Religious Studies (2026), 1–16
doi:10.1017/S0034412526101656

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Divine and human agency as art: Abhinavagupta on aesthetics and world carving

Catherine Prueitt

Department of Philosophy, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Email: catherine.prueitt@ubc.ca

(Received 30 December 2025; revised 15 May 2026; accepted 15 May 2026)

Abstract

This paper explores the mechanism and metaphysics of aesthetic experience according to the 10th–11th-century Sanskrit nondual Pratyabhijñā Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta. It contributes to the global history of aesthetics by showing how the same mechanism, *apoha* (exclusion), accounts for both art appreciation and artistic creation in Abhinavagupta's work. Examining the technical elements of this mechanism from Abhinavagupta's metaphysical works sheds notable light on the nature of commonization (*sādhāraṇī*+$\sqrt{}$*kṛ/bhū*), a key element of Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theory. This paper also contributes to cross-cultural aesthetic theorizing by drawing on C. Thi Nguyen's work on agency as an artistic medium to provide a framework for contemporary philosophers of aesthetics to approach Abhinavagupta's theory.

Keywords: Sanskrit aesthetics; Abhinavagupta; *apoha*; agency; *rasa*

Introduction

Many aesthetic theories across cultures see the relationship between an artist and an art appreciator as reciprocal. This reciprocity is often understood as communicative. No matter how complex the communication, or whether the artist intends a particular message or not, when art enters an intersubjective sphere, it gets bound up in an exchange of meaning.[1] Abhinavagupta, a 10th–11th-century nondual Śaiva philosopher whose works became normative for subsequent thinkers in Sanskrit aesthetics, is no stranger to this way of thinking about art. Yet for him, although art does have a communicative function, the reciprocity of artistic creation and art appreciation goes much deeper. The aesthetic theory for which Abhinavagupta is most famous describes a process of commonization (*sādhāraṇī*+$\sqrt{}$*kṛ/bhū*) by which an appreciator (*sahṛdaya*) is spurred by the elements of a work of art carefully crafted by the artist to effect a transformation of a stable human emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) into an art emotion (*rasa*). The resulting concordance of hearts (*hṛdayasaṃvāda*) can lead to an experience where we are struck by aesthetic wonder (*camatkāra*)[2] as we transform our understanding of who we are in relation to others.[3]

Art appreciation and artistic creation involve reciprocal forms of agency that share the same underlying mechanism: *apoha* (exclusion), the technical process by which an agent develops determinate perceptions by ignoring more or less of the possibilities for how their world could be experienced. *Apoha* is also the fundamental mechanism of creation full stop. Śiva crafts limited worlds out of himself, like how a sculptor carves away slivers of stone to

create a statue. The full scope of aesthetic processes uses agency as an artistic medium to travel between worlds. Moving from one world to another – smaller to larger for the art appreciator, larger to smaller for the artist – affords certain possibilities for aesthetic experiences that are not available otherwise.

Although there continues to be dispute among contemporary Abhinavagupta scholars about whether or not it's necessary to take on Abhinavagupta's metaphysics for his aesthetic theory to cohere,[4] the importance of the mechanism of *apoha* for understanding this theory means that we do indeed at least need to understand the Pratyabhijñā account of world creation. The material in Utpaladeva's (early 10th century) Pratyabhijñā corpus, along with Abhinavagupta's commentaries thereon, contains systematic metaphysical and epistemological arguments that address the process of creation in great detail.[5] Drawing on Pratyabhijñā metaphysics, I detail how the process of creation carves out partial realities that are not thereby false. Following the root metaphor of Śiva as an artist who hides aspects of himself from himself in order to aesthetically relish his own delimited forms, I call this particularizing movement of intentional self-obscuration the direction of the artist. The artist's move to create is realized by their activity of hiding aspects of themself from themself, an activity that proceeds through *apoha*. This process is the converse of the process of commonization that Abhinavagupta flags as a key mechanism of art appreciation.

This paper will proceed as follows. In the first section, 'A topographic account of world creation', I offer an extended metaphor to give a sense of how world creation works in Pratyabhijñā, with a focus on the mechanism that allows for agency to be fashioned as an artistic medium. I also draw on C. Thi Nguyen's analysis of aesthetic experiences of agency to provide some contemporary context for the Pratyabhijñā understanding of agency. Given the complexity of the metaphysics involved, this guiding metaphor will help us keep the big picture in sight. This section will also serve as a conceptual introduction to Pratyabhijñā on world creation for those not familiar with the tradition. Drawing on the framing in the first section, the second and third sections, 'Commonization' and 'Particularization', provide overviews of the directions of the art appreciator and the artist, respectively. Finally, I'll conclude with a brief reflection on what core elements of Abhinavagupta's metaphysics a philosopher today would need to accept to take Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theory seriously.

A topographic account of world creation

By *world*, I mean a causally constrained spatiotemporally restricted experiential locus that is co-constituted by a subject with its environment. It's helpful to think of the Pratyabhijñā understanding of world creation in terms of a topographic map representing an area with sharp changes in altitude. Such maps are made up of stacked figures, with smaller figures representing higher elevations and larger ones representing lower elevations. As images traced on paper, topographic maps are inherently two-dimensional representations, but the aerial perspective of these maps allows a third dimension – altitude – to be represented as the gaps between figures layered side by side and within one another. The aerial perspective relies on the sky invisibly constituting the gaps between land masses: what it is for an area of a map to be enclosed by one figure and distanced from another is just that sky, rather than earth, fills the space between the figures. The most important thing about this metaphor for our purposes is that the aerial perspective of topographic maps emphasizes how the smaller figures are studded upon (and so fundamentally continuous with) larger ones, and yet the boundaries around the figures mark salient differences in altitude and accessibility from one to the other.

Worlds are like this for Pratyabhijñā theorists. For the purpose of our metaphor, the map is reality. The surface of the earth is Śiva's nondual awareness as that which contains all possible worlds. The contours are the limits of subject–object-structured worlds. These

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

worlds are formed by the separation of the sky from the land, which also distinguishes the topography of one land mass from another. The sky, invisible in the map itself but embodied by the aerial perspective, is the passage of space and time. The land masses are worlds carved from a common ground, with larger bases representing broadly shared intersubjective environments and smaller peaks representing increasingly idiosyncratic experiences. Moving to higher altitudes represents particularization; moving to lower altitudes represents commonization. These movements occur via exclusion: increasingly idiosyncratic worlds come about through removing more of the possibilities for where one could locate oneself on the land. Conversely, the movement towards commonization occurs through the recognition that one's particularized world is studded upon larger structures that are accessible through changing the scope of what has been carved away. In aesthetic terms, moving to a lower altitude is the direction of the art appreciator, who expands their sense of their relation to the structures of their world through a concordance of hearts effected by bumping down to a larger slice of reality. Moving to a higher altitude is the direction of an artist who creates delimited worlds through imagination.

If we were to take the perspective of an individual in their particular world, the view would shift away from the aerial perspective of the map. Although both are perspectives on the same reality, the view from above is different from the view from the side of the mountain, particularly in terms of how these views present the relation between land masses at different altitudes. For the individual, the third dimension of altitude is no longer implied, but experienced directly as the difference between land and sky. The gaps between land masses now seem impassible; the individual can't simply walk across the empty sky. But they can explore the environment constituted by the land mass at their altitude. In this environment, the individual's experiences have two particularly salient aspects. They experience (1) their own internal states that do not directly influence the rest of the world, and (2) external objects that interact in causally consistent ways with both the individual and other external objects. That some of these external objects act on their own can lead the individual to guess[6] the presence of unshared but real internal states in others who act in the same kinds of intentional ways that they do. We thereby intuit the presence of other subjects. This is what it means in our metaphor for a contour to represent a causally specific subject–object-structured world.

Here, I note one point that the topographic metaphor might obscure. When we think about our normal practice of climbing up and down mountains, we might naturally presuppose that the individual agent who thereby travels remains the same. This is because we do not actually shift worlds as we literally climb in our everyday, waking life. But the agent who travels up or down the mountain in our metaphor – as in Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theory – is not a self-defined, independently constituted individual who retains their identity as they shift. Key to Abhinavagupta's account of aesthetic experience is the insight that the scope of one's agency is fashioned in relation to the opportunities presented by one's environment. It will be crucial for us to keep in mind that, for Abhinavagupta, as an agent's aesthetic environment is rendered more specific and more refined, the agent themself changes. As the crafted environment of a work of art becomes more specific, so too does the scope of agency exercised by one absorbed in this environment. An agent's ability to fluidly carve certain parts of themself away – the ability to respond to the invitation of the work of art to move outside of one's habituated sense of who one is – opens up a reflective distance between the out-of-artwork agent and the narrower agent who engages the work. For Abhinavagupta, a major pay-off of aesthetic engagement is the experience of agential fluidity itself, which allows us to experience not just the smaller world of the artwork but also the expanded intersubjective world that makes both the artworld and our waking world possible.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This idea might seem unclear. What does it mean for an agent to carve out a mode of agency that is a sliver of their larger self in order to make an aesthetic experience possible? I suggest that we can get a provisional handle on what's going on by drawing on Nguyen's (2020) work on games as a form of art that uses agency as its artistic medium. I do not claim that Nguyen's and Abhinavagupta's theories are the same. There are many differences, some of which will be explored below in context.[7] Here is the key point of convergence for the purpose of clarifying the Pratyabhijñā account of world creation. According to Nguyen, it is possible for an agent to take on a narrowed mode of agency in response to a particular constructed environment in order to have a particular kind of aesthetic experience that's only available given the reflective distance that opens up when the out-of-game agent intentionally forgets large portions of themself and their out-of-game environment in order to be fully immersed in the constructed world. In this way, the in-game agent is neither exactly the same as nor fully different from the out-of-game agent: the in-game agent is an imagined restriction of the full powers of the out-of-game agent. The challenges and opportunities afforded by one's environment modulate the degree of one's agency that is expressed in any given world. What it is to be a player in a game – or, as Pratyabhijñā theorists will understand this dynamic, an agent in a world – is just to fully inhabit an experience of oneself and one's environment as limited by the particular structures that define the range of actions possible within that world. Aesthetic experiences of agency of this kind require a reflective distance, the capacity of the out-of-game agent to construct and fully inhabit a narrow in-game agential mode while at the same time retaining a link to their full, complex out-of-world self.

To make this more specific, let's analyse one of Nguyen's summaries of his thesis: 'Games are the art of agency because games use agential manipulation to create aesthetic experiences of agency across agential distance' (Nguyen 2020, 141). Agential manipulation occurs as a game design provides a player with temporary modes of agency that are formed through granting or restricting powers. These temporary modes are attuned to the goals of the game, which are disposable in that these goals do not matter to the player outside of the context of the game. The in-game agent pursues these goals with everything at their disposal, in service of the out-of-game agent's goal of having certain kinds of experience: aesthetic experiences of agency. Aesthetic experiences of agency centre around the experience of a harmony of the practical fit between an agent's in-game abilities and challenges. Since these experiences are of a harmony of fit, they come about only when one is fully absorbed in the practical tasks set by the game. The experience of a harmony of practical fit cannot be had by the in-game agent for the simple reason that, if the in-game agent were preoccupied with trying to experience harmony, then they would not be able to be fully absorbed in their task. You can't know if your agential capacities attune with your world unless you're exercising those capacities to their fullest. This is why achieving the out-of-game agent's goals depends on an intentional act of self-obscuration: having an aesthetic experience of agency is a self-effacing goal in the sense that it 'cannot be achieved through direct pursuit, but only through the pursuit of some other end' (Nguyen 2020, 54). So, games create a layered structure of agency. As Nguyen describes: 'We do not hold both layers in the forefront of our consciousness. We hide our larger reasons from ourselves for a time, submerging ourselves in the inner layer' (Nguyen 2020, 56). This is why aesthetic experiences of agency in games take place across agential distance. It is the layering of a narrower, constructed form of agency atop of one's full out-of-game agency that allows the out-of-game agent to decide to abide by the strictures of the game for the sake of an aesthetic experience. What we take from Nguyen's analyses at this point, then, is a contemporary specification of what it would mean to inhabit an intentionally self-obscuring sliver of one's own agency for the sake of an aesthetic experience of agency across reflective distance.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The individual who changes altitudes by descending or climbing the mountain in our metaphor is like this. The change of altitude is effected not just by expanding or narrowing one's environment but also by expanding or narrowing the scope of one's agency that is properly responsive to the challenges and opportunities of the environment at each level. In the context of Abhinavagupta's aesthetics, the paradigmatic challenge presented by a work of art is the challenge to overcome one's understanding of oneself as an isolated individual: the challenge to shift worlds by changing the scope of what one has carved away in constituting one's everyday world. In our metaphor, the art appreciator's direction is down the mountain towards more expansive landscapes. In parallel, the paradigmatic challenge of artistic creation is the challenge to fashion a world that is exquisitely attuned to the sensitivities of the art appreciator, thereby providing an opening for the art appreciator to shift their own sense of what is common to themself and others. In our metaphor, the art creator's direction is the direction up the mountain towards a narrower landscape that nonetheless evokes the interconnected depths out of which it is carved. With this scaffolding in place, I turn to explore the directions of the art appreciator and of the artist, respectively.

Commonization: the direction of the art appreciator

The waking world provides hints that reality is bigger than what an individual normally experiences. To follow our metaphor, an individual whose normal environment is shaped by the land mass at their altitude might look out to the sky and see other mountains, currently inaccessible because of the sky between. Yet, these mountains too are apparently populated by other subjects in different environments. Curiosity or a sense of potential kinship with these distant lands could motivate the individual to narrow the gulf between themselves and others by moving down the mountain. Even as they climb down their own mountain, they encounter new environments and broader perspectives on the lands that they have traversed. Participating in these larger forms of subjectivity in more expansive environments fundamentally alters the individual even before they come to a position that would allow them to reach distant peaks. In response to new environments, new modes of agency are activated. If they travel all the way to the base of the mountain range, they may realize that all of the various seemingly disconnected peaks are nothing but the common earth itself, carved at higher altitudes by the sky. This movement from the narrow perspective of the waking world to deeper shared structures is the direction of the art appreciator. It occurs through a process of commonization that attunes an individual agent to the larger structures that encompass and exceed their normal world.

One of Abhinavagupta's most explicit descriptions of commonization comes in his discussion of a famous passage from Kālidāsa's masterpiece *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* (*The Recognition of Śakuntalā*) in his commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*Treatise on Dramaturgy*), the foundational text in Sanskrit dramaturgy. Focusing on the experience of a fawn, this passage articulates a process by which observing a play can lead an audience to aesthetically relish even negative emotions. The fawn in question is terrified because it is about to be shot, and what the audience will come to relish is fear itself. Abhinavagupta describes the audience's experience of fear commonized:

> In that apprehension—because the fawn, etc., which appear lack a particularized form—the fear which is unmarked by space, time, etc., is different from the ultimately unreal awareness 'afraid' on the part of the actor; that fear is of a different kind than the 'being afraid,' which is beset with many obstacles, in awareness-events like, 'I am afraid,' 'this person—whether foe, friend, or stranger—is afraid,' and so on, since this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> 'being afraid' is restricted by the arising of different cognitions, such as shunning and so on, which are created in relation to pain and pleasure, etc.[8]

As the surrounding explanations make clear, the process of commonization begins when a member of the audience, having understood the play well enough to recognize the fawn's fear, inhabits for a moment two contradictory worlds. One is their normal perspective, their everyday sense of themself sitting in a room watching a play. We can think of this, structurally, as the out-of-game agent in Nguyen's theory. The other is the perspective of the fawn about to be shot. We can think of this as Nguyen's in-game agent (the restricted mode of agency attuned precisely to the constructed environment within which it operates). The incompatibility of these perspectives knocks the audience member down to a deeper level of experience that is capable of encompassing both. This knocking down is able to occur because experiential structures can be de-particularized. In an interesting break from Nguyen's model, this deeper level of agency is *not* a return to the out-of-game agent's domain. Rather, the deeper form embeds our everyday agency and the artworld agent within a common form of agency that belongs to everyone in general, but no-one in particular, who shares given a stable emotion. This means that the reflective distance opened by the work of art is not just the distance between the in-game agent and the out-of-game agent but the experience of both in-and-out-of-art-world agents being encompassed in a deeper intersubjectivity. If we cast away our habitual sense of the incompatibility between being oneself and being another, fear need not be indexed to anyone in particular (and we need not remain merely who we normally are).

Freeing the experience of fear from any personal consideration of pleasure or pain, gain or loss, transforms both the subjectivity we experience as our own and the form of the object common to our expanded perspective. Abhinavagupta continues:

> The grasped object in the awareness that is without obstructions, penetrating the heart as if directly present, turning about as if before the eyes, is the fearful *rasa*. When experiencing fear of this sort, one's self is not perfectly immersed, nor in a state of surfacing as a particular. The same goes for others. Therefore, the fearful *rasa* is not limited, but rather commonized and expanded.[9]

This picture of aesthetic relishing as indexed to no-one in particular is what has led many contemporary scholars to portray Abhinava's account of commonization as a process of abstraction away from the world. Yet Abhinava's description in this passage of how this process occurs – through the clash between restricted spatiotemporally structured perspectives that knocks audience members to a larger perspective on themselves and on the object – indicates that the direction of commonization is *not* upwards away from the details of the world but depthwards into the larger reality that always underlies a limited world, even as it generally remains unseen. Commonized fear, the fearful *rasa*, impacts us in a fundamentally different way from self-indexed fear, not because it travels to a land of abstraction but because it pulls us into accord with others, removing alienation and lack.

The movement here, too, is analogous to the development of a reflective distance that allows for an aesthetic experience of agency in Nguyen's theory, but with a twist. As for Nguyen, the distance between the in-game agent and the out-of-game agent opens space for absorption in what it is like to experience harmony between one's world and one's pragmatic response to that world. But the pragmatic fit is of a very specific kind here: it's a pragmatic *emotional* fit. The dimension of an individual's agency that's exercised in an aesthetic encounter for Abhinavagupta is the dimension that draws on deeply embodied resources to have a fitting emotional response to a charged situation.[10] Abhinavagupta's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theory also pushes a step further than Nguyen's. Emotional fit is not idiosyncratic; if we are too absorbed in considerations of our own pleasure and pain, we will not be able to fully inhabit a fitting response in a charged situation. So the reflective distance has to open further. Our ability to inhabit contradictory modes of agency opens a reflective distance on our normal experience of our out-of-artwork self, as well. Just as the agent who engages the artwork is but a sliver of the everyday agent, the everyday agent is a sliver of the larger intersubjective structures that provide content and value to what it is to exist within our waking world. Intersubjective emotional fit is a powerful way to experience these deeper structures. The experience of *rasa* described in this passage, then, is an experience of a commonized emotion by a commonized mode of agency that reveals what it is like to act in harmony with the powers and restrictions posed by being human in an emotionally complex world.

Abhinavagupta continues this passage with an example that lets us in on the technical apparatus underlying his understanding of commonization. He remarks that the experience of the fearful *rasa* via commonization is 'just like when the pervasion is grasped between smoke and fire, or, indeed, between fear and trembling'.[11] The language of pervasion (*vyāpti*), as well as the specific examples chosen, indicate that Abhinavagupta understands the process of commonization to share something fundamental with the process of inference. Especially the first example – the inference of the presence of fire in a particular place from the observation of smoke in that place by a person who has understood the invariable relation between smoke and fire – is the paradigmatic example that epistemologists in different Sanskritic traditions use to cash out their theories of inference. That Abhinavagupta brings in inference-related talk here is, in some sense, surprising given how adamantly he insists that the experience of *rasa* is a direct perception, not inferential knowledge or the result of inferential knowledge.[12] Why would we need to talk about knowing a pervasion relation, which is what allows us to appropriately infer the presence of some currently unperceived entity on the basis of the current perception of a different but invariably related entity, if the *rasa* appears directly and immediately before us? The key comes in understanding what, for Abhinavagupta, it is to grasp a pervasion.

Pratyabhijñā theorists appropriate the 7th-century Buddhist Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory of concept formation to explain the relation between universals and particulars.[13] The term *apoha* literally means exclusion, and it's glossed most commonly using metaphors of carving. When we exclude, we delimit one thing from another on the basis of carving away – by eliminating, ignoring, suppressing – some possibilities for how an object could be construed. For Dharmakīrti, the basic idea is that the terms in an inference track causal capacities in real things, but with different scopes, allowing for different judgements to be formed based on how much of the full range of capacities is ignored by a subject habituated to parsing reality in goal-oriented ways.[14] Primed by our goals, we construct the universal 'smoke' as that which is caused by fire on the basis of observations that anywhere smoke is present, fire is present, and also that there is never the presence of smoke in the absence of fire. That the reason 'because there is smoke there' invariably justifies the conclusion 'there is fire there' provides content to the universals 'smoke' and 'fire'; what is common between any particular instances of smoke is that each of these instances is caused by fire, and what it is to be fire is to be the entity one of whose capacities is the capacity to produce smoke given the right supporting conditions. Dharmakīrti argues that the universal itself is merely inferred, not perceived directly like the particulars. *Apoha* steps in to explain how a universal that is never directly perceived (and so unreal for Dharmakīrti) could accurately connect us to what is perceived (and so real). The universal can do this because it's not some other thing that exists independent of particulars. Rather, it's simply a judgement that obscures the differences among what's left over after a subject has excluded what fails

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to accomplish their goals. For Dharmakīrti, the universal has no reality of its own. It's just an abstraction formed to point to what's actually real: some subset of unique particulars that more or less work the way that a subject wants them to.

Pratyabhijñā theorists flip this on its head. They agree that we understand the relation between universals and particulars in inferences on the basis of ignoring some of the causal capacities of an object while fixating on others. But our perception of particulars does not lead us to construct an unreal universal that is merely helpful but has no reality on its own. Rather, the universal is more real – it encompasses a deeper slice of reality – than the particular, which is a spatiotemporally restricted carving of the universal. A judgement creates a particular out of a universal. Particulars are just delimitations of universals, carved from the same fundamental ground even as they present themselves as distinct from one another when they are particularized in space and time. When we grasp a pervasion, *we directly grasp the fact that each particular is what it is because it is nothing but a delimited aspect of underlying universals*.

The process of aesthetic commonization is like this. It works because particulars are nothing but carvings out of deeper, common realities. Since particulars and universals aren't different things, if we reverse the process of carving (if we allow the clash between our ability to simultaneously inhabit seemingly incompatible particular perspectives to knock us beneath the spatiotemporal restrictions that led to our being figured as discrete agents and in discrete environments), we can reach into an expanded world that reveals previously inaccessible commonalities. As Abhinavagupta states in the aesthetic context:

> Therefore, the causal complex[15] consisting of the actors, etc., is the enabling factor in the process of making the experience direct. In this causal complex, when there is a complete expulsion [of the mutually contradictory limiting factors] because of the mutual obstruction of the limiting causes (such as time, space, being a limited knower, etc.) of real things and of those [limiting causes] provided by the literary work, that precisely is the state of commonality that extensively blossoms. For this very reason, to fully enhance the *rasa*, all of the spectators have a common perception because of the accord of the latent impressions of their minds, which have been made variegated by beginningless latent impressions. And that unobstructed awareness is aesthetic wonder (*camatkāra*).[16]

The limited worlds that we inhabit are constituted by our exclusion of deeper fundamental realities. What good art does is provide us with a path to these deeper realities. De-particularizing ourselves leads to a transformed experience of the object of appreciation; the normal form of the emotion that served as the bridge between ourselves and the other in the play is transformed to be relished in its commonized form. Being knocked out of our normal restricted world can open our eyes to how whatever world we inhabit always reaches back to a fundamental ground containing all possible experiences. This recognition of the embedding of worlds is experienced as aesthetic wonder that moves the spectator entirely outside of themself through the recognition of previously obscured participation in shared structures of reality.

Applying our topographic metaphor to the fawn passage helps to capture what's going on here. Commonization is the movement of an individual *down* the mountain. For Abhinavagupta, shifting one's attention away from the everyday landscape (viewing good art) provides exposure to the existence of distant peaks (other worlds) and so initiates this journey. We begin with the recognition that the seemingly impassible gap (the distinctions imposed by space and time) between our land (the audience member in the theatre) and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the lands of others (the fawn about to be shot) only remains impassible so long as we stubbornly cling to the conceit that our little chunk of the land (the audience member's normal experience of fear indexed to themself) is the only one that we could truly inhabit (the only one that is real). We reach larger, more diverse lands (a de-particularized experience of the fearful *rasa*) as we climb down (lessen the restrictions imposed by space and time by un-carving what we have excluded to form our normal world). The expansion of the land available to us occurs because, in general, land masses at lower altitudes (intersubjective experiences of shared art emotions) support the higher altitudes (idiosyncratic experiences of an emotion indexed to a particular subject) stacked atop them. As the agent moves down to ever-larger slices of the earth (commonizes), they may rest and reflect on the wondrous realization that all of the seemingly incompatible landscapes through which they've passed are sculpted out of the unity of the earth (the totality of reality). They may also reflect on their journey itself (develop an awareness of the fluidity of aesthetic carving itself).

The awareness of the journey, in addition to framing the content of each world in the context of the larger worlds atop which they are stacked, can also spark a realization that the individual may climb not just down the mountain but also up. The process can be reversed.

Particularization: the direction of the artist

It's not necessary to travel all the way to the base of the mountain to experience meaningful shifts in one's environment. Yet something special happens if we do make it all the way down. Remember that commonization is fundamentally a process of lessening how the particularizing structures of space and time limit our movement. When we fully commonize, our perspective is no longer limited by space and time, even as we retain the knowledge of how the limited worlds through which we have passed are defined by these structures. Once we stop explicitly representing the gaps between land masses that are constituted by space and time, we have switched from the perspective of the individual whose movement is limited by the land available at their particular altitude to the aerial perspective of the topographic map. The perspective of the topographic map contains all altitudes stacked atop each other in a context that shows the continuity between land masses, not just the differences that made them seem mutually inaccessible. The recognition that, from the surface, we may scale previously inaccessible mountains is one opening to the direction of the artist. To travel up a mountain, the artist reverses the process that brought them down. Instead of commonizing and expanding their agency to experience deeper worlds, they particularize their agency in order to have increasingly specific experiences of new worlds.

At first, it might seem strange to say that the direction of the artist is towards smaller worlds formed by excluding more possibilities. But remember what the kind of *rasa*-inducing moment explored in the fawn passage does for Abhinavagupta: it meticulously presents a specific character who experiences a specific, fundamental emotion. The art appreciator first understands this presentation as implicating themself, and then is knocked down by the incompatibility of perspectives that they find themself inhabiting to the realization that both perspectives are slivers of a deeper intersubjective world. The form of artistic creation described here delimits a particular world from a common one so that the movement between the two may be effected by the clash of perspectives that results from a particular art appreciator engaging a particular artistic creation. In short, the artist's act of particularization allows what is common to be experienced anew.

Pratyabhijñā theorists place artistry, understood in this way as an activity of creative exclusion, at the core of reality itself. In one of the most famous verses in the Pratyabhijñā corpus, Utpaladeva places the capacity for aesthetic wonder at the heart of the manifestation of any and all worlds: 'Realization (*pratyavamarśa*) is the fundamental essence of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conscious manifestation: without it, this [manifestation], although endowed with the differentiated aspects of [this or that] object, would only have the limpidity [of a mirror], but not sentiency, because [it] would be devoid of aesthetic wonder.'[17] As Abhinavagupta puts it in a benedictory verse introducing Utpaladeva's most sustained discussion of *apoha*: 'We praise Śiva, the sculptor of variety, who – by his mere will – using the chisel of exclusion, carves out objective entities, which are the mass that is not different from his own self.'[18] Freshly carved slivers of reality provide the stability needed to support various worlds. The subjects in their environments that are these slivers experience them as fully real – because they *are* fully real.[19] There is nothing about the substance out of which worlds are carved that is not real, just like how the peaks of mountains are nothing but the earth itself, even though what it's possible to experience from a particular peak is radically different from what one could experience on a different slice of the earth. The process of artistic creation doesn't make something new ontologically, but it does make something new imaginatively, as the artist's activity of exclusion allows them to experience worlds that they had not previously inhabited.[20] Each carving out of the earth is an artistic achievement because it allows previously unthematized aspects of a landscape to shine forth, and these newly delimited forms allow individuals who engage with them from a different perspective to begin the commonization process.

Paying attention to the metaphysical context and the root metaphor of Śiva as an artist helps us see how *apoha* is the common mechanism for both art appreciation and artistic creation. It also helps us see why space and time are flagged by Abhinavagupta in the fawn passage as the paradigmatic divisions that clash and alter in an aesthetic encounter. The first strokes of the chisel of *apoha* carve worlds according to the divisions of space and time; these differential structures underlie any and all worlds. It is precisely through altering what is excluded by the restrictions posed by space and time that agents travel through worlds, affording the possibilities for both art appreciation and artistic creation.

Pratyabhijñā theorists provide their clearest articulation of the nature of space and time in the first chapter of Section 2, on the nature of action, in the Pratyabhijñā corpus.[21] Utpaladeva explains that sequence – understood merely as the incompatibility of phenomena – is the essence of space and time, but the forms of incompatibility instantiated by each are different. Space is an exclusive difference. It is the difference that is the manifestation of material forms that are what they are because they are defined by what they are not: 'Material form (*mūrti*) is nothing but the specific form (*svarūpa*) that is manifest through the mutual[ly exclusive] difference of [multiple] objects... Spatial sequence occurs due to the presence of material shapes.'[22] Time is the incompatibility of instances of a phenomenon that are nevertheless recognized as unitary. Temporal sequence occurs 'due to the mutual exclusion of the phenomena of [their] contradictory parts while resting on the action of an [entity] that is one'.[23] The interplay of these two forms of difference allows for worldly action. Action itself is just the fact that instances of mutually incompatible material forms are nevertheless recognized to be alterations of something that is unitary. As Abhinavagupta summarizes the upshot of this chapter:

> All the knowing subjects and objects are manifested [as] endowed with spatial and temporal sequence, [and] therefore [as being] differentiated; [and] it is the very fact of this manifestation that *is* the Lord's power of creation, which consists in His power of action.[24]

This is what it means for Śiva to use the chisel of exclusion to carve worlds out of himself. Worlds are constituted by the interplay of spatial and temporal sequence; these sequences are themselves merely exclusions; and these exclusions are the product of Śiva's creative artistry.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The connection between exclusion and Śiva's power of creation sheds light in reverse on the process of aesthetic commonization. Recall that, in the fawn passage, Abhinavagupta describes commonization as a movement in which a spectator is knocked out of their habituated sense of themselves as a limited individual, opening a path to a deeper experience of an intersubjectively shared *rasa*. In our metaphor, this was the depthwards movement from higher altitudes, which represent the spectator's self-indexed experience of a stable emotion, to lower altitudes representing the commonized experience of that stable emotion transformed to a *rasa*. In the opposite direction, as detailed in the final section of the Pratyabhijñā corpus, Śiva crafts what we would literally term uncommon creations (*asādhāraṇī sṛṣṭis*). These creations are formed by Śiva's *vikalpakriyā*, the creative activity of conceptualization that is responsible for the creation of particulars via *apoha*. The movement towards uncommon creations is a movement of particularization in which progressively more possibilities for how a world could manifest in relation to a limited subject are excluded.

The term '*asādhāraṇa*' is literally the inverse of *sādhāraṇa*, the term employed in both aesthetic and metaphysical contexts to refer to intersubjectively shared, common realities. We can think of the movement of un-commonization as the particularizing movement from lower to higher elevations, in which intersubjectively shared realities become increasingly idiosyncratic. The process of making a creation idiosyncratic is the reverse of the process of commonization described in the fawn passage in that the idiosyncratic creation (*asādhāraṇī sṛṣṭi*) inhabited by the limited individual is a delimitation of the common creation (*sādhāraṇī sṛṣṭi*) that is the full domain of Śiva's own preconceptual awareness. As Utpaladeva explains in verses 4.9–4.10:

> The idiosyncratic creation of the limited individual—whose nature is that [of the Lord]—depends on the creation of the Lord. It is indeed real since it takes place through the power of the Lord, although [this power is] unknown [to the limited individual]. This power has the form of the vital breath and is an agitation to prevent its resting in itself; [it] has the form of the diversity of various phonemes and is an activity of conceptualization.[25]

Abhinavagupta summarizes these verses as follows: 'For Īśvara, entities are necessarily intentional objects of a pure realization without having a conceptual nature. However, for an ordinary creature, these entities are carried by a concept that is intent on excluding what is other, because [the concept] is useful for everyday activities, such as worldly obtaining and avoiding.'[26] An idiosyncratic experience is one in which the object is not intersubjectively accessible because it has been narrowly created in relation to a limited individual's own patterns of exclusion. The limited individual in their everyday life sharpens the carving that they inhabit by becoming bound to these habituated patterns of exclusion. Although the limited individual does not recognize their own artistry, each delimitation of their experience is continuous with Śiva's own artistic creation.

It straightforwardly matters for the individual that they do not recognize their own creative power because this lack of knowledge limits the individual's freedom. There is also a further reason, brought out by the aesthetic nature of Śiva's creation, why it matters if one recognizes one's own participation in creating the world that one inhabits. The recognition that one's idiosyncratic world is one's own artistic creation opens up the reflective distance that allows one to savour agency itself as an artistic medium. This is similar to Nguyen's harmony of fit, but the harmony in question is the harmony of an agent who recognizes their own perfect freedom to play the game of artistic creation itself. Śiva's highest

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

freedom *is* the freedom to present himself as what he is not, through a process of exclusion that hides aspects of his own powers from himself by intentionally obscuring the full scope of his agency. He is the game designer fully absorbed in playing his own game. This opens a possibility for the aesthetic experience of agency on two levels: the level of the art appreciator who recognizes that the restrictions of space, time, and their own agency are carvings of a larger reality that encompasses contradictory standpoints; and the level of the creator who exercises the freedom to become other than themself while remaining themself.

The artist's movement up the mountain, towards particularization, and the art appreciator's movement down the mountain, towards commonization, are complementary in that they both proceed through manipulating how a world is constituted through the different forms of difference that are space and time. This sheds light on why, as Abhinavagupta claims, the *rasa* experienced by the artist, expressed as the work of art, and then experienced by the art appreciator, are the same.[27] The *rasa* is the piece of reality out of which the narrower slices of the worlds of the artist, the work, and the art appreciator are sculpted. In a good work of art, that which is able to spur the entrance to *rasa* is what's always left over after the work of exclusion has carved away other options. To apply our metaphor, we can think of the emotions able to be experienced as *rasa*s as core channels running through the centre of a mountain. As the piece of the landmass that's continuous at all altitudes, the *rasa*-facilitating core would be accessible to any altitude, even as most positions on the landmass at a given altitude would not be part of this core (peaks are smaller than bases, so the size of the core would be limited by the size of the peak). At the extremes, both reaching the surface of the earth and reaching the top of the peak allow one to recognize the concordance of one's world with that of all others; if one climbs all the way to the peak, all that's left over *is* the bit that's common to all altitudes. This recognition is the highest aesthetic experience, constitutively linked to the aesthetically wondrous realization of the irreducible diversity of worlds embedded within the unity of imaginative agency to fluidly move between levels, fully inhabiting each world because the worlds are nothing but true slivers of reality that playfully hides parts of itself from itself.

An additional example from contemporary gaming may help flesh out how one may experience oneself as both an art appreciator and an art creator in relation to the same artistic movement. In the tabletop role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), a dungeon master (DM) creates a vast narrative world replete with challenges geared towards encouraging the exercise of the complex (but still delimited) agentive capacities of the characters designed and role-played by the other campaign participants. The experiences of the players are the ones most straightforwardly captured by Nguyen's model. But the experience of the DM is more complex. One of the quirks of D&D is that the DM not only creates the world and guides the other player characters (PCs) through it but also themself inhabits non-player characters (NPCs) within the world that they have created. These NPCs may be either helpful or harmful to the PCs, or more often a mix of both. To play an NPC well, the DM must fully assume restrictions on their world-creative agency. NPCs are limited in knowledge and capacities in a way that the DM is not. A particular kind of joy is open to the DM on the basis of their dual role as world-creator and world-participant: the joy of the recognition that a well-crafted world in which they participate has afforded a perfect harmony of agentive capacities and challenges, including the harmony of fit between the capacities and the challenges provided by the NPCs that the DM pilots. The DM experiences this fit as both the art appreciator and the art creator because the full range of aesthetic agency, both appreciative and creative, is exercised by the DM. The reflective distance opened between these art-creative and art-appreciative forms of agency is reducible neither to the experience of the in-game agent nor to the experience of the out-of-game agent. That the DM both creates the world and simultaneously assumes in-game agentive limitations is the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

opening to a deeper appreciation of the full range of agency itself as an artistic medium. This is an additional form of reflective distance, with a corresponding additional opportunity for an aesthetic experience of agency. The experience of the artist who simultaneously creates and appreciates their own creation through directly acting as a limited agent within it parallels Śiva's aesthetic experience of agency.

Conclusion: what we take on and what we leave behind

Abhinavagupta's picture of the reciprocity of divine and human artistic agency possesses astonishing explanatory depth and argumentative sophistication. It is articulated, however, explicitly in a nondual Śaiva context where it is part and parcel of a larger theological project. So is it tenable for philosophers who don't want to take on the full picture of everything as the play of Śiva's artistic agency?

Here's what a contemporary philosopher would need to take on in order to see Abhinavagupta's aesthetic theory as a live option. Reality is such that our agential capacities afford the ability to move between smaller and larger worlds, which are more or less restricted based on what aspects of our capacities and environments we exclude. Further, the experience of this agential fluidity has aesthetic value. I'd like to suggest that this kind of view is neither alien to nor incompatible with contemporary aesthetics. My use in this paper of Nguyen's understanding of games as the art of agency hopefully provides some evidence for the kinds of discussions that cross-cultural engagement opens up. Although the focus of this paper has been on using contemporary tools to help us get a handle on what Abhinavagupta is up to, I propose that looking closely at Abhinavagupta's works could also provide real benefit for advancing contemporary theories because his works contain such sophisticated debates about how the process of agential fluidity works. These debates occur within the highly developed traditions of Sanskrit aesthetics, philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics. The breadth and volume of the materials relevant to understanding Abhinavagupta's aesthetics makes the task a daunting one, but still one worth pursuing.

Beyond this, contemporary theorists might find the full scope of Pratyabhijñā metaphysics, with its strongly theological and soteriological orientation, to be too much to take on. Without discounting the essential role of fundamentally religious concerns to Abhinavagupta's own thought, I still note that the mechanism of exclusion that describes how world-carving works does not itself presuppose that there is a final, divine, absolutely full ground of reality supporting all of these carvings, nor that we may access this ground even if it exists. Indeed, other *apoha* theorists in the Classical Sanskrit context (including the Buddhists who first articulated the theory) do not share these positions. That agency is fluidly constructed in relation to the challenges and opportunities provided by one's environment *within* worlds does not automatically mean that there is a form of consciousness that encompasses all possible worlds. The final step of Pratyabhijñā metaphysics and theology – the idea that all of this carving is the result of a creative, agentive, fundamental consciousness shaping itself from itself – requires significant further argumentation. I will note that Pratyabhijñā theorists provide these arguments (and that they are quite good), but they would of course need to be subject to scrutiny before being taken on board. More modestly, the kinds of aesthetic processes on which contemporary theorists primarily focus occur from within determinate worlds. To the extent that we're interested in artistic appreciation and creation as they occur for beings like us, we don't need to take a stand on fundamental reality to use the tools that Pratyabhijñā theorists provide.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgements. This paper has benefited from conversations with a number of people. In particular, I would like to thank Dom Lopes, James Reich, and Emily Lawson; the participants of the 2024 Rasa Fest at the University of British Columbia; and the participants at the 2024 Special Forms of Perception conference at Yale University.

Competing interests. There are no conflicts to report.

Notes

1. Or of the denial or disruption of meaning, which can be seen as its own form of communication.
2. Torella (2022, 2023) has recently challenged translating *camatkāra* as 'wonder'. For an explanation of my choice to retain the translation 'aesthetic wonder', see Note 16.
3. See Higgins (2007) for a recent overview of Abhinavagupta's *rasa* theory aimed at a contemporary analytic audience. For foundational Indological studies, see Gnoli (1968), Gerow and Aklujkar (1972), Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta (1990), Gerow (1994), McCrea (2009), and Pollock (2016, 181–238).
4. In particular, Sheldon Pollock denies the claim that Abhinavagupta's theology (much less metaphysics) is necessary for understanding his aesthetics: '[Abhinavagupta's] aesthetics seems more autonomous from his theology than what we usually read in secondary accounts; whereas understanding his philosophical treatises may require understanding something of his aesthetics, the reverse is not unconditionally the case' (Pollock 2016, 188). However, see Reich (2021) for an extended argument for the importance of the Pratyabhijñā theological context for Abhinavagupta's aesthetics. Earlier works on Abhinavagupta's aesthetics that integrate his larger philosophical vision have tended to focus on how Abhinavagupta's theology and soteriology shed light on the kinship (but not identity) between the experiences of *śāntarasa* (the quiescent rasa), *camatkāra*, and liberation (Gnoli 1968; Deutsch 1975; Larson 1976; Gerow 1994). Going along with Abhinavagupta's own framing in his works on aesthetics, these studies focus on how it is that an individual art appreciator might come to access levels of reality that draw them ever-closer to liberated experience. Reich (2021) provides a useful advance on these studies by engaging with the reciprocity between human art appreciation and divine artistic creation. This work, however, does not address *apoha* as the shared mechanism of these two directions of creation.
5. See Ratié (2010a, 2010b, 2017, 2021) for relevant explorations in the context of various aspects of the Prayabhijñā corpus.
6. See Ratié (2007) for an analysis of the Pratyabhijñā account of how we 'guess' at the presence of other sentient beings.
7. One difference worth keeping in mind, but which won't be an explicit focus below, has to do with the relative complexity of the acknowledged structures of agential layering in Pratyabhijñā metaphysics as opposed to in Nguyen's account. Nguyen's book is about human agents engaging with games constructed by other human agents, where the humans remain the focus of analysis throughout. The Pratyabhijñā account of world creation is much, much larger than this. In the Pratyabhijñā context, we have the resources to talk about embedded layers of agency beyond the out-of-game and in-game agent. Rather than a real-world vs. game-world distinction, in Pratyabhijñā, we have something closer to infinite artworlds nested within artworlds, each of which affords opportunities for aesthetic experiences of agency for agents as they transition between levels. I also note that the underlying differences in the scope of agency between Pratyabhijñā metaphysics and Nguyen's focus on human agents complicate the question of who precisely enjoys aesthetic experiences. In particular, Nguyen is explicit that it's the out-of-game agent who has an aesthetic experience of agency (2020, 119). In the Pratyabhijñā context, however, both the limited individual (who aligns mechanistically with Nguyen's in-game agent) and the out-of-game artist may experience *camatkāra*, but from different directions. Since the focus here is on the shared mechanism underlying art appreciation and artistic creation, a comparative analysis of the agent of aesthetic experience is beyond the current article.
8. Author's translation. Sanskrit in Gnoli (1968, 13); *cf.* Gnoli's translation in Gnoli (1968, 52) and Pollock's translation in Pollock (2016, 194–195). I would like to thank Emily Lawson for initial collaboration on these passages. All mistakes and infelicities that remain are, of course, my own.
9. Author's translation. Sanskrit in Gnoli (1968, 13); *cf.* additional translations noted above.
10. This is also why there is a difference between the art experience of another's fear or sorrow, as opposed to the self-or-other-indexed real-world experience of these same emotions. Aesthetic responses are appropriate in aesthetic contexts, where we experience a fundamental emotion not in relation to ourselves or another in our normal level of reality, but in relation to a deeper level where considerations of pleasure, pain, etc., are not relevant to any of the expanded subjectivities involved. Things get considerably more complicated when we consider that all worlds are aesthetic creations from Śiva's perspective. This consideration is part of what leads Pratyabhijñā authors to reject any real division between purity and impurity, with a corresponding rejection of the idea that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moral norms are ultimately binding. See Prueitt (2024) for a critical evaluation of Pratyabhijñā ethics given their position on freedom.

11. Translation by the author. Sanskrit in Gnoli (1968, 13); *cf.* additional translations noted above.

12. This is a well-known and much-discussed aspect of Abhinavagupta's aesthetics. For a recent account of this debate up to and beyond Abhinavagupta's position, see Reich (2021), especially Part II. Note that, because of the dialectical context on which Reich focuses, he does not address the role of *apoha* here.

13. The specifics of *apoha* as an account of concept formation and determinate judgement have been highly contested since Dignāga's initial articulation of the theory in the 5th century CE. The theory underwent significant revisions in Dharmakīrti's hands, and Dharmakīrti's version became the touchstone for most subsequent traditions, including Pratyabhijñā. For a recent overview of *apoha*, with a focus on the early articulations, see Prueitt (2023).

14. See Dharmakīrti (2018) for a translation and study of Dharmakīrti's most sustained discussion of *apoha*. Eltschinger et al.'s introduction to this volume also provides a very helpful analysis of how *apoha* is articulated in relation to Dharmakīrti's concerns about the role of universals in inference. See also Matilal (1998) and Kellner (2004) for cogent explorations of the role of exclusion in forming the objects of inference.

15. I have translated the term *sāmagrī* as 'causal complex' to bring out its association with a key term in Dharmakīrti's epistemology: the *hetusāmagrī* (causal complex) as the mutually influencing causal capacities of unique particulars that allow these particulars to appear as a single aggregate in a perception, despite their not actually forming a unity. The *hetusāmagrī*, then, is the joint operation of causally active elements that allows for the production of an effect. See Dunne (2004, 102–105, 165–169).

16. Author's translation. Sanskrit in Gnoli (1968, 13–14); *cf.* translations noted above. Torella (2022, 2023) has recently argued that 'wonder' is not an acceptable translation for *camatkāra* in the Pratyabhijñā context. Torella's exploration is definitive in terms of the semantic range of *camatkāra* for Pratyabhijñā theorists, and his compound gloss of this term as 'inner deep savouring, marked by a sense of bliss and aesthetic appreciation' (2022, 63) accurately captures the sense of this term. I remain unsure if this sense cannot be properly connoted by the English word 'wonder', especially if some qualification is offered. Although Torella does not explicitly define the sense of the English word 'wonder' that he targets, both the focus in Torella (2022) on a lack of equivalence with *vismaya* (surprise), as well as the fact that he devotes his (2023) follow-up article to refuting the connection to wonder as the beginning of philosophy in Greek traditions, leads me to believe that the primary focus is on the sense of 'wonder' as surprise that motivates curiosity to fix the precise nature of the object that has spurred the experience of wonder. Wonder in this sense retains, and sometimes may even reinforce, the sense that the subject and the object are utterly distinct. It can also be a call for the subject to *master* the object, to set it in its right place that is subordinate to the intellectual prowess of the subject themself. While this is indeed a common use of wonder, especially in Greek-influenced philosophical discussions, it is not the only one. 'Wonder' in English also commonly connotes the experience of being moved entirely outside of oneself through the recognition of previously obscured participation in shared structures of reality. It is not uncommonly linked to the recognition of kinship with the objects that evoke it, or even of the sentience of these objects. This is the sense of 'wonder' that I intend in my translation of *camatkāra* as 'aesthetic wonder'. I do recognize and appreciate, however, that the post-Greek philosophical sense of wonder that Torella targets may come immediately to mind for some readers. This is why I employ the compound phrase 'aesthetic wonder' as a translation. I note that this is the translation that Ratié (2021) also employs. Although I remain aware of the limitations of this translation, since aesthetic experience is held in many traditions to be that which moves us beyond ourselves and connects us to larger shared realities, including the qualifier 'aesthetic' helps to mitigate against the egocentric sense of 'wonder' that can be found in relation to a call for philosophical mastery over an object.

17. Ratié's translation in Ratié (2021, 271).

18. Prueitt's translation in Prueitt (2017, 43).

19. See Ratié (2014) for an explanation of how separation is not unreal, despite being a limited expression of ultimate reality.

20. See Ratié (2010a) on the novelty of imagination for Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta.

21. See Ratié (2021) for a monumental edition, translation, and study of the first chapter of Section 2 along with Utpaladeva's previously lost long auto-commentary (the *Vivṛti*).

22. Ratié's translation in Ratié (2021, 320).

23. Ratié's translation in Ratié (2021, 328).

24. Ratié's translation in Ratié (2021, 268–269).

25. Author's translation. Sanskrit in Torella (2013, 77); *cf.* Torella's translation in Torella (2013, 214–215) and Ratié's partial translation in Ratié (2010a, 380). I would like to thank Emily Lawson and Jack Beaulieu for initial collaboration on these passages. All mistakes and infelicities that remain are, of course, my own.

26. Author's translation. Sanskrit in Abhinavagupta (1921, 263); *cf.* Ratié's translation in Ratié (2010a, 380).

27. For a cogent explanation of this core piece of Abhinava's theory, see Reich (2021, 112–131).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Abhinavagupta (1921) *Īśvarapratyabhijñāvimarśinī*, 2 Vols. Srinagar: Nirnaya Sagar Press.

Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta (1990) *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, Ingalls D, Masson JM and Patwardhan MV (trans). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Deutsch E (1975) Reflections on some aspects of the theory of rasa. In Monographs of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, no. 2, *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1–23.

Dharmakīrti (2018) *Dharmakīrti's Theory of Exclusion (Apoha), Part I: On Concealing*, Eltschinger V, Taber J, Much MT and Ratié I (trans). Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies of The International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies.

Dunne J (2004) *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Gerow E (1994) Abhinavagupta's aesthetics as a speculative paradigm. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* **114**(2), 186–208.

Gerow E and Aklujkar A (1972) On śānta rasa in sanskrit poetics. *Journal of the American Oriental Institute* **92**(1), 80–87.

Gnoli R (1968) *The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta*. Varanasi, India: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office.

Higgins KM (2007) An alchemy of emotion: Rasa and aesthetic breakthroughs. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **65**(1), 43–54.

Kellner B (2004) Why infer and not just look? In Steinkellner E and Katsura S (eds), *The Role of the Example (Dṛṣṭānta) in Classical Indian Logic*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1–51.

Larson GJ (1976) The aesthetic (rasāsvadā) and the religious (brahmāsvāda) in Abhinavagupta's Kashmir Śaivism. *Philosophy East and West* **26**(4), 371–387.

Matilal BK (1998) *The Character of Logic in India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

McCrea LJ (2009) *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Oriental Series.

Nguyen CT (2020) *Games: Agency as Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pollock S (2016) *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Prueitt C (2017) Shifting concepts: The realignment of Dharmakīrti on concepts and the error of subject/object duality in Pratyabhijñā Śaiva thought. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* **45**(1), 21–47.

Prueitt C (2023) Apoha. In: Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. London: Taylor and Francis. doi: 10.4324/9780415249126-ZB002R1-1.

Prueitt C (2024) Why care about freedom and agency? *The Journal of Hindu Studies* **17**(1), 117–142.

Ratié I (2007) Otherness in the Pratyabhijñā philosophy. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* **35**(4), 313–370.

Ratié I (2010a) A five-trunked, four-tusked elephant is running in the sky': How free is imagination according to Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta? *Études Asiatiques/Asiatische Studien* **64**(2), 341–385.

Ratié I (2010b) The dreamer and the yogin: On the relationship between Buddhist and Śaiva idealisms. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* **73**(3), 437–478.

Ratié I (2014) Pāramārthika or apāramārthika? On the ontological status of separation according to Abhinavagupta. In Mirnig N, Szántó PD and Williams M (eds), *Puṣpikā: Tracing Ancient India through Texts and Traditions*. Havertown: Oxbow Books, 381–405.

Ratié I (2017) Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta on the freedom of consciousness. In Ganeri J (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 437–468.

Ratié I (2021) *Utpaladeva on the Power of Action: A First Edition, Annotated Translation, and Study of Īśvarapratyabhijñāvivṛti, Chapter 2.1*. Cambridge: Harvard Oriental Series.

Reich J (2021) *To Savor the Meaning: The Theology of Literary Emotions in Medieval Kashmir*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Torella R (2013) *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva with the Author's Vṛtti: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*, 3rd edn. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Torella R (2022) Camatkāra. *Journal of Indological Studies* **34**, 39–71.

Torella R (2023) *Afterthoughts on Camatkāra. In to the Heart of Truth: Felicitation Volume for Eli Franco on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 311–331.

Cite this article: Prueitt C (2026) Divine and human agency as art: Abhinavagupta on aesthetics and world carving. *Religious Studies*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101656