

CINEMA

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THE YOUTHFULNESS OF TAMIL CINEMA AND THE LIMITS OF IMITATION

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As indicated by its title, this short essay is a reflection on the youthfulness of Tamil cinema, on the place of cinema in the lives of young people-and, in particular, young men-and vice versa, the place of youth, and youth masculinity, in the social life of Tamil film. What kind of a relationship is this, and how are we to characterize it in its gendered contours? [1]

In eliciting what youth meant to them, a central motif of my male college friends’ coming-of-age narratives was cinema. Not just smoking one’s first cigarette, donning the latest fashion styles, or falling in love for the first time (activities often first experienced, of course, through film), *going* to the cinema marked many of my friends’ sense that they had “matured,” left childhood and become youth. Bunking class with friends to catch a matinee or jumping over the hostel wall to catch the last show of the night (and, of course, using those escapades as occasions to smoke cigarettes, “do style,” and fall in love, among other things)-these were prototypic youth activities (which is to say, masculinized youth activities). Cinema and youth, youth and cinema-both were experienced by my friends as a time and space of ludic transgression. Located away from family structures and adult institutions, each afforded imaginative landscapes and opportunities for youthful play and experimentation.

On the screen too are traces of that transgression, cultivated on its surface: scenes of ambivalent modernity and urbanity-of fashionable dress and language, romantic love and sexuality, new technologies and modes of transportation, but also of social reform and criticisms of inveterate “tradition” (think of a young Sivaji’s denunciations in *Parashakti* [1952, dir. Krishnan-Panju] or a middle-aged Rajinikanth bringing neoliberal development to Tamil Nadu in *Sivaji: The Boss* [2007, dir. S. Shankar])-and scenes of rough masculinity-of drinking and fighting and smoking and cursing. In the darkened theater, these images themselves call out for and enable other expressions of youthful, transgressive exuberance: whistling, yelling, dancing in the aisles, throwing confetti, surreptitiously sneaking a quarter of whisky. On and off the screen, Tamil cinema has always maintained an edginess, standing at the limits of adult propriety and respectability. This edginess, often embodied by young heroes onscreen, resonates with conceptions of youth masculinity in Tamil Nadu (and elsewhere) as transgressive, irreverent, playful, and modern. College friends answered the question, ‘What is youth cinema?’ by simply saying: ‘Films you can’t (that is, would be too embarrassed to) watch with your family.’

These conjunctions, of course, are nothing new. Consider, for example, the late great film historian and Tamil cinema’s first public relations officer (PRO), “Film News” Anandan’s account of the release and reception of C. V. Sridhar’s 1965 hit *Vennira Aadai*, which featured the debut of a “new face,” J. Jayalalitha. Thinking that the director might “misuse” this debutant heroine to titillate young male audiences (e.g., in “bathing scenes”), the censor board, Anandan said, gave the film an A-certificate. *Because* of this rating, the first day was swamped by male college students (who were, in any case, always the first to see Sridhar’s films) eager to take in otherwise forbidden images of female flesh. They were sorely disappointed when, upon hearing ‘Friend, I’m going to take a swim,’ the screen, in fact, refused to show them as much “glamour” as they had hoped. ‘What a *galatta* in the theater!’, Anandan exclaimed.

Alongside its modernity and subalternity, the youthful transgressiveness of Tamil cinema has been a constant over its hundred-year history. The film historian and anthropologist, Stephen Hughes tells us that young people were a conspicuous part of film audiences from the inception of silent cinema in South India in the early twentieth century. Not unlike my college hostel-mates in the late 2000s, young people at the dawn of cinema in South India were drawn to its exciting and titillating representations, its public anonymity and freedom from traditional controls, and the possibilities entailed therein.

Not just a site for urban youth culture, cinema in the 20th and 21st centuries continues to be a site of moral panic and anxiety about youth. The colonial and postcolonial state, the censor board, and multiple generations of adults have continually worried about the cinema’s capacity to morally corrupt youth, to overwhelm them with images that their “immature” minds cannot yet handle. Central here is the anxiety surrounding *imitation*. Anthropologist Michael Taussig observes in his book *Mimesis and Alterity* that the capacity to imitate is often ascribed to figures of otherness: animals like parrots and apes, but also children, “primitives,” and subalterns are sites of fascination and horror for their seemingly “natural” ability to mimic. Histories of Tamil cinema confirm this ideological association of mimesis and alterity. It is almost a truism that youth culture in Tamil Nadu *is* cinema culture, with everything from fashion styles to fashionable vices attributed to insatiable youth audiences’ unthinking imitation of their matinee idols.

Living in college hostels in Madurai and Chennai from 2007 to 2009, on the surface of things this seemed to ring true. Cinema saturated everyday life in the college. Youth bodies appeared to be projection surfaces of the cinematic apparatus: new fashion styles, haircuts, and slang phrases refracted off of students’ bodies, luminously lit as the silver screen’s own reflection. The first night in my Madurai hostel I went to bed only after being questioned by my hostel mates about my favorite film heroes. In the morning, I was woken by blaring distorted speakers playing songs from Rajini’s latest blockbuster, *Sivaji: The Boss*. Friends narrated and consoled each other’s “love failures” by referencing popular love stories: *Paruthiveeran* (2007, dir. Ameer Sultan) is ‘my story’ one friend explained in narrating the death of his lover, another alluding to *7/G Rainbow Colony* (2004, dir. Selvaraghavan) to detail his amorous travails. Students told jokes and gave nicknames by quoting comedians like Vivek or Vadivel. And they re-enacted scenes at will, by choice (at cultural functions) or by coercion (when ragged by their seniors).

Yet are these acts of imitation? Are the filmy quality of youth culture and the youthfulness of cinema the inevitable results of the fact that young people ape what they see in films, primed like the blank surface of the cinema screen, imprinted like its raw celluloid? Let me describe a prosaic college event-a dance performance at a department function-to suggest that the answer to this question is not only *no*, but that a close attention to how young people engage with cinema suggests the opposite: Tamil cinema is youthful and youth culture cinematic not because young people imitate the cinema but because the cinema liberally draws from its own imaginaries of youth.

Walking down the hallway of my Madurai hostel one evening in January 2008, I passed the room of Prakash, a second-year student with whom I had become friendly. The hit song “*Pokkiri Pongal*” from Vijay’s 2007 film *Pokkiri* (dir. Prabhu Deva) was playing through his cell phone. Its heavy rhythms sounded tinny out of his phone’s small speaker, echoing off the bare, empty walls of his room. I peeked through the door and saw Prakash dancing. He invited me in and explained that he was practicing a solo dance routine for his department’s Pongal function. I promised I would come. The next day, with a handkerchief wrapped around his left hand, a red shirt on top of a white T-shirt, a white pair of slacks, his best pair of leather sandals and a silver chain, Prakash appeared on stage dressed like Vijay’s character in the film. The music kicked in, and Prakash started dancing, replicating dance steps from the choreography of *Pokkiri Pongal*. In doing so, Prakash captured something of Vijay’s “*heroism*” and *panache*, demonstrating his own prowess as a dancer as well as differentiating himself from his peers and the present adult faculty. Prakash was cheekily showing off and ‘doing style,’ as one onlooking classmate noted to me.

Yet Prakash only used *some* of *Pokkiri*’s choreography and only dressed *like* Vijay’s character, introducing his own steps and fashions into his performance. ‘Why?’ I later asked him. As Prakash explained, voicing precisely the anxious discourse about imitation noted above, dancing Vijay’s steps shouldn’t be seen as imitation. For to imitate a youth hero like Vijay is to fall into the stereotype of the subaltern, fanatical fan, the youth who has gone ‘crazy’ about film and slavishly follows his hero. As Prakash noted, he didn’t dress or dance exactly like Vijay because to do so would make him seem like a “*cinna paiyan*,” a ‘little boy’ rather than a “mature” (college) youth.

The very simple point from this mundane example is that the youthfulness of cinema and the anxieties therein are not just a resource for young men like Prakash to show off to their peers (a fact, of course, which already problematizes the notion that youth “imitate” film unreflectively). They are also liabilities. On the one hand, Prakash was worried that his use of film would be seen as having gone too far, as having become too enamored with the cinematic image; on the other hand, he worried that he might be teased for showing off too much, for acting too much like a ‘big man’ by doing too much “heroism” (as indeed, young men were constantly ribbing each other for doing). Here, engaging cinema is an engagement with the liminality of youth itself. Guided by worries about being too childish or being too arrogant (i.e., acting too much like a ‘big man’), young men like Prakash took on the vestments of film but always wore them as a second skin, as something that could and had to be taken off.

Never just imitation, performances like Prakash’s are more akin to *citations*, linguistic quotations that repeat someone else’s words, but only by keeping them in quotation marks, only by altering them and marking them as not-quite one’s own. From this point of view, youth don’t mimic and ape the cinema, and they probably never have. Rather, they *cite* it. Might this allow us to rethink what the youthfulness of cinema and the relationship of youth and cinema might consist in?

Of course, it isn’t only youth who cite Tamil film. Its youthful stars-at the time of my research, stars such as Simbu, Dhanush, and Vijay, the very people who my friends “imitated”- themselves constantly cite *other* Tamil film stars; in particular, “senior” artists like the “Super Star” Rajinikanth, who themselves are constantly citing their own cinematic seniors (and themselves). Think, again, of *Sivaji: The Boss*, where Rajini begins the film as “Sivaji” (an allusion to Sivaji Ganesan) only to be reincarnated as “MGR” (M. G. Ramachandran), with copious allusions to both actors along the way (and others still, including Kamal Haasan).

It is through such citations that young actors mature into full-fledged stars; indeed, how young heroes become *youth* heroes, that is, heroes *for* youth. How they cite and are cited by others is central to what constitutes a particular actor/hero’s popularity, visibility, and status in the industry. This became apparent to me in querying whether “new faces” (new, young actors) could act in so-called “mass” hero roles: everyone I spoke to during my research, from my hostel mates to film producers and actors, answered with an emphatic ‘No!’ How could someone who the audience wasn’t familiar with, who was just a ‘small boy,’ act as a ‘big man’? One had to “build up” to such roles. To do otherwise was to be seen as arrogant, uppity, ridiculous. As for young film fans, taking on the vestments of more senior, established heroes while marking them as not-quite imitations of them is one way to build up to such roles, to become someone who is, in turn, usable to cite.

In closing, consider an example from the “Little Superstar” Simbu’s 2008 film *Silambattam* (dir. S. Saravanan). In a particular scene from the film, Simbu appears onscreen as Ajith from *Billa* (2007, dir. Vishnuvardhan): in the same dress, shot in the same style, alongside the same theme music, enacting the same gestures and mannerisms. (This film/character, of course, is itself a citational remake of Rajinikanth’s 1980 *Billa* [dir. R. Krishnamurthy], itself a citational remake of Amitabh Bachchan’s 1978 *Don* [dir. Chandra Barot].) Simbu is not trying to become or imitate Ajith, however. Rather, he is borrowing something of Ajith’s style while at the same time showing Ajith and his fans that he too is a “fan” and thus someone worthy of their fandom as well. Not unlike Prakash’s dance, Simbu’s performance of Ajith is shot through with parodic winks and innovative permutations that hint at Simbu’s own stylish identity and youthful heroism, an identity worthy of citation beyond any limit of imitation.

Notes

This essay draws on ethnographic research I conducted on college youth culture in the cities of Madurai and Chennai and in the Tamil film industry in Chennai between the years of 2007 and 2014. For more details, see my 2016 book, *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India*, published by Orient BlackSwan and the University of Chicago Press.