

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007  
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Towards Performative Mimesis**

*Parul Dave Mukherji, School of Arts &  
Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New  
Delhi, India*

The central objective of this paper is to rethink representation in art not in terms of conventional mimesis but performance. This emerges out of engaging with traditional theories of Indian aesthetics, which are interspersed with mimetic terminology but are deeply grounded in the performative context. As an inevitable part of such an inquiry, one enters into the space of comparative aesthetics and sets up a conversation between Indian and western notions of mimesis. This throws up a number of issues - a. to question binary logic and euro-centrism under-girding art history and performance theory b. to construct critical tools to examine notions of visual representation in Sanskrit texts on visual arts and performance c. to deploy Derridean concept of new mimesis to understand traditional mimetic terminology and theory in texts such as the *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* d. to explore the possibility of engaging with theoretical framework implicit in the traditional Indian texts of aesthetics and visual arts.

The traditional terminology of mimesis in the classical Sanskrit texts of visual arts and dramaturgy such as *anukṛti* (performative mimesis), *sādṛśya* (resemblance, literally similar looking) and *satya* (“naturalistic”) has been relegated to the margins on the account of certain colonial imperatives. Early cultural nationalists in India avoided engaging with them as they were too reminiscent of western notions of mimesis and so these terms had no use for polarizing distinctions between what was commonly understood as the degenerate materialist west and spiritual India. Hence I take it to be a critical post colonial project to rehabilitate the marginalized theories of performative mimesis which can offer us a new vantage point to look at early Indian art. Ironically, the impetus for a retake on this terminology comes from contemporary western thinkers who had challenged conventional notions of mimesis within their intellectual discourse. However, dependence on western theories of mimesis is both productive and disabling simultaneously.

The frame of reference provided by the western notion of mimesis and its shadow on the interpretations of Indian concepts or conceptualizations, still forces our understanding of *anukṛti* (or similar seemingly puzzling concepts) in terms of a counter-part, as it were. While it is important to realize the question of cultural difference between the two, any attempt towards a radical reconstruction of western aesthetics would entail explaining why representation, mimesis, icon, visibility have such metaphysical force in the discussion of western art.

## Introduction:

At first glance, 'performative mimesis' may appear to be an oxymoron. While 'performative' seems to refer to the realm of the body, temporality and presence, the term 'mimesis' gestures towards the visual, the metaphorical and the 'real'. What do I aim to achieve by juxtaposing two terms that seem to be drawn from what culture theorists have considered as mutually exclusive cultural domains? Crudely put, mimesis seems to be squarely located within a complex intellectual discourse in the west since Plato such that it has naturalized itself as 'western.' It invokes the realm of vision, visual representation and visuality, which again lays claim on western genealogy as much in art as in philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

## Rethinking Visuality in Indian Context:

This is precisely what I intend to contest via the notion of PM and my engagement with Sanskrit texts of dramaturgy and visual arts. Visuality need not be taken as a western phenomenon but a culturally specific plurality. Granted that visuality in the west developed along a specific trajectory and was later even constitutive of modernity, it cannot be taken as an absent phenomenon in pre-colonial art practice and theory in India. If visuality has been so far read as a lack in art practice and theory in Indian, the problem lies more in our conceptual framework that we have derived from the western intellectual traditions than the objects of our study. By this, I certainly don't imply that time has come to turn our attention to indigenous intellectual traditions which are accessible to our post-colonial selves in some pure state. Rather it is by selecting appropriate tools from certain form of critical theory, which are amenable to our project that we can open up the past in a productive way. Unless we have in place a meta-theory about the west, productive alliance with critical theory is impossible.

Traditional texts on visual arts and dramaturgy had a well-developed vocabulary and terminology, which, despite the problem of translation and commensurability, closely approximates the notion of visuality. By visuality, I mean the necessary visual connection between the phenomenal world and modes of signification developed in any cultural formation, which intends it. In other words, visuality is not an ahistorical notion but certain cultures at certain periods take interest in observing the world and forge means to represent it as closely as possible.

In order to foreground this, I will bring into focus on a particular section of a Sanskrit text, *Abhinavabhāratī* of approximately 10<sup>th</sup> century CE which is a commentary by Abhinavagupta on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2<sup>nd</sup> BCE-2<sup>nd</sup> CE). This section encompasses aesthetics, dramaturgy and visual arts besides logic and linguistics. The text has preserved a vibrant debate surrounding the question of visual representation in drama. A divided opinion prevailed as to the relevance of *anukṛti*, a deeply problematic term for translation. There prevailed a group of aestheticians that embraced *anukṛti* (Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Śrī Śankuka) as the constitutive element of performance and visual arts whereas another group (Bhatta Tauṭa, Bhaṭṭa Nayaka, Abhinavagupta himself) vehemently countered its importance. Despite the popularity of this text among Indologists and philosophers, it has not received the critical attention it deserves for the implications it offers to the study of art history and aesthetics and the question of visual representation.

The term performative mimesis had to be coined to translate *anukṛti*. Similar tricky terms are found in *śilpaśāstra* or classical art treatises such as *sādrśya* and *satya* which literally

mean 'similar looking' and 'truthful' respectively. All these terms seem to veer between what we understand by mimesis and visuality. This is not to suggest that terms such as visuality and mimesis, which have a specific history and valency in the western intellectual traditions, are to be imposed on the Sanskrit terms. It is precisely the problem of translation, which will be our point of entry into the discourse. However, in my title, I have preferred the term mimesis to visuality precisely to re-appropriate the former as it has an entrenched status in Art History and make it stand almost equivalent to *anukṛti*.

It has become a commonplace to accept a wide range of styles of representation in Indian art from Ajanta paintings, to Gupta sculptures, Mahabalipuram relief sculptures as idealistic and anti-naturalistic. This view can be traced back to colonial state of the discipline when strict binaries between Indian and western art were maintained whereby hierarchy between the art of the colonized and the colonizer was sustained. When cultural nationalists like A K Coomaraswamy sought to defend Indian art against what he perceived as its misrepresentations in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the hierarchy was simply inverted and binaries were left intact. So while western art was seen as too naturalistic and hence condemned as materialistic, Indian art was elevated to a higher spiritual realm via rhetoric of transcendentalism.

When the textual tradition on visual arts came to light in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it posed as a problem. The classical Sanskrit texts like the *Citrasūtra* was full of mimetic terminology and this was seen as a disjunction; a contradiction between the surviving images on temples and caves and the textual counterpart. Coomaraswamy deftly managed this by a radical terminological recasting through Neo-Platonic framework.

However, the succeeding generation of scholars of post-colonial times recognized the problem but simply made nativist claims that Indian art was never deficient in naturalism but in fact, the traditional Indian artists were as well versed with 'scientific' norms of artificial perspective as the Renaissance masters.<sup>2</sup>

By PM, this is precisely the position that I intend to reject. Such cultural nativism blocks us from really engaging with cultural specificity of both the visual and textual traditions. Rather, it is possible to 'return' to the terms in the *śilpaśāstra* or art treatises and ideally let them speak on their own terms. But that would be too naïve a position to take, given the break with the past not only due to colonial interlude but also the temporal lapse. At least, we could avoid the orientalist skepticism towards the texts which in the words of Stella Kramrish:

If as the text shows and Dr Sivaramamurti stresses, realism was a main consideration with the painters, their criteria of verisimilitude were, no doubt, met in practice, although no object painted in the murals of Ajanta, which are roughly contemporary with the *Citrasūtra* would strike a spectator today as being realistic painted. The realism is in the eye of the beholder and pious stories told, though not in the *Citrasūtra*...<sup>3</sup>

Kramrisch dismisses these terms on grounds of subjectivism implying that realism is in the eyes of the beholder in her Forward to C Sivaramamurti's *The Chitrasūtra of the Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa* and thereby challenging the very premises of his arguments.

### **On Performance Theory:**

Recently, with path-breaking work by cultural theorists on performance aesthetics, the term 'performance' has acquired special resonance for theorizing the performative

practices in the west in relation to the non-west.<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted that the Sanskrit mimetic terminology such as *anukṛti*, *sādrśya* and *satya* have recognized place in both the traditional texts of visual arts (eg. *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara*) and dramaturgy (*Nāṭyaśāstra*). No matter how useful the Performance theory may be for my project, it is impossible to simply "apply" them in my work. What makes its application a problem is its euro-centric binary logic that not only sustains but even structures the Performance Theory.

Take, for instance, Richard Schechner's Performance Theory. Despite his profound attempt to steer clear of euro-centrism, whenever he undertakes cross-cultural comparisons, euro-centrism permeates his text as an invisible structuring principle.

### **Multiculturalism and Art History:**

By coining this neologism of PM, I intend to deploy it as a critical tool to interrogate the binary logic underpinning the question of visual representation that informs the discipline of Art History. As the recent debates within art history reveal, eurocentrism has come under scrutiny as never before and alternatives have been sought to counter it via cultural anthropology and theories of multiculturalism.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that Norman Bryson has deconstructed the metaphysics of presence structuring the disciplinary contours of Art History in the west, his attempt, by seeking detour to a non-European context such as his dyad, the gaze and the glance, stand firmly rooted in the binary logic that he sought to critique.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, recent attempt to address multiculturalism in art history by James Elkins<sup>7</sup> has led to a theoretical impasse owing to deep seated preconceptions about the non-west that Art History is still entrenched in.

While examining earlier works on the question of visual representation, both in the west as well as in India, two sets of problems emerge.

- i. Most of the western art historians and cultural critics have not been able to withstand the spell of binarism and have considered visuality and mimesis as intrinsic to western modes of representation, specially since the Renaissance. This is asserted either as a matter of celebration (Gombrich) and a symptom of western rationality (Elkins) or as a lamentable symptom of modernism. (Guy Debord).<sup>8</sup>
- ii. On the other hand, Indian art historians depending on their nationalist / orientalist or nativist leanings have suppressed mimesis or realism as alien to the native sensibility (Coomaraswamy, Harsh Dehejia)<sup>9</sup> or upheld it as no different from or even superseding the western mimesis.(Sivaramamurti, Niharranjan Ray)

The former position simply reinforces mimesis as an exclusively western notion whereas the latter refuse to go beyond the question of presence of mimesis.

It is this conceptual double bind that I intend to question by the notion of performative mimesis. Is it possible to distance ourselves from assumptions concerning visual representation that are intrinsic to the discipline? What if we start from a radically different perspective?

### **Performative Mimesis: A Derivative Discourse?**

There is yet another function I want mimesis to carry out. One of the common objections that Indian cultural theorists face from the academic community today is their total dependence on western theoretical tools to study objects of their inquiry located in India.

As Vinay Lal has pointed out:

The Subaltern historians are comfortable with Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Jakobson, Habermas, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, but the interpretive strategies of the Indian epics or Purana, the political thinking of Kautilya, the hermeneutics of devotional poetry, the philosophical exegesis of Nagarjuna, and the narrative frameworks of the *Panchatantra* or the *Kathasaritsagara*, are of little use to them. ...<sup>10</sup>

On one hand, it is difficult to ignore Lal's critique which is representative of views held by many western intellectuals including Elkins; but if Lal is invoking a nativist idea of returning to a pristine indigenous past untouched by the colonial experience, it seems untenable. It is here again the concept of PM can become productive in the manner in which it deploys certain critical theory as a heuristic to open up the past. For example, my use of Derrida's reworking of mimesis offers a possibility of creating a dialogical relationship between contemporary theoretical concerns with traditional Indian theorization of *anukṛti* and the closest English terms that comes close to its meaning is performative mimesis. Such premises of my inquiry itself are then inherently multicultural since they traverse culturally diverse terrain, which, however, is not new to the discipline of art history. "Putting the world in to a book"<sup>11</sup> has been its disciplinary prerogative with Hegel still looming strongly over it. What is perhaps new about my project is explore the possibility of a useful concept of multiculturalism in art history and take cognizance of my location in India in relation with art history's built in euro-American centrism. Rather than fitting culturally different objects and texts within art history's existing framework which is both Eurocentric and phallogocentric, I want them to stretch the latter to its limits and transform its disciplinary contours and parameters in a mutual recognition of their differences and commonalities.

Said has put most eloquently gestured towards a model of dialogic encounters which perhaps can under-gird the best form of multiculturalism, while commenting on Auerbach's *Mimesis*:

Moreover, the relationship between the reader-critic and the text is transformed from a one way interrogation of the historical text by an altogether alien mind at a much later time, into a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly, respectful spirits trying to understand each other.<sup>12</sup>

This is what I want PM to do. Recourse to contemporary critical theory is inevitable but restricted as a heuristic framework. Consider my use of the Derridean notion of new mimesis (now to call Derrida western is to mis-recognise his work). It works like a ladder which can be set aside as soon as one has some grasp over an unfamiliar terrain. As a post-colonial, my past still remains the other, which I have to constantly negotiate with. If I already have a framework in place to select from the existing theoretical tools employed by western theorists, even the most reactionary western scholar can unwittingly offer a useful insight not only because of the distance of his being an outsider but of the existence of my framework in use. It is only via a meta-theory that appropriation of 'western' theory can be legitimized and that resonates with the work produced by the Subaltern Studies.

## **Critical Historiography:**

### **Schechner's Performance Theory and cultural difference**

I will focus particularly on that section of the Schechner's text from Performance Theory that deals with Indian aesthetics under the term *rasaesthetics*. While it is an interesting strategy to coin a new term which bears an impact of 'rasa', a key term in Indian aesthetics, Schechner deploys a set of binaries that articulate cultural differences between the west and India as follows:

<b>West</b>	<b>India</b>
Theatre	Kitchen, Bedroom, Toilet
Public	Private
Court	Banquet
eyes	nose, tongue, touch
Gaze	snout-to-belly-bowel
Textual	Oral
Distance	Proximity
Rationality	Pre-rational
Science	Mythology
Analysis	Synthesis
Theory	Practice
Concept/Idea	Body
Thought	Performance
Secular	Sacred
Contemplation	Pleasure
Culture	Nature

The abiding trope in Schechner's formulation draws from an example that *Bharata*, the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* states when he compares a good drama to a well cooked meal. The term *Rasa* itself suggests sense of taste and tongue emerges as the most dominant sense organ around which aesthetic experience is organized. This is an important difference that Schechner takes a note of between centrality given to vision in the west<sup>13</sup> as opposed to other sense organs in *rasa* aesthetics. However, to claim that sense experience through visual perception was alien to *rasa* aesthetics is to reduce *rasa* aesthetics to such a level that aesthetic experience simply becomes an organic and natural state of being, at worst, a form of animal existence and at best, a site of hedonism and erotica.

Traditionally in western theatre, the eyes and to some degree the ears are where theatricality is experienced...Seeing requires distance; engenders focus on differentiation; encourages analysis or breaking apart into logical strings...Modern science depends on instruments of observation, of ocularity...

But in other cultural traditions there are other locations for theatricality. One of these, is the mouth, or better said, the snout-to-belly-bowel - the route through the body managed by the enteric nervous system... The snout-to-belly-bowel is the "where" of taste, digestion and excretion... The snout-to-belly-bowel is the where of intimacy, sharing of bodily substances, mixing the inside and the outside, emotional experience, and gut feelings. A good meal with good company is a pleasure; so is foreplay and lovemaking; so is a good shit.<sup>14</sup>

What is perhaps most objectionable in Schechner's position is inability to accept *rasa* as a deliberate, articulate cultural product resulting from centuries of theorization even if the latter is transmitted orally and through performance in an embodied form. This ensues from his commitment to a view that unless a minimum distance occurs between the performer and object of study, no theorization is possible. It is this minimum distance, which grants a culture space for deliberation and contemplation, which Schechner denies the Indian theorists of dramaturgy in an act of epistemic violence.

### **A K Coomaraswamy: Rhetoric of Transcendentalism:**

Dominance of the culinary trope blinds Schechner to a well-developed theory of visuality present in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. A similar situation occurred in the case of texts on visual arts which also contained a set of mimetic terminology such as *sādṛśya*, *anukṛti*, *satya*. These posed a major dilemma to the cultural nationalists such as A K Coomaswamy and Stella Kramrisch who laid down the foundation of Art History in India. Coomaraswamy's main project was to play down the mimetic connotations and rework their meanings through Neo-Platonic or medieval western scholastic framework to make claims of transcendentalism for Indian art. Being a pioneer, Coomaraswamy's pronouncements on Indian art acquired a hegemonic status and any voice of dissension received no recognition.<sup>15</sup>

In my own earlier work on the *Citrasūtra* where I first confronted the mimetic terminology, the most daunting task was one of translation. This led me to *Nāṭyaśāstra* to examine the context in which common terms were found both in texts on visual arts and dramaturgy. Terms such as *anukṛti* has a fuller exposition in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

### **From Derrida's New Mimesis to Performative Mimesis (Anukṛti)**

The most perplexing aspect about the term *anukṛti* was that it was to be found both in the art treatises or *śilpasāstras* and treatise on performance or dramaturgy. Problem of translatability of *anukṛti* into its literal English translation as imitation or mimesis made a close textual analysis of the terms imperative. Etymologically, *anukṛti* derives from the Sanskrit prefix *anu* –stem form *kṛti* and literally means *following the action of*. That this term had a fuller exposition in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the classic text of dramaturgy than in the art treatises (eg The *Citrasūtra*) implied that the context of performance was vital to understanding its meaning. Without acknowledging this intertextuality across the discourses of visual arts and performance, the terms defy understanding.

What facilitated this reasoning was Derrida's re-take on one of the foundational concepts of western art history and philosophy, mimesis. This, he arrives at, by a close reading of Mallarme's *Mimique* which subverted the earlier Platonic and Aristotelian interpretations. Here, Derrida deconstructs the very concept and philosophy of mimesis and its inherent logocentrism that founded it from Plato to Freud. What was productive about Derrida's new mimesis is that he discovers his model from 'mime' *pace* Mallarme.<sup>16</sup>

Mallarme earns the label of "modernist" by detaching mimicry from logocentric mimetology; Derrida becomes "postmodernist" by putting mimicry to work in the interest of a new reference...<sup>17</sup>

And, by putting Derrida's mimesis to work in the interest of a new reference as in *anukṛti*, I would perhaps be labeled as post-colonial post-modernist!

At this point, Derrida's retake on mimesis becomes very productive in my project of delineating performative mimesis. It clears space for articulating the "classical Indian mimesis". Mimesis thus inflected makes room for performative action rather than metaphysical concept alone. That is precisely the function of the term performative which when coupled with mimesis inflects it towards the corporeal and the material dimension of representation. Here I find Wolfgang Iser's differentiation between philosophical and literary discourse useful to understand the difference between the Renaissance mimesis and *anukṛti* :

What distinguishes fiction in philosophic discourse from fiction in literary discourse is the fact that in the former it remains veiled whereas in the latter it discloses its own fictional nature; therefore it is not discourse, but staged discourse, which unlike fiction in philosophic discourse, cannot be falsified. It is not subjected to any rules of practical application, as it is not designed for any specific use but is basically an enabling structure generating an aesthetic potential.<sup>18</sup>

If we replace philosophic discourse with Renaissance mimesis and literary discourse with *anukṛti*, we come close to what one of the most sophisticated exponent of *anukṛti*, Śankuka meant in his exposition and his dissociation of any truth claim from aesthetic representation. It also helps in understanding cultural differences between, say, the Renaissance notions of mimesis and the classical Indian notion of *anukṛti*. Mimesis and *anukṛti* don't exactly map on to each other and it is the gaps in between that refuse to be subsumed under each which can work as crucial pointer towards exploring the cultural differences. This is not to deny that miming played no role in mimesis and metaphysical image was unimportant in *anukṛti*.

Temporality in mimetic representation registered itself in a different cultural register where movement was seen as freezing of points in space. On the other hand, in the case of Ajanta paintings, movement is a shared feature of the spectator and its representation in painting. This difference can again be explained in relation to the frame. The rise of the Renaissance mimesis can be studied through the prominence that the frame received. The more the actual plane of the painting acquired transparency, the more ornate the frame became. The frame as an organizational principle in painting is what is missing in Ajanta wall paintings. This function is fulfilled by the figures or details of architecture in the painting themselves.

The assumption of the mobility of the viewer precluded the possibility of rise of artificial perspective in Ajanta wall paintings. And instead of developing devices for creating

apparent spatial recession, a kind of colored shading (referred to in the *Citrasūtra* as *vartanā*) brought the figures towards the foreground. So in place of spatial recession, Ajanta paintings prefer spatial progression towards the actual space in front.<sup>19</sup>

### Abhinavabharati and the Anukṛti Debate

Although the discussion on *anukṛti* in Abhinavabharati is restricted to its role in drama, visual arts is often invoked to supply the arguments with 'illustrations'. For example, Śrī Śankuka, one of the supporters of *anukṛti* famously buttressed his position by citing the example of *Citraturaganyāya* or the maxim of the painted horse. Let me take Śankuka as representative of the pro- *anukṛti* group. On the other hand, Bhaṭṭa Tauṭa who rejected the role of *anukṛti* may stand for the other position.<sup>20</sup>

### Sri Sankuka on Citraturaganyāya or the Maxim of the Painted Horse

It is from Śankuka that we learn that mimesis is possible without any prior commitment to a truth claim. As in painting so in drama, *anukṛti* is constitutive of the very mode of representation. Just as we standing in front of a painted horse, accept it as a representation of a horse, it makes no sense to ask certain questions which may fall within a purview of a logician.

Is the painted horse similar to an actual horse? A question of resemblance or *sādṛśya*.

Is the painted horse truly the actual horse? A question of right knowledge or *samyag jñāna*.

Is the painted horse really the actual horse? A question of doubtful knowledge or *samśaya jñāna*.

Is the painted horse a false horse? A question of wrong cognition or *mithyā jñāna*.

Śankuka declares all the four modes of questioning as irrelevant in dealing with a painted image. To a western theorist, this seeming contradiction may pose as a problem. Is mimesis possible without any truth claim?<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps Wittgenstein can offer us with an epistemology of performance to rethink what embodied knowledge is. He helps us in understanding Śankuka. Reception of visual signs in a painting cannot be reduced to a level of cognition but can have performative context. Knowledge itself can get inflected to encompass action. As Ulmer refers to Wittgenstein to locate Derrida's mimesis within post-criticism:

Post-criticism,...functions with an "epistemology" of performance- knowing as making, producing, doing, acting, as in Wittgenstein's account of the relation of knowing to the "mastery of a technique." Thus post-criticism writes "on" its object in the way that Wittgenstein's knower exclaims, "Now I know how to go on!"...<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the idea of a meta-theatre, which informed several Sanskrit, plays which can help us to engage with the epistemology of performance further. Here one section of a play can mime another through the medium of performance and play writing. Rather than actors simply miming say historical figures outside the play, they imitate other actors in the same play whereby giving hints about how the plot will unfold to its audience.

### Anti-Anukṛti discourse by Bhatta Tauta

Mimesis in drama is outright rejected by Bhaṭṭa Tauṭa who foregrounds the representation of emotions. He makes a difference between gestural miming by an actor who imitates someone drinking wine by drinking water and his expression of emotions. He in fact questions the role of mimesis in the latter on grounds that emotions and actions occupy too disparate domains and can never coincide. How can the actor (*naṭa*) imitate emotions of Rama? a. Because he has not ever seen Rama b. because emotions can never be imitated by physical gesticulations. In rather a Deleuzian turn, Tauṭa collapses distinction between object (Rama) and the subject (actor) and asserts that the emotion acted out by the actor is no longer of Rama but becomes his own. Gone is the difference between the object of mimeses (*anukārya*) and the agent of mimesis (*anukartā*).

The most challenging task that needs to be undertaken is to understand the performative dynamics of mimesis in Indian visual arts and in drama where epistemological status of an image need not coincide with its truth claim.<sup>23</sup> This might help us in better grasping *Citrasūtra*'s famous but misunderstood statement:

*Yathā nṛtite tathā citre, trailokyānukṛtiḥ smrtāḥ*

As in dance, so in painting, the imitation of the three worlds is prescribed.

(*Citrasūtra*, 35.5)<sup>24</sup>

A K Coomaraswamy deployed this statement to undermine the importance of mimesis in Indian arts. He claimed that if the three worlds included the fictitious, then mimesis was meaningless in the arts. If we foreground the linguistic component of any representation, the fictitious status mattered little as long as even impossible (rabbit's horn) can be plausibly rendered in representation. Unlike the classical western notion of mimesis which could not allow spectator's attention to fasten on image as representation, performative mimesis did not feel any cultural compulsion to shun this fact but sometimes even stressed it as a necessary condition of any representation.

The traditional terminology of mimesis in the classical Sanskrit texts of visual arts and dramaturgy such as (performative mimesis), *sādṛśya* (resemblance, literally similar looking) and *satya* ("naturalistic") has been relegated to the margins on the account of certain colonial imperatives. Early cultural nationalists in India avoided engaging with them as they were too reminiscent of western notions of mimesis and so these terms had no use for polarizing distinctions between what was commonly understood as the degenerate materialist west and spiritual India. Hence I take it to be a critical post colonial project to rehabilitate the marginalized theories of performative mimesis which can offer us a new vantage point to look at early Indian art. Ironically, the impetus for a retake on this terminology came from contemporary western thinkers who had challenged conventional notions of mimesis within their intellectual discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "Representation: A Performative Act," in Murray Krieger (ed), *The Aims of Representation: Subject/Texts/History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 218.

<sup>2</sup> C. Sivaramamurti, "The Art of Ancient India," *Journal of Oriental Research*, Madras, 8 (1934): 189.

<sup>3</sup> C. Sivaramamurti, *The Chitrasūtra of the Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa* (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1978), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> David Summers, A Book Review of David Summers' *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003) in *Art Bulletin* 86, 2 (June 2004): 373.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Visnudharmottara Chapter XLI", *Journal of American Oriental Society* 52 (1933): 21.

<sup>10</sup> Vinay Lal as cited in Elkins' Review, p. 378. *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 208.

<sup>11</sup> A phrase used by John Onions at the Clark Art Institute in 2000 as cited in Elkins' Book Review of Summers, p. 373.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said in his Introduction to *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), xiii-xiv.

<sup>13</sup> See also Martin Jay for ocularcentrism in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 134.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Shrechner, *op.cit.*, 333-334.

<sup>15</sup> V. Raghavan strongly criticized Coomaraswamy for misinterpreting these terms and it remained unheeded. See V. Raghavan's "Some Sanskrit Texts on Painting," *Journal of Indian Historical Quarterly* 9 (1933): 904-05.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, "The Double Session," trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in Hal Foster (ed), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend Bay Press, 1983), 92.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *op.cit.*, 223.

<sup>19</sup> It is quite interesting to note that the guides in Ajanta unfamiliar with the art historical controversies about mimesis have no difficulty to pointing out certain tricks of visual illusion attributed to the paintings.

<sup>20</sup> That these thinkers who took part in the debate on *anukṛti* were no contemporaries is irrelevant to our discussion.

<sup>21</sup> S. N. Balgandhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness: Asia, the West and the Dynamics of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 370-71.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory L. Ulmer, *op. cit.*, 94.

<sup>23</sup> A very important discussion on the performative aspect of knowledge is given by S. N. Balgandhara, *op.cit.*, 418.

<sup>24</sup> Parul Dave Mukherji, *The Citrasūtra of the Visnudharmottara Purāna* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 2001), 3.

**Parul Dave-Mukherji.** (Ph.D.). Professor and Dean, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She has lectured in India, Europe and Japan (and has been elected as the Delegate at Large representing India on the Executive Council of the International Association of Aesthetics). Her fields of interest include; Indian art historiography, the politics of visual representation and the question of caste and gender in the study of early treatises of Indian art and aesthetics. Recent publications are; *Towards A New Art History: Studies in Indian Art* (co-edited), New Delhi, 2003; guest edited special issue on *Visual Culture* of the *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 17 (Summer 2003); *Rethinking Modernity*, (co-edited) New Delhi, 2005.