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Sukhmani Khorana

University of Wollongong, skhorana@uow.edu.au

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Creative praxis and cross-cultural research

Abstract

This article theorises the process of conducting and exhibiting cross-cultural research through a particular kind of creative praxis, a hybrid visual essay. Beginning with a model for understanding such a visual form, I then go on to detail the pre-production, production and post-production stages. This helps comprehend the potential cross-cultural impact of the chosen methodology, as well as the consequences of various production choices. The article ends with an overview of the impact of the screenings of the visual essay.

Keywords

creative, cross, cultural, research, praxis

Disciplines

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Creative Praxis and Cross-Cultural Research

Sukhmani Khorana
University of Wollongong

COMMENTARY

I Journey like a Paisley (available at <http://vimeo.com/9520203>) is a hybrid visual essay of the kind that Peter Thompson defines in 'The Cinematic Essay' as incorporating the documentary, fiction and experimental genres where appropriate. Its hybridity is attributed not only to the mixing of the genres of autobiography, interview documentary and cultural text, but also to the criss-crossing of disciplinary and ethno-political boundaries. Nonetheless, in employing a definite time, place and

subject, that is, a random sample of young people of Indian origin residing in Adelaide during the spring of 2008, the visual essay aims for the coherence of a situated creative practice. In aesthetic terms, it draws inspiration from Indian-Australian filmmaker Safina Uberoi's *My Mother India* (2001), and Australian director Gillian Armstrong's *Unfolding Florence* (2006). While there are obvious parallels with the former film in terms of examining personal lives that cross between Indian and Australian homes, the latter is a strong influence in terms of its use of Florence Broadhurst's wallpaper art as a motif.

The form of this piece of creative research can be theorised using Elizabeth McIntyre's self-reflexive account of the methods used to produce a script. In this account, 'Facilitating the Script,' she adapts Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity to conclude that 'the researcher is placed within the complex system of interaction between the individual, field and domain in the creative process.' As a genre and a creative form, the visual essay is a remix; it is in this remixing that it produces both a novel methodology for cultural research, and also wide-ranging impact that crosses disciplinary boundaries within the academy, as well as embodying the potential (through its remixed content and process-oriented form) to be accessible to the wider community beyond academia.

The methodology that I adopted in the making of the visual essay, and in writing this reflective scholarly commentary examining its crossover (that is, cross-cultural as well as cross-disciplinary) impact mirrors Robyn Stewart's notion of a 'neonarrative.' This is a narrative that uses a

bricolage of qualitative research methods, and is both located between and is a crossover that links theory and practice (130). The autobiographical register used throughout is not a mere nod to practice-based research, but a symptom of the diasporic location of both the visual and the written narratives. As renowned post-colonial academic and creative practitioner Trinh Minh-ha notes, writers of colour and Third World writers of the diaspora are often condemned to write only autobiographical works (28). However, she adds that in order to start the travel anew, such writers and creative practitioners open up and pass on their stories (28), and herein lies both the importance of their autobiographical voice, as well as the genesis of its cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural impact. At the same time, the hybrid form of the visual essay allows it to appropriate popular cultural forms such as the bright and culturally distinctive visual aesthetics associated with Bollywood cinema, as well as the reflective voiceover common in the literary memoir or observational documentary genres. In other words, the mix of high and low, and of culture-specific and culture-spanning content and form lends the visual essay its cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural appeal. This is not dissimilar to the appropriation of *Bhangra* music by diasporic South Asians in the UK, for instance. According to Michael Giardina, as a transnational performance of culture and community, *Bhangra* 'reveals the processes by which multiple diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging' (34). It is such resistance and re-articulation, and not a mere repetition of fixed home or

host culture discourses that brings the identities and issues of migrants to the attention of the wider community.

I will now narrativise each stage of the production of *I Journey like a Paisley*, and thereby enact the research methodology explained above for the hybrid visual essay (involving autobiography, narrativising and theorising).

PRE-PRODUCTION

The narrative of *I Journey like a Paisley* is Indian-Australian in that it reflects the identity of the maker as well as the filming locations. It is remixed in terms of theoretical discourse, and in line with the model of 'situated knowledge,' that is, producing knowledge that is specific to a local context, yet transcends its location. According to Minh-ha, 'the tale' is a literary genre that belongs to all countries in the sense that 'its extreme mobility has been valued both for its local specificity and for its capacity to speak across cultural and ethnic boundaries' (29). Such a narrative, with appropriate motifs and discourses, is crucial to the success of the cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary endeavour.

In order to signify cross-cultural communication in *I Journey Like a Paisley*, I was keen to select a visual motif with global as well as locally specific resonance. My mother is a trained textile designer, and as a child, I often saw her paint and print the paisley pattern on the numerous fabrics that she exhibited, and later sold in her boutique. As a young adult, I was beginning to realise that my fascination with the paisley pattern had accompanied me to Australia. In my

undergraduate years, I often found myself walking into the Oxfam Community Trade store across the road from the university to just browse and look at ‘ethnic’ patterns and hues. As a graduate student, I began to don fusion garb more confidently. I wanted this comfort with Indian-inspired clothing, the inner-as-outer idea to be reflected in the visual essay. However, I was also keen to research the history of these textiles, and revisit my mother’s designs and possessions so as not to be seen as merely appropriating the ‘exotic.’ In other words, I saw this contextual/historical research as a significant component of cross-cultural creative practice.

It was therefore opportune that I visited India at a time when I was in need of renewing my ties with family and friends, as well as in search of the resilient thread that makes Indian textiles and patterns historical yet contemporary, situated yet mobile. I was not merely going back, but also had the privilege of looking at the personal, political and poetic histories of textiles (and my family’s entrenchment in them) from a diasporic perspective. A crucial leg of my journey was a trip to the newly created Indian state of Uttaranchal, which is flanked by the Himalayas in the north. After visiting friends in the capital Dehradun, I took off for the holy city of Haridwar with my sister. Located on the banks of the Ganges, Haridwar is known for its Hindu pilgrims who flock to the river for communal baths and an evening prayer ceremony, as well as its countless homes for celibate retirees. On reaching the riverbank, I was overcome by the spectacle of the mass of humanity who felt so strongly about taking a dip in obviously polluted waters. This was the

Indian heartland—a version of India that I hadn’t seen during my growing years in the multi-ethnic state of Jammu and Kashmir. I woke up to the possibility that the interviewees for my visual essay may not associate with the paisley and its border-crossing connotations. At the same time, I realised that the paisley was merely my filter for viewing their stories, not an imposition. Such a filter was necessary so as to poetically render migration stories that resisted dominant discourses even as they re-articulated hybrid identities and experiences in a constructive manner. This was similar to the aesthetic strategies advocated by filmmaker-scholar Diem-My T. Bui. According to Bui, an experiential performance by Vietnamese American women titled *Miss Saigon with the Wind* is significant not just for responding to dominant images of Vietnamese women, but also for producing more complex self-renderings (295-297).

With the heterogeneous nature of Indian lives and fabrics in mind, I visited the National Calico Textile Museum in the city of Ahmedabad, which is renowned for its cotton industry. It is also the site of Mahatma Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram where he first began to spin cloth to encourage widespread rejection of British goods. The museum itself was enlightening in its breadth of states and corresponding patterns or styles of embroidery covered, but also steeped in tradition and not very encouraging of photography or further scholarly work. I then had the opportunity to visit the fabric industry owned by a maternal uncle, and therefore gained an understanding of the industrial process of weaving and manufacturing cloth. Gandhi’s

ashram was a step back in time from the various shopping malls that have sprung up in Ahmedabad city in the last decade. I was also finally able to locate a book, not specifically on the paisley, but on India's textile exports at one of the city's numerous Crossword bookstores. This was a sign that despite Ahmedabad's recent capitalist revolution, elements of its local history as the nation's textile hub have lived on.

On returning to my hometown of Jammu, I began to examine my mother's scrapbooks and various other designs she sketched during her textile training. I took photos of them, especially her paisleys and leaf motifs, but was not yet sure how I would use these in the visual essay. The book I purchased in Ahmedabad seemed to indicate that cashmere and pashmina shawls originating in Kashmir constituted a large proportion of India's historical textile exports to the west. I recalled my mother's pashmina collection and its vivid colours and paisley borders. She kindly took them out of storage and narrated the story that lay behind many an inheritance or purchase. The paisleys on the shawls were more intricate than any I had seen before, and I knew I had stumbled upon something visually and metaphorically precious. It was the photos of these pashminas that were used during post-production to punctuate and accentuate *I Journey like a Paisley*. It is crucial that I reiterate that this was not a mere affectation, but an important aesthetic strategy. It is also a thread that links my story and the stories of those whom I interviewed to wider socio-political currents, and hence crucial for recognition and impact across cultures and disciplines. The pattern on these shawls may not be a literal

setting, but it was to frame both the roots and the routes of the journey. It is worth noting that this personal diasporic journey is different from the original colonial journey that led to the export of the Kashmir shawl to Europe, and the re-naming as well as re-shaping of the paisley pattern to suit English tastes (Sharrad 64).

PRODUCTION

I found it necessary to broach a wide range of conversation subjects with my interviewees, ranging from the expected ties with Bollywood cinema and Indian food, to the more difficult questions pertaining to living in the diaspora and dealing with religious and marital choices. I use the term 'conversation' rather than the conventional 'interview' to describe these encounters, because I believed that a conversational exchange was more in line with the cross-cultural and wider community impact that I was aiming for through the visual project. A one-sided or limited exchange with premeditated questions would have simply appropriated dominant discourses (especially on migration stories), hence my conscious decision to avoid this method of cultural research.

To materialise the above concerns, it was crucial to choose interviewees with a range of experiences in India and Australia. At the same time, selecting individuals on the basis of variety in age, class, religion, language and other factors for the mere sake of representativeness would not have been true to the poetic essence of the proposed visual essay. Therefore, given that my own narrative role was to act as a springboard for the interviews, I decided to select interviewees based in Adelaide, and

from my own generation (varying in age from 20 to 35 years). Another significant filter (partly defined by the method of recruitment) was the education and socio-economic status of the participants. The majority was tertiary educated or currently studying, and employed as professionals or with 'white-collar' aspirations.

In addition to the interviews and other footage of the Indian diaspora in Adelaide, I also decided to use personal photos and footage at a later stage during the production of the visual essay. This inclusion of the self was a contested issue, and one that I shied away from initially as I did not want the essay to veer into self-indulgence. However, as the interviews progressed, I gave the last two interviewees (who are personal friends) the opportunity to interview me in turn. I was reminded of sociologist Laurel Richardson's struggle with a researcher-focussed narrative voice and her eventual adoption of 'experimental writing.' She says, 'Separating the researcher's story from the people's story implies that the researcher's voice is the authoritative one, a voice that stands above the rest' (18). Therefore, my inclusion of the self in relation to other interviewees articulates Richardson's Creative Analytic Process (CAP) methodology in that it 'points to the continual cocreation of the self and social science; they are known through each other' (962). I came to realise that the inclusion of my own responses and relevant life segments was crucial to understanding the genesis and evolution of this particular cross-cultural text.

POST-PRODUCTION

The visual essay went through about six cuts before the rough cut was ready, and this process took place from January to July 2009. The conceptual elements of the post-production stage involved countless decisions regarding not only what to include in the frame, but also how to justify that which is left out. As I listened to the interviews, a story of sorts began to emerge, and I decided to structure it with chapter markers such as 'Journeying on a Bollywood Float,' 'Journeying Past Tradition,' 'Journeying to a Better Place,' to help organise the narrative. This also provided light and shade, as comments on candid topics such as discrimination and religion were followed by humorous anecdotes. I learned to make the cut finer, and edit comments with rhythm while providing enough cutaways and stills of paisleys to reduce the 'talking heads' aspect. After discussion with my supervisor, I decided to conduct Skype interview-conversations with my sisters and parents on film. Segments of these were included in the last section of the visual essay, and helped end the circle that began with discussions of family, homes and choices. This decision was also based on the realisation that the trope of family is important for identification across cultures.

SCREENINGS: IMPACT THROUGH CONVERSATION

The original public screening of *I Journey Like a Paisley* took place on the University of Adelaide's Open Day in August 2009 at an on-campus lecture theatre. I invited

friends, colleagues in the discipline, as well as all the participants and their families. The screening itself was marred by a technical error in the guise of low sound. The varying accents of the interviewees and my decision to not include subtitles added to the acoustic confusion, but also possibly made the audience listen harder.

As the screening concluded, I took centre stage and conducted a question and answer session. There were a number of questions about the creative impetus of the project—such as how the visual component evolved from an audience studies response to filmmaker Deepa Mehta's 'elements' trilogyⁱ to its current, more poeticⁱⁱ manifestation; and also about my interest in the paisley pattern and how it intersperses the visual essay. Another viewer remarked on footage from my trip to Canada to interview Mehta, and asked whether Indian diasporic life had similar patterns in different parts of the globe. The most difficult response to deal with, by far, was criticism of the technical quality of the visual document, followed by a query about my filmmaking history. I did not apologise for my creation, but rather pointed out that it was the first time I had made a 20-minute solo production as opposed to a collaborative short film. More importantly, to borrow the words of Maria Lovett, a professional filmmaker who made a technically flawed film in a cultural research context, 'I threw much of my skills and experience as a filmmaker out the window when it came to documenting this story...It's about an opening to epiphanic moments'"(430-431). Such moments certainly dominated instances of audience

connection and pleasure during the first screening of the visual essay.

The next public screening was only a month later at a weekly seminar series organised by the Discipline of Asian Studies at the University of Adelaide. I was impressed that the chair had chosen to wear a paisley wrap, and later told me she had researched the history of the pattern. The venue was a smaller seminar room, and the audience was composed of students and staff who were unfamiliar with my project. I looked forward to their 'first reader' response, as well as a technical error-free screening.

I began with an introduction to the project and the nature of the visual essay. This was followed by the screening itself, which seemed more intimate and immediate, possibly due to the size of the room. I then proceeded to detail the pre-production, production and post-production phases with the aid of web-log entries written during each stage. The ensuing question and answer session took longer to gather momentum, but the responses were valuable. I was again asked to explain the historical significance of the paisley, as well as its contemporary relevance. One of the viewers made a comment about the increasing number of Indian students and corresponding rise in interest in Bollywood culture at her niece's school. This particular response was telling in that it showed cross-cultural, wider community identification with the material.

Since the completion of my doctorate in June 2010, the visual essay has received two further screenings. The first of these was as an installation at the University

of Western Sydney in September 2010, where I presented a paper at the 'Next Generation of Cultural Research Conference.' Even without the sound, the visual text was the subject of discussions about both the importance of the paisley, and also the wider implications of cultural research using creative means. The second of these events was an invited screening at 'Console-ing Passions,' an international conference on television, video, audio, new media and feminism at Flinders University in July 2011. Despite being screened only at academic events thus far, I am pleased that the visual text is crossing disciplinary boundaries within the academy, and provoking questions and responses from non-Indian audiences.

It is the remixed form of the visual essay, and the creative praxis involving a reflection on its autobiographical, narrative and theoretical elements that disrupt the nation- and discipline-bound means of conducting cultural research. This research then becomes cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary from the very first stage of its conceptualisation, and this is a thread that is then also evident in the content and form of the visual essay, and in the audience spaces where it is exhibited. While there are issues of representativeness (of the heterogeneous Indian diaspora in Australia) and technical imperfections that may prevent it from attaining mainstream appeal, the research methodology itself can potentially be applied to other cross-cultural contexts.

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Sukhmani Khorana lectures in media and communication at the University of Wollongong. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland. Along with contemporary Australian and transnational film, she is interested in ethnic and community media, digital storytelling projects, South Asian news media and postcolonial literature. Sukhmani has a forthcoming anthology (from Routledge) on 'crossover cinema.'

NOTES

ⁱ Indian-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's 'elements' film trilogy (consisting of *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*) is the subject of my doctoral dissertation, completed in 2010.

ⁱⁱ 'Poetic' here implies not just a reference to aesthetics, but a particular narrative strategy that is experiential rather than plot-driven.

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