

Experimenta India: Curating and Exhibiting Experimental Film, Video and Moving Image in India

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In 2003, over three evenings at the British Council auditorium in Bombay, a packed hall of about 300 people experienced a day in the life of an insect materially imprinted in celluloid. Filmmaker Stan Brakhage reanimated dead moths by painstakingly affixing the remains of these insects, with leaves and flower petals, onto a 16mm film strip, and fed it through the projector, creating the illusion of life through light. Brakhage evoked the “fragile sensation of its movement, batting against the screen, hurtling in descent”.¹ The effect was exhilarating and terrifying. The film was one of 15 non-narrative, abstract 16mm films, including *Wavelength* by Michael Snow, *Unsere Afrikareise* by Peter Kubelka, and *Berlin Horse* by Malcolm Le Grice, curated by Indian experimental filmmaker Shai Heredia for Experimenta 2003, the first festival dedicated to the practice of experimental cinema and video art in India (figure 1). Founded in 2003, Experimenta India has been nurturing an alternative community that recuperates and assembles international and Indian artists’ films and videos, both historical and contemporary. In this article, I analyse this curatorial history for its engagement with the dynamics of experimentation with the moving image and video art in India; as an index of the challenges of retrieving and remembering of marginalized, elusive or dismissed artistic practices; and the politics, both material and aesthetic, of the curatorial decisions that inform such historiographic work.

The 2013 edition of Experimenta kicked off on November 27 with a rare screening of Pattabhi Rama Reddy’s celebrated 1970 film *Samskara* (Funeral Rites), based on U.R. Ananthamurthy’s 1965 novel, a bold and blistering look at the caste system (figure 2). The print on view was discovered by Heredia at the Arsenal—Institute for Film and Video Art in

Berlin whose collections included a lot of regional Indian cinema. The screening foregrounded questions of living archives, and of access that often defines such curatorial work.² Significantly, the National Film Archive of India also has a print of *Samskara* that cannot be taken out of the archive.

Walter Benjamin reminds us that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”³ It is then significant that Heredia chose to screen *Samskara*, a Kannada-language film in 2013, when Indian state and cinema came together to celebrate the Indian cinema centenary. The memorialization was marked by competing set of affective, material and ideological investments in the national, with a particular privileging of Hindi-language Bombay cinema. Experimenta used the occasion of the film centenary to recover alternative film histories and avenues of distribution and exhibition.

In the words of its curators, the festival envisions an “idiosyncratic movement of cinema concerned with decontextualizing ‘experimental film’ by exploring fresh cultural relationships between genre and form, light and motion, physics and grace.”⁴ The conscious focus of the festival has been to specially reshape the concerns of the traditional avant-garde to include feminine perspectives and desires that have often been occluded from the histories of Indian cinema. Each edition of Experimenta is marked by an extremely diverse body of works ranging from archival recuperation to new contemporary works. Archival screenings include Kamal Swaroop’s *Om-Dar-Ba-Dar* (1988), Nina Shivdasani’s *Chhatrabhang* (1976), Amitabh Chakraborty’s *Kaal Abhirati* (1989), Sanjiv Shah’s *Hun Hunshi Hunshilal* (1992), early D.G. Phalke films like *Lanka Dahan* (1917), and the experimental documentaries produced by the Films Division during the 1960s and ’70s.

Amongst new works, Shambhavi Kaul’s visually stunning *Mount Song* (2013) uses reconstituted imagery from Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s and ’80s, to create an ominous

setting in which doors, cages, lanterns and other familiar genre artefacts seem to take on a life of their own (figure 3). Responding to the loss of an imagined ideal place by mobilizing “futuristic digital artefacts”, Kaul interrogates how the travel of cultural artefacts across borders results in an unexpected melding. Ayisha Abraham’s *Enroute or Of a Thousand Moons* (2011) is a collage of various found and salvaged home-videos from discarded family archives (figure 4). The decontextualized, grainy videos offer little in terms of actual documentation of time, place or history but are connected to a number of forms that come together to create a synchronous rhythm. In its texture and materiality, the 3-inch spool of 8mm film resembles an inanimate object, shelved and ignored. With the passage of light through a glass lens, images once hidden away in the obsolescence of their form are brought to life, conjured up in the manner of what Abraham calls “phantoms of the past”. Kush Badhwar’s *Blood Earth* (2013) explores the relationship between music, struggle and cultural responses to violence through word and sound. It offers a portrait of conflict in modern-day India, focusing on a bauxite-rich region in Odisha where the tribals have been resisting the incursions of the mining industry. It interweaves song, farming, village life and a political meeting to improvise a junction between voice, music, silence, sound and noise. Shot on celluloid and produced by the Film and Television Institute of India, Pratanik Basu’s surreal and poetic diploma film *Sakhisona* uses black-and-white aesthetics to explore the myths hidden in the archaeological layers of the earth. The film narrates the story of Sakhisona who elopes with her lover in search of a home and ends up in an abandoned village by the woods. Constantly switching between the modes of folklore and history, the film re-enacts stories from the recently uncovered remains of a monastery and 6th-century objects in an experimental narrative pattern.

The festival also showcased Priya Sen’s *Noon Day Dispensary*, part of a video series from the Savda-Ghevra Resettlement Colony in Delhi (2014). This vérité-style documentary

disrupts easy narratives around eviction, resettlement and city planning. In its style, the video contests the hold of developmental documentaries and rights-based agendas over forms of explanation and narration. Through the “performance” of the filmmaker and her frame, the work describes the range of negotiations and subjectivities that accompany the process of uprootment and resettlement of the city’s illegal occupants (figure 5). Iram Ghufraan’s *There is Something in the Air* (2011) blends documentary and fictional tropes to weave a narrative that is based on “hearsay”. With no experts, no eyewitnesses and unreliable narrators, the film is a series of dream narratives. The film invites the viewer into a fantastical world as it brings together accounts of the women “petitioners” at the shrine of a Sufi saint who are “afflicted” by something in the air—be it a spirit, demon, ghost or djinn—and explores the possibilities that “insanity” produces (figure 6).

Though the films and practitioners don’t always share aesthetic ideologies or positions, marked as they are by an immense variety of concerns and styles, they share certain larger approaches. These are: a non-acceptance of definitions and distinctions between genres of film—narrative, experimental, documentary and fiction; a rejection of the idea that cinema is only a mass medium, its production, distribution and exhibition dictated by the marketplace; and a bid to explore the interface between the languages of the visual and performing arts on the one hand and the cinematic medium on the other. Rather than asking “What is experimental film?” the festival creates a platform to inquire “What can the moving image do?” Thus, for Heredia, both as a filmmaker and as a curator, it has been important to move beyond a generic category, “experimental film”, to generate reflexive categories such as “Optical Rhythm”, “Digital Mutations”, “Fact and Fantasy”, “Sculpture of the Screen” and “Politics of Form”. The curatorial organization of the festival programme across its various editions reflects the important role Experimenta has been playing in expanding the porous

boundaries of film as art in India, and creating a space that critically reflects upon the continuously fluid and diverse engagements with the moving image.

CAPTIONS

1. Experimenta film festival poster, Mumbai, 2003.
2. Image from original *Samskara* brochure, designed by S.G. Vasudev, 1970.
3. Modernist aesthetics: *Mount Song*, Shambhavi Kaul, 2013.
4. Fragment of a salvaged home-video re-animated: *Enroute or Of a Thousand Moons*, Ayisha Abraham, 2011.
5. Still from *Noon Day Dispensary*, Priya Sen, 2014.
6. Exploring the periphery of sanity: *There is Something in the Air*, Iram Ghufuran, 2011.

NOTES

¹ Darragh O'Donoghue, "Mothlight", *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 32, July 2004, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/mothlight/>. Accessed March 10, 2018.

² Author's interview with Shai Heredia in February 2018.

³ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 255.

⁴ Shai Heredia, "Bombay Experiments", in Brad Butler and Karen Mirza, ed., *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film & Video 1913–2006*, (London: no.w.here, 2006), p. 46.

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