The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Or, What Happens When Peasants “Get Hold” of Images

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[Silent film] has to achieve its effect visually, without the aid of the spoken word. The result is an exaggeration of physical expression and suggestive action. Every device is employed in order to intensify the visual impression, such as the well-known device of the “close-up,” and thus a peculiarly direct and vivid impression is produced upon the mind of the spectator.

REPORT OF THE INDIAN CINEMATOGRAPH COMMITTEE, 1927–28

It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.

WALTER BENJAMIN, Illuminations

One of the achievements of Michael Taussig’s Mimesis and Alterity is to rescue—through a creatively idiosyncratic reading—Walter Benjamin’s 1936 “Work of Art” essay from a utopian hypothesis about the consequences of mechanical reproduction (which all known evidence contradicts), in favor of a complex set of insights about the sensory procedures involved in “getting hold” of images. The stress on the new mimetic technologies’ creation of “an object-implicated enterprise” and on the eye as an organ of tactility (Taussig 1993: 24, 21) is a productive starting point for theorizing the impact of the first Indian-made films in the second decade of the twentieth century, which reconstituted the cinema as a zone of sensory mutuality in which the “space of contemplation” had been abolished.

In this paper I argue that this zone of mutuality, which is so evident in much popular early cinema, is equally apparent in film’s interocular bedfellow, popular chromolithography. The consumption of these images by central Indian peasants in the village of Bhatisuda in Madhya Pradesh forms the central focus of my discussion. The detail and nuance of the later material make evident the complex specificity of popular Hindu discourses about the mutuality and tactility of vision. My intention, however, is not simply to map
out a local media practice that stands apart from other better-known ones, but to explore the parallels across a range of visual practices that the close study of one case helps to bring into a better focus.

The popular Indian practices discussed here may appear on the face of it to be radically different from dominant authorized “Western” practices, but it is my claim that the distance between diverse popular practices is, in fact, surprisingly small. My strategy parallels the use made of anthropological analyses of Melanesian personhood to destabilize the mythic authorized modes of Western personhood. Thus in developing my argument with reference to Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger among others, my desire is not to overscript the ethnographic material in terms of a sovereign Western reason but—in explicit opposition to this—to sketch out a countertheory of Western visuality that can meet, halfway, a different tradition with which it shares much in common. This confrontation is the ground on which a “provincialization” of Euro-American discourses can be explored (Chakrabarty 1992: 20–22).

Rather than attempting to reinscribe an opposition of cultural alterity, what I hope to demonstrate is the existence of hostile continua within societies in which there are strikingly similar oppositions between popular practices of corporeal visuality and elite “decarnalized” practices (Bryson 1983: 95). The anthropological study of media practices in this way draws our attention to the differences within and the similarities between “cultures.”

Read as utopian fantasy, Benjamin’s essay forecasts the decay of a reactionary, hierarchical “aura” as mechanical reproduction floods the world with copies whose “originals” cease to have any significance. Dissolving the originals’ “unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” mechanical reproduction “emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin 1992: 214, 218). Taken at face value, Benjamin’s thesis seems easily—indeed inevitably—refutable: its central argument can find little support from ethnographic and historical enquiry. Authors who have subsequently addressed these themes in diverse cultural contexts have acknowledged Benjamin’s provocations but reached opposed conclusions about the relationship between art objects and their reproductions. John Berger, for instance, wonderfully elaborates Benjamin’s propositions, noting the effect of transposing images from the places for which they were made into public realms of the ephemeral and ubiquitous (Berger 1972: 32). But while Berger can claim programmatically and in the true spirit of Benjamin that reproduction has destroyed “the authority of art,” his case studies suggest an entirely contrary effect. Here, as in the case of the Leonardo cartoon in London’s National Gallery, the mass dissemination of postcard reproductions serves to reinvest originals with a new aura. The original artwork now comes to embody what the reproduction lacks and must be enclosed in shrinelike security structures to protect them from the admiring, and sometimes hateful, gestures of their devotees:

“The bogus religiosity which now surrounds original works of art, and
which is ultimately dependent upon their market value, has become the substitute for what paintings lost when the camera made them reproducible” (Berger 1972: 230). While Berger does indeed echo Benjamin in a complex way, this re-auraticized object is difficult to reconcile with Benjamin’s central narrative. I might also mention here Mary Beard’s study of the most popular postcards in various London galleries and museums whose function she suggests are relics of visitors’ pilgrimage to the great temples of art and culture and affirmations of a canon of great objects and whose postcard dissemination underwrites further future pilgrimages (Beard 1992).

Stephen Sprague’s (1978) work on the role of photography in Yoruba ibeji cults records a similar underwriting (rather than dissolution) of cultic behavior. Mechanical reproduction in the form of photography has largely taken the place of wooden sculptural forms in this cultic veneration of twins. An appeal might be made to Benjamin’s stress on the manner in which “cult value does not give way without resistance” and finds its “ultimate retrenchment” in the “human countenance.” Ibeji photography would, by this reckoning be merely an affirmation of Benjamin’s concession that “the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture” (Benjamin 1992: 219). A skeptic, reading Benjamin without the benefit of Taussig, however, might detect a striking neutrality of technology as carving is replaced by mass-produced plastic dolls and then by the mimetic magic of the photograph. It is not that one needs the human face as an escape clause—as Benjamin suggests—so much as a wholesale revision of the argument, for there is no sign at all of mechanical reproduction enabling an emancipation from the parasitical dependence on ritual.

Benjamin’s observation that “every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” (Benjamin 1992: 217) has generally been read as a sign of the ineluctability of encroaching media practices that have increasingly virtualized the world. Taussig, however, suggests another approach that reconstitutes Benjamin’s work as centrally relevant for anthropological work on media. Taussig chooses to see Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious” not as “ebullient Enlightenment faith in a secular world of technological reason” in which “magic” is replaced by “science,” but rather as a visceral domain in which objects become sensorily emboldened in a “magical technology of embodied knowing” (Taussig 1993: 24).

Reading Benjamin through a Taussigian lens allows us to retain many of the “Work of Art” essay’s crucial insights without having to discard it as simply a flawed hypothesis. Recall that the simplistic reading of Benjamin might focus on his privileging of film as the ultimately cathartic mimetic technology with an unrivaled power to detach “the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” resulting in a “tremendous shattering.” For example, without Taussig’s lens it is difficult to reconcile the intention of and Indian
audience responses to D. G. Phalke’s early mythological movies with film’s “destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (Benjamin 1992: 215). In 1917, following his earlier successes, including Raja Harishchandra (1913), Phalke released Lanka Dahan (The Burning of Lanka) at the West End Cinema at Girgaum, Bombay, where it was shown every hour from 7 a.m. until midnight (Dharap 1985). This was Phalke’s greatest success and was a triumph for the actor A. Salunke, who played both the goddess Sita and the god Rama. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy record that when Rama appeared, the audience prostrated itself before the screen (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1963: 15). It has been claimed that when it was shown in Pune the crowds almost broke down the door and that in Madras the film’s takings had to be transported in a bullock cart with police protection (Dharap 1985: 43). An account of its Bombay opening by the filmmaker J. B. H. Wadia provides some sense of its huge impact upon the audience: “I remember that devout villagers from nearby Bombay had come in large numbers in their bullock carts to have darshan of their beloved God, the Lord Rama. The roadside was blocked with the caravan of bullock carts. Many of the villagers had stayed overnight in their improvised dwellings just to see the film again the next day” (Wadia 1985: 24). (Darshan is a practice of Hindu visuality predicated on the mutuality of “seeing and being seen” by the images of the deities one worships [Eck 1981].)

One year later, in 1918, Phalke released Shree Krishna Janma, of which a portion survives in the National Film Archive in Pune. The greater resources of the Hindustan Film Company enabled Phalke to present a greatly more sophisticated product, which as Suresh Chabria notes, “contains sequences of amazing virtuosity” that suggest comparison with Méliès. From the very start, as Chabria further observes in his stimulating analysis, Phalke “dazzles his audience with magical transformations appropriate to the subject of Vishnu’s avatars” (Chabria 1994: 105, 106). Chabria’s sensitive description of the remarkable opening sequences deserves to be cited at length:

*The plain Hindi calligraphy of the film’s title transforms to letters written with flowers. . . . Superimposed on this floral design appears a circle rotating in a metaphor of ceaseless time and representing the sudarshana-chakra or flaming discus which is one of the attributes of Vishnu and Krishna. Within this design a close up of the child Krishna is now seen in full frontality giving a prologue darshan to his devotees. It is as if the temple and the cinema hall are merged. (Chabria 1994: 106)*

The opening sequences of Shree Krishna Janma also conflate spectators and supplicants, filmic apparition and divine incarnation. After the initial shot of Krishna set against the swirling sudarshana-chakra, the cinema audience sees a foregrounded group of devotees with their backs to the camera beseeching the gods. A title appears: “All human efforts having turned out fu-
tile, the Almighty God is never at a great distance when prayed for sincerely and wholeheartedly” (cited by Rajadhyaksha 1987: 69). And then Vishnu rises magically from the waters revealing himself before the supplicants just as the film itself appears in front of the audience. There is then a series of shots in which the supplicants’ and Krishna’s gaze are interposed. As Rajadhyaksha notes, “Every shot is along the perpendicular axis of the gaze, emphasizing it, and reciprocating from within the frame” (1987: 70).

This “locking in” is a recurrent feature of Hindu devotional practice. There are many later filmic examples (some of which are discussed below), and it emerges as the key trope in chromolithograph consumers’ articulations of their relationships to images. It is also clearly expressive of darshan. However, I would suggest that this practice exceeds its discursive accompaniments. Local understandings of darshan must certainly nuance and finesse our understanding of popular Indian visuality, but underlying this there is a much more widespread practice of what I term “corpothetics” (sensory, corporeal aesthetics). This local Indian practice is certainly on the face of it dissimilar to dominant-class Western practices that privilege a disembodied, unidirectional, and disinterested vision. However, they are not strikingly unlike a whole range of culturally diverse popular practices that stress mutuality and corporeality in spaces as varied as those of religious devotion and cinematic pleasure. So while the power and specificity of local discourses is clearly crucial, I wish to resist a wholesale reduction of meaning to such discourses. Rather than create an anthropologized enclave of darshan-related practices, I am interested in the continuities and resonances with an emerging counterhistory of visuality that is in the process of destabilizing and provincializing (and in the process revealing as historically and sociologically fallacious) authorized dominant-class visualities in Europe, America, and elsewhere. The choice here should not be seen as simply one between a universalism and a cultural specificity (as is implied by Davis 1997: 265 n. 5), for there are also rhizomatic pathways (simultaneously implying similitude and difference) that establish a field which is less than universal and more than local.

Phalke’s “locked-in” and “reciprocated” gazes are expressions of an affective intensity that abolishes the “space of contemplation” conceptualized as a disembodied cerebral construction of the world as picture. Heidegger’s superb “The Age of the World Picture” was produced in 1935—one year before Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay, and there are certain intriguing parallels between them. Both essays develop extraordinarily broad and ambitious evolutionary narratives, and both are surely key reference points for an anthropology of media. In Benjamin’s optimistic history, the decay of an earlier situated aura is presaged by new technologies of picturing. In Heidegger’s pessimistic history, a positively valorized premodern dwelling is ruptured by what Martin Jay has termed “Cartesian perspectivalism” in which the world comes to be seen as picture—a zone of representation established as some-
thing exterior to existence. Picturing becomes inseparable from modernity: “The fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the modern age” (Heidegger 1977: 130).

Whereas for Parmenides, Heidegger argues, “man is the one who is looked upon by that which is” in the modern age, “that which is . . . come[s] into being . . . through the fact that man first looks upon it.” Looking upon the world and constructing the world as picture entails man placing himself against and before nature as something separate: the world is “placed in the realm of man’s knowing and of his having disposal” (Heidegger 1977: 131, 130).

Heidegger does not discuss the role of the body explicitly, but the world as picture clearly implies a separation between that picture and the look that addresses it “for the purposes of gaining mastery” (Heidegger 1977: 132). The Parmenidean paradigm invokes something akin to a Levy-Bruhlian mystical participation in which bodies are not detachable from the world. This sense of immersion and mutuality, which Heidegger locates in a premodernity, resonates with Elizabeth Grosz’s exploration of what Merleau-Ponty termed the “double sensation” of touching and being touched: “My right hand is capable of touching my left hand as if the latter were an object. But in this case, unlike any object, my left hand feels the right hand touching it. My left hand has the double sensation of being both the object and the subject of touch” (Grosz 1994: 100).

Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty can be seen as historiographers of a counterhistory of modernity that is of pressing relevance to anthropologists of visuality. The fragile counterhistory they gesture at suggests pathways toward a corporeal visuality—explicitly marked in some local practices (such as that in the central Indian village I will shortly describe) and though present, more difficult to recuperate in others.

In addition to the early filmic examples outlined above, there are vivid examples of the “double sensation” in more recent Hindi films. The celebrated Jai Santoshi Ma (1975) included several sequences in which the desperate heroine Satyavadi implores the assistance of Santoshi Ma. In these sequences—one of which has been discussed by Lawrence Babb (1981)—the goddess’s vision is shown as a physical extrusive force (a beam of scorching fire), and intercut shots of the Satyavadi’s and Santoshi’s faces are used repetitively to inscribe the mutuality of vision that binds the devotee to the goddess.

In Amar Akbar Anthony, released two years later in 1977, the process of darshan is literally vision-enhancing: being seen becomes the ground from which one’s own vision is possible. Chased by ruffians, the elderly blind mother of the three central characters is attracted by the noise of an ecstatic song in praise of Sai Baba conducted—in keeping with the ecumenical spirit of the film—by her son Akbar (for recondite reasons the three sons have been raised in different religions). While the congregation praises the visibility of god in the Shirdhi Sai Baba and his ability to relight lamps and to turn dark nights
of sorrows into brightness, the blind mother is ineluctably drawn by some mutual corporeal attraction toward the image in the temple. Though blind, she is compulsively drawn to the face and body of Sai Baba who—as the song proclaims the relighting of lamps—reciprocates her devotion with his own brightness in the form of two flames that migrate from his eyes to hers, liberating her from blindness. Touching Sai Baba’s feet, she proclaims her ability to see and to have darshan of the god and tells Akbar that it is thanks to his devotion and the Baba’s “magic” (chamatkar).

ACROSS GENRES AND MEDIA
Phalke’s work emerges from a wider popular visual culture in which mass-produced chromolithographs played a large part, and his films in turn influenced the production of later chromolithographic images. In addition to working as a photographer and a magician, Phalke had worked as a lithographic block maker at the Ravi Varma Press—the leading popular picture publisher of its day.

Phalke’s motivation in producing the “first Indian-made films” was explicitly nationalistic. He wanted to make films for Indian audiences, and Raja Harishchandra was advertised as “an entirely Indian production by Indians” (Chabria 1994: 9). The reappropriation of the technological means of control also involved the reappropriation of a space of perception. Within film, chromolithography, and studio photography one can trace parallel movements that involved the abolition of the space of contemplation and the intensification of an erotic tactility. Contemplation was integral to the disembodied, disinterested—what Susan Buck-Morss would call “anaesthetized”—aesthetics that indigenized Indian practice reacted against (Buck-Morss 1992). Contemplation—which was promulgated in India through colonial art schools from the mid-1850s onward—might be seen as concerned with “hermeneutics” in Sontag’s terms, its abolition allowing the emergence of a new “erotics” (Sontag 1986).

This new space was not simply visual. Ashis Nandy has written about the aural zone of mutuality that emerged during two hijackings of Indian Airlines jets by Sikh militants in 1984. In Nandy’s romanticized yet provocative reading, the claustrophobic technological space of the aircraft soon becomes configured by “the limits imposed by another moral order” (Nandy 1995: 22). Here Nandy gestures toward coterminous “vestigial dialects” that resonate with Heidegger’s idealized premodernity.

A significant element in the articulation of this new morality was the meeting ground afforded by popular Hindi film music. A young hijacker sang “melancholy songs of separation and love from Hindi films,” and the passengers asked him to sing more. For Nandy (and here I identify very closely with his project) this is evidence of a Ginzburgian subaltern resource-
fulness—the ability to conjure up “vestigial traces of a dialect which everyone had half-forgotten” and that were likely to jar the sensitivities of the Indian haute bourgeoisie.

Parallel, though differently historically located strategies, can be seen at play in the privileging of “frontality” in early Indian film (Rajadhyaksha 1987; Kapur 1987) and of the “surface” in early chromolithography. Elsewhere I have argued that this increasing preoccupation with the surface can be seen in part as a rejection of a Cartesian perspectivalism associated with an ethically dubious colonial rationality (see Pinney 1999). Many of the earliest Indian-produced chromolithographs incarnate a series of colonial concerns with the utility of single-point perspective and the necessity of defusing the magical power of images through such technical procedures. Concomitant to this, ritually efficacious images became “representationally” efficacious inasmuch as they came to be judged as successful or otherwise implementations of colonially authorized strategies (“realism,” “perspectivalism,” etc). In the early twentieth century there was a growing sense that these strategies were themselves ethically and politically problematic and required rejection or revision in favor of another figural zone. This rejection is marked in various ways, including the “dressing” and adornment of images in such a way that accreted surfaces occlude depth, through an energizing of antiperspectival neotraditional and neofolk forms that stylistically renounce the colonial, and through the emergence of a magical realist aesthetic that—like Carpentier’s notion of the Baroque—“flees from all geometrical arrangements” (Carpentier 1995: 93).

It is against this historical background that the current rural somatic and “corporethic” consumption of Hindu chromolithographs must be understood. These chromolithographs are produced throughout India by many different companies and may be divided into “framing pictures” and “calendar pictures.” The former (which in this local context constitute the overwhelming majority) used to refer to those images printed with a white border that purchasers would frequently have framed, although it now includes large, laminated, bled-to-the-edge images that are almost never framed. Calendar images (the majority of which are printed in Sivakasi in southern India) all have a distinct size and format and are printed with a section beneath the main image that is left blank for local overprinting. Within the national economy the vast majority of calendar images are distributed free by commercial concerns to their clients, but in the Indian village in central India that I am concerned with, most calendars have been purchased from local stalls and may or may not have overprinting on them.

The village of Bhatisuda—where I have investigated this and other issues intermittently since the early 1980s—is located in Madhya Pradesh, about halfway between Bombay and Delhi. It is near the main railway line linking those two cities and lies six kilometers from Nagda, a major industrial town.
in whose industrial plants a significant number of villagers either work or have recently worked.

Although it is undoubtedly true that in certain key respects popular Hinduism mobilizes a recuperative idiom within a decaying universe, it is fundamentally constructed by what the playwright Brian Friel (in a very different context) once described as a “syntax opulent with tomorrows” (Friel 1981: 42). Mass reproduction gives formerly excluded classes access to all the high gods they can approach directly, in search of their tomorrows, without the intercession of priests. Chromolithographs are popular across all castes and religious groups. Jains and Muslims own images as well as Hindus, and Scheduled Caste Chamars and (warrior) Rajputs or (priestly) Brahmans own similar numbers of images. Across the village as a whole there is an average of 6.9 images per household. These are usually displayed (tacked to the mud wall or propped up in frames) above a thin wooden shelf on which there are various puja accoutrements (incense stick holders, small bells, and various offerings, together with small three-dimensional clay and metal statues of deities). The “syntax opulent with tomorrows” that emerges in Bhatisuda practice is one that springs from a corpothetic practice (that is, an embodied sensory aesthetics) in which it is the devotee’s visual and bodily performances that contribute crucially to the potential power—one might say completion—of the image.

Some sense of the mechanism here can be gleaned from this fragment with a taped interview with Lila—a village “sweeper”—in which the gradual transformation that overtakes an image following its purchase is discussed:

[CP:] When the picture is [for sale in the market] is there any shakti [energy] in the picture?

[Lila:] It’s just paper. That’s all? Yes, paper. It’s just paper, it hasn’t been “seated” [baithana]. You see those pictures that are “seated”? [Lila pointed to the images on the wall.] Those are paper, but by placing them before our eyes [ankh rakhna = to love, to entertain friendship, to admire], shakti [energy] has come into them, . . . We take [the pictures] inside and do puja. We place agarbatti [incense sticks] against his name, against the god’s name. Yes, it’s a paper photo but we recite, we recite while the agarbatti burns. OK, so it’s a paper photo but [that makes no difference]. We entreat the god and the god comes out because the god is saluted. That’s how it is.

The image is installed through “seating” it, and the alienable commodity becomes an inalienable embodiment of the divine, which generates a performative praxis grounded in affective intensity.

The other sense in which Bhatisuda images are opulent with tomorrows lies in the stress on their capacity to give barkat—plenitude. Samvaliyaji, a local incarnation of Krishna, is an example par excellence of a deity who gives
barkat. Whereas orthodox deities such as Shiva are considered essential to alaukik labh (disinterested profit—that is, transcendental concerns), Samvaliyaji can produce bhautik labh (material or physical profit). Under the general label of bhautik, various predicaments are subsumed: uncertainties relating to wealth and bodily health and illness, and matters relating to employment and agricultural productivity.

The consumption of images by Bhatisuda villagers needs to be understood in terms of the processes of bodily empowerment that transform pieces of paper into powerful deities through the devotee’s gaze, the proximity of his or her heart, and a whole repertoire of bodily performances in front of the image (breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking small bells, the utterance of mantras).

In Bhatisuda I once asked Pukhraj Bohra whether blind people could have darshan of a murti (statue). His response helps elucidate both the sequence in the film Amar Akbar Anthony discussed above and the general question of the relationship between visual and broader corporeal perceptions. “Oh yes,” he replied, “you get darshan through divyajyotish [lit. divine radiance, related to divyachaksu and divya drishti (divine vision)]. If your disposition is truthful an internal vision will let you know that the image is in front of you.”

The most fundamental mark of the images’ sensory quality—their predisposition to this corpothermal regime—is their ocular directness. The vast majority of images behold their owners directly, engaging and returning their vision. As Diane Eck observes, the primacy of sight as the idiom of articulation between deity and devotee is lexically marked so that devotees will usually stress that they are going to the temple for darshan, to see and be seen by the deity: it is this “exchange of vision [that] lies at the heart of Hindu worship” (Eck 1981: 6).

The desire to see and be seen by deities is also evidenced in the prevalence of mirrored images within the village. Frequently these are mass-produced paper prints that have been carefully mounted behind partially mirrored glass. The central image of the deity remains visible, surrounded by a complex tracery of tain in which the devotee sees his or her own face in proximity to the deity. These images are usually associated with pilgrimage. Darshan can be thought of as a physical relationship of visual intermingling. The value of images is related to the visual access they give to the deity. Mirrored images allow the devotee to (literally) see himself looking at the deity (in this case there is a double corpothermal—of the devotee’s movement through space on the pilgrimage where he bought the image, and of the devotee’s visual elision with the deity when he places himself in front of the image).

Underlying all the overlapping oppositions that have been outlined above is a distinction between a disinterested anaesthetics that proposes a disembodied unidirectional vision and an aesthetics that stresses the mutuality of seeing and being seen. This mutuality of perception is also expressed in sto-
ries concerning the akarshan (allurement) that images can produce. Pukhraj Bohra related how the murti of the Jain tirthankara Nageshvar Pareshavar near Alod (in Madhya Pradesh) had exerted its hold over him. He first went there fifteen years ago and made a man (wish). He asked that his business should go well and that the crops should prosper, and then he returned to the village. But there was some psychic (mansik) effect from this, some allurement (akarshan) born in the murti. When he was away he felt that he had to go back and see the image, had to see it again and again.

In the village, the overlaying of a purely visual perception with tactile extensions that feed into a broader haptic field is apparent in other modes of image customization. The application of glitter or zari (brocade) or the adhesion of paper surrounds or plastic flowers moves the image closer to the devotee. It transforms the ostensible representation or window into a figurative surface deeply inscribed by the presence of the deity and the work of the devotee and links the image with the wider field of what Bourdieu terms the postural schemes within which it is embedded.

Arati is a procedure in image worship in which a flame is moved in a circle around an image. In Bhatisuda, villagers then cup their hands over the flame and wash the blessing from the deity onto their face. Ramdevji ki arati, painted by B. G. Sharma in the mid-1950s (and still in print), exists in several copies in the village and in this artist’s characteristically semiotically dense manner inserts the narrative of the deity Ramdev into the very act of worship. The process of darshan and the transmission of the “content” of the picture onto the devotee’s face becomes itself the subject and dictates the form of the picture.

Finally we may note that the whole process of the progressive empowerment of images through daily worship involves a continual burdening of the surface with traces of this devotion. Although some households replace all their images every year at Divali, most have a number of old images that continue to accrue potency as they become accreted with the marks of repeated devotion—vermilion tilaks placed on the foreheads of deities, the ash from incense sticks, smoke stains from burning camphor.

Even at the end of its life, a picture’s trajectory is determined by corpothetic requirements, in this case the necessity of ensuring that the image never comes into contact with human feet. Again a fragment from a conversation with Lila:

[The images] are paper, and when they have gone kharab [bad] we take them from the house and put them in the river. That way we don’t get any pap [sin]. [CP: You don’t throw them away?] No, no, we don’t throw them away. You take them out of the house and put them in the river or in a well, and place them under the water. This way they won’t come under anyone’s feet. You mustn’t throw them away or they will get lost. That’s the tamizdar [proper; decorous] way to do it—in the river or well. In our jat we say thanda kardo—make cold. That way they won’t come under [anyone’s] feet.
Bihari, a Bhatisuda resident, holds a mirrored version of a B. G. Sharma chromolithograph depicting Ramdevji. The framed print was purchased by Bihari at Ramdevra, the main Ramdevji pilgrimage center. (Photo: Christopher Pinney)
I asked Pannalal whether he threw his old pictures away: “No no, no. It’s become just like a small temple [madhi]. We put them in water, we break a coconut and give them paraba\(^4\) in the water. If you throw them in the street they will come under someone’s feet.” In Hindi the phrase pair ankh se lagana literally means to look at the feet; idiomatically, “to respect, venerate” and to touch someone’s feet is to physically express one’s obeisance. Certain images in Bhatisuda encode this hierarchical relationship in which the devotee submits his body—through his eyes—to the feet of the deity.\(^5\) It is fundamentally important to Bhatisuda villagers that the bodies of the deities that they have so carefully brought to life should not suffer the dangerous indignity of having this relationship reversed.

**DISTANCING ART**

Several dozen of the images in Bhatisuda village are the work of Bhanwarlal Girdharilal Sharma, known as “B. G. Sharma.” Sharma, founder of Sharma Picture Publications, has profoundly influenced the nature of contemporary mass-picture production in postcolonial India. After an abortive period of study at the J. J. School of Art in Bombay just before independence, he published images of Hindu deities and political leaders with Har Narayan of Jodhpur, S. S. Brijbasi, and other outlets before founding his own company in 1951. His distinctive application of a brash palette to the aesthetics inculcated through an upbringing in a traditional Brahman painting tradition in the Rajasthani pilgrimage town of Nathdwara gained him an enormous pan-Indian market, and all other companies and artists had subsequently to adjust to this style to maintain a toehold in the market. Sharma’s images remain extremely popular and have a wide currency throughout rural India, where many millions of peasants worship deities made visible in Sharma Picture Publications chromolithographs.

B. G. Sharma now lives in a large personal museum in Udaipur. Hanging on the marble walls are signs of the global recognition that have come to him since the 1970s—including a framed letter from Nancy Reagan and a photograph of Sharma with Roger Moore taken while the James Bond movie *Octopussy* was filmed at Udaipur.

In the early 1990s, when I met with him several times, he was keen to distance himself from his earlier work, having found a new idiom through which to express his talent. His earlier populism is a source of unease, and he refers to his 1950s work as the sort of thing one might encounter on the “footpath” (sidewalk). “Nowadays I do very little work in this style, I do most in Mughal style . . . large cloth paintings, on ivory, or watercolors on paper.” Whereas he says his earlier “commercial work” was “rough” and “ordinary,” his present “classical” work requires great patience and skill. His testimonial books are crammed with comments from the famous and the worthy: Rajiv Gandhi wrote, “I’m delighted that the ancient Indian artistic spirit has once again come alive.”
B. G. Sharma’s unease draws our attention to the simultaneous existence within India of what Hans Belting (1994) referred to as “an era of art” and an “era before art” or what Walter Benjamin referred to as the regimes of the “exhibitional” and the “cultic.” Sharma’s predicament results from the realization that his art discourses are not reciprocated by his consumers, who desire objects of ritual utility that they can “get hold of.” In the local “export of meaning” (Liebes and Katz 1990) a cultic domain of popular consumption emerges whose preferences and expectations are very different from those of the images’ producers. Taussig’s rereading of Benjamin permits us to rethink the ways in which local consumers “get hold” of mechanically produced images and to at last recognize the significance of Valery’s claim (with which Benjamin prefaced “The Work of Art” essay): “In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be” (cited by Benjamin 1992: 211).

NOTES
1. The quoted phrase appears in a contemporary ad reproduced by Chabria.
2. Members of 117 households in the village were interviewed in 1995–96, and Lila’s testimony is consistent with all but one of the others.
3. This corporethetics is often reinscribed as the owner traces the journey either with his eyes or his fingers in recalling the journey. Bhavaralal Ravidas pointed out various parts of his Pavagadh image as he traversed a mountainous pathway depicted in the image with his finger: “There is a temple here that you can’t visit because there is a tiger living near the path.”
4. The Hindi equivalent of this Malwi term is visarjan, meaning “ritual cooling.”
5. These include, for instance, photographic images of a Surat-based guru, Shri Paramhansji (illustrated in Pinney 1997: 166) and some Jain images of the (literal) footprints of acharyas.

REFERENCES