The Politics of Making Uncanny: Two Recent Experimental Films from India

Iram Ghufran, *There is Something in the Air (TISITA)*, 2011
DV 28:25 minutes

Growing up in Uttar Pradesh with stories of women spirited away by *djinn* lovers and secondhand accounts of haunted mansions, Iram Ghufran was curious about the distinctions we make between madness and reason, faith and science. In a previous print work, she playfully tells some of her childhood stories in a deliberately fable-like graphic story. *TISITA* sees her shift registers as she focuses on experiences of spirit possession and hopes of a cure in the Sufi shrine of Bade Sarkar in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh. Motivated by a dream logic, Ghufran’s narrative mixes up ethnographic footage, disembodied audio interviews, poetic authorial written text, and fictionalized sequences. Images, sounds, and text slowly accumulate and are made to reverberate inside a cyclical structure. Such is the structure of haunting.

The film tells of women who are affected by “afflictions of the air.” Some have disappeared from the known world, rumored to have eloped with charismatic *djins*; others frequent the Sufi shrine and repeatedly narrate the symptoms of
their spirit possession. Ghufran begins with an empty office in a psychiatric clinic in Delhi, where a dictaphone plays back an interview between patient and doctor: “These voices you hear, are they like listening to me just now or like hearing an old song in your head?” The patient responds patiently but imprecisely, always missing a crucial part of the question. Ghufran’s politics is laid out for those who wish to see it. We realize that more than anything, this is a film about disappeared persons—people who speak but cannot be heard, people who are no longer spoken of, and people lost to time and memory.

When we eventually visit the shrine itself, we are confronted by the “afflicted” of the present. Shot in tender slow motion and framed in mid to close shots, the possessed frantically pace the marbled courtyard of the shrine. But the cure is terribly violent. Ankles are weighted down by heavy padlocks and chains, fingers are tightly intertwined in hysterical despair, bodies are hurled against hard marble walls in desperate entreaty. These sequences impact us with a visceral intensity. Here are individuals speaking with their whole bodies, making fevered appeals to God and anyone else who will stop and listen. We rarely see faces, as Ghufran denies us the comfort of easy identification and judgment. Articulate and strong voices freely speak their mind and tell us about djinns that ask them to strip in public or touch them in unmentionable places. This is a nuanced exploration of a pathology of desire. With little access to the outside world and individual opportunity, some of these “possessed” women find solace in performing a sexuality and aggression that has no place in “normal” society.

TISITA is remarkable in its deep empathy towards its subjects and its decidedly open framework. There are moments of sly humor as when some children at the shrine laughingly mimic the possessed in a game they have spontaneously invented. It is only from this place of openness that we are able to see how very other-ed certain peoples are. A familiar and stigmatized “problem” in India is made disconcertingly unfamiliar as we meet these women on their own terms. Why do they torture their bodies? Is the shrine a better solution than a psychiatric clinic? These are not questions that Ghufran wants to answer. Instead, with an elliptical use of time in narration and editing, the film’s shots and structure mirror the women’s repetitive performances of their disease. We are drawn into a disturbing and confusing world with an immediacy that forces us to recon. We keep returning to images and questions just as the possessed compulsively repeat gestures and words.

Iram Ghufran received her master’s degree from the AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Delhi, a multidisciplinary two-year course that covers video and television production, film theory, photography, and street theater—all with an emphasis on documentary techniques and politics. Soon after, she joined the newly created Sarai Media Lab conceptualized by Raqs Media Collective and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. This unprecedented space was meant to research and experiment with new media “acting outside the commercial pressures of the art market.” Says Ghufran, “I learnt ‘film craft’ at MCRC, but my sensibility to film and other creative forms come from the theoretical framework that analyze the historical link between discourses of unreason and early photography inform the film as much as the unpredictable nature of site-specific ethnography. We are reminded that theory, art, and praxis need not be discrete things.
Indian cinema. Bombay’s mainstream Hindi cinema dominates this history at the cost of other regional film industries, independent filmmaking practices, and experimental ventures. Ironically, even within the meager “parallel film” history that exists, a canon of “art film” auteurs has stabilized. One of the victories of *I am Micro* is that it does not reconstruct Swaroop as an iconic counter-historical figure. His abstracted voice becomes a free-floating signifier of the “micro.”

Shai Heredia studied film at St. Xavier’s College and Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai, and learned the ropes the old-fashioned way in Bombay’s film and advertising industry. Some years later she studied Documentary at Goldsmiths, University of London. Shumona Goel did a bachelor’s in film from Bard College, New York, and then went on to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London to study anthropology. When asked about their common interest in the history of avant-garde film practice in India, both filmmakers recall being agitated by a question. In Europe and the US, they were often asked about the Indian experimental film scene in a way that assumed a cultural lag. This suggestion that they had some “catching up” to do led them into the archives of Indian cinema in search of precedents and role models. The results were surprising. Heredia’s curation of the Experimenta film festival, since 2003, has been largely motivated by this need to present a history of alternative filmmaking practice that might equip contemporary artists and filmmakers with a theoretical vocabulary as well as the sense of a shared artistic heritage.

*I am Micro* is about a love for cinema in times that are changing beyond recognition. Its politics lies in its appeal to historicize the future, rather than fetishize retro technology and cult auteurs. Heredia and Goel are keenly aware of the plural logics of any era. While there is clearly an emotional attachment to celluloid, the film is more than simple nostalgia. It is a project of industrial and social history in which a love for a past format or technology cannot be indulged without an awareness of the human labor and skill that went with it. Film laboratories today are on the verge of closure; hundreds of men and women have been rendered redundant and socially unproductive as their specialized skills have no market in an economy premised on rapid obsolescence. To me, these living histories are far more interesting than what Eleanor Heartney calls the “aesthetic of endless redux” that characterizes much of the current obsession with cinema’s supposed demise.

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**OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Shumona Goel and Shai Heredia, stills from *I am Micro*, 2011 [courtesy of the artists]**