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Online Pooja: The Internet as a site for the Contemplation of the Divine

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of digital technologies for worship and for contemplation. Precisely, it investigates the possibilities of using telematics and virtual reality as an interface with the Divine. The paper proceeds from the premise that the 'divine' or the 'world of Gods', is essentially a symbolic expression for the transfer of attention from the surface appearance of specific things to the underlying 'order' of all things (Guenther 1975, p. 1). It is this 'symboloc expression' that is made manifest or materialised in the various productions of Sacred Art.

1. Sacred Art

Early in the 20th Century the icons of Hinduism and Buddhism underwent a taxonomic shift (Davis 1997)—from the category of ethnographic artefacts to that of art. The advocates of this shift Havell (1908) and Coomaraswamy (1908, 1989) noted that, unlike the modern art of the West, this art did not evoke personal feelings or communicate individual impressions. Instead it generated symbols for 'supra-formal spiritual realities' (Burckhardt 1976, pp. 7-10). Sacred art is the formal manifestation of the spiritual vision of a religion, as its laws are transcribed into artisanship or performative tradition. Sacred art is distinguished from 'religious art' whose objects and rituals, might have sacred content without meeting the 'formal manifestation' criteria (Bruckhardt 1976 p. 9).

In Islam, for instance, art is understood as the manifestation, in the world of forms, of the spiritual realities (*al-haqa'iq*) of the Islamic revelation. (Al-Faruqi, L.L. 1984, p. ix) Specifically, the arts of Islamic culture are integrally related to Islam and its ideology of *Tawhid*. The principle of *Tawhid* or unity derives from the *Shahadah* or confession of faith—*La ilaha illa Allah*—'There is no God, but God', which affirms by negation the inimitability, the infinity and the inexpressibility of God. As R. I. Al-Faruqi (1978, p. 199-201) explains, "*Al tawhid* means the ontological separation of the godhead from the whole realm of nature. *Al tawhid* further asserts that nothing is like unto Him, and hence, that nothing in creation can be a likeness or symbol for God, nothing can represent Him. Indeed, He is, by definition, beyond representation. God is He of whom no aesthetic —hence, sensory—intuition whatever is possible". It follows then, that Islamic art makes its goal the expression of God's inexpressibility in such a figure of nature (naturalism).

There are three design principles by which the theology of *tawhid* is embodied in Art, namely—Abstraction, Stylisation/Denaturalisation and Infinite Patterning. (Al-Faruqi, L.L. 1984, not paginated) These three combine to give us the Arabesque in which abstract geometry and

stylised organic motifs are used to symbolize, within our manifest realm, that which is beyond manifestation. In the Arabesque, the ontology of *Tawhid* (unity) is echoed in the multiple reflections of a single image that nevertheless remains within a finite set. This double negative theory and practice of abstract art echoes the logic of the *Shahadah*, as it arrives at a pre-eminently positive artistic expression for the singularity of God. The causal relationship between the Islamic revelation and Islamic art is further confirmed by the organic rapport between the contemplative nature of this art and the rememberence of God (*dhikirallah*) as recommended in the *Quran* (Nasr 1987, p. 4).

2. Telematic and Virtual Reality Art

The term telematics was first applied in the context of art by Roy Ascott (1984) who has described it as 'broad categories of technologies and methodologies that are constantly evolving—bifurcating, joining, hybridizing—at an accelerated rate'. Between 1977 and 1994 artists like Galloway & Rabinowitz (1977), Adrian (1995) and Ascott (1983) used fax, Slowscan TV, and early computing networks to lay the foundations of telematic art (Dietz, 2001). With the advent of the world wide web in 1989, the use of the global communications network grew at an exponential rate and a new era of telematic art began, involving artists like Mutandas (1994), Goldberg (1995), Vesna (website), Kac, Roberson (2000).

Initially, virtual reality was not networked. Amongst the significant works of virtual reality art since the early 1990's are works by Flischmann & Strauss, Dickson & Scroggins (1991), Novak (website), Laurel & Strickland (1992), Davies (1995), Gromola. In 1993, Mark Pesce, and Tony Parisi developed a three-dimensional interface to the Web which combined both virtual reality and networking. This was developed into Virtual Reality Modeling Language or VRML by a group led by Pesce and Brian Behlendorf (Pesce 1995). This development has been followed up by far more advanced networking initiatives for the desktop like activeworlds whose potential for remote communion is exemplified by cyber@forum (Virtual World Teams, 2000).

3. Ontological Shift

It has been observed that it is the transformation of medieval optics into a scientific perspective in the 15th century, and ultimately photographic representation, that has given us our modern ontology. As Rotman (1987, p. 19) observes, "it is the code of perspectival art... that offers the spectator... the means of perceiving himself, from the outside, as a unitary seeing subject" Implicit in the 'construction' of this 'seeing subject' is its corollary—the 'perceptual object'. In the course of the ongoing technological revolution, however, as all categories of representation have ceded to the digital domain, what had thus far been a series of discrete asynchronous representations that have been 'sent' and received as distinct perceptual entities is fast blurring into a dynamic exchange. The world of perceptual objects seems to have dissolved into what Baudrillard (1885, p. 130) has called 'the ecstasy of communication'. This change in representational, perceptual and cognitive modes is shaking our conviction in the world of objects and subjects and engendering a new sense of being.

This new sense of being is a return to a traditional ontology. In traditional Hindu ontology, for instance, the corporeal sphere of extension—*maya* is a relative reality that is best understood, not by its material forms and objects, but in terms of the 'manner of its operation'. As Ananda Coomaraswamy (1935, p. 158) observes "*Maya* is not properly delusion, but strictly speaking creative power, *sakti*". Ultimate reality or *satya* is the eternal principle that underlies, generates and sustains the derivative realm of spatial and temporal phenomena. *Satya* "subsists there where the intelligible and sensible meet in the common unity of being... that is, only in act." (Coomaraswamy 1935, p. 11).

4. Art as an Interface

In the traditional art of the East and in that of Europe before the Renaissance, there was no separation of art from craft and the artist did not make objects or images solely for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation. Art was a process and, as Coomaraswamy (1956, p. 25) states, it was inseparable from manufacture and use—"when it has been decided that such and such a thing should be made, it is 'by art' that it can be properly made. There can be no good use without art: that is, no good use if things are not properly made." In the traditional 'aesthetics', judgement is made in terms of how well the 'object' serves its use—how well art serves as an interface in life. While this is at odds with the 'perceptual objects' of modern European art it is in agreement with the 'dematerialisation of the art object' in both postmodern and telematic art. At the same time, the status of the art object changes. The culturally dominant *objet d'art* as the sole focus is replaced by the interface. Indeed we find the traditional position in agreement with the telematic view.

5. Cosmogenic Instrumentality

Within the traditional paradigm, a cosmology serves as the basis of an integrative theory of all knowledge. Indeed, the sacred paradigms of the ancient Egyptians, the Indians, the Chinese, the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians are all founded on integrative representations of the physical and metaphysical universe. (Gombrich 1975 pp. 13-14) From a Buddhist point of view the 'strong force' within matter is mind. As absolute reality is voidness, and the objective reality of things is relative, the collective imagination's power to shape things is unlimited. Insight into voidness releases powerful visualizations capable of bringing pure Buddha lands into reality. The Tantric mandala is a representational device deployed in realising these environments of universal enlightenment. Two dimensional geometric mandalas in materials like paint and sand and three dimensional constructed ones are used to trigger inner visualizations of subtle cosmological environments within which the adept locates himself or herself. These 'heavenscapes' or realms of peace have the power to foster wisdom and compassion in our mundane physical universe, drawing it towards the perfected state (Thurman 1991, pp. 33-38).

6. Soteriological Instrumentality

In the sculptural tradition of South India, form is realised by way of meditation or *Yoga*. As Coomaraswamy (1935, pp. 5-6) explains, the image of a *devata*, latent in canonical prescription, is inwardly visualized by the icon maker, or *stapathi*, in a meditative act of 'non-differentiation'. From this inner image he then proceeds to execute the sculpture in a chosen material. In an enlightened comparison Gardener (1982, p. 478) notes that "the Hindu visual arts bear more resemblance to the performance arts of the West than to its visual arts". The textual codification of Hindu iconography is analogous to the score in Western music. The sculptural image is realised in an interpretive 'performance' of sacred text in which the performer imparts his 'vital force'. The worshipper, in turn, applies his or her own 'imaginative energy' to the physical icon, 'realising' the *devata* within the 'immanent space in the heart'. (Coomaraswamy 1935, p. 26) The icon is not simply an object of aesthetic perception. It is a sotereological interface to the divine.

7. Applications of Digital Technology in Religious and Sacred Art Contexts

There is already a significant use of digital media for religious purposes. There are sites by the central institutions, smaller communities and congregations and by individuals. Many sites simply use the Internet to disseminate information but some seem to be extending their premises telematically. There is a strong indication that worship, communion, ministry, proselytising and religious education are now taking place on-line. There are also examples of non-religious art, architectural, archaeological (Maruzio & Alberto 1977) projects that attempt to articulate sacred form.

Appendix. Digital media for religious purpposes

Bardo 1995-1997:

http://fox.nstn.ca/~nstn1195/portfolio/pages/3d.html#bardo

Cyberchurch:

http://www.angelfire.com/ca/cyberchurch/

First Baptist Church Pottstown, 1998, First Baptist Church:

http://fbcpottstown.net/virtual.html

Gray, W. S. 1999, AuzGnosis: Demonstration of Virtual Reality:

http://www.virtualchurch.org/vcwelc.htm

Hieizan Enryakuji, 1997, Hieizan Enryakuji:

http://www.hieizan.or.jp/

Hindu Students Council: University of Michigan, Virtual Temple:

http://www.umich.edu/~hindu/temple/temple.html

Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago:

http://www.ramatemple.org/

Holy Koran in 12 Languages, 1999:

http://i.am/koran

Holy See:

http://www.vatican.va/

Ishiko, S. 1997, Daioh Temple of Daioh Mountain:

http://www.thezen.or.jp/

IslamiCity,1995:

http://islamicity.com/

Jews for Jesus:

http://www.jewsforjesus.org/

Kali Mandir:

http://www.kalimandir.org/index.html

Leonard, E.M. 1991, The Electronic Scriptorium:

http://www.electronicscriptorium.com/

Lubavitch News Service, Chabad-Lubavitch:

http://www.chabadonline.com/

Mu'min Pictures, 1997, The Voice of Islam:

http://www.islam.org/voi/mosquee.htm

Online Christian Community:

http://jabi.com/church/

Online Darshan:

http://www.onlinedarshan.com/

On-Line Temples:

http://www.shivatemple.net/mandir/

Seto, A., Dhundup, T., Jackson, D. & Onada, S. 1997, Atsuro's 3D Mandala VRML World:

http://club.pep.ne.jp/~terukoseto/vrml/vrml.htm

Shakir, M.H. (trans.) 2000, The Koran:

http://www.hti.umich.edu/k/koran/

Shimada, M. 1997, The 3 Dimensional Mandala of Vajrayogini:

http://www-personal.umich.edu/~miyash/VRPage/manYogini/manYogini.html

Shi-tro Mandala for Universal Peace:

http://www.shi-tromandala.com/main.html

Shree Ganeshay Namah:

http://www.ravivaranasi.com/Culture/Ganesh/Pooja.html

Smethwick Old Church:

http://www.smethwickoldchurch.fsnet.co.uk/

Sri Satayanarana Temple:

http://www.cvhts.org/

Sri Siva Vishnu Temple:

http://www.ssvt.org/

Sri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple of Greater London:

http://www.venkateswara.org.uk/

Sri Venkateswara Temple of Greater Chicago:

http://www.balaji.org/

Summit University Press, 1994, Mandala of The Five Dhyani Buddhas:

http://www.tsl.org/teachings/masters/dhyani/frintroduction.html

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, 1999:

http://www.hindutempleofatlanta.org/

The Office of Tibet, 1996, The Government of Tibet in Exile:

http://www.tibet.com/

The Worldwide Virtual Church from Scotland, 2001, The Web Church:

http://www.webchurch.org/

UOC

Udaseen, A. S. S. G. M., Ved Mandir:

http://www.vedmandir.org/

Virtual Church, 1995, A Religious Experience Without Walls:

http://www.virtualchurch.org/vcwelc.htm

Virtual Puja Room:

http://www.pujaroom.com/

Vishnav's Havelt:

http://www.geocities.com/Athens/6035/

Voice of the Vedas Cultural Sabha Inc., Vishnu Mandir:

http://www.netwave.ca/vishnumandir/

Wakita, A. 2000, Zen-Temple Walking:

http://www.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~wakita/Gallery/Temple/temple.html

Yukai, S., Shingon Buddhist School:

http://perso.club-internet.fr/thmodin/English/indexuk.html

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<http://telematic.walkerart.org/overview/index.html>

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<http://www.ecafe.com/getty/table.html>

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http://www.caiia-star.net

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