

Film Review

Milind Soman Made Me Gay

Harjant Gill, dir. 27 min. USA. Frameline, 2007. English. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0dVB4M1FEc>, accessed March 13, 2014.

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In Esther Newton's (2000) collection of essays, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, Newton asks a pressing and significant question for anthropologists doing research in the field of sexuality. In her final chapter, "My Best Informant's Dress," she considers the articulation of erotic subjectivity in the field as something other than a "heroic quest" with or for the other. Specifically, she asks whether "the erotic ever make[s] a human gesture" by situating her lifelong relationship with her closest interlocutor, Kay (an important figure in her well-known ethnography about gay culture in Cherry Grove, Long Island, New York, in the late 1980s). Newton recalls that, without notice or preparation, Kay, at 80 years old and confined to an electric cart, affectionately embraces her leg. Newton writes to David Schneider about this moment, describing the intimacy of the encounter by relating its immediate intensity to Kay's status as her best informant. She recounts: "My heart turned over . . . such are the perils of fieldwork" (Newton 2000:252). What is particularly pertinent about Newton's story is that she recalls these moments not to gain a better, more objective perspective or to displace the relevance of the embrace through a long-awaited confessional. Instead, Newton acknowledges the gesture as a moment of undoing. The ethnographic imperative here is tied to listening as a necessary means not only for connectivity and writing but also for feeling (vulnerable) in affective and unpredictable worlds.

In the 2007 short film *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, anthropologist Harjant Gill reconstructs his own undoing in relation with and alongside other South Asian gay men, who are compelled to make sense of their emergent and embodied exclusions. They forge pathways of gendered performance in line with Gill's own movement between India and the United States. Gill's film title, like Esther Newton's, is a queer exploration—a visual narrative that brings together desire, mourning, and longing, as when he poignantly describes childhood memories of fleeing India after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Gill was only two years old at the height of the persecution and targeting of Sikhs in India, and he attempts to piece together his family's emotional silence around this historical event, as well as his Sikh identity and desire to return to India. What is carved in Gill's memory is the Hindu man on the street who offered him and his family refuge amid the chaos and violence, ultimately saving their lives.

This memory is not isolated as a trauma nor is it disconnected from what comes later in life when he sets his eyes on the Indian model and Bollywood actor Milind Soman. What matters here is the selection and sequence of events as they oscillate between displacement and homoerotic discovery. Gill's desire for Milind Soman is typical of an adolescent's crush for an unattainable celebrity, but there is also a queer connection to his attraction. Despite Soman's performance of heterosexuality, he is charged in 1995 for obscenity and "corrupting public morality" after appearing nude in an advertisement. Gill underscores this by appearing nude in his film, accompanied by image projections of Soman and a woman entangled in the nude, yet, according to Gill, they appear distant from each other as Soman looks away from her and into the camera (see Figure 1). In Gill's imagination, it is instead Soman's and Gill's own eyes that meet. A beautiful collage is formed that frames Gill's desire as moving between signifiers of "obscene" corporeal (hetero)sexuality and the projected texts of India's penal code regarding "obscenity." It doesn't matter that Soman is holding a woman, and it is in this instance that Gill is struck by Soman's beauty and intense eyes. This visual enrapture is also what moves Gill to abandon the camera, and it isn't the first scene in which this happens. Earlier, when the film is introduced, Gill is moving between projections of abundant root vegetables and fruit, as he narrates his envisioned travel back to India and admits that he may not be able to recognize the place he has imagined as home. These emotions are stunningly projected as raw produce blurring into his body as signs of home, longing, and apprehension.

Like the other men interviewed in Gill's film, locations of desire are not immediately obvious. For Daniel Singh, it is in witnessing the gracefulness of an Indian actor; for Ayush Gupta, it was in falling in love with a white man, despite his idealization of South Asian men; for Salman Shamsi, it was in turning back on his religion and becoming undone from kissing a man for the first time.

Gill, like the other gay men, does not explicitly take solace in U.S. discourses of liberal sexuality. The charmed circle of heteronormativity is pervasive, and queers are reminded of their abjection, no matter where they are. At 17 years old, Gill questions whether his fate is "inescapable" as a gay South Asian man living in the United States, where the brutal homophobic murder of 21-year-old Matthew Sheppard highlights his own sexuality, which prompts caution from others. Sexual and raced identity politics is undoubtedly central to Gill's film; however, the goal is

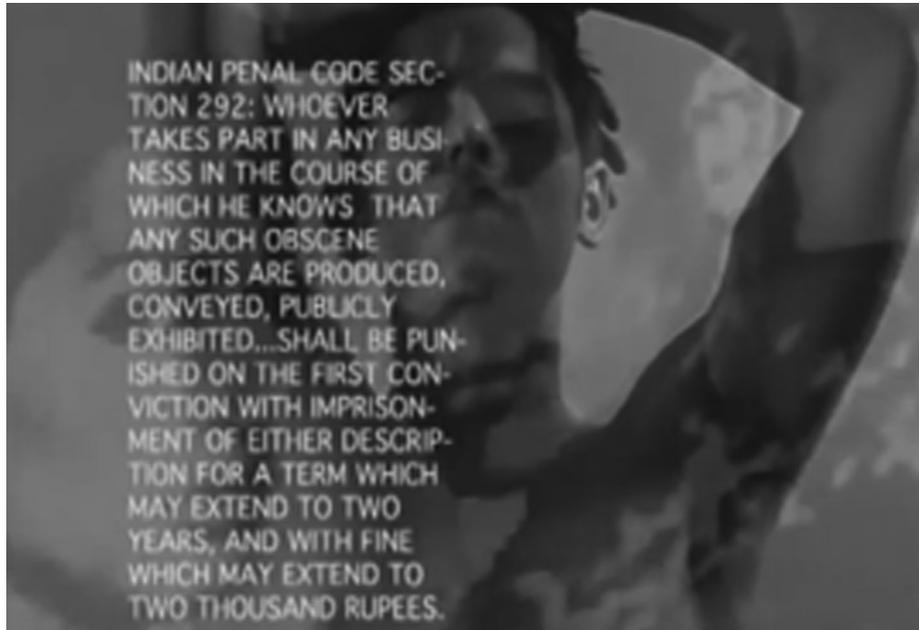


FIGURE 1. Harjant Gill foregrounded with Milind Soman and a woman in the background. (Courtesy of Harjant Gill)

not one of unity, wherein subjects stay intact for the purpose of garnishing “rights” afforded to those who belong to a distinct group. Judith Butler (2004:20) elaborates on this point in her essay titled “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in which she suggests that the formation of other kinds of communities—ones shaped by those who are “beside themselves”—is possible. Gill returns to India after ten years, and his failed search for Milind Soman is also the necessary rupture from an imagined India and an imagined sense of self, one that can no longer easily respond to questions of where he’s from: “One does not always stay intact . . . it may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by

the prospect of touch, by the memory of the feel” (Butler 2004:19).

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