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## ***Darshan, Television, and Media Theory in India*** by Aaron Rester

In 1987, perhaps the most significant South Asian media event of the twentieth century began. It was the broadcast on Doordarshan,<sup>1</sup> the Indian state-run television network, of a version of the Hindu epic *Ramayan*, directed by Ramanand Sagar. The show, despite being given an unfavorable Sunday morning time slot, quickly became a national phenomenon. Originally scheduled for fifty-two one-hour installments, it was soon extended by thirteen episodes (after sanitation workers throughout northern India went on strike to protest its premature ending<sup>2</sup>), and then by another thirteen. The average number of viewers for each episode is believed to have been about 40 to 60 million (despite the presence of just 13.2 million television sets in the country<sup>3</sup> and limited electricity), with the most popular episodes possibly drawing as many as 80 to 100

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a literal translation of "tele-vision," meaning "far sight." We will examine the concept of *darshan* in detail later in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Richman, "Introduction" in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> By 1994, due in no small part to the success of *Ramayan* and the serialization of the other great Indian epic, *Mahabharat*, that number had increased to 47 million by 1994. Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001). p. 77.

million viewers.<sup>4</sup> During the broadcasts, city streets were nearly deserted. Rural villages took up collections to rent televisions and ritualized public viewings were held, in which the television showing the broadcast was bathed, garlanded, and offered *prasad* (consecrated food), as a statue of a deity in a temple would be. On at least one occasion, a riot resulted from a power failure during the broadcasts. When the epic finally drew to its conclusion in 1988, newspapers spoke of "national withdrawal,"<sup>5</sup> and it seems clear that, whether intentionally or not, the serial was instrumental in the rise of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, which adopted Ram, the divine hero of the epic, as the symbol of its Hindu nationalist agenda.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will be an exploration of the television *Ramayanas* as a medium of the devotional act known as *darshan* (seeing and being seen by a divine image).<sup>7</sup> As an important mode of seeing for millions of Hindus, *darshan* has drawn the interest of anthropologists and scholars of religion, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to *darshan* by "Western" media theorists (Marshall McLuhan mentions *darshan* once in *Understanding Media*, but incorrectly defines it as "the mystic experience of the physical presence of vast numbers of people"<sup>8</sup>). I therefore also intend to show how consideration of *darshan* as a mode of media consumption/participation calls into question certain ideas

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Lutgendorf, "All in the (Raghu) Family: A Video Epic in Cultural Context" in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> Lutgendorf, (1995), p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> See Victoria L. Farmer, "Mass Media: Images, Mobilization, and Communalism." In *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* ed. by David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) pp. 98-115. It is remarkable that the BJP managed to co-opt such a powerful symbol for itself, despite the fact that the Congress party -- the ruling party that commissioned and aired the serial -- enlisted the actor Arun Govil to campaign for them in his Ram costume. Rajagopal, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> There are other South Asian modes of media consumption/participation, such as *shruti* (hearing) which are equally relevant to a study of the *Ramayan*, but time and length restraints will unfortunately require me to focus specifically on *darshan*.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 238.

of two of the West's major media theorists: McLuhan and Walter Benjamin. I will first provide background on the place of television within the Indian mediasphere at the time of the *Ramayan* broadcast and narrative tradition out of which it arose. Then I will consider two older media of *darshan* which the television *Ramayan* "nested" within itself. Finally, I will discuss the theories of McLuhan and Benjamin as they relate to this media event.

The medium of television came to prominence relatively late in India. It took several decades after Doordarshan's first broadcast in 1959 for it to truly become a mass medium. This was partly due to the lack of the necessary infrastructure (there were no transmitters outside of Delhi until the 1970s<sup>9</sup>) and partly due to the nature of Doordarshan's programming, which was closely yoked to the Nehruvian developmentalist agenda. "During the 1960s and early 1970s," Philip Lutgendorf writes, "television sets in India served principally as technological novelties to adorn upper-class sitting rooms, where they provided, for a few hazy hours each night, a droning rendition of the day's news... and drably edifying cultural programming."<sup>10</sup>

It was Indira Gandhi's desire to mobilize television in the service of the Congress party for the 1985 elections that led to a rapid expansion in infrastructure, more than tripling the number of transmitters and increasing the percentage of the population potentially reached by television signals from 23 to 70.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps as a result of the cost of this expansion, Doordarshan began airing paid advertisements from private corporations, which "in turn forced the network to provide more varied and entertaining

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<sup>9</sup> Farmer, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 220.

<sup>11</sup> Farmer, p. 104.

fare, since sponsors required assurance that audiences would be watching."<sup>12</sup> Thus Doordarshan began commissioning programs from independent studios. As a result of these measures, the number of televisions in the country increased from 2.8 million in 1983 to 13.2 million when *Ramayan* went on the air just four years later.<sup>13</sup>

It was in this context that Ramanand Sagar -- a producer and director whose Natraj Studios had produced a number of hit feature films -- approached Doordarshan with the idea of a weekly serial version of the *Ramayan*. The proposal was originally rejected by the network, for fear that it would arouse communal unrest,<sup>14</sup> but in 1986, Sagar's revised proposal was accepted and work upon the production began.

The story that Sagar had chosen to tell -- the story of the god-king Ram's exile to the forest with his brother Lakshman and his wife Sita, Sita's abduction by the demon-king Ravan, and her rescue by the brothers and their monkey allies -- is one of the best-known tales in South Asia. Fifteen years before the television *Ramayan*, R.K. Narayan guessed that every individual in India was already "aware of the story of the Ramayana in some measure or other,"<sup>15</sup> so omnipresent is it throughout the culture(s) of the region, and A.K. Ramanujan has written that no one in South or Southeast Asia "ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already.'"<sup>16</sup> The first written version of the story of Ram was the Sanskrit epic attributed to the sage Valmiki (though it was probably composed by numerous authors over a period of several centuries before, and in the early stages of, the Common Era). Since

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<sup>12</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 220.

<sup>13</sup> Rajagopal, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> "Communalism" in the Indian context refers to tensions between the majority Hindu and minority Muslim (and, more recently, Christian) communities. The *Ramayan* serial has been implicated in inciting the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 -- which many Hindus insist was built upon Ram's birthplace -- and the communal violence that followed. See Farmer and Rajagopal.

Valmiki, the story has been told and retold in every subcontinental language and probably every Southeast Asian language as well, and has been recreated in every conceivable medium: song and sculpture, poetry and painting, puppet theater and Bollywood films, comic books and web pages, to name just a few.<sup>17</sup>

For its narrative content, the television *Ramayan* drew primarily on Tulsidas' 16<sup>th</sup>-century Hindi poem *Ramcaritmanas* (the definitive version for most of northern India's Hindi-speaking population), though the serial went to great lengths to proclaim its pan-Indian heritage, citing in each episode's credits numerous non-Hindi versions as "inspirations." As an audiovisual presentation of that narrative, however, Sagar's telling of the story was particularly indebted to two other popular media forms: dramatic stagings of the Ram story (*Ramlila*) and mass-produced "god posters."

*Ramlila* is among the most widespread traditions throughout Hindi-speaking northern India, and has begun to spread to the rest of the country.<sup>18</sup> The word *lila* means "play" (in both the English senses of a theatrical event and amusing oneself<sup>19</sup>); Hindu theologies frequently consider the world to be the result of the *lila* of the gods, and Vishnu's appearance on earth in the form of his *avatars*, such as Ram and Krishna, is often considered a form of *lila*. This act of the god is literally re-enacted in the performances of *Ramlila*, which can range in length from several days to a full month. In the best known and largest of these performances, that of Ramnagar ("Ram's Town," across the Ganges from Banaras), Ram and his divine family are literally present in the

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<sup>15</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (New York: Penguin, 1977) p. xi.

<sup>16</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas," in Richman.

<sup>17</sup> See Richman for a sampling of the many ways in which the story has been told throughout the centuries.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 252.

actors portraying them, and are worshiped as such.<sup>20</sup> The Ramnagar performers (including thousands of audience members, who play the parts of vast crowds of guests at Ram's wedding and the citizens of Ram's capital) physically traverse a space of fifteen to twenty square miles during the course of the performance, recreating in microcosm the wanderings of Ram throughout the whole of India. *Ramlilas* such as these were obvious influences on Sagar's telling of the story, as well as reference points for his audience, many of whom would have participated in such performances.

"God posters," or "framing prints," are today a ubiquitous feature of Indian culture.<sup>21</sup> These mass-produced images of gods (as well as human saints and places of pilgrimage), printed on paper of varying stocks and sizes, are sold near pilgrimage sites and on city street corners, displayed in private homes, places of business, and the dashboards of taxicabs. These images often serve as the foci of rituals of private worship, what H. Daniel Smith has called "a new and pervasive 'omnipraxy,' as exemplified by the shopkeepers and taxi drivers who daily offer flowers and incense to framed pictures of deities before whom they stand simultaneously as *pujari* priest and as devotees."<sup>22</sup> The conventions of such posters are remarkably similar throughout India, despite the large number of individual artists employed by many competing publishing houses.<sup>23</sup> Heavily

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<sup>19</sup> See Edward Dimock, "*Lila*" *History of Religions* 29: 1989, pp. 159-73; William S. Sax, ed. *The Gods at Play: Lila in South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Don Handelman and David Shulman, *God Inside Out: Siva's Game of Dice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

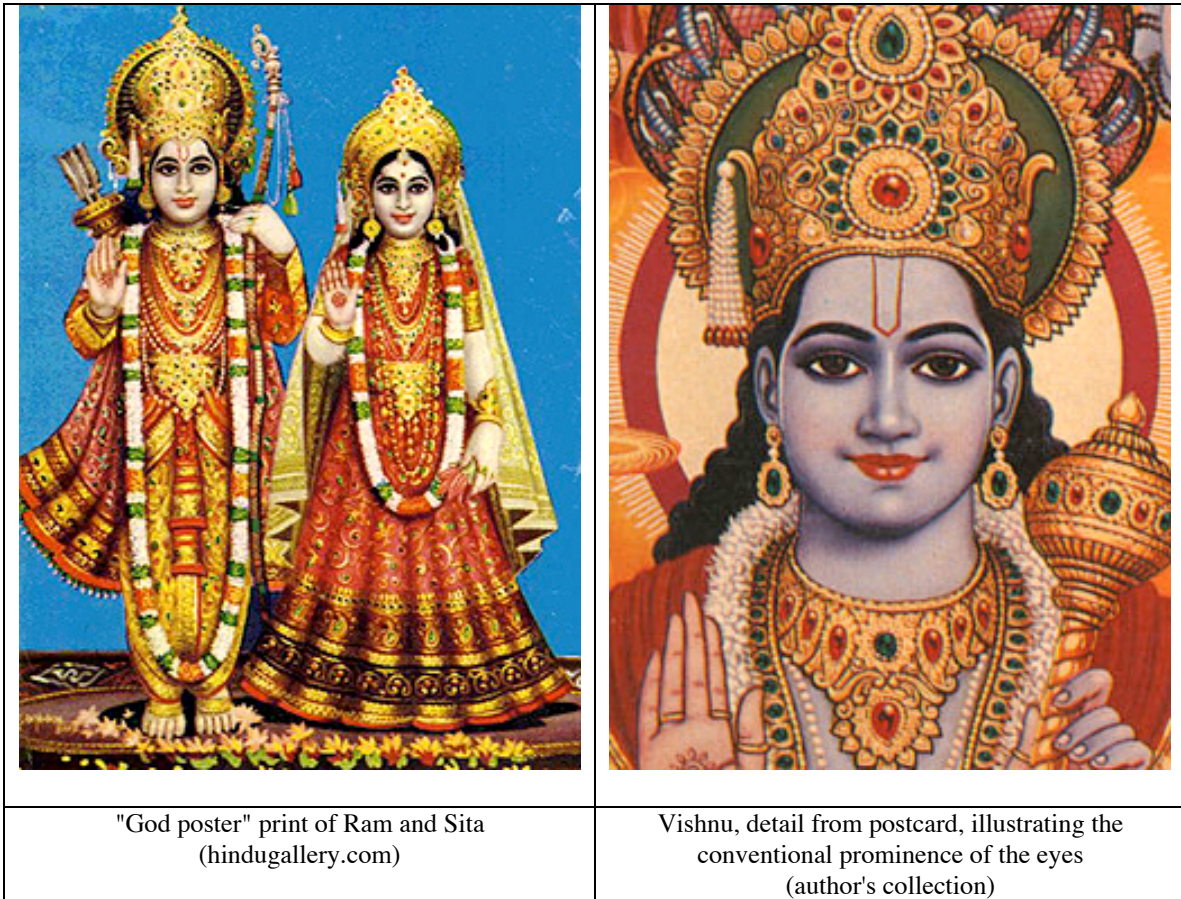
<sup>20</sup> Linda Hess, "Ram Lila: The Audience Experience." In *Bhakti in Current Research, 1979-1982* ed. by Monika Thiel-Horstman (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1983) p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that these prints are not aimed solely at Hindus, but also at other religious communities, including Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and Jains H. Daniel Smith, "Impact of 'God Posters' on Hindus and their Devotional Traditions" in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, p. 30.

influenced by the oleographed paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, which began to be mass-produced in the 1890s, they tend to depict deities in a "naturalist, 'realist' style,"<sup>24</sup> though



the supernatural status of the deities is often marked by extra arms, blue skin, crowns, and halos. Deities and saints are also almost without exception depicted straight on from the front, so that both eyes are prominently visible; this enables the devotional act known as the taking of *darshan*.

*Ramlila* is also an opportunity for *darshan*, both at the *arati* ceremonies that end each day's performance (in which Ram and family are illuminated by fireworks, and "strike rigid poses... bodies erect, faces impassive, lotuses in hand; arranged by the

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<sup>24</sup> Rajagopal, p. 97.

directors according to iconographic prescription"<sup>25</sup>). In addition to these nightly ceremonies, there are moments in the midst of the performance "when the Ram Lila action is arrested to produce a powerful iconographic image. These moments are referred to as *jhanki* -- idiomatically 'tableau,' but literally 'glimpse.'"<sup>26</sup> From a fluid narrative, *jhanki* "distills... a crystallizing glimpse of a cosmic, eternal divinity,"<sup>27</sup> providing the opportunity for devotees and the divinity to gaze at each other -- an opportunity even more auspicious than taking *darshan* from a printed image, for the *darshan* at Ramnagar is said to be "*sakshat*, or 'direct-witness' *darshan*."<sup>28</sup> In this form of *darshan*, the deity is present in the form of an actual person, whose feet may be touched, whose *prasad* may be consumed, and so on. The television *Ramayan* preserved this sense of immediacy, due in part to its medium of dissemination -- as John Ellis has argued, "broadcast TV declares itself as being in the present tense,"<sup>29</sup> as being a window into something which is happening elsewhere *at this very moment* -- and partly by means of direct address to the viewer, both of which allow the TV image to "constitute itself and its viewers as held in a relationship of co-present intimacy."<sup>30</sup>

The direct address and sense of immediacy to which television appears to lend itself meshed nicely with certain Indian dramatic conventions "in which the audience is expected to focus intently on the performer's facial expressions and gestures."<sup>31</sup> Unlike American television, in which, according to Neil Postman, the average image is displayed

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<sup>25</sup> Lutgendorf (1991), p. 327.

<sup>26</sup> Hess, p. 182.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Schechner, "Crossing the Water: Pilgrimage, Movement, and Environmental Scenography of the *Ramlila* of Ramnagar." In *Living Banaras: Hindu Religion in Cultural Context* ed. by Bradley R Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> Hess, p. 181.

<sup>29</sup> John Ellis, "Broadcast TV as Sound and Image" in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 389.

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, p. 388.



for only three and a half seconds,<sup>32</sup> "the emphasis in *Ramayan* was squarely on 'seeing' its characters... [on] drinking in and entering into visual communion with epic characters:"<sup>33</sup>

Scenes and dialogues were long (interminable, critics said) and aimed at a definitive portrayal of the emotional state of each character. This was conveyed especially through close-ups (and in moments of intense emotion, repeated zoom shots -- a convention favored in Hindi films), so that much of the time the screen was dominated by large heads, either verbalizing or silently miming their responses to events.<sup>34</sup>

In short, the *Ramayan* was a "feast of *darshan*,"<sup>35</sup> providing right in your own home (if you were wealthy and lucky enough to have a television), the experience of attending a *Ramlila* every Sunday morning for over a year.

But what exactly is *darshan*, and how does it work? In Sanskrit and in Hindi, *darshan* has a number of overlapping meanings, from the "sense of sight" or an act of seeing, to a philosophical system (in this sense, to see is to know), to the object of sight or an apparition. In a devotional context, as I have already noted, *darshan* is the act of seeing and (as befits the word's combination of passive and agentive meanings) of being seen by a divine image. In *darshan* Enzensberger's idea that every receiver is potentially also a transmitter<sup>36</sup> is made a reality, as the television becomes, in effect, both the giver of divine *darshan* and the receiver of devotee's *darshan*.

The reciprocal nature of *darshan* can only be understood when one accepts the proposition that divine images are themselves alive, imbued with the immanent presence of a transcendent divinity. Richard H. Davis writes:

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<sup>31</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 86. cited by Lutgendorf (1995), p. 250; as Lutgendorf notes, Postman's figure was formulated at the very beginning of the MTV era, and it is likely that the average duration of images has decreased with the growing prominence of rapid cutting techniques.

<sup>33</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 230

<sup>34</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 230

<sup>35</sup> Lutgendorf (1995), p. 230

For many centuries, most Hindus have taken it for granted that the religious images they place in temples and home shrines for purposes of worship are alive. They believe these physical objects, visually or symbolically representing particular deities, come to be infused with the presence or life or power of those deities. Hindu priests are able to bring images to life through a complex ritual "establishment" that invokes the god or goddess into its material support. Priests and devotees then maintain the enlivened image as a divine person through ongoing liturgical activity; they must awaken it in the morning, bathe it, dress it, feed it, entertain it, praise it, and eventually put it to bed at night.<sup>37</sup>

It is significant that, within the temple context from which current forms of image worship seem to have emerged,<sup>38</sup> the establishment (*pratishtha*) of the deity within the physical object usually is not complete until the object's eyes have been "opened" with a golden needle, or its pupils painted on.<sup>39</sup> It is not until the image can see -- can "give" and "take" *darshan* -- that is considered to be alive with the deity's essence. With god posters -- images which are much more domestic and personal than the temple images, which might only be seen by the general public when on procession during festival days -- however, it seems that no such consecration is usually necessary,<sup>40</sup> for "what gives these images power is the relationship that the devotee comes to have with the deity mediated through the image."<sup>41</sup> By taking *darshan* of the image, the devotee herself imbues the image with life; this is presumably the same operation at work in the viewing of the *Ramayan*.

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<sup>36</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation* ed. by Tim Druckrey. (New York: Aperture, 1996) p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> Richard H. Davis, *The Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) pp. 6-7.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, pp. 26-33.

<sup>39</sup> Diana Eck. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1985). pp. 51-55.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Pinney. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 111.

Exactly what happens between a devotee and an image in *darshan* is rarely made explicit, and it is likely that it varies among different "communities of response"<sup>42</sup> and probably from individual to individual as well. What seems clear, however, is that *darshan* is basically a physical act. Lawrence Babb summarizes the theory of vision given in the texts of the Radhasoami sect: "There is a 'current of sight,' a fluid-like 'seeing' that flows outward and downward from the *tisra til* [third eye] to the two eyes, and from there out into the world;"<sup>43</sup> when this flow mingles with that of the guru (who takes the place here of the deity), the guru's sight somehow "takes" the devotee's sight upward and inward, "on a pilgrimage of insight"<sup>44</sup> until the devotee's vision is somehow altered. "The devotee sees as he could not see before, and a wholly new universe comes into view. Most important of all, however, he sees his guru as he truly is; that is, as the Supreme Being."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, it allows the devotee "to drink with the eyes the deity's own current of seeing... it allows the devotee to acquire something of the deity's highest nature."<sup>46</sup>

In this manner of mixing one's being with that of the divine, seeing is a form of touching.<sup>47</sup> As such, its mediation by television in the *Ramayan* recalls McLuhan's assertion that television images are electronic mosaics (in the sense of being composed of many individual pixels that are together seen as a single image), and that as such, television is a tactile medium.<sup>48</sup> As a low-resolution mosaic, McLuhan argues, television,

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<sup>42</sup> Davis, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interactions in Hinduism" *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37 (4) 1981, p. 391.

<sup>44</sup> Babb, p. 390.

<sup>45</sup> Babb, p. 390.

<sup>46</sup> Babb, p. 397.

<sup>47</sup> Eck, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> McLuhan, p. 334.

like touch, "demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being,"<sup>49</sup> as the viewer/toucher must work to build a single image out of the many individual parts presented. The success of television depends on the viewer's role in constructing the image she is seeing; television implies, rather than overwhelming the viewer with visual information as film does: "TV is a cool, participant medium. When hotted up [*sic*] by dramatization... it performs less well."<sup>50</sup> In the case of the *Ramayan*, however, the "hotting up" of television<sup>51</sup> -- the bombardment of the viewer with repeated close-ups and zooms, the heavy-handed depictions of the emotional states of the characters and the "dramatization" that results -- seems to have actually increased the participation of the audience, allowing them the greatest possible number of opportunities to see/touch the deities appearing on the screen while still carrying forward a narrative.

The close personal contact implied by the touch of *darshan* would also seem to conflict with Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura." According to Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of art robs the work reproduced of its aura, the viewer's sense that an object, no matter how close it is to her, is somehow distant and unapproachable. The root of the aura lies in religious ritual, he argues, the veneration of a unique object which is off-limits to all but the initiated; mechanical reproduction brings that object out of the *sanctum sanctorum* and puts "the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself... it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway."<sup>52</sup> In

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<sup>49</sup> McLuhan, p. 334.

<sup>50</sup> McLuhan, p. 311.

<sup>51</sup> The metaphor is ininteresting in an Indian context, because devotion to a deity is believed to generate powerful heat (*tapas*), such that images which mediate that devotion occasionally need to be "cooled" in water to release that heat. Pinney, p. 111.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Trans. by Harry Zohn in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 733.

doing so, "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."<sup>53</sup>

Clearly this has not been the case in India, as the case of god posters illustrates. "In India," Stephen Inglis writes, "mechanically reproduced images continue to participate in the reality of the 'objects' or personages depicted"<sup>54</sup> and they continue to take part in the rituals which mechanical reproduction was supposed to free them from. In fact, the mechanical reproduction of religious paintings appears to have enhanced their sacred power,<sup>55</sup> due to the very ubiquity and accessibility that Benjamin saw as the death knell of the aura.

This is also the case with media like *Ramayan*, which are constructed on many different levels from fragments -- the cobbling together of multiple narrative traditions into a single script; the suturing of scenes shot at different times and places into a continuous vision; and finally the viewer's assembly of individual pixels into a whole, as noted by McLuhan. Such works, as Benjamin realized, can be said to have no original; they exist only as reproductions. Yet the reactions of the audience to the *Ramayan* indicate that the "reproduction" that they were watching was at least as powerful as any statue in a temple.

The amazing reaction of the Indian public to the television *Ramayan* resulted at least in part to the combination of two older media of religious seeing: it brought together the intimacy and accessibility of god posters with the dynamic, immediate, and participatory aspects of *Ramlila*. In reading the event in this fashion, I do not intend to

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, p. 736.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen R. Inglis, "Suitable for Framing: The Work of a Modern Master" in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, ed. by Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 52.

privilege a religio- or media-centric reading of the event -- clearly there are important political and economic aspects to the event that I have barely touched upon, and it is becoming increasingly clear that religion, media, politics, and economics are inseparable in contemporary India. Rather, I hope that this reading will indicate that Western-based theories of media might learn a good deal by paying closer attention non-Western methods of media consumption/participation; at the very least they should become much more wary of the kind of universal claims about media made by McLuhan and Benjamin.

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<sup>55</sup> Smith, p. 29.

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