

ONCE UPON A TIME IN KOLLYWOOD

Siren Hope
Hovedfag UiTø

The lights are turned off. People stop their chitchatting. The words SUPER STAR are covering the whole screen. One letter after the other are flying in from nowhere: R-A-J-I-N-I. People are whistling, shouting and cheering. We are taken to a temple. A woman asks some holy men whether they can bless her with a baby. They agree to help her, and tell her that she should name the child BABA after them. She gets her son, and he grows up from a baby, to a boy to a man. When BABA (played by the famous Rajini) appears for the first time as an adult, there is screaming all around me, and flower petals are thrown in the air. He is wearing a blue shirt with the collar-buttons open; the gold necklace is reflecting the sun. He has a 3 day old beard, black hair, and black trousers. On a train station he is surrounded by his friends. It is a cheerful group of people. They start singing and dancing around him: "Baba, cinema, cinema. . ." I lean back in my chair, and get ready for some hours in the dark.

Indian popular cinema is the dominant form of entertainment for at least a sixth of the world's population. Bollywood is the landmark of Indian film. Few of us are aware of the existence of India's many regional centres of film production. Kollywood, the Tamil film industry, is one of these. Chennai on the Southeast coast of India is its production site. The K of Kollywood has been taken from the name of the road Kodam Bakam, where one back in time found all the film studios. Today the studios are spread in different parts of this city of six million inhabitants. Almost a fifth of Chennai's population live directly or indirectly off the film industry (Thoraval 2000:337). Around 150 Tamil popular films are produced annually. Acquiring a job within the film industry is the dream of thousands of young people.

With the camera bag on my shoulder, and my freshly achieved knowledge on how to make an ethnographic film in mind, I set out to explore the colourful and vibrant world of Kollywood. I would play no other role than that of a young anthropologist trying to become familiar with Kollywood, a place where "reality" and film melt together. The Tamil popular films (as well as other regional popular films in India) have been given

the name 'masala films'. The general meaning of the term *masala* is a mixture of spices. In Tamil cinema the term is expanded in order to embrace the different genres or traits of cinema. The masala films are spiced up with actions that touch upon so many genres that every individual of the cinema hall should have quenched their appetites to some degree by the time the film has finished. There is a treat for everybody: romance, action and fight scenes, drama, thriller, comedy, dance and music. And all of this appears in a melodramatic Tamil-specific setting where elements of everyday life and elements of fantasy go hand in hand.

Cinema is the major form of entertainment in Chennai; Tamils take their whole family (including the baby and grandpa) to see the newest film. Popular films are also screened on television; several channels have "oldies" or recent films continuously running all day. The footprints of Kollywood are highly visible: cinema houses are decorated with glitter and light bulbs of various colours, and the streets are full of fresh and torn up film posters. Catchy melodies from the latest blockbuster films find their way into restaurants and buses, and walking down the road you find them sliding out of the doorways, fighting for your attention. With all of this, the heroes and the heroines are omnipresent in everyday life, and so are the stories about them. The visual and aural presence with the continuous talks about cinema, made me curious to know more about this close correlation between cinema ("fiction") and everyday life ("reality").

Because I am a student of social anthropology, specialising in visual cultural studies,¹ I make both an ethnographic film² and a written thesis.³ The film was completed in August 2003, and the written thesis is in progress. The main focus of my thesis is the relationship of narratives in Tamil social life and popular cinema. However, in this text I wish to introduce a discussion of another film genre, namely that of ethnographic film. I shall present experiences and choices I made both while collecting data and while elaborating on the data. In the first part, I intend to refer to particular experiences and challenges I faced in the process of recording footage. In addition I will make a general description of ethnographic film and filmmaking. In the second part, I will concentrate on challenges, reflections, and decisions taken during the editing phase. In the film footage, like in that of the written field notes, there exists a potentiality of forming different types of

¹Visual cultural studies is a scientific, communicative and educational master/*hovedfag* programme given by the Social Faculty at the University of Tromsø. The programme emphasises film as an imperative tool in gaining access to knowledge relevant to researchers involved with the humanities and social sciences. Data for the written thesis and footage for the film are collected through participant observation during a fieldwork with the duration of several months.

²*Living a Reel Life*, August 2003, 37 min, Tamil and English language, English and Norwegian subtitles available.

³The written thesis has the working title *Once upon a time in Kollywood—Tamil popular cinema and everyday life*. It should be finished by September 2004.

narratives that formulate different representations and understandings. Decisions taken during editing will establish certain representations of the characters and the depiction of the world that surrounds them. In the final part, I will focus on the fruitful interplay between film and text within an anthropological context.

With the computer as a co-pilot I edited a film named *Living a Reel Life*. The film gives a picture of Kollywood films as a part of reality in the lives of Praveena and Suhasini. Praveena is a student of cinematography in the Institute of Film and Television Technology in Chennai. Suhasini is one of very few female directors as well as a popular actress who has acted in around 185 films. One gets a picture of how these women relate to and reflect upon the industry and how they in some ways try to make their own paths.

On how to cook an ethnographic film

A person I have seen is a set of broken images: first someone actually seen, within touch, sound, and smell; a face glimpsed in the darkness of a viewfinder; a memory, sometimes elusive, sometimes of haunting clarity; a strip of images in an editing machine; a handful of photographs; and finally the figure moving on the screen, of cinema itself. (MacDougall 1998:25)

The process of making an ethnographic film is extensive. It took about one and a half years from writing my project description to having a fresh copy of the film in my hands. The core of the process is the fieldwork. After I arrived Chennai with my hopes and fears for the commencing fieldwork, I had to work out some strategies. In order to gather knowledge on the alternative realities presented through Kollywood films, my first strategy became to aim at getting an in-pass in the industry. This I achieved through Praveena and Suhasini: Praveena made it possible for me to join classes where I could learn how they are taught the trade of filmmaking. Suhasini brought me to her working sites where I experienced the making of Kollywood films.

As these women were connected to the industry in different ways they gave me different depictions of the world of Kollywood. Praveena, a student about to enter the film industry and still somehow on the outside, had a lot of preconceptions about it that she shared with me willingly. Suhasini, on the other hand, reflected upon it with her more than 20 years of experience. She contributed a lot to my knowledge on what it is like being a woman in a male-dominated industry. A number of other people directly or indirectly involved in the film industry also helped me achieve an understanding of narrative patterns associated with the masala films,

and these films' degree of popularity. They also gave me their views on what way the masala films correlated with perceptions of everyday life (and the perception of self). After sharing my idea on making a documentary depicting women of Kollywood, fortunately both Praveena and Suhasini were positive to letting me film them. I was now ready to start shooting.

With Praveena I brought my camera to small and large events. I filmed her doing her household chores, the celebration of *Deepawali* (Hindu New Year), the making of her first student film, her trip to a film festival in Delhi, and classes and exercises at the university, amongst others. I met her almost every day. With Suhasini it was different, she invited me to come with her to work only twice. Once while they were filming in a mansion close to Chennai, another time we went together for a longer lasting filming period to a village close to Madurai in the south of Tamil Nadu. Apart from that, I mainly met her in public places, where she was doing her charity work, talking about cinema in the film club, or doing sports etc. I mainly concentrated the filming around describing events and performing interviews. The making of an ethnographic film evolves around participant observation (observational filmmaking).

Maybe this is the time to stop a little and make a description of what an ethnographic film is? The ethnographic film as we see it today is a product of both improvements of technology as well as personalities who have introduced paths for others to follow. Ethnographic films have their roots in observational cinema, the style of a movement of the 1960s that took advantage of technical developments in the recording and editing of sync sound. This introduced a possibility to separate image and sound, and voice-over became more common. In addition to this, camera equipment was made lighter, so it was easier to move around and film the subjects in their own domestic settings instead of inviting them to a studio.

Filmmakers of the French *cinéma vérité* movement (a type of observational cinema), with Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in front, wanted to get rid of propaganda in documentary films. Rather, they wanted to create a mirror of the world they were living in. "The idea was to film lived experience itself instead of summaries or reports on it as condensed in interviews. People were to be represented not as social types or aesthetic patterns, as in some expository and impressionistic films, but as flesh-and-blood individuals" (Barbash & Taylor 1997:27–28). Films were shot and edited in order to be faithful to real time (long takes, wide-angle shots, maximized depth of field etc).⁴

Opposed to American filmmakers behind the direct cinema movement, Rouch and Morin did not want to take the perspective of a fly on the wall (observing and waiting for an event to happen). They decided on an interventionist style, where the camera was used as

⁴Robert Flaherty had given an early introduction to this type of filmmaking in his film *Nanook of the North* (1922). Rather than scripting the filming in advance, that had been common practice until then, he preferred to film the events as they took place before his eyes.

a catalyst for events to happen. To what degree the filmmaker should participate in the social situations is still debated in observational filmmaking of today. It is impossible to be invisible and unnoticed; there will always be some sort of a communication between the filmmaker and the characters. If one becomes too involved and start to trigger situations, the film may rather give a depiction of the filmmaker than of the characters.

An observational style is still applied by ethnographic filmmakers of today. David and Judith MacDougall⁵ are sensitive observers of everyday life. Their films describe the interaction between the filmmaker and his/her characters, and are both self-revealing and self-reflexive. Many ethnographic filmmakers have followed their style. Ever since the sixties there has also been a demand for the inclusion of self-reflexivity in the filmmaking (although such a style has also been criticised for being too narcissistic). A general critique to observational films is their lack of contextualization.

As I have shown, there exist not only one but several definitions to what ethnographic film and observational filmmaking are about. There is a need to take a stand in regard to the existing discussions and discourses. In my case the film works as a visualization of some of my anthropological findings.⁶ My research and filming cannot be seen in isolation from each other. They need to be seen as one because they were done simultaneously. The camera is the researcher's eye, and the tape and notebook his or her memory: events are observed and recorded (both with or without the camera) through participant observation. The camera was used as a methodological tool while collecting data during the fieldwork, and then during the process of editing, the data were put in relation to each other and together they formed a depiction of Praveena and Suhasini the way I perceive them, but it also reveals how they see themselves and how they see me. It is a product of the communication between the two of them and me. As an audience you get an experience of my experience in meeting these people, as well as a feeling that you yourself meet and get to know the people on the screen.

The genre of observational cinema is popularly understood to give a presentation rather than a representation of reality. This issue was discussed a few months ago (January 2004) when I screened my film to a class from Sandefjord videregående skole⁷ specializing in media sciences. One of the first questions that were posed was: "How can you regard your film as realistic when

they had to deal with you filming them all the time?" The presence of a camera in one's research should of course not be ignored. But what does the presence imply? Is it so that once one sees a camera, one starts acting? I believe that with or without a camera pointing to their face, people tend to present themselves in a likable way. They show their good sides, and try to hide their bad sides. Meeting a camera may be similar to meeting a person for the first time, where you try your best to control the other's impressions.⁸ The meeting between subjects and the person behind the camera (in my case, a young scientist, woman, white, and Norwegian) and further what this meeting implies must not be ignored. It is actually this meeting that becomes the essence of an ethnographic film. The filmmaker and the camera ideally become a part of the "reality" represented in the film. The communication (verbal and non-verbal) between the characters and the filmmaker, and the various reactions to the presence of a camera, should therefore not be hidden.

Now, let us move on with some of the experiences I had during my fieldwork. First of all I would like to describe how Praveena and Suhasini reacted to the filming of them, and how they actively took part in the filmmaking process. I think in my situation, the way the characters acted in front of the camera had to do with their preconceptions. Both Praveena and Suhasini are and have been trained at the film institute and have been taught about documentary as genre. Praveena even expressed that she was interested in working with documentaries in the future. Both had an established idea of what is expected in the making of an observational documentary (e.g. it should be "natural" and "real").⁹ On one occasion, when shooting, Suhasini told a crowd of fans standing outside her car: "Don't look into the camera, and talk naturally".

On another occasion, during the festival of Saraswathy (the goddess of knowledge), I filmed Praveena's family preparing for a ritual. (*In Tamil*):

Praveena's mother: She is filming me.

Praveena: Let her.

Praveena's mother: But I don't look nice.

Praveena: Then wear another sari. Do you want to wear another sari?

Praveena's mother: No.

Praveena's brother: Don't put on any make up. Let it look natural.

⁵The MacDougalls have contributed a lot to the establishment of the domain of ethnographic filmmaking. They took amongst others part in the establishment of the "Tromsø School" (Visual Cultural Studies) in the early nineties, and are also involved in other universities around the world that offer courses in Visual Anthropology.

⁶Ethnographic filmmaking is not only practiced within the field of anthropology. It is to be found also in other social scientific and humanistic fields such as sociology, religion sciences, pedagogics and history.

⁷Senior high school; the final three years of secondary education.

⁸This point can be linked to Goffman's discussion around self-presentation, in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1992 [1959]).

⁹They had been taught about "realist documentaries" (ethnographic film is an example of these) in theory. Nevertheless, the type of documentary being the most common in practice in India is one closer to the genre of docu-drama. Here the filmmaker generally does some research on the setting and events on a particular site, and thereby writes a script. Although it is based on what is happening there in everyday life, the documentary is to a certain degree staged.

Praveena, a soon to be cinematographer, was in addition very conscious about the techniques. She came up with ideas of what would be nice to film as well as trying to solve problems concerning e.g. bad lighting or sound conditions.

On the first day of filming, I recorded her brother and her about to start eating:

Praveena goes to turn on the fluorescent lights and tells her brother to turn off the sound on the television. Further she tells her brother (in Tamil): "Sit in this direction and I'll put the food on your plate, and let her film that". Then she moves on to explain (in English) what the meal consists of, pointing out the names of the dishes while she is serving them on her brother's plate. Her brother comments (in Tamil): "They show things like this on Discovery Channel". When she puts the bitter gourd on his plate, he tries to protest; she tells him that he should keep it on his plate, even though he does not like it, since it is for showing me what the meal consists of.

After the first day of shooting, I asked Praveena how she experienced being filmed. She told me that in the beginning she did not feel comfortable, as she is used to standing behind the camera, not in front of it. She felt a bit nervous, and did not like the small gaps of silence when the camera was running and she could not think of anything to say. But then, after some time, she decided to comment on things and explain what she was doing, the way she had seen it done in other documentaries (especially those on Discovery Channel that are quite popular these days). Then she felt more at ease. As time passed by, and she knew me better, I filmed her in all kinds of situations, and the silence that appears from time to time seemed not to bother her much anymore. Suhasini, being an experienced actress was very relaxed in the presence of the camera, and looked directly into it while expressing herself.

As mentioned, both Suhasini and Praveena had an idea of documentary as presenting the "real" and the "natural". They had seen a number of documentaries before, and acted according to the pattern of these. When Praveena talked of documentary she often opposed it to Tamil cinema, that she saw as constructed and unreal. She rather wanted to work with documentary, as it was "closer to reality". Their perceptions of what a documentary should look like influenced how they acted towards me, and thereby also influenced how I finally depicted them while editing the film. The narrative in a film, whether documentary or fiction in its form, refers to other existing narratives. A film narrative may be read as reality if the reference to the other narrative (in this case Praveena's own narrative on what it is like being a woman on the verge of entering the Tamil film industry) is convincing. Thus, one sees that the style and presentation of a theme becomes relevant in judging the "level of truth". Even

though documentaries and observational cinema are constructed through the editing process, they do inhabit a style that tends to be read as a presentation of reality, rather than a representation.

Nevertheless, during the process of shooting, the presence of a researcher with a camera may constantly remind the character that what she says and does may be quoted and presented the way the researcher think is best in the film. I experienced that coming with a camera made people in some situations put limitations to what they wanted to tell me while I recorded. Many times they happily gave me their opinions before and after filming, but not during the shooting. An example is Praveena's mother leaving the room when I filmed Praveena. She would not join the conversations while I filmed, thus I lost her many valuable comments and points of view. I did not always have the opportunity to discuss it with her after I had stopped filming. Throughout the fieldwork, I experienced that some people found the camera attractive whereas others found it repelling. Both may definitely influence your research and the outcome of both film and text.

In the process of gathering film material as well as data for a written thesis, one is in the same situation, that of an outsider. The people you deal with need to get to know you before they learn to trust you. It is understandable that people use more time to become familiar with the filming. Nevertheless, contrary to this idea I felt that in most cases including a camera in my research on women in Kollywood generally made me slide easier into their environment. We shared the interest for filmmaking, and the camera worked as an icebreaker. I will now discuss some reflections and decisions taken during the editing phase.

Adding the masalas

When describing the specific of Kollywood films, I took great comfort in having the possibility to do this through visual means. Describing something so colourful and vivid would be difficult without the ability to depict it through visual means. In order to give a taste of the masala films, I decided to include pieces of them in the film. When discussing the introduction of "external elements" in an ethnographic film it is relevant to introduce the categorization of the diegesis and the extradiegetic. Barbash and Taylor (1997:9) define the diegesis as a film's narrative (story), the extradiegetic is that which is not recorded in sync with the images on site, such as music, or images that are supplemented and added to what you filmed in a particular setting.

In realistic documentaries, such as ethnographic film, extradiegetic images are rarely used. Adding music to your film is maybe more common even though some regard this as polluting the genre. In *Living a Reel Life*, I chose to include both extradiegetic music and images. More specifically I have made use of narrative and stylistic elements that are used in the films produced in Kollywood. Besides taking in use some

clips from these films in order to visualize what the films (that Praveena and Suhasini constantly are referring to) are like, I have stylistically adopted some of the elements being typical to the Tamil way of filmmaking: I decided to make a rhythm of fast-cuts, and use music tracks. This I did both in order to make a statement and to add feelings. I want the viewer to feel close to both the characters and the type of films presented, and hopefully both of them may awake certain feelings and associations in the viewer. As the world of Kollywood is unfamiliar to a European audience, the experience of such films is essential in order to understand the ideal of Kollywood film. Therefore it is an advantage to present my perception of the Tamil film industry through visual means. I want the viewers to achieve an understanding of what the realities of Indian cinema are like through how the film is "cooked".

This may lead to a discussion on whether one legitimately may introduce extradiegetic elements in a film that is supposed to give a representation of what is there in a particular moment in time, a piece of "reality". I believe that there is nothing wrong with the idea of quoting other's work in the film as long as one does so in a just way, and there is a point to it. The "external" element in a film needs to be enriching in some way, maybe by giving a broader context of the issues treated. In this case I think it is a clear advantage to bring in extradiegetic elements. Even if one chooses to be faithful to the elements filmed while in the field, one cannot make a "true" representation of what really is. In the editing phase the footage is broken up and cuts are placed together according to the filmmaker's aesthetic and ethical principles.

Through creating a narrative one constructs meaning into the film material. The film becomes the filmmaker's interpretation and understanding of what went on in an exact event. Within filmmaking you have the possibility of playing with the order of cuts, and in doing so you also cut up the sense of time (as the cuts are not necessarily put in a chronological order). Cuts may establish relationships that are not inherent in the images themselves. In this regard, the editing of observational film material becomes not so different from how it is done in fictional filmmaking (e.g. Tamil masala films). Within popular cinema one may also find complex constructions of social experiences of individuals, and a reference to everyday life.

While making an ethnographic film and writing an anthropological thesis you go through many of the same processes. Data and footage are collected through participant observation, these are sorted before one may start constructing and editing the text and the film. Various realities have been documented through your filmic and textual material. Before reaching the final product, there is in the making of both text and film a process of selectivity and interpretation.

Many stories are told throughout the fieldwork, and a number of these have been captured while filming. While editing the film one has to select what kind of

knowledge one wants to transmit through the film. *Living a Reel Life* became a depiction of Suhasini and Praveena's everyday life, as well as their reflections upon what it is like being a woman in the Tamil film industry. The film also deals with representation as thematic, and gives examples on how women are represented in the popular films through giving concrete examples from feature films, as well as including Praveena and Suhasini's comments on the issue.

After deciding on a story line of the film, one sees clearly what parts of the footage one wishes to include and exclude. As the film is moulded, one has to be concerned about whether one is faithful to the "reality" one has recorded (Barbash & Taylor 1997:8). In both the making of a text and a film one has the viewer/reader in mind. The story needs to be told in an edible and comprehensive way. Ideally in an anthropological work the stories told through the film and the text should fulfil and complement each other.

The love-marriage of film and text

The story told in a film is different to a story told in a text, as the channels are different. The elements constructing the story are established in different ways: in a film the scenes are recorded as the event goes on. Assumptions and emotions that one has in that exact moment affect the way one shoots, and also the outcome. An example of this may be the fact that it is highly noticeable for the viewer to see if there has been a good relationship between the filmmaker and the characters, or a bad one. In a thesis, you describe events that you have been a part of, and your descriptions have a digested and reflective form. You have had time to think and rethink the events several times. Barbash and Taylor express: "If you are writing a book or an article, you can go home and write it all up afterwards. With film, you have to shoot events and activities at the time they occur. If you don't catch them, they're lost forever" (Barbash & Taylor 1997:2).

In an anthropological text you commonly find an interpretation of social situations. In a film you do not necessarily find any explanations to why a situation happened, meaning is rather established through presenting the situation alone. MacDougall speaks of ethnographic film as performative anthropology (MacDougall 1998). Both the characters and the situations will speak for themselves. The viewers receive a performance. With this the filmmaker has maybe less control of in what way the material presented will be "read" by its spectators, than what the writer has. The viewer of a film is to a certain degree more active in the construction of meaning than the reader of a text. "In oversimplified terms, it could be said that to a great extent in these media the viewer is given the subjects but creates the predicates. It is the viewer who discovers connections within a network of possibilities structured by the author. The viewer may make other discoveries too, just as a reader of poetry (or of a rich ethnographic

description) may discover meanings of which the writer is not consciously aware." (MacDougall 1998:70).

In a film you may have limited opportunities in establishing a context around the situation presented. Even though it may lack a broad contextualisation, it may still be very rich in details, colours, movement and atmosphere. As a result it may bring forth strong emotions in the viewer, emotions that appear through the feeling of being present. However, in a text one may easily establish the context of an event, and one can further comment on the issues that are not made explicit in the film, but one cannot show events with all their life and atmosphere as done through a film. Hence, in the production of anthropological knowledge film and text become a unique combination where the one enriches and fulfils the other. As MacDougall puts it: "Anthropological understanding is rarely achieved through unitary meanings. There is never a single code. Film offers anthropology, alongside the written text, a mixing of embodied, synaesthetic, narrative, and metaphorical strands, corresponding to Barthes' 'braid' of significations" (MacDougall 1998:83).

I have in this article given my reflections and experiences of ethnographic filmmaking in its different stages. I have tentatively shown that both the characters and the filmmaker take part in both forming the events and representing them. The reality depicted is a result of the communication between the characters and the filmmaker. In the editing phase it is the anthropological filmmaker that makes the final decisions on how to formulate the narrative of the film. The de-

isions grow out from the filmmaker's experiences and understandings of topics and characters.

The process of ethnographic filmmaking should not be seen in contrast with the process of writing an anthropological text. Although the final product is different, one goes through many of the same phases (planning the project, observing and collecting data, selecting and interpreting, and finally editing the findings) in the construction of both film and text. The film has a strength in giving a visual representation with details difficult expressed through text. The text may provide interpretations and contextualisations that may not be established through filmic material. Therefore I believe that the two are complementary and are two valuable sources of anthropological knowledge that should be more commonly combined within anthropological research.

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