# Rajini's Finger, Indexicality, and the Metapragmatics of Presence

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which Tamil film stars, so-called mass heroes such as the "Superstar" Rajinikanth, are presenced in theatrical events of their onscreen revelation and apperception. Drawing on film analysis, ethnographic accounts of theatrical reception, and metadiscourse by filmgoers and industry personnel, I focus on Rajini's onscreen pointing gestures in highly charged moments of presencing. As I argue, these data provoke reflection on indexicality—defined by Charles Sanders Peirce as a semiotic ground based on "real connection" or "existential relation," such as copresence, contiguity, or causality—for at issue with Rajini's fingers is precisely the question of his auratic being and presence. Instead of analyzing performative acts of presencing through appeal to the analytic of indexicality, then, what if we interrogate those ethnographic particularities of existence and presence that constitute the ground for indexical relations and effects as such? Such an inquiry would refuse to leave indexicality as a self-evident, pregiven analytic, but instead pose it as an open ethnographic question. Opening up the question of existence and presence, as I show, allows us to unearth other semiotic "grounds" of indexicality and representation beyond those that we all too often take for granted.

Why there is no Rajni [*sic*] statue in Madam Tussaud's yet? Because Rajni's heat would melt all the other statues in the museum.

　　—Rajinikanth meme[1]

Rajinikanth once shot down a German fighter plane with his finger, by yelling, "Bang!"

　　—Post to the Facebook group "Rajinikanth Jokes"[2]

I n April 1999, five months before assembly elections in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the then, and now, preeminent hero-star of the south Indian Tamil film industry, Rajinikanth (born Sivaji Rao Gaekwad in 1950), released *Padaiyappa*. Marking Rajinikanth's twenty-fifth year in the Tamil film industry, *Padaiyappa*—his one hundred fiftieth film—broke all box-office records in Tamil cinematic history (Dhananjayan 2011, 206).[3] It also marked a high point of speculation that Rajinikanth, like a number of other actors from south Indian film industries before him, would imminently enter electoral politics.[4]

In the film's dramatic preclimax, the hero Padaiyappa (played by Rajinikanth) arrives at the marriage venue of Chandru, the son of his cross-cousin Suryaprakash (played by Nasser), a powerful government minister and politician. Padaiyappa has come to stop the marriage and instead marry Chandru to his daughter, whom he recently discovered to be lovers.[5] When Suryaprakash's sister and Chandru's aunt Neelambari (memorably played by Ramya Krishnan), the villainess of the film, threateningly commands her brother and the nearby police—who are there to provide security—to beat up and chase Padaiyappa off, Padaiyappa/Rajini responds by laughing and saying, "Yes dear, I'm a single man, but take a look [−HON.] at all the people who are willing to give their lives to this single man" (Heh! Nān tani āḷ tān-mā, ānāl inta tani āḷukkāka uyirē koṭukka ettanai āḷuṅka irukkāṅka ṇṇu koñca eṭṭippāru).[6] The

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1. See http://www.mindthenews.com/20-memes-that-describe-rajnikanths-super-powers/, last accessed April 6, 2016.

2. See https://www.facebook.com/Rajinikanth.Jokes, last accessed November 4, 2014.

3. *Padaiyappa* released on April 10, 1999, running for 202 days in select theaters (the last such film to pass 200 days until 2007's *Paruthiveeran*), and over 100 days in eighty-six towns (Anandan 2004, 28-397).

4. It was rumored at the time that Rajinikanth was considering retirement and that *Padaiyappa* would be his last venture (Ramachandran 2012, 177). While this film marks the end of a particular era of Rajinikanth films (see Srinivas 2016), it was certainly not his last as a hero. He remains the dominant hero-star of the industry to date. See nn. 12 and 13.

5. Tamil kinship practices have traditionally had a preference for cross-cousin marriage (Clark-Decès 2014; Nakassis 2014).

6. I use the following abbreviations for interlinear glosses: 2pl = second-person plural; 3s = third-person singular; AVP. = adverbial participle; COMPL. = completive aspectual verb (*viṭu*); (-)HON. = (non-)honorific form; INCL. = inclusive first-person plural pronoun; INF. = infinitive form of verb; NEG.IMP.pl = negative imperative plural; OBL. = oblique pronominal form (genitive); PRES. = present tense; PST. = past tense; VOC. = vocative. Tamil is transliterated according to a slightly modified version of the Madras Lexicon (with the ex-

low-angle midshot initially only shows us the "single man," Padaiyappa/Rajini, against a blue cloudless sky (fig. 1, top left). Like Sanzio's Plato, Padaiyappa's/Rajini's arm and index finger rise as he delivers this line, as if pointing to the heavens above (fig. 1, top right). The camera, on a zip crane, rises up and follows after his fingertip as it gestures upward and then behind him (fig. 1, middle left). The continuous shot reveals a massive crowd standing behind Padaiyappa/Rajini (fig. 1, middle right), sprawling down the road leading to the marriage hall (fig. 1, bottom). It is at this crowd that Padaiyappa/Rajini points with his index finger, though only with a little help from the camera, which redirects the vector of his pointing finger toward the crowd with a near ninety-degree pan to the right.

What kind of gesture is this extended index finger? And what kind of finger is it? From this brief description, we can readily apprehend this gesture as a cinematically mediated act of deixis, an act of reference that ostends, or points to, its object: the "people" behind this "single man." Such a finger is a canonical example of what Charles Sanders Peirce called "indexicality," that semiotic ground between a token sign-vehicle and its object based on a "real connection" (*CP* 2.287) or "existential relation" (*CP* 2.243), such as causality, copresence, or contiguity (*CP* 2.306; also see Jakobson [1957] 1984, 43; Silverstein [1976] 1995, 204, 212; Hanks 1990, 1999). In this case, it is the spatial copresence and temporal contiguity in the diegetic world of the film—and on the film set—between Padaiyappa/Rajini's finger, the crowd, and the moving camera that ground this indexical act of deixis.

Yet such a relatively straightforward and intuitive description, while not false, occludes something more profound; it predecides what I hope to show is at issue with Rajini's finger: the question of presence and existence itself, that is, the very possibility of indexicality as a semiotic ground. At play in this scene is a particular metaphysics of presence, a particular conception of what entails existence and what existence entails, one that, in certain measure, is distinct from our default notions of presence and representation, and thus, indexicality.[7] As I detail in what follows, filmic images of south Indian hero-stars like Rajinikanth are not only (or

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ception of commonly transliterated terms, e.g., actors' names, song titles, film titles; see Nakassis 2016a, xliii–xvliii). Significant pauses in speech are indicated by the number of seconds in parentheses (#); .hh indicates a marked in-breath; x:: indicates an elongated vowel. In transcripts, gestures and other paralanguage are indicated in <angle brackets>; RH = right hand, LH = left hand, R = right, L = left.

7. This is not to say that Tamil cinema "has" one such metapragmatics of the image while other cinemas may have another, but rather that—as I've argued elsewhere (Nakassis 2016b, 2016c)—(*a*) such metapragmatics are multiple and contested, and (*b*) this multiplicity and contestation play out in and across images, straining against or complementing and amplifying each other as the case (or image, scene, film, or genre) may be. See n. 26.

**Figure 1.** Rajinikanth's index finger in the preclimax of *Padaiyappa* (1999; director: K. S. Ravikumar).

even primarily) representations of characters in a film, nor even of his absent star body; rather, they are presencings of his being. This presencing constitutes Rajini's fingers *as* indexical signs of a particular sort: performatively potent fingers that not only deictically point in the diegetic world of the film but also point beyond it (as we will see, at the audience qua electorate) and that not only visually point but haptically touch, grab, and encompass their onscreen/offscreen objects (cf. Casetti [1983] 1995; Metz [1987] 1991), incorporating them into the very being of the ultimate ground of those indexical acts: Rajinikanth himself.

This mode of being functions in scenes such as this as what I call a "metapragmatics of presence" (cf. Silverstein [1976] 1995, 1993): a reflexive frame that mediates, and constitutively enables, acts of presencing and thus the very possibility of this kind of indexicality. My suggestion is that metapragmatics do not just construe indexicalities by fixing their value vis-à-vis some context (Silverstein 1993, 1998b) but that they must also, logically and in empirical fact,

construe a semiotic ground *as* an existential relation of some kind or other, specifying what (and how it) "is" such that particular indexical effects become possible at all (Ball 2014). To speak of a metapragmatics of presence—rather than a metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976), here understood as a cultural ontology of being and presence—is to speak of how presence, as a pragmatic process and phenomenological achievement, is metasemiotically mediated in and across particular events. Indexical relations are always mediated by some such metapragmatics.

Accounting for the indexicality of Rajini's fingers, then, demands an ethnographic account of being and presence. What or when, indeed, is a "real connection" or an "existential relation"—that is, what and when are presence and being—such that any variety of indexicality could be possible in the first place? While linguistic anthropologists and other semiotically inclined scholars (see Stasch 2011; Fleming and Lempert 2014; Leone and Parmentier 2014; Chumley 2017 and references therein) have had much to say on the first part of this question—namely, how presence is (meta)semiotically mediated and manifested through indexical and iconic processes of various sorts (most powerfully, in treatments of ritual; see, e.g., Hanks 1990; Silverstein 1993, 2004; Eisenlohr 2015; cf. Tambiah 1985; Taussig 1993; Nakassis 2013)—they have less often focused attention back on the analytics that are employed to reconstruct such forms of mediation, namely, the metaphysics of presence presupposed by the notion of indexicality itself (but see Ball 2014; Nozawa 2015; Bauman 2016). What are, in fact, the concepts of presence and existence that underwrite our default analytic conceptualization of indexicality, and how do they square with our own commitments to the ethnographic study of semiotic mediation? What does it mean to theorize mediation (existential *relations*, real *connections*) by positing as its "ground" seemingly self-evident immediacies (*real* connections, *existential* relations)? As these questions suggest, inherent to indexicality is a tension, an ambivalence that is often unreflected upon.

Instead of making indexicality the way we understand sociocultural modes of existence and presence, then, what if we suspend our assumption that we know what indexicality is and instead interrogate questions of how existence and presence are made to be such that indexical relations and effects become possible? Such an inquiry would refuse to leave indexicality as a self-evident, pregiven analytic with some essential unity but would instead interrogate it as an open ethnographic question. This demands not just an appeal to a notion of semiotic ideology—conceptualizations about what (indexical) signs are— but also requires us to appeal to the metasemiotic grounding of the ground it-

self, to an account of what existence is, which is to say, an ideology of being as an ontology of semiosis (Hanks 1999, 125; Kockelman 2015). As my analysis of Rajini's fingers suggests, opening up the question of existence and presence ethnographically allows us to unearth other flavors and qualities—other semiotic "grounds"—of indexicality and representation beyond those that we all too often take for granted.

## Rajini's Fingers

Rajinikanth's *Padaiyappa* (1999) was the last in a series of big-budget, megahit action films in the 1990s that catapulted Rajinikanth to a new level of stardom, confirming his status as the "Superstar," as he is called, of the Tamil film industry.[8] At this point in his career, Rajini came into his own as a "mass hero" (Pandian 1992; Srinivas 2009; Krishnan 2014; Prasad 2014), a term used in south India for an actor who is a "hero" to the "masses," and whose "mass"—or power, charisma, and popularity—has a gravitational pull on all those caught in his orbit, be they fans or filmmakers, voters or governments. Onscreen, mass heroes are bombastic and larger than life, hypermasculine, and all powerful, subordinating the laws of narrative, realism, and physics to their offscreen status and personage as statusful celebrities (Nakassis 2016a).

South Indian film industries, and the Tamil film industry in particular, are historically known for producing these auratic celebrity figures, figures who are not just film stars but who also harbor a "cine-political" surplus, to use Madhava Prasad's (2014) term: a potency to leverage their screen image so as to segue from the film industry to populist electoral politics. This cine-politics, as Prasad (2014) and S. V. Srinivas (2009, 2013) have argued, is a postindependence phenomenon, made possible both by particular hero-focalizing textual practices and by the historically contingent lamination and realignment of the (Tamil) language community (*sensu* Silverstein 1998a), the electorally organized state (i.e., Tamil Nadu), and the political economy of film distribution and exhibition (as coterminous with both; cf. Chakravarthy 2002, 236). In this subnational postcolonial context, it is the textual body and embodied image of the mass hero-star through which political community has been consistently, though not exclusively, imagined and enacted (cf. Anderson 1991).

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8. The films *Mannan* (1992), *Baashaa* (1995), *Arunachalam* (1997), and *Padaiyappa* (1999) all ran for more than 200 days in the theaters; *Panakkaran* (1990) and *Annamalai* (1992) for 175 days; *Thalapathi* (1991), *Pandiyan* (1992), *Ejaman* (1993), *Uzhaippaali* (1993), *Valli* (1993), *Veera* (1994), and *Muthu* (1996) for over 100 days. Out of the sixteen Tamil films in which Rajinikanth acted in the 1990s, only one failed at the box office: *Nattukku Oru Nallavan* (1991).

The most famous, and first, Tamil hero-star called on by the masses to represent them on and off the screen was M. G. Ramachandran (1917–87), or MGR, the *Puraṭci Talaivar* (Revolutionary leader) and *Makkaḷ Tilakam* (*Tilakam* of the people).[9] MGR dominated Tamil cinema from the 1950s to the late 1970s as its preeminent action hero. From the early 1950s, he was an active and important member of the regional DMK party (Dravida Munetra Kazhagam 'Dravidian Progress Federation'), whose ethnonationalist political platform his early films propagated (Hardgrave 1971, 1973, 1979). With increasing popularity, and with his films more and more oriented around his image as a populist leader (rather than to DMK ideology per se; Sivathamby 1981; Pandian 1992), MGR's relationship with the DMK leadership became strained, eventually leading him in 1972 to leave the party and form his own—the A(IA)DMK (All India Anna [durai] Dravida Munetra Kazhagam)—largely out of his extensive fan club network (Dickey 1993a). Contesting state elections after the Emergency in 1977, MGR went on to serve as Tamil Nadu's chief minister until his death in 1987.[10]

It is from MGR that Rajinikanth inherited his cinematic crown as the predominant mass hero of the film industry (though this was not a foregone conclusion at the time), and to MGR that all other actor-politicians have oriented as citational touchstone: most explicitly perhaps, the actor-politician Vijayakanth (b. 1952; also known as Karuppu MGR 'the dark-skinned MGR') and Rajini's prince-heir, Vijay (b. 1974), whose onscreen and offscreen activities often cite and emulate both MGR and Rajinikanth (Rajanayagam 2015; Nakassis 2016a, 169). MGR's political crown and party, however, were captured by his former onscreen (and rumored offscreen) romantic interest, J. Jayalalitha (1948–2016), who—in a telling indication of the gendering of cine-politics—disavowed (rather than embraced) her cinematic past in order to be groomed for politics by MGR (Prasad 2014, 186–92; cf. Nakassis 2015).

In the mid- and late 1990s, with films like *Padaiyappa* (1999) Rajinikanth seemed poised to enter electoral politics and follow in MGR's footsteps, as indicated by a series of veiled and not-so-veiled onscreen and offscreen references to the state's political situation and, in particular, to Jayalalitha, who had been chief minister of the state from 1991 to 1996 (see, e.g., Tamilvāṉan 2002, 214–

9. A *tilakam* is a mark made on the forehead with red *kungumum* powder; it is usually put for good fortune, when one has been victorious or is about to embark on something great. *Makkaḷ Tilakam* is he who brings victory and good fortune to the people (*makkaḷ*), the pride of the people.

10. The Emergency was a nearly two-year period from 1975 to 1977 during which prime minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency across India. As a result, the then-in-power DMK government in Tamil Nadu was dissolved and the state put under the control of the central government. State elections were held again in 1977 at the end of the Emergency.

28; Sreekanth 2008, 125–32; Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 70–71). Rajini's on-screen allusions—for example, in films like *Annamalai* (1992), *Muthu* (1995), *Arunachalam* (1997), and perhaps most explicitly *Padaiyappa* (1999)—were mirrored by Rajini's own offscreen political comments (famously saying in 1996, e.g., "Even God cannot save Tamil Nadu if AIADMK returns to power") and his public campaigning in support of the anti-AIADMK alliance (which won the 1996 elections in a landslide because, it is often opined, of Rajini's support).

Ultimately, however, to the dismay of his fans, Rajinikanth did not enter into electoral politics, nor has he since, deferring the possibility to some vague future or the will of the divine.[11] Three years after *Padaiyappa*, Rajini released his next film, *Baba* (2002), a politically equivocal film and a shocking box-office failure.[12] Since then, Rajini has only off and on made reference to entering electoral politics, just as his films have less explicitly served as, and been read as, intimations to his political plans.[13]

What interests me here is less the question of why Rajinikanth did not enter electoral politics in the 1990s or since (on this, see Krishnan 2007; Rajanayagam 2015), or how to evaluate the cine-political fate of his image in the post-liberalization context (Prasad 2014; Srinivas 2016) of digital media (Rajadhyaksha 2013), where, arguably, the mass hero is "dead" (Kurai 2012). Rather,

11. As Rajini said at the audio launch of *Lingaa* in 2014, "Everybody wants me to join politics. I'm aware of its depth and danger. I'm not afraid, but just a little hesitant. It's not in my hands. If god is willing, I will serve (the) people" (*Times of India* 2014); also see the article titled "God Will Write My Political Script: Rajinikanth" (Ram Raj 2010) and Sreekanth's (2008, 117, 126, 132, 335–36) reporting of Rajinikanth's various statements to the media regarding his political futures.

12. *Baba* (2002), which was written and produced by Rajinikanth, entextualizes Rajini's ambivalence about politics. Early in the film, when it is suggested by someone that Baba/Rajini start a political party, he scoffs, pretending to spit at the idea. Later in the film, when the main villain (a politician) says that Baba will become one of their guys (i.e., work for him), Baba/Rajini refuses, turning his gaze away from the villain to the camera. He points at the camera and says, "I'm their guy" (Nāṉ avaṅkaḷōtu āḷ), which the print of the film that I have telling subtitles as "I only work for the public," conflating the spectator position, the audience, and "the public." At the end of the film, Rajini ultimately refuses his friends'/fans' demand to ascend the position of chief minister (by using one of his seven wishes from the saint Babaji), giving it to an honest politician instead. He renounces the material world (as represented by a mass of bodies waiting for him to return to them) for a spiritual existence. But when the honest politician is assassinated by the villains, Rajini turns back to humanity while a song recounts, among other things, that while Rajini/Baba doesn't desire political positions or parties he cannot turn away from the Tamil soil. The final frame freezes on Rajini, with "to be continued" (toṭarum) inscribed on the image as the end credits begin to roll.

13. One fan biography quotes Rajini at the audio release of *Chandiramukhi* (2005), Rajini's comeback film after the failure of *Baba*: "I know many said I was finished with *Baba*. I wanted *Baba* to be my last movie. Unfortunately, it did not work in my favour. I had to reconsider my decision to quit, to prove to myself that I was still capable. That's why I decided to act in *Chandramukhi*. Failures must never bog you down" (Sreekanth 2008, 201–2). With this statement in mind (and the irony implied in the last sentence), one might suppose that the ending of *Baba* was precisely Rajini's planned/hoped exit from cinema into electoral politics (cf. Srinivas 2009), a plan undermined both by the economic failure of the film and by the political fallout from it (Sreekanth 2008, 167–68, 367).

my interest is how Rajinikanth's films at the height of his popularity and po-
litical possibility were framed by and staged within a particular metapragmatics
of presence, and how this metapragmatics vests images of Rajinikanth with a
particular kind of indexicality and performativity.

This metapragmatics underwrites Rajini's as yet unredeemed cine-political
potential, lending him an "auratic presence" (Power 2006, 55–95) in the theat-
rical event of his image's appearance. This, as I argue through an analysis of
some of Rajini's gestures below, enables his fingers to figurate the encompass-
ment and incorporation of his audience into his body politic, forging a unique
semiotic "ground" to his thereby indexical acts. As we will see, such performa-
tive, indexical acts are complex achievements, acts whose possibility is stretched
over multiple cinematic texts. While every image of Rajini potentially presences
him, this presence is the effect of a compulsive intertextuality, or interdigitation
we might say, across his extensive film oeuvre. This interdigitation manifests as
and in his cinematic image, in and as his potent pointing fingers.

## Poetics/Politics of Presence

The narrative structure of Rajinikanth's films from the 1990s onward unabash-
edly orbits around his star celebrity and massive personage as the Superstar.
Often negatively characterized in liberal media as a form of "hero worship,"
such films' narratives and poetics "build up" the "heroism" of the star's image,
maximizing his exposure onscreen (in terms of screen time and area taken up
on the screen) and figuring him as a charismatic, all-powerful entity that tri-
umphs over all. Mass heroes never lose to the villain, never fail to achieve their
goals, never die onscreen, nor do they act as mere characters in realist diegetic
worlds—at least, not without risking fan ire and box-office failure (Pandian
1992; Nakassis 2016a, 211). As Prasad (2014) has suggested, such "mass films"
position not only the spectator but also other characters (and actors) in the
film, and even its director (see Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 32, 81, 88, 177),
as the hero-star's "fans" and the hero-star as their *talaivar* (leader), an appella-
tive often used to address and refer to mass heroes such as MGR and Rajini-
kanth.

As I have shown elsewhere (Nakassis 2016a, 188–223), the poetics of this
type of film work through, and over and above, its narrative, with every hero-
character always already an avatar of the star celebrity (Dyer [1979] 1998, 98).
Such a form of textuality is constituted as a series of openings and perforations
of the narrative, of presencings of the star within the world of the film in ways
that consistently strain the narrative coherence and logic of the diegetic world on

its own (non-star-centered) terms.[14] But this, of course, is the point: this is never a world on its own terms, but always already on his terms, a world that serves him and obeys his will, that lifts him up so that he may transcend it and survey its bounties and rectify its ills.

As this implies, each mass-hero film is a vehicle for the avatar of a being that exists across the worlds of his films, that is, as an intertextual principle that is iterated across his films (Chakravarthy 2002; cf. Dyer [1979] 1998; Nozawa 2013). And indeed, Rajini's films of this era and since are highly generic and deeply intertextual ("formulaic" in their plots and the tropes they deploy, as both sanguine industry insiders and exasperated film critics put it), just as the moments when he breaks from the narrative and his character and presences himself as Rajinikanth the Superstar are highly ritualized (in multiple senses: as routinized, as a reflexively zoned site of poetic performativity, and as the source from which other cultural forces emanate; Silverstein 2013). This ritualized intertextuality is central to the metapragmatics that ground moments of Rajini's revelation and presencing and thus the indexical acts that occur in his wake.[15]

Below I explore some of these stereotyped moments that build up the hero and presence the star: the title-credit sequence of his films that heralds his arrival; his introductory sequences, where his face is first made visible; and his encounters with the villains of his films, wherein he delivers his signature "punch dialogues" and "*stylish*" mannerisms (also see Nakassis 2010, 150–220; 2016a, 203–5). These are moments when Rajini steps into the audience's presence, recognizing and addressing them as *in* his presence and as part of his being. By focusing on these moments, I work toward an analysis of Rajini's highly charged and stylized gestures, with an eye to his acts of pointing in particular. While such

14. Consider, e.g., Suresh Krissna's (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 33) comment about the introductory song of his 1992 film *Annamalai*: that the sequence intentionally lacked authenticity and realism (showing a milkman with expensive brand sneakers in a fantastical pastoral landscape) because Krissna wanted to show Rajini with "style" (*style* being the term used most often to typify Rajini's signature presence; see Nakassis 2016a). And further, that no one noticed or commented on such incongruities of narrative and star image because that was the extent of Rajini's "draw." Similarly see Krissna's discussion of the song "Kondaiyil Thazhambu, Nenjiley Vazhapoo" from *Annamalai* (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 42–43; cf. Nakassis 2016a, 209) and his discussion of Rajinikanth's clothing in his 1995 film *Baashaa* (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 143).

15. More technically, through such filmic intertextuality and the metapragmatics of presence it affords, and is afforded by, Rajini's profilmic/screened sinsign acts become indexical legisigns (*CP* 2.246), both dicentized (Ball 2014) as indexes of his real presence and rhematized (Gal 2005) as icons of his essential being; such screen images are reportively calibrated to the profilmic moment and to Rajini's other films, reflexively calibrated to the theatrical moment of their appearance, and nomically calibrated to his transtextual, transcendent personage (Silverstein 1993). Also see Krishnan 2009, 2014 and Kurai 2014, and discussion in the main text below. I thank Richard Parmentier and a reviewer for prompting me to spell this out.

acts are not the only moments when Rajini presences himself, Rajini's gestures are a highly stereotyped and insistently iterated site of his image work, and thus serve as a useful entry point into the (meta)semiotic dynamics that are at issue in this article.

## In the Name and Orbit of the Superstar

Since reaching his apogee in the 1990s, Rajini's appearance in a film is never simply as a representation of a character, for every such film is always already a Rajinikanth film, a star vehicle that takes place in his proper names.[16] While this fact is apparent from the publicity and marketing that appear before the film is released (or even made), it is also entextualized at the paratextual edge of his films, announced at the outset of its reels, as shown in figure 2.

This 28-second animated sequence, with attendant theme music, comes before the film proper begins. It often follows a number of other precursory images—the censor-board certificate, credits to financiers, images honoring very important persons, the production house's introduction logo, the film's title card—though it may also precede them, as in *Padaiyappa* where Rajini's Superstar sequence comes after the censor-board certificate but before both the production house's logo and the film's title card. The first of the artists' and technicians' credits (the last of which is always the director's), this sequence heralds the appearance of the hero-star with his proper (nick)name "Rajni" and sobriquet "Superstar." While Rajinikanth began to be referred to as the Superstar as early as 1978 (in posters and other cinema metadiscourse; see Kalaipuli Thaanu 2007, 172–74), it wasn't until the early 1990s that this star-designating epithet mandatorily appeared onscreen before his films began, starting with the 1992 Suresh Krissna directed film *Annamalai*, which first used the animated sequence depicted in figure 2 (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 89; cf. Kalaippul Thaanu 2007, 174). The use of this sequence has continued since, though with updated graphics and sounds since the mid-2000s.

As Krissna describes in a collection of remembrances about the films he made with Rajinikanth in the 1990s and early 2000s, "Surely Rajnikanth, who

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16. This extends to the frequent pattern of naming of Rajini's film after his hero-character (e.g., *Pandiyan*, *Annamalai*, *Muthu*, *Arunachalam*, *Baashaa*, *Padaiyappa*, *Baba*, *Sivaji*, *Lingaa*, *Kabali*). Exceptions to this are telling. It is reported that *Padaiyappa* (1999) was originally to be named *Neelambari* after the villainess Ramya Krishnan's character. The idea was scrapped, however, for fear of the "backlash from fans" (Reddy 2013). Similarly, Rajini's comeback film after *Baba* (2002), *Chandiramukhi* (2005)—which broke in certain ways from the Rajini formula—is named after a female character in the film. One popular biography of Rajinikanth notes: "Rajini's fans were angry and upset. They were bugged with director Vasu for daring to title the film after a woman despite Thalaivar's presence. Only Vasu's repeated promises that the movie would have the superstar back to where he belonged served as a balming effect" (Sreekanth 2008, 200–201).

**Figure 2.** Rajinikanth's 1990s-era title-credit sequence: "SUPER STAR" is written, dot by dot, onscreen followed by the letters R – A – J – N – I [*sic*] that fly toward the audience, one at a time, accompanied by a laser sound-effected swoosh, and then return altogether to sit between "SUPER" and "STAR." A bright white outline lights up the edges of the word "RAJNI," and then subsides. "RAJNI" then flies off the screen into the background as "ரஜினி" (Rajini), his name in Tamil script, flies in to replace it. It too is then emblazoned by a white outline.

was becoming a phenomenon, warranted a unique logo to go with his name, I thought" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 89). Likening it to the classic James Bond title sequence, Krissna narrates how he pitched the idea to Rajini: "Till now you've been described as the Superstar by a few. But the time has come for the status [i.e., Superstar] to precede your name in the titles. So I'll create a logo and a signature tune for it, which will announce the arrival of Brand Rajni. The impact will be magical" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 90). Supplanting and enveloping the name of the actor, this "status" englobes the film that follows *in the name of Rajini's star image*, as an iteration of what has come before and what is to come in the future, a compilation of his previous characters and more, his transtextual identity as the Superstar.[17]

At this first moment of revelation, audiences clap, throw confetti, whistle, and yell (e.g., "Rajini vāḻka! Talaivar vāḻka" [Long live Rajini! Long live our leader!]), responding to and welcoming this virtual/semi-presencing of the hero-star before he can finally be seen onscreen. As Naren, a close friend and former ardent Rajini fan in his teenage years (in the 1990s) said in 2016, the claps begin with this moment because "it's our [INCL.] leader's name, our leader the Superstar.

17. The hovering, virtual presence of Rajinikanth's transtextual persona is not just a framing paratext of the film, however, but is also continually reiterated within the film and its diegetic worlds, as when, for example, Rajini's characters are referenced by the names of his previous roles or simply by his proper name or epithet. See Nakassis 2016a, 208–9.

Our leader is going to come, a new joy, the film's begun. He's arrived!" (Atu talaivan peyar, talaivan Superstar. Talaivan varappōṟāru, putu uṟcākam, paṭam ārambicciruccu. Vantuṭṭāru!). Here Naren's slippage between narrating a future act of presencing (*varappōṟāru*, 'come.INF.-go.PRES.3s.HON.') and a completive one (*vantuṭṭāru*, 'come.AVP.-COMPL.PST.3s.HON.') figures how Rajini's proper names bear some quantum of his presence. Rajinikanth is in the building.

## Introducing Rajini in the Cinematic Flesh

If the title-credit sequence heralds the hero-star and his "status" as a being that will "rise up and open itself" to the spectator (Heidegger [1938] 2002, 68), in Rajini's 1990s films it is his introduction sequence and opening song that first fully presences him onscreen and in the theater. Consider, for example, the opening scenes of *Baashaa*, Rajinikanth's 1995 super hit (directed by Suresh Krissna). After the requisite credit sequences, the film begins with two scenes where the hero's sidekick, played by Janagaraj, is giving money to the needy (first to a fellow auto-rickshaw driver who needs dowry money on his daughter's wedding day, then to the wife of an auto-rickshaw driver who needs her husband's hospital bills paid) on behalf of an absent Manikkam, an auto-rickshaw driver who the savvy audience can assume is our hero, played by Rajini. Hearing about the big-hearted Manikkam from praising others, seeing his honorable deeds carried out by his associate, these scenes intentionally defer Rajini's appearance, kindling our nagging desire of what we already know to be on our phenomenological horizon: a chance to *see* our hero, to be in his presence (Nakassis 2016a, 163–64).[18]

As with Rajini's Superstar sequence, the deferral of the hero's entry is not simply, or even primarily, the setting up of a narrative space within which the actor is to perform and the hero to enter. This is because this is not a story *within* which our hero acts. Rather, it is a story and a world that exists so that he may come upon us and presence himself. As we see below, it is with the hero's entry that the narrative proper begins.[19] The narrative text, and the very representa-

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18. By the early 1990s, as producer Kalaippuli Thaanu (2007, 182) reports, Rajini himself rejected a screenplay—saying it was fit for Kamal Haasan, the great Tamil hero-actor—because the hero only makes his "entry" "five reels" ("*añcu* reel-*ukku appuṟam tān*") into the film; and, moreover, because his first words would be in Hindi. "Would my fans accept such a thing?," Rajini rhetorically asked Thaanu.

19. *Padaiyappa* presents an exception to this perhaps, with Rajini's "entry" coming after the introduction of several other key actors/characters (the veteran star actor Sivaji Ganesan as Padaiyappa's father and Ramya Krishna as Neelambari), and some amount of background story. Partly this is motivated by Sivaji Ganesan's seniority and status in the industry (note that in the running of the credits over the introductory scenes he gets first billing over Rajinikanth, even if the film has already been announced as a Rajini film by his title-credit sequence). Ramya Krishna/Neelambari's introduction is more complex. We can note that her introduc-

tional space of the film, is inaugurated by and encompassed within the hero's star presence; and while already a foregone conclusion, this presencing still requires a "buildup," a dialectic and fine balance between our pressing desire to see him and its deferral, so that when the hero-star finally does appear our elevated level of excitement finds its equal in the grandiosity of his "entry."[20]

In *Baashaa*, after seeing Manikkam's sidekick act on his behalf and in his name at the hospital, the doctor treating the auto-rickshaw driver voices, in Tamil, the audience's demand: "Where is he (HON.)?" Janagaraj excitedly explains with a knowing smile: "Today is *ayuta pūjai* [a day to worship and give thanks to the tools/machines through which one earns], so our older brother [*aṇṇan*] is at the auto-stand tearing it up [*paṭṭaiya keḷappikkiṭṭiruppāru*]." Cut to the auto-stand (named, as we see later, "MGR auto-stand"). We hear a rousing percussive cadence as we are shown a close-up shot of a hand beating a drum, which zooms past to a picture of the deities Lakshmi, Ganapathi, and Saraswati. The shot then cuts to the ground, pumpkins flying into the frame, broken in worship. We then see a close-up of an auto-driver ecstatically playing the drum. Cut to two women doing a *tiruṣṭi* (evil eye) ritual on an auto-rickshaw with a pumpkin as a small crowd watches on, smiling. We again see the excited faces of the drummers. The two young women throw the pumpkin up in the air, captured by an extreme high-angle shot from above. Cut to the pumpkin flying in the air from below, and then to white sneaker–clad feet running toward the camera. Cut to the pumpkin on its downward descent. We then see a profile midshot of Rajini jumping in the air, with a crowd of auto-rickshaw drivers

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tion itself has a number of build-ups that portray her as an important actress/character, in ways that mirror the hero's introduction (including performing one of Rajini's signature *style*s with sunglasses), as do side characters' later typifications of her as *bantā* (show-offy) and *style* (if gendered in telling ways). I would suggest that her introduction before Rajini serves to stage a first iteration of their confrontation and competition (which is the backbone of the narrative plot and its political allegory; see n. 35). This both acts to delay Rajini's entry (and increase our expectation) but also to build up the audience's sense of Neelambari's arrogance and villainy (as the structural inversion of Rajini's heroism). This is consonant with K. S. Ravikumar's original intent to name the film *Neelambari*, after the villainess, rather than *Padaiyappa*, after the hero (see n. 16).

20. In *Baashaa*, Rajini's "entry" is not the first we see of him on the screen. Before Rajini's title sequence a series of shots linked to the production house are shown: a picture of the deceased DMK political leader Annadurai, the name of the production house (Sathya Movies), a photo of the producer, R. M. Veerappan felicitating J. Jayalalitha, and newsreel footage of MGR getting out of his car and being garlanded. It also includes footage, shot from the side so we can't directly see his face, of Rajini throwing flowers on and worshipping the image of MGR. After Rajini's title-credit sequence run a series of revolving photographs of Rajini's different "getups" in *Baashaa*, while the film credits appear onscreen. While fans would have whistled and clapped for Rajini's title-credit sequence and the photographs of his various getups, they wouldn't for his initial appearance with MGR, reported Naren, my friend and former Rajinikanth fan. When I asked why, he noted that the production house's credits were something that came in all their films, so there was nothing new in it; people were used to it. (Perhaps some MGR fans might clap and whistle, he suggested.) By contrast, the revolving photographs were new, something that they hadn't seen before. Hence their excitement.

eagerly looking on and cheering. Rajini smashes the pumpkin with his head (fig. 3).[21]

Next, we see a midclose frontal shot of Rajini landing on the ground. In slow motion, Rajini passes before the camera in his descent, his eyes, still unseen by us, downward cast at the ground. At the nadir of his landing his brow is just below the frame of the shot. As he slowly bounces back up, the camera frames him in a full-frontal bust shot, his eyes now directly looking at the camera, his face smiling. The film seems to slow down even further as his hands raise in a *vaṇakkam* gesture (a traditional gesture of greeting and worship/supplication), his smiling eyes lingering on us as we linger on him (fig. 4). This particular series of shots, as Naren noted to me in a conversation about *Baashaa*, is the peak (*uccam*) of the film's introductory sequence, its affective zenith. With this near-frozen image, the drums segue into the introductory song, "Naan autokaaran" (I'm an auto-driver) and its accompanying dance sequence.

In revelatory moments such as this, the hero-star's appearance onscreen is not just a sight to behold. It offers an occasion for interaction with him. As with Rajini's title-credit sequence (though with more intensity), Rajini's "entry" in the theater is greeted by the audience with whistling, clapping, throwing confetti, jumping up and down, touching the screen, and yellingly addressing and praising him: "*Talaivā!*" (Leader [voc.]!) or even "*Manitakaṭavuḷ!*" (Human god!), as Naren reported from his remembrances of watching *Baashaa* in the 1990s (fig. 5;[22] also see Srinivas 2009; Gerritsen 2012).[23] (I heard similar vocatives yelled in the theater at the 6:00 a.m. first-day show of Rajini's 2016 film, *Kabali*, in Madurai.)

21. It's crucial in the ritual that the pumpkin be smashed so as to release the negative energy, or *tiruṣṭi*, that is absorbed by it during the ritual (Dean 2013). This negative energy is the result of visually mediated desire for the ritually cleansed object. That Rajini breaks the pumpkin with his head is, presumably, a sign that he is so powerful that nothing will happen to him. Indeed, touching such a pumpkin after it's broken is believed to cause bodily harm, which it certainly doesn't do to either Rajini or Manikkam.

22. The video source listed in the caption for fig. 5 is not from a screening in the 1990s but some twenty years later at a theatrical rerun. The practices described in the main text above, however, occur with contemporary mass heroes (including Rajinikanth) and are confirmed from reportage of the reception of Rajini's films during their original theatrical runs (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 89, 143). Naren, my friend and a former Rajini fan, noted that when *Baashaa* is rerun in Madurai (where he lives) he still makes sure to see it. Audience response at such reruns, he said (perhaps with some exaggeration), is exactly the same as it was when the film was first released, as is the "feeling" that the film gives him. Every time feels like the first time seeing the film, he said, even though he has seen it close to fifty times in the theater. On interaction with Rajini/*Baashaa* in the film's digitally remastered 2017 theatrical release, see https://youtu.be/KM-sXr9NDzA.

23. Joyojeet Pal (personal communication, October 29, 2016) reports from his research with Rajinikanth fans for the documentary *For the Love of a Man* (Kalsy and Pal 2015) that fans and projectionists (who worked in the 1980s) often claim that in the 1980s fan audiences would force the projectionist to freeze the frame of the first appearance of Rajini's face so as to perform *tiruṣṭi* rituals on the image. Only after this would the film continue rolling, and the narrative begin/continue. Pal suggested that this practice became incorporated into later Rajini films such as *Annamalai* and *Baashaa* as freeze-frame shots.

**Figure 3.** Enter Rajini: Rajini/Manikkam smashing the *tiruṣṭi* pumpkin in *Baashaa* (1995; directed by Suresh Krissna).

This image responds. As figures 4 and 5 show, this proleptic response takes the form of an aesthetics of frontality that continually shows us the eyes and face of the hero-star as he looks straight at us (Kapur 1987; cf. Leone and Par-



**Figure 4.** Rajinikanth's revelation: greeting the audience in *Baashaa* (1995) after making his grand entry.

**Figure 5.** Screenshots of fans throwing confetti, clapping, and yelling praise at Rajini's introduction sequence in a re-screening of *Baashaa*; source: https://youtu.be/RKJKHxsiqn0, uploaded by Vijay Andrews, November 6, 2011.

mentier 2014, S5). It may also include direct address to the audience or even reference to the time and place of theatrical viewing,[24] as with the image that Rajini's fans are addressing in figure 5 which, as we saw above, finishes with a traditional gesture of greeting (*vaṇakkam*) to the camera/audience (fig. 4).

24. To take a more recent example, consider Rajini's film *Lingaa* (directed by K. S. Ravikumar), which was released on December 12, 2014, Rajini's sixty-fourth birthday. The film features a flashback scene where a cake is wheeled out to celebrate the birthday of one of the two characters that Rajini plays, offering the audience a moment to celebrate Rajini's birthday with him, in his "vicinity," as one English-language reviewer, Baradwaj Rangan (2014), put it. A disappointed Rangan notes: "Oh, there was one other scene that ushered in much excitement. It's when we learn it's the birthday of the Rajinikanth character in the flashback. A cake is wheeled out. People sing the birthday song. Fans watching Lingaa on its day of release, December 12 (Rajinikanth's birthday), will enjoy being in the superstar's vicinity as he cuts his birthday cake. But that's just a temporary high. Next time, how about a film that leaves us with happy memories on other days as well?"

The director of *Baashaa*, Suresh Krissna comments on this shot: "We had Rajini looking into the lens with a smile, which made viewers feel he was looking directly at them, and putting his hands together as if to greet them. At the editing table, I found the gesture so effective that I extended the screen time of the shot. And it secured the response I sought!" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 143).[25]

When Rajinikanth is onscreen in such moments, he is *present*.[26] He is close to us. Rajini is with us in the theater: seeing us, addressing us, touching us. This is not just a physical co-presence. It is also an affective intimacy, even cosubstance. As Naren noted, when you see Rajini looking at you, when he [HON.] comes down from the screen to talk to you (*iṟaṅki pēsuvāru*), to directly order you (*nēraṭiyā* order *pōṭuvāru*), we feel that are we in the presence not only of a "big man and a great leader" (*oru periya āḷu, periya talaivan*), but also of "our [INCL.] elder brother" (*namma aṇṇan*), "someone from our house, someone that we're really close with" (*namma vīṭle oruttar, romba nerukkamānavar*; cf. Dickey 1993b, 351, 356).

To say that Rajini is with us in the theater, then, is to say that the sign of Superstar Rajinikanth is, in some measure, Superstar Rajinikanth himself. As Vivek, a middle-class friend and Rajini fan in his early twenties, put it to me in 2008, echoing Suresh Krissna's own statement of the design of such images, when he saw Rajini's introductory shot in his 2008 film *Kuselan* he felt he was in the presence of a divinity, an affective stance to the image also reported by Naren in reflecting on seeing *Baashaa* in the 1990s. Naren said, "It's like he's looking at us. They always have a close-up of Rajini. They'll show his eyes. . . . A lot of people say it: seeing his eyes is like seeing a god" (Nammaḷe pākkuṟa mātiri irukkum. Rajinikku eppavumē close-up vaippāṅka. Kaṇṇayē kāṭṭuvāṅka. Niṟaiya pēr solluvāṅka: avaru kaṇṇa pāttavuṭanēyē oru kaṭavuḷai pārttatu mātiri anta viṣayam).

So different from our classical understanding of representation—namely, that the sign is not its Object—this understanding of the cinematic sign is often framed in academic accounts—and in the accounts by fans themselves, as with Vivek and Naren above (also see Kalsy and Pal 2015)—by appeal to the Hindu notion of *darśan* (Eck 1997; Jacob 2009; cf. Taylor 2003; Ram 2008, 55–56;

25. Also see Krissna and Rangarajan (2012, 33–34) on a similar shot from "Vandhaenda Paalkaaran" from Krissna's 1992 film, *Annamalai*, a shot that the *Baashaa* (1995) shot references.

26. This is one kind of presence among many (Power 2006), and is productively contrasted with the presence of the actor in occasions when encountered offscreen. (I thank Michael Lempert for pushing me to articulate this point.) In moments such as face-to-face interaction with the person, and in contrast to the presence of the hero-star onscreen or in public crowds (e.g., on shooting spots), fans are often hyperdeferential, reserved, and contained. Rajinikanth is equally deferential in such occasions, enacting his famous offscreen persona as a humble, "simple" person (see Nakassis 2016a, 212–17).

Nakassis 2016a, 271 n. 4), that tactile visual modality through which devotees and deity transact substance, where the idol-sign *is* its Divine Object (cf. Armstrong 1971, 1981; Belting [1990] 1994; Leone and Parmentier 2014). Whether we hold that such a modality of vision is fundamentally religious in nature or that the religious and the cinematic here share a convergent semiotic ideology and phenomenology (to say nothing of participation framework), what I want to underscore is that such images are less something to be seen as such (at least, as we typically understand vision) than they are figurations of, and thus in certain contexts are, haptic forces that entangle and encompass, reach out to grab and act on who and what is seen (cf. Davis 1999; Pinney 2002; Jain 2007; Shulman 2012, 51–53).[27] As Naren said, "In [Rajini's] eyes, there is some kind of power" (Etō oru sakti irukku kaṇṇule).

It is this presence that grounds Rajini's onscreen indexical acts, rendering them not simply past performances captured on film and projected for us here and now but perpetually performative image-acts in the moment of their apperception. When Rajini greets and gestures (or even cuts cake; see n. 24), the indexical ground of his fingers, hands, and words are not simply on the set before the camera, nor are they simply transposed into the fictional world of the film. Rather their ground is also, as a function of these multiply laminated *origo*s,[28] immanent in the theater itself, scaled to the chronotopic envelope of the moment of the spectator's engaged regard, to the viewer and his relationship to Rajini and, ultimately, to Rajini himself, as I discuss in the next section.

At the end of *Baashaa*'s introductory song, "Naan autokaaran," we are left with a final shot (fig. 6). In it, Rajini's body is doubled. One Rajini is facing us, the other with his back to us. Each turns toward and away from us in a loose oscillating synchrony, singing the chorus's rhythmic refrain ("*accukka gumukku*") until (almost) in unison each reaches his hand out to grab the other side of the screen while yelling "Ha!" on the final beat of the song. With this cry, with these two Rajini's looking at and reaching toward us, the moving image comes to a standstill, frozen onscreen for a near second in poetic parallelism to Rajini's introductory revelation (which inaugurated the song; fig. 4). With the fourth wall

27. As a reviewer of this article productively suggested, we might think this modality of semiosis—and thus Rajinikanth's image work—with recent theorizations of "animation" (Silvio 2010) and "characterization" (Nozawa 2013), where rather than identities being performed by an actor, characters are animated, life breathed into them like the deity who manifests as any number of interdiscursively (and ontologically) linked avatars (Silvio 2010, 426). As Nozawa (2013) discusses, the characters that proliferate in contemporary Japan are less representations of fictional subjects than sui generis entities that stand liminally between the onscreen and offscreen.

28. The *origo* is the zero-point of reckoning an indexical sign (Hanks 1990, 38; Agha 2007, 39); for example, the default origo for a personal pronoun such as "I" is the speaker of the event of uttering the token-sign "I." The origo of an indexical sign can be shifted, as in represented speech constructions or film fictions.

**Figure 6.** "Ha!" Rajini at the end of the introductory song "Naan autokaaran" (I'm an auto-driver) from *Baashaa* (1995), multiplied onscreen and reaching out to touch you.

not just broken but crossed by Rajini's outstretched fingers, the introductory song of *Baashaa* concludes, and the story begins.

### Dialogues That "Punch," Fingers That "Do *Style*"

Rajinikanth's most elaborated and emblematic hand gestures are typified by his Tamil film publics as "*style*" (Nakassis 2016a). *Style* is an English borrowing whose meaning in Tamil is closely associated with Rajini (ibid., 7), characterized by his fans (as well as by the characters in his films) as simply what Rajini does and is, though it is more typically used to denote any number of his idiosyncratic, signature actions: from his finger-twirling gestures to the way he rotates his sunglasses around in circles while putting them on; from the way he flips his bangs back to the way he throws a towel onto his shoulders. Through their energized elaboration and enthusiastic flair, such acts of *style* reflexively draw attention to themselves as acts by Rajinikanth, functioning as quasi-proprietary signs of Rajini's personage ("Brand Rajini," as director Suresh Krissna called it above) in all its "pathological particularity," as Venkatesh Chakravarthy (2002) has put it.

   Rajini's *stylish* gestures often go along with his "punch dialogues": poetic and forceful aphorisms and catchphrases that every Rajinikanth film since the 1990s has featured three, four, five, or even six times. Such *stylish* speech acts are also repeated across films, both by Rajini and by other film actors (Nakassis 2016a, 207–12). In the diegesis, such *stylish* dialogues and fingers typically punctuate the hero's confrontations with and triumphs over his enemies, forming a poetic motif that tracks alongside both the hero's narrative and the film's build up of Rajini's star image.

Consider an example from the first half of *Padaiyappa* (1999), where Padaiyappa/Rajini, after thrashing his paternal uncle's (*cittappā*) henchmen (brought to beat up Padaiyappa and force him to sign over some of his family's property), scolds his uncle, delivering a philosophical monologue on justice that concludes with the film's signature punch dialogue. He sets up the punch dialogue by saying, in Tamil, "I don't interfere with anyone, but if anyone crosses my path . . ." In lieu of spelling out what happens to those who cross his path, Rajini/Padaiyappa rapidly spins a cigar around his upward-turned index finger for nearly three seconds (moving so quickly as to generate a swoosh sound effect) (fig. 7), his power and prowess intimidating his uncle and shocking and impressing his cousins.

Rajini/Padaiyappa proceeds to flick the cigar into his mouth from a distance (Rajini's most repeated and emblematic act of *style*), the shot repeated twice, first in a medium close-up and then in a medium shot. After another cutaway



**Figure 7.** Rajini/Padaiyappa rapidly spins a cigar on his index finger for 2.8 seconds of reel time, intimidating his uncle and shocking and impressing his cousins in *Padaiyappa* (1999). Arrows are added by the author.

to his awestruck cousins, the camera cuts back to Rajini/Padaiyappa, who strikes a match off his uncle's shoulder and lights his cigar. Rajini/Padaiyappa then says to his uncle, in Tamil, "You understand, right?," and turns away from him. The camera then cuts to an extreme low-angle, mid-close shot of Rajini's body as he rapidly turns back around (again, with an accompanying swoosh sound effect). This exact shot is repeated twice and spliced together by a jump cut, figurating Rajini's speed and potency and indicating that something important is about to happen. Rajini then delivers the film's punch dialogue, his previously dry, unaffected voice dropped in pitch and drenched with grave reverb: "En vaḻi tani vaḻi. Maṟakkātīṅka" (My way/path is a unique way/path. Don't forget [it]).[29] He begins the punch dialogue with his hands at rest as he says, "En vaḻi" (My way/path; fig. 8,*a*). This is followed by a 1.5-second pause in speech during which his right arm quickly moves to his left and then rapidly sweeps across his body (along with a swoosh sound effect), his palm and fingers rigidly extended and facing downward (fig. 8,*b*). His fingers then curl as his index finger remains *styl-ish*ly extended. His wrist moves up and then down as he says, in synchrony with the gesture, "*tani vaḻi*," his finger iconically tracing his "unique way/path" (fig. 8,*c*). Following a near second-long pause, he then finishes the punch dialogue with a caution, "Maṟakkātīṅka" (Don't forget [it]), as his wrist and upwardly pointing index finger wave back and forth—right, then left, then back right (each stroke's endpoint syncing with the stressed syllables *ma*, *kkā*, and *tīṅ*), symbolically diagramming the negative imperative (fig. 8,*d*).

In delivering punch dialogues such as this one, which precede and follow from his physical displays of dominance (in this scene, the dialogue comes after he has single-handedly dispatched ten hired rowdies), Rajini fully reveals his "mass" (and again, to ear-splitting whistles, claps, and yelling from the audience). Critical to this revelation are Rajini's *stylish* fingers.

Underwriting the performativity of such acts is their citationality. As noted above, Rajini's punch dialogues, like his *stylish* finger-twirling gestures, are incessantly repeated within and across his films (and by other actors as well), forming dense intra- and inter-textual linkages that are eagerly expected by fan audiences. Like Rajini's proper names, such interdiscursive signs come to function as rigid designators—signs whose reference is indexically "fixed" by/to a putative baptismal moment and thereby stabilized across "possible worlds" (Kripke 1981)—linking each iteration back to, even as they build up, the identity/essence

29. In the film's other iterations of this punch dialogue, Rajini finishes the dialogue, along with the same gestures, by saying, in Tamil, "Don't cross (my path)" or "Don't intervene/meddle (in it)."
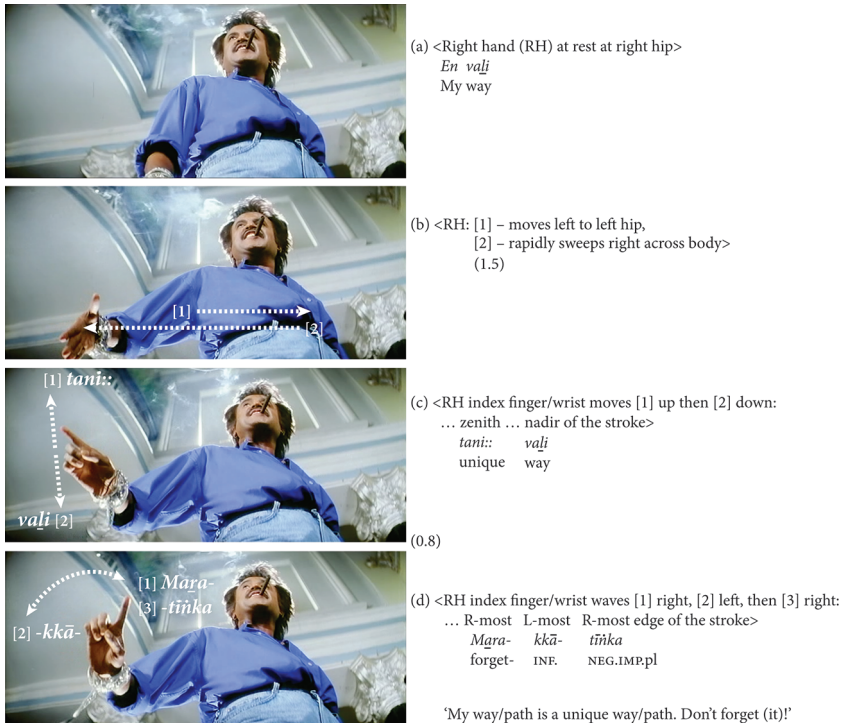
(a) <Right hand (RH) at rest at right hip>
*En vaḻi*
My way

(b) <RH: [1] – moves left to left hip,
      [2] – rapidly sweeps right across body>
      (1.5)

(c) <RH index finger/wrist moves [1] up then [2] down:
      … zenith … nadir of the stroke>
      *tani::*     *vaḻi*
      unique     way

(0.8)

(d) <RH index finger/wrist waves [1] right, [2] left, then [3] right:
      … R-most   L-most   R-most edge of the stroke>
      *Maṟa-*   *kkā-*   *tīṅka*
      forget-    INF.    NEG.IMP.pl

'My way/path is a unique way/path. Don't forget (it)!'

**Figure 8.** Rajini's punch dialogue and accompanying gestures from *Padaiyappa* (1999). Gesture and paralanguage are in <angle brackets> and correspond with superimposed numbers and arrows in the film stills to the left; the Tamil punch dialogue is in the line below (onset of syllables/words aligned with the co-occurring gesture annotation in the line above), followed below by the interlinear gloss (see n. 6 for abbreviations). Right (R) and left (L) are from Padaiyappa/Rajini's perspective.

that holds them together (Žižek 1989), namely, Rajini's transtextual personage as the Superstar (Chakravarthy 2002, 231; Nakassis 2016a, 210–11).

Rajinikanth's mass and his auratic presence in any particular token event of viewing, then, are not present in any simple or immediate way. Not simply mediated by the camera, diegesis, and the screen, Rajini's presence is deeply mediated through multiple not-nows and not-heres that culminate in this moment here and now. This presence is entailed by the fact that Rajini's face, fingers, and voice—as well as his characters and character names, dialogues, musical motifs, visual tropes, shots, and mis-en-scène (Nakassis 2016a, 209)—are multiplied within and repeated across and outside of his films (159–87), each reanimation of him by him conserving and citing the others through their repetition.

As the hero-actor Karthi Sivakumar put it,[30] describing the audience for whom such moments give pleasure, "They call it film history. You have a history of films. And that works when you say a dialogue. When you say something, he [the viewer] imagines (all) the others characters are all saying that line." And using the same finger, we might add.

Out of this citational interdigitation every token image, gesture, and utterance by Rajini instantiates and *is* his auratic presence, that mass that has accumulated and been curated over more than 150 films over multiple decades. As Rajini's memorable punch dialogue from *Baashaa* states alongside his rapidly twirled, raised index finger: "If I say it once, it's like I said it a hundred times" (Nān oru taṭave sonnā nūṟu taṭave sonna mātiri; fig. 9).

Rajini's *stylish* fingers, then, among a battery of other poetic signs, suture together his various manifestations into a single Form, one that ascends beyond any particular film text so that it may hover above and manifest in every single one of them. Such fingers don't simply point to some referent in their deictic field or iconically outline its contours. They also tangle and laminate multiply superimposed indexical relations: between Rajini's fingers and the deictic field within the diegesis (and the film set), between and across episodes within the film text, across his films, between his films and those of other heroes who cite him, between the screen diegesis and theater exhibition, and beyond. The most basic of these relations is also their telos: Superstar Rajinikanth himself. Indeed, the ultimate ground and final referent of Rajini's finger is Rajini, as his films not infrequently remind us at their outset with shots of him pointing to himself as he tells us his character's (and the film's) name (figs. 10–11).[31]

If, then, Rajini's finger is contiguous with his audience (and even with "himself"), it is because of a citational relay through a series of other scenes and other fingers, a relay that spirals around and always returns to Rajini himself, not as a body, nor as a filmic image of a body, but as an essence that commutes itself within a larger political economy of cinema, continually splitting, multiplying, and disseminating itself on, across, and outside the screen. In the next section I show how this essence, by being immanent in the moment of its

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30. Interview with actor Karthi Sivakumar by the author, Chennai, September 13, 2011.

31. Such auto-referential gestures, co-occurring with self-naming speech acts and audience-directed gaze, suture the star into the narrative through an intratextual transitive set of co-referential baptisms, from the actor-star's title sequence (in effect, "This film [*Annamalai, Arunachalam, Padaiyappa*] is a Superstar Rajini film") to the hero-star's "entry" (where he sings "I, Rajini am Padaiyappa, Arunachalam, etc., the eponymous hero-character of this film"). In these films, the star (re)births and then (re)baptizes himself as his character.

**Figure 9.** Iterations of a punch dialogue: "If I say it once, it's like I said it a hundred times" from *Baashaa* (1995). Of this punch dialogue (authored by Rajini himself), the director of the film, Suresh Krissna notes that, "Rajini doesn't use the power-packed line too many times in the film [NB: only four times], but every time he does, force—both physical and mental—emanates from it" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 147).

onscreen revelation, entails a particular kind of "existential relation" for Rajini's acts of pointing: a relation of encompassment and incorporation.

## Standing Behind and Thus *In* the Body Politic of the Superstar

As we have seen, Rajinikanth's finger is used in a number of different ways, many of which are not deictic pointing gestures: as a dance move, as a gesture of emphasis or threat, as a salute, as an icon of some linguistically denoted en-



**Figure 10.** "I'm Arunachalam, man!," from the opening Tamil lyric of the introductory song "Athanda ethanda," *Arunachalam* (1997; director: Sundar C.).

**Figure 11.** "My name is Padaiyappa!," from the eponymous introductory song "En peru Padaiyappa," *Padaiyappa* (1999).

tity, or simply as a *stylish* mannerism. What I suggest in what follows, however, is that these ostentatious fingers cannot be thought of independently of Rajini's acts of ostension (and vice versa), for it is through his ostending index finger that Rajini's presence can encompass the scene of his appearing. This encompassment, I argue, enables Rajini's cine-political potential.

This encompassment is perhaps most manifest in acts of Rajini pointing directly at his Tamil audience, often while describing himself as nourished by them, as one of them, or as working on their behalf. Such overtures are important precisely because Rajinikanth is not ethnolinguistically Tamil. He is from a Maharashtrian background, born in the neighboring state of Karnataka. While ethnolinguistic belonging has never been a criterion for a mass hero standing in for the polity (MGR too was known not to be ethnolinguistically Tamil), in Tamil Nadu—where electoral politics has been defined around the Dravidian movement's championing of the Tamil language (Ramaswamy 1997; Bate 2009)—alignment with the Tamil language community is. By professing allegiance to the language community while pointing at what is figured in such films as its theatrical proxy—the audience—Rajinikanth enacts both his encompassment by the language community and his encompassment of it, entering it as a stranger king while staying on as intimate kin (as Naren noted above), standing beyond and above while also within it.

Consider, for example, a shot (fig. 12, top) from the introductory song of *Annamalai* (1992), "Naan vantheendaa, palkaaran" (I, the milkman, have arrived, man!), which is also reprised as the concluding shot of the film (fig. 12, bottom).[32]

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32. In *Annamalai* (1992) and many other films from this era, Rajini's character has a humble subaltern profession; in this film, a milkman.

**Figure 12.** Top: shot of Rajini pointing at the camera/audience as he sings "Ennai vāl̲a vaittatu Tamil̲ pālu" (I have been nourished and raised by the milk/essence of the Tamil people); from the introductory song, "Naan vantheendaa, palkaaran" (I, the milkman, have arrived, man!) of *Annamalai* (1992); bottom: the last shot of *Annamalai*. This final scene reprises the introductory song and ends with Rajini singing the same line and pointing gesture as above. When Rajini completes the line, the image freezes for nine seconds as the phrase ". . . Tamil̲ pālu" echoes and the production house's credit ("A Kavithalayaa Production") appears onscreen.

Both iterations of the song highlight a medium shot of Rajini smiling and facing the camera/audience as his index finger points at them. As director Suresh Krissna reports having told Rajini during shooting, the shot would "thrill" the "masses . . . because it will seem as though you are looking directly at them" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 33–34). "For viewers, it established a direct connection with their hero on screen" (34; also see discussion of *Baashaa*'s introductory song above). In both iterations, the shot co-occurs with the same line of the song (penned by the lyricist Vairamuthu "to boost Rajini's image as a mass hero of the Tamils" [32]). Rajini/Annamalai, the milkman announces, "I have been nourished and raised by the milk [or essence] of the Tamil people" (Ennai vāl̲a

vaittatu Tamiḻ pālu).[33] The end of the line, "Tamiḻ pālu" (literally "Tamil milk," or "the essence of the Tamil people"), is sung as he produces the pointing gesture at the audience. In the final shot of the film, the image freezes on this gesture for nine seconds, as if to fix the audience as the permanent indexical target of Rajini's finger,[34] the phrase "Tamiḻ pālu" echoing seemingly into infinity, temporally draped over Rajini's ever smiling face and pointing index finger. This is the last image and sound of the film.

Important is how both shots are close enough to highlight Rajini gazing and pointing at the audience—as the ones who brought him into being with their milk/essence—but far enough to allow the viewer to see various approving onlookers who ratify this gesture by approvingly standing behind Rajini: in the first instance, his diegetic mother (played by the late veteran Tamil actress Manorama); in the second, a crowd of onlookers that include his mother, sister, lover, sidekick, and best friend/erstwhile rival. As Rajini addresses the theatrical audience, these intimate onlookers are themselves positioned as an audience for his outward-facing act of direct address, functioning as a mirror to our own act of seeing (and perhaps admiring approval of) Rajini (also see fig. 13).

Such acts of pointing at the audience position the audience not as simple spectators (i.e., those who watch the screen from its other side) but as those who, by being pointed at and by seeing proxies of themselves watching Rajini pointing with approval and admiration, welcome Rajini into the consanguineal ethnolinguistic community as their (adopted) kin and willing martyr. In doing so the film invites its spectators to pass through the screen so as to stand behind and with Rajini. And we might add, so that Rajini may come to stand as their political representative. As Naren said of such scenes, "When he's looking at and speaking to the people, we'll think like, he's a hero for us, a hero who speaks for us" (Makkaḷai pāttu pēsum pōtu, nammaḷukkāna hero, nammaḷukkāka pēsuṟāru appaṭi nnu ninaippōm). Rajini speaking to us, for us; being for

33. On the significance of milk as a substance, Valentine Daniel (1984, 272) notes that for Tamil Hindu dietetics, cow's milk is considered the essence of all food; Margaret Trawick (1990, 39) notes that mother's milk is the purest food, a powerful even dangerous embodiment of her love for the child (93–94); Fruzzetti et al. (1982, 13) further suggest that blood (often opposed to milk), becomes mother's milk when condensed in the body, and it is this blood/milk substance that forms the child as a person.

34. Rajini's *Baashaa* (1995) similarly concludes with its opening song, the film ending with a freeze-frame on Rajini and the other dancers/auto-drivers facing the camera, smiling with their joined hands raised in the air; printed over the final frozen image is *vaṇakkam* (a term for greeting and leave-taking) as the lyric "Nān eppoḻutum ēḻaikkellām sontakkāran ṭā" (I'm always a relative to the poor) echoes over the image. A number of Rajinikanth films from the 1990s feature some variation of this ending (i.e., a freeze-frame of Rajini looking at, smiling at, winking at, or saluting the camera/audience as one of the film's songs plays over it), such as *Panakkaran* (1990), *Pandyan* (1991), *Uzhaippali* (1993), *Arunachalam* (1997), and *Padaiyappa* (1999).

**Figure 13.** Rajini walking toward the camera (top) while pointing at (bottom) and singing to us in the song "En peru Padaiyappa" (My name is Padaiyappa!), from *Padaiyappa* (1999): "Is it not right for me to sacrifice my body and soul to the cause of the Tamil language and people?" (En uṭal poruḷ āviyai Tamiḻukkum Tamiḻarkkum koṭuppatu muṟai allavā?).

us, and now even one of us—here we find a complex transposition and series of transactions across the screen's multiple sides. The aura of Rajinikanth, presenced through the screen by his fingers, acts to incorporate this indexed object—his audience—into his complexly mediated being, entailing a consubstantiation between sign and object that makes this object into his image (fig. 14; cf. *CP* 2.748).

As figurated in these moving images, to be in Rajini's presence is to stand *behind* and thus *in* him, as a piece of his mass, his body politic. Here, the "existential connection" of Rajini's index finger is one of encompassment and incorporation, a replication and extension of his cinematic and political will.

Let me conclude this discussion by looking in detail at one final set of ostensive gestures, those of the preclimax sequence of *Padaiyappa* (1999) with which I began the article. In this sequence, the existential connection of incorporation

**Figure 14.** Made into his image: the images in this figure are from the colorful and spectacularly picturized song "Balle Lakka," the opening song of *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007), the chorus of which articulates an updated neoliberal vision of Rajini as developmental savior and leader of Tamil Nadu (the lyrics accompanying these shots translate as "Hey Bale Lakka Bale Lakka; To Salem, Madurai, Madras, Trichy, or Thiruthani; Hey Bale Lakka Bale Lakka; For all the people, if our elder brother [Rajini] comes, the whole of Tamil Nadu will become America!"). The bodies that stand behind, beside, and in front of Rajini have tiger heads and makeup (a cinematic retooling of the folk dance *puliyāṭṭam*, or "tiger dance," the tiger being a symbol of ferocity and power), their naked torsos each adorned with a unique rendering of Rajini's face (instead of a tiger's, as in *puliyāṭṭam*). During this sequence, the feline bodies jump up and down, causing the plump paunches of the male dancers, these Rajini simulacra—whose hearts and guts have been painted over with Rajini's smiling face—to nod along with Rajini, their model, as he frenetically points in every direction, including at the camera/audience (right).

and encompassment that I have been describing is reflexively narrativized by the film, functioning as an allegory for the very cine-politics that it performatively enacts.

At the time of its release, *Padaiyappa* as a whole, and the preclimax sequence in particular, was transparently seen by audiences and the press as a political commentary, with the film's female villain taken as a stand-in for the for-

| 1 | *Pātteyā* [-HON.], *Paṭai-yappāvuṭaiya paṭaiye?* (0.8) | <hands behind back> | Did you see [-HON.] it, Padai-yappa's army (*paṭai*)? (0.8) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | *Itu summa* trailer *tān mā.* (0.3) | <lifts LH, palm & fingers parallel to ground; slightly lowers head & hand (fingers pointing slightly downward) just before "*tān*," resting at "*mā*" ('dear')> | This is just the trailer, dear. (0.3) |
| 3 | | (0.5) <raises LH index finger & closes other fingers; traces a circle clock-wise three times, then holds with the index finger pointing upwards> | (0.5) |
| | Main picture *nī innum pākkale.* | | You still haven't seen the main picture. |
| | (0.7) | <puts LH behind back> | (0.7) |
| 4 | *Pāttē,* | <hands behind back> | Having seen it, |
| | (0.5) | <raises LH, palm vertical, fingers extended> | (0.5) |
| | *āṭippōyiṭuve.* | <LH quick wrist shake back and forth> | you'll tremble. |

**Figure 15.** Rajini/Padaiyappa's "trailer" for the "main picture." NB: the onset of the gesture in the center column syncs with the dialogue and pauses in the left column. English glosses of the Tamil lines are in the right column.

mer actress and political leader J. Jayalalitha.[35] As the reader will recall, in the preclimax sequence after the villainness Neelambari (read: Jayalalitha) threatens to have Padaiyappa/Rajinikanth run off, Rajini laughs and responds, in Tamil, "Yes dear, I'm a single man, but take a look at all the people who are willing to give their lives to this single man." As he says this, his index finger points upward (see fig. 1). Dramatic horns and strings enter with a rising melody as the camera follows Rajini's fingertip up and then "behind" him, panning to the right to reveal a sprawling mass of people (farmers, we later overhear a constable telling the police inspector in charge of security) with their hands raised in the air, yelling in a single but unintelligible voice. It is at them that Rajini (and the camera) points.

This lengthy single crane shot that moves from Rajini to the subaltern people that support him runs for 50 seconds as the camera snakes along the long winding road that leads to where Rajini is standing. During this shot, the dramatic background score segues into a haunting voice singing the melodic motif of the song "Vetri kodi kattu" (Raise the victory flag), from earlier in the film, over a spare drum rhythm. All along the road, throngs of people are coming toward Rajini, on foot or riding on tractor-pulled flatbeds. After a series of shots of Neelambari, the press, and the police reacting to the crowd, the camera cuts back to Rajini at the head of this Leviathan as he addresses the villainess Neelambari (see fig. 15 for Rajini's monologue).

In this monologue Rajini puns on his character's name, Paṭaiyappā, which is composed of the lexemes *paṭai* 'army' and *appā(n)*, here 'lord' or 'general'. To-

35. As a reviewer of this article pointed out, given the political tension between Jayalalitha and Rajinikanth, and the latter's campaigning against the AIADMK in the 1996 election (which the AIADMK decisively lost), one reading of *Padaiyappa* is as "a poetic rendition of teaching a lesson to the arrogant woman (Jayalalitha) who dared to spite the hero (Rajinikanth) and was swept away from power."

| Participants | | |
|---|---|---|
| Protagonist/antagonist | "I," Padaiyappa (read: Rajinikanth) | "You," Neelambari (read: Jayalalitha) and her brother, Suryaprakash |
| "Influence" and "power" of pro/antagonist | … has (subaltern) "people's influence." … lives by the "people's power." | … have (elite) "political influence." … live by the "police's power." |
| | "this power" = "Padaiyappa's army" (*paṭai* ) | "your power" = "nothing" |
| Spatial locations (see gesture row below) | "The people" are behind Padaiyappa | Neelambari et al. are in front of Padaiyappa |
| Kin relationality (to Padaiyappa) | Includes patrilineal kin | Affinal kin |
| **Actions** | | |
| Verbal, nonverbal | Padaiyappa speaking, gesturing | Neelambari et al. listening/silent, still |
| Gestures by Padaiyappa | Pointing (behind) at "the people" with thumb(s) | Pointing (in front) at Neelambari et al. with index finger of extended left arm |
| Sound effects | Swoosh sound effect with gesture | No swoosh sound effect with gestures |
| **Shot structure** … main shot$_1$ | cutaway | main shot$_2$ … | | |
| Framing and mis-en-scène | Main shot$_{1,2}$: facing Padaiyappa (center-left) and the large crowd behind him; Neelambari, brother, police inspector, nephew, and one other are visible from behind on left and right of frame. | Cutaway: reaction shot of Neelambari's face |
| Shot type | Main shot$_1$: Three-fourth shot to medium-long shot (zoom-out); Main shot$_2$: medium-long shot (steady) | Close-up cutaway (short zoom-in) |
| Shot length | Long single takes: main shot$_1$ = 8.4 seconds (fig. 15); main shot$_2$ = 14.4 seconds | Very short shot = 0.7 seconds |

**Figure 16.** Some poetic contrasts in *Padaiyappa*'s (1999) preclimax scene (cf. figs. 15, 17, and 18)

gether they reference the god of war Murugan, also known as Ārupaṭaiyappā, the Lord of the Six Abodes (also Padaiyappa's full name in the film). The subaltern masses ("army") that Rajini/Padaiyappa points to are already in and with him, they stand behind him and in his divine name.[36] Rajini/Padaiyappa makes this explicit in what follows through a set of poetic contrasts (fig. 16).

Rajini/Padaiyappa contrasts the villainness and her family (his affinal kin)—at whom he points with his left index finger (fig. 17)—as having political influence ("uṅkaḷukku arasiyal selvākku" [you have political influence]), while he, he says while pointing at the crowd behind him with both his thumbs (the speed

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36. Such allusions to Rajini's offscreen religiosity (as devotee), and perhaps to his divinity (as sovereign), are typical of his films in this period, whose titles (themselves the hero's name) and narratives reference particular deities (e.g., *Annamalai, Arunachalam, Padaiyappa, Baba*; see Chakravarthy 2002, 233).

**Figure 17.** Rajini/Padaiyappa points at Neelambari and others with his left index finger while saying, in Tamil, "You have political influence"; from *Padaiyappa* (1999).

and gravity of his gesture accompanied by a swoosh sound effect; see fig. 19, bottom), has the people's influence ("enakku makkaḷ selvākku" [I have the people's influence]).

You live by the police's power (police-*yōṭa sakti*), he continues, with his hands now behind his back, while I live by the people's power (*makkaḷōṭa sakti*). In a simultaneously direct and deferred ostension (Quine 1969, 39), Rajini/Padaiyappa then points at "the people" behind him for a second time, this time with only his left thumb (again, accompanied by a swoosh sound effect), and says, in Tamil, "Before this power . . ." (see fig. 18). He then fully extends his left arm as he points with his index finger (palm down) at the villains in front of him (no sound effect), and says, ". . . your power. . . ." He begins chuckling as his index finger retracts (his arm still extended), his fingers forming a loose fist (palm down, thumb over his fingertips), which then flick twice toward the villains while he laughs and then audibly inhales. Rajini's second flick holds with all his fingers extended at the villains as he completes the utterance ". . . is nothing."[37] In this precisely orchestrated, multimodal act, each gesture's stroke precedes and is held across the discourse that it calls forth, produced in the pregnant pauses in Rajini's speech. These *stylish* gestures proleptically parallel and punctuate his utterance, providing their own gestural proposition alongside his verbal pronouncement.

When the political minister Suryaprakash (Padaiyappa's cross-cousin and Neelambari's brother) orders the police to shoot into the crowd, individual

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37. Rajini/Padaiyappa here says, in Tamil, "jujubi." This is a colloquial way to typify something as trivial or unsubstantial; it is also, interestingly, the English term for *ziziphus jujuba* (jujube, or Indian date; in Tamil, *ilantai paḻam*), though only one Tamil person I spoke to about this term made this connection.

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<G1 – left thumb:          <G2 – left index finger:      <G3 – LH forms loose fist; fingers then flick
  points behind Rajini       points in front of Rajini      2x toward villains (as if brushing them away);
  at 'the people'>           at the villains & police>      LH holds with fingers pointing at villains>
G1-------------------------|G2-----------------------------|G3------fl.--fl.----------|<LH returns behind back>
(0.7) Inta saktikki   munnālē (0.6) uṅka     sakti <chuckles (0.8)> .hh (0.4) jūjūbi
      this   power-DAT. before-EMPH.  2pl.OBL.  power                           jujube
      'Before this power            your power   <chuckles>     .hh    (is) nothing.'
```

**Figure 18.** Rajini's verbal and gestural opposition of his/the people's and the villains' power. NB: G1, G2, G3 in the second line of the transcript indicate onsets of the gestures described in the first line; -----| indicates a hold or continuation of a gesture; fl. = onset of flicking gesture.

members at the head of the crowd (Padaiyappa's patrilineal kin and friends) step forward and take up Rajini/Padaiyappa's interpellative pronouncement. They declare their willingness to be shot in support of Rajini/Padaiyappa and threaten to rip the minister and his family to shreds, if only Rajini/Padaiyappa gives the word. The rest of the crowd applauds, as Rajini/Padaiyappa stands confidently in silence. Standing behind and incorporated into Rajini, the crowd is an extension of his will, at his fingertips (and the tip of his tongue), ready to do his bidding.

This incorporating finger is already anticipated in the film's introductory song, "En peru Padaiyappa" (My name is Padaiyappa; figs. 11, 13). In this song Rajini/Padaiyappa describes his youthful gait (naṭai); his affectionate and simple nature; and the hundred armies (paṭai) standing behind him ("pinnāl nūṟu paṭai-yappā," also interpretable as "the hundred Padaiyappas behind [me]"), as well as sings the praises of Tamil Nadu. The lyric "one hundred armies stand behind me [Padaiyappa]" co-occurs with a close-up shot of Rajinikanth pointing backward with both his thumbs (fig. 19, top), a gesture identical to the two-thumbed pointing gesture in the preclimax discussed above (fig. 19, bottom). The former image is superimposed over a shot of a huge mass of individuals at whom, through these images' juxtaposition, he is spectrally pointing. This background image anticipates the preclimax shots of "the people" behind Rajini/Padaiyappa (in particular, the throngs of people winding down the road toward the marriage hall in the long 50-second shot [fig. 1]). Together, these images prefigure at the outset of the film what is to come at the outset of its conclusion.

Providing the "trailer" for the film's preclimax—itself a "trailer" for Rajini's implied descent into offscreen electoral politics (i.e., the "main picture"; see fig. 15)—in the opening song of the film Rajini points at those who are behind, in, and all around his image. By gesturing behind himself while facing the camera, Rajini points at the people to whom he has given over his body and soul
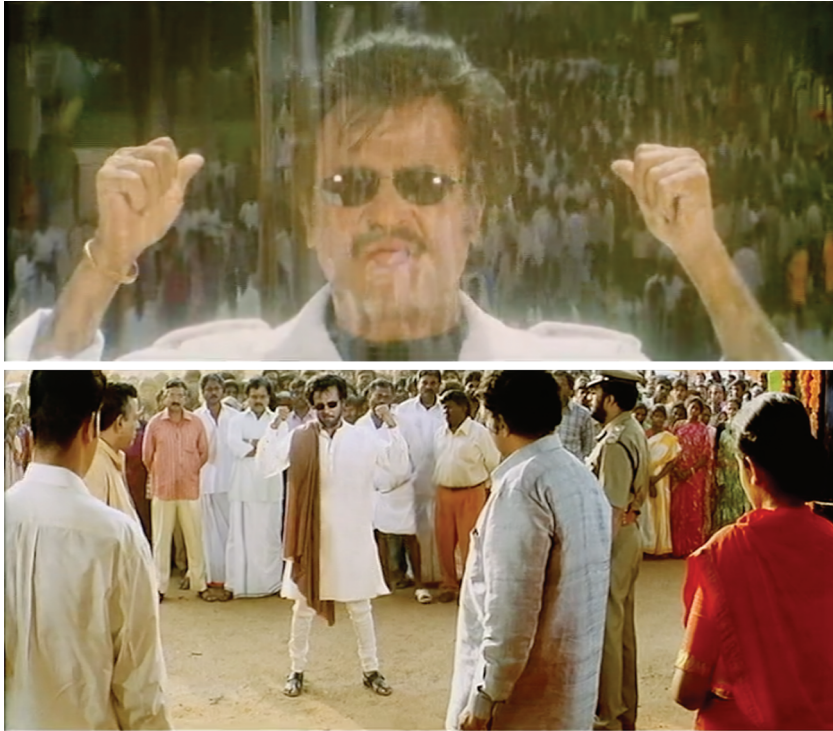
**Figure 19.** Top: "One hundred armies that stand behind Padaiyappa"; bottom: "I have the people's influence." The top image is from the opening song of *Padaiyappa* (1999), poetically prefigured as the "trailer" to the preclimax ("Did you see Padaiyappa's army?") in the bottom image.

(recall the Tamil lyric from the song "En peru Padaiyappa" [fig. 13]: "Is it not right for me to sacrifice my body and soul to the cause of the Tamil language and people?"), that is, to the audience before him and at whom he gazes, who—both in this song and in the preclimax scene—are invited to join Rajini and become part of his spectral, yet substantial, being.

    The audience, then, like Rajini, stands on both sides of the screen, in front and behind Rajini, even as he in turn encompasses them by standing between "the people" onscreen and the people/audience offscreen. This passing through and standing across the screen, as transduced through Rajini's pointing fingers, is an incorporation into the mass hero's body, a body politic that faces outward *to* and *for* us in the transformative mirror of the cinema. The indexical ground here isn't of contiguity, but of entanglement, encompassment, incorporation. This follows from Rajini's distinct form of being and presence, one curated on and across the diaphanous skins of the screen.

## Conclusion

Indexicality is an ambivalent semiotic ground. As a "real connection" or an "existential relation" it traffics between immediacy and mediation. On the one hand, as a mode of representation, indexicality is a mediated and mediating semiotic relation, a Thirdness irreducible to any direct, unmediated contact. At the same time, as Peirce tells us, it presumes upon an immediated moment of copresence, contiguity, causality, a Secondness that resists mediation. The indexical sign depends on, and is defined by, this Secondness. Hence it cannot be fully specified solely by appeal to transcontextual law (Thirdness) or essence (Firstness) but only ever relative to its particular contexts of use, that is, to other arrays of sign tokens that, in their indexical corelatedness, reflexively frame and determine the value/reference of such an indexical sign (if only for then, there, and them). But if indexicality sunders itself, displacing itself by being in the hands of and mediated by other signs and sign users, and if indexicality does so by ultimately falling back onto self-evident notions of existential connection and immediated copresence, then perhaps we can begin to understand its foundational, and perhaps paradoxical, ambivalence, for the irony of this semiotic relation itself points—this time from fingertip to wrist, to borrow a late Wittgensteinian trope (1958, §185; see Staten 1984, 2; Engelmann 2013)—to an implicit metaphysics of presence that it conserves and problematizes at once.

Willard Quine (1960, 1969) long ago underscored this irony in his discussion of the "inscrutability of reference" (also see Jakobson 1953, 21). Recall the problem of "undetached rabbit parts" and other ontological and epistemological perversions that he famously pointed out through his thought experiment of the anthropological linguist trying (and failing) to determine the referent of a "native's" utterance of "Gavagai" while pointing to a white rabbit scurrying by—namely, that the indeterminacy of indexical acts makes any presumed existential relation problematic and yet also unable to be unappealed to. Immediacy must be mediated by some always potentially (and perhaps in principle) nonpresent set of relations and events (e.g., Quine's "collateral knowledge" or "background language"; Silverstein's [1993, 1998b] "metapragmatics" or "ideology"; Leone and Parmentier's [2014] "circle of semiosis"), and thus there is no existential relation except as achieved across signs/acts that are curiously absent from each other while made present and relevant to each other (Silverstein 2005). If indexicality depends on a real connection, an existential relation, this reality, this existence is itself always underdetermined, not present to itself.

To say this, however, is to not to subscribe to familiar antirealist, constructionist stances about the nature of reality. Rather, it is to argue that the self-

evidence of notions like "existential relation" and "presence" can and should be the site of ethnographically based and semiotically informed (i.e., pragmatically deconstructive) analysis, put to the grist of our semiotically realist mill. This both serves as a caution to our own uses of analytics like indexicality, as well as to point outward to the richness of the ethnographic worlds we study, to open up new vistas for the study and theorization of semiosis beyond those that our analytics may obscure from our vision and deaden to our touch. In this article, I have attempted to do this by unpacking the presence, indexicality, and performativity of Rajini's finger. This gesturing finger cannot be reduced to any simple notion of copresence, contiguity, or causality. Emanating from his massive screen presence, and standing under a particular metapragmatics of presence (*qua* ontology of the image; cf. Bazin [1967] 2004; Cavell 1979; Morgan 2006), this finger touches and punches, ascending to the heavens and (con)descending and returning to fix us as and at its tip. This is a finger that encompasses its object, a finger that is not simply represented on the screen but reaches through it, that presences itself and grabs and holds us. It does so through the camera, through the screen, and through Rajini's filmic oeuvre, that dense poetic web of interdigitated references that builds up his mass within and across his films.

In short, Rajini's finger forces a recognition that the very ground of indexicality always stands under some metapragmatics of being, a metafunctionality that mediates what and when an existential relation "is," what it means and does to be and be present, and thus to see and sense, represent and act. To grasp this requires that we provide an ethnography of presence; in this case, detailing the linkages between historical and cultural modes of film spectatorship, (inter)textual and generic film forms, and ethnographies of "reception" and uptake as they conspire to underwrite the image-act onscreen. While these existential grounds are not particular to Tamil cinema (we find them wherever we look, point, and touch), they take reflexively elaborated, cinematic form in the image and body of Rajinikanth, institutionalized as a cine-political resource to the multiform projects that emanate from him, be they film production, fandom, or political mobilization.

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