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Onscreen/Offscreen, by Constantine V. Nakassis, University of Toronto Press, Series: Studies in the Anthropology of Language, Sign, and Social Life, 2023, pp. 400, ISBN: 9781487541774, Paperback $36.95, ISBN: 9781487541804, Ebook-ePub $36.95

Reviewed by

Eleni Sideri
University of Macedonia, Greece

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Almost ten years ago, an ethnography of Tamil cinema was published, exploring the interwoven sensory experience of the "real world" shaped by light, images, sounds and movement. Anand Pandian's work (2015) examined through a sensory ethnography and an almost phenomenological philosophy the question of what cinema is and does to investigate issues of creation, how a vision turns to a film but also how the ethnographic field can be shaped and become inhabited by the ethnographer's encounters. Constantine Nakassis book came to enrich our knowledge about the Kollywood, the film industry of Tamilnadu but in addition to analyze in a thorough and persuasive way how film creation is an act of being in the world. This act takes place onscreen and offscreen in the book allowing Nakassis to generate a holistic account of the cinematic act within the bounded film settings but also in the socio-political changes in the society of Tamilnadu.

The main research question for Nakassis is "what is an image?" and the author tried to answer it through a rich ethnographic material, which he collected during of a period of fifteen years since 2003. So, the book has embedded experiences, theoretical dilemmas, socio-political changes which the ethnographer dealt with throughout his life in the field, fact that allowed him to reflect and process in detail and in depth all the different experiences and changes. The entry point to the field was for Nakassis the fact that very often film starts move successfully to the central scene of politics in Tamilnadu. Following the transfigurations and challenges of this relationship between film and politics in two decades, he delved into the question if the image in the Tamil society is a representational of a performative act and how the fluctuations between the two (arts and politics) produce contingencies among cinema, politics, and society.

Combining different theories, linguistics anthropology, film studies, media anthropology and visual studies, Nakassis did not try to produce a history of theories about the image but instead, he tried to address how images and their ontologies, their acts of becoming cannot be considered in an old, bounded theoretical and conceptual context but in circulation imposed by a global economy and flows. In this framework,

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the cinematic image meets with populist discourses, mobilization, gender politics film industry's profits and limitations. As the author underlined, ontological politics "captures each of these entangled dimensions (…) as they come to construe and produce – or "perform," (…) the reality of images (…)" (p. 27). In this way, he leaves behind the old structuralist tradition of anthropological linguistics and considers film as a total event which moves from on and off the screen.

It is not coincidental that cinema and politics are so tightly bound in the Tamil society. Starting as a colonial practice of modernization, cinema followed the changes that took place in the Tamil speaking world. Cinema took part after the World War II in the ethnolinguistic renaissance of the region which challenged the filmic -and real- hegemony of the Hindu mythologies and visual styles, and it was enmeshed in the process of regionalization and class and elite formation. Especially, in terms of the elite formation, cinema produced an influential space where the agenda of the urban elite could promote its agenda through the introduction of a realistic style. Drawing from this realist, social dramas since the 1930s, the local society envisioned a secular, modernized Tamil mythology. Since the 1970s, the stress on Mass Hero was deepened following the requirements of the advent of populism.

The discussion of the above issues in the book follows a structure in two parts. The first one is entitled *Presence/Representation*, and the second one introduces a reversed order, *Representation/Presence*. The two parts are followed by a discussion as a conclusion. The first part examines how images are performed in specific visual styles and script narratives. The second part discusses the particular in other words how these images follow specific realization within the commercial cinema, creators' voices, creative formats, and specific audiences.

Chapter One and Two are dedicated to Mass Hero and Heroine. Nakassis follows the trajectories of different big film productions which gave birth to the maling of stardom. His analysis is detailed investigating the structure of the filmic sequences, visual style of the cinematography, textual narratives. He also examines how male characters inhabit these filmic worlds and how they open a dialogue with spectators. These images and narrative exchanges produce an interaction, not always symmetrical or harmonious, with society and people. Nakassis' book postulate the ambivalences and factions of these exchanges that pluralize the ontology of creation in its multiple variations enacted in the different film worlds. Heroines-and dancers-is the main theme of chapter two which tackles the issue of gender and how the politics of images and performances allude, challenge, or transform the socio-political construction of gender and the sexualization of female bodies, which ultimately preserve a social stigma.

Chapter Three and Four examine the politics of the parody and that of the real. The two chapters investigate the ways creators try to weave their images through different narrative and representation styles. Nakassis follows in different films how parody could produce conflict through its excess and in comparison to the realistic norms established in the canon of the Tamil cinema. Tracing what realism means in this cinema in comparison to the western filmic tradition, Nakassis shows how, especially in the last years, realism cannot compete to the ideal of the classic period which often produced closed, normative worlds. Instead, the needs of the audiences and the society of the today let ambivalences in the performativity of images to become visible. He looks into those ambivalences in themes like taboo, caste or sexuality. That is why Nakassis refers to "realisms" (p. 191) which become portrayed in the new cinematic images pointing out to "a boundary that both authorizes the reality of their representationality while precisely falling into their opposites" (p. 192).

In the Conclusion, entitled *Ends and Openings*, the author opens the discussion of how the relationship he traced between performativity and representation can produce valuable lessons to the method and tradition of anthropological linguistics. Nakassis makes a persuasive argument that his research can provide an example of how anthropological linguistics can become more extrovert and go beyond its traditional centre, language; not leaving behind or aside language but putting it in the multiscalar and interconnected world.

The Conclusion is followed by an extensive section of Notes which will be helpful to many readers not familiar either with the context of the Tamil cinema or the theoretical issues. The book includes also a rich bibliography and an index.

Onscreen/Offscreen is highly recommended to those interested in anthropological linguistics, cinema and cultural studies, area studies and anthropology of India, as it combines arguments that could strengthen the dialogues between these fields and enrich an interdisciplinary approach to cinema and society.

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