



Movie poster for *Siruthai* (2011), dir. Siva, starring Karthi Sivakumar. Courtesy of Studio Green

Imagination

Cinematic, Anthropological

Anand Pandian

“You are always a possible you.”
—Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*

This essay arises from anthropological fieldwork on the making of south Indian popular cinema. Anthropologists came to exercise “cinematic imagination” in the twentieth century, David MacDougall has argued, a palpable interplay between the visible and invisible allowing them to “re-imagine the world in which their subjects lived and breathed.”¹ Here, ethnographic attention is lent to a series of cinematic situations to further relay the intertwining of cinematic and anthropological imagination.² The essay is composed as a montage of successive scenes of encounter, where the observer is present as one character among others.³ This uneven approach to shifting grounds of the yet unseen and unthought is meant to mirror the course of anthropological inquiry as imaginative pursuit. Nothing here is only as it would appear to be; everything invites further slants of perspective. The essay does not seek to distinguish reality from image, world from screen, the tangible from what is otherwise elusive.⁴ Instead, it shares in the condition that Jean Rouch described as “film-trance,” its observer as a “taker and giver of doubles, as an eater and shower of reflections.”⁵ The essay seeks fidelity to the kind of experience into which cinema often leads, the sense of a life beyond or between oneself and others that is so often yet another film, unraveling in a world that is already cinema, the kind of world in which we keep finding ourselves.⁶

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Swetha first sees “Rocket” Raja when he bursts into a shopping mall crowd. There’s a man passed out on the floor among them. “Rocket landing!” Raja exclaims, and does something deftly with his fists to revive the man. They meet next at a lavish wedding at her uncle’s house, where he nabs a thief running away with sacks of things.

She’s entranced. “That day in the mall when you saved him,” she says, “I saw Mother Theresa in your good deed. Today, when you caught this thief, I saw Netaji in your speed.”⁷

He beams proudly, speaks magnanimously. And then, as she looks admiringly at him, you can see for a few seconds how she imagines him: a towering figure with clasped arms and a modest smile, rising alone into the distant heights of a deep blue sky, his body bathed in a halo of green and white light.⁸

The vision leaves a glint in her eye, and she remains distracted by it. She comes back suddenly with a start, realizing that he’s been trying to get her attention. This is the least of what she misses in the film, *Siruthai*.⁹ He’s already declared in song that he is “really, really not a good boy.” He too is a thief, and he will steal her heart, among many other things.

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Rocket Raja is one of two roles played in *Siruthai* by Karthi Sivakumar: son of a venerable Tamil film actor and younger brother to one of the most popular stars of Tamil cinema. Though *Siruthai* is only Karthi’s fourth release, he already has a huge base of avid fans. In Chennai alone on its opening weekend in mid-January 2011, the film screens 339 times. “House Full” boards are lit up almost everywhere.¹⁰

Loud drums, strings of firecrackers, and dancers in polyester tiger costumes greet Karthi at some of these opening shows, his white Honda City with darkened windows slowly making its way through boisterous crowds of ebullient young men. He smiles graciously, posing for a few photographs at each of the cinema halls.

It’s the weekend of the Pongal festival, an avidly sought window for Tamil film releases. The annual festival celebrates fields and lives flowing over with health and vitality—*pongal* is literally that which overflows, as with the rice and cane sugar that will bubble over the lips of cooking pots throughout the region.¹¹

Other liquids overflow around the theaters. Young men in red T-shirts—members of Karthi’s fan clubs—climb the scaffolding behind lofty vinyl posters of the actor, spraying them with plastic packets of milk and fizzing bottles of beer. The ritual is borrowed, bent, from the world of the Hindu temple, an *abhisheka* or bathing of the cinematic deity in consecrating fluids.¹² As M. K. B. Santhosh, the young leader of a fan association, later describes, “Fifty or a hundred packets of milk, fifty beers. . . . That whole road will run with milk and beer. . . .”



Santhosh takes his initials from his father, a Chennai politician who vanished mysteriously a decade ago. His father helped pioneer the use of massive wooden “cut-outs” to venerate Tamil political leaders, and there’s an unmistakable kinship between that public practice and the vinyl posters that his son now produces, some of which depict Karthi in the manner of an erstwhile royal lord: bejeweled crown, proud sword, lavish garlands.¹³

Santhosh isn’t entirely sure why these images look as they do. “We feel like doing it, we do it,” he says. But the flow of his devotion spills even further. “Do you know what else I want to do?” he adds. “When his next film comes, I want to make sir come on a horse-drawn carriage and make a round of the theaters. I have that desire. . . .”

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How do you approach someone so readily imagined as god and king? Access is a practical problem and a terrifying prospect.¹⁴ Of all the roles that might fill out a book on Tamil cinema, this one—a leading actor—has been the most difficult to “cast.” Agents are hard to reach. Directors quail at the idea of introducing actors they’ve worked with closely. Producers laugh knowingly, yet fecklessly, about these troubles.

The idea of working closely with Karthi is especially alluring. The ruffians he played in *Paruthi Veeran* and *Ayirathil Oruvan* were charming. Thousands of bodies erupt in enthusiasm at his appearance on a stage or screen. People in the industry praise his acting skills and easy demeanor. And he’s a trained engineer, with a degree from upstate New York: not far from a college where you once taught. You imagine telling him all this. You imagine him listening appreciatively.

You meet his father, Sivakumar. Clad in a crisp white pantsuit, the elder man is unexpectedly warm. He presents you with many of his own books and DVDs, signing fond words into a copy of his autobiography. In the face of his sincerity, you're embarrassed to ask for a chance to meet his son. Karthi is shooting daily now for *Siruthai*, but his father promises to try to arrange a meeting when they take a break.

The moment approaches one evening two weeks later. You're loitering in a deserted bookstore near Gemini Flyover in Chennai, checking whether they'd sold any copies of your last book. In the lobby, you catch Sivakumar on the phone. "I'm waiting for his call," he says. "As soon as it comes, I will call you."

You wander around by taxi, waiting anxiously. Karthi leaves Chennai soon for northern Karnataka, to shoot the climactic action sequence for the film. To spend a few days with him there . . . maybe this would be enough? You make a tense note to yourself. "I just want to get this to happen somehow, a climax for my own book in Badami. . . ."

And then, idly fishing the phone out of your pocket again, you see the SMS, "7 o'clock is ok for u?" You rush the driver along a narrow road, stopping only to buy some freshener for your parched mouth. You suddenly notice the wrinkles on your shirt.

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Karthi is more than you could have imagined: affable, sensible, talkative. "I always wanted to know what anthropologists do," he said with a friendly laugh. You can't believe it.

You talk about New York. He'd written a master's thesis in industrial engineering: "Scheduling of Electronic Assemblies in a High Mix Low Volume Environment." Thinking back on that thesis, he says, has helped with the caprice of his work as an actor, the utterly unpredictable fit between oneself and a role to play. "There won't be a breakthrough for six months," he recalls. "The breakthrough will come in one day, and you would've finished the project in one week. It happened to me."

You know what he means.

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One cloudy morning ten days later, you're on a plateau of crumbling sandstone in northern Karnataka, surrounded by undulating ridges of thorny bush, low grass, and outcrops of jagged rock. Among these clumps of grass and rock, men are shuffling cables, boxes, poles, and other gear, preparing for the shoot that will begin today.

You suddenly notice Karthi sitting on a wide slab of red stone, clad in dark blue jeans and a simple grey jacket. He'd arrived at the Badami Court Hotel late last night. In the dark courtyard below your balcony, he and the stunt master rehearsed slow, sweeping kicks and leaps.

You sit beside him on the slab of rock, jutting from a steep face of the high plateau.

“Lovely place,” he says.

“Are you ready?” you ask.

“It’s coming slowly,” he says. “You can’t become Jackie Chan in a day.”

He warns you that these scenes will lack emotional drama. “As an actor your contribution is small for the stunt sequences,” he explains. Still, there’s something essential he must give, something he will think and talk about every day of the shoot: “You give intensity.”

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Every successful actor in Tamil cinema seizes the chance, it seems, to play two roles at once. In the world of *Siruthai*, Karthi plays both cop and thief. Rathnavel Pandian is a righteous police officer dispatched to tackle a gang of mountain bandits. He pursues this campaign with a fearsome snarl, hence the *siruthai* or “leopard” of the film’s title.

Rocket Raja is an irreverent pickpocket, absorbed in various exploits until one day the bandits mistake him for the cop. There’s little surprise in this; the two characters look almost identical. The plot reveals Rathnavel’s death and Raja’s quest to avenge his doppelganger. The climax happens at the lair of the villains, where their leader Bhadra has kidnapped Raja’s girlfriend and Rathnavel’s orphaned daughter. *Siruthai* is produced by Karthi’s cousins. A faithful remake of a Telugu hit, the film is chosen deliberately for its mass appeal. Karthi is quite candid. “This kind of mass commercial film,” he says, “when an actor can pull it off, it gives you another jump in the market.”

Karthi has a vivid image of what his audience wants: “a hero in the film, not an actor.” Many had been disappointed with the ending of *Ayirathil Oruvan* earlier that year, his character looking blankly as his world erupted in an orgy of indeterminate violence. “Why wasn’t I doing anything about it? Why was I witnessing everything happening around me?”

This film will end very differently, Karthi explains. “It’s very Hollywood. Hero comes in and saves the day.” Rocket Raja is a selfish and comical character, but he will avenge the fallen cop with decisive courage by the end of the film.

You follow him down a narrow rock path as he talks of these things. When the camera rolls, Raja struggles with mock emphasis to hold back the unseemly ax of the brutish villain. “This is just like the Jetix channel,” he jokes to the frightened little girl whom Bhadra holds tightly. “See this dirty uncle? This is the villain. I’m the hero. What will the hero do to the villain?”

She remembers. “He’ll hit him!” she exclaims. And when he does,

cheers erupt from a crowd of local men, women, and children watching the shoot from a nearby ridge.

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You are struck by the friendly conversation Karthi sometimes shares with Supreet Reddy, the actor playing Bhadra. Supreet presents a curious and mysterious figure. Clad in a brown jute vest and dirty black cloak, a necklace of curved animal teeth draped around his neck, he retreats to a lone chair and umbrella on the edge of the shoot whenever he can, knotted strings of hair falling over his face as he taps the keys of a small mobile phone.

He speaks with a gruff voice that feels soft at the same time. While he's played villains in over fifty south Indian films already, his brother works as an engineer in Seattle. "I like doing negative characters," Supreet says with a sardonic laugh. "The more cruel, the better for me."

His wooden ax looks frighteningly big beside Rathnavel's small daughter. You ask, curious but also somewhat indignant, how he manages to threaten a small child with death.

"If you got the chance," he asks, "would you want to do a positive or a negative role?"

"A positive role," you say. It's difficult to imagine yourself otherwise. He watches you closely, then asks when you'll return to India. "You can do a sadistic role," he advises. "Half the acting is in the eyes. Looking at you, I can see you doing a sadistic character."

You're shaken by what he sees. Your eyes kept drifting to the patches of plastic scar tissue peeling from his cheek. Then you recover some ethnographic composure. "What about Karthi?" you ask lamely, already knowing where this will lead. "He can only play a hero," Supreet declares. "Soft, no, his eyes?"

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On a flat expanse of bare brown ground, Rocket Raja and Bhadra finally confront each other directly. They grapple with ax, stone, bare hands, and booted feet. This is the "solo fight" to which the film builds, and for close to a minute, there's hardly anyone else to see.

You can't always tell who or what is acting now in the film. Your perspective on the scene jumps, darts, shakes, and spins wildly, cutting too quickly to distinguish blow from blow. The sounds of swift limbs and clanking metal lead or lag behind their visible movement. Spurting dirt, tattered clothing, and whipping hair convey violence themselves.¹⁵

The scene is composed in bits and pieces over several days. Early each morning, thirty fighters gather to face the sun and silently pray. Three men make up the first row of this motley group: Karthi, Supreet, and Ganesh Kumar, the film's stunt master. Someone breaks a lime and squeezes its

juice on the ground, and each approaches Ganesh to touch his suede boots or the earth before his feet. Karthi is the first to make this gesture of humility and respect. Everyone addresses Ganesh only as “Master.” The stunt master is a third-generation fighter in south Indian cinema, and has fought in over two hundred films. “There’s so much history,” he tells you just after dawn one morning. He means the blows recorded on his body: the knee crushed by an accident eight years back; his back trouble between discs L3 and L4; the sternum he’s broken twice. “You’ll have certificates in your room to show what you’ve studied,” he says. “We have x-rays and medical certificates.”

Like a dance choreographer, Ganesh constantly improvises moves. With a sporty bandanna around his neck, he works out darting blows suitable for a thief. “It’s like a monkey’s work,” he says, describing the style he’s developing for this accidental hero. Ganesh also has to keep in mind the physical condition of Karthi’s body: back problems, for example, that keep troubling the shoot. “We’ll have to make it seem as though he’s got it,” he vows.

The plateau is strewn with equipment that will help with this: thick mats of padding, rocks and branches built of foam, blood-red paint and pliable shoes, and the metal hooks and lines of black cable leading up to a forty-foot crane, towering over the horizon. On breaks between shots, stories are shared about such things from other shoots: moments of accident when they assumed a dangerous life of their own, snapping, swinging, falling, breaking away unexpectedly.

Attention will be focused here, however, on the action of the hero alone. “Are you doing spycam?” a voice calls out with friendly concern as you record some rehearsals on your iPhone. It’s the director, Siva, worried that your video might leak onto YouTube. There’s just one thing he forbids you to record on video: the crane, as it lifts the hero for high leaps and kicks. “Let them believe that Spiderman can fly,” he says.¹⁶

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There are many extraordinary things Rocket Raja does in his battle with Bhadra. He aims a kick at the villain’s chest, but Bhadra catches hold of his left knee. Raja leaps off the ground with his other foot, pivots upside-down high in the air, pins Bhadra’s head between his own knees, turns down to grab Bhadra’s legs with his arms, rolls the villain onto his back, comes up to grab one of his legs, and snaps it sideways with a painful jerk, all in a single movement. Physical laws of gravity, mass, and momentum are defied by the hero’s body.

A palpable rage twitches on Karthi’s face as some of these shots are composed and taken. Where does this intensity come from? “I just got hit in the face,” Karthi says. “Yesterday, the last shot . . .” He speaks casually,

as though this is quite straightforward, but you are puzzled. In what sense did he “just” get hit in the face? Just now, the makeup man had applied blood to his brow. Was this a matter of belief then? Was this a problem of depths or surfaces?

Meanwhile, the high crane is moved into place, dangling the ropes and hooks with which Raja will execute his leaping overhead turn. There is talk of the *Karate Kid* as Karthi practices the moves on a thick foam mat covered by canvas and dirt. “As if you’re doing it yourself,” the stunt master advises. Karthi, learning how to lift one leg as if pushing off solely with the other, understands. “It should be done as if I’m doing it myself, without support.”



There is something imperceptible happening for the hero, something essential to the plausibility of his moves. On one break, Karthi tells Ganesh how Akira Kurosawa gave fight scenes a new “intensity” by intercutting wide shots with closeups of the face. You pursue the term. Karthi only smiles. “It’s all make-believe, right? That’s my job. I have to deliver. You’re writing a book. You have to go page by page.”

Where and how is such belief made? Everything depends on the relationship between the hero and the world of activity around him. Beyond the black vest around his chest, the steel rope clipped to it, the team of stuntmen pulling the rope back, and the crane through which it is laced, the moment still depends on the building of a more private alliance with oneself:

Basically, you have to do exactly what you're going to do in every second of the entire action. You have to do it yourself. The rope is there for help. You have to do it the way you will do it, thinking that you can jump, and you can. . . . At every point you should be conscious about yourself . . . your body, your hands, your legs, where exactly, what it is doing.

You marvel at this idea, that the hero must somehow focus his attention, second by second, entirely upon his own body. "It's not so great, anybody can do it," Karthi replies, quietly and with modesty, suggesting that it takes practice more than anything else.

But then he adds, "It's a lot easier compared to Jackie Chan, who does it himself." Even he, it seems, has his heroes. Does he believe that Jackie Chan can fly? Must he?

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A chapter in Constantin Stanislavski's *Building a Character* describes exercises in moving with a fictive drop of mercury. "We all did the same," a student actor reports, "letting the imaginary mercury roll up and down our limbs, shoulders, chins, noses, then let it run out again." The student wonders, "Did we really feel its passage through our muscular system, or did we imagine that we felt the imaginary mercury coursing through us!" But there's little time for such reflections: they must work on the movements, again and again.¹⁷

"I'm reading Stanislavski's book now," Karthi says one morning, naming this one.

"Is it useful?" you ask.

"Yeah," he says. "Every single thing in your body can help you to look like a different person. You should know how to use it."

Karthi echoes the Russian dramatist on the importance of habit, practice, and discipline. There's also the relationship between inward fiction and outward expression that Stanislavski nurtured as a matter of technique. "Imagination," he wrote, "while devoid of flesh and blood, has the ability to summon genuine actions from flesh and blood—from our bodies."¹⁸ For Karthi too, such experience is essential: "How deep you believe what's happening."

There is something very peculiar in this, Karthi admits. The events are themselves unreal: "Your body is not paining. You did not [feel] a blow. But you stand there. You feel it." There's also the scrambled time in which these happenings are staged, for when the take begins, "you're in the middle of the action." How to react compellingly now to a punch landed two days back?

Imagine the life of the character that you are playing, and find a way of dwelling in that life. "Creating the situation again and again, in my mind—that is what it is," Karthi says. He closes his eyes to practice this,

“seeing myself . . . from my point of view,” as he might pursue Rocket Raja’s ordinary routines: coffee in the morning without brushing his teeth, wandering the slum with his friends, sitting beside the sea and feeling the heat of the sun.

“It is his nature which creates through him,” Stanislavski wrote about the actor’s creation of a character: “he is only the instrument.”¹⁹ Karthi also talks about the organic expression of an actor’s selfhood, a nature gaining depth and diversity through such practices of imagination. “You get more and more intricate towards it,” Karthi reflects. “I think you grow in layers . . .”²⁰

This is fascinating, all of it intensely familiar, yet still so inscrutable.

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Closing on Bhadra beside a deep ravine and a narrow old bridge, Raja lands a few swift kicks and punches. His arm is bleeding, but his curled tongue juts out visibly from an open mouth, casting a look of mischievous disdain. The gesture is a familiar Tamil expression of heedless aggression, often identified with lower-class men. “As you go into that mood and do it,” Karthi explains, “it will come naturally.”

Working actively now with a gesture that expresses itself, the actor modulates its force and meaning. “Was that funny?” he asks after one take, ensuring that the gesture matches the narrative progression of the sequence. “He’s confident now, isn’t he?” Karthi asks Ganesh. “He’s not yet afraid?” He hasn’t yet seen, that is, the little girl dangling over the edge of the precipice?

Gathering together around the video monitor to review each take, actor, director, cameraman, and stunt master refine such expressions of feeling with a language of mechanical adjustment: higher or lower, lesser or greater, faster or slower, lighter or heavier. “The more you believe in the situation that is actually happening, [the more] your meter keeps increasing. It’s like the fan regulator, you know,” Karthi says.

But although such talk suggests that imagination may be harnessed and channeled, its workings also constantly surpass these moments of control. Whatever happens in the film doesn’t begin when the director calls, “Action!,” nor does it stop immediately after the director calls, “Cut!” Instead, for Karthi, these situations keep trespassing the boundary between film and life.

Shot after shot, his face holds strangely in a frown or grimace lingering oddly out of place, as others bustle all around him with mirrors, notepads, lenses, and cables. The film slackens its hold on his imagination with visible and peculiar delay. “Because you are always straining your mind,” Karthi admits, “it does some things which you don’t even ask it to do.”

You’re also caught in this play of imagination. He smiles at you one



morning in the midst of a rehearsal. You smile back reflexively, beaming inwardly at this shared moment of mutual recognition. After all, you're a stranger and he's the hero. But then you feel a slight blush of shame, as he turns away with the look still playing on his face.

"Did you have a very active imagination as a child?" you later ask. He laughs in acknowledgment. "Overimagination. I used to tell stories to everybody. My own stories. Very James Bond-inspired." A few minutes later, he lies down in the dirt beside a clear Plexiglas panel, grasping a painted rock made of foam, preparing to gaze fiercely at the reflective glass bulb of a camera lens swaddled in thick black cloth.

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You don't know him very well. But from what you can see, he seems to live in the midst of a ceaseless stream of stories. He's voluble and funny on breaks. He sings to himself. You run together along the main road one evening, and tales are shared between you continuously. The impression he conveys is one of overflow. Prabhu, his cousin, and one of the film's producers, agrees. "If you get him started, he'll talk to you for hours."

Karthi's father, Sivakumar, is also like this. Conversations with him are long and drifting. Over the span of forty years, he acted in nearly two hundred Tamil films, stories that pursue him still. "Literally, I stopped acting six years back," he says. "But every night, in my sleep, the shoots go on."

You press the father for some insight into the imagination of the child. His children didn't see very much of him at home, he admits: he

left each morning at 6:00 and returned at 10:30 each night. But in those same twenty years, Sivakumar says, Karthi watched almost a hundred films and characters that his father played. “All of this would be passing continuously into the subconscious mind.”

He tells the story of one film released when Karthi was two or three years old. Sivakumar plays a Catholic priest. Someone comes to confess a murder. To protect this secret, the priest declares himself responsible for the death. The entire village rushes to attack and lock him up. Only then does the murderer admit to the crime.

“Imagine seeing this film close up,” Sivakumar says. “The boy is sitting before this screen. On the screen, they are beating the father with their slippers. There is a close-up of him bleeding. The way he cried and shouted then, sullyng that theater! ‘They’re beating my appa, they’re beating my appa!’”

Hurrying out of the theater hall in the midst of his own film’s climax, the actor carries his son down the road to the beach, and buys him some ice cream to try to calm him down. But the child continues to cry out. “Appa, appa, they’re beating my appa!” He tries to bring him back—“Hey, it’s your appa here that’s feeding you this!”—but the boy is inconsolable. “No, they beat my appa, they beat my appa!”

“When they magnify that and show it,” Sivakumar says, “the father being beaten, the slippers coming down on him, when all that happens . . . The ice cream is sweet and good, but in his mind, the father is being beaten. All of that will reach within those children, no?”

Even now, this feels gripping. Your eyes are tearing up again.

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“To live a hundred years in the hearts of a people,” a tearful constable tells Rocket Raja at the midpoint of *Siruthai*, “it’s enough to live for a single day.”

He speaks of Rathnavel Pandian, lying gravely wounded in a hospital ward. As the constable recounts the fallen cop’s heroism, we catch glimpses of how Rathnavel has lived such a life, vanquishing the depraved authority of these demonic bandits. With rain, wind, time, and other cosmic forces on his side, and a spinning metallic disc in hand, the policeman slaughters countless foes and restores order under his rule. It is difficult not to imagine him as Vishnu, the avenging deity of Brahmanical Hinduism.²¹

In peninsular India, righteous gods and kings share a kinship dating back to the early centuries of the Common Era. In this age of cinema, many of the temples and monuments of that time have been revived as centers of veneration. Others survive as decaying objects of appeal, such as the local sites of touristic attraction marked so hopefully on the paper placemats laid out each morning at the Badami Court Hotel.

It is on a sandstone rise overlooking the archaeological ruins of Badami, erstwhile capital of the Chalukya empire between the sixth and eighth centuries, that the tense finale of *Siruthai* is shot over several days. The museum commemorating this history is scarcely mentioned by the filmmakers, although everyone and everything must pass daily through its gates to reach the stone stairs leading up to the height of the plateau. Then there are the plentiful gangs of pigs, dripping black sewage onto the narrow, muddy lanes of what is Badami today, an acrid reminder of the impermanence of human exertion.

Karthi too is prone to such reflections. “As appa says,” he muses one morning, “don’t assume that things will remain as they are.” You remember an image like this in his father’s autobiography. “Fame that cinema gives is like the transient clouds of Kodaikanal,” Sivakumar writes. “It arrives unannounced and vanishes quite as suddenly.”²²

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Across the lime-green waters of the Badami lake are the remnants of Chalukya-era cave temples: Vaishnava, Saiva, and Jain. One afternoon, the pull of these distant black spheres strung along the cliffs proves irresistible, and you cross over for a look. On one side of the lake, artisans prepare the serrated discus that Rocket Raja will hurl to annihilate Bhadra. On the other side, in one of the caves, a stone Vishnu quells the lofty ambitions of the demon Bali with three steps through the immensity of the cosmos, a lesson in humility imparted through a cunning shift of perspective.²³ In one of his many arms, he bears his own steadfast discus.

The space has an air of epic grandeur and desolation. The vastness between the cliffs is like a resonance chamber, amplifying the sounds that carry across the water. Wet clothes slap sharply against the sandstone steps below. There’s also the fluctuating thrum of diesel generators, and the words “Ready . . . take . . . action!” resounding even at this distance. The silhouette of a protective umbrella—an abiding visual sign of Indian kingship—bobs along the edge of the shoot, suggesting the presence of someone important.

But from here, everything about the film seems small, except for its sound. Although the stunt master’s commands boom across the water, there are few signs of any of the activity they intend to provoke. People mill about slowly, the forty-foot-crane among them dwarfed by the ruins of the Shivalaya temple on the northern edge of the rise. The word “Action!” does nothing to change the pace, direction, or momentum of what seems to be happening from here.

Meanwhile, a gang of Kannada boys has occupied a terrace below the caves, interrupting this reverie. They pose for their own cameras against the lake with jaunty hips and artful smiles. This is relevant, but also irri-

tating. There's nothing to do but wait, and hope for one more glimpse of life on the screen beyond them.²⁴

Notes

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1. David MacDougall, "Anthropology and the Cinematic Imagination," in *Photography, Anthropology, and History*, ed. C. Morton and E. Edwards (London: Ashgate, 2009), 62.

2. See George Marcus, "The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage," *Visual Anthropology Review* 6 (1990): 2–12. On cinematic devices in twentieth-century American prose fiction, see David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions: The Impact of the Cinema on the American Novel up to World War II* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).

3. Consider Malinowski's early invitation to "imagine yourself" on a tropical beach in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1984). My use of second-person voice here seeks to explore such transformative vectors of literary affiliation, described by Gilles Deleuze in "Literature and Life," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 225–30.

4. On imagination as a transgressive movement "beyond" and "between," see Vincent Crapanzano's *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

5. Jean Rouch, *Cine-Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 100.

6. On experience in an already cinematic world, see my "Reel Time: Ethnography and the Historical Ontology of the Cinematic Image," *Screen* 52 (2011): 193–214.

7. Netaji is a common honorific for Subhas Chandra Bose, the prominent early twentieth-century Indian anticolonial militant.

8. On the fusing of "image and beholder" through such "corporetics," see Chris Pinney's *Photos of the Gods* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

9. Siva, dir.; Studio Green, producer and distributor; released early 2011. The film was a remake of the Telugu film *Vikramarkudu* (S. S. Rajamouli, dir.; released 2006).

10. This account of *Siruthai*'s release is deeply indebted to a video shot by MKB Santhosh, producer; MKB Productions, Chennai; released January 2011. I am also grateful to Santhosh for providing this image.

11. For a discussion of the aesthetics of overflow in Tamil affective life, see Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

12. On this aspect of Hindu *puja*, see C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

13. On such “semiotics of kingship,” see Preminda Jacob, *Celluloid Deities: The Visual Culture of Cinema and Politics in South India* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).
14. In Indian forms of *darsan* or devotional seeing, whether religious or cinematic, “the devotee is permitted to behold the image of the deity, and is privileged and benefited by this permission,” as Ravi Vasudevan writes in *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 114.
15. All nonhuman technologies, forces, and actants at work in the making of cinema.
16. “There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination,” writes John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1934), 267.
17. Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character* (London: Methuen, 1968), 65.
18. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary* (London: Routledge, 84).
19. Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 333.
20. “It is not the original image that the imagination finds but, through the finding, something much fuller, something the imagination has itself perhaps driven to the surface and then shaped and deepened by seeing it,” writes David Shulman in “The Marriage of Bhavana and King Best: A Sixteenth-Century South Indian Theory of Imagination,” *diacritics* 38 (2008): 22–43.
21. The iconic form of Vishnu’s discus appears twice in the film, almost inexplicably in both instances, revealing, as Rachel Dwyer writes in *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* ([London: Routledge, 2006], 160), an “enchanted world where gods are still present, and miracles are almost part of the everyday.”
22. Sivakumar, *Idhu Rajapattai Alla*, trans. Malathi Rangarajan (Chennai: Alliance, 2010), 4.
23. In the guise of a mendicant, Vishnu asks the demon king for a gift of land measuring no more than three steps across. He then assumes cosmic dimensions to wrest away far more. On the Badami temples, see James Ferguson and James Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India* (London: W. H. Allen, 1880), 405–16.
24. I didn’t know, until struggling to compose this last line, that I’d been looking across these waters as if at a wide-angle shot. Here is Ashish Rajadhyaksha on the “cinema effect” in contemporary India: “an interpellative double-take in which narrative constitutes itself through locating its subject simultaneously within its ambit but also standing outside, watching what the narrative is, literally, making of its subject” (*Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009], 120).

