

***Darshan* as Mode and Critique of Perception: Hinduism's Liberatory Model of Visuality**

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While the metaphors characterizing the Hindu notion of *darshan* (seeing, vision, perception) are themselves approached from a variety of perspectives (scholarly, pious, artistic, philosophical, psychological), we often come across an antagonism between Eurocentric modes of seeing as opposed to, and unrelated to, the Hindu notion of *darshan*. This paper will not understand this relationship as an antagonism, but will constructively exploit the relationship between 20th century European discoveries in perception, which utilize various theoretical models, and the Hindu concept of *darshan*. Concluding with a study on modern Indian films—films that are in part influenced by Western concepts—I will conclude that *darshan*, as it operates within the Hindu tradition, is not just a mode of perception but a critique of ordinary perception, the latter understood as an active subject observing a passive object. Because of the cinemagraphic symbiosis in contemporary Indian films, I will utilize contemporary studies on the role of the cinemagraphic close-up and see how that technique has been adapted for specifically Indian purposes, at least those related to *darshan*. What I hope to accomplish is to place *darshan* into the greater discourse of the genesis of perception, and to show that perception, prior to the concept of *darshan*, itself rests on principles not foreign to *darshan*.

Western Errors of Philosophy, Publicity and Perception

The European manifestation of vision, notes Kajri Jain, was primarily grounded in the Kantian conception of high and low art, which was again reascent of the ancient Platonic

distrust of materiality in general.¹ Private art, or low art, was defined by a ‘taste of sense’—a private satisfaction—and often associated with sacredness, reverence, and worship. Public art was defined by a distant, disinterested intellectual reflection, whose cult/religious value had been replaced by that of a transcendental aesthetic, an ecumenical beauty soon to be validated by the emergence of the Western museum and its classified images, foreign cultures, and fetish objects on display. Richard Davis calls attention to this dichotomy in *Lives of Indian Images*, where we can clearly see the two ‘worlds’ colliding in the way the image is approached and displayed.² Within these dialogues, the Kantian dualistic aesthetic still exists, with the traditional European religions being replaced by the system of Hinduism. Kantian thought is instead used as a model to describe a Hindu context. Two problems arise: 1) according to this Kantian model, it is assumed that the public/private divide exists within Hinduism, and *darshan* remains situated in the mystical genre of private, religious, intimate seeing, with its correlative of modern art more generally reflective of secular modes of seeing unhindered by religious passion. This assumption cannot be granted. 2) Even more problematic is the relegation of *darshan* to discussion of religious visuality and not perception in general, and its label as a mode of perception and *not* a critique of perception. The problem at hand is that western scholarship on the topic of *darshan* is severely limited by these assumptions.

The purpose of this paper is to place *darshan* within the wider discourse of perception, and to argue that *darshan*—as an aid to liberation—should not be relegated to a religious system, more specifically, to the Hindu, devotional mode of seeing. In addition, liberation—as the displacement of ego—must not be the sole property of religion. To accomplish this, we must

¹ Kajiri Jain, “More Than Meets the Eye: The Circulation of Images and the Embodiment of Value,” in *Beyond Appearances: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks California: Sage, 2003), 52-53.

² Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1997).

understand the interaction between viewer and viewed *not* as the outcome of the exchange of vision, but as symbolic of what is needed to overcome ordinary perception, defined as seeing opposites, distinctions, ego, self, etc. *Darshan* provides us with a conceptual model of how ordinary vision is attained, and conversely, how it may be overcome. Therefore, *darshan* is not solely a mode of religious perception but also a critique of ordinary perception.

Darshan's Ocular Telescope

In any discussion of *darshan*, we can find an abundance of theories as to what occurs between the image and the worshipper. Diana Eck, in her book *Darsan*, relates the act as, first, a visual exchange between worshipper and deity occurring via the medium of the eyes. Second, during this act, the Hindu deity or the sadhu ‘gives *darshan*,’ and the worshipper ‘receives *darshan*.’ Eck states that “not only is seeing a form of touching, but a form of knowing.”³ It is an ‘auspicious sight,’ and with that sight, the worshipper may receive blessings, knowledge, awareness, merit, etc. Any value assigned to the *darshan* exchange is dependent on many variables. Those variables include what may be offered by the worshipper, the particular deity involved in the *puja*, the type of ritual conducted, or the system of belief (*darsana*) one holds when approaching the image. The association of the visual with knowledge is exemplified by the Hindu term *darsana*, which translates not to a “seeing of the deity, but the ‘seeing’ of truth.”⁴ Eck writes: “The variety of names and forms in which the divine has been perceived and worshipped in the Hindu tradition is virtually limitless.”⁵ Whatever this mode of seeing entails, it shares a common goal—liberation.⁶ To better understand how *darshan* can, in any mode, fit

³ Diana Eck, *Darsan*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

within the context of liberation, we must turn to Lawrence Babb's thesis in *Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism*.

Like Eck, Babb agrees that *darshan* is a double moment, an interaction, "an internal pilgrimage." More specifically, Babb argues that *darshan* provides the worshipper with a "power that carries with it—at least potentially—an extraordinary 'point of view.'"⁷ On visual contact with the deity, the mind becomes engaged in meditation. For his evidence, Babb provides case studies of two modern Hindu sects and a popular religious film. The sacred literature of the Radhasoami sect, a movement founded in the mid-nineteenth century, provides Babb with an acute understanding of the visual. In a small exegesis of some of the sect's poetry, Babb concludes:

The point seems to be that the devotee's own visual power has in some sense been altered, increased, augmented—which may explain the poet-devotee's curious assertion that he has acquired a *durbin*, a 'telescope.' The devotee sees as he would not see before, and a wholly new universe comes into view. Most important of all, however, he now sees his guru as he truly is; that is, as the Supreme being.⁸

This relationship between the focusing of the telescope and the opening of vision, and its connection to liberation, can be found in other examples as well.

For instance, we may find parallels of the visual as it relates to the importance of liberation in such stories as the *Bhagavad-Gita* when Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as the omniscient and ubiquitous Vishnu on the battlefield. With the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s emphasis on love, we can discern the clear connection between *bhakti* and the visual, such that *darshan* is an intimate occasion, and that the intimate setting is required, a fact seen in the emphasis on personal encounter; hence, the erotic metaphors of kissing, touching, or entering the deity in the

⁷ Lawrence Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 37,4 (1981): 388.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 390.

act of seeing them. Seeing is always, metaphorically, touching. Also, through the character of Arjuna, we can learn that even though the truest form of Vishnu is the Supreme being, he is best understood in simpler forms—“But never canst thou see Me with this thy [natural] eye (XI, 8).”⁹ Threatened by the form of Vishnu, Arjuna requests that Vishnu take the form of Krishna once again, so that his fear may dissipate and he may return to his senses.¹⁰

Jain provides another example of the philosophical connection, though historically much later, between intimacy, liberation and perception. It may be no coincidence that, according to Jain in his article titled “Circulation of Images and the Embodiment of Value,” Krishna worship was contemporary with the growth of image-based temple worship in 8th century India, a style of worship “which espoused an unmediated, personalized devotional relationship with the divine, putatively de-linking religious practice from the priesthood and the caste-based division of labor.”¹¹ The alternative was made possible via other, non-priestly, intimate modes of communication such as poetry, song and dance. Poetry, such as that of the Radhasoami sect describing the ocular telescope, is one such modern example, an example which aids the theoretical leap into the metaphors of how “telescope” comes to function in public and private devotion.

In returning to Babb’s “telescope,” the situation becomes most interesting to learn that the same metaphor, when it was used to characterize the ocular relationship of deity as seen by worshipper, is also meant to describe the way the worshipper sees him or herself. The metaphor of the ocular telescope is then directed onto the worshipper via the deity (Eck’s ‘double seeing’) where, with union as an assumption, perhaps an ideal, the worshipper sees as the deity sees.

Babbs terms this union as a ‘closure:’

⁹ *Bhagavad Gita*, in *Hindu Scriptures*, ed. Dominic Goodall (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 257.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹ Jain, 53.

...it is evident that an important theme in Hindu worship is that of 'closure' between deity and worshipper; the devotee surrenders through intimacy, and establishes identification with the deity by taking something of the deity into himself...In the Hindu world 'seeing' is clearly not conceived as a passive product of sensory data originating in the outer world, but rather, seems to be imagined as an extrusive and acquisitive 'seeing flow' that emanates from the inner person, outward through the eyes, to engage directly with objects seen, and to bring something of those objects back to the seer. One comes in contact with, and in a sense becomes, what one sees.¹²

Guiding this entire discussion has been the underlying assumption that Babb makes explicit—seeing is not an objective process. This is due to “closure,” of what can be called a closing of the metaphorical gap between deity and worshipper. To use Western philosophical concepts, which I will address later, subject becomes object and object becomes subject. There is no distinction between the two, each is subsumed into the other—a lack of duality characterizing the highest form of Hindu religious consciousness. However, the question remains to be asked: What special vision does the deity give to the devotee that allows liberation to occur? Perception, it turns out, plays a potentially major role in how we can understand the process of liberation.

Citing George Mead, Babb argues that liberation occurs when the ego makes an object of itself. In order for this to be accomplished, one must enter the role of others. To “truly transform the self, one must create the self anew.”¹³ One must first see oneself before they can be created anew. The 'role of others' is the deity, the one who sees all. In the act of submission, the worshipper is granted the view of oneself submitting, a perspective of the gods. *Darshan* is returned and the perspective, not the gaze, is given to the devotee. 'Taking in,' for Babb, must equal being 'drawn up.'¹⁴ Egoism, as a former perspective and characteristic of ordinary perception, is replaced with the knowledge that, indeed, the person submitting is but a manifestation of the Supreme being, as they are seen from the outside. Egoism can never survive

¹² Babb, 396-397.

¹³ Babb, 398.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 396-398.

the union with Brahman. When liberation is achieved, there can be no discourse of meaning, for we are outside the spectrum of language. Liberation depends on nothing other than itself for meaning. While many discussions of *darshan* end in this final vertical frontier, that of ultimate union and nonduality, finding it useless to continue further into the deeper recesses of mystical encounter, we may traverse the dynamics and conceptuality of *darshan* in its theoretical components.

Secular Dynamics of Darshan

Darshan is not confined to religious seeing, nor must we assume that the dynamics of *darshan* apply solely to a religious hermeneutic. Unity, as will be shown, is just as relevant a term in any discussion of perception as it is in discourses of religious experience. In addition, the nature of that unity remains relatively consistent. As a note, when I use the word ‘dynamics,’ I am theorizing the ritual space in the terms of its phenomenology of perception. In the Hindu example, we have many variables: worshipper, rituals, beliefs, icons, images, intentions, etc. Within these elements, there are many actions that occur. For example, when the worshipper views the deity, his/her vision narrows. I want to call this a ‘closed’ mode of perception, characterized by focus, whether it is a spatial, mental or visual focus, or a fusion of the three. There is a loci of attention upon the deity; attention is not paid to outside contexts, even though those outside contexts are crucial in maintaining the various qualities of the deity, contexts such as ritual adornments, temple structure, color, etc. The deity is central, and primarily with the aid of ritual, the deity instructs the worshipper in his or her path to liberation. In *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*, Stephen Huyler describes Hindu ritual as actions that “must be enacted precisely to show proper respect to the Gods and to facilitate darshan for the devotee.”¹⁵ From this, we may add that the ritual manipulates the mode of perception in such a way as to suit

¹⁵ Stephen Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 36.

the desired outcome, which is, in the case of *darshan*, for a form of the Supreme deity to manifest itself.

Contrary to assumptions, the vision of the deity before the worshipper is one of openness, or, to put it in other words, the vision is of the Supreme Being because it is open. The deity's vision is not restricted, or, we may say its consciousness encompasses all, if in the process we can first discern shades of meaning within the word 'consciousness,' and second, within those shades be able to make value judgments upon superior and inferior states of consciousness. No ritual is conducted by the deity towards the worshipper in order for the efficacy of the transaction to be complete. The image just is, it contains all, and in being all, aids in the creation or the awareness of the ultimate Self. In this discussion, I am aware that not all deities are seen by their worshippers as a manifestation of the all. Some may represent attributes of, say Vishnu, and as in the *Gita* be called Krishna. However, for that incarnation to take place, we can assume that the conditions for the appearance of the Supreme deity must first be present for the incarnation/attribute to occur. Eck writes that:

While it is believed that God is present continually in any consecrated image of *linga*, the bidding and dismissal prayers provide a special framings of the ritual honor-offerings, and they make it clear that the omnipresent God is in no sense restricted by the multiple 'image-incarnations' it undertakes.¹⁶

In addition to the characterizations of open and closed, there are beliefs, images, actual physical adornments and the considered spatiality of the deity; there is geography, time, personal intention and social duty, etc. However, I shall, as Eck does, subsume each aspect of this conceptual apparatus under the greater importance of *darshan* and its relationship to the notion of liberation. More specifically, I will base my analysis upon the notions of open and closed. In awareness of the superiority of the deity's vision, in one example of public devotion the image in

¹⁶ Eck, 50.

procession is often physically held above that of the worshippers; we must also keep in mind the fact that darshan is not restricted to the procession, as darshan can occur without ritual mediation.

Richard Davis writes in *Lives of Indian Images*:

A processional image presents itself to its audience seated high upon a palanquin carried on the shoulders of temple servants or riding in a large wooden vehicle pulled by ropes. It appears dressed in silk clothing and elaborately decorated with necklaces, bracelets, belts, rings, and a crown of gold and jewels.¹⁷

Its spatial prominence is symbolic of its sacred importance as well as indicative of its superior vision. Decoration and beauty is secondary to other criterion. Completeness, the deity's presence, and iconographic correctness all take precedence over adornment. All adornments and rituals are secondary in order to serve the primary function—the possibility for meaning, right interpretation, and for a meaningful experience to occur.

In each case the encounter between the image and his community of response occurred within a complex framing set of cultural assumptions and ideas, what I call a dispensation.¹⁸

Utilizing Stanley Fish's reader-response theory, Davis calls attention to the 'dispensation,' or cultural frame, where meaning is created.¹⁹ That frame need not be definable. The point is that all perception is contextual, and hence, narrows the many possibilities that await its interpretation. This is dispensation on a macrocosmic level, i.e., the cultural contexts. We can, on a microcosmic scale, also view the ritual as frame, where frame acts as the boundary, potential, and possibility for meaning. Where the macro-scale directs perception on a general level, under the influences of religion, history, and language, the micro-dispensation seeks to isolate with greater efficiency the objectivity of the viewing experience within the ritual setting; it is a means to an end.

¹⁷ Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Davis describes the process by which the images are animated. First is the initial selection of materials. Second is the physical fabrication of the image. The third step involves the “awakening” of the image, which centers on the opening of the eyes.²⁰ In reality, each step can last a long time and may include further details and specifications. But this is not the only way deities manifest themselves in sacred images. There are also images that are self-born or self-manifesting. While self-manifesting images provide the possibility to access a deity without the medium of ritual, nonetheless, ritual consecration plays a major role in the identity of sacred images. Perhaps the answer lies in perception itself and the role of the ritual to enact ‘divine’ sight.

But there is another issue prior to the concept of perception, which is that of identity: religious identity versus ‘other,’ secular, every-day identity. It may also be a difference between religious consciousness and ordinary consciousness, with ‘religious consciousness’ generally defined as a awareness of a superior reality, whether that person is in constant communion with the divine, unified with the divine, or has become a god oneself. The religion, via assigned mediators, assigns its own value. The quality of the state of being is not as important as the quality of the mode of perception within any given system. I will take it as a hierarchical necessity that the highest mode of perception is commonly defined by superiority over lesser modes of perception. Even more, we can assume that religious seeing is superior because it is originary, and that lesser forms of consciousness, i.e., ordinary consciousness, are but derivations and distortions thereof. Therefore, seeing reality, especially in the Hindu context, is religious seeing.

What matters in regard to the open/closed modes of perception is how that superior perception is achieved, and if more secular theories of vision—in this case those of French

²⁰ Ibid., 35.

phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and American art theorist/critic James Elkin—agree with their religious counterparts. Secular vision, or ordinary vision, as supposedly opposite to *darshan*, involves frames, distinction, uniqueness, objects, separation, etc. It is everyday vision. It is impoverished because it is limited. It involves concepts and borders for those concepts. As a place holder for ideas, language makes concepts possible with its predicates, objects, nouns and subjects. In many ways, to reiterate Platonic versions of perception, each object takes part in a form (idea) that was imposed on it during the moment of its inception. To know something was to know its form, as well as its participation in the higher forms—the highest being the form of the Good—though participation is not to be confused with liberation. To gain knowledge was to gain philosophical access to the higher organizing principle of that thing, as it could not exist without first being organized. This is ordinary vision. Thinking in the forms relegated the image to text. Each object had a philosophical counterpart, a superior meaning embedded within that only philosophers had access to. The aesthetics or visuality of the image was to be historically relegated as an expression of a philosophical idea. As such, visuality played no substantial role in the creation of knowledge or thought in general.

Pinney makes this clear in his analysis of the way the history of images is always written.

Calling it a ‘durkheimianism,’ Pinney states:

Consequently a very straightforward ‘Durkheimianism’ emerges in which the image somehow draws together and exemplifies, as a social representation, everything that can be identified as potentially determining it, and which the historian wishes to have deposited in the images as the validation of his/her supposition.²¹

When the image is treated as visual text, many things occur. First, textual interpretations become hermeneutic par excellence. Second, and most important, the visual is seen as expressive of the

²¹ Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 205-6.

textual, and therefore, its genesis in the process of thought, of cognition, is either glossed over or rejected. Pinney asserts that in the case of Hindu political representations, the situation was quite the opposite—political images imbued with sacred iconography aided in the pre-verbal creation of a polarized political culture characterized by ideology:

The images [political representations] I have described might be seen as moving through a pathway of what Roland Barthes has called ‘wavy meaning,’ in which their materiality impresses itself upon the surrounding world. While these images are in certain contexts amenable to recoding, they can never be plucked from that pathway and sutured in any simplistic way with the ‘socio-logical’ or ‘political’ reality of any particular historical moment.²²

In the context of political representation, it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that viewing political pictures influences one’s political stance. It is in fact the basis of modern advertising and the assertion that consumer identity should always reflect product identity, and vice versa. Each is created in the process. However, the situation becomes much more complex when discussing the formation of thought, consciousness, and concepts in regard to the visual, especially religious modes of seeing and religious ritual. What I hope to accomplish is to place *darshan* into the greater discourse of the genesis of perception, and to show that ‘ordinary’ or ‘secular’ perception rests on principles not foreign to *darshan* as has been discussed thus far. In essence, as many theories propose, perception *must* include a relationship between viewer and viewed.

Referencing the work of Susanne Langer, Jan Gonda, and Rudolf Arnheim, Eck finds that the Vedic notion of *dhi-*, often translated as ‘thought,’ is best translated as “insight,” “vision,” and “seeing.”²³ Langer posits that the fundamental imaginative activity of making images via the mind’s eye may also be the fundamental “activity of the religious imagination as well.” Later in the text, Eck pulls two quotes from Arnheim that seem contradictory at first. The first quote states

²² Ibid., 205.

²³ Eck, 14.

that the “object we see, either in our immediate range of perception or through the medium of photography, is dependant upon who we are and what we recognize from past experience.”²⁴ The second quote reads: “We find that direct observation, far from being a mere ragpicker, is an exploration of the form-seeking, form-imposing mind, which needs to understand but cannot until it casts what it sees into manageable models.”²⁵ The first quote follows a psychological reading of perception, where past experiences, cultural biases (*i.e.*, Davis’ dispensation) etc., mold a lens of perception from which information is gathered. This places perception into the mind of the viewer. The second quote, while not directly challenging the validity of the first, uses the psychological apparatus but adds to it the concept “manageable models.” What are manageable models? While Eck ends her discussion of Arnheim and the phenomenology of perception with the second quote, there is still much to be said.

Given the postmodern condition of much of theoretical discourse, from the Frankfurt school to Foucault to deconstruction in the humanities, numerous writers on art theory, art history and religious iconography all agree on one basic tenet: seeing is an imaginative activity and interpretations of what we see are far from objective. However, from this chaotic nothing that seems to characterize the world of senses, there appears “manageable models,” superficially constructed to serve the mind. The models Arnheim speaks of are what may be called Plato’s forms, concepts, thinking in isolationist terms, in names—ego, me and world, nature and god, etc. Regardless, these concepts are characterized by their organizing principles and their imposition of inorganicism; the world, as an organic whole, unified and without classification, is divvied up into thinkable models. But we may also posit that thinking does not employ models, instead, models are the very fabric of thought. It is what raises the mind out of sameness (unity in

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*.

multiplicity/Hindu divine perception) and gives it order. Even though it is the value that makes thought possible, in the Hindu system it is not superior and not originary. From the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad's characterization of temporality, we can discern more clearly the type of 'linearity' at work: "Now, at that time this world was undifferentiated. What introduces differentiation is name and form (individuality), so that we can say: 'A man has this name; he has this form.'"²⁶

Any aspiration towards the spiritual life is, according to Upanishadic literature, to begin to rid the world of names, classifications and disciplines. After Narada, in Book Seven of the Chandogya Upanishad, lists the extent of his knowledge Sanatkumara replies that "everything that you have been studying is no more than a name."²⁷ In other words, thinking with distinction is to be achieved in order to understand the true Self. Yet how is this overcome when it relates to darshanic visuality?

As it procedurally relates to *darshan*, to overcome the ego-concept, one must create the opposite of the 'open.' The icon must be presented as unique to the background/horizon surrounding it. To distinguish it from the horizon is not solely to apply ones attention, but also to render its geographical space. That space is created with ritual, prayer, temple structure, decoration, bowing, prostrations, etc. Some spaces may be preordained by cosmological numerology, and may have pre-existing sanctity; but often with the aid of ritual, spaces become sacred, as it is more the combination of various factors *plus* the faculty of attention that creates the possibility for the incarnation. Ritual aside, the deity must also decide to appear. With this ritual structure in mind, I shall turn to theories of perception that share a remarkable conceptual similarity.

²⁶ *Bhagavad Gita*, 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim: “I can see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects which guarantee the permanence of those aspects by their presence.”²⁸ Merleau-Ponty finds that there are no objects, in so far as the object is tied to its varying perspectives. Ordinary vision is characterized by these perspectives. Using the example of a house, he claims that in addition to its limitless number of angles that may be viewed, it also contains pipes, walls and ceilings. Any sight of the object, and therefore any complete knowledge of the object, is impossible. James Elkins agrees in *The Object Stares Back* that the amount of sensory information lost to our faculties far outweighs that which we can perceive.²⁹ Merleau-Ponty writes:

The positing of the object therefore makes us go beyond the limits of our actual experience which is brought up against and halted by an alien being, with the result that finally experience believes that it extracts all its own teaching from the object. It is this *ek-tase* of experience which causes all perception to be perception of something.³⁰

As Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, and Sartre have famously concluded, *all consciousness is consciousness of something*.³¹ Merleau-Ponty agrees, yet builds upon the nature of the “something.” That something must be the absolute positing of an object. It must, assuming pure consciousness is nondiscriminatory, signal the death of pure consciousness and the birth of ordinary consciousness: “and yet the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence, as a crystal placed in a solution suddenly crystallizes it.”³² It is this process of crystallization which creates the concept-ego. It is Babb’s “telescope,” enhanced by the visual aids of religious ritual. As I have noted, while ‘interpretative

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 68.

²⁹ James Elkins, *When the Object Stares Back* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

³¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Williams and Kirkpatrick (New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 1937), p. 44. See also Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1983), 73.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

communities' provide a meaningful way to read and interpret, since no single interpretation is correct and universal, Davis adapts Fish's theory as applied to visuality, contending that "interpretative strategies for encountering objects, like those for texts, have their own social locations and historical genealogies."³³ In much the same dynamic as culture provides a framework in which to view the image, ritual enclosing provides the framework to view the object.; but the outcomes are vastly divergent.

The apparatus of any community of response must not necessarily determine any specific response. There is always ample room for interpretation. Religious meaning may translate to 'meanings' in the plural; social meaning to meanings. But in the case of darshanik ritual framing, there is a clear objective—liberation. By using liberation as the goal, I am setting the gaining of merit, grace, good fortune, and all other related benefactions under the rubric of liberation, assuming they function for the greater result of liberation. In this example, what the ritual provides is a heightened mode of perception vastly superior in concentrated attention to that of ordinary consciousness. Ritual provides the occasion for focused attention, where we can understand attention to be a special form of consciousness not unrelated to meditation. Attention is the closed telescope when the gaze is upon the deity. The returned gaze, being open, is what is desired by the devotee—the view from Brahman's point of view.

To understand this dynamic, we must view ritual as a stylized, didactic systematization of physicality so that perception is focused and enclosed within a specific frame. Such closure of vision, and to place focus upon the image, provides the potential for escape out of ordinary vision/consciousness. Writes Eck:

³³ Davis, 9.

In the first view, the image is a kind of *yantra*, literally a “device” for harnessing the eye and mind so that the one-pointedness of thought which is fundamental to meditation can be attained. The image is support for meditation.³⁴

Seeing, as an imaginary activity, ceases to be so. Through ritual, seeing becomes restricted, and it must *not* be the property of *darshan* to find in concentrated seeing the means to become open.

Instead, it gives people the perceptive ability to gaze at perception itself. *Darshan* can be both the process by which perception becomes closed and the opportunity for it to open—for any view upon any object thus reveals the truth that the object is an object only in so far as it is framed and ritualized.

In *Violent Origins*, Jonathan Z. Smith comes to a similar conclusion when he states that “ritual activities are an exaggeration of everyday activities, but an exaggeration that reduces rather than enlarges, that clarifies by miniaturizing in order to achieve sharp focus.”³⁵ In the context of the animal sacrifice, the act, or ritual, is “a meditation on one cultural process by means of another.”³⁶ As a “focus on a focus,” the ritual releases a meditative space upon daily activities, such as domestication, breeding and selective killing, which have created the need for the ritual killing. In essence, Smith views ritual as a self-reflective, controlled, focused projection of pre-existing cultural practices. The origin of the ritual is not of the utmost importance. What matters is that ritual reflects life, and can bring greater understanding to current cultural practices. *Darshan* fulfills similar requirements. If we were to compare the ritual purposes of sacrifice and *darshan*, we would find that *darshan* sets the space for a meditation—a focus—on concept creation while sacrifice is a focus on the selection and perfection of animal species. The “focus on the focus,” is just that, where the first “focus” is the ritual space as one gazes upon the

³⁴ Eck, 45.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice,” in *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 194.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

“displayed model” of ordinary perception, itself viewed as an organized, controlled ritual; it is a perception of perception. Darshanic ritual is but a projection of internal processes of concept production. The life given to the image by means of the ritual awakening grants it the occasion to perform. It performs the creation of thought, for attributed to it are the same properties given to the ego: beautification, recognition of power, the affirmation of existence, etc. Pinney in *Photos of the Gods* calls this process the “poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images.”³⁷

Elkins observes this as well:

A psychoanalyst might say that we need to believe that vision is a one-way street and that objects are just the passive recipients of our gaze in order to maintain the conviction that we are in control of our vision and ourselves. If I think of the world in the ordinary way, I am much reassured. Everything is mine to command...But this implies something darker: that if I resist the idea that objects look back at me and that I am entangled in a web of seeing, that I am also resisting the possibility that I may not be the autonomous, independent stable self I claim I am. I may not be coming to terms with the thought that I need these reciprocal gazes in order to go on being myself.³⁸

Building off Jacques Lacan, Elkins attributes to the object, any object, not only a living presence, but the possibility of that presence to dangerously disrupt the fictional notion of the self, a sense of myself that is a symptom of ordinary human consciousness. To be human then means to make distinction between self and world. To be human is to think in objects, if we can understand the term ‘object’ to signify a worldview wholly unlike that of the Ultimate Self, whose vision sees objects with the knowledge that it is doing so—a similar vision to that of the returned gaze from the deity. Utilizing Woodman Taylor’s analysis in *Visual Display in Popular Indian Cinema*, I shall draw upon the conceptual dynamic of *drishti* (a South Asian phenomenon) as it is manifested in Hindu cinema, and compare its relation to the visual aspects of *darshan*.

³⁷ Pinney, 197.

³⁸ Elkins, 74.

Darshan in the Cinema

According to Taylor, the first major director to establish the unique ‘Indian’ cinema was Dadasaheb Phalke.³⁹ Appropriating Hindu mythological themes, Phalke

incorporated aspects of established modes of Indian visuality. Most striking was his use of frontally shot deities to create the iconic effect familiar to displays seen in temples where the *murti* or religious image on view sends out its *drishti*, or gaze, through both eyes.⁴⁰

In time, and with the adoption of this darshanic interplay of visuality, coupled with the Persian romance of *nazar* as exemplified in their love poetry, the cinema adapted *darshan* to the thematics of lovers and the genre of romance was born. Due to film’s ability to depict movement and multiple angles, as well as enhance the viewer’s experience with song, we can find in this medium yet another understanding of the role of ritual in *darshan* when its intervisuality became that of love between persons. In the traditional ritual setting, we have prior to any closure the devotee and Brahman. The devotee is activating the ritual space so that the Brahman may actualize, the last step being the ritual opening of the eyes so that it may see. In cinema, Taylor finds that this structure has given way to that of the lover and beloved. The lover, while taking many forms, is frequently the courtesan in his attempt to woo the beloved, who in the ritual setting was God; this is, by all accounts, not a ground-breaking thematic. However, in tracking this transition, many unaccounted perspectives on the nature of the ritual are revealed. Initially serving to attract the God, the cinematic ‘ritual’—as that which sets the space—is that of song in the background, or the interruption of a dance. All this serves to draw attention to the metaphors

³⁹ Woodman Taylor, “Penetrating Gazes: The Poetics of Sight and Visual Display in Popular Indian Cinema,” in *Beyond Appearances: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, ed. ed. by S. Ramaswamy (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 306.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 306-7.

of *darshan*. The closure, or union, with the divine is depicted in these various guises. But this is all framing ritual; Taylor calls it “visual foreplay.”⁴¹

Visual foreplay takes many forms; however, cinematic foreplay is specifically situated within a Hindu semiotics of the body that parallels the significance of the body as found in Hindu religious texts. In a typical scene of visual foreplay, Taylor writes of the generalized male gaze as it follows the contours of a woman’s body:

His gaze slowly moves up her face, focusing at length on an exchanged gaze with her eyes, after which his gaze settles on her lips, the metonym for a kiss. This gazing sequence for romantic devotion, beginning with the feet before moving up the body, is precisely the visual sequence that a devotee undertakes frequently when performing *darshan* of a deity.⁴²

It is this ‘podoeroticism’ of the feet acting as the operating metaphor where the amorous intentions of the male are made known. Fusing the perspectives, the camera takes on the male gaze by moving up the woman’s body, culminating with a gaze of the lips or a returned gaze from the beloved. The camera, as the eye of the lover, is also that of the devotee: in focus, telescopic. In the case of the Hindu romance, *darshan* is the returned gaze of love, of recognition from the other, and this being the case, “sequences of lovers gazing intensely at each other are never depicted in silence.”⁴³ The song and dance accompanying any exchange of gazes is symbolic of the lover’s union. The close-up of the camera’s lens is the closing of the horizon (Merleau-Ponty), such that the object can be created. The horizon, as the background of the cinema—that which is lost to the audience, and that which gives the close-up its correlative, intimate identity—is also a concept of multiplicity. The horizon is ritual, and ritual is material

⁴¹ Ibid., 308.

⁴² Ibid., 310.

⁴³ Ibid., 311.

and belief. As a tool to explain the phenomenon of perception, in the case of ritual, the horizon is the sacred space created for the incarnation of the deity; it allows the deity to be.

Similarly, it is the religious/philosophical space, the difference being the terms sacred and profane. In cinema, the horizon is the shot that may contain multiple objects, people and settings, as opposed to the close-up shot which allows for a precise, intimate depiction of where focus should be. The ritual horizon of the cinema is the lover's actions to draw the beloved's attention. Though it is tempting to fall into the discourse of thinking this process of *darshan* is simply, this is sacred because that is not, I have hoped to provide a few examples as to why this is sacred. It is sacred because perception is sacred. Perception, in the case of *darshan*, is the stylized focusing of attention to reveal the superficial nature of that focus—to construct a space where, literally, that object may return the gaze. It is the content of that returned, open gaze that is the goal of Hindu religiosity, that of liberation. The object performs because we allow it to do so; the devotee is called into meditation.

Theoretical Conclusions

Taking into account the performative aspect of the image within the Hindu context, we can now understand that any dualistic theory of aesthetics—high vs. low, religious vs. secular—is overly simplified. The physical aspects adorning any image places the icon into a context set apart from the larger horizon of objects, the nature of which are irrelevant except to add value to the center image, the “absolute object,” as Merleau-Ponty explains. That “absolute object” is always the deity. The isolation of that object is impossible without stylized borders constructed, prayers offered—without ritual removing it from the horizon. In order to draw attention to the ordinary mode of perception, the deity demands to be made subject to that display. In that telescope of vision characterizing the devotee's perception, the exchange of vision occurs where the subject-object relationship dissolves and the closed perspective/ordinary vision is replaced

with a unified, open vision; liberation occurs. Providing the basis of this transference is that concentrated perception (meditation) on any object releases the object from the ego's grip, and teaches that both object and subject are fictional concepts, or, conversely, that each object reflects the all because each object is created in the same process—God, Brahman, self and other included. The ritual, or the close-up of the cinema, provides the occasion where perception can perceive the narrowing, perverting process of ordinary perception, a state of mind steeped in duality, distinction, name, etc. It is a replacement of ordinary consciousness—worshipper towards deity, which is but a perversion to reality, a inferior perception—to ultimate consciousness characterized in the metaphor of having the God's vision. Receiving God's vision is to receive *darshan*.

As Eck makes clear, darshanic seeing is a form of touching and a form of knowing. As a mode of perception, *darshan* acts as a critique of perception in that the liberation of the devotee is the correcting of their vision. Therefore, what makes *darshan* occur is also what makes thought occur, and so any criticism that the conceptual dynamics of *darshan* makes upon perception must also be applied to thought. Thinking in names, we may add, is also thinking in objects. If Hindu modes of perception provide a gateway to better understand the construction of thought in general, we must also try to see the elements of *darshan* in a non-material virtuality, which characterizes mental processes divorced from physicality. What does the symbol of beauty symbolize, beyond attractiveness and pleasure, when it relates to the genesis of conceptual thought? Could each ritual act correspond to a non-corporeal process, and also remain consistent in regard to spatio-temporal preparation, procedural development and intended culmination/conclusion, which is the birth of ordinary consciousness? Perhaps it will be in the context of *darshan*, with its insightful display of the relationship between perception and thought, that these questions can be properly answered.

In sum, what I have hoped to accomplish is to place *darshan* into the greater discourse of the ‘genesis of perception,’ not solely in the model of a form of perception, and to show that perception, prior to the concept of *darshan*, itself rests on principles not foreign to *darshan*. While much of western scholarship on *darshan* has limited *darshan* to a religious mode of seeing, intimate and devotional, *darshan* cannot be contained by these conceptual categories. Rather, *darshan* speaks to the origin of perception as much as to liberation from it, and its contributions to the discourse of perception are unique to Hinduism and its practices. Moreover, with the help of contemporary film theory, modern Indian films allow this theoretical construction given that the aspects of *darshan* and movement are implicated with rich philosophical meaning; hence, for example, the cinemagraphic parallel between the lover and devotee, a parallel found in Indian films that blends the Western penchant for romantic, individualistic love and the Hindu practice of personal devotion.

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