

The School of Arts and Aesthetics, J N U

<http://www.jnu.ac.in/saa>

Annual Interdisciplinary Conference

November 10 – 13, 2010

Call for Papers:

THE ARCHITECTURES OF EROTICA: POLITICAL, SOCIAL, RITUAL

What constitutes the erotic? Why is it represented with such frequency in Indian cultural practices? How do we interpret these practices? These have been questions central to Indian art history since the very inception of the discipline, presenting us with an opportunity now to trace the historiography of interpretations / constructions of erotica. This question is once again timely in the light of current censorship debates in which paintings, sculptures, films and performances have been put under a magnifying glass. The School of Arts and Aesthetics is organizing a conference to explore the erotic within the context of religious, ritual and secular practices from pre modern through to contemporary times. Our conference will address a broad canvas of culture by involving speakers from cinema studies, theatre and performance studies, history, indology, anthropology and visual studies.

In India the subject entered a non-religious sphere in the Kamashastras at an early date. The multiple historical functions of erotic evocations in Indian arts need reiteration in our times. The *mithuna* or loving couple, for instance, was an auspicious symbol on the gateways of religious shrines, but it was equally a powerful talisman. As a mimetic substitute for a magico-religious fertility ritual, it may have warded off foetus-stealing demons. Elsewhere, it became a tool by which one community could poke fun at another on a temple wall, while it also was a symbolic metaphor connecting one architectural structure with another. It was said to help the earth endure the electrical shock of lightning even as it remained a coded Tantric message. Yet vacillating attitudes plague studies of Tantra; perhaps the only institutionalised space to consciously express erotic dirt and depravity, its scholarly readings remain mired in the promise of double-entendres that speak of higher, subtler psychological and metaphysical truths to their initiates. Erotic metaphors abound also in the typecasting of different *Nayikas* and *Nayakas* in medieval literature that explore tropes ranging from the admiration of their bodies to their experience of the duality of pleasure / pain (frequently represented through biting scorpions and the pricking of thorns). Yet, there remains a serious lack in art-history and studies in classical literature in excavating tropes typecasting the erotic male figure.

As a means of subversion on the other hand, erotic poetry became a powerful tool for religious Bhakti's ecstatic and unmediated union with god. Painting followed poetry in imaging the minute details of Krishna and Radha's love. Similarly, erotic union became a standard feature of stories recounted at Medieval Indian Sufi shrines that were to become a subject of the earliest Indo-Islamic painted miniatures.

The constructions of tropes on same-sex love in South Asia has proved to be no small task for scholarship. Un-mentioned, yet pervasive, the vacillating

attitudes towards homosexuality in Indian art can finally be discussed in the light of growing academic interest in the field.

Turning attention to non-canonical artefacts like decorative objects, the framework of religion which is normally assumed to be a broad umbrella term may be fractured to shed light on specific cultural practices through a focus on the erotic in everyday life. Objects of fetish, food and annals of superstition and medicine provide both, fodder for titillating a partner or providing an aphrodisiac.

Despite the pervasiveness of the erotic until pre-colonial times, it must, no doubt, even in its own times have been received with both approval, indifference and even with opposition to it, just as scholarship has noted the complexity of both colonial and postcolonial attitudes to Indian erotica. Through the lens of historiography, we can shift the focus to retakes on 'tradition' to legitimize cultural politics. Central to the debate around eroticism is how it is implicated in the way the private and public domains are separated. Just as there are representations of the erotic, one can engage with the erotics of representation that not only subsumes gender, but also caste-based hierarchies. Moreover, modernism's policing of boundaries between high versus low, classical versus folk, religious versus secular, etc. can also be contextualized within the discourse of eroticism and sexuality. Increasingly in the post-modern world, therefore, the project of representation itself becomes suspect as grand narratives lose their credibility.

Performance Studies allows us to shift the whole debate by looking *through* erotica rather than at it. The protagonists of erotic theatre and film permit a retake on the usual public scrutiny that leads to assumptions about their morality. Nowhere is this better played out than in representations of actresses; and by investigating nineteenth and twentieth century theatre, the biographies of actresses, dancers and singers and these women's performances we can try and explore the subject from the perspective of the providers of the public demand for erotica. A feminist study to reconcile sexuality and the female lifestyle with the professional demands of theatrical conventions on the one hand and the fulfilment stereotypes established by popular pornographic images can certainly prove illuminating. Not only does this lead to a study of the affects of pleasure, it does so in the terrain of the popular / societal. We can now ask what politically-transformative means surface, how pleasure can move us, and how it can mobilize us towards feminist ends.

The erotic turns into a force-field as soon as it goes through the circuits of mass-production, as seen with reference to major debates conducted on the question of sexual explicitness in the media. For the field of photography, film, television and new media, the erotic has been closely allied with the 'reality effect' central to mechanical reproduction (ever narrowing the gap between the virtual and real). The question of technology can thus no longer be separated from these discussions.

The cinematic transformation of the body through gesture, fashion, dance, music and mise-en-scene creates an erotic sensorium that circulates further through discussions and programmes on the radio, television, magazines, the internet, billboards, and posters. This play with the senses through a powerful visual culture creates a sexualized public domain which has also seen a consolidation in the period after globalization. Globalization has brought with it anxiety about cultural identity that further foregrounds the urgency of addressing the question of eroticism in contemporary contexts. The medium transforms the very terms of representation in the age of mechanical reproduction where the erotic is no longer a matter of representation or performativity or enactment but the 'virtual' is often somebody's 'real', and legitimately thus, seeking representation publicly. Certainly, the contemporary cinema-studies scholarship on pornography and gratuitous sexuality has





widened the scholarly exploration of desire and its psychological readings. Virtual reality, on-line dating and the reports of rape being committed in Second Life bring us to new questions of the experience of the erotic without the presence of the body.

Similarly, state censorship is now central to the way film and television negotiate the cultural taboos of the public sphere and yet it is precisely when the unwritten taboo is crossed that the domain of the erotic enters a discourse on pornography. What is seen as artistic erotica by some is termed pornography by others. Ultimately these distinctions are based on aesthetic, moral and cultural choices / subjectivities and continue to be controversial. It is the aim of this conference to provoke discussion on the boundaries within which the erotic gets defined.


Even before one can contend with matters concerning the erotic in India's cultural practices openly in academic discussions, let alone their public perception, the database of the types and spaces for erotica in 21st century India has suddenly become so much more widespread that its interpretations in the present age must contend with the new face of erotica. Whereas the era of the video-tape in the 1980s and 1990s proliferated western pornography to rural and urban India, new technologies via VCDs, DVDs, the net and mobile phones allow for new means of soliciting and meeting partners, and animation adds a whole new dimension to porn.

To consider the emplacement of the erotic in the cultural practices of India from ancient to contemporary times, we propose a four day conference from 10 - 13 November, 2010. Some of the possible panels / thematics that have been identified are as follows:

1. The Erotic Talisman
2. New studies in Tantra
3. Institutionalising a public space for the erotic: The Cult of the Devadasi, Tawaif...
4. Courtly Literature and Erotic Aesthetics
5. Framing the Sacred Erotic: Bhakti and Sufi constructions and sanctions of the erotic
6. From Colonial Fantasy and Oriental Bodies to Goddesses in Calendar Prints and Cinema Icons
7. Fetishes and aphrodisiacs
8. Do we have a typology for an erotic male?
9. Erotica and the modernist gaze
10. The Historiography of same-sex erotica in India
11. Erotic performance and the cinematic gaze
12. Dance, Trance and the Erotic Ritual
13. Censorship, Provocation and Eroticism
14. Autobiography and Eroticism: Fashioning the Self
15. Femme Fatale: Exploring the Trope of the Erotic Tragedienne
16. Psycho-sexual readings of Erotica in Indian cultural practice and art
17. Constructions of altered sexualities and trans-gendered erotica
18. Marginalia: a sanctioned space for erotic and other *alamkara-s*

Publication:

The proceedings of the conference will be published and a subvention towards the publication is already secured. Speakers at the conference must not have committed their papers elsewhere.



THE SCHOOL OF ARTS & AESTHETICS PROJECT FOR EDUCATION IN THE ARTS & RESOURCE BUILDING (SPEAR)

SPEAR is a three year (SEPTEMBER 2008 – SEPTEMBER 2011) project designed by the School of Arts and Aesthetics to create a model for the proliferation of education in three streams of the Arts – Visual Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies and Cinema Studies. Spear is designed as a comprehensive programme to ensure wider dissemination, collaboration, expansion and enrichment of education in the Arts. During the three years of the project, the School will build on its material resources, invite distinguished faculty, hold regular workshops and conferences, seek institutional collaborations for furthering research, organize public lectures and disburse competitive student fellowships. The objective of this programme is to accelerate the pace of Arts education through an intensive three year exercise which can subsequently turn into a model for other institutions to emulate. SPEAR is supported by the Tata Social Welfare Trust. This conference is held under its auspices.

Funding for the Conference:

A limited number of International and National airfares and maintenance allowances will be met by SPEAR. Should you wish to apply for these, please send your abstract and bio-data addressed 'Architectures of Erotica' to spearjnu@gmail.com, with a copy to jnuartpress@gmail.com

Delegates who may already have avenues of funding available to them personally, from their institutions or other avenues, should inform: the Conference Coordinator, SPEAR, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi 67. This will, naturally, allow us to utilise our funds to support those delegates who may not have other avenues for funding.

Visas:

International delegates can attend or present papers at the conference on a tourist Visa obtainable from your nearest Indian Embassy, Consulate or High Commission. We will provide you with the necessary letters of invitation to support your application.

Deadline for Submission of Abstracts:

Scholars interested in reading a 30 minute paper at the conference, must send a one-page (400 word max) abstract along with their CV by 1 June, 2010 at the address / e mail given below:

For any further queries, please contact:
**Coordinator, SPEAR,
School of Arts and Aesthetics,
JNU, New Delhi 67;**

spearjnu@gmail.com