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THERE AND BACK AGAIN...

MALASREE NEEPA ACHARYA

Institute for European Studies, Brussels

It has been more than seven years since I first confronted *Kalighat Fetish* (2000) and I am writing this piece after just visiting Kalighat in Kolkata myself for the New Year in 2012. The moving memory of my first encounter with this film remains as fresh as the thousands of iterations of fragmentary thoughts I have had about the film throughout the past several years: Ashish assertively setting up a projection on the wall of his Escondido Road apartment on the Stanford campus and yet nervously searching my eyes for a confirmation. Had I been one of the converted that was immediately drawn to, intrigued by and more than anything, comfortable with an aesthetic ideology put forward that is part and parcel to Ashish's filmic oeuvre, or was I just judgmentally confused and put off from the films? I was immediately taken by *Kalighat Fetish*. There was an indescribable sense of familiarity I felt within the fluidity of the unfamiliarly familiar images. To me, the film was a perfect gesture. I immediately felt a certain consciousness that the contemporary composer Arnold Schoenberg once described as 'a joy in a breath.'

In the 1930's when composers were grappling to interpret atonality by abandoning any reference to tonality in Western concerted music, Schoenberg's illustrious student Anton Webern, composed music that expresses emotion within concise periods of time. In his atonal works from his celebrated aphoristic period,¹ Arnold Schoenberg describes his student's pieces, *Six Bagatelles for String Quartet*, as "a novel in a single gesture, a joy in a breath."² The brevity of each movement with clustered notes suspended between spaces of silence serve as a schematic system on which the entire piece is based. Within the work, systematic patterns of growth and decay fluctuate within individual parameters of the music. The divisions of pitch clusters—little dreamlike *nuages* scattered here and there—create a semitone chain; a semiotic link that pervades the construction and development of pitch. Total serial patterns within dynamics and shortened rhythms illuminate the idea of silence as an interdependent element that stakes as important of a place in the piece as any other parameter of sound. Webern's use of specific string techniques and articulation markings also aid in obfuscating the dominance of pitch and thereby placing all elements of sound and silence as interdependent elements in the construction of the movement as a compressed moment in time.

The ease with which the complexity of these controlled parameters exhales the joy in a

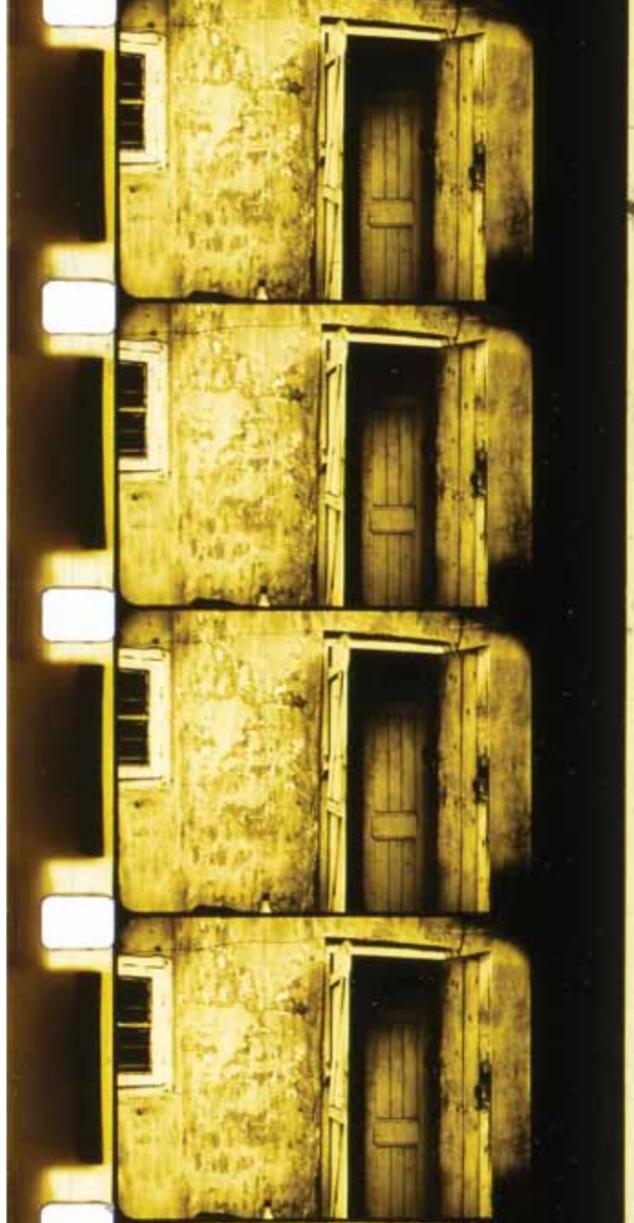
breath in Webern is all but controlled in *Kalighat Fetish*, and yet, the film itself is a fleeting second in an exhaustive set of vignettes, color schemes, dreamscapes—with sound, light, and image all controlled among a variety of parameters. *Kalighat Fetish* is that momentary experience—that sticky sprinkle of salt water that catches your face in the wind when walking along the beach. It is as fleeting as the little whisps that emerge in the futile attempt to tame the kinks of a Bengali woman's hair in its wild state akin to Ma Kali's tresses. That joy in a breath of *Kalighat Fetish* moves me so deeply that I only realize now that my intuitive comfort and curiosity with the film function as a direct result of the ease with which I breathe, ingest, digest, and expel music, sound, light and all the elements. It is in itself, the essence of the way in which I eat, pray, love and be.

My earlier writings on *Kalighat Fetish* in 2007³ considered the role and construction of a productive banality within the film that forms the fabric of the transgression expressed within his oeuvre. Ashish's style of filmmaking constitutes an exploration of the postcolonial self through representations of the everyday in India. *Kalighat Fetish* discovers a representation of the banal within ritual acts of transgression, morbidity and sacrifice. Three specific vignettes weave together the framework of the film; the age-old tradition of a *bahurupée* cross-dressing as the mother goddess herself, the *bagdi* chopping up a sacrificed goat for consumption outside the Kalighat temple gates, and a helicopter that ascends over a crowd of people converged by a body of water. Representations of these spiritually 'abject'⁴ vignettes function in *Kalighat Fetish* as essentially banal acts. The particular images that emerge from these scenes, analyzed in detail, suggest to me that the film superimposes a postcolonial display of visual anthropology to outsiders of Kolkata upon a constant struggle for the spectator's mind to create narratives from the visual interplay of the experimentation as an articulation of the film's own gaze as a productive space for understanding the potential of banality. Within the film, the function of the banal as a tool of resistance, I believe, expresses a postcolonial moment of subversion. The role of banality in this subversion illustrates banality's productive potential in articulating the everyday within a specific postcolonial, subaltern subjectivity.

Representation usurps reality within *Kalighat Fetish*. Reading the film from the post-structural viewpoints of Lefebvre and de Certeau reflect how the everyday is rendered invisible from any

attempt to represent itself.⁵ Acts of transformation from goat to flesh and blood, and from the *bahurupée* from man to goddess presents the fact that transgression does not emerge out of any exceptional sacrificial moment but out of the habituation of ritual—the transformation of a ritual act as a banal act. These rituals, in their movements, are not drawn out but just like the collective crowd of individuals that gaze into the camera, articulate particular 'virtual' moments—a Deleuzian concept for grasping how the experimental film as an open work of art allows for everydayness to persist within a new modality of existence.⁶ These particular moments are temporary in their nature as fleeting representations of a banal moment that is escaping its own identity by breaking across manifold parameters of sound, light, and varying color schemes of sepia, color and black and white that allow for the opening of the spaces between, just as Webern's music functions on multiple levels in one single breath.

What stands as a fleeting momentary gesture that is *Kalighat Fetish* is instead rather a long, eternally enduring moment in *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010). The film is anything but gestural. Instead, something extremely long and enduring stands out within the filmic text. The film begins with the sea. A scene shot of Ashish's close friend, Girish Dahiwalé, immerses a Ganesh statue in the water during the Ganesh *Bisarjan* that marks the close of the *Ganeshotsav* celebration. The film is an entire contemplation on that single scene—a tribute to Girish who took his life a year after the scene was filmed—rendering a sort of eternal stasis characterizes the film as Ashish the filmmaker shows his face to unravel his own journey through mourning and mysticism for the duration of the film. The spacey soundscape emerges from the moment we leave Girish and encounter a dreamlike parallel universe of the realm of the spiritual that is etched in very real images that extend from the Ganesh statue's initial descent into the water by Girish's hands. Each theme that is part and parcel to Ashish's filmic oeuvre—the ritual shaving of one's head, gas masks, masked god and goddess figures performing everyday activities, the use of chant, dance and the arts—all tie seamlessly to the initial footage. In this way, Ashish's filmic approach lends toward a particular ideological development over time. His films invoke music, poetry, myth, and performance central to contemporary postcolonial India to examine the relationship between their status as filmic texts and the 'fictions-in-progress'⁷ of their subjects. In doing so, Avikunthak's focus



as a postcolonial filmmaker is an attempt to represent his uniquely Indian epistemological subjectivity by reflecting on the city of Kolkata as it exists today in banal everydayness while interposing a multiplicity of abject images also shot in their banal existence.

But yet, something seems to move forward within *Vakratunda Swaha*. The tantric energy that is reflected in *Kalighat Fetish* demonstrates the chaos of the space of Kali worship itself. Blood, sweat, excrement, flowers, animal sacrifice and the chaos of worshipping devotees are all a habitual part of the daily worship of Kali and there is a strong postcolonial productivity in this habituation. I find that *Vakratunda*,

however, starts where *Kalighat* leaves off, with the collective energy found in the ocean scenes that, this time around, are intensely personal. We transform the collective swarming of *Kalighat*'s ocean, to Ganesh emerging from a *pukur*, the small pond that serves the individual masked figure. Scenes grow to be intensely personal and spiritually powerful. The ritual banality within *Kalighat Fetish* forces a distance between the viewer and image—rendering the artificiality of the filmic image within a two-dimensional space as the bahurupee Kali extends his tongue towards the camera and paces on the rooftop *chaath*. *Vakratunda* invites the viewer into the scene.

Ashish has often discussed his own work as representing an Indian epistemology. Dipesh

Chakrabarty's postcolonial tome, *Provincializing Europe*, historically contextualizes a moment of rupture in the passage of Indian epistemologies of thought in subsequent Indian ontological praxes that were brought about by colonialism in India. The postcolonial condition relies on employing the philosophies of European thinkers rather than traditional Indian thought.⁸ Ashish has often answered this critique within his own filmic structures that are located in a postcolonial moment while engaging Indian epistemic tradition.⁹ Seven years ago, my understanding of *Kalighat Fetish* relied upon post-structural theory to read the film. My intentions were deliberate; I felt that continental philosophy most accurately served

as a path to reflect a particular moment within Ashish's politics as a postcolonial filmmaker. The political statement of the subaltern artist that emerges within *Kalighat Fetish* is its very absence—a trajectory where banality itself¹⁰ serves as its own subversion and depoliticization of Western epistemological thought as the domination of the oppressive other.

In more than a decade of filmmaking since *Kalighat Fetish*, I believe that *Vakratunda Swaha* moves beyond postcoloniality by successfully voiding itself of European philosophical modes of understanding. To unlock its meanings, one must look to the film's deep connection to *Tantra* as an Indian epistemology. Tantra's earthly basis in ritual to approach the 'supramundane'¹¹ grounds the basic backbone of *Vakratunda* from the initial moment of Girish's entry into the ritual of the Ganesh *Bisarjan*. Within tantric practice, the Lord Ganesha is the Lord of the *Mûlâdhâra chakra*, representing the

Earth (*Prithivi*) as a base¹². This chakra within yantras are the responsible basis for awakening the *kundalini*. Ganesh, in masks and figures is rooted within each scene as a contemplation between the 'microcosm' of the physical body, and the 'macrocosm' of the universe.¹³ It is thus through the ritualized body behaviors of head shaving, the meditation that occurs within the space of each individual scene and most importantly, the magical incantations that are part and parcel to the use of reverse camerawork that define the mystical reemergence of the Ganesh figure. From broken chaos to completeness, the analogy of Tantra is fully realized.

Ashish's filmic attempts at Indian epistemology take shape in *Vakratunda* where the aim, just as in Tantra, is to sublimate rather than obscure a reality that is lost in representation. The process of sublimation occurs in three stages, 'purification, elevation, and the "reaffirmation of identity" on the plane of pure conscious-

ness.'¹⁴ Such is the process itself of *Vakratunda Swaha*, that both opens and closes again with the image of Girish that shapes the film's own consciousness. In this way, my own manner of thinking about films as a spectator over the past seven years has been challenged and developed. Ashish has found new ways in which to fully inculcate an entirely unique ontology shaped by the evolution of an ever realized Indian epistemology that constantly surpasses a postcolonial condition. I believe strongly that art has the power to transgress and subvert any expected notions of how we think and imagine our own being. It is in this context, just as I have been one of the converted when listening to the experimental projects of Webern and the 1930s total serialists, to my own transformations living with, contemplating and constantly visiting and revisiting particular themes in his filmic oeuvre that, for almost a decade, I can see how Ashish's art has and will continue to transgress future ontological lifeworlds.

NOTES

¹ Webern, Anton, "New Grove Dictionary of Music, Stanley Sadie, ed., 2000.; ² Griffiths, Paul, *A Concise History of Modern Music: From Debussy to Boulez*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p. 52.; ³ Acharya, Malasree N. "Reconstituting Banality: Ritual Sacrifice and Collective Identity in Ashish Avikunthak's *Kalighat Fetish*," California: Stanford University, 2007. Unpublished manuscript.; ⁴ Here, I draw from Julia Kristeva's notion of the 'abject' where, ritually morbid acts of sacrifice will be repulsed by its confrontation. Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection' in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp1-31.; ⁵ De Certeau elucidates the logics of the practices of everyday life that are rendered invisible from themselves. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Trans. S. Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 93. 'Everydayness' within Lefebvre is constituted in itself. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Trans. S. Rabinovitch, New York, Harper and Row, 1971.; ⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. I contend here that the virtual event within the experimental narrative provides a space for the productive potential of banality.; ⁷ Abhishek Hazra, 'Erasure of the Subaltern as Auto-Critique:

The Experimental Short Films of Ashish Avikunthak,' Art Concerns.com: *The True Voice of Indian Art*, June 2007, http://www.artconcerns.com/html/essay_abhishekHazra.htm.; ⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000.; ⁹ Ashish Avikunthak, 'In Search of a Genealogy: Experimental, Avant-Garde or Prayoga?,' Paper Presented at the Yale University Film Conference: The Avant-garde and the India New Wave, February 2010.; ¹⁰ I want to suggest, here, that banality's contribution to postcolonial studies is the possibility to present the everyday devoid of any specific political reading which is a direct benefit of banality's productive potential.; ¹¹ Katherine Ann Harper and Robert L. Brown, *The Roots of Tantra*, New York: SUNY Press, 2002, p. 3-7.; ¹² The Mûlâdhâra chakra is represented in yantra by a yellow-colored square figure, in which the bija, 'root mantra,' consists of a Shiva Lingam in an inverted triangle. Here rests the Kundalini as a snake wound around the Shiva Lingam. Ganesh is depicted as having the power to awaken Shakti. Sri Swami Sivananda, *Kundalini Yoga*, New York: Divine Life Society, 1973.; ¹³ Katherine Ann Harper, op. cit., p. 23.; ¹⁴ Nikhilananda, quoted in David Gordon White, editor, *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton University Press, 2000. p. 9.



Image 1



Image 2

Vakratunda Swaha

RICHARD SUCHENSKI

Bard Collge

Although he is only now beginning to receive attention in North America, Ashish Avikunthak is one of the most original and exciting voices in contemporary avant-garde cinema. In an “artist’s” film and video culture defined less by adventures of perception, agonistic anxieties of influence, or the epistemological exploration of filmic processes than by the formulaic extension of pre-existing paradigms, Avikunthak’s work stands out for its vitality, its energy, and its thoughtful reworking of the methods of those filmmakers he has adopted as models. His genuinely cosmopolitan films and videos reflect simultaneously upon the changing face of India, acknowledging the excitement of urban transformations without endorsing globalization’s erosion of local cultures, and on the artistic legacies of both Indian (Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Ritwik Ghatak) and non-Indian (Sergei Parajanov, Andrei Tarkovsky, Michael Snow)

predecessors. Indeed, the most intriguing characteristic of his evolving body of work—its treatment of, and feeling for, temporal experience—could be seen as a synthesis of the modal rhythms of Kaul and Shahani with Tarkovsky’s idea of a work discovered, like a Michelangelo statue, through “Sculpting in Time.”¹

This is especially true of *Vakratunda Swaha*, the richest of Avikunthak’s films to date. A cinematic memorial for a close friend whose suicide is announced by an intertitle early on, the film is also a meditation on the ways in which the ghosts of memory haunt the frozen time of the film strip and the lived time of projection. The first shot, a nearly two-minute long mobile take that follows the movement of a man slowly plunging a statue of Ganesha into the water contains all the visual motifs that circulate throughout and creates a sensation of drift that is reinforced by the ambient music

used to accompany it. The iterative repetitions of the rest of the film—marked by emphatically gestural camera movements as well as shifts in speed, color, and texture—register as attempts to recapture the organic continuity of this opening, which suggests that the spaces of urban commerce and quotidian action are contiguous with the spaces of myth and ritual (*Image 1*).

While he has made a number of completely digital works, Avikunthak remains attached to what he has called the “aura that is preserved in a [celluloid] image.”² His decision to work until very recently in the more expensive and labor-intensive medium of film is rooted not in an allegiance to vaunted theoretical concepts like indexicality or contingency, but in a sacred conception of work connected to the notion that an image is precious precisely because it is fragile, its beauty deepened by the fact that it could vanish at any moment. The hybrid fusion of celluloid

and digital processes in *Vakratunda Swaha* gives formal meaning to these ideas, simultaneously demarcating and interrelating the time of filming (using 16mm film in 1997), the time of editing (more than a decade later using a digital intermediate), and the time of viewing. The resulting color palette appears paradoxically saturated and constrained, and the overall impression, especially when the edited material is printed back to 35mm for cinematic exhibition, is of a natural refulgence captured but not fully manifest, as if seen behind a layer of gauze or summoned by a recall whose vividness has been partially obscured by the passage of time. The circling rhythms of the montage offer a perfect correlate to this effect, emphasizing the unique capacity of recorded imagery to evoke a past that is always present and yet permanently irretrievable.

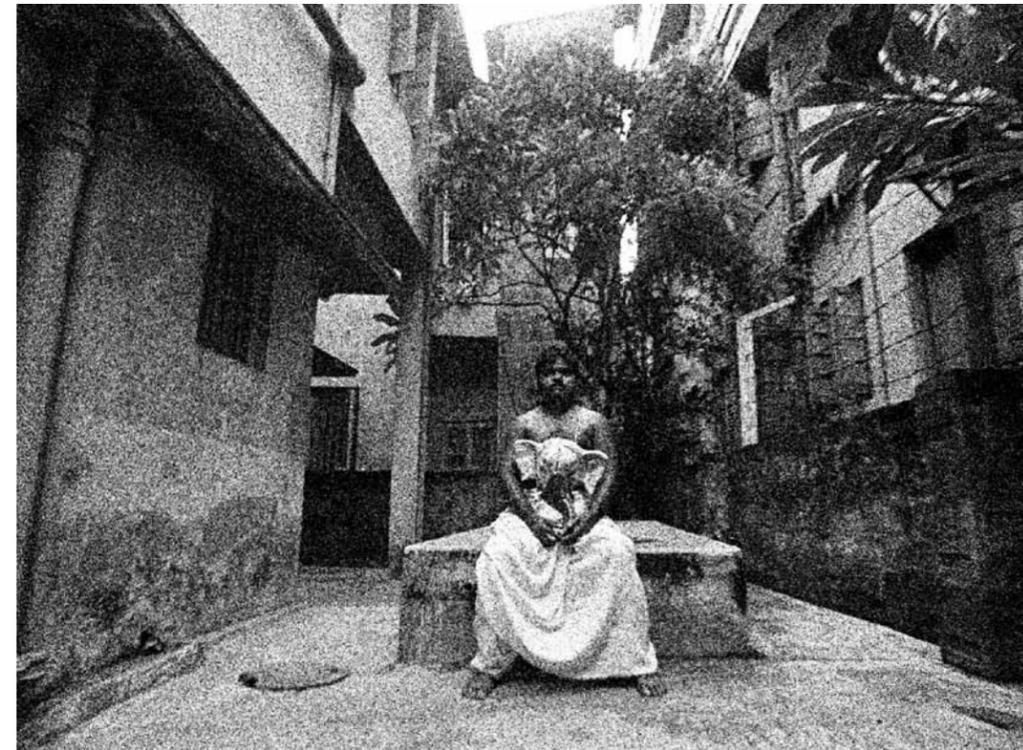
In 2008, Avikunthak (who lives a double life as a professor of anthropology) was invited to participate in a panel discussion at Yale University focusing on the relationship between documentary and avant-garde film modes in the 1930s. His decision to focus his comments on the dynamics of motion in Futurism was highly revealing insofar as it implicitly set his own practice, for all its engagement with non-Western forms and rituals, in dialogue with the spatiotemporal concerns of early twentieth century modernism. For Avikunthak, as for various strands of avant-gardism in the 1910s and 1920s, the atomized streams and sensory shocks of modernity constitute a traumatic rupture that opens up new perceptual frameworks while also enabling new forms of cataclysmic destruction. Both the liberating and disturbing aspects of a Futurist

approach to space and time are embedded within *Vakratunda Swaha* through the shot of the filmmaker, his face concealed by a gas mask that associates him with both Ganesha and the First World War, walking towards the camera with the flow of traffic moving, as if by magic, in the opposite direction (*Image 2*). Technically simple but formally eloquent, the shot looks back to the sorts of slow-motion and reversal effects employed by silent-era filmmakers like Jean Epstein and László Moholy-Nagy, while also highlighting the historical gap separating our moment from theirs. The profound resonance of this threnodic film is tied to these sorts of layered manipulations, to a sense of temporal plasticity that inevitably draws attention to the absence at its center.

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¹As Avikunthak put it in his interview with Amrit Gangar, “In a certain sense I do look at filmmaking as ‘sculpting in time’ as Tarkovsky puts it” [Amrit Gangar, “In Conversation with Ashish Avikunthak” in Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, eds., *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913-2006*, London: no.w.here, 2006, 73].; ²*Ibid.*, 74





Kalighat and Vakratunda Swaha

PARAG R. AMLADI

New York

Kalighat Fetish (1999) and *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010) exhibit a range of Ashish Avikunthak's work as an experimental filmmaker and they embody a number of his preoccupations: anthropology and cinema, the persistence of epic and mythic structures in the modern and in daily life, the intermingling of the sacred and the quotidian, and the echoes in narrative of the old and archaic aspects of our culture—but with a sensibility that is contemporary and modern in a way not often encountered in Indian cinema.

In *Kalighat Fetish* we see the fiesta of Kali, but, so to speak, dreamed—or created—by Kali herself. Her coming into being is a sort of performance: a man meticulously takes on her character, elaborately dressing himself up in all of the terrifying aspects of a Devi. Quite literally, he *incarnates* her. He enters into the

role with as much elaborate ceremony and immersion into detail as a Kathakali performer. In him, we see a process by which, gradually, the ordinary is transformed into the sacred.

The deadly violence of the dark figure of Kali, the consort of Shiva, finds its analogues in the ritual sacrifice of two goats, bathed and prepared for the occasion. And we are not spared the violence of the ritual either. The filmmaker brings alive and to the forefront of our consciousness the significance of the idea of sacrifice. Kali, however, is largely indifferent and detached from the mayhem around her.

This new embodied Kali is cinematically surrounded by decapitation and death and dismemberment—and it is an integral part of the sacredness of the time and space we are in: something on the lines of a tableau or a

dynamic icon. It is neither immoral nor obscene but presented as the cycle of life—the victim and scapegoat as the expiator of the sins of the collectivity. The goats are finally prepared for the market and eager customers await.

In many ways, other artists have used the image of mother goddesses in their *oeuvre*. Not least of them, Tyeb Mehta in whose spare and robust images of trussed bulls, falling figures and goddesses, such violence is aesthetically the very theme. In fact, Tyeb Mehta's short film *Koodal* (1969) may be usefully seen alongside this film as exploring the same terrain. In it, the filmmaker is also seen, a lonely walker in the city, mobbed by crowds on the busy crossroads of Bombay, but the scene then moves to a vacant abattoir and the awesomeness of destruction is even more graphic in the suggestion.





The ruling colors in the film are red and black and gold, the colors of Kali. The brilliant contrast of ebony and crimson recurs as a motif: blood red lips, tongue, flowers, fabrics against dark fleeced goats, dusky skin tones and brilliantly contrasting and ornament. However, unlike as in some of his other films, this Kali does not really “walk among us”. She is not seen by anyone of the worshippers and celebrants, and the intention is not to introduce the holy into the world of our senses even if as performance. It is in fact a sort of conjuring up of a world through this gesture. We have a sensation of being outside time, or in a microcosm of her making. For the duration, he has become her, but in doing so, he appears to enable and substantiate the frenzy and festiveness. The ritual he performs has almost the force of *creation*.

It is perhaps the idea of the gift and sacrifice that underlies the various aspects of this work, for what is a gift if not pure expenditure without the thought of profit? *Kalighat Fetish* depicts—and participates in—the momentary creation of a sacred interval, before the return to the economy of everyday life.

The next film is more complexly structured and bears the indelible stamp of personal experience. As with the first, *Vakratunda Swaha* also moves in complicated formal and circular structures, with many of the variations returning obsessively to a single document: an extended shot of a personal friend, whose life was tragically and early cut short. The brief titles provide the minimal context we need. The film is in a sense both performance and expiation, as the director himself undergoes the ritual tonsure on camera, after which we see a series of formal variations on the theme of mourning.

It is, in fact, a sort of meditation on the idea of loss, and on of the ways in which—in the disenchanting modern—we have to find new rituals to replace the methods to which we no longer have full access: to mourn, to grieve and to connect to the general economy of birth, of life and of extinction and, perhaps, return as well.

A series of masks are exchanged, interchanged, and paraded in the new urban spaces that have

no way of responding to these fundamental and liminal experiences. The images are sometimes almost numinous: to see a god walking among men takes on the character of a miracle.

In fact, throughout the film, the key cinematic trope is the—now rarely resorted to—technique of reverse action. In the work of modernist and revolutionary film makers like Dziga Vertov, reverse action was often used as a demystifying device to make plain the things not visible to the fallible perceptual capacities of the human eye. The film camera became in their hands a sort of extension of the eye, a way of expanding and deepening our perceptual and epistemological limits in terms of speeding up or slowing down time or even reversing its direction. Here, we certainly sense some of that, and additionally, there is the deep wish in the mourning process to simply “turn back the clock”.

But perhaps more interestingly, we also see a contemporary reinvention of the techniques of the trick film which found so much scope in the traditional genres of the mythological and the devotional films, which we have known well through our own film history in the subcontinent.

Stop motion and reverse motion in films from Dadasaheb Phalke to Babubhai Mistry regularly gripped audiences through the forms of *darshan* they were able to replicate, mobilizing the cinematic apparatus to vividly portray the miraculous, and to make it so convincing and immediate. The difficulty with the traditional mythological films was that in their industrial form of production—and despite all the frenzies of devotion they famously provoked—they were, for the most part, only this side of calendar art and *kitsch*. Here, however, the filmmaker abjures the merely illustrative and evocative, and finds ways to recreate a kind of aura of the image. The music especially helps in creating the right conditions for such a reception. There are a series of tableaux that present uncannily presentiments of the holy in this film.

Vakratunda Swaha provides a series of intimations of the figure of Ganesha in the modern world. But then, in the exchange and

interchange of masks, it goes on to make a gas mask a latter day homologue to the deity of good beginnings and auspicious undertakings.

The Ganesha Chaturthi Festival, especially in the topos of “Bombay” and the Bombay cinema, is always the locus classicus of excess. Few films that took the contemporary city as their setting do not end up at that carnivalesque scene. But what is invariably for filmmakers the mark of strangeness, of the exotic and of the *outside*, is for this film, just the starting point: an accidental beginning. But that beginning is also an end which has to be, through the element of performance in the film, atoned for, grieved over, and accepted. If there is going to be any kind of reconciliation with loss, it can only be through submission to a rite: a structured action that is capable of creating satisfying meaning.

But ritual had, perhaps, in archaic times, the precision, the clarity, even the *certainty* we now ascribe to science and technology—and that is probably the most significant general thought we may take away from this film. Is the grim image of the gas mask a suitable equivalent to the icon? And if so, what consolations does this new power over nature give us to replace the consolations we have lost?

The violence of our epic and mythic past is often literalized – and one may even say *dramatized*—in his work, but he does not also ignore the pure visual, musical and sensual delights that the history of organized religious practice also left behind.

In much of Ashish Avikunthak’s work we find little or none of the armature of narrative which is such a staple of the cinema. But they are not documentaries of the political or even anthropological variety. They do not report or record or depict events. But they do encapsulate a great deal of anthropological thinking in the way they mobilize a range of theatrical devices like masks and performance and ritual. They are formal essays and stagings of the meanings of such procedures which have, for the most part in our culture, taken on a purely mechanical, instrumental and economic dimension.



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NEW YORK • LONDON

35 Great Jones Street • New York, NY 10012 • 212.725.6092 • newyork@aicongallery.com

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