

Rajinikanth and the “Regional Blockbuster”

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Introduction

In the recent past, Tamil and Telugu films have managed to find audiences beyond the southern region and have also competed with the biggest Hindi films in Hindi cinema’s traditional markets in northern and western India. A subset of these films are big-budget spectacles, which I would like to call *regional blockbusters*. This term flags the critical importance of developments in the south Indian region and film industries for the emergence of relatively new production and narrative regimes which raise interesting questions of value—of films as commodities and stars alike.¹ In the pages that follow, I trace the evolution of this form to argue that it is symptomatic of a fundamental transformation of industrial-political logics of south Indian cinemas, whose most visible manifestations so far have been the star politician and fan clubs. I propose that Rajinikanth is a useful point of entry into the discussion of the regional blockbuster because he belongs to a small number of Indian superstars who were a part of the very problem that the blockbuster attempts to overcome and, at the same time, a valuable asset for it. By tracking the career of Rajinikanth, I propose to show how crucial this star in particular, but also the south Indian star vehicle known as the “mass film,” is the condition of possibility for a form that may or may not use major stars. The paper is divided into two parts. The first elaborates on the blockbuster as a descriptive-analytical category and shows why it is usefully seen not just as a global form but also a *regional* phenomenon, predicated on locally specific historical contingencies as well industrial-aesthetic practices. The second focuses on Rajinikanth’s career from roughly the period when some of the earliest movies began to be made in both the Madras and Hyderabad film industries to assemble the blockbuster.

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The Blockbuster

The term *blockbuster* means many things and it is necessary to disambiguate the term before adopting it to describe the specific phenomenon I have in mind. The term has been, and continues to be, used rather vaguely to describe films that have an extraordinarily good run at the box office. As Tom Shone (2004) notes, in pre-1970s Hollywood, it was primarily an economic category, referring to big hits, regardless of their production values, genre, et cetera. After the success of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1976), which was the first film to break the Hollywood barrier of \$100 million rental revenue, blockbuster became “the name a movie calls itself” (Shone 2004:28). The blockbuster rapidly grew into a form that was marked by its makers’ *intent* to take the film market by storm. Post-*Jaws* it became possible to have the oxymoronic category of *failed* blockbusters—films that sought to capture the market but couldn’t. Today blockbusters are “unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money” (Hall and Neale 2010:1). Arguably, this is a particularly imprecise mode of categorizing films. It is more useful to deploy the term to capture a larger issue which is far more central to the production and marketing of films today than in the *Jaws* era: the ability to reach larger and newer markets and, by implication, move beyond the big screen to other formats and sources of revenue.

Blockbusters are global in two senses of the term: (1) they have been made in different parts of the world from the 1990s, around the time when theatrical revenues began to decline in proportion to other sources; (2) they are marketed globally. Entertainment industries in Hong Kong, the People’s Republic of China, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan have created their own versions of the blockbuster from the late 20th century. It is therefore not surprising at all that the form would be “brought home” to India at some point. Local histories apart, the global marketing of blockbusters has played a role in creating a baseline of expectations from the form, which include spectacular action sequences and other “attractions” that are evidence of high expenditure on the production itself (and not just marketing). The blockbuster also connotes the outer limits of both financial and technological investment in the cinema.

In the critical discourse on Indian cinema, the category of the blockbuster has not been used as widely as it has been in both Hollywood and East Asian cinemas. This is possibly due to the wide currency

of Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s (2003) term *Bollywoodization*, which captures some key features of the turn of the 20th-century blockbuster: rising importance of non-theatrical revenues, overseas markets, and other signs of the post-celluloid career of the cinema.

I use the term blockbuster in the south Indian context in a limited sense, to refer to a relatively small number of expensively produced films which point to a constellation of features that have to do with finances, production, marketing, and exhibition. Among other things, the regional blockbuster is characterized by its *production logic*, not just the presence/absence of stars, which till the 1990s overdetermined most aspects of cinema—from funding and scripting to the reception of films. Unlike expensive films of an earlier era made in this region, featuring top ranking male stars are not the only reason why these films are expensive. Indeed, one of the most successful films of this category is the *Eega/Naan Ee/Makkhi* (S. S. Rajamouli, 2012; with its Telugu, Tamil, and Kannada titles, respectively), whose most prominent stars are its heroine (Samantha) and villain (the Kannada actor Sudeep), while the hero is a housefly, which cost more to make than the salaries of these stars. Further, the blockbuster is a film that travels beyond the traditional distribution and exhibition circuits of south Indian cinema. The necessary conditions for the travels of these films fell in place only in the past two decades. Dubbing of films south Indian films into Hindi and, more recently, digital projection and the cartelization/centralization of exhibition are key facilitators of travel.

Beginnings

The distinguishing feature of the regional blockbuster is the relatively high investment that is made in what is known in industry terminology as “below-the-line” costs. Film production typically has two kinds of costs. Salaries of the actors, director, scriptwriter, music director, and producer (who is an investor in India but a hired professional elsewhere) are “above-the-line” costs. These costs are decided before shooting begins and any changes in the length of the film, number of shooting days, locations, et cetera do not impact them. Below-the-line costs are related to shooting and post-production work, which can be increased or decreased based on the availability of production budgets. A scene from the script

can be deleted or added, location changed, extras increased, action sequences enhanced with more expensive visual effects, and so on. For our purposes, what is important to note is that above-the-line costs are (usually) fixed and also determine below-the-line expenses.

The costing of a blockbuster is strikingly different from the turn-of-the 20th-century big-budget production. The blockbuster does not always feature major stars but its below-the-line costs are *always* higher than what would be considered normal for an expensive film. After the decline of the major south Indian studios in the 1960s, it was only rarely that high below-the-line costs were incurred in films which did not feature major stars. Or, to put it a little differently, regardless of *quality*, the worth of a project and the quantum of investment that went into it was often determined by the male star who played the lead. From the 1970s, for example, elaborate sets and numerous extras, of the kind we see in the films of the Telugu stars Krishna and N. T. Rama Rao would have been unthinkable in films featuring lesser stars. Indeed, the hallmark of a starless film in south India (and elsewhere) has been location shooting, which is much cheaper than renting studio floors. Take for example, the “class film” which in the 1970s and 1980s threw up new stars in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. It was hailed for its aesthetic quality and high production values but was inevitably made with modest budgets.

Now, let us take the case of three expensive productions of the 1990s which also had a good run at the box office: *Gentleman* (S. Shankar, 1993), *Kadhalan* (*Premikudu* in Telugu; S. Shankar, 1996) and *Ammoru* (*Amman* in Tamil; K. Ramakrishna, 1994). In genre terms, no three films can be more different. The first drew on action and suspense genres while the second is a romance and the third a devotional film. The biggest stars in the combined line up of actors of these films are Nagma (*Kadhalan*) and Ramya Krishna (*Ammoru*, supporting role). Even a cursory look at these films tells us that huge expenses were incurred on their spectacular action sequences and stunning visual effects. They were also better scripted than most 1990s vehicles of major stars.

Why this return to the studio era practice of casting lesser known actors in expensive productions when there were no studios backing up projects? This is all the more curious considering the fact that from the 1970s one of the key functions of the male star has been to attract investment to a project, which was often in the form of pre-selling its distrib-

ution rights. As one Telugu film commentator put it, the star’s primary function is not to attract audiences but distributors (Narasaiah 1981).

A further point about costing. Roughly corresponding with the growing popularity of the music director A. R. Rahman, we notice the sharp increase in the fees paid not only to music directors, but also to directors, who became “stars” in their own right. Today there are several directors—most notably S. Shankar and S. S. Rajamouli—whose fees often rival, or better, that of the male leads in their films. The escalation of the director’s fee is a sign of a key shift in the valuation of projects and determining their investment-worthiness. While blockbusters can be made without stars, the chances are that the director assumes the function that was once seen as the prerogative of the star: anchoring the project and serving to sell the product to distributors and audiences alike. To understand this shift, it is useful to recall the star’s importance for the film business.

Importance of Stars

It is a widely known fact that in India the so-called commercial film only rarely recovers the cost of production from box-office collections. In other words, a majority of films collect less at the box office than what it costs to make them. This situation has not changed much even with satellite rights and other sources of revenue thrown in. Usually, the loss is absorbed either by the producer (investing his own money or borrowing at a high rate of interest), the distributor (buying distribution rights at the pre-sale), the exhibitor (paying an advance on gate collections to the distributor for bringing the film to his theatre), or all three of them. I have managed to trace commentaries on losses incurred by film producers all the way back to 1940, less than decade into the talkie era.²

If film production is a loss-making proposition, how do we account for its *growth* over the decades? As generations of industry observers have noted, fresh investments from new entrants drive production. Even in the middle of the 20th century, a period that is often spoken of in nostalgic terms by later day commentators, a majority of producers in India had produced only one film. That is to say, they didn’t last in the industry to make a second one. From the 1970s, when the “buyer system” of distribution was introduced first in Tamil Nadu and then in Andhra

Pradesh, *retail* distributors bid for rights in smaller territories (sometimes corresponding with a district), competing among themselves to increase the value of films.³ But there was also no dearth of new producers, bringing in surpluses generated in businesses unrelated to the cinema. They were joined by exhibitors who were willing to pay advances for what were presumed to be guaranteed hits.

The star was perhaps the most important part of this complex system. As the story goes, in the good old days of south Indian cinema, haberdashers and bartenders turned producers because they managed to get the call-sheets of stars. It was not as if these men of modest means had surpluses to invest but because money followed stars.⁴

During the studio era, from the investment perspective, there was a limited opportunity for retail investment. Studios pre-sold their films to state- or region-wide distributors who in turn block-booked theatres. Decline of studios, fragmentation of distribution and the rise of stars are all related developments, which have been examined in earlier writings on (south) Indian cinema. A fragmented distribution sector became a crucial channel for sourcing funding for film production from the 1970s. From the reports on Tamil cinema by Sreedhar Pillai (2016a), distribution seems to have become even more fragmented in the past decade.⁵

It is perhaps not coincidental that two producers who contributed to the development of the blockbuster—K. T. Kunjamon and “Aascar” Ravichandran—began their film industry careers as distributors and that too of relatively inexpensive films produced by other industries (Malayalam in the case of the former and Hollywood and Hong Kong in the case of the latter). Evidently, they were both aware of the importance of distribution, for both the expansion of markets and for channelling money into production.

The Crisis

That the post-studio model built on stars was a *successful* one is not in doubt. From the late 1970s, there was a steady growth in the number of productions in both Tamil and Telugu, which even overtook Hindi every once in a while. But the model ran into problems in the 1990s, the notable one for our purposes being *the scarcity of stars*. The generation of stars that succeeded MGR and NTR—namely, Rajinikanth, Kamal Haasan and

Chiranjeevi—became less available to investors as they grew in stature. These stars averaged far fewer films per year than MGR and NTR during their acting years. Chiranjeevi acted in 89 films between 1981 and 1990 but only 21 films from 1991–2000 and just eleven films from 2001–2007 (when the last film featuring him in the lead was made). Rajinikanth has averaged less than one film per year from 1994. Kamal Haasan, with 23 films between 1991 and 2015, has been more generous with his time than Rajinikanth but less so than Chiranjeevi. Male Telugu and Tamil stars who are now in their thirties and forties have tended to average between one and three films a year (Pawan Kalyan has only acted in 23 films in a career spanning 20 years). The scarcity value of stars increased manifold due their decision to severely restrict their availability.

The serial scams in Indian stock markets, including disappearing pisciculture and software firms, and the thriving (if technically) illegal stock exchanges that functioned quite openly are evidence that from the 1990s there was a lot of speculative capital looking for investment venues (Ananth 2006, 2007). The 1990s proved to be a good time for the Telugu and Tamil film industries too. As an investment opportunity, the film industry's production sector became more attractive than ever before, as indicated by the rising number of productions. The production sector was able to attract surpluses generated by other businesses, in spite of frequent reports of expensive productions failing at the box office. South India's production infrastructure was considerably enhanced with the inauguration of new studios from the 1980s, including Ramanaidu Studio (1988) and the Ramoji Film City (1996). Annapurna, constructed earlier, had become fully functional in the late 1980s. Between Telugu and Tamil, 300-plus films were made annually during this decade. At the same time, from an investor's point of view, this was also a moment of crisis. The opportunity cost of working with stars was extremely high: both Rajinikanth and Chiranjeevi were making the headlines of film journals as stars whose remuneration was higher than their Hindi counterparts. Further, even for those willing pay such high fees, these stars were simply not available for years to come.

The Opportunity

If the challenge was to come up with project proposal capable of absorbing, say, five crore rupees, or the cost of Chiranjeevi film in the mid-1990s, and, if Chiranjeevi himself was not available for another five years, what would the production budget—with a Chiranjeevi-sized hole—look like? Let us set aside, for the time being, the problem of mobilizing five crores, which would have impelled most producers to bring that figure down by a factor of ten. Instead, the fearless producer—let us call him Kunjamon, who can raise the amount either by routing his own surplus cash or through syndication—has to deal with the question that will be asked of distributors and exhibitors on behalf of the absent viewer: why would anyone want to watch a starless film? Put quite simply, the magic of the missing star has to be properly internalized or compensated by the film.

What resulted was a “spectacular narrative” to borrow Geoff King’s (2000) otherwise weak concept, which a) packed in songs, action sequences and other “attractions” that would set the gold standard by bettering what was on offer in the vehicles of superstars, b) had high production values and aesthetic quality (like the class film and the 1950s studio productions), and c) was very invested in novel storylines, tightly plotted stories, and new genre experiments. The latter set of features was, up to this point, usually associated with the class film.⁶

Neither formulaic elements nor the star himself was set aside. Both were being overlaid with another set of expectations and supplemented with additional attractions that was in turn embodied by star-like presences. The most important of these for our discussion is the *story* and its keeper, the director.

From the 1990s, directors and other film personalities have been heard repeating the phrase that in their film the “story was the star.” It is not as if the average Rajinikanth film didn’t have a story but the newness of this claim lay in the sea change in both narrative and production logic. An agency other than the star had to organize the disparate “attractions” or constituent elements of the film. At times this was a star-in-the-making (Prabhu Deva), who performed the narrative functions of a major star—which from the days of MGR and NTR has been is to anchor spectatorial expectations—although he wasn’t (yet) one. At other times, it was mounted on genre (say, devotional or youth film) with its “forms and keepings”

(e.g., *Ammoru*, *Kadhal Desam* [Kathir, 1996]). For the most part, plots were tightly woven (e.g., *Gentleman*), even if they had only a single but novel "point" (e.g., *Kadhal Kottai* [Agathiyan, 1996]). Within a very short time, however, "story" and formal and technical innovation alike came to be inseparably linked to a new crop of directors. Several of them proved to be one-film wonders but by far the most important figure to have emerged from the early years of the blockbuster is S. Shankar. Simultaneously, the male star became a crucial asset of the blockbuster. But, as we shall see, this was not the star of the mass film.

Of more immediate interest to us is the manner in which production budgets would become *bottom heavy*, with the sharp increase in below-the-line costs: sets, visual effects, and, of course, action sequences/ choreography. These costs would not just be more than the average film but would push production budgets to record levels. One of the reasons for this increase was rising salaries of directors and music directors which ensured that production budgets rose even without having to sign up superstars. As we shall see in the next section, the entry of a major star into the blockbuster made it even more attractive to the big-ticket investor. But we need to keep in mind that the blockbuster was a form that was initially made without major stars and *because* they were not available.

The economics and aesthetics of the blockbuster were thus quite distinctive. These are not merely expensive films but films where the expenses had an objective correlative, either in the form of "richness" or spectacle.⁹

Special Effects Films

The 1990s was a time when new technologies offered possibilities to filmmakers and pushed up costs considerably. Particularly interesting is the deployment of CGI visual effects. Several filmmakers had woken up to the potential of this expensive technology for novel and spectacular effects. The technology was first used to create a double of the star in the Nagarjuna film *Hello Brother* (E. V. V. Satyanarayana, 1994) which was modelled on a Jackie Chan vehicle (*Twin Dragons*, 1992). In the same year, *Kadhalan* (1994) used visual effects in addition to exotic locations, amazing props (a bus with a transparent body), and numerous extras, to scale

up its song sequences. *Ammoru's* much delayed release in 1995 engendered a spate of devotionals ("Amman" films) that attempted to scale up a low-budget genre that was a standard item of the menu in the 11 a.m. "noon show" slot in most parts of south India. *Ammoru* wove novel special effects into a complex and gripping story that in turn fused elements of horror and family melodrama. *Ammoru* did away with the male star and transferred his crucial narrative functions to the female star-goddess (played by Ramya Krishna). The star-goddess replaces the mass film's male star-protagonist as the center of the social that has been ruptured by the disruption/absence of feudal-patriarchal authority.

Notwithstanding the rather modest aesthetic, technical, and commercial achievements of other Amman films, there is no doubting the profound influence of *Ammoru* in particular, but also the other two films deploying the new technology on the genre. Reports and advertisements in the Telugu film press from the late 1990s show that Amman films not only incurred huge expenses to create screen goddesses but were in fact promoted as "special effects films."¹⁰ I note in passing that the devotional film was a *regional phenomenon*, even in the 1970s with films being produced in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam and travelling widely across southern India through dubbing. The special effects avatar of the devotional film too was made for a regional market and banked on female stars—often relatively minor ones or those who were no longer cast opposite major male stars—to reach audiences across state borders and linguistic divisions.

The blockbuster then is not a genre, or a hit film that grosses a certain amount ("100 crores"). To summarize my argument on the production logic of the blockbuster, it is a big-budget film in which *below-the-line* costs are high. Typically, these expenses are incurred to create spectacle (sets, visual effects, prosthetic make up, extras, etc.). Whether or not the film features a major male star, production qualities are high and story, narrative, and genre innovation are to be expected. The blockbuster is a regional form, which emerged simultaneously in Tamil and Telugu (possibly in other south Indian languages too but I am not competent to comment on them).

The rise of the blockbuster was predicated on the availability of markets beyond state/language borders with dubbing into other Indian languages playing a major role. One of the justifications for the sharp rise

in budgets is the expansion of the market beyond south India. I discuss the significance of *movement* for the blockbuster in the section that follows.

Region as Market

Today we are witness to a rapid expansion of the market for both Tamil and Telugu cinemas. From the 120-crore *Baahubali* (S. S. Rajamouli, 2015) to the two-crore *Kaaka Muttai* (M. Manikandan, 2015), a fascinating array of films made in both languages are circulating well beyond south Indian cinemas’ well-established domestic and international distribution and exhibition circuits. There can be little doubt that Mani Ratnam’s *Roja* (1992) inaugurated this trend. However, let me suggest that the more important development was breaking into the hinterland—the B and C segments—of the Hindi market. Mani Ratnam’s inability to reach these segments of the film market was repeatedly demonstrated in Tamil and Telugu, leave alone Hindi. That frontier may have become accessible due to the efforts of Hollywood distribution majors to reach the bottom rungs of exhibition.

Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh were the largest markets for Hollywood and other imported films from at least as far back as the 1980s, when Indian entrepreneurs began distributing imported films. From the 1990s Hollywood majors began to release Indian language versions of their films. From Nitin Govil’s (2015) account of the period, it appears that *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) was the first major Hollywood film in a dubbed version. Of the 110 prints of the film, 82 were dubbed into Hindi (Govil 2015:126). Relaxation of restrictions on dubbing was among the reasons for the sudden appearance of dubbed Hollywood films. Long before this there was a steady traffic of films dubbed from Telugu and Tamil and vice versa. From the 1980s, between 25–40% of the impressive number of films “produced” in Telugu were in fact dubbed—mostly from Tamil but also from Malayalam and Kannada.

Several key players in Tamil and Telugu industries distributed Hollywood films at some point of time in their evolution. Columbia Pictures distributed its films through Suresh Film Distributors, which is in turn linked to Suresh Productions and Ramanaidu Studios. Aascar Ravichandran began his career as a distributor of Hollywood films. Poorna Pictures, the oldest distributor of Telugu films exited Telugu and focused on non-Telugu and imported films in the 1990s.

Dubbing Hollywood films into Indian languages caught on rapidly and was adopted by distributors of films imported from Hong Kong and elsewhere. Curiously, it was imported films and their attempt to create nation-wide markets which opened up the possibility of tapping the Hindi film market for south Indian productions. Concerted efforts to market Hindi language versions of Tamil or Telugu films was not attempted till the practice was adopted to push imported films into the hinterlands of the Hindi market.

Dubbing into Hindi spread rapidly not just because of push factors at the Hollywood end but also an important pull factor: acute shortage of inexpensive films in the UP-Bihar region from the late 1990s, as Bombay cinema increasingly focussed on high-value overseas markets and the emerging multiplex segment. Akshaya Kumar (2015), who works on Bhojpuri cinema, argues that top of the line Hindi productions became too expensive for the Uttar Pradesh–Bihar market and the vacuum was filled by Bhojpuri films and dubbed films.

Soon, most major international satellite television channels—from National Geographic to Cartoon Network—were available in Indian languages. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of Indian general entertainment (GECs) and movie channels created a demand for inexpensive content to fill up empty broadcast time. Initially, Star Gold specialized in reruns and films dubbed into Hindi while Sony had slots for dubbed films. As the number of channels grew, Telugu and Tamil regional channels too began broadcasting films dubbed from other languages.

What we need to note is that film culture was transformed in less than a decade: increasingly, watching dubbed versions became the default mode of encountering content from elsewhere. Moreover, dubbing, which was largely confined to south Indian cinemas (and for other south Indian cinemas) now spread to the rest of the country.

Dubbing, on the unprecedented scale witnessed from the 1990s, was a necessary condition for the expansion of Tamil and Telugu films beyond southern India. It also increased satellite television and YouTube viewership of films produced in south India, familiarizing unreachable audience segments with stars, directors, genres, and narrative conventions of Chennai and Hyderabad.¹¹

Digital Projection and Centralization of Exhibition

As is well known, cinema halls in India—as against multiplexes—are standalone enterprises. While powerful distributors are known to have block-booked theatres from the 1950s, ensuring that they were not available for hire to other distributors, by the end of 20th century a majority of theatres were too ill-equipped and poorly maintained to screen the better productions. In the early years of this century, when rising maintenance costs and hardening real estate prices had resulted in the closure of hundreds of theatres in south India throughout the 1990s, large distribution companies, which were either private limited companies controlled by media moguls or a new breed of corporate players who had raised capital money from the stock market, began to lease single screen theatres and upgrade them. By 2008, a small number of powerful players had leased thousands of screens across the country. In Andhra, it was reported that a majority of single screen theatres were leased by Geetha Film Distributors (Allu Aravind, Chiranjeevi’s brother-in-law), Mayuri Film Distributors (Ch. Ramoji Rao, *Eenadu* group and Ramoji Film City), Suresh Film Distributors (D. Ramanaidu’s family, Suresh Productions and Ramanaidu Studio), Pyramid Saimira Theatre Limited (a public limited company), and Adlabs (taken over by Reliance in 2006).¹² Around this time, Pyramid Saimira, which later went bank-rupt, claimed that it was the largest theatre chain in India with 655 screens including 44 multiplexes in different parts of India.¹³

This degree of centralization facilitated the rapid digitization of projection, which in turn made it possible for saturation releases on an unprecedented scale.¹⁴ In order for a film to be released on 3600 screens across the country (as was reportedly the case with *Baahubali*), it is necessary for the film in question to be in multiple languages and for distributors to have access to such a large number of screens and for the “print” to reach these theatres on time and at a reasonable cost (digital projection via satellite costs a fraction of polyester prints). Such a scale would not have made sense in the days when prints cost between 50,000 to 100,000 rupees.

The blockbuster therefore emerged against the backdrop of the rapid transformation of the exhibition sector. Like its counterparts in other parts of the world the regional blockbuster is “post cinematic” in the sense that it is a response to the gradual decline of the cinema’s pre-eminence as an economic, social, and cultural form. As we have seen in

the paragraphs above, the scale of the blockbuster would have been inconceivable without digital projection. Kamal Haasan's plan to premiere *Vishwaroopam* on the DTH platform in 2013 was but the logical next step.

What becomes of the south Indian superstar, who is a convenient stand-in for the political work of the cinema as also its peculiar economics, in the blockbuster era?

Stars and the Blockbuster

The film that introduced the blockbuster and the south Indian superstar to each other was *Indian* (S. Shankar, 1996). It was meant to have Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi language versions from the production stage itself. Kamal Haasan had been experimenting with different looks and get ups throughout the 1980s and was thus a natural choice for the lead. In hindsight, it is also possible to suggest that more than any other south Indian star, he needed the blockbuster to scale up his experiments with novel transformations of the star body.

Among all the major Indian stars, Haasan was the one who stood out for his willingness to experiment with novel roles (indeed it was his USP by the mid-1980s). *Apoorva Sagodharangal* (Singeetam Srinivasa Rao, 1989) and *Indrudu Chandrudu* (Telugu, Suresh Krissna, 1989), in which Haasan plays triple and double roles including that of a dwarf and a paunchy middle-aged man with buckteeth respectively, evidence the star's obsession with looking different all the time and also anticipated the arrival of prosthetic make up into his life.

Indian was in many ways a Kamal Haasan vehicle. The film recalls *Indrudu Chandrudu* in which Haasan excelled in voice and body language modulation between his two roles. Further, one of the roles he played was that of a morally degenerate mayor who also ill-treats his family members. The presence of Kamal Haasan ensured that *Indian* was positioned for big releases across south India and in Hindi. Moreover, expensive prosthetic makeup used in the film was applied on the star's body, suggesting that the new technology had to be mounted on a body that was worthy enough of the investment. *Indian* proved to be a success in its Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi versions. The male star played no small role in the positioning of the film for non-Tamil markets because he, like

Rajinikanth, was more than familiar to audiences of Telugu and Hindi cinema.

This logic—of deploying major stars to make multiple language versions of a film—is in evidence in Kunjamon’s production, *Ratchagan/Rakshakudu/Rakshak* (Praveen Gandhi, 1997, featuring Nagarjuna and Sushmita Sen, whose Miss Universe title made her a nation-wide celebrity). While *Ratchagan* was a critical and financial failure, Kunjamon’s attempt to work with expensive stars in order to *invite the participation* of stakeholders from old and new markets (read: Hindi markets) was precisely the direction in which the blockbuster was moving.

However, stars were scarce and, more importantly, brought with them screen images that were not just created after decades of hard work but had intimate and complex links to politics.

M. Madhava Prasad (2014) argues that the major male stars of Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada cinemas were anointed as leadership figures by the populace. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of the phenomenon is organized fan clubs with millions of members, drawn mostly from the ranks of young, urban, lower-middle class and poor men. In spite of their frequent and spectacular displays of loyalty, members of fan clubs have also on occasion actively rejected or resisted what they perceived to be drastic alterations of their star’s image. Regardless of the effectiveness of fan boycotts, by the mid-1990s stars limited themselves formulaic narratives. Trivial as it might seem, dying on screen was not an option for major stars—unless the star in question was cast in a double or triple role.

Kamal Haasan was the least inflexible among the major Tamil and Telugu stars in the 1990s and, for this reason, had the most impressive range of stories—and the least formulaic ones—to his credit. This is not to suggest that others stars had poor acting abilities. The genius of the south Indian star’s vehicle lay in weaving story after story around a set of expectations that could not be ignored (a new mannerism in every film, for example). Further, at the story level too, the stature of the star or the fact of his stardom could not be ignored, even in the vehicles of an earlier generation of stars, as was noted by Robert Hardgrave Jr. (1973, 1979) in his discussions of MGR’s work.

In the mid-1990s, especially after the success of *Baashaa* (Suresh Krishna, 1995), the star vehicle’s narrative came to be centred on the dramatized and suspenseful movement of the story between the two lives of the star: that of an ordinary worker/crook and an extraordinary leader/hero.

Thereby compressing the equivalences and contrasts between the fictional and the real worlds (the latter is of course as much a fabrication as the film)—the stuff of stardom—into the diegesis. In *Baashaa*, Manikkam is no ordinary auto-rickshaw driver. His ability to deal with the everyday problems of his neighbourhood is clearly not a sufficient story level indicator of his extraordinariness. We are given tantalizing glimpses of another source of distinction, long before his past as a famous Bombay gangster is finally revealed. The former gangster *Baashaa* was *acting*—role playing, masquerading—as the auto-driver Manikkam. Likewise, other characters played by superstars including the legendary leaders of Rayalaseema, Samarasimha Reddy (Telugu, *Samarasimha Reddy*, B. Gopal, 1998), and Indrasena Reddy (Telugu, *Indra*, B. Gopal, 2002) *pretend* to be a hotel workers, tourist cab owners, and the like.

However, it is not self-evident that these stars needed to be flexible or versatile in the first place. After all, stars are created by industries and remain in business only as long as they are able to attract investments to the projects they endorse. However, the turn of the 20th century star vehicle was highly localized and packed with spectatorial pleasures that were predicated on *familiarity*: with form, story, star biography, et cetera. This is one of the reasons that it could not travel to film cultures where such conventions or details were unknown. Take the entry of the star into the story in *Padayappa* (1999, K. S. Ravikumar). It is an “item” or stand-alone set piece which does not contribute to the story beyond, of course, introducing the protagonist. In the sequence, Neelambari (Ramya Krishna), who is dressed in western clothes and drives her own imported luxury car, commands workers to destroy a snake pit. Workers hesitate, because the snake pit bears obvious signs of worship, but she insists. Just as a worker is about to start digging, a *hand* grabs the crowbar, barely inches away from the snake pit. A flick of the wrist sends the worker flying into the air. In the next two shots—each only a few seconds long—we see the surprised looks of the devout servant (Soundarya, the heroine) and Neelambari herself. Cut to the hand, which removes a cobra from the pit in slow motion. This is followed by three shots of bystanders and then of Neelambari looking amused. Rajinikanth’s face is now revealed. Snake and star look at each other. He then looks directly into the camera and, as it zooms in from mid shot to close up, salutes the camera/spectator.¹⁵ With great economy the sequence then goes on to show that Neelambari is interested in him while he is attracted her servant.

Neelambari then snaps her fingers at him and asks in English, "Hey, who are you man?" He breaks into song ("En Peru Padayappa"), which is remarkably close to a fan's description of Rajinikanth himself, while scores of his followers materialize with drums and join him to literally make a song and dance of his entry into the fiction.

The entire sequence neither makes sense nor is pleasurable unless the spectator has at least some knowledge of the kind of star Rajinikanth is and the protocols of his star vehicle. This knowledge is also useful for comprehending the numerous references to star biography and the deep significance of context to the unfolding screen narrative.

"Baba": Worth of the Star

Rajinikanth's Telugu counterpart Chiranjeevi had his moment of reckoning in 1995–1996 when serial disasters showed up the commercial and aesthetic unviability of his formulaic vehicles which repeatedly failed to produce narrative-level crises that could convincingly engage the hero. In the typical 1990s Rajinikanth vehicle, it was not merely the power of the villain that made for a convincing crisis but also the incapacity/vulnerability of the hero, often due to familial or other obligations. In *Padayappa* (1999), for example, the hero's daughter is trapped in a relationship with the female villain Neelambari's nephew. In Chiranjeevi vehicles like *Lankeswarudu* (D. Narayana Rao, 1989) and *Big Boss* (Vijay Bapineedu, 1995), this strategy of tying down the hero to familial obligations was attempted but suffice it to say that it worked only in *Hitler* (M. Subbaiah, 1997; a remake of the eponymous 1996 Malayalam film in which the sexual indiscipline of the hero's sisters brings him much grief).

When viewed against the backdrop of Chiranjeevi's difficulties in finding suitable vehicles, Rajinikanth's *Baba* (Suresh Krissna, 2002) comes across as a particularly important film. In addition to being the producer of the film, Rajinikanth is also credited with the story and screenplay. This is therefore as close as we can get to learning about Rajinikanth's own conception his stardom. Its commercial failure signals the end of an evolutionary line as far as south Indian superstars are concerned. *Baba* (Rajinikanth) is born with the blessings of a two thousand year old sage to aged parents. He is unaware that he is the devotee of the sage in a previous life. When *Baba* grows up, the sage tests him by giving him a

magic spell which can make seven wishes come true. However, Baba will be reincarnated many more times if he puts the spell to selfish ends. Baba wastes the spell initially but puts it to good use by reviving a dying Japanese youth, improving his neighbourhood, and, finally, making an honest man the Chief Minister of the state. He then decides to retire to the Himalayas with a group of sages who arrive to take him. He changes his mind when the villain “Ippo” Ramaswamy (Ashish Vidyarthi), the corrupt politician and aspiring Chief Minister, kills Baba’s Chief Minister. The film ends with Baba walking towards a large group of supporters with a title card reading “To be continued....” The ending invites the spectator to speculate on the possibility of Baba/Rajinikanth’s entry into active politics.

The brazenness of the equivalence between the stardom and divinely ordained destiny is not to be discounted as the actor’s megalomania. It is a pointer to a serious problem with the reification of star-image over time, leading to the difficulty of finding story-level explanations for the star’s extraordinariness, as well as also identifying crises for a hero we all know is too big to fail.

Baba bears other marks of the star’s attempt to steer his stardom to into hitherto uncharted regions. It has a Japanese couple, which is a part of the large and diverse constituency that the hero protects. Rajinikanth seems to have decided to follow up on the unexpected success of *Muthu* (K. S. Ravikumar, 1995) in Japan and script his Japanese viewers into the fiction as members of the extended community of *fans* of the Baba character. M. Madhava Prasad (1999) argues that the hero’s friend, who accompanied him on his adventures in the 1950s, became his sidekick or fan in the subsequent decades. Chiranjeevi’s *Big Boss* goes a step further by actually introducing the comedian Ali as a Chiranjeevi fan who “mistakes” the Chiranjeevi character for the actor and becomes his follower (in the fiction). *Baba*’s Japanese couple makes sense to spectators-in-the-know of the relationship between the protagonist and his sidekicks within the fiction and constituencies beyond. As a strategy for reaching out to Japanese viewers, however, it didn’t work. Nevertheless, like several other features of the film, the Japanese couple alerts us the film’s attempt to grapple with major problems confronting south Indian stars and their vehicles.

Baba made legal history of sorts—and was the subject of discussions among law students—when Rajinikanth’s lawyers attempted to restrict

the use of gestures and dialogues from the film, claiming that such a use would constitute a trademark violation. Legal scholars dismissed this as untenable. The announcement, greeted with a “statement of hurt” from the Mimicry Artists Association,¹⁶ also implied that the circulation of dialogues, gestures and mannerisms of stars in fan circles too was subject to prior authorization. What was Rajinikanth trying to achieve through this unsound, ill-advised attempt?

I suggest that we read Rajinikanth’s intriguing film and puzzling actions as attempts at addressing the Indian film industry’s age-old problem with realizing value. To quote Amitabh Bachchan, “Someone out there is making pots of money at [the film industry’s] expense” (cited in Raja-dhyaksha 2003:27)—someone other than the producer or the star, that is. As discussed in the earlier section, the star and a certain category of producer have benefited from the complex economic logic of the cinema. At the same time, the film industry has consistently failed to capture value from the wide circulation of films and their derivatives. Indeed, the incapacity of the film industry to realize value was evident in the pre-cassette era when producers gave away music rights *free of cost* to recording companies like Gramophone Company of India (GCI, which owned the brand HMV) *and* inserted a line advertising the recording label in the advertisements for films (Booth 2014). Unauthorized use of the image of the star to sell commodities ranging from match boxes and notebooks to t-shirts and posters to unlicensed performances of song and dance or dialogue sequences by recording dance performers and mimicry artistes respectively have arguably ensured the widespread visibility of the cinema and its stars. Such uses of the star’s image and copyrighted film-related content also feed fan cultures in the southern region. However, the several million fans who reportedly dedicate the better of their youth to the adulation of Rajinikanth generate no tangible benefits or quantifiable revenues, either at the box office or beyond. There is ample evidence to show that his several million fans cannot rescue a Rajinikanth film from being a box-office disaster (as with, e.g., *Baba* and *Lingaa* [K. S. Ravikumar, 2015]).

Rajadhyaksha’s thesis on the Bollywoodization of Hindi cinema takes up this problem, which is elaborated in terms of the noticeable gap between the cultural visibility/value of the cinema and its economic worth. As he notes, there was a brief moment when, “just ten of the top websites of the time ... were, in that period, worth more than the total

box-office earnings of the Indian film industry” (Rajadhyaksha 2003:27). Resolution of the value question, at least for segments of the Hindi film industry, came in the form of Bollywoodization: additional windows of revenue, monetizing star charisma, co-branding, and so on. One of the main obstacles for attempting this process in south Indian cinemas are also their prime assets: superstars. Their highly specialized but limited repertoire, scarcity even for film production (let alone stage shows and brand endorsements), political ambitions, and stature—all of these factors severely limited their usefulness for a Bollywoodization-like transformation.

In south India, a generation of superstars partially (and temporarily) resolved this problem by *deriving political value from the cinema*, without even bothering to monetize their stardom beyond a point. Neither MGR nor NTR endorsed products nor tried to create a line of merchandise. NTR did “cash” in on his stardom by acting in plays but that was in support of causes whose status as charitable actions was not in doubt. His efforts earned him good publicity and a Padma award, not money (Srinivas 2013:94, 183). Rajinikanth too has refused to lend his name for marketing products and in the process can claim to be ethically superior to others who have done so. But the model of stardom that he was the prime exemplar of was in crisis because there were few (story-level) problems left for him to solve and, as Rajan Krishnan (2007) suggests, he delayed making the transition to active politics (or, chose not to do so).

And therefore the importance of the blockbuster, for addressing at least some of the problems with our cinemas and their stars.

Sivaji: The Boss—*Dramatizing Movement*

Prasad (2009:76) argues that with *Sivaji: The Boss* (S. Shankar, 2007), Rajinikanth “has been converted into a commodity” because “[in *Sivaji*] he does not get to speak to the community of the faithful in the old way.” Prasad does not, however, elaborate on the process by which the star was commodified. He revisits Rajinikanth’s stardom some years later to make the important distinction between star value and star power. The first has to do with reputation and “face value” which is a result of the “familiarity that a star acquires through an increasing, and increasingly popular, body of work” (Prasad 2014:136). All manner of celebrities have

star reputation or value and we notice the increasing tendency to channel this into the domain of politics. Star power, he insists, "is not an investible surplus that the star may deploy in the political marketplace called electoral democracy. It is a position, and the relations stemming from that position. If a star has it, he has it independently of the electoral process" (ibid.). Whereas star value is a surplus that the star attempts to invest, star power accrues due to spectatorial investment in the star. Prasad offers Rajinikanth as an example of a star with star power and argues that an attempt is being made to convert star power into star value (ibid.:137).

Prasad's observations on star power and star value could be read as an attempt to flag the complex problem of value (cultural/political and economic) in the cinema in general and stardom in particular; to put it slightly differently, the gap between quantifiable economic value and the intangible value of the cinema. Prasad's observations on the attempt to convert Rajinikanth's star power into star value can be expanded into an argument on the growing importance of value generation, even among south Indian superstars. From the 1990s, Chiranjeevi began endorsing products (Thumbs Up, to begin with), vehicles of our superstars began to have in-text promotions for prominent consumer brands, publicity of films was underwritten by corporate houses, et cetera. In Rajinikanth's own career, Prasad notes, the process began with *Baba*.

However, Rajinikanth does not appear to have seen the transformation through, both in terms of monetizing his value and choice of films. He has not (yet) taken on advertising assignments. Moreover, he returned to the narratives of his star vehicles of the *Muthu* and *Padayappa* vintage to address the "community of the faithful" as recently as *Lingaa* (K. S. Ravikumar, 2015). In short, the problem may not be the "loss" of Rajinikanth to wholesale commodification but the *re-deployment* of stars in ways that are markedly different from star vehicles of the older vintage.

Like in *Chandramukhi* (P. Vasu, 2005), and quite unlike the typical Rajinikanth vehicle, *Sivaji* cast the star in the role of an upper-middle-class professional. In *Chandramukhi*, recalling the early career of the star when he played negative roles, Rajinikanth was seen in the role of an *evil* feudal lord, whose staged execution is the centrepiece of the film's climax. Notice that both *Chandramukhi* and *Sivaji* dramatize the move-

ment between past and present images, even depicting the “death” of Rajinikanth characters, if only to disavow that possibility.

Rather than stop at making intertextual references to the star’s biography and earlier films, both these films go on to showcase the novelty of the role, something that we expect from the vehicles of Kamal Haasan and Aamir Khan. They foreground the difference between the earlier body of work and the present and, in doing so, dramatize the *movement* of the star vehicle in terms of genre and narrative.

The metaphor of movement plays out in extremely complex ways in *Sivaji*. The film’s story is centred on the movement of money while the star is made over, first as a joke but much more strikingly so with the return of Sivaji as MGR (!). Till the makeover of Sivaji as MGR, the character’s attempts to establish a college to educate the meritorious poor free of cost fail, in spite of his brilliant strategies. The Sivaji character—like the auto-rickshaw driver in *Baashaa*—*masquerades his ordinariness*. Indeed, so much so that there isn’t much by way of the signature style that is rightfully expected of a typical Rajinikanth role. In the latter part of the film, when Sivaji returns as MGR (after actually “dying” briefly), we see the over-the-top invincible star-protagonist that is the hallmark of the Rajinikanth film. In a brilliant comment on models of stardom that dominated Tamil and Telugu industries in the past, the Rajinikanth character tells the villain (Suman) that he is both Sivaji and MGR.

Sivaji is a film in which the drama of the movement from an older format of star vehicle to the blockbuster is played out on the *body* of the star. In a tongue-in-cheek reference to the rivalry between Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth, the film has the latter becoming “white” to impress his beloved. Anticipating his transformation into MGR, Rajinikanth is given a series of looks in song sequences, including that of a European style royal and a blond (presumably racially white) man.¹⁷

Sivaji as a Blockbuster

At 80 crore rupees, *Sivaji* (S. Shankar, 2007) was reportedly the most expensive Indian film made up to that point. At the time of its release, it was rumoured that the film expected to gross 250 crores, offering a rate of return that is usually seen in runaway hits made on shoestring budgets. More than the earnings of blockbusters—which are not guaranteed even

in Hollywood—it is the rising budgets that are their distinctive feature: where they come from, where they go and what possible justification there might be for incurring such costs. Movement of films to new territories, formats, and screens is a big part of the story.

With *Sivaji* we see how closely Rajinikanth’s stardom is linked to the evolution of the blockbuster, whose budgets could not have been justified (or perhaps even raised) if it only had the regional market to tap into. On the strength of his stardom the blockbuster, which had hitherto remained a regional form with a trickle of revenue from the Hindi dubbed version, was positioned for an all-India release, *competing with the biggest releases in every major film market in the country*. With this film dubbing moved beyond the B and C segments of the exhibition sector and into the multiplex and category A cinemas across the country.

The blockbuster needed a star like him, with a recall value beyond the region, to break into Hindi cinema’s market. At the same time, it is useful to recall that Rajinikanth’s career had hit a low with *Baba* and is likely to have resembled that of Chiranjeevi’s, if it wasn’t for the blockbuster. Chiranjeevi has not played the lead in a single film after 2007 and the only two successful Rajinikanth films made after 2005 were Shankar’s blockbusters (*Sivaji* [2007] and *Enthiran* [2010]). So Rajinikanth needed the blockbuster to remain relevant, as an actor and investment proposition.

In terms of budgets, unlike the star vehicles of an earlier vintage, the superstar’s salary no longer accounted for a bulk of the cost, even when we factor in astronomical sums that were reportedly paid to Rajinikanth for *Sivaji* and *Enthiran*. This is because considerable expenses are incurred on other above-the-line costs, including technicians and heroines brought in from Bombay or elsewhere, but most importantly, the director himself whose salary is now comparable to that of major stars (if not Rajinikanth himself). Below-the-line costs too rose sharply, ensuring that films remained bottom heavy. Sets, visual effects, prosthetic make up, extras, locations—almost every single line item in the budget—saw a sharp increase in the blockbuster.

However, the star’s presence in the blockbuster is neither incidental nor does it follow the rules of fungibility. On the contrary, when the blockbuster uses a major star, it does so with an acute awareness of his core constituency and his claims to uniqueness. In *Sivaji*, the Rajinikanth character is seen tossing a chewing gum into his mouth, replacing the cigarette which could no longer be smoked on screen without

disclaimers, thanks to the Health Ministry, now headed by Anbumani Ramadoss of the PMK, a party which had only in the recent past had several run-ins with Rajinikanth's fan clubs. Moreover, contrary to Prasad's argument, the film stages the *return* of precisely the over-the-top style of Rajinikanth that had little place in the narrative logic in the early part of the film. *Dasavataram* (K. S. Ravikumar, 2008) is an out and out Kamal Haasan vehicle, whose centre piece since the mid-1980s has been the novelty of the star's disguises. *Dasavataram* also reminds us that despite its best efforts, the blockbuster does not always succeed beyond the region: this film's Hindi version is considered to be a flop, which only means that most of its substantial earnings (reportedly in the region of 200 crores) came from its Tamil and Telugu versions.

The Superstar-Sized Blockbuster: Movement and Immobility

Vijayabhaskar and Wyatt (2007:32) describe *Sivaji* as “an orgy of commodity fetishism with expensive food, gadgets, clothes, watches, and cars as ubiquitous props.” Whether or not these props are a sure manifestation of its neoliberal ideological leanings, as the authors claim, they certainly foreground “richness” as a feature of the blockbuster. It is not only the visualization of wealth—or finding objective correlatives for expenses incurred—but also the quantum of investments that make the blockbuster a particularly rich form. With the entry of major stars, the blockbuster became so expensive that it began to attract the attention of some of the biggest players in the regional media business. Underwriters of Shankar's partnership with Rajinikanth, for example, are AVM, Sun Movies (public limited company controlled by the Marans), and Lyca, the UK based mobile network operator which has a presence in over a dozen countries, which will fund the 350 crore *Enthiran* sequel, *2.0* as a part of its plans to expand its footprint in the Tamil media scene (Manigandan 2016). The blockbuster also facilitated the growth of other *regional* players with intimate links with local film personalities.¹⁹

As a *star* vehicle, the blockbuster's use of the star-as-body/property, opens up a fascinating set of questions related to the economics and politics of stardom in our part of the country. As Prasad (1999) points out, major male stars have limited themselves to one language cinema after the 1950s. On the other hand, female stars have moved within the region

and beyond. It is as if the south Indian variety of stardom is characterized by the inverse relationship between the intensity of fan following and geographical reach of the star in question. Notwithstanding their fees and fan following, south Indian stars are *immobile*. The only reason their films have travelled is because of dubbing, not their willingness of work in multiple languages. As pointed out above, they are also immobile in terms of their roles as also *narratives* of their films.

The blockbuster, being a form whose costs are predicated on its ability to cross language boundaries via dubbing, cannot bank on male stars alone to appeal beyond their linguistic "territories." Female stars, who are seen playing ornamental roles in these films, are in fact a major asset. They are familiar across the southern region on account of their roles in different south Indian cinemas. Also, several female stars either began their careers in the Bombay industry or have to their credit one or more Hindi films and/or have parallel careers in advertising.²⁰ Just how important female stars, characterized by their incredible ability to move between industries, are for the blockbuster can be assessed by comparing the number of results throw up by google searches for the male lead of *Baahubali*, Prabhas and one of the two non-Telugu heroines of the film, Anushka Shetty. As on March 3, 2016 a Google search from Bangalore showed 2.49 crore results for Prabhas and 2.84 crore for Anushka Shetty. Whatever may be problems with using this data, there is no doubting the simple fact that Shetty is a star of considerable standing.

Shankar has cast female stars based primarily in Bombay (Manisha Koirala and Aishwarya Rai) in his work. Several of his other female stars have had careers in other south Indian cinemas as well (Nagma, Madhubala, Amy Jackson, and Shriya Saran). Compared to either category of female star, Rajinikanth's recent career has been highly restricted. With the exception of the Tamil/Telugu bilingual production *Kuselan/Kathanayakudu* (P. Vasu, 2007): he has not featured, even in a significant supporting role, in any other Indian language since 1995.

Part of the appeal of the blockbuster is the otherness of its spectatorial pleasures.²¹ Whether it is a *Baahubali* in Tamil or *Enthiran* in Hindi, presence of familiar faces notwithstanding, for the most part the stars and other pleasures it offers are not typical of the films that are normally associated with the cinema in spectator's own language. Rajinikanth's over-the-top mannerisms—familiar to me from his Telugu dubbed and Hindi films—are recognizably "Tamil" in origin. During the past decade

a steady trickle of films have spoofed and also constructed a “south Indian aesthetic” (or Tamil or Telugu aesthetic) for audiences of other regions. The Rajinikanth sequence in the Hindi film *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007) inspired a spoof of the *idli western* which in turn was named after Quick Gun Murugan, the Tamil speaking cowboy created for Channel V’s “V are like this only” campaign (*Quick Gun Murugan*, Shashanka Ghosh, 2009). More recently, there was a whole song (“Lungi Dance”) dedicated to Rajinikanth and his fans in *Chennai Express* (Rohit Shetty, 2013).

The otherness of the blockbuster applies equally, but in a different way, to the “native” spectator as well. A large number of regional blockbusters are adaptations from Hollywood and other international genres: the stories and characters are “ours” and recognizably so. However, to draw on Prasad’s (2014) argument that the screen is an alien space that has to be owned, these are our stories mounted on *their* templates/screens. One of the formal aesthetic achievements of the regional blockbuster is the successful indigenization of a number of international genres from fantasy (*Baahubali*) and disaster film (*7am Arivu*) to science fiction (*Dasavataram* and *Enthiran*) and action thriller (*Vishwaroopam*).

A brilliant sequence in the Shah Rukh Khan vehicle *Ra. One* (among the highlights of that film) offers us insights into the duality of spectatorial position of the blockbuster. When Chitti (Rajinikanth), the robot of *Enthiran* arrives to welcome the robot of this film, G. One (Shah Rukh Khan), the latter identifies Chitti as Chitti. However, Sonia (Kareena Kapoor), the wife of the creator of G. One, covers her head, folds her hands reverentially and identifies Chitti, quite correctly, as “Thalaivar Rajini sir.” The double existence of the star and character—recognizable in this instance only to those who are aware of *Enthiran*’s story—are actually split up into Rajinikanth the star and Chitti the character and do not cohere into a whole for any single diegetic viewer in this sequence. At the same time, whether or not the viewer is familiar with the fight sequence of *Enthiran/Robot/Robo* that *Ra. One* refers to, the sequence foregrounds a routine which is easy to associate with Rajinikanth. It also identifies the heroine as a fan from another film culture.

Stardom without Obligations?

Both of Rajinikanth’s blockbusters, *Sivaji* and *Enthiran*, are interesting because they take considerable liberties with the star’s image. *Sivaji* works wonderfully as an extended commentary on Rajinikanth’s stardom: the MGR character is in fact presented as a masquerade—this is not the “real” Sivaji at all, although this is precisely the Rajinikanth whom fanspectators would expect to see. *Enthiran* takes an ever bigger risk, presenting him in the roles of a geek and villain. As an annoyed blogger pointed out, missing from this film are several elements of the typical Rajinikanth film. There are other problems too, with this film:

He [Rajinikanth as Vaseegaran] should have had a one to one with Danny Denzongpa or Chitti (preferably both) and kicked the @#\$% out of them. On the contrary he runs away from a drunk toddy tapper who is teased earlier by Aishwarya. ... My hero had NO moment of Glory except right at the end, and that too it is not physical but keeps chitti [sic] magnetically immobile [sic] etc.... Great for Keanu but not for my Thalaivar.²²

This self-professed Rajinikanth fan is a management consultant by profession. His education, profession, and age (he mentions his grandson in his profile) notwithstanding, his expectations from the film are not very different from what is on offer in a regular Rajinikanth vehicle. As pointed out above, Prasad (2014) makes a similar point with reference to *Sivaji*’s refusal to address the community of the faithful. Apparently, the blockbuster defies such expectations (or, has little need to address them). However, in both films what we see is not the evolution of the star into a new kind of actor but a *return* to the over-the-top role, even if the figure on the screen is not the “real” Rajinikanth character. In the latter film the robot’s incredible capabilities recall Rajinikanth jokes.

In other words, the renegeing of expectations around the star in a blockbuster is contestable. At the same time, there is no doubting the novelty of role in the blockbuster, the deviation from the star’s routine as also the creation of a new set of expectations around the story, special effects, etc. Here the star is not under the obligation to address older expectations but does gesture to them even as the gap between the old and new—written on the body of the star—is highlighted.

In the blockbuster, the star does not appear to be under *economic* obligations of the kind that south Indian stars alone seem to acknowledge. These obligations take to a new level the expectation from film

industries that stars recover the cost of *renting* their bodies. While a number of stars earn their producers profits because of pre-sale arrangements with distributors, a few stars feel obliged to stand guarantee even for distributors. This effectively means guaranteeing the success of the film at the box office—or at the very least owning responsibility for its failure. In the event of a film’s poor performance at the box office, some stars are known to negotiate with their producers to return a part of the pre-sale proceeds to distributors. Stars including Rajinikanth (in Tamil) and Pawan Kalyan (in Telugu) are reported to have absorbed some of the losses of distributors in the past by compensating distributors from their fees. This has led to a situation in the present in which the idea of the star-as-guarantor is taken quite literally by distributors who have begun to claim refunds on their investments, almost as a matter of entitlement. Two recent films evidence this aspect of stardom outside the blockbuster: *Lingaa* and *Sardar Gabbar Singh* (Bobby, 2016). Rajinikanth reportedly “repaid” distributors of *Lingaa* ten crore rupees after they “hounded” him (Nurullah 2015). In April 2016, Pawan Kalyan promised to compensate distributors who incurred losses on *Sardar Gabbar Singh* “because Eros which distributed the film [nationally] will not bear the losses [of local distributors].”²⁴

The sheer scale of the blockbuster, its additional attractions, considerable reputation of its directors, and the entry of players from emergent media and entertainment corporations make for a shift away from the star-centred model of production that was/is typical of the other vehicles of our superstars.

While Prasad (2014) does not discuss the economic obligations of Rajinikanth, he states quite categorically that the refusal to meet obligations of the fan-community is evidence of erosion of star power (or its conversion into something else). Prasad’s argument can be extended to suggest that Rajinikanth’s turn to the blockbuster is an admission by the star that his other vehicles are simply not economically viable anymore (to save his reputation, he could well end up returning his fees, every time a film does poorly). Is that all there is to be blockbuster—the realization by stars that it is time to de-risk their careers and make some more money before the last curtain call?

Rajadhyaksha (2013) raises an interesting question related to the Rajinikanth variant of stardom using star’s signature gesture as the case in point. Although Rajadhyaksha does not say so, in the wake of the

blockbuster, we see that this gesture is now threatened with extinction. Rajadhyaksha wonders,

If...the famous Rajinikanth gesture that was, once, the par excellence act of slicing through cinematic fiction to directly address real-life situations, now finds itself trapped, what then does the digital environment now say to the cinema’s famed ability to impact everyday life?

What would Rajinikanth see in the digital environment—and the cinema’s post-celluloid career—that could facilitate the movement from an image, a vehicle and a set of obligations, which have together trapped him in an idiom of performance that has, among other things, become an object of caricature (and not just mimicry)? I draw attention to three developments relating to his career suggesting that the blockbuster is an important part of Rajinikanth’s transition into the post-celluloid era of entertainment (and politics, perhaps).

First is the *replication* of Rajinikanth in *Enthiran* twice over. In the early part of the film itself, the double role of the star causes disruption of spectatorial expectation by attributing the character’s heroism to *technology*, as if to foreground technology as the chief “attraction” of the unfolding film. Worse, during the film’s climax, there are hundreds—even thousands—of Rajinikanths on the screen. This is the very anathema of stardom, which is premised on the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the star’s body. *Enthiran* presents us with the star image gone berserk. The plague of robots is an acknowledgement of the banality of the image in the digital era—it is everywhere. In the fiction, order is eventually restored. The singularity of the star body is re-established with the robot dismantling itself. However, what *Enthiran* leaves us with at the very end—apart from the hint at a sequel—is the robotic double. The film closes twenty years into the future, when a dismembered Chitti remains (in a museum) while Dr. Vasegaran is only a name, an origin myth for the young children who crowd around the remains of Chitti.

Enthiran foregrounds what animation films and gaming had already built into their business models: decoupling of the star-as-body and star-as-property. The latter’s value will be realized in an ever-expanding field of digital reproduction which will be encountered in formats and screens that have little do with film viewing. Whether it is the star lending his voice to characters created on computers or his body for motion/per-

formance capture animation, digital phantoms are the future and they are already in our midst. Indeed, CGI technology is has been used to resurrect dead stars in south Indian cinema for some time now. NTR was “featured” in a song sequence (“Nachchave Palapitta”) in *Kalisundam Raa* (Udaya Shankar, 2000) four years after his death. More recently, the climax of the Kannada fantasy film *NagaraHAVu* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 2016), advertised as the highlight of the film, features the digital avatar of Vishnuvardhan (died 2009) in a sequence that is a more or less standalone attraction.²⁵

At the consumer end too, there is a proliferation of images. Images of the star as memes, morphs, and remixes but also individual and group “selfies” of acts of consumption, or encounters with screen, proliferate cyberspace and urban public spaces alike. This may not be the end of star power but its reconstitution around a new set of fan practices. These post-celluloid practices are in evidence from the reception of the second of the sequences I wish to draw attention to.

The second sequence I have in mind is in fact a spinoff of *Enthiran*: Rajinikanth’s cameo as Chitti the robot in *Ra. One*, which I referred to earlier. This cameo offers Rajinikanth an opportunity to enhance his scarcity value by making a brief and much advertised appearance. But it does more by acknowledging the thin line between adulation and “disdainful engagement” (Prasad 1998) with his star image. This is the problem that *Enthiran* tried to address by transferring the famous Rajinikanth gesture to the robotic double. In the present, Rajinikanth fans turn up in strength to watch the Tamil dubbed version of a Hindi film (*Ra. One*) only to catch a sight of the superstar in a sequence that lasts about two minutes. These fans will then go on to make mobile phone videos of themselves screaming and whistling their appreciation, and upload these on YouTube or other forums, dispersing the images of the star and themselves well beyond the cinema hall and its neighbourhood. Devotion too has gone digital, much to YouTube’s benefit. And we have yet another instance of somebody other than the star making pots of money.

Thirdly, his unsuccessful tryst with animation in *Kochadaiiyaan* (K. S. Ravikumar, 2014). Unfortunately, this film was too long in the making and came across as rather dated when it was finally released, a good seven years after its trailers were screened in theatres with *Sivaji* (further evidence of the scarcity of our stars). Nevertheless, it is a response to the

explosion of images and screens in the 21st century. Much to the credit of the ageing Rajinikanth, he saw animation and gaming as the frontier that a stardom—limited to the cinema screen, and faithful to it to the very end—had to cross. That this experiment failed at the box office is not in itself evidence of its inappropriateness to Rajinikanth’s stardom.

On the other hand, we also have before us telling failures of the star to see through his own movement to the digital-ready era in the form of *Lingaa*, an anachronistic throwback into the pre-blockbuster phase of his career. Nowhere in *Lingaa* do we see signs of the present, when Rajinikanth is mediated by jokes, YouTube videos, and alien narratives.

Conclusion

Across the world, blockbusters have been assembled by entertainment industries as part of the effort to reach new audiences. Movement of filmed entertainment beyond the cinema—understood as the single screen theatre, its attendant fan excesses, and their socio-political contestations—is among its conditions of possibility of the regional blockbuster. Just as the blockbuster needs the superstar, the latter too needs the form to resolve intractable problems related to his stardom. *Enthiran* (in its multiple language versions) had a higher box office gross than all Hollywood films released in that year.²⁶ Unless a superstar’s vehicles are in fact premieres of campaign videos, as an unimpressed critic accused the latest vehicle of Pawan Kalyan of being, the future of south Indian stardom could well be the blockbuster.

Telugu cinema’s first big encounter with Web 2.0 technology and social media came in 2014, when tweets by S. S. Rajamouli, the director of *Baahubali*, drew attention to a film featuring the unknown actor Sampooranesh Babu. The film in question, *Hrudaya Kaleyam* (Steven Shankar, 2014) is an extended spoof of superstars and their vehicles. According to the film’s director, the movie is inspired by excerpts from the films of major (Telugu) stars on YouTube. When watched out of context, these videos “gave unintentional [sic] humour.”²⁷ This movie is just one of the many points of intersection between old and new media in the present. Without much effort, we can access a rich archive of such materials, from videos of organized fan activity to short films spoofing the latest releases or lionizing their stars (e.g., search for “Pawanism” on YouTube to see

such results). As always, only a small fraction of consumers produce original works even in the digital era but, given the smart phone revolution and the scarcity of star vehicles, we are more likely to see our stars outside the cinema hall more often than we see them on the big screen.

Finally, the blockbuster poses interesting and important questions for the growing number of researchers working on the cinemas of south Indian. This form throws at us, in all their obscenity, issues we have ignored for too long: the complexity of film cultures and markets, *region* as a factor that overdetermines production and consumption of films, the seemingly peculiar economics of the movie business, the transformation of the cinema itself into “content” that is encountered on a range of screens and in bits and pieces, fan activity and star power ... In short, questions related to the pasts and futures of cinema. Now is a good time to ask the question: how does the cinema matter today in south India, where it has always mattered?

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Notes

- 1 See the appendix for a tentative list of blockbusters made in Tamil and Telugu.
- 2 For a more detailed account of production and distribution practices and their links to stardom in Madras and Hyderabad industries, see Srinivas 2009:chapter 5 and Srinivas 2013:chapter 2.
- 3 For an early account of the buyer system, see Madhusudhana Rao (1981:150), who points out that this regime of distribution was first established in Tamil cinema before spreading to Telugu.
- 4 The film industry is *not* unique in its capacity to survive/grow without recovering production cost. News television, going by reports by colleagues working on the media industry, is probably doing better for itself (or worse, depending on how we look at it). Only a tiny fraction of the four hundred odd news channels report profits. Major corporate houses and politicians alike subsidize news television by acquiring stakes in media companies that do not make profits.

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- 5 Pillai (2016a) quotes an industry observer as saying, “Until the early 2000s, established distributors used to call the shots. But now, theatre owners and new distributors, who don’t quite have a sound understanding of the trade, have taken over. The pricing of films per territory is exaggerated, mainly due to fake collection reports floating on social media; this has consequently further increased star salaries.”
- 6 There is also the vague but interesting category in Telugu cinema known as the “story film” (*story pichcharu*). It is any film which is relatively less formulaic and has a novel storyline.
- 9 “Richness” is quality that has been attributed to Shankar in popular film journalism and social media discussions alike. “Richness” is a Madras and Hyderabad industry term for pleasant and context-appropriate framing and visualizations. It is an attribute of set, props, costumes, photography, and overall directoral competence. The point is not that whether people and places look upper class but the extent to which a film is able to create verisimilitude and also provide a rough and ready accounting of its expense in *visual* terms.
- 10 Even a quick glance at the material reveals articles whose titles roughly translate as: “Graphics Festival for the Computer Generation” (on the film *Devi*, in *Jyothi Chitra*, March 28, 1997:10), “65 lakhs for *Neelambari* graphics” (*Number One*, January 8, 2002:20), “Graphics the Highlight of *Neelambari*” (*Number One*, January 22, 2002:21) and “*Sri Satyanarayana Swamy* with 45 minutes of graphics” (*Andhra Jyothi*, ‘Chitra Jyothi’, January 6, 2007, IV). Advertisements too would draw attention to the special effects: “2500 seconds of sensational graphics scenes, never before seen on screen” (*Grama Devata* in *Super Hit*, November 23, 2001:9) and “Major graphics film with *Bhakta Rasa*” (*Sivaranjani*, February 8, 2001, back cover).
- 11 Release of subtitled versions in multiplexes has created a niche audience for regional cinemas across the country. While acknowledging the importance of subtitling, I will leave this out of the discussion for reasons of space and focus.
- 12 Based on a personal interview with R. Gopal (Former Secretary, Telangana Distributors’ Association) in Hyderabad and a report by Times News Network (2008).
- 13 Based on information provided on the company’s website, which is no longer available. URL: http://www.pstl.in/index_1.html, last accessed on April 24, 2008.
- 14 For a report on the impact of digitization on Tamil cinema, see Pillai 2016b.
- 15 Director Suresh Krishna credits Prabhu Deva (of *Kadhalan* fame, who was a dance choreographer before he began acting) with inventing Rajinikanth’s signature direct-to-camera gestures. According to Krishna, Rajinikanth winked at the camera for the first time in *Annamalai* (Suresh Krishna, 1992) during the course of a song which was choreographed by Prabhu Deva. Another song in the same film had the Superstar “looking straight into the camera and holding his hands in supplication, as if thanking the audience” (Krishna and Rangarajan 2012:34).
- 16 <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2002/04/01/stories/2002040100100201.htm>
- 17 The dramatic transformation of the star’s body is perhaps most dramatic in Shankar’s *I* (2015) where the perfect body of the hero is made spectacularly ugly. *I* features Vikram, who had worked with Shankar on yet another film dramatizing the doubling of the star-protagonist, *Anniyan* (2005, also released as *Aparichitudu* and *Aparachit* in Telugu and Hindi, respectively).

- 19 Arka Media Works of *Baahubali* fame is a private limited media company. One of the co-founders, Shobu Yarlagadda is the son-in-law of K. Raghavendra Rao, a second-generation film director with interests in film and television production. Arka co-produced the fantasy film *Anaganaga O Dheerudu* (2011) with Disney. The film was directed by Prakash Kovelamudi, Raghavendra Rao's son. This failed attempt at reviving the folklore film is in many ways the precursor of *Baahubali*.
- 20 The much-lamented dearth of Tamil-speaking heroines, an issue which Nakassis (2015) examines in all its complexity, is among the conditions of possibility of the regional blockbuster. Needless to say, Telugu cinema too has been heavily dependent on "non-Telugu" actresses for over two decades now.
- 21 The importance of spectatorial pleasures that are systematically othered—as belonging to people of other castes/classes or regions, et cetera—has been discussed with relation to "obscene" films from the early days of cinema (Kuhn 1988). Liang et. al. (2007) and Prasad (2004) discuss the issue with reference to colonial India while Akshaya Kumar (forthcoming) argues that the popularity of Bhojpuri cinema is hinged on othering its "vulgarity," as something that appeals to lower-class/caste viewers.
- 22 <http://mohanramanmuses.blogspot.in/2010/10/my-take-on-endhiran.html>.
- 24 <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/after-disappointing-sardaar-pawan-kalyan-looks-rebound-sj-suryah-film-42117>. Visited on April 24, 2016.
- 25 The female lead of the film, the actor-politician Ramya, stated in an interview that the entire sequence which has Vishnuvardhan "recreated digitally" was an afterthought by the producer (and did not involve Kodi Ramakrishna, whose *Arundhati* was the inspiration of this film). See <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/closer-to-real-than-reel/article9214979.ece>, last accessed on October 13, 2016.
- 26 This claim is based on collection figures published by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (2010, 2011).
- 27 Cited in <http://www.idlebrain.com/celeb/interview/sairajesh.html>. Steven Shankar could well have been referring to the sensational videos that made Chiranjeevi a YouTube sensation among viewers who had no idea that he was such a major star. This was largely the fallout of the work by a YouTube user going by the handle Buffalax who uploaded videos of Chiranjeevi's songs subtitled with "misheard" (mondegreen) subtitles. Buffalax later took down these videos, but they subsequently reappeared as uploads by users calling themselves his (Buffalax) fans. See, for instance, the most famous video of them all, titled "Girly Man" (for "Golimaar," from the opening line of the song from the film *Donga*): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDKcevMFUCo&list=PLA6E8925207D8564D>.

Appendix: Tentative list of Tamil and Telugu Blockbusters (1993–2015)

- Gentleman* (Tamil, S. Shankar, 1993)
Kadhalan (Tamil, S. Shankar, 1994)
Ammoru (Telugu, Kodi Ramakrishna, 1995)

Kadhal Desam (Tamil, Kathir, 1996)
Kadhal Kottai (Tamil, Agathiyan, 1996)
Indian (Tamil, S. Shankar, 1996)
Jeans (Tamil, S. Shankar, 1998)
Mudhalvan (Tamil, S. Shankar, 1999)
Anniyan (Tamil, S. Shankar, 2005)
Chatrapathi (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2005)
Ghajini (Tamil, A. R. Murugadoss, 2005)
Vikramarkudu (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2006)
Yamadonga (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2007)
Sivaji (Tamil, S. Shankar, 2007)
Dasavataram (Tamil, K. S. Ravikumar, 2008)
Arundhati (Telugu, Kodi Ramakrishna, 2009)
Magadheera (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2009)
Taam Arivu (Tamil, A.R. Murugadoss, 2011)
Enthiran (Tamil, S. Shankar, 2010)
Eega (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2012)
Vishwaroopam (Tamil, Kamal Haasan, 2013)
Baahubali (Telugu, S. S. Rajamouli, 2015)
I (Tamil, S. Shankar, 2015)

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