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Picturing more than the nation: three spotlights onto the study of visual and media cultures in India


The last decade has seen a growth in studies on visual and media cultures in India by Indian and non-Indian scholars and in terms of interdisciplinary approach, regional width and thematic focus. This follows a similar development in other geographical regions, mainly with respect to Africa and Australia. One of the most dramatic shifts that has taken place in this context is that popular visual culture is no longer confined to ‘kitsch’, ‘folk’ or ‘primitive’ art. With the critique of these fields of discourse often highly ethnocentric and (self-)orientalising, thus constituting a timeless and passive ‘Other’, popular visual culture has come to engender interdisciplinary ventures into a discussion of both hand-crafted and mass-reproduced, often urban and globalised images and technologies that allow for discussions on production, circulation and reception/consumption of its material culture. In this course, disciplines such as anthropology, art history and visual studies have come to rethink their concepts and methods, moving away from descriptive or Eurocentric analyses evolving around normative statements with respect to ‘authenticity’ and ‘realism’, ‘authorship’, ‘origin’ and ‘originality’, or ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’. Instead, there is a significant move towards a more agent- and agency-oriented exploration that recognises glocal contexts, specific modes of production and consumption, and notions of gender, caste and class difference. Moreover, there is greater recognition of the visual and medial interplay that impact production, circulation and consumption practices. And last, but not least,
new’ fields of cultural production have enjoyed attention, shifting the classical focus on one site, usually remote such as a village, to urban or transnational and thus highly multi-sited and entangled contexts.

To mention authors and studies would do no good to this review and whatever is reproduced now is inherently incomplete. However, a few ‘landmarks’ could be pulled up to place the three studies discussed below in this rich topography of inquiries into visual and media production. Key genres such as commercial cinema cultures (regional and national), photography (colonial and contemporary), calendar prints and advertising can be listed as well as studies on television (e.g. soap operas, satellite TV), comic cultures, media censorship and vibrant festival cultures and public rituals. Emphasis of the majority of studies lies on the age of colonial rule or on the era of post-liberalisation in India.

The everyday whereabouts of gods in the bazaar

In many ways, Kajri Jain’s study is a highly remarkable venture into the everyday world of Indian calendar art. It is certainly enriching not only for scholars and students of India but far beyond area studies. It argues for a reconceptualisation of concepts such as truth and falsehood when it comes to judging the efficacy and realism of an image. Instead of assuming an essential, fixed meaning embedded in an image, Jain heralds the idea of distributed meaning and agent-oriented perspectives on a context-specific basis. She thereby also collapses often taken-for-granted tension-loaded dichotomies of religious and secular, ritual and economic, personal and collective, new and old. Jain cautions us not to fall into the trap of embedding images in a moral economy based on ‘mistrust of images’ (p. 12). Like Christopher Pinney, who extensively studied – and theorised – photography, printmaking and popular culture in India, and heralds the idea of an image-based history of an alternative modernity in India that challenges Western visuality in Camera Indica or Pictures of the Gods, she requests inquiries into the highly corporeal and performative contexts in which images are embedded, and from which they emerge. Moreover, Jain underlines the ability of images to ‘make’ worlds, subjectivities and meanings, and must thus be taken as crucial links between imagination and/as social practice. By studying the prints ‘coexisting regimes of value and efficacy’ (p. 14) across different contexts of exchange, she avoids their early fixation, and death.

For Jain, ‘vernacularity’ is a key term to think against more inflexible concepts such as ‘tradition’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘subaltern’. Vernacularity is relevant because it addresses issues of multiple ownership, locality, power and difference in many contexts and agents, leaving space for various forms of contestation around image production, circulation and consumption, without romanticising or exoticising a particular form of ‘authenticity’. In this sense, Jain speaks of a vernacularisation of capitalism that can be studied in calendar prints, and thus expands Robertson’s notion of glocalisation to the discussion of images and media. The ‘messy inauthenticity’, or ‘postcolonial granularity’ of calendar prints is based on the fact that they assemble colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial forms of knowledge and institutional structures and represent many things and realms at once as ‘sacred icons, commodities, gifts, items of ritual exchange and items of libidinal investment’ (p. 18). Moreover, they traverse multiple fields of power and identity formation. Jain goes on in making an equally important argument about calendar images.
as both an art form and part of visual culture, thus building an important bridge between the two ‘disciplines’ and pulling them into a dialogical relationship. Thus, in talking about calendar prints, Jain actually allows for a better understanding of everyday worlds and subjectivities, of aspirations and anxieties of producers and consumers of the images, in different contexts.

The rich ethnographic approach of this book is innovative and fresh, and takes the reader to key production centres of calendar prints, such as Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu and Nathdwara in Rajasthan, to production houses and studios in Bombay, Calcutta or New Delhi, and is based on several years of participatory observation and interviews with artists, calendar producers and vendors, and historical analysis of image itineraries and iconographic analysis. Jain’s interdisciplinary method uses theoretical debates from art history, visual and cultural studies. Moreover, she paints a portrait of the rich visual and performative traditions that can be found in India today, including debates on regional, national and global issues that impact the calendar’s manifold lives. Her interest in the production of value, authorship and originality of the prints is always tied up with analyses of social, religious, political and economic contexts, such as Hindu nationalism, capitalist aspirations, gendered roles and social networks of exchange across private and public spheres in postliberalisation India.

Jain’s arguments unfold in three parts and seven chapters and are an extremely joyful read. Besides the many important observations, the proposition that the efficacy of calendar prints lies to a large extent in what Jain calls the sacralisation of modernity is a valid one, because it challenges the often-promulgated view that the religious and the secular sphere are separated. Instead, as Jain argues, re-enchantment of modernity allows for a coexistence and entanglement of both, without rendering the other impotent. The bazaar as forum, arena and stage of calendar prints is thus the ideal case study for discussions on India’s multi-centred modernities and a must for scholars and students interested in everyday lives of India’s urban centres, small towns, cities and transnational networks and the ways in which the images are connected to changing devotional and emerging consumerist practices. Besides a fantastic discussion of colonial painter and printmaker Raja Ravi Varma and his vast empire of image production that lives on until today, Jain throws light on less known, ‘provincial’ artists and their ways of image-making such as M.V. Dhurandhar and B. Painter from Maharashtra, and tracks the alteration of particular deities and national heroes across time and space, across diverse social strata and religious groups.

The range of discussions in this book is immense and enlightening, also because they take us into concrete fields of inquiry of the partly highly abstract and theoretical excursions. Jain has incorporated, in a way as eloquent as her language and analytical clarity, 156 coloured images that accompany the arguments. They are not just illustrating the argument but generating a life and space of their own, thus turning into ‘informants’ or ‘gatekeepers’ of kinds.

The unruly urban lives of celluloid deities

Preminda Jacob’s book, *Celluloid deities*, differs from the growing interest in commercial cinema in India (spearheaded by Ravi Vasudevan, Rachel Dwyer, Madhav Prasad and Ashish Rajadyaksha) in that it does not look at particular film narratives,
directors, producers or stars. Instead, it follows the footsteps of scholars like Sara Dickey and Steve Derné in their explorations of (predominantly South Indian) film audiences and producers. While Dickey and Derné explore film audiences and their engagement with film stars and the politics of consumption through local players such as film clubs and movie goers, Jacob explores the vibrant world of the film banner and cutout medium in the context of artist communities. She shares Jain’s interest in production and circulation, and in performativity, and thereby draws a picture of the vibrant public culture of Madras, the capital of Tamil Nadu. Despite her background in art history and theory, she has followed, like Jain, an ethnographic approach, living and engaging with the artists, observing the making, and unmaking, of film paraphernalia that not only mark the urban topography of the city but also of the social worlds and politics of the state, and the nation.

Seeing banners and cutouts as contemporary art practices, she shares Jain’s argument to explore visual cultures in the formation of cultural identities in contemporary India. For Jacob, the works are part of a larger field of production of information and knowledge since they tie up with other fields of representation and technological innovation. Interestingly, the author links different spaces, or, in Jain’s words, ecologies, of consumption, circulation and production, as they criss-cross from film into the cinema hall and urban space, the realms of imagination and socio-political practice, and back again. Jacob’s time-frame of exploration covers the 1990s until today, with crucial changes taking place in Tamil politics, film and printing technologies as well as economic liberalisation. The aspirations unfolding in this multi-levelled space range between beauty, wealth and power, and must simultaneously be understood in the context of the contestation for space, lifestyle, poverty and class membership. In terms of the aesthetics of cinema’s visual culture, Jacob addresses the construction of charisma, celebrity and public spectacle, as elements of film rhetoric such as melodrama, action, romance and comedy spill over into rituals of staging political power. Following two strands of inquiry, the production and semiotics of the banner and cutout medium, on the one hand, and larger contexts of political and social imaginary, on the other hand, Jacob’s book is structured in seven chapters. Like Jain, she starts out with a discussion of production sites, the local contexts of artist studios and companies. This is accompanied by an exploration of functional aesthetics of the images in the nexus of art and commerce, as audience tastes and aspirations shape the artists’ works, and thus the public culture of the city. Pleasure features centrally in one chapter, as it is related to personal aspirations and the consumption of the charismatic star image, but also to social conventions and social stereotypes. The close connection of Tamil cinema to the creation of a Dravidian identity and movement also aligns it with analyses of banners and cutouts as propagandistic tools, with an emphasis on the figure of the hero and what Jacob calls ‘particular intense modes of gazing at cult images’ (p. 13). The recognition of ‘darshan’, a particular (Hindu) devotional, and highly performative and interactive way of engaging with the image, is an important part of this book since it also draws our attention to the fluid (and to some extent unproductive/often scholarly) boundaries of religion and politics, imagination and realism. Interestingly, Jacob alerts us to the fact that despite the mass media of film, banners and cutouts are, until most recently, not mass reproduced but hand painted and highly intangible, because they mark public space for very short periods of time until they are dismantled and destroyed. She traces how new media technologies and urban spatialisation (e.g. gentrification) have impacted on the artists’ livelihoods and means of production, as the images move from
painting to print, and within a highly contested and increasingly restricted urban public space.

Like in *Gods in the bazaar*, *Celluloid deities* enables insight into the artists’ aesthetics, as it speaks of their own particular vocabulary with respect to ‘likeness’, ‘effect’ and emotion. It is fascinating to learn about distinctions of regional ‘types’, especially when it comes to the drawing of boundaries between Dravidian and ‘national’ (= North Indian Hindu) concepts of beauty or manliness (p. 35). Another important boundary line attended to is that of caste and religious difference within the artists’ communities. Change in occupation is partly enforced through the opening up of the market and different access to education, enhancing physical, social and economic mobility, and eminence despite the downplay of caste by agents themselves. These movements are also impacted by sources of clientele and financing, and thus constantly enforce competition, conflict and compromise. It is fascinating to read about the different cultural, political and religious codes drawn upon in the course of Tamil cinema history. However, to me, the most interesting parts lie in the exploration of emotional attachment of the viewer to the hoarding, and charismatic spectatorship (e.g. chapters 4, 6 and 7) that could have only been further enriched by ventures into concepts such as embodiment, gender and corporeality.

**The geobody of the nation**

Historian Ramaswamy’s recently published book *The goddess and the nation* is a masterpiece – panoramic and yet deep in content, it takes us back to the early days of the Bengal Renaissance when the ‘Mother of Bengal’ began her journey across India, across space and time, to become a global player in the field of national politics and the production of cultural identity. Interestingly, this itinerary seems to be particularly one of visual presence and has been traced meticulously by Ramaswamy, who has assembled 150 images from an incredible variety of sources, archives and private collections, for her image-based history of India right up to today. Once again, this is an attempt to recognise mass-produced images as cultural artefacts and works of art as invaluable historical data that have so far not been taken seriously, to such an extent that new questions, new theoretical concepts and new methods could evolve from them. Ramaswamy shows that this is possible, and worth the painstaking efforts. She places her images in political and social contexts and thereby touches upon India’s conflict-loaded communal trajectories, the role of cartography in the context of social imagination, education and motherhood as fields of discourse, and the multiple perspectives and meanings attached to this icon by different individual and collective agents.

Between A. Tagore’s Bharat Mata of 1904–5 and M.F. Husain’s Bharat Mata of 2005 lies a century of controversy over the appropriation and alteration of this figure that is so much more than ‘just’ a national icon. She is an object of desire for nationalists, anti-colonial agents, merchants who transposed her onto textile labels; she represents communal harmony as much as communal conflict, non-violent resistance as much as violent martyrdom; and some images show her crying out for help for reasons of rape (e.g. by Muslims or colonialists), decapitation and fragmentation (e.g. in the case of Kashmir and Partition), calling for war against capitalism, Christianity or Islam, against satellite television or alcohol, or empowerment of both men and women. The
range of combinations is endless, but Ramaswamy elegantly and eloquently weaves her way through this territory of ubiquity. The underlining question is how Bharat Mata became an object of desire for so many people, and what that tells us about the role of territoriality, devotion and belonging in a secular age and globalised, yet multi-centred modernity. Going far beyond delivering only a formalistic catalogue of this icon, Ramaswamy, who has also co-founded the popular culture initiative Tasveerghar (www.tasveerghar.net) presents challenging and thought-provoking discussions for scholars and students within and outside the realm of South Asia Studies.

These three studies offered for discussion here will certainly trigger off more research on visual and media cultures – not only in India, but hopefully also tracing inner-Asian and transcultural flows and entanglements.

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References

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This paper endeavours to examine the influence of mass media on the Culture and Tradition of Irula tribes of Nigiris of Tamil Nadu. In the past, early twentieth century anthropological literature classified the Irulas under the Negrito ethnic group. With the advent of effective mass media and communication, Irulas are very much influenced by the power of media in all spheres of life. It has come to prove that mass media and communication have a great impact on the Irula community of Nilgiris region of Tamil Nadu.

Among these, the folk media items are more accessible to the tribals of the area, when compared to modern media items. Without global media, according to the conventional wisdom, how would teenagers in India, Turkey, and Argentina embrace a Western lifestyle of Nike shoes, Coca-Cola, and rock music? Hence, the putatively strong influence of the mass media on the globalization of culture. The role of the mass media in the globalization of culture is a contested issue in international communication theory and research. Early theories of media influence, commonly referred to as "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" theories, believed that the mass media had powerful effects over audiences. This argument was supported by a number of studies demonstrating that the flow of news and entertainment was biased in favor of industrialized countries. There are as many pictures of the world as there are the ways of worldview, because each person perceives the world and builds its image considering his experience, his knowledge, his language. The term "world image" was introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work "Logico Philosophicus Tractatus". Each nation perceives the world in its own unique projection. The specifics of this projection are embodied in the language forming a national linguistic picture of the world. The study of the key national images will reflect the specifics of world perception. The language plays the most significant role in the reflection of these national images on different language levels (words, phraseological units, proverbs and sayings), stylistic means (metaphor, similes, symbols), literary texts.