इसोलतेस ओफ़् वलिद पेर्केप्तिओन्

Isolates of Valid Perception

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This practice-research project applies ancient Indo-Tibetan configurations of perception, cognition, subjectivity and representation to photographic technique. It's aim is to relate intricate mechanisms of visual perception to the creation of still and moving pictures and to engage strategies for embedding perceptual motion inside the underlying structure of images.

The central research question is as follows:

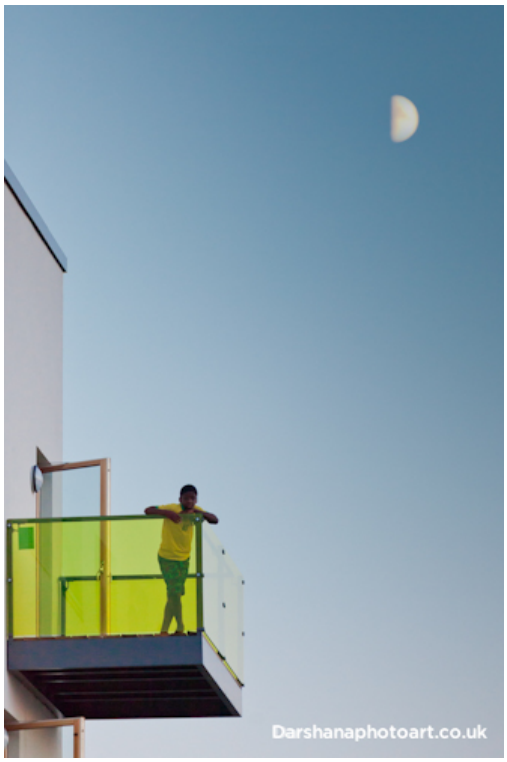
Can the subtleties of Madhyamaka Prasangika configurations of perception (impermanence), cognition (emptiness) and subjectivity (selflessness) be codified in contemporary photographic art ?

Madhyamaka Prasangika is a school of philosophy that flourished at Nalanda University in Bihar from the fourth century until the Muslim invasions of India, and prior to Buddhism entering Tibet in the eighth century. All four Tibetan Buddhist schools (Kagyupa, Gelugpa, Nyingmapa and Sakyapa) are founded upon Madhyamaka Prasangika tenets.

In beginning to address this question, a number of avenues might be usefully explored . . .

Diverse disciplines, from contemporary scientific and critical thinking to the earliest of philosophies originating prior to recorded history on the Indian subcontinent, find themselves in unexpected alignment on questions about human perception and awareness. Regardless of the paradigmatic and temporal lacuna, curiously coincident enigmas arise. Since the Upanishadic origins of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism to cutting-edge research in Neuroscience, Quantum Mechanics, Phenomenology of Perception, Corporeal Ontologies and Affect, the impossibility of pinpointing an irreducible essence or locus in which things, events or selves might inherently exist persists.

In the seemingly straightforward act of everyday observation, are we inadvertently encountering the functioning of our own psycho-physical complex directly ?



Do we ever actually experience a world 'out there' ? Or are we simply experiencing the landscape of our own nervous system imputing dualistic veracity onto cognizance ?

> The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible. (Oscar Wilde)

At the level of synaptic chatter, human physiological impulses appear to operate in accord with evolutionary archetypes (more later . . .) But when reduced to the most basic plane of neuropsychological functionality, only two phenomenological occurrences can be demonstrated to be evident – a mental event of some kind is taking place, and there is bare awareness at a pre-conscious level that something is occurring.Over the course of a lifetime, background psychodynamic mechanisms mediate the minutiae of routine experience to assemble a coherent 'picture' of reality that furnishes us with the capacity to visualize our selves as autonomous entities possessing sovereign powers to negotiate an external environment.

In pursuing this line of investigation, everyday tangible phenomena resemble projections of the mind in much the same way that substance assumes the appearance of solidity to a quantum physicist. And while human volition and material events interact with each other in a similar fashion to matter and energy, the constitution of the enclosing framework is not physically bounded.

Whether reflexive awareness is present or not, individuals exhibit propensities that cause and reaffirm unique sets of phenomena and circumstances to manifest out of a seemingly limitless, if psychically ordered, potentiality. The apparently solid world of dependable material objects that in turns fascinates, repels and distracts us, is for the most part a construction of unquestioning familiarity - or automaticity.

> The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Accordingly, matter, energy and mental events are components in the structure of a fabric we experience as visual perception and awareness generally. To all intents and purposes, consciousness and matter are aligned yet irreconcilable phenomena. Neither can be destroyed or transformed into the other; both are inextricably linked. One cannot come into being independently of the other. Without any awareness, can matter be said to exist ?

Yet, the perceiving mind and the physical world need not be conceived of as existing

discreetly or independently of each other, but as relative aspects of a unitary sphere of being. Indeed, matter and ideas may even be made of the same stuff; with matter consisting of relatively dense inert energy, and thought impulses consisting of subtle flexible energy.

On such a basis, it becomes possible for ideas to metamorphose into material substance. For example, as habituated patterns of subatomic cognitive movement influence the infrastructural organization of the mind-body complex on a detectable material scale, they establish precedents for future patterns of comparable movement to be both recognised and installed as compositionally desirable. Such biodynamic motion is in turn mirrored by the habit-forming activity of the individual on a human scale, when molding the materiality of daily existence. By such means, latent propensities attain physical manifestation in the worldly domain.

You are what your motivating desire is
As your desire, so is your will
As your will, so is your deed
As your deed, so is your destiny
(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

However, imputing dualism onto raw experience need not be construed as a character flaw or defect. This tendency might more usefully be understood as part of a complex evolutionary survival apparatus, deeply rooted in the structure and functioning of the human brain. Without such abilities, we would be unable to locate food and shelter, let alone drive a car, operate a computer or perform as a citizen. Accordingly, the primal function of dualistic dialogue in teleological terms is to establish the self and the world as inherently and concretely separate and 'real' - Cogito Ergo Sum.

But when considered in an ontological context, predetermined functions born of habituation become more problematic: In pursuit of the trappings of a reliably predictable existence, human volition operates inside a triangular correlation. Beginning at the subatomic level, we are attracted to phenomena and events that appear helpful for physical and psychic survival (acquisition), we block elements that appear to endanger survival (aggression) and we remain disinterested in phenomena that appear to contain no survival value (indifference).

In following this line of reasoning, impermanent individuals as perceivers and thinkers, with aspirations of autonomous self-existence (as a consequence of acquisitive desire) are undeniably contingent categories. Yet material-based philosophies championing the primacy of the individual underpin the organisational structure of twenty first century global politics. And the narratives

behind pervasive ideological movements are ubiquitously augmented by at best partial readings of the meanings inscribed in the language of still and moving images.

Recognising that we invest ‘things’ (including photographic representations) with a certain permanence and self-existence as a result of biologically conditioned impulses precipitates a hiatus. An opportunity to evolve a philosophy of image-making that sidesteps the limitations of triangular preconditioning emerges.

Perhaps it is telling that established photographic terminology is replete with the language of aggressive material acquisition: we ‘take’ pictures; we ‘shoot’ photographs and films; we ‘capture’ images. We unthinkingly construct subjects as objects, perpetuating stereotypical forms of looking and promoting knowledges as commodities to be acquired, rather than as sites of engagement that contain the potential to uncover meaningful truths about our relationships with the world.

Perhaps it is also significant that disparate arenas of human endeavor across cultures and eras employ overtly visual categories like illumination and insight to describe an experience of seemingly instantaneous yet reliable ‘knowing’. This provokes a nifty reversal of the Cartesian equation - one in which flashes of understanding miraculously precede thought !

Indeed, we might conjecture that one of the pre-conditions for inspiration to occur at all, is a form of a priori spaciousness that is unobscured by habitual patterns of thinking. In this expansive context, intellectual reasoning performs a secondary process. Its usefulness lies in evolving a conceptual framework that can explain what has already happened ‘by itself’ – or in filing away under ‘rationally incomprehensible’, ‘intuitive’ or ‘esoteric.’

Despite the ubiquitous use of the terminology of luminosity in both spiritual and secular language to indicate enlightened thinking, we customarily regard light as a functional phenomenon that enables us to discern objects. Yet it can be instructive to reverse the direction of correlation and instead posit objects as the agents that enable us to appreciate the shifting qualities of light in the unrepeatable configuration of each instant. In so doing, an equilibrium may be located in which the object, the luminescence and the perceiver no longer operate as separate entities.

'Darsan' is a Sanskrit term dating from around 3,000 BC, but with origins that extend well beyond the birth of written language in any phonetic form. It can be translated as 'seeing' in a holistic sense rather than 'looking' in a conventional sense. Holistic seeing by definition bypasses the selective filters that screen the billions of stimuli that continuously bombard our pre-conscious mind, resulting in relatively

crude biochemical classifications of essentially dualistic value. Such primitive discrimination based on contrast, appears to determine whether a pattern of impulses is permitted to attain top-level conscious awareness or not.

Throughout the history of humanity - largely in the domain of wisdom traditions and artistic movements, although nowadays also as a matter of empirical scientific investigation - countless belief systems have emerged with the purpose of consciously developing sensitivity not only to the presence of, but more tellingly to the volitional consequences of such infinitesimal events. Curiously, the characteristics of this penetrating capability may have humble parallels in day to day life with what we ordinarily take to be an unexceptional embodied intelligence: 'gut-feeling'.

Mindful of the epistemological implications of perceptual activity, darsan-conscious art advocates a receptive rather than an acquisitive approach, in which the formation of images is conceived of as an interaction between perceiver and perceived, not as a conquest. The focus is on interconnectedness, not otherness and the status of process is in equanimous balance with product. In this configuration of creativity, the artist is posited as an unselfconscious catalyst rather than a self-determined author, and the subject itself is regarded as a co-creator and collaborator.

Side-stepping the triangulation of automaticity, darsan-based art embarks on a less-travelled trajectory. Entering a discerning stillness at the very threshold of synaptic movement (prior to habituation entering the frame), darsan art aims to expand this still point as it ripens into motion. As momentum crystalises around the hub of this infinitesimal turning point, composition, shape, line, texture, colour and luminosity fuse to form a perceptual juncture in which the mundane fleetingly mirrors the transcendent and vice versa - in an instant where both are simultaneously and equanimously extant.

In the city of Brahmin
There is a secret dwelling
Called the Lotus of the Heart
Within this dwelling is a space
And within this space
Lies the fulfillment of all our desires
(Chandogya Upanishad)

Such 'valid' perceptions appear to persist in the gaps between electrical impulses and full-blown thought clusters as they cascade towards the manufacture of self-existent desire. As soon as the industry of dualistic enterprise kicks in, the fleeting clarity of any 'direct' perception is eclipsed; hidden from sight by the clouds of acquisition, aggression and distraction thrown up by the industry of dualistic

machinery.

This deceptively common experience of perception has traditionally been symbolized across belief systems in the form of the mandala - a pictorial representation of temporal constancy in motion. The universality of the mandala as an organising principle in art and nature is founded on the principle of the centre as still point; the eternal beginning (and end) of all forms and processes.

Developing awareness of the unconditioned potential contained in a continuum of instants, generates familiarity with the machinations of the psychodynamic systems in place, and triggers an alternative to automaticity. It becomes theoretically possible to adapt the existing machinery to evolve an alternative brain architecture - one that prioritizes the advancement of dexterity in expanding the gaps between thoughts containing dualistic intent.

> It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension. (Carl Jung)

A central task of the darsan-conscious image-maker, intent on decelerating the transience of presence, is to become more closely attuned to those spontaneous occurrences when auspicious combinations of pictorial elements intersect metaphorically with events in seemingly coincidental yet meaningful ways. This procedure represents an up-scaled mirroring of microscopic events into the fabric of everyday happenings.

Such an intervention when performed with awareness of the established evolutionary thrust of biological habituation represents a profound turning point for an artist - a moment in which nothing short of a conscious evolution of the creative capacity of the individual becomes a distinct possibility.

> You do not need to leave your room.
> Remain sitting at your table and listen.
> Do not even listen, simply wait.
> Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary.
> The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked.
> It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet. (Franz Kafka)

In this schema, little is to be gained by accruing endless philosophical virtuosity as intellectual diversion, or by proposing novel forms of artistic representation as decorative adornment. The artist's priority as the catalyst linking events with images is to align picture-forming methods with the aims and purpose of an over-arching project of self-actuation. While subject matter may remain secular and nominally figurative, the foremost objective of such an approach is to imbue the underlying structure of a

picture with a lucid dynamics of perceptual motion that can be discerned.

Not equal to
Not metaphor
Not standing for
Not sign (Minor White)

This organic approach, though intuitive is also methodologically rational - not mystical. It is analogous to a Tibetan form of mind training known as Lojong and a contemplative photography tradition called Miksang. According to Chandrakirti, a founder of Madhyamaka Prasangika philosophy in 4th Century India, gaining familiarity with the nature of everyday, conventional or concealer truths through single-pointed awareness in meditative equipoise, is a reliable method for cultivating parallel insight into the nature of underlying truth. Skilful practice enables the seeker to apply 'inferential valid cognizers' to the subjective relationship between a consciousness and its appearing objects.

This is the starting point of this study.

Exploratory / fledgling photographic work in progress can be accessed at http://www.darshanaphotoart.co.uk/isolates

Textual Research Base

The core of the research field for Isolates of Valid Perception is the philosophical schools that flourished at Nalanda University in Bihar between 4th – 11th centuries; principally the Madhyamaka Prasangika (Middle Way Consequence) school. But also related schools: Madhyamaka Svatantrika (Middle Way Autonomy) / Chittamatra (Mind Only) / Sautrantika (Sutra) / Vaibashika (Realist). There is a substantial Madhyamaka textual base, mainly in the original Sanskrit; some in Tibetan, Pali and Chinese translations. English translations are emerging from the Tibetan diaspora caused by the Chinese invasion of 1959.

Three related areas are:

1. The Upanishadic origins of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism prior to the life of the historical Buddha and his Jain contemporary Mahavira, especially the prevalence of experiential knowledge

that became codified in sutra form orally and only much later in written languages. **I am especially interested in this sequence of events.**

2. A range of contemporary scientific and critical thinking that has parallels with Madhyamaka Prasangika views - Phenomenology of Perception, Corporeal Ontologies, Affect, Neuroscience, Quantum mechanics.

3. Ways in which other Eastern influenced artists / photographers / filmmakers / thinkers have approached similar questions to my own.

(True Perception by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is a text that acted as a catalyst for the fusion of ingredients in this premise.)

Nalanda University Sources

My current information is as yet incomplete. Many of the below texts are available as English translations. I am in the process of locating details.

Madhyamaka (including Prasangika & Svatantrika sub-schools)
Aryadeva: 'Chatuhshataka' (Four Hundred Stanzas)
Bhavaviveka: 'Tarkajvala' (Blaze of Reasoning)
Bhavaviveka: 'Pranjapradipa' (Lamp of Wisdom)
Buddhapalita: 'Mulamadhyamaka-vritti' (Commentary on Fundamental Wisdom)
Chandrakirti: Prasannapada' (Clear Words)
Chandrakirti: 'Chatuhshataka-tika' (Commentary on the Four Hundred Stanzas)
Chandrakirti: ' Madhyamakavatara' (Supplement to the Middle Way)
Jnanagarbha: 'Satyadavayavibhanga' (Differentiation of the Two Truths)
Kamalishila: 'Bhavanakrama' (Stages of Meditation)
Nagarjuna: 'Sutrasamucchaya' (Compendium of Sutras)
Nagarjuna: 'Mulamadhyamakakarika' (Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way)
Shantarakshita: 'Madhyamakalamkara' (Ornament of the Middle Way)

Chittamatra
Asanga: 'Abidharmasamucchaya' (Compendium of Higher Knowledge)
Asanga: 'Yogacharyabhumi' (Levels of the Mind of Integrated Practice)
Dharmakirti: 'Pramanavinishchaya' (Ascertainment of Reasoning)
Dignaga: 'Pramanasamucchaya' (Compendium of Valid Cognition)
Maitreya: 'Mahayanasutralamkara' (Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras)
Maitreya: 'Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes'
Vasubhandu: 'Trimshika' (Thirty Stanzas)
Vasubhandu: 'Vimshatika' (Twenty Verses on Cognition)

Sautrantika
(I'm still researching this school.)
Dharmakirti: 'Pramanavarttika'(Commentary on Dignaga's Compendium of Valid Cognition)

Vaibashika
Various Authors: 'Mahavibhasha' (Great Exposition of Particulars)
Vasubhandu: 'Treasury of Higher Knowledge'

Tibetan

Lama Tsongkhapa: 'Ocean of Eloquence'
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