

# Writing the Present

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Critical discourse in India has largely been shaped by the social sciences. This article suggests that the exploratory sensibility of the arts and the humanities has a specific and productive contribution to make in the present context in which knowledge is instrumentalised and language deemed transactional.

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring... an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes- all the better. All the better.

—Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher,"  
(Rabinow 1997: 323)

In the contemporary period the language of power and that of critique is shaped by an instrumental conception. Both bring a forensic sensibility to their tasks, marshalling facts, contesting their veracity and significance, arguing over details. The form of engagement resembles a joust. Arguments collide, at times fragment each other, but most often follow parallel trajectories with no hope of convergence. The discursive temperature tends to be hot and the rhythm of the prose urgent and pointed. We cannot be surprised if this context favours a re-reading of normative ground over a re-visioning of possibilities, the didactic certainty of judgment over the exploratory sensibility of literature and poetry.

When critique is enmeshed in the discursive practices of the ruling paradigm, its ability "to bring an idea to life" is deeply compromised. Politics is not solely a contest over access to power, decision-making, and legitimate social authority. It is equally a practice and a space for imagining, reimagining, how we might live with each other and with the rest of the phenomenal world. When conceived as a struggle for a form of life, for an

alternative mode of coexistence, social, economic and political institutions represent vectors of interest but not the entire field of engagement.

We need a fresh language—visual, linguistic, analytic—for thinking about the present. We need a language that enables us to pause and reflect on the things we witness, not merely possess facts and figures about them. What dominates today is positivist, instrumental, technical-managerial and teleological thinking. This perspective has served to anaesthetise us to the violence of neo-liberalism, making it seem rational and historically inevitable. The challenges to power have primarily cast their critique within the dialectic of subjugation and resistance, with the affective dimension being comprised of a potent mix of rage, nostalgia, fear and a modicum of hope. But there is more, much more to be said; and prior to that, even more to be noticed and restored to the centre of our consciousness.

One of the ruses of power is to pretend as if that which it desires already exists and, if it does not already exist, will do so given time. A particular idea of the future dominates; and the present is deemed no more than a staging ground for its emergence. From this perspective, the past is rubble, the present inconsequential, and the future the only thing that matters. But, however much it may be wished away, it is the present in which we live. It is in the present that the past is lived and relived, imagined and reimagined, pilloried and embraced. And it is *on* the present that the future is sought to be imposed. Attention to the present thus becomes critical.

What is the role of the arts and the humanities in this context? It is in part to make palpable as experience those abstractions that shape the ruling paradigm

and, in enabling us to feel their implications and effects, lead us towards understanding what the abstraction serves to occlude, mask or distort. Put another way, it is to represent the density, particularity and rich complexity of lived experience and in that process unsettle the ability of an abstraction to continue to make sense. I would argue that it is at this epistemological level that we need to intervene; calling into question not only the so-called facts claimed as true by current thinking but countering its assumptions with an altogether different imagination. The word theory comes from *theoria*, meaning the act of observation. What is it that is right here and which we fail to see? And what textual, aural or visual forms might enable a different quality of attentiveness?

### Experiment I: The Video-poem

A video-poem is neither filmed poetry nor poetry on camera. It is an effort to remake the relations between image, text and sound. According to Tom Conyves (2012),

As one word, it indicates that a fusion of the visual, the verbal and the audible has occurred, resulting in a new, different form of poetic experience. As one word, it recognises that a century of experiments with poetry in film and video...is the narrative of a gradual movement from the tenuous, anxious relationship of image and text to their rare but perceptible synthesis, i.e., from poetry films to film poems to poetry videos to videopoetry.

*Nocturne I* and *Nocturne II* were collaborations with Nicolás Grandi (Grandi and Mani 2013). Grandi's interest in refreshing the image in an era of visual excess intersected with my interest in the potency of words as a non-transparent medium capable of evoking at once mystery, surprise, clarity and complexity. This magical propensity of words to make new meaning had ceded ground to neo-liberalism's drive to literalise language, to fix meaning in pursuit of globalised, frictionless communication. How might one experiment with the image-text relationship to restore to both the ability to convey mystery, surprise, clarity and complexity?

There was, additionally, a shared interest in sound. Indeed, the idea for the video-poem emerged from the everyday

sounds of the night: the symphony of crickets, frogs, the hoot of the owl, the rustling of leaves, the footfalls of humans, snippets of conversation trailing in the wind. These sounds are as intrinsic to urban life as the resonant echo of a pressure horn or vehicles accelerating, decelerating and squealing to a halt. Urban nature is teeming, not merely endangered. Life springs forth in empty plots, abandoned lots, even in manicured parks; from every crack and crevice in the pavement. Yet the imagined soundscape of the city, or of nightlife as we tend to think of it, hardly ever summons these facts. Grandi and I set out to explore these dimensions of the city at night.

It was important to us to offer an experience of integrated plurality: not simply a multiplicity of elements or stimuli (the promise of urbanism) or their manipulation through technological means (as with commercial entertainment). Without disavowing the constructed nature of the narrative, we sought to build into it something of the expansive sensuousness of the natural world and the difficulty of taking hold of it cognitively. And to do this while respecting the ability of a viewer to navigate the shifting thresholds of the known, the unknowable and that which is yet to be discovered. Image, text and sound were crafted to this end.

*Nocturne I* addressed urban nature while *Nocturne II* took as its object the built environment. In both cases a single line of text was written once the visual assembly was almost complete. In *Nocturne I*, "Every tree a forest" sought to extend the visual play of shadow and light, mystery and illumination. The words appear one by one, part-way through the video-poem and form a full sentence only towards the end. By contrast, "Immanence is Plenitude" in *Nocturne II* arrives at the very beginning as a declaration, and fragments of it repeat throughout the video-poem—"im tude," "nence is," "ma ple," et cetera. The words flash like neon lights insistently challenging the conflation of plenitude with consumption in the imagination of urban life.

In using a telephoto lens to carve into the dark of the night, Grandi works with

an idea that is especially relevant to the argument of this essay. The circle of confusion is the region in which objects gradually go from being out of focus, to being in sharp focus, to once again moving out of focus. Playing within the circle enables one to experiment with the way light-rays transform objects, at once revealing things hitherto not visible and remaking what we see. It is a fertile metaphor for understanding interpretation not as surgical dissection and conclusive revelation, but as the art of exploring the perceptual-conceptual depth of field. We open ourselves to observing how playing with focal depth illumines objects and phenomena in new ways, enabling us to travel from familiar zones of clarity to those spaces contiguous to them that are currently blurred so far as we are concerned. It illustrates how altering the angle of perception not only remakes what we see, but also the place from which we see and by extension the mode of our witnessing.

Signs of existence pulse around us. Whether it is aesthetic or ritual practice, forms of sociality or pleasure, much of what neo-liberal ideology codes as passé, backward or else dismisses as local, incidental, irrelevant, insignificant, residual or in need of being cleared away, is not just here but is thriving. Paying attention to this fact, to these practices, we can trace at a micro-level some of the profound cultural transformations that are even now underway. In doing so, we can introduce tonalities not audible in the clash and clang of macro policy debates.

### Experiment II: The Multi-genre Collection

The video-poems extend preoccupations I had been pursuing through the multi-genre monograph, in which a broad thematic concern was sought to be addressed by interweaving analytic prose with poetry, the observational with the sociocultural (Mani 2009, 2013). The intent was to move towards a more exploratory orientation, away from critique-as-wrecking-ball. The impulse grew from a realisation that many dimensions of existence fell outside the restricted, and restricting, purview of dominant narratives. An extract.

## The Room:

Brother and sister live atop a flight of stairs that is in complete disrepair. A 10-foot-by-10-foot room doubles as a living-cum-sleeping area. To its right is a tiny enclosure that is the kitchen. Neither bathroom nor toilet are in evidence; they are presumably to be found off the dark corridor to the right of the entry door and shared with others on the same floor. It is hard to believe that their grandfather once owned many of the properties on this narrow street that abuts Avenue Road. The room is gaily cluttered. Photographs, calendars and wall hangings festoon every inch of available space. Elders, youngsters, gods, goddesses, certificates and plaques are nailed to the wall or neatly placed on the shelves that line it. A rope is strung across the room like an aerial bridge. On it hangs what is left of an old curtain made of wooden beads and clothes in need of airing. Beneath it, a fish tank filled with utilitarian and ornamental items serves as a curio cabinet. It would seem that every object ever bought or received has been retained and given a place.

Although the room is small and the objects many, one does not feel overwhelmed. A quiet dignity pervades the space. The objects seem to exist in and as themselves. They do not appear to carry the burden of family history or memory. They are not a mirror in which the past is sought or in which the present is reflected. They are found objects in the journey of life whose value is quietly acknowledged in their retention. Over time they have become integral to the lives that unfold in their midst: keepsakes that bear witness and offer a kind of joyful, silent companionship.

It is this relationship with objects that offers a clue to their arrangement. A *laissez-faire* approach is in evidence. Metal, plastic, cloth, wooden and paper items spanning four decades of production mingle in the fish tank. The television is perched between a statue and a stainless steel container. Its screen is visible only up close, being partially obscured by the curtain drooping from the clothesline. An economy of space may be said to be at work. But it cannot by itself make sense of the artful jumble of things.

The aesthetic expresses a way of relating to artefacts in which the value of things has not been reduced to their function or to their sociocultural significance. This explains why there is no attempt to group items according to any consistent logic or to showcase a few so as to tacitly reflect some hierarchy, whether about the relative value of things or the status and imagined trajectory of those who possess them. Thus it is that the past does not hang heavily over the room and the future is nowhere to be found.

Not burdened by the weight of social attribution, the things in the room can be as they are. Our interest is evoked but without the accompanying anxiety that by and large mediates our current relationship to things in which humans and their belongings seemingly exist to prop each other up. These are simply objects one has gathered along the way and that one

has chosen to keep. Owner and object are thus free to be in the present, as is the visitor. So it is that we feel spaciousness amidst the clutter. And the freedom to encounter the scene without past or future remaking what is before us (Mani 2013: 29-31).

The Room is one of a set of interwoven pieces about Avenue Road, the main artery of Bengaluru's wholesale district. In 2009, when the street was under threat of being widened I spent extensive time in its environs. (The matter remains undecided.) The proposal had divided the community though it seemed that, on the whole, opposition to widening Avenue Road outstripped support of it. Activists surveyed the area, estimated how many buildings would be destroyed, the numbers of workers and families that would be affected and the practical difficulties of widening a narrow, densely populated thoroughfare. Alternatives to widening Avenue Road were also mapped out in detail.

Discussions with traders and people on the street were animated. Those in favour of widening the road generally spoke in abstract terms: of the project heralding the future, of the pointlessness of clinging to the past, of youth and people with money increasingly preferring malls to traditional shopping areas like Avenue Road, the importance of accepting compensation while it was on offer. Those against road widening spoke concretely: of the rupture of lives, the termination of decades-long relationships, the historical significance of the street and its by-lanes, its energy, its diverse faces (a wholesale market by day, food gully at night). An entire physical and social ecology was evoked. In the media-led civil society debate on road widening, the latter position was dubbed as nothing other than nostalgia for a world already on life-support. Activists adroitly argued against this view, pointing to rights violated, livelihoods lost, the impracticality of resettlement, etc.

For me, the perspective of the pro-development brigade forcefully raised the question of genre. Its trading in future-oriented abstractions depended on a discursive sleight of hand: a dismissal of the living present as a dead or dying past. If that which overwhelmingly predominates and is indisputably alive is brushed away as

marginal and insignificant, what did it suggest about the kinds of stories that needed to be told? What might this context call for in terms of narrative form?

I felt that there was an analytical argument to be made addressing the multidimensionality of issues involved. But there was also an ethos to be conjured: dispassionately, non-polemically, evocatively. And given the discursive violence of the arguments for road widening, it was critical to attend to language and rhetoric. I also felt that, as with other issues related to "the development imperative," it was important to proceed by means eccentric to the circuits along which the debate was unfolding. To travel directly on its pathways was to risk being swept into a centripetal vortex, to be sucked in and drowned out even before one could be heard.

It was in response to this intuition that Avenue Road Suite came to be written as it was. It comprises six short pieces: two descriptive-analytical texts, two observational accounts, one anecdote and a rumination on the words, "street" and "road." The descriptive-analytical texts serve as bookends. "Every Aspect a World unto Itself" is a broad strokes sketch of Avenue Road and of the dynamic of accommodative mutuality and systemic indifference that organises life on the street. This theme is then extended to nature, in contemplating a tree growing on a building façade, picked up again in an anecdote about a stationary store and thematised in the final piece, "The Ideal of a Global City." "The Room" reproduced above and placed between "The Tree" and "The Stationary Store" ponders life with objects as it is currently lived and doubles as an oblique critique of how consumerism remakes it into a fraught relationship. "A Street Is Not a Road," enfolds critique of the disruptive impact of road widening into a semantic consideration of both terms as well as their synonyms. The concluding text pulls together recurring themes into a brief critique of the notion of a global city.

Each piece treats a particular aspect of life on Avenue Road. Elements from one piece reappear in others, adding texture, at times a different inflection. The six texts can stand alone but it is when

read together as they are intended to be that a broader picture emerges. The rhetorical strategy is to render fact as description. This choice reflects an interest in “signs of life” to paraphrase Foucault; and relatedly in representations of such signs that prompt a consideration of new or else neglected facts. The same impulse led to crafting these essays (as also the monograph) so that each chapter retains a degree of autonomy. Each piece is not merely an illustrative example or object lesson, subsidiary to a linear argument which is presented to the reader as a *fait accompli*. It is at once its own “sign of life” and also gives life—breath, flesh and blood—to the broader argument of which it is a part. Interleaving pieces in this way enables one to alternately explore part and whole, the whole in part, the part in whole; to try and intuit the complex, non-linear, non-reductive relations between them.

### In Conclusion

The two experiments I present here grew from my sense that the arts and the humanities could serve to aerate our language, our approach to critique. Critical political discourse in India has been

largely shaped by the social sciences. However, the instrumental thinking of this period and its bequest, the transactional nature of communication, compel us to integrate into our practice a fresh reconsideration of language and of forms of representation, concerns core to the arts and the humanities. Reflecting on the terms of our discourse—the worlds they open and those they quietly shut—is one way to deepen our rhetoric and nuance our understanding.

The language of social science and that of political discourse has lost the capacity to move us. We can knowledgeably debate poverty without our bodies and hearts physically sensing the true meaning of hunger. We can discuss the right to pollute of the developing world as though it were without material consequences for the region in whose defence the principle is being invoked. Abstractions battle each other at an altitude apparently remote from the realities they claim to represent.

The arts and the humanities can breathe new life into sociocultural critique, broadening the scope of our inquiry and pluralising the genres through

which it is expressed. Recasting argument as a polyphonic form can bring alive what is left out or is in the shadows of the dominant framework, giving it another valence and making it matter in a different way. It enables one to pause on questions that may seem tangential but are, in fact, intimately related to the issues being contested. The quotidian and the seemingly trivial throw their own light on the so-called large predicaments addressed in policy discussions. Poetry, art, literature and creative non-fiction can enliven our language, our understanding of the present, and reanimate our imagination of the future.

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