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Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali) An Interview with Ashish Avikunthak[1]

[1] This interview took place in New York in May 2010.

MC: First of all, thanks Ashish for agreeing to this interview. My first question would be about the background to *Dancing Othello*. Why did you decide to make this film? How much of it was planned?

AA: *Dancing Othello* began serendipitously. I was studying in Stanford University when Arjun Raina, the only actor in the film, was touring the US and came to the University with his show in the spring of 2001. He was staging *The Magic Hour* – an experimental mix of Kathakali, Shakespeare and Khelkali (a form of street and folk theater act). The show juxtaposed Shakespeare narrativity with the complex stylization and esoteric theatricality of Kathakali. It was an improvisational performance which created an idiosyncratic theatrical idiom – a hybrid between the East and the West, the classical and the profane, the profound and the frivolous. I was completely blown away by the performance. I knew of him because he had acted in a cult English language film in India (probably the first 'postcolonial' film) written by Arundhati Roy – *In Which Annie Gives It Those One* (1989). This is a delicate black comedy made by Pradip Krishen that recounts Roy's own autobiographical experiences while studying at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. I saw the film as a teenager on the state run television and remembered Arjun from those days. During my interaction with Arjun soon after the show, I instinctively asked him if he was interested in collaborating on a film on his performance. I wanted to make a film that centred on pieces that he formed at Stanford – scenes from *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the eccentricity of Peter Pillai. I explained that we'd shoot the film in Calcutta on 16mm, however I'd not be able to pay him anything. He generously agreed. He came to Calcutta in the summer of 2001 and we shot the film in three days. I shot mostly at my house in Calcutta where I was raised. At these locations I asked Arjun to perform whatever he preferred and we let the energy of the location determine the chemistry of the performance. The film did not have a script and we worked intuitively. Almost all my films are made in this way – it is an intuitive form of practice of scriptlessness. I think of film more like an artist with his art. There are some ideas but there is no definite script, and then you start painting with film – letting the idea, the location, the actor's energy, the crew's mood effect your next strategy. So it's a very spontaneous film practice – it's not planned in any sense. *Dancing Othello* you can say just happened – a series of coincidences, some ideas, a bit of collaboration and a lot of intuition.

MC: The film starts with Arjun Raina dressed as a Kathakali dancer, and performing lines from Act 5 of *Othello* ("It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause", in English

with English subtitles). Therefore two sixteenth-/seventeenth-century traditions, 'Shakespeare' and 'Kathakali', are juxtaposed, and each is seen through the eyes of the other. Does this represent the re-vitalisation of both, or the breakdown of both?

AA: It is both – the deconstruction and the reconstruction – or, as you say, re-vitalisation. In this experiment between the East and West, the gestural effervescences of Kathakali, heightened by its vigorous body movement and complex footwork, enrich the theatricality of Shakespearean drama.

This gives birth to a hybrid performance, merging the epitome of English literature and the quintessence of Indian art. The actor shatters the traditional and conventional practice of Kathakali, by introducing Shakespeare as the narrative focus of the dance form. Here Shakespearean narrative is de/reconstructed by the classical dexterity of Kathakali and simultaneously the classical traditionalism of Kathakali is also de/reconstructed by Shakespearean dramatics.

Fig. 1: "It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause", scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali),* 2002, courtesy of the director.

MC: This is an essential aspect of the film but it is of course just one of its complex narrative/cinematic strategies. We are also shown Arjun Raina playing Peter Pillai, an 'eccentric' character, as you put it earlier – 'ex-centric' indeed, in relation to both Kathakali and Shakespeare (or at least to canonical and/or 'imperial' versions of Shakespeare). We are introduced to a form of street/political theatre, with Peter Pillai directly addressing the spectator, making fun of his/her ignorance of the history of colonialism, and so on. Arjun Raina as Peter Pillai says he is doing *Khelkali* – "khel" meaning "to play" in Hindi – and refers to this as his "little creature". So both 'Shakespeare' and 'Kathakali' are drawn into the orbit of another artistic form, a street theatre with political connotations. Does this constitute some kind of hybridisation of an already hybridised 'Kathakali Shakespeare'?

AA: Yes, or, as Arjun would say, bastardization. You must have noticed the particular intonation, the way he is talking, the way he is gesturing and the improvisational nature, which is very typical of street theatre where one's performance is almost a response to the audience. In a sense, Shakespearean

theatricality meets the subtlety of Kathakali, as mentioned earlier, and they are both 'subverted' in the dramatic space of street theatre. This gives birth to a performative 'caliban' – *Khelkali* – a hybrid act of articulating the post-colonial irony of contemporary India.

MC: I love the expression "performative 'caliban"'. But I'd like you to expand on these terms – "Kathakali", "Shakespeare", "Khelkali". Can you also talk a little bit more about how the film incorporates these artistic practices? And perhaps also about how the film re-articulates them; how it rephrases the ways in which they relate to one another?

AA: There are three elements in the film – Kathakali, Shakespeare and Khelkali. Kathakali – it is one of the most esoteric dance forms in India and is part of the national classical canon. The idea of the 'classical' is a modernist idea. It is a product of a colonial and subsequently nationalistic re-imagination of Indian tradition. There are two intrinsic problems with this idea of the classical. First, it creates a distinction between classical and folk. Here classical is higher, superior and elevated. Classical is elite and folk is subaltern. This creates a false dichotomy between art forms that have emerged from the same heterogeneous matrix of ancient Indian culture and society. An artificial chasm is produced in a continuous, overlapping, diverse tradition. In the process some forms are considered eminent and given state patronage, while others that are equally complex, elaborate and esoteric are neglected and marginalized. Secondly, it creates a canon that never existed. The classical is a product of a distorted schema of the Indian tradition, which emerged from a colonial epistemology and was reified by the postcolonial nationalistic ideology. Kathakali is a product of a religious and ritualistic substratum of Indian culture, similar to most classical Indian dance and music forms. These were not mere forms of entertainment but were part of a complex religious, ritualistic and dramatic tradition. For instance Kathakali, like other classical dance forms, enacted narratives from the Indian epic traditions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – intrinsic part of religious life of India. These forms were part of a cultural system in which distinction between dance, ritual and religion merged into one performative experience – sacred and divine. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a felt need by nationalist intellectuals and artists to construct an idea of a canon in response to the European Enlightenment-driven categorization of the art forms. We needed our own classical art, dance and musical forms. The history of Kathakali is imbricated in this genealogy. Kathakali is decontextualized from its ritualistic milieu and reconfigured as a classical art form. This is when the division between religion and art occurs. This separation, which the film plays upon, is important to recognize. There's a rupture between religion and performance. And dance becomes a secular practice that becomes part of the national classical canon. This film is questioning this idea of the classical, of the national, of the secular – divorced from the religious context. The divorce between the religion and the secular is both a product of modernity and also indirect result

of the trauma of partition. Religion in early years of the postcolony (1950-60s) was frowned upon. It was important for the Indian nation to rupture classical art forms from their religious core. Religion was an anathema that the nation wanted to avoid. This film points to that rupture. The film is a critique of this rupture and distinction. This critique in the film is brought about by making Kathakali into a form of folk, street theatre devoid of its full costume regalia and performing it in a banal location. In this way it becomes khelkali.

MC: If I understood you correctly, your critical intervention in this 'rupture' is not an attempt to reconstruct some kind of spurious, pre-lapsarian, or 'mystical' moment of unity. The film shows awareness of this 'wound', as it were – a colonial and nationalistic 'wound'. But it is also, and perhaps mainly, a re-contextualisation of Kathakali, perhaps a reiteration of the 'wound' *as critique*, a re-contextualisation which is both 'political' and 'religious', so that, for instance, the religious element re-emerges in a different 'uncanny' form, perhaps as the religiosity which permeates the 'everyday', as well as intimate, almost autobiographical spaces.

AA: Yes, over the years, like the other classical forms, Kathakali has gained a reputation as an orthodox dance form, which is steeped in established theatrical norms and averse to outside influence. *Dancing Othello* is about the breaking of this classical orthodoxy of Kathakali and about freeing it from its classical limitations. The classical Kathakali performance consists of stylised costumes, intricate make-up and usage of elaborate masks whereas Arjun just wears a kurta, jeans and trousers with perfunctory make up. In the film I remove Kathakali from its classical spatiality of the stage and locate it in an ordinary apartment complex. These small gestures of incompleteness are a critique of the rupture. Like most dance forms in premodern times, Kathakali was only performed in the religious context of the sacred space – the temple complex. It could not be performed if it was not sacred. But then the rupture happens and Kathakali become'postcolonial, nationalistic and

Fig. 2: The "intimate location" of Shakespeare and Kathakali, scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, courtesy of the director.

Fig. 3: "Fashion Street" in Bombay, scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali),* 2002, courtesy of the director.

secular. It is relocated on the modern stage. In the film I deliberately remove the stage and put it in my own intimate location – in a commonplace space.

It's a normal space, it's a banal space, and it's a daily space. This transformation of the location is also the metamorphosis of Kathakali from the classical into the folk.

MC: In the film there is also an intriguing juxtaposition between this intimate location and the repeated appearance of faces in a street market…

AA: That street market is a very popular market in Bombay called "Fashion Street".
I had shot that footage few years ago in 1996 as part of the single shot *Etcetera* series of films. However, I did not use this portion in that film. That street points out to the banal, to the daily, to the local. I'm not getting the right word but banal comes pretty close to what I mean.

MC: Matter of fact?

AA: Yes, matter of fact. But this is a new form of banal. Because it's not ritualistic, it's not 'religious' – it is daily. It's the postcolonial Calcutta, or Bombay where I have lived. The ploy in the film is to convert something iconic and bring it within my own subjectivity – a hybrid urban, middleclass India. Kathakali is from South India but the film relocates it in the north. Arjun Raina is not a South Indian. He is a Kashmiri Pandit from Lahore. After partition his family moved to Delhi. He was raised there, studied there, and went to England to study Shakespearean theatre. He came back and taught in the National School of Drama, New Delhi. There he learnt Kathakali for ten years. Whereas I belong to a Punjabi family uprooted by partition and raised in Calcutta in a neighbourhood that was full of refugees from the East Bengal partition and the Bangladesh war of 1971. I spent my youth working as a political activist in Bombay and western India and then went to US to study. There I met Arjun and we made a film about Kathakali located in Calcutta. So it's a hybrid over hybrid over hybrid.

MC: So these different forms of displacement must be taken into account in order to make sense of this film.

AA: Absolutely – because Kathakali in postcolonial India has mutated into a secular dramatic form and not a religious ritual of a sacred space. It can be learned by anyone. I then take this displaced form of Kathakali to Calcutta to further dislodge it. This multiple displacement is my critique of the classical.

MC: There is a tendency in Shakespeare-on-film criticism, especially when it deals with 'foreign' films (i.e., films not produced in Britain or the US) to privilege what is done *to* Shakespeare. In *Dancing Othello*, it seems to me, what is done *to* Shakespeare (e.g., fragments of *Othello* in Kathakali, Peter Pillai's appropriation of the "Prologue" to the mechanics' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, etc.) is inseparable from what is done *with* Shakespeare, in terms of political statements, irony on the postcolony, re-articulations of what is 'extra-ordinary' in the 'ordinary', etc.

AA: Ah, Shakespeare! That is the metanarrative of the film. Shakespeare works in opposition to Kathakali. The film shatters the traditional and conventional practice of Kathakali, by introducing Shakespeare as the narrative focus of the dance form, in the process subverting it simultaneously. They are part of the same postcolonial canon. History of Shakespearean performances in India goes back to as early as 1753, when it was first performed at the Old Playhouse Theatre in Calcutta. This theatrical representation was only confined to English audience and actors in order to maintain racial refinement. It was in 1848 that a native Bengali actor for the first time performed Shakespeare – not surprisingly in the role of Othello. However, Shakespeare became the centre of the English pedagogy in colonial India when, in 1835, Lord Macaulay in his famous "Minute on Indian Education" announced the need for a "class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". With this declaration Shakespeare was firmly inserted into the psyche of India. By the time I went to school in the 1980s, Shakespeare was the universal epitome of the English literary canon. I painfully remember learning by rote Marcus Brutus's and Mark Anthony's speeches from *Julius Cesar*. It was a dreadful way of learning Shakespeare. I was traumatised by the way Shakespeare was stuffed down our throats as school kids. I must admit, I am not a great fan of Shakespeare; I like the Beckettian theatre of absurd more. By this time Shakespeare, like Kathakali, had become part of the classical, nationalistic, secular, postcolonial canon.

MC: You have often insisted on the 'dangerous liaison' between Shakespeare and Kathakali in the course of this interview.

AA: In today's postcolonial India they are both an embodiment of the classical – Kathakali represents traditional postcolonial classical and Shakespeare a legacy of

the colonial classical. In India, Shakespeare is no longer considered as imported from the West, it has been domesticated within the Indian cultural consciousness. The history of the combination in the film goes at least as far back to when Arjun was learning Kathakali at the *International Centre for Kathakali* in Delhi. There he collaborated with his guru Sadanam Balakrishanan to work on the adaptation of *Othello* in Kathakali.[2] This amalgamation is important to understand. As I have explained earlier, Kathakali in postcolonial India is secular and devoid of its religious core and therefore its merger with Shakespeare is celebrated. This admixture is the essence of the postcolony. The combination of Kathakali and Shakespeare is symbolically important in postcolonial India, for it marks the moment when the imperial status of Shakespeare is finally domesticated by the 'savage' art form of the Orient. Politically, this becomes a significant act. This exemplifies Homi Bhabha's idea of the hybrid. In this process both Shakespeare and Kathakali are transformed. My film signals this merger but subverts in two ways. The first is to dislocate the performance from the stage into a domestic banal location. For me banality is significant and important. I have dealt in intricate details in my earlier films like *Etcetera*. I'm very interested in the daily, the local, and the everyday. I'm not interested in the spectacle. I believe that the everyday is epic. The banal is the spectacular. In my film I locate the displaced Shakespeare and Kathakali in a banal space and transform them into spectacular epic. The second subversion is Khelkali. This hybrid is the third form (along with Shakespeare and Kathakali) that the film depicts. This is the most ironical form in the film. Khelkali subverts the dual classicality of Kathakali and Shakespeare by reducing it to a folk theatre with its characteristic didactic form. It dislodges Kathakali and Shakespeare from the classical pedestal to a street performance in a political act. Khelkali was born in a mountain village in Arjun's friend's home. Because the ceiling of the house was not high enough, he performed without the elaborate headdress and without make up. This minimalist ethos signals to the robust tradition of political street theatre in India that emerged with the IPTA, Indian People's Theatre Association – the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India – formed in 1942. In India the street theatre is completely a political theatre, it is neither sacred nor classical. The minimalist costumes, the performance in a banal, daily spatiality, the didactic lecture-demonstration, the improvisational nature of the act, transforms the classical into the political theatre. Arjun as the eccentric Peter Pillai – the Kathakali instructor with his heavy accent – becomes the interlocutor who acts out the postcolonial irony.

[2] The reference is to Sadanam Balakrisnan's 1996 production of *Othello* in Kathakali, in which Arjun Raina played the Duke. See Loomba in *Postcolonial Shakespeare* (1998).

MC: An essential part of the de/reconstruction of spatiality – to use your own terms – is the fact that, as you mentioned earlier, the film was shot in your own house.

AA: Yes – the film was shot in my home. It is a rented apartment in a palatial building in south Calcutta made in 1950s. My parents moved into this house as a young couple from north India in 1973, when my father got a job in an Indo-French pharmaceutical company as a factory manager. I was not born there but lived in that

house till I was nineteen. We shot in our apartment, in the courtyard, in the veranda and on the terrace of the building for about three days in June of 2001. Along with *Dancing Othello*, I have shot *Kalighat Fetish* and *End Note* in the same house. The last scene in the film was shot on the last day of the shoot. I told Arjun that we have five minutes of footage and he can say and do whatever comes to him spontaneously. The camera started rolling and he started talking instinctively – it was not scripted, discussed or even thought. That was intuitive, unprompted and a visceral reaction by Arjun to the film and me. He rebukes me and disparages the film, in the process giving birth to a powerful self-reflexive pivot to the film – he is critical of Kathakali and Shakespeare. He is critical of the film and therefore he is critical of himself.

MC: In effect I perceived multiple layers of irony in the film, including, toward the end of the film, a far-reaching critique of experimental, politically-concerned and truth-seeking filmmaking. And Arjun as Peter Pillai is also critical of the spectatorial position of Western audiences in search of the "exotic", like Shakespeare in Kathakali, and even of the spectatorial position of the critic, perhaps especially of the postcolonial Shakespearean critic. Is this about the futility of post-colonial critique?

AA: He is critical of the critic. The critic as audience seeing the film is the final irony. The postcolonial critic himself is the most ironical figure. In the last section of the film, Arjun Raina the actor and Peter Pillai the character in the film become one. And their diatribe against the film and the director of the film is the critique of the filmmaking process. I think it is the most important part of the film – this self-reflexive moment. The film is simultaneously lost and resuscitated in this sequence. Here the film collapses within its hypercritical reflection. But in its collapse is its redemption. During the shooting of this shot the negative ran out, the film got over, but Arjun kept on talking. I told my cameraman not to stop. We knew that nothing was been recorded except the sound. Arjun did not know that the negative had run out, so he kept going on. I was looking at my watch and he retorted to my actions impulsively. It's a very visceral response to the act of filmmaking therefore it becomes very self-reflexive. That's how the film ends. We shot a total of eighty minutes in three days. In the evening after the shoot we had a delicious dinner cooked by my mother at my home and Arjun flew back to Delhi. I went to Bombay to process the film. Then to Pune to edit the film at the Film and Television Institute of India, to work on Steenbeck flatbed mechanical editing machine. There we found that there was a very big problem – the sound was not in sync.

MC: This must have been quite a shock.

AA: I was distraught. But we figured out a way. We first edited the non-sync portion and then we started mechanically syncing the out-of-sync portion. These were pre-digital and Final Cut Pro days. My editor and I worked for five days

physically cutting and joining to make everything in sync. And to an extent what you see in the film is a product of this practice of dealing with a failure, a loss in a certain sense. That's how the film emerges. The narrative of the film happens at the editing table. This is the way I edit all my films. For me editing is almost like a ritual meditation where you cut off from the world and sit in a room with a collaborator and work. You're fixed on the image and just meditating over it and then intuitively start cutting. Letting that particular moment of the action of editing, its problems, its chaos effect the emergence of the narrative. From beginning to end this is the fastest film I have ever made. It was done in two months. I don't think I'm ever going to do it again so fast. It was a film that was never planned. It just happened, but it is a meticulously constructed film. It is not flippant. It is careful because at the moment decisions are taken; they are taken in a painstaking, thoughtful and thorough manner. There's chance involved but it is not an accident.

MC: I love this idea of unpredictability which is not mere chance… You said that this was "pre-digital". But I know you are reluctant to use digital technology? I mean there's no "ritual meditation" in it, in your own terms.

AA: I have problems with video and there are reasons. Cinema has a distinct theory of practice that is starkly different to video. It is not just about its meditative possibilities but its theory of practice. Let me explain. Firstly, digital is very immediate; it lacks the tension and the mystery of the image production process. In its immediacy lies its predictability. Secondly, its process is very easy and non-complex. In its simplicity lies its opulence. It is this combination of predictable and opulence – the lack of mystery and constraints makes digital fundamentally a theory of practice of excess. You can shoot as much as you like. You can edit as many times as you like. It is indiscipline. This excess I feel disturbs the artistic process. Here I am not fetishizing but attributing preference to a particular theory of image practice. I am a Gandhian. I am romantic. I like mysteries. I like constraints. I'm very interested in chance, in accidents, in problems, in restrictions. They make me think beyond the box. Cinema has that possibility. Digital's invention was to kill that possibility. Cinema is chemical and digital is algorithmic. Cinema is effervescent and digital is tepid. Cinema for me is like the chaos of Banaras, Calcutta or even Naples. Digital is the rectilinearity of grided Los Angeles and Manhattan. You cannot get lost in New York or Los Angeles. I like cities where I can get lost. Where there are no maps or signs to help me navigate the city – because in that loss I discover things I have never imagined. That is what cinema gives me. Finally, I am not yet sold by the digital image quality. I just don't like the video quality. It's digital, it's not cinema. It's pixels, it's not grains. For me the image does not seem real. The chemical image is closest to the real. Almost all cinematographers agree about that. If any technological apparatus can create real image, then it is cinema, not digital. The digital image doesn't give you the depth. It doesn't give you that infinite possibility of colour. Digital's practice of excess along with the aesthetic

quality of its image has dissuaded me against it. I think the only reason I will go digital is because it is inexpensive. Digital choice will be a financial choice – not a theoretical choice or an aesthetic choice.

MC: What you're saying is intriguing. Are you saying that there is direct correlation between a system of constraints and creativity in filmmaking?

AA: It's a very weird theory, but let me articulate it. I think any work of art requires certain constraints – restrictions that the society, state, politics, religion, finances throw in. The digital technology is able to rupture through these constraints – because of its ease, its simplicity, its portability, and its economics. For some, this is God sent, especially for professional storytellers – who make living telling stories – any stories. Digital technology provides them an apparatus, which is fast, swift, easy, cheap, accessible and instantaneous. Digital produces moving images efficaciously. For television, advertisement commercials, Hollywood, Bollywood, digital is a boon. It increases their productivity considerably. The professionals don't care about meditative practice of the making or the philosophical underpinning of image aesthetics – they just want the product. I care about these things. I don't think I'm professional. I don't want to be professional. I can't tell your story. It has to be my story. It has to be a product of my own formation, my own ideas, and my own thoughts. Therefore I consider myself a film artist. I don't even think I'm a filmmaker because if I was a maker then I could make any films. I can't make any films. I can only create films that come from my own epistemology, my own ontology. Digital technology is useful for professionals not for me. I have very few stories to tell. Therefore, I don't want to pick up an apparatus that compromises on the practice and the image quality. Why not employ something really challenging, difficult, that requires discipline and produces constraints, is disciplined, mysterious and meditative. Cinema gives me that.

MC: How do you see the political element in your work? Is it separable from other aspects of your work?

AA: I am not a political filmmaker. My films go beyond politics. This means going beyond modernity and into the religious. I am attentive of religiosity – the premodern form of comprehension that is in constant tension with modernity. Religiosity is about a theory of practice – about the process of ritual, doctrinal exegesis, theological deliberation and metaphysical contemplation. I want to know the meaning of being religious in a secular, postcolonial nation. In India, today public discourse about religion is either in the hands of the political right, the priestly class or the television evangelists. Representation of religion in India fluctuates between the anthropological and political grotesque. For me it is a political project to make cinema about religiosity. For me, this move is to make cinema theological and metaphysical. I am intrigued by the possibility to explore cinema as a vehicle for spiritual practice.

MC: This is typical of your latest work…

AA: Yes but this has been my focus since I began making films. I think of my work with *Kalighat Fetish* as a process through which I explore my own religiosity. It starts with *Etcetera*. The films are essential explorations of existence through a contemplation of the ritual. *Etcetera* was a philosophical response to this need of mine. Here rituals are secular. They are devoid of any religious connotation. It is with *Kalighat Fetish* that I find ritual in religious context to be a metaphysical exploration of life. It was an intuitive process. With *Vakratunda Swaha* it is a more conscious process. *Vakratunda Swaha* began as requiem to a dead friend, it ended as a theology on death. From an elegy it was transformed into a ritual. It took me twelve years to make it. The stylistic device that I employ to explore this cinema of religiosity is an aesthetic and political idiom that I call *mythic realism*. This form of cinema is a filmic intersection of the mythological genre and the neo-realistic aesthetic. Analogous to magical realism, mythical realism is a world where mythological times inhabit the everyday, and simultaneously where daily actions become mythical ritual. I come from a middle class, religious Hindu family, where divine figures, sacred symbols and mythic objects infused my urban everyday world in Calcutta. It is this seamless interplay of realism, ritual and myth that I evoke in my work. My films displace the mythic from the domains of the heavenly to the everyday banality and mundaneness of the quotidian.

MC: You said you can't tell stories, except your own. To me, one of the most striking aspects of your work is its emphasis on temporal discontinuity. (In *Dancing Othello*, for instance, there is a constant interruption of narrative linearity.) Perhaps related to this is the emergence of elements that would be difficult to locate, if one were to interpret your films as a linear narrative. Here I'm thinking of the character with the gas mask in *Dancing Othello*, the one who helps Arjuna Raina get ready for the performance.

AA: For me discontinuity is a form of continuity. I am not excited by linear or cyclic narrative, I am interested in disjunctural narrative. A narrative that is at the verge of non-narrative – it is halting, interrupted, digressive and the meaning is located in parenthesis within parenthesis. It is not a cinema that requires decoding; rather it is a cinema that requires the audience to create its own codes of comprehension. It is not an easy cinema, but neither it is impossible cinema. It's very interesting that you pick out the character with the gas mask. He has been my obsession in my latest film – *Vakratunda Swaha*. The gas mask character in that *Dancing Otello* is gesturing to a moment of modernity, I think.

It's the modern moment that threatens the classical. However, in *Vakratunda Swaha*, I delve deeply into the iconography of the gas mask – it becomes a metaphysical character of the ambiguity of death. On the one hand iconographically gas mask is the symbol of death and on the other hand ontologically it is the

technological apparatus that protects from the death. In the film I emphasize this ambivalent, contradictory duality of the gas mask – of the death that protects life.

MC: What about the use of black and white and the use of colour in *Dancing Othello*?

AA: Formally, I am interested in producing a *haptic affect* through my films. This is an effect of somato-sensory perception produced by the filmic image, through the careful manipulation of its texture. I exploit both the chemical and the structural nature of the filmic image to produce a visual effect that creates an affective textural impact. Usage of a multiple kind of film stocks having different gradation, granularity, quality and age, chemically alerting the images to produce various effects, swiftly and suddenly moving between color and black and white images within a diegetic moment, variation of the frame rate, the modification of the exposure and the sharpness of the image – these are some of the strategies that I employ to bring about a haptic affect. I do this because I want the cinematic experience to move beyond the visual to the visceral. I seek to invoke a primordial effervescence through the moving image that is phenomenologically not just about seeing, but is also about feeling.

MC: This is kind of Deleuzian…

AA: Yes, completely Deleuzian. It does gesture to Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the optic and the haptic, the smooth and the striated. I am interested in a visceral affect through manipulation of the visual. The history of filmmaking has been a process of bringing uniformity of the image experience. For the first early decades film chemistry was concerned about producing film stocks with the most diverse grey scale. Then, with the coming of the colour chemistry it was about the possibility of getting the most elaborate colour palette. Each of these attempts was to bring about homogeneity

Fig. 4: "The gas mask", scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, courtesy of the director.

of the image. Or, to put it in Deleuze's terms, a smooth image, the visual image. In my cinematic practice I am interested in breaking this and producing striated imagery – which, like my narrative, is halting, disjunctural and hesitant. I began experimenting with haptic narrative with *Kalighat Fetish*, when I used sound stock (b/w film of very slow speed used to record sound) to produce the high contrast imagery in the film. In *Dancing Othello* I use optical methods to produce the distinct superimposition to create the disjunctural imagery.

MC: Roysten Abel's film *In Othello*, based on his successful theatrical production *Othello. A Play in Black and White*, was released in 2003. Adil, the Othello character, is a Kathakali trainer, and the film includes fragments of 'Kathakali Shakespeare', so there are similarities between *In Othello* and *Dancing Othello*, at least at a superficial level. How would you situate your work in relation to Roysten Abel's?

AA: I think *Dancing Othello* and Roysten Abel's film are vastly different. Abel's film attempts to narrate *Othello* by referring to the practice of contemporary theatre culture in India and places the erotic tension of Othello in the sexual intimacies of a contemporary performative culture. My film on the other hand articulates the politics of postcoloniality masquerading as a documentary on culture. There are similarities in the sense that both the filmic texts are interpreting Shakespeare and locating in contemporary postcolonial India, where modernity and premodernity merge in a seamless rupture. So 'Kathakali Shakespeare' in my film intermeshes with contemporary theatre and emerges as 'postcolonial caliban', whereas in Abel's film it becomes a kind of erotic play.

MC: With Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003) and *Omkara* (2006), adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, 'Shakespeare' has consolidated its position in mainstream Bollywood cinema. At a recent Shakespearean conference the category of 'auteur' was evoked to define some of the characteristics of Bhardwaj's cinema. How far would you agree with this? Any opinions about these films?

AA: I do not see Vishal Bhardwaj as an auteur. He is a filmmaker seeped in the commercial logic of Bollywood capitalism. He makes films that within the context of mainstream Bollywood seem radical but are fundamentally located within the dominant financial logic of entertainment. Here the decision-making power of the filmmaker is greatly compromised with producers, financers and distributors. Significant creative decision of the director is jettisoned by their interjections, in the process making a consumable cinema product. The cultural, political and economical logic of Bollywood does not allow the formidable agency that is critical in the making of an auteur. Although it would be correct to locate his Shakespearean intervention as an important moment in the history of narrativity in Bollywood. I would credit Bhardwaj for bringing Shakespearean narrative into the mainstream of Indian cinematic imagination in a powerful way. Both *Maqbool* and *Omkara* are

masterful narratives that very dexterously re-locate Shakespearean tales within the complexities of Indian popular culture. However, in these films Shakespeare is subsumed within the cultural logic of Bollywood entertainment.

MC: What are you working on at the moment? How does it relate to your previous work?

AA: At the moment I am working on a couple of films that explore deeply the idea of cinema of religiosity. The first is an interpretation of a sixth-century BCE later Vedic philosophical treatise, *Katha Upanishad*, which for the first time articulates the mystical experience that is central to Hindu theology. It is the quintessential ancient Indian philosophical narrative. A disciple goes in search of a guru, in this case the Hindu God of death himself – Yama. This is followed by the deliverance of the lesson about enlightenment – the practice to go beyond the cycles of life and death. The other film is an exploration of folk deities, religion and modernity, and pushes the ideas that I have been exploring with *Kalighat Fetish, End Note* and *Vakratunda Swaha*.

MC: Thank you Ashish. I'm very grateful for this exciting account of your work, and *Dancing Othello* in particular.