

The prose of the world: the field speaks for itself

The procession advances slowly. The courtesans... perform obscene dances; ... the drums, trumpets, and all sorts of musical instruments give forth their discordant sounds. ... Those who have nothing else to do shriek and shout. ... To form a proper idea of the terrible uproar and confusion that reigns among this crowd of demoniacs one must witness such a scene. As for myself, I never see a Hindu procession without being reminded of a picture of hell.

Saskia Kersenboom

Thus reports a French missionary in South India at the end of the 18th century (Dubois 1978:604-5). Saskia Kersenboom and Thomas Voorter offer their own account of a Hindu procession in their joint production of the DVD *Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi* (2006). Dubois's advice that such an event should be witnessed first-hand alludes to the experiential nature of understanding. 'Being there' reigns supreme; next, however, looms interpretation. Both his and our world operate frames of reference that differ significantly from those that underlie an actual procession. To report, therefore, inevitably involves such 'framing'.

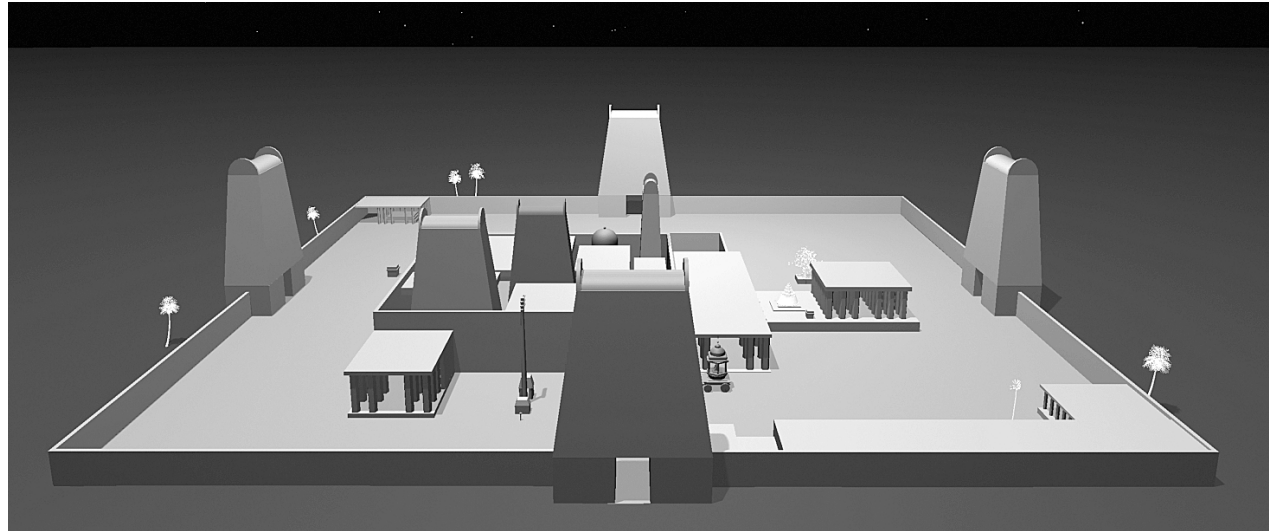
In contrast to the travelogue, the present authors investigate the possibilities of interactive multimedia. They aim to simulate the perspective of an 'eye witness' by inviting the user to access the DVD. This forms the grid of its design and familiarizes the user with frames of reference employed by Hindus in their devotional practices. Earlier and recent fieldwork among daily and festival routines in South Indian temples immersed the authors in liturgical practices of textual recitation, visual display and musical support (Kersenboom, 1984 ff). This gradually led to a 'logic of practice' that informed the collection of data, their analysis and, ultimately, the design for their multimedia representation.

Interactivity: 'being there'

The ingredients of real time and space are crucial to the perspective of the eye witness. It is, however, not only the 'eye' that is involved in this encounter. A ritual procession is performed physically and purposefully. The picture of hell that looms large to Dubois fuels a deeply satisfying experience for the goddess's devotees. They throw their bodies, senses and souls into the procession, pulling the chariot by hand, feeling Kamakshi's eyes on them, beating their cheeks in submission, and, most important of all, uniting with her in an act of mutual 'incorporation'. The goddess absorbs her devotees by accepting their gifts of flowers, food and red kumkumam powder, while she, in return, infuses herself into them through the sprinkling of holy water, by sharing the 'leftovers' of her food and flowers touched by her presence, and ultimately by sharing and applying the red kumkumam worn on the forehead. Moreover, this powder can be taken home, abroad, anywhere – provided it is kept in a ritually 'safe' place – and thus live interaction with the goddess is possible anytime, anywhere through the simple act of applying the sanctified red dot.

This the DVD cannot do. What it can do is program a trajectory of information – nodes where 'tacit knowledge' can be articulated. This type of 'expertise' is highly pragmatic: silent-

DVD: temple ground
'Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi'



ly it inheres cultural practices. However, when it does articulate itself it demands more media than the verbal alone: all the senses are addressed in the encounter. This modern media can do, to some extent, through the interactive use of the media of 'word, sound and image'.

Frames: the prose of the world

To report means to frame: to select a grid, media, their materiality and to design their accessibility. The ritual procession is the 'raw', physical mode of communication where bodies meet in real time, real space, mixing and mingling their substances with the natural elements. Its logic is one of transformation: the devotee leaves the temple in an altered, stronger psychic/physical state than when he or she entered the sacred grounds.

This the DVD cannot do either. The Digital Versatile Disc is an ultimate product of 'literacy'. Unlike popular ideas that DVD is primarily used for displaying video, it can equally contain word, sound and image files. In a way its design is similar to effective dramaturgy. The magic of the proscenium theatre, its dark auditorium and well-lit stage, the significant stage props and costumes are all foreground to a compelling story, while at same time the actual performance guarantees physical distance between actors and audience. In the DVD, the stage is the television or computer screen, and the actors perform their roles in digital form. The user can no longer touch the performers, nor is he touched by them in an act of 'mutual incorporation'. The social dimension of seeing and being seen that still survives in the theatre has been obliterated in the digital world. Instead, the user enjoys it in private and explores the flexible possibilities of the DVD. The loss of 'proximity' is creatively replaced by 'autonomy' over the process of learning. This new, multimedia prose can be stopped, repeated, fast-forwarded or paused. The digital procession turns a linear prose of the world into a non-linear, multi-layered, associative adventure. If the user craves to explore the unknown, he can travel at random and at leisure into underlying layers of information, stories, songs, dances, iconographies and metaphysics stored under the objects that he encounters in the digital procession. This circumambulation is a celebration of conceptualisation, beckoning the viewer to experience for himself, and confront the real world.

Design: from 'thick description' to rich application

Participant observation is the key to the entire process of data collection, data analysis and their representation. Endless hours of participation in Hindu temple rituals preceded the actual filming of the event in Kanchipuram on Friday, 31 January 2003. Mutual sympathy, familiarity, and a natural competence to blend in with the proceedings were imperative for the presence of the camera and the process of filming the procession. Thomas Voorter was able to film its progression only after acquiring the necessary 'tacit expertise' of what and who make up the process and when, how and why the procession moves the way it does. Its itinerary, tempo and highlights empower Hindu devotion and had to be taken into account as keys to understanding it. The 'terrible uproar' heard by Dubois proved to be a very strategic use of musical instruments and

sound effects such as fireworks and gun shots. The sound file forms the flow chart of the linear journey. In this application, the 'shrieks and shouts' do not come as a surprise: they highlight the ultimate lustration of the goddess in her cleansed, peaceful and sublime form, as she blesses her devotees after her long journey through the night. In real life, incorporation immediately follows.

Digital, interactive multimedia reset frames of reference that have marked academic literacy for over three centuries. Fieldwork, data collection, interaction and co-authorship of researcher and informant as well as the physical categories of time and space, sensory perception and the human body are central concerns in developing designs for interactive multimedia. *Eye to Eye with Goddess Kamakshi* invites an investigation into the various aspects of the inspiration that draws hundreds of Hindus every Friday to share her presence again and again. Its design is based on the cultural practices found in Hindu temples and their Sanskrit and Tamil normative manuals, offering a digital journey that branches out into an extensive database of verbal and printed discourse, of instrumental and vocal music, and of audio-visual recordings, iconography and material culture. This investigation and experimentation with multimedia representations as innovative methods for qualitative research seeks a new coherence in scholarly argumentation and communication: a prose of the world – a digital language that speaks for itself. <

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Video still.
Darshanam:
mother and child
Thomas Voorter,
'Darshanam'

