Spoofs and the Politics of the Film Image’s Ontology in Tamil Cinema

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All Film Spoofs, No Spoof Films

Commercial Tamil cinema has long been a travesty of itself, its textuality woven from so many citational allusions, homages, and self-parodies; and yet, until recently there was no such recognized genre of the *spoof film*, only “comedy tracks” trailing in the shadows of the grandiose hero and his more serious narrative, parodying his potent image here and there, most often through scenes of comically inverted or failed heroism (Nakassis 2010:209–221). In 2010, this was seen to have changed, with the release of a surfeit of spoof films—Venkat Prabhu’s *Goa*, Simbudevan’s *Irumbu Kottai Mirattu Singam*, and, most importantly for this paper, C. S. Amudhan’s aptly titled *Thamizh Padam*, or ‘Tamil Movie.’ And then of course, there was that unwitting spoof hero, the self-proclaimed “Power Star,” Dr. S. Srinivasan, who entered the scene in 2011 with his unbelievably absurd, yet ambiguously self-serious, film (*Lathika*) and public persona (figure 1).

Industry insiders and film enthusiasts often explain this seeming paradox that Tamil cinema is all spoof with no spoofs by pointing to the self-seriousness of the industry—that is, that it can’t take a joke; or alternatively by pointing to its cultural and historical particularity—that is, that “spoofs” are a foreign genre. But what is so notable is that the industry has long made jokes at its own expense. Think, for example, of Nagesh’s memorable comedy track from 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

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has everything lined up to make a film ... except a story. Or, more recently, consider a film like *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), whose hero, the “Superstar” Rajinikanth, and comic sidekick, played by Vivek, are continually parodying Rajini’s own image as a celebrity hero-star; the film is a smorgasbord of pastiche upon pastiche, parody upon self-parody. No exception to Tamil cinema, then, self-reflexive parody is and has long been its rule.

![Figure 1. “Power Star” Dr. S. Srinivasan’s ‘true victory,’ his debut film *Lathika*’s (2010) unbelievable 200th day in the theater](image)

What, then, do we make of this rash of “new” and “different” spoof films—as media reportage and industry insiders characterized them—that emerged at the end of the naughts, films that out-and-out mocked Tamil cinema’s conventions and clichés, in particular those of the hero (and, importantly, in ways that ultimately refused to reinforce that very
hero position)? In this essay rather than frame these films primarily in historical/epochal terms—that is, the important question ‘Why now?’ (Rajan Kurai 2012; cf. Srinivas 2009:216–217, 2016)—my primary interest is to interrogate and worry what is being parodied in these films, in what way, and to what ends, and thus to ask the related but distinct question, under what conditions, and with what kind of politics for an image, can such a parodic image appear?

As I suggest, such spoofs are not simply parodies of particular texts, pastiches of particular genres, or satires of particular persons; rather, through a combination of each of these textual strategies and more, they travesty and caricature, and thus constitute an explicit politics of refusing, a particular “ontology” of the cinematic image, to invoke André Bazin’s (2005:9–16) famous phrase. They take issue with the very being of a specific kind of image within commercial Tamil cinema: that onscreen and offscreen entanglement that materializes as the figure of the so-called mass hero.

In south Indian cinemas, the term “mass hero” denotes a celebrity star actor whose offscreen status and popularity (his “mass”) enables him to inhabit the diegetic position of the hero-figure in a narrative that, without exception or equivocation, revolves around, and (re-) confirms, his larger-than-life heroism (Nakassis 2016:159–223). On the one hand, the term captures how such hero-stars are a step above ordinary actors/heroes, massive and powerful in and out of the industry, on and off screen; on the other hand, the phrase denotes that such heroes are heroes to the “masses.” At the confluence of this ambiguity is what Madhava Prasad (2014) has called “cinepolitics” (also see Pandian 1992; Srinivas 2009), a political potency that has historically enabled such south Indian mass heroes to leverage their screen image to stand-in for the ethnolinguistic polity and segue into state-level political office. It is the image ontology of the mass hero, then, that is the central target of such spoofs, an image that sutures the hero’s screen surface to the actor’s offscreen stardom, the hero-star’s stereotyped genericity to the political economy of production, distribution, and ( politicized) reception that revolves around his “mass.”

Two Parodies of Tamil Cinema

Venkat Prabhu’s Goa and C. S. Amudhan’s Thamizh Padam released on the same day, January 29, 2010. Both did well, but between the two, Thamizh
Padam was better received among audiences and performed stronger at the box-office. With a much smaller budget and much higher returns, Thamizh Padam was declared the first “super-hit” of 2010.

Both Goa and Thamizh Padam were framed in media reports as spoofs, if different in degree. Like his previous films, Chennai-600028 (2007) and Saroja (2008), Venkat Prabhu’s third directorial venture, Goa was a non-hero-focused, “Hollywood” style film (as he and the press would have it) that featured significant amounts of intertextual parody (e.g., the use of other heroes’ “punch” dialogues and hand gestures) and pastiche (e.g., cinematically depicting characters who are not mass heroes through a mass-hero tropology). In particular, the first half of the film was a parodic homage, full of playful intertextual winks to the “nativity” films of the late 1970s and 1980s that were made famous, in part, by his father, the director Gangai Amaren and his paternal uncle, the “Maestro” or Isaïnāni (‘Musical Genius’), Ilaiyaraaja. The second half of the film, however, left the homage and parody behind and pursued a (relatively) straightforward non-parodic narrative strategy (a coming-of-age story cum romantic comedy cum bank heist).

By contrast, Thamizh Padam was composed almost exclusively from intertextual references to other films, ranging from homage to satire, earning it the title of Tamil’s first full spoof film (Dhananjayan 2011); or, in a telling intergeneric comparison, as one Tamil friend put it to me, Thamizh Padam was “India’s Scary Movie,” a reference to the American franchise of horror spoof films (with release dates in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2013).

Both Goa and Thamizh Padam were lauded by the press, and certain industry insiders, as “a breath of fresh air” (Kamath 2014) to the musky, stagnant airs put on by mainstream, hero-oriented cinema (Kamath 2010). Directed and produced by “rank outsiders” new to the industry (Amudhan 2010; Sashikanth 2011), Thamizh Padam in particular was considered a courageous film, seen to risk the ire of powerful film personalities and their thin-skinned fans. Indeed, the popular television show and forerunner to Thamizh Padam, Lollu Sabha elicited precisely such reactions for its cinematic travesties, including attacks on their office by upset fans (Rambala 2011a, 2011b) and jury-rigged bombs sent to the homes of its actors and director (Behindwoods 2008; cf. Cody 2015). For industry insiders and audiences, then, the very existence of Thamizh Padam was itself an achievement, if also an irritation; and that it was a
success was a surprise and, for some, an omen (Kamanth 2010; Rajan Kurai 2012).

In what follows I look more closely at Thamizh Padam. My aim is to elicit the specific ontological politics, even anti(cine)politics, of the image at play in Thamizh Padam and the metadiscourses surrounding it. My larger argument is that this (anti cine)politics of the image is underwritten by a politics for the image, a politics that is necessary for such an image (and thus for its politics) to even appear onscreen in the first place.

“Tamil Film”

Coming from an advertising background, C. S. Amudhan was an outsider to the Tamil film world when he began writing Thamizh Padam. Describing how the idea for the film came about, in a 2010 interview he said,

Uh, this was something that, uhm, uh- you know everybody who watches Tamil films thinks about these things, you know, what if the scene were like this? (CN: Right), you know, this is what we tell our friends, this is what we, uh, when you’re having a drink, this is what we do: ‘How would it be if it were like this?’ So uh I started writing, writing this more out of fun (.) than anything else. And I absolutely had no intention of (.) trying to find a backer for this to make (it) into a feature film. ... Um, I had very low aspirations for it. I’m- I thought maybe it could go on television, or maybe be a DVD exclusive product.

Amudhan managed to hook up, however, with an acquaintance, Sashikanth, a Chennai architect with common clients as Amudhan’s advertising company. Sashikanth had recently founded his own film production company, YNOT Studios (which Amudhan came to have a 25% stake in, up until 2011). Sashikanth’s aim for YNOT was to create a film production house that created commercial content “alternative” to the standard fare of the industry. As Sashikanth told me in his Chennai home in 2011, part of his vision for YNOT Productions, even before he teamed up with Amudhan, included producing a spoof film. When Amudhan pitched him three concepts during a brainstorming session—a satire, a “road-trip movie,” and a “historical”—Sashikanth seized upon the idea of the spoof, saying, “Let’s, let’s go after taking on the industry.
Because that’s what we’re standing for.” From there, Amudhan narrated the film’s “one-line”8 to Sashikanth’s childhood friend Dayanidhi Azhagiri, who had recently begun his own production company, Cloud 9 Movies.9 “Excited by it [the “big idea … to do a spoof”],” as Amudhan put it to me in 2010, Cloud 9 bought the first-copy rights of the film from YNOT, eventually going on to see the film to its theatrical release.10

Textuality of Thamizh Padam

By design, Thamizh Padam’s story is typical; in fact, excessively typical (Chandru 2010; Sashikanth 2011). At the level of its narrative, it tells the story of the birth of a young boy, Shiva, who is to be killed at birth (in a parodic renvoi to Bharatiraja’s Karuthamma [1994]). Saved by his grandmother, he is raised in a slum of Chennai and grows up to become a “hero.” As a young adult, Shiva (played by the actor, Shiva, of Chennai 600028 [2007] and Saroja [2008] fame, both directed by Venkat Prabhu) falls in love and loafs around with his college friends (in the vein of Shankar’s Boys [2003]) and, as in all “mass” masala films, thrashes throngs of local rowdies in various kerfuffles (a la Rajinikanth’s Baashha [1995] and Madhavan’s Run [2002]). To win the permission of his girlfriend’s father, he becomes a rich man (like Rajini in Annamalai [1992]). At their engagement ceremony, however, when the name of his father (whom he doesn’t know) is asked, he vows to discover his roots before he marries, returning to his home village (named Cinemapatti [‘Cinemaville’], in reference to the nativity films of the 1970s and 1980s) to reunite with his family. Finally, in a twist sourced from Vijay’s Pokkiri (2007), it is revealed that our hero, Shiva is a police officer hunting down the city’s gangsters, killing each (in scenes parodying Apoorva Sagodharargal [1989] and Anniyan [2005]) in his efforts to reach their boss, “D” (pronounced ṭi iVar.).11

In the climax sequence, D. captures Shiva’s girlfriend (a la Gautham Menon’s Kakka Kakka [2004]). Shiva saves her and confronts D., only to find out that it was his grandmother all along, who played the villain so that he could fulfill his dream to become a hero.12 In the courtroom climax (featuring the late oft-judge, V. S. Raghavan in a scene that also cites the courtroom scenes of Vijayakanth’s Captain Prabhakaran [1991] and Ajith’s Citizen [2001]), all are absolved and go on to live happily ever after.
As Chandru (2010), one of the scriptwriters of the film indicated to me, the film was written to have a narrative/plot just like any other Tamil film. With such a one-line set, Amudhan and his assistants then contemplated which particular film from the past had the “best,” most “iconic scene” for every specific plot point of the story. If it is a confrontation with a villain, Chandru proffered, then the most iconic scene is Rajinikanth’s *Baasha* (1995); if it’s the introductory scene of a heroine, then Radha Mohan’s *Mozhi* (2007, starring Jyothika as the heroine); if it’s a love scene, then Prabhu Deva’s bharatnatyam scene in *Kadhalan* (1994), and so on.

The narrative structure of *Thamizh Padam*, then, was designed as a pastiche of the narrative style of commercial Tamil cinema as such, composed of parodies (*sensu* Genette 1997[1982]:81–85) of particular elements of Tamil cinema. The kinds of intertextualities and voices at play in *Thamizh Padam* was, as Amudhan noted to me, intentionally over-saturated, pushed to an “intertextual overkill” (Waugh 1984) with “as much as you could cram into one movie” (Amudhan 2014). And indeed, the film abounds with film-citing puns, quotations, playful homage, anachronisms and other incongruities, travesties, and satires. Similar actors who acted in the parodied films were cast in *Thamizh Padam* to act in the same roles, often given the names of the characters they played in the source texts. Whole scenes were recreated with humorous twists (e.g., the hospital scene from *Thalapathy* [1991] where a henchman named Ramana is visited by his don [a parody of Mamoothy’s classic role], except that it turns out not to be his henchman but someone else called Ramana; when the don apologizes for bothering him, the man utters Vijayakanth’s famous dialogue from his 2002 film *Ramana*: “Tamille enakkū piṭikkāta orē vārattai manippu” [‘Forgiveness is the only word I hate in the Tamil language’]). Every level of textuality, in short, was fair game in *Thamizh Padam* and shot through with spoof, caricature, and absurdity, from the organization of the plot down to character types, character names, actors, scenes, shot sequences, mis-en-scene, dialogues, accents, costumes, music, lyrics, et cetera.

While the film, however, involved a full range of intertextual practices drawing on a heterogeneity of film genres, character types, and celebrity types, near everyone—its director, its producer, the popular press, and its audiences—focused on its satiric caricaturing of the bombastic, larger-than-life, cinepolitical image of the contemporary mass hero, the way in
which *Thamizh Padam* revealed the hero of commercial Tamil cinema to be ridiculous, cliché, and artificial. Indeed, in a certain sense, Tamil cinema is figured by *Thamizh Padam* (the ‘Tamil film’) as metonymically reducible to the so-called mass hero and the ontology of the image that he anchors, to which I turn below.

**An Ontological Politics of the Image**

More than lampooning a figure of cinematic textuality or taking the piss of puffed-up actors, *Thamizh Padam* took the tangled conjunction between star actor and film hero on, off, and across the screen as its object of derision and disaggregation. Always already his extratextual self, his transtextual persona, and his textual avatar (Nakassis 2016), the mass hero is an excessive cinematic figure, traversing the screen and condensing his multiple textual and extratextual peregrinations in and as his image/body. His is an abundantly present image (Nakassis n.d.), demanding our attention and often our (political) allegiance in/across its moments of appearance, not just to his character or his screen presence, but to that transtextual, even transcendental, subject that animates him for us (Srinivas 2009; Prasad 2014). This image/subject is, as elitist discourses on film typically denounce it, the “idol” that is “worshipped” by credulous subaltern “masses.” The executive producer of *Thamizh Padam*, Sashikanth (2011) voiced this narrative, saying that:

> These guys [i.e., mass heroes] 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- 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/cut-out]. I mean, it’s rubbish. It’s real stupidity. I mean, if you look at it from a common man’s perspective, what- the- what’s happening is real stupidity.

Taking as its object of parody the total cinematic fact of the mass hero, *Thamizh Padam* hoped to reveal that the mass hero’s perforation of the diaphanous membrane of the screen, his excessive presence and cine-political potency, is, to shuffle our metaphors, simply the emperor’s new clothes. From its makers’ perspective, *Thamizh Padam* aimed to show how absurd and unserious the hero of Tamil cinema is and, by extension, how unserious most commercial Tamil cinema is; and thus how people in and
out of the Tamil industry take the film image too seriously (as an “idol” to be “worshipped,” as Sashikanth framed it above). Or, as the dance master Kalyan Kumar (2011), who choreographed the introductory song of Thamizh Padam put it, how people can’t see that “it’s just a movie,” no more than a representation, a fiction, an illusion (cf. Nakassis 2014).

A Politics of (Im/possible) Worlds

Consider the very premise and world of Thamizh Padam. In a flashback at the beginning of the film, we learn why the village nāṭṭāmai (‘headman,’ played by Ponnabalam, who starred as the villain of the popular 1994 film Nattamai) decreed that all male babies be killed at birth. Male children from Cinemapāṭṭi all grow up and go to Madras, he intones under a banyan tree during a panchayat meeting (figure 2).

Figure 2: Spoofed headman under the banyan tree

Once in Madras, they start ‘speaking “punch dialogues,” dancing “kuttu songs,” and then, if that’s not bad enough, give television interviews, even before their first film is released, proclaiming that they’ll be the next chief minister!’ All this, he gravely concludes to a crowd of villagers nodding along in assent, gives the village a bad name and causes political troubles. The nāṭṭāmai then pronounces that any family that allows a male baby to be born will be cast out of Tamil Nadu; and further, he declares to an audibly aghast crowd, if any family disobey 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 paḻu
ṅkunțka ṇṇā anta viral aṭṭi naṭikkira anta tambi paṭattē nūṟu mūṟai namma paṅcayattin TV-le pākkaṇum tōy!”) (figure 3).

Figure 3: Spoofed headman spoofing Simbu

When Shiva’s character is born, his fate, then, is death by a 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 that talking?’, he replies: “Nān tān Mini Superstar tān pēsūrēn” ‘It’s me, the Mini Superstar speaking’ (another lampoon of Simbu, the self-anointed “Little Superstar”). Shiva asks his grandmother to put him on a train to Madras (where all trains go in the canonical nativity films of the late 1970s and 1980s) where he will become a “periya hero” (a ‘big hero’). He then delivers one of Iḷaiya Taḷapati (‘the Young General’), Vijay’s punch dialogues from the 2007 film Pokkiri (“Oru muṭivu etuttē nānē en pēccu kēṭamāṭṭēn,” ‘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 Chennai. There the rest of his life as a hero unfolds.

What is of interest to me here is not simply the satire of the uppity actor, Simbu, who baptizes himself a star when he is, metaphorically, and in Shiva’s case, literally, still wet behind the ears with afterbirth; or the travesty of an infant giving punch dialogues like a serious mass hero; rather, it is that the character in the diegesis frames himself, and is framed by others, as a film hero even though he does not act in any films. Indeed,
Shiva’s character, Shiva, while typified as a film hero, is not an actor. Rather, he is simply a mass hero living in the non-cinematic world of the film; the diaphanous membrane of the screen is, in fact, completely dispensed with in the diegesis of Thamizh Padam (or rather, Thamizh Padam enacts its dispensing for us so that we may see it all the more clearly). Living a film offscreen (in the film) with his every breath, Shiva’s diegetic world is always already the onscreen and offscreen at the very same time. The world of Thamizh Padam is a world that cannot, or rather refuses to, differentiate between reel and real worlds, precisely so as to force its viewer to make that distinction herself. The warp of Thamizh Padam’s spoof textuality is this laminated chronotope of the offscreen/onscreen. This self-reflexively doubled/collapsed spacetime lampoons, with each absurdity that unfolds, the idea that the hero-star can exist on and off the screen at once as a mass hero without slippage.

It is unsurprising, then, that Thamizh Padam’s parody of the mass-hero film focuses on precisely those textual aspects of the mass hero which themselves cultivate this onscreen/offscreen entanglement, such as the formulaic “introduction song” (Nakassis 2016:161–167), wherein the hero-star is lyrically and visually adulated (often addressed with the actor’s personal name or with the hero-star’s “titles” [on which, more below]), where he presences himself for us—looking directly at the camera/audience in mid/close-shots, delivering political-cum-philosophical messages to the audience (as a future talaivar ‘leader’), among other perforations of the fourth-wall (such as dancing with the dance choreographer).

In Shiva’s introduction song in Thamizh Padam, for example, Shiva is surrounded with gigantic cutouts of himself, milk poured over them and ritually sanctified against the ‘evil eye’ (practices which are fan activities that adulate the hero-star’s image offscreen; figures 4–5).
Shiva is also adulated by throngs of (female) fans/followers, with the lyrics sung by a chorus of voices praising and addressing him as the ‘lift [elevator] of the poor,’ ‘the leader of the world, the god who can topple even Obama’ (“ulakattukku talaiyan ni Obama-vai vilta vanta iraivan ni”), among other superlatives. Shiva himself sings that he is the ‘god to save the world’ (“ulak raṭcika kaṭavuḷ nān tān”), the ‘adored child of the community of mothers [a reference to MGR]’ (namma tāykulattukku nān tān cellapīḷḷai”). He sings, ‘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 “Tala” Ajith] and the general [a reference to the ‘Young General’ Vijay]’ (“Tani āḷa sinkaram tōṭṭen, sarittiramā uyāntuppōṭṭen, Talaiyum nān tānē Talapatiyum nān tān”). He makes various references to his political ascendency in 2011 (figure 6), as well as giving an inane philosophical aphorism, advocating the necessity for unity, involving
different types of vadai (‘fried lentil donuts’) which a drunken fan—ventriloquating the director’s mocking voice—rejects (“Un tattuvam taṅkātu-
aṅañā” ‘your philosophy is unbearable, older brother!’). He 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 (freedom from the cycle of rebirths)’ (“Ennai vaḻippāru vālkkai celiikkum, ennai vaṉankippāru moṭcam kitaikkum”).

Figure 6: Shiva telling us that 2011 will be our year

One particular element of this song that was singled out by its makers as emblematic of the film’s satire of mass heroes was the “titles” that adorn the their personages. These sobriquets—such as Superstar (Rajini-
kanth), Ulaka Nayakan (‘World Hero,’ Kamalahaasan), Ultimate Star (Ajith), Iḷaiya Talapati (‘Young General,’ Vijay), Little Superstar (Simbu), Action King (Arjun)—are used in media reportage, by fans, in the title cards of the hero-star’s films, and even by characters in the hero-star’s films to denote his collapsed onscreen/offscreen image. The reference of such quasi-proper names cuts across the screen, connecting the actor’s films and characters to his transtextual star-persona to his offscreen “real” self, and vice versa, compiling every iteration of the hero-star as an avatar of his total image. As the film’s producer, Sashikanth (2011) put it, the film “was intended to make fun of people having these titles for themselves” (cf. Genette 1997[1982]:134). He continued, “It’s stupid. I mean, I really don’t understand what makes them think they can have titles for themselves. It’s just-, it’s ridiculous. It’s just really ridiculous.”
As Sudish Kamath (2014), the journalist and film critic (and one of Thamizh Padam’s most vocal supporters), said to me in an interview:

Um, well it’s a, it’s a very rare thing for uh::: the film industry to not take itself seriously, you know? Because, uh, we we we’re talking about an industry where everyone uh: comes up with uh, you know, uhm: names for titles for themselves, like uhm, it started with Rajinikanth-17 … And then slowly all these uhm heroes started doing that, you know? They, they would just come up with their own thing that-::: so that- at one point in time there was a “Top Star,” a “Little Star”- no, “The Little Superstar,” there was a “Universal Star,” there was a “Supreme Star.” There were all these different uhm, you know, titles taken, so that finally there were not enough stars <CN laughs> uh <chuckles> that uh people could use. And it was sounding really ridiculous, you know, imagine “Little Superstar” and “Top Star” and stuff like that. And uhm, so, during- and- in- in fact, this is something that even Tamizh Padam makes fun of. So to actually make fun of the film industry, which doesn’t laugh at itself, required quite a lot guts.

Satirizing the way such titles blur the reel and the real into the adulated celebrity of the hero-star, Shiva in Thamizh Padam has a number of hypertrophic names: “Mini Superstar” as a neophyte and then “Akila Ulaka Superstar” and “Periya Talapati” (a reference to Vijay’s Ilaya Talapati ‘Young General’) in his adulthood. This surfeit reflexively marks itself as caricature not simply in the number of titles that Shiva has, but also in their semantic and morphological elaboration. Shiva’s titles feature a greater number of terms (not Superstar but Akila Ulaka Superstar) and more effusive superlatives, such as Akila (‘Whole world’) and Periya (‘Big, large, older’). Most interesting to note in this regard, and perhaps to the point, is that Akila Ulla Superstar (‘The Superstar of the World in its ENTIRETY’) has since stuck to Shiva, the actor, humorously trailing him across and outside his film texts as part of his name (e.g., in media reportage about Shiva’s work in other films), confirming and conforming precisely to the semiotics of the title that Thamizh Padam tell us is problematic.
Chronopolitics

*Thamizh Padam*’s caricature of the mass hero is not simply an 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 cinepolitical mode of social relations that his aural image figurates (namely, the cinematic adulation of the hero/leader and the figuration of his audiences as fan/cadres). It is also a chronopolitics, an attack on the temporality of the mass hero as well. 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 is absurd and unrealistic and in the sense that his chronotope is untimely in this modern day and age.¹⁸

Consider another scene from the first half of the film. After Shiva has moved to a Chennai slum and grown up, 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 7).

Figure 7: A young Shiva delivers a punch dialogue to his grandmother

He says, ‘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 poruntu pattu varuṇam āyiccu, ānā pattu vayasu āvatu. Nān eppa hero āyi nānē galāṭṭā tatti kēṭkūṟatu?”). In response, his grandmother simply tells him to peddle on a nearby bicycle. When he protests in disbelief (a trace of the filmmaker’s mocking voice), she insists. And indeed, as depicted through a five-second time-lapse shot, when Shiva begins
pedaling on the stationary bicycle his young pantless legs age into adult panted legs (figures 8–9). Now a college-age hero, he returns to the market just in time to beat up the rowdies in a Rajinikanth-parodying fight scene (from *Baashaa* [1995]).

Similarly consider the climax sequence of this film, a travesty of the 2004 hit film *Kakka Kakka*. The villain, D.’s henchmen have captured Shiva’s fiancé and taken her to an empty warehouse. She screams his name, “SHIVA!” (figure 10) and the head henchman shoots a bullet at her (figure 11). Shiva—who is in the hospital after receiving a beating from the bad guys while in a deep, alcohol-induced slumber from their Pondicherry road-trip (which is also when they kidnapped his fiancé)—hears her call and gets up (figure 12). He gets out of bed and does 100 push-ups (we hear him count them: “45, 68, 100”; figure 13) as the theme music kicks in. Cut to the bullet in mid-air (figure 14). Cut to Shiva grabbing his gun. (The lyrics of the song here mockingly sing “Too much!”) Shiva gets into an autorickshaw. We then see him haggling with the auto-driver (figure 15). He stops for tea. He checks this watch (figure 16). 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 (figure 17). Cut to the bullet in mid-air (figure 19). Cut to him urinating on the roadside (figure 20) 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 jumps and saves her (figure 21).
Figures 10–21: Shiva, our hero who knows he has all the time in his world
In these examples we see a reflexive exaggeration of what Thamizh Padam presents as the chronotope of the mass hero, a narrative spacetime warped around the mass hero’s onscreen image and offscreen status. The joke, of course, is to play up the disjuncture between the time of what is shown to us (the time of the hero) and the time of the diegesis (presumably some linear Newtonian time), literalizing the reel time of the hero and thereby showing its disjunctures from our real time. Within the time-envelope of the fight, for example, Shiva has gone through puberty and aged a decade, and simply through (a montage of) bicycling! Within the time it takes a bullet to travel a hundred feet, Shiva was able to exercise, haggle, have a tea, flirt, pick up his dry cleaning, urinate, 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 of the wisdom of his grandmother), now into the age of heroism he now 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 as the mark not simply of the film’s wink to us about how heroes exist in (a fantasy) time, but also to suggest that the hero has himself come to take seriously his own absurd temporality, that he himself has confused “reel” for “real” time.

The recognition that the hero’s time is not (that is, should not) be our time, the time of the offscreen real, was central to Thamizh Padam’s aim: to assert that the mass-hero image is untimely, something of the present-past that should go into the past and simply die. As the film’s producer, Sashikanth (2011) put it:

I loved Rajinikanth movies. I mean, who doesn’t like Rajinikanth movies? Good versus evil, you go after and punch these guys and things like that. But you gotta understand that the sen-, that- it’s just not the sensibility of it. We still want good guys to bash up the evil guys. But the set up has changed. I mean, we, we live in a different era now. You can’t just have an opening numbe:r, the guys doing the-, it’s just, I mean- I think the larger audience have also rejected the formula. ... I think honestly, uhm, the larger audience have clearly said that it’s not interesting.
Or continuing his comments about the absurdity of “titles” for film heroes, he commented on yesteryear heroes like MGR:

They come from a different era, right? They were GO::ds 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. They don’t- Today (the hero-star) Suriya is accessible when you’re buying a soap. (CN: Right) He is there. So it’s it’s no big deal. It’s it’s, 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 kno::w, 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, 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. I think, uh- 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—one that treats the image as an immanent presence, as an idol—is figured as a thing of the past (that won’t go away), as part of a generational shift, both of the audience—who have become “updated” (Chandru 2010; cf. Rajan Kurai 2012:44), at least in urban places— and of filmmakers. As C. S. Amudhan (2010) noted, “many of the young people who are making films today uh are taking themselves lighter, are not treating the whole thing uh with uh uh, how do you call it?, uh, with devotion that the en- the uh the last generation did, you know. We’re not taking ourselves that seriously.” It is this “coming of age,” this “breath of fresh air,” as journalist Sudish Kamath (2014) put it, that films like Thamizh Padam and Goa were seen as propleptically representing and attempting to bring into being. This, of course, is a familiar elitist narrative of, and lament about, commercial Tamil cinema (cf. Ganti 2012): as developmentally stunted, but eventually maturing out of a past era of rural subaltern credulity, idol worship, fetishism, and fantasy into a desired (if always deferred) telos of
a modern realistic cinema appreciated by liberal, cosmopolitan (middle-class) subjects who can take a joke, who know that the hero’s time is not our time (in fact, is not anyone’s time), who know that “it’s just a movie,” that an image is just a representation and no more.\footnote{23}

**Yearning for Another Kind of Image**

As I have been arguing, the textual politics of *Thamizh Padam* attempted to shift the ontological basis of the image: from an image that *presences* the hero in every domain in which he appears to a *re-presentation* of some absence, that is, as a fiction in which we suspend disbelief rather than a potent performative act beyond (dis)belief itself; and further, to show that this presentist image (which is, in reality, we are told, actually just a representation) does not accord with reason, sense, and a sensibility for the real—that is, with realism.

*Thamizh Padam*, of course, is not a realist image of the world but a hyper-trophied image of the bloated irrealis of the mass hero. But animating this exaggeratedly unreal image is a yearning for what *Thamizh Padam* is not: for a film image that is a transparent window, not to the status and ego of the hero, but to the world in/as itself.\footnote{24}

In reflecting back on *Thamizh Padam* four years after its release, C. S. 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, Amudhan indicated. He went on to say, candidly,
Well see uh, the thing, the dialogue that is spoken in *Thamizh Padam* when Shiva spends his first night there (in his native place of *Cinemappaṭṭi*). He says, what happened to this village? And uh, uh uh, there is nobody here anymore. And the dialogue that the guy says is actually, is some- was- was something that I wanted to say, you know. He said, uhm ... “Vaṅktukkiṭṭa kuṭumbam ŭkura mātiri itu vaṅktukkiṭṭa ľr ((???)). 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 kālatttule Bharathiraja, Gangai Amaren inta mātiri āṭkaḷ ellām vantu inkē panniṭṭuppāṅka. Appō orē shooting nallā irukkum. Ippa inta pakkam yārumē varutu illai <clicks mouth> ((???))” (‘Once upon a time directors like Bharatiraja and Gangai Ameran shot films here. It was going well. There was a lot of shooting. But now no one comes here anymore’). That’s the reason the film, the 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 Amaren and Sundarajan were at their peaks (CN: hm hmh) 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. So that, those were some of the reasons why I thought those portions were critical to, you know, the movie.

Here we may recall Linda Hutcheon’s (2000[1985]) observations that parody always harbors within its heart its own conservative nostalgias; or to adapt Gerard Genette’s (1997[1982]) observations regarding parodic satire and caricature in European literature: there is always a particular normative ideology, a politics, that underwrites satire. While parodic satire ideologically frames itself, and is framed by scholars (e.g., Bakhtin 1984; Lopez 1990) as transformative, romantic, and liberatory, caricature, as Genette points out, abides a slightly different, if related ideology: that what is being caricatured should be in some other, more referentially accurate, simple or plain style, not so elaborated or stylized. Caricatures often frame their targets, Genette (1997[1982]:96) notes, as “artificial language,” as nonsense, as without meaning.

Both these ideologies are united in *Thamizh Padam*, whose implicit framing of the image holds out for a realism that it hopes to make possible, arguing that in the place of the mass hero Tamil cinema might
return to (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. In Amudhan’s earnest recounting of his spoofing homage to the nativity films of an earlier generation, he laments their loss, the passing of a “golden era” of cinema with its simple, unadorned representations of real village life. In this lament, then, is a desire: for an image, and a political economy of the image, that does not emanate out of the social status and persona of the hero-star, but from a (not just possible, but likely, even existent) world as captured, represented, and emplotted by the director’s own voice and vision (on which, more below). Here, the parodic image is a means to an end, to a more “serious” cinema that dispenses with the artificiality of the image and embraces another kind of image, another kind of aesthetics.

While Amudhan frames this here as a turn inwards, to “nativity” and the “culture” of the Tamil people, it also involves a turn outwards. Indeed, both Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu’s films have been described, by both themselves and by the media, as attempting to bring global, modern, and Hollywood-style filmmaking into Tamil cinema. (The mass hero, in this discourse neither cosmopolitan nor authentically cultural, thus appears as a kind of matter out of place.) Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu, for example, continually framed their own aspirations and efforts against a recognizable canon of Hollywood and “world cinema” directors—Scorcese, Kubrick, Tarantino, Kurosawa—or Tamil directors whose own efforts are also so oriented—Vetrimaran, Selvaraghavan.

If the image that will ultimately come to stand in the place of the mass hero is a sober, realistic image, it is also an image that stands in a different relationship to the offscreen. It is an image that does not emanate out of the subjectivity of the hero-star, but represents some (potentially) objective world. In certain measure, Thamizh Padam’s parodic doubling of the mass hero partakes of this kind of image, figuring itself as a realistic “mirror” of the fantasy world of Tamil cinema itself. And yet in this doubling which aspires to displace the mass hero remains an afterimage, a halo. The to-be-surpassed parodic image that Thamizh Padam temporarily puts in the place of the mass hero, by that very fact still stands in his presence and being. Not just a representation, it too has a performativity inherent to its being, it too tangles onscreen and offscreen, touching and sparring with the very being of the image it denies and
denies itself to be (see note 14 and the concluding discussion of the paper).

For a Less Serious Industry

In the first week of March of 2010, at the engagement ceremony of Thamizh Padam’s producer, Dayanidhi Azhagiri, Sashikanth, C. S. Amudhan, and Venkat Prabhu found themselves deep in their drink. Amudhan had recently produced an ad spoofing Venkat’s ad campaign for Goa, which featured the tagline “A Venkat Prabhu Holiday,” by putting “Thamizh Padam ... a C. S. Amudhan Working Day” (figure 24–25). Showing the ad to Venkat Prabhu, as Amudhan (2010) narrated it, Prabhu said “the nerve of you!” in mock protest.

Together, they decided that, in return, Prabhu should make an ad that “pulls the leg” of Thamizh Padam (Amudhan 2010). Venkat subsequently released an ad that spoofed a Thamizh Padam 50th day celebration ad with the headline “En? Etarku? Eppati? Ena enkaḻukkē puriyāmal oṭikkonṭirukkum 50-avatu nāl” (“Without our understanding why, for what reason, or how, Thamizh Padam is running for its fiftieth-day [in the theater]”) by writing
“Itanāltān ... Itārkākatān ... ena eṅkaḷukkum makkaḷukkum purintu veṛrīkaramāka oṭikkoṇṭirukkum 50-avatu nāl” ('Both the people and us understand why and for what reason Goa is running successfully for its 50th day [in the theater]') (figure 26–27). The idea of the ads, Venkat Prabhu and Amudhan told me, was “cheap publicity,” a fun way to keep people talking about the films.

After a series of such print ads going back and forth, “everyone was getting heated about it,” as Venkat Prabhu (2010) put it. He and Amudhan started getting calls from their producers, from the producer council, from big actors, and from worried friends who warned them that these kinds of public fights were bad for everyone involved. They were counseled to stop their feud.

Figures 26–27: Left, Thamizh Padam ad; Right, Goa ad spoofing the Thamizh Padam ad

Around this same time Amudhan and Shiva were invited for the second episode of the NDTV television talk show, Hands Up, hosted by
journalist and parallel cinema filmmaker Sudish Kamath. (As we saw above, Kamath was an ideological ally, and friend, of Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu, having written favorable reviews of both films as examples of a possible future for a new and “different” Tamil cinema.) *Hands Up*, as Kamath (2014) put it, 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 newness was the sociality of the show itself: egalitarian, irreverent, and playful—which is to say, the exact opposite of the stereotype of how the sociality of the Tamil film (and television) industry works: hierarchical, reverent, and serious.

To make light of this stereotype of the respectful/hierarchical industry, *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), a film in which Shiva also acted. As Kamath reasoned, “I made them spoofed up for uh a segment from Venkat Prabhu’s uh film, because, I mean, he’s [Venkat Prabhu] the only guy who’s not going to take offense if we make fun of him.” (Venkat Prabhu is seen within and outside the industry as an easygoing filmmaker who doesn’t take himself too seriously, who don’t have any “ego,” on or off the set. 28)

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]) 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 (e.g., Amudhan’s commenting that his *Thamizh Padam* is “an epoch defining movie,” or that he had been hurt by Venkat Prabhu’s Mocktale). The posts sparked a series of ad hominem attacks online by their respective social networks about the opposing side/director’s failings.

Given the decidedly serious response to their prank, Amudhan, Prabhu, and Kamath decided to turn up the volume of the feud. Playing it up through a series of public communiques—Kamath taking responsibility for the feud on-air, issuing a public apology online, reediting comments from the *Hands Up* episodes for teasers to make it seem that Prabhu was 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 clear the air and patch things up. Instead they staged an even more emotionally charged drama where each traded jabs and puffed up their own egos, Venkat Prabhu even storming off stage at one point. Toward the end of the episode, with emotions at their peak, they revealed the whole thing to be an April Fool’s prank.

The “misunderstanding”/prank that they staged turned on the idea that what one director simply meant as a joke, as something to be taken “lightly,” was taken too seriously by the other, who was thereby figured as having too much “ego,” prompting a serious attack at the other director. The moral, of course, was that the industry shouldn’t take itself as seriously as it does (Kamath 2014). 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, turned on the ease by which people assumed that even those who are known to be easygoing and always joking (viz. Venkat Prabhu and Amudhan) were in a serious battle of the egos, that underneath the veneer was ultimately and always an industry organized around sensitive individuals who just can’t take a joke. That the audience didn’t know it was a joke, then, was the joke, not simply because they were tricked, but also because it positioned the audience as subjects who couldn’t conceive that film personalities could, in fact, simply be joking around when it came to their own public images; that is, it elicited the belief that images of film industry insiders are never mere representations but are always residually performative acts, be it the mass-hero’s presence on the big screen or a joke between directors on the small screen.
A Politics of Production

The offscreen “feud” between Amudhan and Venkat Prabhu reveals how *Thamizh Padam* and *Goa* are not simply critiques of textual conventions, or of the celebrities that stand behind them, but of the sociology and political economy of the film industry. But their plea is not simply for a more realist image of time and space, a less political cinema (one that doesn’t take its heroes to be politicians-in-potentia), or a less reverent and hierarchical cinema/industry—though it is all those things as well. It is also a plea, as I suggest in this section, for a different mode of image production.

Consider, again, Shiva’s introductory song in *Thamizh Padam*. About three minutes into the song a subtitle appears on screen when Shiva is singing about how he’s the dream boy of all the college girls (Figure 28).

![Figure 28](image1.png)

![Figure 29](image2.png)

Figures 28–29: Top: ‘Your Shiva is the singer of this song’; Bottom: ‘He wants you to know that your Shiva sang this song’
The subtitle reads “Inta pāṭalai pāṭiyavar uṇkaḷ Shiva” (‘Your Shiva is the singer of this song’) — a reference to how some of the films of the actor Vijay in the 1990s provided a subtitle telling the viewer that he, the hero-star (here, Shiva) is singing the song that you are hearing his character sing in the diegesis. About seven seconds later, the subtitle changes (Figure 29). A matrix clause has been added, framing the now subordinate clause and adding another voice into the mix: “Inta pāṭalai pāṭiyavar uṇkaḷ Shiva enrum pōṭumāṟu kēṭṭuk koṇṭār” (‘He [Shiva] asked (us) to put that “Your Shiva is the singer of this song”’).

While the first subtitle parodies a particular practice of tangling on-screen and offscreen, the second lampoons the division of labor it implies: the widely held belief that is not the director, but the mass hero who directs the film, who tells the audience what he wants them to know; hence the necessity to have the subtitle twice, first to enact the actor/star’s intervention into the diegetic world and second, to insist that this is at the expense of the will of the filmmaker, who is no longer the author of the film text but merely a toiling animator of it (cf. Goffman 1981).

In interviews with me, Amudhan and Sashikanth, like Venkat Prabhu and his assistant directors, consistently invoked “the story” — not the hero — as the basic, foundational element guiding their filmmaking (see Srinivas 2016). Consider Amudhan’s (2014) comment on the relationship of the hero to the story, using the example of the “Superstar” Rajinikanth:

Rajini’s style started as something being unique. Now it’s a caricature. Now it’s become very—now he’s become only the style. He used to be about performance and then style was cherry on the cake. Now there’s only the cherry, there’s no cake. So uh, you need to have (a) good story ... you still need, the basics of filmmaking need to be there. It needs to be good, uh uh, (there has to be a) basically good screenplay.

Here Amudhan voices a common criticism of commercial Tamil cinema: that instead of a sensible story, a coherent narrative, is simply a congeries of masala orbiting the hero. Commenting on how mass-hero cinema (from the time of MGR) had displaced an earlier mode of story-driven cinema, Amudhan in 2010 noted:

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

As Amudhan frames it here, the problem is that the hero has eclipsed the narrative itself, his image dominating it and forcing it to conform to his transtextual personage, its temporalities, and its modes of social relationality. Again, this is not just a critique of a kind of image or narrative textuality, but of a mode of production and a political economy of film. We can read Amudhan’s appeal simultaneously in two ways: as a plea for the story (and not the hero-star’s image) to guide the filmmaking process and as an appeal to the authority of the director—the storyteller/author—over the animating actors that merely enliven his story.

As Amudhan (2010) said of his own process, “I let the story, the narrative rule the process. I don’t cast until I finish my script. Um, I wait until I’m sure what the product is before doing anything else.” This is in contrast to a film built around a “bankable star,” as Amudhan (2014) later put it to me, with other elements filled in by simply following a standard “formula” (cf. Nagesh’s comedy track in Kadhalikka Neeram Illai [1964], discussed above).

For Sashikanth (2011), who saw Thamizh Padam and his production house in general as “taking on the industry” by producing “alternative” films, choosing a film was all about the quality of the “content,” the plot, and most importantly, the “script.” By emphasizing that he chooses films solely based on their scripts, Sashikanth was drawing a distinction to those producers who choose their projects based on the name and fame (what is often referred to as “market value”) of the hero-star or the director (cf. Srinivas 2016). As he 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). This appeal to the script was a common lament about the industry, its absence a sign of the industry’s backwardness, its lack of transparency, its ad hoc nature (cf. Prasad 1998).
This was also a lament about the economics of the industry—one that feeds on black money and non-transparent accounting, and that operates with, as Sashikant 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 uh 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 and try to sell it for 20 crores. It’s stupidity, actually. (my underlining)

For Sashikanth, the mode of production built up around the mass hero turns on huge windfalls from a few films rather than a rationalized production cycle that is efficient and that calculates and manages risk. Note 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” (cf. not a “film”) is “clearly” and reliably able to give a “return” according to some “market standard.”

For Sashikanth and Amudhan, then, Thamizh Padam, both as a textual form but also as the outcome of a mode of production, emblematized a total rejection both of a kind of image and a kind of cinema, from the level of the text and its chronotope organization (mass-hero films for untimely, credulous subaltern crowds vs. alternative, good cinema for modern, liberal publics) to the social organization of the industry (hierarchical vs. egalitarian, older generation vs. younger generation) and its modes of sociality (uptight vs. laid-back) and economic organization (black vs. white, irrational vs. rationalized).

Underwriting these various critiques, then, runs an anti-cinepolitics (cf. Prasad 2014), a rejection of a kind of image, a kind of filmmaking, a kind of industry organization that produces an illiberal excess to cinema which manifests in “hero worship,” populist politics (remember the panchayat scene and introduction song of Thamizh Padam), and opaque economics. How to confront this excess? How to enter and confront this
political economy of the image, not just economically but also politically? And what kind of politics is this?

The Politics for an Image

Making a film like Thamizh Padam, as industry insiders, audiences, film critics, and its makers themselves noted, was inherently risky and gutsy, even unthinkable. This was not simply because the spoof was not a recognized genre in the industry (i.e., for historical/cultural reasons), nor because the film lacked big name actors, directors, and technicians (i.e., for economic reasons); but also because such a film, by attacking a mode of production organized around a touchy and humorless cinepolitical form of heroism, would risk resistance from the industry and perhaps even violent retribution from upset fans (as had happened, for example, with the parody television show Lollu Sabha, as noted above). When I asked the former director and comedian Manobala (who played one of Shiva’s sidekicks in Thamizh Padam) in 2010 if most producers would have opted to take on a project like Thamizh Padam, he noted dramatically:

\[
\text{‘They would never take it on, sir! It would’ve never come out. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, if I’d made Thamizh Padam they [the ones affected by the film] would’ve chopped off my legs and arms.’}
\]

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 movies they didn’t work in the industry.”

While ultimately Amudhan found a production house to bring the film to theaters (see below), the film did face some setbacks along the way, some pushback from the mass of the hero’s image. There was resistance from the industry press and the 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 images of Shiva in the
introductory 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, who says ‘I’ve got nothing to lose,” Amudhan [2014] reported), and once cast, they often felt uncomfortable with their lines, asking Amudhan to change them or tone them down for fear of “hurting” the parodied person. And once finished, the film faced resistance from distributors, who were initially unwilling to buy it.

In the end, however, these were relatively minor problems. The film got made. It was released. It was a super hit. Audiences, in general, found it hilarious, laughing with the film at the industry and its heroes (and perhaps at themselves). 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—e.g., Simbu—and some persons’ careers may have been impacted from the satire they endured).

Was the lack of reaction following Thamizh Padam’s release indicative that it was a fait accompli, its politics a foregone conclusion? Was Thamizh Padam simply the telltale sign, as Rajan Kurai (2012) has suggested, that the mass hero is already ‘dead,’ his rotting corpse ripe for parody? That, as the Thamizh Padam screenwriter Chandru (2010) said to me, audiences today are “updated” and cosmopolitan, matured by world cinema and primed by Hollywood spoofs and television shows like Lollu Sabha; that, as Sashikanth (2011) put it, a “new era” has dawned or that, as Sudhish Kamath (2014) suggested, Tamil cinema has “come of age”? That audiences had already rejected, or were ready to reject, the mass hero formula, instead demanding “alternative,” sensible, entertaining “content”? Or did Amudhan et al. get away with it simply because, as Amudhan and Sashikanth noted about themselves and their producers Cloud 9, they were “rank outsiders” to the industry who never assisted with anyone and thus who didn’t know better, who had nothing to lose and owed nothing to anyone in the industry?

Perhaps. All of these reasons certainly make sense within a particular emplotted chronotope of the maturation and modernization of the Tamil film industry, just as they fit neatly with the heroic narrative of Thamizh Padam’s makers triumphing against the odds. But rather than rehash these stories, I’d like to draw attention elsewhere: to the politics for the
image that underwrote *Thamizh Padam’s* politics of the image, a politics not based on liberal maturation or outsider irreverence but on political muscle and the counterthreat of physical violence and state force.\textsuperscript{42}

Consider again how Sashikanth got into films. Central to Sashikanth’s story is that his father is a politician, E. A. P. Shivaji from the DMK political party (MLA, Thiruvalluvar district). Around the same time that Sashikanth had decided to get into film production, so too did his close friends, Dayanidhi Azhagiri (forming Cloud 9 Movies) and Udhayanidhi Stalin (forming Red Giant Movies), two grandsons of Kalainjär (‘the Artist’) M. Karunanidhi, the patriarch of the then-in-power DMK.\textsuperscript{43} 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, the industry guy trying to politicize *Thamizh Padam* (because it was a parody movie).”\textsuperscript{44} As Amudhan (2014) said regarding their difficulties, “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.”

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 Madurai, and held a central cabinet position) was producing the film. As one actor opined (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 (i.e., behind the film), anyone who was upset with the film would just have to shut their mouths and their assholes and sit quietly’ (“sūttaiyum vāyaiyum pottiittu tān pōkaṇum”). This backing involved not simply the threat of intimidation, but actual force. Indeed, with its producer’s family in control of the police and other non-state agents of force, *Thamizh Padam* didn’t have to contend with one of the main impediments to producer and distributor’s profits: digital piracy.

At the same time, the Maran brothers (Karunanidhi’s grandnephews) were increasingly monopolizing film production and distribution and
integrating it into their expansive media empire, which included Sun Television and Kalainjar TV, among a number of newspapers and radio stations. As one film producer pointed out to me, at the time of our interview (late July, 2010) all of the hits of 2009–2010 with the exception of one (Kalavani [2010]) 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. 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 (also see Dhananyajan 2011). While the content of the campaign was, indeed, clever, the ability to continually blast the public with it at virtually no cost was important as well.

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Spoofs and parodies are never simply a politics of the image; there must also be an offscreen politics in place so that this image may itself appear. This is as true for the figure of the mass hero as it is for parodies of him; and in this we may detect a particular dialectical relationship between the politics for an image and the politics of an image, each working in concert, but not in lock-step, each affecting and giving rise to the other. In Thamizh Padam, as I have argued, the very texture of the film’s politics (its liberal mockery of the cinepolitical mass hero and his “worship,” its chronopolitics, etc.) turned on a politics for its image (its illiberal political backing and corporatization, among other politics still [see note 44]), with the hope that this nexus might, in fact, entail into being a different kind of image and image space: a more realist, representationalist enclosure, produced through transparent story/director and script-driven production. Here a politics for an image gives form to the (parodic) politics of an image (though not in any straightforward or reflective way), and thus potentially acting in turn as the politics for some future (realist) image, and so on. What is important to underline is how these politics of/for an image are dialectically sutured together in/as the image itself; in the case of Thamizh Padam, so as to shut up the assholes while putting the rest of us in stitches.

But if so, this points to a curious performative contradiction and ideological erasure immanent in this dialectic of image-politics. Part of the moral of Thamizh Padam was that “it’s just a movie”; that is, the film
and its makers ask us not to see the hero-star’s image, and in fact all images (including its own), as what they otherwise are: performatively potent image-acts that affect and presence themselves in the scenes of their appearance. Instead they ask us to simply see them as mere representations.

And yet, the spoof image cannot, by the very fact that it clashes with and partially becomes what it cites, not help but be an image that traverses, and consubstantiates, the onscreen and offscreen in precisely the ways that the mass hero’s image does. To take Thamizh Padam’s intervention seriously, then, is to inhabit a subjectivity that doesn’t, and yet, then does, take its images too seriously, it is to cut a Gordian knot through an image that, in ironic inversion, traces the lines of the onscreen and offscreen in precisely those ways it says it doesn’t and advises against.

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Notes

1 Important to note here are also Sakti Chidambaram’s Mahanadigan (2004; and particular sequences from his 2005 film Englishkaran, both starring Satyaraaj), the Vijay TV spoof series Lollu Sabha (which spoofed a particular film per episode, running from 2001?–2010[?]) on Vijay TV, as well as Venkat Prabhu’s previous films Chennai-600028 (2007) and Saroja (2008), both of which featured some amount of parodic play on Tamil cinema (and film “heroism” in particular). Since 2010, one might note Onbathude Guru (2013) as another film spoof of a sort. Dhananjayan (2011) reports that Naveen Vikramadityan (1940) was “the first full length comedy spoof in Tamil cinema” (pp. 46–47), followed by Chandrahari (a 1941 spoof of Harichandra). Tamil cinema, of course, has a longer history of satire, e.g., N. S. Krishnan’s Nalla Thambi (1949) and Cho Ramasamy’s 1971 Muhammad bin Tughluq.

2 “Power Star” perhaps gives us license to parody Marx’s adage that history repeats itself ... first as spoof, then as farce. It was reported in the media that, in addition to personally producing his first film, Lathika (2011) and thus launched himself as a sui generis mass hero (financed presumably from his work as a medical doctor and pyramid schemer), he also paid viewers (or plied them with alcohol and biryani) to watch the film so as to run it, in one theater at least, for 225 days (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmtSQVcKry4). What is so strange about Dr. Srinivasan—besides his uncharismatic charisma, his absurd self-promotion (e.g., his claims to being on par...
with industry stalwarts such as Rajinikanth), or the way in which he has attracted ironic(?) “fans” (who seem to love how bad he is at being a hero-star)—was the way in which, initially at least, he seemed not to understand that he was taken as a joke by audiences and within the industry. Of equal note is how he has, since Lathika, gone on to be cast in a number of comedy roles in films which ran well (and where his role as an avowed comic was received rather successfully). (Similarly, consider the viral Tamil sensation Sam Anderson [Times of India 2012], who went from absurd, but sincere film hero to a minor comedian acting in mainstream films [including Venkat Prabhu’s 2013 Biriyani]; or even J. K. Ritesh, a minor politician who tried to launch himself as a major hero in ways perhaps reminiscent of the Power Star.) On a recent cinematic allegory of the self-serious actor who appears to all others as a self-parody (and parody of the industry itself, to say nothing of the subaltern dupe), see Karthik Subbaraj’s 2014 Jigarthanda (cf. Rajini’s 1997 film Arunachalam, with its own own film-within-the film that features an absurd hero in the comedian Senthil).

3 While film scholars who have focused on parody have noted that film parodies may take up any and every aspect of cinema, on or off the screen, in general this literature has focused on the textuality of the parody and the textualities it spoofs (see, e.g., the May 1990 issue of Quarterly Review of Film and Video; also Genette 1997[1982]). Here, however, my interest is not in how either the offscreen or the onscreen may be the target of parodic citation, but rather in how the entanglement between them is.

4 Venkat Prabhu’s films importantly mediate two alternate trajectories vis-à-vis the ontology of the mass hero’s image; on the one hand, they attempt to instate a narrative-dominated film style in a slick urban, “Hollywood” style (cf. the neonativity films of Bala and his former assistants); on the other hand, they are playfully attuned to commercial Tamil cinema, constantly poking fun of the image of the hero through their burlesque. As such, Venkat Prabhu’s films are often taken in media reportage and among audiences to index a “different” kind of cinema in narrative style and attitude (i.e., in not taking itself too seriously). Thamizh Padam clarifies these stakes as a critical intervention that directs itself as an explicit attack on the mass-hero image as such. See main text for discussion.

5 The first half of Goa is filled with actors who acted in memorable films from this era playing similar roles (e.g., Vijayakumar, Anandaraj, Periya Karuppu Thevar, Kovai Senthil, Shanmugan Sundaram—the last two of which also acted in Thamizh Padam) in similar scenes (such as the hilarious panchayat scene in the first half of the film) in a town named Pannaipuram, the name of his father’s native place.

6 Neither Amudhan nor Venkat Prabhu assistanted with a senior director before helming their first films, as is the norm in the Tamil film industry, though Venkat Prabhu was a character actor in the early 2000s and, given his family’s involvement in cinema, is still, in many ways, very much an industry insider (see note 44 below).

7 Such attacks followed their spoof of Kamal Haasan’s Thevar Magan (1992), though there was also unrest following their spoof of Vijay’s Pokkiri (2007), “Bakery:”

8 The one-line is a summary of the plot of the film, each scene summarized in “one line.” It is not a break-down by shot, nor is it a dialogue script, but a narrative outline of the film.

9 Sashikanth (2011) told me that Dayanidhi Azhagiri’s cousin, Udhayanidhi Stalin’s film production company Red Giant Movies was originally supposed to produce the film.
in conjunction with YNOT. However, since Udhayanidhi was busy with another project, he referred it to his cousin’s company, Cloud 9 Movies.

10 Thamizh Padam was pre-sold to Cloud 9 for around 3.25 crores (its actual cost to YNOT), and then sold again to another party, then to principal distributors, to their sub-distributors, and finally to exhibitors (Sashikanth 2011). Sashikanth reported to me that he sold it at cost because, as it was his first film, he was more concerned with producing sellable content, so as to presumably get his foot in the door of the industry and generate a name for his company as a bankable, reliable production house of “alternative” content. He narrated this in the context of criticizing the dominant mode of production of the industry, whereby windfall profits from huge hits are attempted to be made from hero-oriented films, rather than rationalizing the production process to create regular, if lower profit-margins (see main text below for more discussion).

11 The Tamil address-term ṭi is generally used with a female addressee who is either an intimate of the speaker or much lower in status. With an elder woman it would be considered highly impolite.

12 This plot element is perhaps the least recognizable as a standard narrative twist in Tamil cinema; and not surprisingly, it was the one element that most viewers found unsatisfying about the film.

13 Indeed, to say that Thamizh Padam parodies either a text or a style or a mode of celebrity artificially/prematurely separates what, in fact, Thamizh Padam attempted, through its parody, to performatively disaggregate.

14 And, of course, what makes Thamizh Padam a parody or satire is not just its textual excess (for often, at the level of the text, it is no different than a typical mass-hero film); rather, it is the main actor, Shiva’s offscreen status as an up-and-coming hero (a cinna paiyan [‘little boy’] in the industry), who had previously acted in Venkat Prabhu’s non-hero-centered films, delivering all his lines with a smirking straight face that seems always on the edge of cracking up. As with the “Power Star,” the very idea of an unserious, unstatusful actor taking on such an image is laughable (cf. Nakassis 2010:209–221; 2016:196). As a critique of the onscreen/offscreen entanglement that is the mass-hero image, as I suggest in the main text below, Thamizh Padam of necessity partakes of precisely this onscreen/offscreen ontology of the image: the relevance of Shiva’s offscreen status to the onscreen image is one example of this.

15 Here Sashikanth is referencing religious rituals of pal abishekam wherein a divine image or idol has milk, or other substances, poured over it. Such rites are also performed by fans on large images of heroes, sometimes with milk, other times with beer (Nakassis 2016:271, n. 4).

16 Part common noun and part proper name, such superlative rigid designators (Kripke 1981) refer across all “possible worlds,” cinematic and not, tangling the actor and all the characters he animates into the singular identity-image of transcendental subject of adulation and respect, as denoted by his sobriquet. If Rajinikanth is the actor’s name and Basha, Billa, Padaiyappa, et cetera are his characters’ names, it is the appellation “Superstar” that sutures actor and character, infusing each character with something of the others, and conserving the iterated “build up” of the actor-hero’s “mass” so as to unleash his gravitational force elsewhere, on or off the screen (Nakassis 2016:209). In referring across all possible worlds, cinematic and not, such
“titles” tangle those worlds together by hovering virtually over every avatar/iteration of the hero-star.

17 This is, of course, not quite the case, since actors before Rajinikanth were adorned with such titles (e.g., MGR who was also called Puratāci Talaivar [‘Revolutionary Leader’], Vattiyār [‘the Teacher’], and Makkal Tilakam [‘the Light of the People’].

18 In this critique do we not hear echoes of André Bazin’s (2005) essay “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema”—wherein he critiques montage (and Russian formalism and German expressionism) as destroying cinema’s inherent ability to represent time in its substance, to embalm it in its reality—or even Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1982) discussion of the parodic/realist chronopolitics of the novel (vis-à-vis the “epic” chronotope)?

19 Similar to this parody of the temporality of commercial cinema is another parody later in the film (taken from Annamalai [1992]), with reminiscence to Rajini’s Arunachalam [1997] as well) where Shiva’s girlfriend’s father—named Koodiswaran(!) (‘Billionaire’)—while waiting for his coffee tells Shiva that he will never marry his daughter to a poor guy like Shiva. In response, Shiva goes out and makes his name and fame, becoming a tycoon in a montage that features him working his way up from being a milkman to a tycoon with IT parks, rail stations, beaches, airports, mortuaries(!), jails(!), and electricity boards named after him. We see scenes of him selling toys, then delivering newspapers, and finally constructing large engineering projects. He returns to his girlfriend’s house before even the coffee has arrived, as his future father-in-law conspicuously notes, and wins his favor.

20 Again, this chronopolitics is not simply one that takes issue with the image qua representation; that is, the problem isn’t simply that mass-hero films have absurd representations of temporality (as reflection reveals, most all films do, in fact). Rather, what Thamizh Padam takes issue with is the temporality of the onscreen/offscreen entanglement itself. This is precisely the joke at play with Shiva’s sidekick friends, played by Manobala, Vennira Adai Moorthy, and M. S. Bhaskaran, three veteran comedians in their 60s and 70s. Dressed up as college students, and with the same names as the teenage characters of Shankar’s Boys (2003), these elderly comedians travesty the fact that—as C. S. Amudhan (2010) noted regarding the comedian Vivek, who “must have grandchildren by now”—whereas actors age (in the chronotope of biological time), they keep playing the same young characters in films. In reel time they don’t age. In a similar joke, Shiva asks his adopted grandmother about his parents. When he asks if they are still alive, she—who has not aged since his birth—says, ‘If I’m still alive, won’t they be too?’ To which Shiva responds ‘That’s right grandma, how is it that after all these years haven’t changed?’ (“Atu sari pāṭṭi, ittanai varuṣanika ni ippaṭi ippatīyē irukke?”). She says, ‘You can be forty and still go to college (in the movies), so why shouldn’t I be this way (i.e., unaged)’ (“Āmām nāppatu vayasu college-kku pōkalam, nām appati irukkakkukkuttātu?”). Here, we might read the parodied figure as the actor Murali, who long acted as a college hero after his success in his 1991 college film, Ithayam. (Thanks to Perundevi Srinivasan, who suggested this to me during the discussion of this paper at the Chicago Tamil Forum workshop, May 21, 2016.)

21 The screenwriter Chandru (2010) noted to me that Thamizh Padam didn’t fare particularly well in rural areas, but was a bit hit in cities, that is, with audiences who are “updated,” as he put it (cf. Hansen 1991:27ff. on the spoof of the credulous spectator/performative image in an early silent film).
In an interview with me in 2014, Kamath said: “And for me, that was like the coming of age of uh Tamil cinema where we finally decided that ((??)) we’re not going to take ourselves that seriously because we’re making entertainment, right? So let’s, let’s not pretend like that we’re making epics, let’s not pretend that we’re making like Schindler’s List out here. …”

For the director, C. S. Amudhan, however, this was less a linear history than a circular one, with the mass-hero figure an interloper into the proper domain of cinema: the story (on which, see more below in the main text). When prompted by me with a quote from Dayanidhi Azhagiri that “The Tamil film industry needed a film like this [Thamizh Padam], and it needed it right now,” Amudhan (2010) responded by saying:

I think it has always needed it. I think it’s needed it for the past thirty years. Uh, because see, the hero thing has not always been there. This, this mega-hero has not always been here. It came along with MGR. Until then the story was like it should be, the narrated was the main party of the story, and then there was a guy who played the lead. But this whole thing about films being centered around a hero uh is a new uh, relatively new thing.

This isn’t to say that either Amudhan or Venkat Prabhu would avow, or even desire to make, “realist” films in the style of post-WWII European cinema. Indeed, neither Venkat Prabhu’s nor Amudhan’s later films would be considered “realist” by EuroAmerican/art cinematic aesthetics, even if within the Tamil film industry they are seen as (relatively more) realistic vis-à-vis the presentist mass-hero film (see Nakassis and Dean 2007).

It is not for nothing, then, that Venkat Prabhu’s Goa also offers a parodic homage to this era of cinema, an era that both he and Amudhan grew up with. And it is also not for nothing that Amudhan (2014) pointed to the director Vetrimaran (who assistanted with Balumahendra) as “the great hope of young Tamil cinema.”

Both Venkat Prabhu and C. S. Amudhan noted to me that, while comedy and shock were central to their cinematic style, both intended to make more “serious” films in the future (at the time of the interview with Venkat Prabhu, he was referring to his first foray with a mass hero, Ajith, in his 2011 neo-noir film Mankatha), films that their previous spoof films would open the space for. As Amudhan (2014) noted, Thamizh Padam was “an idea ... whose time had come ... a long time ago and had never been done.” Regarding his second (and still to be released film), Amudhan (2010) noted that “the second movie around ... is when I would try and do what I always thought how filmmaking should be and the kind of thing that need(ed) to be done ... That [Thamizh Padam] was not about me making a film. It was me giving structure to an idea. Hereafter is when I would try to uh uh make movies the way I want to make them.” He said of his second film, “I’m trying to make uh Tamil cinema’s first international thriller.” In our 2014 interview he compared the Hollywood film to Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

As Sashikanth (2011) noted, in Hollywood, one can make smart, intelligent commercial films (for him, examples were Dark Knight [2008], Sherlock Holmes [2009], and Inception [2010]). In Kollywood, by contrast, it was difficult, if not impossible to make any such film in a commercial context.

Venkat Prabhu’s filmmaking style is said to be less dictatorial and autocratic than other directors (indeed, Prabhu’s films are always referred to as made by the “Venkat
Prabhu team” because he consistently works with the same individuals in a presumably more democratic mode of production, one in contrast to the stereotyped hierarchy of the industry where assistants and junior artists are “slaves” to senior artists, producers, and directors. One (parodic) sign of this is how Venkat Prabhu and his “team” continually use the word “sār” (‘sir’) with each other on and off the screen, parodying the norm of sār usage among industry insiders.

29 Relevant here is that Premji is famously known for appropriating a line from Chandiramukhi—“Enna kotumai Saravanan itu?” (‘What horror is this, Saravanan?’) said by the actor Prabhu Ganesan—and using it in every Venkat Prabhu movie (Nakassis 2016:174).

30 As Kamath put it to the directors on-air during the show (episode 6, Hands Up, April 1, 2010): “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?”(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9p_zxhQvwuc&index=2&list=PLSCNPTijj3XaPYNqW8zHVItSO9t2TWkk)

31 What I would also underline is how this prank puts into joke form an otherwise serious critique of the organization of the industry. Amudhan’s original “critique” of Venkat Prabhu that kicked off the prank was that “just because Prabhu is from an industry family doesn’t mean that he owns the industry.” More than just a lampoon of the sensitive offscreen egos of its principal players, part of the prank was that such egos organized the political economy of the industry itself. Indeed, note how Amudhan’s original print advertisement figured the difference between himself and Venkat Prabhu as between a director “on a holiday” and a director on a “working day,” that is, between those who have to work their way up and struggle, while others are simply handed things because they, and their family members, are big names in the industry. The prank seemed to say cinema is just for fun, don’t take it seriously, precisely because those who take it seriously have organized the industry in a way that turns on the reverence to authority and hierarchy (i.e., to them), and this is not a good thing—and don’t you see, even those who seem not to, even they still do take it seriously.


33 In another example from the second half of the film, Shiva alights upon how to find his parents: ask the railway master. Shiva then calls for a “cut” to the railway station (where they will be going in the diegetic world) that is addressed to the director and/or editor. At that point we hear the director’s voice from behind the camera, ‘We’re the ones who take care of editing, you pay attention to your own work!’ Shiva apologizes, and we again hear the offscreen voice muttering to itself, ‘He doesn’t even know how to act but he is now trying to direct too!’

34 In 2014, Amudhan noted:

We’re not seriously trying to revolutionize (the industry) or anything like that. We’re just guys having fun ... But what it [Thamizh Padam] ultimately does is that it also shows them [mass heroes] in a certain light in which they are not comfortable being seen in, which his like, big spoof time. You know, uh, they are, they’ve always (been) accustomed to being put on a pedestal. And uh this kind of approach irks them, and uh, it questions their very-, because that’s that’s how movies get made, you know, they have this
formula of how to uh make movies. You know, you have a bankable star. And then, uh you have a story which has a love portion and uh a glamour portion. It’s a formula right? So if you question that formula and the audiences start to think about this then they would not know how to function, because then the formula doesn’t apply. And they, uh, they would really not know how to function. I’m talking about uh uh heroes, producers, directors who work like that. I have nothing against them. Uhm I enjoy uh watching those kinds of movies too sometimes. But uh, the kind, the the spoof genre does actually threaten them.

At the same time, Amudhan was sanguine about the effect of this threat. In 2014, he said:

I don’t think that Thamizh Padam changed anything <chuckles>. I mean, let’s be realistic, we’re talking about a hundred years of cinema. I don’t think it changed anything, but uhm I think it would have woken up certain stakeholders in the industry like assistant directors, for example, into- okay, this stuff is actually ridiculous and has been done so many time. So uh, in movie discussions I think this will feature to some extent. Uh but we’ll need dozens of Thamizh Padams <chuckles> before we can actually make a dent in the uh mainstream thinking.

Sudish Kamath (2014), however, was more optimistic, noting that the mainstream has shifted since/because of films like Thamizh Padam. As evidence he observed that today directors like Venkat Prabhu are making films with all the big heroes (Surya, Ajith, Karthi).

35 Here, in Sashikanth’s discourse note the common trope of distinguishing orality from literacy as the mark of the non-rational and the rational.

36 Also part of Sashikanth’s (2011) lament was that there was no clear notion of an efficient, rational division of labor in the film industry. For example, he noted that it is often assumed in the Tamil film industry that the director also has to be the script-writer, the storyteller, et cetera. Instead, he said, direction and scriptwriting are different tasks and different roles in the production process, and should be filled by different individuals.

37 Sashikanth’s discourse keys a longer-standing desire and discourse to corporatize the Tamil film industry, to render it transparent and rationalized, and it stands alongside the emergence of new models of financing and producing films. We can read Sashikanth here alongside the emergence of low-budget, story-driven and non-hero centered films that emerge in the early 2000s in Tamil cinema (see Nakassis and Dean 2007 for discussion), as well as the emergence of a number of of new producers (e.g., Shankar, C. V. Kumar, Moser Baer [for a time]) and directors of such films (e.g., Balalishaktivel, Bala, Selvaraghavan, Venkat Prabhu Ameer, Sasikumar, Sasi, Vetrimaran, Karthik Subbaraj, and Balaji Mohan).

One important provocation—suggested by S. V. Srinivas in commenting on this essay during the Chicago Tamil Forum workshop (May 21, 2016)—is the parallel and difference of this moment with statist interventions into Indian cinemas (in the guise of the FFC/NFDC) and the emergence of a new crop of smaller-budget, realist, story-driven films, directors (Balachandar [who later got into production], Bharatiraja, Balumahendra [whose assistants included Bala, Vetrimaran], etc.), actors (Kamal
Haasan, Rajinikanth), and technicians in the 1970s. In an earlier moment, one might also motion to the importance of Sridhar.

38 Amudhan (2010, 2014) and Sashikanth (2011) framed finding such a producer to be, if serendipitous (as both noted that most film producers wouldn’t touch such a project with a ten-foot pole), a relatively straightforward process with few hickups. Shiva (2014), however, narrated to me a different story. As he said of a failed narration by Amudhan with a producer who didn’t understand the spoof concept:


Because a lot of people didn’t/won’t accept it [Thamizh Padam]. Producers didn’t/won’t accept it. In fact, Amudhan went to all of them, and when he narrated the story, one producer even slept through the whole thing. After it, he got up, and when Amudhan asked “How is the film, sir?” he said, “What is this, son? All these scenes have already been done (in other films)? How could we make this into a film?”, and sent him off. He had no idea what a spoof was!

<laughing> So it was really discouraging. But what our-, anyone- we want to break something, we need to do something new. That’s what our interest is.

39 And indeed, with the exception of Shiva, none of the actors were even told that the film was a spoof during its production. Simply told it was a “funny film,” Amudhan only told the actors what they needed to know scene by scene, often to their confusion when they were told to do absurd things or speak absurd lines. As Amudhan said, “We didn’t tell them what they’re doing. They wouldn’t appear on set if I told them.”

As Shiva (2014) told me in a humorous story, the actress who played the heroine was, as usual he noted, a non-Tamil speaking north Indian (Nakassis 2015). When she asked what the lyrics to the romantic hero-heroine duet song “O Maha Zeya” meant (a song whose “lyrics” were solely composed of non-sense syllables used in other Tamil songs, which the hero and heroine had to sing with serious feeling), he told her some stereotypic love lyrics (‘If you’re not in this world, then I’m not here either’), which she, as he narrated it, took to heart.

For those actors who were in many scenes (e.g., Manobala, M. S. Bhaskar, Vennira Adai Moorthy), at first it didn’t register that this was a full-on spoof film, for, as Amudhan noted,

It’s [i.e. that kind of comedy scene] not that remarkable because spoof scenes are there in literally every movie, I mean. So the fact that we’re doing an entire movie which is spoof based was the, was the surprise. So on day one, on day two, on day three, on day four you wouldn’t realize this. But then as you keep shooting and everything, these guys are doing only this stuff. They’re not doing anything else. Then it’s, then they start coming to me and asking me “So, so what’s actually happening here?” <chuckles; breaths in> Uh, eh-uh “See it’s mostly funny, so it’s spoof based, and especially your portions are fully funny, maybe there are other serious <starts laughing as he is talking> portions in
While *Thamizh Padam* was written to be irreverent to the industry, this entire effort was explicitly framed by its makers as not out to “hurt” anyone, as not being directed at persons. (That no one was hurt personally was also one of Shiva’s conditions on doing the film, as he told me in 2014.)

Drawing the line, and cutting the Gordian knot, between the personage and the image, then, depending on maintaining on a fine balance that, again, turned on and ended at the personal name. As Amudhan (2014) noted, rather than calling out someone by name (e.g., like Simbu in the panchayat scene), he might simply be referred obliquely (e.g., as ‘that little brother [“anta tambi”] who does that thing with his hands’). Similarly, the dance master Kalyan Kumar (2011) noted to me that in choreographing Shiva’s introductory song, he felt Amudhan had gone a little too far in certain respects, individuating persons rather than stereotypes. As he said:

> When I was doing that uh *inta* ['this'] song, uh that opening song of Shiva dancing, his cut-outs and everything. Actually they uh a lot of [the mass hero’s] Ajith’s- this thing, Vijay’s cut-out and everything and they had put *Tala illai*, *Talavali* ('Not the Head but the headache'). I said “Avoid certain things. You can’t go overboard.” I said “Don’t go overboard, like insulting a person personally. Maybe a character he has done. <mouth click> You know, you can *kalacakify* ['make fun of'] the character, (but) not the PERSON.” And (so) I had to cut a little bit here and there, and I said, then it is okay.

Similarly, in his choreography Kalyan Kumar didn’t take specific steps identifiable with a particular person, but just did things that typically happen in heroes’ introductory songs. But, “I only did one thing where finally this guy comes and dances, this choreographer (=Ashok Raja?), I would have done also that. ... <laughing> That I did.”

As this discussion suggests, despite any stated intention not to hurt anyone personally, in parodying an image that is inherently about how the image is caught up with the person, we can see how the desired effect of *Thamizh Padam* was precisely to do just this, for to disaggregate the ego of the actor from the performative pragmatics of the image is to attack his cinematically extended person(age). (Hence the whole discourse about the industry being unable to “take a joke,” discussed in the main text above.) Returning to the comedians Manobala, M. S. Bhaskar, and Vennira Adai Moorthy, for example, Amudhan noted that after they figured out that the whole film was a spoof they came to him.

Uhm, they((‘d say)) “Please-” They woul- if they, if I gave them a controversial dialogue they would come up to me and say, “Do you really want me to say this? Can I maybe say this? It might offend them directly. Those, it’s like underlining the name so can we not do that?” So we have had-, ((you know I’m)), in some places I put my foot down and said “No please, you have to say this.” And in certain places I said, “Okay, it doesn’t make much of a difference, so-.”

Here the issue was that the person who they are making fun of would get mad at the actor for simply saying the lines. When I queried Amudhan (2014) on the logic of this, for wasn’t Amudhan the one responsible for the film and its dialogues?, he responded by saying:
I’m on the same side as you, because I would think it’s “I had nothing to do with that, I was just mouthing the lines.” But they would think “You could have said no! When it’s so insulting to me you could have just said no. I know you so well, you’re my friend, you could have said no.” (CN: Right) They would think that.

41 One example, perhaps, is the enthusiastic dance master who is parodied in Shiva’s introduction song (Ashok Raja?, see note 40 above). It was suggested to me that, because of Thamizh Padam, his popularity waned. While I have not been able to confirm any such effect, some of my avid filmgoing friends have noted to me that, indeed, since Thamizh Padam, that kind of dancing-with-the-hero—now defamiliarized as absurd—has atrophied on the screen. As Genette (1997[1982]:79) writes: “Pastiche is not only cathartic for its author; it is also sterilizing to its victim, who is condemned to rehash stereotypes endlessly or to abandon them altogether, and thus become someone else” (Genette 1997[1982]:79; or something in between.

42 My suggestion here is not that this is the only such politics for the image, or that we need think of politics narrowly as organized around electoral party politics. Indeed, in addition to the politics of humor (the ability to take a joke, the very humor that is elicited from the film) and the liberal politics of representationalism/realism noted above in the main text, we can point to the dynastic politics that underwrites much of the industry and Venkat Prabhu’s films in particular (see notes 31 and 44); to a gender politics (e.g., the largely unexamined homosociality of the metadiscourse surrounding these films); and to an ethnolinguistic politics of belonging (a comparison of the reception of Thamizh Padam, a film made by a Tamil about Tamil cinema, with Shah Rukh Khan’s Bollywood spoof of Tamil cinema in Chennai Express reveals the politics of cultural intimacy at play here). (I thank Amanda Weidman for encouraging me to clarify these points.)

43 While Rajan Kurai (2012:35) has suggested, not entirely without base, that if someone from Karunanidhi’s family—the head of the Dravidian party, the DMK (within which MGR grew to be a mass hero)—could produce an anti-hero film, then this must be because times have changed. What I would emphasize, however, is that such a film could only be produced, in a certain sense, because he was the son of Azhagiri, because Thamizh Padam was backed by a political force. From this point of view, the more things change, the more they stay the same … Rather than in epochal terms, then, I prefer to see Thamizh Padam as elucidating certain dynamics that have subtended and continue to subtend Tamil cinema.

44 Being a cinema industry insider also has its perks, of course, as a (dynastic) politics for the image. As Venkat Prabhu (2010), son of Gangai Amaren, nephew of Ilaiyaraja, and cousin of Karthik Raja, Yuvan Shankar Raja, and Vasuki Bhaskar, noted,

Because I come from a family (for the industry) where, you know, I can use anybody’s, like Bharatiraja’s ((song)) because he’s seen me as a kid. Everybody has seen me as a-, They’ve literally seen me grow up ((???)) So it was, they all, they all took it [God’s parodies] very nicely.
Interviews Cited


References Cited