

**SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE: POETRY, MUSIC, AND THE BLENDING
OF WESTERN AND INDIAN AESTHETIC TRADITIONS:
A DISCUSSION OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF ALIGNMENT**

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An inter-artistic parallel is not dictated by the pre-existent structures of the arts involved; instead, it is an exploration of how these structures can be aligned. (Steiner 334)

Images for *Shadow and Substance* were gathered primarily in New Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur, India, and in Kathmandu, Nepal, during late October and early November of 1995. Throughout India I had been captivated by the color of the fabrics the women wore and the process of the creation of these fabrics. Silk dipped into raw, vibrant colors in huge brass cauldrons, dried in the wind, carefully folded. While waiting for the Agra train to depart, I watched two women dry a sari by holding it at the corners and gently undulating its entire sixteen-foot length. The train station was crowded and chaotic, and all kinds of activities were happening in front of, behind, and underneath their sari—business as usual—but the slow-motion movements of the sari felt like a meditation. While watching the drama of this scene unfold, I saw the sari as a metaphor for a cross-over or a boundary, a membrane perhaps uniting a non-material, ephemeral world with the physical world. The sari as a cloth-veil that provoked my imagination because of what it suggested on the side that was not visible to me, what mathematicians call a non-orientable surface (like a Möbius strip). Ambiguous boundaries in a continual state of change: blending, dissolving, restructuring, clarifying.

The prayer flags at Kathmandu's two-thousand-year-old Soynambu stupa aroused other reactions. You could almost see the prayers floating up to heaven, liberated in slow-motion when the breezes blew down off the Himalayas, like the steam rising from the brass cauldrons. These flags moved with the gentlest of motions. Not like our huge nylon United States flags that are either in a state of complete flaccidity or else whipping themselves to shreds. Prayer flags use the wind as fish use water.

Shadow and Substance aligns with poetry and music

I like to compare the process of constructing *Shadow and Substance* to the process of writing a poem. Poetry and video share a temporal dimension. Every scene, like every line of a poem, must have an economy of expression and contribute to the force that motivates the work and, like with poetry, *Shadow and Substance* is open to multiple interpretations. Both employ rhythm, pattern, symbols, associations, contrast, coloration, and evoke mood through metaphor. While the images and sounds of *Shadow and Substance* are estranged from traditional narrative values of conventional television, the viewer who understands the work in terms of visual and poetic meanings will understand video as an art form that merely shares a technology with television but aligns more significantly with poetry. As Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote, "poetry is an activity of which a poem is but one of many possible products."

Shadow and Substance includes two pieces of North Indian classical music called ragas. Raga is a Sanskrit word derived from the verb *ranj*, which means to color or to tinge with emotion. Ragas express moods (e.g., joy, sorrow, calm) and are played at specific times of day because they are understood to be interrelated. Evoking mood, the melody and rhythm of the images and music reinforcing each other, is one of the intentions of *Shadow and Substance* and is perhaps its most important aesthetic objective. Intertwined in such a way, music evokes qualities usually reserved for images, such as color and texture, and the two-dimensional video images are understood more spatially.

We expect sound to be inextricably tied to a visual. As an example, think of how disorienting (and frightening) it would be if a baby opened its mouth to yell and the sound of a vuvuzela came out instead. By extension, when we attach music to visuals we also attach meanings that are, in fact, arbitrary. Music is extremely adaptive to the needs of

the visual, so stripping an image of its sound and substituting other sounds can create powerful new meanings. There are thousands of examples of this in film, from Kubrick's use of Richard Strauss' tone poem "Also Sprach Zarathustra" in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to both Fellini and Coppola's use of the "Ride of the Valkyries" in their films *8 ½* and *Apocalypse Now*, respectively. But in *Shadow and Substance*, I connect image and sound in ways that imply their shared qualities. What are these shared qualities? Again, rhythm, pattern, associations, contrast, coloration, mood.

When we are bombarded by everyday sounds that help define the movements and events that constitute our perceptual world, sounds can assume a connotative quality, they can sound *like* something. When selecting the music for *Shadow and Substance*, this sense of the connotative was important. Rhythmically and conceptually, the music is intended to suggest the time of day, the images, and the ambient sounds of the environment, implying a musical restatement of the meaning of the images. For example, the first composition, an excerpt from a raga, features a strong tonic element that other tones and harmonics seem to be trying to escape from. Notes glide in half and whole-steps above and below the D# that is the music's foundation. This musical idea reinforces the visual idea of the plastic trying to free itself of the tree. Wind is an important visual element that, on a literal level, acts on objects and suggests its own physicality and sonority; it is the medium that music depends on for its very existence. On a metaphoric level, wind assists in motivating the viewer through the piece. It's like a gentle hand that pushes the viewer into the domain of the work, leading and guiding through the action to its conclusion. *Shadow and Substance*, like the Indian raga, creates a cumulative effect: a weaving of texture, rhythm, and pattern. It does not intend to tell a traditional story with a beginning, middle, and end.

The Tibetan prayer flags are a visual correlative to the cloth seen in earlier sections and to the plastic in the trees. As mentioned earlier, Tibetan prayer flags gently blowing in the breeze release their prayers to the spirit realm, much as the chants of Buddhist priests broadcast their positive energies to the world. Chanting links to the continuous drone that is the foundation of a raga.

The last selection of music, a mid-day raga, is synchronized to the mid-day perambulations of people, vehicles, and animals. Many of the sounds are connotative of "natural" sonic phenomenon: the shehnai, an instrument that sounds like a blend of a kazoo and an oboe, suggests a hive of busy bees; the drone the thrum of a city; the beat/rhythm duplicates the rhythms of heartbeat and walking, the dance of traffic. Scenes are stripped of narrative value. They are deconstructed to their basic elements: color, shape, movement. Narrative content comes into focus only occasionally; an example is the man who stares at the camera while traffic in the background speeds past him. The "tal" or beat of the music is the force that motivates the succession of images.

The possibility of alignment with Indian aesthetics

Shadow and Substance interprets ideas of both the Western and Indian aesthetic traditions. For Indian aestheticians, the power of art comes from the artist's ability to transcend the physical and the transient to express the spiritual and the everlasting. This aspiring to a sense of the sublime is called "rasa." Rasa also refers to the emotional satisfaction that is the result of the experience of art. A work of art is not successful unless it is gratifying to the senses and to the spirit. "The engrossed audience member cannot draw a boundary between where the self ends and where the aesthetic response begins." (Anderson 166) Again, the cloth represents this boundary, the boundary between the self and the senses and the desire to transcend it.

Indian aestheticians also believe that perception itself is a seriously flawed activity. It is best expressed in the analogy of the rope and the snake, an idea that appears both in Hindu and Buddhist writing and philosophy. Sankara, a great Indian teacher, put it this way, "a rope appears to be a snake because of darkness or defective sight. Here the snake is pure illusion since it has no correspondence with the reality of the rope. Still, the apprehension of the snake is real enough for it produces fear which is an undeniable empirical fact." And the Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche Khetsun

Sangpo writes, "Fright is the same when we actually see a snake and we think we see a snake. The person frightened still doubts that the snake is a rope, but as soon as they realize it is a rope their fear disappears. The world we think is true and real is mistaken appearances." The point is, meanings and emotions are attached to objects and experiences according to our perceptions. Because of their visual similarities, the rope becomes a snake as a result of mistaken perceptions, and the meaning of "rope" is temporarily suspended. In a similar fashion (but without the element of danger!), by using the metaphor of the cloth, the viewer is asked to suspend his or her understanding of cloth in its utilitarian sense and accept the idea of cloth as a conduit from one visual reality to another.

To promote these aesthetic ideas, the video image is often fragmented by slow-motion and strobing effects to guide the viewer away from a literal interpretation. Poetic concerns again come into play. Rather than show real-time images of "men dyeing cloth" to denote "cloth production," which is how the sequence would read in a documentary, new meanings are expressed by altering time structures and narrative logic. Even though the viewer experiences the illusion of being a part of the action and experiencing the event as it unfolds, its meaning lies in metaphor.

In the view through the window of the auto rickshaw and in the images that follow, the piece calls attention to the limits of perception, or how our own view is merely a window onto a much larger reality that, for the most part, eludes our grasp. It suggests the physicality of the visual process itself, where images are not created one at a time, like frames of a film, and then stung together by the brain, but as a continually changing mosaic of color, light, shadow, and texture.

A total solar eclipse

On October 24, 1995, a total solar eclipse occurred. And one of the best places in the world to view it was at the ancient Moghul ghost city Fatehpur Sikri, about thirty kilometers from Agra. Even though the eclipse did not achieve totality in Agra, I wanted to observe the effects of the light on the Taj Mahal. The Taj is famous for the moods it evokes throughout the day according to the color of the light and white marble's ability to concretize it. What better place to observe the effects of a total solar eclipse? It was like watching a range of lighting conditions that normally occur over a much longer time period, accelerated and compressed into only a few minutes.

A total eclipse can seem extremely unsettling, confusing, and perilous, it has the power to inspire profound and reverent fear. The New Delhi newspaper warned pregnant women not to venture out of doors during the eclipse, and it was strictly forbidden to eat anything, because opening your mouth makes you vulnerable to wandering evil spirits looking for easy entry into a body. Immediately preceding near totality, birds flew to their roosts and became completely silent. The temperature dropped by about thirty degrees. At the closest point to totality, the dome of the Taj, which looks like an inverted cauldron and suggests the cauldrons of the cloth-dyers, shimmered in the thin, bluish-black light, mirroring the cosmic dance that was happening in outer space.

In the celestial alignment that occurs during a solar eclipse, the moon subjugates the sun's power to light and warm the Earth. Eclipses remind us that, in the periodicity of the cosmos, sometimes things happen that seem to usurp the natural order. An eclipse of the sun transforms the shadow of the moon into something substantial. Shadow and substance exist in a moment of convergence.

The sun, the moon, and the Earth's occasional alignment in an eclipse suggests the alliance of the art forms and aesthetics that have been my focus. In viewing *Shadow and Substance*, I hope the viewer is receptive to the notion that video can be an amalgam of visual, poetic, musical, and aesthetic principles. Ultimately, this decision rests with the viewer. It's said that an audience needs to work hard to understand contemporary art but, actually, it has always been the case that a work of art connects with some people and not with others, and the reasons are complex. The poem from the medieval period of Indian history that I placed at the beginning of *Shadow and Substance* expresses this idea in an eloquent way:

A poet's song
Sings in the hearts of poets: the common
 throng
Does not respond.

The ocean's swell
Wakes to the moon: do tides rise
 in a well
Or muddy pond?