
BLOOD ON THE TRACKS

AMAR KANWAR

RAKHEE BALARAM

A burst of scarlet leaves, a family photograph, a woman at a loom, oranges hanging from a tree, light piercing through a train window and the sound of a train, an archival video of refugees on a train during Partition, a woman drying a cloth in the sun. So unleashes a sequence of images that begins Amar Kanwar's monumental *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), a video installation with eight channels broadcast simultaneously that narrates the experience of rape in India across time frames and depicts political conflicts and communal violence. Using contemporary and archival footage, the filmmaker bears witness to those who have withered under the dreams of Nehruvian nation-building and progress in India's sixty years of democracy. The filmmaker turns his lens on historically volatile areas—the Northeast, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, Bangladesh, and Kashmir—as well as on India's minorities and the politically or socially oppressed: women, Dalits (the "undercaste"), Adivasis (tribal peoples), Sikhs, and Muslims. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's "tryst with destiny" and promise of a secular and plural India made in 1947 at the time of Independence is tested by Kanwar, who, like a rebellious version of the proverbial Dutch boy, removes his finger from a dam so feeble it releases a wave of memory and images that evoke a tragic history.

Kanwar decries the belief in a unified nation by focusing on cases of gender, caste, religious, and feudal discrimination in India. The multiscreen format of *The Lightning Testimonies*, capturing such accounts across eight channels, creates symmetry with the number of individuals and the fluidity of the experiences of the people in the regions he investigates.¹ In doing so, he addresses three areas of inquiry in his films: official or national history, methods of storytelling, and memory. How does one confront history? What of the lost voices in a democracy? How to remember? Official accounts contained in various tracts are exhibited by Kanwar, only to be undermined by his use of image and narrative as a means of revealing the violence behind the documented word—he draws attention to the painful reality of the women, or *Veerangana* (brave heroines, as the nation once deemed them), who suffered rape and abuse during the Bangladesh war and later were forgotten. In this manner, words can be seen as unstable agents of complex truths while at the same time the interplay of images and textual interventions work to unveil history, as with the documentary accounts of rape and conflicts subsequent to Partition witnessed in his films.

The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, first encountered in *The Lightning Testimonies* on Screen 3, underlies many of Kanwar's films. The British departure from the country at the time of Independence marked an end to colonialism but left a country divided with the formation of West and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). Kanwar's earlier trilogy, comprising *A Season Outside* (1997), *A Night of Prophecy* (2002), and *To Remember* (2003), explores various political and social ramifications of Partition and the new democracy: from the present-day Wagah border, or military Line of Control, between India and Pakistan; to the songs of people across conflict-ridden Telangana, Nagaland, and Kashmir; to the plight of Dalits and the commemoration in books and statues of their visionary leader, B. R. Ambedkar; and, in the final film, to Mahatma Gandhi's troubled legacy of peace. Kanwar's filming of a diverse democracy and its crises returns us to the problem of Partition and ultimately to questions of individual and collective agency.

Partition of the country resulted in acts of violence. The massacres in Punjab at the time of Partition were among the bloodiest, with rape being part of the atrocities, yet the silence surrounding such incidents—the lack of words—has been filled only by official accounts.² Indian historian Ashis Nandy has characterized this silence as a psychological defense among the Indian middle class. Of the years 1946 to 1948 he remarked: "With very few exceptions, everyone—victims, perpetrators and witnesses—tried to wipe

out the experience of the period."³ This inherent silence is one that Kanwar deliberately enacts and confronts through the documentary mode. Narratives of Partition and the acts of violence in divided Punjab and Bengal at the time of Independence and in its immediate aftermath, haunt this traumatic revisiting, both through their explicit use in his films and through layers of suggestion. Kanwar also invokes the biographical when he addresses how his own family in Punjab was affected by Partition in *A Season Outside*, in which he seeks to regain his individual identity from this history.

Kanwar was preceded in his documentary, or even "postdocumentary," style that challenges the medium's inherent conventions by Anand Patwardhan, a vanguard Indian documentary filmmaker who began to pursue the form during the 1970s and 1980 and continues up to the present. Patwardhan has explored such sociopolitical crises as the Indian Emergency and its suspension of basic rights from 1975 to 1977, the destruction of Babri Masjid—the Babri mosque—in 1992, the building of dams, the conditions of slums, Dalit issues, and minority politics throughout these decades.⁴ The documentary format, which gained further ground after 1998 with the rise of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who held power until 2004, allowed filmmakers in India to transgress boundaries between the public and private realms and to contrast "official" and individual voices. It further allowed Kanwar, who moved fluidly across the country through politically unstable areas, to record and edit multiple stories as a reflection of a complex and vulnerable democracy that he labeled as "in crisis."⁵ This focus distinguishes Kanwar from his New Delhi-based contemporaries Raqs Media Collective, three media practitioners who trained in documentary filmmaking and whose work centers on the immediacy of the local—specifically urban—versus the "nation," while further critiquing the machinations of global capitalism.

Kanwar's individual style of filmmaking and politics also separates him to some degree from the New Delhi-based Sahmat (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust), a collective of a wide range of artists and activists who work to defend secularism and demonstrate resistance to communal violence.⁶ Sahmat's own largely celebratory project *Postcards for Gandhi* (1994–95), for which members of the collective wrote or designed witty or subversive postcards to the leader, is at odds with Kanwar's own complex and personal account of the figure in *To Remember* and his brief evocation of him in *The Lightning Testimonies*. Archival footage, grainy video, and photographs become the repositories of truth in *To Remember*, whereas Gandhi's actual memorial museum—Gandhi Smriti (formerly Birla House)—the setting for this film, becomes nothing

more than a sophisticated tomb. Kanwar's use of the museum calls to mind Marguerite Duras's screenplay *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959; directed by Alain Resnais), with its setting of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and its evocation of both the atomic bombing and the public abuse of the *tondues* (women accused of being Nazi collaborators) in France in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Vengeance for such public humiliations is found in the final sequence of *The Lightning Testimonies*, in which the naked women (*imas*, or mothers) in Imphal, Manipur, reenact the scene from Mahasweta Devi's play *Draupadi* and taunt the soldiers for their previous assaults and for their brutality and rapes—a testimony to the way in which trauma can be borne out collectively and on the public stage.

Questions of history and the act of memorialization are enduring themes in Kanwar's work. A voiceover in Screen 4 of *The Lightning Testimonies* asks, "How to remember? What remains and what gets submerged?" And in Screen 5, a similar question is posed through the use of text: "How does one remember and how does one tell? Which image can represent the ever-changing words of a testimony?" The hint of a tremor underlies Kanwar's admission here of the capriciousness of memory flooded by the power of emotion, reflected in the filmmaker's use of camerawork and editing. Repetition, close-ups, slow motion, accelerations, pans, blurs (still to motion, still to still, motion to still), freezes, saturations of light and color, intermittent acoustic sounds, and silence characterize Kanwar's video, which is held together by a masterly control of intensity and pacing. The video also emphasizes the intervals between different techniques, the fractions of time that occur before and after them, which points further to the device as part of a larger framework of the narrative and act of storytelling.⁷ Manipulation of affect can reinforce political positions as well, as seen in his 2007 work *The Face*, which presents a sequence of repeated rose petal offerings on Gandhi's cremation site, meticulously edited through accelerated and slowed motion, that becomes a sinister reflection of the corruption of the offerer—the Burmese dictator Than Shwe. Kanwar's precise control of time and its flow between past and present shapes the narrative and experience of history.

Some of these recurring motifs act as intertextual allusions, drawing the viewer deeper into the world of the narrative through visual images that create a coherence despite their spatial and temporal displacement in the viewing encounter, whether across a series of films or within the same one. This is seen in *The Lightning Testimonies* in which motifs of nature, animals, and children offer a simultaneous and competing narrative of

innocence in contrast to that of the rape presented. This corresponds with Kanwar's method of complex and sophisticated storytelling, whose mix of the poetic and the "real" could be seen to subvert Western body / mind divisions, while his multinarrative format in part draws from ancient Indian epics.⁸ The notion of repetition and trauma, explicit in Kanwar's films through repeated imagery and victims' accounts, can thus be seen both within and outside of local traditions. Veena Das, in her work with women affected by Partition, writes pointedly of the different ways in which trauma is handled by diverse societies with respect to "patterns of sociality" and, like Kanwar, moves beyond the Freudian notion of repetition compulsion as universal, as suggested by other (Western) scholars.⁹

Kanwar, as a male filmmaker investigating the largely female experience and accounts of rape in *The Lightning Testimonies* (though he also addresses sexual violence against Dalit men), draws a parallel between state-inflicted and individual violence. He recounts the female experience through allegory and constructions of time. Weaving, which forms a part of the opening sequence of the eight films in *The Lightning Testimonies*, becomes a layered motif that reinforces the position of women in the film.¹⁰ This parallel is furthered by notions of "cyclical time" as inherent to women's bodies, emphasized again by the multichannel video format—all of which is not to essentialize woman or the experience of the films but to draw attention to individual strategies within them.¹¹ Feminist scholars have praised the filmmaker for his "ethical" treatment of sexual violence and his use of the eight-channel video screen format that allows a congruency between the act of witnessing and the impossibility of narrating such an experience.¹² The film's stress on the materiality of images and words—what has been seen as a "bombardment" across multiple screens that destabilizes the viewer¹³—could conversely recall Jacques Rancière's realm of the sensible, where the distribution of such forms as "sensations" makes the political possible.

How does one remember? Kanwar presents a final alternative within the framework of the video—a metaresolution to the traumatic encounter the video depicts. Shards of terracotta vessels form a makeshift shrine in honor of Bilkees, a Muslim who was raped while pregnant and whose own daughter was killed—and who sought but did not initially receive justice from the state. Kanwar, through his textual intervention, indicates that the tribal people who cared for her, after finding her violated on their lands, created a memorial for her and her dead family. The redemption then, of *The Lightning Testimonies*, may also be placed here—within the narrative itself—a corollary to the widespread ignorance

and neglect of such cases, redeemed by virtue of the fact that there were those who bore witness first. This moment, along with the confrontation and reversal of power suggested by the *imas* in Imphal, creates another type of redemption in the film in which those who were unclothed by force disrobe to challenge their symbolic aggressors—a moment mirrored earlier when the actress Sabitri disrobes on stage to confront the police in the original play directed by her husband Kanhailal. Kanwar evokes the possibility of such forms of atonement throughout the film. Yet the final moments on Screen 8, in the dying seconds of the video, revisit the Adivasi shrine once more before closing with a shot of a near-empty field. Walter Benjamin's dream of an Angel of History is replaced by old shards and broken relics of tribal witnessing and quiet justice. The cycle continues.

1 For more on this see the interview with the artist by T. J. Demos, conducted October 2010, in *Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot for a Biennial*, ed. Ghalya Saadawi and Ismail Al Rifai (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011), 425–28.

2 For an analysis of official, personal, and private accounts of Partition, see Ishiaq Ahmed, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3 Ashis Nandy, "Days of the Hyena: A Foreword," in *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from 2 Bengals*, ed. Debjani Sengupta (New Delhi: Shristi, 2003), n.p.

4 For a comparison of the work of Anand Patwardhan and Amar Kanwar, see Geeta Kapur, "A Cultural Conjecture in India: Art into Documentary," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 30–59, esp. 38–51.

5 Kanwar, as quoted in *ibid.*, 39.

6 For more on the work of this group, which was founded in 1989 at the time of the murder of Indian agit-prop street theater performer Safdar Hashmi (1954–1989), see *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989*, ed. Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2013).

7 In a conversation with the author on September 2, 2013, Kanwar discussed the way he staged moments of the film that rebound and echo across the multiple screen format, building on recurring motifs or filmic techniques that also comment on moments in his previous films.

8 See Torunn Liven, "Image vs. Text: Aesthetical Operations and Ethical-Political Spectatorial Production in Amar Kanwar's *A Season Outside* (1997) and *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007)" (master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2012), 57, 63, <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/34712/duosistetorunnliven%5B1%5D.pdf?sequence=2>.

9 See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), esp. 102–3.

10 Freud, for example, endowed the traditional act of weaving with feminine attributes intimately related to the female body. "It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving." Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis" (1933), lecture 33, "Femininity," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 22, 1932–1936 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 132.

11 See Julia Kristeva, "Woman's Time," trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 13–35.

12 See for example Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Double Violation? (Not) Talking about Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Asia," in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 146–63.

13 See Shanay Jhaveri, "In Conversation: Amar Kanwar and Shanay Jhaveri," *Marg* 61, no. 3 (March 2010): 92–103.