

Introduction

Theorizing Playback

In playback, the body confesses to being the puppet brought to life by the voice.

—MICHEL CHION, *THE VOICE IN CINEMA*

In 1975, a reviewer for the *Toronto Sun* reported on a live performance by Lata Mangeshkar, then the reigning playback voice of Hindi cinema, during her first North American tour. “Lata Mangeshkar is what is known as a ‘playback singer,’” he wrote. “That is the vocalist who replaces the voice of the leading lady [in a film] whenever she breaks into song. . . . And if the actress is anyone important, her singing voice is supplied by Lata Mangeshkar” (Deora and Shah 2017, 45). Though North American audiences had become acquainted with the sounds of Indian classical music in the 1960s through the Beatles and the concert tours of sitarists Ravi Shankar and Amjad Ali Khan, this was their first exposure to Indian popular film songs. The term *playback* refers to a system that relies on the technical capacity to separately record and subsequently synchronize aural and visual tracks in the production of the song sequences that are a central part of Indian popular films. Playback singers are so called because their voices are first recorded in the studio and then “played back” on the set as the visuals of the song sequence are being filmed.

Indian playback singers embody a combination of characteristics and roles that would have been unfamiliar to North American audiences in the 1970s. Singers who, in the North American context, would have been relegated to a behind-the-scenes, anonymous role, were in India clearly well-known celebrities. Yet, as the reviewer noted, while their voices commanded tremendous affective power, these singers’ live performances did not include visual signs of self-expression or involvement with the performance. “An obstacle for the potential fan of the media-saturated Western world is the show’s rigorous lack of visual distraction. There is no dance, no interpretive acting—just the music” (Deora and Shah 2017, 45).

The reviewer's conclusion—that both the music and its mode of performance were “an acquired taste”—reflects the fact, as true now as it was then, that playback singers embody a culturally specific form of celebrity for which there is no real equivalent in the North American context.

Taking its cue from the reviewer's puzzlement, this book seeks to understand playback in India as a culturally specific institution that has generated novel forms of celebrity, publicity and performance, and affective attachment to voices. Though playback relies on particular technical capacities and media assemblages, it is more than a simple technological process of substituting one voice for another. Technological capacities alone did not determine the institution that playback would become in India; for instance, they did not dictate that the aural track would be recorded before the visual, that singer and actor had to be two different people, or that the singer would be a known celebrity rather than a behind-the-scenes ghost singer. Moving beyond a narrow technoindustrial explanation of playback, this book explores its significance as a realm of vocality and performance that has become intricately encoded with meaning over the roughly seventy years it has been in use in India.

Playback is a complex set of practices involving the production, recording, amplification, manipulation, and circulation of voices. It acknowledges not just the audience's awareness that onscreen body and offscreen voice are produced by two different people but, indeed, the expectation that this division of labor between singing and acting, voice and body, will be maintained. In contrast to Hollywood cinema and the American media entertainment industry, which have been preoccupied with maintaining voice-body unity, Indian popular cinema responded differently to the affordances of separating sound- and image-tracks, embracing sound cinema's fragmentation of body and voice as a necessary and positive feature. In the latter half of the twentieth century, playback became a key aspect of Indian popular cinema's famously “heterogeneous mode of manufacture”: the separate production of the various parts of the film and their final assembly into one unit (Prasad 1998, 42–43). Indian film industries moved from a period of using singing actors in the 1930s and 1940s, through a short phase in which unacknowledged “ghost” or “traded” voices provided singing voices for onscreen actors, and then, in the early 1950s, to the system of playback, in which the use of dedicated singers was acknowledged.¹ Knowledge about playback singers began to circulate in the 1950s through news and film magazines and, by the 1960s, through live stage performances by the singers themselves. Playback singers became well-known in their own right, often overshadowing onscreen actors and actresses in their popularity and the longevity of their careers. The legacy of these developments is a distinctive form of celebrity and a lasting fascination with the difference, and disjuncture, between the onscreen body and the singing voice that emanates from it, a play of matching and mismatching that is elaborated

and aestheticized both onscreen in the films themselves and in offscreen sites of performance and audition.

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This book is based on historical and ethnographic research in the South Indian Tamil-language film and culture industry. It situates playback within the cultural and political context of Tamil South India from the post-independence period to the post-liberalization present, tracking the emergence of playback in the 1940s and 1950s, its consolidation in the 1960s through the 1980s, and its partial dismantling since the 1990s, when new technological capacities for sound manipulation and structural changes in the film and entertainment industries have transformed earlier modes of production and ideals associated with playback. This relatively long time frame makes it possible to see how playback as an institution has both shaped and been shaped by a wider sociopolitical context.

While independence and liberalization provide anchor points linking the narrative to a broader Indian national-cultural history, a more specific story also emerges here. Although playback as a system came into standard use in the various film industries of India around the same time, its practices and aesthetics have not been harnessed to the same sociopolitical projects everywhere. Focusing on the Tamil-language film industry, this book offers a perspective distinct from that provided by the more-studied Bombay-based Hindi-language film industry, now known as Bollywood. Sound films in Tamil have been produced since the 1930s. The Tamil film industry is based in Chennai (formerly Madras), which, along with Bombay and Calcutta, was historically one of the three major hubs of Indian film production. It takes its present-day name, Kollywood, from the first letter of Kodambakkam, the neighborhood of Chennai where the major studios were originally located and where much production activity continues to take place.² The Tamil film industry is one of India's most prolific, producing between 150 and 200 films per year, only slightly fewer than the number of Hindi-language films produced each year in Bollywood.

Tamil cinema has historically been shaped by the priorities of regional political and ethnolinguistic identity more than by questions of national identity, presenting aesthetic, social, and political content distinct from that of Bollywood cinema (Velayutham 2008, 7). While a national-secular "modern" public sphere was evoked in many Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s by the trope of romantic love across ties of caste or community, and while Hindi cinema worked to present a pan-Indian subject supposedly devoid of specific ethnolinguistic identity, in South India these were the years in which ethnolinguistic nationalism emerged as a political force. In the context of the linguistic reorganization of states following independence, as a challenge to the then nationally dominant Congress Party, a new regional political party, the DMK, began to use cinema to assert a

new “Dravidian” political identity.³ It eventually consolidated its political power in its electoral victory of 1967, creating a powerful and long-lasting link between cinema and politics and establishing cinema as a prime site for the construction and elaboration of Tamil ethnolinguistic identity.

The liberalization of India’s economy beginning in the 1980s is widely recognized as a major turning point in India’s history and ethos as nation.⁴ The increase in available consumer goods that resulted from liberalizing economic policies was accompanied by an explosion of privatized media in the 1990s that brought in images and sounds from abroad and provided alternatives to state-controlled radio and television, while giving increased scope and prominence to the advertising industry (Fernandes 2006; Mazzarella 2013). Though the power of Dravidian ideology has become attenuated in the post-liberalization context, its legacy continues to interact with the dynamics of the post-liberalization period—the emergence of the “new middle class,” the increasing salience of consumption-based class distinctions, and the new forms of masculinity and femininity⁵—with distinct implications for the sonic and affective resonances of playback voices.

DISTRIBUTING THE SENSIBLE

Playback singers’ voices have been a ubiquitous element of the aural public culture of South India since the 1950s. In the absence of a separate popular music industry, film songs, here as elsewhere in India, have long constituted the main source of popular music. In addition, the institutionalization of playback itself as standard practice in film production was contemporaneous with major political shifts in mid-twentieth-century Tamil South India; both depended on the affordances of voice amplification technologies. In the 1940s and 1950s, the very same years that the microphone was transforming singing styles and aesthetics for playback singers, it was also playing a key role in the oratorical transformation associated with the rise of Dravidian politics: the development of a “refined” style of public political speaking that depended on microphone amplification (Bate 2009).⁶ But although the nexus of politics, performance, and expressive forms such as oratory and cinema is a topic of particular relevance in the context of Tamil South India (see Bate 2009; Prasad 2014; and Nakassis n.d.), a critical consideration of playback has not been part of this scholarship. This is perhaps because playback singers have never assumed political roles. Unlike acting and other authorial roles such as directing, scriptwriting, or composing lyrics, being a playback singer and being a music director have been consistently and often deliberately constructed as nonpolitical roles in the context of Tamil cinema.⁷

The framing of singing as a nonpolitical act should not, however, obscure the sociopolitical significance of playback voices. Indeed, recent scholarship has explored voice as a site where macrolevel constructs such as race, gender, or national identity get scaled down to the bodily level, constituting a naturalized

domain of aesthetics and sensibilities that are produced and reproduced through embodied practice, performance, and mediated consumption (Ochoa Gautier 2014; Harkness 2013; Eidsheim 2019). While discursively articulated ideologies sometimes determine which voices become audible in the public sphere, different possibilities may also be enabled, or silenced, by the affective and disciplinary entailments of listening practices (Hirschkind 2006; Kunreuther 2014; Eisenlohr 2017). On analogy with the concept of “scopic regimes” (Metz 1977; Jay 2011), we can identify “regimes” of aurality and the voice: the forms of regimentation effected by modes of discipline in vocal production, recurring practices and contexts of audition, shared ideologies about the sonic qualities of voices, ideas about the relationship between body and voice, and the technological media through which voices come to be heard. These, in combination, work on bodies and sensibilities, even—and perhaps especially—when the voices in question are not considered to be explicitly political (Kunreuther 2014).

While at points in this book, I do occasionally connect playback to politics proper—that is, to the world of political parties and democratic forms of representation—I work throughout with a more expansive notion of the political that inheres in what Jacques Rancière has called the “distribution of the sensible.” Rancière resisted drawing direct connections between art and political formations or regimes, but he did note the world-making capacity of expressive forms, their capacity to organize the way things are perceived: as he put it, their “parceling out of the visible and the invisible” (2004, 19).⁸ I take up Rancière’s provocation here by exploring the ways in which playback constitutes a particular distribution of the sensible. First, at the most basic level, playback produces and manages both visibility and audibility, determining what is seen and what isn’t, whose voice is heard and whose isn’t, who sings and who speaks. This is done through the institutionalization of a division of labor among different personnel (actors and singers) and at different sites (onscreen and offscreen). Second, playback differentiates voice qualities by gender and social type, narrowing the range of possibilities for what female or male voices should sound like and the indexical associations that are allowed to go with them. This process of regimentation is also accomplished through the flooding of the market with a few particular voices. And finally, playback, through its divisions of labor, frames the act of singing in a particular way, creating an inside and an outside that can be crossed for performative effect. All of these processes—division of labor; differentiation, narrowing, and flooding; and framing—are “distributions of the sensible” with particular effects and implications.

The emergence of playback’s distribution of the sensible is part of a larger twentieth-century shift in ways that the female form was becoming available to be heard and seen in the public sphere through different expressive and medial forms, including music, dance, and cinema. Throughout this book I note the ways in which playback as a system and its shifting aesthetics have at times seemed to close off possibilities or to open new ones, sometimes doing both simultaneously but

always in asymmetrically gendered ways. Playback maneuvers within a cultural context where respectable femininity is defined by the careful management, and often avoidance, of public appearance. Cinema, by this logic, constitutes a distinctive and potentially problematic site of appearance because of its open-ended mass audience and because its contexts of reception can never be controlled. Within this medium, the combination of a single individual's body, voice, name, and authorial will or intention can create a potent sense of presence that can work to the benefit of male actors or singers but has long been largely undesirable for actresses and female singers (Nakassis and Weidman 2018). Playback emerged as a way of manipulating these elements, putting body, voice, name, and authorial will and intention together in different ways and mitigating the effects of combining them.

Distributions of the sensible shape, in ways both concrete and more general, who and what gets heard, and in what ways, in the public sphere (Fraser 1990). They undergird the structures that regulate cultural production in mass-mediated contexts, the "performative dispensations" that function at once as "patron and police," both enabling and circumscribing the possibilities for performances (Mazzarella 2013). A dispensation both "opens and maintains a protected space in which a form of life can be performed . . . and decides on the exception, on what falls outside the symbolic order of the law," or what is considered vulgar, obscene, or inappropriate (Mazzarella 2013, 41). In so doing, a performative dispensation not only regulates the kinds of things that can be performed, but also attempts to regulate their performative force: the meanings or effects that particular performances may have. In the context of this book, I explore the post-independence decades and the post-liberalization decades as two different performative dispensations, each of which mobilizes a complex combination of permissions and prohibitions in order to tie the sensuous, performative force of voices back to an acceptable meaning (Mazzarella 2013, 40).

IDEOLOGIES OF THE EMBODIED AND DISEMBODIED VOICE

The persistence of voice-body unity as an ideal in Hollywood cinema has rendered the existence of a separate voice "behind" the screen attached to a body onscreen a problem—one that must be either hidden or masked or resolved by bringing the owner of the behind-the-scenes voice out into the open to be acknowledged as the true source. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane has argued, in order to counteract the disarticulation of body and voice by technical means, much is invested in representing them as springing from the same source (Doane 1980). The most literal dramatization of this is the iconic and much-discussed climactic scene of the Hollywood musical film *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), which manages to present a happy onscreen resolution by revealing the owner of the "true" voice behind the curtain, while simultaneously masking the fact that her voice was, in fact, provided by an unacknowledged singer.⁹

Meanwhile, a powerful current within the American media entertainment industry works to naturalize singing as a modality that expresses the self in a privileged transparent and direct way. The existence of a “behind the scenes” singing voice remains the stuff of scandal or at best comedy.¹⁰ The embodied voice in the act of singing is continually staged as an act of expressing sincere emotion and self-identity. In the American context, this ideology of the singing voice was bolstered by the strong distinction drawn, beginning in the 1960s, between “folk” music—defined as unmediated, spontaneous, uncommercialized expression—and “pop” music, deemed to be overly commercialized, technologically mediated, and disconnected from the subjectivities of its performers. Rock borrowed heavily from the ideology of the folk but transformed the idea of singing from expressing the truth of a community or collective to expressing the truth of the self (Frith 1981, 163–64; Meizel 2011, 52–53). The idealized figure of the singer-songwriter that emerged was that of a self-contained, self-possessed individual whose voice was an expression of his or her own interiority and experience. The continuing influence of this figure is apparent in the values that underlie American music TV reality shows. On *American Idol*, for instance, contestants are enjoined, even when singing a song they didn’t write, to “make the song their own” (Meizel 2011, 56–63); there is a strong expectation that the singer will be interpellated by the song in the act of singing, that they will realize a song that was written by someone else and has been performed countless times by hundreds of others to be an expression of their own individuality or experience. Complementing this insistence on the sincerity of performance is a fixation on the voice as that which lies behind the mask of appearances. The disembodied voice becomes the site of truth, linked both to meritocracy and to recognition.¹¹

These examples constitute different popular-culture versions of the metaphysical conceits of interiority and self-presence underlying conceptions of the self in Euro-Western modernity, in which the voice, conceived in a particular way, plays a central role. Within the European philosophical tradition, a particular model of the speaking subject gave rise to notions of voice as guarantor of truth and self-presence; voice became both a metaphor for the subject’s interiority and the vehicle through which a subject comes to express inner thoughts to others (Weidman 2006, 2014a; Taylor 1989, 390; Dolar 2006). Voice, body, and self came to be tightly linked in this conception, giving rise to a distinct distrust of the sonic, material voice because of its potential to break free from the self and to evoke the body rather than the inner thoughts of the idealized subject (Cavarero 2005; Tolbert 2001). Consequently, much Euro-Western theorizing about voice—including the work that would critique this concept of voice—starts from the assumed ideal unity of voice, body, and self, treating the voice separated from self or body as disorienting, whether disablingly or productively so. This has led to a dense interdisciplinary web of theorization about the voice as *acousmètre*—the voice delinked from a visual representation of its source—as a site of power and mastery, as well as of excess and danger (Chion 1999; Dolar 2006; Kane 2014).

In his writing on the voice in cinema, film sound theorist Michel Chion characterizes both playback (where a body performs to and “mimes” a prerecorded voice) and dubbing (where an unseen voice actor’s voice is substituted for the words uttered by the onscreen actor) as “trick effects” meant to dupe the spectator into believing that the body she sees and the voice she hears stem from the same source (Chion 1999, 155). The revelation that it is instead technological artifice holding a body and voice together, Chion suggests, amounts to a kind of confession, the exposure of something shameful. “In playback,” he writes, “the body confesses to being the puppet brought to life by the voice” (1999, 161).

But what if we started, as Indian playback does, with the opposite assumption—that the dissociation of body and voice, the division of labor between appearing and sounding, is the ideal? What if we assumed that it is, instead, the embodying of voice that is the artifice, the strategic achievement that provokes anxieties and thus requires careful management? In challenging familiar links between voice and self/interiority, agency, and representation, playback prompts us to move beyond universalizing ideas about voice in Western philosophy and film studies to empirically explore how voices gain their effective and affective power in a context where different ideologies of the embodied and disembodied voice are at play. Playback—not the simple technological process but the cultural institution it became in India—does not seek to convince the spectator that onscreen body and offscreen voice belong to the same person; it does not operate according to the logic of the “mask” and the desire for what lies “behind” it; nor does it fetishize the moment of the reveal. We may well then ask, as Chion does, “What becomes of synchronization if it is no longer supposed to conquer our belief?” (1999, 160). That is, if the synchronization of the sound and visual images is not intended to enable the suspension of our disbelief and immerse us in a fictive diegetic world, what other functions and effects might it have?¹² In this book, I shift Chion’s question away from his abiding concern with the representational effects of the acousmatic voice and toward the sociological implications and affordances of a system that separates onscreen body from offscreen voice. This sets the stage for three intertwined theoretical moves: away from the acousmètre and its preoccupation with voice and representation, and toward animation, voicing, and performativity.

FROM ACOUSMÈTRE TO ANIMATION

In Chion’s provocative statement, the figure of the puppet draws attention to the complications of a simple notion of agency that arise when an offscreen/unseen voice is paired with an onscreen/seen body. The puppet is a concrete embodiment of both the mediation of voice and the distribution of agency within and across persons and personae (Enfield and Kockelman 2017). The figure of the puppet also draws attention to the performative power of the singer’s voice to bring

things to life, pointing more toward the concept of animation than that of the *acousmètre*. The *acousmètre* gains its meaning and significance from the interplay between a visible body and an invisible “source” sound or voice; its dynamism is derived from the tension between the spectatorial desire to find the source and the impossibility of locating it (Kane 2014). Animation, by contrast, is not ruled by the search for the “source.” It shifts attention away from the psychic processes of the spectator and toward the forms of agency and subjectivity that are enabled by multiple possibilities for the assumption and attribution of voices and the embodiment of physical forms.

My use of the concept of animation here builds on the ways that the concept has recently been theorized in film theory, linguistic anthropology, and the anthropology of media. The digital turn has spurred a retheorization of cinema as a form of animation both within a longer history of animating practices and techniques and within the more contemporary landscape of digital media (Manovich 2000; Beckman 2014). Animation, with its emphasis on artifice—the techniques of creating the illusion of movement and life—has been marginalized in conceptions of cinema as either a recording medium that captures real life or an “art” form ruled by the authorial intentions of the director. Reconceptualizing cinema in terms of animation leads to the acknowledgment of the forms of labor and *techne* involved in producing cinematic images and, in particular, can lead to new ways of thinking about the coupling of sound and visual image.

Within linguistic anthropology as well, animation as a concept has been used to question naturalized categories and assumptions about expression and agency. Much of this thinking has stemmed from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who used the concept of animation in various writings in an effort to break down the monolithic category of the “speaker” and to understand the production of the “self” in utterance and interaction. In Goffman’s well-known formulation, the emitter, or “animator,” of an utterance may be different from its originator, or “author,” as well as from its “principal,” the individual or entity on whose behalf or in whose interests the utterance is spoken (Goffman 1974, 517–18), and all of these are distinct from the “figure” or “character” that is thereby conjured (522). Goffman noted the varying distances an animator could assume in relation to the “figure” being animated, offering a range from cases where the animator and figure are embodied by the same body, to those where the figure is externalized onto another human or nonhuman body (522).¹³ And he noted the stakes involved in the act of animation: the varying ways an animator could reduce his responsibility for his act and the risks—of exposure or failure—entailed in every act of animation. For as he wrote (tellingly, at the end of a paragraph about a male playwright, his female character, and the actress who animates her), “authoring a remark and making it are quite different matters” (523).

Animation as a framework attends to the multiplicity of agents and the fragmentation of roles, both broadly relevant to my concerns in this book. In

contradistinction to the stereotypical scenario of performance in which the creator-character ratio is one to one, with an actor engaged in the mimetic embodiment of a character, animating practices often involve a single animator who animates multiple characters or a single character who is animated by multiple animators (Silvio 2019, 42–43). Multiple participant roles and role fragments (Irvine 1996) are thus made possible by the act of animation. Likewise, the “striation” across different modalities and media that occurs when various aspects of a single character are animated by different animators disrupts the presumed organic coherence of the human body (Silvio 2019; Barthes 1982).

As I have noted, the default condition in Tamil cinema is that appearance and voice *do not* have the same source, and there is no need to hide this because they are known and expected by the audience not to. A key implication of this fragmentation and specialization of roles is that it juxtaposes two people (and their associated star-texts), both of whom are animators: that of the actress whose body “animates” the song visually and that of the singer whose voice “animates” (in Goffman’s sense, by voicing) the song’s words and melody. Crucially, the playback singer is also potentially juxtaposed with another animator, the dubbing artist, whose job is to voice the spoken dialogues. Compared to playback singers, dubbing artists are lower status, partly because they are relatively unknown and partly because their animating role is associated with the profane domain of speaking rather than, as we will see, the sacralized role of singing. A complex semiotic economy of voice and appearance underlies this differentiation. The relatively privileged status of playback singers is reflected in the standardization and elaboration of conventions for appearing “offscreen” as themselves and the importance accorded to these appearances, opportunities that traditionally have not been available to dubbing artists.

As a cultural institution, then, playback constructs singing in opposition not only to bodily performance but to speaking as well, setting up singing and speaking as two different kinds of communicative acts that implicate their animators in different ways. Using Goffman’s notion of the “frame,” defined as “principles of organization which govern events and our subjective involvement in them” (1974, 10), I consider how singing, defined within particular parameters, operates as a kind of frame. “Singing” is constructed as the voicing of words and melodies that others have written and composed—and that therefore doesn’t involve the singer’s self in the same way as speaking does. Throughout this book, I pay close attention to the implications and affordances of this division of labor and the ways it is elaborated in discourse, cinematic representation, and performance practice. Both voice and body, and singing voice and speaking voice, have been sometimes coupled and sometimes disarticulated, always in asymmetrically gendered ways. For example, while male singers have sometimes been able to combine the roles of singing and speaking, or animator and author, to powerful effect, such combinations are much more risky for women.

Recent discussions at the intersection of anthropology and media studies have framed animation not just as a set of practices or techniques but more broadly as a tool for thinking about possibilities for subjectivity and human action in the world (Silvio 2010, 2019; Manning 2009; Fisher 2019; Nozawa 2016; Manning and Gershon 2013). These remind us that although animation may conjure images of cartoon characters and special digital effects, it is a much broader category of human creation and action. Various practices recognizable as animation share a common feature: the existence and exploitation of a gap between what is projected and the animator working “behind the scenes.”

This gap produces the fundamental ambiguity of animation, the tension between its mechanistic and its spiritual connotations (Hales 2019). Discussions of animation from Science and Technology Studies perspectives have noted the close relationship between the concept of animation—endowing something lifeless with life, voiceless with voice, motionless with motion—and the concept of automation: producing automata that seem to perform humanly, machines that take over human functions, or images that seem to move in human ways (Stacey and Suchman 2016). In playback, this ambiguity registers as the tension between the singer’s role as machinelike provider of voice, on the one hand, and as life-giving force, on the other. As we will see, a key difference between playback singers of the pre- and post-1990s eras—and one with distinct ideological and gendered implications—is in the degree to which they cultivate bodily stillness or, conversely, allow their own body to be animated by their voice. The restriction of bodily movement and expression can, as Goffman noted, have the desired effect of “reducing responsibility,” of presenting the animator as a “mere emitter” of speech or sound (1974, 518–19). But, in some semiotic economies of voice and appearance, the seeming restriction of someone’s role can also have the effect of amplifying its power. As I show, the conception of the female playback singer as “just the voice,” a nonauthorial, nonemotive agent whose labor was conceived of as confined to her voice, was a restriction of her role that had the effect of endowing it with distinct status and affective power.

Ambiguity engenders indeterminacy. By opening a gap between the animating agent and that which is animated, claiming an animating role can constitute a kind of refusal, a cover that blocks visibility or access to the “self” of the animator, providing a space for maneuvering within dominant power structures. As Goffman pointed out in his earlier work, any number of “acts” can happen under cover of, or in the name of, stereotyped, institutionalized modes of self-presentation he termed “fronts” (Goffman 1956, 26–27). Different forms of animation, as Daniel Fisher has recently argued, afford the capacity for indirection, circumspection, and self-effacement through the curation of others’ voices: in short, “the opportunity to be something other than one’s own self” (Fisher 2019, 44). The act of animation can be “radically non-representational,” “plac[ing] the self under erasure, indicating the reflexive problematization of the voice and person, rather than its prosthesis”

(Fisher 2019, 37). By rendering ambiguous the relationship between the animator's "self" and the figure that is being animated, acts of animation can constitute a form of resistance to forms of power structured around identity, authorship, and ownership (Silvio 2019; Manning 2009).

FROM VOICE TO VOICING

By suggesting that the roles of animator, author, and principal could be—and often are—played by different individuals, Goffman made room for the realization that many speech acts are "acts of alterity" rather than of identity (Hastings and Manning 2004). Animation releases us from the tyranny of "identity" and "expression" as motivations for vocal acts. Once voice is freed from having to express the truth of the inner self, confirm the reality of a physical body, or be the acousmatic "source" of a visible image, myriad strategies and possibilities of *voicing* emerge (Bakhtin 1981; Hill 1995). Linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill has shown how the presence of multiple and competing voices within any single speaker's utterance can be studied through attending to the ways that material, sonic aspects or affordances of speaking are used to evoke, or "voice," recognizable social types or figures. Against a simple link between a voice and a persona or identity, Hill suggests that the "self" is not locatable in any one particular voice but emerges in the juxtaposition of and interplay between the voices that are evoked (Hill 1995).

The voice has remained, for the most part, undertheorized and unexamined in studies of animating practices, assumed by subjects and analysts alike as functioning simply to add detail; ground the virtual, visual animated figure in the "actual," "real" world; or aid in constructing a star persona (Boellstorff 2008, 112–16; Manning 2009; Silvio 2019, 164–65; Montgomery 2016). Within anthropology, meanwhile, the question of *whether* a subject or entity (subaltern, avatar, etc.) can speak has dominated, limiting the inquiry to a narrow conception of agency and bracketing out the significance of the sounding voice. Both of these approaches have prevented a more nuanced inquiry into *how* various forms of vocalization and sounding produce and project different forms of presence, subjectivity, and agency.¹⁴

The concept of voicing opens the careful study of the singing voice, a project more often undertaken within ethnomusicology and voice studies, to modes of analysis that have been developed by semiotically informed linguistic anthropology. Employing a particular timbre or phonational setting while singing or using a "plain" rather than adorned style of singing, for example, are material and sonic techniques of vocal production that afford opportunities for voicing socially recognized characters and moral positions (Agha 2005; Keane 2011; Harkness 2013). As Nicholas Harkness suggests, producing the sonic "voice voice" does not only mean cultivating a skill or mastering an art; it also entails taking on a role in a configuration of socially defined and culturally and historically specific role possibilities (2013, 18–20).

Part of the story that this book tells is about the reorganization of singing voices and vocal aesthetics in Tamil cinema, between the period I identify as the heyday of playback, the 1960s, and the post-liberalization present. This is a matter not only of the emergence of new kinds of vocal sound but also of a change in the meanings—in linguistic anthropological terms, the social-indexical associations—attached to those sounds. I explore how vocal sound becomes subject to indexical regimentation, the limiting or narrowing of possible associations that are allowed to go with any particular voice (Bucholtz 2011). Anthropological explorations of the social life of qualia have shown how sensuous qualities (visual, sonic, tactile, etc.) come to be collectively articulated and given value in particular contexts (Munn 1986; Gal 2013; Chumley 2013; Harkness 2015). Building on this work, I explore how sensuous qualia embodied in aspects of the voice, such as loudness, timbre, or elements of diction, or in other modalities of performance, such as how a singer dresses or moves while singing, come to be collectively recognized and described as more generalized qualities.

Linguistic anthropologists have described this process as enregisterment: a process in which combinations of signs (linguistic and nonlinguistic) come to function as a register, readily recognized as indexical of particular characterological attributes or categories of space, time, and persona (Gal 2013, 33–34).¹⁵ Once thus enregistered, qualities become available for uptake on a wider scale to voice or otherwise perform recognized social types and positions (Agha 2005). For example, as I show in chapter 2, singing in a plain, unadorned style became a way of voicing a Dravidian “everyman” identity, or, as I show in chapter 5, huskiness became a way of voicing a post-liberalization subject, shifting away from earlier associations with sexuality and immorality. The concepts of register and enregisterment provide a way of scaling up from individuals and their stylistic choices to larger historical shifts in performance practice and aesthetic sensibilities.

More generally, the structure of voicing that playback creates is that of “delegated voice,” a configuration that involves professionals who are hired to speak for (or, in this case, sing for) others (Keane 1991; Irvine 1990, 1996). It is not just the fact that voice is delegated but the specific form that delegation takes that is significant. For whom is voice delegated, and to whom? How are voicing relationships set up between sources and animators? For instance, in the Korean Christian context, as Harkness shows, Korean *songak* singers create a voicing relationship with an authoritative source outside themselves, thereby figuring themselves as a vessel or conduit whose emotional self can be separated from the emotional and affective impact of their voices (Harkness 2013, 204). In a somewhat similar way, as I show in chapter 3, female playback singers of the 1960s were figured as “just the voice,” the emotional and affective power of their voices stemming precisely from the fact that they themselves were not the “source.” But playback also affords singers the opportunity to create voicing relationships with other “sources,” not only off-screen authorial ones like lyricists or music directors but also onscreen ones, like the characters or actors for whom they sing. For example, as I show in chapter 2,

the affective power of T. M. Soundararajan's voice was generated through the construction of an intimate voicing relationship with the prominent male hero-stars for whom he sang.

In enabling these different kinds of voicing relationships, playback sets up a structure akin to what Bakhtin called "double-voiced discourse," which, as he wrote, "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other. . . . It is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other" (1981, 324). The concept of double-voiced discourse is useful in its emphasis on the labor of keeping on- and offscreen personae separate, as well as on the bleeding through from one to the other (the "conversation") that inevitably occurs. In the case of playback, we may speak of at least triple-voiced discourse, for at minimum, a playback singer voices the "I" of the character in the song, the "I" of the actor/actress, and the "I" of the singer's own off- or behind-the-screen self. The leakage across these participant roles (also see Irvine 1996, 135 and 148–50) can either be mitigated and controlled or intentionally enhanced and cultivated for performative effect.

FROM REPRESENTATION TO PERFORMATIVITY

Onscreen images, sounds, and stories in Tamil cinema are never fully contained within the films' diegetic worlds, nor are they ever fully divorced from the offscreen personae of actors and singers. The main mode of engagement with cinema in Tamil Nadu is not with whole films viewed in the theater but with cinematic sounds and images and star personae detached from the filmic narrative and made available for reanimation and uptake in different contexts (Nakassis 2016; Srinivas 2016). The concept of the *acousmètre*, with its fixation on the visible and the invisible and the meaning of what is on the screen, fails to address the productive and necessary relationship between on- and offscreen personae and performances in Tamil cinema.

This entanglement of the onscreen and the offscreen in Tamil cinema suggests an underlying semiotic ideology of the cinematic image that is distinct from the idea of cinema as primarily representational. Following Webb Kean's formulation, I take semiotic ideology to refer to "people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce" (2018, 65). In the US context, everyday and scholarly engagements with film are motivated largely by an underlying semiotic ideology that takes cinema to be primarily a mode of representation, a kind of "text" that depicts a fictive diegetic world. Such a semiotic ideology erects a boundary, much like the "fourth wall," between the world created by the text, and

depicted in the film, and the world outside. This division permits only certain kinds of meaning, limited to the plot, narrative, characters, and aesthetic qualities of onscreen images, to be made of the cinematic image. By contrast, in the Tamil context, it is acknowledged that the boundary between film and the world outside is porous. Cinematic images are not limited to their representational capacities; they are, rather, taken to be acts that an actor or singer has chosen to perform publicly, that reflect back on them and their reputation. In emphasizing the “act”ness of an image over its status as a representation, this semiotic ideology takes the cinematic image not simply to be a *sign* of the presence and persona of its animator, the actor and/or singer, but to be performative in its capacity to produce this presence (Nakassis and Weidman 2018; Nakassis n.d.).

In Tamil cinema, body and voice, appearance and audition, sight and sound, acting and singing are organized around a dialectic of representation and performativity. The representational mode shields the actor or singer’s offscreen identity and persona by having them stand under the authorizing role of someone or something else, such as the director, the narrative, or the film’s diegetic characters. By contrast, the performative mode presences the actor’s or singer’s offscreen persona and identity, making the song and the performance of it palpably return to him or her instead of, or in addition to, the onscreen character, diegetic situation, or their author (Nakassis and Weidman 2018, 126). Acknowledging performativity as a dynamic that coexists with, competes with, and often overshadows representation means that not just those who appear onscreen but also those who work “behind the scenes”—including playback singers but also dubbing artists, lyricists, sound engineers, choreographers, etc.—are potentially subject to presencing. The specialization and fragmentation of the production process creates multiple potential presences and absences (Nakassis and Weidman 2018).

Two consequences of this are relevant for my concerns in this book. First, rather than a focus on visibility or invisibility as such, a consideration of how presence is produced through different modalities counters the conceit of “behind-the-scenes” workers who work to create and maintain an illusion on the screen, itself a relic of the visualist bias of cinema studies and the semiotic ideology of cinema as representation. Instead, considering the screen in a more literal sense—as that which enables the visibility of some while shielding the presence of others from visibility (see also Hoek 2013)—invites an awareness of the ways presence can be achieved or blocked independently from visibility. Following from this, once the focus shifts from representation to performativity, it is possible to move beyond theorizing playback as an authorial or spectatorial attempt to match an ideal voice with an ideal body to make a perfect onscreen combination. Rather, playback becomes a means of exploiting the division of semiotic labor between appearing and sounding, making the aural and the visual work with and against each other to produce and manage the effects and entailments of presence.

ON METHOD

The chapters that follow work across different scales, attending to the sound and embodied production of voice; analyzing the cinematic pairing of voices with onscreen images; ethnographically analyzing particular events of performance and studio recording; following individual life trajectories, careers, and strategies of self-presentation; documenting broader industrial and aesthetic shifts over the seventy-odd years between the start of playback and the present moment; and contextualizing these shifts in relation to both South Indian/Tamil regional history and Indian national history. I worked with historical sources such as articles and readers' letters from film magazines, radio programs, and publicity materials and biographies of singers. My ethnographic work consisted of observing live performances and studio settings where recording and postproduction work was happening. I also conducted more than forty interviews with playback singers from different generations and others, including music directors, sound engineers, fans, light music troupe heads, and radio announcers.

As I quickly discovered, whom I could talk to, as well as when and where, were matters regulated by social and professional hierarchies. I had planned to interview singers and then ask them if I could accompany them to observe their recording sessions, but I soon realized that singers were not necessarily socially authorized to grant me access to the studio. Rather, in most cases, the person in charge in the studio was the music director or sound engineer; singers, even those of some stature, did not generally control this space socially or professionally. As I learned, going through the appropriate channels of contact required extensive legwork, phone work, and time to navigate. While I was sometimes successful in pursuing these, often I was not. For instance, music directors in Kollywood are notoriously hard to get to; aside from any secrecy that may be due to competition, their inaccessibility is a crucial means of performing and maintaining their image as geniuses existing in their own world (see also Pandian 2015).

My research experience was also shaped by the dynamics of cultural intimacy and its attendant hierarchies of value. The nostalgic elevation of music from earlier decades as "evergreen" songs from a "golden" period was paired with the notion that nothing since was worthy of being listened to, much less dignified by scholarly study. The programming of an organization called "Vintage Heritage," dedicated to the history of Tamil film music, for instance, includes only songs from the 1940s and 1950s. A record collector informed me flatly that "after the 1960s, it's all trash." Nor was this attitude limited to older folk; a thirtysomething friend and interlocutor expressed to me his frank dismay that I had chosen to write an article about an item number and thus dignify it with scholarly attention (Weidman 2012).

In numerous and various forms, I encountered the notion that only certain things were suitable for scholarly scrutiny. For instance, at one show celebrating the prolific and venerated playback singer S. P. Balasubrahmanyam (SPB), I was seated next to a couple of unquestionably respectable ladies in their fifties. They

were puzzled by my notebook and video camera, and particularly by how I seemed to pay attention to all the wrong things: the lowly troupe singers instead of the great SPB and, even more strange, the very fact that I was at a light music show instead of a classical music concert. One of the ladies leaned over to me. "You should go for a Karnatic concert instead of this," she said, gesturing dismissively toward the stage as a female troupe singer began a performance of a racy item song. I leaned forward to video-record, and she and her companion rose and pushed past me to leave, returning only later when SPB again took the stage.

My research moved forward not because I surmounted these difficulties but because I realized, somewhat like Hortense Powdermaker in her anthropological study of Hollywood in the late 1940s, that what I perceived as barriers to my acquisition of ethnographic knowledge were in reality important social facts, valuable clues about the social organization of the world I was trying to study (Powdermaker 1950). I did find singers who were curious about my interest in Tamil film songs and were willing to speak with me, and I sought out music directors who were retired or just starting out and, therefore, in a sense, had less at stake. I became more aware of, if not able to completely close, the gap between my interests and priorities as an ethnographer and the economies of value and prestige within which my interlocutors operated, where attracting fandom, maintaining professional face and reputation, and gaining positive publicity were of paramount importance.

Interviewing publicly known figures and celebrities heightens the fact that the ethnographic interview is never a transparent communicative situation or a simple means of acquiring information; there is always a tension between the priorities of the ethnographer and those of the interviewee (Briggs 1986). I realized that while most singers had a standard publicity narrative about their lives and careers, many, particularly from older generations, had never been asked to verbally articulate aspects of their musical strategies or training. I changed the way I asked questions as I became more attuned to the fact that singers most frequently interacted with journalists and fans, not anthropologists. And I became highly aware of my own ethical responsibility in the moments when interviewees seemed to stray from the standard narrative they often gave about their careers into realms that were, for them, less trodden, less designed for public consumption. The individual identities of many of my interlocutors, as well-known artists and celebrities, matter greatly to the story I am telling here; however, I have sometimes chosen to make an interviewee's identity vague when a comment could be construed as contrary to the image they wish to project or damaging to their own or others' reputations.

THE LIFE OF PLAYBACK

I began thinking about this project while studying Tamil in Madurai in the mid-1990s, where cinema and the aural and visual culture of local and state politics

were ubiquitous aspects of everyday life. I honed my language abilities on a steady diet of Tamil films from the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Meanwhile, through contacts with film musicians in Chennai made in the course of doing research on Karnatic (South Indian classical) music (Weidman 2006), I became aware of the many people involved in the creation of film songs, including playback singers. I also became aware of the complex relationship—characterized by highly ideologized contrasts between “high” and “low” culture but also mutual exchange—between Karnatic music and film music.

By 2009, when I began the research for this book in earnest, a number of changes linked to India’s economic liberalization had taken place, shaping the theoretical concerns and scope of this project. In 1998, after years of governmental neglect and disapproval, the government of India granted industry status to commercial filmmaking, citing it as an engine of economic growth through its generation of revenue and its global circulation. Formerly condemned as a disorganized and shady underworld that churned out trashy films, the film industry came to be resignified as a symbol of “native ingenuity and success” (Ganti 2012, 75). This shift has introduced ideas about artistic agency and creativity, according new value to directing, acting, and other film-related roles, such as music director, playback singer, and sound engineer, while at the same time often devaluing older aesthetics, practices, and personnel.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the decentralizing dynamics of economic liberalization were manifest in two major changes that affected the field of playback singing directly. One was the shift from the dominance of a few singers at any one particular time to competition among many, a situation that has fundamentally altered the goals and forms of recognition to which singers can aspire. The other was the change, enabled by multitrack digital recording, from recording film songs almost entirely at two big studios in Chennai to recording in many newly opened small studios around the city. Along with vastly expanded capacities for postproduction manipulation of sound that have come with multitrack digital recording, this has significantly altered the processes and social relations of film song production, as I show in chapter 6.

By 2010, the Tamil film industry had also fully undergone the transformation of musical and vocal aesthetics that music director A. R. Rahman was ushering in when he emerged on the scene in the early 1990s. I remember vividly the outcry that followed the release of the blockbuster hit *Kaadalan* in 1994, one of Rahman’s early Tamil films as music director. Critics and those loyal to the aesthetics of earlier decades, defined by music directors M. S. Viswanathan and Illayaraja, complained vociferously about the use of “nonsense” words in the songs and their “lack of melody.” But by 2010, Rahman’s signature sound and style had become the norm, and Rahman himself had won an Oscar and risen to international fame, changing the horizon of aspiration for Tamil film music from the local and national to the global.

Finally, one of the most consequential developments on India's media landscape since the early years of the new millennium has been the emergence and proliferation of music reality shows. The new availability of satellite television and the multiplication of channels in the 1990s following India's economic liberalization opened up thousands of hours of potential programming time, much of which came to be filled with cinema-related content. The iconic music contest show *Antakshari*, which tested contestants' encyclopedic knowledge of film songs and ability to recall them on the spot, began to air on Zee TV in 1993. This was followed by the introduction of *SaReGaMa*, which introduced the idea of judging singers' performances, in 1995. In 2003, *Indian Idol*, modeled on *American Idol*, aired its first season and was quickly joined by numerous other similarly premised shows in regional languages. Reality shows have become a major site of publicity for both established and aspiring singers, introducing new values that, as I show in the last chapter of this book, have challenged the ideals and aesthetics of playback in key ways.

The years in which I conducted the research for this book—2009 to 2018—were a time of striking contrasts and developments whose full consequences remain to be seen. While many playback singers who had come of age in the 1950s and 1960s were still alive and active to varying extents, there was also a palpable sense that an older era had passed. Young singers and so-called new-age music directors spoke readily of the differences between their aesthetic priorities and those of the earlier era. The established genre of the “mass hero” film, which had been a mainstay of Tamil cinema for decades, was facing competition, first from the “realist” or “new face” films of the early years of the new millennium but increasingly, as well, from the “alternative” films of the 2010s that feature “character” heroes or that seek to conform more to a Hollywood aesthetic of coherent narrative development and sleek cinematography, often decreasing or even doing away with song sequences altogether and introducing new forms of cinematic masculinity (Kailasam 2017; Rajendran 2018a). At the same time, gender disparities and sexual harassment in the industry had become overtly discussed topics; 2017 was declared the “year of the woman” with the release of a crop of new women-centered films in Tamil (Muralidharan 2017; Krishnakumar 2017), while the #MeToo movement has reverberated through the Tamil and other film industries (Rajendran 2018b).¹⁷ In the larger cinematic-political context, the passing away of two longtime political rivals with ties to Tamil cinema, Chief Ministers J. Jayalithaa (in 2016) and Mu. Karunanidhi (in 2018), has left a political vacuum in Tamil Nadu and intensified ongoing speculation about the shifting relationship between cinema and politics (Cody 2017; Krishnan 2014).

While this book is an anthropological inquiry into the cultural institution that playback became in South India, it is written from the vantage point of the shifts I have described above, a time when many of the key values and aesthetics of playback have been challenged, if not completely replaced, by different values,

aesthetics, and practices. The chapters that follow are organized in rough chronological order into three parts. Part I, “Prehistories,” examines the gendered way playback’s possibilities were imagined as it first began to be used in the 1940s in the Tamil-language film industry, and the regimentation of gendered vocal sound that resulted when playback became standard practice in the 1950s. Chapter 1 shows how playback started as a form of experimentation with the female voice and body in the early 1940s even while the unity of voice and body for male singing actors was left unchallenged for nearly a decade. Although the playback system technically made possible many different kinds of voice-body pairings, it, in fact, led to a greater regimentation of gendered vocal sound, eliminating earlier forms of gender play with voices.

Part II, “Playback’s Dispensation,” examines the aesthetics and practices that became normalized as playback assumed its hegemonic form. Chapter 2 shows how, in the 1950s, the male voice came to be appropriately masculinized, leaving behind the varied and ornate vocal aesthetics of a generation of singing actors. The repeated use and resulting ubiquity of a single male voice was central to constructing both the specific sound of a representative “Dravidian” singing voice in the 1960s and a distinctive form of male stardom that fused cinematic and political power. At the same time, a typology of female voices, which would hold for several decades, was solidified: a division between those considered “sweet” and licit and those deemed immoral and “loose.” In chapter 3, I explore the technological, discursive, and performative labors undertaken to construct and maintain the respectability of female playback singers. Singing was defined in a very specific way, not to be confused with acting or other modes of vocal expression, such as speaking or expressing emotions, which might imply the involvement of the singer’s body, will, or intention. But within this, a tension developed between the ideal of staying within the singing frame, being “just the voice,” and the forms of excess that could intrude if a singer seemed to allow her body or intention into the performance. As I describe in chapter 4, a whole repertoire of vocal sounds and techniques came to stand as signs of feminine uncontainment and immodesty, particularly the stylized laughs, cries, sighs, and other sounds known as “effects”: moments of performative excess that spilled out of the narrative/representational frame and exploited the fine and permeable line between singing and acting.

Part III, “Afterlives,” examines how the vocal sound, public persona, and structural position of playback singers have changed since the liberalizing reforms of the 1990s. Chapter 5 traces the process by which the typology of female voices described in preceding chapters was dismantled, moving from relatively subtle changes in the 1970s to the more dramatic shifts that occurred later in the 1990s and initial decade of the 2000s. I show how the admission of “new voices” in this later period has been governed by a complex politics of caste, class, and gendered ethnolinguistic identity. In chapter 6, I engage ethnographically with the studio and stage, describing their transformation in the post-liberalization period

through the emergence of high-budget, glitzy, English-medium stage shows that privilege an aesthetic of “liveness” over the earlier ideal of reproducing onstage what had been recorded in the studio, and through the shift from a relatively centralized recording process to a decentralized and spatially and temporally fragmented production process. Finally, in chapter 7, I discuss the implications of two postmillennial developments: the rising popularity of television reality shows based on contestants’ performances of film songs and the increasing number of male actors singing their own songs onscreen. Both of these in their own ways disrupt the regimes of voice and listening associated with playback, inserting the voice into new representational economies that reflect the changed media ecology of the postmillennial period.

Defining playback as a practice of animation draws attention to the ways that, like all practices of animation, it is a world-making project, one that brings to life not just the onscreen image but a whole set of values, aesthetics, and social and affective relations. At the level of industrial practice, by putting voice first in the temporal order of production, playback endows the voice with the performative power to animate and shape the visual image. At the institutional, sociological level, playback establishes a division of labor, generating a system of values and a set of social relations reflected in particular aesthetics and performance practices but extending into wider society; as Malinowski said of the *kula*, it is a “big and complex institution that . . . embraces a vast complex of activities, interconnected, and playing into one another” (1922, 83). And at the level of the semiotic, playback’s complex play with presence, with audibility and visibility, with the onscreen and the offscreen, generates powerful affective responses and attachments to voices. Together, these chapters aim to understand how postcolonial gendered subjectivity, ethnolinguistic nationalism, and neoliberal transformation in South India have been made real—that is, “brought to life”—by playback and its shifting distributions of the sensible.

