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Poetics of Praise and Image-Texts of Cinematic Encompassment

Developing the concept of image-text *out of Roman Jakobson's notion of aesthetic function and linguistic anthropology's discussion of entextualization, this paper shows how the tropology explored by the late Bernard Bate in twentieth-century Dravidianist oratory is taken up and recontextualized in the late twentieth-century Tamil films of the "mass hero" Rajinikanth. I trace a particular image-text across the two major media of modern Tamil politics—oratory and cinema—showing how it threads an aesthetics of political power and representation in this part of south India. In doing so, the article theorizes what images are and how they circulate.* [poetics, oratory, politics, cinema, India]

For John Bernard Bate (1960–2016)

Introduction

In his 1958 "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," Roman Jakobson (1960) famously elaborated on the *poetic function*, or what he called over twenty years earlier, the *aesthetic function* (Jakobson 1935[1987]). Both terms characterize the predominant, focalized aspect of poetry and other arts, though as Jakobson made clear, this function is neither confined to poetry nor art, nor are poetry and art only aesthetically functional. Jakobson wrote in 1935:

> Just as a poetic work is not exhausted by its aesthetic function, similarly the aesthetic function is not limited to poetic works; an orator's address, everyday conversation, newspaper articles, advertisements, a scientific treatise—all may employ aesthetic considerations, give expression to the aesthetic function, and often use words in and for themselves, not merely as a referential device. (p. 43)

"In and of themselves," "not merely as a referential device"—that is, not as representations of something else, not as signs that always lead us away from themselves, to something they are not. Rather, the aesthetic function focalizes signs *as* sign-vehicles, which is to say, to use the Peircean terms, as *sinsigns* (or tokens)—phenomenal, palpable forms in their existence in time and space—and thus *qualisigns*—signs whose semiotic function devolves to their imputed qualities (Keane 2003; Chumley 2017). The poetic function, thus, is a reflexive metasemiotic function (Silverstein 1993) calibrating the sign to its own sensuous material form *qua* form. As such, the poetic function points up that signs are—as a function of their embodied bundling of qualities—always multiplex, internally fractionated such that they may

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typify themselves; which is to say that the aesthetic quality, or poetic functionality, of any sign (or stretch of signs) projects, if only potentially or virtually, *textuality*—relations of indexical co-occurrence and iconic coherence. This was clearest, as Jakobson (1960) pointed out, with cases of parallelism, where the perceived recurrence of some feature of discourse weaves a texture, a structure of repetition/difference across iterated elements that constitute relations of mutual co(n)textualization; in a word, an image.

Linguistic anthropologists, building upon Jakobson, have come to use the term *entextualization* to denote the emergent processes whereby such relations of sameness and difference of co-occurring token-signs (or semiotic fractions thereof) across an evenemential envelope of semiosis come to be chunked together into coherent "text." Text, on this view, is what Peirce called a *legisign* (or type), a metasemiotic principle that construes and constitutes a heterogeneous array of sign tokens as an iterable higher-order unity (Silverstein and Urban 1996). As semiotic types, texts are detachable from the particular token-contexts in which they are embedded, liable to interdiscursive processes of de/recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990), circulation (Urban 1993; Gal 2018), and citation (Nakassis 2013, 2016) across time and space (Silverstein 2005).

Here, the poetic function is generalized as a particular kind of metapragmatic function (Silverstein 1993), an endogeneous metasemiotic frame that reflexively regiments and typifies the pragmatics of some semiotic event. Every process of entextualization turns on such an implicit metapragmatic function, whereby the iconisms between the indexically contiguous signs in question co-textualize each other. At the same time, processes of entextualization are also regimented by metapragmatic discourses (or ideologies) of various kinds. Indeed, not just a precipitate of entextualization, a text—as a recognizable, iterable form—is itself such a metapragmatics for construing the texture of some array of signs (as, e.g., a token of its type).

Yet while Jakobson's poetic function has been central to linguistic anthropological discussions of (en)text(ualization), it has not been theorized as itself constituting a distinct kind of text(uality), instead being swallowed up into the distinction of *interactional* and *denotational* text (Silverstein 2004). The latter—an emergent metasemiotic model of symbolic signs—describes coherence relations vis-à-vis the denotational content of some discursive event ('what is/was represented'), while the former—an emergent metasemiotic model of indexical signs—describes coherence relations vis-à-vis the pragmatics of some discursive event ('what is/was done'). In both cases, the poetic function plays its part as an immanent metapragmatics regimenting the entextualization of denotational or interactional coherence—or more often, both (since every denotational text is also an interactional text, though not vice versa).

In addition to denotational and interactional text(uality), it is analytically useful, however, to distinguish what we might call *aesthetic textuality*—those emergent structures of qualia that co-textualize each other to form diagrammatic iconic textures in events of semiosis—and *image-texts*.[1] On this view, images, or image-texts, are the outcome and regimenting metapragmatics of a dynamic process of entextualizing aesthetic, figural forms, what Jakobson (1960:359), following Hopkins, called in the context of speakable language, "figures of sound." An image-text is what the aesthetic/poetic function entextualizes, what it precipitates as a metasemiotic type (a diagrammatic iconic legisign) in and across contexts of embodied, formal occurrence (token-pictures), just as an image-text is a metapragmatic principle for construing the sensuousness of semiosis.[2]

This approach has a number of implications for thinking about images. (1) Images are not necessarily visual but may occur in any modality. (2) An image-text, like all texts (in the technical sense developed here), is duplex, constituted by metasemiotic and semiotic (i.e., formal) partials in dialectical concert. While, on the one hand, an image-text is an internally patterned (and thus minimally coherent) set of (quali)signs

set off from its surround (be it its context or other images; Leonhard 2011),[3] on the other hand, it is only so under some metasemiotic formulation that so construes it. As Nelson Goodman (1976) pointed out, the very possibility of likeness between a sign and its object (and thus the entextualization process) is always relative to some ideological position (Gal 2005) or, to extend W. J. T. Michell's (1994, 2015) term, a meta-picture.[4] (3) What counts as an image-text, therefore, is perspectival and thus political (Rancière 2007, 2009; Nakassis in press). (4) As a corollary to the above, an image-text cannot be defined on its qualia alone (even if this is, interestingly, how we often experience images) but rather as the intersection point of a number of metafunctions: text-in-contextual, inter-textual, and ideological. (5) Images, thus, are not artifacts or objects (Silverstein and Urban 1996; "pictures," *sensu* Mitchell 2015). They are evenemential relations; they are (the outcomes of) events of semiosis (Bal 1992[2006]) just as they are an interdiscursive principle that holds *across* events and media of semiosis.

In this paper, I am particularly concerned with this final point: by what semiotic labor are image-texts entextualized and de/recontextualized across events, transduced and transported across media? Jakobson (1935[1987]) and his Russian Formalist colleagues confronted this issue through their notion of "the dominant": that putative aesthetic principle that unites some set of works as a coherent whole within/across some epoch. Art historians, as well as cultural and linguistic anthropologists working on "ethnoaesthetics," have similarly proposed overarching principles to explain how images (or motifs or styles) circulate/inhere across media, such as culture, worldview, "the period's aesthetic concept" (Mitchell 1994:88), or formal (autotelic) logics.[5]

In what follows, however, my interest is not in such decontextualized abstractions. Indeed, I caution against them. Rather, my interest is the concrete processes and relations through which specific images are entextualized and interdiscursively taken up by variously interested projects to various effect (Murphy 2015; Chumley 2016). To this end, I look at the cross-modal peregrination of a particular metonymic figure of reversible encompassment, following it from south Indian literature to literarized oratory in south Indian politics to politicized filmic form in south Indian cinema. Across interactional and denotational textualities, modalities and media, how are particular image-texts taken up as resources to forge connections across otherwise disparate domains of aesthetic and political activity? How do they constitute image-acts, and to what effect?

Pure Tamil, Mass Hero

The nineteenth century saw a transformation of politics and ethnolinguistic imagination in the Madras Presidency of south India. Colonial philological research into the relatedness of what became known as the Dravidian language family (Trautmann 2006; Mitchell 2009) proved that the south Indian languages—Tamil, Telugu, Toda, Kannada, Malayalam, et cetera—came from a different genetic stock than the north Indian languages (viz. Indo-Aryan/European)—Sanskrit and its congeners and daughter languages—and that its speakers, as later scholars argued, were of a different ethno-racial and culture-historical population. Toward the final decades of the nineteenth century, Indian scholars collected and made publicly available the poems, epics, and grammars of Tamil antiquity—the so-called Sangam literature (~300 CE; Shulman 2016:299ff.). Alongside this literary renaissance, as Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) has detailed, was a religious resurgence of Saivism—framed as distinct from north Indian, Aryan, Brahminical Hinduism—as well as, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the non-Brahmin movement, a consortium of elite, upper-caste non-Brahmin south Indians who protested the Brahmin monopoly on colonial positions of power (Pandian 2007).

Into the twentieth century, these different threads came to be articulated and transformed through the so-called Dravidian movement, an explicitly political project lead by *Periyār* ('the Great One') E. V. Ramaswamy (1879–1973), and later *Ariñar Aṇṇā*

('The Learned, Older Brother') C. N. Annadurai (1909–1969) and *Kalaiñar* ('The Artist') Mu. Karunanidhi (1924–2018). This project narrated an autochthonous, egalitarian and secular, ethnolinguistically pure Dravidian/Tamil community (which they represented) that was and continued to be, they inveighed, unjustly dominated by an Aryan, Sanskritic, and casteist Brahminical culture and political party—the Indian National Congress—from the north.

After independence in 1947, Annadurai and Karunanidhi—two charismatic orators who were also screenwriters for theater and film—broke off from Periyar's iconoclastic Dravida Kazhakam ('Dravidian Federation'), forming the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK; 'Dravidian Progress Federation') in 1949, a political party aimed at a mass, populist electorate. The DMK was electorally victorious in 1967, rising on the wings of the anti-Hindi protests of 1965 that opposed the central government's imposition of the Hindi language on civil service exams. Dravidianist parties have controlled the Secretariat in Fort St. George ever since, and their populist, ethnolinguistic politics of Tamil language and culture remain hegemonic.

Scholars of the Dravidian movement have pointed to two communicative media as central to its emergence and success: public oratory and commercial cinema.

From Stage to Secretariat

John Bernard Bate's groundbreaking monograph, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic* (2009) details the aesthetic of political oratory that became emblematic of the Dravidianist parties, in particular, their use of *sentamil̲*, a speech register of 'refined,' 'beautiful' Tamil in events of public address. 'Pure' (that is, denuded of Sanskritic and English words), literary, and littered with antiquated Tamil forms, this register indexically invokes a Tamil antiquity, a time imagined to predate contact with Brahminical Hinduism and Sanskrit, a time of Tamil kings ruling a Tamil land. *Sentamil̲* personifies and presences *Tamil̲tāy* or 'mother Tamil,' a feminized deification of the language to which Dravidianist orators proclaimed devotion and which they promised to protect (Ramaswamy 1997).

As Bate (2009, 2012, 2013) showed, while evocative of Tamil antiquity, *sentamil̲* was a modern phenomenon. Kings and other 'big men' in the pre-modern past did not speak to large crowds in public places, let alone in *sentamil̲*. Only in the period of late nineteenth and early twentieth century did Tamil leaders began taking to the stage to publicly speak in Tamil, using *sentamil̲* in a speech genre (sermonic oratory) sourced from Protestant homily (Bate 2004, 2005, 2010). As Bate argued, it was through this mode of oratorical address, with its pre-modern literary aesthetics, that a modern Tamil public—and thus the "Tamil people"—were performatively brought into the world.

From Screen to Secretariat

With independence, ongoing agitations in the Madras Presidency for the creation of language community–based states resulted, first, in the creation of Andhra Pradesh (for Telugu speakers) in 1953 (Mitchell 2009) and later, with the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, in the creation of Madras State (for Tamil speakers; renamed Tamil Nadu in 1968), Kerala (for Malayalam speakers), and Mysore State (for Kannada speakers; renamed Karnataka in 1973). While film production in the first decades of the twentieth-century in south India was resolutely multilingual and non-regionally specific in its distribution (Hughes 2011), with the linguistic division of the Madras Presidency distribution channels came to be increasingly enclosed by state boundaries, and film production in the Madras Presidency more firmly gave way to regional industries associated with named languages (viz. the Telugu industry of Andhra Pradesh, the Tamil industry of Tamil Nadu, etc.).

Already using popular theater as a political medium, from the late 1940s onward leaders of the Dravidianist DMK party such as Annadurai and Karunanidhi turned to

cinema to propagate party ideology, penning screenplays (many of which were plays they had written and produced) for party-affiliated actors to espouse oratorically efflorescent monologues in line with Dravidianist narratives (Hardgrave 1971, 1973; Pandian 1991; Krishnan 2009). In addition, the DMK utilized charismatic stars such as Sivaji Ganesan (1928–2001) and M. G. Ramachandran (1917–1987) to draw large crowds to their public meetings, wherein they staged their imagined community of ancient Tamil sovereignty in *sentamil̲* (on which, more below).

The most popular such star was *Puraṭci Talaivar* ('the Revolutionary Leader') M. G. Ramachandran (MGR). Closely affiliated with the DMK (a party member from 1953 and an elected representative from 1962), MGR's popularity rode alongside that of the DMK. Yet while his films promoted DMK party ideology, as Sivathamby (1981) and Pandian (1992) have noted, the narratives (i.e., denotational textuality) of his swashbuckling folkloric but also socially realist films held out a space especially for *him* as *the* hero of the masses who would bring social justice to the people. With the death of Annadurai in 1969, tensions with Karunanidhi led to MGR forming his own party in 1972, the Annadurai DMK (ADMK; later AIADMK), largely out of his extensive fan club network (Dickey 1993a). In 1977, the A(IA)DMK swept the elections, MGR ruling the state as a democratically elected monarch, as Madhava Prasad (2014) has put it, until his death in 1987. Since then, control of the state government has oscillated between the DMK and AIADMK, the latter helmed by MGR's onscreen and offscreen consort, *Puraṭci Talaivi* ('the Revolutionary [Female] Leader') J. Jayalalitha (1948–2016) until her death in late 2016.

Madhava Prasad (2014) has termed this close relationship between south Indian cinema—and in particular, its "mass heroes"—and politics *cine-politics*. As Prasad and S. V. Srinivas (2009) have argued, cine-politics turns on the way in which a certain kind of hero-centered film not only denotationally entextualizes the hero-character as a leader of the masses, but also presupposes an offscreen surplus—the star image of the celebrity actor—that it integrates into and projects out of the narrative. The interactional textuality of such films "build up" the image of the hero-star as a *talaivar* ('leader'), adulating him and figurating his audiences not only as film fans, but as political followers. It is this cine-political surplus that actors like MGR have leveraged to segue from the film industry into electoral politics (Pandian 1992), the most recent being *Karuppu MGR* ('the Dark-Skinned MGR') "Captain" Vijayakanth (b. 1952) and "Superstar" Rajinikanth (b. 1950), the former in 2012 (to much disappointment, ultimately) and the latter in late 2017 (with much hope from his fans). Enabled by the historically contingent lamination and realignment of the (Tamil) language community (*sensu* Silverstein 1998), the electorally organized state (viz. Tamil Nadu), and the political economy of film distribution and exhibition (as coterminous with both), in this sub-national postcolonial context, it is the textual body and embodied image of the mass hero-star through which political community has been consistently, though not exclusively, imagined, represented, and enacted for the last four decades.

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Here, then, are two communicative media that have been linked to the emergence of a Dravidian political sphere: the oratorical eloquence of *sentamil̲* and the populist cine-politics of commercial cinema. A number of authors have focused on the common imaginaries/narratives of stage oratory and DMK films (Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993a), the use of DMK-style oratory performed within such films (Pandian 1991; Krishnan 2009), and the use of film songs within Dravidianist political party meetings (Bate 2009:80). In this paper, I trace a different, if related connection between these two media: their *aesthetic textuality*. I do so, however, by focusing on a later period than the heyday of the DMK film (1950–1960s)—the 1990s—and on a different star than MGR—Rajinikanth. Rajinikanth's films from the 1990s are a rich site for the poetics of cine-politics, this period being a high-point both of Rajini's popularity and of speculation that he would enter electoral politics (only eclipsed perhaps by the hype following his stated intention to form a political party in 2017). It

is also the period following MGR's death (a cinepolitical vacuum that came to be filled by Rajinikanth) and the peak of bitter political competition between Karunanidhi's DMK and Jayalalitha's AIADMK. This is the same period as Bernard Bate's dissertation fieldwork (1992–1995; see Bate 2000:viii–x), providing a useful comparison case to his ethnographic materials.

In what follows, I show how the adulatory aesthetics of Rajinikanth's films work through a particular tropology that Bate identified as central to what he called the Dravidian aesthetic—namely, the trope of *ākupeyar* (roughly glossable as metonymy/synechdoche) as used in events of political praise (*pukaḻ*). My suggestion is that such an oratorical tropology of praise and adulation can be found at play in the multimodal poetics of the Tamil mass film, allowing us to trace out the interdiscursivity of a particular kind of image-text of reversible encompassment that threads the distinct interactional and denotational textualities of political speech and cinematic exhibition. This image-text, I suggest, was one basis of Rajinikanth's cine-political potential in the 1990s, a basis that has carried over into the current, open-ended moment of Tamil politics where Rajinikanth would seem to be planning to contest elections across the state.

Oratorical Praise of the Party Leader

One of the central features of political discourse in Tamil Nadu is praise, by lower-level party members to higher-level leaders, and vice versa. As Bate (2009:97) argued,

> Praise by subordinates is (and emblematizes) an ancient cultural logic in the production of power in the Tamil lands, a logic by which the praiser participates in the greatness of the praised at the very moment of naming that greatness. . . . [P]raise embodies power and one's relationship to it: one praises one's leader with the desire to participate in the world of that leader and to thereby generate greatness for oneself. The logic of this practice . . . is contained in the very tropic structures found in the vocative phrases . . . deployed in the mainstream political practice of contemporary Tamilnadu.

Bate suggests, not unproblematically nor without some ambivalence (see note 19), that these tropic structures have a basis in classical Tamil literature and the indigenous treatises that provide their grammar. Bate focused on sutra 290 of the thirteenth century grammar, *Nannūl* and commentaries on it; in particular, their treatment of the paradigm *ākupeyar*, what Bate translates as "transformed words" (*āku* 'become [s. thing]' + *peyar* 'word, noun'; Annamalai 1990 translates it as "transference noun"). Taking up A. K. Ramanujan's (1985, 1999:43–44) discussion of the aesthetics of the Sangam literature, Bate contends that metonymy, in the form of *ākupeyar*, is the dominant of Tamil poetics, which favors relations of (indexical) contiguity over similarity (i.e., metaphor, as in Western poetics).[6]

Ākupeyar comprises sixteen named tropes (though the set is essentially open-ended, as Annamalai 1990 notes). Each involves a semantic relation between a head noun whose default meaning is "transferred" in some tropic usage. Such extensions move from species to genus, or vice versa, and may include place, time, part, attribute, activity, measurement, instrument, container, result, actor, whereby some part of a whole (a place, time, part, quality, etc.) is used to name the whole, or vice versa. For example,

(1) *ūr* *sirittatu*
town laugh-PST.NEUT.
'the town laughed,' to mean 'the townspeople laughed'
(*iṭavākupeyar, ākupeyar* of place-to-s.thing in/of that place)

(2) *aṭuppiliruntu* *pālai* *iṟakku*
stove-ABL. milk-ACC. take off.IMP
'Take the milk off the stove' (to mean, 'Take the pot of milk off the stove') (*tāniyākupeyar, ākupeyar* of container-to-contained)

(3) *talaikku pattu rūbāy koṭu*
head-DAT. ten rupee give.IMP.
'Give ten rupees per head' (to mean, 'Give ten rupees per person')
(*cinaiyākupeyar, ākupeyar* of part-to-whole)

As Bate (2009:100) notes, such relations involve a contiguity of elements: "As the author of *Nannul* describes it, *akupeyar* depicts one thing in terms of another; but unlike metaphor . . . the two relata always exist *in praesentia*: both are present in some contiguous relationship with each other."[7] For Bate, following Ramanujan, this "contiguous relationship" is itself a metonym of a more general Tamil motif of reciprocal relations of encompassment. Ramanujan (1999:44; also see 1985:247, 264) writes:

> [C]ontainer-contained relations are seen in many kinds of concepts and images [in Tamil literature]: not only in culture-nature, but also god-world, king-kingdom, devotee-god, mother-child. . . . what is contained mirrors the container; the microcosm is both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it.

As Bate shows, political oratorical moments of address and praise draw on such images heavily; in particular, on a particular subclass of *ākupeyar*: *tāniyākupeyar*, where "the thing containing or characterizing something takes on the name of the thing contained or characterized" (Bate 2009:104–5; see [2] above for a standard example), like feelings for the heart or light for a lamp. Bate's discussion, thus, moves from a semantico-grammatical relation (as in *Nannūl*) to a pragmatic process, from (grammars on) literature to the nitty gritty (if also beautiful poetics) of real politicking.

Consider Bate's example of vocative address displayed on temporarily erected arches put over the roads leading to a DMK party meeting in Madurai, August 1994:

(4) *uṭanpiṟappukkaḷin uyir-ē*
siblings-GEN. life-EMPH./VOC.
'O, Life of the Siblings'

This heralding is addressed to the leader of the DMK, Kalaiñar Karunanidhi, put up by a party functionary. As Bate argues, this phrase of praise not only addresses the leader (as a first-order index) but also points to the party member (as a second-order index). And while neither are present, the vocative/emphatic *-ē* presupposes a virtual co-presence that renders hailer and hailed contiguous with each other (Bate 2009:108), such that each "dwell[s] inside" the other and the praiser "enjoys an intimate, emotional and fruitful relationship with his leader" (ibid.:112). This presencing is enabled by the fact that the phrase has a citational relationship with Kalaiñar's own trademark salutation to his audiences (itself a citation of Annadurai's address of party workers as *tambikaḷ* 'younger brothers'; Rajanayagam 2015:140n3), used to close his opening salutations at public meetings:

(5) *en uyir-in-um mēl-āna anbu uṭanpirappukkaḷ-ē*
1prs.OBL. life-COM.-CL. above-ADJ. love siblings-EMPH./VOC.
'O, my siblings whom I love even more than my own life.'

Here, then, the party worker hails his leader as he (like all party members) has been hailed before, and as he anticipates being hailed again in the upcoming meeting. This renders the vocative in (4) not simply an event of praising address but a performative baptism of sorts, an iterated act of naming that metonymically draws its name from the mouth of the named (Kalaiñar). Further note how *uṭan-piṟappuk-kaḷ* (literally, 'with/together-birth-PL.') figurates the party as a consanguineal group, whose very life is the party leader, Karunanidhi. Karunanidhi loves the party and its workers (his siblings) more than his own life even as *he*, in fact, is the life of the party

and its workers. This reversible container-contained trope figurates an exchange, of each placing the other's life at the core of their own being (and thus above their own individual existence). Life (that which is contained by a body) appears in/as the name for the container (the person and his body), which itself contains the party within it (in/as the body of the leader).

As Bate details, such political discourse takes place within ritualized meetings enframed by monumental, temporary structures—like the cutouts of archways from which these vocatives cry out, as well as fortress-like entrances and gargantuan representations of party luminaries that surround and constitute the space of the meeting (see figures 6–7 in Bate 2009 and figures 1.1, 1.3 in Jacob 2009)—that unwind a chronotope of a Tamil kingdom of yore in the here and now. The speeches in *sentamil̲* that are proleptically anticipated by such vocative phrases (among other "ancient" tropes of adulation and praise) place the orator at the epicenter of this chronotope (centerstage, literally; figure 1), even as the temporal order of such orators places the party leader at its zenith (as he is the last to speak).

Praised at every step of the way (from the arches to the preceding speeches to the crowd's adulatory cheers), the orator-leader within this Dravidianist imaginary comes to citationally embody the antiquity of Tamil civilization and the Tamil language itself, a fact itself made explicit in praise that explicitly names the leader as, for example, 'Child-like Tamil' and the like (Bate 2009:68; Rajanayagam 2015:130).

This performative figuration, this image-text of the leader as the center of a political party and world that he himself contains in his body is condensed in these vocatives of praise and adulation even as it is unfurled in the political discourse and spatial mise-en-scène that follows them in political meetings. And this is to Bate's larger points: (1) through specific acts of praise, political leaders (including former cinema stars like MGR and Jayalalitha) become both metonymic *and* encompassing of the language community and the state (Bate 2009:124); and (2) such a generalized image-text of metonymy-encompassment is a central modality of political action in the Dravidianist dispensation that has dominated Tamil Nadu politics for more than the last half century.

Image-Texts of Cinematic Praise

Such forms of praise and hierarchical intimacy are not specific to Dravidianist oratory. They are also a central part of cinematic culture in Tamil Nadu, among other sites of quotidian cultural practice (Appadurai 1990; Cody 2009). The same tropes of praise and adulation are used by fans to talk about and address film stars, be it in spontaneous discourse, public meetings,[8] or ritual occasions such as celebrations of the star's birthday.[9] And they appear on film posters and cutouts whose aesthetics and imagery are exactly the same as those described by Bate for party luminaries (Pandian 2005; Jacob 2009; Gerritsen 2012). Such images serve as the site of various citational rituals of sovereignty/divinity performed by fans: honorification (e.g., garlanding pictures of the star), ritual purification (e.g., pouring milk or beer or soda on the star's picture), and evil eye (*tiruṣṭi*) prophylaxis (Nakassis 2016:271n4).

In what follows, I focus on a different, if related aspect of cinematic praise: on how films themselves constitute acts of praise and adulation of star actors like MGR and Rajinikanth. Indeed, the whole of such "mass films"—as involving narratives (denotational texts) about powerful heroes who serve justice to the people in ways that "build up" the hero and portray him in a positive light as a leader—is an act (an interactional text) of praise (or *pukal̲*) of the offscreen personage of the hero-star (see Pandian 1992, Dickey 1993a for examples). And within such narratives, of course, specific discursive acts of praise abound. Rajinikanth's films since the 1990s, for example, are littered with scenes where his friends, family members, lovers, and even/especially enemies admire and praise his strength, Tamil speech, dark-skinned beauty, "style," and good heart and willingness to help the people, likening him to a lion (an emblem of sovereignty in India), a tiger (figure 2 – top), an immoveable mountain, an innocent child, a king, or a particular deity (for which his characters are

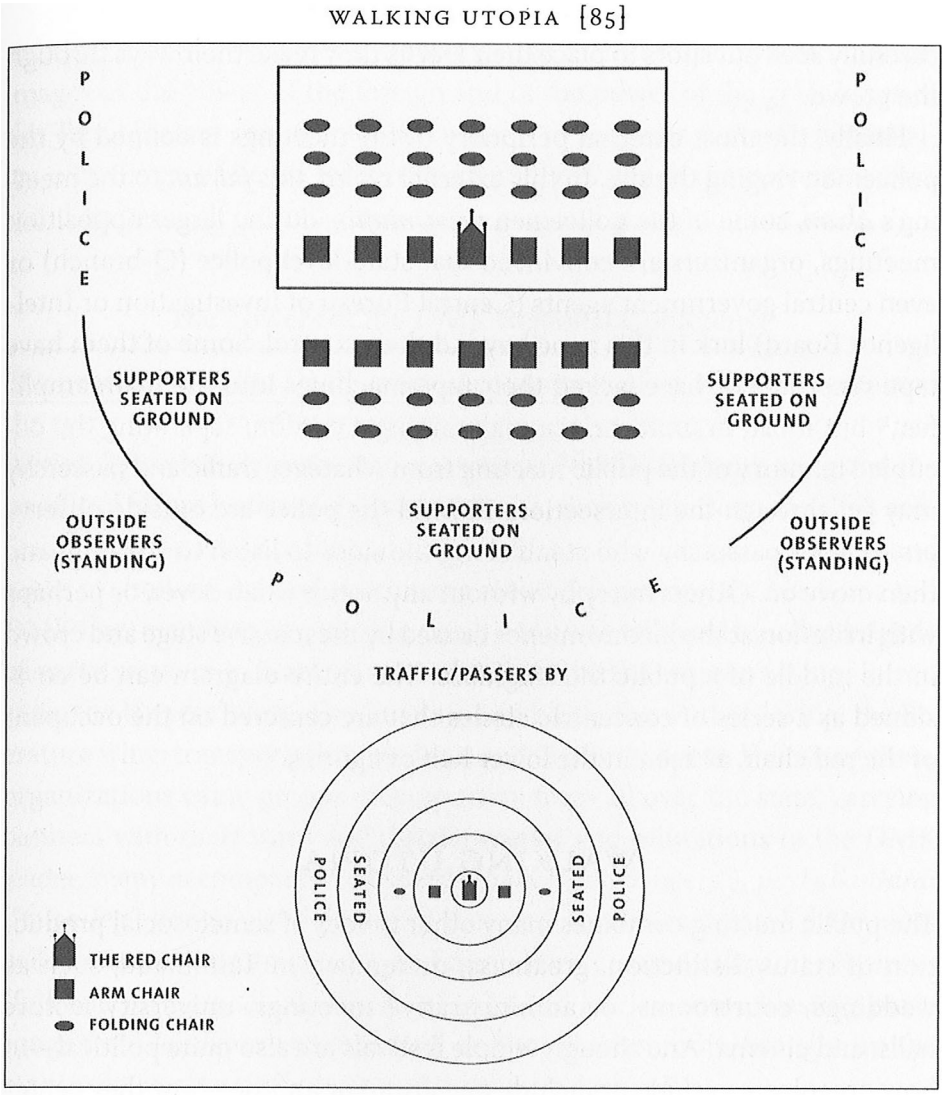

FIGURE 5 Spatial axes of distinction in a public meeting: front–back, center–periphery, *akam–puram*. Line drawing by Mouli Marur.

Figure 1. The organization of a Tamil political meeting, ca. 1994; from *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic* by John Bernard Bate, page 85. Line drawing by Mouli Marur, Copyright © 2009. Reprinted with permission.

most often named), among other figures. Some of these tropes directly mirror imagery discussed by Bate: for example, Rajinikanth's 2007 film *Sivaji: The Boss* (dir. S. Shankar) features a digitally effected montage (~2:18:30) which shows Rajini's trademark stylish gait, his footsteps turning dirt roads into paved roads, arid landscapes into lush farmlands, and straw-thatched huts into residential complexes (bearing his name, Sivaji). This CGI montage echoes a motif from the medieval king-praising *meykirthis*—"even wastelands flourish if your foot steps there" (Bate 2009:127)—and adulatory praise showered on political leaders such as Jayalalitha in the mid-1990s:

"O, Fantasy who brought the Kaveri River to fatten this golden fertile country for all of history! . . .
O, Our Goddess of Love who has placed her foot in Anna District!
O, Leader equal to the Lion!" (quoted in Bate 2009:128)

Similarly, consider the trope of *maṭakku*, meaning 'a folding, refracting (through a prism)' (also 'to repeat, overpower, stop with an argument, to deflect, destroy, kill, tame, humble, counteract'). In *maṭakku*, a particular sound is alliteratively repeated across a piece of discourse to give it rhetorical force (Bate 2009:129–30; Shulman 2017). As Bate notes, such a literary trope finds expression in political posters that multiply the image of the leader. We find similar tropes throughout Rajinikanth's films, as when his body is multiplied onscreen (figure 2 – bottom) or when repeated jump cuts of the same action are spliced together in quick sequence. In both cases, the multiplication of Rajini's body in time or space honorificates him (cf. the trope of *mariyātai*, 'respect,' through grammatical/semantic plurality) by connoting his power and prowess.

Below I focus more closely on *Padaiyappa* (1999)—Rajinikanth's hugely popular, record-breaking 150th film, marking his twenty-fifth year in the industry (Anandan 2004:28-397; Dhananjayan 2011:206)—and its entextualization of Rajinikanth as the container and contained of the Tamil ethnolinguistic community, which is to say, the polity itself, a filmic image-text of reversible encompassment and image-act of praise. To show this I give an analysis of two linked sequences—the opening of the film and the pre-climax confrontation with the villainess—detailing how dialogue, film lyrics, gesture, sound, mise-en-scène, shot composition and editing, and intra- and inter-textual poetic references weave a particular aesthetic texture of encompassment.[10] Augmenting and contextualizing this analysis with discussion with the film's director, K. S. Ravikumar (2018), film viewers, as well as press metadiscourse and ethnographic accounts of filmgoing, I show how this aesthetic textuality was entextualized by such stakeholders as an offscreen act of political representation.

Figure 2. Two Shots from "Vetri Kodi Kattu" ('Raise the Victory Flag'), *Padaiyappa* (1999). Shot 1 (above): Rajini walks toward the camera in a medium close-up as his face morphs into a tiger's and then back to his own (not shown); shot 2 (below): the camera then cuts to a long shot, with Rajini multiplied onscreen.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Enter the Superstar

Padaiyappa's extended opening sequence begins with the de rigeur appearance of Rajini's name and epithet "Superstar." Heralding his arrival, and claiming what follows as taking place as in his name, only then does the producer's banner and the film's title appear. Next comes a relatively long preamble to Rajini's entry (long for Rajinikanth films from the 1990s, at least; Nakassis 2017b:213n19) consisting of two scenes—a marriage at a temple and the heroine worshipping at a snake nest—that introduce a number of key characters: veteran actor-star Sivaji Ganesan as the father of Rajini's character, Arupadaiyappa (or Padaiyappa for short); Padaiyappa's love interest, Vasundhara (played by Soundarya) and the villainess and Padaiyappa's cross-cousin, Neelambari (memorably played by Ramya Krishna).

After the temple scene, which shows Rajini/Padaiyappa's lineage as the stewards of the village and its Arupadaiyappa (or Murugan) temple, the film cuts to a young woman, Vasudharan who is pouring milk into a vessel while worshipping a cobra's nest (a sacred site for some Hindus). A group of men fearfully run into the scene upon seeing a (different?) snake, at which point one man (played, ironically perhaps, by the "fight master" [stunt choreographer] Kanal Kannan) says in Tamil, 'What the hell, those women are boldly pouring milk for the snake! Are you all men or what, get out of here!' When he hears the snake, however, he comically jumps in fright. Cut to the snake slithering on the ground. Cut to a black sports car driving quickly as we hear a peppy song, with shots back and forth between the snake and the car. As the car nears, the frightened men unknowingly run in front of the car, which screeches to a halt to avoid hitting them.[11] We hear them whisper in fear that it's the 'boss lady' (*mutalāḷiyammā*). The boss lady, Neelambari, who is also Vasundhara's employer (and later, romantic rival for Padaiyappa's affections), gets out of the car and scolds the men, arrogantly ordering them to kill the snake despite their protests of the sacredness of its nest. They proceed to try and stab it with their metal pikes, as the pious Vasundhara prays to the village's deity Arupadaiyappa to protect the snake. At the last second, right before the men are about to kill the snake (who has retreated into its nest) a hand and forearm with its sleeve stylishly rolled up enters the frame, grabbing the pike (figure 3 – left). Cut to the shocked-and-awed faces of the men (figure 3 – right) and then to Neelambari's surprise. Cut back to the hand which throws off the pike and the man attached to it, who flies impossibly high into the air. Cut away shots to the shocked/impressed faces of Neelambari and Vasudharan are followed by a cut back to the snake nest. The film's theme music kicks in and we see the hand reach into the nest to pull out the cobra with, again, cutaways to the awestruck characters. (At this point, Neeleambari takes off her stylish sunglasses.)

In slow motion, we finally see Rajini. The theme music yells "Hey! Padaiyappa!" (the name of Rajini's character we can infer) as he rises up in profile, a tracking shot bringing him tighter into the frame, responding to our desire to see and get closer to him. His character's namesake turns out to be none other than the god that the heroine prayed to for protection, whose temple his patriline hereditarily maintains, that of the Tamil deity, Arupadaiyappa/Murugan! Staring the snake down as he smiles, Rajini slowly turns to look directly into the camera. He then stylishly salutes the camera with his free hand, along with a swoosh sound effect—to connote the speed and power of his gesture—and another chant of "Hey! Padaiyappa!" from the acousmatic chorus (figure 4).

In revelatory moments such as this, where the hero-star's appearance has been desirously expected and excitingly deferred, the hero is revealed in his full plenitude, in frontal bust shots that show us his face, foregrounded from everything else. This is a moment of transaction. Rajini's "entry" in the theater is greeted by the audience, whose members whistle, clap, throw confetti, jump up and down, touch the screen, and yell acts of praising address: "*Talaivā!*" ('Leader [VOC.]!') or even "*Manitakaṭavuḷ!*" ('Human god!'), as Naren, a friend and former Rajinikanth fan (in his teenage years in the 1990s), reported from his remembrances of watching Rajini films from the 1990s

Figure 3. Rajini's "entry" in *Padaiyappa*. Left: the lone hand answering a prayer for Arupadaiyappa's protection; right: the shocked-and-awed faces of the local men, including the "fight master" Kanal Kannan (holding the pike).
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

and as I similarly heard at the 6:00 a.m. first-day show of Rajini's 2016 film, *Kabali* in Madurai. The image is designed to reply, with an aesthetics of frontality that insists on showing the eyes and face of the hero-star as he looks straight at the camera, as if he is "telling to the audience, audience-*ṭṭa nērā solṟa mātiri*" ('saying it directly to the audience'), as K. S. Ravikumar, the film's director put it to me in 2018. Such "deictic" shots (Casetti 1998) often include direct linguistic or gestural address to the audience (as in figure 4 – right) and even reference to the time and place of theatrical viewing (Nakassis 2016:166, 2017b: 217n24).

As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Nakassis 2017b), in such moments Rajini is not simply represented onscreen, be it as an indexical trace reportively calibrated to some profilmic event of performance or as a symbolic character nomically calibrated to a fictional diegesis. He is also *present* to us: with us in the theater, looking at us, saluting us. Not just physical co-presence, this is affective intimacy. As Naren noted, when you see Rajini looking at you, when he [HON.] comes down from the screen to talk to you ("*iṟaṅki pēsuvāru*"), to directly order you ("*nēraṭiyā* order *pōṭuvāru*"), we feel that not only are we in the presence of a 'big man and a great leader' ("*oru periya āḷu, periya talaivan*"), but also 'our [INCL.] elder brother' ("*namma aṇṇan*"), 'someone from our house, someone that we're really close with' ("*namma vīṭle oruttar*," "*romba nerukkamānavar*"; Dickey 1993b:351, 356).

Through this presencing, Rajini's image is entextualized as a token-reflexive sign, reflexively calibrated to the moment of exhibition and apperception while also sutured into the film text, and thus offered up as an object of praise on *both* sides of the screen: in the diegetic world and in the theater, and in the traffic between them. As K. S. Ravikumar (2018) told me, the composition of this sequence (e.g., camera angles, framing, effects, etc.) was designed to "build up" Rajini's "image" over and beyond, yet also through, the story and character. Indeed, as an elaborated ritual that is typical of all of Rajini's films from this period,[12] this opening sequence doubles the hero-star, on and off the screen, such that for the duration of the film, it is not simply the character, Padaiyappa that is being (interactionally) praised in and by the (denotational) narrative and its (image) aesthetics, but simultaneously and more importantly, Rajinikanth himself.

Figure 4. Rajini's revelation and salute to the audience in *Padaiyappa*.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Encompassing the Scene of His Presencing

If Rajini is figured as an object of praise, this praise is refracted back to the audience, much in the same way as we saw in the mutual praise between the orator-politician and his party workers that Bate discussed. Consider the rest of *Padaiyappa*'s opening sequence. After Rajini/Padaiyappa salutes the audience, the camera cuts back to the impressed faces of the onlookers, then to Rajini/Padaiyappa who kisses and pets the cobra on its expanded hood. The camera cuts to the modern, sexy Neelambari looking Padaiyappa up and down, and then to the homely, traditionally clad heroine, Vasundhara who stands humbly worshipping/thanking him. While Padaiyappa returns Neelambari's gaze with his own amorous smile, he is, by contrast, visibly shaken when he registers the sight of Vasundhara. At this moment, the peppy theme music stops abruptly, and Padaiyappa takes off his sunglasses to take her in—poetically mirroring, but inverting Neelambari's stance toward him as he reorients his gaze, and moral bearing, to the demure Vasundhara.

We then see the subaltern man whom Rajini/Padaiyappa threw off, looking at Rajini/Padaiyappa with trepidation, backing away. Rajini/Padaiyappa smiles, walks toward him and affectionately puts his hand on his chin, slapping him on the cheek twice as the man beams. Cut to a high-angle Akela crane shot of Rajini with a crowd of men behind him smiling as the opening song, "Singa Nadai Pottu" ('Walk Like a Lion,' penned by the famous Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu) begins. Rajini sings the first two lines in Tamil, only to be interrupted by Neelambari, who haughtily snaps and asks him, in English, "Hey, who are you, man?" Rajini answers with the chorus of the song—"*En peru Padaiyappa*" ('My name is Padaiyappa')—auto-baptizing himself as his character while he dances.

In this sequence, Rajini's pointing gestures, the mise-en-scène, and the song lyrics figurate his containment within an ethnolinguistic polity that itself, by implication, is coterminous with his audience. At the end of the first verse, Rajini sings, "*tālāṭṭi vaḷarttatu tamiḻ nāṭṭu maṇṇappā*!" '(I was) lovingly raised by the Tamil Nadu soil, man!' As he sings this, Rajini points down at the ground at his feet, with a large crowd of traditionally dressed male and female onlookers to his right and left, and a line of dancers and drummers behind him (figure 5)—a spatial arrangement designed to connote Rajini's powerful image as a political force (K. S. Ravikumar 2018). Here, Rajini is enveloped on three sides by an image of "the (Tamil) people," the fourth wall of this square being the open-ended yet overdetermined surface inhabited by the audience, an audience thereby invited by the mirror of the screen's projection as co-participants in this spectacle of belonging.

Later in the song, Rajini sings in Tamil,

Pattu māṭi vīṭu koṇṭa sottu sukam vēṇṭām.	No need for luxury or a ten-story house.
Paṭṭaṅkaḷai vāṅki tarum pataviyum vēṇṭām.	No need for titles or posts.
Mālaikaḷ iṭa vēṇṭām. Taṅka makuṭamum tara vēṇṭām.	No need to garland or give golden crowns.
Tamiḻ tāynāṭu tanta anbu pōtumē.	The love that the Tamil motherland has given is more than enough.
En oru tuḷi vērvaikku oru pavun taṅka kāsu koṭuttatu Tamiḻ allavā?	Isn't it Tamil that gave one pound of gold coins for shedding a bead of my sweat?
En uṭal poruḷ āviyai Tamiḻukkum Tamiḻarkkum koṭuppatu muṟai allavā?	Isn't it right to sacrifice my body and soul to the cause of the Tamil language and people?[13]

As he sings that his sweat was repaid by the Tamil language in gold, we see a close-up of a CGI sweatdrop fall on dry earth and turn into a gold coin. And as he sings that it is only right that he sacrifice body and soul in return to the Tamil people and their language, he points directly at the camera as a crowd of onlookers watch him with smiling approval and joined hands (figure 6).

Figure 5. Rajini pointing at the ground from which he was raised, framed on three sides; from the song "Singa Nadai Pottu" ('Walk Like a Lion'), *Padaiyappa*.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Here the image-text comprises a part (Rajini's sweat) joining with a whole (the soil) that raised and nurtured Rajini, only to turn that part (that child and his bodily substance) into wealth. And for this alchemic transference of dirt to personhood to sweat to dirt to gold, Rajini is ready to give his body and soul back to the Tamil soil, people, and language that raised him. In effect, this image constitutes an act of thanks, directed to the audience's acceptance and support of Rajinikanth, the actor. As K. S. Ravikumar (2018) put it to me, lyrics like this say, in effect, 'It's only because of you [SING.] that I have come, it's because of you [PL.] that I have become a big man' ("*Unnālē tān nān vantēn, uṅkaḷāle tān periya āḷ ānēn*"); and thus, 'listen to (and do) what I have to say' (cf. Naren's discussion of Rajini as giving 'orders' to the audience as a 'big man,' 'leader,' and 'older brother').

This array of co-occurring denotational, pictoral, and gestural signs, schematizes a backside and frontside, with Rajini as that schema's deictic origo (cf. figure 1). And just as Rajini's body is doubled on and off the screen, this image-text also figurates two addressees—an onscreen diegetic audience and an offscreen theatrical audience—that are poetically equated to each other and, as the denotational text of the lyrics suggest, scaled up to the ethnolinguistic community and state. This multimodal, screen-traversing image-text, thus, diagrams a reversible metonymic relation of encompassment and consubstantiality between the star (Rajinikanth) and his audience (qua "the Tamil people") through a parallel relation of the hero (Padaiyappa) and those who surround him (the onscreen bodies that admiringly gaze upon him).

Critical to such political gestures is the fact that Rajinikanth is not ethnolinguistically Tamil but born in Karnataka from a Maharashtrian background. Of course, ethnolinguistic identity has never been a criterion for a hero-star representing the Tamil polity—MGR too was known to be not ethnolinguistically Tamil (Rajanayagam 2015:129–32). What *is* criterial in Tamil politics since the Dravidian movement, however, is allegiance to the Tamil language community—as enacted in this opening scene (and many others like it; see Jegathesan 1999:37 for such an interpretation in the popular press).[14]

Not just consubstantiality and allegiance, however, this image-text is also entextualized as a claim on political representation. As Naren said of scenes like this one when we spoke in 2016, 'When he's looking at and speaking to the people, we'll think like, he's a hero for us, a hero who speaks for us' ("*Makkaḷai pāttu pēsum pōtu, nammaḷukkāna* hero, *nammaḷukkāka pēsuṟāru appaṭi nnu ninaippōm*"). But also *as* us. As Naren said on a later occasion when I asked how fans understand moments in songs such as this—when, for example, Rajini seems to be singing his own praises—he eschewed this as self-praise per se, responding that 'whatever's in people's hearts concerning Rajini, that's what comes out from Rajini's words' ("*makkaḷuṭaiya manasule Rajiniyai paṟṟi enna nenekkiṟāṅkaḷō atu Rajiniyōṭa vārttaiyiliruntu veḷiyā varutu*"). That is, in songs like "Singa Nadai Pottu" Rajini both praises his audience and voices their

Figure 6. Rajini walking toward the camera (left) while pointing at (right) and singing to us in the song "Singa Nadai Pottu," *Padaiyappa*: 'Isn't it right to sacrifice my body and soul to the Tamil language and people?'

praise of him; his words are addressed to them but ultimately sourced from *their* own hearts, from they who have raised and rewarded him, who have given him his very being and substance, status and power. Like Kalaiñar's and his cadres' reversible image-texts of containment, here Rajini incorporates his audience, creating a mise-en-abyme of containing and containment, praising and praised, onscreen and offscreen.

Consider how this image-text of metonymy and encompassment is built upon, and citationally reiterated, in the pre-climax of the film. Here more than elsewhere the particular political context of the film is key. *Padaiyappa* was released in April 1999, five months before the assembly by-elections in Tamil Nadu that year. Speculation that Rajinikanth would imminently enter electoral politics was rife, and audiences and political pundits were looking to Rajini's statements, on and off screen, for clues as to his political plans. (He did not, however, enter the fray then, only announcing plans for a political party in late 2017.) This political hype had been built up to in the months and years before by a series of onscreen and offscreen allusions by Rajini to the political situation of the state and, more particularly, to J. Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister during this period (1991–1996; Nadar 1999; Tamilvāṉaṉ 2002:214–28; Sreekanth 2008:125–32). In this context, thus, *Padaiyappa* was taken up by audiences and the press as a statement about Rajini's political intentions, with Neelambari, the film's arrogant female villain—who Padaiyappa bests and puts in her place—taken to represent Jayalalitha.[15]

The film's dramatic pre-climax takes place eighteen years after the introduction scene. Padaiyappa and Vasundhara have married, a humiliation that has driven Neelambari mad with rage. She has returned one generation later to exact revenge on Padaiyappa by orchestrating a false romance between her brother's son, Chandru and Padaiyappa's daughter. Chandru's father (who is also Neelambari's brother and Padaiyappa's cross-cousin), Suryaprakash has in the interim become an important politician and government minister. In cahoots with his sister, he has arranged the marriage of his son to another, leaving Padaiyappa's daughter in the lurch, breaking her heart by denying her her love (as Neelambari was so denied) and publically shaming Padaiyappa in the process.

In this scene, Padaiyappa arrives at the marriage venue to stop the marriage and unite his daughter with Chandru, whom he has discovered actually does love his daughter. When Neelambari commands her brother and the nearby police—who are at the marriage hall to provide security—to beat up and chase Padaiyappa off, Padaiyappa/Rajini laughs and says, 'Yes dear, I'm a single man, but take a look [-HON.] at all the people who are willing to give their lives to this single man' ("*Heh! Nāṉ taṉi āḷ tāṉ-mā, āṉāl iṉṯa taṉi āḷukkāka uyirē koṭukka eṯṯaṉai āḷuṅka irukkāṅka ṉṉu koñca eṯṯippāru*"). The low-angle mid-shot only shows us the 'single man,' Padaiyappa/Rajini against a blue sky (figure 7 – top-left). Padaiyappa's/Rajini's arm and index finger raises up as he delivers this line, the arc of his gesture first pointing upward to the heavens (figure 7 – top-right) and then over his backside (figure 7 – middle-left). On a sixty-foot Akela crane, the camera follows Rajini's fingertip upward only to then pan ninety-degrees to the right to reveal a sprawling crowd ('farmers,' we later hear)

whose hands are collectively raised in the air (figure 7 – middle-right, bottom), their voices chanting in a united but unintelligible chorus.

This fifty-second shot winds along the road, revealing a sprawling, interminable mass of bodies, all walking toward the marriage hall, where Rajini stands as the telos and head of the crowd. After a series of shots of Neelambari, the press, and the police in reaction to the massive crowd, the camera cuts back to Rajini. Standing across from Neelambari in a high-angle, frontal medium shot, he says to her as the camera tracks backward:[16]

01	*Pāṭṭeyā* [-HON.], *Paṭai-yappāvuṭaiya paṭaiye*? (0.8)	<hands behind back>	Did you see [-HON.], Padai-yappa's army (*paṭai*)? (0.8)
02	*Itu summa* trailer *tān mā*. (0.3)	<lifts LH, palm & fingers parallel to ground; slightly lowers head & hand (fingers pointing slightly downward) just before "*tān*," resting at "*mā*" ('dear')>	This is just the trailer, dear. (0.3)
03	(0.5) Main picture *nī innum pākkale*. (0.7)	<raises LH index finger & closes other fingers; traces a circle clockwise 3x, then holds index finger pointing up> <puts LH behind back>	(0.5) You still haven't seen the main picture. (0.7)
04	*Pāttē*, (0.5) *āṭippōyiṭuve*.	<hands behind back> <raises LH, palm vertical, fingers extended> <LH quickly shakes back and forth>	Having seen it, (0.5) you'll tremble.

In line 1, Rajini puns on his character's name, *Paṭaiyappā*, which is composed of the lexemes *paṭai*, 'army' and *appā(n)*, here 'lord' or 'general.' Together they reference the Lord of the Six Abodes, that avatar of the quintessentially Tamil god, Murugan, the god of war; and, as reader will recall, the deity of the village temple Padaiyappa's

Figure 7. Rajinikanth pointing in *Padaiyappai* to 'all the people willing to give their lives to this single man.'
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

family stewards. The 'army' of subalterns that Rajini/Padaiyappa points to, thus, are figurated as already "in" and with him, standing behind him and in his godly name. Rajini/Padaiyappa continues his dramatic monologue,

05	*Uṅkaḷukku arasiyal selvākku.*	<LH index finger pointing at villains>	You all have political influence. (figure 8)
06	(1)	<hands behind back>	(1)
07	*Enakku* <swoosh sound-effect> (0.7) *makkaḷ selvākku.*	<L & R arms raising up> <LH & RH thumbs pointing backwards>	I <swoosh sound-effect> (0.7) have the people's influence. (figure 9)
08	(1)	<hands behind back>	(1)
09	*Nīṅkaḷellām* police*yōṭa saktile vāḻrīṅka.* (0.5)		You all live by the police's power. (0.5)
10	*Nān makkaḷōṭa saktile vāḻrēn.*		I live by the people's power.
11a	*Inta saktikki munnālē*(0.6)	<LH thumb pointing behind>	Before this power (0.6)
11b	*uṅka sakti* <chuckles 0.8> .hh (0.4)*jūjūbi.*	<LH index finger pointing at villains> <LH forms fist, then flicks 2x toward villains (brushing them away), then holds with fingers pointing at villains>	your power <chuckles 0.8> .hh (0.4) is nothing.

Here, Rajini/Padaiyappa poetically contrasts Neelambari and her family (his affinal kin)—at whom he points with his left index finger (line 5, figure 8)—as having political influence while he—he says while pointing at the crowd behind him with both his thumbs (the speed and gravity of his gesture accompanied by a swoosh sound effect; line 7, figure 9 – bottom)—has the people's influence. You live by the police's power (line 9), he continues with his hands now behind his back, while I live by the people's power (line 10). Rajini/Padaiyappa then points at 'the people' behind him again (but only with his swoosh-sound-effected left thumb), and intones, 'Before this power, your power is nothing' ("*Inta saktikki munnālē uṅka sakti jūjūbi*"; line 11). As he says 'your power' he fully extends his left arm and points with his index finger at the villains in front of him (no sound effect). Chuckling as his index finger retracts (his arm still extended), his fingers then form a loose fist and flick twice toward the villains while he laughs and audibly inhales, gesturally throwing them off like dust from his fingertips. Rajini's second flick holds the gesture with all his fingers extended at the villains as he completes the utterance "*. . . jūjūbi*" ('. . .is nothing'). (See Nakassis 2017b:232 for a tabular summary of these poetic constrasts.)

Similar to the opening sequence, here too the scene's multimodal poetics (by gesture, linguistic deictics, mise-en-scène, denotational contrasts) schematizes a front/back, with Rajini at the center of it all looking straight at the camera. By contrast to the opening sequence, however, the pre-climax's poetics strongly embeds this deictic schema within the film's narrative frame. Rather than simply gazing out at the audience, here the diegetic foreground (i.e., the space directly in front of Padaiyappa occupied by Neelambari et al., who we see at the shot's edges; see figures 8–9) stands between Rajini/Padaiyappa and the theatrical foreground (the fourth wall), diaphanous and opaque, translucent and reflective at once. This composite tropic effect—the result of strongly frontal (reflexively calibrated) deictic shots of a narratively motivated, deictically decentered (reportively calibrated) scene—encourages the sense, as K. S. Ravikumar (2018) noted about his choice of camera angles in this scene, that Rajini is not only speaking against the politician villains in the story but also for/to the audience, indeed, for the very "people" that are behind and before him (his diegetic and theatrical audiences, respectively).

In response to Padaiyappa's monologue, Suryaprakash (Padaiyappa's cross-cousin and Neelambari's brother) orders the police to shoot into the crowd to disperse them (in a non-deictic shot framing him slightly off-axis; cf. the frontal shots of

Figure 8. Rajini/Padaiyappa points at Neelambari et al. in with his left index finger while saying 'You have political influence' (line 5 in the transcript); from *Padaiyappa*. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Rajini), prompting individual members at the head of the crowd—who are Padaiyappa's patrilineal kin and friends—to step forward and take up Rajini/Padaiyappa's pronouncement. In a high-angle shot, one after another, they praise Rajini/Padaiyappa and denounce the villains. They passionately declare their readiness to be shot and killed in support of Rajini/Padaiyappa and threaten to rip the minister and his family to shreds, if only Rajini/Padaiyappa gives the word. Standing behind and with Rajini/Padaiyappa, the crowd loudly applauds, showing their willingness to do his bidding, as he stands in silent confidence.

This metonymy/encompassment of "the people" is already intratextually anticipated in the film's opening song discussed above. In addition to praising the Tamil people and language, in the first verse Rajini sings of the hundred armies (*paṭai*) standing behind him ("*pinnāl nūṟu paṭai-yappā*"). This lyric coincides with a close-up of Rajinikanth pointing with both his thumbs behind him (figure 9 – top), an identical gesture to that of the pre-climax (line 7 in the transcript above; figure 9 – bottom). The former image is layered, through an "optical" effect (K. S. Ravikumar 2018), on top of an image of a huge mass of individuals at which, through this spectral superimposition, Rajini/Padaiyappa is pointing.[17] This image anticipates what constitutes the film's narrative high-point—the hero's (and the people's) triumphant show of force over their common enemy (the current crop of politicians)—iconically condensing in tableaux form the hero-star's spectral merging with "the people," who do not simply stand 'behind' Rajini but surround and penetrate his image, his being.

This juxtaposed image is precisely the "trailer" (line 2 above) for Padaiyappa's triumph over Neelambari, itself the "trailer" for Rajini's intimated "entry" into electoral politics and his implied vanquishing of Jayalalitha (i.e., the "main picture," line 3). Recalling his praising/praised encompassment/encompassing of the Tamil people as sung, gestured, and pictured in the film's opening song, in the pre-climax the audience is invited to stand with and in Rajini's presence, in his political body, the potential/imagined body politic of the Tamil polity. Here, Rajini's onscreen/offscreen presence eucharistically entangles, encompasses, and incorporates the audience (cf. Silverstein 2004:626–27), even as his audience contains him as their adopted son, brother, lover, husband, leader, king, and god.

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Rajinikanth didn't get into politics the year of *Padaiyappa*'s release or even in the decade that followed, as many expected. Yet the cine-political reverberations of this film, and others from this decade, have emanated forward in time to our present moment, some eighteen years later (like Neelambari's anger, in an ironic reversal). J. Jayalalitha died in late 2016, vanquished not in elections by Rajinikanth but by the ravages of illness in a hospital bed. In the power vacuum that followed, on December 31, 2017 Rajinikanth—among a number of other contenders (including the actor-star, Kamal Haasan)—finally, to everyone's and no one's surprise, stepped into the

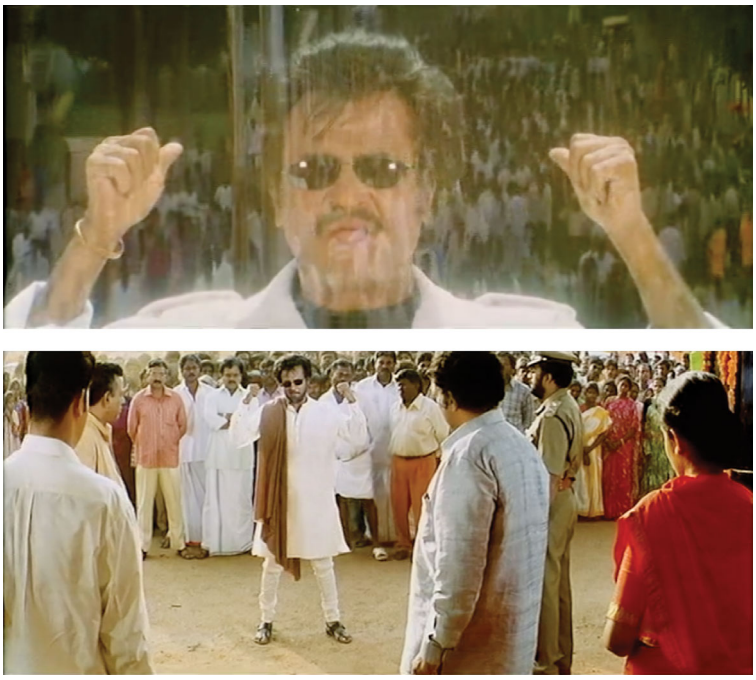

Figure 9. 'One hundred armies (*paṭai*) that stand behind Padaiyappa' (top image, from *Padaiyappa*'s opening song), the "trailer" to *Padaiyappa*'s pre-climax: 'I have the people's influence' (bottom image, line 7 of transcript).
[This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

limelight of the political theater. Whether Rajini will succeed is unclear. There are good reasons to think he will not (Rajan Kurai 2012; Rajanayagam 2015). But in either case, the intelligibility and uptake of his films as political acts—and thus, the plausibility of his entrance into electoral politics—is built upon, I contend, the performative potential of a particular image-text as it threads time, space, medium, and modality: that of the leader who contains and is contained, who speaks for and is spoken through, surrounded by the people who stand in his heart, and vice versa. It is precisely this image that *Padaiyappa,* along with Rajini's many other films from this period and since, takes up ands re-entextualizes.

Conclusions

This paper has had two aims: (1) to draw out a shared aesthetics and image-text of political representation between Tamil cinema and political oratory; and (2) to outline an account of what an image is.

But what does it mean to say that cinema and politics "share" an aesthetics or image-text (or style or motif)? On what evidentiary basis might we analytically draw an interdiscursive line from (Ramanujan's discussion of) third-century Sangam poetry to (Bate's discussion of) medieval grammars and modern political oratory and (my discussion of) turn-of-the-twenty-first-century cinema?

As alluded to at the outset of the article, an earlier anthropology or Indology might posit a cultural aesthetics or worldview as the basis for such sharednes. A. K. Ramanujan's and, to an extent, Bernard Bate's discussions of these continuities of poetics and politics in the Tamil-speaking world make just such a suggestion, positing an "Indian way of thinking" (Ramanujan 1999), "core Tamil concepts," and "ancient cultural logics" (Bate 2009:97, 110–11) to explain such interdiscursivities.[18]

Yet as Bate also argued, such continuities were as much the effect and outcome of a historically contingent process carried out by situated, interested agents (viz. Dravidianist politicians, but also filmmakers, lyricists, and actors) who, in their uptake and re-invention of what they figured as past—indeed, as "Tamil culture"—entailed such interdiscursivities into being.[19]

This process is precisely what the notion of image-text aims to theorize at the level of aesthetic form, namely, that evenemential process by which aesthetic, figural forms are drawn in and carved out from the flow of semiosis, entextualized into an aesthetic infrastructure of interdiscursivity and, in this case, political action. (It is worth recalling that linguistic anthropology's catachrestic uptake of the term *text*—as well as *ideology*—served as a critique of the culture concept and its culturalist assumptions of sharedness [Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Woolard 1998].[20]) Such an account rethinks the question of the image and its motility, not from the vantage of cultural logics, worldviews, epochal concepts, and the like, but as a function of the concrete occasions through which images become construed and consequential, meaningful to and usable by those party to such events and the processes generated thereby.

In short, to draw the lines from Dravidianist oratory to the cine-political form of the mass film is to follow those situated, interested practices that themselves draw these lines, to those events—of film-making and film-viewing, criticism and its reading, fan celebrations and authorial reflections (e.g., in interviews)—wherein particular image-texts are given sensuous form and intelligible structure, thereby retroactively or proleptically reaching out beyond themselves to other such events and images. An image-text, thus, does not simply pre-exist its uptake; rather, such relations are created anew in the form of images that tenuously lay claim to such interdiscursive (dis)affinities and (dis)affiliations.

This is not to say that such processes of entextualization are intentional, strategic, or self-reflexively explicit to those party to such texts (though they may be, of course); that viewers necessarily construed the aesthetic form of *Padaiyappa* as deploying kinds of *ākupeyar* or that directors modeled their camera angles, dialogues, or mise-en-scène on the tropology of Dravidianist oratory. Indeed, K. S. Ravikumar (2018) rejected such connections when I proposed them to him. (Though he did enthusiastically agree that a film like *Padaiyappa* was like a political function involving the reciprocal praise of leader and party worker, pointing out that Rajini's directors at the time, including himself, were "very much interested to bring him to politics" by "building up" Rajini's image with particular camera angles, dialogues, lyrics, and so on.[21]) And Naren, while he found such connections plausible (in particular, given the influence of Karunanidhi's oratorical aesthetics on the film lyrics of Vairamuthu, his long-time confidante, friend, and staunch Dravidianist and classical littérateur in his own right), he also found them surprising and not self-evident.

And yet both, as well as journalists and other public commentators, readily construed—and in the case of K. S. Ravikumar, designed—the image-texts discussed from *Padaiyappa* as a form of mass, populist politics, one with explicit citational links to the aestheticized cine-politics of M. G. Ramachandran and, via him, Kalaiñar Karunanidhi (and from there, following Bate, to *Nannul* and Sangam-age poetry). What politics and representation mean here is a function of this aesthetics of adulation and praise as entextualized in an image-text of reversible encompassment. Yet if so, this is not because this is simply the form Tamil politics takes; rather, it is because these kinds of images have been taken up by social agents—like Karunanidhi and MGR, K. S. Ravikumar and Rajinikanth (and others), and, critically, their fans/followers—as one kind of tool to do one kind of politics. It is through such historically specific forms of uptake and reiteration (Gal 2018) that such image-texts have become a sign—indeed, an image—of (the imminence of) politics, and thus themselves acts of politics for those who would so take them up.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This article is inspired by and dedicated to our late, dear colleague and friend, Barney Bate. Its argument and analysis were first articulated in Nakassis 2017a, 2017b, and presented, in varying forms, at the *Chicago Tamil Forum – Poesis/Politics of Language and Place in Tamilagam* (May 25–27, 2017), *Langage et Société: Un dialogue entre Paris et Chicago* (Paris, France, June 12–14, 2017), and in my *Language in Culture 1* graduate seminar in Autumn 2017 at the University of Chicago. It benefitted greatly from discussion with participants at all these venues, as well as from critically engaged comments by E. Annamalai, Amanda Weidman, and an anonymous reviewer. Emily Kuret greatly assisted me with the figures and transcripts in this article.

1. This, in effect, restates and disaggregates Silverstein's (2004) notion of *dynamic figuration* into its textual partials (aesthetic, interactional, denotational). Note that just as every denotational text presupposes some interactional textuality, every interactional text presupposes some aesthetic textuality. And, in the latter case, vice versa: while we can imagine "pure" images (cf. Pocock 2011:168), they are always embedded in some image-act, or interactional text (such as imagining "pure" images). The relationship between an image-text and an image-act, or a denotational text (in film, narrative), however, is not one-to-one: the same image-text may be the basis for any number of acts or emplotted within any number of narratives; and vice versa. On the notion of image-act, see Nakassis in press.

2. While this notion of *image-text* takes up Mitchell's (2015) distinction of "image" (diagrammatic legisign) and (token) "picture" and his interest in the interplay and mutual imbrication of the iconic and symbolic, I do not use *image-text* in the same sense as he, i.e., to denote the "*relations* of the visual [image] and the verbal [text]" (Mitchell 1994:89n9; original emphasis, cf. Ranciére's [2007] *sentence-image*). As noted in the main text below, an image-text is not modality specific.

3. One might think of frames for paintings and photographs; stylistic and genre shifts, parallelism, or conventionalized tropes in literature; titles/names, captions, price tags (Mitchell 1986:40); or more complexly multimodal poetic patterns, as in film, where editing, camera movement, framing, mise-en-scène, dialogue, gesture, among other signs, entextualize particular images. See Spyer and Steedly (2011:19–23) on "enframement."

4. Recall Peirce's (1868[1992]:49) provocation that "we have no images even in actual perception" but only experience images as a (metasemiotic) inference across acts of sensation in time.

5. In art history, see, e.g., Wöfflin 1915[2015]; Wittkower 1949[1971]:101–54; Gombrich 1979; Steiner 1982. (See Mitchell 1994:83–107 for a strong critique of the "Sister Arts" comparative method.) In anthropology, see, e.g., Boas 1927; Lévi-Strauss 1975[1982]; Sherzer and Sherzer 1976; Witherspoon 1976:155–78, 188–202; Feld 1982; Tedlock 1984; Witherspoon and Peterson 1995. See Webster 2009 for a helpful review of this literature in the Amerindian context.

6. While Bate focuses on *ākupeyar*, his discussion also implicates *anmoḻittokai*, a notionally related trope where some grammatical element of a larger noun phrase is deleted (e.g., a person ending), leaving the modifying element to denote the whole. For example,

veḷḷāṭaiyavaḷ	*vantāḷ*	➔ *veḷḷāṭai*	*vantāḷ*
white-dress-woman	come-PST.SING.FEM	white-dress	come-PST.SING.FEM
'The woman-in-white-dress came.'		'White-dress came.'	
(to mean, 'the widow came')			

By contrast to *ākupeyar* (where there is no such deletion), in *anmoḻittokai* agreement is determined by the full nominal form (cf. *veḷḷāṭai vantatu* 'white-dress came[NEUT.]'). I thank E. Annamalai for drawing this distinction to my attention.

7. Bate (2009:105–7) argues in his discussion of *aumaiyākupeyar* (or 'simile') that metaphor in the *Nannūl* is reduced back to relations of contiguity, so that, in effect, metaphor is a subclass of the contiguity tropes of *ākupeyar*. This, he suggests, provides a challenge to any study of rhetoric that presumes Western categories/classifications as universal analytics.

8. MGR famously addressed his cadres/fans as "*irattatin irattamāna uṭanpiṟappukkaḷē*," deploying (and one-upping) Karunanidhi's signature vocative with what became his own signature trademark, *irattattin irattam*, meaning 'the blood of my blood,' a reference to his fans donating blood to him after he was shot in 1967 (Rajanayagam 2015:126–27, 130). And just as they were substantially in him, he too was in their hearts, and under their skin (and thus in their blood): to show their loyalty, MGR encouraged fans to have his face tattooed on their body. Jayalalitha, for her part, combined both vocatives, addressing her crowds as "*itaya*

teyvam puraṭci talaivar em. ji. ārin rattatin rattamāna en uyirinum mēlāna enatu arumai uṭanpirappukkaḷ" ('Oh, my wonderful siblings whom I love more than my own life, who are the blood of the blood of MGR, the Revolutionary Leader and God in/of Our Hearts').

9. On Rajinikanth's birthday on December 12, 2007, for example, I spent the afternoon and evening with the Vilakkuthoon fan club in Madurai. We drove to a number of different neighborhoods to attend local fan-club events where fan-club leaders at various tiers of the organizational hierarchy made speeches praising their *Talaivar* ('leader') Rajinikanth in an aesthetic form comparable to political party events (though of a smaller scale). (My presence itself was taken as a kind of praise, as showing the international reach of Rajinikanth, and I was recruited to give a speech to praise Rajinikanth.) Film music blasted, shawls were exchanged, pens and notebooks distributed to poor school children. As we drove through the streets in a small procession of several vehicles, they waved flags (of the political party they hoped Rajini would start) and yelled call-and-response chants. In these chants (and later in conversation with me), these thirty and forty-something year-old men variously, and passionately, likened Rajinikanth to their mother, father, older brother, husband, friend, god, family deity, and above all, their leader.

10. This analysis draws on and expands Nakassis 2017b.

11. For reasons of space, I simplify the structure of this scene; more themes are relevant here, including gender stereotypes between the two female characters and the interpersonal dynamics between them as mediated by Rajini/Padaiyappa.

12. Baradwaj Rangan (2017) dates such "build up" entry scenes to 1980, the time when Rajini came into his own as a "mass hero."

13. The first four lines have no explicit subject, with the stative verb *vēṇṭu* ('want, desire') conjugated in the neuter future negative. Given that the lines before and after denote Rajini/Padaiyappa with first-person pronouns we can infer that these statements apply to Rajini, though they also stand as general statements residually addressed to the audience. Indeed, K. S. Ravikumar (2018) framed Vairamuthu's lyrics here as "advice to the people" in a style that harkens to MGR's *tattuva pāṭalkaḷ* ('philosophical songs') of the previous cinematic generation. This ambiguity also figurates the encompassment achieved through the mise-en-scène, gestures, dialogue, and the like discussed in the main text.

14. Rajanayagam (2015:128) observes that while Karunanidhi and MGR expressed a political relationship to their followers as one of kinship and blood (MGR's being a response to Karunanidhi that came to take on, in their rivalry, a mimetic literalness; see note 8 above), in (citational) contrast Rajinikanth's films often (but not always) refer to his fans/followers, as in *Padaiyappa*'s pre-climax scene, as a crowd that has gathered on its own (*tānā sērnta kūṭṭam*), brought together by love (*anbu*) and honesty rather than political orchestration or canny interest.

15. While this allegorical entextualization was partially disavowed by public reportage that indicated that the story's basic outline was given by Rajinikanth to K. S. Ravikumar based on *Ponniyin Selvan*, the modern epic by Kalki Krishnamurthy (see Rajinikanth 1999; Ramachandran 2012:175), K. S. Ravikumar (2018) confirmed that he explicitly wrote the Neelambari character with Jayalalitha in mind, transposing onscreen the offscreen political "fire" going on at the time between Rajini and Jayalalitha.

16. Gesture and other paralanguage are in <angular brackets>; RH = (Rajini's) right hand, LH = left hand, R = right, L = left.

17. This is not the same shot taken from earlier in the scene, though it was recorded on the same day, in the same location, and with the same crowd of extras (K. S. Ravikumar 2018). Similarly, Rajini's get-up is different across the two shots.

18. Bate often wrote, in moments when he was channeling his teachers A. K. Ramanujan, McKim Marriott, and Paul Friedrich, about the "ancient Indian cultural logic" of praise (Bate 2000:96, 2002:355, 2009:97) and the "ancient Tamil phenomenology" (2000:47) with its "two-thousand year old Tamil literary motifs" and "deep notions of Tamil value" (2000:121–22, 2009:110–11).

19. Bate (2009:98, 117) was uncomfortably aware about the culturalist implications of some of his arguments, contending—in moments when he was channeling his other teachers (Marshall Sahlins, Barney Cohn, and Michael Silverstein; see note 18)—that such continuities were not simply pregiven or inherent but contingent and achieved (Bate 2000:93–94; 2009:66–67), wherein the seemingly old was produced by historically novel strategies; to wit, the Dravidianist uptake of "ancient" Tamil literary tropes and/in "modern" homiletic genres.

20. W. J. T. Mitchell's work (1986, 1994) in visual studies in the same period provides a parallel critique that attempts to displace art history's concern to discern the ephocal logics that

undergird some group of works. Instead, he suggests tracing the ideologically interest-driven processes—"the concrete forms of actual representational practices"—that underlie such works (1994:88–89).

21. When I asked K. S. Ravikumar (2018) what kinds of "inputs" Rajinikanth gave to the writing and production of "Singa Nadai Pottu," he interestingly noted that Rajini requested that some of the lyrics that Vairamuthu wrote be removed because they "built up" (i.e., praised him) "too much." In this case, the lines were cut, though in other instances, the director indicated, the filmmaker's polite but enthusiastic insistence to praise Rajini could overcome his hesitation. Note how this complex production format (Goffman 1981) complicates any assumption that such image-texts of encompassment are straightforward expressions, intentions, or strategies (or necessarily originate with) those who are entextualized as their focus (be it Rajinikanth, MGR, or Karunanidhi). This underscores the point that image-texts are the precipitate of processes that are perspectival and situated in any number of social positions (*for whom* such semiotic arrays are images, and images of such and such kinds, and taken up in some context or other for some purpose or other, etc.), indeed, distributed across them; in this case, implicating fans, directors, film lyricists, music directors, dance choreographers, the hero-star himself, among many, many others in differential footings to the so-entextualized images in question. Here too, as one reviewer of the article helpfully noted, we might also include comparative questions of how different media afford different possibilities or tendencies for entextualization, both in their production formats and participation frameworks and in their multimodality (political oratory and cinema involving distinct, complexly reticulated production formats/participation frameworks and multimodal configurations of sound, vision, space, touch, and so on).

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