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The ontological politics of the spoof image in Tamil cinema

Constantine V. Nakassis

Department of Anthropology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines *Thamizh Padam* ('Tamil Film', dir. C. S. Amudhan), a 2010 spoof of the Tamil cinema of south India. While *Thamizh Padam* mocked near every aspect of mainstream Tamil cinema, its main target was the industry's 'mass heroes', those larger-than-life stars whose image blurs onscreen and offscreen. While recalling Bazin's discussion of the ontological identity of the photographic film image and its object, the auratic presence of the mass hero's image affords a populist political potency that runs counter to Bazin's liberal humanism and realist aesthetics. Drawing on analysis of *Thamizh Padam* and interviews with its makers, I show how *Thamizh Padam* attempted to undermine the ontology of the mass-hero's image, its mode of production, and political charge. In its place, *Thamizh Padam* advocated for a narrative representationalism guided by the director and his script/story. The article concludes by rethiking Bazin's discussion of the ontology of the film image, suggesting that it can be productively reframed by attention to the ontological politics of and for images.

KEYWORDS Ontology; Bazin; parody; politics; Tamil cinema

Introduction

Commercial Tamil cinema has long woven its texts from so many citational allusions, homages, and self-reflexive satires. However, until recently there was no such recognized genre of the spoof film, only so-called comedy tracks trailing in the shadows of the grandiose hero and his (relatively) more serious narrative, parodying him here and there, most often through scenes of comically inverted or failed heroism.[1]

In 2010, this changed. On January 29, the 'first full length spoof' of Tamil cinema was released (Dhananjayan 2011, vol. 2, 320).[2] It was aptly titled *Thamizh Padam*, or 'Tamil Film'. A success at the box-office, *Thamizh Padam* was declared the first 'super-hit' of 2010 in the south Indian, Tamil film industry, an outcome which was not quite expected by many in the industry, including perhaps its makers.

CONTACT Constantine V. Nakassis cnakassi@uchicago.edu

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Thamizh Padam's executive producer, Sashikanth (2011) recounted to me that from the moment he and the film's director, C. S. Amudhan got together to conceptualize the film, it was about 'taking on the industry'. Directed and produced by self-described 'rank outsiders', and lauded in the English-language press as 'a breath of fresh air' to the stuffy airs put on by the film establishment (Kamath 2010, 2014), from its first to last frame *Thamizh Padam* parodied nearly every recognizable feature of commercial Tamil cinema. From its nonsense, romantic song lyrics and over-the-top fight scenes to its formulaic plot and unbelievable twists, *Thamizh Padam* spoofed 'as much (of Tamil cinema) as you could cram into one movie', as C. S. Amudhan put it to me in 2014, with near every scene, dialogue, character, song, dance, lyric, shot, location, set, and prop being a reference to some or other Tamil film.

For its audiences and makers, however, what was most important was the way *Thamizh Padam* ruthlessly satirized the so-called mass heroes of Tamil cinema – those bombastic, larger-than-life celebrity star-actors that south India is (in)famous for producing, whose fantastical screen lives bleed into their public offscreen personages (and vice versa), and from there into populist political life (as indicated by the 'mass' in 'mass hero'; Pandian 1992; Srinivas 2009; Prasad 2014; Nakassis 2016, 2017, 2019, forthcoming).

For these filmmakers, 'taking on the industry' was about taking the piss out of these mass heroes, revealing their celebrity and screen images to be ridiculous, cliché, and artificial. But the film was more than a lampoon of textual conventions; it was also a critique of the production culture and political economy that is grounded by and that emanates from such heroes. In short, *Thamizh Padam* attacked the ontology of the mass-hero's image, to catachrestically extend André Bazin's ([1945] 2005) famous phrase. It attacked the *being* of a particular kind of image, an image that collapses sign and referent, that blurs hero and star and tangles onscreen and offscreen.

Central to Bazin's conception of the ontology of the film image is its *presence*. Beyond iconic resemblance or symbolic representationality (montage), Bazin provocatively argued that what characterizes cinema is the *ontological identity* between a photographic image and its profilmic object (Bazin [1945] 2005, 14; Morgan 2006). The film image affords the *presence* of its object, for it *is* – in some substantial respect – its object. Though derived from his analysis of mid-century neorealist Italian, French, and Hollywood cinemas, Bazin's arguments about the presence of the film image uncannily characterize the south Indian mass-hero in unexpected ways. In both cases, at issue is how the image presences its object, blurring and dispensing with the distinction of sign and referent, where immanent to the image is the offscreen reality from which it emanates (Gunning 2008). Yet the reasons and mechanisms that account for the mass-hero's

auratic presence are radically distinct from those given by Bazin for the film image per se, just as are their aesthetics and politics.

For Bazin, the ontology of the film image was founded, on the one hand, on the mechanical, physical process by which, through a camera, a profilmic reality imprints itself on film or equivalent surface, transferring something of itself to its image and its projection (Bazin [1945] 2005, 14) and, on the other hand, on the (transhistorical) desire of the spectator to arrest time (and death) in and through the immanent presence of an indexical image (Rosen 2001). If the latter earlier found itself satisfied by religious idols and relics (to which Bazin likened the film image) and other plastic arts (e.g. portraiture), it is the cinema that fully realizes this ontological identity and presentist desire.

As Bazin suggested, this identity/presencing was something to be recognized and respected by filmmakers and their films, implying an aesthetic style and approach to production that he called 'realism' (Morgan 2006). Reflecting his anti-authoritarian, liberal humanist politics (Staiger 1984; Schoonover 2012, 1–67; Hassan 2017), realism for Bazin ([1945] 2005, 15) affords an experience of the image and its reality with fresh eyes and an open mind. Such an experience allows for meaning to emerge *a posteriori*, rather than being imposed *a priori* by the text, activating the freedom of the spectator to engage with the inherent ambiguity of reality and its emanations (Bazin [1955] 2005, [1958] 2005). Or rather, the right kind of realism can do this, for the performative presencing of the image – in the case of demagogic images of Stalin, for example (Bazin [1950] 1985) – can also dangerously overwhelm the liberal subject, reducing the openness of reality to a singular, transcendent authority (Bazin [1951] 2005, Hassan 2017).

What then to make of the mass-hero's auratically present, yet highly non-realist filmic image and the populist politics it enacts? Here, presence is wrought through a different 'regime of imageness', to use Rancière's (2007) phrase. Not through the physical indexicality of the apparatus (nor through a realist embrace of it), as I have argued elsewhere (Nakassis 2016, 2017, 2019, forthcoming), the mass-hero's presence is the effect of: (1) dense intertextual references to the hero-star's other films and to his offscreen personage; (2) an aesthetics of frontality that has him looking at and directly addressing the audience; (3) the image's presupposition of audience responses as if he were in the theater in the very moment of his appearance; and (4) the uptake of such an image by his fans *as* bearing his presence. Fans are known to address and greet the image, touch the screen, and even ritually cleanse the image as one does with a religious idol (see Nakassis 2016, 159–223, 2017 for more discussion). Such an image (tropically) literalizes Bazin's metaphorical comparison of film images to religious idols and relics (cf. Schoonover 2012, 54). In doing so, I argue, it offers a travesty of and challenge to the anti-authoritarian, liberal democratic sensibilities that many, including Bazin, impute to the realist

ontology of the image, suggesting instead a populist politics born by an image of/with charismatic authority.

My exploration of the mass hero and spoofs of him proceeds from this provocative disjunction between Bazin and the mass hero, using it as an occasion to think with and trouble the question of what a film image *is* and can *do*. If, for Bazin, the critical feature of the film image's ontology is its *presence*, how are we to understand *how* presence is achieved, maintained and institutionalized, transformed or negated (Nakassis 2017)? And what aesthetics and politics emerge around and through such processes? Rather than siting the question of being or presence as *in* or *of* the image, apparatus, or spectator, I suggest that we see ontologies as historical and political achievements of situated social projects, projects that make the being of images a site of political contestation, dialogic becoming, and even institutional stabilization. An ontology, as I argue in what follows, is both a claim on/for the becoming and being of images that is itself materialized in and by images.

I begin from what I take to underwrite the recent return to Bazin in film studies: the recognition of the ontological heterogeneity of film images, as provoked by considerations of digital images (Prince 1996; Morgan 2006; Gunning 2008) and the historical alterity of early silent cinemas (Gunning 1989; Hansen 1991). My aim, however, is not simply to demonstrate the fact of ontological plurality (e.g. by posing it as a technological, historical, industrial/institutional, or culturalist form of difference). Rather, my aim is to show how multiple ontologies butt up against and intermingle with each other in and through images. And furthermore, that this constitutive plurality and entanglement are intrinsically political in nature (Mol 1999). Taking this view, as I argue in the conclusion, allows us to reframe Bazin's ontology as one such set of claims (historically and ontologically consequential, to be sure) on and for the being of the image.

One among many; indeed, a spoof film like *Thamizh Padam* also offers an opportune site to examine such issues. Like Bazin (if with an ironic anti-presentist twist), *Thamizh Padam* articulates an ontological politics. It calls for a different kind of image and, as we will see, a different kind of industry and production format (cf. Goffman 1981), one based on directors, scripts, and stories rather than on hero-stars and their spectacular, powerful personages; it yearns for an image that emanates not from the performative mass of the hero-star but from the representationalist relationship of a director to a (realist) fiction to a (real) world.

The cine-politics of mass heroes

The stakes of this politics are high. Mass heroes do not simply anchor a kind of image. They mediate the political economy of images in Tamil Nadu more generally. This is true in two ways. First, they anchor the

production of films (and thus related media such as television, popular music, and print). Traditionally, big-budget Tamil films begin not as a script or even a story (and thus not with a writer or director) but with a producer booking the dates of a hero-star (see note 1). Everything else – story, director, cast – typically follows the hero, including the money; casting a hero is the grounds for financing a film (either by attracting investment or by pre-selling it to distributors), ensuring the film's distribution and theatrical release, and attracting audiences and collecting box-office returns. As such, the Tamil film industry has long centered its organization and economics around its heroes (Srinivas 2016).

Second, the mass hero is a political figure in the most literal of senses (Hardgrave 1979; Pandian 1992, Dickey 1993; Srinivas 2009). Mass heroes are figured, on and off the screen, as leaders (*talaivarkaḷ*) of 'the masses'. Not just a celebrity star actor whose offscreen status and popularity (his 'mass') enables him to inhabit a position in a film that, without exception or equivocation, adulates and champions him (Nakassis 2017, 2019), hero-stars such as M. G. Ramachandran (1917–1987), Vijayakanth (b. 1952), and most recently Rajinikanth (b. 1950) in Tamil Nadu have also historically segued from the screen into electoral politics, leveraging their onscreen image to form their own political parties, garner votes, and capture government posts. Every mass hero is a state Chief Minister in potentia, a fact evident to and much commented on by film publics, fans, media pundits, politicians, and hero-stars themselves.

Prasad (2014) has used the term *cine-politics* to describe this populist political potency of the mass hero. This cine-politics is frequently typified by elite liberal critics, often in the English press, as 'idol worship', a senseless and unthinking 'devotion' by credulous (subaltern) subjects who can't see that 'it's just a movie', as Kalyan Kumar (2011), the choreographer of *Thamizh Padam*'s opening song put it to me. The executive producer of *Thamizh Padam*, Sashikanth (2011) similarly voiced this narrative, saying of *Thamizh Padam*'s spoofing that:

> These guys [mass heroes and their fans] deserve it [being made fun of]. If at all we put down anything, they deserve this [spoofing]. … But they're not gonna like it. That's for sure. You're bringing down their- this idol worship kind of scenario, where you're putting milk on that guys' thing [image]. I mean, it's rubbish. It's real stupidity. I mean, if you look at it from a common man's perspective, what's happening is real stupidity.

Here, Sashikanth references religious Hindu rituals of *pāl abiṣēkam* wherein a divine image or idol – the deity him/herself, in fact (Davis 1999) – is sanctified by having milk, or other substances, poured over it. Such rites, as noted above, are also performed by fans on large images of hero-stars, sometimes with milk, other times with beer or soda (Nakassis 2017). Here,

Sashikanth iconoclastically typifies such practices as a false idolatry, a 'real stupidity' that deserves to be made fun of and revealed for what it is (as he understands it, at least).

In a context where cinema is serious politics, then, spoofing such powerful figures is risky (even sacrilegious, as Sashikanth suggests). Indeed, a forerunner of *Thamizh Padam*, the popular television show *Lollu Sabha* (Star Vijay, 2001–2010) provoked the ire of thin-skinned heroes and their fans with their film spoofs, eliciting threats by satirized actors, attacks on its office by upset fans (Rambala 2011a, 2011b), and even jury-rigged bombs sent to the homes of its actors and director (Behindwoods.com 2008; cf. Cody 2015). *Thamizh Padam* risked just such reactions, a fact not lost on its makers. There were real stakes in making and releasing such a film.

These stakes were planted in multiple domains: in the textual economy of commercial films, wherein the hero dominates the diegesis and narrative; in the film industry's sociological organization and 'heterogeneous' mode of production (Staiger 1985, 87–95; Prasad 1998), wherein mass heroes and their stakeholders wield enormous influence and authority over the image (at the expense of directors, other actors, and technicians); and finally, in electoral democratic politics, wherein mass heroes' populist appeal provides them with political power. *Thamizh Padam*'s spoof intervened at all of these levels, linking them together in its attempt to displace one image ontology with another.

In the following sections I focus on three strategies in *Thamizh Padam* that offer a plea for and potentially effectuate this ontological shift by parodying: (1) the collapse of the onscreen and offscreen worlds of the hero-star, (2) the adulatory social relations between star and audience implied by this conflation, and (3) the temporality of the mass hero. I contextualize these strategies and draw out their implications through interviews with the filmmakers, actors, and technicians of *Thamizh Padam*, as well as through discussion of a marketing stunt by C. S. Amudhan (*Thamizh Padam*'s director) and Venkat Prabhu (a director whose film, *Goa* released on the same day as *Thamizh Padam*, and which also featured much film parody). I then interrogate what kind of politics is necessary *for* a film like *Thamizh Padam* and its (anti-cine)politics *of* the image to be made and released. (As we will see, *Thamizh Padam*'s liberal politics of representation, ironically perhaps, turned on an illiberal form of kin-based, party politics.) I conclude by arguing that questions of ontology have to be sited with respect to both kinds of politics.

The ontological politics of *Thamizh Padam*

Consider the narrative premise and diegetic world of *Thamizh Padam*. The film begins with the birth of a male child, Shiva in a village hut. When his

sex is discovered, it is decided that he will have to be killed, as required by village law (a parodic twist of Bharatiraja's 1994 film *Karuthamma*). In a flashback, we learn why the village *nāṭṭāmai* ('headman,' played by Ponnabalam, who starred as the villain of the popular film *Nattamai* [1994, dir. K. S. Ravikumar]) had decreed it to be so. Male children from the village, Cinemapaṭṭi ('Cinemaville') all grow up and go to the metropolis of Madras, he intones under a banyan tree during a panchayat meeting (Figure 1 – left). Once in Madras, they start 'speaking "punch dialogues" [bombastic one-liners], dancing "kuttu songs" [energetic folk songs], and then, if that's not bad enough, giving television interviews, even before their first film is released, proclaiming that they'll be the next Chief Minister (of the state)!' All this, he gravely concludes to a crowd of villagers nodding along in assent, gives the village a bad name and causes it trouble with the government. Any family that allows a male baby to be born, the *nāṭṭāmai* pronounces, will be cast out of Tamil Nadu; and further, he declares to an audibly aghast crowd, if any family disobeys his order and maintains contact with such families, 'They will have to watch the films of that finger-twisting little brother [a reference to the aspiring mass hero, Simbu] one hundred times on the panchayat television' ('*Appaṭi paḻuṅkunīṅka ṇṇā anta viral āṭṭi naṭikkiṟa anta tambi paṭatte nūṟu muṟai namma pañcayattin* TV-*le pākkaṇum ṭōy!*') (Figure 1 – right).

When Shiva's character is born, his fate, then, is death by branded tetrapack (!) of spurge milk. Before this can happen and minutes after his birth, however, he gets the attention of his grandmother, who is to administer the poison. When she confusedly asks, 'Who's that talking?', he replies: '*Nān tān, Mini Superstar tān pēsuṟēn*' 'It's me, the Mini Superstar speaking' (another lampoon of Simbu, who anointed himself with the epithet 'Little Superstar', a citation to the 'Superstar' Rajinikanth, the most massive of the mass heroes since the 1980s). Shiva asks his grandmother to put him on a train to Madras (where all trains stereotypically go in the nativity films of the late 1970s and 1980s) where he will become a '*periya hero*' (big hero).[3] He then delivers one of *Iḷaiya Taḷapati* ('the Young General'), Vijay's punch dialogues from the action film *Pokkiri* (dir. Prabhu Deva, 2007): '*Oru*

Figure 1. Spoofed headman at the panchayat meeting under the banyan tree (left) spoofing the stylish gestures of the would-be mass hero, Simbu (right).

muṭivu eṭuttā nānē en pēccu kēṭkamāṭṭēn' ('If I make a decision, even I won't listen to what I say'). The old woman responds, in amazement, 'You really *are* going to become a big hero', and decides to take him to Madras where Shiva (played by the adult, comic actor Shiva) grows up to become a 'hero'.

Of interest here is not simply the satire of the uppity actor, Simbu, who baptizes himself a star when he is metaphorically, and in baby Shiva's case literally, still wet behind the ears with afterbirth; nor the ludicrousness of an infant giving punch dialogues like an adult mass hero. Rather, what is most salient is that in this and subsequent scenes the *character* frames himself, and is framed by others, as a film hero even though he does not act in any films. Shiva's character, Shiva, while figured as a film hero by the narrative, is not an actor in the diegesis. Rather, he is simply a mass hero living in the non-cinematic world of the film. The mediating membrane of the screen is dispensed with in the diegesis of *Thamizh Padam*; or rather, the film enacts its dispensing for us so that we may see it all the more clearly. This self-reflexively doubled/collapsed spacetime lampoons, with each absurdity that unfolds, the idea that the hero-star exists on and off the screen at once *as a mass hero* without slippage.[4]

Narrativizing this slippage at its outset, *Thamizh Padam*'s parody focuses on precisely those generic aspects of the mass-hero's image which cultivate this onscreen/offscreen entanglement, in particular, those aspects that frame and 'build up' the hero-star as a political leader to his fan audiences. Take, for example, the opening song in *Thamizh Padam*, a formulaic genre convention for introducing the hero in all his prowess and style (Nakassis 2016, 161–67). As the song begins, we see large cutouts of Shiva. Milk is poured over one as the crowd screams 'Long live our leader!' (Figure 2) while another is ritually sanctified against the 'evil eye' (Figure 3 – left). As the latter is performed, the cardboard cutout morphs into Shiva's physical body as he salutes the audience (Figure 3 – right).

As we see these images a chorus of voices sings praise to Shiva, addressing him as the 'lift [elevator] of the poor', 'the leader of the world, the god who can topple even Obama' ('*ulakattukku talaivan nī, Obama-vai vīḻtta vanta iraivan nī*'), among other caricatured superlatives. Shiva himself sings while looking directly the camera, 'I am the single man who has touched heaven, who has risen to the pinnacle of history; I am both the head/leader [a reference to the mass hero, *Tala* Ajith] and the general [a reference to the mass hero, the "Young General" Vijay]' ('*Tani āḷā siṅkaram tōṭṭēn, carittiramā uyarntuppōṭṭēn, Talaiyum nān tānē Taḷapatiyum nān tān*'). Shiva makes various references to his political ascendency in 2011 (Figure 4) and at one point even tells the audience, pointing directly at the camera, that if 'you praise me your life will flourish; if you worship me you'll receive *moksha* (i.e. be freed from the cycle of rebirths)' ('*Ennai vāḻttippāru vāḻkkai ceḻikkum, ennai*

Figure 2. Performing *pāl abiṣēkam* on Shiva's image; in the background, flags fly with Shiva's face on them as crowds of people hold their hands up in respectful supplication.

Figure 3. Neutralizing the 'evil eye' accrued to Shiva's image (left) as it comes alive and salutes us (right).

Figure 4. Shiva telling us that 2011 will be 'our' year in politics.

vaṇaṅkippāru moṭcam kiṭaikkum'). In each of these examples, *Thamizh Padam* hypertrophies recognizable textual conventions that aggrandize the presentist star image of mass heroes (adulation by other characters, an aesthetics of frontality, direct address to the audience, intertextual citations to more statusful hero-stars, etc.; see Nakassis 2019). And while such conventions themselves often reflexively and playfully engage with the hero's performative image, *Thamizh Padam*'s spoof, in its own playful (yet dead-serious) exaggeration, (knowingly) reads and represents such images *as* unironical, serious claims worthy of parody (see note 4).

Thamizh Padam's satire of the mass hero, however, is not simply a representationalist attack on the way in which real and reel spaces/worlds are warped and blurred in/by his excessive presence. Nor is it simply an attack on the cine-political mode of social relations that his auratic image figurates (namely, the cinematic adulation of the hero-leader and the figuration of his audiences as devout fan-cadres). It is also a *chrono*politics, an attack on the temporality of the mass hero. It is the anachrony of the mass hero that *Thamizh Padam* hopes to show us, that he is *out of time*, both in the sense that his chronotope (Bakhtin 1982) is absurd and unrealistic and that it is untimely in this modern day and age.

Consider the scene that bridges the film's opening flashback and its first song. After Shiva has moved to a Chennai slum and become a young boy, he bears witness to a number of rowdies terrorizing the bazaar and extracting protection money. Frustrated in his impotence, our young Shiva runs home to his grandmother to deliver a series of finger-twirling, swoosh sound-effected punch dialogues (Figure 5). In response, his grandmother simply tells him to peddle on a nearby parked bicycle. When he protests in disbelief (a trace of the filmmaker's satirizing voice), she insists. And

Figure 5. A young Shiva delivers a punch dialogue to his grandmother: 'It's been ten years since I've been born, but I'm still only ten. When will I become a hero so I can raise my voice against this atrocity?' ('*Nān poṟuntu pattu varuṣam āyiccu, ānā pattu vayasu āvatu. Nān eppa hero āyi nānē galāṭṭā tatti kēṭkuṟatu*?').

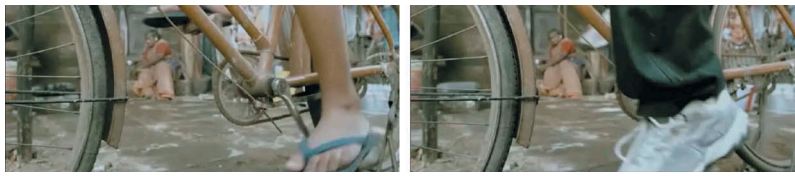

Figure 6. Riding a stationary bicycle: Shiva's transformation from a child (left) to a hero (right) in five-seconds time.

indeed, as depicted through a five-second time-lapse shot, when Shiva begins pedaling on the stationary bicycle his young pantless legs (Figure 6 – left) age into adult panted legs (Figure 6 – right). Now a college-age hero, he returns to the market just in time to beat up the rowdies in a fight scene (parodying Rajinikanth's *Baashaa* [1995, dir. Suresh Krissna]) that leads into the opening song of the film.

Similarly consider *Thamizh Padam*'s climax sequence, a parody of the hit film *Kakka Kakka* (2004, dir. Gautham Menon). The villain, D.'s henchmen have captured Shiva's fiancé and have taken her to an empty warehouse. She screams his name, 'SHIVA!' (Figure 7 – top-left) and the head henchman shoots a bullet at her from across the room (Figure 7 – top-right). Shiva – who is in the hospital after receiving a beating from the bad guys while in a deep, alcohol-induced slumber from their recent Pondicherry road-trip – awakens when he hears her call (Figure 7 – second-row, left). He gets out of bed and does 100 push-ups (we hear him count them: '45 … 68 … 100'; second-row, right) as the theme music kicks in. Cut to the bullet in mid-air (third-row, left). Cut to Shiva grabbing his gun. (The lyrics of the song here mockingly sing 'Too much!') Shiva gets into an autorickshaw. He haggles with the auto-driver (third-row, right). He stops for tea. He checks this watch (fourth-row, left). He grabs a newspaper. Cut again to the bullet flying in mid-air. Shiva gets on a city bus and casually flirts with the woman next to him as if he had not a care in the world (fourth-row, right). Cut to the bullet in mid-air. He goes to his dry cleaner to get his jacket cleaned. He checks his watch (fifth-row, left). Cut to the bullet in mid-air (fifth-row, right). Cut to him urinating on the roadside (sixth-row, left) and, again, checking his watch. Finally, he arrives at the warehouse and enters. The bullet is still flying in slow motion, ever closer to the heroine. At the predestined last second, Shiva leaps and saves her (sixth-row, right)

In these examples, the joke is to play up the disjuncture between the time of the hero and the diegetic events in which he acts, the latter presumably conforming to linear Newtonian time (Aumont et al. [1983] 1992, 93–94). Within the temporal envelope of a bazaar shakedown, Shiva has run home, talked with his grandmother, gone through puberty and aged a decade (simply through a montage of bicycling), and run back to the bazaar!

Figure 7. Shiva, our hero who knows that he has all the time in his world.

Within the time it takes a bullet to travel across a room, Shiva was able to exercise, haggle, have a tea, flirt on the bus, pick up his dry-cleaning, relieve himself on the roadside, and save the damsel in distress!

But if, as a small child, our hero Shiva has not yet internalized this epic/heroic time (hence his initial disbelief in the wisdom of his grandmother), now into the age of heroism he knows his time. Checking his watch confidently, he is sure that he has all the time in the/his world. The reflexive

sensibility of the hero to his own temporality here serves not simply as the film's enunciated wink to the viewer about how heroes exist in a fantasy time (which if read literally are impossible), but also to suggest that the hero has come to take seriously his own absurd temporality, that he himself has confused (what the film figures as) the artificial temporality of cinema for 'real' time (in contrast, by implication, to a realist cinema, which would render reel and real time as evenementially coincident as possible).

This asynchrony is also figured by *Thamizh Padam* as a kind of anachrony: that is, that the hero's time is not (and *should* not be) our time is framed by the film as a sign of his untimeliness, of the fact that mass heroes are something of the present-past that should go into the past and perish. The film's executive producer, Sashikanth (2011) gave explicit voice to this, commenting about yesteryear mass heroes like M. G. Ramachandran:

> They come from a different era, right? They were *gods* then. They were gods. Uh that kind, that was their kind of thing. The celluloid was a way of looking into the gods. They [the people] didn't get them on television. They don't get to see them on roads. Today (the hero-star) Suriya is accessible when you're buying a (bar of) soap. He is there. So it's no big deal. You can get to *see* them. It's not the same (at that time), 'I don't know where to see these people.' You know, that's- that completely, this connect of seeing god on screen is great [i.e. was greater] then, I think. Imagine you don't get to see these people otherwise in real life. But today, internet, you- it'll come, but you get to see his *face*. But then unless you cut somebody's photo, and keep them in your house and then look through them, you don't even know, you can't, that visual connection of wanting to see somebody you like is, was non-existent. … But I think that we're on the threshold, that cusp of leaving behind a lot of baggage and then moving forward. I think in the next five years, ten years, I think that's gonna happen. You look at the old filmmakers, they've pretty much died. They've all gone, like out of the industry.

Here a particular ontology of the image – as immanent presence, as 'god' – is figured as a thing of the past ('they come from a different era', as Sashikanth put it) that hasn't quite but will soon go away, as part of a generational shift, both of the audience – who, in urban areas at least (where *Thamizh Padam* ran the most successfully), have become 'updated', as *Thamizh Padam*'s scriptwriter Chandru opined (2010; cf. Kurai 2012, 44) – and of filmmakers. As Amudhan (2010) noted, 'many of the young people who are making films today are taking themselves lighter, are not treating the whole thing with, how do you call it?, with devotion that the last generation did, you know? We're not taking ourselves that seriously'.

This is a familiar and longstanding iconoclastic narrative about popular Indian cinemas: that they are developmentally stunted but (always) in the process of maturing out of a(n almost) past era of rural subaltern credulity, idol worship, fetishism, and fantasy (Vasudevan 2010; Ganti 2012; Mazzarella 2013), what Sashikanth typified above as 'real stupidity'. The

desired, if continually deferred, telos of this narrative is a modern realistic cinema patronized by liberal, cosmopolitan (middle-class) subjects who can take a joke, who know that the hero's time is not their time (in fact, is not anyone's time), who know that it's 'just a movie' and no more.[5] *Thamizh Padam* situates itself in and through this narrative, marking off a (present-) past from a (present-)future, performative presence from representation, fantasy from realism. *Thamizh Padam*, of course, is *not* a realist image of the world but a hypertrophied representation of the bloated irreality of the mass hero. Yet animating this satirically unreal and performative image *is* a representationalist yearning, for a film image that is a transparent window, not to the mass of the hero but to the world itself, as narrativized by a director and his story.

Yearning for another kind of image

In reflecting back on *Thamizh Padam* four years after its release, Amudhan (2014) noted to me that, whatever flaws or critiques there were of the film, 'I went out and said all the things that I wanted to say'. When I asked him what that was, he noted that he wanted to make the 'definitive spoof', 'a comprehensive Tamil cinema mirror'. But there was more than that, he indicated. He continued by describing a later scene in the film where Shiva returns to his rural hometown of Cinemappaṭṭi to locate his family:

> Well see, the thing, the dialogue that is spoken in *Thamizh Padam* when Shiva spends his first night there (in Cinemappaṭṭi). He says, what happened to this village? And there is nobody here anymore. And the dialogue that the guy (an older villager, acting as Shiva's guide) says is actually, was something that I wanted to say, you know. He said … '*Vāḻntukkiṭṭa kuṭumbam ṅkuṟa mātiri itu vāḻntukiṭṭa ūr ((???))*'. Which means, he's saying, like a family that's lived well and then gone down, this is a town that has lived well and then gone down to ruins. '*Oru kālattule Bharathiraja, Gangai Amaren inta mātiri āṭkaḷ ellām vantu iṅkē panniṭṭuppāṅka. Appō orē* shooting *nallā irukkum. Ippa inta pakkam yārumē varutu illai* <clicks mouth> *((???))*' ("Once upon a time, directors like Bharatiraja and Gangai Amaran shot films here. It was going well. There was a lot of shooting. But now no one comes this way anymore"). That's the reason the town is desolate, because there is no shooting happening there. But in a sense, that was the golden age of cinema for Tamil cinema, you know, when Bharathiraja and Gangai Amaran and Sundarajan were at their peaks and making original, cultural based cinema, unique cinema from Tamil Nadu. That was actually the golden age. And what he is saying was actually a reflection of what we thought.

Here we may recall Linda Hutcheon's ([1985] 2000) observation that parody always harbors within its heart conservative nostalgias; or to adapt Gerard Genette's ([1982] 1997) observation regarding parodic satire and caricature in European literature: there is always a particular normative

ideology that underwrites satire. While parodic satire ideologically frames itself, and is often framed by scholars, as transformative, romantic, and liberatory (e.g.; Bakhtin 1984; Lopez 1990; cf. Harries 2000, 120–34), caricature, Genette points out, abides a slightly different, if related ideology: that what is being caricatured should be expressed in some other, more referentially accurate, simple or plain style. Caricatures often frame their targets, Genette ([1982] 1997, 96) notes, as 'artificial language', as unnecessarily stylized nonsense.

Both these ideologies are united in *Thamizh Padam*, whose implicit framing of the image holds out for a representationalism that it hopes to make possible, arguing that in the place of the mass hero Tamil cinema might (re)generate (something approximating) the 'original, cultural based', 'unique' cinema of Tamil cinema's 'golden age', the realist nativity film of the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is evident in the quote above, as Amudhan laments the loss of such narrative-centered cinema and its generation of auteur directors who brought unadorned, naturalistic representations of village life to the screen for the first time. In this sense, *Thamizh Padam*'s parodic image is a means to a realist end, to a cinema that rearticulates image and referent as authentic and truthful.

But while in the above quote Amudhan framed this as a turn inwards, to 'nativity' and the 'culture' of the Tamil people, it faces outwards as well. Like many of the directors whom I have interviewed in over a decade of research on Tamil cinema, Amudhan continually framed his own aspirations and efforts, and his own critiques of Tamil cinema, against a recognizable cosmopolitan canon of Hollywood and 'world cinema' auteur-directors (e.g. Scorsese, Kubrick, Tarantino, Kurosawa) and their narratively driven and (comparatively) realist films (cf. Vasudevan 2010, 7; Ganti 2012). Amudhan's invocation of the realist nativity films of the 1970s, then, should not be read as a simple call for a nostalgic return to a 'golden age' but as a provocation for a continually different (i.e. non-formulaic and 'original') cinema, in the way that the director-lead realist films of the 'golden age' of the late 1970s offered a fresh break with the hero-driven commercial cinema of their time.

In the wake of *Thamizh Padam*, a spate of such 'different' films were, in fact, released (e.g. *Aaranya Kaandam* [2011], *Pizza* [2012], *Kadhalil Sodhapuvadhu Yeppadi* [2012], *Soodhu Kavvum* [2013], *Jigarthanda* [2016]). Such films have since been variously called by critics and scholars of Tamil cinema as 'new wave', 'experimental realism', and 'neo-noir' (Gopalan 2008; Krishnan 2013; Kailasam 2017; cf. Nakassis and Dean 2007).[6] As Vasuki Kalaisam has put it (2017, 7), *Thamizh Padam* was a 'signpost' for these small-budget films who broke from the hero-driven commercial fare that dominates mainstream Tamil cinema, *and* from the neonativity films that proliferated in the 2000s.[7] While a detailed discussion

of these films is beyond the scope of this article, it is critical to note that, like *Thamizh Padam*, this new crop of films were directed by new 'outsider' directors without film industry backgrounds (e.g. Thiagarajan Kumararaja, Karthik Subburaj, Balajimohan, Nalam Kumarasamy) and produced by new producers with equally outsider credentials (e.g. C. V. Kumar, S. P. B. Charan, and Sashikanth, *Thamizh Padam*'s producer). Such commercially successful films are self-reflexively quirky and experimental ('not taking themselves too seriously', as Amudhan said above, of the 'young people [...] making films today'), violent and absurdist, lacking both substantial hero figures – in fact, articulating a crisis of masculinity, Kailasam (2017) argues – and a strong moral or emotional core (what in Tamil Nadu is called 'sentiment'). Registering at one and the same time an enthusiastic cinephilic relation to Tamil cinema of the past[8] and, as Hariharan Krishnan (2013) has argued, a deep disaffection with and yet intimate investment in mainstream regional (cine)politics, such films can be seen as actualizing precisely the sensibility of *Thamizh Padam*, not as a negative parodic form but as a positive aesthetic claim on the image.[9]

Not just about textual aesthetics, however, Amudhan's was also an appeal for a different production culture. In the next section, I turn to a marketing stunt that took place three months after *Thamizh Padam*'s release between C. S. Amudhan and the director Venkat Prabhu. This stunt was itself a spoof, an offscreen prank that aimed to demonstrate and make fun of the self-seriousness of the film industry. This prank keyed critiques articulated by *Thamizh Padam* and its makers that the uptight and hierarchical sociality and sociology of the industry deleteriously impacts how films are made. Not just a plea for a different kind of image, this was also a plea for a different mode of image production.

For a less serious industry

In March of 2010, at an engagement party for *Thamizh Padam*'s producer, Dayanidhi Azhagiri, Sashikanth, C. S. Amudhan, and Venkat Prabhu found themselves deep in their drink. Amudhan had recently released an ad spoofing Venkat Prabhu's ad campaign for his own film *Goa*, a comedy that came out on the same day as *Thamizh Padam* and that also featured a significant amount of hero-parodying humor. The print ad took *Goa*'s tagline 'A Venkat Prabhu Holiday', and transformed it into 'A C. S. Amudhan Working Day'. In doing so, Amudhan mockingly contrasted himself – as an outsider to the film world who had to work for his chance in the industry – to Venkat Prabhu – an insider who comes from a famous film family who, by implication, had his film career (his 'holiday') handed to him. As Amudhan (2010) told it, he showed the ad to Venkat Prabhu, who said in faux protest and anger, 'the nerve of you!'

Over drinks, they decided that Prabhu should make an ad that 'pulls the leg' of *Thamizh Padam* in return. Venkat Prabhu subsequently released an ad that spoofed a recently published *Thamizh Padam* 50th day celebration ad that featured the headline '*Ēn? Etaṟku? Eppaṭi? Ena eṅkaḷukkē puriyāmal ōṭikkoṇṭirukkum 50-āvatu nāḷ*' ('Without our understanding why, for what reason, or how, *Thamizh Padam* is running for its 50th day [in the theater]'). *Goa*'s ad had the headline: '*Itanāltān … Itaṟkākatān … ena eṅkaḷukkum makkaḷukkum purintu verṟikaramāka ōṭikkoṇṭirukkum 50-āvatu nāḷ*' ('Both the people and us understand why and for what reason *Goa* is running successfully for its 50th day [in the theater]'). The idea of the ads, Venkat Prabhu and Amudhan both told me, was 'cheap publicity', a fun way to keep people talking about the films as they wrapped up their theatrical runs.

After a series of such parodical print ads went back and forth, 'everyone was getting heated about it', as Venkat Prabhu told me in July 2010. He and Amudhan started getting calls from their producers, from the producers' council, from eminent senior actors, and from worried friends. All warned that these kinds of public fights were bad for everyone involved. They were counseled to stop their feud and bury the hatchet.

Around this same time Amudhan and Shiva were invited for the second episode of the recently begun NDTV television talk show, *Hands Up* (2010–2011), hosted by journalist and parallel-cinema filmmaker Sudish Kamath. (Kamath was an ideological ally and friend of both Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu, having written favorable reviews of both films in the English-language press as examples of a possible future for a new and 'different' Tamil cinema [Kamath 2010].) *Hands Up*, as Kamath put it to me in 2014, was an attempt at a new kind of show, one that didn't have any of the conventional 'rules' for a talk show. Central to this was the sociality of the show itself: egalitarian, irreverent, and playful – the exact opposite of the stereotype of how the sociality of the Tamil film and television industries works: hierarchical, reverent, and self-serious.

To make light of this stereotype, *Hands Up* featured a bit called 'Mocktales', where guests had to humorously redub some scene from a film they were a part of. In the show's second episode, aired in early March of 2010, Amudhan and Shiva redubbed, and spoofed, a scene from Venkat Prabhu's *Chennai-600028* (2007), in which Shiva had acted. As Kamath reasoned, 'I made them spoof up for a segment from Venkat Prabhu's film, because, I mean, he's the only guy (in the film industry) who's not going to take offense if we make fun of him'.[10]

In late March, Venkat Prabhu and his brother, the comedian Premji Amaren were invited to the show. In collusion with Amudhan, they decided to use their Mocktale (in this case, a scene from Rajinikanth's *Chandiramukhi* [2005, dir. P. Vasu], which Premji had already famously

parodied in Venkat Prabhu's previous films) to make fun of *Thamizh Padam*. What followed was a series of Facebook posts by Amudhan and Prabhu that played up the faux feud. Each comment framed the other director as an ego-sensitive megalomaniac. The posts sparked a series of ad hominem attacks online by their respective social networks against the opposing director.

Given the decidedly serious response to their prank, Amudhan, Prabhu, and Kamath decided to turn up the volume. Playing it up through a series of public communiques – Kamath taking responsibility for the feud on-air, issuing a public apology online, editing comments from the *Hands Up* episodes for televised teasers to make it seem that Prabhu was really upset with Amudhan, and vice versa – the fight was made to seem genuine. Alongside such staged drama, *Hands Up* elicited sincere sound bites from industry personnel (e.g. the journalist Shakti, from the industry magazine *Galatta*; the director Gautham Menon) weighing in on how the two directors should resolve their differences.

On the first of April, Venkat Prabhu and Amudhan came together on *Hands Up* to allegedly clear the air and patch things up. Instead, they staged an even more emotionally charged drama where each traded jabs and puffed up their egos, Venkat Prabhu even storming off stage at one point. Toward the end of the episode, with emotions running high, they revealed the whole thing to be an April Fool's prank on the audience by two close friends.

The prank they staged turned on the idea that what one director simply meant as a joke to be taken 'lightly' was taken too seriously by the other, who was thereby figured as having too much 'ego', prompting a serious attack in return. The moral, as the show framed it, was that the industry shouldn't take itself as seriously as it does. As given voice by S. P. B. Charan, Venkat Prabhu's friend and *Chennai-600028* producer, in a link segment of *Hands Up* that aired after the prank was revealed: 'The seniors in the industry, lighten up! There are a lot of new directors and actors, new fresh blood coming in who have a great sense of humor. So learn something from them. We are learning a lot from you guys. But you have to take a page out of our books as well. So lighten up people'.

The prank, in short, played on the ease by which people assumed that even those who are known to be easygoing and always joking (Venkat Prabhu and Amudhan) were in a serious battle of egos, that underneath the veneer of parody and humor was ultimately and always an industry sociologically (and gerontologically) organized around sensitive individuals who just can't take a joke. (As Kamath put it to the directors on-air before revealing the prank: 'Is there a thing called a sense of humor for the Tamil film industry? Because you guys are the funny guys, and if you guys can't take a joke, then I don't know who can'.) That one couldn't intuit that it was a joke, then, was the basis of the joke (cf. Boyer and Yurchak 2010).

Through its deception, the stunt positioned its onlookers as credulous subjects who mistook fictional representation for reality, as dupes unable to conceive that film personalities could, in fact, simply be joking around when it came to their own public images. In other words, the prank elicited the belief that images of industry insiders are never mere representations but are always residually performative acts, be they of the mass-hero's presence on the big screen or of a joke between directors on the small screen. This was a lesson, the prank suggested, that younger directors – the 'new fresh blooding coming in with a sense of humor', as Charan put it – had to convey to both the 'seniors' of the industry and to audiences. In the end, after all, it was the young *directors* Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu who had flipped the script, who had controlled the narrative of the prank to show the audience what was illusion and what was real.

A politics of production

The offscreen 'feud' between Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu underscores that *Thamizh Padam*'s critical bite was as much about the sociology and political economy of the film industry as it was about questions of aesthetics or audience uptake. In this faux feud and in my interviewers with the film's makers, we can detect a call for a different mode of image production and a different locus of authority over the image, that of the director and not the mass hero.

Consider, again, Shiva's introductory song in *Thamizh Padam*. About three minutes into the song a caption appears on the screen when Shiva is singing about how he's the dream boy of all the college girls (Figure 8 – top). The text reads '*Inta pāṭalai pāṭiyavar uṅkaḷ Shiva*' 'Your Shiva is the singer of this song' – a reference to how some of the films of the hero-star Vijay in the 1990s provided a caption onscreen telling the viewer that he, the hero-star was singing the song that the viewer was hearing his character sing in the diegesis (rather than, as is typically the case, a professional playback singer). About seven seconds later, the caption changes (Figure 8 – bottom). A matrix clause has been added, framing the now subordinate clause and adding another voice into the mix: '*Inta pāṭalai pāṭiyavar uṅkaḷ Shiva enṟu pōṭumāṟu kēṭṭuk koṇṭār*' 'He [Shiva] asked (me/us) to put "Your Shiva is the singer of this song"'.

While the first caption parodies a practice of aligning and blurring onscreen and offscreen, the second lampoons the division of labor it implies: the widely held belief (and in some cases reality) that it is not the director but the film's hero who directs and controls the film, who tells the audience what he wants them to know; hence the necessity to have the caption twice, first to enact the actor-star's intervention into the image's production format and second, to insist that this is at the expense of the will

Figure 8. A politics of production format; top: 'Your Shiva is the singer of this song'; bottom: 'He asked (me/us) to put "Your Shiva is the singer of this song"'.

of the filmmaker – who is no longer the author of the film text but merely a toiling animator of it – and his story.[11]

In interviews with me, Amudhan consistently invoked 'the story' – in pointed distinction to the 'bankable' star – as the basic, foundational element guiding his filmmaking. In doing so, he voiced a common criticism of commercial Tamil cinema: that instead of a sensible story and a coherent narrative, its films are made up of a jumble of disjointed 'tracks' (comedy, romance) and spectacles (fights, songs) loosely woven around the hero (cf. Vasudevan 2010, 4–7). Commenting on how the rise of hero-star-oriented cinema in the 1950s (and again in the 1980s and 1990s) displaced an earlier mode of story-driven cinema, Amudhan (2010) noted:

> And I think it [hero-star-centered cinema] started to take away the sheen of story telling … I don't mind ten movies a year coming out like that … but it became completely topsy turvy, we had only movies of this kind coming out. And I think we have an inherent- as a people, as Tamil people we have a very rich ethos out of which to make stories. And we are very good storytellers. I think we lost that … because this [heroism] was hogging all the space.

As Amudhan put it, the problem is that the hero-star has eclipsed the story and its teller. Again, this is not just a critique of a kind of image or narrative textuality, but of a mode of production and political economy. Amudhan's appeal is both a plea for the story (and not the hero-star's image) to guide the filmmaking process and for the authority of the director – as storyteller/author – to subordinate actors as mere performers enlivening *his* story.

For Sashikanth (2011), who conceived his production house, YNOT Studios as a source for 'alternative' commercial productions, choosing a film was not just about 'content' (or story) but also about the 'script'. Emphasizing that he chooses films solely based on their scripts, Sashikanth distinguished himself from producers who choose their projects based on the 'market value' of the hero-star or the director. As he further emphasized, he never listens to oral 'narrations' of stories (the typical way that films are pitched in the industry), but only will *read* scripts, by which he meant a detailed production script that indicates all aspects of the filmmaking process (from decoupage to properties to dialogues; also see Kamath 2012).

This appeal to the script was a criticism of an industry that has long worked independently of production scripts (even when they exist) and has preferred a more improvisational style of filmmaking (Pandian 2015). Invoking the script, then, was a way of framing the rest of the industry as backward (even illiterate), ad hoc and disorganized, inefficient and economically opaque.[12] As Sashikanth lamented, the economics of the industry feeds on black money, bloated budgets, and non-transparent accounting, and operates with, as he estimated, ninety-five failures kept afloat by five mega-hits. As he said, outlining his own business 'model' in comparison:

> Our [YNOT's] model, again, is very clearly we don't work on this exponential kind of looking at profits and things like that. I think you should be able to create a value chain right across to the distributor, the theater guy. The producer should understand that if he creates a product, he- his return should be clearly 15, 18 per cent market standard when you're creating as a kind of thing- You shouldn't suddenly build-make a film for 8 crores [80 million] and try to sell it for 20 crores [200 million]. It's stupidity, actually. (My underlining)

For Sashikanth, the heterogeneous mode of production built up around the mass hero turns on huge windfalls from a few films rather than a serial, rationalized mode of script-dictated production that is efficient and that calculates and manages risk. Note, in particular, the corporate-speak of Sashikanth's discourse and the business imaginaries it invokes and opposes: 'making' and 'selling' films in order to collect 'exponential profits and things like that' (which is 'stupidity') in contrast to a 'value chain' where 'a product' (note, not a 'film') is 'clearly' and reliably able to give a 'return' according to some 'market standard'.[13]

In short, *Thamizh Padam*, both as a film text and the outcome of a mode of production, rejected both of a *kind of image* and *a kind of cinema*, from the level of the text and its chronotopic organization (mainstream, 'mass' films for untimely, credulous subaltern crowds vs. alternative, 'class' films for modern, liberal publics) to the social organization of the industry (hierarchical vs. egalitarian, older vs. younger generation, heroes vs. filmmakers), its modes of sociality (uptight vs. laid-back), and economic organization (black vs. white, irrational vs. rationalized). But with economic and political stakes so high, in an industry so putatively hierarchical, self-serious and thin-skinned, how did such a film ever even get released, let alone made? What was the politics *for* the image that made it possible for such a politics *of* the image to come to light?

The politics for an image

Making a film like *Thamizh Padam*, as industry insiders, audiences, film critics, and its makers noted, was gutsy (*tairiyam*), even unthinkable. This was not simply because the full-length spoof was not a recognized genre in the industry, nor because the film lacked big name actors, directors, and technicians. It was because such a film, by attacking an image type, production culture, and political economy organized around often touchy and humorless heroes, risked resistance from the industry and perhaps even violent retribution from upset fans.

When I asked in 2010 the former director and producer, and current comedian, Manobala – who played one of Shiva's sidekicks in *Thamizh Padam* – if most producers would have opted to take on a project like *Thamizh Padam*, he noted dramatically in *Tamil*: 'They would never take it on, sir! It would've never come out. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, if I'd made *Thamizh Padam* they [the ones affected by the film] would've chopped off my legs and arms!' ('*Eṭukka māṭṭāṅka sār! Veḷi āka muṭiyātu.* Tamil *Nāṭṭai poṟutta varaikkum* Thamizh Padam *nān eṭuttiruntā ennai kai kālai veṭṭi pōṭṭiruppāṅka*'). Less sensationally, Sashikanth (2011) noted that 'There was an existing rule in the industry that any movie that makes fun of movies doesn't work in the box-office. … [I]t's just like a psychological thing that people [filmmakers, actors, etc.] used to carry, that whenever movies made fun of (other) movies they didn't work in the industry' (cf. Harries 2000, 18).

While ultimately Amudhan and Sashikanth found a production house (Cloud 9 Movies) to bring the film to theaters, the film did face setbacks along the way. There was resistance from the Tamil Film Producers Council, which tried to stop the film's production at the outset. There were problems at shooting spots, as when fans got upset at seeing huge cutouts of Shiva in the opening song trolling their favorite heroes. It was

difficult to cast actors and hire technicians ('Nobody would want to be part of [a] spoof, unless it's a rank newcomer who says "I've got nothing to lose"', Amudhan reported to me in 2014), and once cast, actors often felt uncomfortable with their lines, asking the director to change them or tone them down for fear of 'hurting' the parodied person (and suffer the fallout personally). Once completed, the film faced resistance from distributors, who were initially unwilling to buy it.

In the end, however, the film got made. It was released. It was a hit. Audiences, in general, found it hilarious, knowingly laughing with the film at their heroes (and perhaps at themselves). Contrary to what might have been expected, there were no fan mobs ripping out the seats in theaters, no threats to the director, no publicly outraged film personalities. Indeed, what was more surprising was the conspicuous absence of *any* kind of widespread negative reaction to the film upon its release, from either the industry or its publics (even if certain film stars' feeling were reputed to be hurt – such as the 'Little Superstar' Simbu – and some persons' careers affected from the satire they endured).

Was the lack of reaction following *Thamizh Padam*'s release indicative that its interventions were a *fait accompli*, its politics a foregone conclusion? Was *Thamizh Padam* simply the telltale sign, as Rajan Kurai (2012) has argued, that the mass hero was already dead, his rotting corpse ripe for parody? That, as English-language journalist Sudish Kamath (2014) suggested, Tamil cinema had 'come of age'? That, as the *Thamizh Padam* screenwriter Chandru (2010) said, audiences and filmmakers today are 'updated' and matured by world cinema, rejecting the 'formula', as Sashikanth (2011) put it, and instead demanding 'alternative', sensible 'content'? Or perhaps that, as Amudhan said to me, the filmmaking team knew the limits of good fun and, with a couple of exceptions (e.g. to the minor hero-star, Simbu), avoided *personally* insulting anyone? Or did Amudhan et al. get away with it simply because, as Amudhan and Sashikanth noted about themselves, they were 'rank outsiders' to the industry who never assistanted with anyone and thus who didn't know better, who had nothing to lose and owed nothing to anyone in the industry?

Perhaps. Many of these reasons make sense given recent changes in Tamil cinema,[14] and they fit with a familiar (ideologically charged) narrative of the maturation and modernization of the Tamil film industry, just as they fit neatly with *Thamizh Padam*'s makers' own narrative of triumphing against the odds (itself perhaps elicited by the interview frame of my research). But rather than rehash these stories, I would like to draw attention elsewhere: to a particular politics *for* the image that underwrote *Thamizh Padam*'s politics *of* the image, a politics not based on liberal

maturation, outsider irreverence, or generational shift, but on political muscle and the counter-threat of physical violence and state force.[15]

Consider how Sashikanth, an elite corporate architect, got into films. Central to Sashikanth's story is that his father is a politician, a member of the legislative assembly from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party.[16] Around the same time that Sashikanth had decided to get into film production and 'take on the industry', so too did his close friends, Dayanidhi Azhagiri (forming Cloud 9 Movies) and Udhayanidhi Stalin (forming Red Giant Movies), two grandsons of *Kalaignar* ('the Artist') M. Karunanidhi (1924–2018), the patriarch of the then-in-power DMK, a political party that rose to prominence, in part, through its ambivalent connection with M. G. Ramachandran, the first mass hero to move from politics to the state secretariat. As Sashikanth put it to me,

> So what happened was that from being a complete outsider in the industry I was suddenly associated with people who were suddenly looked upon as the big guys in the industry. … And we wanted Cloud 9 to back the movie because we were facing political issues, political not in terms of politicians, but in terms of the industry guy(s) trying to politicize *Thamizh Padam* (because it was a spoof).

As Amudhan (2014) said regarding their difficulties with making the film, 'The thing that made it happen was that the production house was a big political entity at that time. … So that kind of calmed the fears'. Or as Chandru (2010), one of the film's screenwriters noted to me, the political backing allowed them to be more 'bold' in what they wrote.

The consensus, in fact, among the industry persons with whom I spoke, once I queried them on this issue, was that this film was possible *only because* of the fact that the son of the notorious rowdy/politician, M. K. Azhagiri (Karunanidhi's son) – who at the time had an iron grip on the southern city of Madurai, and held a cabinet position in the central government – was producing the film. As one actor opined in Tamil (with the caveat that he didn't want his frank speech about current politics to be associated with him): 'with that kind of political support, there wouldn't be any kinds of problems. With Azhagiri behind his son, anyone who was upset with the film "would just have to shut their mouths and their assholes and sit quietly"' ('*sūttaiyum vāyaiyum pottīṭu tān pōkaṇum*'). This backing involved not simply the threat of intimidation but actual force. Indeed, with its producer's family in a position of influence vis-à-vis the police and other non-state agents, *Thamizh Padam* didn't have to contend with one of the main impediments to producer and distributor's profits: piracy.

During this same period, Karunanidhi's grandnephews and Dayanidhi Azhagiri's cousins, Kalanithi and Dayanidhi Maran were also increasingly monopolizing film production and distribution, integrating it into their

expansive media empire, which included Sun Television and Kalaignar TV, among a number of major newspapers and radio stations. As one film producer pointed out to me, at the time of our interview (late July, 2010) all of the box-office hits of 2009–2010 with the exception of one, *Kalavani* (2010, dir. A. Sargunam), were produced or distributed by family members of the DMK party's higher echelon. And that success, he noted, was precisely because of their ability to both avail free publicity and to easily sell the television rights of their films through family-controlled media. One of the keys to the success of *Thamizh Padam*, according to Sashikanth (2011), was that it had a well-thought-out and clever marketing campaign that was able to generate a lot of buzz (Dhananjayan 2011, vol. 2, 321). While the content of the campaign may have been clever, the ability to continually blast the public with it at virtually no cost was surely important as well.

Conclusion

If the politics of images concern the contestation, but also distribution, of images and what they represent (and the entailments therein), they also critically involve not just *what* is imaged but what *is* an image, what it can be or become (or should not be or become). The politics of images involve a redistribution and transformation, as Rancière (2007, 2009) has put it, of the sensible and intelligible.[17] Such redistributions and transformations are mediated by (and afford) particular projects. Yet such projects do not simply aim to open up new spectatorial sensibilities or intelligibilities, as Rancière suggests, but also, as I have emphasized here, to actualize new image ontologies.

Thamizh Padam is engaged in one such project. And so too, as our discussion of it has suggested, is Bazin's account of ontology of the film image. As noted in the introduction, Bazin was at pains to make a claim on and for images as bearers of realist presence, and thus as sites of political and ethical possibility. This is clearest in his critiques of film images that are not realist enough (as in German Expressionist film), images that are 'too real' or realist in the wrong way, such as pornography or executions (Bazin [1957] 2005; cf. Williams 1989, 184–228; Schoonover 2012, 13, 62; Hassan 2017), or in the naturalized image of the authoritarian leader (Bazin [1950] 1985). While Bazin's normative politics is relatively muted in his classic essay, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' ([1945] 2005), this politics for the image, as his commentators have noted, is at the very heart of his ontology; indeed, it is at the heart of any and every ontology of the image, I would argue. That is, any ontology of the image is always articulated in a contested normative field of ontic heterogeneity and possibility. Such contestation, and the plurality it presupposes and entails, imply that not just 'in' or 'of' the image or the apparatus or the subject, the being of the

image is distributed in multiform sites (on sets, in theaters, and beyond) and projects (of filmmakers, actors, producers, audiences, film critics and theorists, political parties, etc.) that converge on, and give rise to, images.

It is of particular historical interest that Bazin's formulation of the question – his particular politics for the image (and its production) – did not simply emerge out of his analysis of film but also mediated the circulation, uptake, and even becoming of film images, manifesting itself in and as a politics of images articulated by realist cinemas the world over (Andrew 2011); in a word, as a particular ontology of the image. We might say without irony, then, that 'THE' ontology of the image *sensu* Bazin is to be found in the relationships between Bazin's – among others' – politics *for* the realist image (and *against* other kinds of images), the industrial organizations and production cultures it mediated and continues to mediate, the textual aesthetics and sensibilities it cultivated, championed, and disseminated (even, circuitously, to Indian cinemas [Majumdar 2016, 588]), and the kinds of images and image practices it gave rise to (see, e.g. Andrew 2011, part IV). This is not to wage the critique that Bazin's realist ontology (or any ontology) is just an ideological chimera, as suggested by 1970s film theory. Rather, it is to think critically with and against Bazin and suggest that the being of a film image is the existential, real effect of these politics of and for the image, a point that in his praxis – if not in his theory – Bazin himself demonstrated.

We see precisely such an intertwined relation of the ontological politics of and for the image at play in *Thamizh Padam*. The texture of *Thamizh Padam*'s parody (its liberal mockery of the populist mass hero and his 'worship', its chronopolitics, etc.) is enabled by a particular politics for the image (the film's kinship-based political backing, its corporatization, among other politics still), with the hope that this politics of/for might, in fact, bring into being a different kind of image and production culture; that it might defang the cine-political performativity and insistent presence of the mass hero and replace it with a representationalist image, one driven by a story and script in the control of directors and their producers. The politics for and of images here mutually interact, presupposing and entailing each other through and as images; indeed, the iconoclastic and parodic politics of *Thamizh Padam* is itself a politics for a future image. As I suggested, one might read the 'neo-noir' turn in contemporary Tamil cinema in this context (without too quickly reducing it to the 'effect' of *Thamizh Padam*, or any single film, of course). Spoofs like *Thamizh Padam*, then, like the writings of Rancière and Bazin, among others, attempt to disentangle what are knotted together in some particular regime of imageness, attempting to bring other images, other ontologies, other industry relations, and other politics into being (while also conserving certain elements as well, of course).

This mutual relationship between the politics of and for images, of course, need not happen in any straightforward or reflective way, if it happens at all (indeed, any such politics is always an open-ended gambit liable to failure).[18] What is important to underline is how and when these politics of/for the image come to be linked to each other (and what kinds of projects aim to accomplish such linkage), sutured together *in* and *as* the image itself, in and as its modes of production, social relations, and being – in the case of *Thamizh Padam*, so as to shut up the assholes while putting the rest of us in stitches.

Notes

1. Industry insiders often explain this seeming paradox that Tamil cinema is all spoof with no spoofs by pointing to the self-seriousness of the industry (see the main text below for more discussion); or alternatively, by suggesting that film 'spoofs' are a foreign genre. Yet the industry has long made jokes at its own expense. Think, for example, of Nagesh's memorable comedy track from C. V. Sridhar's classic 1964 romantic comedy *Kadhalikka Neeramillai* ('No Time for Love'), which turns on Nagesh's nascent film production: a parody of the film producer, Nagesh has everything lined up to make a film … except a story. Or, more recently, consider a film like *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007, dir. Shankar), whose hero, the 'Superstar' Rajinikanth, and comic sidekick, played by Vivek, are continually parodying Rajini's star image. The film is a smorgasbord of pastiche upon pastiche, parody upon self-parody. No exception to Tamil cinema, self-reflexive parody is and has long been its rule. What makes *Thamizh Padam* – the film discussed in this article – different from this, however, are: its out-and-out parody (rather than being confined to the 'comedy track' the whole film is a spoof); its refusal to reinforce the hero position through its comedy; and, as I discuss in the main text, the satirical bite of its ontological politics.
2. 2010 saw a veritable surfeit of spoof films in the Tamil industry: C. S. Amudhan's *Thamizh Padam*, Venkat Prabhu's *Goa* (which released on the same day as *Thamizh Padam*), and Simbudevan's *Irumbu Kottai Mirattu Singam*. Important precursors to these 2010 films include Sakti Chidambaram's *Mahanadigan* (2004; and sequences from his 2005 *Englishkkaran*), the STAR Vijay TV spoof series *Lollu Sabha*, as well as Venkat Prabhu's *Chennai-600028* (2007) and *Saroja* (2008). Dhananjayan (2011, vol. 1, 46–47) reports that *Naveen Vikramaditya* (1940, dir. K. S. Mani) was 'the first full length comedy spoof in Tamil cinema' (in this case, of a well-known folk story) followed by *Chandrahari* (1941, dir. K. S. Mani), a spoof of the story of *Harichandra*. Tamil cinema also has a long history of satire, for example, N. S. Krishnan's 1949 *Nalla Thambi* and Cho Ramasamy's 1971 *Muhammad bin Tughluq*. But not simply the small explosion of spoof films in 2010, the late 2000s also saw the emergence of a number of farcical, yet seemingly serious heroes such as the 'Powerstar' Dr. S. Srinivasan, Sam Anderson, and J. K. Ritesh. While others have asked the important question, Why now? (e.g. Kurai 2012; Srinivas 2009, 216–17), my primary interest here is to interrogate *what* is being parodied in *Thamizh*

Padam, in what way, and to what ends, and thus to ask the related but distinct question, under what conditions can such an image appear?

3. The term *nativity* here refers to a genre of films that emerged in the 1970s that naturalistically depict folk life in rural Tamil Nadu.
4. Whether or not the mass hero or his films actually abide this idea is another issue; arguably, *Thamizh Padam* reads the mass-hero figure more literally and seriously – i.e. more univocally, more credulously – than his films or his fans, the former of which often reflect on and play with just this gap/slippage. Or, we might say, *Thamizh Padam* meta-parodically voices (what it takes to be) the credulous spectator's literalism. Both, of course, are possible at the same time.
5. Given the caste-linked stereotypes of image uptake that *Thamizh Padam* was parodying, and the class location of the film's makers, one reviewer helpfully posed the question of the role of caste in this politics of the spoof. While there is a certain logic that would lead us from class to caste, distinguishing the stereotyped quality of this logic from its reality is complex. My research data didn't warrant any particular conclusion on this issue. On its textual surface, *Thamizh Padam* has no overt caste politics of its own, nor did caste appear as an issue in either media reportage about the film, in my conversations with viewers, or (expectedly) in its makers' talk about the film. In a context, however, where screen image and caste are deeply imbricated, as Damodaran and Gorringe (2017) have argued, we might see such an omission as itself articulating a particular (non)politics of the image. In addition, given the caste(ist) implications of what Amudhan lauds as the 'golden age' of Tamil cinema – the nativity film (see main text below) – this silence participates in the naturalization of caste (Rajangam 2016). Interestingtly, the sequel of the film, *Thamizh Padam 2.0* (2018), opens with a caste riot, arguably reflecting Tamil cinema's own increasingly critical and explicit focus on caste dynamics.
6. A key figure anticipating such films is the director Venkat Prabhu, whose popular films have wed a deep (if playful) investment in the Tamil film canon with a cosmopolitan orientation to (realist) Hollywood cinema and tongue-in-cheek hero-parody.
7. Such neonativity films of the early 2000s – what Lalitha Gopalan (2008) has dubbed 'cruel cinema' and Hariharan Krishnan 'the cinema of disgust' – are marked by their gritty realism, violence, and distrust of Dravidian(ist) politics, as well as by a particular cohort of directors (e.g. Balumahendra's former assistant directors, Vetrimaran and Bala, as well as Bala's former assistant directors, Ameer and Sasikumar). By the late 2000s, such realist films themselves became a recognizable 'formula' (Gopinath 2011; Damodaran and Gorringe 2017), and it is with respect to such increasingly stereotyped films that the new crop of absurdist, hyper-reflexive 'neo-noir' films have to be situated, both in continuity and difference. While Amudhan (2014), for example, found path-breaking neonativity films like *Paruthiveeran* (2007) and *Subramaniyapuram* (2008) 'brilliant', he went on to say: 'it's spawned this genre altogether now which is getting really irritating … This is the problem we have with Tamil cinema, they won't leave well enough alone. When you've done something, you have to move on. But they won't'.

8. As Amudhan (2014) noted to me, despite their parody, many of the scenes of *Thamizh Padam* turn on an intimate knowledge and care ('loving detailing' as he put it) that only a cinephile of Tamil cinema could have.
9. When I interviewed Amudhan in 2010 and 2014, he laid claim to precisely this aesthetic and discourse as his own in characterizing his future projects. Amudhan's planned-for second film, *Rendavathu Padam* ('Second Film') was completed by our 2014 interview but had (and has) yet to be released. Not a spoof film at all, Amudhan described *Rendavathu Padam* to me in ways that fit exactly to the 'neo-noir' films that followed after *Thamizh Padam*.
10. Venkat Prabhu is seen within and outside the industry as an easygoing filmmaker who doesn't have any 'ego', on or off the set, and whose 'team' of directors and technicians is run in a relatively egalitarian manner.
11. I use the terms *author* and *animator* in Goffman's (1981) senses.
12. For discussion of similar critiques of Indian film industries, see Prasad (1998) and Vasudevan (2010).
13. Sashikanth here keys a longer-standing discourse about the need to corporatize the Tamil film industry, to render it transparent and rationalized (see Srinivas 2016). One can also hear his experience as a corporate architect bleed into his speech here – initially using 'build' to refer to the 'product', then repairing with the more film-appropriate term 'make'.
14. As noted in the main text, we might point to the successful (re)emergence of realist and experimental, small-budget films since the early 2000s (Nakassis and Dean 2007; Gopalan 2008; Kailasam 2017), along with a slew of new directors, producers, and technicians; as well as to recent changes within mass-hero films themselves (Kurai 2012; Nakassis 2016, 221–23); for example, hero-stars like Ajith and Rajinikanth have recently attempted to break with (or at least loosen the grip of) their 'image traps' (Pandian 1992), playing characters with muted heroism in relatively realist narratives (e.g. Rajini's 2016 film *Kabali*) or by playing negative roles (e.g. Ajith's 2011 *Mankatha*) in films directed by filmmakers known for their non-hero-based films (Pa. Ranjith and Venkat Prabhu, respectively). Similarly, we can point to the highly self-reflexive irony of the mass hero's image in recent films like *Sivaji* (dir. Shankar, 2007; see note 1), among other films.
15. This is not the only such politics for the image, of course. In addition to the politics of humor and the liberal politics of representationalism noted in the main text, we can point to the dynastic politics and social networks that underwrites much of the industry (on which more in the main text); to a gender politics (e.g. the male homosociality of the industry); and to an ethnolinguistic politics of belonging (a comparison of the reception of *Thamizh Padam* with the pointedly negative reception of Shah Rukh Khan's Bollywood spoof of Tamil cinema in *Chennai Express* [2013, dir. Rohit Shetty] reveals the politics of cultural intimacy at play here). I thank Amanda Weidman for encouraging me to clarify these points.
16. When the sequel to *Thamizh Padam, Thamizh Padam 2.0* released in 2018, some Twitter users raised the question of whether the film – which was otherwise explicitly political in its satire – was soft on the DMK because C. S. Amudhan's father-in-law is a senior cadre of the party. In response, the director denied being soft on anyone, or of any influence from his father-in-law's affiliation. When *Thamizh Padam* was released, Amudhan's affinal

political connections did not come up, either in the press or in discussions with the film's makers or audiences.

17. Rancière's (2007, 2009) concern is to shift our image of politics, away from the questions of cause and effect (How does this representation cause this effect in audiences? How can such a cause–effect relation be unmasked and undone?) and toward the question of how what is experiencable and intelligible is redistributed, that is, how new 'regimes of imageness' are opened up and transformed in non-deterministic ways. *Thamizh Padam*'s politics engages both such images of politics: it attempts to unmask one regime of imageness (and in service of a particular representationalism) but with the hope of opening up a different topography of the possible. Rancière is useful for his productively broad conception of the political. But while Rancière would have us (normatively) choose one (image of) politics or the other, here my interest is empirical: what do image politics look like in different times and places? And how are we to site and theorize such politics?
18. As we noted, there is an ironic, even contradictory, relationship between the politics of *Thamizh Padam* and (some of) the politics for it. As one reviewer helpfully pointed out, there is no reason to think that the liberal politics of *Thamizh Padam* (say, in attempting to shift genre conventions or production processes) need have any implications regarding the 'crony-capitalist networks of circulation' that made the former possible (though there is no in principle reason why they couldn't). The empirical question I'm interested in is under what conditions could a politics *of* an image itself serve as a politics *for* an image, and vice versa (even if those politics *for* don't necessarily 'take')?

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