

ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK RETROSPECTIVE

gratis
7. - 12.6.19



Wolf freut sich, Filmemacher, Künstler und Anthropologen Ashish Avikunthak für eine von Abhishek Nilamber kuratierte Retrospektive seiner Filme willkommen zu heißen. Mit großer Begeisterung möchten wir euch zu Filmvorführungen, Q&As und Diskussionen mit einem der aufregendsten indischen Filmschaffenden der Gegenwart einladen.

Ashish Avikunthak ist seit 24 Jahren als Filmemacher aktiv. 2014 wurde er von der Art Review als einer der Future Greats des Jahres bezeichnet: „In einer Kunstwelt, in der eine immer größer werdende Zahl von Kritiker*innen bemängelt, dass die globalisierte Kunst zunehmend die Form eines ausgehöhlten visuellen Esperanto annimmt, bleiben Avikunthaks Filme fest in einer indischen Epistemologie verankert, zeichnen sie aber zugleich durch ein Verständnis für westliche Avantgarde-Praktiken wie denen eines Andrei Tarkovsky oder eines Samuel Becketts aus.“

Wolf is happy to welcome filmmaker, artist and thinker Ashish Avikunthak for a retrospective of his films curated by Abhishek Nilamber. It's with great excitement that we invite you all to join us to film screenings, Q&A's, audience discussions with one of the most interesting contemporary Indian filmmakers

Ashish Avikunthak has been making films for the past 24 years. In 2014, He was named Future Greats 2014 by Art Review. Its citation succinctly describes his films: "In an artworld where an increasing number of critics are arguing that much globalised art takes the form of hollowed-out visual Esperanto, Avikunthak's works insist on an Indian epistemology while utilising a rigorously formal visual language that is clearly aware of Western avant-garde practices such as those of Andrei Tarkovsky and Samuel Beckett. These are self-consciously difficult works that are filmed in a self-consciously beautiful way".

THE CHURNING
OF KALKI (KALKI-
MANTHANKATHA)

The Intentions Behind The Retrospective

I first met Ashish Avikunthak in the framework of research project United Screens. Ashish in the interview with me, described films in three main categories and I paraphrase -

Coca-Cola films : mass produced, mass distributed, exploitative and appropriative of the local sensibilities and resources. This is crass entertainment.

Wine films : crafted for a niche group, requires acquired taste to palate the serving and hence barriers to access are high. This is high-brow culture.

Moonshine films : Moonshines are brewed for the community/tribe with love, passion and local ingredients. This is radical art. Ashish considers himself to be a moonshine filmmaker who is uncompromisingly independent.

His films and his practice, have been primarily discussed in either an academic and/or theoretical framework. And with this retrospective event series at Wolf Kino, we intend to share five of Ashish's special brews, with the cinema community in Berlin. And just like how the moonshiners are eager to gather reactions from different tribes about their brew, we along with Ashish, are eager to learn what Berlin audience thinks of these five films that we have programmed.

Another intention of this retrospective, is to highlight the long friendship based collaboration between Ashish and his co-producer Kristina Konrad (Weltfilm), that supported four of Ashish's films since 2012. Such collaborations are very important, where the market and nations have made us believe that only commerce and diplomacy are grounds for long term collaborations. Kristina and Ashish's sustained collaboration stand as an example of transnational collaborations based on mutual respect and artistic admiration. Such a close collaboration with an Indian filmmaker and German film production company is unique. Arguably, this collaboration between a German production compa-



KATHO UPANISHAD

ny and an Indian filmmaker is one of the most long-standing Indo-German collaboration in the history of Indian cinema since the partnership between Franz Osten and Himanshu Rai in 1930s under the aegis of Bombay Talkies.

A major motivation for this program to come to fruition is the passion, dedication and enthusiasm of the team at Wolf Kino, who have consistently innovated the idea of 'cinema programming' to provide us with multiple lenses to look at cinematic arts of varied forms.

- *Abhishek Nilamber*

Begegnungen mit Ashish und Basab - und ihren Filmen

Ich lernte Ashish 2011 in Locarno bei den OpenDoor meetings kennen. Das Projekt, das er damals vorstellte, „a psycho-political film that symbolically explores penetrating violence by the state in Indian contemporary society onto the intimate spheres of individuals“, faszinierte und interessierte mich, die ich noch nie Indien gewesen bin, und wir verstanden uns auch persönlich sehr gut. Seine Arbeitsweise: Mit kleinem vertrautem Team und wenig Geld, unabhängig zu produzieren, passt(e) mir sehr. Wir blieben in email-Kontakt. Nachdem ich seine Filme, in die ich fasziniert eintauchte, ohne sie zu verstehen, gesehen hatte, beschloss ich, Ashish' Arbeit zu unterstützen.

Statt des oben genannten Projektes, realisierte er ein Jahr später Rati Chakravayuh, der hochkonzentrierte „one-shot-film“, bei dem ich half, die Postproduktion fertig zu stellen. Normalerweise steige ich früh ein, lese die Treatments oder Drehbücher, gucke Rohschnitte, nicht so bei Ashish's Filmen. Seine rigore formale Bildsprache, seine eigenwillige und eigenständige Arbeitsweise und natürlich auch die örtliche große Distanz, brachten mich gänzlich davon ab, mich einzumischen. Wir sprachen nie darüber.

Alle 4 Filme, bei denen ich auf diese Weise beteiligt war, führen mich in eine mir unbekannte Welt, die Ashish auch nicht versucht, in eine mir vertraute Sprache zu „übersetzen“, so dass ich gar nicht in Versuchung komme, sie „entschlüsseln“ oder interpretieren zu wollen. Sie berühren etwas Existentielles, Untergründiges, sie sind für mich düster und wunderschön.

2017 sahen wir uns in Berlin wieder, als Aapothkalin Trikalika | The Kali of Emergency im Forum Expanded aufgeführt wurde. Und ich lernte den Kameramann, Basab Mullick, kennen. Basab wohnte bei mir, spät nachts, todmüde von der Berlinale und ihren Wanderungen durch Berlin, wo sie die Stadt neugierig und aufmerksam erkundeten, redeten wir noch stundenlang über Indien, Deutschland, den Holocaust, Politik, Filme, Literatur, Musik...Ich kenne wenig Menschen in Deutschland, die so viel wissen von der deutschen Geschichte, Philosophie und Kunst wie Basab. In diesen nächtlichen Streifzügen habe ich viel von Basab's und Ashish's Indien und ihrem künstlerischen und filmischen Ansatz erfahren.

- Kristina Konrad (Weltfilm)



ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK

with London, Locarno, Rotterdam, and Berlin film festivals among other locations. He has had retrospective of his works at Centre for Moving Image Arts, Bard College (2015), Apeejay Arts Gallery, New Delhi (2015), Rice University (2014), Signs Festival, Trivandrum (2013), Festival International Signes de Nuit, Paris (2012), Yale University (2008), and National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai (2008) and Les Inattendus, Lyon (2006). In 2011 he was short listed for the Skoda Prize for Indian Contemporary Art. He has a PhD in Cultural and Social Anthropology from Stanford University and has earlier taught at Yale University. He is now an Associate Professor in Film/Media at Harrington School of Communication, University of Rhode Island.

Biographies

Ashish Avikunthak films have been shown worldwide in film festivals, galleries and museums. Notable screenings were at the Tate Modern, London, Centre George Pompidou, Paris, Taipei Biennial 2012, Shanghai Biennial 2014, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, along

Abhishek Nilamber (1987, Hyderabad - India) works with projects and products which catalyses democratisation of knowledge. He is a curator and project manager at SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin and programmer and creative consultant at Backyard Civilization, Kochi, India. Nilamber has been living and working in Berlin since May 2016.

PROGRAMM

Fr 7.6 19:00 Uhr KATHO UPANISHAD

Regie: Ashish Avikunthak, mit Ram Gopal Bajaj, Suvrat Joshi, Indien 2011, 80 Min., OmU bengalisch mit englischen Untertiteln

Ein Film über das Streben nach spiritueller Erlösung, in dem Nachiketa und Yama, der Gott des Todes, in einen metaphysischen Dialog treten.

Fr. 7.6. 7PM

A film about a man's pursuit for nirvana that centers on the metaphysical dialogue between Nachiketa to Yama, the God of Death.



THE EMERGENCY
OF KALI

Sa 8.6. 19:00 Uhr RATI CHAKRAVYUH

Regie: Ashish Avikunthak, Indien/Deutschland 2013, 103 Min., OmU bengalisch mit englischen Untertiteln

In diesem ersten indischen single-shot Feature Film treffen sich sechs frischvermählte Paare und eine Priesterin, um über das Leben und den Tod zu reden, über den Anfang, das Ende und alles im Dazwischen - bevor sie schließlich miteinander Selbstmord begehen.

Sa. 8.6. 7PM

In this first indian single-shot feature film six young newlywed couples and a priestess meet after a mass wedding. They sit in a circle and talk - before committing mass suicide.

RATI CHAKRAVYUH



So 9.6. 20:00 Uhr Cinema of Prayoga: Theory against experimental from India - Talk by Ashish Avikuntak

In seinem Talk wird Ashish Avikuntak sein Konzept eines „Cinema of Prayoga“ vorstellen, mit dem er den Eigenheiten

des indischen Avantgarde-Kinos Rechnung trägt und es gleichzeitig von westlichen Traditionen abgrenzt.

Su 9.6. 8PM

In his talk Ashish Avikuntak will argue for a definite theory of practice distinct from the experimental or avant-garde cinema of the West to comprehend the idiosyncrasies of Indian cinematic avant-garde.



Mo 10.6. 19:00 Uhr THE CHURNING OF KALKI (KALKIMANTHANKATHA)

Regie: Ashish Avikunthak, Indien/Deutschland 2015, 79 Min., OmeU bengalisch mit englischen Untertiteln
Zwei Schauspieler aus Kalkutta gehen zur größten Menschenversammlung der Welt - dem Hindu Festival Kumbh Mela. Dort suchen sie Kalki - die zehnte und letzte Inkarnation Vishnus. Ihr Pläne werden jedoch von einem jähen Kriegsausbruch durchkreuzt...

Mo. 10.6. 7PM

Following the footsteps of Samuel Beckett's „Waiting for Godot“, two actors from Calcutta go to the largest gathering of humans on earth - the Hindu festival of Maha Kumbh of Allahabad to search for Kalki - the Tenth and the final avatar of Lord Vishnu.

Di 11.6. 19:00 Uhr THE EMERGENCY OF KALI

Regie: Ashish Avikunthak, Indien/Deutschland 2016, 79 Min., OmeU bengalisch mit englischen Untertiteln

Die schrecklichen, wie majestätischen Inkarnationen der Göttin Kali stehen im Zentrum dieses Films - einer metaphysischen Kontemplation in Zeiten unaufhörlicher Katastrophen.

Tu. 11.6. 7PM

Centering on the terrible and the majestic incarnations of Goddess Kali and her celestial avatars, this film is a metaphysical contemplation in times of perpetual emergencies.

DISPASSIONATE
LOVE

Mi 12.6. 19:00 Uhr DISPASSIONATE LOVE

Regie: Ashish Avikunthak, Indien/Deutschland 2018, 91 Min., OmeU bengalische mit englischen Untertiteln

Die geteilte Erinnerung an einen Freund, der Selbstmord begang, lässt drei Liebende langsam in einen Abgrund aus Begehren, Trauer und Sehnsucht rutschen.

We. 12.6. 7PM

Recalling memories of a friend who committed suicide, three lovers slowly slide into an anguish labyrinth of desire, loss and longing.



RATI CHAKRAVYUH

Interview with Ashish Avikunthak by P.K. Surendran

Q: You have been using lot of myths, rituals in your films. In this film you are presenting the Gods and Goddesses directly. How do you look at this?

A: I see my films as a cinematic intervention of the later – here the ancient is embattling the modern. I see my work in a long tradition of commentarial practices in Indian tradition, where the ancient in the form of religiosity, rituals and the sacred is invoked to challenge the present, wrestle with the contemporary in search of an invigorating understanding of being. This is not mere reinterpretation, or retelling or reimagination or reinvention. My practice is itself act of religiosity, devotion and consecration. I think of my work in the lines of sculptors who make temple idols, or artists who drew paintings of divinities or the ritualists who presides over ceremonies. More recently, Raja Ravi Verma and Dadasaheb Phalke who infused modern technologies like lithography and cinema respectively with Indian religiosity. We are all enforcing the contemporary with the ancient. We are all suturing the present with the past. A past which is ephemeral and endangered. A past that is being politically and culturally eradicated. My quest is to not merely to excavated this past, but to enliven it into our present consciousness. In short, through

my films I am invaginating the modern with the ancient.

Q: There was lot of references to nudity and sex of Gods and Goddesses orally in your earlier films. In this film, you show the Gods and Goddesses in various forms. They walk naked, wearing mask of Kali. You show one of the naked female and her genitals in various positions.

A: Nudity in the history of cinema has most often been represented as the “sexed body”. This is the depiction of the human body that has overt sexual connotations. These sexed bodies are shown in filmic narratives involved in an erotic or in a sexual act. These are concupiscent figures that are charged with the carnal and lustful desires – both amorous and violent. In Indian cinema where a sanctimonious censorship regime has prohibited the portrayal of nude bodies, the sexed body appears as the “risqué body” – sexually provocative, seductive and lurid. In this cultural ecology, the nude body is unequivocally represented and consumed as the sexed body. With the rise of the pornographic industry the consanguinity between the nude body as the sexed body has been sealed. In my films, I disrupt and rupture this relationship between the nude body and the sexed body. In my films nudity, sexuality or sensuality emanates from an entirely distinctive ideological, historical and philosophical domain. It is specifically located in a pre-modern Indian (Hindu, Buddhist and Jain) iconographic representation of the human body that is conspicuous in sculptural and pictorial traditions. Here the nude body unambiguously exemplifies the divine at its profound and banal at its inconsequential. I, very especially invoke this iconography of the nude body in Aapothkalin Trikalika. The nude body for me is the pure body, the pristine body, the primeval body and the primordial body. The ideological connotation of the pure, the pristine, the primeval, and the primordial are deeply located in the religious worldview that has been expressed in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions. The divine nude is seen at the its earliest in Indian iconographic record

in the second century BCE especially in the context of the Yaksha and Yakshi figures that populate the various Buddhist sculptural traditions in particular the Amravati and the Mathura School of Art. Subsequently the iconography of the divine nude is seen throughout Indian subcontinent irrespective of religious beliefs. Divine figures, heavenly figure, and even royal figures are shown naked to symbolize their magisterial immaculateness.

Q: Your portrayal of epic characters from Hindu mythology and incidents are in its extreme. Explicit sexual dialogues about Sita, etc. Her love for Ravana and her hate against Ram. She even questions Ram's masculinity. It is a blow to the popular belief. We are too conservative to accept such interpretation in India which is slowly becoming very right wing. Why do you do this?

For me mythologies and especially Indian mythologies are living traditions. They are not static texts that exist in the western world. They are living traditions. Epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas were never held as static texts. They were always in motion, constantly changing, transforming in a continuous process of metamorphosis. These were living texts. These were oral, ontological tradition rather than an orthodox written tradition. Ideas, thoughts, words, stories were always constant process of flux. They were in endless process of evolution and alteration. Neither were these singular texts as we seen in the Greek or Roman traditions. These had multiple lives, many origins and many forms. For instance, the critical edition of Mahabharata that has been published by the Bhandakar Oriental Institute in Pune was produced from 1,259 manuscripts. In the case of Ramayana, A. K. Ramanujan's famous essay: "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and Three thoughts on Translation", which was removed from the history curriculum of Delhi University by Hindutava forces few years ago, elegantly argues for the multiplicity and diversity of the Ramayana tradition. It is the hegemonic essentiality of moderni-

ty with its fixation with written, closed, one, unchanging artifact – the book, that a certain permanency is desired. Indian tradition has always resisted this idea, because of the intense of amount of diversity and multiplicity that has existed in India. Aravindan's masterpiece Kanchana Sita and my film is part of this long practice of retelling, reinterpreting and reconfiguring religiosity. The brilliance of these texts is that they have a substantial space for contemporary interpenetrative spheres to interact with them. Each age with read, interpret and make there own Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Q: There are single shot films like Russian Ark (Alexander Sokurov) and Empire or Sleep (Andy Warhol). Tell us how different is your concept of time in comparison with these films and your earlier films.

Both Russian Ark and Empire or Sleep are two separate end of the same representational cinematic spectrum. Both the films are about spectacle. In Empire or Sleep the cinematic spectacle is that of extreme banality. In the case of Russian Ark it is hyper spectacular. Both are focused on visual excess. In case of Warhol his films are product of Pop Art world that he was ushering and the rise of American minimalism that he was part of in the 1960s. On the other hand Sukurov's work can be located in the nostalgic resuscitation of a pre-Soviet history in a post-socialist Russian world. Both films for me are not about temporality. They are exploiting temporality to push a narrative teleology of

THE CHURNING
OF KALKI (KALKI-
MANTHANKATHA)



spectacle. Here the temporality of the single shot is merely employed to advance the narrative of the cinematic text. In the case of Warhol it is anticipating the conceptual valence of a minimalist narrative – the man sleeping or the changing façade of the Empire State building. In the case of Sukorouy, the single shot is employed to illustrate historical narrative of pre-Soviet Russian heritage. In both cases, the ontology of cinematic temporality is manipulated to drive the telos of the narrative. In Rati Chakravayuh, I am trying to make a cinema that is only about the ontology of the time. It is not a handmaiden for narrative advancement. I think of cinema as a temporal medium. Therefore time is important. Time is central to my understanding of cinema. So I make cinema of temporality. I think cinema is the only medium of representation that allows us to work with temporality. It is as Andrei Tarkovsky suggested 'Sculpting in Time'. I began my film work with a series of single shot films called, Etcetera (16mm/color/1997) and then I made Katho Upanishad in 2011 as a triple-shot film, and now, Rati Chakravayuh. For me, single shot is a cinema of temporality. Here time takes precedence rather than narrative. This is not just an aesthetic or a stylistic choice, but a political choice. In this world of high intensity montage film making a single shot allows for an introspective form of cinematic experience. In this context the possibility of making film in a single shot remains for me the most profound way of exploring cinema, and Rati Chakravayuh for me is its most explicit example.

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8,5€ / 7,5€*

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This pamphlet is printed by Wolf Kino GmbH for the Ashish Avikunthak Restrospective, taking place at WolfKino in Berlin between 7 - 12 of June 2019.



Mit Unterstützung des Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata

With the support of the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata