

## DANAM CONFERENCE 2007

### SESSION RT4

**Theme: Tantra and Rasa: Embodied Divinity and Aesthetic Self-Realization**

**David Peter Lawrence**, University of North Dakota, *Convener*

**E.H. 'Rick' Jarow**, Vassar College, *Presiding*

## ABSTRACTS

**David Peter Lawrence**, University of North Dakota

***Suggestion, Universalization and the Disclosure of Sakti: Revisiting Abhinavagupta on the Relations of Aesthetics and Monistic Saivism***

My paper will examine key discussions by the Kashmiri thinker Abhinavagupta (c. 950-1020 CE) pertaining to the relations between his aesthetics on the one hand, and his monistic, tantric Saiva philosophical and religious theories, on the other. I will endeavor to interpret Abhinava's writings in the different areas as expressions of an integral and broadly cohesive intellectual system. The paper will focus particularly on Abhinava's reformulations of Anandavardhana's theory of the suggestion (*dhvani*) of aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*) by the formal structures of literature, and conception of aesthetic sentiments as universalizations of ordinary human emotions. It will explore ways in which Abhinavagupta subsumes these processes within the monistic Saiva myth of Siva emanating, embodying himself within, and controlling the universe through his power and consort Sakti; and rituals that recapitulate the myth, leading the adept to identity with Āiva by disclosing his or her possession of immanent Sakti.

**Kerry Martin Skora**, Hiram College

***Abhinavagupta's Aesthetics of Touch: Synaesthetic Awareness and Lucid Dream-Play***

I recover the intimate connection between aesthetic and tantric experience, as understood by the Kashmiri tantric-cum-aesthetic visionary Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025 CE). Shifting attention away from disembodied conception and toward "inner touch" or bodily felt sense, I retrieve the sensuousness of religio-aesthetic awareness. By focusing on synaesthetic awareness, I extend previous scholarship (Gnoli, Masson and Patwardhan) on Abhinavagupta's aesthetic descriptions of the highest religio-aesthetic awareness attained in the "sacrifice of sexual union" (*kulayāga*). Building on works by Lannoy and Schechner, I connect the sexual ritual to the religio-aesthetic experiences in the multi-sensory environments of temples and cave sanctuaries. I present a model of "lucid dream-play" to evoke the highest religio-aesthetic stance (inspired by neuroscientist James Austin), arguing against theories depicting such experience as both disembodied and "non-aesthetic." Inspired by Trika Shaiva notions of "play" (*līlā, kṛīdā*), I conclude that the highest religio-aesthetic stance for Abhinavagupta is full-bodied and sensual phenomenal immersion.

**Loriliai Biernacki**, University of Colorado  
***The Ethics of Delight***

Thinkers as disparate as Richard Rorty, Joan Copjec, and Eli Wiesel have suggested that the cultivation of ethical responses to our neighbors lies not with more rational argumentation, but rather through the heightened awareness of other people via the medium of art and story. This paper seeks to explore the possibility of ethics within an idea of art as aesthetic encounter in the *Eye of the Light on Suggestion* (*Dhvanyālokalocana*) of the 10th century Tantric thinker Abhinavagupta. This text, the *Eye of the Light on Suggestion* became one of the most authoritative texts on aesthetic appreciation, setting standards for art for centuries, through the present.

In this paper I suggest that the key to the power of aesthetic experience lies especially in that which is absent, not expressed; that the power of suggestion along with its ethical force lies specifically in its acknowledgement of a meaning that is precisely incomplete.

**Sthaneshwar Timalsina**, San Diego State University

***Aesthetic and Mystical: Reading Tripura Literature Through the Lens of Rasa***

Central to the argument of this paper is the concept that the esoteric and aesthetic experiences become one in the Tantric tradition of Tripurasundari. Hindu Tantric tradition considers Tripurasundari as one of the highest divinities. Etymologically, Tripura means 'beyond the triad', and Sundari means 'the beautiful one'. She is the deity envisioned beyond the triad of subject, object, and cognitive process, and is considered beauty materialized. Texts such as *Saundaryalahari* exemplify this union of esoteric and aesthetic in the practice of Tripura.

The language used to identify her beauty functions as a tool to describe mystical experience. Suggestion (*dhvani*) is a means to access both the mystical and aesthetic. The application of *alamkara* parallels the ornaments (*alamkara*) in the body of the goddess. Along these lines, experiencing the presence of the goddess is identical to the highest aesthetic bliss.

**Jeffrey Stephen Lidke**, Berry College

***A Tantric Semiotics of the Body as Rasa in Classical Indian Dance***

Through a multimedia format of dance, bol recitation, song and visual projection, I seek to articulate a Tantric semiotics of the body as rasa in Indian dance. The presentation will speak through three hermeneutical voices: one voice grounded in my own recent ethnographic research at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta and imminent visits to dance sites in middle and southern India, together with a second voice informed by a textual analysis of Sanskrit theories of aesthetics (*alamkara-sastra*), together with a third voice by critical scholarship on dance traditions (e.g., Daniels, 2005; Gill, unpublished). In imitation of the Indian dance tradition, the presentation will dance itself within and through the body gestures (*mudras*), modes of emotional articulation (*abhinaya*), and rhythmic movements (*nrtya*) that are the means for embodying and conveying rasa within the sanctified, dynamic realm of Indian dance theater (*bharatanatya*).