

SELLING CINEMA:

The Impact of Digital Technology on Outdoor Tamil Film Advertising

Synopsis

This study is based on the hypothesis that outdoor advertising for Tamil cinema seeks to continually adapt to newer print technologies while consciously exploiting the professional skills of the graphic designer and the photographer. Tamil cinema advertising in Chennai has always been a powerful and vibrant visual art form—be it in traversing the era of non-digital posters and hand-painted hoardings, or in moving into the realm of digital technology. In keeping with the changing times and advanced technologies, publicity for Tamil cinema has assimilated from hybrid sources to generate a new visual language. The purpose of this study is to highlight the new aesthetic of graphic design in Tamil cinema publicity as dictated by digital technology.

Known as Madras until 1996, Chennai the capital of Tamil Nadu, regarded as the cultural capital, epitomizes music, dance, theater and art. Till about 1960, Chennai was the center of all South Indian language cinema production, the largest segment of which was Tamil film. Its film industry, popularly referred to as ‘Kollywood’ is the second largest in the country.

Cinema is an urban phenomenon in terms of social space, production and function, and a clear indicator of modernity. A significant part of Indian popular culture and mass psyche, cinema is an economic and cultural institution, made and watched in a

commercial context. The growth of Indian film production has been colossal and is closely associated with the rapid expansion of Indian cities and the resulting urban lifestyle. Chennai, much like Mumbai, is home to cinematic signs and sounds such as movie posters, hoardings, print advertisements, radio and music albums, where film making and viewing are a significant part of the urban experience.

While much has been written about the visual culture of Mumbai-based Bollywood cinema, as reflected in its dynamic advertising, such as posters, hand-rendered hoardings and so on, little has been published about Tamil film promotionals. Visual culture in Chennai's urban space has been extensively shared by Tamil cinema hoardings and posters. This almost undocumented area of academic study—advertising for Tamil films in Chennai during the digital era—forms the area of my research with particular examples forming the focus of my study. Each phase of Tamil cinema publicity is marked by a distinct aesthetic change in its advertising. In addition to promoting film, advertising for Tamil cinema employed the visual vocabulary of the period to reflect the ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values of the cultural environment, while often shaping it as well. In other words, it epitomized the spirit of the age. The examples chosen are geographically limited to the city of Chennai.

Advertising is a significant commercial activity, and is evidently thought to be an effective communication medium which promotes the sale of goods and services through a range of media, including newspapers, radio, television, and more recently the internet. A highly visible sign of contemporary consumer culture, advertising has been exploited

by the Tamil cinema industry as well. The thesis titled ‘Selling Cinema: The Impact of Digital Technology on Outdoor Tamil Film Advertising’ studies the subject of outdoor advertising for Tamil cinema from 2000 onwards which has been impacted and modified by digital technology. Having transitioned into the realm of digital print technology, publicity for Tamil cinema began to assimilate from hybrid sources developing in the process a ‘new’ look. As communication design, it conveyed in its posters and hoardings the primary narratives related to the film.

With the swift development of technology, advertising for Tamil cinema seems to have grown significantly beyond the two-dimensional format. This necessitates that the study, in order to be focused, may not concern itself with non-print mediums such as the internet, television, mobile phone advertising and the like, which fall beyond the scope of this thesis. Digital technology has been exploited by the Tamil film industry for its promotionals, particularly posters and hoardings, from the year 2000 onwards. Eight years later, all unlicensed hoardings were dismantled in the city of Chennai, and new restrictions on poster pasting came into force. Therefore the focus of this study will be on small and large format outdoor print media, particularly posters and hoardings in Chennai from 2000-2008, the time frame being dictated by the use of digital technology, which conspicuously altered the language of design in Tamil cinema publicity.

The film poster, a key advertising medium for Tamil cinema, continues to thrive as a primary means of communication as well as a significant art form. The nature of the poster has enabled it to not merely survive, but to evolve throughout its history as an

effective medium of promotion and persuasion. The other form of out-door publicity for Tamil cinema in Chennai has been the hoarding, billboard or the 'banner'.

Posters and hoardings are temporary mediums of communication and advertising with a short lifespan, serving a similar purpose but varying in scale and format. In function, posters and hoardings are essentially products of communication between an active force and a responsive one. Its originator, whether an individual, institution, business or organization, has a message to sell; the recipient, its target audience, is persuaded to buy the message. The interchange takes place in the public domain. Thus, the need to steal the viewer's attention, even if only for a split second, has dictated the look of posters and hoardings for Tamil cinema.

Examining cultural expression in any medium is in effect looking at a moment in dialogue. Theoretically, street art such as posters and hoardings are particularly dialogic art forms drawing attention to artists and graphic designers, who have moved beyond formal spaces such as galleries by placing their art in public areas. Posters and hoardings for Tamil cinema, particularly as they belong to the entertainment category are dialogic, aimed at virtually any sector of society; the means by which their messages are conveyed with universal appeal are crucial to their effectiveness. They address the audience in everyday, contemporary language with compelling imagery. Being cast in colloquial idiom, the promotionals change their tone and vocabulary to express and imitate shifting cultural values and codes of behavior.

In India posters became popular with the introduction of mechanical printing. The famous nineteenth century Indian artist Raja Ravi Varma initiated a popular painting style appropriating the materials and techniques of Western academic art. He is credited with creating a dynamic, new aesthetic style that had a huge impact on Indian visual culture and his paintings were regarded as important signifiers of both modernity and nationality. Ravi Varma transformed print culture in India with striking illusionist iconography of Hindu themes. His influence percolated to South Indian popular calendar art, and from around 1956, South Indian poster and calendar artists had their works printed as chromolithographs by means of the newly introduced photo-offset machines in Sivakasi, a small town in Tamil Nadu, which has today grown into one of the largest printing centers in India.

In Chennai, hoardings or banners, and cut-out advertisements were hand-produced by organizations known as banner companies that specialized in this labor-intensive art form. Besides a core group of artists, apprentices and managers, each company also hired the services of lettering artists and carpenters, and laborers who erected these constructions on the street and in cinema halls.

The study is introduced by means of a brief background of the city of Chennai which forms the backdrop in which the examples are set. Chapter One provides a concise overview of key contributors to the development of Tamil cinema until the 1960s. Attention is paid to publicity mediums such as handbills, song booklets, newspaper

advertisements and posters of particular films to highlight the design language of the time.

Chapter Two examines the progress in the advertising of Tamil cinema, particularly that of non-digital posters and hand-rendered hoardings from the 1960s until the late 1990s. Poster design and layout of this era involved illustrators and poster artists who were skilled in the manual development of artwork. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the practice of these artists was adversely affected by commerce and technology. Kumar, who began as a signboard painter and continues as a free-lance designer having adapted to new technology has been used as a point of reference. A summary of the types of printing technologies used for Tamil cinema poster printing as well as an analysis of select examples of non-digital posters has been provided in Chapter Two. The chapter will also highlight the process and technique of hand-painted hoardings and ‘cut-outs’. The visual aesthetics of this form of publicity is closely linked to photorealism, influenced by photography which played a major role in the marketing of Tamil films, thereby promoting the ‘star system’. Reference will be made to the work of Chennai-based Venkatesh of Jayaram Arts and a freelance artist Jayakumar while alluding to banner and cut-out advertising before the advent of digital technology.

The rapid transition from hand-rendered to digital medium happened in the late 1990s with the advent of solvent print technology. As the progress of technology manifested itself in the global market, the local publicity for Tamil cinema adapted the newest technological mediums to replace the older craft-based, labor-intensive methods. Chapter

Three develops the thesis argument while highlighting the impact of digital technology on Tamil film publicity, the resulting aesthetics of graphic design, Tamil and English typography, digital photography, and the like. The altered appearance, scale and visual appeal effected by digital technology in the posters and hoardings of Tamil cinema have elevated graphic design in Tamil film advertising into a near ‘fine art’ status. The chapter seeks to interrogate a subject area such as graphic design in Tamil film publicity, which is in constant flux in terms of form and content, in the context of speedily changing technologies. It draws attention to the design development in Tamil cinema promotion, citing select works of professional designers such as K. Vijay Sekar of Corporate Media Men Private Limited, Sidharth Chandrasekar of Mitra Media, and photographer G. Venket Ram of Venket Ram Photography, all of whom are based in Chennai, and have contributed to creating a ‘new reality’ through technology driven images.

Chapter Four examines how technology has led to innovative trends in the marketing of Tamil cinema advertising such as star power, star value, and fan loyalty resulting in a novel advertising strategy, namely ‘co-branding’, as witnessed in hoardings and posters. The globally popular concept of celebrity sponsorship has been adapted by the Tamil cinema industry as well, using film stars to promote local brands. The collaboration between corporate or product advertising along with that of Tamil cinema visuals was a promotion strategy that enhanced the sale of both the film and the product or service, through the sharing of the hoarding space. The digitally enhanced visuals of the film star as ‘sign’, affected the meanings constructed by the viewer of the character in the film.

The thesis examines in the Conclusion, the varied responses to digital technology and the impact digital technology has had on the advertising for Tamil cinema, an industry that thrives on adapting latest technologies to its advantage in the promotion of its product. Tamil cinema publicity is post modern in that sense, that it has exploited the aspect of digital manipulation of graphic design and photography, thereby ‘constructing’ a visual experience favorable to its promotion.

Specific posters and hoarding advertisements of Tamil cinema are analyzed using theories and concepts such as semiotics, denotation, connotation, gaze, spectatorship, scopophilia, and so on. The semiotic analysis of Tamil cinema publicity assumes that the meanings of advertisements are designed by their creators to move out from the surface on which they are carried, to shape and lend significance to the experience of reality. Advertising, news, and television commercials clarify that visual signs are used not to simply denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the visual sign. Because graphic design deals with the spectator, and is set in the public domain, it is the goal of the designer to be persuasive. Therefore, the designer’s center of attention shifts from the interrelation of visual components to that between the audience and the design, recognizing the receiver as active participant in the construction of the message. The audience decodes or interprets a visual statement as a passive reader in the communication process without being an active participant in the formation of meaning. Advertising for Tamil cinema extended cinematic spectatorship and fantasy from the intimate space of the theater to the open public domain of the streets lending itself to scopophilia.

It has been demonstrated that technology plays a crucial role in the popular forms of culture, particularly cinema. The Industrial Revolution established a dichotomy between culture and technology. It also ingrained the notion of ‘high culture’ as spiritually enriching, superior to mass or ‘low’ culture. Indian cinema and its publicity, once considered low culture, has now transcended class barriers and has mass appeal. The product of a new public culture that arose during the twentieth century, Tamil cinema advertising has linked traditional Indian culture with developing technology. Thus, ‘techno-culture’ as reflected in Tamil film publicity, entails a fusion between technology and culture, eroding in the process the distinction between high and low culture in cinema.

A popular attitude and theory, ‘technological determinism’ refers to the belief that technology is the agent of social change. Technological ‘progress’ appears to be relentless in the current scenario of mass communication thereby resulting in economic progress. Advertising in the Tamil cinema business, therefore adapting to digital technology did not merely mediate fresh consumption but also contributed to the profitability of the film. The study explores the effects of the computer, an important tool of digital technology, and the new language it has heralded in the design of Tamil film posters and hoardings—graphic design. The degree of manipulation now possible using digital imaging software such as Adobe Photoshop has entered a post-photographic age, allowing morphing, retouching and cloning in imagery. The resulting seamless collages challenge the sense of photographic truth. Further, with the aid of computer software, a designer can produce letterforms, commonly known as typefaces, that have shifted from

the exclusive dominion of the type foundry to become virtually the autographic marks of the designer who invents them. Especially obvious in the titles created for Tamil cinema publicity, the designer by means of digital technology has developed a fresh vocabulary in vernacular type that has given new life to conventional Tamil typography.

More than any other form of visual culture, today graphic design is ubiquitous and cannot be understood in isolation but in a communication context. As a communication medium it lures the public to buy products or services; in this particular instance, advertising by means of posters and hoardings for Tamil cinema is meant to draw the audiences to watch the film. The theory-assisted analysis attempts to prove that communication by means of graphic design can be iconographic, aesthetic, work as a marketing tool, or be purely informative. Tamil cinema publicity may have been created for ephemeral purposes; however, it is deeply rooted in popular culture where graphic design is a force to reckon with.

The thesis illustrates that with design keeping pace with new technology, designers of visual communication, graphic design and the related areas of advertising now need to rely on their intuition and training to create appropriate visual messages. Graphic designers and art directors have a new role and encounter a more difficult and albeit lucrative task in negotiating a client's vision and a viewer's response to the designed message. This is partly due to the fact that present day viewers of advertising messages differ from those of past decades. Today, consumers are exceedingly diverse vis-à-vis age, education, income and social background and have a wide variety of expectations.

Additionally they have greater exposure to the constant stream of visual stimuli that current media offers, and more varied experiences in responding to a world of designed messages. The entry of digital photography, and its superior claim upon both art and reality, has enabled the perfect amalgam of aesthetics and commerce for advertising.

With a complete ban on hoardings that were unauthorized or unlicensed and on those that posed a hazard or obstructed visibility in early 2008, and restrictions on surfaces where posters can be pasted, Tamil cinema advertising has found alternate spaces such as the increase in newspaper advertisements, television commercials, on bus shelters and public transport, internet, downloads on mobile phones—movie songs as ring tones, film stills or actors as wall paper designs. Through the transition in different mediums, publicity has developed in keeping with its times and despite current technological progress and legal restrictions, advertising has proved that it will never die, particularly for Tamil cinema. My inference is that Tamil cinema publicity has in the recent past, moved beyond much exploited aspects such as commodification of the male or female body. Instead it has witnessed the advent of a new visual language combining the expertise of the graphic designer, the photographer and digital technology. The advertising generated by this new partnership has assumed an aesthetic sophistication that is highlighted by technological progress. Therefore, outdoor advertising for Tamil cinema, while being hinged to the cinema that it publicizes, has emerged as a site of negotiation for recent and advancing technologies and socio-cultural trends. The pivot of this negotiation is the creativity of the designer augmented by the technological devices available to him.

Chennai continues to be the hub of Tamil cinema. With an avid audience for Tamil cinema and rise in multiplex culture in Chennai, publicity for this popular medium will go on. There is little doubt that Tamil cinema will continue to ‘sell’ while adapting to the latest media, and remaining ever ‘young and vibrant’.



Film: Naan Adimai Illai
(I am not a Slave, 1986)
Artist: Venkatesh, Jayaram Arts, Chennai



Film: Aayutha Ezhuthu
(The Final Word of the Tamil Script, 2004)
Designer: K Vijay Sekar,
Corporate Media Men Pvt Ltd, Chennai