



Image 1



Image 2

Vakratunda Swaha

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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 Ganesh 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 Ganesh 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.

NOTES

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

