'I'M THE VERY BEAUTIFUL CITY'
CONVERSATIONS WITH BOMBAY, DOCUMENTED

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As far as my identity is concerned, I can take care of it myself.
– Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation[1]

It's for you to figure out who I am ... I don't care.
– Ranu, in I'm the very beautiful (dir. Shyamal Karmakar, 2006)

If this film ever gets released, I can show everyone.
I've laid myself bare, everything exposed!
Parents, home, everything.
Nothing is concealed.
Now, I want to show that after I dress up,
I'm the very beautiful!
There's no parallel.
... This I really want ... please let me!
– Ranu, in I'm the very beautiful (dir. Shyamal Karmakar, 2006)

CITY AS STUDIO

When commuting on the local train which connects the western suburbs with what might be called Mumbai's downtown area, once you pass Bandra, the tracks continue along the bridge over Mahim Creek – connecting the Mithi River with the Arabian Sea. The creek, said to be vital for the ecosystem of Bombay, is a mangrove-filled mini-ecosystem in itself. It announces itself through an extreme smell, caused by the sewage and industrial waste that find their way into it. On coming closer, its waters look dark, cumbersome somehow, heavy and oily. Along the rail-tracks runs a pipeline. Migrants to the city have made parts of this marshland stable enough to settle in, to inhabit and to now be called a slum. One day at dusk, while passing Mahim Creek on my way home in the local, I saw through the train's window the flickering of a colour TV surrounded by a group of people standing on the concrete base of an electricity pole, seemingly right in the midst of that black water body.[2]

This was in the year 2002 – a fleeting yet memorable moment. It was a scene almost too easily translateable into a spectacle of urban hacking techniques, of the ubiquity of contemporary urban screens, or indeed embodying the materiality of Mumbai's contrasts – the creek as a dense, oily, moving substance giving way to virtual and lightweight transmission of images. Wouldn't this also be the perfect opening shot for a documentary film on the quotidian strategies of slum dwellers, stressing their precarious yet clandestine modes of profiting from the city's networks of technology and media goods? Or indeed, the start of a fictional narrative? Wouldn't Mumbai allow for such an image to appear absolutely real? Thinking of the city as studio is to reflect on the actual and conceptual city-spaces chosen as worthy of the documentary camera, and to acknowledge how the city might in turn challenge the constructions and identifications of its own image.

In a city so overwhelmingly driven by the iconic images that commercial cinema projects on to it, and where a large part of its daily routine, its speed and its scale is defined by the machinery of their production, where does the making of documentary-mode films fit in? What is the nature of the city created through the imaginaries of

1 Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

2 I have referred to this scene earlier when it became the starting point for a curated video programme addressing the relation between urbanity and video. 'Video as urban condition' was initiated and conceptualized by Anthony Auerbach who invited contributions for offline and online presentations; see http://www.video-as.org/, last accessed on 20 August 2011.

3 See Ranjani Mazumdar, Bombay Cinema: An Archive of
the City, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota
Press, 2007, in particular Chapter Two, 'The Rebellious
Tapori', which discusses the distinctive hybrid Bombay
cinema language that accounts for the need of a widely
understood city language that simultaneously defies the
purity and power assertions of a regional language in
a city made of migration. See also Ashish Rajadhyaksha,
Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to
the Emergency, Delhi: Tulika Books and Bloomington:
Indiana University Press, 2008: 195–202 – especially
his discussion of territorial realism in Bombay's fiction
cinema, citing Jabbar Patel's Simhasan (1977), Vidhu
Vinod Chopra's Parinda (1989), and famously, Saeed
Mirza's Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai (1980), Mohan
Joshi Haazir Ho! (1983) and Salim Langde pe Mat Ro (1989),
or later, Ramgopal Varma's Satya (1998).

non-fiction makers, through their ways of living and working in it? Where and what are those city-sites that are chosen as relevant, urgent, representative, wished for, and thus admitted into the documentary archive of the city? And does this archive in turn add equally to our ideas of the Bombays we live in, remember, dream of, work towards?

Or, asked differently, if we look at Bombay as the subject and context of documentary film practice while maintaining that a wider national and international frame is in many cases an informing or aspirational background, do the contours of a documentary-type Bambaiyya[3] fold themselves into the multiple styles of narration and aesthetic forms? If the city demands a specific way in which it is to be navigated, does it also foster its own realisms, its own ways of imagining possibilities, to document what often evades a single frame or a set narrative?

EMERGENT CITIES
TAKE NO. 1: RELATIONS OF MATTER

A young labourer stands behind a roadside food-stall. He receives a plate with a fried egg, prepared for him on a large, cast-iron frying pan. He eats at a steady pace, mechanically, staring straight into the camera with somewhat piercing eyes. A peculiar form of addressing the viewer at the end of the film: frontal, direct, yet detached. The labourer recalls for the viewer a construction worker having his meal earlier in the film. Here the camera moves in closer to capture fragments, watching over the man's shoulder from behind or observing him from the side and the front. The diegetic sound is relatively closer to the viewer than its material source (an effect that occurs several times in the film), which provokes a sensation of somebody gulping down a glass of water as if right next to the viewer, emphasizing the bodily act. Then one sees, and again one hears, through the cranked-up sound, hot tea being ceremoniously poured into a porcelain cup with saucer and into a glass. From here the camera moves slowly upwards and looks out of the ditch. High-rise buildings are in the far-off background. These two sequences in Mani Kaul's fast-paced documentary, Arrival (1979), cause ruptures within his experimental city symphony. They gesture towards the concealed look behind the camera, thereby revealing it and attending to the kinds of relations it constitutes.

Arrival begins by linking back to the village-site as the source of much of the food that gets processed in the city, then offers a quick succession of sequences showing aspects of the mass production and distribution of consumer goods in Bombay. The film expresses urbanity through the stamina of the city's labour force. The harsh conditions of the labourers are neither dwelled upon nor ethnographically explored, but instead are embodied in the density, effort, rhythm and continuity of labour; the scarcity of space is replicated or enhanced in the images themselves and by a collage of fragments of labour evoking an assembly line.

The film's gaze is a camera eye — a mechanical eye. The disembodied camera moves through and above crowds of labouring bodies akin to a scanning device. From a bird's eye view it shifts swiftly to an observational position in the midst of a busy road, trying to capture its surrounding with a 360-degree pan shot out of a car which emphasizes its odd placement between lorries, carts and human bodies. The frames of the car's windows are visible; they indicate a thin separation and locate the camera

inside the vehicle while studiously gauging its outside. When this observer perspective changes – rapidly gliding down from being high up, moving along and then right in the middle of a market to catch fragments of its activities – the lack of a definite position for the camera while recording city life reminds of Dziga Vertov's The man with a movie camera. There is no natural, immediate or real perspective from where to observe city 'life, as it is'.[4]

This mechanical gaze becomes a quite literal way of examining urban dimensions and materiality by focusing closely on the relations between human as well as animal bodies. Close-ups often indicate how consumer goods are processed and distributed: goats gathered in a confined space first, pushed forward one by one to be butchered, then hanging from poles, moved through the slaughter house, and finally the meat cut up into pieces. The camera takes account of how apples and coconuts are neatly displayed in a stall; the weighing of fruits and vegetables privileges measurement as much as assessment of scale through details such as a hand counting bananas, a labourer's legs vis-à-vis an enormous pile of oranges unloaded from a truck, or the relation between the size of a sack of grain and a man's spine. The film's dedication to grasping the city through an assessment of the material relations it produces is also enacted through a lyrical sequence which suspends the flow of production processes. Positioned on top of a high-rise building, the camera's eye follows a long piece of typewriter paper slowly floating downwards, like a dupatta, as we overlook the city from a privileged position. A sonic layer that develops from the sound of typing into a melody, enhancing the sense of the paper dancing along the waves of the wind, supports the sense of time the viewer receives – when the height of the building is made tangible through the duration taken for the paper to almost disappear from view. Relations between material and space, and the varying degrees of density, energy and dimension these create are devices to comprehend aspects of the urban.[5]

Arrival thus introduces the 'city as studio', as a mobile and permeable – though congested and uneven – space. It approaches the urban as a site that defies fixed localities and perspectives, and that denies a singling-out as well as a practice of knowing and naming. The camera is disembodied while both sides of this observing technical device stay anonymous and detached: they are strangers to each other.

The final sequence of the film, described above, does however single out a specific human face and offers a form of direct address, merely, and quietly, putting a momentary halt on the general labour and viewing processes in the city. It cuts through the earlier flow of movements and opens up the possibility, and this only, of another relation between the body on the screen, the city and the viewer.

TAKE NO. 2: RELATIONS OF GOVERNANCE

The audio-visual language of Arrival leaves no doubt that it is pointing to the strain on labourers' bodies, but it is the female voice-over – a source of dispute between the filmmaker and the producer of the film, Films Division of India – that renders its images evidential.[6]

> … money embodies the power of purchasing, a command about all the labour and even all the producers of labour in the market. … It attempts to establish a general exchange relation between money and labour, and reduces the labourer to a commodity.

The voice-over interrupts the sensorial evocations of relations between city-space,

4 See Hito Steyerl's discussion (in Die Farbe der Wahrheit, Wien: Verlag Turia & Kant, 2008: 93ff) of Dziga Vertov's proclamation to record 'life, as it is', which understands the addition of 'as it is' as evoking an ambiguous position, posing it as an open question. On the one hand, 'life, as it is' is ever only created through and in the image, it does not exist outside of it; on the other hand, the urge to capture life and 'life, as it is' on film, i.e. life 'as such' as authentic and real, is – as has numerously been argued – loaded with representational claims and power assertions.

5 Much more could be said about the film's overall soundscape and its experimental collage of very different kinds of music tracks which evoke multiple sound and image relations.

6 Mani Kaul made the first version of Arrival with a commentating voice-over, a loose paraphrasing of Karl Marx' writings. However, on subsequent viewings of this first print, Kaul increasingly felt that the film worked well, if not better, without the commentary. He tried to convince Films Division (FD) to make further prints without the commentary, but FD strongly believed that audiences in India would require the voice-over. Finally an agreement was reached to have a few prints without the commentary exclusively for film festival screenings, which Mani Kaul came to perceive as his version of the film. I owe this information to Lalitha Krishnan.

city labour, city matter and city life. It also alters the more playful address of camera gaze and the spectator's look through analytical and opinionated speech.

For many viewers, the expository quality of this voice will resonate with the multicoloured logo on the right corner of the screen – the signature imprint of the Films Division of India (FD), Government of India's documentary, information film and newsreel production agency. The materialist and critical agenda will however also irritate the familiarity with a voice of the state which articulates its benevolence. FD, set up after the country's independence in 1948, followed in the footsteps of the British Film Advisory Board founded in 1940,[7] carrying forward a colonial legacy. 'The Films Division presents', which opens each FD documentary, short/animation film screened across the city and the nation, signifies very particular documentary practices, although one's reading of those continues to develop and diversify with accumulative research even as FD's place as an institution and a site on the documentary city map alters with its changing specificity of, for example, personnel.

Yet the mandatory screening of FD documentaries before a fiction film succeeded in developing a crucial repertoire of images that fed into a nationwide associative memory.[8] Some would think that this was to the detriment of the documentary's reputation as the main corpus of films in circulation was imbued with an aura of didacticism, was patronizing in style, and foreclosed entertainment value or imaginative creativity.[9] Despite this well-known critique, however, a sense of nostalgia and the mere fact of a shared pool of images find articulation in oft-recounted experiences of cinema-viewing.

The parental speech act – which, even if not listened to, cannot be entirely ignored – thus starts with the very screening space that firmly occupies the city, and continues by contrasting the lure of a fictive narrative of Bombay's entertainment cinema with the state's view on emergent social realities, and, moreover, what those realities should become in relation to what they are not yet. Much has been written on the prophetic message of state-produced documentary films, especially those distributed in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1947 and during the 'green revolution'. In many of them the audience is constituted as a 'not-yet citizen' or a 'citizen to-come' who should, in consequence, build and enliven the newly independent nation-state that too is yet to come into full being. The state's gaze towards the city parallels this view. Similar to Bombay as it is constructed in much of its commercial cinema, the Bombay addressed within FD narratives epitomizes a national fantasy and, for some, a political agenda. The prophetic message and image of urban potentiality are crucial. But while the fiction film portrays the seductive city tempting city dwellers and newly arrived migrants into its life-changing possibilities, its glamour mixed with underground crime, its display of opulence and its exhilarating speed, FD's Bombay is a city in need of rescuing, a slum-sprawl that calls out to be ordered, a disease in dire need of a cure, a space of unworthy existence, 'like rats in a hole', of a not-yet-human, bare life. Such a definition of city dwellers, as 'the flotsam and the jetsam of society',[10] is often voiced from within the city's indoor spaces: an office without a name but endowed with the superiority of the knower, a laboratory-like white room, urban planners gathered around miniature models, an expert behind a desk. The precarious space of the slum – an unruly site of streetside, makeshift houses with long lines of dislocated people queuing up for water or food, or faces looking bewildered into the camera –

7 Films Division of India was founded under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. For its particular history and relation to the British Film Advisory Board, used to produce war propaganda, see: Srirupa Roy, 'Moving Pictures: The postcolonial state and visual representations of India', Contributions to Indian Sociology, vol. 36, nos. 1 and 2, 2002: 233–63, and Beyond Belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007; B.D. Garga, From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-Fiction Film in India, New Delhi and London: Penguin, 2007. Accounts can also be found in shorter texts published in online and offline forums and magazines, such as Himal (www.himalmag. com, www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/ hsa/) or upperstall (http://www.upperstall.com).

8 From 1948 FD produced 52 films (one per week) annually, and every cinema owner was required to screen one of them right before the fiction film for which the audience purchased tickets.

9 This depiction surely does not do justice to all of FD's productions as Arrival itself confirms; it merely indicates a broad direction and perception. Since Shai Heredia's research (2005) aimed at excavating experimental film production under the aegis of FD, and the subsequent showing of films by, for example, S.N.S. Shastry, Pramod Pati and Vijay B. Chandra, more attention has been paid to individual filmmakers' and FD commissioners' wider artistic vision which created spaces for film experimentations beyond the education paradigm. This research into FD's archive has recently further been expanded. Independent filmmakers curate weekly Saturday screenings and other events. What is called the fd ZONE proposes relations between archive and state independent films, and hereby opens out a discursive space for a new engagement with FD's history. See http://filmsdivision.org/category/the-fd-zone

10 Both quotations are from FD footage deployed in Vertical City (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).

is juxtaposed with the city-site where rescue is conceptualized and articulated via development programmes, ideologies of progress, rehabilitation schemes, and law and order. A classic ethnographic division of looks and knowledge production, which also divides the city into those who look, analyse and develop cures for those being looked at, salvaged or expelled.

TAKE NO. 3: RELATIONS MEDIATED

> A young girl with a small child on her hips.
> An elderly man with a young boy on his lap.
> A woman clad in sari sitting upright on her bed.
> A young man standing in front of his small roadside shop.
> A group portrait – of people seated on and around a concrete bench.

Vertical City (2011), a visual essay by Avijit Mukul Kishore, starts with people – firmly placed and looking straight into the camera lens. Their gestureless look does not reveal much more. These steady images, still life-like portraits of the inhabitants of slum replacement projects at the outskirts of the city, convey a firmness of being in one's location. They frame Vertical City's experiential exploration of twenty-first-century Mumbai's rehabilitation projects, and give visual articulation to the commerce-oriented city planning that uses these projects to make hitherto uninhabited land valuable in the property market. If Arrival stresses the structures set up to provide the city with goods, Vertical City points to the lack of amenities and infrastructure that is symptomatic of the lowest end of customers of building companies.

Vertical City's camera is an embodied one and yet not personified. It is codified, maybe, only through the voice-over narrative which the viewer might align with the camera, and through the final sequence shot out of a landing airplane which allows the filmmaker a bird's-eye view of Mumbai's slum areas. The multiple-voice narration reflects on the recent history of market-driven rehabilitation, the gains and losses for the various parties involved, and the fact that most slum dwellers are pawns in an economic game of land distribution played out between the city council, the property market and involved NGOs. Similar to Arrival, there is a measuring of dimensions. The height of a building is experienced by the camera following water being carried up several staircases. There are investigations of the materiality of concrete, of thick walls gathering dust and humidity, long pathways, large gates, streams of light and long shadows. The camera enters and gauges the habitats, and while trying to find its way, is partly led by those who have converted that concrete urban landscape into a liveable space. Often the hand-held camera moves while the people remain steady, enhancing its conceptual displacement.

The state, as well as the historical background to the current rehabilitation, are quoted through black-and-white archival FD footage, referred to above. Market forces are imaged through advertisement shows set up by building companies, which seek to create an experience of a new, clean, colourful, spacious and light city that likens itself to Hong Kong and Singapore. The conceptual division of the city's sites remains largely the same, except that the market is not personified via an expert; its location remains ubiquitous and its representation virtual.

The frontal and direct address attained through the portraits which frame otherwise experiential Vertical City is complemented by sequences of children

acknowledging the presence of the camera, interacting with it and performing in front of it. Not dissimilar yet necessarily different from Arrival, these are moments gesturing as much towards an exchange of gazes as to the impossibility of it. While there is a completely different media context (from 1979 to 2011), there is now also another film history, concerning the making of slum areas into sites for studios. The media context of the filmmaker as well as the mediatization the urban poor are familiar with have substantially changed. Whereas the mechanical camera in Arrival at times appears as if held by an invisible albeit ubiquitous alien who is looking straight into the brutality of the city's economy, the camera in Vertical City is neither fully mechanical nor held by an expert observer or political filmmaker with firm convictions. The persona expressed through Vertical City's gazes appears more as that of a visitor carefully scanning the spatial and sensual dimensions of the city-beyond-the-city, and hereby experiencing its material form, while being aware of its own subjectification which flares up in the direct address through children posing in front of the lens and women expressing anger about their living conditions. The city's media technologies, and its politics of image and space, seem to have penetrated the bodies of both — the one who holds the camera and the people in front of it.

EMERGENCY CITIES

Hamara Shahar / Bombay, Our City by Anand Patwardhan (1985) opens with shots of the 1983–84 yearbook of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay: 'street neatly divided at Chembur', 'smooth flow of traffic at Wadala flyover', 'Mahalaxmi Race Course in action', then Marine Drive and city traffic by night. These picture-book images are quickly browsed through while the sound already evokes the following scenes of dry, barren land, police brutality during a demolition, and then an elderly woman who, surrounded by members of her community, addresses the issue: 'We are being attacked by all sides. There is no one to turn to. Allah have mercy on us!'

Hamara Shahar unfolds its narrative from this beginning: from the camera being right at the place of violent removal of slum dwellers, juxtaposed with images that present the city as an affluent, cultured, well-functioning and energetic metropolis. There is no attempt to hide the camera's position; in fact it is used as an interlocutor to give testimony as well as to question its efficacy for that very purpose, and to embarrass politicians whose opportunism is now recorded. But the self-consciousness of the exploratory mechanical camera eye shifts to an interactive or observational look, and the camera moves into the hands of a social and political actor, while the filmic narrative is driven by an editing process which supports or places in context the filmmaker's occasional appearances and his political conviction and purpose. The filmmaker is present as a persona who offers his or her analysis by building a line of argumentation through having access, though not equally, to the city-sites that are juxtaposed: the slum under attack and demolished, the defiantly built streetside tents, slum dwellers and activists marching through the streets, resistance songs and theatre performed on an open field — sites that are threatened, fragile and displaced, yet contested and re/claimed, versus the Municipal Commissioner's abundant bungalow, the politician's office, upper-class apartments and affluent high-rise buildings, sailing-boat regattas in front of India Gate — sites confirming law, order and acts of conquering, sites

of ease, space, leisure, distinction. This argumentative montage could be read as a gesture towards the internationalist ripple effects that Latin American Third Cinema had, not to make an argument of direct lineage or succession but to align the Bombay city film with militant film trajectories.[11]

These oppositions of placement and displacement do, on the one hand, follow the dichotomy of city-sites set up by the documentary motion of the state, whose acts are here critiqued. On the other hand, the construction of sites of displacement in the independent political documentary film starts from something that was already there and lived in but is now under threat, rather than a not-yet site filled with not-yet citizens. Furthermore and crucially, in films such as Although the city looks quiet (dir. Pradeep Dixit, 1986), Occupation: Millworker (dir. Anand Patwardhan, 1996), but in particular I Live in Behrampada (dir. Madhusree Dutta, 1993) or Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko (dir. Deepa Dhanraj, 1985), though the latter is based on Hyderabad, the chosen city-sites in Hamara Shahar become a film setting – call forth a recording camera – because of an immediate urgency. The urban site documented and constructed is that of a city of urgency, and this city's narrative is expressed through a political polemic, provoked through an injustice that is perceived as needing a filmic response right here and now. The conceptual city of urgency, emergency and precarity is constituted through the actual location of the slum or the pavement – but also through the very acts of demolition of a city council, or through the ensuing communal violence that destroyed stigmatized neighbourhoods in Bombay post the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, or through the dynamic between political rhetoric, social and economic crises which culminates in a whole city (Hyderabad) coming under emergency law and curfew. The main incentive is to bring into visibility parts of the city that are either not given an image, or given an image that casts it as a problem, a disease; and thus the need for visibility justifies the clear denomination of the city-sites as 'in crisis'. The documentary modes of telling the story of the 'city in crisis' work with and enhance the excess produced by emergency actualities: police force, governmentality and communal violence are used climactically, and actuality becomes a protagonist moulded into a dramatic, or tragic, story-line forging the dramatization of the city.

While a contemporary critique, also from the filmmakers themselves, addresses the power structures and benevolent gesture in the filmic act of 'giving a voice to the other', the resulting expansion of image repertoires relative to the respectively available media contexts needs to be emphasized, as also the kind of filmic address which exceeds the emergency narrative. Thus, while the city continues to be cinematically divided, and reduced, the conceptual city-spaces addressed are extended by, for example, adding layers of media discourses, historical contextualization, the political complexity of contradictory voices, as well as the very materiality of the city which surpasses the defining mechanisms of the state documentary and possibly the frame of the filmmaker's conscious motivation.

The slow-paced collection of quiet moments of living under curfew in Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko creates its own particular time–space and lends uncategorized depth to the escalation of violence during a political rally. The lyricism of the fiction-like portraits of those held at bay from public space cuts through the climactic escalation of a riot, and expands a spectacularizing notion of emergency.

The street theatre scene in Hamara Shahar stands out not only because it replaces

11 Hamara Shahar's sailing regatta, underscored with classical music, reminds of Octavio Getino and Fernando E. Solana's Third Cinema classic, La Hora de Los Hornos / The Hour of the Furnaces, and its stark critique of the class divide in Buenos Aires by its montage of urban sites and symbols of the rich (indulging in top-floor swimming pools, for example) next to the brutality of masses of cows being slaughtered and the deprivation of the rural poor. This interestingly realigns the Bombay city film with an international movement of political cinema which had its bearings already in the 1970s.

the pure image of a victimized slum dweller. Through the ridiculing of not only politicians' election campaigns but one's own plight, the city-site of urgency invites compassion with laughter and thus another sensual response; and, yet again, a possibility for a new kind of city relation in-between a film subject – here collective and resistant – and film spectator. Furthermore, the film's inclusion of slum dwellers protesting and filling the streets of Bombay with banners might evoke the city's own documentary history where, pre-independence, its temporary non-fiction film studios appeared in the localities of Gandhi's anti-colonial campaigns and along the marches of his supporters. On the other hand, the city's acts of defiance through songs and poetry have recently reappeared in the weave of resistance songs in A Night of Prophecy (dir. Amar Kanwar, 2002), where Prakash Jadhav's poem, 'Under Dadar Bridge', adds another pulse to the image of the displaced, and the sleeper resting high up on the iron skeleton that shoulders the train station links the city back to the conflicted nation through poetry recited in Kashmir or Andhra Pradesh.

The strategy to confine city locations for political or film practical purposes via immediate urgency is interestingly fostered and countered by the very same temporal aspect of immediacy. I Live in Behrampada opens with a speech act that strengthens any argument for a talking-head device foregrounding a way of telling and hereby blasting the frame. The woman – part of the Muslim community whose houses and entire belongings were destroyed after having been bombed – who speaks directly into the camera: 'Why do you make us suffer like this? How have we hurt you? Must you abuse us in this manner? You have to live here and so do we ...', must be listened to; her address is direct and singular, and yet speaks of a wider demand for spaces of dignity – in the city and in the city-film. When we see her later, in line with other women in front of a hut as if set up for an interview, she is more likely to disappear behind the script that has been prepared for her. The immediacy of course lies in that momentary address-like relation between her and the camera, and in this being consciously used as an opening shot. As a forceful opening speech-act it blasts the frame of a manipulatable document on many levels: the non-containable strength of her enunciation forcefully articulates the non-graspable dimensions of humiliation, and its numerous quotations by visual artists such as Nalini Malani and Navjot Altaf when seeking a language to address the violations and scars that remain and are being reinforced in Bombay have led to a continuous re- and un-framing of this vocal exclamation. The re-use of a related victim account in Dutta's more recent film, 7 Islands and a Metro (2006), points further to the possibility of relocating the testimony that appeared on behalf of the city-in-crisis-now within the narrative of a multi-voiced urban chronicle.

What is at stake however is not only the city 'in crisis', but the federal and the national that the city is standing in for. City politics serve to accuse the state, political-party actors, ideologies or the industry, and the chosen city production sites function as evidence in playing out that antagonism. The filmmaker is hereby taking on a role as representative of the under- or mis-represented city and seeks to add to the archive of the city, hitherto comprised of state renditions and Bombay cinema's fictional images. The larger aspiration or reach however seems to be to insinuate spaces and histories beyond the specifics of Bombay, and to acknowledge how the city itself is inflected by emergency narratives on national and international scales. Urban settlements and their destruction evoke violent histories of migration and

displacement, as well as concretely reference the Indian Constitution and its claim for equality (Hamara Shahar); urban communal riots reflect on and embolden memories and once-anticipated futures of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country (I Live in Behrampada) while foreshadowing hegemonic and violent governmentalities (Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko).

MOMENTS IN BOMBAY'S DOCUMENTARY HISTORY
1896: Lumière Brothers films screened at Novelty Theatre
1901: Novelty Theatre releases newsreel footage of the Boer War
1910: Growth of a pea plant, film made by Dadasaheb Phalke by exposing one frame every day as an initial proposal for making moving images
1920s–30s: Actuality material used to document occurrences of political urgency by Indian and international film companies and individual filmmakers.
1921: Great Bonfire of Foreign Clothes screened at West End Theatre – a feature-length documentary on the journey of Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Maulana Shaukat Ali and others from collecting foreign garments in the streets of Bombay to setting fire to these at a maidan near Elphinstone Mills. The film runs for two weeks.
1930: Film industry and theatre owners shut down for two days in protest against the ban of footage showing Gandhi's Dandi March.
1940s: British war propaganda films
1948 onwards: Films Division-mandated education and information films, shorts, topicals
1960s: Subversion and experimentation within Films Division
1969: Social Communication Media course at Sophia Polytechnic for Women
1970s: Emergency rule in the country, coinciding with the emergence of the independent documentary film movement; screenings of films in neighbourhoods where they were shot with portable 16mm projectors; documentary film shows in schools and colleges, and in cultural centres like British Council, Alliance Francaise and Max Mueller Bhavan
Late 1980s: VHS library at Anand Patwardhan's house
Early 1990s: Video magazines by media corporate houses
1992: Mumbai International Film Festival of Documentary, Short and Animation films (MIFF) – bi-annual
1995: Chauraha, documentary screening forum, at NCPA
Mid-1990s onwards: Proliferation of private television channels and later, Reality TV
Late 1990s: 'Digital Video Recording of Women Artists', a project of Sparrow (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women)
2000s: Digital post-production studios for documentaries – Studio Agneetar, Studio Chrysalis, Fireflies Post Sound
2000: Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) starts commissioning documentaries for Doordarshan; University of Mumbai introduces Bachelor of Mass Media course.
2002: Godaam – documentary footage archive of Majlis
2003: Gujarat found footage archive
2004: Vikalp movement and Vikalp screenings at Bhupesh Gupta Bhavan, later at Prithvi Theatre and Alliance Francaise; Experimenta Film Festival
2005: Distribution of documentaries through Magic Lantern Foundation's initiative, 'Under Construction'; Anand Patwardhan's War and Peace released in theatres
2006: Madhusree Dutta's 7 Islands and a Metro released in theatres
2007: Centre for Media and Cultural Studies in Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) launches postgraduate course; 'Cine Labia' (LGBT film club) screenings; NDTV shows documentaries on Sunday afternoons; websites streaming documentaries online – synclinefilmstore.com, cultureunplugged.com; films uploaded on vimeo and other file-sharing sites.
2008: Online documentary footage archive, pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive); bookshop at Prithvi Theatre starts selling documentary films on DVD
Late 2000s: Video-walas, amateur filmmaking; mobile phone cameras, surveillance cameras; LCD ads; computers, archives on private shelves and in hard drives; home-based sweatshops for filmmaking; film talk in Sai Baba Complex, Andheri, Malad, Borivili, Kandivli, Dadar, Bandra, Colaba, Juhu Sea View; ubiquity of urban screens...

CITY ROUTES AND REGISTERS

Transformations in filmic languages usually do not occur along linear lines of progressive change, but particular moments in time might provoke a certain density of questions, an aggregation of energies. Such a condensation might occur with or be supported by a culmination of long-looming queries and reflections on documentary film, its ways of speaking – speaking for and about, its productive or limiting relation to the political, or its being too closely linked to moments predefined as 'crises' – to city-sites circumscribed by urgency and precarity. Does the documentary act which seeks to open out and instigate new thought cease to act as 'inconvenient witness'[12] when utilizing its protagonists – people and city-spaces – as evidence for what has been determined as a zone of urgency, accompanied by a political framing and with possible solutions already decided?

Those questions, which I encountered when following production processes in Bombay of various documentary films in-the-making in 2002, seemed sharpened through a 'critical event'[13] which permeated the editing studios and private-home sweatshops, where conversations would often ultimately lead to the carnage in Gujarat. The intellectual dilemmas, political inquiries and film-ethical questions which seemed to speak of that moment most precisely were those that hesitated to frame 'the crisis' similarly to any other crises, namely, through a language that hitherto seemed adequate to make visible; those that saw their practice of victim accounts taken on by news channels without this impinging on the sovereignty of the perpetrators; and those questioning their abilities as documenters to take adequate account of the kind and political scale of the violence that occurred. Testimonies and acts of listening and responding were ever more important, but particularly in a city like Mumbai where the riots of 1992–93 provoked three immediate filmic reactions, what prevailed in 2002 was a refusal to follow the given logic of the action and an admittance of possibly not having a language yet that could testify to the contemporary.[14]

While 2002 seemed to crystallize a moment of introspection for some, related sentiments had already impacted on filmic approaches to the city which clearly were seeking to expand the city horizontally and vertically. Endeavours of decoding city-sites framed by the logic of 'rescue' or 'urgency' were under way by including sites that had been deemed too normal, too unproblematic, too mundane to need or deserve reflection, and, importantly, by including the spatially and conceptually transient, the personal routes of citizenship and the many different registers at which the city is lived in singular ways and through the everyday.

To look at Jari Mari, a settlement adjacent to the international airport in Mumbai made up of migrants now mostly working as daily wage laborers, while 'nothing particular is happening there',[15] was a crucial incentive for Surabhi Sharma's Jari Mari: Of cloth and other stories (2001). The layered portrayals of Sharma's protagonists – female labourers, mothers and housekeepers – sketch the city as one where the factory as fixed locality diffuses and spreads into the sweatshops in the lanes of the slum, and where the worker's value and profit are indexed by the number of pieces that can be mounted, dismantled or stitched within an hour, a day, a week. The trading chains made up of sellers and buyers, locally and internationally, allocate the labourer a place within the crediting system of the global city economy through the numerical;

12 See Ranjit Hoskote, 'Bearing Inconvenient Witness: Notes in Pro-Confessional Mode', Crisis/Media: Sarai Reader 04, 2004: 2–9.

13 See Veena Das, Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; and Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

14 The radically different media context between the early 1990s and 2002 has to be taken into account here. For a more in-depth discussion of this argument, see also Nicole Wolf, Make it Real: Documentary and other cinematic experiments by women filmmakers in India, Frankfurt/Oder: European University Viadrina, 2007; available online at opus.kobv.de/euv/volltexte/2013/66/.../Wolf_Nicole_Make_it_Real.pdf

15 From a conversation between Surabhi Sharma and the author, 6 June 2002.

they evoke the city and its transnational routes through index systems. Hereby the camera remains and moves through Jari Mari, pauses, dwells on and communicates the texture and speech that ties Jari Mari at the same time to the local everyday and the larger cityscape. Via the condition of female labourers at the lowest end of the city's economy, Jari Mari extends its chosen city-studio conceptually. It makes public the bleak inequality of urban distribution of wealth, yet the polemic is not addressed through melodramatic devices and thus the narrative's destiny less firm.

A feminist impulse and politics, which underlines Jari Mari and influences a series of 'city films' – and a discourse which would need more attention than is possible within the scope of this text – is enacted in the self-reflexive filmmaker–narrator persona which Paromita Vohra uses as a way to navigate the city and the myriad questions it poses towards contemporary feminism: how feminist history is remembered, rejected, experienced, enlivened and furthered by girls and women with very varied stakes and possibilities in the city itself. For Unlimited Girls (2002) Paromita Vohra explores the city via the chat room and thus her, i.e. the fictional character's, home computer screen, a conceptual city-place which opens itself out to shopping malls and Barbie beauty contests, as much as to the Vacha women's library and a conversation with the union leader Meena Menon at Sea View Restaurant, or a working-class self-made film director and the taxi of a female driver.

The politics of space are, on the one hand, further addressed, complemented and complicated by the middle-class home, and often the filmmaker's home or neighbourhood itself becomes the focus of interrogation (Lakshmi and I, 2008; On My Doorstep, 2009 – both films by Nishta Jain). On the other hand, the previously mentioned excessive speech acts, the synergy of protest or enactment, relations between spaces, morality and fear (Memories of Fear, dir. Madhusree Dutta, 1995) are expanded not only through a questioning and searching narration, but by making the imaginaries, the dreams and the fantasies that the city produces, allows or swallows the very focus of a documentary's politics. The construction of a filmmaker's own territorial realism is thus foregrounded, and set horizontally next to actuality material rather than subsuming it. The treasuring of the performance of the self becomes itself a documentary city-site which can loosely encapsulate the playing together of city-dreams, cinema narratives, media realities, governmentalities of the urban, and how these are more or less clandestinely subverted or capitalized on. Hereby the camera's privilege to look down from a high-rise building on to the labour of the city now accounts for the labourer who is cleaning windows high up outside a skyscraper and enjoying a quiet moment of the city (7 Islands and a Metro).

The city's technology, including its billboards and multiplexes, its surveillance cameras and shopping malls, its ubiquitous market economy signs and simultaneous homogenization, its embodiment of majoritarian politics visible in the realm of popular visual culture, its hospitality to piracy and chor bazaars – the city's overall entrenchment in international telecommunication and audiovisual technology permeates the body and gets reflected back in the kinds of documentary images with which the contemporary city is addressed. The scanning camera in Arrival is now competing with the many scanning technologies that the city sustains, and the city's many images invade the filmmaker's imagination of itself making the camera into a very self-conscious urban screen. The film production sites are transition spaces, hallways, train stations,

construction lorries crossing flyovers, the rooftop, the corner shop, the shopping mall, the doorstep, the photo studio, the editing and image/sound software on laptops and at internet cafés. Disputes cannot always be addressed through clear antagonisms; the filmmaker accounts for her/his own implication; speech acts can be screams or be entangled in complex questions around gains and losses when being heard and seen, at times demanding the right for opacity. Actuality in the contemporary city documentary might now, more overtly, encompass the past, the contemporary and the latent future, all of which collide with the imaginary and the dream.

RANU/'S CITY

Ranu is the very beautiful and she is the city. Ranu succeeds in living and working in the city of Mumbai – here she leaves her plight, she works hard to afford her own flat, she gains recognition, she lives through disappointments, she continues, she travels the nightly streets, the bars, the beaches. She is the city because she epitomizes its struggle to be recognized for all the things she is and, more so, the things she would like to be. She is real, direct, rough, full of conflict and possibilities, charming, playful, teasing, loving, hurt, removed, and she is using the camera flirtatiously. With the camera she enunciates 'life, as it is'. She might be the coming urban public.

The filmmaker/camera wants to get to her life, wants to capture her life, as it is. Shyamal Karmakar exposes his desire to capture and to dramatize Ranu's life. He dwells on the documentary relationships that are inevitably driven by games of power, affection, anxieties, and acts of self-preservation and enunciation. The camera is embodied, intimate, innocent, violent, always there and a part of life.

But again, life is deemed most immediate, most clear to see and most real, through pain, suffering, urgency, crises, and maybe through the image of its/her need to be rescued. Ranu's skin, burnt through an attempt at suicide as a teenager, becomes the skin of the city. Ranu resists to be rescued, and she resents the betrayal of the camera which is scanning her body. Here life gets even more precarious because the ones in front and behind the camera are not strangers to each other, and they can no longer pretend that they are. They need to deal with each other, fight for respect on equal and sometimes not so equal accounts, address the voyeurism and surveillance they critique and perpetuate.

Ranu/'s city is willing to reveal itself in all detail, but desires to determine the intimacy of the revelation and the image of her life. At times she gives up and asks you the filmmaker and you the viewer: 'It's for you to figure out who I am … I don't care.' She wants to appear beautiful but ultimately she wants to stay undefined, a beautiful image only.