

BOOK REVIEW

Onscreen/offscreen

By Constantine V. Nakassis. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 400 pp.

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In the summer of 2007, my family traveled to India. Like other such family trips, this visit came with the usual slate of shopping and visiting our extended family. My father, however, had other plans. In the months leading up to our departure, he made it known to the entire household that he absolutely had to see a movie during our stay in Chennai. But not just any movie. He had to see *Sivaji: The Boss*, starring Superstar Rajinikanth, the most legendary actor of Kollywood (as the Tamil film industry is known). Accompanied by my cousins and uncles, my father ended up seeing the iconic Rajini take on corrupt politicians, romance young women, and emerge victorious from fantastical fight scenes. With each of three successive viewings, my brother and I witnessed our father become more swept up in Rajini's presence onscreen, whistling anytime the star emerged with his signature catchphrases and stylized way of donning his designer sunglasses. In those moments, we realized that Sivaji was not just a character for my father and other fans. Sivaji was Rajini. Rajini was Sivaji. The two were one and the same, and Sivaji's scripted words and actions onscreen permeated one's offscreen imagination, enhancing the larger-than-life aura and status of Rajini himself.

Onscreen/Offscreen, by Constantine V. Nakassis, captures the energy and excitement that larger-than-life Tamil actors, and the Tamil film industry as a whole, has on audiences and fans in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Drawing on over a decade of ethnographic research with actors, directors, and producers in Kollywood, and with the viewers who consume and live through these films, Nakassis examines how these filmic images never remain restricted to the silver screen. Actors, actresses, and storylines extend beyond the cinema, entangling celebrities with local and state-level politics. As Nakassis argues, this symbiotic, almost inseparable alliance between film imagery and the political has been present in the Tamil film industry since the advent of sound films in the region. Yet this history also reveals a specific ontological politics of film images in Kollywood, one that still informs the spillage and slippage of onscreen speech acts and performances into the offscreen lives and politics of actors amid

shifting stances around caste and class in Tamil Nadu, and the (re)emergence of new cinematic trends.

Nakassis frames the ontological politics of Tamil film images through the intersection of presence and representation, two ends of a semiotic continuum that thematically divide the book. By framing the book around presence and representation, the author highlights the semiotic dialectic between images and their referential potential or, in other words, where onscreen acts become interpreted and realized in different kinds of offscreen personalities, subjectivities, and politics. Building this framework within a broader linguistic anthropology of cinema, Nakassis situates presence and representation as both the product—and index—of the pragmatic and metapragmatic effects of Tamil cinema and images. Onscreen images become fully realized and meaningful only when contextualized within a broader social matrix. Methodologically, such relations and their accompanying semiotic processes come into focus only through “a necessary tacking back and forth between close analysis of select films (indeed, particular scenes and image-acts) and a selective interrogation of their making, circulation, and uptake so as to theorize this relation of onscreen/offscreen” (p. 11). This kind of dialectic runs throughout the book. It is illustrated through Nakassis's decision to approach this broader semiotic process by demonstrating how onscreen presence informs audience interpretations of representation and, conversely, how onscreen representations of social life in Tamil Nadu, or the Tamil film industry itself, open the potential to critique offscreen politics and social structures.

On the former end of the semiotic analysis, Nakassis focuses on the slippage between onscreen presences and their referential potential and metapragmatic associations in offscreen audience uptake and interpretation. This process is introduced through an analysis of the metapragmatic effects of the relative “mass” accrued by cinema heroes like Superstar Rajinikanth (chap. 1). Such heroes blur the boundaries between their filmic personae and their real-life subjectivities, making films a site where leading male actors often launch their political careers, extending their heroic exploits onscreen into offscreen politics

in Tamil Nadu. This overlay between the hero's image and the actor/politician also has consequences for supporting or minor male character actors, who are wary of how their actions against the hero onscreen are not simply taken as performances and are instead interpreted as having an offscreen intentionality that fans can hold them accountable for.

The offscreen extensions of onscreen performances are also steeped in and entangled with a broader gender politics (chap. 2). In contrast to the hero, the heroine is faced with stigma for her onscreen performances, which extends to offscreen discussions and stances on these actresses' morality and behavior. For the actress/heroine, presence onscreen represents who she is offscreen. Today, most actresses working in the Tamil film industry are from non-Tamil ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The waning presence of Tamil actresses upholds ethnolinguistic and gendered ideologies around the purity and sanctity of Tamil women. At the same time, the trend to employ young, non-Tamil actresses continues the practice of creating images that titillate the audience, particularly young male viewers. Thus, the stigma surrounding the heroine is not only about being seen but also the politics around "being seen seeing a filmic image" (p. 67), which highlights the gendered politics of voyeurism as copresent with the film itself.

Nakassis goes on to demonstrate how the semiotic inverse of presence and representation is also socially mobilized in the framework of an ontological politics of Tamil film images, in which what is represented in the film rests on the presence of those social formations and identities offscreen. Be it a parody of the action-hero genre (chap. 3) or a film framed as a commentary on caste and class politics and gender inequalities by auteur directors (chap. 4), Tamil films largely rely on how directors creatively craft, meme, and embed images in the film to provide a broader metacommentary on the cultural politics of the Tamil film industry and social politics more broadly in Tamil Nadu. Yet, as Nakassis notes, these textual practices also shield directors from the ire that can stem from offscreen processes of interpreting these films' critiques.

Throughout the book, Nakassis seriously engages with critical film theory and media studies, highlighting how

anthropology (and specifically linguistic anthropology) can provide a more complex understanding of the politics of film and images. The result of this engagement is an expansive account of Tamil film practices and politics that uses concepts central to linguistic anthropology to navigate social life between (filmic) text creation, uptake, reaction, and back to creation once more. Yet more interesting is Nakassis's final bid to expand and reconsider the boundaries of linguistic anthropology, emphasizing that the book does not explicitly focus on language. In returning (or closing) with this request to consider *Onscreen/Offscreen* as an example of a linguistic anthropology of cinema, Nakassis locates this work within the longer intellectual and analytical tradition of linguistic anthropology since the latter half of the 20th century. He also creates a space for nonlinguistic anthropologists to consider themselves conversant with the questions and approaches central to the subfield.

At the same, Nakassis invites scholars ensconced in linguistic anthropology to interrogate our assumptions about what constitutes the "linguistic" as an object of analysis. It is an invitation that hearkens back to the subdiscipline's foundational tensions and the challenges that many linguistic anthropologists face when articulating what our object of study is (especially when it is not focused on "language" in any strict denotational sense). This appeal, issued in the final pages of the book, can be read as a starting point for linguistic anthropologists to critically reexamine the boundaries that we might place around our "linguistic" and "nonlinguistic" objects of analysis and investigation. Just as Kollywood's speech acts and performances travel across mediums that complicate the assumed divide between the fantastical images on the cinema screen and the real world, so too does Nakassis's final theoretical proposal encourage us to continually do the same kind of reflexive work, reshaping the limits of linguistic anthropology as a whole.

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