

Mad Metaphors and Slippery Similarities in the *Citrasutra*: The Case of *Anukṛti* in Comparative Aesthetics

**Parul Dave Mukherji
School of Arts and Aesthetics
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India**

Comparative aesthetics in India has its roots in the postcolonial movement of the 1950s when comparing aesthetic concepts and practices across cultures seemed to resonate with the aspirations of a new nation and its conception of cultural sovereignty. In the wake of globalization, assumed to entail reduced distance between cultures and concomitant contestation of the nation-state, world literature and art studies¹ have emerged as new areas of research and inquiry within which the discipline of comparative aesthetics may be placed. The comparative aesthetics of the mid-twentieth century, however, was driven by a different agenda. In the 1950s, comparative aesthetics enjoyed popularity in a newly decolonized India as a field that was expected to bring to light an alternative knowledge system that the West had overlooked in its desire to colonize the world. After a decade and a half, the euphoria came to an end, since the discourse of comparative aesthetics could not extricate itself from Eurocentric notions of representation.

However, the reinvention of comparative aesthetics in the present seems to follow in the wake of comparative literature.² Moving beyond the cultural politics of Cold War hostility between the West and the rest, where the latter was subsumed under area studies, comparative literature offered a new model of hospitality drawn from the former interaction across European literary cultures.³ Today this notion may seem newly precarious with the UK's Brexit and Samuel Huntington's looming prophecy

of clashing civilizations, an ominous possibility in our world threatened by violence, intolerance, and religious fundamentalism. In this sense, how does comparative aesthetics reshape its concerns and disciplinary thinking to become relevant in contemporary times?

In fact, in 1965, a special issue of the *Journal of Art and Art Criticism* was devoted to *Oriental* (my emphasis) aesthetics with contributions from leading experts including K. C. Pandey, P. J. Choudhary, and Ramendra Kumar from India.⁴ Among the Western scholars who took part in this debate were Archie Bahm, Eliot Deutsche, and Thomas Munroe. This moment inaugurated a vibrant cross-cultural dialogue on aesthetics just as it also gestured towards a certain unevenness of the field.

There is a resurgence of comparative aesthetics in our more recent, globalized times but the stakes have changed remarkably over the last four decades. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Oxford University Press had brought out an *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* with its first entry being on the Kashmiri aesthetician Abhinavagupta's contribution.⁵ Aesthetics, once overshadowed by the cultural studies turn, has once again begun to take the center stage of many disciplines and is understood as deeply imbricated with politics.⁶

Given these conditions, art-historical terminology has a different valence in the postcolonial world. It does not merely supply a linguistic framework to think through practice but is also deeply intertwined with civilizational identity. When art history came to India in the nineteenth century under the aegis of colonialism, the very status of the fine arts was denied to the land of “much maligned monsters.”⁷ Its multiheaded

and multilimbed gods and goddesses found on temple walls were understood as the result of barbaric imagination, rather than as being shaped by a body of rational and canonical discourse. Amid these assessments, the discovery of ancient Sanskrit texts on art (*śilpaśāstras*) in the early twentieth century came as a relief to the cultural nationalists of India. The *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (circa fifth-sixth CE) was one such text, which was “discovered” in 1924 by the Viennese art historian Stella Kramrisch. However, this text, with its profuse mimetic terminology, posed a challenge to the nationalist characterization of Indian art as transcendental by art historians and art critics like A. K. Coomaraswamy and O. C. Ganguly. The nationalists desired instead to define it in contrast to the “materialist naturalism” of Western art.

In 1988, I returned to this text with the objective of producing a critical edition as part of my D.Phil. at Oxford University. My approach was partly inspired by E. H. Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*,⁸ which led me to work with the idea of illusion in Indian art as a means of contesting the transcendentalist model. *Art and Illusion*’s lens of the psychology of visual perception made me look for Indian theories of vision to explore the interface between epistemology and aesthetics. It directed me to B. K. Matilal’s book on *Perception*,⁹ which introduced me to the realist epistemology of the Nyaya Vaisesika school of Indian logic.

My meeting with Gombrich at the Warburg Institute in 1986 was momentous, but I then realized that Gombrich had moved away from the perceptual relativism of *Art and Illusion* to a kind of perceptual absolutism. Perfect representation, or illusion, for Gombrich was achieved only twice in human history, first in the Greek period, and

second in the Italian Renaissance. When I informed him about the Indic textual sources and terminologies on mimesis in art, he directed me to E. Kris and O. Kurz's *Legend Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*.¹⁰ I now remember being troubled by its skepticism toward textual material and its association of magic with non-Western representation. Was Gombrich consigning the Sanskrit treatise and all the textual references to a primitivist space, to a people of childish mentality who said one thing and did something quite different, whose art and theory were unaligned and incompatible?

Puzzling over mad metaphors and slippery similarities in the *Citrasūtra*

The *Citrasūtra* dazzled me for its mimetic terminology—*anukṛti* (performative mimesis), *satya* (truthful), *sādṛśya* (verisimilitude), *pratiti* (probable/convincing), *anulomyam* (along the natural direction of hair), *sajiva* (living), *saśvāsam* (breathing)—and daunted me for its evident problems of translation. Do the domains of *anukṛti* and mimesis intersect or reveal gaps as my attempt to translate *anukṛti* into mimesis fails? What challenge does it pose to comparative aesthetics, which often deals with unequal semantic domains across different cultures? This explains my adoption of a doubled term, “performative mimesis,” in order to translate *anukṛti*; if we are to move beyond visual representationalism to a performative mode (akin to Derrida's take on mimesis after Stéphane Mallarmé).¹¹

How does one make sense of this text's insistent bid for high verisimilitude and auspiciousness (*maṅgalya*) at the same time? A painting had to smile, speak to the onlooker, and breathe the same air as the spectator on the one hand and yet the text

also expressed horror for empty (*śunya*) space. This claim of realism ran counter to the bizarre metaphors that underlay the classification of different body types. The text set up a “slippery web of similarity” between human body parts and the world of animals, birds, flowers, shells, and so on, which was outlandish to modern sensibilities and complicated questions about the nature of representation.

Disentangling three levels of mimesis: Magical, aesthetic and logical

In fact, within the *Citrasūtra*, a clear distinction was maintained between the magical, or animistic mimesis, and aesthetic mimesis. If the former primarily concerned the domain of affect, where an auspicious painting must breathe, speak to the viewer, and please the gods, the latter involved a particular mode of representation involving high artistic dexterity and knowledge of the human body.

My search for a wider discourse on mimesis led me to another later text, *Abhinavabhāratī*, a ninth-century commentary on *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a text on dramaturgy. The whole debate around *anukṛti* was couched in a philosophical/epistemological framework in which visual perception and inference intersected and the question of the claim to truth was detached from that of the real. While the visual arts were regarded as providing examples for a discourse around representation, the text insisted that *anukṛti* was a vacuous concept unless the terms of the relationship between the copy and the original were known. In fact, this text on drama invoked *anukṛti* as encompassing both mimesis (Fig. 1) and mimicry (Fig. 2).



1 A detail from Mahajana Jataka, Cave 1, Ajanta Frescoes, western India, ca. 5th century CE (photograph: American Council for Southern Asian Art Digital Images)



2 Photograph of Ram Gopal, a dancer from Mysore (1912–2003) demonstrating a Kathakali dance posture

The *Citrasūtra*, being more oriented toward the visual arts, dealt with magical mimesis that governed the making of sacred icons in one chapter and aesthetic mimesis in another. Icons had to be depicted fully frontal; the text cautioned that any transgression would lead to dire consequences for the artist and the patron. But the very next chapter laid down the rules of foreshortening (*kṣayavṛddhi*) by discussing nine postures that were arrived at by rotating the human body across a vertical axis. It even set up a hierarchy between the skill-intensive superior three-quarter view and the pure profile, which was regarded as unrefined (literally rural/*grāmyasanthitam*).¹² Its aesthetic concerns are reflected, however, in the criteria for a failed and a successful painting: use of lines that are too thick or thin; lack of distinction; oversized cheeks, lips, and eyes; crooked lines; and mixing up of colors. Note how the aesthetic is dominated in its list of virtues by what is defined as a painting expert (*citravid*): he should draw the neck, hands, feet, and ears without any ornaments; be able to draw someone pierced by an arrow and someone old; produce images that convey the difference between a sleeping and a dead body through the clever use of foreshortening; and be able to draw waves, flames, smoke, flags, and garments with the speed of wind (*vāyugati*).

Clearly *anukṛti* is caught between two frameworks: one of a straightforward endorsement of mimesis (a painter is a “resemblance maker”). The definition of skill is here anchored in actual material practice and the conventions of painting. The second coexistent framework is based on animism or vitalism, which believes in a painting’s magical capacity to capture life in which emptiness is seen as a sign of death and an antithesis of life (Fig. 3).



3 Ajanta Mural, Cave 1, *A Lady Listening to Buddha's Sermon*, western India, ca. 5th century CE (photograph provided by Y. S. Alone)

What at first sight appears to be opposites in terms of rationality and magic are linked together in the terms of the former. Take for instance the manner in which the skill of a painter is so fine-tuned as to make possible the visual depiction of *cetana*, or consciousness, a feature that underlies the distinction between a sleeping and a dead body.

Decolonizing mimesis

If we reflect on these mimetic terminologies dispersed across the twin context of the *Citrasūtra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*,¹³ it is possible to contest the category of magical realism that is often applied as a blanket term for understanding non-Western art.

Mimesis in the Indic context unfolds across multiple levels that span the realms of magic, aesthetics, and rationality. Such an understanding of mimesis runs counter to the recent theories of mimesis by Michael Potolsky¹⁴ and Natasha Eaton.¹⁵ For Potolsky, “Art in these cultures is closely intertwined with ritual and daily life, much

as it seems to have been in archaic Greek culture before Plato's intervention. Without the presumed difference of art from reality that underwrites Plato's critique of mimesis, the idea of realism, of reproducing life in a different medium, has little meaning."¹⁶ Likewise, Eaton's *Mimesis across Empires*, informed by Michael Taussig's study on indigenous mimesis,¹⁷ also continually associates non-Western mimesis with magic and affect.

For me, the premodern terms for mimesis have a complex grounding, partly in magic, ritual, icon worship, and talismanic beliefs, but in conjunction with this, another trajectory that is often overlooked, as it is subsumed under the magical. It is through the recognition of the "real" embedded within the practices of ritual and worship that it becomes possible to unravel another logic of representation and even to admit the category of artistic labor in premodern art theory. At the same time, it opens a possibility for ascribing reflexivity to the text that continually and self-consciously moves back and forth between art and reality—a prerogative that is not exclusive to Western aesthetics. Can the theory of *anukṛti* generate new knowledge about mimesis and compel us to rethink the basis of representation itself?

Notes

¹ Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).

² Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson, eds., *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics: An Interface between East and West* (London: Ashgate, 2006).

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁴ *The Aesthetic Attitude in Indian Aesthetics*, a supplement to the special issue on Oriental Aesthetics, *Journal of Art and Art Criticism* 24, no.1 (Autumn 1965).

⁵ Michael Kelly, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶ See Kajri Jain's work on public monuments commissioned by the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayavati and its attendant aesthetics. Ranciere is

productively invoked to address the caste issue in aesthetics. “The Handbag That Exploded: Mayawati’s Monuments and the Aesthetics of Democracy in Post-Reform India,” in *New Cultural Histories of India*, ed. Tapati Guha Thakurta, Partha Chatterjee, and Bodhisattva Kar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁸ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1960).

⁹ B. K. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

¹⁰ E. Kris and O. Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (1934), (reprinted by New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” in *Mimesis des articulations* ed. Sylviane Agacinski et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 67ff.

¹² Parul Dave-Mukherji, ed., *Citrasutra of the Visnudharmottara Purana* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002).

¹³ Parul Dave-Mukherji, “Who’s Afraid of Mimesis? Contesting the Common Sense of Indian Aesthetics through the Theory of ‘Mimesis’ or Anukarana Vada,” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (London: The Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

¹⁴ Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁵ Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 95.

¹⁷ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).