

# Emotions without Desire: The Challenge of Sanskrit Aesthetics

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Abhinavagupta (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century, Kashmir) is arguably the most significant figure in the history of Sanskrit aesthetic theory. His grand systematization radically transforms the concept of art and the understanding of the aesthetic phenomenon, also by deeply intertwining it with the philosophical, mystical and tantric speculations of *śaiva* absolute monism. In this presentation, I'll try to outline the entire unfolding of the aesthetic event, from the demiurgic act of the artist, endowed with a genius almost on a par with the creative power of God, through the enlivening enactment on the part of performers—being theatre the supreme art in Ancient South Asia—and their detached-cum-involved skilfulness, up to the blissful savouring of the aesthetic object on the part of the connoisseurs, ultimately a direct experience of one's own pure consciousness that elevates the enjoyer of art to the level of the mystic, the aesthetic to the level of the ecstatic. Moreover, I'll try to identify and analyse the four fundamental aesthetic concepts that Abhinavagupta borrows from previous aesthetic speculations, but drastically reinterprets in his own art theory. This act of theoretical appropriation and refunctionalization allows both the preservation of a strong link with the authority of traditional knowledge and the seemingly harmless introduction of speculative novelty into the tight texture of a traditional knowledge system. Rooted as it is on a counter-intuitive but extremely refined understanding of the aesthetic emotions as 'emotions without desire', the philosophical outcome of Abhinavagupta's hermeneutical enterprise is a theory of art whose explanatory power, sheer sophistication and universal

appeal represent a highly valuable contribution to any yet to come global aesthetics.