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MNEMOSYNE

Making Sense of the Works of Amar Kanwar: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Amar Kanwar (b. 1964) is an Indian video and installation artist whose stated concern is violence in the context of South Asia. This article will examine two works, *A Season Outside* (1997) and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), proposing that empathy, intersubjectivity and a search for harmony, influenced both by Gandhi and Buddhism, are key concepts relevant to their interpretation while the choice of images and the editing process convey an embodied, phenomenological experience that is coherent with these influences. In addition it will infer from some evidence given by the works and by the artist that this search for social and collective harmony also has a psychological and individual dimension. It will be argued that the latter constitutes the true power of the works as the spectator does not so much reflect upon the violence exercised by the various perpetrators and experienced by the victims in a rational and political manner, but, rather, witnesses the film-maker's reaction to the experience of violence; a situation which Vivian Sobchack has characterised as phenomenological. Through this process the spectator can empathise with the narrator and reflect on the affects examined by the works: namely violence and loss, but also love and compassion.

Introduction

Amar Kanwar (b. 1964) is an Indian video and installation artist whose stated concern is intercommunity conflicts, triggered by political, economic, social and religious rivalries, in the context of South Asia. Despite the inscription of his work in an array of Indian documentaries, movies and installations dwelling on similar concerns, and his own genealogy of Leftist political activism, his works stand out in terms of form and content as proposing a detached, hence aesthetic experience, rather than having a clear-cut political message. Empathy, intersubjectivity and a search for harmony, influenced both by Gandhi and Buddhism, appear as key concepts relevant to

Amar Kanwar's aims as the works allow the viewer to reflect, in a phenomenological way, on violence. A self-reflexive subtext pervades some of them, suggesting that an acknowledgement of an individual/anthropological trope towards violence is also at stake. This article endeavours to shed light on the artist's aim, through his own words, and on the process through which his works convey this aim to the viewer, by looking at the imbrication of image, soundtrack and text overwritten on the image, at the intermingling of archives and live recording, of moving and still scenes, and at the rhythm which underpins the montage. After narrating the artist's journey into video art, locating it in its political and artistic context, it will examine the construction of two works, *A Season Outside* (1997) and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), trying to convey the phenomenological experience of the viewer and the understanding that can be grasped from it, through a comparison with the montage of Yasujiro Ozu and his use of 'pillow shots'. It will conclude that these works can be interpreted as 'Warburgian' spaces in which violence is acknowledged as an affect, an emotional disposition that transcends religious, economic and national barriers (but not genders), but also as a means to counter violence, through the shared experience between the people filmed, the author and the viewer – thus re-establishing the intersubjective dimension of our being.

A Journey Away from the Tangible

After a BA in History and training in film-making during an MA in Mass Communication at Jamia Millia Islamia College, New Delhi in 1987, Kanwar started making documentaries focussing on economic, scientific and social issues. In the late 1990s he abandoned the genre, deterred by the uncomfortable position of interrogating someone about earning the minimum wage, while being aware that his tapes cost the person's monthly wage (Koshi, 2012: min. 2.21/3.09). He joined a stream of film-makers – such as Pankaj Rishi Kumar (Kapur, 2003) – or video artist Nalini Malani – in trying to understand the role of the police, the state, and the political parties in the economical, social and political violence that befell India (Koshi, 2012: min. 8:30/9:48). His inner urge to engage with the question of violence – 'I have a compass which keeps spinning me into zones of conflict', he says at the beginning of

A Season Outside – is related both to his own history as the member of a family of Hindus who fled Pakistan in 1947, and to the violent events that have marked his youth: the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the massacre of the Sikh community that followed, and the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal; all in 1984. His works address intercommunity conflicts in the Sub-continent from Partition onward, equating national and religious conflicts with economically-driven demonstrations of power: *A Season Outside* (1997)¹ refers to Indo-Pak diffidence; *To Remember* (2003), to the shattering of Gandhi's utopia of non-violence during the 2002 massacres in Gujarat; *The Sovereign Forest* (2011) to economic and ecological aggressions by the mining industry on rural indigenous communities in Odisha; *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007)² with sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers, as well as by powerful landowners. He uses the grants he obtains by exhibiting on the global scene – he has exhibited at Documenta 11, 12 and 13, at Kassel in Germany (2002, 2007, 2012), at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the UK, and at the Art Institute of Chicago (2013), as well as at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA 21) in Vienna (2014) – to present his work to local Indian communities through travelling exhibitions, workshops and conferences in remote areas, a widespread practice among activist film-makers (Kapur, 2003), for which he received the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change (2014).

His use of visual material (testimonies, live scenes and archives) and his articulate presentation of his work at multiple conferences also tend to position him as an intellectual/activist. Yet Kanwar distances himself from a cause-and-effect dialectic (Kanpur, 2003; Kapur, 2011: 287–8) and from 'super-articulate explanations' that in his view shed no real light on the causes of violence (Koshi, 2012: min. 17:30/18). Foreclosing a 'Griersonian authoritative narration' (Liven, 2012), he chooses to construct his films as 'poetical narratives' trying to understand 'the passage of time' in India (Koshi, 2012: min. 18:30/19:05) based on a virtual collective voice, his own words being mixed with others. The presence of still images of objects and nature, of

¹ *A Season Outside* (1997) can be viewed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5WllkBLG7o> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

² A visitor's recording of the installation *The Lightning Testimonies* can be viewed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZtZYuKSxMU> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

close-up views of hands tapping or weaving, of feet dancing, of a pulsating heart in a dying body, the haunting auralty of his voice, and the haptic quality of the grain of the film may be read as means of conveying the affective and meditative dimension of his mostly political works. Yet such a reading eschews the global reach of his work that challenges viewers who have no stake in Indian politics, who may not necessarily agree with a Leftist analysis and the implied solutions of the problems explored, or who, like the critic Ann Rutherford, cringed at the 'logo-centric – dense political tracts compiled around tightly constructed written texts' of his first films (Rutherford, 2014: 228). Rutherford was only able to engage with the 'elegiac' visions of trees moving in the wind of *The Sovereign Forest*³ as the silent video image projected on the pages of a book made with banana leaves and inlaid with objects – seeds, photographs and archives – forced her to move around the installation and thus engaged her phenomenologically, kinaesthetically and emotionally (Rutherford, 2014: 232). I disagree with both interpretations as my perception of the first films is that they are as engaging kinaesthetically, phenomenologically and emotionally as *The Sovereign Forest: A Season Outside's* coming and going of recurring scenes and its choice of hazy hues, which colour the film emotionally like a performance of Indian classical music following the rules of *raga*, as I will analyse below. The absence of soundtrack and the slow motion of *To Remember* bestows the work with a haunting, surreal quality. Even while dealing with political issues, many films go largely beyond logocentric and political interpretations of archives as they interweave images and words, texts and subtexts in rhythmic patterns that somewhat turns them into meditative musical performances: *A Night of Prophecy* (2002) records vernacular poetry around India, showing its potential as an expression of economical and social trauma but also as collective resilience. *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007) addresses metaphysical/anthropological questions regarding the fabric of life, human relationships, and the role of love and memory in overcoming loss. *The Sovereign Forest* gives voice to indigenous tribes from Odisha and demonstrates their specific relationship with the natural world as a

³ A presentation of the *The Sovereign Forest* can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/77030739> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

space of expression. *A Love Story* (2010) examines globalisation and mining from the inside, equating the grief felt at losing one's land with that of 'a lover, or a mother' (Vial Kayser, 2016), while *King of Dreams* (2001) is concerned with the sexual/phallic impulse to penetrate and possess. All these works question the relationship between the personal and the collective, the subjective and the intersubjective, the conscious and the subconscious. This concern, which is shared by Western postmodern authors and artists, explains the global visibility of Kanwar's works, beyond a narrower framework of Left-wing Indian activism that characterises the reception of Anand Patwardhan for example. Similarly, in the 1960's Satyajit Ray's films reached out to Western audiences because of a shared concern with the chasm between the individual and the group, modernity and tradition, while those of Ritwik Ghatak, enthralled with Bengali poetry, epic tragedy and political anomie, remained Indian-bound.

I will now address the question of what exactly is mediated through the works of Kanwar, looking at the content and form of *A Season Outside* (1997) and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007).

The Construction of a 'Poetical Narrative' in *A Season Outside*

The film is a testimony of the enduring presence of Partition in the mindset, and daily life, of Indians and Pakistanis. It starts with a close focus upon people's feet, naked or wearing worn-out sandals, stepping in a gently rhythmic manner on and off the white line that marks the border between India and Pakistan, in the town of Wagah (**Fig.1**). As the camera moves backwards, the feet appear to belong to Pakistani and Indian porters passing boxes of merchandise over the line, and the camera moves from one head to the other, as they bend forward while avoiding touching each other. The delicate, matching hues of the garments – 'ours were in blue and theirs were in red. . .', says Kanwar's voice-over (min. 1:42) – and the soft grain of the camera erasing any clear delimitations between people and garments match the choreography in conveying a sense of harmony to the scene. This ballet of workers gives way to the ceremonial military performance in which, every day at sunset in front of mutually observing crowds, soldiers of both sides perform a ritual dance of defiance. Wearing hats

topped with shiny plumes and jackets embraced by embroidered belts, they march towards one another, lifting one foot high in the air, as if to kick, shifting their heads nervously yet in rhythm, both towards and away from the enemy, and casting fierce glances at each other from either side of the open gate. As they suddenly go into slow motion, the images underscore the archaic-animalistic aggressiveness of the ritual. The next sequences show the Hola Mohalla festival in Punjab (**Fig. 2**), whereby Sikhs re-enact the decision made by the last Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, to go to war against the Mughal emperor in retaliation for his deeds. It is followed by a train slowly moving across the border – a reminder of refugees fleeing en masse in 1947 – then by a fight between rams in front of an entirely masculine crowd that seems enthralled by the violence that one animal inflicts upon the other. As the scenes share the same grainy qualities, the same warm colours, the same slow motion, the same silence, they appear as if seen by an outsider through the window of a train travelling slowly on its track, passing through villages and moving between discrete stories. The soft voice-over follows the smooth flow of the images. Unconcerned with the specificity of any particular scene, it meditates upon the roots of violence: 'Conflicts are forever overflowing with validity and there is no sense in getting stuck with any specific identity' (min. 20:47); 'I need to find answers that work for every kind of conflict . . . regardless of place or community' (min. 21).



Figures 1 and 2: Amar Kanwar, *A Season Outside* (from *The Trilogy*), 1997. Analogue and digital colour video with sound, 30 min. (Inv.#13537) Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

The following sequence is filmed in a Tibetan refugee camp in India, where the narrator hopes to find an answer to what seems to be a human trope to violence, through a conversation with a monk who advises: 'You must not return pain for pain, evil for evil'.

This advice would appear enlightening if the narrative did not clash with the images: Kanwar films a young Tibetan pushing a toddler by pressing his hands on the infant's back, making the child fall painfully, before he goes into hiding behind a door (min. 23:54); archival images show what we must presume to be Indian soldiers fighting in Kashmir, while documentary images testify to what appear to be Chinese police officers brutally kicking monks. The impossibility of deciphering the images with certainty, their varied visual quality, origin and localities (in colour and in black and white, from India and from Tibet, contemporary and archival), add to the discrepancies between text and image, underpinning the difficulty to ascribe any single origin to the violence depicted on screen. Next, in an out of focus manner, the camera remotely records a series of silent, archival images of Gandhi marching with followers in what appears to be an empty movie theatre. It epitomises the limits of Gandhi's message of non-violence (*ahimsa*), as when, at the beginning of the film, Kanwar recites a dialogue about tolerance between the Hunter commission and Gandhi (*The Evidence*, 1920) (min. 4:25/4:30), over images of the confrontation between soldiers in Wagah. While Gandhi's words of wisdom reverberate into the spectator's psyche, Kanwar adds: 'When you look for answers inside yourself, deep inside you discover particles with different roots. And in [this] clash probably lies the roots of violence' (min. 7:37). He suggests that beyond an appeal to tolerance, the psychological or ontological roots of violence need to be excised.

Within this loop of animated scenes of crowds engaging in a spectacular activity are inserted more intimate, almost silent scenes: a field with high and ripe wheat through which march armed soldiers, accompanied by birdsong; a puppy being bullied by crows in a courtyard; an old woman closing her window overlooking Chandni Chowk, weary of the marshal parade taking place on

Republic day, and retreating to the shelter of her apartment; a tree gently blowing in the wind while a train moves slowly across the border and the passengers wave at the camera; a bird of prey gliding along a valley. As these seemingly tranquil images provide a pause for the viewer between scenes of action, offering seconds of silence in which they may reflect upon what they have already seen, the image breaks this meditative stance with harrowing stories: the voice-over accompanying the image of the wheat field says 'the tree on the left is ours, but the two in the centre are theirs', designating the inescapable differences between Indians and Pakistanis (min. 7:18); when the puppy is bullied the voice-over asserts that 'when provoked . . . when your dignity is at stake, then . . . it is rightful to arm your truth' (min. 9:48); and while the old lady closes her window, the narrator reflects upon Tolstoy's violence against his wife Sophie (min. 18:10), and recalls his own mother telling him about women nailing boards over their windows to prevent 'the other' from entering during the period of Partition. Then the train appears on screen, proceeding slowly across the border, and, with another twist, the narration returns to the theme of domestic abuse referring to Kanwar's own mother holding a hammer in a room 'with no windows'. He asks: 'When there is violence inside your own home, where do you escape?' (min. 19:18).

The montage thus manifests Kanwar's disenchantment with ideological narratives that eschew the psychological, the inner roots of violence, as exemplified by Tolstoy's ambivalence in his personal life, which was at odds with his political outlook. The film ends with a return to the ceremony at Wagah, when the gate is closing again. While a Mujahidin looks fiercely at the camera, a young Indian casts a melancholic eye at the opposite side. The narrator suggests that the cycle of violence, the 'season outside', is triggered by external influences and memories that are imprinted in the psyche like 'maps' that 'your mother has put inside you, that your father has put inside you' and which 'you have to constantly identify and try to find a way out' (Serpentine, 2011: min. 2:50). The white line of the border is only one such internalised trigger: 'I wonder who is watching, you me or someone else's memories' (*A Season Outside*: min. 2:37).

For Kanwar the 'way out' is 'actually a journey 'in' (Serpentine, 2011: min. 2:50) and violence may end thanks to the resolve of the child watching the border closing to establish his own voice, his 'season inside'.

As we have shown, this idea is conveyed to the spectator not only through words, but also through a cinematic form which relies both on visual elements as well as voice-over: images of different locations, often in slow motion and shot mostly in the same light to obtain similar tonalities and a blurred grain, transform the real into distant scenes, as if the narrator was unravelling memories into a series of embodied landscapes. The interweaving of these images with unrelated archival footage shot in black and white further ascribes to them the quality of a dream in which events of past and present are undistinguished from one another. The warm and soft timbre of the artist's voice, hoarse with tobacco, comments upon the images in a distant, meditative prosody, spewing words in a hush-hush rhythm, using sentences that often have no discernible grammar, invoking other memories and other images, often of an intimate nature. This process of a wandering narratorial meditation upon the visual scenes displayed evokes Walter Benjamin's *Passages*, yet the choice of words and the rhythm with which Kanwar hovers between the personal and the social, the individual and the collective, is also close to the style of political poetry on the Sub-continent (Kapur, 2003). A sentence such as '[s]ome day you wake up and the sun does not rise' (min. 25) shares its rhythm and melancholy, for example, with an image in the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Lahu Ka Surag [The Trace of Blood]* (1965): 'There's no sign of blood, not anywhere. I've searched everywhere' (Lazard, 1988: 49). For Faiz, the poetic form is a political banner, an articulation of the fight that may contribute to victory: 'Someday perhaps, the poem / Murdered, but still bleeding on every page / Will be revealed to you. / Someday perhaps, the banner / Of that song bowed low in waiting / Will be raised to its great height by a tornado' (Lazard, 1988: 3). Kanwar also hopes that the poem can break the cycle of violence but he is singular in suggesting that violence 'is personal terrain as well'. He says 'I needed to enter into poetry in order to comprehend that' (Vial Kayser, 2016).

His understanding of the personal lingers between the individual/psychological and the mystical/cosmological, which explains Kanwar's interest in Sufi and Bhakti poetry, and also in Buddhism:

There is a relationship between Bhakti and Buddhism, and Sufism as well, and Sikhism. All these traditions, even though they define themselves differently have something in common. Bhakti expresses itself a lot through poetry and music, like Sufism. And initially even the Sikh tradition had a lot of poetry. In Buddhism you don't find this way of expressing your search for the meaning of life necessarily through poetry but there is a kind of irreverence that you find in the Bhakti tradition as well. (Vial Kayser, 2016)

The structure, visual values and rhythm of *A Season Outside* can also be compared with Indian poetical and musical rules, whether political or religious, which are based on the repetition of rhythmical phrases, accelerations and decelerations: a combination of 'slow' or rapid syllables, interrupted by a pause, creates the metric or *chandha* in poetry (Mishra, 1999);⁴ meanwhile, a combination of 5, 6 or 7 notes create a motive or *raga* in music (Ravikumar, 2002), that gives the piece its emotional quality (*raga* means 'colouring' in Sanskrit), and its aim is to convey emotions to the reader or listener, conceived as colours of the mind. The importance of literal colours, of emotions and of rhythm – sometimes slow, sometimes rapid, sometimes even, and sometimes odd – is obvious throughout the images and the commentary of *A Season Outside*, as a transcription of the first sentences conveys:

Sometimes you reach a place (6) / you have expectations (6) / but suddenly
you start seeing something else (6 + 5 = 11) // At first I saw colours (6)//
I had thought ours were red (6) / and theirs were green (4) / but instead (2) /

⁴ Each verse (or *pada*) can have between 1 and 26 syllables. In a verse of 8 syllables called *anustup*, a form which expresses praise or is presented as an invocation, the 5th syllable should be short, the 6th long and the 7th alternatively long and short (as long syllables last for two feet the verses can, however, vary in length) (Mishra, 1999: 13). The rules do not prescribe a specific length of the poem but, rather, what counts is the rhythm. In a metre of 12 syllables, *totakam*, meaning 'not easy going', the 3rd, 6th, 9th and 12th syllables are long, whilst other syllables are short (the *totakam* thus has 16 feet and there should be a pause after the 4th, 8th and 12th syllables) (Mishra, 1999: 108).

ours were in blue (5) / and theirs were in red (5) // I'm on the border of India and Pakistan (6 + 6 = 12) / and it's odd (3) / but I never imagined I would react to colours (7 + 7 = 14) // But then sometimes (5) / the colours of the mind (6) / tend to suddenly fly out (7) (min. 1:42); It is a very peculiar feeling here (6 + 6 = 12) / because the line scattered my family across the Sub-continent (12 + 5 = 17) // Like seeds in the wind they flew (7) / each carrying their own box of colour. (5 + 5 = 10) (min. 2:10)

In music, in addition to the rhythm given by the number of notes, the *raga* is constructed by modulations of the melody that successively scales up or accelerates, and subsequently scales down or decelerates, according to the principle of *arohana/avarohana*. The rhythm of the voice in *A Season Outside* follows this principle as shown in the passage cited above: the single dashes I have included in this transcription of the voice-over indicate the slight pauses in the narrator's voice between scaling up and down, while the double dashes indicate the long pauses that give structure to the voice-over's accelerations and decelerations.

In Indian music, a main melody (called *vadi*) is usually conducted by a leading instrument (such as the sitar, or the voice of a singer), which forms a dialogue with a secondary set of notes (*samavadi*) played by an accompanying instrument (such as the drums). In *A Season*, images shot in short focus alternate with images from faraway, images of people moving are framed with almost completely still images of scenery during which the voice gives way to the abated sounds of music or animals (bird-song, the clip-clop of horses' hooves) and quasi-silences (the wind blowing through tree branches, people walking through crops). Hence both the flow of images and the soundtrack follow the dialogic rules of *vadi/samavadi* (the contrapuntal major/minor melody), as it alternates quiet views and sounds of nature with violent scenes of humans and of *arohana/avarohana* (acceleration/deceleration) as the voice-over slows down and fades, then returns and accelerates, like a lied, bringing to the fore the narrator's subjective standpoint. This aural and visual construction, which echoes the literal role of classical music in Indian avant-garde cinema of the 1960s, can be opposed to the singular voice of the author, which accompanies, for example, the images by Lebanese architect and writer Tony Chakar, exhibited in *Beirut, the*

Impossible Portrait (2003); or to the voice of the narrator, seemingly coming from the eye camera, that comments upon the silent events and scenes, recalled or imagined, in Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Mirror* (1975), whose influence Kanwar acknowledges. Both convey a sense of a lone individual subjectivity, looking at the outside world, but shut out from it. On the contrary for Kanwar, as for Marxist poets in the Sub-continent, the perception of his own subjectivity necessarily takes place within the collective:

I realized quite a few years ago that [. . .] I cannot exit from the practical craziness of life and find some understanding. I need to develop the ability to find this central moment [of awareness] *inside* the craziness, rather than looking for an ideal place, an ideal moment. (Vial Kayser, 2016)

Thus, in *A Season Outside* Indian poetical and musical tradition mixes with Marxism's will to social totality through Kanwar's creation of a collective voice: 'It is only in the interactions between one oral expression and another that you find understanding' (Vial Kayser, 2016). The same collective principle is at play in *The Lightning Testimonies*, to which I shall now turn.

Witnessing the Unsayable: *The Lightning Testimonies*

While *A Season Outside* offers a constant flow of images and words displayed upon a single channel, the video installation *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007) is a series of eight video channels presenting various testimonies of sexual violence over a period of fifty years, from 1947 to 2007. The circularity of *A Season Outside* is transformed into a different kind of momentum in *The Lightning Testimonies*, in which a series of individual stories, each one discretely enclosed in terms of its drama and circumstances, reverberates upon the other stories through Kanwar's use of soundtrack and through their pathos. On the first screen a woman narrates her daughter's rape by an Indian captain in Nagaland in the 1990s, and her fight to bring her daughter's rapist to justice, which is symbolised by the weaving of a shawl; while on the next screen the story of Mangyangkokla, a woman raped by Indian soldiers in 1957, is told. The following two screens depict Partition and the abduction of women that ensued:

screen three talks about Mridula Sarabai,⁵ an activist who undertook the responsibility of repatriating around 75,000 abducted women to their 'respective' countries, during Partition between India and East-Pakistan (now Bangladesh); whilst screen four looks at the legal definition of an abducted woman as established in edicts issued by the two governments in 1949. The fifth screen moves forwards in time, displaying archives relating to Bangladeshi women raped by Pakistani soldiers during the War of Independence in 1971; whilst screen six depicts Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002; screen seven shows drawings, mainly of the female nude, which relate to the abduction of Dalit women in Maharashtra in 2006 by upper-caste land owners as punishment for a land dispute. Finally, screen eight is positioned so that it faces the other screens and it is the last to end. An actress playing the part of the legendary Adivasi Draupadi laments her rape in prison and how she used her naked and blood-stained body to confront a police captain. Her performance is followed by the documentary images of twelve mothers standing naked in public to protest the killing and possible rape of a young girl, Thangjam Manorama, by the soldiers of the Assam Rifles in 2004.⁶

At first, the multiplicity of the stories of *The Lightning Testimonies* tends to prevail over a common narrative: some of these crimes against women took place recently, others during Partition; some in the secrecy of a forest or a house, others in plain view, with a woman paraded by soldiers in front of the community: 'everyone saw them come, so did the orange tree' (Kanwar, 2012: 268–9). The installation also insists on the array of power relationships at play, foreclosing any simplistic analysis or blame: a victim of the Partition tells how Hindu families agreed to burn their daughters alive rather than have them raped by Muslims (Kanwar, 2012: 230–1); how Muslim families told their daughters '[w]hen the Sikhs come kill yourself'; how a brother and husband tried to hang a seventeen-year-old girl to avoid her being

⁵ Background information about *The Lightning Testimonies* can be found at: <http://thelightingtestimonies.blogspot.co.uk/> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

⁶ The play was an adaptation by Heisnam Kanhailal of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi*, performed in January 2000. It was hailed as prescient of the death of Thangjam Manorama (see Bhonsle [2016]).

abducted, then lashed out at her in rage when she survived their attempted murder (Kanwar, 2012: 228–9). The same happens in Kashmir even today: ‘And as always’, the voice-over tells us, ‘everyone knows that the Indian Army attacked Muslim women, that the militants attacked Hindu women, that a man with a gun attacked both’ (Kanwar, 2012: 300–1). Even the good will of Mridula Sarabai is questioned by the narrator: ‘Insisting consent would have no meaning in an atmosphere of fear’ (Kanwar, 2012: 240–1), she ignored a woman who ‘couldn’t bear to return to the family who had tried to kill her before the rape’. Another ‘screamed and abused you as you sent her back home’ (Kanwar, 2012: 238–9).

Present-day acts of remembrance and grief are mixed with archival footage showing photographs, official texts, empty rooms. Evidence is scattered, the information is not easy for the viewer to access or understand. Even in the catalogue of the exhibition, *Evidence* (Kanwar, 2012), the stills are shuffled as if to preclude any easy relationship between images and facts. This choice of montage purports to echo the madness of the events depicted, and to reveal the discrepancies of official historiography.

The installation thus restores into the collective psyche the stories erased by official archives and historiographic record while showing the madness of events, and can be compared to the albums made by Japanese photographers Shomei Tomatsu or Kawada Kikuji after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Counterposing iconic pre-war black and white images of Japanese military heroes with images of rubbish that speak of the excessive consumption within Japan of American goods after the war, Kawada’s album ‘The Map’, starts with this sentence: ‘We have been adrift [. . .]. Where do we find our map today, our vision, our shining order?’ (Merewether, 2006: 135). According to Charles Merewether, Kawada’s images ‘expose the silence and caesura within the historical record’ and transform official historiography into ‘a haunted twilight world out of which figures and objects appear and disappear in a force field of flux and transformation’ (Merewether, 2006: 135).

Kanwar’s work can also be read as enacting a putative memorial, in which he poses crucial questions of memory and memorialisation: ‘How does one remember? Does the truth need a memorial image?’ (Kanwar, 2012: 296–7). His use in this video

installation of close up shots of a series of disconnected images – an orange tree, an embroidered pillow (**Fig. 6**), a full moon in a night sky – thus regularly arrests the flow of these tales, but also somehow suggests that the 'story never disappears. It exists in stones, in trees, in locations, objects, windows. . .' (Kanwar, 2007).⁷ The work is clearly redemptive, as Kanwar saves these singular stories and victims from oblivion, sometimes directly referring to the victims in the narrator's subtext: 'How did you come this far Bilkees?' the subtext asks a victim, referring to her fight for justice and informing her that a shrine has been built besides the tree where the incident of 28 February 2002 took place (Kanwar, 2012: 276–9). To restore the singularity of each of these victims is to counter the process of objectification that lies at the root of their ordeal and, as such, Kanwar's process is similar to Claude Lanzman's in *Shoah* (1985), in which the director's objective was 'to give the victim an imperishable name' (citing Isaïe 56, V during the opening shot). It is also similar to Ai Weiwei's naming each of the 5,000 or so young victims of the Sichuan earthquake in his video *Citizen Investigation* (2009). Yet the work is also preoccupied with moving 'beyond suffering' (Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2009: min. 2:20/2:23) as shown in the ambivalence of its title, which evokes both a candlelit vigil and a thunderbolt: *vajra* in Sanskrit, being the (Tibetan) Buddhist word for enlightenment. As Kanwar states: 'When you remember in a particular way it clarifies you. The purpose of clarifying you in the present, is that you can take a step forward. So in that sense the act of remembering really is an act of moving forward in time' (Stedelijk Museum, 2008: min. 8:09/8:40).

What comes to the fore is the importance of the survivors: understood as bearers of the presence of the missing victims, as 'memory' caretakers: 'It is memories that really make up memorials and such is the power of resistance that it warmly embraces all in the inside and on the outside' observes Kanwar in *A Season Outside* (min. 10:30). These voices mix facts with emotions, as they express their grief whilst the series of images presented show people's personal belongings, recall their intimate and

⁷ Kanwar also reminds us that the events in Gujarat are archived differently by different communities through a variety of memorialising means: 'in a stone, in a tree, in a song' (Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2009: min. 1/50).

mundane gestures of daily life, of weaving a fabric, of taking water from a well, and sometimes narrating, singing and acting to exude the pain: 'Mother will you tell the story of your little girl and how she was woven into the texture of your dress?' (Kanwar, 2012: 280–1) asks a friend of the little girl abducted in Nagaland. As survivors share their memory with the spectators, they bring these victims into the contemporaneous now and restore their presence within the collective consciousness as benevolent ghosts. This act of memorialisation recalls Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*: 'Tell it my son' says a victim, 'on behalf of those who have yet spoken' (Kanwar, 2012: 262–3). By giving voice to the survivors, the films also helps to heal the ruptures that trauma imposes on these survivors, who themselves tend to become ghosts, locked into their personal grief, living in the past. This traumatic dissociative state is inflicted upon them through their particular status as the bereaved survivors of victims who have been killed in brutal and violent ways. As Kai Erikson writes, 'sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body [by] traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals' (1995: 185).

Formal structure is essential to the achievement of the installation as we shall now examine further, looking at the communalities of the making of the two films already examined – Kanwar's *A Season Outside* and *The Lightning Testimonies* – with Ozu's cinema.

The formal structure of *A Season Outside* and *The Lightning Testimonies* and the cinema of Ozu Voice-over, colours, rhythm, blurred images

A Season Outside and *The Lightning Testimonies* share many formal features. In both films the voice of the artist is an essential link between the images presented and viewers of the film. Kanwar sometimes expresses his own thoughts, sometimes invoking a spectator through the use of the second person – 'Do you know of a way to relate a wheat field with gigantic transparent walls on the outside and on the inside' (*A Season Outside*: min. 7:20) – or addressing a victim, such as Bilkees, or a 'perpetrator', such as Mridula Sarabai (*The Lightning Testimonies*, screen 2 and 3). This process evokes Jean-Luc Godard's avant-garde cinematic technique in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) when the characters break the film's fourth wall, directly addressing the

camera and interpolating the viewer as a witness to their situation, thus emphasising that 'any given text, is socially and formally constructed and should be shown to be so', and reminding us that every voice is inter-subjective, 'neither the "out there" nor the "in here"' (Nichols, 1983).

Like *A Season Outside*, *The Lightning Testimonies* expresses a relationship between colours and emotions: 'I thought about the colours first. Shall we do it in black or red? Though she was afraid she was very brave. [. . .] So I choose the red colour' says the mother who weaves a shawl in memory of her dead daughter (Kanwar, 2012: 305). The juxtaposition of archival footage in black and white with contemporary scenes shot in colour, gives the installation a duality of emotions, as actual and remote hues appear as metaphors for vivid and forlorn experiences, contemporary scenes and inner memories.

Rhythm is conveyed through Kanwar's layering of his own voice with the voices of witnesses, as well as by the dates of each event that appear on the screen.

Still images

Most importantly the testimonies are regularly interrupted by silent stills or slowly moving images showing natural scenery – a full moon in a night sky, the sky seen from below through the trunks of rubber trees, insects climbing the bark (screen 2), an orange tree shot through a close up, a bird flying far away (screen 2) – or empty spaces – a room containing only a fallen stool (screen 1), a derelict wall, a courtyard with hanging cloth; a courtyard with the rain pouring onto a single table; an embroidered pillow (screen 4), an empty corridor, a curtain (screen 7), or a terrace with the blurred image of a girl folding a sari through the reflection of the sun (**Fig. 3**) (screen 4). These images stop the flow of the diegetic narration and its cohort of (imagined) corpses and blood – as none are actually shown. Over the still images the voice-over pauses and the listener's attention shifts from the testimonies being delivered to the space opened up by these images, which offers a symbolic escape from what has been told.

The influential Japanese film-maker Yasujiro Ozu is celebrated for his technique of incorporating such gaps into his films in the form of silent, quasi-still images



Figure 3: Amar Kanwar, *The Lightning Testimonies* 2007. Eight-channel digital colour and black-and-white video with sound, 32 min. 31 sec. (Inv.#11490) Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

devoid of human subjects. Documenting the state of disarray and anomie experienced by his characters in the aftermath of what has just been said or what is about to come, Ozu's empty images divest themselves of people to portray instead the richness of scenery – an empty sky with slowly passing clouds, a view of the ocean, the smoke escaping tall, slender chimneys, telephone poles, gas tankers, a leafy tree bending in the wind or a naked tree against the winter sky; sometimes they are still views of domestic interiors – a gas burner with a teapot, a vase placed beside a window, empty corridors.

Ozu's iconic still images⁸ share many visual and semantic features with Kanwar's video installations: a tree against the sky is used by Ozu as a marker of solitude in

⁸ A selection of stills can be found on the website dedicated to the film-maker, under the reference 'pillow shots', available at: <http://www.a2pcinema.com/ozu> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

the opening of a *Woman in Tokyo* (1933),⁹ when the brother leaves home to study, and a leafy tree in *Late Spring* (1949), during the Kabuki show when the daughter reflects on her celibacy (min. 58:51).¹⁰ It is to be found in *A Season Outside* in reference to the abuse of the artist's mother (min. 19:18) (**Fig. 4**) and in *The Lightning Testimonies*, in screens 1, 2 and 8, when the storyteller ceases to speak in order to pause and remember the missing person. Meanwhile, images of industrial architecture, such as the gas tanker in Ozu's *A Hen in the Wind* (1948),¹¹ function as a warning of an impending threat.¹² Its meaning is perceptible through repetition only, as the object is not threatening *per se*. Since the image is taken from a higher position using a crane or jib, the gas tanker introduces the perspective of an invisible, informed protagonist – the film-maker behind the camera. These images can be compared with the recurring views of the military barracks shot at night along the border in *A Season Outside* (**Fig. 5**), or the scenes of a bird of prey seen from an aeroplane, which appear both in *A Season* and in *The Lightning Testimonies*.

Empty corridors in Ozu signal an impending affective change: in *Late Autumn* (1960) the view of the well-lit, empty, corridor-like passageway outside the apartment signals that the mother remains alone after her daughter's wedding, and that her daughter may not visit again, while in *Late Spring* (1949) the dark, empty interior corridor echoes the father's anticipation of being alone after his daughter's marriage;

⁹ The view of a tree against the sky as a 'pillow shot' in *A Woman in Tokyo* can be viewed at: <http://www.a2pcinema.com/ozu-san/films/captures/womanoftokyo/pillow1.jpg> (Last accessed 1 August 2016). *A Woman in Tokyo* (1933) can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sa7FEyP4tLU> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

¹⁰ See *Late Spring* at min. 58:51 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQMqNHyUwJM> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

¹¹ The gas tanker used as a pillow shot can be viewed at <http://www.a2pcinema.com/ozu-san/films/captures/heninwind/pillow1.jpg> (Last accessed 26 July 2016). *A Hen in the Wind* (1948) can be viewed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCN5atfibjM> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

¹² The gas tankers appear when the mother decides to prostitute herself (min. 19.38), when she confesses to her friend (min. 28.30) and to her husband (min. 44.36), and when the husband visits a prostitute in retaliation (min. 58.12).



Figure 4: Amar Kanwar, *A Season Outside* (from *The Trilogy*), 1997. Color video, with sound, 30 min. dimensions variable, edition 5/6. Courtesy the artist and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012. 2012.150.1.



Figure 5: Amar Kanwar, *A Season Outside* (from *The Trilogy*), 1997. Color video, with sound, 30 min. dimensions variable, edition 5/6. Courtesy the artist and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012. 2012.150.1.

in *A Hen in the Wind* the internal entrance of the apartment, with a bicycle, appears sequentially when the mother is anxious about the future.

In Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies* an empty courtyard in which rain is pouring appears prior to the governmental edict that defines an abducted woman in legal terms (screen 4); an empty courtyard with cloth hanging on a line appears when a woman recalls wearing a different dress each day in anticipation of her death during Partition (screen 4); and empty corridors, preceded by curtains, accompany the story of Pakistani soldiers looking for Bangladeshi women (screen 5). Mundane domestic objects are also present in the works of both film-makers, when emotional tension is high: the embroidered pillow in *The Lightning Testimonies* suddenly occupies the whole screen after we are told about girls killed by their families during Partition (screen 4) (**Fig. 6**), while a single vase in front of a large window appears in Ozu's *Late Spring* when the heroine experiences great anxiety at the thought of leaving her father (min. 1.28.20/1.28.30).¹³ Kanwar, like Ozu, thus uses these shots to allow the viewer to perceive something 'intolerable' (Doganis, 2012: 51–2; Deleuze, 1996: 29¹⁴).

How does it work? Hans Gadamer suggests that 'if we look at the sky and are filled with the beauty of what we see there and linger over it, we experience a shift in attention that causes its sign character to retreat into the background' (Gadamer, 2004: 146). As the sign retreats, the image can receive the character's and the viewer's projected feelings. It makes us realise what is being experienced emotionally outside of, and prior to, the presentation of the image. Images of large trees moving with the wind, for example, can be manipulated in this way to evoke the fragility of human destiny and thus the semiotic meaning of the tree in and of itself retreats, allowing the viewer to reflect upon what has been narrated in prior scenes of the film.

¹³ The single vase in front of a large window can be seen in this still from *Late Spring*: <http://www.a2pcinema.com/ozu-san/films/captures/latespring/21.jpg> (Last accessed 26 July 2016). *Late Spring* can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQMqNHyUwJM> (Last accessed 26 July 2016).

¹⁴ 'Une situation purement optique et sonore [. . .] fait saisir [. . .] quelque chose d'intolérable, d'insupportable. Non pas une brutalité [. . . ni] de scènes de terreur [. . .]. Il s'agit de quelque chose de trop puissant, ou de trop injuste, mais parfois aussi de trop beau, et qui dès lors excède nos capacités sensori-motrices' (Deleuze, 1996: 29).



Figure 6: Amar Kanwar, *The Lightning Testimonies* 2007. Eight-channel digital colour and black-and-white video with sound, 32 min. 31 sec. (Inv.#11490) Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

In the case of architectural features and objects, the projection can also be understood through kinaesthetic empathy: the notion that the body – according to James Elkins – enlarges itself when it enters an empty room (Elkins, 1997: 137–8, cited in Fimiani, 2009) may explain why we project ourselves as standing alone in the centre of the empty courtyards shown in *The Lightning Testimonies*. Our memory of daily objects and the affects they convey (Stafford, Fall 2004: 316–7, cited in Fimiani, 2009) may explain why, when looking at a single table in a courtyard in Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies*, we perceive the absence of a missing girl; just like when seeing the lonely vase near the window in the empty bedroom corner in Ozu's *Late Spring* we perceive the heroine's sense of emotional disarray.

Noel Burch has called these still images in Ozu 'pillow shots', using the analogy of the function of 'pillow-words' in Japanese poetry (Burch, 1979: 160), and I have

similarly suggested that Kanwar's insertion of still images in *A Season Outside* follows the rules of the Indian musical and poetic form of *raga*. Ozu's 'Pillow shots' act as a point of reversal of meaning, like the caesura at the end of the first or second line of a Haiku. They create a shift, allowing him 'to control the most minute aspects of the film's rhythm, while maintaining a game of hypothesis and revision' (Bordwell, 1988: 132). Burch considers them as infused with the Zen Buddhist view that man is not the centre of the universe (Burch, 1979: 161). As Gilles Deleuze argues in *L'image-temps* (Deleuze, 1996: 25–6), through the spectacle of nature these images serve to restore what 'man has broken' – the flow of ordinary life, the harmony between man and life. Kanwar shares this Rousseauian view of the supposed harmony of nature and the idea that man is but a small element in the cosmos, which he also relates to Buddhism: 'I think it is not very difficult to see that if one were to look at the world and feel that humans or man is central, then the flaw in that kind of conception would show up very quickly' (Vial Kayser, 2016). This view is central to Kanwar's film *The Sovereign Forest* (2012), which is a longing for a harmonious relationship between man and his environment, inspired in part by local tribes' philosophy of nature. As he has stated in interview, he tries to convey this awareness through his images:

[In meditation] if you separate every intake and every outtake of breath you are able to actually perceive every breadth. When you do that, a certain kind of awareness begins to happen, about your own self and the world around [. . .] then you are be able to see that there is a certain "inner relationship" that exists between everything. (Vial Kayser, 2016)

Intersubjectivity as a Central Concern

In conclusion, it can be said that Kanwar's reaching out to a global audience suggests that his endeavours are shared by many who do not understand the specific context of the work, nor the information it conveys, information which is often sparse and rarely explicit. Like Ozu's highly stylised cinematic technique, the content of Kanwar's work is mostly immanent to the images themselves, embedded in their

visual and rhythmic qualities, and their relationship to the soundtrack. In the way that poetry told in a language unknown to the listener can successfully convey its emotional content through the body language of the performer, when we look at Kanwar's images we do not so much focus our gaze on what he shows but, rather, we look at him watching these scenes as they unfold. His narratorial and diegetic engagement with violence and mourning is what we relate to. Vivian Sobchack understands cinema as the perception 'of experience by experience' that 'moves us because we recognize it *as* experience' and which thus provides 'the *intersubjective* basis of objective' communication (Sobchack, 1992: 5; emphasis in original). As we watch Kanwar watching scenes of violence or grief, we engage phenomenologically in his attempt to decode the source of violence. His voice and the voices of the witnesses concur with the movements of the camera, creating a space in which monadic subjectivities become connected in intersubjective acts of sharing and thus liberated, in a looping process that dialectically mediates between the individual and the subjective (Massumi, 2002: 16, 26). *A Season Outside* and *The Lightning Testimonies* allow this liberation because they eschew the supposed objectivity of the documentary. The interweaving of images transforms the optical into the haptic, and the images are felt from within, almost unconsciously.

Kanwar's editing thus hovers between past and present, movement and stillness, successfully yoking together unconscious images, giving them a new meaning, and using their haunting or spectral energy within the contemporary. They trigger the reactivation of images of negative and positive affects, that linger into the unconscious, following Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*, the survival of pathos embodied in images and their actualisation into the contemporary through later images. They act in a manner akin to what Richard Semon calls '*engram*', in which he postulates that memory is a form of energy conservation, with each event leaving a trace upon the next. According to Warburg, this *engram* could be conveyed, sheltered within the work of art, as 'dynamogram', crystallising the energetic charge and the affects of collective memory. The artwork could then 'reactivate' this memory when needed within certain collective contexts (Gombrich, 1970: 242, cited in Agamben, 1998: 20–1).

Kanwar's installations suggest that the source of violence is entrenched in the collective and personal psyche, be it religious, in Muslim, Sikh, Indian communities, or secular (he mentions Tolstoy as a violent husband). He also regularly mentions his own potential capacity for violence and one can feel behind his composed figure and soft voice an impatience, perhaps a repressed anger, ready to emerge. This entanglement of the collective and the individual, of the affective and the rational locates him outside the frame of a Marxist understanding of violence, *i.e.* as the result of class struggle and the repressive nature of the state, which Benjamin discusses in his criticism of violence (Benjamin, 1986). It can be surmised from the glances exchanged between people over the Wagah border, from the gentle encounter between a peasant and a goat in *The Sovereign Forest*, in the slowing heartbeat of the victim of Myanmar's military repression, Ma Win Maw Oo, dying in the arms of her father in *The Torn First Pages*, and from the love expressed by survivors in *The Lightning Testimonies*, that Kanwar is pointing to the energy of life, and the nurturing power of love. This reading might also explain his attraction to Bhakti poetry and Buddhism, both of which equates love of nature with love between people and the production of life. In his films, the political arguably lies in the fact that each work suggests that the seeds of violence are latent within each of us, as are the seeds of harmony, and that it is the individual subject's responsibility to help the seeds of harmony multiply, by sharing them in intersubjective and collective encounters (Vial Kayser, 2016).

In the silence of his works, the spectator experiences a form of meditation on this existential condition and its moral imperative, based not only on Gandhi's precepts of engagement with the social, but also evoking Sartrean existentialism. Kanwar's works might be understood as answering Husserl's call for a phenomenological approach to experience that allows us to seize our consciousness in its intersubjective dimension, in the midst of our engagement with the world (Husserl, 1980). Through this phenomenological process, we begin to understand how our affects, the way in which we react emotionally to our encounters with others, become mirrored and possibly modified. This reading positions Kanwar's work within the ethical and aesthetic realm. As Gadamer reminds us, 'a work of art has its true being

in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it' (2004: 103).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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