weight*, a near-synonym of the similarly English-borrowed *mass*, both terms denoting in Tamil the influence and importance of a powerful, dominating person. As such, he is also a hero to "the masses." Heroes like Ajith Kumar are not simply auratic, presenced bodies to be seen and desired in images. They are also political bodies on whom demands for representation may be made.[24] As journalists and academics often point out, electoral politics in Tamil Nadu is a direct extension of cinema, where very popular actors are expected to, and often do, become political leaders. The mass hero onscreen is thus always a sovereign in potentia offscreen; a leader to the masses qua citizen-spectators, his mass anticipates some future political horizon beyond the screen. Mass-hero films cultivate this "cine-politics," as Madhava Prasad puts it, addressing audiences not simply as fans but as followers of their *talaivar* (leader), the star. It is precisely this populist cine-politics—and the figure of the illiberal fan in particular—that activates in postcolonial South India a liberal anxiety about democracy (and its limits), one implicitly evidenced in the knowing, anxious laughs in television recountings of the slap scene (as we saw above) and, as I suggest below, in *Mankatha*'s textual form.

Mankatha was not, however, a typical mass-hero star vehicle (although it was a star vehicle all the same). Nor did it conform to Ajith's mass-hero image at the time. Ajith Kumar's film career began in the 1990s and followed a pattern typical of other mass heroes.[25] He began by acting in narrative-driven, relatively realist (so-called class) films as a romantic hero. After a series of successful hits—including *Kadhal Kottai* (Castle of love, Agathiyan, 1996) and *Ullaasam* (Joy, J. D. and Jerry, 1997)—Ajith garnered critical praise as a gifted actor and developed a large and dedicated fan-club base. His 1999 blockbuster *Amarkalam* (Battlefield, Saran, 1999) introduced him as "the Ultimate Star," a citational reference to "Super Star" Rajinikanth, the preeminent mass hero of Tamil cinema since the 1990s. This gesture made claim to a level of stardom that Ajith capitalized on in the 2000s, releasing increasingly commercially oriented action films such as *Dheena* (A. R. Murugadoss, 2001), a film which earned him his second sobriquet, *Tala*. During this period, Ajith's films promoted his "mass," shifting him from a character actor to a star whose films built up and adulated his star image. While Ajith's early films invited realistic identification with his characters, his later films offered fans what Madhava Prasad calls symbolic identification, a relation founded not on representational similarity—he is like me—but on hierarchical difference.[26] At this stage of stardom, films that do not conform to the mass-hero formula—such as Ajith's 2007 *Kireedam* (Crown, A. L. Vijay, 2007), a relatively realist film in which the hero fails to achieve his goals—risk being met coolly, even outright rejected, by fans and often fail at the box office.[27] This is what M. S. S. Pandian has called the mass hero's "image trap."[28]

24 M. S. S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992); S. V. Srinivas, *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009); and M. Madhava Prasad, *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India* (Chennai, India: Orient Blackswan, 2014).

25 Constantine V. Nakassis, *Doing* Style: *Youth and Mass Mediation in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 196–203.

26 Prasad contrasts imaginary identification (where I become Him, my ideal object of desire) and symbolic identification (where I identify with Him for the qualities that make him different from and superior to me).

27 For both reasons, after its initial release, *Kireedam* was recut so the hero triumphs. See "Tamil Kireedam Changes Climax," *India Glitz*, August 3, 2007, https://www.indiaglitz.com/tamil-kireedam-changes-climax-malayalam-news-32775.html.

28 Pandian, *Image Trap*.

In this context, Ajith's choice of Venkat Prabhu as director of his landmark fiftieth film was highly significant. Venkat Prabhu is a director known for making non-hero-centered films with a dash of what is understood in the Tamil context as Hollywood-esque realism and hero-parodying comedy. For many, then, *Mankatha* was an example of Ajith's ongoing struggle to break out of his image trap. Just the year before, Ajith publicly announced that he would no longer use his epithet "Ultimate Star" in title credit sequences. And months before *Mankatha*'s release, on his birthday (a major day for fan activity), he disbanded his large network of fan clubs. As one director put it to me, all this was Ajith trying to say to his fans and the wider public, "I'm not planning on entering politics, I am just an actor."

Such image work on and off the screen makes *Mankatha*, and its slap scene in particular, a rich site to explore the ontological politics of the image. To unpack this politics, I begin with the potent presence of the mass hero's image for his viewing publics and its textual and sociological underpinnings. It is such presence, as we will see, that is at issue in the competing claims on the image in *Mankatha*.

PRESENCE OF MASS

Consider a particular ethnographic scene of presencing (or rather, a montage culled from online fan videos and my own experiences of similar scenes from over a decade of ethnographic research on Tamil cinema): *Mankatha*'s first day, first show, August 31, 2011, just after dawn. Theater premises are packed with young male bodies, some frenetically celebrating the film's release by dancing, yelling, whistling, or setting off firecrackers, others grinningly looking on, participating vicariously while waiting for the theater to open. Huge billboards of the star loom outside, garlanded with flowers by fan clubs and perhaps still moist from the milk, beer, or maybe soda poured over them in citations of Hindu rituals of idol purification. As the doors open, bodies flood inside. The crowd is antsy in anticipation and breaks into whistles when the government's censor board certificate appears onscreen, an image of a document that announces that the projector is on and that the star is, as it were, in the building. Producers' banners come and go.

Most mass-hero films, including Ajith's, begin with a title credit sequence: the star's epithet and name flashed onscreen so as to herald his arrival and lay claim to what follows—the film proper—as in his names.[29] In a telling deviation from this norm, *Mankatha* begins with something else: a cloudless sky and the phrase "A Venkat Prabhu Game." Having announced the director's claim on what follows, the camera pans down to reveal an arid, desert landscape where Faizal (Aravind Akash), a henchman of Arumuga Chettiar, is tied up on his knees. With this image, audience members whistle and scream, calling out Ajith's name, anticipating and demanding his arrival. Some stand right in front of the screen, able to touch its projected images.

The narrative progresses, and the crowd simmers down slightly, although it does not remain silent; there is some continuous whistling and yelling. Our ears strain to hear that Faizal is about to be executed by local thugs hired by crooked cops. Forty seconds into the scene, a gun is raised and pointed at Faizal, the trigger cocked. We then hear the loud revving of an engine as the film again cuts to the cloudless, blue sky. Out of the left edge of the frame, a jeep flies across the screen in slow motion

29   Constantine V. Nakassis, "Rajini's Finger, Indexicality, and the Metapragmatics of Presence," *Signs and Society* 5, no. 2 (2017): 201–242, https://doi.org/10.1086/692128.

(see Figure 4). The film's theme music kicks in. *Tala* has finally arrived! The theater erupts. Full-throated screams and ear-piercing whistles rip through the room as young men jump up and down, shirts and handkerchiefs twirled over their heads, confetti thrown in the air.

Although Ajith's presence is palpable in the space-times of both the diegetic scene and the theater, the camera defers showing him to us. In the sequence that follows, the camera lingers on the flying car in slow motion, interspersed with shots of the awestruck faces of Faizal, the police, and the thugs. Only after sufficiently deferring our desire to *see* Ajith does the screen reveal his body, but not yet his face, as he emerges from the jeep in a low-angle, medium-long shot, the image even going dark for a split second as if we are blinking in disbelief that he is finally here. What's finally unveiled is the hero in his full plenitude: his rugged face in a tight, frontal, slow-motion close-up (see Figure 5).

Ajith's first appearance is not just a sight to behold. It is, in a sense, *him*—the hero-star, *Tala* Ajith Kumar—before us, letting us see him and take him in. And, as we've seen, this presence offers an occasion for interaction with the screen: whistles, yelling, touching, addressing, and adulating the hero-star. And to our responses, this image responds in turn. The arrival of the mass hero almost always takes the form of an aesthetics of frontality that accedes to our desire to see and be seen by him.[30] This is an image that doesn't simply represent. It *acts*. It directly addresses us, looks and points at us, and, in many such films, speaks to us.[31] Here the screen does not offer us a substitute, surrogate world apart from our own, a world emanating from some past moment, as Bazin or Cavell suggest.[32] Rather, it is our world, simultaneous and contiguous with us. This is the mass hero's *presence*.[33]

What follows this revelation is a fight sequence that demonstrates Ajith/Vinayak's physical dominance. He thrashes the police and hired thugs in a precisely choreographed spectacle of slow-motion shots of punches thrown and bodies flung, alternating with rapid action sequences quickly spliced together. Glossy and effects-laden, brightly lit and in shallow focus, these images culminate with a return to Ajith's face in a close-up shot that poetically recalls his first appearance. Ajith then turns around and a grid of images appears along with the film's theme music. Each box of the grid offers a film clip from one of Ajith's previous forty-nine films. The shot pulls back to reveal the grid as one side of a cube, one among many flying toward Ajith (see Figure 6).

As the boxes near the back of Ajith's head, he turns to face us and the cubes congeal together *as* his face, encircled by a gold band. The filmic image is replaced with, or rather it absorbs, this multitudinous collage of his previous films. Ajith here

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30 Nakassis, *Doing* Style, 166.

31 Nakassis, "Rajini's Finger"; cf. Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator*, trans. Nell Andrew with Charles O'Brien (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; first published in Italian in 1986).

32 André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," in *What Is Cinema?*, 1:108–109; and Cavell, *World Viewed*, 23–25.

33 Such presence is often framed in popular and academic discourse by culturalist appeal to the Hindu notion of *darśan*, that tactile visual modality through which devotee and God transact. While fan subcultures in Tamil Nadu cite *darśanic* practices, such spectatorship should not be reduced to Hindu religious ontologies. This tactile mode of vision characterizes interactions with non-religious figures and, in the cinema, is grounded in specific political histories and aesthetic conventions irreducible to "religion" (Prasad, *Cine-Politics*). Rather than characterizing a "cultural" or religious mode of vision, such vision (including *darśan*) is a particular manifestation of a general potential of the efficacy of visuality—one that, in any case, can be found beyond Hinduism and South Asia. See, for example, Bredekamp, *Image Acts*; and Freedberg, *Power of Images*.

Figure 4
Ajith's entry in *Mankatha* with a dwarfed Faizal in the background (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

Figure 5
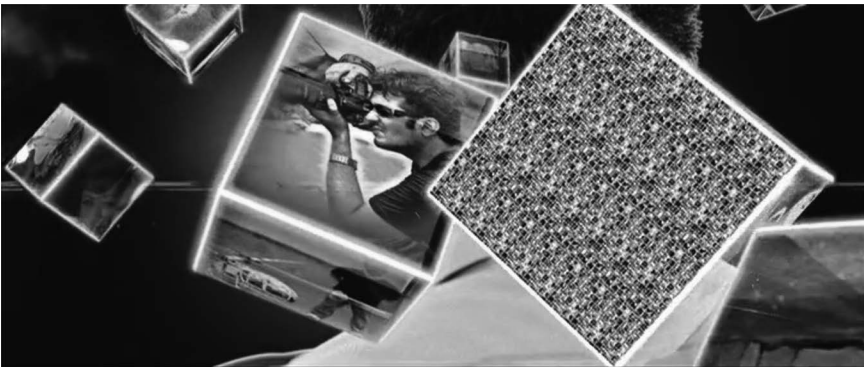Ajith's revelation in *Mankatha* (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

Figure 6
The beginning of Ajith's title sequence in *Mankatha* (Cloud Nine Movies, 2011).

is the cumulative "buildup" and telos of his "film history," as it is called in the Tamil industry, every single image sequence of his oeuvre but a molecular instance of his self-same, trans-filmic being, *Tala*. The image then flips around, revealing its Janus face to be a gold gambling chip. (Mankatha is also the name of a betting card game at the center of the film's heist plot.) Emblazoned on the chip is "Thala 50," that is, the fiftieth film of our *Tala*.

This deferred title sequence announces what we already knew all along. This is not just "A Venkat Prabhu Game"; it is Ajith's film. (As Ajith/Vinayak maniacally screams later in the film, "This is *my* fucking game!") *Tala* presenced, the film's name appears onscreen. The opening credits roll, and the story resumes.

From this discussion, I highlight two issues critical to the mass-hero film genre and to the performativity of images that emanate from the mass hero's presencing. First, this is a spectacle, a spectacle of *him, his* spectacle. This opening scene turns on the star's "entry," not simply his specular revelation onscreen but his spectacular perforation of the theater's fourth wall. Furthermore, this revelation-cum-perforation emerges out of a narrative setup (saving Faizal as a way into his gang) that cannot contain it. The extreme close-ups of Ajith's face set in bright lighting, the slow-motion shots and computer graphic effects edited with frenetic jump cuts, the gratuitous shots of his stylish gait and awesome strength—this tropology serves not the story per se but to presence *Tala* himself. We might also say that this rupture, like the title sequence that follows it, serves to envelop and subsume the narrative text and diegetic world (and ultimately the audience and its world) under the hero-star's massive image. This is *his* world, and when it ceases to be exclusively his, when he has to face up to the resistance of a reality that is not his own (e.g., in the act of a slap), such breaches must be resolved, either onscreen (e.g., narratively) or offscreen, as by angry viewers exacting retribution on particular individuals (such as Vaibhav) or by simply rejecting the film (as with *Kireedam*).

Second, not all actors can anchor such worlds. While the character actor Aravind Akash *acts* as Faizal in the diegesis, it is Ajith who *is* onscreen in the theater. While the screen veils Aravind Akash with his character, images of Ajith allow us to see *through* the screen and character to what subtends it: on the one hand, to the actor's personage as *Tala* and, on the other hand, *as Tala*, to all of Ajith's previous films. Ajith's title credit in *Mankatha* explicitly figures this compulsive and avowedly formulaic intertextuality, a visual trope that underscores that every character played by Ajith Kumar *is Tala*, that trans-textual being that sutures together a film oeuvre to a biographical person and vice versa. Every such avatar adds to the star's mass, growing with every film into a roaring chorus. It is this chorus that is met with the deafening cries of his fan publics when *Tala* is presenced in the theater. A celestial body holding all others in his wake, they orbit him in an iterated, circular trajectory, their motion bent to his, their fates determined by his. This is the hero's *mass*.

We can now begin to understand why the character Sumanth slapping the character Vinayak constitutes a problematically performative image-act of the actor Vaibhav slapping the actor Ajith. Events that occur within the orbit of the mass hero always potentially count as more than representations, for Ajith is present in his image. Here the representational bracketing of the image—the ideological notion that a film is just a representation, a mere fiction—is superseded by an insistent presencing *in* the present of its imaging. This substantial presence—the fact that the slaps

hit not just Vinayak's but Ajith's cheek, and not just in some profilmic past in front of the camera but also in every moment of their exhibition—enables this cinematic representation to be an image-act that affronts the body and personage of Ajith himself.

But the intensity and performative effect of Vaibhav's slaps are not simply a function of Ajith's status as a mass hero. They are also linked to a sociological, industry-internal relation between Ajith and Vaibhav as "senior" and "junior" artists, respectively, as well as to the aesthetic form and narrative framing of the scene itself. I explore each in turn.

VAIBHAV'S AUDACITY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL REALISM OF THE IMAGE-ACT

At issue in Vaibhav's slaps are two kinds of indexicality and two kinds of realism: the first articulates a profilmic space-time to an image (to slap Vinayak onscreen is to have slapped Ajith in front of the camera); the second reflexively articulates the previous relation to the space-time of the image's exhibition (to have slapped Ajith-as-Vinayak on film is to slap Ajith in the theater). The former presupposes the kind of causal and physical indexical relations and logics that have long concerned film theorists, wherein the photographic image is a trace of some past event. Here images emanate from the physical reality of the profilmic. The latter kind of indexicality, by contrast, is subtended by the offscreen sociological status of the celebrity hero-star as an image-immanent being. Here images emanate from the (metafilmic) reality of the actor's status. I call this the *sociological realism* of the image-act.[34]

Recall that one of the main reasons that Suresh and Anbu gave for why fans were so upset by Vaibhav's slaps was that Vaibhav was just a "little boy." When I asked Suresh why Vaibhav was so afraid to act in this scene, why Vaibhav had to apologize, and why he, Suresh got upset when he saw the scene, Suresh said that it was because Vaibhav is just a "junior artist" in comparison to Ajith, who is a "senior artist." Part of the anger, then, is Vaibhav's audacity: Who is *he* to dare hit our *Tala*? What are his qualifications? Here we can see how the mass hero's intertextuality, his "film history," has its corollary in a spectatorial logic that evaluates the presence of the film image against the offscreen industry status of those who animate it. Who is this actor to appear on the screen? Is he a "little boy" or a "big man" (*periya āḷ*), a "new face" or an established star with many hit films to his name? Vaibhav himself explained to me fans' anger in this way:

> It's like, uh, "Iva[n] yār-ṟā, ivan Tala mēle vaikkiṟān?!" anta mātiri.
> ("Who the hell is he [-HON.] raising a hand to *Tala*?!" like that.)
> That was the thing. . . . I was just only three movies old.[35]

Here Vaibhav voices, in an English-framed representation of Tamil speech, fans' response to his slaps. He explains it, code-switching back to English, with a trope of age

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34 In calling this sociological realism, I draw on reception studies that show how realisms are a function of audience uptake; e.g., Christine Gledhill, "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 129–168; and Janet Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative as a Tale of the Historically Real: The Return of Martin Guerre," in Gaines, *Classical Hollywood Narrative*, 107–128. As such studies demonstrate, attending to whom something is realistic opens up the question of what realism is or can be. It is important, however, to note that such multiplicities are at play not only in "reception" but also in the production process as well as "in" the image.

35 Vaibhav Reddy, interview.

("I was just only three movies old"). An impetuous cinematic toddler, Vaibhav scales his lower status to Ajith—nine years his chronological and forty-seven films his cinematic elder—as a developmental progression of maturation. Just as children shouldn't raise their hands and voices to their elders, so too junior character actors shouldn't raise a hand or voice to their mass heroes, at least not without their comeuppance.

This fan voice, however, was not just an externalized body animated by Vaibhav within distancing quotation marks. It was also, as he suggested, his own interior voice. Earlier in our conversation, Vaibhav noted that his anxiety about hitting Ajith wasn't just about fears of fan retribution. It felt unseemly to hit someone with such eminence, someone whose films he'd been watching since he was a teenager. It "wouldn't be nice," as Vaibhav put it, because *he himself* was an Ajith fan.[36] How could he hit his own idol? Here again, we see how offscreen industry hierarchies of age, generation, and film history underwrite the image, both in its becoming ("production") and its perpetual affective charge ("reception").

A comparison here with *Mankatha*'s climactic fight sequence is instructive. In this spectacular sequence, Vinayak comes head-to-head with the police officer who has been gunning for him, Pritviraj, played by the "Action King" Arjun, a senior artist and former hero in his own right. In this scene, Arjun and Ajith exchange blows in a dazzling set of highly stylized, choreographed sequences. But everyone with whom I spoke (from the film's stunt choreographer, Silva, to fans like Anbu) emphasized that no one would get mad at Arjun, even if they don't like seeing Arjun hit Ajith.[37] There are a number of reasons for this—including aesthetic and narratological ones, as discussed later—but the central one is that Arjun, while not of equal standing with Ajith, is of the "same category and level," as Anbu put it. Anbu went on to say that Vaibhav, by contrast, "doesn't have as much worth" compared to Arjun, who has "a lot of experience." Naren, a close friend of mine in his late thirties, explained it similarly in 2016: Arjun is a "big actor," whereas Vaibhav is just an "ordinary guy" who would have only acted in a few films. He's a nobody in the industry. Voicing the fan, Naren said in Tamil, "Being new, who the hell are you to threaten my leader?!"

AESTHETIC REALISM AND THE EVENT OF THE SLAPS

In comparison with its introductory sequence and climactic fight sequence, most of *Mankatha* has a gritty, naturalistic feel. Sitting down to watch the slap scene with Sakti Saravanan, the film's cinematographer, in his home, I spoke with him about the look of the scene and how he achieved it. Sakti emphasized the "rawness" of the scene, which was filmed in a naturally dusty location, and of the film in general: "There's nothing refined in the film. . . . There is a real chaos to everything."[38] "We wanted to record that chaos," he emphasized, making sure that the camera work was "dynamic" to reflect the unstable, changing nature of Vinayak, who first appears in the film as something of a good guy but is revealed in the slap scene to be a "really bad guy." This scene lays bare Vinayak's true colors: consumed with greed, he is willing to do and say anything for money.[39]

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36 Vaibhav Reddy.

37 "Stunt" Silva (stunt choreographer), interview by the author, July 28, 2016, Chennai, India.

38 Sakti Saravanan (cinematographer), interview by the author, September 1, 2016, Chennai, India. All quotations attributed to Sakti Saravanan in this section are from this interview, as are production details, unless otherwise noted.

39 This is brought out by *Mankatha*'s postproduction coloring. The film has a sickly greenish-yellow

When I asked Sakti what they did to achieve this rawness and chaos, he invoked a naturalist ideology of the image, saying, matter-of-factly, "nothing at all." No camera tricks, no special effects, no editing effects. They didn't curate the image, he said, leaving it intentionally without any "balance" in its composition.[40] They didn't use any "fine lighting," opting for natural lighting ("whatever was available") in outdoor locations. In addition, in the slap scene, Sakti used a lightweight, handheld camera (Arriflex 235) with a short zoom that easily allowed him to move with the camera, both physically and with the lens. Equipped with a wide-angle lens rather than a long lens (long lenses allow the object of focus to be foregrounded and appear larger relative to other objects in the frame), Sakti was able to cover as much of the performance space as possible while maximizing the camera's proximity to the action. Additionally, this setup optically flattened Ajith's image and thereby elevated Vaibhav, putting Vinayak *into* the scene rather than projecting Ajith out of it.

Table 1. Formal contrasts between *Mankatha* and Ajith's "typical" mass-hero films; these distinctions are fractally reinscribed within *Mankatha* between the slap scene and other key scenes (e.g., the introductory scene, climactic fight scene with Arjun).

	Mankatha / *Mankatha*'s slap scene	"Typical" mass-hero film / *Mankatha*'s introductory scene, climactic fight
Camera	Hand-held (single)	Steady (multiple)
Lens / Zoom	Wide / Short	Long / Long
Depth of field	Deep, flat	Shallow
Composition	Unbalanced, jittery	Balanced, "smooth"
Découpage & mise en scène, Performance	Unplanned, "Extempore"	Planned, Choreographed
Editing	Long single shots	Rapid multiple shots
Lighting	Natural, "rawness"	Artificial, "fine"
Coloring of image	Dark, greenish	Bright, colorful
Post-production	No special effects	Special effects

Echoing Bazin's writings on cinema's capacity to maintain the phenomenological reality and spatiotemporal coherence of the profilmic event (e.g., through long shots, deep focus, transparent editing, and natural locations), these production choices aimed to capture the *event* of slapping in its entirety, spatially and temporally. As *Mankatha*'s director, Venkat Prabhu, explained to me, it was important to use a wide shot with long cuts—in particular, when showing the slaps themselves—so that viewer can "see everything" and so that the "full action" of the conflict between the characters was highlighted as a single event.[41]

For Sakti Saravanan, however, recording this event in its performed reality was not just about being there as a detached observer to "document" the performance (as he also framed it in our discussion). Filming also involved being part of it, being *in*

tinge. Designed in preproduction, this coloring, Sakti stressed, is in contrast to the bright and glossy, "sophisticated" color palette used in most of Ajith's films and in certain scenes in *Mankatha* itself (such as the climactic fight sequence).

40   But see note 39.

41   Venkat Prabhu (director), interview by the author, August 1, 2016, Chennai, India.

it. This is why, Sakti indicated, he used a single handheld camera with long-duration shots rather than multiple cameras and quickly edited shots, as in the spectacular fight scenes. As Sakti explained, if you use more than one camera, "you're not free." You're located, fixed in time and space, unreactive. When you use a handheld camera, you can move, react. With a handheld camera, Sakti and the spectator could enter deeper into the scene, allowing for a dynamic transaction with the event.

This camera setup was particularly important since, in order to guarantee the "natural output" of the performance, as Sakti put it, the filmmakers intentionally did not choreograph the altercation or use set positions (as is typical in fight scenes, including those in *Mankatha*).[42] Sakti had no real idea what the actors were going to do. It was, he said, "extempore": "Whatever occurred to me at that time, that's what I shot. I didn't plan (my movements) at all." He continued, saying in Tamil, "I was reacting to the dialogue, to the 'mood.'"[43] Not simply recording what was in front of it, the camera thus transduces the profilmic performance in and as the image's own dynamic form, interacting with the actors' performance and thus becoming part of the performance itself. Critical here is Sakti Saravanan's use of short zooms and subtle physical movements. Such movements have a dance-like feel, iconically echoing the facial expressions, volume, timbre, and dialogue of the characters, creating a poetic resonance across modalities of expression that function as what Pier Paolo Pasoloni called "free indirect" images.[44] As Sakti noted, each camera movement—each shake, zoom, and dip—has his "touch," capturing his own reactions to Ajith and Vaibhav's acting, to the drama, emotion, and contingency of the event.

While for Bazin, the importance of realism was how it enables the subject's freedom to make meaning out of the open-ended contingency of the profilmic world, for Venkat Prabhu and Sakti Saravanan more important was how a realist style shaped and amplified the narrative flow and dramatic pathos of the scene. Particularly important was how this realist style impacted the viewer's voyeuristic involvement.[45] As Venkat Prabhu noted, the narrative development—in particular, Vinayak's vulgar insult of Vaibhav's wife (truly shocking for a mass hero, Venkat Prabhu emphasized)—prompts the anxious question, "What is he [ambiguously, Vaibhav/Sumanth] going to do?" It is this drama that necessitates a realist style that allows the viewer to get *inside* the spatiotemporal envelope of the diegetic event. "It should make you feel like you're standing there with them, watching them," Venkat Prabhu said in Tamil. "Without you knowing it at all," he continued, "you've been brought inside of the scene, which builds up its tension."[46]

Equally critical for these filmmakers is that the voyeuristic presence and affect that this realist aesthetic enables is independent of Ajith's star image and distinct

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42 Indeed, Venkat Prabhu directed this sequence rather than the stunt choreographer Silva precisely because it was not a "fight" at all but a (dramatic) "scene." See Venkat Prabhu.

43 This improvisational approach is common in the Tamil film industry, which places a premium on openness to the particularity of the shooting event and its locations. This isn't to say that shoots are disorganized or unplanned but rather that the filmmaking process is reflexively attuned to its inevitable contingencies. See Anand Pandian, *Reel World: An Anthropology of Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

44 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 167–186.

45 This desire for dramatic intensity also explains why Sumanth slaps rather than punches Vinayak. As Vaibhav explained, a slap is an emotional act that is personal, between friends. By contrast, as both Venkat Prabhu and Silva said to me, a punch is something that happens in "cinema," that is, it choreographed, unspontaneous. A punch in this emotionally charged scene between former friends would make the scene unrealistic and fake, Venkat Prabhu noted. See Vaibhav Reddy, interview; Venkat Prabhu, interview; and "Stunt" Silva, interview.

46 Venkat Prabhu, interview.

from his auratic presence. Not simply realist in the sense that they respect the spatial and temporal coherence of the profilmic event, or that they voyeuristically suture the spectator into the scene, these images are realist because of their *intertextual opposition* to the aesthetics of the typical mass-hero film, an aesthetics that *Mankatha* itself selectively deployed (e.g., in the introductory scene and fight scene with Arjun) (see Table 1).[47] The whole idea, Sakti Saravanan and Venkat Prabhu repeatedly insisted, was that this scene (and *Mankatha* overall) should *not* be like Ajith's other mass films.

Like Bazin's own liberal humanism and the realism he saw (potentially) expressing it, the politics of realism in *Mankatha* stands in tension with, and even opposes, the aesthetics of the hero's spectacle and its implied authoritarian politics. While Bazin's realism turned on recognizing and cultivating a presence that exceeds representation, in *Mankatha*, it is precisely the performative presence of the mass hero that the scene's representationalist frame—that is, the affectively intense and immersive fiction created by the filmmakers' realist "touch"—attempts to dampen. The ambivalence of this image, which must put into play that which it attempts to defease, namely Ajith's presence, reflects precisely the ambivalence of presence itself. This fact was not lost on Bazin, who warned of the political risks of the presentist filmic image of a figure like Stalin.[48] Just as Bazin articulates his realism, the ontology it presupposes, and the politics it entails through a differentiation of the realist image from other types of images (e.g., German Expressionism, certain kinds of propaganda films) and their attendant politics (e.g., fascism), here too we find multiple realisms, politics, and ontologies of the image in contestation. Such heterogeneity is not only distributed across images, however; it is also inscribed within them.

The image of Vaibhav's slaps is one such ambivalent image. Note how the realism of the slap scene, precisely by bracketing Ajith's presence, simultaneously forces the viewer beyond the representational enclosure of the image to the star's auratic body. This in turn amplifies Vaibhav's slaps of Ajith as a profilmic event, as an act that really took place. Here the representationalist realism of the scene not only defeases Ajith's presence; it also entails it. In an era of digital images, where the spectacle of the mass hero's presence is ever more exaggerated through various non-realist film techniques (including the painterly aesthetics of computer-generated graphics), the slap scene's realist aesthetic treatment—and, we might add, the way in which it figured the image not as Ajith's but as the "touch" of its filmmakers—was itself a stinging offense to fans.

AMBIVALENT REALISMS

Like the film's (selectively) realist style, the narrative realism of *Mankatha* also simultaneously mitigated and entailed the slaps' performativity, offering up different, competing positions to engage the image. As Venkat Prabhu noted, during *Mankatha*'s production, it was an open question for him whether audiences would accept the film with all its deviations from the mass-hero formula.[49] Particularly risky was the way

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47   Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 38–46; Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 143; and Staiger, "Securing the Fictional Narrative," 113.

48   André Bazin, "The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols, trans. Georgia Gurrieri (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 29–40; and Hassan, "Total War, Total History."

49   Venkat Prabhu, interview. All quotations attributed to Venkat Prabhu in this section are from this interview.

the film positioned Ajith, the spectatorial site for fan attention and affective invest-
ment, as anything but a typical hero. Not only did he appear his age in this film, with
his natural, salt-and-pepper hair (unusual for heroes of his stature and age), but he
also wore the same dark-colored, sweat-stained, torn shirt for nearly all of the film's
second half, eschewing his signature handsome, stylish appearance. Even worse,
he played a completely unredeemable character. Would anyone accept Ajith as an
unabashedly greedy, violently ruthless, scheming, and deceitful character who curses
vulgarly and insults innocent women? Even one of Venkat Prabhu's assistant direc-
tors vigorously protested this depiction, pleading with the director on the shooting
spot to change Ajith's dialogue in the slap scene.[50]

The slap scene most acutely staged this reversal, functioning as the plot's
"turning point," as Venkat Prabhu put it, in which not only has the hero become the
villain but also viewers are asked to emotionally sympathize with a lesser character
and ratify his righteous anger against the star's character. Venkat Prabhu justified
this structure of identification, and the need for Vaibhav/Sumanth to slap Ajith/
Vinayak, by appealing to the logic of the story and its characters. Like the realist
shooting style and its optical flattening of Ajith's image, here the narrative demotes
the hero-star to a character. By putting the moral right on the side of Sumanth, the
scene fails to conserve and build up the star's mass, instead giving some of it over
to Vaibhav.[51] Indeed, as Venkat Prabhu noted, this "was a scene for Vaibhav" to
showcase his emoting and foreground his character. This diegetic moral economy
conspires against the fan's anger by suggesting that we should be angry with Ajith/
Vinayak, if anyone. To Venkat Prabhu's mind, this narrative logic—and the realist
identification with Sumanth that it invited—(should have) worked against the fans'
anger at Vaibhav. But curiously, it amplified it.

Consider Anbu's narration of fans' anger. Like many, perhaps most, film star fans
in Tamil Nadu, Anbu was ambivalent about his fandom. Coming from an upwardly
mobile, lower-middle-class background, educated in a prestigious Chennai college,
and with some experience as an assistant film director, Anbu voiced a familiar elitist
discourse differentiating those who can see that it's "just acting" and those who take the
image more seriously. When I prompted Anbu by saying that Vaibhav/Sumanth slaps
Ajith/Vinayak for a good reason (namely Vinayak's vulgar insult of Sumanth's wife),
he responded, in Tamil, by derisively voicing the stereotypical fan's response: "Beyond
the reason, they'll sort of think stupidly, like, How could you [-HON., Vaibhav] hit
him [Ajith]? There may be a thousand good reasons. Ajith said it, so what?"[52] Here
narrative logic and fictional framing are rejected as irrelevant concerns; indeed, they
are themselves framed as *acts* that threaten the hero's personage.

Yet even if this fan response rejects the film's narrative justifications, the slaps'
sting—and the intensity of the fans' repudiation—was interpreted through this very
narrative logic. Anbu continued by noting that if minor characters hit Ajith (e.g., in
a fight sequence), no one will care too much. This is because, as he noted in Tamil,

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50   Venkat Prabhu.

51   As Venkat Prabhu noted to me, this itself was an act of celebrity munificence, since Ajith, as an emi-
     nent hero-star, didn't have to concede any screen space to a junior actor like Vaibhav.

52   Although distancing himself from those who got mad at Vaibhav, when Anbu saw fans' reaction in the
     theater, he felt proud, he said, of how much respect people have for Ajith. This "overemotional" reac-
     tion, as Anbu put it, validated his own (rational, cool) appreciation for Ajith as a good person and thus
     his own prestige (*gettu*)—rather than disesteem—as an Ajith fan because it showed how Ajith was "in
     everyone's hearts." On the ambivalence of Tamil film fandom, see Roos Gerritsen, *Intimate Visualities
     and the Politics of Fandom in India* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

"they're just passing [through the story]." But with Vaibhav's character, he continued, "he's in half of the film. He's a character that travels throughout the film with Ajith . . . so the impact is more [intense]." Not just a dampening of fan affect, the intimacy of Sumanth and Vinayak—and the importance given to Sumanth, and thus Vaibhav, by the narrative—makes Vaibhav's slaps of Ajith an unforgivable betrayal. There may have been a thousand narrative reasons for Sumanth to hit Vinayak, but (because of them) how could *Vaibhav* hit *Ajith*?

AUTHORIZING THE SLAPS, OR THE PRINCIPAL OF ANIMATION

As we've seen, commercial Tamil film, not unlike other film traditions, presents its viewers with a set of overlapping tensions—between so-called class films ("serious," realist cinema) and so-called mass films, story and star, character and actor, presence and representation—which intersect in the film image and the performative effect and affect anticipated and engendered by that image.[53] These tensions also suffuse the profilmic event. How, in fact, does an image like that of Vaibhav's slaps come into being in the force field of the mass hero? If realist images and mass-hero images articulate different politics, what politics are necessary for such an image to be conceived, performed, recorded, and exhibited? How could Vaibhav have done it?

On the 2012 birthday television special for Ajith, *Happy Birthday Ajith* (Vijay TV, May 1, 2012), Vaibhav recounted the filming of the slap scene. He recalled that when he found out that he would have to slap Ajith, he categorically refused. As Vaibhav narrated it in Tamil, when Ajith overheard this, Ajith said to Venkat Prabhu, "I've read this scene. If there's even one dialogue missing from it, Prabhu, I'm not going to let it slide." Responding, Prabhu said, "No older brother, I'll shoot it like that. I don't have a problem. But he [-HON., Vaibhav] is saying that he won't hit you [+HON.]." Turning to Vaibhav, Ajith then said, "I've been sweet for all these days, but if you [-HON.] don't act [in the scene as it's written], I'm going to beat you with this hand and throw you against the train."

Ultimately, Vaibhav agreed to do the scene. But, as he told it, he struggled to bring himself to slap Ajith, or even to see Ajith as Vinayak. On the first take, he only managed to lightly hit Ajith on the cheek. After more physical intimidating and berating by Ajith to "act properly," it took another eight to ten takes for Vaibhav to finally sufficiently slap Ajith, with Ajith continuing to complain that Vaibhav was "just acting," "just only touching me."[54]

Consider Ajith's ambivalent position here: on the one hand, he enjoys ultimate authority and authorship over but not principalship (i.e., responsibility) for the filmic image. This authority is not only with respect to the actor Vaibhav, who will slap Ajith only if physically intimidated to do so. It is also with respect to the director, who felt he needed to ask Ajith's permission to even include such a scene, as Venkat Prabhu reported in the Sun TV special.[55] On the other hand, Ajith insists that Vaibhav not consider the act that subtends the act of acting—namely, slapping him—but instead focus on the craft of "acting properly." That is, he asks that Vaibhav do his job as an actor: to animate a character in the script, the way the director wrote

53 Dyer, *Stars*; and Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," *Screen* 26, no. 5 (1985): 27–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/26.5.27.

54 Vaibhav Reddy in *Happy Birthday Ajith*.

55 Venkat Prabhu in *Mankatha Siṟappuk Kaṇṇōṭṭam* (Mankatha: A unique perspective), Sun TV, September 11, 2011.

it. But therein lies a further irony, for as Venkat Prabhu told me in 2016, he hadn't originally written the scene this way, nor was Ajith's character as villainous. He had originally written a much tamer scene. "You tend to mellow it down a bit [with big stars]," he said, "because you don't want the fans to go mad."[56] But Ajith wanted more. He wanted more slaps. And he wanted a more negative character. As Venkat Prabhu told me in 2010, Ajith wanted to do something like Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), a telling comparison since Ledger's role as the Joker was figured in some English-language media as a tragic coup of so-called method acting, of the actor becoming his character (beyond the frame of the film) rather than simply playing it.[57]

Ultimately, in the orbit of the mass hero, to act as a character requires an order of authority beyond the script and the story and thus beyond the director's authorship. It requires, quite literally, an order given by the mass hero himself. While Ajith demands that Vaibhav show fidelity to the script's representational economy and not to the economy of his mass, such a demand must be waged from within that very star economy. This authority hovers before and after the image. It envelops that image, even in moments when the hero's mass is leveraged to allow space for an image that does not orbit the mass hero, even in moments that attempt to discard his graven image and its compelling power.

Of course, as Vaibhav's insistent refusals, fans' recalcitrant anger, and the filmmakers' hesitations indicate, Ajith's auratic star image is not so easily displaced. The mass hero does not have the authority to authorize the ontic transformation of his image, the power to effectuate his own (or others') escape velocity from the gravity of his mass, on the set or in the theater. As Vaibhav told me, in the slap scene, he could never fully bring himself to act as his character, just as some viewers couldn't bring themselves to forgive his transgressions or accept the narrative's justifications for them.[58]

To conclude, let me make two points. First, as we've seen, a fundamental ambivalence suffuses the image-act of the slap. This image harbors a confluence of disjointed forces (aesthetic, sociological, and narratological) that play into and against one another as well as a series of claims and counter-claims played out in the image about what that image is or should be. This ambivalence inheres in the textuality of the scene, in the realistic style in which the slaps are shot that invokes, and exploits, that which it implicitly contests: Ajith's star image and its presentist aesthetics. But this ambivalence also emanates from and travels beyond the screen, from and beyond the profilmic moment. It appears in Vaibhav's desperate voice in the end credits; in the director having to ask for the hero's permission to direct the scene; in Ajith's violent insistence on set that they act just as characters in a story rather than in the thrall of his stardom. It appears in the way that Vaibhav is repeatedly called on to publicly narrate his fear and reluctance to even consider such a scene. And finally, we hear it in the anxious (middle-class) laughs that surround these narratives and in the fascination of television hosts and audiences (and anthropologists) who want to hear about credulous fans who really got upset, inscribing their own distinction as sensible viewers who only see the film image as a representation and nothing more.

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56 Venkat Prabhu, interview.

57 Venkat Prabhu (director), interview by the author, July 13, 2010, Chennai, India. For a critical review of such English media sources, see Samuel Kampa, "Is Acting Hazardous? On the Risks of Immersing Oneself in a Role," *Aeon*, April 18, 2019, https://aeon.co/ideas/is-acting-hazardous-on-the-risks-of-immersing-oneself-in-a-role.

58 Vaibhav Reddy, interview.

Second, these ambivalent forces and counterforces problematize the question of responsibility and authorship of the image. What is being negotiated in the making and uptake of this scene is precisely who and what authorizes the image. Who is its master, in control of its becoming and its effects? The director? The story or diegetic world? The script? The star? The audience? While ultimately it is in the name of the director-script-story-character that the mass hero authorizes the image, the question of responsibility remains an essentially open one, for what is at stake for Vaibhav (but not Venkat Prabhu or Ajith) is that for some section of the audience, no amount of hedging can fully suspend the performativity of his slaps. In this is a particular conception of agency and image, one that a final interrogation of the fans' anger at Vaibhav elucidates. When I asked Anbu and Naren why fans don't get mad at directors, who write and direct the scripts that have actors like Vaibhav hit mass heroes like Ajith, they both voiced the same logic. Anbu said in Tamil, "Vaibhav is to blame [and not the director]. . . . Where did your [-HON., Vaibhav] intelligence go? [mouth click] Where did your sense go? If he [-HON., Venkat Prabhu] says [to hit Ajith] will you hit [him]? It'll go like that." Naren responded, in relation to his favorite hero of his youth, Rajinikanth, saying in Tamil,

> Naren: I'd say, Why the hell did you scold and hit [our] leader, man?!
> CN: Okay, but what if he said, I'm just an actor. The story is written like that?
> Naren: Don't act [in scenes] like that anymore. Even if they tell you to, don't act. . . . You scolded my leader just for that [i.e., because someone told you to]? . . . If there is a scene where you have to scold him and all, tell [the director], I won't do it.

CONCLUSION

In Vaibhav's slaps we see an ontological politics working across the image's textual surface, its paratextual commentaries, and its extratextual peregrinations. This manifests in each of these sites as a tension between a liberal yearning for a representationalist, realist image and the gravitational pull of the auratic presence of the mass hero. These competing images forestall and enable each other, simultaneously stoking their iconophilia and iconoclasm.[59]

This politics itself forms, as we noted, the political economy and genre organization of the Tamil film industry more generally, whose productions are roughly split between big-budget "mass" films and realistic, representationalist, small-budget "class" films, the latter of which take inspiration from, among other things, a global film culture shaped by Bazin's legacy of film criticism and theory.[60] *Mankatha* internalizes this tension in its textual form, as perhaps all Tamil films do to varying degrees, the poetics of their images evincing a struggle for the dominance of, and balance between, different ontologies, politics, and production formats of the image.

This discussion does not imply that images do not have an ontology, of course.[61] Rather, it implies that any inquiry into the nature of images has to contend with the fact that their being is constitutively mediated by multiple, contentious ontological

59   W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 157–158.

60   Rochona Majumdar, "Art Cinema: The Indian Career of a Global Category," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 3 (2016): 580–610, https://doi.org/10.1086/685605. See Dudley Andrew, ed., *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

61   It also doesn't mean that discussions of ontology are to be dismissed as mere ideology, as in much 1970s film theory. Indeed, all such dismissals already harbor their own claims on the nature of images.

claims, be they by fans, filmmakers, or film critics and theorists, as they come to inhere in but also beyond the image. Ontologies are political facts. (Is there nothing more political than a claim about being, about what is or is not?) And images are themselves often the medium of such ontological claims. I consider this one of Bazin's profoundest insights. But rather than adjudicate such claims in the name of being (on moral, aesthetic, or philosophical grounds), one might pursue instead an empirical study of the processual pragmatics of such ontological politics and their entailments—that is, the study of how social actors (like Bazin, Anbu, and Venkat Prabhu) account for images and the entailments therein. From this point of view, Bazin's ontology is, among other things, an empirical datum, a situated ontological politics criterial to the ongoing unfolding of the (still-contested) being of at least some filmic images, one that has had and continues to have its own effects on and off the screen.[62] The ontology of images is caught in this reflexive loop, as the medium, object, and outcome of particular claims on and accounts of the being of images. This is the nature of images.

As this implies, rather than a settled, or even in principle settleable, question (be it by the analyst or anyone else), the ontology of the image is an open question. If and when some such impulses become regimented and institutionalized, thickened and separated out as seemingly stable, self-same, and singular ontologies—so as to be neatly formulated in theoretical discourse; experienced as the self-evident nature of images; or folded into technological apparatuses, political economies, or cultural norms—this is the historical achievement of situated and interested political processes that are ongoing and tenuous and in dialogic relation with those other urges, movements, and counter-movements that images bear in their contested being. Not a provincial example, the Tamil case discussed in this article shows this in its exemplary generality.

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62   Andrew, *Opening Bazin*.