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## Desire, Youth, and Realism in Tamil Cinema

*This article first examines representations of women's desire in Tamil cinema, from highly implicit and non-transgressive representations of desire in an older movie to linguistically explicit and transgressive representations of desire in a recent hit movie. We then examine how such contemporary filmic representations are related to what we call a mode of realist spectatorship, and how this mode of spectatorship is linked to a particular social group (male youth) and to film form. We argue that the emergence of this mode of spectatorship, the films associated with it, and their connection to male youth are due to changes in the film market and to differential socialization by generation. Finally, we argue for realism in film as holding when film form and spectatorship are highly calibrated in the following way: some set of filmic representations are evaluated by viewers and filmmakers through culturally mediated classifications of "real" and "unreal" which are operationalized truth-functionally in events of evaluation; such representations presuppose these classifications, and by virtue of regular presupposition can entail an experience of "reality" for viewers. [anthropology of the media, realism, spectatorship, Indian cinema, Tamil Nadu]*

### Introduction

Indian cinema is famously popular in India, and this is no truer than in Tamil Nadu, India where the Tamil film industry rivals Hindi cinema in output, (arguably) in quality, and in fan devotion.<sup>1</sup> Most work on Tamil cinema emphasizes either its connection with politics (Hardgrave 1973; Pandian 1992), its escapist utopian content (Dickey 1993, 1995), or, more recently, its relationship to the middle classes and the nation (Prasad 1998). In this article, we explore a mode of realist spectatorship and its relationship with a set of new movies which have not been, and cannot be, adequately theorized by such work.

In order to interrogate the dialectic between viewing practices and film form we look at the reception of a recent Tamil hit movie, *7G Rainbow colony: based on a true story*. *7G* is unique in its frank and explicit representation of the heroine's desire. In a number of ways, however, the movie is also representative of a number of newer, youth-centered "realistic" love stories that are differentiated by their makers and viewers from "ordinary," "fantastical" Tamil movies, past and present.

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In order to contextualize desire in 7G and its reception, we first look at an older “commercial” blockbuster, *anbee vaa*. We then move to the representation and reception of desire in 7G, showing how reflexive discourse about 7G is organized by a mode of realist spectatorship. By this we mean that talk about film is organized by the assumption that films are to be evaluated as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable based on their correspondence with “reality.”

This account differs from work which reduces spectatorship to text-internal models of events of reception, or to models of events of reception mandated by the film “apparatus” (e.g., Baudry 1986 [1970], 1986 [1975]; Metz 1986 [1975]; Mulvey 1975; MacCabe 1985; Rajadhyaksha 1993; Vasudevan 1995; Prasad 1998). Such accounts confound actual events of interpretation with models of interpretation. We understand spectatorship as made up of actual *events* of reception by viewers of a text, or some component of that text. For us, what is at issue is how social interaction is oriented to texts through the actual responses of viewers and filmmakers. This cannot be answered from text analysis, nor from deduction from first principles (e.g., psychoanalysis), as has been the case with much film theory.

We go on to show how films like 7G and their patterns of reception are connected to a particular social group (male youth) through changes in the film market and differential socialization to mass media by generation. We argue that in the case of recent films like 7G, these processes account for the calibration of film form and modes of spectatorship.

Finally, from these materials we argue for a theory of realism in film that takes into account film form *and* reflexive discourse about such film form. In particular, we argue for a definition of realism in film as holding when: there exist some set of films, or elements of some set of films, that are evaluated by viewers and producers through culturally mediated classifications of “real” and “unreal”; such classifications are operationalized by truth-functional correspondence evaluations by viewers and producers; such films presuppose these classifications and their operationalization, and by virtue of this can actually entail an experience of “reality” for viewers.

### Escapism and the Viewer

A common viewpoint encountered by film researchers in Tamil Nadu is the disparagement of popular film as a “mass society” cultural form (cf. its Euro-American counterpart, Horkheimer and Adorno 1976 [1944]; Marcuse 1964; see Bennett 1982). C. Rajagopal, former Congress Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, compared “cinema to alcohol . . . he campaigned for prohibition and had successfully implemented it. He went on to say that if the industry could stop producing films they would be doing a signal service to the community” (Sivathamby 1981:20; see also Dickey 1993:130–133; Rajadhyaksha 1993; Vasudevan 1995:2812). This view figures the audience as vulgar and dumb, and popular cinema as unserious, unreal, and escapist. This point of view is often heard in everyday talk about film (Derne 2000; Srinivas 1999:12–13). Yet even if viewers decry a film as trash (to the researcher), “popular” cinema remains popular, and viewers continue to enjoy such cinema.

Much academic work on Indian popular cinema, mostly done before the mid-1990s, has reacted against this view (Thomas 1985; Nandy 1987–8; Kakar 1990:ch.3; Baskaran 1991; Dissanayake and Sahai 1992; Dickey 1993, 1995; Derne 2000). For such authors, while “popular” cinema *is* escapist in form and content, the audience is not duped by such movies, but uses them in an aesthetically sophisticated, time-tested, and familiar way that functionally deals with their real problems and emotional needs.

While one is not hard-pressed to find examples of “escapist” Indian movies, there is error in conflating “popular” with escapism. Rather than describing how much viewers like some movie or box-office success, “popular” becomes a *genre* designator.

This misconstrues a subset of movies that are popular for the set of movies which are popular, conflating audience reception with formal features of texts.<sup>2</sup> As far as Tamil cinema is concerned, there have been important changes in the last ten years or so that have made the aforementioned work only applicable to a subset of popular movies.<sup>3</sup>

In short, popular Indian cinema is not a monolithic and internally homogenous genre. The emblematic escapist *masala* film<sup>4</sup>—note, a genre designator—is simply one kind of popular movie. By distinguishing popularity (a feature of audience reception) from formal features of text, we open the possibility of detecting various forms of audience reception to film texts, and hence to asking how such reception is linked to narrative content *and* to social relations operative outside of the text.

### Desire and Chastity in Tamil Cinema

That women's public expression of desire is considered transgressive in "Tamil culture" may be gleaned from ancient literature, colonial reform movements, contemporary mass media, proverbs, and everyday conversation.<sup>5</sup> Central to norms regarding women's expression of desire is a concern with chastity (Anandhi 2005); in particular, explicit verbalization and easily identifiable behavioral repertoires (e.g., demeanor indexicals such as dress) as linked to one's chastity. Work on Indian cinema indicates that these standards extend to how people evaluate cinema as public sphere activity (Prasad 1998:ch.4): norms of women's propriety are to be honored on-screen as they are offscreen.

Yet the proliferation of premarital love themes in movies that play off such norms points to a tension between norms of women's propriety and a valorization of romantic love. Movies, like the interactions they represent, are presented with a challenge: how to express mutual desire without transgressing norms of publicly observable interaction. That is, it is not the case that desire or its representation is necessarily transgressive, but that certain modes of representation in certain contexts are felt to be so. Indeed, women's desire has long been a feature of Indian cinema (Rajadhyaksha 1993). The question is, how can desire be represented non-transgressively? Below we look at a Tamil film very popular in its day (and today as well), *anbee vaa* (1966, director: A. C. Trilogchander), to show how desire is represented in a "typical," "commercial" film.

### Synopsis of *anbee vaa*

The main character is the famous millionaire J. B. (played by MGR). Exhausted with his fame he goes to the vacation resort Simla to take rest. There no one knows who he is, so he decides to take on the persona of Baalu, a common man. As Baalu, he meets the heroine, Geetha (played by Saroojaatheevi), a rich Tamil girl from Bangalore who is vacationing with her parents. A competition ensues between the two involving each tricking the other into situations where his or her feelings for the other are admitted. This 'play' (*nadippu*) eventually morphs into love.

There are, of course, obstacles. First, Geetha is already promised to another, and she herself finalizes the union in her exasperation with Baalu's antics. However, J. B. knows the to-be-groom, who abdicates his right to marry Geetha to J. B. Up to this point, Geetha doesn't know that J. B. and Baalu are the same person. Rather, she believes that J. B. is Baalu's cruel boss. Playing on her ignorance, Baalu tests the veracity and strength of her love and devotion. His insecurity as a rich man whose money is coveted by others prompts him to ask her how she would deal with being poor. In this scene not only her devotion Baalu is proved, but so is her hate for J. B. Eventually finding out that Baalu and J. B. are the same person, she believes that this ruse was simply another trick. Feeling cheated, she writes a

suicide letter and runs off. J. B./Baalu catches her and saves her from the clutches of the (comic) villain Sitting Bull. In backing down to J. B./Baalu, Sitting Bull provides the correct gloss for the moment, "Lovers' fight" (in English). The lovers embrace.

Geetha's desire plays a crucial part in the unfolding of their love. Discussion with several informants who had recently seen the movie and had seen it when it came out confirms Geetha's desire for Baalu. Yet, how do viewers recognize this? As we show below, Geetha's desire for Baalu is achieved through multiple signs, none of which on their own count as expressing desire, but whose overall compositional effect predicates desire *on behalf* of Geetha without her ever having to be the agent of desire. Though attributed to Geetha, desire always comes from outside of her. She desires without ever transgressing any norms of interaction, as confirmed by our informants.

### Coincidence, Next-Turn Behavior, and Parallelism in *anbee vaa*

Coincidence, confusion, and accidents are some of the main ways that the lovers are brought together in romantic situations. Via such situations—which presuppose desire in order to be intelligible at all—desire is attributed to the characters. It is important, however, that such situations emerge *not* by the agency of the characters (especially the heroine), but from *outside* of them.

For example, in one of the first scenes Geetha is playing golf. Baalu criticizes her stroke using the address term that her father uses for her, *paappaa* ('baby'). As with other address term systems, a duality of intimacy/rudeness is at play. Geetha, annoyed, turns around. She insists on using the more distant first name, though Baalu insists that he very much likes 'little baby' (*chinna paappaa*) instead. In anger she turns and says "*vaa da*" ('come'), grabbing what she thinks is her father's hand to leave. However, by accident she has grabbed Baalu's hand, and by implication addressed him with an intimate/impolite imperative (*vaa*) and address term (*daa*). Baalu smiles mischievously and asks 'Are you calling me?' At first glance, the relationship between Baalu and Geetha is ambiguous between intimate and rude. However, by her slip, the interpretation slides to the intimate insofar as her attempted act of intimate address to her father is mistakenly superimposed onto her interaction with Baalu. Baalu plays on this, using the verb 'to call' (*kuuppidu*), which has a sexual connotation in opposite-sex usage. This is confirmed in the reaction of her father who is quite embarrassed. Though she tries to mark social distance, the external framing of her act formulates a romantic relationship to Baalu.

At first, Geetha resists the romance. However, through the course of the movie, Geetha's reactions to such accidents, coincidences, and confusions move very gradually from resistance to acceptance. For example, later in the movie, on the pretense that Baalu has fallen very ill due to a trick played on him by Geetha, Geetha takes care of him as repentance. A lightning storm comes, and Baalu mentions that as a child, his mother would hug him to keep him from being afraid. Both are afraid. At the next lightning strike they embrace and eventually fall asleep in each other's arms, while Geetha sings a song. (Here a song sequence comes which confirms their romantic relationship under the trope of king and queen.) When they wake, by coincidence they turn their heads to face each other at an intimate distance. Geetha's eyes first move to his face, then away, registering embarrassment. She stands up, looking up and down, each time her gaze moving further away from him. She covers her eyes with her hands, then peeks to see him, then covers her face again. Finally, when leaving the room she looks directly at him, wobbles her head, and blinks both eyes. That this is a mutual romantic interaction is ratified by Baalu's disappointment when she leaves the room.

There is nothing about looking up and down, nor covering one's eyes that intrinsically conveys desire or love. However, given the romantic alignments put into play

by external factors, the characters have no choice but to choose a stance toward the situation they find themselves in.

Similar sequences of coincidence followed by responses that presuppose a desiring subject are recursively strung together over a set of parallel episodes. Much of the narrative of the movie is organized around the competition between Geetha and Baalu wherein each, under the guise of 'play' (*nadippu*), tries to trick the other into assuming what turns out to be, seemingly, a one-sided relationship (e.g., of sympathy, friendship, and ultimately, love).<sup>6</sup> Crosscutting this episodic parallelism is a trajectory whereby a more and more clearly identifiable expression of desire/love globally emerges, even though it is locally indeterminate at any one point in the narrative. Indeed, the crisis of the movie occurs when the presupposition of this love can no longer be contained within the guise of play. At this point, the fusion of play love and real love, itself accomplished over the course of the narrative under the threat of its falsity, drives Geetha to attempt suicide, and ultimately into J. B.'s arms.

There are other ways that desire gets represented without ever being directly enunciated (e.g., song-and-dance; overheard monologues; characters speaking for another; parallel romance plots). What is important, however, is that desire is highly non-localizable in the film, and its expression is dispersed over many such modes of representation. The cumulative effect of these representations is to depict desire for Baalu, voiced as Geetha's desire, without Geetha ever taking on the role of agent of desire. Indeed, in surrendering to Baalu Geetha says that through his 'play' he *made* her love him. Only after the elaborate construction of desire can such an admission become explicit, and even then Geetha does not express her desire for Baalu. Rather, it is Baalu who declares his love for Geetha in the context of asking to marry her. Here it is revealed that Geetha has already been promised to another. She says:

*baalu, innakki niingka keedda  
intha arumaiyaana keeLviye  
annakki keeddirunthaa inmeeram  
ungka kaal adile vizhunthu  
kedappeenee.*

Baal, if you had asked me on  
that day the wonderful question  
that you asked today, I would  
have fallen at your feet at that  
moment and remained that way.

Even at the clearest moment of linguistic enunciation, her desire is phrased as a counterfactual hypothetical.

In discussions with those who had seen *anbee vaa* there was never any objection to Geetha's behavior. We have argued that this is due to the fact that desire is represented as originating outside of her, and this is consonant with widely circulated norms of public male-female interaction. (It is also consonant with Trawick's 1996 [1990] discussion of ideologies of love in Tamil families, which require that desire and emotion only be indirectly expressed.)

### Synopsis of *7G Rainbow colony: based on a true story*

If the representation of desire in *anbee vaa* is minimally explicit, the recent hit movie *7G Rainbow Colony: based on a true story* (October 2004, director: Selvaraghavan) is noteworthy for its much more explicit representation of the heroine's desire.

In this movie an upper-class north Indian family, down on their financial luck, moves into a middle-class housing colony in Chennai (apt. 7G). The father of this family has recently taken out a loan and has arranged a marriage between his daughter Anithaa (played by Sonia Agrawal) and Kishore, the son of the loan giver. On the next floor (apt. 7H) is a middle-class Tamil family whose son, Kathir (played by Ravi Krishna), is a typical aimless youth. He drinks, smokes, loiters, fights, and does



poorly in his studies. She, on the other hand, is a properly demure girl. At first, she very much dislikes him. However, he takes a liking to her and begins aggressively pursuing her. The peak of her hate occurs when, due to a sudden stop on a crowded bus, he accidentally gropes her. This results in his public beating and being taken into police custody. In a moment of mercy she doesn't press charges. After this the reformation of his character begins.

His rowdy spirit broken, he avoids her respectfully. However, through coincidences he keeps running into her. Slowly he begins to initiate a friendship with her. He is still in love with her and soon starts to beg her to give him a chance. She, seemingly out of pity and due to his constant prodding, gives him a chance on the condition that he improve himself. She forces him to study, and eventually, after she realizes his unique talent as a mechanic, gets him an interview at a motorcycle plant. When he clams up during the interview she pulls him aside and reveals her love:<sup>7</sup>

Anithaa: I love you *kathir*. *poo!*  
*evvaLavoo naaL wait paNNe,*  
*ippa cholReen. viiddukku poo!*  
*paaru, intha maathiri oru*  
*poNdaaddi veeNaamaa?*  
*mmm?*  
*kishorethaan.*

Kathir: *ille anithaa!*

Anithaa: I love you *kathir*.  
*enne vechchu nii eppadi*  
*kaappaaththa pooRee, huh?*  
 I love you, love you!

An.: I love you Kathir. Get out of here!  
 You have waited so many days,  
 now I'll say it. Go back home!  
 Look, don't you want a wife like  
 this? <looking down at her body>  
 mmm? <shakes her head crying>  
 Just Kishore then.

Ka.: No Anithaa!

An.: I love you Kathir.  
 Having me, how will you protect  
 me, huh?  
 I love you, love you!

He goes back inspired and gets the job.

Later in the movie, having been found out by her mother, the lovers are separated. She and her family move away. Because of this separation and her impending marriage, the lovers arrange for a secret rendezvous in a mountain resort. There they stay in their own room in a lodge. In this lodge scene—the most controversial scene in the movie—Anithaa begins to undress in front of Kathir. Kathir is incredulous and protests. What mistake is there in it, she asks. He should sleep outside, he suggests. If he has confidence in himself then they should be bold enough to sleep in the same bed, she responds. What if while sleeping their hands and feet touch, he asks. So what, she replies. He states that he might not be able to control himself, that something bad might happen. She says:

Anithaa: *chari. eedaakuudam NNaa*  
*enna? enna ippoo?*  
*manacheyee koduththuddeen.*  
*enne kodukkamaaddeenaa?*

Kathir: *anithaa.*

An.: Fine. What if something unexpected happens? What now?  
 I've given you my heart. Won't I  
 also give you myself?  
 Ka.: <With a shocked expression>  
 Anithaa.  
 [Males in audience clap and  
 whistle.]

She continues,

- Anithaa: *enna naan ippadi ellaam peechuReen NNU shock-aa irukkaa?*  
*ennavoo theriyale. intha reNdu naaLaavee en manachu chari ille kathir.*  
*ethe paaththaalum payamaa irukku. ellaaththeyum vidduddu, thaniyaa engkaavathu pooyidalaam NNU thooNuthu.*  
*enakku theriyum. naan paNRathu ellaamee thapputhaan.*  
*intha maathiri thaniyaa vanthathu. on kuuda oree room-le thangkaRathu.*  
*ellaamee thapputhaan.*  
*But, ennaale ethaiyumee control paNNa mudiyale. enne miiRi ethoo oru force enne izhukkuthu.*  
*manachukkuLLa enna ellaamoo ooduthu kathir.*  
*vedkaththe viddu cholladdaa? oru nimishamaavathu onakku wife-aa irukkaNum NNU aacheppadReen.*
- real wife. *manachaaleyum,*  
*udampaaleyum. mmm.*  
*ivvaLavvu naaL nii maddum thaanee ippadi ellaam feel paNNikkiddu irunthe.*  
 But (now for the) first time, *naan feel paNReen.*
- An.: What, are you shocked that I am talking this way?  
 I don't know! In these two days my heart/mind hasn't been okay Kathir.  
 Whatever I see I'm afraid.  
 Having left everything,  
 I feel like I should go somewhere alone.  
 I know. What I am doing is all a mistake.  
 Coming here alone like this.  
 Staying with you in the same room.  
 It's all a mistake.  
 But, I can't control anything.  
 Beyond my control some force is pulling me.  
 So many things are running through my mind/heart, Kathir.  
 Can I leave aside my modesty and speak (honestly)? For at least one minute I desire that I am a wife to you.  
 Real wife. By heart, and <whispering, looking down> by body. mmm. [Clapping by some male audience members.]  
 For this many days only you have been feeling this way.  
 But (now for the) first time I feel (this way).

Kathir, indeed shocked, asks if it is actually her speaking. She continues,

- Anithaa: *athukkaaka love paNNa aaram-bichcha odanee edam koduththuramudiyumaa?*  
*appa onmeelee nambikke varale. . . .*  
*ippa en kathir, ethu chonnaalum keedkRaan.*  
*veelaikku pooRaana,*  
*champaathikkRaana. naaLekki ethaavathu prachchane NNaa kuuda enne vachchu kaappaaththuvaaan.*  
*thairiyachaali.*  
*enne avvaLavvu deep-aa love paNRAana.*  
*ithe vida oru poNNukku veeRa enna veeNum, huh?*
- An.: For that matter, could I let you have me in all respects, as soon as we started loving each other?  
 I didn't have confidence in you then. . . .  
 Now my Kathir listens to me, whatever I say.  
 He goes to work, he earns. If there is some problem in the future he will protect me.  
 A bold and courageous man.  
 He loves me that deeply.  
 Other than this what else does a woman need, huh?

Kathir interprets her statements as expressing her desire to force her family to allow them to marry. Anithaa clarifies:

- Anithaa: Suppose, *antha kishorukkee kalyaaNam paNNa vachchid-daangka NNaa, enne avvaLavvathu*uram love *paNNathukku* at least *onakku intha chanthooshaththey-aavathu koduththamaathiri irukkum, le?*
- avan enne thodumpoothellaam enakku on njaapakam.*
- ennenneevoo peechuReen, le?*
- enakku paiththiyam pudichchuchchi kathir.*
- Please, *ithukku meelee ethuvum peechaathee.* I feel like doing it.
- onakku ishdam ille NNaa, poo. ethoo naan kenjchuRa maathiri irukku. che!*
- ithe cholRathukku munnaale naan evvaLavvathu yoochichchu iruppeen, theriyumaa?*
- life full-aa on njaapakaththe vachchukkaNum NNu aachep-paddeen.*
- onakku puriyale NNaa viddiru.*
- An.: Suppose, if they marry me to that Kishore, at least for your love for me I can give this pleasure/happiness to you, right? [Most males in audience applaud. Some male viewers whistle.]
- Whenever he is touching me I will think of you. <sighs, looks down>
- What am I saying?
- I've gone mad, Kathir.
- Please, don't talk about this anymore. I feel like doing it.
- If you don't, then go. It is like I am begging or something. che! <turns away>
- Do you know how much I have thought about this before saying it?
- I just wanted to keep your memory all my life. <Kathir tries to touch her shoulder, she bats it away.>
- If you don't understand, just forget it.

Kathir, confused, says "It all seems like a dream, Anithaa. I can't believe it at all" (*ellaam kanavu maathiri irukku anithaa. nambavee mudiyale*). At this point, in all theaters in which we saw the movie, the crowds' whistles and claps reached their apogee.

The next scene is a song-and-dance sequence. There is cutting between Anithaa dancing for Kathir and a scene in a nightclub with 'sexy' (*kavarchchi*) dancing and sexually suggestive lyrics. In this scene Kathir and Anithaa have sex. The next day it again becomes clear that all Kathir wants to do is get married. Anithaa is caught between obligations to her family (her father would have another heart attack if they married) and to Kathir (who says he will die if he is without her). An argument ensues in the street, Anithaa resisting immediate marriage, again asserting that at least she could make him happy for one day. Anithaa, in frustration, says:

- Anithaa: *naan thappu paNNiddeen. nii chanthooshamaa irukkaNum NNu onakku enne koduththeen. paaru. foolishness!*
- ippa onakku athu daily veeNum NNu thooNuthu. athaan ippadi ellaam peechuRe.*
- An.: I made a mistake. So that you could be happy I gave myself to you. See? Foolishness! [A large number of male viewers yell in disapproval.]
- Now it seems you will want it daily. That's why you're talking like this.

Kathir slaps her. She apologizes. He tells her to get lost. She begins to walk away, crossing the street. He begins to follow her, to reconcile. She is hit by a truck and he by a car. She dies, he lives. Unable to bear her loss, he goes into a semi-psychotic state believing her still to be alive. Yet he has become the man she wanted: responsible, family-oriented, earning.



### Talk about 7G

While tropes of coincidence, parallelism, and song-and-dance are used in 7G to represent desire, such tropes do not carry the bulk of the semiotic burden.<sup>8</sup> Rather, desire is expressed by the heroine through explicit discourse, as an inspection of the film dialogue above shows. Anithaa is a woman who openly expresses her desire *as* a subject of desire (even if at times she puts the agency of this desire outside of her).

If *anbee vaa* fits into the paradigm of escapist movies whose mode of spectatorship disallows public norms to be transgressed on screen (Prasad 1998), how do viewers and the filmmaker deal with the transgressive representation of desire in 7G and the movie as a whole?

The reception of the movie—as evidenced in interview responses, film reviews, and internet forums—can be classified in two ways: those who outright rejected the film and those who were willing to engage with it and, more or less, enjoyed it. Some viewers rejected 7G outright on the grounds of vulgarity, impropriety, and embarrassment. “You couldn’t watch this movie with your family” (*intha padaththe kudumpaththoodu paakkamudiyaathu*), as S. K. (male; lower middle class; unmarried; early thirties) said. This is consonant with spectatorship as described in the literature on Indian cinema, discussed above, where one of the main bases for evaluating films as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, is adherence to norms of public behavior (Prasad 1998:ch.4; Thomas 1995).

However, this view was *not* held by a majority of the viewers interviewed. Indeed, the movie was a big hit and most of the people we spoke with thoroughly enjoyed it, even if many were ambivalent toward parts of it. These viewers, as we show, evaluate the movie based on a mode of realist spectatorship. That is, their talk about the film is organized by the assumption that the evaluation of films as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, can and should be based on whether or not films accurately represent “reality.” Thus, they presuppose classifications of real and unreal (versus normatively correct and incorrect, as was the case with those who outright rejected the movie) as the basis for film evaluation. This way of talking about the movie was also held by the filmmaker and the press. For these viewers, the press, and the filmmaker, this mode of reasoning licenses the transgressive representations of female desire in 7G on the condition that such representations are real(istic): an image can be shown, and even should be shown, if it is “real.”

The reality of the film was the most common reason for why viewers and the press said they liked 7G.<sup>9</sup> Viewers used terms like *uNmai* (‘truth,’ ‘reality’), *chakajam* (‘naturalness,’ ‘reality’), *iyalpu* (‘naturalness’), and “natural life” when lauding depictions of everyday life (e.g., the housing colony, the bus scenes), the characters and their family relationships (e.g., father–son), and the narrative (the love story).

In elaborating on why he considers the movie so “new,” A. (male; [lower] middle class; unmarried; early twenties) argues that it is because it mirrors real life:

A.: *antha padam puthuchu NNaa  
padaththile vanthu pachangka  
irukkaangka, le? teenage boys.  
avangka ennanna paNRaangkaLoo  
appadiyee kaaddiyirukkaangka.  
ethuvumee maRekkaame appadiyee  
kaaddiyirukkaangka. . . .  
ellaamee puthuchu.*

A.: That movie [7G] is new means in the movie there are kids, right? Teenage boys.  
Whatever they are doing, just like that they have shown in the movie. Without covering anything up, they have shown it just like that. . . .  
Everything is new.

For A. the movie shows youth life as it is and doesn’t hide anything, even if it is unpleasant. Here the film’s realism means that representations in the film can be found in viewers’ own lives (as A. later explicated with examples from his own life). Moreover, this is something which is new to Tamil film, which typically hides reality (we return to the contrastive aspect of this mode of realist spectatorship in the next section).

In particular, the reality of the hero, and the ability to identify with him, was a central criterion for the value of the movie for many viewers, including some female viewers (e.g., T. A., a thirty-something lower [middle] class married woman with two sons). M. S. (male; middle class; unmarried; early twenties), when discussing the lodge scene, stresses the importance of the hero to viewers:

M. S.: *paakkRavangkaLukku vanthu athu oru  
periya vishayamaa ithuthaan irukku.  
... ippa oru hero NNaa nammaLa  
maathiri irukkaNum. nammaLa  
maathiri irunthaathan ennaala atha  
uNaramudiyum. aahaa! naama  
cheyya kuudiya vishayamddu.*

M. S.: To people who are watching,  
this (scene) is a really big deal.  
... Now a hero has to be like us.  
Only if they are like us can we  
feel. Aha! Things that we could  
do (are shown).

For M. S., the importance of the hero, and the ability to identify with him, is the precondition on an emotional engagement with the movie, and thus with enjoying it. Moreover, as he elaborated later in the interview, because the hero is “like us” the lodge scene is more than just an unnecessary addition to the movie. It is absolutely necessary as it is a possible future scenario for a young male like M. S. In this sense, an appeal to the reality of the movie licenses showing what would otherwise be transgressive and vulgar.

This asymmetry in identification with the hero and not the heroine is consistent with the observation that while male characters are often identified with by viewers, the conditions under which viewers identify with heroines are complicated by the perceived immorality of what their characters sometimes do on screen and stereotypes about what kinds of people actresses are (see Mishra 1999:266; Seizer 2002 [2000]; Osella and Osella 2004:244–5). And given that the chastity of Tamil women is taken as an emblem of “Tamil culture” (Anandhi 2005), this gender asymmetry gets reflected in the frequency with which the heroines (e.g., in 7G, *M. Kumuran: Son of Mahalakshmi, punnakai mannan*) and actresses (e.g., Asin, Jothika, Khusboo, Simran, Sneha, Sonia Agrawal) in Tamil films are not Tamil. This partly explains why talk about realism in movies like 7G tends to focus on the hero.

In sum, this mode of realist spectatorship takes as its central assumption that a film is realistic, and hence good, when examples of its representations can be (plausibly) found in the world (of viewers). This requires classifications of what is real and unreal, even if the contents of such classifications are themselves up for debate. One issue where there was a lack of consensus, indeed outright ambivalence, was the heroine’s actions, in particular, her expressions of desire. Are they real or unreal? As we see below, the answer to this question conditioned the acceptance or rejection of the representation of her desire.

We turn to a conversation between three men—P. (male; unmarried; late twenties), L. (male; middle class; married; late twenties), and K. (male; [lower] middle class; unmarried; late twenties)—where such positions were debated.

P.: *climax vanthu uNmai  
kedeyaathu. climax vanthu  
built up paNNi  
mudichchuthu. 7G-ooda  
climax vanthu built up paNNi,*

P.: The climax (of 7G) is not  
real/true. The climax is some-  
thing that they made to end the  
picture. Having made up 7G’s  
climax,

P./L.: *athu uNmai ille.*

P./L.: it’s not real/true.

P.: *athu uNmai ille.*

P.: It’s not real/true.

K.: *uNmai ille.*

K.: Not real/true.

P.: *athu vanthu thapputhaan. ippadi  
oru poNNu irukka mudiyaathu,  
le?*

P.: That [Anithaa’s behavior] is  
wrong. A girl cannot be like this,  
right?

Here these men all agree that the movie's climax, and by implication her behavior, is not realistic; moreover, there is something wrong with such behavior. A woman cannot be like that (note the statement takes the dynamic modal *mudi*). Contrary to P., L. later disagrees, and presents a different opinion (he agreed with P. initially). For him, the whole movie is real:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>L.: <i>kathe nalla irunthuchchu. nadakkaRathe eduththurkkaangka, le? nadakkaRathe eduththurkkaangka.</i></p> <p><i>aanaa vanthu ippa puuraa piLLai vanthu oru paiyan oru piLLai naalu paiyane love paNNuthu ippa. ippa vanthu oru paiyan naalu piLLai love paNNuthu.</i></p> | <p>The story was good. They've filmed what happens, right? They've filmed what happens.</p> <p>But nowadays, everywhere, a girl, a boy, a girl loves four boys now. (And) nowadays a boy loves four girls.</p> |
|---|--|

For L., the story is good, and acceptable, because it is real. More specifically, today's women are like men, and like the heroine in 7G. A girl might love four different boys, and a boy four girls. P. takes exception to this statement and responds:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>P.: <i>antha maathiri poNNu irukku. kaNdippaa irukku. athaavathu ellaaththileyum ellaareyum kuRai chollamudiyaathu. ippa avar chonnaar, oru poNNu naalu peer love paNRaangka, aanaa ellaamee appadi ille.</i></p> <p>P./L.: <i>ellaamee appadi ille.</i></p> <p>P.: <i>. . . thamizh naaddile irukkiRa kalaachchaaram rompa viththiyaachamaa irukku. foreign-ukkum ingkeekkum neReya viththiyaacham irukku. naaddile oovoru kalaachaariththilum viththiyaachangkaL irukku.</i></p> <p><i>innikki ethaavathu konjcham trend maaRirukku. aanaa ingkee vanthu love paNRavangkaLaam irukkaangka innumum.</i></p> | <p>P.: There are girls like that. Sure there are. That is, one can not blame everyone for everything [referring to what L. said]. Now he [L.] said, a girl loves four men. But it's not all like that.</p> <p>P./L.: It's not all like that.</p> <p>P.: . . . The culture in Tamil Nadu is very different. There are a lot of differences between (what is in) foreign countries and (what is) here. In a country, in every culture, there are many differences.</p> <p>Today there is something of a trend changing (in this). But there are still many, they say, who do love here.</p> |
|---|---|

Here P. contradicts L.'s proposition that all women are like the heroine of 7G. P. resolves this contradiction as a question of the makeup of the population. Some women are like that, some are not. This reflects a contradiction between the values and realities of Tamil/Indian culture:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>L.: Indian culture-kku oththu-varaathuthaane?</p> <p>K.: culture pirakaaram paaththaa,</p> <p>K./L.: <i>oththuvaraathu. chari varaathu nadavadiikkai.</i></p> <p>L.: <i>athaavathu Indian culture pirakaaram, kuudi pooRaangka, le, appa. athu vanthu chari varaathu, Indian culture pirakaaram. aanaa uNmaiyleeyee nadakkaRathu, ennaa ithuthaan nadanthukkid-dirukkuthu. 7G rainbow colony-le enna nadanthathoo athaan nadakkuthu.</i></p> | <p>L.: Indian culture won't accept it, right?</p> <p>K.: If you look according to the culture,</p> <p>K./L.: it won't accept (it). Her actions won't be right.</p> <p>L.: That is, according to Indian culture, going together then, right? It won't be right according to Indian culture. But, <i>in reality</i> it is happening, because just this is happening. Whatever happens in 7G <i>rainbow colony</i>, that very thing is happening.</p> |
|---|--|

Here K. and L. highlight that Anithaa's actions are transgressive in the eyes of "Indian culture." L. turns this around by foregrounding the normativity of "culture," distinguishing it from "reality." Ultimately, 7G reflects reality, a reality in contradiction with "Indian culture." Finally, P. summarizes the differences these three men have on this issue:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>P.: <i>athaavathu, enakku ippadiththaan irukkalaam. niingka cholRathu vanthu enakku pidichchirukkalaam. antha lodge scene naan eeththukkuveen. avarukku pidikkaame irukkum. avar oraLavukku eeththukkalaam NNu nenekkiReen. ovvoruththanum oru character thaam. ellaarukkumee correct-aa cholla mudiyaathu.</i></p>                                  | <p>P.: That is, this may be just like this for me. What you say may be something I like. I will accept that lodge scene. It may not be liked by him [K.]. I think he [L.] may accept it to some extent. Everyone has his own personality. We can not say correctly for everyone (what he thinks).</p>                                       |
| <p>K.: <i>athu vanthu thanippadda manitharooda karuththu.</i></p>   | <p>K.: That is an individual's personal opinion.</p>  |
| <p>C. N.: <i>ungka karuththu?</i></p>   | <p>C. N.: (What is) your opinion?</p>   |
| <p>K.: <i>eeththukkamudiyaathu.</i></p>   | <p>K.: I can't accept it.</p>   |
| <p>L.: <i>naan eththukkuveen. (aanaal) . . . intha pakuthi vanthu total thamizh naaddukku intha pakuthi pidikkaathu.</i></p>  | <p>L.: I accept it. (But) . . . This part wasn't liked by anyone in Tamil Nadu.</p>   |
| <p>K.: <i>thamizh naaddukku pidikkaathu. ellaarum enna chonnaangka? uNmaiyaana kaathal uNmaiyaana kaathal. aanaa sex-le pooythaan mudiyum NNu kedeyaathu. "over" general-aa peechuvaangka. tsch. avangka vanthu involvement-aaki irukkaangka. antha story vanthu original story. athile nalla involvement-aaki irukkaangka. over-aa irunthathu.</i></p> | <p>K.: Tamil Nadu didn't like it. What did everyone say? True/real love is always true/real love. But it doesn't mean that (it) will end in sex. "Excessive," that's how they talk in general. <i>tsch</i>. Everyone is involved. That story is an original story. Everyone is very involved in it. It [the lodge scene] was excessive.</p> |

P. states that each person is different, and that different people may take up different positions with regard to the reality of the movie. While L. wholeheartedly embraces the movie, and P. seems to accept it to some extent, K. is highly ambivalent. For him the story is original, it is natural, but the ending is excessive. This is also the same man who earlier in the conversation extolled the heroine for explaining sex so perfectly in the lodge scene that it actually ceased to be sex: "(Anithaa) explains it very correctly, very perfectly. . . . It isn't sex" (*rompa correct-aa perfect-aa explain paNNuvaangka. . . . sex ille*). While L.'s acceptance of such behavior is perhaps explainable by his own willingness to engage in non-normative behavior—he married for love across religious communities—what is important here is that for all three men what is at issue is "reality" and its relationship to the film.

As this conversation shows, this mode of realist spectatorship makes possible certain arguments regarding "Tamil culture" and film vis-à-vis chastity, desire, and love. Since an appeal to reality forms the foundation for evaluating 7G, it also becomes a frame for discussing Tamil culture and *its* reality (and for L. the denaturalization of the normativity of "culture"). Thus, it creates a new space of discourse. Once an appeal to reality is the basis for viewing films, certain filmic representations that would not have been even thinkable in popular cinema (following Prasad 1998)—for example,

the explicit expression of female desire—become possible objects for evaluation and debate by viewers. As we saw, whether or not viewers believed that specific representations in 7G were realistic, they regularly appealed to reality in evaluating such representations. That is, if it's real, show it; if it's not, don't.

And this is true of the filmmaker's discourse as well. While he is not ambivalent about the reality of the heroine of 7G, the director of the film, like its viewers, evaluated the movie and his role as director through appeals to reality. As he states regarding the portrayal of female desire:

In the South (of India) . . . everybody starts scolding me, "What sort of female is it?" *But still I want to resemble what females we have today.* Today. Because Chennai or Tamil Nadu or even the whole of India has improved a lot. But still we have a huge gap between the people from that period and the people of the last ten years or last 15 years. We have a huge gap. Those people want to put a mask and just pretend everything is fine. Our society is the most, uh, orthodox. Every female is a virgin. *I can't take that because we know what is happening out there.* So we, I don't want to just take a mask and put it on my face and act. . . . Females are like that [the heroine of 7G]. [Selvaraghavan 2005, emphasis added; see also *India Glitz* 2004; *Rediff* 2004; *Sify* 2004b]

This quote figures the opposition to the movie as older, hypocritical, out of touch with reality, and backward.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, like L., Selvaraghavan decouples the normativity of culture from questions of reality. Rather than covering anything up, the imperative for him is to show what is actually "happening out there" (which A. praised above). While there is more going on in this quote than we can explore here (e.g., the director's class position and gender), what is important is that he too grounds his discourse through appeals to reality, and this justifies his depiction of desire in the film.

In sum, the way that viewers, the press, and the filmmaker talk about the movie is based on appeals to reality as the foundation for reasoning about a film, and its worth and acceptability. For viewers we have called this a mode of realist spectatorship.<sup>11</sup>

In the following sections we show how this mode of spectatorship is related to film form ("new faces," average characters, logical narrative structure) and other kinds of movies, to particular kinds of viewers (male youth), and to the mass media context in Tamil Nadu (satellite television, box-office failure of older formulas, changing audience demographics). We argue that the emergence of films like 7G, the mode of spectatorship associated with them, and their connection to male youth are due to changes in film markets since liberalization and to socialization to mass media across generations.

### Real life, Fantasy world, and Film Form

It has not been uncommon since at least the 1950s for the press, academics, or filmmakers to periodically claim that some Indian film represents a break from the formulas and fantasies of Indian cinema toward a "new" and "realistic" cinema (Prasad 1998:ch.5; Kamal Hassan 2005). Selvaraghavan, 7G's director, reflecting on the successful movies of 2004, states:

- S.: Last year, there were so many movies released. (The) only commercial film which was a hit was *killi*, it is called, because it's got a huge star following. . . . The remaining seven (hits) . . . are all experimental movies.
- C. N.: Do you think people's tastes have changed?
- S.: Major way. . . . Nobody wants to see a hero flying. . . . We [filmmakers] also, we also want a change. So everybody already changed. Otherwise these movies, you can't think of making this movie [7G] ten years before or 25 years before. It won't run. But today people will accept these kinds of films *only*. [Selvaraghavan 2005]



Here Selvaraghavan makes a distinction in popular Tamil movies between the “commercial” and the “experimental.” A number of differences are assumed regarding the popularity of “commercial” films (due to star attraction) and their narrative tropes (marked by the fantastical), in contrast to newer, “experimental” films like 7G. The director further asserts that viewers have changed: people don’t want to see unrealistic films. They would rather see movies like 7G which are, by implication, realistic.

Such new “experimental” movies aren’t based around the star’s cult of personality. Indeed, many of the newer heroes are “new faces” who have no acting experience (the “anti-hero trend,” *Chennaionline* 2003). This helps producers keep down casting costs (which sometimes run up to half of the budget; A. M. Ratnam 2005; Kathir 2005; Sircar 1999) and avoid stars’ “tantrums.” It also provides freedoms to the director (e.g., control of the script; easier scheduling for shooting) and allows him to become a star himself (K. Balachandar 2005; Kathir 2005; Selvaraghavan in *Cinema in India* 2004b:35). In short, in an increasingly risky market, there is a strong incentive to avoid the costs that come with stars. The “earlier days,” when a movie’s success was guaranteed by its superstar hero, are over:

Today (it) is coming to a point where they [the audience] will accept only good films which talk something about sense, a little sense. You can’t make a nonsense film with even a superstar. They’ll throw it away. Two days. We never had that kind of latest thing going on. Now we have a problem. The movie is not good. Whoever it is. Whether it is Kamal Hassan or Rajnikanth or Amitabh Bachchan. Whoever is in the movie. They don’t like it . . . they’ll throw it away in two days. Two days. Earlier days, for the stars, the movie used to run for 50 days. Whether the movie was good or bad the movie used to run. But today, (if) they don’t like, that’s it, it’s over. Three days, all the boxes, all the prints, come back to the office. [Selvaraghavan 2005]

For Selvaraghavan and other filmmakers with whom we spoke (A. M. Ratnam 2005; Kathir 2005) this has meant that “new faces” in “realistic” stories like 7G are seen as keys to success.

Such “new faces” bring anonymity and ordinariness, and hence authenticity, to the characters they play. Such new heroes are less muscular and darker skinned in appearance (e.g., Dhanush), dress in everyday clothing, and speak terse dialogue in spoken Tamil sprinkled with English (and not, as in the past, in extended monologues, often times thinly veiled political speeches, in “pure” literary Tamil). He is the average young man. As Selvaraghavan (*Rediff* 2004) states:

The hero of 7-G is an average guy with whom youngsters can identify. . . . You walk on the street for a mile, you may bump into at least 50 or 60 of them. I would say 70 percent to 80 percent of the guys you meet in Chennai are like my hero.

Like viewers who stressed the importance of identifying with the hero to the value of the film and its reality, 7G’s director emphasizes the average character of the hero. This is a way to foster identification with the hero—as the producer of 7G A. M. Ratnam calls it, “the boy next-door” look (*Sify* 2005)<sup>12</sup>—and thus to secure a film’s popularity. In short, the mode of realist spectatorship described above is itself part of film texts insofar as filmmakers see this realism as aesthetically superior and economically viable.

This turn to realism is also a turn away from the fantastical, as Selvaraghavan’s reference above the “flying hero” of older films shows. The obvious unreality, as viewed by many viewers and filmmakers, of (older) “commercial” movies is linked to the larger than life figure of the Tamil superstar hero (e.g., actors like MGR, Rajnikanth, Vijaykath, Vijay) in the same way that the “new face” motivates the ordinary and the realistic. This classification of real and unreal film elements is often repeated by fans of newer movies like 7G. As K. states:

K.: 80s-le padam, 79-le padam appuRam vanthu, kaRpane padam kaRpane ulakam, hero ippadi irukkaangka. heroine appadi irukkaangka. song, duet, marriage. 7G padam, kaathal padam natural life. . . .

eighties nalla hero. dance paNNiddu pooyiduvaple. paaddu mudinjchu udanee love vanthirum.

entertainment kaRpane ulakam. two and a half hours kaRpane ulakaththile udkaarntathukku time pass.

ithu appadi ille. udkaarntu padam paakkum poothu nammukku theriyum, namma life-kkuLLe vanthiruvom.

oru subject namma life kaNdippaa varaNum: uNmaiyaana stage, uNmaiyaana love. paakkum poothu vanthu oru chanthoosham, kaathal padam, 7G padam.

K.: In the 80s movies, in the movies of '79 and afterwards, the fantasy movie, the fantasy world, the hero is this way. The heroine is that way. Song, duet, marriage. The movies 7G and *kaathal* are natural life. . . .

The eighties (movie) has a good hero. He is dancing. (And) immediately after finishing (the song), love comes.

Entertainment fantasy world. Sitting for two and a half hours in a fantasy world, it's (just) entertainment.

It [7G] isn't like that. Sitting down, when we are watching the movie, we know, within our life, we come (on screen).

(In 7G) a subject, our life, definitely must come: a real/true scenario, a real/true love. When we watch the movies *kaathal* and 7G a happiness (comes to us).

For K. older movies are characterized by their 'fantasy world' ("*kaRpane ulakam*"). In contrast, newer movies like 7G are natural and realistic. It is 'our life' shown on screen. Here there is a premium on newness and difference insofar as it is operationalized as naturalness and realness. Realism is defined *against* a(n older) denaturalized type of film (a *masala* film like *anbee vaa*) which, as K. noted elsewhere in our interview, is laughable when watched today. That is, realism is realism *with respect to* some other set of "unreal" representations.

So far we have charted out a mode of realist spectatorship and argued that it is distinct from modes of spectatorship associated with films like *anbee vaa*. We did so by looking at representations of female desire and their reception in two films, *anbee vaa* and 7G, as an entry point. We have further shown how the film form of popular "realist" films like 7G presupposes, or is calibrated with, viewers' and filmmakers' discourse. We have also seen how this mode of realist spectatorship figures films like 7G as new, different, and real, in contrast to older cinema and ordinary, commercial cinema as fantastical. This realist difference is the reason why viewers enjoy films like 7G, as well as the reason given for the success of these movies by filmmakers and viewers.

It is important here to differentiate between realist "art" (or "new" or "middle") cinema and "popular" cinema. What marks newer movies like 7G as different from realist art films (and "escapist" *masala* films) is that they have a will to mass popularity through realism. While we do not have space to compare the realism of Indian art films and the realism of popular movies like 7G, a significant difference is *for whom* such movies are a reality. Movies like 7G presuppose a particular social group and its "reality": male Tamil youth.<sup>13</sup> That is, the realism of 7G is a realism *to* male youth, both with respect to film form (young male protagonists) and the inhabiting of modes of spectatorship (young male viewers). Below we argue that this connection is due to changes in the film market and the film-going audience, and to socialization to mass media by generation.

### The Film Market, Realism, and Youth

One of the reasons for the connection between new “realist” films, a mode of realist spectatorship, and male youth are changes in the Tamil film market which have made male youth the most important target audience for filmmakers.

With the liberalization of some key electronics industries and the expansion of television in the mid-1980s under Indira and Rajiv Gandhi (Chatterji 1987; Ninan 1995; Rao 1998; Farmer 2003), and later with the expanded liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s and the coming of satellite television (Pendakur 1991; Pendakur and Kapur 1997; Shields 1998; Jenkins 1999), the market for film has changed in Tamil Nadu. The penetration of (satellite) television in particular has had profound effects on film-going. With a large increase in time for programming without an equal increase in programming, films and film related shows have crowded the air (Agrawal 1998; Page and Crawley 2001; Pendakur 2003). This has contributed to the middle classes and older working population going to the theater less and less (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; A. M. Ratnam 2004; Kathir 2005; this was also corroborated by our middle-aged informants). In addition, the increasing availability of relatively inexpensive video-CD technology (and earlier VCRs); the relative expensiveness of DVD technology; and lack of renting have meant that filmmakers’ profits must be collected in the theater, or at least is so perceived by filmmakers.

Further, cinema attendance can be highly problematic for young women, as compared to male youth. While male youth are assumed to be avid consumers of film and are given license to move freely about public space without reproach, norms of propriety regarding young women’s presence in public space limit their consumption of film. This means that women are less likely to be the primary addressees in movies marketed for mass consumption, insofar as addressivity is connected with (perceived) theater attendance.

Thus, as the family *qua* film-going unit has receded, and because the cinema hall as public space can be problematic for women, peer groups of young men have become (perceived as) the main component of the audience (Derne 2000; A. M. Ratnam 2004). This has meant that movies are increasingly tailored to young men, a fact reflected in the narrative structure of 7G and its popular songs<sup>14</sup>, as well as in the framing of the movie and its director by its makers, movie reviews<sup>15</sup>, those involved in the film’s publicity<sup>16</sup>, and viewers. Young characters, young actors, youth concerns (premarital love), and youth settings (colleges) are the order of the day (K. Balachandar 2005; Kathir 2005).

For filmmakers, central to the figurement of the audience as youth is the perception that audience identification with the hero as similar to viewers is the key to profit and that the *masala* superstar hero has lost his power to inspire identification with many of today’s youth viewers. Hence the turn to average, “realistic” youth protagonists. For film viewers, as we have seen, this shift in film form has been accompanied by a new basis for evaluating movies which rejects and denaturalizes the *masala* movie as “ordinary” and valorizes realism, especially of the hero, as “new” and “different.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, there is a calibration between viewers, modes of spectatorship, and film texts and filmmakers’ discourse held together by popularity *qua* film profits.

In sum, in contemporary Tamil cinema we see a constellation of changes in personnel (“new faces,” young directors), narrative tropes (the ordinary hero, the “real story”) and form (a focus on internally coherent plots), as well as generic classification by viewers and filmmakers (older vs. newer/younger movies, ordinary/commercial vs. different) and modes of spectatorship (realist spectatorship). Table 1 summarizes these changes.

Such changes mutually reinforce each other and differentiate “newer” films from both contemporary “ordinary” films and “older” films. We suggest that such mutual reinforcement and differentiation provide the conditions for the formation of genre/style (cf. Briggs and Bauman 1995 [1992]; Collins 1993; Silverstein and Urban 1996)—that is, the realism of new movies like 7G at the level of film form—and

**Table 1**  
**Summary of some contrasts between older, "fantasy" films and "new," "realist" films,**  
**their associated modes of spectatorship and audiences.**

Example	<i>anbee vaa</i> (1965)	<i>7G Rainbow Colony</i> (2004)
Elements of film form	Implicit representation of female desire Superhero protagonist Superstar actor playing the protagonist <i>masala</i> narrative structure High, "pure" Tamil monologues Political allusions	Explicit representation of female desire Average young male protagonist "New face" playing the protagonist Cohesive linear narrative structure Colloquial Tamil with English Depoliticized plots
Mode of spectatorship	Reckoning of film's worth and acceptability based on correspondence with norms of public behavior.	Reckoning of film's worth and acceptability based on the film's correspondence with "reality." (from the perspective of realist spectatorship)
Typification of the two kinds of film	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">             Old(er)              Ordinary (<i>chaathaaraNa</i>)              Fantasy (<i>karpane</i>)           </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">             New(er) (<i>puthu</i>)              Different              Real (<i>uNmaiyaana, chakaja</i>)           </div>
Audience	Family as main film-going unit	Peer groups of young men as main film-going unit

for the creation of (youth) emblems through filmic texts insofar as such differentiation can be linked to a particular "social domain" (Agha 2007) of (young) producers and viewers.

We have argued that film-profitability is one way that producers and viewers are linked such that a particular (realist) film form, a particular mode of (realist) spectatorship, and male youth are connected. We argue below that the connections between youth, realist spectatorship, and "new," "realist" films are also due to differential socialization to mass media by generation.

### Socialization, Realism, and Youth

Through socialization to a field of films (the mythological, the social, the *masala*, Hollywood film, realist film, etc.) and metadiscourses about such films, individuals come to be acquainted with particular conventions of film form and viewing practice. Socialization to such films and metadiscourses about them vary across generation for both viewers and filmmakers. Thus, to some degree, ways of viewing and talking about film vary across generations and are fractionally-congruent within generations. In particular, generational differences in viewing patterns, insofar as they are regular, may form perduring modes of spectatorship, which in turn may come to be presupposed in particular kinds of films.

Further, as differential socialization results in differential presupposable knowledge about films (which films are new vs. old, what counts as different vs. ordinary, etc.) and viewing practices, it provides the conditions of possibility for the reanalysis

of such differences as indexicals of generation through foregrounding and denaturalizing “ordinary,” “older” films as, in the Tamil case, outdated, unconvincing, laughable, and unreal: those films are older, fantastical, and for them while these films are newer, realistic, and for us.

This is what we have seen in the Tamil materials discussed in this article. Viewers who inhabit a mode of realist spectatorship laminate film-internal contrasts (fantastical–real, superhero–ordinary hero) onto temporal contrasts (older–newer movies) and demographic contrasts (older–younger audiences) when differentiating “realist” films like 7G from “older,” “fantasy” films like *anbee vaa*. Such contrasts are also deployed in discourse by young filmmakers like Selvaraghavan both in positioning their films as for youth, as we saw above, and in positioning themselves *as* youth.<sup>18</sup>

For Tamil viewers today, the *masala* film, a longstanding mainstay of Indian cinema, has become presupposable as a standard for reckoning film. That is, it is the “ordinary” film, in distinction to the diversity of regional, national, and transnational media texts available to today’s Tamil viewers. And with the audience’s increased power of selection (they can, after all, watch movies on TV, video-CDs, in the theater, or not at all), perceived ordinariness has increasingly become a liability. The impact of television as competing medium and repository for older commercial Indian films, Indian art films, and Western films (i.e., benchmarks for “difference”) cannot be underestimated. Such a diversified mass media field presupposes and entails the discriminating powers of viewers, especially youth viewers.

The result has been that newness and distinctiveness have become operationalized vis-à-vis appeals to reality. “Newness,” “difference,” and “reality” become the ways that viewers, quite familiar with the conventions of various types of movies, define “good” films against “ordinary” films which are perceived as unreal. Hence the possibility for the success of Tamil movies like 7G which, on the one hand, facilitate young male viewers’ identification with the “realistic” young hero (which “ordinary,” “fantastical” movies fail to do) and, on the other, buck “typical” (i.e., fantastical) movie conventions by not “covering anything up.”

This is the logic underlying viewers’ explanation for why the heroine of 7G must die at the end of the movie, an ending which almost all viewers interviewed, as well as the director, agree is the best ending possible. As A. stated in our interview, the heroine’s death is a “plus point” for the movie. Any other ending would have made 7G just another “ordinary” movie, and thus “bad,” given the contradictions presented in the narrative (which reveal the precarious position of women caught in a double bind of love versus marriage, devotion to lover versus family); the necessity of maintaining the link between viewer and hero; and a history of previous movies with neat, happy, and unrealistic endings (cf. Gabriel 2002:64ff.).

There is, of course, no necessary connection between newness and realism, though it does seem to be a common one in various realisms.<sup>19</sup> New forms need not be thought of as real, and vice versa. However, in the case we have discussed, familiarity with films foregrounded and typified as “older,” “ordinary,” and “unreal” makes it possible for realism to be associated with newness and difference, and youth.

This is not a theory of stages of development of viewer sophistication (cf. Kottak 1990). It is an account of sociohistorical trajectories of genres/styles and modes of spectatorship comprised of the calibration of film texts and modes of spectatorship achieved, in part, through the denaturalization of “other” forms.<sup>20</sup> Simply put, the social life of genres and the modes of spectatorship are shaped by the very fact of changing cultural (con)texts to which members of a culture are differentially socialized. Thus, the production of social difference (e.g., by generation) and modes of (realist) spectatorship are dialectically related. And further, as film form and modes of spectatorship are calibrated, the proliferation of film genres/styles and changes in modes of spectatorship are dialectically related.<sup>21</sup>

In this article we have charted out a mode of realist spectatorship, its presupposition in “new,” “realist” movies, and the connection of both of these with male youth. We contrasted these “new,” “realist” films with “older,” “ordinary,” “fantasy” films



using the representation of female desire in *anbee vaa* and 7G as an entry point. We argued that the emergence of realism to male youth *with respect to* other popular Tamil films is to be explained by changes in the linkages between producers and viewers via the film market and by differential socialization to mass media by generation. In the next section we offer a more general account of realism.

### Theorizing Realism in Film

Film realism can be understood in at least three ways. First, like the Tamil viewers that we spoke with, “realism” may be deployed as a truth-functional correspondence relationship between a text and the “real” world: a text is real to the extent that tokens of its referents can be found in “reality.”<sup>22</sup> Second, much academic work has discussed realism in terms of formal features of texts or the cinematic apparatus. A third view might see realism relativistically as whatever people say it is. Understanding realism only as any *one* of these, we argue, is problematic.

The first view, realism as correspondence, posits realism as self-evidently coded in the text, a transparent iconism between text and world, and hence offers no theory of its constructedness, or of representation as mediation. In fact, it denies such constructedness. It doesn’t take much to point to the limits of the correspondence relation view of realism, and hence, for our purposes, such a view is insufficient.

In the second view, realism as genre/apparatus, realism is theorized independently of actual events of viewing. Realism is an inventory of formal text or design features linked to, and often times taken as reflecting, a particular historical moment, ideology, or social formation (e.g., modernity or capitalism) that mandates a particular mode of viewing. Yet how do we then deal with *actual* viewers and what they make of “realistic” texts? What is to be done about cross-cultural variation regarding which films count as real and which ones don’t? This view fails to appreciate that viewers may receive a text in many different ways, ways that can only be recovered *outside* of the text. Instead, through a form of methodological individualism, this view attempts to intuit available “subject positions” from an analysis of only film form (plus some transcendental theory of the Subject, see Allen 1995).

Finally, if we take realism only as culturally relative viewing practices, we run into the problem that similar evaluative stances may be inhabited by different viewers despite differences of formal text features (e.g., everyday speech vs. formal speech) and degrees of correspondence of film to intersubjectively observable features of the world. As analysts we are at an impasse. We have no way of relating claims of realism to features of texts or of the world, except by correlation to evaluators. The realism as viewer evaluation approach becomes a descriptive inventory of *sui generis* claims. It lacks any explanatory power.

Based on the materials discussed in this article, we argue that an adequate theory of realism requires, minimally, all three views. First, as we noted, realism is understood by those who deploy its rhetoric as involving a correspondence relationship. (This is not to say, however, that viewers mistake text for reality.) Tautologically, realist texts feel and are thought of as realistic to viewers. A realist text is linkable to some (plausible) reality in order to be intelligible at all.

Second, such a truth-function is always applied through culturally mediated (i.e., epistemologically situated) classifications of real and unreal in events of evaluation. (Note, of course, that such classifications are highly internally complex.) And to the extent that such classifications vary across some population, realism is always realism *to someone*; in the Tamil case, realism to male youth. Thus, for the young male viewers we interviewed, “reality” was *the* primary ground for evaluating, and valorizing, films even if what that meant was up for debate. One way of conceptualizing this is as a (regular) mapping between extra-text(ual) “chronotopes”—the Bakhtinian (1981) notion of semiotically mediated time-spaces peopled by certain social personae—and the textual chronotope in question (Agha in press). Here the

question is, to what degree do film texts fit with other models of social reality available to viewers?

Further, as realism is regimented by metasemiotic discourses, there are as many realisms as there are metasemiotic discourses which aim to regiment the chronotope mapping in question. In addition, such mappings are not only one-way (Bakhtin 1981:254); texts can just as well serve as grounds for (re)analyzing known, as well as yet unexperienced but imagined, realities (Appadurai 1991).

The final element necessary, in our view, to a cogent account of realism is the idea that recurring modes of spectatorship become regular parts of film texts. When such presupposition–entailment (Silverstein 2003) relationships between texts and modes of spectatorship become regularized we can begin to talk about the formal generic/stylistic features of realist movies. Such regular presupposition–entailment relations are, in fact, the condition of possibility for the second view of realism outlined above which simply assumes their stability in order to proceed with its analysis. (Note that the ways in which this regularization of presupposition–entailment happens may be multiple. In the Tamil case we noted the film market and socialization to mass media as two such ways.)

In sum, we understand realism as cultural form that minimally must account for film texts, producers, viewers, and their interlinkages. Realism exists when: (i) there exists a classification of texts, or elements of texts, as real or unreal for some social group; (ii) this classification is presupposed or explicitly deployed in such texts; moreover, by virtue of such regular presupposition, such realist texts can actually entail an experience of “reality” for viewers; (iii) viewers evaluate (un)real representations with a truth-functional correspondence theory.

Such a tripartite relation is often reanalyzed by viewers and filmmakers, and hence can serve as the grounds of further metasemiotic work: troping on existing classifications of realism, or denaturalizing them and resetting the parameters on “reality,” thus feeding back into the emergence of new film forms and modes of spectatorship. That is, realism is *realism with respect to* other representations. Finally, such a tripartite relation, its regularization, and its reanalysis are subject to processes of audience formation and differentiation. That is, the production of social difference and modes of spectatorship, and thus film forms, are in dialectic tension.

## Notes

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1. The following transcription conventions are followed for Tamil: *th* = dental stop த்; *d* = alveolar retroflex stop ட்; *ch* = palatal stop ச்; *nj* = palatal nasal ஞ்; *ng* = velar nasal ங்; *n* = dental/alveolar nasal ன்; *N* = retroflex nasal ண்; *zh* = retroflex frictionless continuant ழ்; *l* = alveolar lateral ல்; *L* = retroflex lateral ள்; *r* = flapped fricative ர்; *R* = trilled fricative ற்; long vowels are represented by doubling the letter (e.g., *a* = அ; *aa* = ஆ). In film dialogue and interviews, Tamil words are *italicized*. English words used in Tamil are non-italicized. Audience comments during film viewings are indicated by square brackets [ . . . ]. Kinesics in the film dialogue are indicated by angular brackets < . . . >. In interviews, square brackets indicate anaphoric referents and parentheses indicate elided constituents; a forward slash (/) between initials indicates overlapping speech.

2. Without quotes around *popular* the phrase *popular cinema* will henceforth refer to cinema which has high box-office appeal. In our usage, the term does not designate a genre.

3. Many statements made in the mid-1990s about Tamil cinema (of the mid-1980s) reveal their datedness. For example, “Viewers themselves often reject tragic films and others whose endings leave them dissatisfied. They also say that they do not like to watch movies in which

problems are shown 'realistically'" (Dickey 1995:150, also 146). See discussion below on ethnographic data taken from the same city, Madurai, by viewers who state the *exact opposite*. It is even arguable to what extent such work is applicable to the period in which the authors discuss (e.g., consider the popularity of K. Balachandar's consciously realist, anti-superhero films since the 1960s).

4. *Masala*, literally meaning mixture or blend, in reference to movies designates movies that have a bit of everything for everyone—song-and-dance, melodrama, romance, comedy, fight scenes—often at the expense of (Western standards of) logical coherence and "realism." The *masala* film is considered the emblematic, commercial Indian movie.

5. Here we are interested in "Tamil culture" as a trope deployed in discourse about norms of (gendered) behavior by Tamils, in particular film viewers and filmmakers. Viewers consistently employ phrases like "Tamil culture" (or "Indian culture") to speak of such standards.

6. This 'play,' its misunderstandings, and resolutions conform to the well-known and long-standing Tamil notion of *uudal* ('sulking,' 'lovers' quarrel')—a literary, filmic, and interactional genre. We thank one of the *JLA* reviewers for pointing this out.

7. We saw the movie five times in theaters in Madurai and Chennai where we also observed audiences' reactions to the movie. Dialogue excerpts were recorded and transcribed, along with audience reactions. Common reactions by audiences across viewings are indicated by square brackets [ . . . ].

8. Research was conducted between November 2004 and July 2005. Recorded interviews with 25 viewers (and informally with more), individually and in groups, were conducted mainly in Madurai (a city of over a million, though often described as a large village), but also in Chennai (the states' largest urban center and capital) and Villappuram (a regional town), by the authors. Our most in-depth interviews with viewers were conducted in Madurai. For this reason, we present materials from our Madurai interviews. Interviewees, referred to by initials, were both men and women, from the lower, lower middle and middle classes, ranging from teenage to middle age. Interviews cited in this article were conducted in Tamil. Interviews with producers and directors were conducted in English by the authors (unless otherwise cited). Other materials (print magazines, newspapers, radio reviews, posters, lyric books, internet reviews and web-board postings), both in Tamil and English, were collected and analyzed.

9. For Tamil press, see All-India-Radio 2004; *kungkumam* 2004; *vikadan* 2004. For English press, see *Cinesouth* 2004; *Galatta* 2004; *Sify* 2004a; Smitha 2004; Warriar 2004. For internet fan reviews, see *kirithivasan* 2004; *laxmanmd* 2004; *manoj\_muthu* 2004; *redchili* 2004; *shogan* 25 2004; *venkat\_rs* 2004; *yrum*, 2004.

10. Fans' internet reviews of the movie also take this stance: "Coming back to the 3-letter word that has been a concern to the older audience, there are dashes of it here and there. But hardly any of it is unnecessary or unrealistic" (*venkat\_rs* 2004; see also *yrum* 2004). In the press, see *Economic Times*, *Madras Plus* 2004; cf. *vikidan* 2004 which questions this realist stance altogether.

11. There still remain two seeming contradictions to our description of the mode of realist spectatorship raised by work on "escapist" Indian movies such as *Sholay* (1975) (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992) and the analysis of MGR era Tamil films (Pandian 1992). First, "reality" and "naturalness" are used in events of evaluation by viewers of "escapist" films. Second, we find identification of viewers with god-like heroes (This is how MGR's political popularity is understood by academics; Pandian 1992; cf. Nandakumar 1992:44). However, though realism was deployed as an evaluative criterion by some viewers in Dissayanake and Sahai's reception study of *Sholay*, it is not *the* central one, as it was for the viewers we interviewed. In Dissayanake and Sahai's viewers' discourse the question of realism is sporadic. When it enters, it does so in opposition to, and *not* as the *reason for*, the popularity of the movie. Regarding identification, viewers' alignment to MGR's characters are quite different than viewers' alignment to the hero of a newer movie like *7G*. As Prasad (1998:70) notes, viewer-hero filmic alignments in MGR era films are tied up with emulation or disapproval and not similarity *per se* (see also Rajadhyaksha 1993; Dickey 2001). They also presuppose an unequal relationship between viewer and hero, while identification in newer movies like *7G* make no such presupposition. It is no coincidence, then, that the rise of modes of realist spectatorship have patterned with the steady decrease in overt political allegory in Tamil films, characteristic of older DMK films, which modeled hero-viewer alignment on political leader-follower alignment (see Vasudevan 2004).

12. See *Cinema in India* on the anti-heroic image of Dhanush, one of the most popular such "boys next door":

If you meet him casually in the streets you may not be able to distinguish him as the celebrated star. . . . He looks like an earnest college student. He is neither loud nor flamboyant. . . . He does not have the obvious physical appeal or the swashbuckling arrogance of a film star who has made his name and fame early in life. Instead he exudes a quiet confidence that one expects from a serious, focused college student. [2004a:8]

13. We don't exclude the possibility that people other than male youth may find such movies realistic, for as we saw in our interviews with viewers, they do. This, however, does not mean that (male) youth are not central to such "newer" movies—both as target and actual audience, and as narrative focus—and the mode of realist spectatorship associated with them, but instead that given this (stereotyped) linkage, viewers (youth or otherwise) may align themselves to such films and their presupposed mode of spectatorship.

14. For example, the opening song of the film, "Our age" (*naam vayathu*), begins:

*naam vayathukku vanthoom. naam  
iLamaikku vanthoom. intha irupathu  
varudam, ada veeNaay poonoom. ini  
kaNgaLil ellam peN mugam varum.  
thinam kanavukaL thaanee nam uNavaay  
maaRum.*

We [incl.] came of age. We [incl.]  
became youth. These twenty years (we)  
have wasted. From now on, in all (our)  
eyes young women's faces come. We  
live off our daily dreams.

The song-and-dance scene continues, in lyrics and visuals, with depictions of the behaviors of typical young men.

15. See *Economic Times*, *Madras Plus* 2004; *India Glitz* 2004; *vikidan* 2004.

16. For example, at the 7G 60th day celebrations in Tirunagar, Madurai (December 12, 2004), speeches by politicians and those involved in mass media repeatedly returned to the youthfulness of the film and its "realism." Selvaraghavan was called to the stage by the announcer as 'the modern director, respected Selvaraghavan, the pulse of the youth' ("*navayuka* director *iLainjarkaLin naadiththudippu mathippiRkuriya chelvaraakavan*").

17. The *masala* movie is still alive and well, of course. It is simply another type of movie which enjoys popularity. This has not left the *masala* movie unchanged, however. Consider, for example, the increasingly big budgets to make fight scenes seem as realistic as possible (i.e., not seem fake). Here, Hong Kong and Western fight scenes form the standard, making lower-budget action seem fake.

18. For example, in establishing the "reality" of their movies, two relatively young directors of youth-centered movies, Kathir and Selvaraghavan, explain that their movies tell *their* life stories, and that it is only through their personal experiences as youth of today's generation that they could tell "different" and "new" stories (Kathir 2005; Selvaraghavan 2005; Selvaraghavan in *Cinema in India* 2004b:35).

19. Indeed, many accounts of realism in the West stress the process of denaturalizing some other form as "ordinary" or "mainstream" through introducing some hitherto unexamined 'really real' reality, or technique which reveals that reality operationalized as "new." For examples, see Carroll's (1988:102; see also 1996:243–244) account of Bazin's discussion of the evolution of film form from montage to depth-of-focus; see Allen 1995 (pp. 89–90) on changing thresholds for "projective illusions" with respect to realism and datedness; see Williams 1991 [1977], Abercrombie et al. 1992, Gledhill 1992 (p. 133), and Hallam 2000 (p. xi, 17, 253) on realism as denaturalizing other films, and their ontologies, through introducing new and unexamined realities.

20. This genre-spectatorship connection can be extended to the history of Indian films in general. For example, early "mythologicals" were often understood through the frame of *darshan* (Bharati 1977; Lutgendorf 1995; Pinney 1997, 2002; Liechty 2003); that is, the mapping from the chronotope of the temple to the cinema hall. Such a mode of spectatorship was displaced over time as the dominant mode of film-watching (though not replaced; e.g., see the reception to the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* television serials, Mankekar 1999). Nandy's (1998:8–10) discussion of the pre-"angry young man" hero as derided in representations of the efficacious "new" vigilante hero of the 1970s is another example of such denaturalizing interdiscursivity belying differential socialization across time. See Collins 1993 for a similar argument regarding 1960–70s American films and audiences.

21. Note that in this account such changes in spectatorship and film form are fundamentally organized by age-sets and not class(-fractions) *per se*, *contra* Prasad's (1998) account of realism in contemporary popular Indian cinema. While such age-sets are crosscut by class, class is not the most important factor in understanding such changes. Hence we find lower-class (*kaathal*),



middle-class (7G), and upper middle-class (*Bombay, rooja, kaakka kaakka*) heroes telling a “real story” to a cross-class audience. For Prasad (1998), class relations—which films reflect—undergird Indian coalitional politics, as well as modes of film production. Changes in the former have resulted in changes in the latter, and the former is known through film content and film-internal models of spectatorship. Though Prasad’s explanation is elucidating and plausible, our analysis has shown that it is fundamentally limited insofar as the relevant group foregrounded is *not* a class-fraction but an age-set. Prasad’s attempt to read realism out of recent popular movies as sign of a “real subsumption” is rendered problematic when we attend to filmmakers’ and audiences’ actual discourse. This is not to say that “realist” films and spectatorship are not unmarked for class. Indeed, realism is middle classed in at least two ways. First, the high-culture value of realism with respect to the “new” or “middle” cinema has, since the 1970s, been entrenched in (upper) middle-class discourses. However, even if this stance toward older mainstream film by viewers is similar to the upper middle-class stance on popular cinema, the two have not blurred. Our research revealed that high-culture disdain of popular movies (including 7G) has not changed much. Second, new realist movies often project a middle-class consumer and moral vision of reality (see Liechty 2003 on Nepal). But, again, that such a middle-class vision of reality is assumed in some films does not mean that the class component is the most important one. Such films are consumed across classes in similar ways, and not all films assume a middle-class vision. Further, realist films in popular cinema do share an age component. Finally, to note that such narratives, and the metadiscourses that typify them, have a class component in no way entails that films unproblematically reflect, or are symptomatic of, class relations or modes of production.

22. There are academic versions of this stance which, though differing in complexity, also ultimately posit realist representation as iconism of text/apparatus with some more basic reality (e.g., Bazin’s 2004 [1967] causal theory of filmic iconicity, cf. Kracauer 1960; Walton’s [1984] notion of “transparency”; Prince 1996 and Currie 1996 on “perceptual” realism; Baudry 1986 [1970] on the iconism of apparatus to man’s psychical makeup). Ang’s (1985 [1982]) “emotional realism,” while recognizing the importance of emotional resonance and providing a sound critique of propositional content-focused analysis, also operates under a correspondence theory of realism.

23. Thanks to Asif Agha for this reformulation.

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