

Article

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**Dynamic Spaces, Mobile Vision: Reading Cinematic Space in Mani Kaul's 'Dhrupad' (1983) and 'Siddheshwari' (1989)**



*Dhrupad* (1983)

The 1970s was a time for the radical cinemas in India. Filmmakers experimented with film forms and styles, created compositions that were not frequently seen in the history of Indian cinema before. Reading modernist practices in Indian cinema would not necessarily follow a particular pattern, but instead would involve studying the differences in aesthetic choices and styles of various Indian filmmakers of the time - mostly because, such stylistic practices and experiments in film form occurred rather sporadically.

The Indian New Wave produced one of the most unique schools of filmmaking in India in which one can note philosophical reflections in the film forms, style and aesthetics. Two major filmmakers of this tradition, Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani brought forth certain stylistic features in their filmmaking that seem to produce ideas based in movement and time. This essay would particularly try focusing on the two major documentaries by Mani Kaul - '*Dhrupad*' (1983) and '*Siddheshwari*' (1989) to arrive at the understanding of the treatment of cinematic space and eventually understand

how the film form itself takes the shape of a ‘discourse’ in these two films.

### **Non-Convergence and Anti-Representation: The logic of Spatial designs in Mani Kaul’s films**

Mani Kaul seems to have taken an anti-representational position in his filmmaking, for which the idea of non-convergence becomes central to his film language. Some of Kaul’s own writings can give us an idea of his treatment of spatiality and thus, the kind of film language he was trying to develop. It is quite evident from what he writes in “Seen from Nowhere”; his ideas of space are in contrary to that of the European Renaissance perspective model. While Renaissance painters like Leonardi, Gietto et al had strived to achieve a three dimensional representation of the real with a point of convergence lying at infinity, Kaul’s treatment of cinematic space (and thus the image itself) is based in a sense of perspectivelessness. He makes two divisions for understanding spatial design: the ‘object-horizon’ and the ‘point-void’ split. The former involves placing an object at the foreground and the converging point lying at infinity. In other words, the object-horizon division is similar to the Renaissance perspective system. Kaul suggests an alternative to this - the point-void split, that mostly deals with ‘absent’ spaces, that is, a space that is perceived through its ‘non-availability of being’. This is the non-converging space, as Kaul writes:

“The communication set up between the point and the void is not despite but through the mediating space and I. That is, the spiral remains “harmless” to the spaces in the

universe, nature and world, and to the I, made relative to the whole being.”

Kaul derives this idea of non-convergence from the Mughal miniature paintings, and broadly from the Classical Indian art forms. This is precisely the idea of anti-convergence that gets reflected in his film narratives as well, for instance when he adapts Dostoevsky in films like ‘*Idiot*’. In a book-length conversation with Udayan Vajpeyi in *Uncloven Space*, Kaul talks about the influences of Bresson, Matisse, Dostoevsky and Tarkovsky in his films as he mentions: “I wonder what could be common among these four? And I think that these four artists were working against the ideas of perspective and convergence.”

What Kaul tries achieving in terms of spatial construction in his films is a translation of the perspectivelessness of the Indian Classical music and miniature paintings into the film language itself - the non-convergence released into the spatial and temporal designs.

### **A ‘World in Flux’: Reading Kaul with Gulammohammed Sheikh’s ‘The Mobile Vision’**

Reading Mani Kaul’s film form takes us beyond the dualities of reality and representation, rather it is the image that gains a pure, autonomous nature in his films. Obscurity is a common label when it comes to reading Kaul’s films, but what makes his films different from conventional narrative forms, is the the very nature of his image, that is rooted in the idea of multiplicity. Multiplicity for Kaul’s films essentially helps in developing a new spectatorial eye, a new kind of vision where the perception of an art

object belongs to a travelling eye. The noted painter Gulammohammed Sheikh in his seminal essay published in the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, tries formulating the idea of ‘mobile vision’ that seems to talk about a similar kind of spectation. In contrary to the Renaissance perspective painting style and the concept of realism (and representation of the ‘real’ in European oil paintings) or illusionism which according to Sheikh is based on the idea of an interiority of space, he talks about a “multifocal view of space, unhampered by quantum of optical scale”, which can create a ‘polyvalent view of the world.” This multifocal organization of space is rather a form that involves physical movement of spectatorial vision. Ashish Rajadhyaksha notes that Indian artists like Sheikh started writing about similar ideas of Indian art practices and aesthetics “at a time when the tyranny of European renaissance perspective, naturalism and objectivity had become significant issues for debate.” Speaking in similar lines, Kaul would continue to comment on the apparent ‘flatness’ in his film images. While speaking to Vajpeyi, he notes: “One world ... diversely expressed. But where man can tolerate multiplicity, he will bear these distinctive worlds.”

Though one cannot be certain whether Mani Kaul constructed space in his films based on Sheikh’s idea of the mobile vision, it can be certainly argued that the spatiality that is constructed in Kaul’s films is a space that is constantly in flux. Sheikh writes in the essay:

“The question however is not an isolated one of pictorial space and representation of forms. The imperatives of

the mobility of vision spring from the view of the world in flux rather than in a momentary stasis, in multiple rather than a singular focus.”

This ‘lack of centre’ in varied Indian art works (the Ajanta murals, Pithoro paintings, and a few others, as cited as examples by Sheikh) results in a ‘deterritorialization’ that in itself makes the space appear ‘fluid’. In this context, Sheikh notes: “The weight of centrality, obtained through juxtapositions of vanishing point and physical and pictorial centres crucial to an illusionistic visage, is here replaced by collective equanimity of forms which lends them ease and grace.”

In simple words, what Sheikh may have hinted at in this essay, is the concept of a vision that is not centred, but mobile, in a sense that the organization of space in a work of art is such that it necessitates movement of the eyes along the space for perceiving it. The space becomes dynamic when a corporeal body moves through it.

The spatial organization in Kaul’s films lacks ‘depth’ because the logic is based in a certain idea of ‘flatness’, like the one that is found in the Akbarnama miniatures. When an image in Kaul’s film lacks a proper point of convergence or depth, it is not a mere allusion to the miniature paintings or Indian Classical music, but beyond that, the image reflects the logic of the movement that is inherent to these traditions. For the miniature paintings, the spectator would never find defined depths, rather the vision is meant to travel over the flat surface and perceive the image accordingly. Similar is the perception of Indian Classical music, for which the listener may enjoy the improvisations and endless combinations of

notes, for time itself is embedded in such art forms.

This can further help us read Kaul's documentaries, '*Dhrupad*' (1983) and '*Siddheshwari*' (1989) and get a sense how the Kaul articulates the idea of multiplicity through the spatial (and temporal) designs in these two films.

### **Fluid spaces in '*Dhrupad*' and '*Siddheshwari*': A view of the world based in Multiplicity?**

Mani Kaul made two documentary films - '*Dhrupad*' and '*Siddheshwari*' that were funded by the Films Division, but their formal aspects and the film language are far from what is known as non-fiction. It is mostly because of the fact that since both cinema and music are temporal mediums, Mani Kaul seems to have translated music into duration to arrive at an image of time itself. In his essay "Beneath the Surface", Kaul writes "when nothing moves, time does".

Focusing on the much celebrated Dagar tradition, '*Dhrupad*' features Kaul's own teacher, the Zia Mohiuddin Dagar on rudra veena and one of his brothers Fariduddin Dagar as the vocalist. '*Siddheshwari*' on the other hand is a documentary featuring Siddheshwari Devi, belonging to the Benaras Thumri tradition. But beyond these, what is most interesting to note about these two films is that the film form is in conversation with music itself. The spatial designs in these two documentaries never intend to engage with

the 'real' aspect that becomes crucial for non-fiction. Rather, the shot arrangements and cinematography is such that the films become more of a discourse, enabling a new kind of spectatorial vision.

In both '*Dhrupad*' and '*Siddheshwari*', the spaces appear flat, due to lack of convergence and depth. But apart from that, there is a fluidity in spaces - a principle that develops throughout the films.

In '*Dhrupad*', for instance, several times, we see the Dagar maestro playing the rudra veena and the camera pans and shots of scriptures, statues or painting scrolls appear. In the final sequence, the camera pans and tilts over a depthless cityscape and gradually goes into a haze - a shaky camera gradually going out of focus, while a Dhrupad score continues to play.

It becomes more complex in '*Siddheshwari*'. One may recall the sequence in which Siddheshwari (Mita Vashisht) is singing and in a parallel track we hear dialogues: "Chapla mera naam, mera baap bara gawayia tha..." (My name is Chapla, my father used to be a prominent singer), the camera cuts to a freeze shot of hands and changes to a black-and-white image, followed by Vashisht singing. Now the camera shows monumental structures, a pan from left to right on Vashisht's face, and again to a miniature painting. I argue that such shot arrangements make the film a discourse - where there is a fluidity between the subjective and objective point-of-view shots<sup>1</sup>. Such practices of

<sup>1</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini elaborates this idea in his 1965 Pesaro Film Festival speech, where he calls the new kind of cinema as 'The Cinema of Poetry', and considers the language of cinema is inherently poetic, for cinema now involves 'free indirect point-

of-view shots' - a concept, later borrowed by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* to ideate 'free indirect discourse' and perception-image.

filmmaking not only enables a mobility of the spectatorial vision, but allows a world that unfolds, blurring the point of views. Kaul may have tried presenting a spatial design in ‘*Dhrupad*’ that could reflect his idea of the ‘absent’ space, that is the point-void split, in which there is no particular closure, rather a the space has lost its usual co-ordinates of convergence such that, instead of a certain meeting point, there can be innumerable number of ways for linkages to take place. The spatial design becomes way more fluid in ‘*Siddheshwari*’, especially when the moving camera roams all over the spaces - the space made even more dynamic by the movement of Siddhi’s body. This is precisely what Sheikh means by ‘a world in flux’ - where discourses and movements (within the image) are possible simultaneously on both land and water. One may recall the sequence in which Siddheshwari is seen floating in the water, followed by a subjective shot, taken within

the water surface and then another shot of her floating.

The apparent reason why Kaul made his images ‘flat’ and ended by arranging shots that do not care to explain narrative continuity, could be the idea of ‘deterritorialization’ and above all, multiplicity that is opposed to the Renaissance style of convergence. Space in Kaul’s films becomes fluid, such that it can no longer remains bound within the usual Cartesian co-ordinates, rather it is a space that has lost its homogeneity. Kaul in the wave of the Indian New Wave could make such unique formal choices for he understood “the moment cinema can lay itself parallel to any other more established art form, it will be able to free itself into independence.” This leaves us wondering, when we envisage a certain form of Indian vis-a-vis other art forms, would we arrive at the image of ‘multiplicity’?

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