

Rasafication: The Aesthetic Manipulation of our Everyday

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Enter the mall and the catchy but sleazy background music keeps on manipulating me throughout my stay. In the underground I read the news, send an SMS home—and the telephone keeps on making me ‘upbeat’ through soft colourful digital designs. If I have the sound on, it keeps on beeping pleasantly.

Today it is not that we would have to escape to the mountains to get some peace. We need to stay home and shut the media. Our personal atmospheres—if they still exist—are all the time bombarded, at least if we are somewhat middle or upper class, and we live a somewhat modernized, Western(ized) life.

Although the long thread of theories about the *rasa*, the emotive atmospheres discussed on the Indian continent since taxonomist Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* (‘A Treatise on Dramatic Art’, 500 BCE–500 CE)—philosophized famously by the Kashmiri thinkers in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries, most notably Abhinavagupta (*Abhinavabhārati*)—connect *rasa* thinking only to art (vs. everyday life), i.e. mainly theatre (sometimes poetry or music, but e.g. painting is mentioned only in Sankuka’s theory of imitation (Pollock 2016, 2)), I feel we should discuss *rasa* when we encounter contemporary everyday life.

When we discuss popular culture or media culture, we tend, maybe echoing classical art research, to pick up ‘a work’, for example a film, TV series¹, a piece of music or a book. But a lot of production today is not aimed at becoming a ‘work’, but to weave a readymade (commercial) atmosphere into our everyday life.

When one reads the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and thinks about this, one can of course point to the fact that the performances in both Bharata’s and Abhinavagupta’s time seem to have been very clearly coded, i.e. that the stage art at their times was not much about interpretative riddles and that it was very clear what meant sorrow and what constructed the heroic.

Also we do not have any doubts on how we are bombarded. Professionals (designers, musicians) working on our ambients work with simple codes, so that we know we are surrounded by for example (capitalist) ‘happiness’. Their *rasas*, if one can talk about them with this concept, are definitely not the same as in classical Indian drama.

To sum up in a simplified way Bharata’s thoughts – this is not a text where we need to discuss *rasas* in detail, and any reader can easily find the main sources and exegetical material on them: according to Bharata (who e.g. Abhinavagupta follows without exceptions) there are eight *rasas*. Every single play has one dominant ‘emotive atmosphere’. This has to be chosen by the author. In later versions of the theoretical thread a way of thinking emerged, which accentuated that it should also meet a qualified, *rasa*-conscious audience.

The *rasa* theories based their idea on atmospheres on the following strain of thought: Emotive atmospheric states experienced in drama are not the same as we have in our everyday life. There is a psychological distance separating experiences of art and everyday experiences, and this distance is made possible following the artistic work of high-level performers, and a good play at hand.

Everyday emotions, the *Bhāvas*, form a kind of a base for this. This base is elevated and phenomenologically speaking *reduced* into another type of experience, as Sucharita Gamlath writes wittily (1969, 372). Roughly speaking one could say that we are talking at least partly about something which has in English been coined aesthetic experience (especially one can think of John Dewey concept of ‘an experience’ here (1980))—or what the Germans have coined *Erlebnis* or *Ehrfabrung*, the former accentuating ephemeral and ‘hyped’ forms of experience, and the latter expressing slower, well-grounded and ‘high cultured’ experiential forms. In the sophisticated manipulation of sight and hearing—the strongest of our senses—the play is able—here art beautifully becomes as strong as (or alike) religion for the first time in Indian philosophy—to overcome our *ego*. This leads to spiritual elevation. *Rasa* theory is about artistic sublimation with a spiritual spice.

Well, one can discuss the spiritual here. One must bear in mind that the classics did not have a very autonomic or well-defined world of art at their hands, and religious philosophy was dominating all kinds of systematic thinking. This is not to say that there would not be something alike in religious worlds and artistically produced fictional worlds. We are anyway through the *rasa* pushed out from our everyday world into a parallel way of being, a parallel world. This heightened world and our elevated position in it, is a reflective one, one which enables us to see things from a higher point of view, and a state where e.g. moral and plastic ugliness do not matter for us. We are in a way 2.0 for a while.

Abhinavagupta talks about it like we would be entering “into another world, in some measure an unreal one, and losing ourselves in it *completely*” (Pollock, 2016, 1), but, with a long history of going into different types of performances, I am quite sure that Abhinavagupta is colouring the issue a bit here. I like Chantal Maillard’s pragmatic way of putting it: aesthetic emotions overcome everyday, ordinary emotions (Maillard 2010, 190). To continue with Arindam Chakrabarti’s definition, the *rasa* produces a kind of a ‘cooked’ “meta-feeling” (Chakrabarti 2010, 198), with a distance towards the everyday.

Although the readers of this journal have probably already gained a basic education in the *rasas*, let’s go through the list (which corresponds to everyday emotive states):

Erotic, Heroic, Terror, Disgust, Humorous, Compassion, Wonder and Dread (Bharata 1999, 56) are maybe not now something I would immediately like to connect to the kind of everyday experiences I talked about in the beginning, but why should *rasas*, if they exist, be only about the *rasas* typical of classical Indian drama? I have a hard time believing that even the classical theorists would have aggressively been restricting the use of the concept if they would know about the challenges we face today.

Bharata himself writes that “It is impossible (...) to know all about dramatic arts since there is no limit to emotions and no end to the arts involved.” (Bharata 1999, 53) What would he have thought of our everyday manipulation? Well, one can of course say immediately that its heightening impact cannot be thought of in the way we use it when we talk about well-written and well-performed classical drama. On the other hand, when one thinks about it, after centuries, in India thousands of years of highly developed drama, it is again in India where many of our global forms of media aesthetics are today born and developed. As India is one of the main developers of our digital and atmospheric mediated life, maybe there even is a trace of old *rasa* thinking applied unconsciously or consciously by nerds in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru?

Bharata writes that “(*r*)*asa* is the cumulative result of stimulus, involuntary reaction and voluntary reaction” (1999, 55). Everyday emotions (*bhāvas*) are “condiments and herbs”, which “render food tasty”. They are the materials in use in the *rasas*. As original ingredients of a good tasty *dāl*—the example is mine and very personal (I love *dāl*)—they are not anymore felt at all on their own.

What if one thought of this above mentioned example and reflected on the way we are all constantly marinated by the atmospheric ambiences, which professionals trained in art and design schools have worked out for us? We live in atmospheres where the origins, both the stimulus and the original emotions they echo, have become one. I jump in my car and the soft audio signals keep manipulating me. I sit in the office and hear the background music floating from the nearby café. And I follow up the incredible performance of beautifully designed cars in traffic while a contemporary music piece sings ‘to me’ through the radio.

In the end, the atmosphere where I am, might not be heroic, nor sad, but definitely it does not often stem from me. I am here, my ego overcome, and often I feel like just a product myself, a product which echoes the atmospheric states produced for me. It is maybe not about connecting to the universal levels of consciousness imagined/interpreted to be a part of the process of catching up with the *rasas* in the classical theories on performance art, but definitely in some weird, capitalist, contemporary sense, I feel often uplifted by these half-things (as Tonino Griffero calls atmospheres, Griffero 2010). And I do not experience often emotions of my own, but the ones produced by Indian nerds, American cinematographers and Swedish pop musicians, ones which make it easier for me to buy chocolate or to just feel that my life is fine.

This global industry of atmospheres is often unnoticeable for us theorists, as we tend to look for works of something, for our inquiries in aesthetics, cultural studies and art theory. But it surrounds us, nearly everywhere. *Rasa* theorists say that the emotions gained from the stage are somewhat phenomenologically reduced, but interestingly the atmospheric

structure, the aesthetic web which is woven around us, is phenomenologically strong, at the same time as the marinating effect of the *rasas* keeps on staying quite on the backside of our experience. It is not that we’d come home and describe what we experienced in the mall, but that this endless, hardly notable *rasafication* of our everyday is present without making much noise in our lives.

Abhinavagupta says that: “let us revert to the spectator. His own self continues to be merged in the represented exploits, and through it, he goes on seeing everything in this light(.)”, (Abhinavagupta, 1956, 97) i.e. he sees as one interesting side of the *rasas* their way of *staying* with us, also after the intensified dramatic performances he is interested in. But what is we are all the time in this play, in a more shallow way?

This is not the moment to raise awareness of the way G.T. Deshpande (1989, 78) writes about the higher *akti*, the “capacity of awareness of the self,” in connection to *rasas*, nor of the way the whole thread of thinkers involved with the *rasas* seem to talk about a kind of an absolute state reached through the *rasa* experience. The heights of art and popular culture are very different experiences. This is the moment to think, if the best professionals around, who are getting well paid to just manipulate us to be a bit upbeat, ready to consume and to feel laid-back, can be so good that they and their negative work on our senses should be taken seriously in aesthetics.

Peter Sloterdijk talks about ‘atmo-terror’ in his book *Sphären* (1998-2004). Why not take the atmo-terror – or *rasa*-terror? – whether we like it or not, to be something which actually is a holistic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, constructed by an endless line of designers, nerds and popular artists? If once the best professionals worked on drama, maybe they today work to make our everyday more aestheticized, fluent and ‘nice’? The spectacle of our everyday life, which capitalism needs to keep rolling, is a fantastic life work for many.

Edwin Gerow (1979, 559) writes that *rasa* studies have tended to focus on the concept as a philosophical or psychological problem. While its connection to the tradition of Sanskrit literature and theatre has been noted, “studies have tended to follow the line established by Abhinavagupta and Bhatta Nāyaka in the 9th and 10th centuries, in emphasizing its intuitive, cognitive and even transcendental (or theological) character, instead of seeking to understand it in and through the plays that articulate it.” Here one could add that maybe the theoretical tradition should be taken so seriously that it could explain our life in the contemporary spectacle where we live in.

And, as the contemporary scholar Arindam Chakrabarti writes in the introductory chapter for his absolutely great and fresh-minded *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, it is “(n)ot so much “beautiful” or “lovely,” which the concept grasps. ““(A)mazing” and “awesome” (...) express Indian aesthetic theories better.” (Chakrabarti 2016, 1). If mall background music is not the perfect object for some *rasa* theories, neither are highbrow dramas or for example novels by the ‘experientially lazy’ Proust—I don’t understand why Priyadarshi Patnaik mentions Keats’ shallow and intellectualistic poem “This Hand, Now Arm and Capable” (Patnaik 2016, 43) in his text on the *rasas*—and one can say that immediately, anyway, when one pops out from the classical Indian dramatic tradition where the concept was developed with the *rasa* concept, one is already applying it.

And, both aesthetically and politically, I think what really matters today in everyday aesthetics is the way we are softly manipulated throughout our lives. It might be that this in the end could also be one of the big political questions of our time. It is not just that pop music is—this we know—“the soundtrack of our lives”—but that we do not even encounter works of music or graphics anymore that often, just a steady flow of pleasant forms, like a river, where we swim from our birth—a Hello Kitty lamp blinking in the ceiling when we are brought home—to our death: our funerals are more and more digitalized, and many of us hear background music or see the visuals of laptops or phones massaging our eyes when we take our last breath. From home, where my stepson’s computer game gives the background music, I travel in my car—beeping softly to remind me to put on my belt—to my workplace, where ambient music flows from the café to remind me about the need to reread Bharata and Abhinavagupta.

Rasafication was something the classics could not imagine, but their theories, for sure, I think this brief theoretical sketch already shows it, provide us hints on how we could possibly start framing our contemporary aestheticization with the help of their life work.

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Notes

¹ See e.g. my upcoming text “Rasa Industry: (Notes) on Classical Indian Aesthetics and TV Series,” which will be published in Zoltan Somhegyi and Max Ryyänen (eds), *Aesthetics in Dialogue* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020).

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