

SHAMBHAVI KAUL

Rini Yun Keagy: You've mentioned that when you were younger you had viscerally intense experiences watching films, that they would make you feel physically ill. Can you talk more about this and how this changed overtime?

Shambhavi Kaul: My earliest memory of watching a film in a movie theater is in Pune. My father, Mani Kaul, was teaching at the film institute one summer and I was staying with him. I mostly remember playing in a small thicket behind the school and spending a lot of time in the movie theater there. One afternoon I found myself in a screening of *Hungarian Rhapsody* (1979)—a Jancsó film. It was a very intense experience. After that, everything in the movie theater seemed overwhelming. For a time I would literally get sick midway through a film.

Keagy: Can you talk more about the Miklós Jancsó film (with Udo Kier)?

Kaul: I have not watched it again and maybe I'm too scared, or I don't want to disturb how I remember it. It was all about power in a way that terrified me. I often wonder if it was the content of the film, or an extremely intense experience of cinema itself.

Keagy: I imagine that the filmmaking milieu that you were surrounded by was very masculine.

Kaul: Certainly.

Keagy: A masculine power that seemed unjust, even at a young age?

Kaul: Looking back, this could be a reason for my extreme reaction. I never thought about it in that way, but it makes a lot of sense. From my vantage now, I am much more aware of the masculine filmmaking milieu that surrounded my father. It was a world made up of the master and his admirers. Sometimes there were detractors, but in our world, they served as little more than comedic foil [*laughs*].

It is possible, as a little girl, I sensed how I would eventually be excluded from such a world. But, I mostly remember feeling very proud of my father. Later, in my teenage years, my attitude became much more complex. I also realized I would have to devise some other kind of mode for myself.

Keagy: Did this mode comprise that contradiction of terms that is being ambitious and being a woman?

Kaul: Yes, for sure. But also, at least as it relates to growing up with a well known father, the option to shape myself in his image was never a real option for me. Certainly not in the way it seemed to present itself as an option to his students and followers.

Keagy: Perhaps that saved you...

Kaul: I often think that! Anyway, the figure of the auteur never sat very well with me. But, I think it could also have something to do with my mother. Growing up, my friends marveled at how honest and open our friendship was. She is a great listener, and she remembers little things, and

she loves having conversations. It is probably not a coincidence that I have favored a discursive approach in my own work—one that is borne of exchange rather than mastery. This is probably most evident in my work with reappropriated materials but I think it is prevalent in general.

Keagy: It's wonderful to know that this discursive approach can be attributed to your mother. These perhaps less obvious influences on our practices are important to acknowledge. It's true that as you engage 16mm film, hand-processing techniques, HD video, and recently sculptural photographs, each mode is in discussion with the others. In terms of your approach to the idea of craft, the creation or montage of images, do you have a preference for editing or shooting?

Kaul: I'm all about editing! I have said before, that I consider my chief modes to be accidental finding and assembling. Of course, this is easy to imagine when working with reappropriated materials but, how does one apply this to cinematography? The truth is, I struggle so much while shooting. I find pointing at things very uncomfortable. It gives me the feeling of grabbing, like I am being opportunistic, or acquisitory. In one shoot I tried to inhabit a dog's perspective as a way to circumvent this feeling. I shot everything from the ground level. But it was also a kind of play-acting—I suppose I was trying to be anything but "man"!

Keagy: [Laughs] Play-acting in order to invalidate the “grabbing male” cinematographer is very inventive! Well it's true that even the words “mastery” and “craft” are highly gendered.

Kaul: Cinema is so gendered.

Keagy: Yes, and so much of your work is about disrupting cinematic language so that it becomes a new, generative cinematic space. You've even ventured to new territory in your recent film *Hijacked* (2017). As an artist with a body of work largely devoid of human presence, which you often deliberately remove, you seem to be at ease directing the human actors in the film, who are presumably passengers on an airplane. There's an idiosyncratic, sometimes unsettling, and precise choreography in their movements. Can you speak about working with actors and your choice in stylizing these austere gestures? Is there any relationship between this performativity and the choreographic montage of your reappropriated films? I see a sort of similar humor as well, manifest in wildly different forms.

Kaul: The operation of narrative in cinema has been an ongoing engagement. Earlier, when I did not include human actors in my films, I still hoped to invite human audiences into the evacuated spaces. Rather than offer human actors as protagonists for identification, I created an unlikely field for identification, populated by animated objects, animals, etc. So there was both the invitation to enter, and the somewhat disorienting feeling upon entering. In the new film that includes human actors, I was thinking about how to cast them as something other than “narrative agents.” The challenge was to cast them in a way that was as disorienting as the nonhuman protagonists.

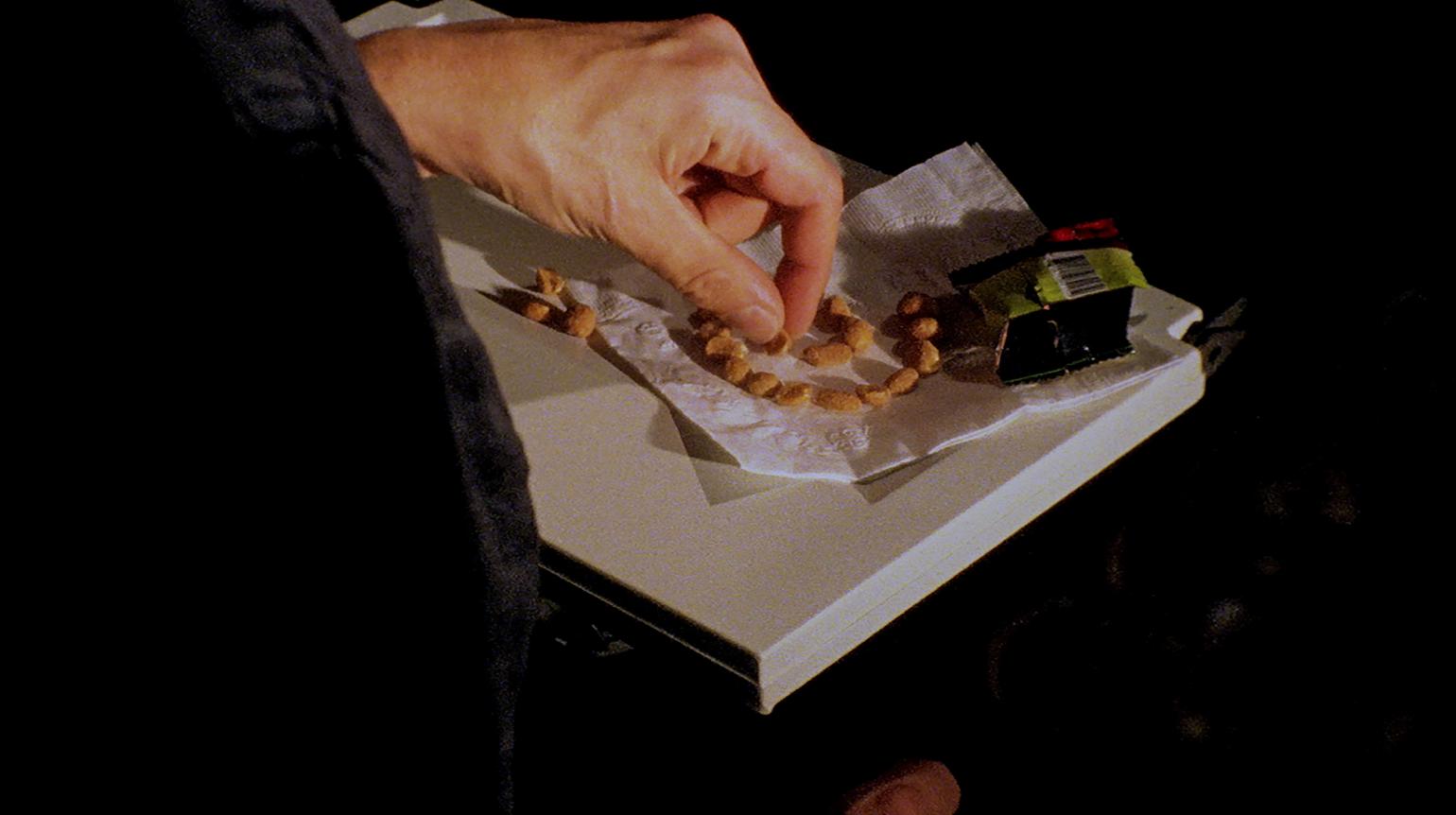
I think the choreographed actions you allude to are one such strategy. The movements are based on specific activities that people do on airplanes: eat peanuts, perform seat exercises, or sleep. When these same recognizable activities are slowed down and performed so deliberately, they become quite strange. Another strategy is to separate the dialogue from the actors, and reproduce them as subtitles. In this case, I was relying on the ubiquity of subtitles in cinema.

Of course subtitles signify a “foreign” film, and seem natural alongside my cast of “brown” and thus “foreign” actors. Still, when they appear in English, with no words being uttered, it changes their significance.

Keagy: The “brown” bodies definitely operate in a narrative register, alongside the title of the film and the setting as the interior of an airplane. You do create a strange and humorous cinematic proxy to a “foreign” film with the actors and your use of subtitles. The textual reference is an intriguing correlate to your accompanying booklet *In-flight* (2017), a piece that reappropriates texts and images from in-flight magazines. In their original context, these publications often take themselves very seriously and function to seduce. In your hands, they become mysterious, amusing, and disturbing.

Kaul: Humor is so important in my work but I find it difficult to articulate how it works [in my films]. I think it has something to do with the sociality of the cinematic experience. While all the work seeks to disorient, the humor works as a sort of anti-distancing device. Perhaps it is an invitation





to have fun. It also makes the audience watching the work feel a sense of comfort in their joining together in laughter. Given the type of work I make, perhaps this is hard to believe, but I'm really invested in the idea of cinema as entertainment.

Keagy: [Laughs] It's curious that this should be so subversive! I mean, there are precedents in experimental cinema, but the sparse aesthetic of your work counterposed with humor is unique in that it engages the viewer without becoming dramatic irony. Your commitment to cinema as entertainment in *Hijacked* is clear—the film also speaks to the industrial modalities of mainstream cinema—but there are more expansive types of narrative agency at play. Beyond the more obvious representative markers in the film: brown bodies, the foreboding soundtrack, the title, etc., it's this gesture that makes me think of time as both extemporaneous and contemporaneous.

Kaul: This kind of temporality is what initially attracted me to airplanes. There is a phenomenon that I believe

is increasingly true: that we experience our current time as "retro." And airplanes are a really great example of this. Their huge, bird-like, metallic, riveted bodies bring to mind 19th-century technologies. It would seem much more of "our time" to be traveling in some kind of dematerialized mode [laughs]. That disorienting lag between then and now feels very real in an airplane. Jet-LAG! [laughs] Alongside these retro aesthetics is another somewhat retro idea: that of escape. In a globalized world, it is very hard to imagine what constitutes "escape," geographically speaking. I mean if the globe is known, then there is no "other" location to escape to.

Keagy: And if geographical escape has become impossible, it is exactly this idea of an absurd lag, or of time travel, with its sometimes fantastical demarcations of future and past, that the film conjures for me. In the history of air travel, for example, some things have stayed the same, some things have changed, cell phones have now replaced playing cards as escapist devices.

Kaul: There is so much more about airplanes that I want to think about and explore. Returning to these ideas: the strange temporality of airplanes, the redundant promises of escape, as well as the notion that the airplane is another black box space like a movie theater...famously, the movies people watch on airplanes are invariably disaster movies! On the face of it, this seems very odd. Still, I suppose popular cinema offers audiences a form of mastery over the narrative, and so it could be that it is strangely calming to watch disaster movies on an airplane.

Keagy: [Laughs] Fascinating. It makes sense that you would think about disaster movies in this context of narrative mastery! *Hijacked*, of course, works very differently. You use abstract spatial references to create the narrative of flight. Besides the black-box, you also shot in an airplane graveyard. Was the project inspired by the latter?

Kaul: I went to the graveyard without much of a plan. I found out about it and simply decided to go shoot the airplanes. While shooting it, I became

aware of an interesting effect: when shooting up, against the sky, the decommissioned airplanes appeared to be flying. The film *Hijacked* is assembled around this idea. But actually the very first exploration in my airplane project was the text from in-flight magazines. For a few years, while I was working on other stuff, I was collecting these magazines, and marking out sentences in them. In fact, *Silver Bird*, the title of my gallery show, was a term that I found in one of these magazines. Later I learned that “silver bird” is pilots’ lingo for an airplane.

Keagy: How do you know about pilots’ lingo?

Kaul: From online pilot blogs!

Keagy: [Laughs] This was part of your process...?

Kaul: Yes! For instance, in *Hijacked*, the idea for the orchid came from a blog that focused on strategies for collecting airplane points, negotiating upgrades, etc. One traveler had posted a picture of his first-class experience that featured a single orchid stem in something like a test tube attached to the plastic panel near his seat...[Laughs]. My writing collaborator, Rachel Price, and I have a lot of fun coming up with ideas, and we often draw on these kinds of internet sources.

Keagy: [Laughs] And that test tube orchid stands in for a mythical tropical island.

Kaul: Exactly. To me, it is important that the scenes in *Hijacked* are very much based on people’s real experiences of these spaces. Everything from the amenities of the first-class cabin, to reports of people stowed away in the luggage compartment. Even the story of a man who once poisoned his girlfriend by eating peanuts before kissing her is based on a news report. It is quite like a documentary in that sense. Even the booklet, *In-flight*, could qualify as a documentary project as it draws on

texts taken from actual American in-flight magazines.

Keagy: Do you find American magazines have a different perspective or focus from that of international airlines?

Kaul: Possibly. There are a lot of similarities across the genre but one of the focuses in some American magazines, beyond tourism, is the military. Some of these airlines support the military and carry features in their magazines about “the men and the women.” Of course they mean, “the men and the women in uniform” but if you take “in uniform” out, you have “the men and the women” doing this and that. I found it extremely compelling how “the men and the women” are in grave danger, and difficult situations, but they keep persevering, no matter what. For instance, the portion about the transportation of “innumerable legal documents,” and “coolers full of vital organs” was pulled from one such militaristic feature. It is quite startling how, in these magazines, you can flip the page from this and find yourself in Thailand or India and learn about how cheery and friendly the locals are.

Keagy: Traveling as militarization and colonization. Also, it’s a captive audience for this literature and ideology.

Kaul: Yes, absolutely. I’ll admit to having a pretty dark sense of humor. I find it funny that the American Airlines magazine is literally called, “American Way”!

Keagy: [Laughs] One of the travel feature quotes exemplifies the tone of this “American Way” ideology: “Distant thunderstorms. Crickets with Marimbas. Bamboo flutes. Percussive instruments. Tropical birds. Lines connecting dots shot down creating momentary connections. We were somewhere in the East.”

Kaul: This came from a feature describing art installations in airports. At the end of the list of observations,

the reporter concludes, “We were somewhere in the East!” I should say, and I think it is obvious, I edited the texts quite freely. For instance, I would sometimes assemble a paragraph from bits found in various parts of a feature. In terms of strategies for appropriation, I am less interested in the traditional, conceptual approach of simply recontextualizing materials.

Keagy: I agree that your assembly of texts and abstraction of images for *In-flight* makes the work more stratified than if it were a simple recontextualization... Curation is something that you’ve also been experimenting with, for example in the presentation of your works as performative screenings, and your voice reading texts between films. Can you talk about these performative screenings and how you might change them for different audiences? You and I talked about the difference between the “artist talk” and the more abstract performance of the *In-flight* texts.

Kaul: In these performative screenings, I’m interested in the triangulation of artist [author], audience, and artwork in the context of movie theater darkness. This is why I like to read in the dark between the screenings. I have a number of versions of text I read. In some contexts it can be quite academic, offering insights and context to the work. Other times, I pare it down and weigh it much more towards the artistic writing, which does not deliver the work in the same way. But I am interested in how this puts pressure on the function of the movie theater, the figure of the filmmaker being present but unseen and offering insights through a mic. When we were talking, I was inspired by your suggestion to do away with the artists talk altogether, and to use only the artistic writing. I have never done that before. There is definitely the potential to make it more of an art show.

Keagy: Yes, even though *In-flight* was made as a precursor to *Hijacked*, I think it relates to all of your work on more interesting levels.



Kaul: When I read these texts with the earlier films that did not have human actors in them, the presence of the filmmaker was the introduction of the human. It was thus easily read as a performative narration. Now, because I include the newer work with actors, it is more complex to read as such.

Keagy: People who attended your recent screening at Cellular Cinema told me that they did have the experience of a performative author-in-the-dark.

Kaul: That's great, because I'm much more interested in the author as live performer or narrator, than some kind of self-reflexive gesture of pointing to the author.

Keagy: I think this applies particu-

larly to your work *Safe Travels* (2017), a CGI rendering that puts the viewer in the perspective of flight or floating in space, with only a pair of curtains obstructing the view of the tropical location that we should or will visit. But there is no arrival at a destination, we aimlessly float in circles, without text or sound, and it's extremely funny. This piece seems to function most fully when it plays against the different formal qualities of your other films within the performance, or as the gallery piece for your Jhaveri Contemporary show in 2017. You seem so willing to order, reframe, and juxtapose your work in these performative ways.

Kaul: I think my willingness to constantly recast the work is part of what I call my "discursive approach" more generally. Often it is as simple

as a practical consideration. In the instance of *Safe Travels*, when I wanted to include it in the movie theater context (rather than the gallery), it seemed necessary to add something to it. After all, it is an uneventful loop with no sound. So, I decided to read from the booklet while playing the loop, so it wouldn't be so tedious.

Keagy: Many audiences are unwilling to watch this type of work in a theater.

Kaul: Right. And even in the case of those audiences who are willing to sit through slow, uneventful cinema, I am not sure I wish to produce that kind of experience. It goes back to my interest in making things entertaining!



Keagy: [Laughs] This is why I had asked in another conversation about what types of films you like. I wanted to get at your propensities, sensibilities and tastes in order to understand your thrust toward entertainment. You'd answered less by naming films than by describing a number of scenes in films that involved oceans, rocks, a dusty road. Why are certain terrestrial locations interesting to you given that you grew up in urban Bombay? And I wonder if it has something to do with this notion of "place of origin" that seems important in your work. Much has been said about your film *Scene 32* (2009), shot in the salt flats of Kutch, and of it being an exploration of your birthplace...

Kaul: And, truthfully, it isn't even precisely my birthplace...the actual spot being a little further up north [laughs]! Maybe this gets to both "terrestrial locations" and "place(s) of origin": there is a story about my birth that was repeated many times to me as a child. I was born in the middle of one of my father's film shoots. In the desert...

Keagy: Incredible.

Kaul: ...my parents had miscalculated my birthdate, and I arrived sooner than expected. My father loved to tell how I was born in the middle of "nowhere" during his film shoot. So, I suppose the idea of the mythological origin point, visualized as a barren and cinematic terrestrial location, is one that was more or less drilled into me.

Keagy: Did he say that it was going to arrange your fate as a filmmaker?

Kaul: He may have been suggesting it. In one version of the story, I was born in a makeshift tent hospital, and he discovers it is the same exact makeshift tent hospital in which he was born!

Keagy: And you're not sure any of it is true?

Kaul: I think there are truthful aspects to it.

Keagy: Do these familial myths have any link to the mythological films from South and East Asia that you appropriate? I wonder about the provenance of those films and where they exist in your psyche or when you decided to utilize them in your work.

Kaul: The ideas of "origin point" and "cinematic mythologies" certainly link *Scene 32* to the reappropriated films that consider generic forms of the "East" circulating inside cinema. Through this circulation, they become shorthand for something more complex. It is not simply that these generic Easts act as reductive stereotypes for those who don't know better. More interestingly, they become mythological origin points for those who know it all too well!

