



Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Gandhinagar
presents a symposium on

Global Modernities and Modernisms in Art, Philosophy and Literature

Date and Time

10:00 to 6:00 PM

November 20, 2023
Monday

Venue

AB 6/202
IIT Gandhinagar

Symposium Coordinator

Dr Arka Chattopadhyay
Humanities and Social Sciences,
Indian Institute of Technology
Gandhinagar

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Keynote Speakers



DR ASHISH AVIKUNTHAK
*University of
Rhode Island*



DR BRINDA BOSE
*Jawaharlal Nehru
University*

Plenary Speakers



DR SHARMITA LAHIRI
*Indian Institute of Technology
Gandhinagar*



DR ANGUS MCBLANE
*Indian Institute of Technology
Gandhinagar*

All are welcome!

**Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Gandhinagar
Presents a Symposium**

On

**Global Modernities and Modernisms in Art,
Philosophy and Literature**

November 20 Monday, 2023

Concept Note: This symposium, following up on our 2022 symposium on ‘Global Literary Modernities and Modernisms’ arrives in the wake of the centennial year of 1922 when T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* ushered in a new era of ‘High Modernism’ in European literary history. What the Eurocentric discussions of 1922 modernism often forget is that Rabindranath Tagore’s book of genre-bending texts, *Lipika*, was published in the same year, as was his play, ‘Muktodhara’ (‘The Waterfall’). If a Nobel laureate like Tagore can fall through the cracks, we can imagine the situation with other less visible writers in India’s multiple linguistic traditions and the rest of the world! Modernism is not one and it didn’t happen only in Europe. In 100 years from 1922, we have acknowledged modernisms in the plural as “coeval” global literary developments. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel’s framework of ‘Geomodernisms’ and Sophie Sieta’s work on the little magazines, offering a global network of modernisms, are important instances. The recent publication of the global modernisms anthology, edited by Alys Moody and others have widened its scope beyond Europe, deep into South and East Asia. With the emergence of transnational modernisms and world literature studies, we have come to examine the cultural politics of how literature travels across national borders and makes homes in ‘host cultures.’

This symposium hopes to expand the discussion on modernities and modernisms in and outside Europe with an eye to go beyond literature into diverse artistic forms like cinema, visual and plastic arts and movements of critical and philosophical thinking that come under the dynamic and shifty nomenclature of the modern. We will focus on transnational networks in modernisms, consider questions of decoloniality, aesthetics, representation and identity categories. Both our keynotes open the forum by introducing comparative and coeval discourses of multiple artistic modernities and modernisms with a particular emphasis on the Indian scene. Prof. Brinda Bose’s keynote analyzes international formations of avant-garde aesthetic practice, comparing three artists’ communities in Weimar, Shantiniketan and Kasauli, considering both politics and pedagogy of modernist art. Prof. Ashish Avikunthak’s keynote, coming from a practitioner as well as a theorist offers a critique of avant-garde cinema in India by situating *Cinema of Prayoga* as an

alternative to Indian cinematic modernisms. The two plenaries follow the spirit of the keynotes by delving into Indian philosophical and vernacular literary modernities that nevertheless make appeals to multilingualism and diasporic experience respectively. Prof. Angus McBlane zooms in on the works of Daya Krishna to complicate philosophical traditions, epistemologies and novelties in relation to the idea of modernity. Prof. Sharmita Lahiri's plenary addresses the idea of the interstitial modern subject in the intercultural and transnational registers of diasporic experience, presented in Sunil Gangopadhyay.

We have doctoral panels that variously return to modernities and modernisms in India and abroad. Darshna Kumar examines colour as a mode of experience in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, engaging with his reading of modernist paintings. Prashant reads Jorge Luis Borges' stories to demonstrate how total institutions operate in his work and import a mystical totality in relation to modernism. Parul Tiwari deals with Antonin Artaud's thoughts on cinema and the ontology of the image to link them with an anti-theatrical practice in modernism. Udit Banerjee analyzes Bengali short stories from Assam that problematize cultural identities, navigating regional modernities and dwells on the techniques utilized by the writers to depict the fluid self-expression and subjective resistance. Bikram Kotal brings in the theme of obscenity qua modernisms and avant-garde literature by looking at the works of Subimal Misra who challenges the very institution of 'sahitya' or literature in his anti-establishment writings.

As the above array of papers testifies, the symposium will contribute to our contemporary understanding of global modernities and modernisms in all their diverse multiplicities across nationalities, ethnicities, disciplines of critical thinking and art forms.

Symposium Coordinator: Dr. Arka Chattopadhyay, Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Gandhinagar

Schedule

Venue: AB 6/202

10AM: Opening Remarks: Dr. Arka Chattopadhyay

10:15-11:15 AM: Keynote 1: ‘Modernist/Avant-Garde Arts Practice: A Politics of Community and Pedagogy’ – **Dr. Brinda Bose**

11:15-11:30 AM: TEA

11:30: 1PM: Plenary Panel: (Chair: Dr. Arka Chattopadhyay)

‘Reconstruction, Reformulation, and Contrariness in light of ‘Modernity’: On Daya Krishna’s ‘Conceptual Imagination’ and ‘Newness’ ’ – **Dr. Angus McBlane**

‘The Indian-American immigrant: The alienated modern man: A study of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Purba Paschim (Vol 2)*’ – **Dr. Sharmita Lahiri**

1PM-2PM: LUNCH

2PM-3PM: Keynote 2: ‘Cinema of Prayoga: A critique of ‘avant-garde’ and the ‘experimental’ in Indian cinematic modernity’ – **Dr. Ashish Avikunthak**

3PM-4:30PM: Doctoral Panel 1 (Chair: Dr. Ashish Avikunthak)

‘Color(s) as a Modality : Sensible openness at the genesis of the visual world through Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy’ – **Darshna Kumar**

‘Borges, Totalities, and Analogies from Mystical Discourses’ – **Prashant**

‘Image, Desire, and Being: Antonin Artaud’s Thoughts on Cinema’ – **Parul Tiwari**

4:30-4:45 PM: TEA

4:45-5:45 PM: Doctoral Panel 2 (Chair: Dr. Brinda Bose)

‘Reading Identity, Flux, and Resistance in Bengali Short Stories from Assam’ – **Udita Banerjee**

‘Rethinking the Aesthetics of Obscenity in the Selected Short Stories of Subimal Mishra’
– **Bikram Kotal**

5:45 PM- 6 PM: Closing Remarks – **Dr. Arka Chattopadhyay**

Abstracts

Keynote 1:

Modernist/Avant-Garde Arts Practice: A Politics of Community and Pedagogy

Brinda Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Modernists are usually thought of as individualistic and lonely, and so it is intriguing that many of them were part of vibrant artistic communities that produced substantial work — both in collaboration and in friction — in close company of each other for significant lengths of time. Many of these groups were cross-disciplinary (like the Bloomsbury Group), but some worked predominantly within one aesthetic genre like art, or poetry; many Modernist manifestos were the products of such communities. In this paper I will look at three artists' communities that I will suggest have specifically modernist resonances, separated though they are by location, time or both: the contemporaneous Bauhaus in Weimar/Dessau, Germany (1919-1933) and Kala Bhavana in Tagore's Shantiniketan, India (1919-present); and the late-modern Kasauli Art Centre in the hills of northern India (1976-1991). At these locations, modernist/avant-garde artists produced a politics of their own, experimenting with form, material and content within their community practices as well as with pedagogical methods that were radically different in their time. I will trace some threads that connect these culturally and/or temporally disparate spaces, to think about what impelled aesthetic communities to refashion their arts practice into communities with pedagogical compulsions; and what sustained or fractured them in their art-making together and apart.

Brinda Bose teaches at the Centre for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her areas of interest are in modernist and avant-garde literature, art and cinema, gender/sexuality studies, postcolonial writing in English and Bengali, film studies, political aesthetics and humanities studies. Among her publications are the edited collection *Humanities, Provocateur: Towards a Contemporary Political Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury, 2021), and a monograph, *The Audacity of Pleasure: Sexualities, Literature and Cinema in India* (2018). Others include the edited collections *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* (2006), *Translating Desire* (2007), and *Gender and Censorship* (2002); the co-edited *Interventions: Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film* (1997), and *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India* (2007). She has done critical editions of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Her current projects are on avant-garde aesthetics in India, global avant-garde traffics, and translations of Bengali modernist poetry.

Plenary 1

Reconstruction, Reformulation, and Contrariness in light of ‘Modernity’: On Daya Krishna’s ‘Conceptual Imagination’ and ‘Newness’

Angus McBlane, Indian Institute of Technology - Gandhinagar

Daya Krishna’s (1924-2007) work offers us a twinned or ‘contrary’ impulse in regards to plurilingual philosophizing - while also primarily writing in English. On the one hand, there is the necessity of reconstructing and reformulating the traditions of Indian philosophy in light of ‘modernity’ and colonialism (an ongoing project in Philosophical Historiography) to not only revitalize these traditions in the contemporary period, but also to leverage their conceptual resources to contemporary questions. On the other hand, there is the necessity to be unbounded from “one’s own ‘conceptual tradition’” allowing for greater movement between various “bodies of knowledge”. These contrary impulses find relief in his disclosure of ‘Conceptual Imagination’ and ‘Newness’ as philosophical imperatives for ‘thinking creatively’, articulated in light of, in spite of, in the light of, ‘modernity’.

Angus McBlane is currently Visiting Assistant Professor (Philosophy and Cultural Theory) in the Humanities and Social Sciences and Centre for Cognitive and Brain Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology – Gandhinagar. He is also Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Cultural Studies programme at Queen’s University (Kingston, ON, Canada). He received his PhD from the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory at Cardiff University (Wales, UK). He works primarily across Posthumanism, Phenomenology, and Comparative/World Philosophy, and focuses mainly on questions of Ontology and embodiment, especially non-human embodiment.

Plenary 2

The Indian-American immigrant: The alienated modern man: A study of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Purba Paschim* (Vol 2)

Sharmita Lahiri, Indian Institute of Technology - Gandhinagar

This talk focuses on the response to the experience of cross-cultural migration, determining diasporic identity construction, as presented in the second volume of Bengali novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Purbo Pashchim* (East-West).

The first volume of Gangopadhyay’s magnum opus *Purba Paschim* begins as a poignant rendition of the post-partition experience on both sides of the Bengal border. The first volume ends in 1967, at a time when West Bengal was swept by the Naxalite movement. The second volume

of the novel opens in 1970, and the setting of the opening is New York. Atin, whom we had seen at the end of volume 1, as a young college lecturer in North Bengal getting involved with the Naxalite movement, has moved to America to avoid persecution back home as a Naxalite. In this study, I will focus on Gangopadhyay's depiction of the Indian-American diasporic experience through Atin, and how in the process the figure of Atin comes to emblemize the perennial isolation, alienation, and the lack of a stable identity of the modern individual.

Gangopadhyay presents a complex trajectory of the immigrant experience; a young Atin in his early twenties, perceives migration to America as a process of alienation and exile. In fact, he stubbornly resists any possibility of assimilation into the American world. Later, we see an Atin, in his early forties, fully absorbed in his American experience; so engrossed is he in his pursuit of the American Dream that he seems to have blatantly discarded his roots and those that tie him back to the roots. Yet, at the end of the novel, Atin, now an American citizen, fails to completely relinquish his Indian ties. The final image is of a naked Atin distraughtly suspended in the liminal space of his hyphenated Indian-American identity.

The conclusion of the saga of Atin suggests that the Indian-American diasporic experience is determined by the hyphen in the identity, which prevents the immigrant from fully belonging to one space - original or adopted. Thus, an immigrant figure like Atin comes to signify the perpetual alienation, isolation, and lack of stable identity of the modern individual.

Sharmita Lahiri is an Associate Professor of English at Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Houston and did a post-doctoral fellowship in Writing Pedagogy at the University of Houston Writing Center. Her areas of interest are Indian Writing in English, Bengali literature, Women's Writing, Feminist Studies, and Writing Pedagogy. She has been an invited translator for the European Federation of Associations and Centers of Irish Studies

Keynote 2

Cinema of Prayoga: A critique of 'avant-garde' and the 'experimental' in Indian cinematic modernity

Ashish Avikunthak, University of Rhode Island

In Amrit Ganger's introductory essay on *Cinema of Prayoga* published in the Tate Modern exhibition catalogue in 2006, his main concern is twofold. First is his criticism of the terms experimental and avant-garde as inadequate typological, categorical or framing conceptual devices to be used in Indian context. Second is his attempt at creating an alternative theoretical framework for Indian cinematic modernity. In this essay, I provide a historical and theoretical foundation for

his first contention. I first locate the discordance between the multiple theories of avant-garde in the history of western art and aesthetics and then show that their uncritical import into the context of Indian cinematic modernity is at best an uncritical mimesis and at worst inefficacious postulation. I argue that the theoretical armature of *Cinema of Prayoga* provides a definitive critique of the cavalier employment of the terms avant-garde and experimental in Indian cinematic modernity. I assert that *Cinema of Prayoga* provides an alternative theoretical framework to comprehend especially the idiosyncrasies of Indian cinematic modernity. It emphasizes that a mere derivative appropriation or a credulous transference of western art historical theories, models and conceptual framework is not adequate to grasp, explain or theorize filmic archives that have been erroneously categorized in India as experimental or avant-garde.

Ashish Avikunthak is an internationally renowned filmmaker, an archaeologist, and a cultural anthropologist. His films have been the subject of more than a dozen retrospectives and sixteen solo shows and have been shown worldwide in major film festivals, group shows, and museums. He is also the author of "Bureaucratic Archaeology: State, Science, and Past in Postcolonial India" (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He has a PhD in cultural and social anthropology from Stanford University and has previously taught at Yale University. He is now a Professor of Film/Media at the Harrington School of Communication at the University of Rhode Island.

Doctoral Panel 1

Color(s) as a Modality : Sensible openness at the genesis of the visual world through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy

Darshna Kumar, Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) work on aesthetics presents an occasion to extrapolate a differentiation between "human organization" and "spontaneous organization" of the visual world we perceive. The former consists of human constructs for the understanding that takes these constructs as the base of the visual world and believes what exists, exists unshakably; whereas the latter is the sensorially sensible assistance at the point where things germinate for us. Merleau-Ponty's motivation for supporting the latter approach to expression in paintings comes mainly from the precursor modernist artist Paul Cézanne and other modernists. He contends that to see visible objects, various visual elements hide themselves in order to let the object emerge and the moderns tried to liberate these "phantoms". To put it differently, they opened up different dimensions of the visible world by being present at the moment of its genesis. I further explore color(s) as a dimension or a modality of existence in themselves. I do so by, firstly, reading Merleau-Ponty's understanding of depth as the "first dimension" instead of the "third dimension" from which height and width are abstracted to demonstrate how outlines are abstracted from

color(s) and; secondly, by asserting a sensible approach to the movement of eyes when the visible landscape is emerging for us. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy provides us with a metaphysics of modernist paintings that is open to and assists the genesis of the visible world.

Darshna Kumar is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. She has a Master of Arts degree in Society and Culture from Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar as well. Her research interests include Phenomenology, Aesthetic Theories, and Critical Animal Studies.

Borges, Totalities, and Analogies from Mystical Discourses

Prashant, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar

The paper explores the heterogeneous nature of 'totality' within the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges's (1899-1986) short stories to demonstrate the shift in the approach towards mysticism in modernist literature. Mystical ideas in Borges's works turn into a function, and departing from their conventional meaning, their invocation through analogies allows the exhaustive process of infinitisation to transform into 'totality'. For instance, the attributes associated with divinity (or Godhead) form the foundation for depicting the totalistic nature of institutions that span the entirety of the universe, as seen in the story "The Library of Babel". At certain junctures, this notion of 'totality' is taken to the extreme, bordering on an envisioning of the 'total power' over the masses, as exemplified in "The Lottery in Babylon", where it closely aligns but cannot be reduced to totalitarianism. However, in stories like "The Congress", 'totality' does not refer to a coercive or authoritative structure; rather, it presents the possibility of an institution formed collectively, embodying a 'totality' that fosters a sense of belongingness, or we can say that one becomes a part of the 'totality' as an ethical relation. Broadly, the paper explores the concept of 'totality' in Borges and examines how his characters engage with a 'total structure' or a 'total experience', highlighting the dynamic power relationships between Borges's characters and the total institutions within his works.

Prashant is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, India. He has a Master's degree in English and American Literature from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. His research interests include Buddhist Studies, Continental Philosophy, Eroticism, Latin American Studies, Modern fiction and poetry, Mysticism, Surrealism and Phenomenology.

Image, Desire, and Being: Antonin Artaud's Thoughts on Cinema

Parul Tiwari, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar

This paper studies the French author Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) for his ideas on cinema through his ‘film scenarios’ and writings on cinema. These underexplored materials on cinema would help position Artaud’s anti-theatricality and his thesis on the ontology of image that affects a spectator. He demands films that “adopt cinematographic quality which still has to be found”, meaning, the form already surpasses its practice. And by this, he means all kinds of practice including the future innovations on color, sound, non-narrativity, would have to struggle to find the cinematographic quality because it would require subversion of the very senses and orientation that the subject would use to create cinema. The paper would argue that in Artaud, instead of the film-maker subverting structural dominations that orient our vision, sense of optics, and perspective, it is the image which performs the subversion. It is not this or that kind of cinema which would ‘become minor’ in a Deleuzian sense, instead cinema itself is a ‘becoming- minor’ of our vision and its orientation. This would allow us to ask, through his idea of the “renewal of plastic matter of images”, what kind of relation does the inherent plasticity of moving image have with the subject watching the film. If the image ‘invades’ the subject as a machinic automaton whose essential materiality lies in movement, what transformations do we find in the subject? This would entail an exploration of the nature of image and its play with desire, to think about the nature of being (as something like a being-towards-image) in Artaud’s works.

Parul is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Gandhinagar. She has a master’s degree in Arts & Aesthetics from the School of Arts & Aesthetics, JNU. Her research interests include Modernist theatre and philosophy.

Doctoral Panel 2

Reading Identity, Flux, and Resistance in Bengali Short Stories from Assam

Udita Banerjee, Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar

Following the Indian partition, the us-other binary in Assam was reinforced time and again because of the demographic changes that took place due to large-scale migrations and compelling differences in terms of ethnicity, language, and culture. It is in this context that Bengali literature from Assam has depicted the postcolonial existential crisis of the Bengali migrant community in the face of violent ethno-linguistic conflicts. Stories such as Rupraj Bhattacharya’s “Mandas” and Amitabha Dey’s “Wake Up Call” center around the journey of their migrant woman protagonists whose lives are dictated by an overwhelming sense of mobility and precarity. As ethno-linguistic conflicts in Assam grow more intense, a complex mosaic of multiple migrations, homelessness, and statelessness force them to negotiate marginalisation on various fronts, leading to the rise of affective hate politics within the state. By employing interior monologues, these narratives offer

insights into the characters' minds and demonstrate how intergenerational memory and traumatic experiences of the past contribute to the formation of their fragmented identities in the present. Drawing from modernist traditions in literature (like emphasis on self and fluidity of being) as well as experimental forms such as symbolism, this article will argue how such narratives, rooted in the Bengali language and experience, become crucial mediums of resistance and self-expression for the Bengali writers living in Assam, representing their eternal quest for identity and individualism. In doing so, it will also address the present-day condition of the migrant women, especially in the backdrop of implementing national policies like the NRC and CAA. In application of Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'cultural politics of emotions,' it will essentially illustrate how the notions of being and becoming in a conflict-ridden state like Assam always undergo phases of deconstruction and reconstruction, embodying and encountering socio-culturally conditioned and emotionally influenced perceptions and prejudices.

Udita Banerjee is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Gandhinagar. She has completed her M. Phil from the Department of English and Culture Studies, University of Burdwan. Her research interests include Postcolonial Literature(s) and Border Studies.

Rethinking the Aesthetics of Obscenity in the Selected Short Stories of Subimal Mishra

Bikram Kotal, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar

In this paper, I will examine the trope of “obscurity” in the short stories of Subimal Mishra (1943-2023) and what “obscurity” means for the modernist writer and the reader. Mishra was a Bengali anti-establishment avant-garde writer who questioned the very notion of “sahitya”(literature) and fictionality through his writing. Obscurity is a major theme in the writing of Subimal Mishra, and it is an essential part of his use of collage and experimentation. The aesthetics of obscurity that pervades the modernist arts and literature was also a natural outcome of modernist experimentation. The trope of obscurity offers him the opportunity to perpetuate a kind of “planned violence” against the institution of literature. This paper explains how the concept of “juxtaposition” as found in Subimal's narratives needs to be read in connection with the motif of “obscurity”. This study also examines how the obscene becomes a form of appeal that Subimal employs in his narrative to challenge assumptions about textual interpretation and to redefine the relationship between reader and text.

Bikram Kumar Kotal is a doctoral student at the department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar. He has done his MA in English Language and Literature from the University of Calcutta. His research interests are modernist literature, global modernism, and modernism in Bengali literature.