

Director's Cut

The NCPA launches a season of cutting-edge Indian cinema, "The Cinema of Prayoga*", conceived and presented by Amrit Gangar

formal engagement, India's cinematic cutting edge needs definition and introduction. This seven-set programme aims to take stock of an entire genre of film, acquainting audiences of today with a rich strand of cinematic history that may be unfamiliar to them.

Conceived and presented by the film theorist and curator Amrit Gangar, the seven-part programme has been imagined in such a way that will give opportunities for interaction and discussion in a *mimamsa* (investigative) mode. The series will include many films screened over seven months, featuring the work of seven filmmakers including Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Shaina and Ashok Sukumaran. Gangar's aim is to show that India's cutting edge cinema has a real sense of purpose in our culture, as the *Cinema of Prayoga*, which by its very nature is young in spirit.

Amrit Gangar explains his thinking behind the series: "During 2005 in Mumbai, Shai Heredia, the Director of Experimenta invited me to curate a programme, which I called *Cinema of Prayoga*. Finding the Eurocentric term 'Experimental Film' inadequate and exclusivist, I had been considering an alternative term for a long period and it eventually reached fruition in a programme of the same title at London's Tate Modern in 2006 that also saw release of the book, *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913-2006*, edited by Brad Butler and Karen Mirza. The forthcoming NCPA season is the first programme in India to follow in its pursuit."

**Prayoga is a Sanskrit word, which loosely translates as 'experiment' but can also mean 'representation' and 'practice'.*

Sarjak 1. Samvaad 1: Ashish Avikunthak

Thursday, 12 June 2008, 6:30pm

Filmmaking is not Ashish Avikunthak's full time profession. He has a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Stanford University in the USA and currently teaches at Yale University. This followed his undergraduate degrees in social work and archaeology in Mumbai and Pune Universities, respectively. He has worked as a folklorist among the Warli aborigines in Maharashtra. He is also a still photographer and his b&w photographs of Kolkata's iconic Howrah Bridge were exhibited at the NCPA in Mumbai in 1999. Self-taught and financed, he is a *prayoga* filmmaker for over a decade. His works

Saat sarjak. Saat samvaad. NCPA, Little Theatre, June to December 2008

There has always been an alternative scene running parallel to so-called mainstream Indian cinema. And in fact, on account of its genuine artistic nature, the parallel stream is not as marginalized as is generally believed. Mainly expressed through non-narrative techniques with an emphasis on



have been shown in film festivals around the world, including his first feature, *Shadows Formless*, which had its world premiere at the Locarno Film Festival in 2007. Here, **Ashish Avikunthak** discusses his work with **Amrit Gangar**.

Amrit Gangar: Your cinema makes me feel 'kaal', its temporality. Do you treat cinematography as a temporal art?

Ashish Avikunthak: In a certain sense I do look at filmmaking as 'sculpting in time' as the great Russian director Tarkovsky puts it. And my foray into filmmaking was directly an attempt at playing with time – all the four films in *Et cetera*, are directly an attempt at engaging with real time, the fact that they are single shot, single take, unedited films. For me, as a temporal experience they are most linear cinematic narrative, most pure. These films, rather than sculpting in time, were slicing time. However I feel video art has been more successful as an engagement with real time. I look at my films as an attempt at invoking 'kaal' as a metaphysical entity, rather than 'kaal' as a temporal category; *Et cetera* and *Kalighat Fetish* being articulation of such an invocation.

Whenever I see your film Kalighat Fetish, I remember Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the Kalighat temple. He was quite disturbed by the killing of animals there. He asked his host, "How is it that Bengal with all its knowledge, intelligence, sacrifice, and emotion tolerates this slaughter?" [Source: Gandhi's autobiography 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth']. In your film, you give so much time and space to the 'violent' images. Is it your 'experiment with truth'?

Kalighat Fetish is contemplation on two ideas – transgression and morbidity. They are connected

by the act of transformation, leading to death. Both the violence of sacrifice and the performance of transformation for me are transgressive acts performed as an engagement with morbidity. They are part of the same act of reverence and anguish. For me, *Kalighat Fetish* is an outcome of my own interaction with the memory of death and dying. The 'brutality' of the sacrifice is for me a meditation on the morbidity of death.

Personally, the film is a cinematographic rendition of memory. The film has been shot in two spaces that are an integral part of my 'memory-scape' – the house in which I was raised and the famous neighbourhood Kali temple in Kolkata, the Kalighat.

My home has been an ambivalent space for me – I don't really have very fond memories, nor do I have any terrible memories of the space. It has always been, and very simply, the house where I spent eighteen years of my life, from 1973–1991. My parents don't live in that house any more, but we still own it. Over time, it has virtually become an ossified in my memory. I have shot other films here too – *Dancing Othello* and *End Note*. Whenever I go to Kolkata, I spend a lot of time in this house.

Kalighat Fetish is a manifestation of these recollections – more an experiment with memories than with truth. And unlike Gandhi I do not claim to inhabit any moral universe. Gandhi's comment originated from the Vaishnava sectarian belief that he firmly held and was raised in. He was unable to appreciate the ritualistic necessity of the sacrifice within the Tantrik Shakta cult of Kalighat.

Any particular reason for selecting Samuel Beckett as the inspiration for End Note?

I discovered Beckett in my college days in Bombay, when I saw a Marathi rendition of *Waiting for Godot* there. Around that time I was also exploring Theatre of the Absurd, which I chanced upon while reading existential literature. I was very influenced by Beckett, not so much by his longer plays but by his short ones. His ability to produce philosophically profound dramatic works with a strong sense of brevity and sparseness awed me. So much so that in my college in Pune we performed his shortest piece ever – *Scream*.

The choice to decide to make *Come & Go*, on which *End Note* is based, dates back to my engagement with Beckett back in those days. The play haunts me because of its intricate formal structure, cyclical in nature. Within this formalization, Beckett produces a profound sense of trauma. It is this sense of melancholic trauma that I wanted to bring out in the film. This is a very personal film for me,

incredibly personal, for not only has it been shot in my childhood house and neighbourhoods, but specifically because I decided to cast women dear to me in this film. It has my wife, her sister and my cousin. I always wanted to make a film that connected to me in a very intimate way, hence I avoided professional actors. The film was shot in two parts over two years, in December of 2000 and in the summer of 2002. Because of terrible lack of money and technical problems, it took another two years to finish.

Formally, the first part of the film is a deconstruction of *Come & Go*, and the second part a kind of reconstruction. This was done in order to destabilise Beckett's brevity and to exacerbate the trauma.

And with Beckett your preference is also Shakespeare, in Dancing Othello, for example.

Dancing Othello is a political film, unlike the others in this NCPA series. It stands apart from rest of my work. The idea of the film took roots when I saw Arjun Raina perform in Stanford. I then decided that I would like to make a film on his *Khelkali*, which was juxtaposition between Kathakali performance and Shakespearian dramaturgy. The core concept of the film was to subvert both the traditions of classical art to bring out the irony of postcolonial situation. This is done throughout the film as the narrative moves between Kathakali, Shakespeare and the performance of postcolonial mimesis done by Arjun. The film ends with a self-reflexive turn with the last monologue that Arjun delivers, where he gesticulates and mocks the filmmaker for making a self-indulgent film. This film is most influenced by my academic training as a cultural anthropologist. Through this cinematic text I attempt to grapple with the irony of the postcolonial situation which cultural theorist such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have tried to enunciate in their scholarly works.

I thought you were, in a way, dealing with the postcolonial fetish.

True. It is a film that attempts to critique our postcolonial fetish with the idea of the classical, both native (Kathakali) and foreign (Shakespeare), through the usage of *Khelkali*'s English usage that Arjun had developed. This was made during the incipient years of the call centre BPO revolution in India (2001). Arjun had just left his job as a professor at the National School of Drama in Delhi and was flirting with the emerging BPO industry as a 'voice culturist', teaching young Indians to speak in American English. He was at once amused and shocked at the political and financial prevalence of the English language in contemporary globalized



India. On the other hand, this film is also a product of my biography. I went to a very elitist English medium convent school in Kolkata, where we were fined one rupee if we spoke in 'vernacular' Bengali or Hindi. We were taught Shakespearian classics, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and the romantic poets. Simultaneously Doordarshan, government-run television, would bombard us with what the state considered classical: Hindustani classical music and Indian classical dance, from Odissi to Kathakali. So in effect *Dancing Othello* is a process of engaging with this idea of 'classical' that I grew up with. It is an attempt at questioning the symbolic and political meaning of such classical idioms in our postcolonial daily lives. At one level it's a critique of postcolonial inconsistencies; but eventually, I end the film by turning the tables on myself, when I subvert my own authorial legitimacy, in a way transforming this film into an 'ironical irony'.

This is also the most collaborative film that I have ever made, without a dialogue or a script. It's mostly a product of improvisation and collaboration as we were shooting. The narrative of the film was laid only when I started editing the film.

This interview is an extract from the no.w.here publication Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913-2006, edited by Brad Butler and Karen Mirzano (London, 2006, available from www.nowhere-lab.org).

Ashish Avikunthak will be at the NCPA to discuss his films on 12th June. For full details of this and other film presentations, see the Programme Guide in this issue of On Stage, page 15.