

Piercing the Skin of the Idol

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Religion is the oldest of archives in our subcontinent. All the principal moments of the ancient relationship of dominance and subordination are recorded in it as codes of authority, collaboration and resistance.

(Guha 1985:1)

The ‘anthropological’ theory of art proposed in *Art and Agency* ‘merges seamlessly with the social anthropology of persons and their bodies’ (Gell 1998: 7). Building on David Freedberg, among others, Alfred Gell does a brilliant job of persuading us that anthropologists should concern themselves with the performative dimension of artefacts. In the first part of the book, at least, he rejects a linguistic approach, dwelling instead on the agency of images.

The analysis of image-worshipping practices in a central Indian village which I shall present in this chapter confirms Gell’s stress on the agency of images, but my concern is also to try to resolve an earlier question of Alfred’s about the nature of aesthetics, and to transpose some of the discussion onto an avowedly political ground. In his 1992 article on the technology of enchantment, Alfred drew a parallel with Peter Burger’s suggestion that analysts of religion should adopt a standpoint of ‘methodological atheism’. Anthropologists of art required an analogous ‘methodological philistinism’ which would involve ‘an attitude of resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of works of art’ (Gell 1992: 42).

Rather than a resolute indifference, I will propose a sideways step away from ‘aesthetics’ to ‘corpoethetics’ as one way of comprehending the praxis through which enchantment manifests itself. I will present this argument in relation to the history and contemporary village consumption of mass-produced religious chromolithographs. The first part of my discussion considers a shift from what Michael Fried (1980) terms ‘absorptive’ to ‘theatrical’ images from the late nineteenth century onwards, and the second part draws on Susan Buck-Morss’s work (1992) to articulate a practice of ‘corpoethetics’. In my concluding comments I question whether, when seen as part of practice rather than of formal analysis, what appear to be related art practices can be said to form a ‘macroscopic whole’ (Gell 1998: 221) rather than – in some contexts – divided and mutually antagonistic forms.

Space permits me only to briefly skate over the impact of Government Art Schools in creating a new form of 'strategic mimicry' in nineteenth-century India. The convention of single-point perspective was seen as the key which would unravel an Indian resistance to the 'powers of observation'. In an elusive manner Panofsky (1991) hinted that single-point perspective co-opted a religious expectation into a technical procedure, and there are grounds for suggesting that the value of perspectival representation to its colonial proponents lay in its capacity to translate value from content to form. Just as gold had migrated from the surface of the picture to the frame, perspective facilitated the displacement of fetishistic representation into the very structure of representation itself. Advocates of Art Schools, such as Richard Temple, positioned perspective as part of a larger scientific project which they imagined would lead to the supersession of 'traditional' paradigms by 'modern, rational' ones.

We can also understand the representational changes encouraged by the Art Schools in terms of Michael Fried's distinction between 'theatricality' and 'absorption'. The European art whose shadow was cast over India had passed through engagements with vanishing points that incarnated corporeal viewers to a practice that in Norman Bryson's words implied a 'transcendent point of vision that has discarded the body' (1983: 106–7). Bryson's arguments parallel those of Michael Fried who observes the rise of what he calls the 'supreme fiction' of an absent beholder in late eighteenth-century French painting. This disembodied 'absorption' was exported to India and can be seen as an attempt – in tandem with the Art School's stress on 'naturalism' – to deny the magical origin of images. The move towards absorption is clear in the output of the Calcutta Art Studio. Formed in 1878 by graduates of the Calcutta School of Art, many of its chromolithographic images were structured by an internalized gaze. Nala looked at Damayanti, not the viewer of the picture; likewise Shiv turned his vision towards the 'Oriental cupid', not to the devotee gazing at the image. Pre-existing ritual images, and later (post-1920s) 'magical realist' paintings by contrast, assumed an embodied 'corporethetics'. By corporethetics I mean the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people (except Kantians and modernists) have with artworks.

In Michael Fried's work the driving forces of change in European art – from French eighteenth-century history painting through to modernism – are strategies that deny the presence of the beholder through strategies of 'absorption'. Drawing in detail on Diderot's critical commentaries, Fried describes an increasing disengagement of paintings that acknowledge the presence of the beholder. These acknowledgements usually involved direct eye-contact between the picture's subject and the beholder, a relationship Diderot disdained:

Lairesse claims that the artist is permitted to have the beholder enter the scene of his painting. I do not believe it, and there are so few exceptions that I would gladly make a

general rule of the opposite. That would seem to me in as poor taste as the performance of an actor who would address himself to the audience. The canvas encloses all the space and there is no one beyond it. When Susannah exposes her naked body to my eyes, protecting herself against the elders' gaze with all the veils that enveloped her, Susannah is chaste and so is the painter. Neither the one nor the other knew I was there (cited in Fried 1980: 96).

In addition to its more obvious explanation, this voyeurism can also be thought as a circumlocution that constructed a 'privileged' art as the antithesis of ritual art, i.e. that art whose sole *raison d'être* is to act as a conduit between beholder and deity. We can also treat this as part of an archaeology of the aesthetic mystification of art which is critiqued in Alfred's earlier work and the first sections of *Art and Agency*.

Fried thus emerges as the antithesis of Gell for Fried deprecates anything that reminds us of art's primary function.¹ 'Good' art for Fried is art which negates the presence of the beholder. Making a link between his study of eighteenth-century French art and 1960s modernism he concludes that mediocre work has a 'theatrical' relation to the beholder, whereas the 'very best recent work' is 'in essence *anti-theatrical*' (1980: 5). The emergence of modern art, Mitchell writes in his valuable gloss,

is precisely to be understood in terms of the negation or renunciation of direct signs of desire. The process of pictorial seduction Fried admires is successful precisely in proportion to its indirectness, its seeming indifference to the beholder, its antitheatrical 'absorption' in its own internal drama (1996: 79).

Fried's privileging of indirectness might be condemned in a Bourdieuan idiom as Kantian reification, but it might also be seen as a strategy to numb the human sensorium, taking the image away from the direct presence of the beholder and from the realm of 'corporetics' to what Susan Buck-Morss (1992) terms 'anaesthetics'. The internalized absorption of the paintings becomes a means of transferring the beholder's own encounter into the subject of the image in what might be termed the fetish that dare not speak its name. Absorption, indirectness and history painting, were part of the package exported by the colonial state into its Government Art Schools in the nineteenth century. The 'supreme fiction' of the absent beholder becomes – in colonial India – a mark of Western 'distinction' and a marker of distance from Hindu idols. Here, in Hans Belting's words is the epochal divide between an 'era of art' and an 'era before art' (Belting 1994).

However, whereas in Fried's account 'absorption' marked an irreversible shift towards a desirable indirection, in popular Indian art its tenuous hold was quickly lost as consumers started to demand images stripped of this 'supreme fiction', images that fundamentally addressed their presence and invoked a new corporetics.

The difference here reflects not so much a cleavage between France/Europe and India, as a difference between an elite and a public aesthetic, for there are many centrally important aspects of 'Western' visual culture (for instance pornography, or the iconography of sport) that reject indirection and value corporeality just as there are numerous Old Masters in Western galleries which function as ritually sanctified persons.²

The hold of absorption and history painting was tenuous and reached its apogee in the work of Ravi Varma, the Indian painter who is most amenable to the Western genre of art historical evaluation. Partly this is the result of his own self-mystification in Vasarian mode but it is, more importantly, the result of his adoption of a painterly style that strove for the 'supreme fiction'. His most canonized works are those that look past the beholder. Ravi Varma's characters behave as if they had heard and ingested Diderot's command: 'think no more of the beholder than if he did not exist. Imagine at the edge of the stage, a high wall that separates you from the orchestra. Act as if the curtain never rose' (cited by Fried 1980: 95). It is this which his imperial patrons so admired. Conversely it is this (dominant) element of Ravi Varma's work which is so utterly invisible in the archive of Indian popular visual culture. The fragments that do survive of his work are those sensory images which unequivocally acknowledge the beholder's presence. In these images the beholder is a worshipper, drinking the eyes of the deity that gazes directly back at him.

We can conceptualize this historical transition as that between 'absorptive' and 'theatrical' images (to invoke Fried), but we can also think about them in terms of the difference between what Susan Buck-Morss describes as 'anaesthetics' and 'aesthetics'.³ In rethinking Benjamin's 'work of art' essay she has argued that the original field of aesthetics encoded in the Greek *aisthētikos* connoted a broad domain of sensory reality. The 'modern science of aesthetics', however, 'understood as detached contemplation rather than instinctual cognition, functions as a form of anaesthetization, a way for numbing the human sensorium, overwhelmed by the shock of war or the shock of industrialization' (Efimova 1997: 75). In a wonderful application of these ideas Alla Efimova shows how Soviet Social Realism mobilizes an aesthetics in its original sensory meaning. 'From this perspective, the aesthetics of Soviet everyday life no longer appears to be a paradox. As a powerful stimulation of the senses, by means of pain, fear, or exaltation, life did not need to be beautiful or pleasing to be "aesthetic"' (ibid.). The aesthetics of Socialist Realism, therefore, are not of the anaesthetizing variety. They 'touch on the raw', and de-anaesthetize.

Buck-Morss's⁴ archaeology of aesthetics is peculiarly useful for our understanding of mass-picture production in India for here we encounter images produced within and mediated by the anaesthetizing discourses, and those produced within and mediated by sensory practices. If we envisage this as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, we can place images produced in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century nearer the 'anaesthetized' end, and the popular twentieth-century

‘magical realist’ images can be placed at the other. It is the numbing of the human sensorium which makes the colonial mimicry of earlier images so compatible with conventional art historical exegesis. It is the sensory immediacy of the later images which makes them so intractable to conventional analysis and regard, one important reason being the absence of ‘aesthetic’ exegesis by those that consume them. The central Indian villagers whose picture-buying and worshipping practices I now want to briefly consider do not surround them with reified discourses. Rather, they speak of a depicted deity’s efficacy, and link the origination of the image to their own biographies (for example it may have been purchased at a pilgrimage site). For an Anthropology driven by the need to accumulate linguistic testimony, this is a severe problem. Buck-Morss’s ideas, however, lead us to an understanding of a different dimension of significance in which it is not the efflorescence of words around an object that gives it meaning but a bodily praxis, a poetry of the body, that helps give images what they want.

In India, the reawakening of the human sensorium went hand in hand with the insertion of mass-produced images into spaces of Hindu worship. This relocation had a twofold characteristic, involving movements towards, on the one hand, sacralized spaces and, on the other, domestic spaces. Thus there was a movement from mundane spaces such as the Art Schools into temples where images had a different work to perform. The need to demonstrate appreciation through explanation was replaced by bodily gestures and the look of the devotee. The other parallel movement involved the displacement of pictures from the drawing rooms of colonial India’s elite to the crowded shelf of the domestic puja-room. This entailed new forms of physical intimacy with images and an increasing irrelevance of formal ‘anaesthetized’ discourse. Something of this trajectory can be seen in the way in which technologies of reproduction – first chromolithography and then photography – have allowed Pushtimarg devotees an increasing bodily intimacy with Shri Nathji, the Nathdvara *svarup*. Today the photographic studios outside the temple contain painted simulacra of the deity in front of which devotees pose and physical proximity can be recorded.

A recurrent refrain in the analysis of popular art traditions concerns the ways in which consumers of images are either unable or unwilling to speak about their form. This hesitancy to produce reified discourse about art objects is, indeed, sometimes taken as an excuse to maintain the distance between such unarticulable practices and the great industry of art historical exegesis (a divide which *Art and Agency* will do much to erode). True, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has chosen to eulogize what he sees as a popular elision of life and art as an alluring opposition to the idiocies of the bourgeois enchantment with form, but generally the absence of such discourse is taken simply as proof of a disabling lack.

Shifting the level of analysis from aesthetics (i.e. anaesthetics in Buck-Morss’s terms) to corporetics discloses not a lack but a rich and complex praxis through

which villages articulate their eyes and bodies in relation to pictures. The 'meaning' of the images lies in their 'needs' – the necessity of worshipping them, in 'corporetics' rather than 'anaesthetics'.

The village of Bhatissuda,⁵ located on the Malwa plateau in Madhya Pradesh, is inhabited by many eager consumers of the images whose history has been fleetingly touched on earlier. Chromolithographs are popular across all castes and religious groups. Jains and Muslims own images as well as Hindus, and Scheduled Caste Chamars and (warrior) Rajputs or (priestly) Brahmans own similar numbers of images. (Across the village as whole there is an average of 6.9 images per household.)

Bhatissuda's population is spread through 21 castes, and although village income is still overwhelmingly derived from agriculture (the main crops being maize, sorghum and wheat), the presence of the largest viscose rayon factory in Asia a mere six kilometres away in the town of Nagda has had an enormous impact on the economic fortunes of landless labourers, and has structured local discourses on history and the nature of progress. The village cosmology reflects the nature of popular Hinduism in this area and there are temples and shrines to the main gods: Ram, Hanuman, Krishna, Shiv, Ganesh, Shitala; and also to local deities: Tejaji, Ramdevji, Jhujhar Maharaj, Bihari Mata, Lal Mata, Rogiya Devi, Nag Maharaj, and many more.

The horizontal and vertical topography of the village encodes a symbolic separation and hierarchization of the diverse *jati* groupings that make up Bhatissuda. Higher-caste households are predominantly built on higher ground in the centre of the village and most Scheduled Castes live in untouchable *jati mohallas* on the south side of the village. Chamars live nearest the village in compact groups of small huts, and Bagdis inhabit a more dispersed *mohalla* which forms a spur, spreading from the village down towards the River Chambal.

Villagers encounter religious 'objects mediating social agency' in various different forms. Here I will briefly consider consecrated temple images, the presence of deities in the human bodies which they 'thrash' (i.e. 'possess')⁶ and (at more length) chromolithographs. The first two of these manifestations are fully and illuminatingly discussed in *Art and Agency* and a chromolithograph by B.G. Sharma of Santoshi Ma features as an illustration.

Although a small number of temple images are *svarups* – that is, 'self-made' images – most are of the two sorts described in *Art and Agency*: reincarnations of existing ones (as in the Puri *navakalevara* [Gell 1998: 144–5]), or (more commonly) the 'more abstract' Brahmanic consecration through *mantras*. Both of these equally depend on an indexical contiguity, for in these contexts Brahmans are simply conduits for a pre-existing power which is summoned in the material form of *mantras*.⁷

I asked Pukhraj Bohra, a Jain landlord living in the central square of Bhatissuda, which images in the locality were *chamatkari* (miraculous, wonderous):

Nageshvar Pareshavar near Alod is a very *chamatkari* image. It came out from the inside automatically. It was in the earth. It's possible that someone made it and buried it but I don't think so. When I first went there 15 years ago I made a wish (*man*). I asked that my business should go well, that the crops should prosper and then I came back. But there was some psychic (*mansik*) effect from this, some allurements (*akarshan*) born in the *murti*. When I was away I felt that I had to go back and see the image, had to see it again and again.

This sense of *akarshan* – the spell that the image produces on those who get its *darshan* – was articulated even more forcibly by Hemant Mehra, the Bombay resident son of Har Narayan the famous chromolithograph publisher in Jodhpur, Rajasthan:

I first went [with my mother] to the Chamunda Devi temple in Jodhpur Fort 20 years ago. Then 6 years ago I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep. It was 5 am and I just couldn't get the temple and the fort out of my mind. At 6 am I took my scooter up to the temple⁸ which was closed. I felt that the temple was mine. The priest opened the temple and I meditated for 5–10 minutes. Before that I never used to meditate and suddenly I just felt like I was floating in the sky, upside down, like jumping from a parachute (sic) . . . sitting but couldn't feel the ground. I felt I belonged to this place. I don't know what happened but I looked into the eyes of the statue and something happened eye to eye. I started crying . . . pure tears were coming out and I thought what is happening? The pandit told me that Chamunda Devi had called me. I had been twice to Vaishnavo Devi⁹ but nothing like this ever happened. I walked away and I felt like I was under some shadow of protection . . . [then for a long time] I had to keep going back to Jodhpur and spending more and more time there. It was like a magnetic power.¹⁰

What emerges strongly in these accounts is the erasure of the recipients' agency as they are propelled towards actions over which they have no control. In Bhatissuda a parallel sense (of the index as patient) emerges as the chief criterion for adjudicating the genuineness of possession.¹¹ Alfred considers Michael Allen's ethnography of Newar *kumaripuja*, the worship of the living embodiments of Durga, and concludes that *kumaris* are consecrated in the same ways as manufactured artefacts: 'there is an insensible transition between "works of art" in artefact form and human beings . . . they may be regarded as almost entirely equivalent'. I will argue at the end of this chapter that while those who 'thrash' are clearly similar in some way to artefacts such as temple images, there are also fundamental differences and they often find themselves in conflict.

Our understanding of the role of chromolithographs for many people in Bhatissuda must start from a recognition of the prohibitions that still prevent most Scheduled Caste members from entering village temples. Although many Scheduled Castes have their own caste-specific shrines (*autla*, *sthanak*) they are generally unable to enter village temples to the main gods. Whereas 'clean' castes may enter temple precincts, Scheduled Castes are required to squat outside, at some distance. Channu and Lila Mehta – the village Bhangis¹² – are quite explicit that it is this denial which necessitates their domestic engagement with the Gods through chromolithographs. Confirming that her family were still unable to enter most of the village temples, Lila remarked, 'for this reason we have made a temple inside our house'.

Channu and Lila Mehta live in a low mud house on the eastern periphery of Bhatissuda overlooking a steep gulley which drops down to a Chamar *mohalla*. The most striking feature inside the house is a small black and white television, a gift from one of Channu's Nagda resident brothers. To the right of this, two-thirds of the way up the wall is a display of fifteen assorted images, together with a few clay *murtis* (three-dimensional images). In the sort of arrangement which is common in the village, a line of images are displayed above and below wooden shelves bearing an assortment of three dimensional images, colourful decorations and steel cups. Among Channu and Lila's display there are large laminated prints depicting Lakshmi and Ganesh, Arjun, Ram Sita and Lakshman, a large black Shivling, and various images of Lakshmi showering wealth from the palms of her hands. There are also two framed prints of the Rajasthani renouncer king Ramdevji, and the Krishnalila, a large glittered image of Satyanarayan in a wooden shrine-like structure, and a mirrored glass panel depicting the local Krishna incarnation Samvaliyaji. Add to this a couple of postcards of Shiv and the Buddha, a couple of paper prints of Durga and Shiv, plaster images of Ganesh and Shiv, two women with their hands folded in a welcoming namaste, a couple of mirrors, some peacocks, tinsel and sundry other plastic decorations together with a flock of frenzied green parrots and the ensemble is complete.

Apart from the glass mirrored image these were all purchased in Nagda – the nearby town – where there are two shops, and one stall specializing in 'framing prints', which prior to the festival of Dipali are supplemented by about a dozen small stalls and itinerant tradespersons selling religious images. Most of Channu and Lila's images were purchased in successive years just before Dipali, and this is reflected in the predominance of images of the goddess Lakshmi who is worshipped during this festival which marks the start of the financial year.

The glass mirrored image depicts Samvaliyaji, Avari Mata and Bhadva Mata who are the subject of a recently flourishing cult in Mandasaur District. Channu and Lila had visited the Samvaliyaji temple, as also the nearby Bhadva Mata shrine several years ago and had purchased the image from a stall there. At Samvaliyaji, and also Pavargadh in Gujarat which they had recently visited, Channu and Lila's

madhyam (low)¹³ *jati* and *uttam* (high) *jatis* are indistinguishable for here there is no *chhuachhut* (untouchability) or *bhed bhav* (hierarchy).

Lila's testimony also clearly marks out pilgrimage as an egalitarian activity, not only because many *tirth* (i.e. pilgrimage) sites operate in liminal caste-free spaces, but also because the dislocations of travel and the anonymity of the crowd nullifies any attempt at the sort of *jati* identity which is so entrenched and enforceable in a stable village community. Beyond this parallelism between the dissemination of the divine permitted by lithography, and the comparative openness of the spaces in which pilgrimage happens, we might also point to a simple logistical entanglement – a substantial minority (18 per cent) of all the images in the survey households were purchased at pilgrimage sites and depict deities associated with those.

Hans Belting opens his awesome study of the first millennium of Christian religious images with a series of observations about the relationship between images

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Figure 8.1 Glass mirrored image of Samvaliyaji

and theologians in the European tradition. He presents a history of a 'war' between popular images and religious hierarchies, and between the figural and the linguistic. The growing popularity of images was seen as a direct threat to the power of the Church since they might 'act directly in God's name'. Images spoke to a deep level of experience and desire which was profoundly subversive of the linguistic imprisonment of the divine that institutional religious structures projected. Theologians assumed a reactive position towards images seeking to 'explain' them and 'rather than introducing images, theologians were all too ready to ban them' (Belting 1994: 1).

The contrast between the practices Belting describes and those in India is powerful and unavoidable. It is true that there were occasional iconoclastic movements in modern India (for instance the early Arya Samaj and many currents within the 'Bengal Renaissance') but overwhelmingly images have had a great freedom to act on their own, untrammelled by the concerns of theologians. Indeed theology has frequently concerned itself with the eulogization of images.

This suggests a profound orientation within societies to either discursive closure (e.g. through the endless debate about the intentionality of sacred texts) or figurality in which significance is part of an ongoing visual and performative project. Attention is directed not towards a precise interpretive closure, but towards an ongoing performative productivity. One is put in mind of Lyotard's remark that there is always something happening in the arts that 'incandesces the embers of society'. This differential accentuation of the discursive and figural moulds different models of causality. In the one it is language which constrains the image, and in the other it is the image which appropriates language. In Western historiography images are habitually over-determined linguistically (and, as Carlo Ginzburg [1989] notes, this tradition then creates the visual as a puzzling anomaly).

In this light the battle between Bryson's semiotic, linguistically driven approach to art and W.J.T. Mitchell's stress on the 'pictorial turn's' figurality is something of a false contest inasmuch as it concerns itself with a general theory of visuality, rather than with specific theories for diverse traditions. Something of this is also apparent in *Art and Agency* for though it commences with a muscular Mitchellism, disavowing Panofskian and other varieties of linguistic iconography, the structuralist 'formal analysis' that increasingly invades it is ineluctably determined semiotically (though not, Alfred insists, linguistically: cf. Gell 1998: 165–6).

In Bhatissuda the mere possession of visual forms gives access to the ongoing project of divine energy. Although it is undoubtedly true that in certain key respects popular Hinduism mobilizes a recuperative idiom within a decaying universe, it is fundamentally constructed by what the playwright Brian Friel (in a very different context) once described as a 'syntax opulent with tomorrows' (1981: 42). Mass-reproduction gives formerly excluded classes access to all the high gods whom they can approach directly without the intercession of priests.

The 'syntax opulent with tomorrows' which emerges in Bhatissuda practice is one that springs from a corporeal practice in which it is the devotee's visual and bodily performances which contribute crucially to the potential power – one might say completion – of the image.

Some sense of the mechanism here can be gleaned from the following fragment of a taped interview with Lila. (I should note at this point that I interviewed members of 117 households in the village, and Lila's is consistent with all but one of these others.)

[CP] when the picture is on the trolley in the market is there any energy (*shakti*) in the picture?]

[Lila] It's just paper (*kagaz*). That's all? Yes, paper. It's just paper, it hasn't been seated. You see those pictures that are seated? (Lila pointed to the images on the wall.) Those are paper but by placing them before our eyes (*ankh rakna* = to love, to entertain friendship, to admire), *shakti* has come into them [. . .] We take (the pictures) inside and do *pūja*. We place incense sticks (*agarbatti*) against his name, against the God's name. Yes, it's a paper photo but we recite, we recite while the *agarbatti* burns. OK, so it's a paper photo but [that makes no difference]. We entreat the God and the god comes out because the god is saluted. That's how it is.

The other sense in which Bhatissuda images are opulent with tomorrows lies in the stress on their capacity to give *barkat* – plenitude. Samvaliyaji is an example par excellence of a deity who gives *barkat*. Whereas orthodox deities such as Shiv are considered essential to *alaukik labh* ('disinterested profit'), i.e., transcendental concerns, Samvaliyaji can produce *bhautik labh*, that is material or physical profit. Under the general label of *bhautik* are subsumed uncertainties relating to wealth, bodily health and illness, matters relating to employment and agricultural productivity. Like the vast majority of villagers Pannalal Nai (a retired factory worker) lights incense sticks in front of his images at sunrise and dusk. I ask him what he 'says':

Not much . . . give wisdom, give comfort (*gyan rakhna, aram se rakhna*) I just say that. And then in the evening at say 7.30 or 8 o'clock I say the same things that I said in the morning. God, ensure our protection, give *barkat*, food, water, children, small children, protect all this.

The consumption of images by Bhatissuda villagers needs to be understood in terms of these processes of bodily empowerment which transform pieces of paper into powerful deities through the devotee's gaze, the proximity of his/her heart and a whole repertoire of bodily performances in front of the image (breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking small bells, the utterance of *mantras*).¹⁴ However, many of these images also bear traces of these activities in their form, and in some cases prescribe the process of viewing itself.

The most fundamental mark of the images' sensory quality – their predisposition to this corpothetic regime – is their non-absorptive directness. The vast majority of images behold their owners directly, engaging and returning their vision. As Diane Eck observes, the primacy of sight as the idiom of articulation between deity and devotee is lexically marked so that devotees will usually stress that they are going to the temple for *darshan*, to see and be seen by the deity: it is this 'exchange of vision [which] lies at the heart of Hindu worship' (Eck 1981: 5).

There are vivid examples of this process to be seen in popular Hindi films. In *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), for instance, the process of *darshan* is literally vision-enhancing: an elderly blind woman pursued into a Sai Baba temple regains her sight through her physical proximity to the *murti* of Sai Baba. Sai Baba's *darshan* is depicted as a pair of lights which physically transfer to the devotee's eyes, restoring her sight.¹⁵

Most villagers 'seat' their pictures without the assistance of Brahmans. Pannalal Nai, however, calls a Brahman to install newly purchased images. On these occasions the priest will swing the image in front of a mirror and perform a *sthapana* (installation) of the deity.

The desire to see and be seen by deities is also evidenced in the prevalence of mirrored images within the village. These images are usually associated with pilgrimage. *Darshan* can be thought of as a physical relationship of visual intermingling. The value of images is related to the visual access they give to the

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Figure 8.2 Chromolithograph of Ramdev pasted behind mirrored glass

deity. As *Art and Agency* documents, mirrored images allow the devotee to (literally) see himself looking at the deity (in this case there is a double corpothetics – of the devotee's movement through space on pilgrimage where he bought the image, and of the devotee's visual elision with the deity when he places himself in front of the image).¹⁶

Other modes of image customization – such as the application of glitter, or *zari* (brocade) or the adhesion of paper surrounds or plastic flowers – are also corpothetic extensions that move the image closer to the devotee, transforming the ostensible representation or window into a surface deeply inscribed by the presence of the deity.

Parallel to this we might note the manner in which other objects of value are occasionally introduced onto this surface. There were several examples in the village of the placing of auspicious banknotes against the glass of framed images. Sitabai is the wife of a contracted worker in the nearby factory, and once came across a two-rupee note in the mud road to the next village. 'Found' notes are considered auspicious and should not be re-entered into the cycle of exchange from which they have recently departed. Sitabai chose to stick her note on an S.S. Brijbasi chromolithograph of the Ram Durbar. This practice is not confined to Hindus, for there are two prints owned by a Muslim family against which are pasted two Rs.2 notes which bear a serial number containing sequences (the numbers '786') which Muslims hold to be auspicious.¹⁷ The dressing of images takes the place of words. Instead of exegesis, instead of an outpouring of language – there is a poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images.

Arati is a procedure in image worship in which a flame is moved in a circle around an image. In Bhatiusuda, villagers then cup their hands over the flame and wash the blessing from the deity onto their face. *Ramdevji ki arati* painted by B.G. Sharma in the mid-1950s (and still in print) exists in several copies in the village and in this artist's characteristically semiotically dense manner inserts the narrative of the deity Ramdev into the very act of worship. The process of *darshan* and the transmission of the 'content' of the picture onto the devotee's face becomes itself the subject, and dictates the form of the picture.

Finally we may note that the whole process of the progressive empowerment of images through daily worship involves a continual burdening of the surface with traces of this devotion. Although some households replace all their images every year at Divali, most have a number of old images which continue to accrue potency as they become accreted with the marks of repeated devotion – vermilion tilaks placed on the foreheads of deities, the ash from incense sticks, smoke stains from burning camphor.

Even at the end of its life, a picture's trajectory is determined by corpothetic requirements, in this case the necessity of ensuring that the image never comes into contact with human feet. Again a fragment from a conversation with Lila:

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Figure 8.3 Banknote containing the sequence '786' pasted onto a chromolithograph of Burak-ul-nabi

(The images) are paper and when they have gone bad (*kharab*) we take them from the house and put them in the river. That way we don't get any *pap* (sin). [CP You don't throw them away?] No, no, we don't throw them away. You take them out of the house and put them in the river or in a well, and place them under the water. This way they won't come under anyone's feet. You mustn't throw them away or they will get lost. That's the proper way (*tamizdar*; decorous) to do it – in the river or well. In our jat we say *thanda kardo* – make cold. That way they won't come under [anyone's] feet.

I asked Pannalal whether he threw his old pictures away:

No no, no. It's become just like a small temple (*madhi*). We put them in water, we break a coconut and give them *paraba*¹⁸ – in the water. If you throw them in the street they will come under someone's feet.

In Hindi the phrase *pair ankh se lagana* literally means to look at the feet, and idiomatically 'to respect, venerate' and to touch someone's feet is to physically express one's obeisance. Certain images in Bhatiusuda encode this hierarchical relationship in which the devotee submits his or her body – through his or her

eyes – to the feet of the deity.¹⁹ It is fundamentally important to Bhatissuda villagers that the bodies of the deities which they have so carefully brought to life should not suffer the dangerous indignity of having this relationship reversed.

Sometimes in Bhatissuda I succumb to the regrettable temptation to brag to villagers about my meetings with the producers of the images which adorn their walls. However, my allusions to artists such as B.G. Sharma or Yogendra Rastogi or others of my acquaintance are always greeted with a supreme indifference that suggests that villagers recognize that they themselves are the true artists who have brought the images to their full fruition.

The images purchased and worshipped by Bhatissudans are very different from Vermeer's *Lacemaker* and Trobriand canoe prow-boards. They produce no sense of 'captivation' (Gell 1998: 68–72) and there is no interest in or recognition of these images as the product of particular artists. Villagers have no conception and no emotional investment in the 'materials artists manipulate', since without the devotee's creative imput the image's do not function properly. Like the '*Slashed*' *Rokeby Venus* by Mary Richardson (Gell 1998: 63–4), villagers produce infinitely more powerful images than the original artists ever managed.

Villagers' indifference to the base materials from which they fashion their 'seated' images is not reciprocated by the artists, however, for many see themselves as victims of the ritually driven demands of the rural market. Many contemporary artists bemoaned the constraints of commercial picture publication. Their predicament is to be 'artists' in a world that has little need for them. Whereas they construct the most valued parts of their self in terms of a personal style, the industry on which they depend requires only repetition and finesse. This is the reflection of the demands of a mass-market that lives, to quote Hans Belting's phrase, in an 'era before art'. A large part of these frustrated artists' predicament can thus be seen as an outcome of this simple division: the producers live in an era of art, but their consumers do not. This dilemma was forcefully expressed by the Meerut-based painter Yogendra Rastogi:

There are so many restrictions. Suppose we are preparing a scene with figures, we can't have any weeping, any anger, anything like this. The images a person wants for his puja room cannot depict anything cruel. Calendar pictures are not concerned with art. They are concerned only with images that can be worshipped . . . Gods or Goddesses giving their *ashirvad*, their blessings, with a smile.

Suppose (he continued) I am painting a picture of a boy studying. He should be looking down at his book, but we have to paint him so that he is looking at the person looking at the picture. But if he is studying, how can he look at you?

Freedom Fighter (Figure 8.4), a popular print of a Rastogi painting showing a patriotic boy with a history of the Indian freedom movement, was a compromise that retained some signs of its author's intransigence: the boy's eyes look not at

the viewer, but obliquely to the left. Rastogi's complaints suggest that the struggle between absorption and theatricality is a real one for many commercial artists with pretensions: the fact that, as Fried once wrote, 'one primitive condition of the art of painting [is] that its objects necessarily imply the presence before them of a beholder' (1980: 4) is of more than purely theoretical concern to them.

In addition to the disjunctions created by most Bhatiusuda villagers' refusal to inhabit the era of art, we must briefly map a much more profound conflict that informs the relationship between mass-produced images, temple *murtis* and those that 'thrash'.

At one level there is much in popular Hinduism to support the general argument of *Art and Agency*. A common response by villagers when questions of differences between deities is discussed is to throw up their hands and say '*ek hi maya hai*' – it is all (just) one illusion, one 'play'. They mean by this that 'ultimately' all the

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Figure 8.4 Yogendra Rastogi's 'Freedom Fighter'. Courtesy of Yogendra Rastogi

differences are resolvable into a single central imaginary form. In this sense villagers affirm that the gods can be thought of as a network of stoppages. One might also see in images of Hanuman – composed of an endless repetition of the name of his master (Ram)²⁰ and of the *trimurti* of Ramakrishna, The Mother, and Kali (in which the three faces coalesce in a common physiognomy) – further evidence of a concentric/fractal idiom.

But rather in the same way as I have suggested above that we need to theorize a bodily praxis in order to understand the reception of Hindu chromolithographs, we need also to position the formal discourses and representational conventions described in the paragraph above in the context of the chaotic physical enactments of being Hindu in Bhatissuda village. Once we do this, the formal articulations and synoptic overviews start to assume the same marginal position that ‘aesthetics’ has in relation to everyday ‘corporetics’.

During Nauratri – two periods of nine nights each year associated with goddesses – some Scheduled Caste households remove their domestic chromolithographs and place them in the Jhujhar Mata *autla* (shrine) which is maintained by Badrilal, a Bagdi (Scheduled Caste) *pujari*. The (usually framed) prints spend nine lunar days nestled against the red stones and paraphernalia that form the centre of the shrine and accumulate an additional power from the excess energy of the consecrated shrine during this period. Domestic images are also installed in the Bihari Mata shrine which also lies in the Bagdi *mohalla*. Bihari Mata lives under a *nim* tree on the southern fringe of the village and large laminated prints of Durga and Kali are nailed to the trunk of the tree and an old framed image of Durga is propped behind several red tridents that sprout from the base. This framed image is taken in the parade around the village at the conclusion of the nine nights along with the bowls of wheat shoots (*javara*) which will be cooled at the end of the procession. However, the relationship between chromolithographs and consecrated images, and that between those that thrash and consecrated images, is not always so tranquil.

Nauratri is a very dangerous period: it is ‘hot’ (*tamsik*) and vast numbers of *bhut pret* (ghosts and spirits) thicken the air. They live ‘with a free hand’ (*khuli chhut rehte*) and ‘play’ without restraint. The unpredictability of events is intensified by the numbers of villagers who thrash. Several *bhopas* or *ojhas* (mediums) will without fail thrash, and a further dozen or so villagers (some predictable, some not) will also thrash with sundry goddesses, spirits of ancestors who met violent deaths and *jhujhars* and *sagats* (warriors who died from either a single blow to the neck, or several blows, respectively).

In Bhatissuda, Nauratri is often eventful. During the Kvar Nauratri in 1995, Kushal Singh – the village psychopath – strode up to Kannaji, a Chamar *ojha* who, thrashing with Shitala (the goddess of smallpox), was making his twice-yearly circuit of the village. Dressed in a sari, Kannaji is led backwards around the village and those seeking protection for the coming year sit in his path, waiting

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Figure 8.5 Hemraj with his framed Durga image, two days prior to the Nauratri procession

to be stepped over. Kushal Singh faced Shitala/Kannaji and then punched him ferociously in the mouth. The following year Kushal Singh – sober and contrite – prostrated himself in front of Shitala/Kannaji inscribing his inferiority so that the whole village could see.

But it is events in 1993 which have a special relevance for the argument I want to make here. An extract from fieldnotes:

The predominantly Bagdi procession which had set out from the Bihari Mata shrine was outside Mohan Nai's house near the central *chauk*. Bihari Mata had entered the

body of Hemraj and she was wearing a green veil and holding a lime-tipped sword. She danced wildly around Lal Mata who was in the body of Badrilal – the *pujari* of the Jhujhar Maharaj *autla* – in an orange sari and mixed in this melee was a *sagat* in the body of the Rajput Balwant Singh. Two girls carried pots of *javara* (wheat sprouts) and between them a Bagdi boy carried Hemraj's framed Durga picture which had until then been displayed in the Bihari Mata shrine. As this swirling mass of people made its way down anticlockwise through the village, women and children, and Rup Singh knelt down to have their afflictions cast out. This involved a curative fanning (*jhadna*) effected with the bedraggled peacock whisks held by the two goddesses. Every so often Badrilal would appear to choke and then, with cheeks bulging, a lime would appear from his mouth.

What happened next showed the extent to which this frenzied outpouring of ecstatic energy fractured the normally hierarchical ordered space of the village. Outside the house of Kalu Singh the Rajput *sarpanch*, Badrilal swirled in a particularly aggressive manner as the goddess succumbed to some intense rage and it seemed as though everyone would invade the premises. Then the procession veered suddenly away toward the nearby Krishna temple where the ferociously angry goddess ordered that the *javara* and the image of Durga be taken inside. The *javara* were then placed on the platform at the front of the temple and at this stage Jagdish Sharma the Brahman *purohit* who lives just to the left of the temple shot across the front of his verandah and started to plead with the Goddess in Badrilal. Badrilal was frenzied, shouting and spluttering, his cheeks bulging as though his throat would at any moment disgorge limes.

This was an extraordinary and dangerous moment. Jagdish was clearly terrified. For about ten seconds it seemed completely probable that Badrilal might try to chop off Jagdish's head with his sword but in the event he retreated. Marigold and rose petals were scattered over the front of the temple and the procession moved on through the Bagdi *mola* southwest towards the Lal Mata *autla* and the Chambal river.

Later, discussing this incident, Mohan Singh and Pukhraj Bohra (both of whom are non-drinking vegetarians), opined that Jagdish Sharma had imposed his *rok-tok* (restriction/obstruction) because Badrilal was drunk and if he had polluted the purity of the temple space that protected the Krishna *murti* there would have been *nuqsan* (destruction). The 'skin' that surrounded the *murti* was imperilled, and it was to protect this that Jagdish had risked his life. Badrilal produced a corpothetic engagement with the Krishna *murti* that was incommensurable with the dominant order. The ecstatic dimension to thrashing brought Badrilal very close to piercing the skin of the Krishna idol.

Art and Agency does consider the 'relationships that exist between [artworks] as individuals, and other members of the same category of artworks, and the relationships that exist between this category and other categories of artworks' (1998: 153). However these questions are only ever framed stylistically and formally, never politically. The three different categories of divine embodiment

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Figure 8.6 Lal Mata, in the body of Badrilal, approaches the Krishna temple

that I have discussed in this chapter do not support a 'fractal' view of artworks or of 'concentric idols'. The wonderful description that Alfred provides of the multiple skins of the Jagannath temple in Puri elides a Brahmanic fantasy about how the cosmos should be ordered with the messy reality of contemporary India. That contemporary reality – with which a different sort of anthropology of art might engage – is not a place of tranquil homunculi. It is, rather, structured by disadvantageous flows and the conflict that this gives rise to. In these conflicts – as I have tried to document ethnographically – the skins of some idols may be pierced by others. Alfred Gell does a brilliant job of focusing on the ways in which objects mediate social relations: the task now is to analyse the different and conflictual social relations that make objects work for them.

Notes

1. Despite this Fried's concepts retain a conceptual utility if read against the grain.
2. Paralleling the argument in *Art and Agency*, W.J.T. Mitchell writes: 'Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they

exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder' (1996: 72).

3. My intention here is not to simplistically conflate these various dichotomies, for they are clearly not assimilable in this way. Rather, I am interested in the way in which the resonances between these (in many ways very different) conceptual pairs can illuminate the material at hand.
4. There are continuities between Buck-Morss's argument and David Freedberg who suggests that 'Much of our sophisticated talk about art is simply an evasion. We take refuge in such talk . . . because we are afraid to come to terms with our responses' (Freedberg 1989: 429–30).
5. The 1991 Census recorded the village population as 1,366.
6. *dhunana* = to beat, to thrash, and also to card cotton. Villagers will say *mataji dhun rahi hai* (the goddess is thrashing), *jhuajar dhun raha hai* (jhuajar is thrashing) and so on.
7. In this context I would qualify Gell's stress on the internality of images. Within this wider genre Indian versions of the 'vierge ouvrate' are relatively rare and the eyes of Hindu deities are less commonly 'holes' ('giving access to the hidden interior within which "mind" resides') than surface organs from which emanates a physical *extrusive* form of vision (as Gell makes clear elsewhere in his discussion of Kramrisch [1998: 116–17]. See also [Babb 1981]).
8. This early morning allurements which pulls the devotee to the temple is also a trope in Hindi movies (e.g. Yash Chopra's *Deewar*).
9. An enormously popular Goddess living in Kashmir.
10. This conversation was in English.
11. Babu Singh possessed by the pastoral deity Tejaji has become an almost weary sight in Bhatnagar. At every Satya Narayan puja (held in the Tejaji shrine) he starts to 'thrash', much to the amusement of village children. But most adults are not impressed: Mohan Singh said 'he acts as if he owns it but it can't be his slave (*ghulam*) . . . *shakti* is not tame/submissive for anyone (*shakti kissikoi ka dabba nahi*)'.
12. Sweepers, and removers of what is usually euphemistically referred to as 'nightsoil' (human excrement).
13. Literally 'middle', metaphorically 'low'.
14. On these grounds one might wish to qualify the claim made in *Art and Agency* (1998: 118) that imagistic devotion is achieved 'entirely by looking'. The notion of corporetics is intended to draw attention to the much wider sensory field within which agency is manifest.
15. I once asked Pukhraj Bohra whether blind people could take *darshan*: 'Yes. You get *darshan* through *divyajyotish* ['celestial astrology' implying luminence, and related to *divyadrishi*, celestial vision]. If your desire is truthful then an

- internal eye comes into being. It's like some natural state of rest [*praktatik mind*] in which the *murti* is just there in front of the soul [*man*].'
16. This corporetics is often reinscribed as the owner traces the journey either with his eyes or his fingers as he or she recalls the journey. Bhavaralal Ravidas pointed out various parts of his Pavagadh image, 'there is a temple here that you can't visit because there's a tiger living near the path'.
 17. At the village level, Muslim image practices are hard to distinguish from Hindu and Jain ones. Nane Khan, who noted that he owned 7 *dharmik tasviron* (religious pictures) said: 'They're from Macca-Medina [You've been there?] No . . . They're from Ajmer . . . they have lots of *shakti*. After bathing we wave an *agarbatti* (incense stick), clasp our hands, *bas*. We offer flowers, garlands . . . we get *prasad*. If you have a completely truthful heart you'll get what you want. There's a Ramayan isn't there? Well, it's like that but better (*aur zyada*) . . .'
 18. Malwi. Hindi = *visarjan*.
 19. For instance in photographic images of a Surat-based guru, Shri Paramhansji, and some Jain images of the (literal) footprints of *acharyas*.
 20. In Devanagri script, conceptualized as a *mantra*.

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