

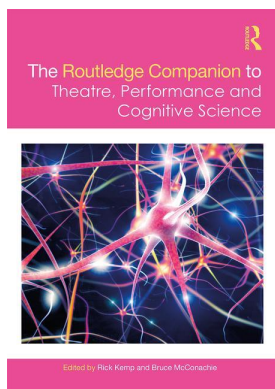
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RELISHING PERFORMANCE

Rasa as participatory sense-making

Erin B. Mee

‘There is no drama without *rasa*’ according to *The Nāṭyashāstra* (The Science of Drama), the Sanskrit aesthetic treatise attributed to Bharata (1996, 54). *Rasa* has been variously translated as juice, flavour, taste, extract and essence; it is the ‘aesthetic flavour or sentiment’ savoured in and through performance. Bharata tells us that when foods and spices are mixed together in different ways, they create different flavours; similarly, the mixing of different emotions and feelings arising from different situations, when expressed through the performer, gives rise to an experience or ‘taste’ in the partaker, which is *rasa* (55). *Rasa* is what is ‘tasted’ when a performance is ‘digested’ or ‘taken in’ by a partaker. The goal of Sanskrit drama was to create *rasa*, and *rasa* remains central to genres such as *kutiyattam* (a particular way of performing Sanskrit drama in Kerala, South India) and *kathakali* (a genre of classical dance-drama in Kerala). *Rasa* exists only as and when it is *experienced*: ‘the existence of *rasa* and the experience of *rasa* are identical’ (qtd Deutsch 1981, 215). Similarly, *rasa* exists always and only as the result of an *interaction between* performer and partaker. For Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1025), who commented extensively on *The Nāṭyashāstra*, *rasa* is not a gift bestowed upon a passive spectator or a commodity bought by a consumer, but an attainment, an accomplishment; someone who wants to experience *rasa* has to be an active participant – or, to use the dining metaphor, partaker – in the work.

Because Bharata has taken his metaphor from food, I refer to the spectator or audience member as a partaker: someone who has to choose to take in a performance, who has to actively put it in the ‘mouth,’ chew on it, break it down and roll it around on the ‘tongue’ to relish it; who has to ‘ingest’ and ‘digest’ the performance, incorporating it into the self. *Rasa* is active, participatory, interactive, social, experiential, sensual, tactile, multi-sensory, internal, emotional, intellectual, embodied and an attainment. Abhinavagupta refers to *rasa* as an ‘*act of relishing*’ (Deshpande 1989, 85 emphasis mine), and as such, *rasa* is both a noun and a verb: the relishing of the flavour and the flavour that is itself relished.

While the dining metaphor is useful for a first pass at understanding *rasa*, it eventually breaks down because experiencing and processing a performance is not, at the cognitive level, the same as eating a meal. Ultimately, *rasa* is a theory of embodied response to a performance – a theory of partakership – that can be understood in light of cognitive science. I will put *rasa* in conversation with Giovanna Colombetti’s discussion of embodied, experiential, participatory sense-making in *The Feeling Body* to position *rasa* as an ‘affective dimension of

intersubjectivity, construed as an embodied or jointly enacted practice' (Colombetti 2017, 172) of participatory sense-making.

According to Bharata, 'rasa is the cumulative result of *vibhāva* [a stimulus], *anubhāva* [an involuntary reaction to the stimulus], and *vyabhicāri bhāva* [a voluntary reaction to the stimulus]' (1996, 55). Bharata lists eight rasas, each of which has varying degrees of intensity: *shringāra* (love, affection), *hasya* (joy, laughter, happiness), *raudra* (anger, rage), *karuna* (sadness, grief, depression), *vira* (strength, heroism), *adbhuta* (wonder, awe), *bibhatsa* (disgust) and *bhayanaka* (fear).

To examine how rasa works according to Bharata, let us focus on *shringāra*. *Shringāra* has been translated into English as 'love,' but in Bharata's description, *shringāra* encompasses much more:

In our daily life whatever is pure, holy, resplendent is referred to as *shringāra* [...] Moreover, a person enjoying happiness, achieving his desires and helped by proper season, flowers, etc. when he is in a woman's company – that is called [...] This *shringāra* results in the case of men and women, of healthy youth. It is of two kinds: *sambhoga* (fulfillment), *vipralambha* (non-fulfillment; lit. separation).

(Bharata 1996, 56, 57)

Shringāra that is fulfilled can be stimulated by 'season (i.e., spring), garlands, scent (anointment), ornament or experience or by listening to, or seeing desired company, beautiful surroundings, delightful music, [and/or] beautiful parks' (57). Clearly, *shringāra* can exist in the everyday world as well as on stage, and can be stimulated by many things, so rasa encompasses emotional experience in everyday life and on the stage.

Each rasa is built on a 'sthāyi bhāva,' or underlying emotional state. *Shringāra* is based on love; *hasya* is based on humour; *karuna* is based on compassion; *raudra* is based on horror; *vira* is based on the heroic; *bhayanaka* is based on fear; *bibhatsa* is based on repulsion; *adbhuta* is based on wonder. As Vinay Dharwadker points out:

The Nāṭyashāstra's boldest implication is that the sthāyi bhāvas comprise an individual subject's fundamental mode of existence in the world – that a self exists only in one or another of these long-lasting states at any given time, persists over time in a succession of such states, and has no other mode of existence.

(2015, 1384)

Shringāra is built on the sthāyi bhāva *rati* (love). For *shringāra* an underlying emotional state is subjected to a stimulus which, in the case of *shringāra*, might be a smell, a memory, a trip to the park, an interesting conversation, or an interaction with a loved one. This stimulus (*vibhāva*) would then mix with the sthāyi bhāva to create *anubhāva* – an involuntary or non-conscious psychophysical reaction to the stimulus, such as 'sweating, thrill, break in voice, trembling, pallor, tears and breakdown' (Bharata 1996, 57). The stimulus and the sthāyi bhāva also create *vyabhicāri bhāva*, a more conscious and somewhat controllable reaction to the stimulus, which might include impatience, bashfulness, excitement, dissimulation or jealousy.

The Nāṭyashāstra's main goal is to help performers evoke rasa; most of its chapters focus on how to create and present facial expressions, hand gestures and bodily postures that will embody the outward manifestation of an emotion so it can be shared with, and evoke a response in, the partaker. Bharata says that *shringāra* 'must be expressed [...] by loving looks, lifting (raising) eyebrows, side-glances, graceful steps and gestures, which are all *anubhāvas* or involuntary (natural)' (Bharata 1996, 57). Rasa occurs when the sthāyi bhāva of the partaker is subjected

Table 21.1 How the rasa shringāra is generated

Sthāyi Bhāva (in the partaker)		Vibhava + (stimulus)	Anubhava (involuntary reaction to the + stimulus)	Vyabhicari Bhava (voluntary + reaction to the stimulus)	When expressed by the performer through abhinaya and shared with the partaker through:	= Rasa
Rati (love)	Season (i.e., spring), garlands, scent (anointment), ornament or experience or by listening to, or seeing desired company, beautiful surroundings, delightful music, beautiful parks.		Feeling stunned, sweating, thrill, break in voice, trembling, pallor, tears and breakdown.	Dejection, lassitude, suspicion, jealousy, infatuation, fatigue, helplessness, anxiety, confusion, remembrance, boldness, bashfulness, fickleness, pleasure, excitement, heaviness, pride, sorrow, impatience, sleep, forgetfulness, dream, awakening, intolerance, dissimulation, ferocity, desire, disease, insanity, death, fear and guessing.	Loving looks, lifting (raising) eyebrows, side-glances, graceful steps and gestures.	Sringara

to the vibhāva of the situation, and the anubhāva and vyabhicari bhāva of the character as performed by the performer, and shared with the partaker through *abhinaya*, the Sanskrit term for acting. *Abhinaya*¹ literally means ‘to carry forward,’ and the actor is known as a ‘*katha patram*,’ or vessel for the story and its thematic and emotional content. The actor’s primary responsibility, which is built into the terminology, is to be a vessel to carry forward the character-story-situation in order to evoke a rasic exchange with the partaker (Table 21.1). To put it mathematically: sthāyi bhāva + vibhāva + anubhāva + vyabhicari bhāva + abhinaya (4 aspects) = rasa

Colombetti articulates a theory of embodied sense-making that parallels Bharata’s articulation of rasa. She argues that skills such as imitation, along with a responsiveness to others’ facial expressions and physical gestures, ‘embody [...] a *pragmatic* form of understanding others’ (172) that is not based on internal simulation or mentalising, but constitutes an embodied *practice*. She refers to this as ‘*participatory sense making*, which is enacted in the concrete interaction between two or more autonomous agents coupled via reciprocity and coordination’ (172). These skills, present in daily life and in partakers of performance, create rasa – an emotional taste – through pragmatic, participatory and embodied sense-making in the coordinated and reciprocal interaction between performer and partaker.

An understanding between self and other involves empathy, which is, in Colombetti’s view, ‘an *experiential* access to the other’s subjectivity,’ a ‘feeling in’ (174). She stresses the ‘*sensual* nature of our experience of others,’ and refers to empathy as a process of sensing-in (174). For example,

I do not experience the other’s bodily sensation [as my own]. Hence when I see a hand tensely contracted in a fist, I do not experience this tenseness in my own hand, as if my hand were itself tensely contracted in a fist. At the same time, however, I do not just see the other’s hand and judge that it is tense [or mentalize about its tenseness]; rather, I experience the tenseness in the other’s hand.

(174)

Crucially, for a discussion of rasa as partakership, this direct body-to-body empathy occurs in the *relationship between* self and other: ‘I neither “lose myself” in the others nor incorporate

the others' experience into mine in a sort of extended awareness of myself' (181). Empathy, then, is not self-referential: I do not convert the other person's experience into my own in order to understand it (e.g., 'I feel your pain'). 'Rather, I retain an awareness of myself and the others as distinct subjects. At the same time, however, I am also aware, via basic empathy, that the others' feeling is the same as mine' (181). Colombetti's analysis of empathy functions as a description of *rasa* as *sensual* and *experiential*, as a *relationship* between performer and partaker and as a *process* of sensing-in. This opens up an understanding of *rasa* as a *practice* of empathy in performance.

Colombetti points out that 'one need not be able to name the emotion that one empathizes in the expression – even though, arguably, one's emotional vocabulary can affect how one perceives expression' (177). In other words, this connection is often, even usually, 'prereflective' (181). Colombetti also points out that there can be a 'mismatch between the feeling that is empathized and the one that the observed person actually experiences' (177). For example, an actor portraying anger may evoke fear; an actor portraying fear may evoke pity. Nonetheless, the partaker experiences the performer 'as a source of feeling' (181).

If *rasa* is a way of experiencing another's emotions through the embodied relationship between self and other, if *rasa* is an affective dimension of intersubjectivity, it is an act of empathy, a practice of empathy and an empathetic response. Colombetti argues that the *awareness* of sharing a feeling (which is different from empathy) leads to a 'higher unity' between self and other (181). *Rasa*, which is an awareness of a shared feeling in that the partaker attends a performance to have a shared feeling and to be aware of that shared feeling – is then a mode of social bonding. Although *rasa* is most often discussed as an exchange between performer and partaker, performers partake of each other's performances, and partakers experience each other's responses, meaning that *rasa* becomes a flow of intersubjectivity between performer and partaker, partaker and partaker, and performer and performer.

As a fundamental mode of existence, as embodied sense-making, as a way of responding to others (whether fictional or real), as a response to performance and as an act or performance in and of itself, *rasa* is incorporated in(to) the self. Which is to say it participates in constituting the constantly becoming self. Crucially, *rasa* constitutes the constantly becoming social self.

Note

- 1 Bharata discusses four kinds of *abhinaya*: bodily expression (facial expressions, gestures, foot work), known as *āṅgika abhinaya*; vocal expression (*vāchika abhinaya*); expression through costumes, scenery and props (*āharyā abhinaya*); and the outward expression of the performer's emotions and feelings (*sāttvika abhinaya*).

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