

# REEL WORLD

AN ANTHOPOLOGY OF CREATION



ANAND PANDIAN

WITH A FOREWORD BY WALTER MURCH

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*With a foreword by Walter Murch*

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**FOR SANCHITA**



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## FOREWORD

*Walter Murch*

Set this giant dream machine in motion! Wrestle with the angel of light, the angel of machines, the angels of space and time!

—Jean Cocteau, director, on the first day of production of *Beauty and the Beast* (1946)

Cocteau's invocation hints not only at the multifaceted nature of cinema, but also at the mysterious forces that seem to govern it. I am sure that the Tamil filmmakers we meet in Anand Pandian's book *Reel World* would immediately approve of Cocteau's prayer, so similar to some of their own, recognizing Cocteau as a brother filmmaker despite his distance from them in time, space, and culture. In fact, his angels of Space, Light, and Time lend their names to three of *Reel World's* chapter headings.

This mutual recognition between filmmakers seems universal: whenever I have traveled for work or teaching—in Europe, South America, India, Africa, Southeast Asia—I have experienced an immediate familial bond with the local filmmakers, an understanding that we belong to the same tribe, so to speak, and that this tribal alliance trumps the cultural or linguistic differences that would nominally separate us. I certainly found the same thing in the pages of this marvelous book, which brings fourteen Tamil films under the anthropological magnifying glass, placing them in a deep cultural context (and Tamil culture is one of the world's deepest), while also dissecting each of seventeen cinematic arts and crafts, as well as painting vivid portraits of the practitioners.

What emerges repeatedly over the course of the book are different versions of the phrase—spoken in wonder, exhaustion, contemplation—“Just go with it, try anything”: an acceptance of the circumstances of the mo-

ment, but also a leveraging of those circumstances to make a creative leap beyond the immediate problem or situation. This is not unique to Tamil cinema (although for various reasons it may have found its apotheosis there); the tension between control and spontaneity is deeply woven into the fabric of cinema. It recalls an observation that my mentor Francis Coppola made about directing: “The director is the ringmaster of a circus that is inventing itself.”

Francis is the master of this kind of spontaneous invention. One example among thousands: Vito Scotti, the supporting actor playing Nazorine the baker in *The Godfather*, made too many sweeping hand-gestures in the first take of his scene with Marlon Brando, probably out of nervousness. The overuse of hand gestures, shorthand signature for Italians in cinema, was something that Francis was anxious to restrict throughout the film. But this shot was particularly significant because it was the first, on the first day of shooting, and if it wasn’t right it would be a bad omen for the rest of the process. Francis later told me, “My heart sank: the first shot, and I was seeing the very thing that I most wanted to avoid.” What did he do?

A lesser director would have reminded Scotti not to use his hands so much. But of course this would only make the actor overly self-conscious and probably even more nervous. Instead, Francis said, “Cut. Excellent, excellent. Except that I just realized I made a mistake in the staging. Tom Hagen [Robert Duvall] would have already poured you a welcoming glass of brandy.” And here he gestured to Duvall to give Scotti a glass and *fill it right up to the brim*. So, take 2 proceeded with Scotti in position, but gingerly balancing a glassful of brandy in his hand. The gestures were still there, natural in their accents, but reduced to the minimum. And Scotti was less nervous because the director had admitted that *he himself* had been mistaken. The results you can see for yourself in the film.

My own mantra for this paradoxical state is *open closedness*. Or, if you prefer, *closed openness*. Filmmaking requires a resolute faithfulness to the plan you have in mind, otherwise the chaos of the world tears your film to shreds. In that sense, you must close yourself off to outside influences. But you must not be *too* closed, otherwise you will blind yourself to the opportunities that are offered up by the angels of circumstance. Francis did not have the idea of the brandy glass in his mind before shooting the Nazorine scene, but he was alive to its potential, and the glass emerged at the right moment as the solution to an unexpected problem.

A concrete image to go with this is the *parachute*, which functions correctly when it is in the dynamic equilibrium of exactly this state of closed/openness. If it never opens, you are dead. But if it opens too far, you are just as dead.

A side effect of this Zen-like contradictory tension is the presence of the spiritual dimension in filmmaking. Because of its complexity (the precise meshing of those seventeen arts and crafts) and because time is so crucial, it is among the most contingent of human activities. For better or worse, so much depends so frequently on so little: a chance meeting, a glance, a sudden change in the weather, a broken wire, what the cameraman had for breakfast. Consequently, there are few filmmakers who are not superstitious. In Tamil productions, the superstition is more ritualized than, say, in American filmmaking: here you will find garlanded cameras, anointed with sandalwood and saffron, and priestly invocations of a *puja* at the beginning of shooting (and indeed at any momentous turning point during the making or marketing of the film). But Cocteau had his prayer to the angels of cinema, and all of Francis Coppola's films, too, begin with a ritual on the first day of shooting: the crew coming together to hold hands in a circle and calling out a chant given to them by Francis: "Poowahba, poowahba, poowahba" —meaningless syllables, perhaps . . . but perhaps, at a deeper level, not.

Tamil cinema does not have (thankfully, not yet) the corporate rituals of focus groups and market research (which are themselves a kind of superstition). The creative talents and film tribes in *Reel World* are operating largely on their own, like Hollywood in the 1920s, using their personal intuitions about what the culture will respond to, what it longs for, what it requires. And the results are, unsurprisingly, commercially uncertain; there are several poignant images here of desolate theaters with films, whose creation we have followed, playing to unenthusiastic audiences of a dozen people. But on a percentage basis, the results of the rough-and-ready Tamil approach to filmic creation are not far from the results of sophisticated U.S. market research: 131 films were made in Tamil Nadu in 2009, of which 19 recovered their costs, and perhaps 5 turned a substantial profit. A quick calculation says that the remaining 107 films, or 81 percent of the total, lost money, which agrees closely with the conventional Hollywood wisdom that 80 percent of the films made each year lose money. So the precariousness and contingency we see during production seems to extend to all aspects of the industry, no matter what the underlying technology or culture. Apart from a few huge successes, the return on investment for the industry as a whole, worldwide, is meager compared to other major industries.

Which begs the question, asked in a broad cultural context: Why do we keep doing this? Collectively, we are clearly not doing it solely for profit, though inevitably a few lucky individuals do become wealthy.

One of the answers is that the matter is out of our control: we filmmakers appear (to ourselves) to be intermediaries, not authors. We do

this because we cannot *not* do it. Nirav, the cinematographer, observes, “I am not a magician. I am the medium. I’m not creating anything.” Yuvan, the composer, says: “I’m sort of a messenger. It just flows through me . . . I’m just a mediator.” The same idea is expressed many other times throughout *Reel World*: the inspiration (the breath) blows through us, sometimes unbidden. We do not create it, we transmit it from somewhere else into this world. A mysterious creative force appears to be using us (all of us) to further its own ends, and we are devotees of this force—resistance is hopeless.

Of the many unique things about *Reel World*, the most ambitious is Pandian’s attempt to capture this moment of creation, in writing, composing, directing—the moment that the spark of inspiration connects the individual artist to the numinous forces around him—Cocteau’s angels, so to speak. This is overtly referenced in the chapter on music, where the spark of creativity is simply ascribed to the goddess Saraswati: “Where else does it come from?” asks the sound engineer working for composer Yuvan. From personal experience, I can say these moments (when they do occur) are very quick and must be acknowledged rapidly or else they vanish in a pique. We must always, even in our most mundane moments (paradoxically, frequently the most fertile), be ready to see things, or hear things, out of the corner of our eye/ear, and drop everything to seize the moment. Most of all, we cannot solicit these moments: they will come when they feel we are ready for them (which may not be how we feel). As Picasso said, “Inspiration comes, but she has to find you working.”

I still strongly remember one of my own “Saraswati moments”—the stunned shock I experienced when, almost on a whim, I put the sound of a helicopter in synchronization with the rotating ceiling fan in Willard’s Saigon hotel room in *Apocalypse Now*. The effect was so powerful, and the power was so unanticipated, that the editing machine I was using seemed to have been transformed. I, who was conscious of what was happening mechanically was nonetheless completely convinced that the sound was being created by the fan itself. “If it convinces me, it will convince an audience,” I remember thinking. That fleeting moment was the fertilized egg out of which I could construct, in a montage of superimposed images, sounds, and Jim Morrison’s music, the opening eight minutes of the film (which was unscripted): a nightmare of slow-motion helicopters and napalm that swirl and coalesce into this one concrete (and mundane) image/sound, which pulls dreaming Willard back into consciousness (*Saigon. Shit. I’m still only in Saigon.*), and from which he then descends into the darker and more jungly nightmare forecasting his future.

Most often, Saraswati visits us when we are alone; and when that

aloneness is paired with the tangential fleetingness of these encounters, it is not surprising that Pandian never witnessed—as he acknowledges—an actual moment of creative insemination. It is conceivable that an ethnographer like himself could have been in the room with me at my “helicopter” moment, but the actual sparking event itself was unanticipated, and over in a few milliseconds. And then the ethnographer’s presence itself might have made Saraswati hesitate to appear. These things are delicate.

In compensation, *Reel World* goes into much fascinating detail about the consequent development of the original ideas, in some cases quite soon after the moment of inspiration; and if we use our imaginations we can project backward in time to the moment itself, as astrophysicists do searching for the ineffable moment of the Big Bang.

Another possible clue to the *Why?* question posed earlier occurs when Pandian describes attending a public screening of *Subramanipayuram*, a Tamil film made in 2008, which quickly became a tremendous popular and critical hit. A scene within the film takes place in 1980 in a cinema theater, centered around the release of an earlier blockbuster Tamil film. The whistling enthusiasm of the audience onscreen was mirrored and amplified in the packed audience around Pandian such that “it was impossible to distinguish the whistling of the loudspeakers from [the whistling audience] around us.” There was an unnerving feeling of immediacy around Pandian, the theater packed with bodies that “teetered between jubilation and violence.”

I remember a somewhat similar situation upon the release of *The Godfather* in 1972. The Baptism montage—where the baptism of Michael’s godson was intercut with the simultaneous revenge-killing of Michael’s enemies—was intended by Francis (and by all of us who worked on it) to be a chilling sequence in which we saw Michael cold-bloodedly trading his immortal soul for worldly power, completing his transformation into the Godfather. Many audiences of the time, however, were violently vocal during that scene, expressing their bloodlust for retribution in Michael’s name, and ignoring (or so it seemed) the damage being done to Michael’s soul. I remember that Francis’s experience of watching his film with audiences like this shook him, and somewhat painfully he rearranged his previous expectations of audience response. There is an echo of this in Pandian’s account of the audience’s response to the “crude beheading” of the villain of *Subramanipayuram*: “Joy was everywhere, impossible to place.”

A bit of mathematics can help us here. The making of a film might require, on average, a total of 150 people working for two years, which would work out to three hundred human-years of work. In a single large theater, however, you might find an audience of six hundred with an aver-

age age of twenty-five years, which works out to fifteen thousand years of human experience sitting there in the dark waiting for the film to begin. Fifteen thousand years is twice the length of recorded human history. Fifteen thousand years of hopes, dreams, tragedy, success, pain, pleasure, and so on: all jumbled into the theater waiting for a thin beam of light, and a stream of vibrations from the paper cones of audio speakers, to reorganize the audience over the next two hours into a semicoherent entity. All of the emotional power of the experience comes from those fifteen thousand years of lived human lives; directed, sculpted, and channeled by a thin beam of light/sound whose objective power is small (only so many watts, after all), but whose coherence (if it is a good film) is very great (three hundred human-years of labor). The theater is the river delta where these two streams meet: Chaotic Power intersects Organized Coherence, and the former is given the coherence it longs for by the latter, as the latter is given flesh by the former.

The occasional pessimism about the future of cinema overlooks the perennial human urge—at least as old as language itself—to assemble in the fire-lit dark with like-minded strangers to listen to stories.

The cinematic experience is a re-creation of this ancient practice of theatrical renewal and bonding in modern terms, except that the flames of the Stone Age campfire have been replaced by the shifting images that are telling the story itself—flames that dance the same way every time the film is projected on the cave wall of the theater, but that kindle slightly different dreams in the mind of each beholder, fusing the permanency of literature with the spontaneity of theater. In the best sense, a *mass-intimacy* is created where the film speaks to the totality, but each member of the audience believes, sincerely, that the film is talking to him individually, with secret knowledge about things that only he knows.

So despite cinema's perennial uncertainty and the overall meager profit, we participate in cinema both as practitioners and audiences for reasons other than money. The cinema screen is a magic portal that gives us access, when things coalesce successfully, to a numinous *something*, deeper than our ordinary day-to-day existence, and which links us, despite the technologically advanced trappings, to our commonly shared human prehistoric past—and perhaps to our imagined future as well.

Pandian's phrase *teetering between jubilation and violence* hints at a darker question about the role of theater and music in society, something that has been discussed since Plato: Does the theatrical experience (and cinema is theater on steroids) provide a healing cathartic release of built-up tensions, or does it exacerbate the very tensions that it is depicting? Pandian goes into detail about this issue, examining what he calls the "nakedly commercial" and "belligerent masculinity" of many Tamil

films (the audience at Tamil Nadu cinemas is mostly male) and posits it alongside the reported frequency of rape in Indian society, much of which has made international headlines. As, of course, has the gun culture of the United States and the frequent mass-killings at schools performed by disaffected or unbalanced young men who are frequently devoted to films that validate revenge by gunfire. This debate is long-standing and on-going: Does cinema influence behavior, or is it healthy cathartic release? On the *influence* side of the question, the \$171 billion invested annually on television and Internet advertising in the United States would appear to be poorly spent unless the advertisers believed that their commercials actually influence the behavior of their intended audiences.

*Reel World* also catches its film tribes at a fascinating historical flex point: much of the audience for Tamil films is still firmly rooted in tradition—the book begins with a farmer irrigating his fields and singing a song from a recent film—but the impact of digital technology is rapidly transforming both the means of production as well as distribution and exhibition. The latter is particularly relevant, since Indian cinema, with its vibrant audience participation and heavy 35mm film prints, is vulnerable to the atomization enabled by the proliferation of individually owned digital screens: tablets, phones, LCD displays. It will be fascinating to discover how all this resolves in the years to come, though the pattern elsewhere in the world is already becoming fairly clear.

On a more personal note, *Reel World* was particularly engaging to me because my mother was born in the Tamil region of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) in 1907. She was the daughter of two Canadian doctors, Mary and Thomas Scott, who had emigrated in 1893 to manage the Green Memorial Hospital in Manipal, which lies just fifty miles from Tamil Nadu across the Palk Strait. My mother spoke Tamil when she was a little girl, and stories of her early childhood were full of the images and sounds, songs and smells of the vibrant Tamil life as persuasively presented in these evocative pages.





## NOTE TO THE READER, ALSO A LISTENER AND SEER

This is a book about experience in a world that looks and feels so much like cinema—the sensory textures of this experience, and the circumstances of their crafting. Books on cinema typically focus on films already known for their critical value or popular appeal. They are usually written with the assumption that their readers would know something about these films.

This book, however, concerns a Tamil cinema still marginal in the contemporary world. More to the point, my choice of films is almost purely an accident of ethnographic circumstance: it so happened that I found myself in the midst of these projects as they unfolded.

What follows is therefore written with no assumption that you do know, or even should know, anything about these particular films. The chapters take up various cinematic moments as events in their own right, and my hope is that these stories will hold all that you may need as a reader. Still, though, I'm guessing that you might sometimes want a bit more—after all, the book seeks to think with the tangible sensations of cinema.

If and when such curiosity strikes, there is a website, [www.reelworldbook.org](http://www.reelworldbook.org), meant to accompany this book. There you'll find a number of photographs and film clips that may resonate with the words that follow here, each keyed to one section of a particular chapter.

These are images and sounds that confronted me ceaselessly in the writing of this book. But I'd like to think that you might also see and hear them, or something like them, even as you thumb through these pages. This is something that tends to happen in a world of pervasive cinema. I'm trusting that your faculties have gotten as restless and entangled as mine.





## CHAPTER 1    **Reel World**

You could almost smell the onions, even before the bend in the road. Bulbs the size of castor pods, pressed into pairs along crimson ridges of dirt. The sun still hadn't cleared the summit of the mountains to the east. Rivulets of water crept slowly through the hollows of the field, leaving behind maroon trails of soft, wet earth. One corner of the orchard field was still dry, and these new bulbs would lend their shoots only in exchange for water.

Logandurai had been out here all night, running the small motor that powered his pumpset. Far upland from the common well, water seeped through the pipes at a lazy pace. Sometime before dawn, the electricity suddenly went out, when there were still four beds of onions left to irrigate. And so the farmer waited, anxiously, for the power to return.

He thought back to what he'd already done for this crop: all the plowing with his bulls; the travel to a distant city to buy these bulbs; a night of watering that would not end. Then the motor started to thrum once more. Picking up his spade, Logandurai started to cut channels in the dirt walls dividing one bed of plants from another. And as he worked, he began to sing—"With all this desire, I raised a bed of soil, and planted a single shoot."

People sing all the time, to their plants, to themselves, to each other. But here's what struck me when I ran into Logandurai that morning, in a tract of orchards deep in the south of Tamil Nadu. He'd found a tune to match the rhythm of his spade. The lyrics gave him a voice to describe what was happening just then, expressing all the hope and desire of that moment. And what made this possible was the popular Tamil film that had somehow surfaced in his recollections.<sup>1</sup>

Did Logandurai imagine himself as the young woman who sang these lines in the film, a bundle of green shoots in hand and her feet planted into the wet soil of a paddy field? Or did he imagine her, or someone like her, singing this song to someone like him? Grizzled, graying, with burnished skin and an easy smile, he was a handsome man. There was something about the build of his nose and jawline—when we first met, I thought immediately of Richard Gere.

But this middle-aged man in a fraying polyester shirt was not a Hollywood star. He was a farmer of modest means, eking out a living in an obscure village in south India. He worked with halters and plow blades, with paddy, bananas, and onions. He and his wife ate and slept on the floor of a room piled high with jute sacks of grain.

These were their conditions of life. And yet, despite its relentless difficulties, Logandurai could experience this life as a cinematic scene: not in a spirit of escape or denial but instead as the deepest expression of its hope.

What happened that morning in his orchard, over thirteen years ago, has been nagging at me ever since. How could something with such epic dimensions, cinema, slip into a space as intimate as this one, this narrow and fleeting gap between a body, a spade, some plants, and the earth and water among them? What could cinema express about the truth of such experience?

## EXPERIENCE IN A WORLD OF CINEMA

Imagine this scene again. Imagine a camera mounted to the hood of a car as it rounds a bend, toward the same field. The crenellations of onion peel and dirt captured by a macro lens. The glints of light in the running water, thrown from an array of reflective panels pointed at the sky. The bulb of glass, encased in black metal, arcing down to meet the farmer's burnished face. The speakers planted into the loose soil, booming sounds for the man to mime. A heap of spades in case one breaks. Everyone bustling around the scene, careful of where their shadows fall. Someone beside a video monitor, already thinking of how to cut from one shot to another.

Did this happen? Could it happen? "Any person today can lay claim to being filmed," the German literary critic Walter Benjamin wrote in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

This is a book about experience in a world of cinema, a book about what happens to life when everything begins to look and feel like film. Cinema is experience of light and sound, but many other things as well: hope, wonder, desire, pleasure, the drift of dreams and imagination, the movement of rhythm and speed. Cinema has profoundly recast the scope of contemporary experience. Cinema can also help us understand its feel-

ing and texture. This book pursues such understanding by examining how cinematic experience is crafted—the techniques that transform ordinary spaces and moments like this one into elements of a cinematic world.

A cinematic world: I'm guessing that you might know what I mean by this, even if it's been a long time since you've seen a film, even if you've never been to a place as wild for cinema as modern India. I'm guessing that something like this may have happened to you—

You're walking down the road on a damp and cloudy day. The music on your headphones sounds as gloomy as the weather. As you listen, you can see yourself walking. Those around you begin to look like extras on a set.<sup>3</sup>

You stay up watching French films on cable TV. You dream of leaving your job, leaving an abusive husband, working in France for a while, and coming back with enough money to buy a decent house for your kids.<sup>4</sup>

You see an explosion, a fireball, devastated buildings, and panicked victims. Someone asks what happened. Dazed, you don't know what to say. Then you find the words that everyone else is finding. "It was like a movie."<sup>5</sup>

I first met Logandurai a few months before September 11, 2001, in a village at the head of a remote agrarian valley in south India. Cinema here was ubiquitous and inescapable. People kept saying things like this: "My story is like cinema. . . . My life deserves a movie. . . . Hundred rupee tickets, and I'd still pack the houses." Once I recorded the life of a middle-aged man who worked in the valley's grape orchards. He asked me to trail him through the countryside with a video camera, while he launched each story at a different grove or meadow with the same salutation: "O my dear fans . . ."

All of this was somewhat odd, but also strangely familiar. I grew up in Los Angeles, a few miles from the "HOLLYWOOD" letters of the Santa Monica Mountains. For years I expected the bathroom faucet to run red with blood, like the gory Tamil thriller that my parents took me to one weekend at the Montebello Public Library. Or, there was the summer of 1985, when a serial killer, the "Night Stalker," was on the loose in L.A. I remember watching from a window as my father stretched in the backyard after a run. I can still summon that dread, the sense of an impending catastrophe beyond the glass, the feeling of being stuck in molasses as the inevitable would come, always in slow motion.

What should we make of such sensations, these feelings of being caught up in some current of life as though it were a film? Some might diagnose severe cases of such confusion between real life and cinema as a very contemporary form of psychic disorder, a "Truman Show delusion."<sup>6</sup> One might seek to lead people suffering from this delusion back to reality, in the way that Truman Burbank finally manages to pierce the

shell of the studio staging his life as reality television in the 1998 Hollywood film *The Truman Show*.<sup>7</sup>

We often think of cinema in just this way: as a stream of images that obscure reality, screen us from the actual conditions of our lives, disable us from reflecting upon the truth of our experience. We tend to think of such an existence as a peculiarly modern fate, a consequence of being awash in a flood of media images. And we tend to assume that, as critics, our task is to lead people around the screen, to reveal whatever still remains invisible to them: *You may think you're just enjoying yourself, but you're also taking pleasure in the nation this film glorifies, the social class this film idealizes, the masculine violence this film celebrates.*

These problems are real. Critical perspective on them is essential. Too often, however, our critiques have relied upon naïve and flimsy distinctions between truth and fiction, reality and representation, the tangible matter of the world and mere images of it. Must we always seek to step beyond such representations in the name of understanding, and to implore others to do the same? This book seeks a different way of thinking with the worlds that cinema creates, a more intimate way of engaging the feelings of desire and fear that such media make possible.<sup>8</sup> “The act of seeing,” as Vivian Sobchack reminds us in a meditation on film experience, “is an incarnate activity.”<sup>9</sup>

Suppose that whatever we’ve done, felt, and thought has always happened in the thick of images. Suppose that reality itself is only this: a boundless multitude of impressions, endless slants of perspective. Suppose that the world is pervaded, even composed by such images: a spectator gazing at a screen and a farmer looking down at a field, to be sure, but also the water seeking a path along the crevices of that soil, the roots reaching down through the medium of that moisture, the pungent odors exploring that space of the air above. Suppose we took all such movements, whether human or not, as image-making activities, as jostling perspectives on a world and its potential for life. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposed a name for this way of looking at things: “the universe as cinema in itself, a metacinema.”<sup>10</sup>

Reel world, real world—the universe as a flux of images, and every film an experiment with its reality.<sup>11</sup> How does one grapple with the look and feel of such volatile environments? Our ordinary perception of things always ebbs and flows, coming in and out of focus. But there are those who live more intensely with these cinematic mechanisms, those who constantly work to modulate their force and texture. Say we plunged into the depths of some of their experiments—what would happen to us, and to our understanding of this life in a world of images?



## AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CREATION

The set is sweltering. Sweating faces, all around, wrapped in blue-green surgical masks—maybe for the swine flu panic in the morning papers, maybe for the paint fumes still heavy in the air. A black locomotive gleams wet under the lightboxes hanging from the rafters. They're rebuilding this colonial-era railway platform for *Madrasapattinam*, a historical romance between a young Englishwoman and an Indian washerman. Sketches and photographs litter the set: gathered over several years, pulled into plans over many weeks, molded into plastic, wood, and metal in a frantic burst of activity over the past few days.

They've already begun to shoot on one side of this unfinished arena, but then everything grinds to a halt. There's an angry rash spreading across the delicate ivory of the English heroine's face. The mood turns anxious, restless. Krishna scans his clipboard, plotting what to do while the problem is diagnosed. The words *Assistant Director* are lettered onto the back of his red Adidas T-shirt. He shakes his head, shares a wry laugh. "Anything can happen at any time."

Anything? Really? There are things I want to ask Krishna, but he's already somewhere else, and I'm just a visitor here, trying not to get in the way. I remember what Vishnu Vardhan, a young director and now a good friend, told me one evening at a café in the heart of old Madras (now called Chennai), on break from shooting a gory action thriller. The phone rings, and he imagines his son lying in a hospital bed. A horn sounds on the road behind him, and he can already feel the truck ripping into his car. A guy goes up on stunt wires, and Vishnu can already see the nails in the rafters driving into his head. An SMS buzzes in his pocket—"Hello sir, I have some 9mm pistols, if you are free, I will come show you"—and he can already sense the watchful eyes that mistake these stunt guns for a terrorist arsenal.

Anything can happen at any time. There is much to worry about in this sense of the radical potential that any moment may bear, but such openness can also be confronted as a field of unexpected promise. This is a book about creation in a world of enduring flux, what William E. Connolly calls "a world of becoming . . . marked by surprising turns in time, uncanny experiences, and the possibility of human participation to some degree in larger processes of creativity that both include and surpass the human estate."<sup>12</sup>

Think of that familiar sense of accumulating and even threatening novelty that marks so much of our contemporary experience. How does newness emerge in such a world? What does it take to make a life in the midst of such emergence? How does experience keep pace with the





boundless change visible wherever we turn? This book pursues such questions through the creation of Tamil cinema in south India.

Wherever I followed filmmakers like Krishna and Vishnu—the streets and studios of Chennai, the sandstone plateaus of central Karnataka, the soaring bridges of Kuala Lumpur, the mountains of Switzerland, or the deserts beyond Dubai—I found a milieu of tremendous uncertainty. Consider the enormous complexity of filmmaking as a technical and material process. Accidents come in endless varieties: the excitement that crests and wanes with every new story; the protean play of light, wind, and other natural forces shadowing every take; the unforeseeable needs that inevitably trail shot footage into editing and composing studios; the constant failure of actors and equipment to act and react as they should. Directors, cameramen, designers, and editors struggled with this caprice, but I also found them constantly anticipating and improvising with chance events. Everything that was interesting about their cinema seemed to grow from this openness to fluid circumstance.<sup>13</sup>

For many decades, across the wide span of global cinema, there was only one sustained anthropological study of film production: Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, published in 1950.<sup>14</sup> The book still deserves a close reading, rife as it is with startling and unexpected insights: "The Melanesian puts his faith in coercing the supernatural through using a magical formula, which consists of a spell and rite handed down by tradition. Hollywood people have their formulas too: stars, gimmicks, traditional plots."<sup>15</sup>

The parallel is bracing, this juxtaposition between the contemporary

Los Angeleno and an islander of the South Pacific. But this anthropologist had rested her hopes for the future of cinema on the eventual overcoming of such kinship: “The magical thinking and system of production which flows from it,” Powdermaker writes, “are probably no more necessary to making movies than the corn dance of the Pueblo Indians is needed to making corn grow.”<sup>16</sup>

Modernity has long been described as a triumph of reason over passion, as a mastery of nature’s contingency. But I write at a time when this victory seems neither as assured nor as desirable. Filmmaking is compelling precisely because it splices together forms of thinking and feeling, encouraging an openness to the magical powers and dangers of a world resistant to human control. To be sure, filmmakers have strategies at their disposal, techniques designed to provoke particular feelings and sensations. All this depends, however, on how deeply they themselves are affected by their own productions. No one may be found here manipulating automatons from the safe distance of a remote-control panel. Cinema draws its force from the affective lives of its makers: from the immersion of filmmakers themselves in cinematic currents of feeling.<sup>17</sup>

Tamil filmmakers are often hailed in local media as *kalai brahmakkal*, “creator-gods of the arts.” But like so many of the gods of Hindu India, these are individuals engaged in gambles with fate.<sup>18</sup> There are no systematic forms of audience research that the Tamil film industry relies upon: no market surveys, test screenings, quantitative exit polls. Instead, and at every stage, these films are composed by individuals who take their own felt sensations—however flighty and unpredictable—as proxies for the likely reactions of their eventual audiences. A faith in the promise of experience, however fickle: this is why filmmaking is such a compelling arena to examine what it means to inhabit a world of chance.<sup>19</sup>

Like cinema itself, this is a book that grows from the perils and rewards of serendipity: a handful of lucky breaks and countless missed opportunities, profound gifts of trust at the risk of betrayal, kinships that took root unexpectedly when slammed doors were pried back open.<sup>20</sup> Over the past eight years, I’ve had the chance to work closely with many central exponents of Tamil cinema—directors, cinematographers, actors, composers—but also more marginal yet essential technicians, like choreographers, stuntmen, poets, and digital compositors.<sup>21</sup> Although I’ve spoken with hundreds of Tamil filmmakers and many more of their fans, this book depends most heavily on short stints of anthropological fieldwork with seventeen Tamil film projects at different stages of production. Each chapter of this book takes one cinematic craft as an opening into a distinctive mode of experience.

“Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have

our fields of view,” William James wrote in 1904. “Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds.”<sup>22</sup> Each chapter of this book takes up one such horizon of experience to traverse and explore: imagination, for example, or color, voice, and love. The first few chapters broach these modes through preliminary stages of filmmaking: the scripting of a story and the pitches made to a producer, the building of a set and the scouting of locations. The next few engage different dimensions of shooting: cinematography, direction, and acting. The scene then shifts to various kinds of studio work with completed footage—music, voice dubbing, editing, and visual effects—before closing with the release of a completed film and further reflections on this anthropological engagement with creative process.<sup>23</sup>

Although this is a book about the invention of things like cinema, the kind of creativity at stake here doesn’t come from somewhere deep inside those unique people we like to call “artists.”<sup>24</sup> The idea of the creative genius is still too strong, too magnetic, too misleading, giving too much credence to the intellect and its intentions. Unlike the “making of” features that come with every well-packaged DVD these days, the voices and views of filmmakers here are constantly swamped by the tides and horizons in which they work. From writers’ dens to dubbing studios, from outdoor shoots to intricate sets, what we find, again and again, is another face of a creative world, expressing itself differently through every sound, every feeling, every image, every cut.<sup>25</sup> Creation is a field of channels, flows, and relays, an attunement, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, to “the world as a work of art that gives birth to itself.”<sup>26</sup>

To engage creation in this manner is to resist the commonplace notion that human beings make things by imposing their forms and ideas upon the inchoate matter of the natural world.<sup>27</sup> I try to work instead with “a sense of the real itself as protean and perennially unfinished, at once malleable and imbued with its own forces and determinations,” as Stuart McLean puts it, “a continuity between human creativity and the processes shaping the material universe.”<sup>28</sup> Painting, poetry, music, dance, sculpture, and photography—whether these or any other of the myriad arts that together constitute what we call cinema, what we find are ways of participating in the creative process and potential of a larger universe beyond the human.

## ON LOCATION IN KOLLYWOOD

A red-carpet night at the Nehru Indoor Stadium in Chennai. Almost every celebrity from the world of Tamil cinema seems to be gathered here this evening, smiling for the cameras that pivot from all angles and the

crowds of fans that cheer from the stands, gamely dismissing the flocks of mosquitoes from the Cooum's nearby sludge. Sponsored by a detergent manufacturer and staged for broadcast on the Vijay TV satellite channel, the occasion celebrates fifty years in film for one of Tamil cinema's most famous and beloved figures: the actor, writer, and director Kamal Haasan.

The title of the event flashes again and again from the video screens ringing the stage: "World Hero Kamal: A Continuing History." Throughout the night, speakers on the stage look back and forth between southern India and southern California. Here's what the host proclaims: "Tamil cinema introduced you to our people. You introduced Tamil cinema to the world!" Then a senior director who worked with Kamal Haasan in the 1980s adds this: "You never tried to make Kodambakkam into Hollywood. You wanted to make Hollywood into Kodambakkam!" Later there's a speech by Venu Ravichandran, who had given the actor the title *Ulagu Nayakan*, or "World Hero." Everyone knows him as "Oscar" Ravichandran, after the name of his Chennai production company, Oscar Films, a word that he began to spell "Aascar" when the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences protested in 2008.<sup>29</sup>

Not Hollywood, not even Bollywood, but Kollywood, based in the studios and byways of the Kodambakkam area of western Chennai. Although Indian cinema seems synonymous these days with Mumbai's Hindi-language Bollywood productions, most of India's films are produced each year by regional film industries working in vernacular languages such as Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Bengali. In 2011, for example, India's Central Board of Film Certification cleared 1,255 feature films for release: 206 in Hindi, followed by 192 in Telugu, 185 in Tamil, and the remainder in twenty-one other languages and dialects.<sup>30</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America, meanwhile, rated 758 films for release that year.<sup>31</sup>

The history of cinema in India began with touring exhibitions of drama, music, short films, and vaudeville performances at the outset of the twentieth century, and silent feature films that drew diverse audiences into the new cinema halls of colonial India. Then, in the 1930s, native Indian film productions exploded in number and scale.<sup>32</sup> The first "Tamil talkies," so to speak, were produced in Calcutta and Bombay, relying on directors, actors, and musicians from different parts of India and presenting songs and dialogues in several languages at once.<sup>33</sup> These cosmopolitan legacies persist even now. This book engages films remade from Telugu into Tamil and from Tamil into Hindi, an editor who works between offices in Chennai and Hyderabad, a Gujarati cameraman who processes his Tamil films in Mumbai, and a Tamil composer best known for channeling the sounds of American hip-hop.

Still, the cultural and political distinctiveness of Tamil cinema is undeniable.<sup>34</sup> The consolidation of Tamil film production in the sound film studios of Madras by the 1940s coincided with the rise of Dravidian cultural nationalism.<sup>35</sup> Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the film studios of Madras emerged as powerful players in the Tamil political landscape. Popular films made by votaries of the ruling Dravidian political parties showcased heroes such as M. G. Ramachandran as saviors of the common people, garbing them in party colors and symbols.<sup>36</sup> Since 1967, the post of chief minister in the state of Tamil Nadu has been held almost continuously by men and women from Tamil cinema: two screenwriters, an actor, and two actresses. And the fan clubs that mobilize in the name of major stars operate almost like party organizations themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Most work on Tamil cinema has focused on these political features. But Tamil films also appeal to their audiences in a more diffuse and all the more powerful manner, by re-creating on-screen the circumstances and concerns of ordinary life in the region. One of the most distinctive qualities of recent Tamil cinema is its concern for *nativity*, a word that the industry uses as a shorthand for everyday habits, customs, and spaces. Pursuit of the everyday has taken Tamil filmmakers far beyond the studio confines of Kodambakkam, into the shoreline quarters and slum alleyways of Chennai and into countryside tracts far from that capital city. Most contemporary Tamil films are suffused with prosaic elements of cultural heritage: vulgar idioms of slang and humor, localized forms of bodily gesture and dress, practices as routine and banal as irrigating plants or pouring out glasses of tea from a wood-planked stall.

As with so much of India's globalization since the 1990s, Tamil cinema has also turned toward more distant horizons of hope and desire: the cities of Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, for example, where some of the films in this book were shot. But, at the same time, villages, small towns, and metropolitan margins of south India maintain a hold on contemporary Tamil film. Cinema here bends itself toward ordinary life, while ordinary life hankers after cinema, to the point where these domains become hard to distinguish. Recall my friend Logandurai, singing a film song set in a village not far from his. Logandurai's own village in southern Tamil Nadu, Kullappa Goundan Patti, was the site of one Tamil film shot and released in the mid-1980s. Logandurai even had a cameo in that production, *Rasathi Rosakili*. He played a farmer, someone like himself, teaching one of the actresses how to carry grain atop her head.<sup>38</sup>

"Everyone wants to be emperor of Rome," Kamal Haasan told me one morning at his house on Eldams Road. "Who becomes a centurion?" There is no doubt something profoundly anarchic about this enterprise of popular cinema in India, recognized officially as an industry as late

as 2000. Young men—more rarely, young women—come as apprentices into trades as varied as cinematography, choreography, and editing with almost no formal training. Tamil production houses come and go each year. Fates are wagered on luck and timing.

But there are also many new and interesting things happening in the thick of this tumult. Pirated DVDs from around the world offer fresh perspectives on familiar places. Many speak now of a “New Wave” of gritty and experimental Tamil films, conversant with contemporary developments in global cinema yet faithful all the same to the vicissitudes of life in south India.<sup>39</sup> The work of this younger generation of emerging filmmakers lies at the heart of this book.

A few months after the night that lauded “World Hero Kamal,” I attended a much smaller event in Chennai celebrating the launch of a new film by a young director. The program began with a familiar invocation to the goddess of the Tamil language. But then there was something I’d never heard before, a song in praise of cinema itself:

Restless into dream into seed into story  
into bud into fruit into language into light  
into body into space into gain, o endless  
wealth of gifts! O god before our eyes!  
O godscreen, whom we call Cinema!  
We bow first to you! A bow for the  
screen! Our bow for the screen!<sup>40</sup>

These opening lines had a profoundly mythic quality about them—cinema as cosmogony, as the genesis of a universe.<sup>41</sup> The poem went on to celebrate famous names in the history of Tamil film and Indian cinema more generally, but also figures as widely dispersed as Thomas Alva Edison, the Lumière brothers, Charlie Chaplin, Akira Kurosawa, and Alfred Hitchcock.

There are many such things throughout this book that might be unique to this corner of the globe, and I try throughout to excavate the significance of this local culture and context. But I also try to think and dream as far and wide as I can with these Indian filmmakers, however crude their circumstances and productions may seem to distant eyes.<sup>42</sup> As the words of this poem attest, there are aspirations here of a global scope and questions concerning the very nature of things.

“Craftsmanship is a mode of thought,” Ananda Coomaraswamy insisted a century ago, challenging those habits of mind that distinguished Western art from Eastern craft, lofty spiritual endeavors from merely material preoccupations.<sup>43</sup> This study of Tamil filmmaking may convey something about creative craft and industry in contemporary India.

## ON WRITING: CINEMA, FICTION, ETHNOGRAPHY

Throughout my research for this project, I met the same question time and again: “When are you going to make your own film?” Everyone I spent time with could see that I was also picking up techniques—secrets, even—like all the assistants and apprentices working on the sets and in the studios of others, waiting for the chance to craft a film of their own. There was the sense that I must also have the same desire, that this madness for filmmaking had seized me too.

My answer to the question always went like this: “I don’t want to make films! I like writing books. I’m writing a book about cinema. I don’t want to make cinema myself.”

Over time, though, this reply began to feel hollow. Why insist on this difference between books and cinema? What was at stake in using this medium to tell stories about that one? What should a book about cinema look and feel like, especially if its focus would be the look and feel of film?

These questions were gnawing at me one morning on the road to Tiruvannamalai, a temple town nestled against a scrubby hill slope fifty kilometers southeast of Chennai. I was on my way to see a Tamil director, Mysskin, who had bunkered down at a spa there to work on a new script, a story of international espionage.

The road cut through urbanizing peripheries and fields of rice and sugarcane, a dry riverbed and the ruins of a medieval fortress. But these were geographic details I barely registered. My head was buried in the book that Mysskin had lent me, a novella about war in the Caucasus. Here’s how Tolstoy begins *Hadji Murat*, the last of his works:

I was returning home through the fields. It was the very height of summer. The meadows had been mown, and the rye was just about to be cut.

There is a delightful selection of flowers at that time of the year: red, white, and pink clover, fragrant and fluffy; impudent daisies; milky-white “she-loves-me, she-loves-me-nots” with their bright yellow centres and their fusty, heady smell; yellow rape with its honeyed scent; lilac and white tulip-like campanula, tall and erect; creeping sweet peas; neat scabious, yellow, red, pink, and lilac; plantain with a hint of pink down and a faint, pleasant smell; cornflowers, a bright deep blue in the sun and when young, but pale blue and flushed with red in the evening and when ageing; and the delicate almond-scented bindweed flowers that wither straight away.



I had gathered a large bunch of different flowers and was walking home when in a ditch I noticed in full bloom a wonderful crimson thistle of the sort that is called in Russia a “Tatar” which people take pains to avoid when mowing, and which, when it is accidentally cut down, is thrown out of the hay by the mowers so that they do not prick their hands on it. I took it into my head to pick this thistle and put it in the middle of the bunch. I climbed down into the ditch and, driving off the fuzzy bumble-bee that had sunk itself into the heart of the flower where it had fallen into a sweet and languorous sleep, I set about picking the flower. But this was very difficult: not only did the stem prick me on all sides, even through the handkerchief in which I wrapped my hand, but it was so terribly strong that I struggled with it for some five minutes, tearing through the fibres one at a time. When I finally plucked the flower off, the stem was already quite ragged, and the flower no longer seemed so fresh and pretty either. Moreover, in its coarseness and clumsiness it did not go with the delicate flowers of the bunch. I felt regret at having needlessly ruined a flower which had been fine in its place, and I threw it away.<sup>44</sup>

By that morning on the way to Tiruvannamalai, I already knew this passage well. On more than one occasion, I’d heard Mysskin read aloud these opening pages of *Hadji Murad* to his assistant directors, lingering on the cadence and texture of Tolstoy’s language. The director’s passion for literature was well known; he had even borrowed a name for himself from the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, Prince Mishkin. “What I like about Tolstoy,” he once told a few of us, marveling once more at the description of this persistent thistle flower, “is that his images just pour and overflow.”

Look again at how the Russian writer sets the scene for his novella. Someone in the distance, walking through fields of hay and rye. Then a quick series of vivid close-ups: clover, daisies, campanulas, cornflowers. Pull back, and you see them being gathered. Pull in again, and you see one more that went unnoticed, the Tatar thistle. Someone crouches to pick the thistle. Watch it prickle against a handkerchief. A struggle ensues. Then you see the flower once more, frayed, wilted, tossed away in sorrow.

Like cinema, the language brims with visual energy. This shouldn’t be surprising, as Tolstoy was deeply intrigued by the transformative powers of vision and visual technology.<sup>45</sup> In his 1898 diary, for example, he sketched a narrative strategy for *Hadji Murat* that would proceed as a montage of successive perspectives: “There is an English toy—the peep show—beneath glass there first appears one thing, then another. *That* is how to show Kh[adzhi]-M[urat]: as a husband, a fanatic, and so forth.”<sup>46</sup>



Many of Tolstoy's most prominent Western contemporaries and successors—writers from James Joyce to Vladimir Nabokov, Gertrude Stein to William Faulkner—were fascinated by cinema and brought diverse techniques of cinematic expression to their novels. Devices like scenographic description, perspectival montage, and temporal discontinuity have completely recast modern prose fiction.<sup>47</sup> Writing this book on cinema, I have also tried to grapple with the value of such cinematic experiments in narrative form and voice.

I've done this as an anthropologist, as an heir to a peculiar twentieth-century tradition of quasi-literary realist prose called ethnography. Here too cinematic tones are unmistakable. Recall this famous passage from Bronislaw Malinowski's 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, likely the most influential image of anthropological fieldwork to this day:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea.<sup>48</sup>

The dramatic scene of isolation that Malinowski sketches in this passage was no doubt staged.<sup>49</sup> Consider, nevertheless, its cinematic quality, the way that a foreign observer is pulled into a novel world, cutting back and forth between perspective on that world—gear, beach, dinghy, neighbors, New Guinea—and perspective on this character within it, as if initiation into anthropology was an invitation into a well-edited film.<sup>50</sup> As it happens, Malinowski recalled his final days here having “rushed along with Moving Pictures speed.”<sup>51</sup>

Such rhetorical flourishes may lead you to suspect the scientific commitments of their author. Anthropology, however, is an anomalous science, one that has long staked its claim to truth on the vicissitudes of sensory and embodied experience.<sup>52</sup> Many in the discipline now acknowledge our ethnographic works as fictions—not in the sense that they are false or unreal but instead because they fashion anew worlds of life and thought, rather than simply reproducing some reality that already exists (*fictio* in Latin: something made, shaped, molded).<sup>53</sup> This acknowledgment has nurtured diverse experiments with writing in contemporary

anthropology, works that spill into genres as diverse as memoir, poetry, novel, and natural history.<sup>54</sup> The chapters that follow likewise pursue various kinds of resonance between ethnographic writing and cinematic experience.<sup>55</sup>

Cinema may seem an especially intractable medium to think and write with, given the turbulence of its sensations and the jagged succession of its images.<sup>56</sup> Why tether an enterprise as serious as critical reflection to things as fickle as images, feelings, and sensory impressions? Indeed, as the filmmaker and anthropologist Lucien Castaing-Taylor has noted, “iconophobia” is typical of intellectual responses to the mercurial powers of such media.<sup>57</sup>

Suppose, however, that we began with a different picture of the relationship between thinking and feeling, thought and sensation. Think of what Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed.”<sup>58</sup>

If we take seriously this idea, that thinking can happen only in and among the things of the world, then we might find ourselves in a rather different relationship with whatever it is that we think and write about. Cinema might become more than another object of thought, awaiting its turn in the grist mill of rational decomposition. We might instead begin to confront cinema itself as a medium of thought, as a way of thinking with the visceral force of moving images.<sup>59</sup> This, in fact, is one of the essential principles of cinematic montage: a “dynamization of the inertia of perception,” as Sergei Eisenstein put it, through the juxtaposition of contrary forms.<sup>60</sup> How best to articulate that mode of thought and expression with our own?

In what follows, I’ve tried to work with some of the formal properties of cinema—image and sensation, rhythm and tempo, structures of anticipation and displacement—as means of thinking through the experiential textures of the medium. Each chapter is composed as a montage of scenes, questions, and sensory impressions. Each cuts from angle to angle on a situation as it unfolds, as its characters confront the shifting tides of circumstance. The import of these successive perspectives often falls into the gaps that come between them, a risky move, to be sure, when it comes to scholarly writing. But I write like this as a way of underscoring the germinal quality of these situations, to try to show how encounters with the unexpected can generate novel forms of thought and

experience: for filmmakers and the environments they engage, for anthropologists and the milieus in which they work, for readers and the narrative worlds they enter.<sup>61</sup>

Recall how Michael Taussig described the montage form of shamanic ritual in the Putumayo Amazon: “alterations, cracks, displacements, and swerves all evening long. . . . In the cracks and swerves, a universe opens out.”<sup>62</sup> Here, I think, lies the most crucial significance of the sensory and affective turn that so many disciplines have taken in recent years: a chance to confront and engage the open-ended unfinishedness of life, to follow the happening of things as they happen, to fold the uncertainty and vulnerability of living relations into the very substance of our intellectual work.<sup>63</sup>

With these developments in mind, this book explores the affective life of practices such as storytelling, shooting, cutting, and composing, but also seeks to convey in its written form—to evoke, embody, express, exude—something of their creative and disruptive force.<sup>64</sup> A chapter on desire comes as a torrent of impassioned words; parallel columns confound the distinction between past and present in a chapter on time; a staccato series of eighty-six terse cuts composes a picture of cinematic speed. And, as you’ll also see, the book keeps breaking throughout from retrospective narration into episodes unfolding in the present tense.

I fall back upon such devices as means of narrowing the gulf between the writing and what it concerns, as ways of trying to write from a standpoint of immanence, from *within* the world this book is about—to try to think like cinema thinks, to tap resources for thought in the very texture and momentum of its sensory material.<sup>65</sup> This too is a long-standing conceit of anthropological science—think of what Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote so hopefully of the orchestral form and feeling of his *Mythologiques*: “When the reader has crossed the bounds of irritation and boredom and is moving away from the book, he will find himself carried toward that music which is to be found in myth.”<sup>66</sup>

That morning in Tiruvannamalai, Mysskin had actually forgotten that I was coming, and he’d gone off to look for a nearby crocodile farm. Whenever writing, he confessed later that day, “I have to forget myself.” There is always the chance, in work like his and ours, of waylaying something along the way: an expectation, an argument, the indulgence of a viewer or a reader. But these are the risks we court in working with such transformative powers, in seeking to craft what Michel Foucault once called an “experience book,” something that “has the function of wrenching the subject from itself.”<sup>67</sup>

Experience is a matter of experiments with life, an arena of conjectures, trials, and difficult lessons.<sup>68</sup> What follows is a series of experi-

ments in cinematic experience: trials undertaken by certain Indian filmmakers and also by an anthropologist wandering and writing in their midst. In fact, I should warn you now, before we get any deeper—some of these ventures are bound to fail.

## AN ECOLOGY OF CINEMA

Trailing the making of popular Tamil films, this book has wound up following a series of stories told of contemporary life. Many of these cinematic tales are dystopic portraits of naïve hope and unexpected betrayal in the cities and countryside of modern India. Their spirit often resonates with “the big picture” of these times, to borrow an idiom for perspective born in an age of cinema.<sup>69</sup> Aspirations have a far more tenuous hold on the promise of a better future than they have had at more optimistic moments. Momentum seems to be stalling for all but a few. The “creative destruction” of modern advancement appears to have reached a fevered and unviable pitch.<sup>70</sup>

Many have begun to identify our time as the apotheosis of the Anthropocene, a geological age of human domination.<sup>71</sup> Some of the most unsettling anxieties of the present, Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, concern the prospective chaos of “futures we cannot visualize.”<sup>72</sup> And yet we are flooded daily with attempts to do just this, with endless and overwhelming images of disaster and collapse at a planetary scale. Indeed, we might best identify this moment as the era of the *anthroposcene*, as a time whose spirit and mood are most indebted to such images of a pervasive and encompassing human agency, for better or for worse. “The age of the world picture,” Martin Heidegger called it in 1938: “Everywhere and in the most varied forms and disguises the gigantic is making its appearance.”<sup>73</sup>

Rising seas, burning forests, wide swaths of urban rubble: such images can be paralyzing, especially when they convey the sense of inevitable things happening at a distance impossible to span. Who is responsible for these things? How do we grapple with such problems, without denying the chance for a livable future to those who have had far less of a hand in their genesis? What place do other living beings, things, and forces have in our strategies for survival? Where to seek possibility, maybe even hope, in the face of looming catastrophe?<sup>74</sup>

So much seems to turn, both ethically and politically, on the cultivation of new forms of perspective—on learning to see beyond the conceits of human agency and its sometimes murderous consequences. “What is this world beyond us and the sociocultural worlds we construct?” Eduardo Kohn has encouraged anthropologists to ask.<sup>75</sup> Cinema can help us with this task, help to wrest our thinking away from stubborn habits