South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped

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Before I set about the daunting task of unwrapping the aesthetics referred to in the title of this paper I have to face the equally challenging task of unwrapping what exactly we mean by South Asian.You might think that because you find me seated here that I know where it is or that I am in collusion with its founder/discoverers. The truth is geography was never my strongest subject at school. So I am here not as seasoned visitor to South Asia or indeed a fully paid up citizen but like Columbus ready to start the journey to find this fabulous place. The Akademi will have to play the role of the Spanish crown in this venture.

Accurate orientation skills, I am sure are essential to the success of any navigational enterprise so before I set sail I just want to make sure of where I 'm starting from. Yes, it is London; the north part of it to be exact where it is commonly held that civilisation is bounded by the north circular and Peckham is another planet rumoured to be the next target of the American Space programme.

I know, residence in North London does not prepare you for adventure on the high seas. I'm desperately looking at the two words 'South' and "Asia' for some clues. South is easy enough. (Even I know that it does not mean south London.) After much reading of sailing manuals I know that it is there to navigate me away from the North (code rich, post industrial in fact post most things, with many airports with sophisticated surveillance systems,) and towards its opposite which is post nothing except

colonial and whose inhabitants sometimes either clean those airports that I mentioned or get scrutinised by the superior security systems.

The second word Asia, frankly, is hugely problematic. Huge being the operative word. I look at my world map making sure it is of the politically correct Pieters projection. Even that does not help me understand where I'm supposed to head for after I've pointed my vessel south past Harwich.Are we talking Kowloon or Kerala? I mean, I can allow myself a small margin of error but I do not want to get it spectacularly wrong like my "hero" Columbus. (Just imagine mistaking The States for India- they drive on different sides of the road for a start)

The only hint I can get for Asia is that it is pointing me to a geographically specific place, a country. A place with strictly guarded boundaries like most countries, that defines itself by its difference to its neighbours. Some place of recognisable attributes, of common belonging by virtue of race or ethnicity. If that is what is meant by Asia, an exclusive way of belonging to a geographically specific place then I do not think I can represent it for the simple reason that it is a way of belonging in which I do not recognise myself or find in it the manner I conduct my life. I cannot collude with a concept that seems be predicated on some ahistoric, transportable essence of Asians and one that does not do justice to the everyday dynamics of the political and geographic Asia. I am by nature suspicious of monoliths. And monolithic boundaries often are symptomatic of and the legacy of those superior surveillance systems of the north which are nervous of the uncategorizable individual(well, they hide better) and tend to privilege large and general categories. Further more one has to take just a short walk along any London street to realise that you do not have to sail the high seas to find Asia. It is there in every street corner and gloriously non-exclusive. To say I'm from North London is Asian enough.

So what is our common constituency that has me sitting here? One certainly is the sediment of cultural evolution that once bound our ancestors to a time and a place. However it is crucially important to state that this connective tissue is not prescriptive or a litmus test of some rigid authenticity. It can be as tenuous or as binding as any individual chooses. To some it may be a wall which if breached could be a loss of identity; to others it may be permeable . What is more interesting is that given that connectiveness our presence here in London today also binds us as people who have experienced re location/s to greater or lesser degree or are interested in what that experience entails.

So in the light of all this I think I have to rechristen this paper 'Re location aesthetics unwrapped by a person who may or may not have a sari in their wardrobe"

My work as a choreographer continually draws my attention to the body. The body is the site of the text of the dance. This not only makes the dance text extremely contingent and unstable it also constantly forces me to come to terms with the other discourses that are written on and with the body. Put in a different way, it is the same limb that makes the abstraction of a straight line in a dance studio that also runs for a bus, remembers the route home, expresses sexual orientation or makes its cultural and political choices. The embodied, physical nature of these actions and choices has become all the more obvious as genetics and cybernetics tells us that the old dualities of mind (intelligent) body (sensual) need to be updated. The cyborg, where intelligence is supremely physicalised as well as manufactured has become the metaphor for a new way of understanding the body. Furthermore those entities that used to be regarded as immutable biological essences such as gender and ethnicity are increasingly understood more as discourses and as contingent patterns, things that have been negotiated and therefore can be unpicked and

contextualized rather than things that we have become locked into to carrying with us unchanging and unchanged wherever we go. As a migrant, as some one who has seen first hand the slipperiness of essence, and appreciated just how much manipulation one needs to maintain that essence in changed environments, I have found these arguments particularly persuasive. Dance, it seems to me, is yet another discourse, an ongoing conversation that the body is capable of (It is no accident that increasingly more is written about dance by academics in cultural and gender studies than by traditional dance scholars) and open to the same unpicking and interrogation. Many of my aesthetic choices have been determined by this license to unpick.

One, of course, can make the choice to keep dance and discourse apart .I was trained as a classical dancer and classicism is a country rather than a terrain and it almost invites a separateness. One felt the discipline and the comfort of secure borders. You needed an oath of allegiance to get citizenship (I hereby swear to produce beautiful correct shapes, strive for symmetry in the use of space, and obey the dictates of music down to the last nano second. I will always jump as high as I can, keep my hips square. I will keep my back straight and chin up and my gaze unflinching and allow no vulnerability or irony to creep in but will always project a supremely confident extroverted image of myself) It is very 'in your face' as some one said. Like talking loudly all the time.

But I have always had difficulty keeping things in tidy compartments. One of those nifty little things you can buy in Ikea that keep your socks from fraternising with your jumpers could have done the trick. But it was too late. I had already noticed the other stuff in the same cupboard and had begun to take an intense pleasure from the mess and revel in the impurity of it all.. The damage was done. Migrants come in two colours. Those who have tidy drawers (saris to the temple and to visit in laws, Armani for other occasions) and those who don't. I belong to the latter.

A commitment to untidiness or to put it another way to the increasing interface between the many physical discourses meant that the body in the rehearsal studio had to relate to what Anne Cranny Francis describes as the polymorphous early 21st century being that travelled to get there.

"The polymorphous body which is the result of the “dissolution of conservative notions of the body as a coherent and unified entity, defined and regulated by a range of hierarchised dualisms, such as male/female,white/black,mind/body,human/alien,human/machine,human/animal. Instead, we are presented with a polymorphous body, which explores the boundaries of gender, sexuality,class, race, ethnicity, age and the interactions between humans and machines. Because of the fluid nature of the social reality in which it exists and functions, the polymorphous body is obliged to engage in this exploration. Individual bodies which are(or attempt to be) passive or inactive will be repositioned by the social, political, economic and technological life in which they are immersed. So there is a sense in which passivity is an impossibility. The body is in the text of everyday life; by enacting that text, it becomes not a product but the processor of everyday life.”

Take "Time" for instance. In the classical dance of my training you conquered time by controlling it through the intricacies of rhythm. The dynamic progress of the body was essentially linear and goal oriented. You committed yourself to the destination and then departed. Time outside the studio however, seemed to be showing me something different. Arrival and departure did not manifest themselves as opposing fixities and chronology seemed defeated every time I put on a Tamil film music CD in a car that was travelling along a British road. My body seemed to be moving to different dynamic, what I call the windscreen effect, a continuos to and fro, restless movement which can access a range of things where the integrity lay, not in the achieving, in the fruition of

something but rather in the commitment to the momentum, to the flux. The dance work that I made in 94 called Raid which was inspired not by dance but by a street game came about because I fell in love with exactly that watchful toing and froing, the constant crossing and re crossing of boundaries that is so much part of Kabbadi. A metaphoric arc of movement that allowed you to access the whole gamut of choices like a radar, keeping faith with what I found fascinating about life out side- the possibility to depart and arrive almost simultaneously.

The choice of music also reflects what I need to communicate about "Time" and my times. The newness of the story seems to dictate the need for music that shares the same slice of the history. I have found it a challenge to choreograph to music that exemplifies structural and emotional values unmediated from past times.

Space is the next character in the choreographer's tale. The upright spine of the classical dance tells one story about the body and its relationship to the space around it. I also wanted to tell other stories where perhaps the progress of the dancer was more chequered and buffeted by sudden shifts in weight, direction, speed where the spine had to duck and weave and have a turbulent, breathless relationship to its surroundings. At times the space around was almost the enemy, an element to resist, a source of tension rather than complicity where the dancer was the adversary rather than a celebrant.

The stage spaces in Europe come with their own history and conventions. Its preordained hierarchies find their way into our speech when we use phrases like upstaging someone or waiting in the wings . Given the fact that in most other departments of my life I am a creature of the margins I am more drawn to the edges of the stage than the centre. The spaces where the boundaries of the performance space and the wings begin to blur have always had a special appeal.

You may well ask in the light of my comments so far whether my initial classical training had now become totally redundant. On the contrary it s very artifice is something that I reference time and time again, not in the monolithic way that I was taught but as an important narrative of the body.

It was not too long ago that a dance critic in Britain bemoaned the fact that a Bharatha Natyam dancer was using taped music and pointing out that a tape machine wasn't exactly "ethnic". I remember thinking then how strange it was that migrants who are supremely the creatures of artifice, not being organic to their surroundings, hot house plants who got here from far corners of the world like space travellers and required to be multilingual on many levels were then expected to represent some simple, homespun ideal of authenticity and not betray the slightest hint of their upheaval; to be expected to sit cross-legged and tell old stories of mystic deeds; to acquiesce to demands that we keep faith when in fact, we have broken faith by leaving

Personally I have savoured the non-naturalness of my presence here. It connects me to the current rehabilitation of artifice deep in the centre of all that is natural. With the gradual erasure between man and machine or rather our better understanding of the machinery of intelligence, pattern (those traditional organisers of classical dance that give it its formal qualities) together with randomness has now become central to our understanding of nature.
Artifice also privileges the extremes of the manipulated body such as the turn out, the mudras and the striving for virtuosity.

Katherine Hailes in her book "How we became post human" posits a fluid Present in contrast to a Past where" a stable, coherent self ... could witness and testify to a stable coherent reality". In our Present hybrid, information-rich but physically

embodied lives ,according to her "meaning is not guaranteed by a coherent origin; rather it is made possible...by finding workable solutions within given parameters"
I find classical dance, which celebrates inventiveness within given parameters, bursting out of that last sentence to capture us anew. Hailes's description also leads us to the impact that the lack of a coherent origin has on art making specially the aesthetic choices made by art makers.

Aesthetics have, for me at least, been about personal, often small choices made in the studio. There has been no master plan(presenting ideas in a forum like this sometimes gives the impression of continual coherence over the years. If only!) Questions asked in one dance work have found resolution years later in another sometimes by sheer accident. and I have made numerous wrong choices along the way. It has rarely been about servicing a consensus of beauty if any such exist today in Britain. My choices have been, on the whole, about finding an image and narrative of the body that I can recognise as belonging to myself and my times.

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