

## **Constructing the Traveller's 'Gaze': A Reading of Raj Kumar Hirani's film *PK* (2014)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

'Gazing' is a complex process that involves the conditioning of the eye according to certain discourses. This relationship between 'gaze' and 'discourse' was first pointed out by Foucault as he introduced the concept of the 'medical gaze'. Urry and Larssen applies this concept of the 'medical gaze' to tourism studies as they develop the concept of the 'tourist gaze'. Their concept of the 'gaze' of the tourist/traveller operates at a dual level. At one level the 'gaze' is socio-culturally framed and is filtered through various socio-economic, cultural and psychological matrices as gender, education or nationality. At another level, this tourist 'gaze' is meticulously 'constructed' in a systematic formulaic pattern by a host of professionals associated with the tourism industry and the tourist/traveller is often presented with pre-set objects/insignia to gaze upon.

Raj Kumar Hirani's 2014 film *PK* might be studied as a significant specimen where the tourist/traveller 'gaze' operates at this dual level. Given that the main protagonist PK is an alien who is stranded in this earth, his encounters with the 'other' here assumes a Gulliverian proportion. These 'encounters' with the objects/spaces that PK 'gazes' upon are meticulously constructed by Raj Kumar Hirani, the director of the film. Raj Kumar Hirani's role here becomes analogous to the tourism professionals who are entrusted with the meticulous 'construction' of a space/object fit for the consumption of the tourist/traveller.

**Keywords:** traveller, gaze, film, PK, construction

Strictly speaking *PK*, the film, is not a celluloid version of a travel narrative. It is rather an imaginative fiction that has travel at its core. The plot has that PK, the main protagonist, is a humanoid alien from another planet who lands on earth on a research mission. But the remote control of his space-ship gets stolen and he is left stranded. The film is the story of his 'travel' in search of the remote. Given that PK is an alien, his search for his remote makes him undertake a journey through a completely unknown territory. The chief contention of this paper is to examine how PK negotiates this territory and by what means. But, unlike the conventional travel narratives which "consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator" (Youngs 3), here we find a double-layer of third-person narration—the first being the narration of Jaggu Sahani, who reads out the story of PK from the book she had written on him, and the second, the omniscient narrator, the script-writer/director himself. This paper seeks to highlight how this omniscient narrator represents PK's journey in search for his remote. This representation is done through the 'construction' of PK's 'gaze' at what he encounters. The narrator performs a dual function—firstly, he 'constructs' the encounters PK would have to negotiate, and secondly, he uses multiple signs to construct PK's gaze during the journey. In short, the construction of PK's journey parallels the construction of his gaze. PK 'gazes' as he travels.

As far as this paper is concerned, this construction of PK's 'gaze', the traveller in Hirani's film, is based on John Urry and Jonas Larsen's seminal study *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, (2011) which provides a new paradigm to the 'gaze' of tourists and how this 'gaze' is 'constructed'. Urry and Larssen develop their theory from Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1976) where Foucault says:

The clinic was probably the first attempt to order a science on the exercise and decisions of the gaze...the medical gaze was also organised in a new way. First, it was no longer the gaze of any observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution...Moreover, it was a gaze that was not bound by the narrow grid of structure...but that could and should grasp colours, variations, tiny anomalies... (Quoted in Urry 1)

Urry and Larssen, in their *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, applies this Foucauldian concept of 'gaze' to tourism studies as they contend that the basis of any touristic experience is 'gazing' at things or sights that are out of the ordinary, which in turn determine the pleasure the touristic experience imparts to the tourist. But, this 'gaze' is not innocent 'looking' but is rather pre-conditioned, as Urry and Larssen points out: "Just like language, one's eyes are socio-culturally framed and there are various 'ways of seeing'." (2). Such 'ways of seeing' are often filtered through the tourists' "ideas, skills, desires, and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education." (2). This is but one aspect of the tourist/traveller 'gaze' that Urry and Larssen highlight. Their further contention is that this 'gaze' of the tourist "is as socially organised and systematised, as is the gaze of the medic" (1) thereby linking the tourist gaze to the medical gaze as propounded by Foucault. This organization and systemization of the tourist 'gaze' involves restoration/ remodelling of old objects/spaces or the 'construction' of entirely new spaces out of virgin environments for tourist consumption based on the prevailing discourses of the tourism industry. Urry and Larssen point out that the discursive relationship between the tourists and the objects/spaces they 'gaze' at are developed and maintained by a host of professionals who constitute the edifice of the tourism industry:

These relations are discursively organised by many professionals : photographers, writers of travel books, blogs and guides, local councils, experts in the ‘heritage industry’, travel agents, hotel owners, designers, tour operators, TV travel programmes, tourism development officers, architects, planners, tourism academics and so on. In contemporary tourism, these technical, semiotic and organisational discourses are combined to ‘construct’ visitor *attractions...*” (17-18).

In the context of the film *PK*, the role of Rajkumar Hirani becomes analogous to such tourism professionals.

The first ‘construction’ that is made in *PK*, the film, even prior to the construction of individual ‘gaze’ for PK, is that of his persona as a ‘traveller’ as opposed to that of a ‘tourist’. This distinction between the traveller and the tourist dates back to the first half of the nineteenth century, around 1840, when “that particular combining together of the means of collective travel, the desire for travel and the techniques of photographic reproduction, becomes a core point of western modernity” (Urry and Larssen 14). All these aspects, no doubt, caused massive democratisation in the field of travel. But, as Youngs says in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*:

Along with this democratisation comes a fear of the loss of special privilege and exclusive experience. As still happens today, there is a perception that mass travel is a dilution of something precious; that neophytes are incapable of proper appreciation and spoil the rewards for the cognoscenti. It leads to intensified attempts to distinguish travellers from tourists, both in travel practices and travel narratives. (58-59)

Strictly speaking PK is not a ‘tourist’. He is something more than that and this might be inferred from the ‘gaze’ that the narrator constructs for him. Urry and Larssen in their classification of ‘gazes’ mentions of the ‘anthropological gaze’ and defines it as: “The anthropological gaze describes how individual visitors scan a variety of sights/sites and are able to locate them interpretatively within a historical array of meanings and symbols.” (20). The anthropological gaze, they elaborate, can be the most intrusive since tourists will insist on staying for lengthy periods within the host community in order to get to know it ‘authentically’. PK’s ‘gaze’ becomes anthropological for two reasons—firstly, due to his long duration of stay, though perforced; and secondly, for his having to conceal his identity he incorporates himself into the host society adopting many of its socio-cultural ‘mores’. In the process, he comes across more as a ‘traveller’ than as a ‘tourist’.

The narrative construction of ‘gaze’ in the visual narrative of the film *PK* runs on a dual level—at one level, the narrative constructs the gaze of the audience/readers/spectators and on another level the gaze of the main protagonist PK is constructed. The process is simultaneous and the two constructions run parallel. Construction of the audience gaze starts from the very logo of “Rajkumar Hirani Films” displayed in the very first frame of the film. The silhouette of the dangling ‘R’, ‘H’ and ‘K’ signifies a show, the trope being used is that of a puppet show. Immediately afterwards, the locale is constructed for the audience’s encounter with PK—the *havelis* in Rajasthan set amidst the vast desert. The construction of PK, the alien, is that of an apparently naked male with the remote-control of his space-ship

hanging around his neck. This construction of PK is significant. Travel has been the prerogative of the 'male' since the earliest times (which started changing only from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) but this stripping of the male traveller immediately posits him in the margin—the dominating sign of masculinity undercut by the nudity. In effect, PK becomes another Gulliver gazing at completely new 'constructions' never encountered before.

The construction of PK's 'gaze' might be classified under three broad heads. These classifications are not water-tight and are often mutually overlapping. They are: 1. language, 2. social mores, 3. religion, and 4. the city of Delhi.

### **1. Language**

The language component in the construction of PK's gaze is significant primarily because in PK's planet there is no language. People communicate there by holding each other's hands and transferring their thoughts. The language PK comes to hear and later learn to use while on earth is an instance of 'embodied gazing'. 'Embodied gazing' is part of the 'performance turn' in tourism studies that Urry and Larssen introduce in their *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. The 'performance turn' within tourism studies, according to them, highlights that tourists experience places in more multi-sensuous ways such as touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and so on, as well as the materiality of objects and places, and not just as objects and places viewed as signs: "Tourists encounter places through a variety of senses....Tourists eat exotic food, smell new odours, touch each other, are touched by the sun, dance to pulsating 'soundscapes', talk with friends and occasionally get drunk." (195). Other instances of 'embodied gazing' constructed in *PK* are the moments of PK's physical intimacy with Jaggu as when Jaggu wipes the cream off PK's lips during one of their outings or when the drunk Jaggu hugs him the day before he leaves earth for his home.

The most important linguistic construction is the name 'PK' itself. This word, an abbreviated form of *peeke*, the Hindi word meaning drunk, comes to be assigned to this nameless alien from the very beginning of the narrative. This word doesn't mean anything to PK, but almost anywhere he goes, he confronts the question "*Peeke ho ka?*" ("Are you drunk?"). He is baffled because even people confronting him for the first time (as for instance, the police inspector to whom PK goes to lodge his complaint against Bhagavan/god) seem to know his name. But, even after learning the Bhojpuri language, PK never questions the meaning of the word 'PK/*peeke*'. Though 'names' bear no meaning for him, the narrator nevertheless constructs the connection between PK's name and identity, as when Jaggu observes if PK marries here on earth, his wife would find it very hard to introduce her husband socially and PK in turn asks Jaggu, the main female character, to suggest a new name for him. For PK, the word 'PK' was simply a denotation before, now it becomes a connotation and he wants to change his name to something that is socially and aesthetically acceptable.

Another example of this construction of 'gaze' through language is the sequence in the jail lock-up where PK complains to Jaggu about the difficulties in learning and understanding the discursive nuances of languages in this earth. The epistemological and discursive difference that can be generated in the meaning of a single word by uttering it 'variedly' is constructed for the audience 'gaze' as PK narrates his difficulties in understanding the Hindi word *aacha*. PK deciphers four meanings of the word. He classifies them as: 1. pronouncing the word *aacha* by simply shaking your head means 'everything is

ok, alright'; 2. pronouncing *aacha* by widening your eyes means you are in a shock (he provides an example of it, like when one's mother has met with an accident); 3. pronouncing *aacha* in a loud voice will mean one is angry (PK's example-'okay/*aacha*, so you've come to teach me!'); 4. dragging the word for a while during pronunciation will mean one is 'thinking deeply'. PK complains that appropriate expressions must accompany these pronunciations for meanings to be conveyed.

The third instance of this 'embodied gazing' through language comes at the very end of the narrative when PK returns from his planet with a few other researchers. Just before landing on earth, PK, now acting as a tour operator, mentions the dos and donts his colleagues must keep in mind while being here on this planet. He says that the most important confusion in this planet lies in the language. He provides an example: If anyone overhears somebody saying in the marketplace "I love chicken" or "I love fish", then it doesn't mean the people love these animals, but rather they are going to have chicken or fish for lunch. PK then pronounces the objective their research mission: to study why there is so much difference here on earth between what people think and what they speak.

## **2. Social Mores**

In this category, the focus will be on how the traveller's gaze is 'constructed' by using dress; currency notes; song and dance; brothel and sex as various signifiers. Just as in the case of language, there is no concept of dress in PK's planet.

### **2.1 Dress**

The first person PK encounters on his arrival is a Rajasthani villager wearing a traditional multi-coloured turban, a woollen half-sweater, a traditional kurta-pyjama, sporting a salt-pepper moustache, a walking stick in his hand and a transistor on his shoulder. Then, and later when he sees other people in a variety of dresses, PK confuses them to be skins of various types. The concept of dress being completely alien to him, he classifies and categorises people as 'shining' (people wearing bright dress), 'full black' (women wearing burqua), 'colourful' (women wearing colourful sarees), 'white' (men wearing white dhoti), 'tight' (men wearing tight-fitted clothes), and 'loose' (people wearing loose clothes). The climax to this confusion is 'constructed' for PK through the 'sign' of the 'dancing car' as he gazes at a couple having sex inside a car leaving their dresses near the window which PK steals. The construction of 'gaze' continues as PK confuses between the male and female items of dress and later comes to differentiate between the dresses worn during daytime and during night; and among dresses associated with various sports, professions and religions. That dresses of different colours have different signifieds in different religions is brought out for PK as when he confusedly consoles a Christian bride wearing white thinking she's a widow or when he consoles a Muslim lady wearing black burqua for the same reason with disastrous consequences.

### **2.2 Currency Notes**

The construction of currency notes for PK in the narrative is a classic example of Barthesian 'denotation' and 'connotation'. For PK the currency notes are pieces of paper

with nothing but the photograph of an old man (Mahatma Gandhi) but which could be bartered for food. But any paper containing the same photograph does not hold the same value, as those cannot be bartered. PK realises that one particular kind of paper with the photograph of the old man (Mahatma Gandhi) is valuable while others are not. Being an alien, PK at first, sticks to the denotative meaning of the currency notes as he is in no position to understand their connotative significance.

### **2.3. Song and Dance**

PK's encounter with a band master named Bhairon Singh introduces PK to traditional Rajasthani folk song, music and dance. The staging of this encounter is part of the narratorial strategy of constructing the 'gaze' of PK towards the planet earth where culture is associated with identity. This encounter is also an instance where the 'anthropological gaze' becomes operative in the narrative. The paradigm of the traveller participating in local culture (although 'staged' for the sake of the tourist gaze in most instances) is 'constructed' for the audience as PK is inducted as a performer in Bhairon Singh's band and he starts accompanying the band in its itineraries.

### **2.4 Brothel**

PK's encounter with the brothel is another instance where the Barthesian concepts of denotation and connotation are found operative. The brothel for PK is a 'unique locality' inhabited by very beautiful and friendly people and where everybody wants to invite PK to their rooms. Just as in the case with currency notes, here too the denotative aspect of the signifier 'brothel' becomes significant for PK as he is totally unaware of its connotative nuances. But, the narrator foregrounds a different connotation of the signifier 'brothel' as he constructs PK's encounter with a prostitute in the 'honeymoon room' with its canopied bed. The brothel becomes an avenue that provides PK access to the hands he needs to touch to learn the local language so very necessary to search his stolen remote. Though the brothel ritual of offering *paan* (betel leaf) to PK as also his being slapped out of the room for addressing the prostitute as a sister is constructed in the narrative as an instance of 'embodied' gazing, what comes across prominently is PK's confusion between the denotative and the connotative aspect of the signifier 'brothel'.

### **2.5 Sex**

The signifier of the 'dancing car' constructs the first impression of sexual intercourse for PK when he gazes at a couple having sex inside a car. This gaze at sexual mores is constructed further in the office of Cherry Bajwa (the chief executive of the TV channel office where Jaggu works). When Jaggu takes PK for an introduction with Cherry, PK finds a packet of condom lying on the floor. He asks around for the owner of it but everyone either shies away or denies owning it. When informed by Cherry that it is used for having sex and people maintain privacy about it, PK finds no reason why people in this planet rush to claim a fallen purse but the very same people shy away from a fallen packet of condoms. This 'gaze' at the sexual mores is further constructed when PK finds no answer to the question that if people are so very private about having sex then why is there so much fanfare during marriages which assert the formal social sanction of the same 'sexual' act. A similar construction of 'sex' is found again at the end of the narrative when PK, now the tour guide, advises his co-researchers about not going around naked while on earth and informs them that

acts such as kissing and other similar things are done by the people here on this earth behind closed doors.

### **3. Religion:**

#### **3.1 God**

The construction of God and religion occupies a central position in this narrative where the multifarious religions and their diverse religious activities are constructed for PK's 'gaze' by means of specific signifiers. When PK comes to Delhi in search of his stolen remote everybody, right from the policemen to the common people from all walks of life and religion, tell him that only 'god' can help him search his remote. For PK 'god' is constructed as a 'manufacturer' of men who lived along with them in palatial buildings called temples, churches, mosques or gurudwaras. Thousands of people go to this 'god', pay the requisite fees and get their problems solved. This 'god' can be bought in the form of idols which act as the medium of communication with the real 'god'. But since there are no transmitters fitted inside, 'god' cannot be contacted directly. One can pay him fees but no receipt is issued for safe delivery of the goods prayed for and hence there is no guarantee. No complaints can be lodged against 'god'. The 'gaze' constructed for PK encompasses all the major religions and sects and PK is made to come to the conclusion that there are several 'gods' in this world who all played different roles and had opened their own different 'companies' (religions). These companies are run by 'managers' and each and every people in this earth are related to one or the other 'company'. When babies are born they have no 'logos' of any 'company' printed on their bodies and only afterwards they are branded (baptized to a particular religion). PK's 'gaze' towards god and religion is further constructed as he is made to follow the rites and rituals of all the major religions and sects and when, despite everything, he fails to locate his remote he pastes and distributes photo-bearing leaflets of 'god' as 'lost' all over the city of Delhi. These acts of PK are again instances of 'embodied gazing' present throughout the narrative of the film.

#### **3.2 Religious Insignia and rituals**

Religious insignia are used abundantly in the construction of PK's 'gaze'. All the religions are signified by their respective insignias but by making PK enter a church with Hindu religious items of worship, or a mosque with Christian religious insignia, the narrator constructs for him the codified structure of the religious faiths. Equally important are the rites and rituals associated with the various religions such as fasting at or on different times of the day; self-flagellation; or bathing the deities in milk. Later in the narrative when PK deliberately confuses the godman Tapasvi, who had stolen his remote, by introducing people of one religion dressed with insignias of another religion, PK's process of 'embodied gazing' comes to a full circle. Having stayed long enough in this earth PK now comes to manipulate the prevailing religious discourses for his own advantage.

#### **3.3 Godman**

'Godman' makes up the final strand in the construction of religion for PK's gaze. A flamboyant personality equipped with professional managers, back-stage artists and exceptional public-relation skills, the 'godmen' are constructed as the fraudulent

intermediaries between god and his devotees. Their influence over their devotees is constructed for PK by 'staging' the daily interaction of Tapasvi with his vast concourse of devotees. This 'gaze' is re-introduced at the end of the narrative when PK, now the tour guide, advises his co-researchers to take a u-turn and run away if they meet someone here on earth who claims to make them contact 'god' directly.

#### 4. The City of Delhi:

The construction of the city of Delhi runs parallel to the construction of 'god' as far as PK's gaze is concerned. Delhi is constructed through its famous architectural signs: a mixture of Mughal and British architecture—Jama Masjid set amidst the rubble of Old Delhi; Rashtrapati Bhavan; and the Red Fort. As PK goes around asking who can help him find his remote, he encounters the general populace of Delhi, who again function as signifiers for the Indian society as a whole: "Now only god can help you", advises a person drinking tea in a tea-stall sitting on his scooter (a signifier of Delhi and the rest of metropolitan India); "Fall on god's feet, only he will take you across", advises another with his sunglasses tucked up his forehead and a bag on his shoulder (a typical Indian male face in the Jama Masjid area); "God knows brother, who are we to know?", a woman shopkeeper tells him (a common Indian city woman); "God knows where you will find it [the remote], now be off from here", retorts a *nimbu paani* seller near the Red Fort (a snapshot of Delhi with the *nimbu paani* seller in the foreground and the Red Fort in the background); "Keep faith in god", advises one elderly Sikh person travelling in a crowded bus (the metropolitan multi-religious Delhi). Later, as PK chases a person dressed as Lord Shiva down the streets of Delhi and among the buildings, enquiring him of his remote, the middle class homes and the corporate offices in Delhi are constructed for him to 'gaze'.

The 'gaze' constructed for PK is meant to be more incisive and intrusive than is the norm in general travel/tourism practices. PK's 'gaze' verges on the 'anthropological'. But then, PK goes and comes back again to earth with a very limited knowledge of the territory he is visiting. However 'anthropological' might be the gaze constructed for PK, the narrative construction involves foregrounding of selected details and the eliding of others to the background, thereby making the 'gaze' fragmentary. Fieffer's ideas of 'post-tourism' might be applicable in the context of PK's 'gaze' construction: "...the post-tourist knows they are a tourist and tourism is a series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience." (Quoted in Urry and Larssen 114). Though the character of PK is not constructed as a post-tourist and he comes across more as an example of a 'classic' traveller confronting a new 'other', yet his experience too is neither 'single' nor 'authentic'. Given the post-structuralist discursive milieu with an increased emphasis on ideas derived from the social constructionists such as Vivien Burr, a complete and authentic 'gaze' for PK (and for that matter, any tourist/ traveller) might never be constructed, as this construction will always be socio-culturally filtered—the filter of the 'personality' of the narrator/tourism industry professionals.

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