
Incredible India!

Exploring Changing Aesthetic of the Visual in India

My paper here attempts to analyze the effect of technology on visual perceptivity. I argue that the effect of technology on the existing modes of visuality in the colonial period were not just limited to the standardization of the existing plural live performances. In the process of mediating the visual, technology also has a dialectic relationship adding both to medium as well as to content. The visual was therefore not just a medium through which nation was code, it became a part of the code itself. In the course of my paper I will attempt to trace this changing aesthetic of the visual by analyzing a few visual texts historically: a) the films of Dadasaheb Phalke; b) 1857 mutiny narrative (1911); c) the visual verbal creation of the Anna Hazare movement d) the juxtaposition of visual and the verbal: an instance from Rang de Basanti. Through these I will try and show how the aesthetic of the nation has been formulated in the visual medium and how iconography has shifted from the domain of the content to the medium itself.

I.

Sandria B. Freitag's *Visions of the Nation: Theorizing the Nexus between Creation, Consumption, and Participation in the Public Sphere* tries to locate the role of the visual in creating new theoretical approaches to nationalism by comparing a variety of visual media. She emphasizes that when the viewer looks at visual evidences of processes of creation, consumption and production of forms of popular culture, they interact to make the consumer choose among a new and overwhelming formation of sources. Consequently, by considering a range of media together along with traditional constraints and iconic conventions consumers are enabled to take certain things as given and thus create meaning around images and icons. Allied media works as other sites of power where consumers actively negotiate their ways through the choices thrown up before their gaze. A mobilized gaze is formed which not only guarantees a large audience but also the focus on the frame of this range. The very ambiguity of the visual mode of communication makes the viewer contextualize and interpret it in his/her individual way which provides room to negotiate his/her relation with the state.

She connects these three aims through the argument that visual vocabularies formed through the new media of photography, poster art, cinema to live performances, forge a sense of imagined community. Consequently this has led to the emergence of a nationalist rhetoric. For the sake of efficiency she takes up the notion of the public sphere as that which exists over and against the state, in partial independence from it. This includes dimensions of social life that cannot be confounded or swallowed by the state. It does not pertain to the private sphere but where issues are commonly recognized as of common concern. It is within this generation of information that the confluence of visual materials related to live performances, photography, posters and cinema acquire importance.

The act of consumption, Freitag sees, is based on the consumer's attachment of inner feelings to objects that have the ability to shape his identity through the consumption. This very act lies at the nexus of consumption and nationalism for by the turn of the century, both prompted individuals to make choices that allied then with others who identified individually as members of an ambiguously delineated but none the less shared group. In order to understand the workings and the limits of consumption as a practice defining individuals and groups in British India was a dialogic process that drew on several sources including indigenous forms of popular participation in public life and metropolitan forms of production, she traces the ways in which consumption interacted with nationalism.

She traces how visual images are shapers and bearers of thought. Through concepts of *darshan*, *bhakti*, live performance traditions, not only does she explain how the centrality of the gaze works but also locates the gaze in the native practices of courtly culture, religious practices in the subcontinent. *Darshan* emphasizes the interdependence of the visual and the intellectual for central to this act is to stand in the deity's gaze, and behold the image: through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine. It is a mutual gaze where both the image and the onlooker look at each other. Seeing then becomes an act of acquiring knowledge. *Bhakti* on the other hand refers to

the act of relational love where antiestablishment figures often championed the downtrodden. Both these at the same time relate basic cultural vocabulary, and a common idiom of discourse. Live performances occupy a democratic ground where the face to face participation by active observers reinforces the notion of active devotionism and thus a victory of shared ideology. Another significant aspect is the use of props that carried various symbols for the performances. The messages of the performances could change yet what important was to make this available in the psyche of the on lookers.

The last section deals with the evolution of mass consumption of visual media in South Asia. He contextualizes this especially in the domain of paintings and posters. In paintings, he takes up the example of Ravi Varma to show how he borrows his images and props of Gods and shifts the three dimensional quality of the compositions with a new depth and dimension introduced as images receded into imaginary distance. The placing these images in historical places and pretty landscapes were made possible through the availability through photography. The use of color had iconic overtones apart from adding to the realistic aura. In case of posters the emergence of these visual symbols was significant. First, this fit into the genre of pan Indian or national frames. Second a domestication of divinity is also achieved. With photographs the imaging of the nation was spread sporadically and at the same time was made familiar. The nation becomes visible and also appropriable. Studios emerged at every town and photographer set themselves along religious sites or others where mass gathering was foreseen. By setting up colorful backdrops the subject was accommodated within a shared context both evocative and ubiquitous in nature. Photographs ushered in a world of consumption of images that naturalized the images and held them at the nexus of the local and the national, the domestic and the public. When cinema enters this domain, we find various icons of mass consumption already present. The first films tried to reach out to a pan Indian audience and thus took stories from the live performances. The mobilized gaze gets authenticated within the cinema hall. Also, the cinema industry being a huge one included artisan of all kinds. With the introduction of talkies, we see the industry now reduced to one tenth of its size for now, the language fixed target audiences and accordingly concentrated consumption.

II

Within this frame then if we see Phalke's essay on the beginnings of cinema in the India. Phalke was determined to present a instance where not only, 'Indian people would get an occasion to see Indian images on the screen and people abroad would get a true picture of India'. What immediately then comes to the forefront is the parallel act of representing the picture of a 'nation' not just to the people but by the people of the nation itself.

Rajadyaksha traces the presence of a nationalist gaze within the scopic regime of society through Phalke's primary sources: Ravi Verma's paintings, traditional theatre forms etc. What was prevalent in the domain of visibility is a perception of narrative that can be traced back to the earlier art forms of Mughal architecture, Mahabalipuram etc. The historicity of the nationalist gaze can then be traced to the pre-colonial practices of *darshana* and *bhakti*. What Phalke took for his film may not necessarily be a nationalist political project but definitely a representative of the unconscious gaze that was already existing in the 'India' perceived in the present live performances of *raslila*, *jatra* etc of the time. What the space of the theatre then does is to bring together the mobilized gaze of its spectators and through modern technology standardize the perspective of the vision of the nation. Another aspect of the gaze is the frame that projects it. In Phalke's films, the positioning of the frame resembles that of a fixed theatre space, i.e. neither centrifugal nor centripetal but a constant frame. Characters are seen moving about in the zig zag manner as one would do in a theatre. The frontality of the gaze can be seen in the characters, positioning of themselves, perpendicular to the horizon, looking straight at the spectator.

In conclusion, then we find how consumption of various cultural signifiers are made available in new domains of representation that go on to situate themselves as icons and images communicating visually a higher dynamics of power, gaze and surveillance that was already there but is now redefined according to changing needs.

III

Historic Mutiny Sites is a short silent film produced in 1914 by the British. As the title suggests, the film revisits the 1857 mutiny sites around Delhi. If we look at the 5minute document we see that the sites that have been visited are primarily seen from the colonizers eye asserting the power with which it had done away with the mutiny. The

subject then is included in this vision. It is made to also bow down to the assertion of the white skin. The film starts with old, broken gate ways now being repaired, a railway station filled with a band whose costume has lost luster in the modern world and thus they walk in a group but idly. The craftsmen have now been reduced to work on the streets. The Nizam's ground has now been reduced to small garden where paths have been chalked out by flower pots. People wander about the palace which now resembles an old temple. However, the musicians still play as lost resonances of the past. The inter-title introducing the next phase of film reads "where Gen Nicholson fell" showing clearly that the act of commemoration is to memorialize the lost souls of the British. The Fort in the background has a bunch of ragged musicians playing. The camera angle deliberately juxtaposes the site and the miniature people entering it. The statute is held high as people go below it. We visit St. James Church, Magazine Gateway and finally the mutiny monument. All of them follow the same aesthetic pattern.

The small documentary then juxtaposes Indian civilian in the background of the historic mutiny sites. The gaze is significant. They portray the image of colonial India not only to their people but also the citizens. The taming of the gaze is symbolic of the taming of the mutiny, of the rebels and thus in short the taming of the country.

IV

If we look at the Anna Hazare movement a word that shook the nation's consciousness and dragged everyone to their TV sets was *corruption*. As a 76 year old Gandhian sat on a thirteen day fast against corruption in public offices, citizens of the nation were reminded of their personal thrifts with corruption. Interestingly, Anna Hazare or his supporters of this 'movement' fought against monetary corruption. This included everything from a common man giving bribe to get his work done to the 2G scam. As utopian as this idea promised, it stirred in the citizen an

"impotent rage at the daily experience of having to pay bribes to petty officials and functionaries to secure timely delivery of any service ... Added to this accumulated anger at being cheated in their quotidian living was their discovery of the loot in the upper echelons of governance, by top politicians, senior bureaucrats, and the judges in the higher courts, which came cascading in a series of scams exposed by the media."

What becomes significant in the above scenario is the upsurge of a nation over a word that promises no limited meaning. The word 'corruption' when tuned to the domain of 'politics' becomes a symbol with little or no reference to its context. What it does then is to

"reflect the spirit of impatience of these ordinary citizens with bureaucratic red tapism, addressed their demand for immediate relief and justice, met their desire for maximum punishment for the corrupt politicians and officials, and satisfied their sense of schadenfreude at the penalization of the latter. The bill epitomized their ultimate faith, born out of utter despair, in an omnipotent authority – the Lokpal."

It does this to address a domain of public desire and correlate it to a space of public memory. For instance if we look at one of the slogans of the Anna Hazare campaign: "Anna is India, India is Anna" one is reminded of the cry of "Indira is India, India is Indira" that was coined by one of her sycophants during her announcement of her populist 20-point program with the declaration of Emergency.

My critique of Anna Hazare movement lies not in its attempt to rise against the corrupted bureaucrats but in its mere legislature limited attempt and its absence from grass-root mass movements to change social habits. Then, how did the 'Hazare Campaign' attain such a stature? In my opinion, it is the word *corruption* and the symbol it poses. In being an umbrella term for all kinds of monetary corruption Anna attempts a linear battle of the good against the evil. If we look closer to the kind of corruption, Anna aims at i.e. bribery, which is this class against which he is fighting. "Both those taking and giving bribes come from the same segment – the urban middle and lower middle classes and the rural farming community. It is these people who flocked to Anna Hazare's demonstration. They are a divided lot, torn by self-conflict as bribe takers and bribe givers." There can thus be no difference between the corrupt and the non-corrupt for they all belong to the same vicious circle. Sumanta continues, "They are a divided lot, torn by self-conflict as bribe takers and bribe givers. The same electrician or telephone linesman who demands bribe from his neighbor to restore the service, or the three-wheeler driver who cheats his passenger, has to pay a bribe to the local petty official to gain a no-objection certificate to get his house registered!"

V.

Let us take a different example. If we look at advertisements like the *Jago Re* campaign and films like *Rang De Basanti* we find another word in reaction to corruption: *Rebel*. Again, this is also a word heavy laden not just with a certain kind of energy, but also carries the particular sense of immediacy (as in the Anna Hazare Campaign) to rise against corruption. Nevertheless, not everyone, however enlightened is entitled to this license. What becomes relevant is also the need to acquire responsibility. Significantly, *Rang De Basanti* does this by showing a group of students from a premier institute, their sense of duty. By bringing them face to face with the nation's history and cooking up a certain sense of corruption that the public can identify with, the film erases the boundaries in between. The film celebrates their energy yet in showcasing their death we see it trying to emphasize the need to provide a correct channel to their energy.

This is very evident in the image of the nation posed in the very songs of the film. If we take the song 'Be a Rebel', we can see how a group of drunk citizen circle the India gate with one of them leading by standing on the deck of the jeep and all of them salute the India gate. As drunk as they seem to be, it is rather strange that they have been able to retain their sense of awe, admiration and patriotic spirit for the nation. The very song is a rap, structured closely in on the national anthem.

To the mahal of the Taj
To the Minar of Qutub
To the Kumari of Kanya
To the Panjim of Goa
To the Kaancheepuram
Zindabad Zindagood
All have something to say
They all have something to say
They all have something to say

Follow me Follow me Follow me now!

Apni tho paatshala, masti ki paatshala
Be A Rebel

If look closely at the above line we find how the nation has been sketched out geographically, historically, linguistically. In the end there is both an urge to mobilize people through "Follow me Follow me Follow me now!", and at the same time to eventually become a rebel. This song reflects a certain energy of the song but unlike the other song in the film, 'Loose Control' this song attempts to graph this energy with the domain of the nation's imagination. The message seems clear, the energy of the youth is celebrated but deemed dangerous too. Therefore there arises a need to discipline it through a consciousness of the nation's identity. The lyrics of the song show how the imagination can be played with as long as the dimension of the nation is not compromised with in terms of tradition and outlook. The compromise sought is reflected here in terms of language (it is bilingual).

VI.

In the all the above scenarios, I have shown that the trajectory through which the words visual content and its response have a split but attain higher meanings. It is thus evident that language attains a different meaning altogether in certain contexts. In Sasurrean terms, the relations of the signifier and signified have been redefined. It is worth reading the way codes are conceived through convention and habit. In the above contexts, I have shown how a sense of immediacy is linked to a collective memory to form symbols that can cut across the nation's boundaries. It is thus by a ritualization of perspectives rather than the actual content that gives a sense of the meaning. The structure and its content loses precedence to ritualize a certain visual perspective.

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