

## Video Abstract Transcript

Sugata Ray, 'Hydroaesthetics in the Little Ice Age: Theology, Artistic Cultures, and Environmental Transformation in Early Modern Braj, ca. 1560–70', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (2016), doi:10.1080/00856401.2016.1208320.

Hello. My name is Sugata Ray, and this video introduces an essay that I have written for *South Asia*. The essay begins with an extraordinary illustrated manuscript of the *Bhagavata Purana* that was discovered in a small private collection in Rajasthan. The mid sixteenth-century manuscript, now dispersed across museums and private collections globally, has been admired in histories of Indian painting for its astute pictorial strategies and animated narration. Take, for instance, this folio now in the San Diego Museum of Art. The divine Krishna is seen playing with his devotees in the river Yamuna in the pilgrimage center of Braj, the 90-square-mile pilgrimage site in North India where Krishna is believed to have spent his youth. The artist has carefully tilted the pictorial plane to create a sense of spatial recession, while the river, flowing diagonally, cuts across the surface along a central axis, disregarding margins and boundaries that define pictorial space. Even though the central theme of the narrative is Krishna's divine play, it seems that the artist has carefully used pictorial arrangements to draw the viewer's attention to the blue river with lotuses and blooming creepers. The blue of Krishna's body blends into the blue of the river, making it difficult to discern the separation between the river and the divine body.

Something had radically changed in the mid sixteenth century. This mode of depicting water—the swirling fluidity, the use of white delicate lines to demarcate the turbulent waves of the Yamuna—was unprecedented in painterly cultures in India. In the essay, I read this centralisation of water as a representational tactic that emerged with the Little Ice Age, a global climatic period marked by lower temperatures in Europe and the North Atlantic Basin, and droughts and famines in other parts of the world.

In drought-ravaged North India, the beginnings of the Little Ice Age not only paralleled the emergence of a new form of artistic cultures that emphasised the liquescent materiality of flowing water, but also saw the enunciation of a new theological aesthetic that centralised the veneration of the natural environment of Braj as a manifestation of the divine body of Krishna. This essay traces the intersections between representational practices and theological aesthetics during the first few decades of the Little Ice Age.

As a discipline, Art History, of course, takes objects, structures, and artistic representations produced by the human species as its principal archive and locus of analysis. Consequently, artists, their patrons, and their audiences emerge as the primary agents in this history. How might perspectives from the emerging field of ecocriticism unmoor Art History's engagement with the past from its speciesist bias? What do we stand to gain from this unmooring? The hydroaesthetics of visual culture in early modern North India, my essay argues, presents us with an exemplary site to produce an ideation of an ecological Art History, one that brings together the natural and the artistic. In turn, the act of beholding flowing water becomes the crucial link that connects localised

aesthetic practices with an expanded non-human trans-territorial arena where water was a limited commodity.

There is, then, something to be said about hydroaesthetics. Rather than maintaining distinctions between the political, the environmental, and the technological, hydroaesthetics allows us to comprehend the interconnectedness between the ecologies of the natural environment, human subjectivity, and social relationships, to place water in an intrinsically interconnected field linked through a interweaving of the human and the environmental. One aim of the essay is to examine the ways in which cultural, situational, and spatial practices destabilise the understanding of water as merely a natural resource to highlight sociologies of flow, contested environments, the politics and ethics of ritual practices, and new methodological possibilities that conjoin the ecological with the aesthetic.

But what, we might ask, does water have to do with aesthetics? Certainly, at one level, it allows us to de-familiarise waterscapes by excavating their often neglected aesthetic dimensions. At the same time, a focus on the affect of water—its flow, its spaces, representations—allow us to move beyond politically conservative and nostalgic fetishisations of the pristine. One might remember the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, who launched his campaign by the river Ganges in Varanasi: ‘I am grateful to the party for giving me opportunity to contest the election from the holy city of Varanasi! With blessings of Ganga Mata and Kashi Vishwanath’, Modi had tweeted. Reassessing hydroaesthetics for their critical potential highlights how water can never be contained within such homogenous constructions of nature, culture, or geo-terrains.

By bringing together two discreet strands in historiography—one centered on ecological aesthetics and the other engaged with political aesthetics—I propose we reconsider the cognitive and political orientation that is critical for an ecological Art History. Rather than maintaining distinctions between the political, the environmental, the technological, and the aesthetic, transversality, as Guattari stresses, may indeed allow us to comprehend the interconnectedness between the ecologies of the natural environment, human subjectivity and social relationships. At the same time, transversality also connects optics, an ecological aesthetic and theological philosophy to provide a deeper history of artistic practices, political governance and natural resource management that places water in an intrinsically interconnected field linked through a quotidian interweaving of the human and the environmental.