The prose of the world: the field speaks for itself
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The prose of the world: the field speaks for itself

T his report a French missionary in South India at the end of the 17th century (Dubois 1978:604-5). Saskia Kersenboom and Thomas Voorter offer their own account of a Hindu procession in their joint production of the DVD Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi (2005). Dubois’s advice that such an event should be witnessed first-hand alludes to the experiential nature of understanding. ‘Being there’ reigns supreme; next, however, looms interpretation. Both his and our world operate frames of reference that differ significantly from those that underlie an actual procession. To report, therefore, inevitably involves such ‘framing’.

In contrast to the traveller, the present authors investigate the possibilities of interactive multimedia. They aim to simulate the perspective of an ‘eye-witness’ by inviting the user to access the DVD. This forms the grid of its design and familiarizes the user with frames of reference employed by Hindus in their devotional practices. Earlier and recent fieldwork among daily and festival routines in South Indian temples immersed the authors in liturgical practices of textual recitation, visual display and musical support (Kersenboom, 1984 ff). This gradually led to a ‘logic of practice’ that informed the collection of data, their analysis and, ultimately, the design for their multimedia representation.

Interactivity: ‘being there’
The ingredients of real time and space are crucial to the perspective of the eye-witness. It is, however, not only ‘the eye’ that is involved in this encounter. A ritual process is performed physically and purposefully. The picture of hell that looms large to Dubois fuels a deeply satisfying experience for the goddess’s devotees. They throw their bodies, senses and souls into the procession, pulling the chariot by hand, feeling Kamakshi’s eyes on them, beating their cheeks in submission, and, most important of all, uniting with her in an act of mutual incorporation. The goddess absorbs her devotees by accepting their gifts of flowers, food and red kumkumam powder, while she, in return, infuses herself into them through the sprinkling of holy water, by sharing the ‘leftovers’ of her food and the actual performance guarantees physical distance between actors and audience. In the DVD, the stage is the television or computer screen, and the actors perform their roles in digital form. The user can no longer touch the performers, nor is he touched by them in an act of mutual incorporation. The social dimension of seeing and being seen that still survives in the theatre has been obliterated in the digital world. Instead, the user enjoys it in private and explores the flexible possibilities of the DVD. The loss of ‘proximity’ is creatively replaced by ‘autonomy’ over the process of learning. This new, multimedia prose can be stopped, repeated, fast-forwarded or paused. The digital procession turns a linear prose of the world into a non-linear, multi-layered, associative adventure. If the user craves to explore the unknown, he can travel at random and at leisure into underlying layers of information, stories, songs, dances, iconographies and metaphysics stored under the objects that he encounters in the digital procession. This circumambulation is a celebration of conceptualization, beckoning the viewer to experience for himself, and confront the real world.

Design: from ‘thick description’ to rich application
Participant observation is the key to the entire process of data collection, data analysis and their representation. Endless hours of participation in Hindu temple rituals preceded the actual filming of the event in Kanchipuram on Friday, 31 January 2003. Mutual sympathy, familiarity, and a natural competence to blend in with the proceedings were imperative for the presence of the camera and the process of filming the procession. Thomas Voorter was able to film its progression only after acquiring the necessary ‘tact expertise’ of what and who make up the process and when, how and why the procession moves the way it does. Its itinerary, tempo and highlights empower Hindu devotion and had to be taken into account as keys to understanding it. The ‘terrible uproar’ heard by Dubois proved to be a very strategic use of musical instruments and sound effects such as fireworks and gun shots. The sound file forms the flow chart of the linear journey. In this application, the ‘shrieks and shouts’ do not come as a surprise: they highlight the ultimate irrationality of the goddess in her cleansed, peaceful and sublime form, as she blesses her devotees after her long journey through the night. In real life, incorporation immediately follows.

Digital, interactive multimedia reset frames of reference that have marked academic literacy for over three centuries. Fieldwork, data collection, interaction and co-authorship of researcher and informant as well as the physical categories of time and space, sensory perception and the human body are central concerns in developing designs for interactive multimedia. Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi invites an investigation into the various aspects of the inspiration that draws hundreds of Hindus every Friday to share her presence again and again. Its design is based on the cultural practices found in Hindu temples and their Sanskrit and Tamil normative manuals, offering a digital journey that branches out into an extensive database of verbal and printed discourse, of instrumental and vocal music, and of audio-visual recordings, iconography and material culture. This investigation and experimentation with multimedia representations as innovative methods for qualitative research seeks a new coherence in scholarly argumentation and communication: a prose of the world—a digital language that speaks for itself.

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References

DVD: temple ground
Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi

Video still:
Darshanam: mother and child
Thomas Voorter
Darshanam

Endnotes