

IMAGE, MUSIC, TEXT

Kamayani Sharma watches Ashish Avikunthak's *Katho Upanishad* and assesses the filmmaker's strategies of adapting an ancient philosophical text into a three-channel installation.



Inside the dark expanse of a gallery, the wall-sized projections of Ashish Avikunthak's 82-minute, three-part *Katho Upanishad* (2011) confounded one's sense of scale for the first few minutes. The young dhoti-clad man with his back to us in the first channel and the one in jeans and T-shirt walking towards us in the third, played by the same actor, appeared larger than life as one entered Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai. Suggesting the discombobulation that accompanies stumbling into front row seats at a movie theatre, the physical proportions of the screen contradicted the aesthetic of the film aimed at resisting the commodified character of mainstream cinema.

Divided into three chapters, *Katho Upanishad* was adapted from the 6th century BCE text that narrated the story of the dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama the god of death about what it is to die. The first chapter has us follow Nachiketa (Suvrat Joshi) through the wilderness, in the second we encounter Yama (Ram Gopal Bajaj) and the third depicts Joshi walking towards us in the middle of a busy road even as the traffic seems to be moving in the opposite direction.

Ashish Avikunthak. *Katho Upanishad*. 82 minutes. 2011.

According to film historian Amrit Gangar, the three sections of the triptych correspond to the notions of the quest for truth, its obtainment and finally, its experience, in a work that is a meditation on the ultimate nature of the self and the cosmos and the relationship between knowing and being. The Ruchenfigur perspective echoed that of sequences from *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010), in which one followed the tragically young Girish Dahiwalé walking into a melee for the Ganpati visarjan. Also in common between these two films discussing mortality were the parts where a character (in *Vakratunda Swaha*, Avikunthak himself wearing a gas mask) ambled on the road on a loop in reverse. Death has played a prominent role in several works by the artist; here, *he* was officially credited. Avikunthak has addressed existential anxieties even in a film as hallucinatory as *Kalighat Fetish* (1999), which sought to understand death through ritual and sacrifice by way of a case study of festivities at the Kalighat temple, in the process often being mistaken for an ethnographic documentary. *Katho Upanishad* suffered from less ambivalence

in that regard, though its self-conscious objective to cause contemplation by the viewer, at times bordered on the pedantic.

The artist, fiercely partial to film and the labour that goes into employing it, chose to shoot parts of *Katho Upanishad* in the digital format, such as the 58-minute single take that constitutes the middle chapter, since he could not have shot without cuts using 16 mm and 35 mm. He has referred to film as an ephemeral medium because of its inherent vulnerabilities to age and wear and digital as an immortal one for precisely the opposite reason. In a film that deals with the meaning of life and death, this mix of technologies might be a conscious formal choice. The structure of the film was derived from that of classical musical compositions, the middle section being the longest and slowest (in terms of camera speed). This telescoping of the two art forms most concerned with measuring the passage of time – film and music – was foregrounded by the simultaneous screening of the three chapters, two of which were different episodes of the same narrative and thus fragments of a whole. An exponent of the Cinema of Prayog, Avikunthak has often spoken about his desire to use the medium of film to represent the phenomenology of time, for the viewer to become aware of his or her status as a temporal subject through the act of watching his work. With the spectre of Mani Kaul and Andrei Tarkovsky forever present, his films have always employed formal modes that try to approximate the lived sensation of being in time. Wide angles, single takes and over-the-shoulder point of view sequences have featured extensively in his filmography, right from his 1997 tetralogy *Et Cetera* with the peregrinations in *Renunciation* and *Soliloquy*, the protagonists with their backs to us, dwindling away into the distance. *Katho Upanishad*, shot in two days in a forest near Karjat, was rehearsed extensively over a period of months, urging one to wonder whether the act of creating the film mimed the act of viewing it, the collapsing of time on screen matching the compression of months into forty eight hours that the cast and crew would have had to manage.

Given that cinema technology has always been aimed at the manipulation of the visual to express the physical (spatio-temporal), with avant-garde cinema the world over having a long history of contending specifically with this experiment, one wasn't sure how *Katho Upanishad* radicalized the project. Can one really set out to devise a novel way of capturing time simply by shuffling the frames? The long take is increasingly, if slowly, becoming part of the mainstream – Alexander Sokurov's 2002 feature *Russian Ark* was shot in one fluid 96-minute sequence. Television, with its arcs stretching out over years, is pushing its limits as never before, employing multiple tenses and techniques to tell a variety of stories and

histories within one episode. One wonders how the evocation of 'real time', all too familiar to generations weaned on the aesthetic of news channels, could be accomplished more effectively. Is the argument that *Katho Upanishad's* slow, meditative pace and its placement in a white cube affords the viewer the luxury of lingering and forces her to reflect more deeply? One is urged to question whether this is not a particularly bleak estimation of spectators' ability to ponder over images without being instructed. The essay by Gangar which accompanies the work provided information about the different Indian philosophical schools' ideas of time – would it not be possible to watch *Katho Upanishad* without being thus 'initiated'? Avikunthak has stated that his films aren't to be 'decoded' but with this work, this did not seem to be the case.

Avikunthak has defined his adaptations such as *Dancing Othello* (2007) and *Antaral* (2005) as "ideational hitchhiking", using Shakespeare and Beckett as 'prompts' for his own artistic forays. But one was interested to know how this 6th century BCE text was being reconfigured. The choreography of elegant camera movements, the interruption of sylvan silence and Nachiketa's initial solitude with the suddenness of Yama's paternal speech, the gentle allusion to the change of season as the tropical vegetation gave way to delicate foliage and the curvaceous tracking shots of their highly stylized dialogue summoned the viewer's attention. There is an intriguing roundness to the camera movements that initially draws one in but then becomes repetitive and monotonous in a way that is convincing neither as a commentary on the tedium of waiting, nor a rhetorical decision, a metaphor for Nachiketa's psychological state. Avikunthak mentions wanting to 'marginalise' narrative but one is not sure if there was an inherent marginalization, rather than a distraction from paying attention to it. The film actually followed a linear logic of movement, with character development and a relationship between the leads. Any analysis of the film's concerns would be an analysis of the text. The classical metaphor of the long walk undertaken together by a *guru* and his *shishya*, common to all ancient philosophical traditions from Plato and Socrates to Nachiketa and Yama, takes on certain shades in post-televangelism era. The sermon-as-performance has become an established trope in the age we live in, and the long middle chapter brought it to mind, making the viewer ask how possible it would be to adapt a classical Indian text without it becoming a pat rendition. How can one intervene in a work so strictly bound by form and content?

Regarding Avikunthak's 'cinema of religiosity': one struggles to understand how his films in general and this one in particular are religious experiences in themselves (his definition of the phrase) and not *about* religious experience, handling as they purport to the grand theme of being via



Ashish Avikunthak. *Katho Upanishad*. Installation view. Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai. 2012.

images of rituals. Rather than falling under the rubric of an entire cinema of religiosity – by which one would mean the entire regime of structures constituting one’s practice are aimed at one’s devotees as in, say, Bollywood – the films seem more about understanding specific types of faith-based emotion. Is it the sentiment of religiosity (palpable in *Vakratunda Swaha*), then, which one should recommend as a definition? It is true that as viewers of this particular film, we might have been caught paying attention in a manner that was closer to religious interest, following the protagonists and eavesdropping on their profound exchange, perhaps seeing Yama as a preacher with answers we might seek ourselves. But any invocation of the phenomenology of religiosity was also compromised by a simultaneous recognition of how mannered the whole mise-en-scene was, including the self-aware delivery of dialogues which allowed one to distance oneself from the spectatorial process and assert one’s status as a viewer of video. Apart from an obvious influence like Bill Viola, Gangar mentioned the work of American artist Daniel Reeves as sharing Avikunthak’s thematic preoccupations, and indeed the latter’s pieces from the ’80s, *Sabda* (1984), *A Mosaic for the Kali Yuga* (1986) and *Ganpati: A Spirit in the Bush* (1986) seem

to articulate concerns about the contemporary routed through ancient Indian theology and philosophy.

Gangar also notes that it is “interesting to see the way Avikunthak shifts from the Tantric Ontological e.g. *Kalighat Fetish* (1999) or *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010) to Vedantic Epistemological in *Katho Upanishad* (2011)”. While there is certainly a hectic vividness in *Kalighat Fetish* and *Dancing Othello* and a surreal nostalgia in *Vakratunda Swaha*, the tenor and staidness of *Et Cetera* makes it a direct ancestor of *Katho Upanishad*, thus contradicting this reading. As with any medium, in cinema too, the physical equipment must articulate the metaphysical fixations of the user of that equipment, the artist. In a work that tries to show that being and knowing are the same, this difference between the ontological and the epistemological does not hold up. The viewing of the film is to accompany Nachiketa on his journey to know the truth and vicariously participate in his engagement with Death, an undertaking not everyone will find rewarding.