

The Experimental Short Films of Ashish Avikunthak

Abhishek Hazra

PUBLICATION DETAILS

First published in the online arts journal www.artconcerns.net, June 2007



A still from *Soliloquy*, one of the four separate films comprising the *Et cetera* tetralogy

The Experimental Short Films of Ashish Avikunthak

Abhishek Hazra

Nothing perhaps is more fragile than the construction of an oeuvre – the retrospective unity conferred on a ‘body’ of works that happen to have been authorized by the same name. And when this author also happens to inhabit different modes of authorial production – experimental films and cultural anthropology for example, as in the case of Ashish – it is all the more difficult to sustain the fiction of this retrospective unity. Which is not to deny the possibility of interconnected thematics that could stitch their way through bibliographic references and spliced 35 mm frames, but rather to acknowledge the inherent instability of these thematics as we can only glimpse them at their moment of dissolution. This essay then, is more of a fragmented trace of my engagement with Ashish’s films than any comprehensive commentary on the art and craft of Ashish Avikunthak¹.

While the larger theoretical armature is perhaps more clearly foregrounded in films like *Rummaging for Pasts*² or *Dancing Othello*³, it is in *Kalighat Fetish*⁴ that the armature attempts to make itself less visible, thereby rendering the difficulties of reading the film, a part of the filmic text.

How are we then to read this film? As a dense clump of pointers to the questions of gender, family and domesticity in the nationalist project in colonial Bengal?



A still from *Kalighat Fetish*

Indira Chowdhury's work⁵ has shown us, how the nineteenth century Bengali male, deeply disturbed at being categorised as 'effeminate' by his colonial masters, fashioned a new nationalist project that attempted to reclaim his own virility through the figure of a powerful mother figure – the new imaginary of the mother of the nation – while simultaneously appropriating the Orientalist language of Aryan supremacy. Sometimes this appropriation adopted inventive forms that staged a smooth translation between a benevolent and powerful Queen Victoria and a physically weakened but spiritually powerful Bharat Mata. In these feminine figures it saw an expression of a language of power that asserted itself without disturbing the traditional patriarchal gradients of power. Shakta traditions – practices of worship centring around Kali, that dark and powerful

Hindu goddess – was drawn upon heavily in constructing this image of the powerful Bharat Mata, ready to assert herself through the agency of her worthwhile sons. Is the cross-dressing *bahurup*ee Kali then a reminder of these complex dynamics of gender that animated the early years of the nationalist movement (and which continue to inform the Hindu fundamentalist program of our times, albeit in a modified form).

What is very interesting is how Ashish alludes to the figure of the nation in the film. Interspersed with shots of the Kalighat temple and the *bahurup*ee, are slow panning shots of a public gathering on a waterfront. The dull diffused light of a cloudy day and the unhurried pace of the camera create an almost lyrical ambience. People intersect the gaze of the camera and move in and out of the frame while the space and the place seems reluctant to divulge any further information about itself to the viewer. Is it Bombay? – you wonder to yourself.



A still from *Kalighat Fetish*

After a while you realise that perhaps it is a large procession (A Ganesha immersion perhaps?) and soon enough you spot – for a vanishing second almost – a tableau bearing a conspicuous decoration of the Indian tricolour. And before you can take your eye off those familiar colour combinations, helicopters and aeroplanes appear in the sky and disappear as soon as they make their entry. Though the camera fixes an even, distant gaze

in these sequences, without foregrounding any particular visual element, for many of us familiar with the rituals of the nation state – its triumphalist pathology of celebrating military muscle power – it is not difficult to recognise the familiar outlines of that intimate enemy.

Kalighat Fetish spends considerable time with this young person immersed in his technologies of selfhood – mostly we see him in a space that appears to be his own room, smoking *biris*, flipping through a pornographic magazine or attending to the aesthetics of his body through a series of push ups. He also then starts dressing up as the goddess Kali and later we see him dressed up in his *bahurupée* Kali attire walking on the terrace of a building. At some point, he takes a swig of water from a Coke bottle. The Coke label then also reminds us of other similar details: the stack of (CDs) we briefly noticed on his almirah or the Van Damme poster prominently displayed one of the room's walls.

Is this image of the Kali with the Coke bottle then a comment on the contemporaneity of tradition? A tradition that is irrevocably shaped by the contemporary and yet where the entire thrust of the discourse around tradition is geared towards simulating an erasure of precisely those tell tale marks of the contemporary. In the South Asian context, quite a significant number of our so called traditional cultural practices – the turban of the Sikhs, for example – are in fact of much recent vintage, and emerged as a direct result of the colonial encounter with the British. As Bernard Cohn's work⁶ has shown us that in the 1850s when the British started actively recruiting Sikh soldiers for their army, they insisted on recruits who 'looked' like Sikhs. Consequently the unshorn hair and the accompanying turban became the definitive marker of that uniquely Sikh quality of 'controlled wildness', which made them the favoured choice of the British.

The discourse of tradition then is but a performance of authenticity predicated on a notion of deep time. And it is a performance that relentlessly oscillates between the private and the public, where a public rhetoric makes its way into the interstices of intensely private spaces, even as fragments of the private get mobilised to create this larger public rhetoric. So, in *Kalighat Fetish*, while the *bahurupée* dresses himself up within the confines of his own room he casts away his masquerade in the liminal space of a *gali* - a threshold of a passageway which connects the outside of the road to the inside of the rooms while still technically being a part of the architectural unit of domesticity – the house.

The way Ashish renders the *gali* into an evocative space reminded me, perhaps a bit tangentially, of his paper on the Park Street cemetery in Calcutta where he makes clear his intellectual investment in the history of material culture.

Finally, colonial historiography – both the nationalistic and the subaltern schools – have ignored material culture either as primary sources for constructing narratives of colonial India or as objects of critical scrutiny. Implicit in this article is a claim to consider colonial material culture as a form of primary source material in order to construct more nuanced narratives of colony and colonization in India⁷.



A collage of stills from the film that form the background image for *Rummaging for Pasts* on Ashish's website (<http://www.avikunthak.com/Sicily.html>)

However, it is the film *Rummaging For Pasts: Excavating Sicily, Digging Bombay* that engages most with the question of material cultures and history. At one level, the film argues for a more expanded idea of archaeology that would treat both a shard of iron age pottery and an incomplete reel of found footage as objects equally worthy of disciplinary attention, for both collapses within their own bodies a entire universe of traces. Now, without undermining the relevance of this formulation, we should also note that the concept has already permeated the broader cultural understanding of archaeology. For example, in the Routledge Classics edition of Foucault's "The Archaeology of Knowledge", the cover shows a tight crop of a wall – presumably a city wall - whose surface has become a palimpsest of visual ephemera like printed advertisements and posters. On the other hand the concept of the found footage is no longer just an avant garde preserve, with a wide variety of found footage film festivals gaining increasing popularity. And now one can also argue that online platforms like You Tube, bring in an entirely new order of momentum to the circulation of 'found footage'.

For me, what was most engaging in *Rummaging For Pasts* was the way it brought in media under the shadow of the dead. For many of us, who have data trapped in old data cartridges that can no longer be accessed because the trusty Commodore that could read it has become a piece of dysfunctional plastic, dead media is a very palpable reality. And the frenetic blur that is our contemporary mediascape, obsolescence more than anything else seems to be the, operative logic. Dead media, however has a much longer history than Commodore computers. As Bruce Sterling quite persuasively argues in his Dead

Media Project⁸ – a fascinating online collaborative effort to document a wide variety of dead media - that the Incan quipu⁹ is as much of a media artefact as the Parisian Theatrophone¹⁰ of the 1880s.



A still from *Rummaging for Pasts*

From another perspective, one could also argue that *Rummaging For Pasts* opens up our ontological conception of the “found object”. If one were to ignore the rolling credits of the film, which by the way is quite interestingly conceptualised as trajectory of decomposition, one could imagine that the entire film is constructed from two sets of found footage material: the Indian wedding footage from a Bombay flea market and the extended interviews with archaeologists at Monte Polizzo from the unedited rushes of a National Geographic style documentary film. Perhaps the director of *Rummaging For Pasts* was a friend of this documentary’s cinematographer, and that’s how he got access to the rushes, saving him the trouble of recording (or “finding”) the final documentary from the TV. However, though the information in the credits, along with some fairly innocuous ‘Googling’ on Ashish Chadha, tells us the ‘real’ story – that the footage with the archaeologists was actually shot specifically for *Rummaging For Pasts* - what is interesting is that by adopting the formal language of straight forward interviews and talking heads that is quite different from Ashish’s other films, *Rummaging For Pasts*

seems to in a way play with these other possibilities of its own making. Does this confusion between original and found footage then offer us a way to view original footage as another kind of found footage?

Beckett's 1966 play *Come and Go* is known for being sparse, almost like the whisper that the characters in the play share between themselves. Eschewing plot, characterisation and dramatic tension the play instead stretches its precise formalism across a combinatorial framework. In withholding the identity of the three characters while submitting each one of them to the combinatorial schema, the play seems to allude to a crisis of identity. Are these three characters three uniquely different people or are their identities freely interchangeable? Is it impossible to conceive of a scenario where Flo could possibly take up Vi's place or Vi, Ru's? Perhaps those place markers on the stage indicated for Flo, Vi and Ru point not to their corporeal selves but to the more abstract entity of their subject position. The subject position of Flo, then is a discursive space that enables its inhabitant to affectively produce the subjecthood of Flo.



A still from *Antara*

Ashish's *Antara*¹¹, amplifies this aspect of the play beautifully, not by making the film more minimal than the play – the play anyway is at the limits of sparseness – but by

bringing in a flourish of contextual detail. *Antaral* locates the characters historically and culturally. The city in the film is Calcutta, or more precisely the area of south Calcutta close to the Tollygunge lake. The precision here stems not from locative exactitude – the film doesn't really disclose the street name and the house number – but from the strong sense of place that it produces. I will not digress into the historical significance that the North South polarity of Calcutta embodies, but as an incomplete placeholder for that deferred discussion, let me offer you this small extract from *A Princely Impostor?*, Partha Chatterjee's magisterial narrative of the secret history of Indian nationalism¹².

But by the turn of the century, as the city had grown as the premier administrative, mercantile and industrial centre of the Indian empire, the European residential areas had expanded south toward Ballygunge, while the successful Bengali professional groups moved away from the congested “native town” in the north of the city and built new houses in Bhawanipur. Landsdowne Road separated Bhawanipur from Ballygunge and soon acquired the stamp of the new lifestyle of the modern Calcutta bhadralok, freed from the constrictions of the large extended family mired in orthodox ritual, confidently engaged in the making of a new urban culture that could participate in the modern world and yet assert its vernacular identity, self-assured and relaxed in the company of the European elite.



A still from *Renunciation*, one of the four separate films comprising the *Et cetera* tetralogy

A tetralogy of four separate films – *Renunciation*, *Soliloquy*, *Circumcision*, *The Walk* - made between 1995-1997, *Et cetera*¹³ explores the dialectic between screen/film time and real time at various levels. As a mode of formal-conceptual investigation of temporality, screen time / real time explorations have a venerable history in experimental film making, particularly in the work of the structuralist filmmakers. Apart from the last film in the tetralogy, all the other films strongly foreground a solitary human subject staging an apparently unconscious performance for the camera. The film as such, then almost becomes a documentary evidence of this performance.

So, in a way, it is possible that *Et cetera* can claim a certain kinship to the practice of performance art. Though performance art has always revelled in the sheer recalcitrance of its own ephemerality, it also has an ongoing dialogue with the conceptual implications of ‘documenting’ a real time event. The documentary recording of a performance, even if it achieves a perfect temporal fidelity, matching its own time length to that of the performance, can only be a fragmented leftover of the actual performance. A leftover that perhaps urges the viewer to resuscitate the performance through the optics of his own imagination.

In fact, this disjuncture between the embodied presence of the performative moment and the document that attempts to record and capture it is wonderfully alluded to in the manner in which Ashish uncouples the aural and visual trajectory in *Renunciation* and *Soliloquy*. Both these films begin with the sound track synchronised, both spatially and temporally, to the visual that unfolds before us. However, close to the end of the film that relationship is very consciously ruptured. In *Renunciation*, even while the rickshaw puller has ceased pulling his rickshaw and is walking down the steps leading up to the Hooghly that flows beneath the Howrah bridge, we hear the familiar tinkling of his bell. As it begins, *Soliloquy*, synchronises the panting sounds of the lone walker to his on-screen image. The relationship between the intensity and volume of this panting sound and the on screen image of the walker, makes the viewer spatially orient himself to the location of the hand held camera, a camera that closely follows the advancing body of the walker. However, towards the close of the film, as the walker approaches and jumps across a dry river, the camera ceases to follow him closely. While the distance between the camera and the walker increases, with a proportional reduction in the size of his on-screen image, the sound continues to maintain its close proximity to the walker. As this contrast between the sound and image becomes more acute, with the spatial location of the walker indicated by the sound and that indicated by his on-screen image falling under two different orders of magnitude altogether, the supposed indexicality of the walker’s image is brought into a crisis – the walker then appears to oscillate in an interstitial space between image and sound.

All the four films in *Et cetera* are marked by a certain restrained lyricism that invites multiple viewings. Without getting into any litigious argument about formal attributes and disciplinary practices – questions like, “does the ‘looped projection’ belong more to video art than to experimental film ?” – one could tentatively suggest that the format of the video installation within the context of the white cube of the gallery, might be an interesting setting to experience this tetralogy.



A still from *Dancing Othello*

I had started this essay by underscoring the sheer fragility that undermines our idea of the oeuvre. However, notwithstanding this fragility, individual works do cast their dappled shadows over one another. As I was watching *Renunciation*, the first film in *Et cetera*, perhaps for the seventh or eighth time, I could hear faint murmurings of Peter Pillai's voice. Peter Pillai, as we would remember, is one of Arjun Raina's theatrical self in *Dancing Othello* – Ashish's collaborative meditation on Raina's practice of attempting to articulate a hybrid dance language of Shakespeare and Kathakali with all the political charge of a post-colonial critique. Towards the end of *Dancing Othello*, in an ironic self reflexive gesture that frames both Ashish and Raina, Peter Pillai directly addresses the filmmaker and chides him for his self indulgent practice of making films that lack any 'social message'. Perhaps this ironic framing of 'social message' could be viewed as a gestural attempt to rescue the social from the strictures of the 'social message'.

Does this gesture then give us a context with which to read the figure of the submerged subaltern in *Renunciation*? The rickshaw puller who pulls his hand drawn rickshaw over the Howrah bridge, abandons it, nonchalantly walks down the steps of the ghats, removes his slippers and walks into the Hooghly to disappear under its waters? Is this erasure of the subaltern figure, then Ashish's silent auto-critique? For many of us who would like to

see ourselves as inhabitants of the political left, that erasure is perhaps a reminder of our own hubris – a reminder that our enthusiasm for emancipatory politics has to be tempered with the realisation of its eventual irrelevance. The apparently elusive genesis of praxis is perhaps always elsewhere – just outside the horizon of our gaze.

¹ This is the film critic and curator Amrit Gangar on Ashish: "Filmmaking is not his full time profession. Academically, he is a student of archaeology at the Stanford University in the USA, where his dissertation is on the anthropology of Indian archaeology. 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 Bombay in 1999. Self-taught and financed, he is a prayaga filmmaker for over a decade."

In conversation: Ashish Avikunthak with Amrit Gangar

"Cinema Prayoga: Indian Experimental Films 1913-2006" eds., Brad Butler & Karen Mirza, 2006 (London: no.w.here).

<http://www.avikunthak.com/Amrit%20Gangar%20Interview.htm>

² **Rummaging for Past: Excavating Sicily , Digging Bombay (Digital Video, 27 minutes, Color, 2001)**

"Rummaging for Pasts is an experimental juxtaposition of two cinematic documents: the video dairy of an international archaeological excavation and a collection of assorted eight millimeter found footage. The archaeologists, digging on the site of Monte Pollizzo in Sicily, are in pursuit of an ephemeral past, its people and its meaning; the found footage, excavated from a roadside junkyard in a Bombay flea market, embodies forgotten images of a collective memory. Two archaeologies; one an academic endeavor, the other a collector's fetish; one investigating the pre-classical world of the Mediterranean in search of the indigenous Sicilian, the other a gaze into the private moments, ceremonies and rituals of urban middle-class India of the 70s. The film is an attempt to engage with the ambiguity inherent in the rumination over these pasts, once abandoned now reconstructed, assuming fresh connotations and meaning. The multiple objectives of the archaeological endeavor coalesce with the palpable visuals of a brief nostalgia to emerge as a continuous narrative." (Ashish Avikunthak)

<http://www.avikunthak.com/Sicily.html>

³ **Dancing Othello / Brihannala Ki Khelkali (2002, 16mm, Color, 18 minutes)**

"The film explores the moment of imaginative intersection of two seventeenth century classical artistic tradition- Shakespearean tragedy and South Indian dance form- Kathakali. Giving birth to a hybrid performance merging the epitome of English literature and the quintessence of Indian art. Situated in an ambivalent dramatic space, the Shakespearean English, as a symbol of a colonial language, collapses into the classical rendition of an orthodox dance form. Here Shakespearean theatricality meets the subtlety of Kathakali, subverted in the dramatic space of street theatre to give birth to a performative 'caliban'- Khelkali- a hybrid act of articulating the post-colonial irony of contemporary India." (Ashish Avikunthak)

<http://www.avikunthak.com/Othello.html>

⁴ **Kalighat Fetish / Kalighat Athikatha (1999, 16mm, Color, 22 minutes)**

"The film attempts to negotiate with the duality that is associated with the ceremonial veneration of the Mother Goddess Kali- the presiding deity of Calcutta. It delves into the subliminal layers of consciousness, underlying the ritual of Kali worship. The film ruminates on the nuanced trans-sexuality that is prevalent in the ceremonial performance of male devotees cross-dressing as Kali, in an act of obsessive devotion. This is interwoven with grotesque elements of a sacrificial ceremony, which forms a vital part of the worship of the Goddess. Both these narratives are merged in an experimental encounter, celebrated with liturgical

utterances in Sanskrit, in order to grasp the subtleties that are integral to Kali worship.” (Ashish Avikunthak)

<http://www.avikunthak.com/Kalighat.html>

⁵ Chowdhury, Indira, *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and Politics in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998

⁶ Cohn S. Bernard, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996

⁷ Chadha, Ashish (2006) "Ambivalent Heritage: Between Affect and Ideology in a Colonial Cemetery", *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 11(3): 339-363

⁸ <http://www.deadmedia.org/>

⁹ The Quipu is a system of knotted cords used by the Incas to store massive amounts of information important to their culture and civilization. The colors of the cords, the way the cords are connected together, the relative placement of the cords, the spaces between the cords, the types of knots on the individual cords, and the relative placement of the knots are all part of the logical-numerical recording. (from http://agutie.homestead.com/files/Quipu_B.htm)

¹⁰ 'Theatrophone' was a home entertainment device in which microphones were installed on the stages of such theatres as the Paris Opera to pick up the sounds of live performances and relay them by wire to the telephone exchange, where an operator was on hand to offer a selection of programmes to subscribers renting Theatrophone receivers. Several different programs, related from various theatres, were available to subscribers who could make their own selection by revolving a switch and inserting coins into their machines to buy a fixed amount of listening time.

¹¹ Endnote | Antara (2005, 16mm, Color, 18 minutes)
“Three women reminisce about their times at school and rekindle and affirm old friendships. They share a strange secret about each other that is never made known to us. The film is a cinematic interpretation of Samuel Beckett's 1967 dramaticule, "Come and Go". “ (Ashish Avikunthak)
<http://www.avikunthak.com/Antara.html>

¹² Chatterjee, Partha, *A Princely Impostor? The Kumar of Bhawal and the Secret History of Indian Nationalism*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2002

¹³ Et cetera (1997, 16mm, Color, 33 minutes)
“Et cetera is a tetralogy of four separate films thematically coherent within a conscious bonding and exploratory in nature. They seek to examine the various levels at which the reality of human existence functions. In these films, specific ritual exertations have been focused on and their movements, contemplated upon, by studying the dynamics of their etymologies. The relationship between the living and the inanimate is the pivot on which the action in the films occur. These largely mundane actions, prevailing in the vocabulary of daily living is deliberated upon. Here they are mythized in the context they appear, either as a tonsuring act or a walk in the cemetery. Thus the attempt is to move beyond the creations of grandiose actions to give semiotic credibility to often observed diurnal performances, which are neither grand gestures nor major events. The tetralogy is an intention to comprehend the complexities, subtle and obvious, inherent in these movements. This is constantly emphasized in Et cetera as symbolic poetics and celebrated.” (Ashish Avikunthak)