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**CHENNAI AS “CUT-OUT” CITY**

Pushpa Arabindoo

In a context where Mumbai and Delhi provide much of the empirical fodder for contemporary urban development discourses in metropolitan India, it is not often that southern counterparts such as Chennai, Bangalore, or Hyderabad make the headlines. It was thus intriguing when, in April 2008, a considerable amount of buzz was generated around a minute-and-a-half commercial, *A day in the life of Chennai*, released as part of a vast multimedia campaign to promote the Chennai launch of India’s oldest and largest circulating English daily *The Times of India*. Over the years, the Mumbai-based national newspaper had made forays with local editions into several Indian cities, but had stayed clear of Chennai, purportedly due to this Tamil/Dravidian city’s rather conservative, orthodox image. The reorganisation of Indian states along linguistic identities in the 1950s had resulted in the reinscription of metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata with regional identities mainly framed by the local language—Marathi for Mumbai, Tamil for Chennai, and Bengali for Kolkata. In Chennai, this was further enhanced by the strong force of Dravidian politics, which emphasised a distinctive ethno-linguistic Tamil cultural subnationalism. Thus, when *The Times of India* decided to make a late entry into the Dravidian state, its marketing strategy recognised the need to highlight its understanding of the local culture to capture Chennai’s citizens as consumers. Accordingly, the soundtrack was set to an addictive folk beat (popularly known as *kuthu*), and the title phrase *nakka mukka* was recovered from the underbelly of the city (primarily the slums) to prove that it can capture every aspect of the daily life of Chennai. Literally meaning tongue/nose, in colloquial dialect it is also an expression for letting your hair down and dancing like it is your last dance. It is not uncommon for Indian advertisements to look for populist references drawn from local cultural landscapes to build their lexical repertoire, and hence, it was not surprising when the song became an instant hit, turning into an anthem of sorts. The attention seemed well deserved when the commercial won several prestigious advertising awards including two golds at the Cannes Lions 2009, with juries highlighting the use of local culture in fresh and inspiring ways. The narrative of the advertisement is unmistakably strong as it singles out the key aspect of the city’s quotidian life, a characteristic duality evident not just in its name Madras/Chennai, but also in its fascination for cinema and politics. The film is conceptualised as a short satire on the life of a double-sided, giant “cut-out” character switching between the roles of an actor and politician, and navigating the ups and downs of cinema and politics through the course of one day in Chennai. This use of the icon of the cut-out is understandable given Chennai’s informal claim as the cut-out capital of the world. Cut-outs emerged in the twentieth century as gigantic effigies hand-painted on plywood as part of political campaigns or outdoor advertisements (mainly promoting cinema), and evolved into an integral element of the cityscape. However, even though the images in this film capture some of the essential elements of the city such as its exuberant fan clubs for movie stars and a politics dominated by endless rallies and effigy burning, they offer only a fragmented, and more worryingly, distorted peek into the city’s urban kaleidoscope. Advertisements that set up a dialogue with urban spaces do so in generally impressionistic terms taking only bits of the local landscape and placing them within a wider order of aesthetised intelligibility. Capturing Chennai’s local frenzy through a rapidly cut, fragmented collage of shots, the selection of images are not meant to be extrapolated to the whole of the city but to create a specific visual representation of the city. At the same time, one cannot but question its understanding and portrayal of Chennai’s spatiality. For, the urban route carved by the central cut-out character is confined mostly to stereotypical snapshots of the city. Commencing with *Kasimedu*, the quintessential fishing harbour in the northern part of the city, the cut-out as a rising movie star journeys down the landmark colonial trail from Esplanade (Parry’s Corner) to Mount Road, switching sides (literally) into a politician whose fluctuating fortunes trigger chaos and violence on the streets, only to meet a mythical end in the public space of the city, Marina Beach, and is eventually exiled to peri-urban wilderness at the city’s fringes. The visual shorthand employed in tracing this circulatory logic raises some anxieties about whether this is indeed Chennai. The unfolding scenes focus on particular kinds of spaces epitomising the local culture through which it can communicate with the citizens of the city. But somewhere this connection is not fully made as it ends up satirising rather than celebrating the local. A worrying aspect is the way the camera pans across a multitude of exchanges, each associating Chennai’s public culture with the lifeline of the cut-out. In trying to suggest a new urban consciousness, a specific kind of public is constituted in the process where hyper-real images present exaggerated tensions within this
realm. Marked by visible displays of chaos and disorder, there is a suggestion of a subaltern public sphere as elaborated by Nancy Fraser, which is clearly undermined through a stereotypical representation of a counter-public that is dominated by the irrationality of a violent crowd.5

More importantly, the populist commercial overlaps with a particularly bourgeois moment in the city when an officially sanctioned drive was launched to remove all “unauthorised” hoardings in the city. In the post-independence period, hand-painted plywood cut-outs had come to relay specific messages about film, politics, and religion—one that was specific to Dravidian urban culture.6 Organising the city’s spaces in less mundane and more spectacular ways, the surreal landscape of cut-outs served as makeshift mimics of the real, integrating images of popular culture into the conventional paradigm of urban landscape. For years, Chennai’s “urbanscape” was dominated by the text and images of cut-outs of all sizes, which rarely read coherently as text but nevertheless offered a fascinating commentary about the city. However, since the 1990s with the launch of neoliberalisation policies, a yearning for a bourgeois urbanism of orderly, regulated spaces has triggered an aversion to what is now considered not local culture but urban graffiti. Thus, located in the fuzzy boundaries of public/private spaces, this landscape involving a lucrative enterprise of rentals and taxes is condemned as an urban scourge that has recklessly mushroomed across the cityscape.7 In 2008, coinciding with the release of A day in the life of Chennai was a Supreme Court verdict banning unauthorised hoardings in the city, after which more than half of the cut-outs in the city were promptly removed.

Anchored in the Times of India film is a phantasmic understanding of Chennai’s socio-political geography, which brushes aside much of the emerging challenges associated with the Dravidian city’s efforts to juggle the tensions of the local, the national, and the global. Instead, a rhetorical reimagining of the cityscape is produced where the interpretation of the local is mired in a parochial understanding of the city. Thus, at one level there is an urge to reject the advertisement’s patronising fervour amidst a concern that more than stereotyping, these images stigmatise the city. While it is easy to dismiss the images as perhaps a north Indian newspaper’s clichéd imagination of Chennai as a Tamil/Dravidian city, their visual aesthetics are however useful in furthering a discussion about the essence of contemporary Chennai that extends beyond the imagined into the real world. At a time when a new identity of a globalising city is being carefully constructed and staged with the city’s public spaces projected as ideal circuits for the flow of global capital, the film’s exorcism of a violent subaltern Other from the underbelly of these spaces is not gratifying. Nevertheless, it reveals in unexpected ways the disjuncture between Chennai’s image and reality as a Dravidian capital, and hence is useful in challenging some of the recent development aspirations based on an agenda of sanitised aestheticisation that ironically involve the removal of cut-outs from the cityscape.
1. The film is available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU_qyQmYQ

2. This included a vehement opposition of Hindi as India’s official language, and extended to a general dislike of political and economic dominance from a Brahmin dominated, supposedly Indo-Aryan culture prevalent in North India. However, a changing equation between regional and national parties based on coalition politics has muted the aggression of Dravidian politics. Even though Dravidian parties in one form or the other have been in power since the 1960s, Chennai falls woefully short of displaying a true Dravidian identity, with a forced “Tamil geography” that is visible only in bits and pieces. In 2004, the Delhi-based Swaraj magazine in its special edition on Chennai described it not just as a city but as an idea: conservative if not orthodox.

3. Madras was renamed as Chennai in 1996 in a move to vernacularise the city by rejecting the colonial toponym. While reassertion of a nativist agenda by a regional government played a critical role in this decision, the implications of this name change extended geographically, with both the names (Madras and Chennai) serving to spatially order an increasingly divided city. Thus, Chennai and Madras have come to exemplify the tale of two cities, where the former exhibits an elegant and ordered globalising landscape largely in the south, while the northern half portrays filth and decay associated with mal-development. Cinema has played an important role in Tamil politics, serving as a serious vehicle of political mobilisation for the Dravidian parties, with many leaders beginning their career in films, either as writers or actors. For discussions on Tamil cinema and politics see, for instance, S. Velayutham, (ed.), Tamil cinema: The cultural politics of India’s other film industry (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

4. Cut-outs involved the materialisation of a film star or politician with a brusque, energetic touch, turning them instantly into an object of adoration. In recent years, this traditional form of cut-outs have been increasingly replaced by billboards that are computer-printed on vinyl fabric. See, O. Note, “Imagining the politics of the senses in public spaces,” in South Asian Popular Culture, 5/1 (2007), 129-143.

5. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy,” in Social Text, 25/26 (1990), 56-80.


1. The West Side Savings Bank at the intersection of Seventh Avenue South, West Fourth Street and Christopher Street, in New York. The images were shot by a Times photographer named Larry Morris on the evening of July 2, 1969, five nights after a raid on the nearby Stonewall Inn, a nightclub popular among gay men and lesbians, which touched off disturbances that have come to be seen as a defining event in the development of the gay rights movement. Source: Courtesy of The New York Times.

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