Hindu Modern: Considering Gandhian Aesthetics

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Double Blind

A friend recounted what I believe might be an apocryphal story upon hearing about my interest in Gandhian memorials. The story goes as follows: during outbreaks of communal violence in Ahmadabad, a group of volunteers go around the city, blindfolding the numerous statues of Gandhi. This story circulated after violent attacks in Gujarat in early 2002 during which large numbers of Muslims were deliberately targeted and killed in Ahmadabad and other cities in Gujarat. The Gandhian legacy was repeatedly invoked in newspaper reports on the attacks, expressing surprise at the virulence and directed nature of the attacks taking place “in the land of Gandhi.” We might assume that the volunteers were blindfolding the statues in order that the great man may not witness the traumatic repetition of the very behavior that he fought against. In this case, the sculpted form assumes corporeality, turning into a body that feels pain and hurt, against which it must be protected. Or perhaps the blindfolds were a way of giving license to engage in the very acts of violence and sacrifice thought necessary to achieve a certain ideal of national purity, one that is in direct conflict with both Gandhi’s understanding of self-purification and the means he thought necessary to achieve it.

In both interpretations, the statue in this story represents an uncanny presence, of the absent but not yet dead figure of Gandhi, and the intrusion of this uncanny figure into contemporary public space. The story, an allegory for the haunting presence of Gandhi, unmoored from his proper place in the past, represented by the memorializing statue, serves to underline the peculiar legacy of Gandhi in postindependence India as a figure who is simultaneously revered and deemed
irrelevant to contemporary politics. Although the memorial serves as a prosthetic
device aimed at “not forgetting,” it also must function, paradoxically, to suppress
the active intrusion of a past into the space of the present.

The memorial statue looms larger than life and is ubiquitous across India,
found even in some of the smallest villages. On the one hand, the scale and spread
of these statues proposes an extraordinary legacy, placed out of time by the for-
mal nature of the object and thereby frozen. On the other hand, Gandhi’s image
also inundates the everyday, lived space of the nation at the much smaller scale
of the currency notes on which his iconic image is emblazoned. Simultaneously
extraordinary and mundane, the blindfolded statues of the story simply mirror
the increasing irrelevance of Gandhi’s legacy in moments of extreme crisis such
as the Gujarat riots.

This abstraction of Gandhi’s iconic imagery from his own somatic practices
and his methods of communicating philosophical ideas through epic narrative
forms is the subject of much recent critical work on Gandhi’s legacy. William
Mazzarella (2010) argues in a recent article that the abstraction and circula-
tion of Gandhi imagery within the emerging consumerist public sphere of post-
liberalism India serves in fact to underline the “untimely provocation” that Gan-
dhi poses to such a political formation. On his reading, the particular form of
abstraction—namely, the detachment of an iconic image from Gandhi’s own
somatic politics—mirrors the significance of somatic practices in the production
of the consuming subject and can therefore be analyzed as a symptom of those
processes of subjectivation.

I pursue a connected but different set of explorations of the Gandhian legacy,
specifically working through its productive proliferation in relation to modern
and contemporary Indian artistic practices. Like the image of Mao Tse-tung in
the Chinese public sphere, Gandhi’s legacy and his iconic imagery have served
as means of experimenting with aesthetic compositions in response to political
provocations. Jacques Rancière in his recent book Aesthetics and Its Discontents
(2009: 14 – 15) writes that

[aesthetics] is a form for identifying the specificity of art and a redistri-
bution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience. . . . [A]
regime for identifying art [that] is linked to the promise of an art that
would be no more than an art or would no longer be art. . . . The stake
here does not only concern those objects that fall within the sphere of art,
but also the ways in which, today, our world is given to perceiving itself
and in which the powers that be assert their legitimacy.
Working with Rancière’s particular interpretation of aesthetics, I explore a series of artistic interventions across different media, based on an active relationship to the Gandhian legacy, that have appeared at different moments of national significance. If the stake of considering a system of Gandhian aesthetics concerns the ways in which, as Rancière puts it, “our world is given to perceiving itself and in which the powers that be assert their legitimacy,” the particular artistic interventions I explore here draw on Gandhian legacies to make particular claims on a national-modernist space. Further, I try to connect the contradictions suggested by these artistic interventions to an interpretation of Gandhi’s own position on nonviolence as an aesthetic category or as a mode of expression suggested specifically by a reading of *Hind Swaraj*.

**Memento Mori**

Gandhi objects, connected metonymically and metaphorically to Gandhi’s image — including statues, relics, streets bearing his name, stamps, and currency notes — are, of course, ubiquitous. Some of these objects are obviously memorials — like the statues and the shrines (which I refer to further on) — while other objects are floating signifiers for the Gandhi image. These include his personal effects, like his spectacles and the sandals (chappals), the spinning wheel (charkha), and three monkeys, as well as the various houses and ashrams in which he stayed. These latter objects are directly touched by Gandhi’s aura through his use of them. The Delhi-based contemporary photographer Dayanita Singh’s photograph of Gandhi’s room in Anand Bhawan, the Nehru family residence in Allahabad, attempts to decode this aura through a record of emptiness, caused simultaneously by the disappearance of the subject and its metonymic substitution by certain objects (fig. 1). The empty bed in the photograph, simply titled “Gandhi’s Room,” raises powerful questions about presence in absence and emptiness. The photograph hanging above the bed, of Gandhi with the young Indira, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and later the prime minister of India, frames the political space of this absence and its intersection with more recent histories.

Singh’s work is often produced as a series of images, syntagmatically connected through signifiers copresent within the series. Thus the emptiness and absence of Gandhi’s room is connected evocatively to the cutout of Gandhi resting placidly in front of a small glazed porcelain sculpture of the three monkeys who “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil,” one of the few objects that Gandhi is said to have possessed as an exception to his rule of nonpossession (fig. 2). The cutout figure of Gandhi and the photographs and hand-drawn portraits of Gandhi
on the wall in Gandhi’s room also hint at a relationship between the “real” and the “fake.” In a third image, an arrow points to an exhibit of the cloth worn by Gandhi on his last day, with the explanation that it is “blood-stained” and therefore “original” (fig. 3). The manner in which that distinction between real and unreal, real and representation is complicated within the frame of Singh’s images staks a claim about what is not there and what remains in the context of a legacy.

The work titled “Gandhi’s Room” is part of a larger project documenting life in empty spaces, vacated of the living while still being places preserved in an expectant state. In an interview about this project, Singh says: “I realized I could make a
portrait of a person without a person in it. I started to make photographs of spaces without human beings, yet peopled by the unseen generations who had lived there before. Very soon I was consumed by this seeming emptiness; beds of those who had passed away, but that were still made everyday, beds turned into shrines, with photos and sandals on them” (quoted in Sinha 2003). Singh’s work hints at the constant intersection between the public figure and the notion of privacy, etched into the silent histories of empty spaces. As Gayatri Sinha (2003) writes, specifically remarking on the many empty beds that Singh has photographed: “As empty spaces, they carry an impress of the pure sterility imparted by death — the sense
of the ascetic and the pure that comes with too many washings of the same white sheet. The bed as empty, but silent witness, to moments of unspoken privacy and eros also appears.” These empty spaces, however, are peopled by not only the unseen generations that lived there before but also the unseen spectators viewing Singh’s photographs and making or missing those subtle syntagmatic connections. The force of Singh’s work is in those connections offered in her narrative sequencing of images that are neither documentary nor fictive but evocative of a distinct sensibility of spaces where privacy and the intimacy of loss are at once abstract and thus publicly shared while remaining personal and visceral.

Margaret Bourke-White, who photographed Gandhi extensively for *Life* maga-
zine, dwells at length in her autobiography on the display of intimacy between the leader and his followers in public as an expression that disturbed her modernist understanding of the public sphere and of politics as a space devoid of sentiment and affect. Between Bourke-White’s portraits of Gandhi and Singh’s portrait of Gandhi’s room, however, we might detect a common struggle over aesthetic compositions as responses to specific political dilemmas.

Bourke-White’s response to the contradictions that she perceived in Gandhi’s public, political practice and her own modernist sensibilities is perhaps best expressed in her celebrated image of Gandhi at the spinning wheel (fig. 4), which composes him as one with the machine, much like the absent, heroic masses of the American republic are represented in her images of the Fort Peck Dam (which formed the cover image of the first issue of Life). Bourke-White devotes the extended beginning of her chapter “The Birth of Twin Nations” in her autobiography, Portrait of Myself, to her wait for the moment at which she was able to

Figure 4. India, 1946: Indian leader Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi reading as he sits cross-legged on the floor next to a spinning wheel that looms in the foreground as a symbol of India’s struggle for independence, at home. Margaret Bourke-White/Time and Life Pictures/Getty Images
take her masterful and iconic portrait of Gandhi spinning at his charka in Poona in 1946. As she puts it in her preface to taking this particular photograph, with her first set of portraits of Gandhi, “Photography demands a high degree of participation, but never have I participated to such an extent as I did when photographing various episodes in the life of Gandhi” (Bourke-White 1963: 273). Racing against a deadline to rush the film off to New York, she was met by the recalcitrant insistence of Gandhi’s secretary that she learn how to spin in order to appreciate the moral and political significance of the charka as Gandhi’s chosen symbol of the struggle for independence.

When asked whether she knew how to spin, Bourke-White (1963: 273) explained, “Oh, I didn’t come to spin with the Mahatma, I came to photograph the Mahatma spinning” [emphasis added].” When she realized that she would not be granted the audience necessary to take the picture, she decided to drop photography and ask for a spinning lesson—to drop the machine age with its ball bearings and steel parts—or, in other words, its smoothness and durability for the fragile autonomy of the humble charka—but only to serve the instrumental end of spinning her way to a photograph. When at last she was allowed to take the picture, Gandhi’s secretary placed two constraints on her, which she explains were to maintain silence as it was a Monday, Gandhi’s weekly day of silence, and not to use artificial light. Finally wrangling permission to use no more than three peanut flashbulbs, she managed to record what was to become one of her most famous images; after wrestling with her camera and flashbulbs, she left. “I threw my hands around the rebellious equipment and stumbled into the daylight, quite unsold on the machine age,” she writes (Bourke-White 1963: 275).

Yet the portrait of Gandhi that emerges from this encounter is a mechanical one that drains the act of spinning itself of its political significance by foregrounding the charka as machine and simultaneously investing Gandhi with a subtle, private, and heroic aura, more attuned to a dominant, liberal American political sensibility. Bourke-White thus translates her own experience of being asked to spin before photographing Gandhi at the spinning wheel into a sensibility familiar to the machine age that separates man from machine as private from public, foregrounding the machine as an instrument of the political actor. Of course, Bourke-White continued to photograph Gandhi over the next two years, and these portraits exhibit an increasing understanding of a form of politics that was both modern and mass democratic but also invested in the body of the leader and its aura.

In the case of Singh’s portraits, the dilemma is to capture the melancholic loss of political aura while recording its haunting presence in the context of a divided public sphere in which these muséal rooms—at Kirti Mahal in Porbandar, Mani
Bhavan in Mumbai, Anand Bhawan in Allahabad, the Aga Khan palace in Pune, and Birla House in Delhi—all serve, as public sites, as deathly reminders of the violent disappearance of certain ideals from the public sphere. Singh’s images remind us of the immense power of photographic images to comment on these disappearances.

Reclaiming Modernism

If photography serves to memorialize disappearance, the expressive and compositional practice of architecture in memorializing Gandhi has yielded important testimonials to the constitutive tension between a national and a modern aesthetic identification. The contemporary Indian artist and photographer Ram Rahman in his eloquent exploration of the attempts of his father, Habib Rahman, to overcome the anxieties of influence notes that the very first Gandhi memorial of independent India, constructed by Habib Rahman at Barrackpore, was, in fact, wholly modernist in material and in spirit. Among the buildings designed and built by Habib Rahman, the Gandhi Ghat Memorial at Barrackpore is also part of a large collage work by Ram Rahman titled “The Modernist Dream: Nehruvian Vision.” It was one of the works shown at the Chemould-Prescott Gallery in Mumbai as part of an exhibition of photographs and videos, specifically in dialogue with a scholarly conference on the occasion of the Hind Swaraj centenary. The collage shows Habib Rahman’s prominent public architectural works both in their pristine state at the time of construction and in their contemporary state of decay.

Ram Rahman’s collage connects these images with text commentary and an image of the dying Habib Rahman. Habib Rahman was one of independent India’s first architects of public works who, like many prominent Indian architects who followed him, was trained in the United States rather than in Britain, making architecture an important Indian space of experimentation with global modernism.

1. The show, curated by Ranjit Hoskote, was titled “Detours” and included, among other works, Singh’s images of Anand Bhawan.

2. Although Habib Rahman is somewhat older than the others, he along with Charles Correa, Balkrishna Doshi, and Achyut Kanvinde, recognized as the first generation of Indian modernists, were trained in the United States under Walter Gropius and Buckminster Fuller or, in the case of Doshi, in London, where this influence was directly honed by working with Le Corbusier and later Louis Kahn. However, it must be noted that even during the colonial period, indigenous industrial capitalists who formed a new urban elite were experimenting with global style by constructing residential and apartment complexes in the art deco style all over India and all through the early decades of the twentieth century. The Marine Drive seafront art deco residential district in Mumbai is a good example of the extent of these global modern exchanges.
For Habib Rahman and other architects of his generation, the difficulty of approximating any compositional tradition other than the modernist lies in part in the fact that the nation of Gandhi’s imagination was formally unrealized, except perhaps in the structures that Gandhi himself built—his ashrams, which expressed ideals of simple living, of living off the land, and of nonhierarchical space, reflected in the design of the *kutirs* (cottages), which are open and permit the free flow of people between inside and outside, erasing the strict separation between public and private space.

Charles Correa’s Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya (Gandhi Memorial Library) is recognized as one of the most successful homages to these ideas, while also being recognizably within the international modernist tradition. James Belluardo writes that Correa’s brick-and-concrete clustered pavilions for the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya refer directly to Louis Kahn’s Bath House for the Jewish Community Center in Trenton, New Jersey—this is a contested but common reading of this project (Ashraf, Belluardo, and Frampton 2000). The building uses elements and materials that echo those used in the other buildings in the ashram—tiled roofs, brick walls, stone floors, and wooden doors. “These elements,” Correa writes, “combine to form a pattern of tiled roofs, in a typology analogous to the villages so central to Gandhiji’s thinking. They are grouped in a casual, meandering pattern, creating a pathway along which the visitor progresses toward the centrality of the water court” (Charles Correa Associates). Unlike Correa’s later work, which draws explicitly on Hindu mythological symbolism, the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya draws more on Gandhi’s spatial experiments, re-creating a modernist geometry from Gandhi’s use of space and flow. The open plan of the museum—which houses Gandhi’s letters, photographs, and other documents tracing the freedom struggle—also serves the modernist architect’s democratic aspirations, best expressed in an iconic photograph of village women captured wandering through the museum (Charles Correa Associates). Correa himself, believing that architecture can serve as an agent for change, writes that it is no wonder that “a leader like Mahatma Gandhi is called the architect of the nation, not the engineer, nor the dentist, nor the historian” (Correa 2010: 237).

The architectural historian Jon T. Lang (2002: 55) writes that Correa’s design shows the link between a number of Modernist artistic ideas and Gandhian philosophy, especially in the frugality of the means used to achieve architectural ends. The unheroic nature of the pyramidal roofs, the patterns of light and shade and the openness of plan remain an exemplary marriage of function and form in much more than the strict Modernist
sense of activity and container—of designing a space or room simply to allow an activity to be carried out efficiently.

Placed in the context of the proliferation of modernist architecture in the post-independence period, Correa’s Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya stands out, as the figure of Gandhi enables an opening for an otherness to enter the strict formalism and functionalism of modernist space while tying that space to nationalist claims. Indeed, placing Correa’s Gandhi Smarak beside Le Corbusier and Nehru’s modernist phantasmagorias in Chandigarh, we begin to get a sense of what this opening constituted and why it might have been important.

As Kanu Agarwal, a Delhi-based practicing architect who has worked extensively on Ahmadabad, writes of the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya:

I think it is an attempt to illustrate that a “Gandhian modern” was possible (the patron of Indian modernism was Nehru after all, the patron of Chandigarh and well-versed with Le Corbusier’s work). It takes relatively humble materials in the manner of Le Corbusier’s brutalist work—exposed brick and concrete to which Correa added wood and Mangalore tiles as personal expressions—and layers them with tropical regionalism of the day, and a very open layout, almost a non-plan that opens it towards the Sabarmati River (with an amphitheater). (Kanu Agarwal, pers. comm., September 2010)

However, Agarwal also points out the tectonic complications of considering this structure to be truly “Gandhian” insofar as it “uses water as phenomenological device in a semi-arid region.” In this sense the library could be reasonably contrasted with the works of Laurie Baker, the well-known “Gandhian” architect who took a distinctly Gandhian materialist approach to building. The Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, by contrast, sits in a hybrid space, easily consumable as a product of Gandhian modernism, particularly in the ways that it abstracts the principle of “openness” for climactic and political reasons and because its main outcome is less an experimentation with the materials and site conditions themselves than a showcase of the relationship between Gandhian social philosophy and the socialist roots of modern Western architecture.

**Body Doubles**

Moving further away from the moment of independence and its modernist dreams, we find that Gandhi’s bodily experiments—fasting, silence, and celibacy—have provided the canvas for several artistic experiments with the politically fragile
and indeed disintegrative politics associated with national development in the middle decades of independence.\(^3\) Gandhi’s fragmented body, supplemented by its prostheses—the spectacles, the walking stick, and the grandnieces—pushing at the limits of corporeality have been mobilized by several artists including Atul Dodiya and Surendran Nair to stand in for a public sphere riddled with violence and fatigued by dreams of progress.

The commemorative context of 1997–98—freedom, partition, and assassination—brought about an outpouring of artistic production on the figure of Gandhi, and it has continued well into this millennium.\(^4\) While the visual artistic works are important and complex in and of themselves, I focus here on cinema, not only because its popular impact and appeal far exceeds that of contemporary visual art but also because the different syntactic approaches opened by the cinematic integration of movement, time, sound, and narrative are easier to read in terms of the complexities of deploying the Gandhi image in the post–Babri Masjid context. As is well known, the destruction of the masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in northern India in 1992, directed by militant Hindu chauvinist organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and others, is a seminal moment in contemporary Indian politics (it also coincided with India’s integration into global capital markets). This event, together with the riots that followed the demolition of the mosque by an organized mob demanding the reconstruction of a Hindu temple dedicated to Rama at the same site, has marked and transformed political violence and forms of ethnic conflict dramatically. The Hindu chauvinist political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allied organizations rose dramatically to power in the early 1990s through a sustained campaign to reclaim the mosque site, which they claimed was the site of Rama’s birth, or Ramjanmabhoomi, and the site of a temple commemorating his birth that was desecrated by the Moguls in order to build the now demolished mosque. Thus the Babri Masjid demolition marked and indeed scarred the commemorative celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of independence in a specific way.\(^5\)

3. I note here that these works by visual artists and certain cinematic texts do take Gandhi’s body seriously even as it disappears from the public space of consumerist advertising and messaging, following Mazzarella’s analysis (2010: 21) of the erasure of the “profoundly corporeal basis of Gandhi’s understanding of publicity and efficacious mass communication.”

4. Among the commemorative events was the important 1999 show by Dodiya, “An Artist for Nonviolence,” which focused on watercolor re-creations of historic photographs that specifically dwell on Gandhi’s emaciated body. The artistic-political collective Sahmat also produced a show and a series of circulating objects titled “Postcards for Gandhi” on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary.

5. My claim is that the visual artists working with the Gandhi image during this commemorative period were, by and large, operating in a much more secularist-nostalgic mode, whereas cinematic
The demolition, among other effects, triggered a series of bombings in Mumbai in March 1993 that constituted an opening for coordinated terror attacks, of which there have been several since then. Such attacks include, most recently, a series of coordinated bombs on commuter trains in July 2006 and the commando-style attacks on five sites in downtown Mumbai in November 2008. These coordinated attacks draw simultaneously on the logic of military tacticians and urban planners, who view the city as an abstract, homogeneous geometric space, without regard for particular neighborhoods or particular groups as targets even if the stated intention is to strike fear among specific constituencies. Such militant violence has raised questions about responsibility and specifically about the ontology of the enemy, who was previously made visible through a grid of colonial categories based on appearance, custom, and language. Today’s militants are remarkable in their anonymity—as was the case with the train bombers of July 2006—or in their generic appearances as members of a Westernized, consumerist middle class, as were the ten militants who carried out the coordinated attacks in November 2008.

A climate of uncertainty about the marks that might help in identifying the enemy followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid; the question of Hindu victimhood came to the fore viscerally, and around the fiftieth anniversary of the nation’s independence in particular, the “price paid” by Hindus was a subject of public discussion. More specifically, Gandhi’s so-called capitulation to Muslim demands was frequently brought up by Hindu chauvinist groups. But these discussions must be seen not only as an articulation of victimhood but also in the uncertainty about Hindu identity itself. As Arjun Appadurai (1998) argues, physical violence of the kind involving face-to-face contact with the “enemy” itself is performative insofar as it attempts to diagnose and establish, in ontological terms, the essence or the identity of the enemy.

In this context, the film Hey Ram (Oh God), written and directed by Kamal Haasan and released in 2000, is an interesting text, coalescing around the problem of national trauma and its victims. Like the controversial Marathi play Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy (I Am Nathuram Godse Speaking), spoken in the voice of Gandhi’s assassin, the protagonist of Hey Ram, a South Indian Brahman archaeologist named Saketh Ram, voices so-called Hindu victims’ complicated and tortured dialogues with Gandhi. Ironically, the protagonist, like Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s assassin, can only construct his victimhood via Gandhi. Saketh texts were, in general, more aware of the necessity of responding to the demolition of the Babri Masjid.
Ram’s guilty and shame-faced scolding of Gandhi, accompanied by an almost pastoral attitude toward violence on his part, enacts this exchange in the first half of the film. In the second half, this exchange, or the doubling between Gandhi and the interlocutors—for whom the protagonist stands in—becomes much more complicated. Setting out to assassinate Gandhi, Saketh Ram is interrupted in this journey by a Muslim friend from his past and apparently persuaded to drop his mission. Instead, he seeks out Gandhi to apologize to him for what he was about to do, only to be rebuffed by the apparent moral inflexibility of Gandhi and, shortly afterward, to witness his assassination at the hands of another man.

The film’s title, Hey Ram, is supposedly the phrase uttered by Gandhi before he died but also alludes strongly to the Ramjanmabhoomi controversy. Following these events, Saketh Ram takes a vow of silence, unbroken until the very end of the film. But throughout his years of silence and apparent contrition, Saketh Ram moves from being an archaeologist rationally immersed in history but needing to be “rescued” by a Muslim from his violent fantasies to becoming a perversely Gandhian figure himself. His emaciated body and his Gandhian nonviolence speak to the disappearance of the Hindu militant but, at the same time, to the mingling of Gandhian ethical practices into the militant, contemporary body of the nation. Taken as a whole, the tragic-epic structure of the film remains ambivalent about the protagonist’s political position.

While Gandhi’s vows of silence punctuated and introduced a deep interpretive ambivalence into the public sphere at key historical moments, Saketh Ram’s silence simply puzzles and leaves the door open for viewers either to identify with his earlier militant self or to assume that he has indeed undergone a “cleansing” transformation to nonviolent passivism. But because he becomes a passive consumer of the history unfolding around him, viewers are left to draw their own conclusions about that history by placing it within the violent contexts graphically explored by the film—including the partition riots and Gandhi’s assassination.

As Ravi Vasudevan states in his review of Hey Ram, the film walks a very thin line between inviting reflection on the kinds of violence it depicts and a fascination with those very acts, laced with prejudiced representations of Muslim bestiality and Hindu masculinity. Vasudevan (2000) writes,

Nowhere is this peculiar impasse better suggested than in the movie’s framing narrative. For the Saketh Ram of the present, in his emaciated, dhoti-clad body and his extended vow of silence, now lasting some 40 years, undoubtedly conjures up an image of Gandhi frozen in time. It is as
if transference has taken place between the healer and the patient even if the movie has not been able to persuade us of the cure.

The sense of anxiety that stays after the movie is not with a disruption of the false sense of security, lip-service and diminished historical awareness that icons shore up.

Between these two ends of aesthetic politics — between the architect’s modernist dreams and the archaeologist’s secular nightmares (for the film does purport to depict the fall of an “enlightened,” secular Hindu) — a third space of experimentation is opened by the works of artists like Singh who walk the thin line between political correctness and political didacticism today. Where do their struggles between personal violation and the violence of the political, their struggles between “silent history” and “empty space” enacted through the fragmentation and the reconstitution of the Gandhian figure in painting, installations, and photographs, lead us? If indeed we are tracing a connection between Gandhian philosophy and its modernist interpretations, we should also perhaps attend more carefully to the universalist aspirations of a Hindu modern that emerge even as figures of Gandhi are blindfolded in moments of extreme secular crisis.

**An Artist of Nonviolence**

Gandhi’s own response to this conundrum of relating to modernist compositional strategies for political action, intimately tied to the use of force, arms, and violence, is outlined telegraphically in the pages of *Hind Swaraj*. The text, composed as a dialogue between Reader and Editor, is also an act of composition, producing the figure of ancient civilization as an ethical and political counterpoint to modern civilization. His focus on the ontological forms of society engendered by the spread of mechanical apparatuses such as the railways is key to his critique. These forms are characterized by speed and, therefore, by the suddenness of their effects, which multiply before they can be accounted for or reflected on. Gandhi (1997: 47) writes that “[railways] accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited these places. Nowadays, rogues visit them in order to practise their roguery.”

By contrast, Gandhi suggests that true civilization means good conduct, which in turn is tied to the speed and capacity of the human body rather than to the prosthetic extension of those capacities through the use of machines. “It was not
that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre” (Gandhi 1997: 68–69). Here Gandhi (1997: 67) equates “true” civilization with “a mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions.” While the ultimate goal is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions, Gandhi’s excursus in Hind Swaraj already points to an interest in securing particular forms of actions — those mediated through the use of machines, for example, to particular kinds of experience and conversely to specifying the experiential dimensions of the opposite forms of action, that is, actions that result in the observance of morality. As he puts it in the chapter on railways, “Good travels at a snail’s pace — it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways. Those who want to do good are not selfish, they are not in a hurry, they know that to impregnate people with good requires a long time. But evil has wings. To build a house takes time. Its destruction takes none. So the railways can become a distributing agency for the evil one only” (Gandhi 1997: 47–48).

In the above passages, Gandhi’s attention to the temporality of action and the forms of experience that they engender suggests the development of a relationship between ethics and aesthetics through the individual cultivation of certain forms of experience, specifically experiences of a slow speed rather than those whose effects depend on suddenness. Here experience valued in and of itself, as the basis of the modern category of aesthetics, is connected fundamentally with an ethical project of observing morality rather than with the celebration of sensual experience. Familiar to us from individual experience in mass-cultural contexts, aesthetic experience in such contexts transposes sensual experience into seduction and manipulation, enabling the formation of cultlike devotion to cultural icons. Gandhi’s attempts to oppose an aesthetics whose experience is dominated by speed and suddenness — that is, forms of political expression enabled by the use of machines and arms — to an aesthetics of slowness and contemplation — that is, forms of ethical self-regulation enabled by practices such as spinning, fasting, and silence that he unveils later in his political career — are significant to understanding the “off-modern” nature of Gandhi’s experiments in the political sphere. Here I use Svetlana Boym’s (2010: 1) evocative conceptualization of the off-modern: “‘Off-modern’ is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress.” Although Boym (2010: 1 – 3) uses this term to
designate “a contemporary worldview that took shape in the ‘zero’ decade of the twenty-first century that allows us to recapture different, often eccentric aspects of earlier modernity,” I have transposed her use to Gandhi’s aesthetic practices, which, while remaining within the dominant modern understanding of aesthetics by privileging experience, nevertheless propose a radical departure. Insofar as his practices involve reconnecting the modern aesthetic value on experience in and for itself with an ethical imperative that draws on a modernized religious sphere to produce an alternative to the mass-political experience of democracy, we might say that Gandhi experimented with a new form of reconnecting aesthetics and ethics in order to reshape the political sphere.

Through his opposition between an aesthetics based on moral experiences deriving from acts propelled by the artifices of speed and suddenness and an aesthetics based on moral experiences deriving from acts that are slow and contemplative, Gandhi in fact creates the conditions for cultivating the ethical capacities that ultimately influence the nature of the political subject. The transformation of the political subject into an ethical one through self-sacrifice and slow building in turn sets the conditions for the erasure of the mass-political subject himself or herself. Yet his strategy for affecting this erasure involved the use of mass forms of political action. As such, the success of this political strategy depends on unyoking aesthetic action from politically instrumental goals and instead connecting aesthetic acts to the ethical self-formation of the political subject, who is at once an individual devoted to his or her moral obligation as well a mass actor. In so doing, Gandhi attempted to break the seductive relationship between aesthetics and politics that produces the modern mass-political subject in the first place.

This opposition between slowness and suddenness as an aesthetic element of the practice of nonviolence is ever more relevant today in the context of events such as the Mumbai attacks of November 2008. While much about the event remains unclear, what is evident is that the attackers imagined their work as aesthetic performance. The transfiguration of politics into aesthetic performance with specific, calculated effects is more generally a feature of our times. To read Hind Swaraj today is to grasp the significance of a different kind of aesthetic performance tied to ethical self-regulation. What is more, it may point to a way out of the impasse of an endless dialogue with modernism, most visible as a site of traumatic struggle in contemporary artistic production.
References


