

# SANKUKA'S DREAM: PERFORMATIVE MIMESIS OR ANUKRITI WITHOUT A TRUTH CLAIM IN THE REALM OF VIRTUAL REALITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is the reinterpret the term 'Anukriti' in the digital age. Finding brief mention in the age-old text of Natyashastra, the term has witnessed a fairly tumultuous discourse with an albeit brief and lackluster outcome in the ancient Indian texts. In the Information age, however, the idea of mimesis without truth claims, or 'Anukriti' find increasing pertinence. This is explored through a thorough immersion into the debates on Anukriti and the critique extolled by Abhinavagupta. The paper makes effective use of Parul Dave Mukherji's analysis in "Who is Afraid of Mimesis: Contesting the Common Sense of Indian Aesthetics through the Theory of Mimesis or Anukaraṇa Vāda.", which opens up the discourse on Anukriti to a range of exciting possibilities. Using Jaques Derrida's concept of 'differance', Baudrillard's simulacra, and Deleuze's idea of 'becoming', the paper expands the concept of Anukriti to explain instances of performative mimesis in digital era, with a specific focus on V.R. art. The paper employs several examples starting from the pop-culture movement, all the way up to Virtual Reality experiences in 2020, to understand performative mimesis or Anukriti, which is pervasive in our cybernetic world.*

In 2002, Ben Langlands and Nikki Bell began exploring the boundless potential of Virtual Reality programs. They developed a project called *The House of Osama bin Laden* simulating his hide-out in Afghanistan. Viewers/participants could navigate the space using a joystick. The project was a result of a research-oriented visit to Afghanistan the same year and aimed to explore the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent U.S. military action. Virtual Reality programs make use of a specific kind of technology that facilitates human-machine interaction within a simulated environment. The simulated environment may be real or fantastic. Initially, chiefly associated with the gaming industry, the technology has now ventured into diverse sectors including military, education, commerce, and art. In the context of these constructed environments and simulations, ideas about the original, the copy, and the imitation becomes pertinent. The purpose of this paper is to locate the relevance of Anukriti, as a term encompassing both mimesis and mimicry, in the

contemporary digital simulacra. The aim is to understand the transformation of the term with reference to experiments being done in the sphere of digital photography & art, AI, and VR. The paper wishes to pose Anukriti as an evolved form of traditional performative mimesis illustrating (in the contemporary digital moment) mimesis without a truth claim in Baudrillard's capacious simulacra.

The term 'Anukriti' comes from the seminal Indian dramaturgical text of *Natyashastra*. It is constituted of 'anu' and 'krti' – which translates into "acting-after", i.e., imitation or mimicry. It held central importance in the canon until the 11<sup>th</sup> century which is when Abhinavagupta extols his resonant critique and extinguishes Anukritivaad totally in his *Abhinavabharti*. The term imitation derives from the Greek, 'mimesis', which is a term that has been an active part of the discourse since Plato's time. However, the two terms aren't a direct translation of each other. In fact, in Bharat Gupta's

*Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian*, he compares the two terms and concludes that Anukriti results in the creation of a new work that is “independent and self-sufficient”. The best way to define Anukriti, perhaps, is through the lens of performance, where mimesis and mimicry intersect. Therefore, we can define Anukriti as a form of performative mimesis. Even in the debate around it in *Abhinavabharti*, the text doesn’t differentiate between mimicry and mimesis, in fact, it uses Anukriti to refer to them both. And although, the term finds acute contestation in the realm of performance, it is welcomed with open arms in the *Shilpashastras*, and especially in the *Citrasutra* of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* which included terms such as ‘anukarna’ and ‘satya’. Resemblance-making or ‘sadrshya karanam’ was the chief aim of a painter.

A brief historiography of the debate on Anukriti from *Abhinavabharti* will offer a clearer understanding of the term and its relationship with its Greek counterpart. There were two factions – one that supported Anukriti, and the other that denied its legitimacy. The debate begins with Bhatta Lollata’s *Upacitivada* that explains rasa as that which results from an “intensification of the ordinary movement of the mind” resulting from the effects of the play, the production, and the performance. Here, the actor is the ‘copy’ of the character (original) in the text. It is Sankuka who foregrounds mimesis and evolves *upacitivada* into *anukarnavaad*. He grounds his theory in *anumana* logic (inference), which is one of the factors that differentiates it from the Platonian and Aristotelian understanding of mimesis. One of the most important points that Sankuka makes is the distinction he posits between illusion and delusion. All creative acts demand an acceptance of illusion, while delusion, for Sankuka, is what the untrained eye achieves. Referring to an example of a painted horse, he says, the question of whether or not the horse is real is irrelevant. He vehemently dissociates art from truth claims. According to him, doubt has no role to play in the world of representations. The artist need not create realism to perform Anukriti, the artist must create an

*anushadhana* (correspondence) between the horse and the marks on the canvas.

Abhinavagupta, following his guru Bhatta Tauta, questions the *anukarnavadins*. He poses hypothetical questions, such as – in a play, are the spectators aware that the actor is imitating some character. He says that while an actor can mimic bodily movements, it’s not possible to mime emotions. And even if you take Anukriti to mean miming body movements and gestures, you arrive at a logical absurdity, since such a category becomes infinitesimally large. The anti-anukriti faction even rejected generality as mimesis, claiming that although generality was a real category, the way that a cow may depict cowness is not the same as the way an actor would represent Ram and Ramness, and that each individual performance would be different. And finally, the critique that demolished the *anukritivadins* was concerning the fact that the actor was not some empty vessel. That the actor, pretending to be a character, would ultimately have to draw from their own well of emotions and experiences to create some form of *rasa-nishpathi*. In the process, according to the opponents of Anukriti, the actor displaces the character, and hence it would not make sense to say that they’re imitating their own emotions.

In the case of visual arts, Anukriti was undermined to defend Indian art against the prominent colonial opinion that saw Indian art as barbaric. The art historians of the time (20<sup>th</sup> century) defended Indian art by accruing to it the claim of being transcendentalist. The *Shilpashastras*, discovered around the 1920s were instrumental in creating this position. This position was pit against western Naturalism and therefore, Anukriti had to be pushed aside. This only strengthened the colonial position that held mimesis in art in high regard, while also creating strict binaries between Indian and Western art. For Parul Dave Mukherji, the only way to break away from the west/non-west binary is by turning to native theories of art that can forge new instruments of analysis. This is where she positions the framework of comparative aesthetics. A native theory of the arts cannot emerge from a

totally native framework – it must emerge from a dialogue with contemporary theories. She rejects a purist approach, and says, “To say that in the Indian context, the perceptible world was of no consequence to cultural practice on grounds of some inherent autonomy of mental images (Coomaraswamy/Bharat Gupt) or ritualistic immersion in non-Western art (Potolsky) or lack of distinction between image and reality (Lefevre) is an exercise in epistemic violence.”

What’s interesting here is the relationship of realism and naturalism with mimesis. If we take a peek at the cultures outside the west, we find that realism is not their goal. Take for example, Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, highly conventional, but considered abstract from the western lens. The distinction between art and reality, so important for Plato, is not taken very seriously here. Realism, Potolsky tells us, defines mimesis as exact reproduction of nature, and focuses on the relationship between works and the world. He tells us that the evolution of all our technologies including the still camera, the motion picture camera, and consequently, and presently, V.R., are all attempts to figure out better ways of depicting reality, but that they are preoccupied by the traditional ideas around mimesis. He goes as far as suggesting “that it is only because Plato defined art by its more or less accurate reproduction of the real that linear perspective or photography or virtual reality can be understood to mark progress in art, rather than just a change in medium or style.” Nineteenth century realism was captivated by the quotidian. Potolsky questions this fixation with depicting everyday life, about whether it was essential to realism. He gives us examples from science fiction films that use realism to represent the extra-terrestrial and supernatural, and magical realist novelists like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who render “the unreal familiar or the real strangely unfamiliar.” Mimesis, Potolsky tells us, has a flexible definition that changes across cultures and contexts. Imitation, for him, is not simply deference to the past. He gives us literary examples of Dante and Milton imitating Virgil’s *Aenid*, but at the same time

contrasting Christian ideals with pagan antiquity. Imitation, in such cases, is what leads to intertextuality. Potolsky discusses Dionysius who advocated that imitation was closer to emulation. That imitations “should reproduce the ‘natural grace and charm’ of the model, not just its verbal and stylistic features.”

One pertinent question that inevitably pecks at this discussion of mimesis, imitation, and Anukriti is about the relationship between the original and the copy. In Abhinavagupta’s final critique of Anukritivaad, he talks about a painting of a cow. He says that a painter can create an image of a cow but cannot manifest one in reality. Interestingly, Sankuka derides precisely this very question of the real in the context of aesthetic representation. The only place he falters at is when he claims that aesthetic experience is discursive (as an imitation), and non-discursive at the same time, in that, it should transcend the realms of right and wrong. According to Parul Dave Mukherji, we must understand the performative forces of Anukriti in Indian visual arts where the “epistemological status of an image need not coincide with its truth claim.” The very same truth claim that Sankuka disparages. Mimetic action equals constant illusion and displacement. It is only because he relies on inferential (anumana) logic that ontology finds its way back in to smack Anukriti down. For Potolsky, it is imitation that makes an original an original. It turns the original into a model that can be used for further imitation. This is rather different from the way Benjamin would explain the relationship between the copy and the original. For him, the copy diminishes the value/aura of the original.

In 1984, Andy Warhol created a series of re-imagined masterpieces. His *Birth of Venus (After Botticelli)* is part of a set of six images of the same composition, 4 on canvas, and 2 on linen, each in a separate colorway. Venus is against a salmon pink background, cropped, turning Botticelli’s flowing masterpiece into a stunning portrait, an older icon to stand beside his Monroe series. It’s Venus in technicolor. He repackages art history and presents it as a pop icon creating subversion. His silkscreens

question popular culture and its canonizing powers. His Venus is “an image of an image, with no reason but a surface reason” (Sherman and Dalton, *Andy Warhol*, 2009). What is the truth claim that his silk-screens make, in fact, what is the truth claim that even Botticelli’s Venus makes? Warhol isn’t interested in faithful representation of the original.



Figure 1. (left) *Birth of Venus (After Botticelli)* by Andy Warhol (source: christies.com) seen in comparison with (right) *Botticelli's Birth of Venus* (source: wikipedia commons)

He subverts the image using techniques of repetition and mass-production that were closely linked to his pop-art practice. He detaches the image from its original context, and then repeats it, talking about the proliferation of visual culture and especially images in contemporary society.

Much more recently in 2019 Pushpamala N. exhibited a show at Delhi’s Nature Morte gallery. Her work included photographs, videos, sculptures, all a culmination of her photo-performances. Her practice involves re-creating already existing images for the camera, these are mostly self-portraits that are composed within an elaborately and meticulously designed mise-en-scene. In the image titled, *Bharat Mata (After 1905 painting by A.N Tagore)*, she painstakingly re-creates A.N. Tagore’s iconic *Bharat Mata* painting, which was an icon of swadeshi nationalism. In fact, interestingly, we even see the transcendentalist Sadanga-inspired aesthetics manifested in the painting by Tagore that artists in 20<sup>th</sup> century were adopting, as a rebuttal to

colonial naturalism that we talked about earlier. In this image, we can clearly see a kind of performative mimesis without a truth claim, i.e., Anukriti without a truth claim playing itself out. Like Warhol, Pushpamala subverts art history by literally performing the role of Bharat Mata from the painting, creating the exact same mise-en-scene; only this is a photograph. We see how performative mimesis has led to the creation of something new. She comments on the currents of nationalism that were charged up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (when the painting was made) and the current revivalist/nationalist trends underway in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Figure 2. (left) N. Pushpamala's Photo performance as Bharat Mata (source: Naturemorte.com)

This idea of performative mimesis (Anukriti) without a truth claim is what V.R. technologies aim to perfect. V.R. experiences require headsets that display panoramic vision. The visuals are synchronised to the user's eye and body movement. Artists have been experimenting with V.R. for a little over a decade now and have come up with truly exciting work that engage the viewer and demand their participation. Artist Anish Kapoor, in 2018, created a Virtual Reality artwork titled, *Into Yourself, Fall*, in collaboration with Acute Art. He takes the viewers into a constructed journey into the human body. He curates an experience for the viewer where as soon as we put on the headset, we're transported into a forest scene, smack in the middle of a clearing. Trees encircle the user as they encounter a black hole on the ground, into which you fall, travelling through tunnels made of flesh and muscles. He wanted to create a physical experience through a virtual medium, disorienting the viewer/participant and forcing them to introspect. With a

complementary soundtrack, the experience is totally immersive. Kapoor wants to create a visceral effect. The camera rotates a full 360, creating spiralling motions, dizzying the spectator. He explores the sublime in the vertiginous fall into the unknown that is your own body. As an artist, Kapoor has been preoccupied by the relationship between the material and immaterial, and Virtual Reality offers him the perfect playfield to have these interact in ways that can be viscerally experienced by the spectator. His constructed environment does not offer any truth claim. In fact, the artist doesn't claim to represent any objective reality. Instead, an imaginative reality is presented that offers a strange kind of phenomenological experience. And despite the absence of a truth claim, the artwork elicits strong emotional reactions. The viewer, in a way, performs or participates to construct meaning, not simply cognitively, but by actively exploring and co-creating a journey.



Figure 3. Still from Anish Kapoor's "Into Yourself, Fall" (source: acuteart.com)



To bring back Sankuka here, it is not about whether it's a real forest, or a real void, or real muscles. He also said that mimetic action involves perpetual displacement. In this case, the meaning is constantly transforming. Jacques Derrida too, in his *Of Grammatology*, explains how writing entails the processes of iteration and repetition, and how this compromises the concept of a fixed original meaning. His concept of "differance" explains how meaning is constantly deferred and never fixed. He explicates for us that there is no direct relationship between a sign and its referent. For him, any imitation would involve his play of differences and therefore, no one is the same. For Baudrillard too there is no distinction between the real and the simulated, in fact, contemporary society is replete with signs detached from their original referents, acting as autonomous entities. For him, there are 3 levels of simulation. The first is that of faithful representation, in which symbols reflect a hidden reality. The second level entails the perversion of reality – where signs and symbols take on autonomous lives such as in Disneyland. The third order is that of hyper-reality, where signs and symbols are disconnected from reality, creating a

simulated hyper-reality, as in *Into Yourself, Fall*. According to Baudrillard, this infestation of autonomous signs and symbols leads to meaning getting flattened, and a blurring of the lines between reality and representation. In a simulated, hyper-real world, faithful mimesis is impossible. Here, mimesis may be viewed as a simulation of a simulation of a simulation. Representations lose their referentiality, and float around as signs, waiting to be attached to signifiers. Gilles Deleuze explains it in the best way. He thinks of repetition in terms of a transformative process, involving a constant production of differences, and constantly in a state of becoming, constantly creating new multiplicities and assemblages. For him, the virtual is a space of infinite possibility, while the actual consists of the manifestations of that which is created in the virtual. Something we see happening in, say, Harshit Agarwal's *Masked Reality*, where virtual portraits are turned into 3-D printed sculptures. For Deleuze, mimesis is not equal to copying, but entails a transformative process that creates new realities. Again here, we see Bharat Gupta's understanding of Anukriti as creating new work that is independent and self-sufficient at play here.

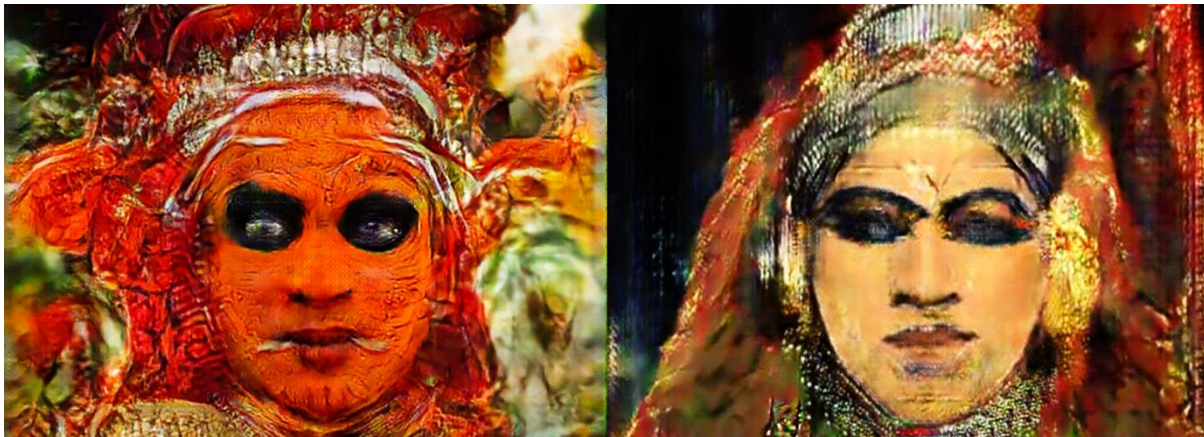


Figure 4 Screen grab from Harshit Agarwal's *Masked Reality* (source: art-ai.io)

Harshit Agarwal's *Masked Reality* is another project using A.I. and V.R. technology to present us with renewed understanding of what performative mimesis could entail. In this work Agarwal explores the concepts of identity, tradition, and caste politics

through the viewer's interaction with the artwork. He questions the malleability of these concepts in the digital and virtual space. He draws inspiration from the various mask cultures of India that are part of rituals or ceremonies that are supposed to be

transformative and offer the experience of transcendence. The mask disguises, it entertains, much like technology today offering filters and constructed personas to perform through. His creation merges the audience's faces with data inputted into the software of the ritual dances from southern India. The system works it out and offers us two images. One is that of a female Kathakali (dance form relegated to the 'upper' castes) dancer and the other of a male face in the Theyyam (dance form relegated to 'lower' castes) face painting style. Through this he comments on the fluidity of identity while also breaking caste and class barriers, in that the audience is made to embody the 'other'. Through his work, he blurs the binaries between social constructs such as identity, gender, class, and caste. Here we see the software itself create something new by referring to images of the real object. Mimesis here creates a transformative process/performance that creates something new – which also has no referent in the real world, and as such simply exists as another autonomous sign.

In the context of Baudrillard's floating sign economy, Derrida's play of differences, and Deleuze's notion of becoming, the status of the real is unimportant. There are almost no distinctions between the copy and the original. The idea of performative mimesis or Anukriti, which traditionally laid claim to some original object in the real world has now transformed. Mimesis here could simply come to mean a proliferation of the simulation. V.R.'s integration with the gaming industry has led artists to explore some truly immersive potentialities of the medium. Art often helps us alter our perception of the world, and V.R. does this in the best possible way. *Into Yourself, Fall* is only the beginning, the tip of the iceberg of what a medium such as this can offer. V.R. poses challenges to the traditional art market, with its infinitely reproducible digital files. Several other artists including Cecile B. Evans from London with his *Hyperlinks or it Didn't Happen* (2014), using the medium to explore the hybridity of organic and technological life involving an animated avatar of Philip Seymour Hoffman, or Ai Weiwei's *Omni* (2019), that places the spectator within the space of the elephants in Myanmar and the refugee camp in Bangladesh. It's refreshing and pertinent to note that this sort of denial of a truth

claim in art is what Sankuka had been espousing for all along.

## ENDNOTES

1. Commentary on Natyashastra
2. Ibid. 74
3. Ibid. 79
4. Potolsky, Mathew. *Mimesis. The New Critical Idiom*: Routledge 2006. Pg. 93
5. Ibid. 96
6. Intertextuality refers to the idea that all narratives borrow images or plot points from some familiar storehouse.
7. Ibid. 56
8. Mukerji, Parul D. 2016. "Who is Afraid of Mimesis: Contesting the Common Sense of Indian Aesthetics through the theory of Mimesis or Anukarana Vada." In *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. London: Bloomsbury. Pg. 88-89

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