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THERE AND BACK AGAIN...

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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

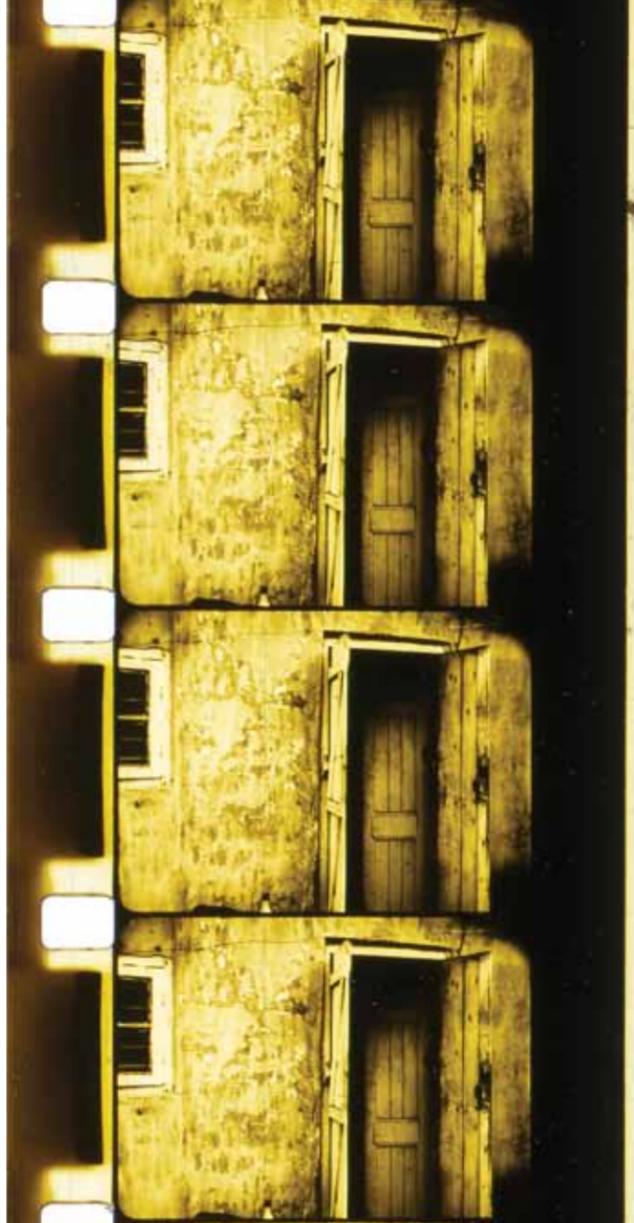
breath in Webern is all but controlled in *Kalighat Fetish*, and yet, the film itself is a fleeting second in an exhaustive set of vignettes, color schemes, dreamscapes—with sound, light, and image all controlled among a variety of parameters. *Kalighat Fetish* is that momentary experience—that sticky 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.