Seeing in the Theatre

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0. Two Perceptual Projects

[**TEXT 1**] "In everyday contexts, perceptual experience (*adhyavasāya*) is determinate and has two forms: correct and illusory. Neither has any relation to figuration (*alaṅkāra*). If you correctly identify a pearl oyster shell, or if you wrongly perceive it as silver—in neither case is there anything striking. What we take for figuration is a projection (*adhyāsa*) distinct from both the above, in which, while knowing [the distinction], we say, 'This thing is *in* that thing' (*etasmin tadeveti*). The result is an unearthly strikingness." (*Sañjīvinī*, Vidyācakravartin 1965, 66; cf. Shulman 2012, 59)

Two perceptual projects: seeing face-to-face and seeing-in. A phenomenological contrast:

"What is distinctive of seeing-in […] is the phenomenology of the experiences in which it manifests itself. Looking at a suitably marked surface, we are visually aware at once of something in front of or behind something else. […] I understand it in terms of a single experience with two aspects, which I call configurational and recognitional. Of these two aspects I have claimed that they are phenomenologically incommensurate with the experience of perceptions—that is, of the surface, or of nature, from which they derive, and what I had in mind was something of this order: Sometimes we experience a pain in the knee. This is a complex experience, but it is not to be understood by seeing how one part of it compares with having a pain, but nowhere in particular, and how the other part compares with being aware of one's knee and where it is." (Wollheim 1998, 220-1)

- Lamenting the fact that issues to do with "how spectators come to grasp" the contents of theatrical performances are rarely addressed in theatre studies, James Hamilton has recently described those issues as "the new questions for theatre theory" (2015, 105).
- Yet the philosopher I will discuss, Śrī Śaṅkuka, already provided an answer at the end of the first millennium, an answer which he believed was flexible enough to generalise to cases of depictive representation outside theatre.

Śrī Śaṅkuka (c.860), *Commentary* on Bharata's *Nāṭya-śāstra*, *Treatise on Drama*; reported by Abhinavagupta (c.1000) in *The New Dramatic Art* (*Nāṭya-śāstra of Bharata, with the Abhinavabhāratī of Abhinavagupta*. Vol. 1, ed. K. Krishnamoorthy. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1992, pp. 265-8)

1. Understanding Plays

An example (discussed by theatre historian Julia Walker (Walker 2006). A Boston socialite, Anna Quincy, recorded in 1833 in her diary the effect on her of Fanny Kemble's performance of Bianca in Henry Milman's play *Fazio*). Quincy records that

"The moment which I think produced most effect on the house was at the moment when Fazio is to be led off to execution in the prison. She has just been imploring the jailer to delay a few moments in the most passionate manner, when the bell tolls, the sound of which seemed to turn her into marble. She stood riveted to the spot—her eyes fixed, her cheek pale and ashen. Fazio embraces her, but she is entirely insensible of it, and he is led off the stage leaving her a solitary figure. She stood, I should think, five moments, a perfect statue, and the death-like stillness that reigned over the crowded audience, every person seeming to hold their breath, was very striking. "She stood the bloodless image of despair" until the bell tolled again."" (Walker 2006, 36-7)

Walker speaks of Quincy's "double consciousness of the theatrical event," who, she says, is "both 'inside' the imaginative fiction of the play and 'outside' it, observing Kemble's technique as a discerning connoisseur" (37), describing the process as an "oscillating dynamic" in which audiences "shift back and forth between an imaginative 'inside' and practical 'outside'" (37).

"Looking at a suitably marked surface, we are visually aware at once of something in front of or behind something else. I call this feature of the phenomenology 'twofoldness.' Originally concerned to define my position in opposition to Gombrich's account, which postulates two alternating perceptions, Now canvas, Now nature, conceived of on the misleading analogy of Now duck, Now rabbit, I identified twofoldness with two simultaneous perceptions: one of the pictorial surface, the other of what it represents," says Wollheim (Wollheim 1998, 220-1)

2. Śrī Śaṅkuka on Theatrical Seeing-in

- attempts to argue that the fundamental intellectual virtue on display in audience engagement is a cognitive one
- proved short-lived, soon to be displaced by Abhinavagupta with a rival non-cognitive view, that what is of fundamental importance is an affective virtue, the ability to respond to the play with emotions of a distinctively aesthetic sort.

[**TEXT 2**] "On the strength of inferential signs—the causes known as factors; the effects consisting of the reactions; the auxiliary causes, namely, the transitory emotions—which, though artificial (*kṛtrima*), since they are acquired by human effort, are not recognized as such, we apprehend as existing in the actor a stable emotion that is an imitation of the stable emotion in the main character, Rāma, say, and precisely because it is an imitation it is designated by the special term "*rasa*"." (*Abhinava-bhāratī* 1, 265; Pollock 2016, 81).

"Śrī Śaṅkuka's "key argument in aesthetics […is…] primarily an epistemological one (how *rasa* is apprehended) […namely,:] because we cannot directly perceive emotion, we must infer it [… and he …] understands *rasa* as an *imitation* (*anukaraṇa*, *anukṛti*, literally an 'after-making') in the actor of the stable emotion in the main character." (Pollock 2016, 78).

But we should be careful here:

- "imitation" (*anukaraṇa*): nothing more complicated in mind than the basic idea which motivates the contour theory of musical expression. According to this theory, an expression of, say, melancholy, in music is similar in 'contour' to a facial, vocal or behavioural expression of melancholy, but is in fact just a melancholy look and not an expression that manifests anyone's melancholy state: "… just as a willow can be sad-looking, or a person's face happy-looking, music can present an expressive appearance in its sound (without regard to anyone's felt emotions)" (Davies 1994, 277).
- So to say that an actor "imitates" the emotion of the character they enact need mean nothing more that they assume an expressive look, a look whose function in normal circumstances is to indicate that emotion (Lopes 2005, 73).
- "inference" (*anumāna*): nothing more than that the state in question has a component of identification, the identification of the character being played and the emotion being expressed.

[**TEXT 3**] "In this inferential process none of the following notions arises in us: the actor is actually the happy Rāma; or the actor is not in fact Rāma and not really happy when we had first thought him to be the happy Rāma; or that he may or may not be Rāma; or that he is similar to Rāma."(*Abhinava-bhāratī* 1, 265, l.7-9; Pollock 2016, 82)

[**TEXT 4**] "The perception [of the spectator] is quite distinct from cognitions that are true, false, dubious, or based on similarity, e.g. "He [the actor] is Rāma and Rāma is he," "He is Rāma–but no, a later cognition rules out the first and shows us that he is not Rāma," "He might or might not be Rāma," and "He is similar to Rāma." Rather, it is like looking at a painting of a horse." (*Kāvyaprakāśa* 4.28; Shulman 2012, 63).

[**TEXT 5**] "Rather, it is like looking at a painting of a horse, and has the form: "Here is the happy Rāma." To quote, "There is no appearance of doubt, or indeed of truth or falsehood—we have the

thought, 'This is him,'" and not 'This is him in actuality.'" (*Abhinava-bhāratī* 1, 265, l.12; Pollock 2016, 82)

"The logical status of the spectator's cognition can be stated as 'This is that' (*asāv ayam*), a statement that is distinct from 'This is really that' (*asāv evāyam*)" (Shulman 2012, 63).

[**TEXT 6**] "The restrictive particle *eva* excludes the non-connection, the connection with something else, or the permanent non-connection of the predicate-property, when attached to the predicate term, the subject term or the verb [respectively]. Even when not actually used, *eva's* role is understood from the speaker's intention, for [any] sentence has exclusion as its result. Examples [of the three cases] are: 'Caitra is an archer', 'Pārtha is an archer', and 'A lotus is blue'." (Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇa-vārrtika* 4.190–2).

- An ambiguity in the expression "depicted object".
- In distinguishing between merely seeing Rāma and really seeing Rāma, Śrī Śaṅkuka has, in effect, provided a phenomenological distinction between seeing-in and seeing face to face, and the suggestion is that the former involves, as the latter does not, the character.
- All this is put by Śrī Śaṅkuka in the claims that the actor "imitates"—that is, configures the expressive look of—the character's stable emotion, and that the audience "infers"—that is recognises—the character's emotion in the look of the actor.

Brecht's Non-Aristotelian Drama

"We have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely 'entangled' in what is going on" ([1936] 1978, 78). "… it is a common truism of the [aristotelian] type of play that the audience, once it is in the theatre, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must and can be reached only through its emotions […whereas…] the latter theatre holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded." ([1936] 1978, 79).

"… the principle – that the actor appears on the stage in a double role, as Laughton and as Galileo; that the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing […] – comes to mean simply that the tangible, matter-of-fact process is no longer hidden behind a veil; that Laughton is actually there, standing on the stage and showing us what he imagines Galileo to have been." ([1948] 1978, 194).

3. An Analogy Between Painting and Plays

[**TEXT 7**] "As to your argument about a cow's being "constructed" (*saṃyujyamāna*) of yellow and other colours of paint: if the sense meant here is "manifested," (*abhivyajyamāna*) that is patently false, because no real (*pāramārthika*) cow is being manifested by the paint as though by a lamp. All that is being produced thereby is a particular configuration (*samūha-viśeṣa*) similar to a cow. The painting is the domain of appearance (*pratibhāsa*), namely, that an entity similar to a cow subsists in a particular arrangement of red and so on similar to the arrangement of the parts of a cow. The configuration of theatrical elements, however, is never grasped in a cognition of similarity to a stable emotion like desire. (*Abhinava-bhāratī* vol. 1, p. 278; Pollock 2016, 186-7).

Husserl's three objects hypothesis

"We have three objects: 1) the physical image, the physical thing made from canvas, marble, and so on; 2) the representing or depicting object; and 3) the represented or depicted object. For the latter, we prefer to say simple 'image subject'; for the first object, we prefer 'physical image'; and for the second, 'representing image' or 'image object'." ([1904-5] 2005, 21).

"The different objects—the painted surface, the depicted subject, and the "perceptual figment" that is the image object—are also different focal points of attention: For example, if I contemplate the picture of Raphael's theological subject hanging above my desk, the picture appears to me as a

physical thing, as a thing hanging on the wall; I focus my attention on that. Then I change the direction of my contemplation and focus my attention on the image object: there then appears to me an achromatic little figure of a woman, about a foot and a half high, tinted only in black and white and surrounded by two cherubs, considerably smaller and tinted in the same way, and so on. In normal contemplation of the picture, I live in the image consciousness. In that case, I focus my attention on something entirely different: I see the form of a sublime woman, of superhuman size, two powerful and large young angels, and so on. I also say of these that they "appear," but obviously this does not occur in the proper sense. I see the subject in the image object; the latter is what directly and genuinely appears." ([1904-5] 2005, 48).

Husserl says that "it [is] impossible for us to view the appearance belonging to the image object as a normal perception: It bears within itself the characteristic unreality of conflict with the actual present" ([1904-5] 2005, 51).

"[N]one of the positions in perception theory would be of the absurd opinion that there is no difference between the presentation of a real thing (for example in a shop window or on a tray) and the artificial presence of an image object. […] The concept of real presence specifies presence in terms of a worldly kind of presentness with substantial attendance. That is why there can be a nonreal, artificial, presence—a presence, precisely, without substantial attendance." (Wiesing, *Artificial Presence*, 2009, 19–20).

Characters and depictions as virtual entities

"Artificial" or "fabricated" (*kṛtrima*) is the word Śaṅkuka too uses to describe the nature of what is depicted onstage (ABh. 1, 274.6; 275,1), the same word Sarasvatī uses in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* when she interrogates Līlā as to the nature of its conjured-up virtual worlds (MU 3.18.15; cf. Chakrabarti 2018, 7); it is also the word used to describe the status of a god's *avatāra* on earth (Couture 2001, 322). Indeed, the term *avatāraṇa* has a precise technical use in the language of theatre, where it is used to describe the movement performed by actors as they move from the wings to the stage itself (Couture 2001, 319). Perhaps *kṛtrima* is best translated as "virtual".

Chalmers' virtual realism: five criteria for reality: existence, causal powers, mind-independence, non-illusoriness, and genuineness (Chalmers 2022, 108–116). He argues that the objects seen in a simulation meet these criteria. So he writes, for example, "Do the objects we perceive in a simulated world exist? If I'm in a perfect simulation, does the tree outside my window really exist? My opponent says, "No, the tree and the window itself are mere hallucinations." I say, "Yes, the tree and the window really exist." At some level they're digital objects, grounded in digital processes in a computer, but they're no less real for that." (115). He defines simulation realism as the claim that "if we're in a perfect simulation, the objects around us are real and not an illusion", putting the weight on the fourth criterion.

4. The Absent Subject Experienced

"… when talking about picture perception, we need to consider not two, but three entities. They are the following: A) the two dimensional picture surface; B) the three dimensional object the picture surface visually encodes; and C) the three dimensional depicted object […Of these…] B is a virtual object: it is fully determined by the marks on the picture surface given the rules of optics and it has only perceptible properties" (Nanay 2018, 170).

We might call B the "depiction" and C the "subject depicted". Nanay provides three examples, of which two echo those of Husserl: "In one of Henri Matisse's portraits of his wife, Madame Matisse's face appears to be entirely green. So B's face is green, but C's face (that is, Madame Matisse's face) is not green at all. [Again,] in the case of black and white photographs, B has no color. But C does" (2018, 170). Third, caricatures.

"How does the representation of C influence the perceived color (and the cortical activity)? A straightforward proposal would be to say that it is the mental imagery of C that influences the perceived color. You have a (not necessarily very salient) mental imagery of the heart and this mental imagery (and the color red that shows up in it) influences your perceptual experience of the orange heart-shape (that is, it influences your perceptual phenomenology). Similarly, when you recognize

Mick Jagger, you have a (not necessarily very salient) mental imagery of Mick Jagger and this imagery influences the way you see the caricature. […] So this gives us the following picture: we have two perceptual states and (at least in some instances of picture perception) also a quasi-perceptual state: the perceptual representation of A and the perceptual representation of B, and we also have the quasi-perceptual representation (that is the mental imagery) of C. And in order to explain the phenomenology of seeing this picture as a caricature of Mick Jagger, we need to take all three of these perceptual/quasi-perceptual states into consideration." (Nanay 2018, 176–7).

Nanay: quasi-perceptual mental imagery, vs. Bhattacharyya: negative attention to the absent subject.

Aniconic representation, e.g. an empty throne as a way of depicting the Buddha.

5. Rival Cognitive Views

Three: (1) McConachie's "conceptual blending" view; (2) Stern's "seeing-as" view, and (3) Walton's "games of make-believe" view.

"The cognitive concept of identity, plus the ability of the mind/ brain to do conceptual blending, makes possible the doubleness of actor/characters (and player/positions). […] audiences generally "blend" the actor and the character together into one image, one concept of identity, to enable their affective immersion in the performance." (McConachie 2008, 42)

Hume speaks of the mind as a "kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an ininite variety of postures and situations" (T 1.4.6.4/SBN 253), and he uses the term "imagination" in its premodern sense for the faculty in question. Timothy Costelloe exploits a different metaphor of depiction to encapsulate Hume's concept of imagination: "The image of a canvas […] and the implied presence of a painter who works upon it, reflects nicely the inventiveness of the faculty and the simultaneously active and passive elements that Hume discovers in it." (2018, xii).

"When we sit at the theatre, the curtain goes up and a person walks out on stage, we see that person not (or not merely) as some old British actor whom we once saw on a TV show about people who spend too much money on their pets, but as Oedipus, by now a blind old man who has suffered at the hands of fate [… and then…] We are imagining that he is Oedipus" (Stern 2013, 36).

"It has been argued that an important feature of theatre, one that is lacking in films, is the actual presence to the audience of actors, real people. The significance of the presence of actors may be explained by the fact that they are objects of the spectators' imaginings. Spectators imagine of Sir Laurence Olivier, when he plays Hamlet, that he is Prince of Denmark; there is a real person before them who they imagine to be faced with the task of avenging his father's murder, to hesitate in carrying it out, and so forth." (Walton 1990, 26)

utprekṣā "poetic imagination"

Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* is, Shulman says, "one long *utprekṣā,* continually instantiated in specific figurative expressions" (Shulman 2012, 55): seeing a messenger in a cloud. The messenger uses the same trope, seeing in the contours of the surface of the earth over which he flies various other objects.

"*utprekṣā* could thus be said to be an ongoing negotiation between two perceptions—one seemingly "true," the other "false"—that are made to converge by the very existence of the two structural poles of the figure, the subject and object of imagined comparison. […In…] *utprekṣā,* what is swallowed up is the perception or recognition of the subject. … In other words, *utprekṣā* ends up as a kind of "seeing as X"; the everyday perception of the subject is overpowered by the imaginative one." (Shulman 2012, 58-9).

• For such cases, Walton's analysis of seeing y in x—that in seeing x one imagines seeing y—is probably correct.

- Walton speaks of "a visual game of make-believe" in which "what is special about her experience [of the canvas] is that it is penetrated by the thought, the imagining, that her seeing is of a [horse]" (Walton 1990, 300).
- Perhaps *utprekṣā* be understood as a case in which one plays a visual game of make-believe, imagining, of one's seeing a beloved face, that one is seeing the moon. Then, reading the construction ("etasmin tadeveti") as a locative absolute, one might formulate the trope as being that with regard to a face, what one sees is just the moon

Conclusion: I have argued that Śrī Śaṅkuka built a cognitive theory of audience engagement around a concept analogous to Wollheim's "seeing-in", that his account fares better than rival cognitivist accounts in that it is not based on an appeal to the imagination, and that it is philosophically untouched by the critique of cognitivism in India. Abhinavagupta's decision to do so was motived on extra-philosophical grounds, such as a wish to synethise Śaiva theology with aesthetic theory.

Bibliography

Please note that Hilla Wait has created an ORLO readings list wherein all the readings for this lecture series can be accessed. The link is (http://readinglists.bodleian.ox.ac.uk and enter "Seeing in Sanskrit").

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