This Day Is to Be Special: the Role of Exaggerated Contrast in an Indian Wedding
Ekant Veer, University of Bath, UK

This movie documents an explorative look at how audial and visual cues are purposefully exaggerated in Indian culture as a means of separating the sacred from the profane. It is known that one of the key elements of sacredness is its separation from the profane (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989). This research shows how aspects of a typical North Indian wedding ceremony and the events surrounding the wedding are used as a means of contrast. Audial and visual cues are knowingly and often excessively exaggerated from everyday Indian life as a means of ensuring separation from the profane.

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FILM FESTIVAL SUMMARY
This Day is to be Special: The Role of Exaggerated Contrast in an Indian Wedding
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LONG ABSTRACT
The role of sacred and profane objects has been well founded in consumer research for some time. Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry’s (1989) seminal paper underlines the pervasiveness of the sacred within modern consumer culture. This research takes a reflexive look at one particular aspect of the sacred and profane relationship; that is, the way in which the sacred is kept separate and detached from the profane as a means of maintaining the importance and power associated with the sacred.

By drawing on a reflexive stance to this research the film presents the results of one interpretation of an Indian wedding. Reflexivity in this case, allows for the researcher to engage with the research site, but also accept his or her own biases and theoretical dispositions (Joy et. al 2006). The results presented show how audial and visual cues are exaggerated to illustrate the importance of sacred events in the lives of Hindu Indians. Although this research focuses specifically on a North Indian Hindu wedding the results from the research offer explanations for the exaggeration of audial and visual cues in other contexts.

This research uses the artistic concept of negative space as an analogy for how the sacred is contrasted with the profane. White space, Negative space or Silence all refer to the role that pauses or emptiness play in promoting the focus of a particular subject (Murray 2005). For example, in music, without the silence between notes the notes themselves lose meaning (Zakia 1993). One may not consciously be aware of the negative space that encompasses a piece, but without it the nature of the artistic creation is often muddled and lost in the composition (Brittain & Beittel 1960). It is when the difference between the negative and positive space is overly exaggerated that one can more clearly see the positive, but also the role that the negative plays in framing the subject itself.

This research shows how the contrast between the positive, in this case a wedding, and the negative, the everyday lives of the participants, is exaggerated to more clearly understand and appreciate the positive or sacred as being differentiated from the profane and everyday. Although all five Aristotelian senses are exaggerated in an Indian wedding this movie only focuses on the exaggerated contrast of audial and visual cues.

The methodology employed in the research was that of a videoethnographic study. The chosen context was a typical North Indian Hindu wedding held in December 2006. The research followed the marriage participants throughout the many different Hindu wedding rituals as well as interviewing family members to understand the cultural meanings associated with the various aspects of the wedding. In total, 14 hours of video tape was recorded focusing on the wedding itself. However, to understand the everyday lives of the participants the researcher continued to follow the couple before and after the wedding as they lived their lives away from the sacredness of the ceremonies. A further 11 hours of video was taken of non-wedding context. The final dataset comprised primarily of observational data and interviews with various people living in Delhi.

From the research it was seen that colour was the most prominently exaggerated visual cue used to differentiate the wedding from the negative space of the participants’ everyday lives. Gold, red, orange and silver all play a prominent role in the observed ceremonies, but are rarely seen in such brilliance and concentration in everyday Delhi life. Clothing is also used as a means of contrast with turbans and finest saris worn especially for the ceremonies, but are rarely worn at other times. The central focus of the main wedding ceremony is the Hawaiian holy fire that grows in intensity as the ceremony progresses. The combination of rhythmic chanting and growing flames offer an almost hypnotic audial and visual contrast from the often mundane nature of city life.

Audial cues are clearly contrasted in a number of ways. For example, when the groom approaches the bride on the wedding day he is led by a large band playing traditional and auspicious instruments such as the Shehnai. The sounds experienced by participants are in stark contrast to the soundscape of traffic and white noise that typify modern Delhi life.

Based on the research it is possible to see a number of areas where audial and visual cues are overly exaggerated to promote the importance of the sacred and positive and differentiate it from the negative space that the profane offers. This effect is also seen in many other contexts beyond the Hindu wedding ceremony, such as the prominence of Washington monument over the relatively flat landscape of Washington D.C.; the use of stained glass in Christian architecture and even the importance of a singular finger set aside for wedding rings in western culture. When mixed with the profane the sacred loses its efficaciousness (Durkheim 1915 [1928]); however, by exaggerating the difference between the sacred and profane the sacredness of the Hindu wedding is more easily recognised as such.

REFERENCES


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