Landscapes of Expression: Affective Encounters in South Indian Cinema

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Abstract: Focusing on material environments of affective encounter, this essay examines the expression of feelings such as joy, longing, and sadness in South Indian popular cinema. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork with Tamil filmmakers in Chennai, Switzerland, and Dubai, the essay explores worldly accidents of circumstance through which cinema gains affective life.

Early in the Tamil film Malaikottai (Bhoopathi Pandian, 2007), a young man, Anbu, pedals a cycle through the crowded dusty streets of the South Indian city of Trichy, searching for the rooftop terrace where he recently spied Malar, a local college student, for the first time. We see that it is only Malar’s wrinkled grandmother who has tottered onto the terrace this afternoon, carrying up a bucket of clothes to dry; we see as well that the love-struck Anbu nevertheless imagines Malar doing the very same in her place. She shakes out a red sari, and the camera tracks the droplets of water that slowly and magically float in Anbu’s direction, borne across the frame by a hopeful melody and a chorus of humming voices.

Anbu closes his eyes as the droplets hit his face, and the film cuts to a wide-angle panning shot of verdant green slopes and snow-clad peaks. It is as though the water and the sound together have carried both character and viewer alike into an imaginary space of intensified possibilities. As the music builds into the rhythms of a song sequence, Anbu and Malar saunter and frolic through alpine meadows, green fields, orchards, and snowy hillsides. The voice of the singer seems to belong to Anbu, and yet its expressed feelings suffuse the material qualities of the space he and Malar are traversing:

Life, my life, that moment I saw you, I froze
This bond, I felt it, that moment you saw me,
To live in your eyes ... like camphor, love, I melted
You’re that song I always hear, do you know?
You’re my bloom, always budding, do you know?
I’m that breeze you always feel, will you know?
I’m the speech in all your silence, will you feel it?

As with many other songs in South Indian popular films, we see here a blurring of the intimate boundaries between self and other, a poetics expressed not only through language but also through the audiovisual spectacle of the song sequence itself. Echoing classical traditions of South Indian poetry that identified milieus for the expression of feeling in the suggestive qualities of varied natural environments, the film expresses the affective lives of its protagonists through the resonant space of a corresponding landscape.

This sequence may be taken as a contemporary South Indian example of what Gilles Deleuze has described as the “affection-image” in cinema. Following Spinoza, Deleuze describes affection as “a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body,” as a matter, that is, of encounter and composition. In his work on cinema, Deleuze suggests that it is through a “virtual conjunction” of powers and qualities that affections may be “expressed for themselves, outside spatio-temporal co-ordinates.” Essential here is an understanding of expression as a matter of virtual encounter. At stake in the affection-image, Deleuze suggests, is “potentiality considered for itself,” expressed by the impersonal passage and intensification of qualities and capacities through a milieu that is real without being fully present in its reality. The expression of an affect does not constitute the actualization of an idea, feeling, or form of being that lies in waiting elsewhere, but is rather an event of transformative eruption in itself. Expression is an immanent movement of becoming, and what is expressed by means of such movement is a “possible world [that] is not real, or not yet, but [that] exists nonetheless”: the undulating horizons of all else that world may be. The affective joy of this particular sequence from Malaikottai, for example, is expressed through a series of virtual encounters—with a vaguely familiar terrace, an elderly woman, a few droplets of water, and, ultimately, a totally foreign landscape of immersive expression—all of which bear far more power and intensity than they would at first appear to carry.

The value of such attention to affective expression—that is, to expression of affection in an immanent milieu—may be underlined by counterposing this idea to another of deceptively parallel significance: the representation of emotion. Film Studies has long dwelled on emotion as the foundation of film’s powerful ideological effectiveness: films are understood to constitute stable subjects (individual, national, municipal, \ldots).

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or gendered) of experience through the viewing subject’s felt identification with the travails of characters, situations, and narrative trajectories. To take such operations as a matter of representation is to suggest that both terms of this identification precede, in some sense, their cinematic mediation: that the being of one comes to recognize itself in the visible form of the other. But cinematic spectatorship from a Deleuzian standpoint, as Richard Rushton has emphasized, is a “matter of placing oneself where one is not, of becoming someone or something one is not.”

If we take affection to “mark the coincidence of the subject and the object in a pure quality,” as Deleuze suggests, we may find cinematic forms of movement and displacement that provoke more visceral and depersonalizing kinds of encounters. Becoming is a passage of sensation that renders indistinct “what is animal, vegetable, mineral, or human in us”: to be displaced elsewhere by cinema is to become other than what one is.

Cinematic affects are created and charged by their passage back and forth between bodies and things, persons and places, lived dispositions and living situations. In what follows, I suggest that the transmission of such affects through cinema may be tracked in relation to the power, agency, or effectivity of cinema’s expressive landscapes or environments. I do not mean to imply that such spaces form a fixed and determinate “context” for the representation of given feelings; rather, I am suggesting—keeping in mind a useful distinction drawn by Brian Massumi—that cinematic landscape may be taken as a “situation” of “qualitative overspill,” a fabricated environment of encounter, resonance, and excess, what Deleuze describes as “space . . . charged with potential.”

In recent years, film scholarship has begun to examine much more closely the affective powers and qualities of cinematic mise-en-scène. Anne Rutherford, for example, has called attention to elements of location in Theo Angelopoulos’s films as “catalysts” of “sensory awakening,” while Eric Ames has examined the “haptic” and “kinetic” force of landscapes in Werner Herzog’s documentaries. In a recent volume on Landscape and Film, Martin Lefebvre argues that the hallmark of a cinematic “landscape” as such—over and above the ubiquity of cinematic “settings”—lies in its “autonomy” from a film’s narrative and action, in its emergence as a spectacle independent of the narrative movement of the film.

There is no doubt that such studies share a concern for the autonomous powers of landscape and of affect, one that reflects a broader interest in contemporary Film Studies and the humanities more generally in the activity, agency, or vitality of nonhuman

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6 Deleuze, Cinema 1, 65.
9 Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 218; Deleuze, Cinema 1, 119–120.
entities. Some of the greatest challenges lie, however, in the means by which one seeks to identify such autonomy, and in the danger of unintentionally falling back on a residual humanism. Lefebvre, for example, suggests that the appearance of landscapes in cinema may be taken either as the “intentional” and strategic outcome of film directors or as a consequence of the cultivated capacities and sensibilities of film audiences. His presentation of these two alternatives is not altogether surprising, as the problem is a methodological one: how does one track the autonomous force of affective qualities and situations in cinema when one is working primarily to “read” films from the standpoint of either their creators or their viewers? What I suggest in this article is that ethnographic work on “landscapes” of filmmaking offers one effective route beyond this interpretive impasse, one means of grasping affect as a mode of becoming with the world.

In the summer of 2007, for example, I flew from Chennai to Zurich with sixteen members of the Malaikottai cast and crew and over half a ton of film equipment on a weeklong trip to shoot this particular song sequence for the film. I found that these filmmakers—like hundreds of others before them—had come to Switzerland with a particular image in mind, blithely presuming that the environment would bend itself to the necessities of the film. As the young producer in charge of the expedition confidently stated as we waited our turn at the airport immigration counters, “Switzerland is like an outdoor studio.” Over the course of the next few days, however, endless accidents confounded and unraveled this presumption of a natural studio environment. The filmmakers were buffeted, rattled, and frustrated by the very natural and material elements evoked by the song sequence, forcing a profound transformation of the situations through which the song ultimately gained expression. With such exigencies in mind, I argue here that cinematic landscapes express not only the feelings of filmic characters, the intentions of their makers, and the hopes of their viewers but also the force and quality of material worlds that enfold and exceed them all.

Cinema draws its vitality from affective encounters with many kinds of worlds: those of characters and the landscapes within which they engage one another, those of filmmakers seeking and remaking resonant environments for cinematic elaboration, and those of audiences who may or may not be moved by the horizons of these works. It is my contention here that ethnographic encounters with film production constitute an especially effective means of engaging such emergence. Drawing on

12 See Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Such contemporary positions resonate with the early twentieth-century film theory of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Dziga Vertov, whose cine-eye Deleuze has intriguingly described as an “eye of matter” (Cinema I, 81).


fifteen months of ethnographic research on diverse filmmaking projects in the Tamil-language commercial film industry, I focus mostly closely on two Tamil film crews working on short-term shoots in Switzerland and Dubai in 2007, and briefly on the process of releasing a third film in early 2009. My fieldwork suggests that cinematic landscape may be taken as an ongoing process of aesthetic encounter, rather than as a static frame of a given form. Further, the affective texture of cinematic landscape emerges through the productive force of unpredictable circumstances. I explore practical tactics deployed for the “engineering” of affect, but also the myriad ways in which the affective qualities of these environments themselves exceed and escape the intentions of their makers. Before turning to these films, let me say something more about the cultural and practical context in which such projects find expression.

**Landscapes of Expression in Tamil Cinema.** Indian cinema remains widely identified with the Hindi-language Bollywood productions of Mumbai, although many more films are made each year in the regional-language commercial film industries of South India. Tamil cinema, based primarily in the southern city of Chennai, is a regional industry with a global audience of its own. For the past forty years, the office of chief minister of the state of Tamil Nadu has been held almost exclusively by Tamil film actors, actresses, and screenwriters, attesting to the significance of the medium in South Indian collective life. Its cultural prominence has been sustained by the efforts of many filmmakers to closely mirror the situations and concerns of quotidian Tamil life in their films. In stark contrast to the cosmopolitanism of Bollywood cinema, this regional film industry has for decades focused on the singular visual, aural, and affective qualities of local South Indian customs and inhabited milieus. With the decline of integrated studio shooting in Chennai in the 1970s, Tamil filmmakers broached two everyday environments as filmmaking bases: the urban middle-class households and neighborhoods of Chennai, and the rural villages and landscapes of the western and southern Tamil countryside. At stake in both of these milieus, especially the latter, was a vernacular notion of “nativity,” or regional cultural realism, articulated by Tamil filmmakers in relation to—and sometimes in explicit support of—powerful political and cultural currents of nativism and Dravidian nationalism in South India. Hundreds of films shot almost fully in the countryside (and distinguished by their peasant protagonists, use of local dialects, and folk music soundtracks) sustained the emergence of a rural film industry based in and around Pollach in western Tamil Nadu.

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17 On the political efficacy of Tamil cinema, see M. S. S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992).

The single film widely acknowledged to have inspired this turn to the countryside is *Pathinaru vayathanile* (At the Age of Sixteen; 1976), directed by Bharathiraja, a novice filmmaker hailing from the rural Cumbum Valley of southern Tamil Nadu. The film opens with a camera panning and zooming through fields of flowers and trees rustling in the breeze as a woman’s voice plaintively addresses these very elements of the landscape, asking about her missing lover. We can see neither her nor the one to whom she is singing. It is unclear whether the swiftly moving camera is searching for her or for her lover—or whether, indeed, the landscape itself is singing while the camera seeks in vain to identify the source of the voice.

For many years prior to its production in this form, the director had fruitlessly sought support for the project from the Film Finance Corporation of India; this English-language synopsis for a prior version of the film also begins with an image of expressive landscape:

Wafted by the soothing breeze from the Mountain of Suruli, deep down in the heart of Tamil Nadu lies a small village called “Kokilapuram.” In the centre of the Village stands meditating an old banyan tree looking down to the thatched roofs of the houses clustered around it. . . . Even before the dawn breaks, the Village wakes from its dreamy slumber hearing the lullaby of the native soil—the folk songs emanating from the hearts of the peasants. And the poetry in these folk songs reaches down to the roots of human emotions, which in these Villages are knitted with ritualistic and traditional beliefs. These emotions, their way of thinking, are much conditioned, and modified by the way of life, and very rarely find expression beyond the village horizon. And this story, set against such a rustic background, is woven around a young girl Mayil, who is born and brought up in such an environment, and yet living apart in a world of her own—in an imaginative world of hopes, ambitions, and dreams.

Bharathiraja shared with me a weathered mimeograph of this seminal text in the history of Tamil cinema in the midst of a lengthy discussion at his Chennai office in late 2009. Thinking back to this, the first of many films he would stage and shoot in rural South India, the veteran director described himself as having been “fed up” with the artificial houses, roofs, and ploughs that had hitherto composed village studio sets: “What happened in my village was entirely different. There was no reality in that. That’s why I first took the camera outside. . . . [I didn’t] feel the soul, the soul, you know?” The director described a process of mixing or merging his own “feelings” with the living environment in which he was working, an affective relationship through which he came to recognize the landscape as an actor. “Location itself is a character,” he said. “It will speak, the location will speak to you.”

How are we to interpret this philosophy of expression? A brief detour from the medium of cinema will be helpful here. The classical Sanskrit dramatic theory of *rasa*, or aesthetic “taste,” has often been invoked to account for emotional expression and audience response in Indian cinema. In a recent survey of Indian filmmaking conventions, for example, Philip Lutgendorf observes that such an aesthetic vocabulary
“remains in use in Indian vernaculars,” supporting a “broad cultural consensus . . . that a satisfying cinematic entertainment ought to generate a succession of sharply delineated emotional moods.”

The relevance of rasa to contemporary Indian filmmaking remains a subject of ongoing debate among scholars of Indian cinema, a problem beyond the scope of this essay. I would like only to point out here that the dramatic theory of rasa is an aesthetics of sensory refinement, articulating the desirability of, in Norman Cutler’s words, an “essential distance from the circumstances that individuate and concretize emotion.”

Such transcendence of empirical or situated experience, however emotional in its dramatic texture, would appear to have little to do with the life of feeling to which Bharathiraja refers.

At the same time, however, there is another Indian aesthetic tradition, founded on the classical Tamil poetic notion of tinai—widely translated as poetic “landscape,” “situation,” or “context”—that has a much greater resonance with the expressive forms at work in modern films such as Pathinaru vayathinile. Enlisting the flora, fauna, natural elements, and typical human occupations of diverse regions as poetic devices, Tamil love poetry of the early centuries CE situated each of five moods of love in an appropriate terrain of poetic expression: montane union, pastoral patience, desert absence, littoral pining, and riverine quarrel. Through this felt interplay of interior and exterior states, A. K. Ramanujan notes, “the actual objective landscapes of Tamil country become the interior landscapes of Tamil poetry.”

Consider, for example, the following classical Tamil poem as translated by Ramanujan:

Only the thief was there, no one else.
And if he should lie, what can I do?
There was only
a thin-legged heron standing
on legs yellow as millet stems
and looking
for lampreys
in the running water
when he took me.

Set in the landscape of the riverine lowlands, the poem presents a woman lamenting the unfaithful nature of a man with whom she shares a life; she evokes the hunt for

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20 For example, Rachel Dwyer argues that the use of rasa risks a kind of nativism in presuming the continuity of a singular aesthetic tradition; see her Yash Chopra (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 67.
24 Ibid., 30.
prey, picturing a heron in the landscape. This extended figure is an instance of the poetic device known as ullurai: an “inward speaking” effected through the play of an “inner” or hidden meaning presented within a larger domain. With such resonance in mind—in this case, between the thieving man and the predatory heron—Ramanujan identifies ullurai as a poetic “inscape”: each such element in these classical poems “expresses a universe from within, speaking through any of its parts.”

With Spinoza and Deleuze in mind, we might also call this an expressive immanence: the affects of this poetry arise within landscapes of expression.

Such traditions of expression cascade forward into the Tamil present through inchoate routes of transmission and reverberation, as well as through more systematic exercises in the recuperation of a classical Dravidian heritage in diverse arenas, ranging from the content of school textbooks to the oratory idioms of public speech. While the Tamil film industry provides its leading figures with a public platform to profess their belief in the uniqueness of Tamil culture—Bharathiraja, for example, famously opens each of his films with a voiceover addressed “to my sweet Tamil people”—it would be difficult to find evidence in Tamil cinema of any direct application of literary and poetic conventions. At the same time, however, there are certain striking resonances of expressive form. Pathinaru vayathinile, for example, begins with an evenly paced sequence of eight shots of the natural environs of its rural setting before settling on the image of its heroine waiting beside a train. All but one of these first nine shots—including the shot of Mayil beside the train—convey a sense of a wide and expansive space, either through a fixed wide-angle frame or through the widening effect of a pan, zoom, or change of focus. The exception is the eighth shot, a static close-up fixed steadily on the drops of water falling from a few green leaves.

There is something jarring about this image if it is considered from the standpoint of continuity editing: indeed, this is the only shot at the outset of the film that is framed against the black of a nighttime sky. If it is considered as an affective “inscape,” however, we may find condensed in these weeping leaves the mood of the entire film, which begins and ends with Mayil waiting sadly for a train that does not come. When I asked Bharathiraja about his use of such montage sequences in this and other films—a distinctive practice for which he is well known—he modestly dismissed such tactics as an “amateurish” residuum of his youth. But he also went on to make sense of his craft as a director from the standpoint of poetry. Speaking of a related series of shots in this film, in which the varying course of Mayil’s love is captured intermittently by the condition—first flourishing, then desiccated—of a mango seedling growing beside her house, the director said, “As a poet, if you think . . . you know, that [the] girl’s mind, heart, is thundering, [her] heart is thundering, how will you show [this]? I can feel the


tenderness of water.” In other words, it is through the affective quality of this exterior substance—water—that the affective quality of an interior state finds expression.27 “Then you can add the music, then you can make them fully feel that girl’s character,” he added. This was the work of “a poet in celluloid,” he said with a laugh, insisting that even he did not know how this was done.

**Globalizing Milieus of Tamil Film Production.** In dwelling on this film and the recollections of its director, I mean to suggest neither that there is an essentially Tamil or Indian mode of expression at work here nor that there is evidence here of the same Deleuzian philosophy of expression with which I opened this article. I would suggest, however, that certain kinds of productive resonance do arise between these two disparate domains of thought and practice. We may take such resonances to form what Christopher Pinney has described as an interpretive “space that is less than universal and more than local.”28 In exploring this conceptual space, we ought to keep in mind as well more recent transformations in its corresponding empirical coordinates.

Like Bharathiraja, many contemporary Tamil filmmakers made their reputations by depicting on-screen their own native neighborhoods and villages, showing their own social classes, castes, and local communities and their own spatial trajectories from countryside to metropole. The affective intensity of their works has often depended on the local and familiar quality of these narrative situations and the environments in which they were staged. But here, as elsewhere in India, recent years have seen a momentous globalization of cinematic locales, since stories, narrative sequences, and countless song sequences have been shot at great expense in far-flung localities in Europe, Asia, Africa, the South Pacific, and the Americas.29 Beginning in the 1990s, in other words, the spatial frames of Tamil cinema began to convey broader vectors of Indian economic liberalization and cultural globalization. As marked spaces of fantasy, imagination, and desire, song sequences have especially come to express the more dispersed horizons of emergent middle-class aspirations.30 This conjuncture is perhaps exemplified most clearly by the prevalence of Indian tourism in those foreign locales that are highlighted in, and popularized by, overseas film shoots; indeed, countries such as Switzerland, Malaysia, and Singapore offer incentives for foreign film crews precisely with this rationale in mind.31

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27 For further discussion of this aqueous poetics of sympathy in Tamil cultural tradition, see Anand Pandian, *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 181–220.
29 While some earlier Tamil films such as *Ulagam Cuttrum Valiban* (The Youth Who Circled the World; M. G. Ramachandran, 1973) and *Ninaihalie Inikkum* (The Thought Itself Is Sweet; K. Balachander, 1979) were shot extensively in foreign locales such as Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia, the practice rose to prominence only in the 1990s. The overseas distribution market to nonresident Indians has some bearing on this development, but Tamil filmmakers mostly stress emergent desires for novelty among audiences back home.
31 Switzerland Tourism, for example, released a glossy promotional brochure called “Switzerland for Movie Stars” aimed specifically at Indian filmmakers in the mid-2000s. Diverse accounts of the history of Indian film shoots (most especially Bollywood) in Switzerland may be found in Alexandra Schneider, ed., *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema and Switzerland* (Zurich: Museum für Gestaltung, 2002).
It is important to keep in mind that, in terms of narrative structure in Indian film, song sequences have often constituted departures from the diegetic setting. Popular Indian cinema has been characterized persuasively as a “cinema of attractions,” akin to early cinema, relying heavily on the spectacle of glamorous stars, staged thrills, bouts of verbal eloquence, and fantastical sets and locations. Even the most mundane narrative settings often surface as “chambers of dreams” that extend the horizons of ordinary life. Over and above such “ordinary” travels, song and dance sequences (long prevalent in Indian films in varying forms) often propel actors and viewers alike into startlingly dissimilar spaces and situations, regularly “interrupting” the narrative at moments of heightened tension and lending an expressive topography to otherwise inarticulate feelings and moods. Songs, in other words, may be seen to work as pleasurable audiovisual spectacles or attractions independent of the audience’s subjective “absorption” in the plot and in the fate of its characters. Until the mid-1990s, the quest for spectacle often took Indian filmmakers to diverse sites of regional and national tourism, such as the lakes and forests of Kashmir. Such travel has more recently given way to foreign locations that showcase novel instances of natural beauty and metropolitan modernity (Figure 1).

In my many conversations with Tamil filmmakers, I found that they often had functional explanations for the songs in their films and the milieus of their staging, rationales that dwelled specifically on an imagination of their affective powers. Directors, cinematographers, actors, editors, and others work with a sense of their audiences as profoundly fickle in their cinematic affections and inclinations; this collective affectivity—in Spinozist terms, an excessive capacity to affect one another, and to be affected by the screen—is underscored by the evident volatility of the bodies seated in darkened theater rows. Would a proposed scene, shot, location, or dialogue elicit loud cheers or disparaging comments hurled at the screen, peals of unintended laughter or the hush of shared sorrow, a glowing sea of text messaging or frequent breaks for bathrooms, drinks, and cigarettes beyond the allotted midpoint intermissions? Most Tamil filmmakers appear to work and rework their films with a careful anticipation of


34 On the interruptive character of Indian cinema, see Lalitha Gopalan, Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema (London: British Film Institute, 2002).


36 Global song locations in Bollywood cinema are discussed in Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti, eds., Global Bollywood: Transnational Travels of the Song-Dance Sequence (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Taking a broader perspective, Biswarup Sen writes that “Bollywood song is the product of a practice that has been characterized by a radical openness to externalities and a consistent engagement with cultural production elsewhere here” (“The Sounds of Modernity,” 85). Anustup Basu challenges the implicit commitment to “dialogue-based propositional realism” through which song sequences are often characterized as interruptions of narrative cinema (“The Music of Intolerable Love,” 155).
such shifting bodies and moods. Within this economy of affects—what some filmmakers here describe as the “graph” of the film—songs are widely understood to play a particularly significant role, interrupting the film’s narrative momentum with the pure pleasure of spectacle and sensation on the one hand, while also intensifying the course of certain developing feelings on the other. This is often characterized as a delicate dance. As actor Vishal Krishna, who plays Anbu in Malaikottai, put it, “[I]t’s actually a break for them, but you have to make sure that large numbers of the audience don’t take a break, [or] only the [projection booth] operator would watch the song.”

The imagined precision of this claim, however, is belied in practice by the profound susceptibility of Tamil song sequences to the contingent circumstances of their fashioning. Songs are often shot in the final weeks of a film’s shooting schedule when producers face the most difficult financial and temporal constraints, forcing them to cut corners and make disappointing compromises. It is often the case that the relevant audio tracks are finalized by composers and sound engineers no earlier than the start of the shoot itself. Directors must typically cede control of song sequences to “dance masters,” who work only intermittently on any one project, leading to persistent conflicts over creative decisions improvised on the spot. Backgrounds, too, are often established at the very last minute, not only in studios—where one may find set crews working hastily alongside filmmakers who have already begun to shoot in some other direction, while the smell of wet paint and sawdust remains in the air—but also on location, where they are subject to protracted discussions, negotiations, and unexpected deviations.

I got a vivid impression of these complications through my encounters with Travelmasters India, a Chennai-based company that has organized hundreds of overseas expeditions for Indian film crews over the past twenty years. Managing director N. Ramji quickly understood that, as an anthropologist, I would want, as he put it, “to get embedded in a shoot.” Negotiating this possibility from my home in Baltimore,
however, proved enormously complex, because of the profound vagaries of the projects he was coordinating. On July 11, 2007, for example, Ramji wrote to tell me that he thought he would have a Tamil shoot starting on July 26 in Switzerland. But a few days later I was told to prepare for an entirely different trip:

Hi ANAND

WILL KEEP YOU POSTED AS NOW THEY ARE TALKING OF CAPE TOWN. BUT THEY WILL GO SOMEWHERE AND THAT I HOPE TO FINALIZE TOMORROW

SO BOSS KEEP A CLOSE WATCH AS EVERY MINUTE PLANS ARE CHANGING BUT DEFINITELY ON 1 AUG THEY HAVE TO LEAVE

Best regards
RAMJI

“Why Cape Town?” I asked him on the phone. “Something new,” he muttered, as though it was obvious and not worth elaborating further. A few days later, Istanbul surfaced briefly as the chosen destination before giving way to Cape Town again, although within a week Ramji angrily reported a “screwup” in visa planning that had led the crew to think of Switzerland, where Travelmasters had already facilitated more than two hundred Indian film shoots. Five days later, I had a ticket to Chennai to meet up with the Malaikottai crew, and we finally left for Zurich on August 6—all of us, that is, except Vishal, the protagonist of the song sequence, who was already committed to shooting another scene that day and would therefore fly overnight to arrive on the morning of the shoot.

Such vicissitudes often left me feeling vulnerable, even desperate. The filmmakers themselves, however, generally seemed inured to this flux: in the improvisational environment of Tamil filmmaking, as I gradually came to see, there is tremendous scope for unexpected things to simply “happen” at any given moment. This openness to circumstance—a disposition cultivated by necessity—forms the necessary backdrop for the kind of understanding of affective expression in South Indian film that I am pursuing here. Due in part to the incessantly improvised nature of filmmaking practice, a close examination of that practice yields a glimpse of how affects arise and gain expression in these films. And because their makers cede some measure of control over these practices to the situations in which they work, attending to these circumstances yields an effective way of grappling with the affective autonomy of cinematic landscape: space is often invested with power and affective quality in Tamil cinema through the very “happening” of film on location.38

37 In a later discussion, Ramji boasted that he could give twenty-five reasons why Indian film crews like to go abroad, including longer summer daylight hours, fewer problems with crowd management, the appeal of a foreign holiday for the stars, the lower cost of working for longer hours each day with a smaller crew, the softer quality of more lateral sunlight in the temperate zones, and so on. His company has long been the leading travel agency in the field.

With these ideas in mind, let me turn now to two recent instances of Tamil film crews shooting songs in places outside of India, working in both cases to find expression for affective qualities deeply resonant with the milieus in which they were shooting. I should stress that my choice of these two films was itself an accidental consequence of the contacts and networks that led me to them. Neither was a notably good film by any measure (except commercial success, in the case of one), and both were disparaged by their own makers as “commercial” in their ambitions. Neither was directed by someone of great consequence in the Tamil film industry; in fact, in the first of these instances, the director was fully absent for the duration of the shoot, as neither he nor almost anyone else on his directorial team managed to secure travel visas in time. Lest this all seem too alarming, however, I should stress that I am much less concerned here with the creative vision of “auteurs” than with their dispositions to affect others, and be affected themselves, in shared (albeit implicit) ways: in the elaboration, that is, of a shared culture of filmmaking. Let us examine then how two affects in particular—joy and longing—find expression in working landscapes of cinema.

**In Pursuit of Joy.** The narrative trajectory of *Malaikottai* is that of the quintessential Indian action film: young Anbu, visiting the South Indian city of Trichy from his native village nearby, finds himself thrown into an urban environment of wanton cruelty and unlawful violence, a larger situation that he nevertheless manages to master personally with principled ease and even good humor. For this reason, the instances of affective passivity—not activity—that mark his headlong fall into love in the midst of this campaign stand out especially: Anbu is startled awake on a bus by the sight of an airplane passing closely overhead, he is then immediately jolted by the sudden collision of the bus with a car on a busy bridge, he is startled by the glimpse of Malar on a nearby terrace as soon as he turns from the sight of the accident, and then shortly thereafter he is literally and magically moved by airborne droplets of water to a verdant mountainside somewhere far away. We are suddenly in the space of a song: “Uyire Uyire,” or “life, life.”

Having taken us to Switzerland, the film restores its hero to his state of active mastery. The fast pace and hopeful melody of the song is matched visually by rapid cuts, repeated morphs, quick dissolves between split screens, and choreographed movement synched with beats and cuts. The heroine, Malar, who is present in the sequence as the spectral embodiment of Anbu’s still-fantastic love for her, takes evident pleasure from his ardent looks and complex dance steps. After the first slow pan across a range of snow-clad mountains—one of the few shots in the song that focuses attention on the space itself—the alpine backdrop seems to serve mostly as an apt setting for the exercise of the hero’s talents and the display of the heroine’s beauty, an activation of person in space realized most fully perhaps by one shot in which the hero’s outstretched arms appear to be guiding the camera that captures his rotation through it.

Through much of the song, in other words, the landscape seems to agree with the expressive characters moving within its midst. Green fields and flowered meadows, tree-lined roads, and snowy plains provide free and ample space for the pair to step

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39 On the action-image as expression of the active modification of a situation, see Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 141–159.
and leap through. Their choreographed movements fill the frame with energetic intensity as their extended limbs often reach toward the edges of visible space. Framed against blue sky, puffy clouds, and soaring peaks, Anbu turns his beaming face upward at one point to bask in the light of an unseen sun, creating a striking visual impression of total immersion in its warmth (Figure 2). Such images seem to radiate simultaneously with all of the poetic situations associated with “joy” in such classical Tamil works as the *Tolkappiyam*: prosperity, sensation, sexual union, and play. But this mode of affective expression also recalls the understanding of joy arising from a Spinozist tradition of thought: an affect, in Deleuze’s words, “produced by the idea of an object that is good for me, or agrees with my nature . . . [that] increases or aids our power of action.”

The joy of these lovers is conveyed, that is, not only by their smiling faces and the harmonious agreement of their bodies in motion but also by their resonance with an immersive landscape of expression.

Over five days of shooting in the Bernese Oberland, this tangible feeling of joy was carefully elicited by the *Malaikottai* crew from the environment itself through diverse filmmaking techniques. In the shot I just described, for example, three handheld reflectors directed all available light toward Vishal’s blissfully smiling face one morning atop Grindelwald Park (Figure 3). On other occasions, camera assistants sat patiently before a low-mounted camera holding up a single flower or a sinuous log, the objects’ blurred outlines within a corner of the frame suggesting that the camera itself looked toward the dancers from within the elements of the landscape. Such efforts no doubt worked to deepen the affective qualities of the profilmic environment.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that such tactics arose only by chance on a daily basis, through an improvisational engagement with encountered spaces. Shepherded through the countryside by a Swiss location manager who doubled as bus driver, the crew made their decisions about where to stop and shoot literally on the spot, through ongoing rounds of argument and discussion punctuated by sudden attractive

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40 As identified in the *meypattiyal* section of this fifth-century Tamil grammatical text.
views outside the window. Often, they would stop to frame and discuss a series of possible shots at one spot, only to conclude that none of them would work. “It didn’t set,” explained Vishal on one of these occasions. But there were many other times that the opposite happened, when a location proved far more useful than it was first presumed to be. Spilling out of the bus and into a roadside apple orchard one afternoon, for example, the crew decided at first to take just a few shots for a musical interlude in the song. “The background is too weak,” Vishal said, adding, “It won’t last for more than three shots.” But he and the others had underestimated the qualities of the landscape this time, as I saw them do often over the course of that week. By twilight that day, they had shot not only an interlude but also one of the main verses in the song.

This openness to the virtual horizons of encounter was also reflected in the way in which the song itself was rendered present throughout the shoot. Visual accompaniments to the music and lyrics were shot in discrete fragments, bit by bit in nonlinear fashion, with the sense of where to go next evolving moment by moment. “Shall we go there?” the cameraman, dance director, and actor would often ask each other. Only the song’s dance director, Bhaski, was fully absorbed in the song as a continuous flow, looping it repeatedly on his headphones between locations, and constantly rehearsing potential moves with his own body between shots and takes.

For each shot, the sound engineer cued brief sonic fragments to boom across the otherwise quiet terrain, creating “acoustic spaces” to layer with visual and kinetic elements. Bhaski would call, “Mood!” rather than “Action!” to signal that the cameras would roll.42 “Mood, mood, come on Vishal! Power, power!” he yelled one afternoon, for example, as the pair tried to master a particularly difficult series of steps. He grew visibly excited at the sight of successful moves. “Beauty! Beauty!” he would blurt out in English, while others huddled around the small video feed to see what had happened within the frame. These moments left me with the impression that the crew

encountered these takes on the monitors both actively and passively: as objects that they had made themselves, and as spectacles that were simply understood as good or bad, as forceful or feeble in their effect.

“Very poetic,” an assistant director commented about one of the first shots taken on the initial day of the shoot, a wide shot of the lead pair dancing beside a curving lakeshore as waving branches framed their distant bodies and a flock of swans crossed the foreground (Figure 4). The image felt to me like an English landscape painting, and, indeed, cameraman S. Vaidhi told me the next morning on the bus about his early training in painting and photography. Like so many others, he described photography as a kind of painting with light; however, what struck me here in watching him work was that his tools lay largely beyond his own hands. Like most Tamil film crews shooting outdoors in foreign locations, the Malaikottai crew economized by working without the aid of artificial lighting, relying entirely on the shifting skies and the use of reflectors and weathered panels of white Styrofoam. “Hey, light is coming, light is coming,” Vaidhi would say, pressing the technical crew to speed their preparations for a shot. Eliciting action in natural spaces, these filmmakers were themselves acted upon by the play of natural light. “It’s opened! Quickly, quickly!” they would say hopefully to each other about an opening in cloud cover, before lapsing into a familiar lament: “It closed, just like that.” The single entity that appeared to exercise the most power over the crew was not the producer but the sun, which was chastised bitterly at times in the third-person familiar.

By far the most consequential way in which this milieu clashed with the expressive horizons anticipated by the film crew had to do with the aesthetic quality most essential to their plans: the color green. “We want something that’s endlessly green,” producer T. Ajay Kumar explained to location manager Peter Francione on the very first morning of the shoot. For cameraman Vaidhi, this keenness for “the purest green” had to do with a desire to present Anbu and Malar in a “fantasy world” where it appeared that human beings had never existed before. The director of the film, meanwhile, back in Chennai, had implied that the affective qualities of the color itself had led them to
Switzerland in the first place. “Greens. Love mood,” he mused. “Hero and heroine’s love mood. I wanted a green backdrop. So we decided to go to Switzerland. . . . It’s a peaceful thing. Of all the colors there are, you can keep looking at greens for however long you want.” Certain shots in the song would ultimately bear this out. The first glimpse of Malar that the song sequence yields, for example, is a close-up of her eyes alone, framed against a uniform visual field of luminous and saturated green—indeed, an “any-space-whatever,” in the sense proposed by Deleuze.

Ironically, however, only minimal parts of the song found visual expression through such vivid color, on account of the very force that had suffused this terrain with so much of it.

A premonition of the problem was registered as early as the Zurich airport immigration counter, where an officer had remarked ominously when informed of our plans, “Bad weather.” The crew members had landed in central Europe in early August with an image in mind of long summer days and sunny blue skies, only to have their project interrupted by incessant rain (Figure 5). Francione, the location manager, gathered weather readings for different regions of the area each morning, but efforts to evade the rain failed day after day. With each sudden downpour, bitter jokes would ensue. Shoot in the bus? Shoot in the hotel room? Shoot on the hotel room balcony with the green mountains as backdrop? Talk would then turn to making the best of difficult circumstances. Shoot the hero trying to open his umbrella and finding it stuck? Shoot him walking obliviously in the rain, thinking of Malar? Shoot the Indian pair walking, oblivious to the rain, while the Swiss Francione looked on quizzically? But concern about the stars falling ill put an end to such speculations. The rain ultimately forced a costly one-day extension of the shoot, and even then, it remained unclear whether the crew would finish shooting the film in time. “It’s the weather that isn’t in our hands,” said the producer nervously. “God is great,” someone tried to assure him.

The filmmakers found the rain a problem not only because of the hazards of physical exposure but also because of what it did to the visual impression of the terrain itself, reducing visibility and flattening depth. By the third day of the shoot, their strategy had been radically transformed, from the pursuit of pure green space as backdrop to a reliance on structures such as train stations, cobbled courtyards, and buildings sheltered from the elements. In one series of shots taken that day, Anbu spies Malar reading on a bench before a small stone church; sitting down slyly beside her, he closes his eyes and leans in for a stolen kiss, only to fall over in surprise as he realizes that she has spotted him and leaped quickly away. The cameraman, dance director, and actor had conceived this vignette while sheltering themselves in a bistro earlier that day.

43 Deleuze, Cinema I, 108–111. See also the discussion here of color itself as affect (118).
Musing on how to sequence these evolving shots, their discussions later drifted back to some of the lakeside shots taken on the first day. “For that, beauty is needed, backdrop beauty,” said Vishal. “Because we don’t have that, let’s do this story.” Ambient conditions of work, in other words, had led them from framing the landscape as an expressive environment to treating it as nothing more than a backdrop for foreground action. Boarding the bus later that day, I asked Vaidhi about his expressed hopes for green. “He died,” the cinematographer replied curtly, separating himself in the present from the self who had earlier sketched this strategy.

The producer, meanwhile, had long since abandoned his buoyant image of the “outdoor studio,” saying darkly to no one in particular, “I am sick of this place.” Indeed, the filmmakers now risked a new danger in the pursuit of their revised approach: sheer boredom. From the very beginning of the shoot, the Malaikottai crew expressed worries that audiences would recognize the spatial backdrops of various shots, blunting their force. Many of them had been to Switzerland several times already on similar shoots; one choreographer, for example, admitted leaving her own camera at home in Chennai for this trip, her fourth, to the country. “To whom will I show these pictures?” she asked, implying that there was little feeling to be wrung from yet another encounter with this place. The Swiss location manager stopped the bus at one hilltop crossroads—shrouded in rain and mist—and tried gamely to persuade his passengers that this spot had never been seen in a Tamil film. The lead actor and actress both reacted skeptically, and the cinematographer chimed in with a sarcastic joke—“Yes, they even shot Karagatta Karan right here!”—while Vishal broke into a lyric from this well-known Tamil village film of the 1980s. Expressed in such humor was an anxiety that audiences would react to Malaikottai’s song with a cynical and indifferent distance, a worry only compounded by the crew’s reliance on Swiss structures. Caught between rain and boredom, the mood of the crew ebbed and flowed with the weather.

Luckily, things took a turn for the better on the final day of the shoot, when the crew worked under shifting clouds and intermittent sun on a panoramic summit in Grindelwald Park. “Changing and changing, it keeps showing different locations,” Vaidhi beamed, adding, “[it] seems as though we could have just waited in our hotel room for this.” The producer too was in good spirits, having posed—like most of the others—with his star for a picture against the mountain peaks that morning. “And that is Switzerland!” he replied happily to Vaidhi. Seventy shots were taken by sundown that day, and the dance director also seemed to have been caught up in enthusiasm for the place itself. “It shows, it shows, the Swissness shows!” he said excitedly, as a final silhouette of the leading pair was framed beside a copse of trees in the gathering dusk.

The Malaikottai crew left Zurich the next day with enough shots to complete the song sequence. Alpine joy would eventually find expression within the film’s frames, but only as an accidental consequence of the filmmakers’ struggle to find it. Let us note the difficulty of discerning the traces of these accidents within the space of the song itself.

Bollywood director Yash Chopra, who in many ways pioneered the use of Swiss locations in Indian cinema in the 1990s, has lamented the “Ootification” of the country, its novelty worn down by unrelenting shoots in the manner of the South Indian hill resort of Ooty. See Meenakshi Shedde, “‘Switzerland Is a Disneyland of Love,’” in Bollywood: The Indian Cinema and Switzerland, English-language inset, 6.
The song sequence ends with an image of the hero leaping out over a wide, snowy valley, turned away from the camera, arms and legs extended as if losing himself within its breadth. It is as though we do not need to see his face to know that he is smiling.

**Longing for Relief.** Not far from Interlachen was the Alpine saddle of Jungfraujoch, marketed to tourists from India and elsewhere as the “Top of Europe.” The day after the *Malaiikkottai* shoot ended, I took the train up to the visitor’s center to stop at “Hotel Bollywood,” with its wall-to-wall Indian film posters and movie-reel decor highlighting both its Indian tourist clientele and their own cinematic attraction to Switzerland. From the lobby downstairs, I placed a call to Ramji at the Travelmasters office in Chennai to discuss where I might go next. He was just back from Namibia with an Indian film crew himself, and he said that I could stay in the area to wait for the imminent arrival of another Tamil film crew, or fly instead to the United Arab Emirates, where a song shoot for another Tamil film would begin shortly. It may have been nothing more than the massive headache brought on by the altitude from which I was calling, but I too was tired of Switzerland. Second thoughts haunted me when I landed in Dubai two nights later; at 11:20 p.m., pilots reported a ground temperature of 104 degrees Fahrenheit.

Just after sunrise the next morning, I was squeezed into a white SUV heading into the desert southeast of the city. The film crew was here to shoot a pair of songs for the Tamil film *Nam Naadu* (Our Country; Suresh, 2007), centered on the meteoric political ascent of a nominally young party activist played by veteran Tamil actor Sarath Kumar. The actor himself was preparing to start a new political party in Tamil Nadu, and critics would later describe the film as “a drama that’s more a proclamation of [Kumar’s] solo entry into politics.”

In the film, the actor often conveys the impression that he is addressing an audience far beyond his followers on screen, a blurring of film and politics familiar to Tamil cinema that is further charged here by the intertwining of political and romantic attachments.

A young schoolteacher first encounters Muthalagan (Kumar) when she finds her school van blocked by a roadside protest he is leading. Peeved at first, the demure Gowri is easily won over by the grace with which he waves them through. Soon enough, she turns to Muthalagan for help in blocking construction of a soda bottling plant that threatens to dry up the water supply of her native village. He quickly succeeds, and she (along with hundreds of others) cannot help but chant his name enthusiastically. The film cuts to a quiet office, where Gowri, alone, calls Muthalagan on the phone. “I need to tell you something important,” she says with a shy laugh. “It’s just that I don’t know how to say it.” He is affable and encouraging, but she remains bashful: “It wouldn’t be good to say it on the phone. Can I see you in person?”

As she asks this last question, the film has already shifted visually to Muthalagan striding down a desert road in black leather and sunglasses; gentle background flute music yields to driving guitar chords and a boisterous Arabic melody, while the film flashes between close-up shots of undulating belly dancers and Gowri herself, now

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swaying sensuously in a much more revealing blue costume. We take it that she is singing, and enacting, what cannot otherwise be expressed:

In the hearts, the hearts of both
Friction, friction, life’s friction
Call, and I will come
I will give a thousand things
You are a sea of bliss
For she, this stream, to join

These lyrics rely on a Tamil poetics of devotion, the image of the hero as a sea of bliss echoing the literary portrayal of gods and kings as objects of erotic longing for enchanted female devotees. The affect of longing, Spinoza writes in terms resonant with this tradition, may be understood as “a desire, or appetite, to possess something which is encouraged by the memory of that thing, and at the same time restrained by the memory of other things which exclude the existence of the thing wanted.” The song from *Nam Naadu* expresses longing in both of these senses, precipitated on the one hand by the reverie in which Gowri calls Muthalagan, but on the other hand framed by the acknowledgment that her desire to be with him cannot yet be fulfilled. It is as though the song sanctifies terrestrial political struggle—in all of its manifest desire and evident friction—into a cosmic erotics of potential union with divinity. The sequence ends with an image of Gowri looking back at the camera as she steps slowly over sand into the blue seas beyond her. The screen fades to black before her feet touch the water in this final shot, and, indeed, the film will defer the consummation of their romance for a long time to come.

Both aurally and visually, the song is suffused with a mood of tension, antagonism, and contradiction, as its insistent tones and rhythms are matched by aggressive and, at times, jarring cuts. Visually, tension arises from the ways in which the song sequence presents Muthalagan, object of longing, as fully and even violently present—he revs up a dune buggy as the guitar picks up at one point, and repeatedly pulls Gowri sharply to him—and, at the same time, as elusive and distant. The “other things”—to use Spinoza’s words—that preclude her full possession of him include the belly dancers that often surround her, filling other parts of the frame and even engulfing it completely at times. Although they never approach Muthalagan, their seductive movements, synchronized with her own, suggest that she must share her desire for him with others (Figure 6). Crucially, the three environments within which the song is set—rolling sand dunes, a rocky dam surrounded by craggy peaks, and a white sand beach ringed by a stone barrier—may also be taken to express this mood of longing. There is nothing settled about these spaces, all of which seem hard, rough, and uncomfortable in various ways, as though there is no way to enjoy the physical contact that the song presents so forcefully. Longing, Spinoza reminds us, is a species of sadness, not of joy.

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46 I have in mind the poetic devices often at work in Tamil literary genres such as *bhakti* and *ula*, and am grateful to Amanda Weidman and Blake Wentworth for their insights here.


48 Ibid.
As in Switzerland, certain tactics were deployed on this shoot to elicit such qualities more effectively from the terrain, albeit with a startlingly different rationale. On arrival at the sand dunes on the first morning of the shoot, for example, the producer immediately declared, “This is not a real desert.” The dance director, Shanti, felt the same way, pointing out all the “green patches” of shrubs that broke up the visual unity of the rippling sand. Was there no desert here without such patches? she asked the Indian location manager, suggesting that these bits of green looked like “rubbish.” The following day at Hatta Dam, a series of shots were framed against the coarse rubble face of the dam itself. It was a precarious spot, difficult to walk on, let alone mount a steady camera on. And yet Shanti applauded the cinematographer for managing to frame hero and heroine against the harsh tumble of adjacent rocks as well as against a range of jagged crags in the further distance: “It’s nice, no? It’s hard” (Figure 7). This contrasted sharply with the presentation of Swiss greenery in Malaikottai as an ideal environment for love. But the choreographer, Arun, offered a fascinating explanation later that evening. The song was meant to be “rough,” in its beats, choreographed moves, and overall mood of ardor. “If I put a green [element], it will make the scene soft,” he suggested. In Spinoza’s language, it was as though the color would recall joy.

In the mind of the film’s cinematographer, the visual and aural intensity of the song would provide “a little relief” for an audience otherwise absorbed in the unending spectacle of politicians clad in customary white. But the most significant longing expressed in the shooting of the song was neither that of its characters nor that of its potential audience, but instead that of the filmmakers themselves. Data about likely summer daytime temperatures in Dubai had somehow been miscommunicated; even for an Indian film crew accustomed to working in challenging physical circumstances, it was unbearably hot (Figure 8). Some tried putting more coconut oil in their hair,
while others soaked caps and kerchiefs with water to cover their heads; cartons and bottles of buttermilk were passed around regularly, along with faintly chilled water; the few umbrellas were snatched back and forth, and sometimes disappeared; the hired vehicles provided brief air-conditioned respite to those who could fit into them on breaks; but despite all of these efforts, some still vomited and fell ill from the brutal heat. “This is not life at all,” one of the makeup men plaintively declared, gazing out at the desiccated terrain. One afternoon a fierce wind blew coarse sand into our faces as a road shot was rehearsed, sweeping up caps and lyric sheets in lacerating currents of air. The rehearsals continued grimly, while the normally taciturn director felt compelled to speak in a sober tone: “No need to move. This itself moves us.”

The passivity enforced by such conditions was registered most strongly on the bodies of the lead actors. Despite the booming instructions—“friction, friction”—shouted out, the actor and actress moved weakly and chastely. He was an older star, she was awkward and hesitant in this, her first Tamil film venture, and both had visibly wilted under the ineffectual shade of their umbrellas. The film crew relied on the sequined belly dancers to make up for this obvious deficiency of erotic charge. These five women—Russian immigrants to Dubai—were essential to the “audiovisual scene” of the song, their movements redoubling the Arabic melodies of its sound while their bodies filled out the visual space of the frame.49 They were often asked to surround the hapless heroine with their twisting limbs, as if to share the affective intensity of their bodies. “Come on girls! Shakes, attitudes, OK!” Shanti called out, admitting that they were indeed “the life of the song.” But these women, coming and going in their own

air-conditioned SUV, clearly added another layer of longing to the life of the shoot itself. They were a matter of lurid speculation for the mostly male crew, provoking a hush of awe when they boldly changed into scanty bikinis on the very edge of the shoot at the Hatta Dam. “They’re bathing. What a life,” Shanti said wistfully. The dancers relaxed in the shallow water while the filmmakers, still sweating, tried to look elsewhere.

On the Sad Fate of Certain Films. Cinema draws its vitality from affective encounters with many kinds of worlds: those of characters and the spaces within which they engage one another, those of filmmakers seeking and remaking resonant environments for cinematic elaboration, and those of audiences who may or may not be moved by the horizons of these works. Whether on or before a screen, these encounters unfold through the affective play of longing, fear, joy, and dismay, in spaces of emergence whose vicissitudes cannot be predicted. The success of films, in commercial terms, depends on the overlapping of these varied circuits of feeling, a congruence between the affective lives of those who make, watch, and populate films. But this is rare and unpredictable; in the Tamil film industry, most films fail by far to recoup their costs. Malaikottai was a commercial success; Nam Naadu was a forgettable flop, as was the political party it forecast. Sadness itself is an essential affect, and Spinoza’s concise description of its quality—“a man’s passage from a greater to a lesser perfection”—applies just as well to the life of many films as it does to the state of those who make them. Consider, for example, the fate of another recent Tamil film.

With its stark and barren landscapes, rustic soundtrack, and poignant moments of rural suffering, Aval peyar Tamilarasi (Her Name Is Tamilarasi; Meera Kathiravan, 50 Spinoza, A Spinoza Reader, 188.)
2009) was released and received as a film in the Tamil cinematic tradition of rural realism. The film tracks the unraveling of a childhood romance between a village schoolboy and the young daughter of an itinerant family of shadow puppeteers. Midway through the film, in a startling and heedless moment of betrayal, the boy drunkenly forces sex on the girl. She soon disappears, her studies and family in ruins, and he spends years searching her out again. The male protagonist of the film is among the most melancholy figures of popular Tamil cinema, buffeted by circumstance and suffused with regret. An entire song—“North, south, east, west / In what direction did she go?”—passes with him wandering, slumping, or lying about in indifferent rural expanses. Presented with such images, the designer of the film’s publicity told me, “All I can show is sadness.” But I found this quality expressed most vividly in the unexpected resonance I felt between two haunting landscapes in the film: the glowing bugs that float in the air like wondrous stars one night as the boy and girl walk along a forest path, and the ashes of the girl’s burned schoolbooks that hang in the harsh sun in the aftermath of her rape a few years later. The film closes with the pair reunited and reconciled in a North Indian brothel—like the bugs and the ash, drifting through the elements toward a state of lesser perfection.

_Aval Peyar Tamilarasi_ is also a film about the struggles of shadow puppeteers to draw audiences back from other forms of entertainment, such as the circus, cabaret, and television, and it is difficult to avoid taking the fate of these puppeteers as an allegory for the fate of such moods in contemporary Tamil cinema. “It’s not a sad film. It’s a realistic story,” the producer of the film, G. Dhananjayan, insisted to me as I studied the process of the film’s release in March 2009. But at Udhayam Theatre in Chennai on the day of the film’s release, I could somehow feel, palpably, that this was a mistaken assessment of the film. Whistles, cheers, and laughter erupted loudly and regularly through most of the first half. “Mood is good, people lively . . . . You’ve got ‘em!” I texted Dhananjayan excitedly from inside. After the intermission, however, catcalls and laughter surfaced repeatedly at moments when I was moved. I recorded many thoughtful audience responses at the intermission, but only hurried and empty platitudes at the end. It was as though the sadness of the film ultimately lay less in the trajectory of its story and more in the discordance of feeling it provoked. The affective life of the audience had somehow been lost—left, rather than taken, somewhere else. With tepid and ambivalent reactions slowly percolating outward, theaters remained mostly empty, and the film was gone in a couple of weeks.

Few filmmakers that I have met in India believe that they understand fully why certain films move audiences while many others do not. They do, however, hazard countless conjectures at the level of individual moments of film, speculations stitched together, through productive practice, to form a fabric of experience whose affective texture will remain uncertain until—and often beyond—the film’s release. Causal relationships between these two forms of affective encounter—that of filmmakers with a world of potential frames, and that of spectators with a manufactured cinematic world—are difficult to establish. But the affective powers of film depend at least partly upon its affection by the situations in which it is fashioned, and this occurs at least partly independently of the intentions of its makers to foment or allow such affection. We may take the pathos of a film for its maker, as for its spectator,
as a matter of what Sergei Eisenstein called *ex-stasis*, a “departing from his ordinary condition.”51 This departure may be without a destination, and that is indeed what so often makes film powerful. But in writing of cinematic landscapes of affective expression, I have had in mind less the fixing of spatial contexts for the framing of feeling, and more the fluid processes through which affects come to inhabit a world.52 Expressed through cinema, in other words, is the nature of a world whose affective texture arises accidentally: bodies, feelings, and qualities collide to powerful, and sometimes memorable, effect.

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