Realism, On and Off the Screen

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In late September of 2008, I met with Sasikumar, the director of, and one of the main actors in, *Subramaniyapuram*. I had scheduled the appointment to speak to him about his popular and critically acclaimed debut film, its realist aesthetics, and how the film portrayed and spoke to contemporary Tamil youth, a subject I was researching at the time. *Subramaniyapuram* was popular with young people. I had watched it with friends in Madurai, and then again in Chennai only weeks before. It was a film which sparked off all sorts of conversations among my friends, from speculation on missing scenes (Did the heroine get killed in the end or not? Were critical scenes edited out?) to the nature of, and tensions between, male friendship and romantic love. It was a film that captured the imagination of these youth, largely because of the way it naturalistically depicted the life worlds of the film's two young protagonists, Azhagar and Paraman (played by Sasikumar).

Much of the time I had with Sasikumar in his office was spent talking about how he achieved the film's realism. We spoke of the detailed research he did to make the sets as realistic as possible, to get the Madurai youth slang authentic and true to the era, to show love "just like" it would have been in the 1980s (innocent and timid), and to show violence as it "really" is (without exaggeration, special effects, or dramatic soundscapes). *Subramaniyapuram* was designed to be a mirror to 1980 Madurai, a snapshot of the Temple City at that moment in time, captured on film and projected onto the screen. It was this realism, Sasikumar explained to me, which made the film a hit, which allowed it to find a place in the audience's heart. The film connected with audiences because the screen reflected something of their desires back to them, but through a detour, rerouted through a time and place now gone.

Subramaniyapuram does exude a gritty realism. It is filled with the quintessential hallmarks of classical realist cinema: outdoor locations, natural lighting, colloquial language, long shots, invisible editing, non-professional actors, and a conspicuous absence of camera tricks, special effects, and the like. The film lingers on the experiential texture of the minute, be it of a lover's glance, the sounds of a temple festival, or the angle of a blade slicing the flesh. Like the neorealism of post–World War II Italy, made famous by directors like Roberto Rosellini and Vittorio de Sica, *Subramaniyapuram* doesn't simply tell a story. It opens up a world, a world that lives beyond the narrative, embalming a time and place—as the great French film critic André Bazin would put it—through the near-excess of its attention to detail. Because of its fascination with the minutiae of this world, as Sasikumar suggested in our interview, an intimacy was created with the audience, an intimacy that translated into rupees at the box office.

But it wasn't just the realism of the film that stuck with me after seeing it in the theater. And it wasn't just our stimulating, in-depth discussion of the film's realism that left a lasting impression on me after my talk with Sasikumar. It was something else beyond the film's realism, something that *Subramaniyapuram* did in, and to, the world of its exhibition, a world outside of the film text. This was not the represented world of 1980 Madurai, but the world that representation created in 2008 Madurai. What stuck with me was the connection and continuity between these two Madurais, the way the line between the "real*ist*" filmic world of 1980 Madurai and the "real" world of viewers in 2008 Madurai was blurry and indistinct.

The diaphanous screen between these two worlds, the reel and the real, was made manifest to me through a chance encounter with the comedian-cum-traitor of the film, Kasi, played by Ganja Karuppu. I happened to run into Ganja Karuppu when walking out of Sasikumar's office after our interview. This serendipitous run-in with the man who played the lynchpin of *Subramaniyapuram*'s climactic twist was a moment out of frame, both in the sense of being outside of the frame of my research—we chatted only briefly in the space of the waiting room, he going in and me going out of the office—and in the sense of being outside the frame of the film. It was a liminal moment in a liminal space, situated somewhere between the world of *Subramaniyapuram* and the world outside of it.

There was something strange about my encounter with Ganja Karuppu, something cinematic about it even. Ganja Karuppu was just as Kasi was in the film: seemingly reserved, his body poised in shrunken deference,

and yet almost mockingly so, his simple demeanor counterbalanced by an acerbic wit. We exchanged greetings and names. I complimented him on his performance in the film. And while he thanked me, it seemed as if there was something behind his humble and almost embarrassed thanks, as if there was another face behind his face. This Janus was not menacing or insincere. It was ironic, but also melancholy, as if consigned to a fate that he also resisted, tragicomically. Or at least so it felt at the time.

The oddness of our encounter was also due to the fact that it had been anticipated in my conversation with Sasikumar only minutes before. In describing the level of emotional attachment that people had to the film, Sasikumar referenced Kasi's betrayal in the film's climax. After taking revenge on the man who arranged the death of his best friend Azhagar, Paraman comes to meet Kasi, another good friend, on a riverbank outside of town. When Paraman sees henchmen coming for him, he yells to Kasi for a sword. Kasi retreats slowly, withholding the blade. Paraman, confused and enraged, charges him. Kasi pushes him away. The henchmen descend on Paraman, overwhelming him. As they begin to slaughter Paraman, a single steadycam shot reminiscent of Orson Welles's introductory shot in *Touch of Evil* (1958) follows Kasi as he walks to a nearby road. Paraman's murder recedes into the background, shrinking but never quite disappearing. We then see Kasi walk up to a white Ambassador car. He is handed an envelope of money. He sits down on a mile marker. His body shrinks, deflates. He pants and his body expands as he lights up a cigarette.

In the theater, this scene elicited screams, yelling, and insults from the audience. At this moment of betrayal, in its instant of recognition, the audience was conjoined to the screen. They addressed it as it addressed them, condemning Kasi as he condemned Paraman, hurling invectives as if they were *in* the scene. It is this scene, and the crowds' reaction to it, that Sasikumar cited in our interview to demonstrate his point that the film's realism was hard-hitting, that it affected the audience at an emotional level. Having made this point in our interview, as a joking aside, Sasikumar noted that Ganja Karuppu still refused to come to the theater to watch the film. If he dared to show his face at the scene of the crime, audience members would scold him, curse him with "vulgar" words, and even threaten to hack him to pieces with a machete! When I ran into Ganja Karuppu, seeming so similar to Kasi, I couldn't help but ask if it were true. He confirmed it, humorously but gloomily describing how people would try to hit him, attack him, and insult him, Ganja Karuppu the actor, for

betraying Paraman, the character. With each word of his comically exaggerated report of abuse, his body recoiled from an imagined blow. Ganja Karuppu went out of focus as his body pulled away and winced in narrated remembrance. Kasi came into focus.

We laughed. Ganja Karuppu entered Sasikumar's office. I went back to the college hostel where I was living at the time. But the encounter troubled me, and it stuck with me. It hit upon an unresolved tension at play in the film and its worlds: a film touted as realistic, a mirror of reality, and yet whose social life inside and outside the cinematic frame comingled with a reality that it was distinct from, a film which reflected but also seemed to act on the world, a world which spoke back and hit back.

It wasn't merely that the film spilled out into the theater and beyond. All films potentially do this. Rather, it was that something of the cinematic clung to Ganja Karuppu, and he suffered it as a perpetually mistaken, and yet very real, identity. Part of Kasi hung around like a dark shadow in the foyer of Sasikumar's office, superposed on Ganja Karuppu's body. To paraphrase performance theorist Richard Schechter, while Ganja Karuppu was not Kasi, he was not not Kasi either. Lurking within the ambit of the real that *Subramaniyapuram* depicted on screen was another real, the reality of this lingering shadow that the film cast outside the theater.

Subramaniyapuram's climax was visceral. To be seen, it had to be embodied. To see it was to be implicated in it. People felt compelled to yell at the screen. Angry and betrayed, viewers cathartically expiated the evil of Kasi's betrayal by cursing him and his real-life surrogate. And yet, this wasn't simply a matter of taking the film *as if* it were reality. Rather, it involved treating Ganja Karuppu *as* Kasi, *as* a traitor, a turncoat, a villain. Where the film began and ended was unclear. The screen was dissolved, or rather, projected outward and back onto us. It addressed us and, in turn, demanded a response.

Both joking narratives about the reception of *Subramaniyapuram* point to an excess of the film's realism, of the way in which the film seemed to be too real for viewers. The joke is that such viewers confuse a mere representation for what it only fictively represents. This figure—the dupe who mistakes representations for what they represent—has a long history, both in the West (think of Plato's allegory of the cave) and in India. In Tamil Nadu, this figure is often associated with fans of famous heroes like M. G. Ramachandran (1917 – 1987) and Rajinikanth (b. 1950), actors whose celebrity inspires a devotion among audiences that can verge on the religious

(or for those who disapprove, the fanatical). M. G. Ramachandran, or MGR for short, is the canonical figure here. MGR segued from cinema to politics in the 1960s, becoming the chief minister of the state in 1977 until his death. Academics who have studied MGR's career have argued that his ability to become such a successful politician was due to his on-screen image as a protector of the people and defender of justice being parlayed into the off-screen realm of electoral politics.

Even today, it is not uncommon to hear from MGR fans that he was a good man, a strong man, a moral man, and that his films provide evidence for this very fact. In more skeptical circles, this conflation of MGR's on- and off-screen image is written off as an effect of his propagandistic films on impressionable, uneducated, and immature audiences. And yet, as I was told by those partial to him (those presumed dupes), MGR was known to be a good man not because the representation of MGR on screen "reflected" who he was or what he did in some sort of direct way, but because MGR *chose* to portray good, moral, just characters. Such fans didn't confuse the image with reality. Rather, based on a set of assumptions about how MGR picked his films, they deduced reality from the image. Hence, as they explained, MGR made sure his characters didn't smoke, drink, cheat women and the like, because he didn't do, or condone, such things. Knowing the power of cinema to potentially affect the audience, I was told, he took social responsibility for his "mass" appeal.

Who, indeed, would want to act on screen as a villain—to smoke, to insult, attack the innocent, and do other such bad things—other than someone who enjoys such things? What kind of person would willingly offer himself to be seen doing such things? To ask these questions of the on-screen image is not to see the image as simply a representation. Rather, it is to see it as a moral act unto itself, as something to be aligned to, answered, rejected, and tangled with. It is this entanglement with film that links Kasi to Ganja Karuppu, and *Subramaniyapuram* to its audience. With this in mind let us return to Sasikumar's narration of Ganja Karuppu's travails as Kasi in the real world:

> It [people's emotional involvement in the film] has gone that far. When I went back to all the shooting locations in Dindugal to say thanks to everyone, I brought him [Ganja Karuppu] along with me . . . When I took him along, there were some ladies sitting there.

> "Hey son, why are you hanging out with him?" they asked. "He's the traitor, right? He's the traitor! Why are you still hanging out with him? Why are you going around with him? He's a—"
>
> "No ma'am, he's my friend," I said, "It's just for the film, just for the film. It's just a movie, it's only a film."
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> "Fine, it's just for a film, but how could he do something like that for money?" they asked.
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> They had gotten so involved [in the film]! . . . .
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> "Fine, it's a film, but how could you take money to do that?" they asked.

For Sasikumar, these ladies were confused, blinded by emotion, blinded by realism. And yet, as they stubbornly insisted, they weren't really confused at all. "Fine, it's just for a film, but how could he do something like that for money?" Or, which amounts to the same, how could Ganja Karuppu act in such a horrific role? What kind of person must he be? "It's just for the film . . . It's just a movie," Sasikumar tried to explain. And yet, these ladies' objection was obstinately indifferent to cinema's presumed division of on-screen and off-screen, indifferent to Sasikumar's "just".

Subramaniyapuram is a realist film. But by saying this and by the film being this, something more fundamental about cinema is glossed over, something that *Subramaniyapuram*, for all its realism, affords us an insight into: the fundamental openness of cinema to the world, a world against and through which cinema defines itself. This is an openness to the possibility that the lines between the cinematic and the non-cinematic are not as clear-cut as we might otherwise assume. This is an openness within cinema that realism denies, an opening into and out of the text, an invitation from the film which requires an answer from the audience. This openness requires the audience's own openness to the screen, which is to say, a practiced indifference to the dichotomy of representation and reality, film and "real world".

This indifference or openness is not the same as what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "suspension of disbelief", that mode of audience engagement that famously characterizes how audiences engage with fiction by willingly bracketing its unreality. The suspension of disbelief implies that in our more rational moments, were we to see the film as it really is, as a mere re-presentation, as a fiction and a fantasy, we *would* and *should* disbelieve that cinema is part of the world, that it is "real". What *Subramaniyapuram*

and its audience reactions imply, however, is that what we suspend is not cinema's fantasy, but its reality. We suspend belief in the very distinction of reality and representation, the belief that cinema is somehow apart from the world, a mere representation that stands apart from it.

Isn't the lingering afterlife of *Subramaniyapuram*, how it clings to the body of Ganja Karuppu, a sign of disregard of the fictitious lines that separate the screen from the not-screen? And isn't this already implied by cinema itself, even as we continually deny it? *Subramaniyapuram* and its engagements with its audiences show that the lines that film supposedly relies upon to be understood, felt, and enjoyed are constantly being transgressed by it. They show that realism always slips away from itself, how film is always already acting in the world that it is purported to be distinct from. Or, if we wish to disperse these antinomies, that the screen dwells in its surroundings much as any other act or event does, never extricable from them, stubbornly insisting without respite, "Fine, it's a film, but . . ."