

A DECONSTRUCTIVE STUDY OF ASISH AVIKUNTHAK'S SHORT FILM, "CIRCUMCISION": THE CENTER, THE PLAY AND THE APORIA

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Abstract

This essay offers a deconstructive reading of Asish Avikunthak's short film *Circumcision* (part of *The Tetralogy: Et Cetera*), focusing on the productive tension between the film's title and its visual content. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's critique of phallogocentrism—particularly his claims that “the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it” and that meaning operates through *différance* rather than presence—the essay argues that Avikunthak stages a deliberate mismatch. The title promises the permanent, irreversible, and intrapersonal ritual of circumcision, typically performed in infancy without the subject's consent. Yet the film depicts mundan, the temporary and reversible act of head-shaving performed on a consenting adult. This disjunction, the essay contends, performs a deconstructive gesture that challenges “the concept of centered structure” by displacing the title's authority over the image. The analysis proceeds through three interrelated concepts: the center, play, and aporia. First, the film demonstrates that the apparent center of meaning (the title) is not located within the work but outside it—in the viewer's cultural memory, expectation, and desire for hermeneutic closure. Second, this dislocation inaugurates what Derrida calls “play”: the endless slippage of signifiers that disrupts the reassuring certitude of the logos. Third, the film confronts its audience with aporia—the “nonpassage” or threshold where interpretation becomes impossible, where one is “exposed, without protection, without prosthesis, without possible substitution.” The viewer, expecting violence, receives instead a barber's caress; expecting permanence, witnesses a temporary loss; expecting meaning, encounters deferral.

The essay concludes by reading the film's final image—the camera rising from the young man to the barber to the distant sky—as a visual enactment of *différance*. The sky offers no destination, no final signified, only pure expanse. Avikunthak's “Circumcision” does not fail to signify; it signifies differently, through absence, play, and the aporia's gift: not a way out of the threshold, but a way of dwelling within it. The cut, the essay suggests, is never simply where it seems to be.

Keywords: *Derrida, deconstruction, aporia, différence, Avikunthak, circumcision, mundan, phallogocentrism, play, event*

Writing about the collapse of the Western phallogocentrism wherein the concept of speech is regarded as the center around which writing adjusts and compromises itself; Jacques Derrida in 1970s announces the advent of an “event” that puts the age old system of thought and theorizing upside down. He claims that the meaning/ the logos or “the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it* (J. Derrida 352)” – that is, the thing that appears to be the base and foundation of a system is actually dependent on the collateral for its very existence. The center, in other words, is a structural effect rather than an originating presence. This self-contradictory, inconsistent, or illogical logic—whereby stability is produced by what it excludes—forms the deconstructive kernel of Derrida's critique of metaphysics.

Asish Avikunthak's short Film, “Circumcision” gives us two things:

- i) a title – ‘Circumcision’ and
- ii) a video clip – where an adult man gets his hair chopped off, by a middle aged person who seems expressionless. Throughout the video the young man holds on to a pessimistic rather sad demeanor but there is a change in his expression in the end. After the completion of his task the barber rubbed both his hands up-and-down over the young man's face. The man's expression almost touched on contentment or peace as he lets go of the hair and the video clip ends with the camera going up from the young man to the barber and farther to the distant sky.

The video is short, intense and a part of *The Tetralogy: Et Cetera* which consists of four films: (1) “Renunciation,” (2) “Soliloquy,” (3) “Circumcision,” and (4) “The Walk.” So, what is this work about? What is the director trying to achieve here? First, let us turn to the literal meanings of the two elements Avikunthak provides: the act shown

(mundan, or head- shaving) and the title's reference (circumcision). Circumcision is a religious act: something which separates a male from the common diminutive of mankind and introduces him into a particular religious-cultural-historical lineage. It is typically performed in infancy, when the child is barely able to comprehend anything except pain. The infant remains unaware of the act's symbolic intent; the meaning is imposed from without, by the community and its laws. Avikunthak's film, however, stages a deliberate mismatch. Under the title "Circumcision," we witness the act of shaving the head. Here, a man undergoes the ritual voluntarily, consciously. He is aware of the act, understands its possible significance, and knows that what he loses—his hair—can be regrown in due time. Baldness is temporary; hair returns. The blade works only on the surface, cutting dead keratin, not living flesh. By contrast, in actual circumcision, the tool is a knife [something that has more metal to it for the task it is supposed to perform asks for it], and it cuts through living skin—the foreskin—which has no prospect of regeneration. The act is irreparable. The state it leaves the person in is also irreversible. Circumcision marks the body permanently; it inscribes an unerasable sign of belonging. Getting bald, on the other hand, is about appearance—an interpersonal, external transformation. Circumcision is intrapersonal, intimate, involving the self more than the gaze of others. One is seen as bald; one is circumcised within.

Avikunthak's substitution thus performs a deconstructive gesture whereby he challenges "the concept of centered structure" (352): the title (the apparent center of meaning) does not align with the image (the supposed margin). The "event" Derrida speaks of—the dislocation of the center or the locus [that is, the meaning of the film]—here takes cinematic form. The film asks: what happens when the name of a ritual is detached from its conventional referent? Is shaving the head a form of symbolic circumcision? Or does the mismatch reveal that all rituals are arbitrary signifiers, anchored not by essence [signified]

but by differential play? It does suggest that the whole structure of the work of art, here the film, is characterized by the deferral where meaning is deferred. The barber's final gesture—rubbing the young man's face—and the young man's expression of peace suggest a rite of passage nonetheless. This again supplements the outcome of circumcision [pain] with that of relief. The center – title (circumcision) is not in the act shown but outside it: in the title, in the viewer's expectation, in the cultural memory of what circumcision means. The film thus becomes a meditation on how meaning is produced through dislocation, absence, and the collapse of phallogocentric certainty. The film enables the interpreter to face what Derrida terms "aporia," meaning "the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, nonpassage (Aporias 8)." The Greek word derives from *a-* (without) + *poros* (passage, way), literally signifying "without passage" or being at a loss. Watching the film makes a person enter into a "state of puzzlement" leaving her on the threshold where she cannot comprehend the locus, "not knowing where to go (12)."

It [not knowing where to go] had to be a matter of [il devait y a/fer du] the non passage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens [se passe] and is fascinating [passionnel in this nonpassage, paralyzing in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such (12).

The audience is given the entrance – she is presented with the subject – the film "Circumcision." From the moment she reads the title on the big screen in front of her that flashes the nomenclature, she begins to expect that which is to come next – the act – the violence. The cultural memory starts to play its role for she almost apprehends what could appear next, as if engaged in an internal dialogue; Could he dare to show it on the BIG SCREEN? If it is shown, could that be the real act captured and prepared for a literary audience? Who can be subject to its violence? Or it can merely be the representation of the ritual? The audience is bewildered by that which appears on the screen, completely disoriented by the audacity of the attempt and stumped by the whole thing [the artist, his work] and his intention behind the choice of such a nonchalant subject].

It should be a matter of [devrait y a/fer du] what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem, a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of a secret (12).

Modernism has already informed us about the death of the author [here the artist] leaving the task to the reader [here the audience] to constitute the meaning of the text. It has also taught us that sometimes the text may exist

without meaning at all in protest to the phallogocentric dominance of structure and its logos. But post-structuralism entails that meaning is *deferred*, produced through difference. Hence, if the audience's confusion in deciphering the meaning of Avikunthak's film "Circumcision," is an instance of facing "a play" – the play of signified – that disrupts the fundamental immobility and the reassuring certitude of the logos/ meaning/ center, "which itself is beyond the reach of play (352)." And lack of this certitude creates an anxiety for the audience for whom it is "no longer be possible to constitute a problem" – the work appears to "block" her way as it separates her from the traditional methods of

interpretation. She is exposed—without protection, prosthesis, or substitution—revealing the failure of her structuralist assumption that the title must govern the image or the signifier ["circumcision"] must relate to the signified ["mundan"]. The audience is "disarmed, delivered to the other" ["difference"] – the lack of meaning/ logos in the structure; who seems "incapable even of sheltering [herself] behind what [structuralism or deconstruction] could still protect the interiority of a secret [the structure where the center is subject to 'play']" – for the center is never at the center but outside it – the logos or meaning she has been trying hard to discover was never meant to be delivered, it has been suspended and supplemented by the absence. The title "Circumcision" has never intended to deliver what she has been anticipating for it only aimed at portraying the deferral – the act of "mundan" is not meant to substitute the ritual of circumcision from the beginning because it desires to serve the other, that is, the slippage of meaning/ logos/ center.

Avikunthak in his "Circumcision" stages aporia through the mismatch of title and image, playing on Derridean *différance* which suggests that meaning is never fully present, always in play. Yet to say this is not to accuse the film of nihilism or mere nonsense. On the contrary, the film's power lies precisely in its refusal to offer the viewer a comfortable hermeneutic shelter. The camera's final movement—upward from the young man to the barber to the distant sky—enacts visually what Derrida theorizes as the nonpassage. The sky offers no destination, no terminus, no final signified. It is pure expanse, pure deferral. The viewer is left not with an answer but with a question mark suspended in that sky: What just happened? Was that a circumcision? Was that a renunciation? A soliloquy? A walk? The tetralogy's title, *Et Cetera*, finally reveals its cruel generosity. It says: the list is never complete. Meaning is always *et cetera*. The film, thus, does not fail to signify. Rather, it signifies *differently*—not through the presence of a stable center but through the productive agitation of its absence, aporia and *différance*. The young man's expression of peace at the end is not peace achieved through understanding. It is the peace of having let go — not just of hair, but of the demand that the ritual *mean* something determinate. In this, Avikunthak offers a quiet, even tender, deconstruction. The barber's hands rubbing the young man's face are not violent. They are almost caressing. Perhaps the film suggests that the true event is not the cut itself but the exposure to the other that follows — the moment when, stripped of the prosthesis of certainty, one simply *receives* the gesture without needing to decode it. That is the aporia's gift: not a way out, but a way of dwelling in the threshold. The center, as Derrida knew, is not at the center. Avikunthak's film shows us that the cut is never simply where it seems to be — and that, perhaps, is the only circumcision that matters.

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