

FILM REVIEWS

Hello Photo

PRODUCED BY
NINA DAVENPORT
IN CONJUNCTION WITH
HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S FILM
STUDY CENTER

DISTRIBUTED BY FIRST RUN
ICARUS FILMS
153 WAVERLY PLACE
NEW YORK, NY 10014
212-727-1711

1994. VHS VIDEO. 55 MINUTES



Photo courtesy of First Run Icarus Films

Hello Photo contains results of Nina Davenport's one year of travel through India with a 16mm camera. Several times we actually see her using her camera in mirror-image. The tone and perspective are framed by Davenport's use of a Lord Krishna quote at the very beginning of her film: "Open your eyes and see my thousands of forms, diverse, divine, of many colors and shapes. Of course with the ordinary eye, you cannot see me." The mood is one of walking around and seeing what there is to be seen. All that I have to say in the following review comes from this premise.

The film is, for the most part, an exercise in seeing the filmic results of physical interactions of people, places and things with a person (female) using a motion picture camera. We see the results of looking-with-a-camera and, in places, being-looked-at-with-a-camera in both acknowledged and unacknowledged interactions, some welcome, others not so.

For example, in some scenes, people, usually children, are competing to get their faces in front of the camera; in others we see people standing back, taking more of a passive and tolerant pose and attitude. We are regularly reminded, in a reflexive stance,

that we are always getting what a person-with-a-camera has seen—sounds of both operating film and still cameras are heard at regular intervals. And as part of a voice-over commentary, we learn about the paradox of wanting to be seen accompanied by the dislike of being looked at.

The film is largely about questions of mediated representation starting with references to Bombay's prolific film industry—these scenes seem to book-end and punctuate the total film. Davenport offers viewers a rich array—but little understanding—of images, of a broad variety of locations, people, activities and topics, some for public access, others more in private contexts.

In addition to images of film production, Davenport includes scenes of oxen blocking traffic, a polo match, workers in a jute factory, a traveling circus, preparations for a wedding, erotic sculpture (we hear: "Please help yourself to take a photograph"), men and women in chains, elephants blessing people, beggars as well as a school for the blind including men and boys reading Braille texts (an ironic twist on the predominant ocularcentric perspective) among several others. These juxtapositions are indeed intriguing and appealing for certain kinds of questions, especially complex and cross-culturally

variable relationships of humans, animals and machines.

Viewers will be reminded of *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov and other of his montage films, or more specific to India, *Photo Wallas* by David and Judith MacDougall (1992). Though the latter has a much more direct attention to itinerant still photographers, it retains in places a similar enigmatic quality.

The value of the film is that it makes viewers conscious of camera-people interactions, calling into question what one really has when one has pictorial representation of virtually any kind. This is a film about relationships that everyone knows exist but, for various reasons, do not want to attend to in any sustained manner. It also can be valued as a film about the politics of camera-use—who has the right to look, to film, or to avoid the camera gaze. Several times we hear off-camera voices: "Tell me what are you doing?," "Are you looking for anything?," and, for the title, "Hello, hello."

For college-level film studies and aesthetic objectives, the film might stand on its own—it is a particularly rich text for communication and media studies. But for social science instruction, the film must be accompanied by some form of ethnographic infor-

mation on Indian society and culture—in short, more contextual information is needed. Specific learning contexts and specific interests of an instructor will determine the value of this work. ■

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Puja

Hindu Expressions of Devotion

PRODUCED AND DISTRIBUTED BY
THE ARTHUR M. SACKLER
GALLERY
OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
202-357-4880

1996. VHS VIDEO. 20 MINUTES

This video is part of a larger packet the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution has produced in conjunction with the exhibit of the same title. The packet also includes a teacher's guide with reproducible handouts and Indian pop-art posters of various Hindu deities. The materials in the teacher's packet are also available on a Web site, <http://www.si.edu/asia/puja/start.htm>.