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**MAKE IT REAL**  
**Documentary and other cinematic experiments**  
**by women filmmakers in India**

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# MAKE IT REAL.

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## Preface

*This is in Berlin – summer 2006. Soudhamini and I have finally found a spot on the side of the canal that seems appropriate and where we sit down in half sun and half shade. We had been talking vividly while walking here and, as it often happened, got excited by that sense of ‘something new arising out of talking’. This something often moved between the abstract realms of Grounding, of Relation, of time and space conjunctions and the concretes of space and time of film installations as well as different aspects of the conglomerates of the ‘cultures’ we both lived in. Our excitement stemmed from these extremely valuable moments where the coming together, the rubbing shoulders, the pushing each other further, of our different perspectives of various kinds, seemed fruitful; where we felt that we managed to create our little and yet so precious space where new thought could arise. We felt these moments were such a gift that we wanted to extend them and somehow capture them or share them, without wanting to be pretentious as to their value for others, but just to play with them further. So the idea arose that Soudhamini would look for images around us, with her camera and while we continued our conversation, to not only record the talking and sharing and arguing but attempting to somehow, if not literally and not exhaustively, visualize what conversations can do, what arises from amidst them or, to create a talkative visual narrative on the side. As soon as the camera button was pressed though, we both felt paralyzed in our thinking and talking. We felt spotted and observed and the thinking and talking just wouldn’t flow. This felt very strange to us as we were both ‘professional interview makers’ and we tried out different ways of reducing our inhibition. Finally we let it go, ‘just for now’. We shut down the camera and then continued talking while sitting and observing boats passing by, while walking more, having dinner, walking home, until finally we realized that we had talked continuously for almost 7 hours. While I was exhausted even though finding it difficult to let go, Soudhamini had more energy left and was eager to watch more films. So we both retreated to our rooms, me jotting down into my notebook some of the things we had delved into before I fell asleep, Soudhamini watching Chris Marker’s The last Bolshevik. Our morning tea was accompanied by exchanging our views on Chris Marker’s essay films and how we both planned to spend our day...*

There is a tradition of the conversation between the filmmaker and the academic or critic. They can be standard Q & A’s about production figures, they can be two narratives with pre-set agendas and they can be a space which allows something to develop out of talking. They seem most interesting when both interlocutors are similarly implicated in the talking and what is talked about. Here as well, conversations and sharing thoughts on film and politics, art and places, on choices to be made for life and work, have been the inspiration and the continuing drive for my PhD project. They kept me going. Listening to a

recorded interview or receiving ideas for a new film project via email continued to set a spark in my head and returned energy to continue writing. But they also kept me on my toes to persistently reflect on the possible relevance of my project and necessary new questions that I, or we, might have to ask to carry on challenging what I write. Conversations produced momentary and singular spaces which only concentrated on the exchange that happens between two people and at the same time they relentlessly drew our many different outsides in. They allowed the oscillation between an abstract thinking about terms and concepts and the concrete lived-in realities; they made it possible to keep those spheres separate for brief moments, to then in fact interchange what is abstract and what concrete and to finally embody how closely these spheres are intertwined or do indeed belong to the same.

This beginning is therefore to treasure these encounters that happened in many different places, face to face as well as via different media. It is to emphasize their importance as being, at the same time, context, material and thought. It is to admit how impossible it sometimes is to give back these moments of talking in writing. It is thus mostly and finally to acknowledge and thank all the filmmakers who gave their time to go on these extended and open journeys.

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## Introduction

### Subjects

“She writes about the minority of the minorities, one of the smallest groups one could imagine. Not only documentary filmmaking in India, no – *Women Documentary Filmmakers in India*. And I am one of her subjects.” (Madhusree Dutta, March 2003)

With this remark and a smile Madhusree Dutta introduced me to friends of hers in Berlin where she was part of a collaborative group project presenting cultural and political aspects of Bombay under the umbrella project *Ersatzstadt (Substitute City)*.<sup>1</sup> Her smile came to stand for what I call a *twinkling eye* and, next to other gestures in conversations and meetings, its texture indicates the kinds of relations that created the material from which my writing, and its many subjects, arises. Those gestures, as well as other reflections, statements, questions and side remarks, in extended, arranged, recorded or ad-hoc conversations, chats on the phone or e-mail notes from this not so small group of women filmmakers, became text as well as the context of my work.

During the summer of 2007, I had an e-mail conversation with Madhusree Dutta about her latest film *7 ISLANDS AND A METRO* (2006).<sup>2</sup> Amongst the many other things we talked about, was her formal choice to dramatise her non-fiction feature by structuring the film around two fictional narrators. The two characters who weave together documentary material and dialogues with very different kinds of ‘Bombayites’ (citizens of Bombay), were inspired by the two writers Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, both crucial figures for modern Urdu short-story writing.

I wrote:

“ (...) I watched *7 Islands and a metro* again yesterday.

It was especially interesting as I had looked through the conversations we have had and some texts you had given me some time ago. (...) I remembered you mentioning your fascination with trains and their iconic status, but also the difficulty in making this into a film, the inaccessibility of it. Also, that a certain kind of feminism as an approach didn't seem enough anymore. And your appreciation of the documentary form because it offers you almost every possibility or even impossibility.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ersatzstadt* was hosted by the theatre *Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz* (Berlin). Madhusree Dutta and other members of *Majlis* ([www.majlisbombay.org](http://www.majlisbombay.org)) collaborated with *pong* (Merle Kroeger, Philip Scheffner, here also with Dorothee Wenner). See: <http://www.pong-berlin.de/projects.html>. [http://www.etuipop.de/ersatzstadt/maps/e\\_map01.html](http://www.etuipop.de/ersatzstadt/maps/e_map01.html). This collaboration continued through the trans-national EU funded project *Import/Export. Cultural transfer*. <http://www.im-export.net>.

<sup>2</sup> *7 ISLANDS AND A METRO*, D: Madhusree Dutta, 100 min, Digibeta, colour, India 2006.

Now one thing that I appreciate a lot about *7 Islands and ...* is its political scope. It brings a lot of thought on the questions of migration and just movement of people, citizenship, history, religion, belief of various kinds: belief in a future also, and in the idea of the urban and how it stretched horizontally and vertically, in material terms and philosophically and politically. (...)

I like the kind of address of questions of belonging, the migratory background of the city, the way people define that they belong and belong more than others through various means. Also, in terms of rights. Who claims the right to stay. Then the looking at the 'fighters' of the city, that what makes it tick every day, the little things like the chai wallah [tea vendour] who is invisible and yet so important to make the city what it is, but also that quotidian struggle that is accepted as matter of fact. (...)

And then the narration through the two figures Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto gives of course another depth and weight. It points an extra finger at the repetitions in history, again at inheritance, also the politics in the choice of inheritance. Now while watching I was also thinking of course about the choice of enacting them. Like in many of your other films that is a particular choice, taken for specific reasons. I think at the beginning I found it more distracting. I loved the narration, the sound of the different regional languages, just listening to the sound and the flow and what's being said, that's extremely rich, and at the beginning the actors disturbed me a bit by paying attention to that and I found them too dramatic. Later, and especially in the end, the confession scene with Manto's story *Colder than Ice*, there I find it very strong and convincing, very emotional but not spectacularising the violence by means of a victim account, instead approaching it via the perpetrator. I think that's an extremely good choice. So towards the end I could very well see the narrators place in the film, and their strong function as a device to narrate, as a direct address and yet a bit removed. (...) (email, 27<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

She wrote:

" (...) I know, the actor-characters are much controversial. What excites me is putting the contrived melodrama and the low-key documentary footage next to each other. I am interested in that moment of discomfort that the joints between the two provide. Nicole, one of the tragedies of modernism is that it has killed melodrama. And one of the biggest tragedies of documentaries, at least in India, is that the best of them are also modernist. I am yet to get the right skill to do it effectively, but I am sure of its merit.

Another reason for the existence of those two characters is to kill the seduction of the 'real people'. The reality of 'people' can be so engrossing to the effect of being paralytic. I realised it as soon as my first film *I Live in Behrampada* became a cult. Bombay, monsoon rain, people from the fringes, beauty of violence... I think this film would have become a drug if I did not puncture it with the contrived narratives. (...)

You remember the sequence where a poor male vendor and the traditional fisherwomen are in loggerhead. When I started shooting that sequence I knew everything about it. But, I changed thoroughly through the process. By the end of it I was fragmented. The livelihood right of the male vendor, the poor migrant, his vulnerability and his slyness of a survivor... and the threat to the traditional trade of the local women, the violence perpetuated by the women, their desperation, their sheer beauty, their grandeur, their organised voice... no amount of feminism, marxism, border study can help us in this situation. It is also my most honest film where I tried to say that I don't know.



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta

I don't know whether we help the invisible people when we make them visible through our works. Isn't visibility also a burden, citizenship a trap? Everybody may not want to be a citizen." (excerpt of email response 29<sup>th</sup> July 2007)

I am quoting this email conversation at length, right at the beginning, as it introduces some of the main concerns of the women filmmakers whose work I am going to address in the following. Madhusree Dutta's strong focus on the form of her non-fiction feature introduces a commitment to presentational and aesthetic choices that I will expand on throughout. The many fields of discussions that were evoked in her latest film and partly raised in our email conversation are closely linked to what's at stake for my project. They are part of the subjects that I seek to address.

What I propose is that there is a wide range of prolific explorations of documentary mode filmmaking that has been and is continuously happening in India by women filmmakers of different generations. I want to share what I have been intrigued by. Namely, that there is a commitment to filmmaking practices which is deeply invested in contemporary political questions. Those often stem from an engagement with the local, which is necessarily entangled with the 'global', but is similarly relevant for a much wider realm. I will argue that those films are *good to think with*. This dedication to the *political*, that takes shape in multiple cinematic forms, is thus inextricably linked to reflections on, negotiations of and the working upon notions of the *real*. What I suggest then, and what I wish to enlarge through my writing is that the film examples I cite, and many others that I can't attend to within the scope of this project, make valuable contributions for not only thinking about those notions but for an endeavour that seeks to expand those figures: the real and the political. They do so through the many practices that constitute documentary filmmaking, from its very conception to its production and distribution. By negotiating the format of the



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta

documentary and by not letting themselves be limited by given genres, they *make real* what may be perceived as beyond ‘the limits of the possible’.

Madhusree Dutta’s reservations and worries as to the ‘drug’ effect of ‘real people’ or the beauty of violence already introduce crucial challenges that are taken up in different ways by the filmmakers I worked with. Her choice for including enactment and her desire to bring back cinematic forms that have been expelled from the realm of the documentary are also exemplary for what filmmakers are compelled by. Throughout the different chapters I will look at historical incidents and political frameworks to get closer at what I understand Madhusree Dutta describing as the death of the myriad possibilities of documentary form through modernist ideas. Attending to contextual conglomerations of what modernism in this case implies and thus to the particular discourses, institutions and aims that the documentary was thought and made in, within the Indian situation at different points in time, is hereby one part of my project. However, giving a historical frame will remain fragmentary as will the presentation of a contemporary scene of documentary filmmaking in India. Especially at this point, where documentary filmmaking in India is flourishing, an encompassing encyclopaedic description would amount to an, almost, equally thick book as is the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* edited by Willemen and Rajadhyaksha.<sup>3</sup> While it is more than time for a publication of that kind, this has not been my task.

My research has been driven for one by a cinephilic fascination with documentaries and by an even larger excitement in discovering ‘another’ history and present of documentary filmmaking, and its many experiments that has for so long been neglected within an international arena of film history, and theory as well. But, I also came to this research with a set of political questions. Most importantly, the energy that I drew from my research and



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta. Character Saadat Hasan Manto.

<sup>3</sup> Rajadhyaksha, Ashish & Paul Willemen 1999. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. London: BFI.

from the continuous exchange with filmmakers was that this open set of questions overlapped, complemented with and was fruitfully challenged by the kinds of questions that were at stake for the filmmakers themselves.

Those queries start with a continuous search and interrogation of how it is possible to intervene into the minor and larger precarious constellations that make the world we live in. How can singular films interfere? How is the choice for a particular narrative and a way of making space for subjects a form of activism? How does it disrupt the realities we inhabit? How can their proposals of other forms of realness be understood and how do they disperse? The inquiries continue with many of the issues that I see 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO dealing with, especially by its intricate manner of linking big questions with the small every day and by showing how intertwined many of the issues are that it attempts to tackle.

7 ISLANDS AND A METRO is a love declaration to the city Bom Bahia, Bombay or Mumbai, as it has been named by different 'rulers'. Love as in being able to be honest, to treasure the beauties and to also point one's finger at the wounds that have been created, the dark corners, that which went wrong. The film interrogates the histories that make the contemporary of Bombay. It shows the impossibility to sketch a linear history but unfolds the richness and the amalgamated of Bombay stemming from its myriad migrant communities that have entered the city and made it their home at various points in time. Not only the abundance of community cemeteries, from the Christian and Japanese to the Italian and Jewish immigrants, but the fighting over space for bodies, dead or living, is provocative. The many desires and struggles for belonging, and surviving, that make the texture of the urban every-day, are set next to the richness of how Bombay *looks*, thus the variety of its visual culture but also how supremacist ideologies of Hindu cultural nationalism and neo-liberalism have an increasing stronghold on this multiplicity and seek



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta. Character Ismat Chughtai.

to conform and contain it.

This is clear from the beauty and aggressiveness of dozens of lorries trespassing the city and indicating more Singapore-like high-rise buildings to be substituted for sprawling slums that take away valuable city space. It is also apparent through the inhabitants of a modern housing complex who define themselves as the “normal person, which is a vegetarian”, explaining why it is justified to create vegetarian only neighbourhoods and how it is impossible for them to live with the smell and the presence of the Other. The multiple justifications of one’s own belonging and the multiple histories of Bombay that are hereby narrated stand next to the wounds of the city. Madhusree Dutta cites her own film *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA* (1993)<sup>4</sup> that she made during the immediate aftermaths of the Bombay communal riots in the winter of 1992/93. Thus, she addresses an event that haunts the city and that inevitably stands in relation to the communal carnage that took place in Gujarat in 2002 (to which I will attend in my conclusion). She also negotiates how “racial and communal violence of the practical kind – as in riots – is today a reality show material” and how for her film she “work[ed] on building a metaphor to cope with it [organised racial hatred, N.W.]”. Madhusree wrote that she wanted to end the film with a return to hope. The final sequence is thus a metaphorical pilgrimage of Muslim women in burqa, “the lowest in today’s social ladder”, who come out to “save the city, the human kind”.<sup>5</sup>

My own questions, which are also shaped by my own backgrounds, geographically and academically, are very close to the reflections I have sketched out through Madhusree Dutta's work and they are negotiated in different ways through the films as well as the conversations that are central to the following chapters.

I will thus speak about inheritance and tackle the practices and the implications of



Source: *7 ISLANDS AND A METRO*, by Madhusree Dutta.

<sup>4</sup> *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA*, D: Madhusree Dutta, 46 min, Video, colour, India 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Madhusree Dutta, email 29<sup>th</sup> July 2007.

choosing what we inherit. Hereby inheritance can range from a singular film style, a film history, or aesthetic traditions that belong to ones wider context. It can include forms of activism and particular social movements as well as violent political events and a history of prejudice and communal or racial hatred. All of this will be related to questions of Belonging with the idea and the wish to think through forms and possibilities of grounding that are relational and inclusive rather than rooted, fixed and exclusive. Thus, a lot of talking, filmmaking and writing attended to what it means to listen to the Other, thus to be answerable. When and how does it occur and what are the mechanics that prevent us from listening to how others speak? Closely linked is thus the question of visibilities and invisibilities, of telling and remaining silent, and how invisibilities and silences may be choices. These are all large looming and ambitious questions and this project does surely not give conclusive answers to them. Those considerations however form the discursive frame within which my research and the working with the different kinds of material occurred, they constitute the horizon towards which films were and are made.

Thus, while at the initial stages of my research there also seemed to be a need to catch up with writing the many unnoticed histories of non-fiction filmmaking, what intrigued me much more were those continuous encounters with filmmakers which engaged me in the above questions. I saw their reflections resonating with my own interest in the different kinds of experimentations with documentary film forms and their linkages to the notion of the political and activist endeavours. Although currently too easily employed a notion, I want to use activism broadly as a pushing of 'the limits of the possible'. Perceived and expressed in a range of different ways at different times of the project, by myself and the makers, this desire for a pushing, a dissent or an intervening in how the contemporary is thought to be possible is indeed the main intellectual and political drive of this project. This then is my *subject*.



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta.

## Contexts to expand meaning

I want to briefly refer to the visual culture context within which the films I attend to get made. This is not only for embedding those within intertextualities but to strengthen the point of their politics. What I am briefly sketching is also the realm from which I came into this research. Namely, via an interest and a fascination with a history and complexity of visualities and ways of seeing which seemed to offer an alternative to single perspectives on images as representations of a world 'out there' that the onlooker regards from a distance.

The basic premise of this project is to perceive visual culture contexts as places of knowledge production rather than understanding the visual as representation of something else. From this standpoint stems a curiosity for the stories and histories developed from the side of the visual as well as an interest in how those are constituted. Diana Eck's study *Darsan, Seeing the Divine image*<sup>6</sup> has by now become a classic when referring to the specificity, which 'ways of seeing' in the South Asian context can entail. Derived from Hindu ritual practices but reaching far beyond the religious realm into, for instance, audience relations to cinema screenings or practices with calendar art and chromolithography prints, an acknowledgement of the centrality of visuality within the South Asian popular culture realm has been stated numerous times. The danger is hereby the creation of what Christopher Pinney has called "anthropological enclaves of *darsan*-related practices"<sup>7</sup>, which makes detailed attention to the multiplicity of contemporary practices and their translocalities, even more important. Nevertheless, the attention to particular kinds of practices and philosophies of the visual, which include tactility and a sense of interaction that is, also, implied in *Darsan* as a 'seeing and being seen', has led Christopher Pinney, in reference to his own research on a variety of image practices, to talk about "corporetics"<sup>8</sup>. A visual culture context which is characterised by practices of 'corporetics', rather than aesthetics, thus includes the sensorial and the corporeal and consequently different ways of *knowing by seeing*. This understanding, that one can be touched by images and how one's own touching and haptic relation to an image is part of the act of seeing, relating to and understanding an image, is within western scholarship

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<sup>6</sup> Eck, Diana 1998 (1981, 1st ed.). *Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Pinney, Christopher 2002. "The Indian work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Or, what happens when peasants 'get hold' of Images". In: Ginsburg, Faye D., Abu-Lughod, Lila & Larkin, Brian (Eds.), *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

thought through from phenomenological realms as well as for instance Deleuzian film scholars, such as Laura Marks.<sup>9</sup> Those overlaps and alliances are what Chris Pinney describes as the “confluence of overlapping regimes”<sup>10</sup>, which are also crucial for this project. But, further from an attention to the visual as a particular realm for knowledge production, the visual becomes a site for multiple negotiations and ideological battles. By discussing selected examples of the history of the printed image in India, Chris Pinney “tr[ies] to make the case for visual culture as key arena for the thinking out of politics and religion in modern India.”<sup>11</sup> Pinney stresses hereby that there is a long history of this ‘key arena’ that shapes Hindu cultural nationalism, while attending to medium and to period specific ways of how religion is rendered political in the making, distribution and perception of images.

This area of study is extended, surely for the background of my project, by scholarly work investigating the relation between image and politics within an era of mass media. Arvind Rajagopal has to be named here for his arguments concerning the central role of mass media for contemporary politics and in particular its changes after the screening of the televised serial version of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* (on the state channel *Doordharshan*), deploying Lord Ram as a symbol of Hindu nationalism.<sup>12</sup> Though Pinney has critiqued Rajagopal’s argument of a complete rupture in the relation between image making and ideologies through the onset of television, Rajagopal’s was one of the first studies



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta.

<sup>9</sup> Marks, Laura 2002. *Touch. Sensuous Theory and multisensory media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Marks, Laura 2000b. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Ginsburg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod & Brian Larkin (Eds.) 2002. “Introduction”. In: *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Pinney, Christopher 2004. ‘Photos of the Gods’. *The printed image and political struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books. P. 8. See also: Pinney, Chris 2000. “The Image in Indian Culture”. In: *The Oxford Companion Encyclopedia of Sociology and Social Anthropology*. Das, Veena (ed.) Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pinney, Chris 1997. *Camera Indica. The social Life of Indian Photographs*. London: Reaktion Books.

<sup>12</sup> Rajagopal, Arvind 2001. *Politics after Television. Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

attending in detail to the visual political arena at the beginning of the so-called 'Visual Revolution', the liberalisation of the Indian market and thus the proliferation of TV channels, but most importantly the working together of a traditionalist religious and neo-liberal politics. Purnima Mankekar has added to this discussion through her important research on female television spectatorship.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a number of studies have particularly emphasised the construction of Indian national identity and specifically the becoming dominant of Hindu cultural nationalism within the realms of visual culture.<sup>14</sup>

Through the journal *Public Culture* and further publications Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have added to discussions on the 'inter-ocular field' between film, photography, advertising, popular culture, chromolithographs, urban and rural visual culture in India.<sup>15</sup> Film scholarly work on Hindi cinema also stresses the intertextuality of cinema and other forms of popular culture and the complex interplay between cinematic constructions of the contemporary and the lived-in reality.<sup>16</sup> This conglomeration of a centrality of vision and visibility, the politics of popular culture and the interrelations between politics, religion and media is thus part of a context within which independent documentary filmmakers are producing their images. It is those mentioned studies as well as my own ethnographic experience and the myriad references by filmmakers to their own understanding of how their visual culture context is increasingly dominated by an interplay



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta. Citing Dutta's film I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA

<sup>13</sup> Mankekar, Purnima 2000. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics. Television, Womanhood and Nation in Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> See also Mankekar 2000. Rajagopal 2001. Pinney, Chris & Dwyer, Rachel (eds.) 2000. *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Ohm, Britta (forthcoming) *The Televised Community. Culture, Politics and Market of Visual Representation in India*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

<sup>15</sup> Appadurai, Arjun 1997. *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Breckenridge, Carol A. (Ed) 1995. *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Dwyer, Rachel 2006. *Filming the gods: religion and Hindi cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.

between neo-liberal market oriented ideologies paired with Hindu-culturalist definitions of what India and Indianness signifies and thus how it should look like. Far from wanting to define the film works discussed here as mere products deriving from this visual cultural context, it is crucial that supremacist interventions are tied to visibilities and invisibilities. They thus impact on documentary filmmaking in various ways. They make, as I said, the larger horizon in respect of which politically motivated films are produced. They interfere in small editing decisions or in larger choices of content and language. They also intervene very concretely through measures of censorship as I will explain further on.

Part of the visual culture context is of course the different kinds of cinematic practices in the immediate as well as a wider international context. On the scholarly side, documentary filmmaking in India fell outside the growing interest (during the 90s) in Indian mainstream cinema which is massively produced in various local film industries, Bombay Hindi cinema probably being the most widely known.<sup>17</sup> I have learned much from those studies as well and the most basic argument and approach I take from the lost prolific works amongst those, namely the critique of the notion of belatedness which was attached to Indian cinema when looked at from the assumed centre of a Euro-American oriented film history and theory. Thus a writing of film histories and a theorising from film narratives and aesthetics which replicates historicism and the violence enacted through translation that universalizes.<sup>18</sup> Madhav Prasad has most eloquently critiqued the naturalisation of a relation between western modernism and the birth and development of cinema, a starting point which then determines how everything other than Hollywood gets theorised as stylistic forms which “haven’t arrived yet”.<sup>19</sup> I argue that this also holds true for many of the writings on non-fiction film where productions outside the Euro-American context were either neglected or looked at for their content rather than their specific form and contextual if not transnational histories. Developmentalist assumptions about documentary films from ‘the South’ filling knowledge gaps of ‘the North’ without much appreciation of the actual film works, or a serious engagement with artistic formal explorations and contextual histories. A Eurocentric approach that regards everything ‘other’ as material yet to be theorised, a

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<sup>17</sup> To mention just a few publications: Prasad, Madhava 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi film. A historical construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Vasudevan, Ravi 2000. *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, Oxford. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>18</sup> See also: Kapur, Geeta 2000. *When was modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Tulika Press.

<sup>19</sup> Prasad 1998: 1ff.

predetermined relation between the so-called knower and the known which also resonates with observations like Godard's, where 'poetry is for Israel and documentary for Palestine'<sup>20</sup>, has had an impact on scholarship as well as receptions of films at film festivals. In a conversation I had with Amar Kanwar in February 2002, he criticized the reception of his films at the International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen (Germany) on content only, rather than audiences addressing films on formal levels as they would in relation to European documentary mode films. Amar Kanwar's presence within the international art context is an indication of changed perceptions and, in full appreciation of the scope of his work, there is much to be said about the current marketing of 'Indian film or video art'.<sup>21</sup> A reception of Indian documentary film within a developmental paradigm was also enhanced by the fact that throughout the 90ies documentary film making in India was mainly supported through national or international development agencies or funds. This impacted on filmmaking conditions which I will expand on in chapter 1 and 2, while the critique of historicism, particularly in relation to the scholarly Subaltern Studies group, will be addressed in chapter 3.

The visual culture context of the films and filmmakers is thus a loaded one and it could be argued that independent documentary film stands in a shadow position next to other images which shape the public sphere to a much more visible extent. However, on the one hand, non-fiction filmmaking is not only increasing continuously but also the efforts of filmmakers to create new public spheres through the distribution and showing of their works (see Concluding Remarks). *7 ISLANDS AND A METRO* for instance had a cinematic release in Bombay and Calcutta, though those occasions are rare. On the other hand, my project works along questions of whether and how a minority cultural practice or practices from the so-called margins can intervene in the mainstream or the dominant without or in fact through not aiming to be precisely that, i.e. part of the mainstream. While filmmakers themselves have no illusions as to the impact of their work, their politics lies exactly in continuing to increase marginal or niche spaces through their networks of

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Rancière, Jacques 2007. "Art of the possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière". in: *Artforum* January 07, p. 259.

<sup>21</sup> *A season outside*, Amar Kanwar's film from 1998 was chosen by the *Documenta XI* team and a new project was commissioned that he had then already embarked on (*Nights of Prophecy*). His work is now shown internationally, he received several prizes, residencies and has solo art shows (for example at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London 2002, the Renaissance Society in Chicago 2003 and at Peter Blum gallery in New York in 2004). For the many art events that also feature documentary works from India see for instance: *body.city* at House of the World Cultures in Berlin (2003), *Subcontingent* in Turin (2006), *Bombay. Maximum City* in Lille (2006).

debating, making and showing work, but also through the very form of their languages. I do not argue that each decision is guided through that larger political and visual culture realm, but I do argue that there is an increasing awareness of shrinking spaces for artistic and political expressions and consequently a need to work against those tendencies. The task of a project like mine, in relation to the above studies, is thus to probe how independent documentary film takes part in the described inter-ocular fields. Hereby I am approaching their images as makers of history from another side, from the political quest for intervention. During the initial stages of my research, this potential was viewed as particularly critical by many documentary filmmakers as well. In order to understand this scepticism further, anchors of their visual culture context need to be laid out.

### **Quests for New Languages**

What became apparent during my early research phase, when I was trying to come to an initial understanding of 'the documentary film scene in India', were the gaps in how the relation between form and reality was thought about. At times this seemed a generational divide, but this was certainly not the always case and even less a sufficient explanation. There were responses to my questions about filmmaker's perception towards their working context, such as: "In India we don't have time for form, there are too many issues to be dealt with".<sup>22</sup> Thus a kind of self-censorship and a limiting of one's own creativity in accordance with a divide between poetics and documentary (that I will speak of more). Statements like this one stood next to filmmakers expressing an immense need to think through the forms of politics and thus image making.

*"At this moment, I am not so sure about the documentary film movement in India. I really think we need a new language" (Ranjani Mazumdar, Nov. 1999)<sup>23</sup>*

This expression of a perceived stagnation concerning non-fiction film language, at times articulated with a sense of fatigue or complaint, was shared by many others. While I was most often received very hospitably and with an immense openness to showing me work

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<sup>22</sup> I have heard this literally but use this here rather as a phrasing of a position that I encountered in various ways and from different filmmakers. Further, I do not want to attach a name to this statement, as without further explanation this would corner the respective speaker.

<sup>23</sup> Ranjini Mazumdar is a member of the women's media collective *Mediastorm* on which I will expand below. She is a filmmaker and scholar on cinema. See: Mazumdar, Ranjini 2007. *Cinema: An Archive Of The City*. New Delhi: Permanent. Black.

and talking about different levels of their making, there was also an initial skepticism and self-criticism because 'nothing interesting was happening here', and that I would thus be better off doing that kind of research somewhere else. However, through the films I saw and at times maybe even more through the intensity and urgency of conversations I had, and indeed an energy that stood behind statements like the above, I did get a strong sense of 'newness arising', new and different practices and images being welcomed, looked for, tried out and vibrantly discussed.<sup>24</sup> By now this is nothing new; many films, fiction and non-fiction, works related to the documentary realm and now entering the art world as well as artists taking up video practice and forms of documenting are blossoming and can be seen internationally. What I want to emphasise in the following is however this particular point of emergence.<sup>25</sup> My project is thus interested in precisely this phase of transformation. A phase that I see as exemplary and which occurs again and again throughout histories of film and art production and which in hindsight is often named as a *turn*. Without naming it yet, though there can be power in naming I believe, I want to make fruitful the energy from what I see as a space of conjunction. An energy thus, that arises from a contingency of various histories, particular presents and the multiple visions being created at specific points. Hence, I will pay particular attention to examples and changes within the Indian documentary context that occurred throughout the 90ies, but will also trace back their lineages and thus place that time of emergence into a wider perspective. Also, films continue to emerge and some of their potential indeed arises from the formal quality of something surfacing and continuing to be incomplete.

That my project is very much anchored in the notion of transformation is of course due to the aforementioned changes in the overall media and political scene in India throughout the 90ies and continuing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ironically, my focus was further supported through the extremely disturbing and horrific communal carnage that occurred in Gujarat (February to May 2002) during the main part of my research. The different chapters of this project are organised such that they give insights into the various histories and consequently discourses that led to what Ranjani Mazumdar expressed as a 'need for a new language. This structure will guide me, and hopefully also the reader, to my

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<sup>24</sup> See: Morley, David & Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds) 1996. *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*. 1996. London: Routledge. In there Part III: New Times, Transformation and transgressions, the meaning of New Times.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Marks 2000b: XiV. Marks refers here to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their notion of 'newness arising' and a 'new generation coming into being'.

concluding remarks: 'Inconvenient witnessing – productive silences'. I will argue there that a zooming in attentively or a heightened condensation of Ranjani Mazumdar's statement occurred in 2002 when the large scale violence spread in Gujarat. From this point onwards many of the conversations I had with filmmakers and artists revolved around these events and the possibilities of reacting through audio-visual media, through filmmaking or other artistic practices. I will come to explain how the discursive framework that I develop throughout is crucial to think through the particular rupture that characterised the immediate aftermaths of 'Gujarat'.<sup>26</sup>

What I understood from the 'urge for a new language' was thus a need for a constructive engagement in the heterogeneous character of a potent visual culture context with the aim of intervening in a "distribution of the sensible", which "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community"<sup>27</sup> through "the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility"<sup>28</sup>. Thus that the need for other "bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible"<sup>29</sup> in and through filmmaking spoke for a much larger desire to think the contemporary and the political that shapes it otherwise, to imagine oneself, one's sense of belonging and one's participation in a society other than what was hitherto given as choices by governmental politics as well as oppositional social movements.

### **Early Encounters**

I thus met women conceptualising, writing proposals, producing, shooting, editing and distributing non-fiction films and I tried to follow these different steps of the making they are involved in. These women lived for the most part in the urban centers of India, mainly in Delhi, Bombay, a few in Bangalore, Pune or Madras, some between Delhi and London, Bombay and New York or Bangalore and Berlin. While I was initially interested in the generation that started filmmaking or video practicing throughout the 90ies, it soon

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<sup>26</sup> I write about this in more detail in the last section of this thesis: 'Inconvenient witnessing – productive silences. Concluding remarks'. In 2002 I spent 6 months (January to June) for research mostly in Bombay and Delhi, with brief visits in Bangalore, Pune and Madras. See also Methods.

<sup>27</sup> Rancière, Jacques 2004a. *The politics of aesthetics. The distribution of the sensible*. London & New York: Continuum, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 19.

appeared more fruitful to link this to what emerged a decade or two earlier. This often makes for very different backgrounds and experiences as to their filmmaking training in institutions, through assistance jobs with more established filmmakers or as members of particular social movements or NGOs. Nevertheless, the filmmakers share experiences or overlap in certain contexts and networks and through specific discourses. They sometimes shared editing studios, worked with similar camerapersons, met at similar national as well international festivals. They post and discuss common email lists, apply to similar funding bodies or together organise campaigns against censorship. They may have similar repertoires as to a history of documentary films in India. Thus, they all have a sense of a 'documentary film scene in India'. Yet, they will have different reference points as regards the films or makers they deem as most influential for their own work, they may see themselves very differently related to what this open group of a 'documentary scene in India' is, they may relate to fictional film histories, international contexts, art contexts and other audio-visual works. They also had very different views on particular campaigns and ways of organising movements related to filmmaking. They have similar and often disparate working and living situations, locations or routines. They often aspire to very different kinds of filmmaking and thus contribute very different aspects to that space of condensed conjunction, this extended moment of emergence that I want to describe.

As stated above I was curious about the relation between a rapidly changing Indian media scene and independent non-fiction film or video practice by women. However, neither did I stick rigorously to a definition of non-fiction or documentary films, nor will I refuse to make references to male filmmakers. I have expanded my gaze to works which I perceive as taking a very interesting formal relation to the *real* and to forms of documenting. And the work of and the many conversation with male filmmakers have of course influenced my writing. They are obviously in constant dialogue with some of the main women filmmakers in my project, working in collaboration or living with them. My initial choice to focus on women filmmakers provoked very interesting discussions. It was met with antagonism by some and welcomed as necessary by others, and I will refer to those reactions, their backgrounds and implications further throughout my text. By way of introducing my interest, I made clear that I did not embark on defining a category of women filmmakers in India, thus did not start from a pre-given linkage that I assumed between them. The initial impulse was precisely the wish to search for a variety of practices and images and their

ways of engaging or not engaging in feminist politics or women's movements respectively. I have also struggled over this decision. I struggled most when I shifted towards either a larger framework or intricate details of film form, where I either lost sight of gendered aspects or where the challenge was to search more clearly for the kind of feminist politics at stake. Through these struggles, I have learned to see even more the importance of self evidently describing practices as centre stage and thus shifting how or what is described as the margins. This then enabled me to attend to the particular, the particularities of images and of feminist politics and theory in filmmaking and in writing. And it ultimately became another similarity, a search and a questioning that I shared with the filmmakers.

I propose that the films and their makers who I engage with in my writing are exemplary. They represent an eclectic choice that I made for specific reasons. I believe they share their bringing of new assets into the different cultures of filmmaking engaged in the documentary mode. They all set precedence for a practice, an image or a way of telling that they themselves might have missed in the contexts they grew up working in. I argue that all of the works are conscious plays with form, that no documentary aesthetic is self evident or naturally arising from the materials of lived-in (empirical) realities but develops from particular engagements with the many possible relations between image making and the *real*. They engage in story telling as much as in actuality and factuality, reflect on notions of documentation and approach the documentary as a space of experimentation. They propose, in very different manners, alternatives regarding the politics of form and of practice and they thus partake in understandings of the political, of movement and Movements, of change, of perceptions of the self and the public sphere and of how to create a context of a civic society to imagine oneself within. Their offered paths of how to think transformation are thus closely linked to possible forms of citizenship and participation. The filmmakers, their practices and their audio-visual works are therefore performative as in their making present and future imaginaries.

The concrete 'how' of these imaginaries is what I want to look at more closely. By relating to very different kinds of films that might otherwise not necessarily be aligned, I want to avoid starting from fixed perceptions of genres of experimental film, documentary or video art. Similarly, while I will be relating to realism as an aesthetic category, my starting point is not a particular perception of or a singular theoretical rootedness concerning the notion of

the *real*. The political-intellectual drive of this project, as in seeking possible political effects of film and video work through a focus on what I call new ‘possibles of the real’, does however lead me to treat the real not as being in opposition to the unconscious or imaginary. The journey is thus much more an interest in the effect of realness that “spaces itself out into the world”, where “it informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning in them its risk becomes realized.”<sup>30</sup>

There have been several early encounters with filmmakers which have already indicated, the kinds of sites within and with which they negotiate their own practice. Many of them have not been included within the chapters but they are a necessary backbone to what follows. I would thus like to sketch two of those meetings which have so to say paved the way.

In November 1996, I met Vasudha Joshi, a filmmaker based in Calcutta. I was at that time not ‘on research’ but working with NGOs in Northern India, but in hindsight I see this meeting as a very important cue that initiated this project and which over the course of a few years brought me back to looking at it through the framework of a PhD. I was at the time working as an intern for Vasudha Joshi’s sister, Anuradha Gupta, who had, together with her partner Pawan K. Gupta, founded the non governmental organization *SIDH* (Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas) in Moussourie, Landour (Uttar Pradesh). Vasudha Joshi was preparing her film *FOR MAYA* (1997).<sup>31</sup> Along with seven other documentaries, *FOR MAYA* was commissioned by the *FUR*<sup>32</sup> to be screened in 1997. Titled *India’s Quest* these films constituted “[a] series of documentaries and discussion videos on issues that India confronts as it celebrates 50 years of Independence” (from video credits). They were the pilot project of PSBT (Public Service Broadcasting Trust, see also chapter 2), were screened on Doordarshan, the state national TV channel and distributed as a film package nationally and internationally. Vasudha

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<sup>30</sup> Glissant, Édouard 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> *FOR MAYA*, D: Vasudha Joshi, 38 min, Video, colour, India 1997.

<sup>32</sup> *FUR* (Foundation for Universal Responsibility of his Holiness the Dalai Lama) in associations with PSBT (Public Service Broadcasting Trust). The commissioning editor was Rajiv Mehrotra and the film series was financially supported by the Ford Foundation. See also: Raqs Media Collective (eds). 2000. *Double Take. Looking at the Documentary*. New Delhi: *FUR* and PSBT. PSBT developed from an initiative of the *Forum for Independent Film and Video (FIFI)*, a loose network of documentary filmmakers which shut down around 1997. See also chapter 2.

Joshi's brief was to produce a film on 'gender'<sup>33</sup>, other areas were pluralism, non-violence, spiritual heritage, sustainable development, education and democracy & governance. Each filmmaker or filmmaker team was working in consultation with a scholar working in the respective field. Vasudha Joshi, as I initially learnt from her sister, was partly trained in Britain and her film VOICES FROM BALIAPAL (1988)<sup>34</sup> had won several prizes and was (nationally and internationally) perceived as a very crucial and courageous document of a community's resistance against the government's decision to locate a missile testing range in Baliapal. Her response to the PSBT call was to take an essayistic autobiographical approach. At the time, this was still a more rare style to choose than it would seem now and to me FOR MAYA remains an example of the films that are somewhat ahead of their time. Through glimpses into her grandmother's, her mother's, her sister's, her own and finally her 5-year old daughter Maya's life, she reflected on the changes between these generations of women. Their life stories are merely hinted at, a grid of relations emerges very subtly next to family constellations, unrealised lives and untold stories. The self-reflective look into the family and yet the opening out to wider conditions, structures and moralities which impact women's lives, the faint signals of inheritances next to the choices through changing contexts are expressed in very visceral ways. The melancholy when entering a closed up family house continues and transforms with the clarity and straightforwardness of a five-year old girl. In its tone, its non-moralistic and clear gender politics, FOR MAYA thus left an impression of a singular feminist politics that I then wanted to follow up when I embarked on my research.

Discussing her script ideas with her sister brought Vasudha Joshi to Landour, where I met her. The possibilities and challenges in combining her personal approach with a commissioning body and framed within the rhetoric of a nation-state celebrating its 50 years of Independence was what stuck in my mind as the core of her considerations. Next to her film, our short meeting thus introduced a set of entanglements between a postcolonial nation-state reflecting on its past and moving towards the future, funding bodies for documentary film with particular agendas, working structures and schedules, visionary individuals next to a state bureaucracy, individual filmmakers with a strong commitment to film as much as a drive for intervention and the thinking through possible

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<sup>33</sup> Dr. Tanika Sarkar, a feminist historian was thus supervising *For Maya*. See Raqs (2000) and PSBT on [www.psb.org](http://www.psb.org).

<sup>34</sup> VOICES FROM BALIAPAL, D: Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit, 40 min, 16mm, India 1988.

different formats to approach an *issue*, reach an audience, develop a politics. The challenging parameters of feminism and film as well as the nation and the filmmaker as citizen were apparent.

Now I wonder what a similar series on the occasion of 60 years of Independence would look like? Interestingly, from the documentary side there has now been a strong focus on the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. Though already present before, the filmic and otherwise interrogation of the history that created two different nation-states that very much see each other as Other, has increased after 'Gujarat'. Sameera Jain had already addressed the choices that some people made at the time of partition, for or against their homes, in her two part film *PORTRAITS OF BELONGING* (1998)<sup>35</sup>. I saw both films in October 1999, when I visited the *Film South-Asia Festival* in Kathmandu<sup>36</sup>. This bi-annual festival in Nepal was then very crucial because it was a relatively neutral location for filmmakers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to meet, see and discuss each other's films; everybody stressed the importance of that factor and even though other realms for exchange are opening up the festival retains its pivotal role. Sameera Jain's *PORTRAITS OF BELONGING* struck me as a very subtle but no less strong example of an intervention into marginalising and stereotyping presentations of the Muslim community in India.<sup>37</sup>

„We met so many who chose to stay, continuing to belong, navigating impossible terrains, shifting courses to survive with grace.“ (Sameera Jain, voice over)

Both films thus portrait people who chose to stay although their religious background



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta.

<sup>35</sup> *PORTRAITS OF BELONGING: BHAI MIAN*, D: Sameera Jain, 30 min, Betacam, colour, India 1998. 30 Min. *PORTRAITS OF BELONGING: SAGIRA BAGHUM*, D: Sameera Jain, 30 min, Betacam, colour, India 1998.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.himalassociation.org/fsa/>

<sup>37</sup> See my article: "Portraits of Belonging" - Eindrücke zu Repräsentationsspielräumen und Diskursen von unabhängigen Dokumentarfilmemacherinnen in Indien'. *Frauen und Film* 2002, Frankfurt/ Main. p 99-114.

marginalised them in their home place. Sameera Jain includes how Bhai Mian, the Muslim kite maker who is in the focus of one of her short films, talks with his Ustadji about times when Hindus and Muslim would go to each other's wedding, she also includes references to urban masters' plans in the 60s which had considerable impact on the remaining living spaces for the Muslim community living Shah Jahanabad (Old Delhi). Sameera Jain's films appear gentle and yet they make definite choices in portraying their two main characters, their families and livelihoods, in all their complexity. Religious belief is part of their lives as much as their work, families and friends. Attaining a cinematic space which does not shy away from the responsibility of looking at and listening to the cause of the Other while not framing him or her within a narrative of victimhood became something that I regarded as a matter of concern along with many filmmakers. It related on the one hand, to the political atmosphere of a Hindu cultural nationalism and on the other hand, when talking to Sameera Jain about her choices while making the film, to her reflections when moving in and out of Shah Jahanabad while researching and shooting, evoking questions concerning the belonging of the filmmaker subject as well as the complex politics of representation. Additionally, the compromises she had to make to Doordharshan, the governmental channel, and her clear decision not to embark on another project with a governmental institution although funding spaces were at that time still extremely scarce, showed the different levels of political choices that had to be made at each point in the production of a film. Many of those will be addressed throughout the following chapters.

Following my method of research, for which I pursued a selected number of filmmakers and their projects more in depth while simultaneously attempting to pay attention to their various contexts, I chose to organise this text in three main chapters which are centered around portraits. While many thematic threads link the diverse practices of filmmakers, their singular approaches seemed most accessible when not taken apart and dispersed along thematic chapters and subchapters. The form of portraits was thus for me a clear choice for placing 'my material' in the foreground and an attempt to work from there.

Thus chapter 1 takes Paromita Vohra's UNLIMITED GIRLS (2003) as its main focus and proposes a particular history of non-fiction film that toys with fiction as well as with understandings of feminism or real feminism. The figure of the real is the conceptual anchor here. Chapter 2 starts with Surabhi Sharma's JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND

OTHER STORIES and through this film I write another history of documentary filmmaking in India, linked to what mostly is referred to as *the* history of the independent documentary in India but also moving from there. The notion of the political, in its various definitions and productions is central here. These two chapters are linked and supplemented through *Intermediate notes on emancipation*, a portrait that is brief in the textual space it takes, but comments and adds on to many aspects discussed in chapter 1 and 2. Both notions, the real and the political, are taken up again and expanded in specific ways by looking at Sherna Dastur's MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER. Additionally, the audience question is looked at more closely. Chapter 3 comprises two portraits and three films. It starts from Soudhamini's IT RESTED and discussions of 'looking at the other' and moves to aspects of translation via her film PITRU CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS on to Pooja Kaul's RASIKAN RÉ. History and inheritance comes back as subjects of chapter 3 and will closely be linked to conceptual questions of belonging, grounding and what it means to *listen* to the Other. My concluding remarks take the violence in Gujarat as a central figure and interrogate how previous discourses get sharpened during this catalyst and by thinking with it. Here I want to refer to several filmmakers, film works as well as projects of alignment and the construction of a filmmaker community. I understand the events in Gujarat as a point of caesura as well as an instance which provoked an opening out to yet other filmmaking practices and questions towards the relation between film, the real and the political.



Source: 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, by Madhusree Dutta. Final sequence.

## Methods

### Conversations as Theory

In the following I am going to argue for conversations as theory, being in conversation with theory and the ethnography of film's diverse practices.

My research and writing has been characterised by my search, almost an obsession at times, to bring together the various kinds of materials that I gathered and met when doing ethnographic research on documentary filmmaker's practices, in egalitarian ways.

Rancière writes that:

"Equality is actually the condition required for being able to think politics. However, equality is not, to begin with, political in itself."<sup>38</sup>

I think it is this endeavour and what Rancière calls an "anarchist theoretical position" that opposes a "position of mastery"<sup>39</sup> that I was interested in throughout. I did not want to work with my 'material' "in terms of surface and substratum"<sup>40</sup> but clearly start from a position of "emancipation [as] the process of verification of the equality of intelligence" which is " (...) the equality of intelligences in all its manifestations".<sup>41</sup>

My thinking in those terms came from my material, namely the many conversations I had with filmmakers. It also came from my background in anthropology and following a self-reflexive stance in anthropology which recognises the constant overlap of theory and method, thus how the 'what' and the 'how' of knowing the world is closely intertwined<sup>42</sup> or, the thinking about how we, as anthropologists, produce knowledge from 'having been there.'

*"Write something critical," he said. "Yes," I responded, "I will try."*

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<sup>38</sup> Rancière 2004a: 52.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid: "I always try to think in terms of horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities, not in terms of surface and substratum. Where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 25: "The equality of intelligences is not the equality of all manifestations of intelligence. It is the equality of intelligence in all its manifestations."

<sup>42</sup> See Moore, Henrietta L. & Sanders, Todd (Eds) 2006. "Anthropology and Epistemology". in: *Anthropology in Theory. Issues in Epistemology*. London: Blackwell, p. 1ff.

During a very early stage of my research a filmmaker told me this after I spoke to him about what I was interested in.<sup>43</sup> His encouraging but also demanding response remained on my mind and the further I went along my initial worried reaction as to how I could acquire sufficient knowledge to be adequately 'critical' changed into questions:

Critical of what or of whom? Or should it rather be critical to someone or something? How is criticality<sup>44</sup> really exercised? And how thus possibly reaching outside a 'merely scholarly' realm? Could finding spaces of criticality ultimately be my subject, "our" subject? His casual remark correlated with my own reflections on what my contribution could possibly be when writing *on* 'documentary filmmaking in India'. For whom was I researching and writing? To whom could the questions I raised be critical as in being relevant? How could it be more than merely filling a knowledge gap 'in the West' on the prolific and diverse film production by 'women documentary filmmakers in India'? Or would this merely remain a noble dream to console myself for the many hours people offered when talking to me or for the realization that going elsewhere wasn't tackling the violent and supremacist histories and presents of what was mainly my living context?

My search for criticality was influenced and supported by what I have earlier called a *twinkling eye* in relation to how Madhusree Dutta introduced me to friends of hers. I encountered that twinkling eye in various disguises. In a looking over my shoulder into my note book with a humorous comment of 'I am a bit scared of that book', allowing me to take a photograph in an editing room by jokingly adding 'only if you write something positive about us', also in very definite comments about whom I mustn't miss out to include in my study and later in more or less hesitant emails regarding the development of my PhD and when one could finally read something. These comments stand next to casual phone calls when chatting about the state of each others research projects, comparing the state of being overwhelmed by having to sort through too much material (rushes, conversations, notes etc.), also discussing choices towards free lance work or being employed, including

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<sup>43</sup> This statement was surely not meant in gendered terms, i.e. not as a proposal made by a male filmmaker to write 'something critical' about women filmmakers, but rather directed towards documentary filmmaking in India generally.

<sup>44</sup> Irit Rogoff has discussed the shift from critique to criticality in recent presentations and publications. Criticality means implicating oneself in the critical stance, rather than exercising it from the vantage point of knowledge production: "It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to criticality – from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to operating from an uncertain ground which while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames." See Rogoff, Irit 2003. "From Criticism to Critique to Criticality", <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>, last retrieved Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

quick social lunches and dinners in a busy working routine, discussing advantages and disadvantages of living alone or other fabrics of contemporary urban living and working situations that often take place through moving between cities and continents. Thus, my research happened with a constant shifting between being colleagues, the relation of curator and filmmaker, being friends, neighbours and, also a researcher talking with 'her subjects'. These 'subjects' were extremely aware of the kind of research I was doing and were, though in different individual ways, conscious of the casual conversations which I recorded, or of film team meetings where I was shifting between being a rather quiet observer taking notes and a participant in making comments because I was asked to or felt I had a valuable opinion. The same filmmakers at times asked me to not record certain parts of our conversations and commented on how bizarre it was for them to not be the one asking the questions but being the interlocutor on the other side of the mike and thus not having complete control over the outcome. Hence, most of my research interviews were *conversations between cultural producers*.

All this was not very surprising and might not be so for the reader. However, the degree of parallels in our working practices and therefore the similarities pertaining to the various reflections and decisions having to be made and thus related to the politics of how to produce a film or a text were extremely striking. Through a constant mirroring effect (as in similar and yet different), my seemingly constant and immediate implication in what I was researching, I became haunted by thinking through the implications this might have on my particular knowledge production through these encounters. What was supposed to be subject and object of research interviews became conversations between cultural producers engaged in researching, questioning, filing, structuring and editing other people's lives, producing various kinds of films or texts. When the particular re-search for documentary films was described with a 'double take', a 'second sight'<sup>45</sup> or a filmmaker talked about having spent the last one and a half years continuing to go back to a particular urban area in preparation for her film<sup>46</sup>, then I came to a point where I posed the same questions as raised *within* my so-called 'material', which I was asked to analyse and be *critical* of. The so called relation between the knower and the known was not at all obvious, indeed it was challenged, turned around and if it is ever present, here it seemed

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<sup>45</sup> Raqs Media Collective (Eds) 2000. *Double Take: Looking at the documentary*. New Delhi: PSBT. p.31.

<sup>46</sup> See chapter 2 on Surabhi Sharma's research process for her documentary JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES.

irrelevant as a working category. Hence, rather than merely taking account of these parallels and similarities, my research and writing process was accompanied by thinking through the implications arising from there. Thus, I return to epistemological questions that have time and again been in the centre of anthropological debates, namely the close link between what kind of knowledge can be produced through anthropological practice and how, through which methods, meaning gets created.

What were the consequences for methods and practice within my project?<sup>47</sup>

Methodologically this began with transparency and thus the sharing of my research questions with the filmmaker's I wanted to work with. In fact, this was a basic requirement to embark on my research as questions which challenged the filmmakers themselves or were of interest to their own work made a fruitful working relation much more likely, or possible in the first place. This also required a constant positioning of myself vis-à-vis political events as well as raising critical comments towards scripts, rough cuts, editing decisions within the situation rather than sparing those for my text. For the publication of my text this extends to consultations with filmmakers whose quotes I use extensively.<sup>48</sup>

Most importantly however through the course of my research those conversations between cultural producers attained more and more importance. Talking seemed to be what I was mostly doing when following filmmaking practices. The kinds of talking that took place seemed to create their own ethnographic spaces, their own logics, their own ways of relating to their specific contexts. They create spaces of resonance, of negotiations. They were often, as other ethnographic moments I passed, unpredictable. They created many

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<sup>47</sup> What I am referring to is partly related to what has been called and discussed as 'dialogical anthropology'. Many of the proponents of a dialogical anthropology have developed their working ethos as response to the 'Writing Culture debate' and its critique of representation in anthropological texts and through a turn to linguistics and in particular to the work of Michail M. Bakhtin. These debates are a valuable background but discussing their different standpoints would lead to another dissertation. I am therefore attempting to avoid using the term 'dialogical' knowing of its various connotations and contestations in linguistic, poststructuralist and anthropological contexts. For a substantial engagement see: Reinhardt, Thomas 1999. *Jenseits der Schrift. Dialogische Anthropologie nach der Postmoderne*. Frankfurt: IKO – Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation. Reinhardt discusses the work of the principle advocates of a dialogical anthropology such as Vincent Crapanzano, Tullio Maranhao, Stephen Tyler and Denis Tedlock and provides an extensive bibliography on the topic.

<sup>48</sup> It has been agreed that I am working with all conversations and other material for the production of the PhD text. With that script I will then go back to the 'main protagonists' and discuss problems or comments they might have. There is also the idea of having conversations with earlier conversations as a self reflexive moment adding to the conceptualizing of the particular moment of my project. Surely, over the course of 3-4 years, people change their thinking, their practice, their circumstances, but the moment of emergence or 'the turn' will remain the main focus of this project (see my introduction).

instances of surprise and provoked something new arises from amidst them. The conversations I had shifted between filmmakers describing processes of researching, filming and editing or reflecting on the wider context of documentary filmmaking in India, other people's work, film histories as well as abstracting from their own work, theorizing, imagining, fabulating as much as analysing their own work or its potentials. I understood each of these tones of thinking and talking as equally valuable in their production of meaning, each aspect by itself and moreover together. Thus, conversations became much more than question and answer or a vehicle for coming to know about something else. I became more and more intrigued by the spaces they produced or, as I claim, by the theory they produced. This is for one because most of my interlocutors abstract, intellectualize, theorize their own work and what they said to me often resonated with theoretical backgrounds I came from, but also because something happened while talking. Often this was a quality that became clear while being in conversation and other times it occurred when I continued to converse with my material later and in preparation for writing. In the following chapters the speaking with filmmakers and the talking about their films and issues around them, are thus one of the main material that I work with. I often quote them at length, talk through them and set them next to my other material.

The other ethnographic moments I am paying much attention to, are my encounters with the actual films. I will later continue to argue how through each film screening a film becomes present, again, and thus attains new meaning in each viewing situation and for each viewer. Often those moments of watching a film were combined with the talking, when watching a rough cut together with a filmmaker or being talked through a film by the maker. In whatever situation and context it occurred, the viewing of a film became an ethnographic moment. Additionally, I am weaving the narratives that films create through their content and form into my narratives. I enlarge certain sequences by writing them out to stress their quality, the arguments that they make in different ways and how they relate to the filmmaker's thinking about issues in question.

Further, the strength that I see in research that works with ethnography is the taking into account a multiplicity of experiences and treating those as egalitarian in their potentialities. Ephemeral observations in a city, assemblages of sound, light, things said, images seen, sensory experiences through one's body can, I think, not be assumed to be political acts

per se or looked at to explain embedded aesthetic qualities in films. But, they are part of the texture of people's life and work contexts. They can draw our attention towards the complexity of spaces, hint at desires and loosely relate to experiments with images, sounds and how those travel and translate. They can, as parts of conversations or together with practices and moving images, switch our coordinates of seeing, hearing and understanding. The aim of ethnography is then here as well not the driving towards a true representation or an authentic account of ever so complex constellations but to transgress the notion of a 'field' by being sensitive to hints at imaginaries, other ways of perceiving and thinking and thus possibly new ways of acting upon the present. I see this in relation to what AbduMaliq Simon calls: "...a practice of being attuned to faint signals, flashes of important creativity", to "small eruptions in the social fabric that provide new texture, small but important platforms from which to access new views." While Simon distinguishes this practice from "(...) the work of detailed ethnographic examinations of new social movements, new living arrangements, or new forms of urban productivity,"<sup>49</sup> I want to argue for an expansion of ethnography, or understand ethnography as not only including the intelligence of our bodies and the making of meaning through embedded technologies and materialities but to extent a 'second sight', an attentive looking (in its broadest terms) to memories, desires and imaginaries. This would thus be in close vicinity to acts of listening to the *making of the real* through the film works, whereby moving images are not verifications of those but desire and image stand in an open ended relation to each other.

Conversations often made these suggested constellations very clear and yet left them ephemeral. Conversations are often more or less subtly invaded by contexts through the sound of a pressure cooker or the prayer from a nearby mosque, a phone call, television news, the humming of a fan, strangers in the train squeezing onto your skin and chatting about their day at work with their commuter colleagues. These invasions bring in political events, social contexts, evoke working conditions and practices as well as they take part in creating sensory experiences. They often produced an intensity of time and locality while the talking happened. A laughter recorded next to a background sound, an uncomfortable moment next to an interruption of the conversation can at times create precisely that contingency that appears meaningful and yet would lose its intensity if analyzed as one

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<sup>49</sup> Simon, AbdouMaliq 2004. *For the City Yet to come: Changing African Life in four Cities*. Durham: Duke University Press, p.12.

can't make too much of it. Working with conversations thus also allowed me to play with those evocations and to keep them as layers, as surfaces next to other surfaces.

### **Theory in conversation**

Conversation as theory is of course an approach that is itself in conversation with other theories. While I will throughout my text refer to aspects of methodology, and reference works that have been influential through their different disciplinary approaches, or how they intervened in boundaries of those, I want to mention a few areas that I am indebted to. Overall, what I have drawn on shows my own journey from anthropology through film studies, fine art theory and what could be understood broadly as visual cultures. It however also reflects the interdisciplinarity that anthropology must necessarily entail or what it meant to for me to work ethnographically with the films' and filmmakers' diverse practices.

That writing about filmmaking practices from an anthropological perspective means to perceive filmmaking as social practice is the very basic premise of this project, which however was not so basic when I started to work on it. It is due to scholars like Faye Ginsburg, Mark Hobart, Christopher Pinney, to name those specifically that have been influential for my own academic development, that today I do not have to describe any longer what I mean by media anthropology but can refer to a large field of very diverse research projects. The point that filmmaking practices and their visual results stand in reciprocal relation to the living and working contexts of the respective filmmakers and most importantly that film and other media participate in the creation of new social spaces was significant for the construction of my project. The publication of Ginsburg's, Abu-Lughod's and Larkin's *Media Worlds. Anthropology on new terrain* in 2002<sup>50</sup> for instance gives a concise background of crucial work which has established the field of media anthropology. The variety of contributions give a rich introduction into the different fields, methods and arising questions and conceptualisations that ethnography of media and media practice opens out. One specific aspect that is discussed here, in my own project, is an anthropology that does not only look at what George Marcus has called the 'activist imaginary' but which addresses a complicity with one's subject, either in the parallel activities that one is engaged in or in seeing one's work as a participation in political

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<sup>50</sup> Ginsburg, Faye, Abu-Lughod, Lila & Larkin, Brian (Eds) 2002. *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

society. The work of academics that happens outside academia is hereby of crucial importance, whether it is the organisation of film festivals, thus the politics of a curatorship or the writing of texts that reach other audiences than a mere academic one.<sup>51</sup>

Closely related but also touching upon other realms and making other interdisciplinary links is the anthropology of art and aesthetics which recognizes the agency of each participating factor within artistic production, dissemination and reception processes, thus the agency that film is “taken to exercise”.<sup>52</sup> Especially writings, which have simultaneously analysed the aesthetic, or anaesthetic, workings of art as well as their complex intertwining with politics, have shaped perspectives I would like to take towards non-fiction film.<sup>53</sup> They inform a more general theoretical direction, while scholarly work engaged in the history of art and image practice in India, as I have indicated in my introduction I seen as a necessary background to my thesis, if not always direct as often the specific epistemic frames of the documentary tradition in India connect to different aesthetics traditions, as I will explain.

My approach to film has thus been from the side of anthropology, taking an interest in practice and in embedded aesthetics. The films themselves as well as film theory have become more and more central but I do not align myself with one particular theoretical approach only. Through my overall focus on potentialities and a view on documentary film which looks for reality effects rather than films as representations of I have found myself closest to a Deleuzian cinema philosophy. The work of Laura Marks has enhanced this affinity, especially as the film works she cites in *The skin of the film*<sup>54</sup>, the intercultural cinema, bears relations to the moving images I was fascinated by. Other than Marks I do however not claim to have taken a Deleuzian approach. Similarly phenomenological studies that stress the relation between the viewer and the screen have supported my thinking but I do seek to position myself within them.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> I am here also referring to Werner Schiffauer’s writings in the print news media which argues and writes against reductive and prejudiced understandings of Islam and Muslim communities in Germany.

<sup>52</sup> From the Introduction by the editors, Pinney, Christopher & Thomas, Nichols (Eds.) 2001. *Beyond Aesthetics. Art and the technologies of enchantment*. Oxford: Berg Publishers. p. 2. This collection of essays critically reflects the work of Alfred Gell.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> Marks, Laura 2000b. *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

<sup>55</sup> See for instance Sobchak, Vivian 1991. *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Many more works could be cited, from Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism*<sup>56</sup> to the actual Third Cinema Manifestos written during the late 60s and early 70s, discussions that took place in the film magazine *Screen* in 1988 looking at race and cinema and re-evaluating Frantz Fanon's work for the realm of cinema, to, of course, much of documentary film theory. Recently a lot has been debated, conferences and written about documentary in relation to its exhibition in art context. I have benefited from those film and art works as well as from discussions around those.<sup>57</sup>

In chapter 3 I will refer more to the group of South Asian scholars that has formed the Subaltern Studies group. Their critique of historicism is part of what I have mentioned as the relegation of documentary filmmaking from the South to formless deliverers of news bites. My reflections on historicity are mostly indebted to the Subaltern Studies first 4 volumes and I have been immensely inspired by Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Habitations of Modernity* and *Provincializing Europe* as his thinking transversality, histories and stories for an understanding of contemporary structures and later his study of believes of value and prejudice are close to questions I am trying to follow up here.<sup>58</sup> I will thus mostly refer to his work rather than the Subaltern Studies group as a whole and I do not aim at an exhaustive critical reading of the Subaltern Studies group's writing. But, a thinking and writing *otherwise* than in centre and periphery constitutions, was very much at the heart of my project and is related to an endeavour of egalitarian thinking that I referred to via Rancière. This immediately links to my attempt to shape the 'looking upon India' into a 'meeting half way', thus to include my own implication as in the histories and presents of the contexts I live in.

Ultimately this brings me back to the question of criticality.

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<sup>56</sup> Shohat, Ela & Stam, Robert 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*. London, New York: Routledge. See also Dissanayake, Wimal & Guneratne, Anthony R. 2003 *Rethinking Third Cinema*. London, New York: Routledge.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Nash, Mark 2005. *Experiments with Truth*. Catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition *Experiments with Truth*, 3 December 2004-12 March 2005. The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In there specifically: Enwezor, Okwui 2005. "Documenta 11, Documentary and the 'Reality Effect'", pp. 97-103.

<sup>58</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2002. *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, and Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

What has been most important to me is that I work with theory that stays engaged with the political and that I can use it in exactly that manner. I wanted to make it fruitful for the questions I had, that the filmmakers had and that we shared. This project is thus not firmly embedded in one or more analytical frameworks. It draws from diverse corners of theoretical thinking and writing. I often quote theory as I quote filmmakers and I often use both ways of speaking like poetry and weave them into my text.

As indicated through my early encounters I have been 'in touch' with this research topic since 1996, when I spent one year in mostly North India for language study and working with NGOs mainly in the sector of education. Directed research started during two months in the autumn of 1999 and further two months during spring 2001. The main part of my material stems from my time in Bombay and Delhi, with brief visits to Bangalore, Madras and Pune, from January to July 2002. Through current communication possibilities but also the respective filmmaker's travels and changing their locations of living and working, I could follow up many of the conversations I had. Those are often not quoted directly yet significantly informed the current text.

A concluding note on the inclusion of images in this text, that largely consists of referencing films and videos: The film stills do not serve to illustrate my arguments, even though I have often included stills that are identical with scenes or sequences that I describe and discuss. The series of images I have chosen are only meant to give the reader an impression of the kinds of films I talk about while she or he is reading, as of course, seeing a film comprises more than recognising individual frames, which can be represented by screenshots or film stills. To be able to get a visual impression however is probably especially important here, as it can in this case not be assumed that the films are known – or easily accessible. And yet, the series of images I have chosen to be part of this text hopefully contribute to it as an independent layer.

## PART I - A. How real can you get?

“If the women’s documentary film movement has to become a vibrant practice, we must be able to address that which is *psychologically real*. In order to do that we may need to be more humble and see what we can learn from popular cinema instead of chasing a mythological notion of reality.” (Shohini Ghosh, 1998)<sup>60</sup>

### 1. Passionate

“Like memories, images are multisensory, and cinema uses its audiovisual means to build images around memories. ... cinema works to reassign histories to these mute objects and unrepresentable senses: to pair the song with a picture, the smell with a sound, the texture with a memory.” (Marks, Laura 2000b: 71)

*An older woman, short grey hair, a close up shot as she lights a cigarette, a concentrated expression. Vina Mazumdar (Center for Women Development Studies) She leans back in her chair, looking towards but not into the camera.*

*Fearless<sup>61</sup> (off-camera voice): “Do you know many people who don’t want to call themselves feminist?”*

*The camera stays very close to Vina Mazumdar. Her cigarette smoke fills the screen at times and seemingly with it the atmosphere of the conversation, making for an intimate feel of the scene. She talks confidently and thoughtfully about how the earlier, meaning her generation may have more problems with calling themselves feminists as they see themselves foremost as having been a part of the freedom movement and had never considered themselves as being discriminated against, while feminism was associated with people who felt being discriminated against, as weak people.*

*Vina Mazumdar: “That’s why the participation and the investigation of the ‘Committee on the Status of women in India’ proved to be such a brain shattering experience”.*

*Vina Mazumdar talks of the ‘very big blow to one’s self-perception, as a social scientist, as a teacher, and as a woman’, through that report.*

*With a magnifier in front of the camera, we browse very closely over the names of the writers of the “Report of the Committee on the Status of women in India” and its index.*



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Vina Mazumdar, Center for Women Development Studies.

<sup>60</sup> From Lecture notes given to the author, emphasis N.W. Lecture held at women’s studies program at University of Montana, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1998.

<sup>61</sup> *Fearless* is the chat room ID of the fictional character, which leads the spectator through UNLIMITED GIRLS (D: Paromita Vohra, India 2003, 94min.), the journey of exploring different histories and positions of feminism in India.

*The camera moves through the report slowly provoking a gentle sense of touch. The music in the background is a minimalist soundscape, it appears soft and like imitating steps.*

*"I used to have nightmares. I have heard my mothers voice in my dreams: 'this is why we gave you all those opportunities to study, kya kaam ke lagaya - what happened to your sense of responsibility?' I have heard my mothers voice (with emphasis in her voice and body gestures)..."*

*Cut to the black and white archival footage showing a freedom movement march, Mahatma Gandhi at the forefront.*

*Vina Mazumdar: "To be apolitical at that time was to be: a non Indian, was to be anti-democratic, a reactionary."*

*Nadia<sup>62</sup>: "Why has that changed?"*

*Vina Mazumdar: "Movements have long roots, they take time, they take time to major, to expand."*

*Cut to colour footage from the 1990 Calicut women's conference.*

*Women at the conference are singing a song: "Oppressed at home and in the world Half the world, yet counting for less ... ."*

*Lots of women are marching through the city streets with large coloured banners. More footage shows streets full of women; women marching, dancing and holding speeches.*

*Fearless: "You went to the Calicut conference in 1976?"*

*Meena Menon: "The first Calicut conference." (with emphasis)*

*Paromita Vohra: "What was it like?"*

*We still see similar footage while Meena Menon talks with fond memory of her experience in 1976.*

*"Great! One of the important reasons was that it was just after the Emergency. Some of us had been underground, some were arrested, some were tortured, all of that. There was just this feeling of so much wonder."*

*More footage while Meena Menon talks about how the 'conference brought together academics and activists openly for the first time'.*

*More footage of women singing songs, demonstrating, sitting and chatting, holding speeches.*

*The sound dissolves into Meena Menon singing, shortly after the image blends into a close up of her sitting in an open-air restaurant at Juhu beach in Bombay.*



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra.

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<sup>62</sup> Nadia was the 'real' name of *Fearless*, used in Paromita Vohra's concept note for the film, but is not worked with in the actual film. Vohra draws on the stunt queen *Fearless Nadia*, an Australia born woman who, in the 30s and 40s, became a famous actress in Indian fiction film, through breathtaking action stunts and fighting episodes. For a fascinating account of *Fearless Nadia's* biography within the context of Indian popular Cinema see: Wenner, Dorothee 2005. *Fearless Nadia. The true story of Bollywood's original stunt queen*. Penguin Books India.

*She sings in Hindi, the English subtitles read:*

*“Rise up my sister  
and come with me sister  
and listen to me sister  
You don’t need that oppression,  
so don’t take it anymore”*

*Meena Menon: “Bas – ek pura verse meine gaaya. (Enough, I sang you a whole verse.)*

*Paromita Vohra responds, first in Hindi: “Kisne likha tha”, then: “Who wrote that song?”*

*Meena Menon, very matter of fact: “I did. We did Ramla, Pravin and I. Once on the train from Bombay to Chandigarh. We were sitting in the train, we had nothing to do - so we wrote a song.”*

*She laughs out loud.*

*Cut to the beach and the ocean while Meena Menon talks about how difficult it was to be a feminist during the 70s and how many representatives of leftist groups asked: ‘What’s patriarchy? How does it fit into the mode of production?’ And how for her it had been particularly important to work with men and women, to lead a textile worker’s union with 90% men; about choices that society doesn’t really give you – “to exercise a choice outside the tide” and how crucial it is to form groups for political change.*

*Meanwhile we cut to her sitting on a mattress in her flat.*

*“When you see it you say, I can do that.”*

*A time line appears on a TV screen, moving quickly through a long list of events, crucial moments, laws, declarations – the music speeds up, gets more and more layered.*

UNLIMITED GIRLS had been commissioned by the Delhi based NGO and women’s organisation *Sakshi*. There were initial conversations about *Sakshi*’s expectations of the film and a continuous though not very frequent exchange during the production process. After Paromita Vohra sent a rough-cut version of UNLIMITED GIRLS to *Sakshi*, the part sketched above was one of the scenes they could initially not relate to, which they did not find important to have in the film, which they found random, “randomly placed”. During a conversation I had with Paromita Vohra after this reaction, she however expressed very strongly how she found this scene to be especially important and successful, and that while she wanted to very seriously respond to the NGO’s comments, she was committed to making no compromises concerning this particular part.



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Meena Menon.

Taking into consideration that for lay people it is often difficult to imagine the final film product on seeing just a rough version, she stressed that for her this was the most perfect, and perfectly placed part in the entire film, and that it worked so well for her precisely because it “works emotionally”.<sup>63</sup> Throughout the many times I have now viewed UNLIMITED GIRLS, with various kinds of attentions and in different contexts, I continue to find myself captivated by how it retains a particular cinematic strength, how it indeed works emotionally, intellectually and politically by producing a particular affect towards the spectator. In that affect, the scene embodies some of the main intentions of the film that I would like to delve into. After all, Paromita Vohra stressed that she wanted Meena Menon in her film for her passion: “That’s what I find a feminist is, a passionate person”.

## 2. Senses of realness

Each time and place creates its own regimes of truth, its own authorised aesthetics of reality and what is perceived or aspired to as *the Real*. How these aesthetics and regimes are defined depends on multiple factors whereby political discourses, historical events and overlapping visual culture contexts play a major role. In India, the need for defining the newly independent Indian nation-state created demands for authentication towards local film cultures. It has been argued extensively that art as well as film practice and what it produces was, and is, judged according to how authentically it represents the nation.<sup>64</sup> How does a film succeed or fail to create “Indian visions” or “a freshly felt Indianness” that is nevertheless related to a traditional past?<sup>65</sup>



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra.

<sup>63</sup> From conversation with Paromita Vohra, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2002. I met Paromita Vohra first during my visit in spring 2001. During my stay in 2002 I followed up and took part in the production of UNLIMITED GIRLS (see more below) and we had continuous conversations throughout. Direct quotes are taken from recorded conversation and I will indicate the respective dates.

<sup>64</sup> See: Vasudevan 2000. Prasad 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Dasgupta, Chidananda 1980. *The cinema of Satyajit Ray*. Delhi. P. 45. Cited in: Vasudevan, Ravi: *Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism in Indian cinema: the double take of modernism in the work of Satyajit Ray*. P. 14. Last retrieved from [www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net). 10<sup>th</sup> March 2004. Also published in Biswas, Moinak 2006. *Apu and After. Re-visiting Ray's Cinema*. Oxford: Berg Publishers. Vasudevan critiques Das Gupta's search for authenticity in Ray's film through questions towards the mere content of the film, like 'Did marriages like this really exist'. Vasudevan prolifically contests the notion of a straightforward classic realism and thus Ray's support of a uni-linear history that leads into the Indian present, by dismantling the formal irruptions in Ray's films, which go against this notion.

My concern here is whether and how this legacy still impacts as a key question to measure the achievement of also non-fiction film. While at first sight this agenda is more clearly set out for most non-fiction films that derive from and serve governmental institutions, it might be less so for the documentary that sees itself independent of the nation-state and whose goal is often precisely to intervene in its ideology and in the best case think apart from it. This discussion took place more extensively within the realm of fiction film in India, but for my line of thought particular aspects of a discourse, which searches for presentations or cinematic evocations of the 'real India' nevertheless appear vital despite the different histories. Aspects of this discussion are for one a friction between the popular culture of the mainstream formula film and what is understood as art cinema and with filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Shyam Benegal and others as Parallel Cinema. Within that division the mainstream is seen as escapism for the masses while not accomplishing to depict the 'real lives of the people' and especially missing out on representations of the rural and the disenfranchised. A serious art cinema thus takes on the needed image-making of a 'more real' modernity in India, relating to a past but most importantly striving for reform and progress. I am here not commenting on the mentioned filmmakers' work, which may itself be reduced through such a discourse, but want to lay stress on what is conceived as a hierarchical relation between irrational popular culture and sophisticated cinema that is linked to neo-realist genres.<sup>66</sup> The success and praise within European film circuits of Satyajit Ray for instance worked as well through defining it as "truly Indian". Perceptions of how power and hierarchies get translated in colonial and postcolonial times are transmitted into representational practices and add to an atmosphere where an intellectual elite is seen as far away and still creating images of a 'domestic *terra incognita*<sup>67</sup> with a patronising habitus. Accusations that these attempts stem from an attitude of guilt by an upper class urban intelligentsia, which nevertheless fails to create a public by failing to represent the nation other than replicating colonialist narratives, throws light on the difficult class and caste issues. While the Subaltern Studies group discussed the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to create a national context within which 'other' Indians can imagine themselves<sup>68</sup>, Gyan Prakash complicates the issue by specifying and historicising processes of power

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<sup>66</sup> See also M.S.S. Pandian quoted in Pinney, Chris & Dwyer, Rachel 2001. *Pleasure and the Nation. The history, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. While talking from a different time and location, namely about the Tamil cultural elite in the 1930s, Pandian stresses, how " 'realism' was one of the ways, [...] that the elite attempted to recuperate an idiom of cultural hierarchy within the medium itself. P. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Pinney, Chris in: Pinney & Dwyer 2001: 5.

<sup>68</sup> See Guha, Ranajit 1998. *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press. P. xiii. Quoted in Pinney & Dwyer (Eds.) 2001: 4.

translations from the colonisers to the Indian elite and their repercussions for an Indian modernity.<sup>69</sup> By referring to this admittedly much more complex discussion, I want to evoke on the one hand the loadedness of a visual culture context and on the other hand a series of hierarchies and dichotomies, regarding one's positions towards the Indian state and its implications for image production. Further and crucial, the potency of images and the histories of how in the South Asian context they have created cultural nationalisms are at the back of my mind. Those legacies, and presents, are a crucial context to what follows. As mentioned earlier, filmmakers who choose non-fiction films as their medium of expression, often do not belong to an economic elite. While in most cases they are part of a secular intelligentsia, not seldom with a family background that could be counted as a political and - or - a caste elite, their film and activist practices often makes it imperative for them to engage even further with "the rest of the nation", while stark differences remain, as for legacy and every day life experiences. Moreover, there is a long veiling 'hangover' of dichotomies between the rational and irrational, tradition and progress, escapism and politics, pleasure and sophistication, sense and intellect.<sup>70</sup> Writing on documentary film movements and attempting to understand how processes of authentication and the realness of images are judged here, needs to of course bring further histories – political, cultural, aesthetic and film theoretical - into play. The complex and interrupted intertwining of culture and politics is thus connected to contextual socio-realisms in non-fiction, which again places itself against art cinema and its particular address to a so-called elite audience.

Speaking more broadly then, definitions of truth and notions of the real, while not conflating the two terms, can govern, be authoritarian, utilitarian; they can be played with, joked with, they can be pushed to the edge. They are in most cases highly politicised and what developed as a critique to one regime of truth might quickly create another. What I am attempting to do throughout the ensuing text is to pursue and create narratives that wander between understandings of politics and what is perceived or proposed as the real. I do this by specifically attending to the relation between feminism and notions of the real, because I understand that in this negotiation we find a fruitful path to what is at stake. I am hereby not starting out from any art historical or film theoretical discourses on realism, but am working from and along selected film examples and related conversations and observations. By working from the material I hope to reach a plateau from which to view the real growing from its relations to

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<sup>69</sup> Prakash, Gyan 1999. *Another Reason. Science and imagination of modern India*. Princeton University Press. P. 51ff.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Prakash 1999.

multiple pasts and presents but at times also denying those ties and unwinding in new directions. Paromita Vohra's film on feminism – UNLIMITED GIRLS – is my anchor for this journey. It invited me to a re-reading and re-animation of particular films, film histories and the discourses around those. I will meander from and to this film, towards other key films within and outside the history of the Indian women's movement or contextual discourses on feminism. This weaving of a particular narrative, a fragmented history which admits its many holes and inconsistencies, is driven by the search for an expanded notion of the real as an aesthetical and political goal and ultimately as a feminist politics. This starts by exploring ways of looking at singular plural realities of people, places, experiences I encountered and starting to explore how these find their ways, messy but surely, into the possibilities which films can create.

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During the rough cut editing and last shooting schedules for the fictional parts and a few inserts for UNLIMITED GIRLS, I visited Paromita Vohra a few times in the editing studio where she had rented a small editing suite. This studio, located in the Mumbai neighbourhood, Dadar East and run by the documentary filmmaker Anurabh Bhattacharjee, was the first to rent out digital editing places in Bombay since 2000. Only a few years later this seems like a historical place, as most filmmakers have now acquired their own editing facilities and the studio had to be closed down. These changing work conditions that entailed moving from professional editing studios to the computer in one's own home, have a definite impact on working practices and one's relation to technology. Some filmmakers who are otherwise not camera persons started to use a mini-DV camera, often as a research tool where exploration can happen through and with the camera. Also non-linear editing facilities can open up a more playful relationship, though certainly the digital requires its own knowledge base and experience and could constitute an obstacle for some as well. Overall though, technology becomes very much a part of the everyday. Some filmmakers mentioned specific kinds of sociality during editing phases, notions of control but also of intrusion as well as more expanded processes of editing, although the more complex consequences of this cannot be addressed here.<sup>71</sup> At the time however *Studio*

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<sup>71</sup> In conversations with Anjali Punjabi e.g. the move between film and video played quite a crucial role. In 2002 she was just finishing her first film on Mirabhai, A FEW THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, which was funded and produced by *Films Division* (see chapter 2) and shot on 35mm. Apart from the structural constraints of working with the timetable and rules of a governmental institution, she also mentioned that she wanted to make a second Mirabhai film on video, where she could shoot herself as well as having a camera person and which could be more explorative. During that time she was also collaborating on a

*Agneetar*<sup>72</sup> was an important undertaking. It offered relatively cheap editing facilities to mostly independent non-fiction filmmakers while keeping up-to-date with recent hard and software equipment. Anurabh Bhattacharjee, the owner, jokingly told me that he might be my most important informant as several of the women filmmakers I worked with were editing their films at his facilities and I was indeed a frequent visitor at this location in Dadar East.<sup>73</sup> Dadar train station was always buzzing with commuters and exuded a sense of being a central hub for people and trade. It was then a neighbourhood where walking on the street dressed in a more 'western fashion' could provoke various reactions and I remember keeping it in mind whenever I was to visit the studio. The studio itself was in an older building hosting a few other offices, which now even more seems to belong to the *old Bombay*. There was a largish common room when entering, barely equipped with metal cupboards, a wooden table and chairs to have lunch, teas or conversations in editing breaks. As in most offices there was a peon who would provide hot and cold drinks, samosas and other snacks from outside. The room Paromita had rented was the smaller of the two AC-equipped offices and seated just three people. In contrast to my visit to for instance P.M. Sateesh's sound studio *Fireflys* located in a brand new building in a developing area of Andheri West, *Agneetar* carried the texture of a particular Bombayite heterogeneity, soon to slide into realms of nostalgia.

During one of the afternoons that I spent at the studio, Paromita Vohra and her editor Jabeen Merchant<sup>74</sup> merely transferred remaining footage, checked and discussed the newly arrived graphical animated parts and thus there was a more easygoing atmosphere and time for casual chats and conversation while watching the material. The atmosphere seemed to me to be typical of the release of high concentration during an intense working period and thus provoking a constant shift between serious discussions about minor and larger decisions and playful humour and laughter. Paromita jokingly told me how it was making her nervous to see me writing in my big

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fiction script with a male friend, where the technology and aesthetic possibilities of a mini DVD camera played a crucial part in the unfolding of the narrative. (From conversations with Anjali Punjabi, 31<sup>st</sup> January and 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2002)

<sup>72</sup> *Agneetar* means Fire-Wire, the cable needed to transfer digital film footage to a computer. Thanks to Paromita for pointing this out to me.

<sup>73</sup> I want to take this opportunity to thank Tipu (name by which Anurabh Bhattacharjee is known) for being extremely generous with his time. During our very first meeting, to which I arrived considerably late, still learning to estimate distances in Bombay, I ended up spending the rest of the day watching films, asking many questions and listening to his views on the documentary scene, being invited to dinner and watching more films. Meetings like this always felt like a gift and an immense luxury.

<sup>74</sup> I had one longer conversation with Jabeen Merchant alone and we met several times in the editing room as well as during the script meetings I participated in. I knew her already through her editing work with Surabhi Sharma.

green notebook. Asking for permission to take pictures of her and her editor she responded jokingly, “only if you write good things about us.”

The colours of the graphics had to be decided and even though saffron was one of her favourite colours, using it was out of the question. For Paromita Vohra and her editor it seemed to be too symbolic of the Hindu-nationalist propaganda at the time, while she later stressed that she might now use precisely this colour on purpose to counter the use of simplistic symbolism. Similarly there was a discussion about the suggestiveness of combinations of red and blue towards the US flag. Negotiating one’s work within a current visual cultures context was also apparent when we discussed the feminist potential or rather regressive factors of, at that point and amongst young people, the very popular film DIL CHAHTA HAI, directed by Farhan Khan. Paromita had included a brief sequence in her film as DIL CHAHTA HAI was promoted as depicting the ‘new and modern generation’ of young urban Indians and the supposedly new ways of men and women relating to each other as equals while its look and narrative privileges three affluent boys who come to stand for ‘being modern’.<sup>75</sup> We chatted about the latest Hindi film music, our disappointments about the last Hindi-movie blockbusters, the ethics of editing the sequence of a character out of interview material which could lead to very varied narratives, the longing to read lots of trash novels when the film was over and using young upcoming television stars who were most probably not affordable for the fake ads in the film although these should ideally be faces which people recognised. The editor, Jabeen Merchant, who had completed her training at the FTII in Pune, talked about her engagement in discussions around the privatisation of the film institute and how former and current students feared that the Institute would fall into the hands of RSS or Shiv Sena organisations. It was a special afternoon that remained in my mind, maybe so special because it had a quality that I deem telling of a certain every-day dynamic; an oscillation between random conversations and very focused discussions, meandering between practical production talk and larger, quite pressing, political issues, between editing choices made out of aesthetic reasons and personal likings and those that required sophisticated manoeuvring between working with humour and irony, taking ethical responsibility towards ones subject and the larger orientation the filmmaker wished to choose. How to be true to ones material, to the film

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<sup>75</sup> In conversations I had with other people it was often stressed how DIL CHAHTA HAI (D: Farhan Khan, India, 2001, 183 min.) was indeed stretching the ‘limits of the possible’ within a mainstream format, as one of the main male characters falls in love with an older woman. It is however her fate to be a widow, alcoholic and thus she has to die before the end of the film to give way for a younger woman to take her place.

form and to the drive for a politics? How to emphasise, that an afternoon like this seemed so familiar that it could possibly take place anywhere and yet, that it is also very specific and telling of a particular context at that moment in time? And how to suggest that, sometimes, when I look at UNLIMITED GIRLS I see it embedded in those seemingly every day and random situations and yet bursting with complexity, intensified and loaded through a political climate, embedded in specific conversations, mundane and yet reinvigorating a passion for film and politics and that nevertheless, the film certainly takes on many lives very independent of all these evoked contexts?

### 3. Histories

The film sequence which opens this chapter and introduces UNLIMITED GIRLS addresses various issues related to the history of the Indian women's movement, but maybe more importantly it acts strongly upon ways of telling this history and thus impacts on a viewer's possible relation to the narrated. While there are other scenes which work with similar audiovisual and narrative devices, for me, this sequence's particular sensual address made it an especially rich one and I suggest it moves the spectator in a multilayered sense.

Through the spoken content within the discussed scene (placed in the second part of the film under the section *Notebook*) we move from the time of the Indian freedom movement to the period of the Emergency under Indira Gandhi (1975-77) and moments of the Independent women's movement which took shape after this period of extreme reduction of civil rights.<sup>76</sup> Both, Vina Mazumdar and Meena Menon talk as witnesses of particular historical times, yet they are not interviewed to the effect of *representing* a historical moment, a specific group or ideology, or exerting an expert position. Surely they add to the film narrative in authenticating ways by having lived through certain debates and historical events, but what is shaping their narratives are in the first place their personal memories, the choices they made as women and as feminists and the



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Archival Footage of Independence Movement.

<sup>76</sup> For an excellent ethnography of Emergency narratives see: Tarlo, Emma 2003. *Unsettling Memories. Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. London: Hurst & Company. See also chapter 2 which refers more specifically to that period and the filmmaking practice which started then.

implications those had as well as their current thinking about feminism and the questions arising from there. In a conversational tone they are thus reflecting on the workings of social movements and the linkages between national and gender politics. The film stresses their passionate personalities and politics, they come across as frank, direct, determined and without following any protocol and hereby somewhat deconstruct the image of female virtue that is exercised through archival footage of women in white saris supporting the independent movement, footage which is offered as further traces of history.<sup>77</sup> Archival film footage is of course a common trope within historical documentaries, whereby its use within a narrative or argument can be manipulated to various ends, there often being connotations of proof and authentication attached to audio visual documents. What does this film material stand for within UNLIMITED GIRLS, how is it used and to what end?

The footage is fragmentary. It is not explained or particularly contextualised within a time line but located as accompanying the mentioned conversations. Thus, the historical material does not appear to be editorially situated to prove an argument made; less for authenticating reasons than as additions to the personal experiences being depicted. In their briefness and incompleteness the excerpts chosen are more emotional and atmospheric than informational. Yet they are certainly iconic and easily recognisable in the case of the black and white footage showing Gandhi and the archival footage of a freedom movement march, which adds another image layer concerning women's location in the construction of the nation state. For some also the coloured footage of the Calicut women's conference in the early 90s might evoke memories. These images are traces, which seem to cause cinematic - more than documentation – spaces. However, they allow the spectator to connect to moments in Indian history and to histories of the Indian women's movement.



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Calicut women's conference.

<sup>77</sup> Explorations of working with historical archival or found footage has been a practice widely used and discussed within film and art contexts. Some of the possible discussions can be found in: Merewether, Charles (Ed.) 2006. *The Archive*. London: Whitechapel/ MIT Press. For a deconstructive approach to the archive Jacques Derrida's 1996 *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression* is certainly a very thought provoking and frequently referenced source.

The Calicut footage, with its streets full of women marching, songs, banners and manifestos, carries a strong vigour, it evokes an emotional and political richness of women gathering and strongly expressing the politics that connected them. The footage carries the energy of agitation, of a calling, a calling for change maybe. The style and dynamic of the conversations emphasise a personal and sensuous quality whereby the intimacy and the emotionality is in the way of telling rather than through moments of intimate privacy so that the scenes use and “... stress[es] the *social* character of embodied experience: the body [as] a source not just of individual but of cultural memory”.<sup>78</sup> The camera being very close to the Report on the *Committee on the Status of women in India* and slowly moving over names and introductory pages, the materiality of the paper is enhanced and produces an almost tactile experience of memory. A “feeling of reflection”, attained through equality between and an interconnectedness of emotion and intellectual engagement is one of the cinematic and political strengths of the film. A haptic viewing experience rather than a deep focusing-in is produced. As a gesture of moving through a rich history, this movement is repeated several times in the film: A coloured time line runs through on a TV screen, a map is sketched with signs showing streets named after famous women, the camera moves across the wall which the character Fearless fills throughout the film with pamphlets, postcards, newspaper articles – a tapestry full of feminist histories. There is not the play with video quality which Laura Marks sees so potent for tactile viewing experiences, but there is certainly an association with a move away from a deep, one-perspective gazing towards a kind of looking that touches and thus an approach to knowledge production as an open process, a haptic seeing rather than a wish to capture and fixate.<sup>79</sup> The images become an invitation to reflective moving; the haptic, the sensual and touch are not feminine but enact an intellectual drive and a feminist politics.<sup>80</sup>



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Calicut women’s conference.

<sup>78</sup> Marks 2000b: Xiii.

<sup>79</sup> See Marks, Laura 2002. *Touch. Sensuous Theory and multisensory media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Marks writes here on the haptic quality of selected video works.

<sup>80</sup> See also Brütsch, Matthias, Vinzenz Hediger, Ursula von Keitz, Alexandra Schneider, Margrit Tröhler (Eds.) 2005. *Kinogefühle. Emotionalität und Film*. Marburg: Schüren.

This emphasis on linking to the sensual and the reflective mode is not only supported but taken further through the soundtrack. Paromita Vohra addressed this during a conversation, which took place during the final editing phase and while the film music was still in progress.

N: What is your ideal aim concerning what the sound could add to that which is there through the images already?

P: I think what I would like the sound to add is that feeling of always moving, being on the move, which I think it can do. Also, to underline a *feeling of reflection*. This is a very emotional thing, but I think it is kind of there in the film and the sound will bring it together. At least the tune that they [musicians] have composed - we are thinking of working with a theme, which we then interpret differently throughout the film. It's pretty nice because it's like a drum and base rhythm and it's a jazz type track, so it doesn't have a particular emotion, but it has that feeling of somewhere moving, thinking, moving, thinking, and almost drifting as if in your own world, but through glass corridors so you can see the world around you, which is the ideal feeling I would like. So if the music can do that. (pause) But, also to at times give that layered sound of many voices happening at the same time. Of course I want it to be a very very urban feeling, because I think again there is that convention of the kind of music in women's films, and it would be very bad jazz, or it's folk music, or whatever, I don't want all that. So yes, in that sense I think the music will be a bit different and it will be much more to my personal taste than anything else and that to me is important. (19.06.2002)

Apart from responding to what is seen here as a contextual convention for non-fiction filmmaking by women, Paromita's choice works towards a certain mode of representation. The sensuous quality of the atmosphere that characterises the scene with Veena Mazumdar is strongly supported by an accompanying layer of sound which enacts movement from the background as it were. Hereby spatiality is provoked between sound and image.<sup>81</sup> An experience of memory – enhanced through the quality of the conversations - of these historical instances seems emphasised and suggests a recognition being awarded; a recognition though which does not freeze those moments in the past as the ongoing music and editorial choices for linking the scenes provoke a sense of movement. The eclectic and emotional quality evokes an importance of histories without defining them or prescribing how to relate to them. They are local histories and reflect moments of Indian nation-state building, during its emergence and extreme crisis period, yet the personal memories and the footage used do not function to authenticate the writing of *a History*, they offer *traces* of histories for reflection and remind one of a citational history in the Benjaminian sense. The spectator witnesses personal memories and change, not only visually but sensing it and experiencing it. An

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<sup>81</sup> Throughout this project a lot more could be said about aspects of sound, though it is of very varied importance for each particular film. While especially within the realm of documentary film theory, sound had been neglected for a long time – something that also sound persons in India complained about, there is now growing literature on the philosophy and the politics of sound and music in film. I attempt to pay attention to the sonic though this is not in the foreground and I will do so less with reference to the emerging body of scholarly work. See e.g Lerner, Neil, 'Damming Virgil Thomson's Music for *The River*', in: Gaines, Jane & Renov, Michael (Eds) 1999, *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

emotive intellectual intimacy with the images and the conversations is created, a distant history brought close to the viewer through relation. Identification happens with *Fearless*, who we never see as a 'real' person; she is a fictional persona, who embarks on a journey to search and continuously raise questions. This particular construction of a leading character defies the mechanics of identification but lends itself as a platform that offers points of contact to be established or activated by the viewer. The screen becomes a sounding board and the screening event a call to ask questions and to follow ideas and evolving conversations. Through the overall formal openness a dialogical relation and a phenomenological meeting space in between the screen and the viewer is achieved. The spectator is invited to create a relationship with time, history and change, opening up spaces for diverse though collective imagination.<sup>82</sup> Allowing for singular relations to those fragments might open up spaces for different kinds of feminisms, thought, felt and lived, whereby the sequences can function as an invitation for a receptive form of belonging, like expressing proposals for how to live feminism. The scene could instigate thoughts about what it meant for these women to bring out the report on the status of women or to visit the first Calicut women's conference after the political violence during the Emergency and precisely in these provocations realness seems to lie, a liveable history and an experiential realness to come.

The wish for a history that "resonates with our lives", raised in the chat room conversation,<sup>83</sup> and the repercussions of the women's "brain shattering" (Vina Mazumdar) experiences are emphasised on formal levels. Paromita Vohra took the phrase "brain shattering experience" together with others she encountered throughout the filmmaking as a text layer for the rap song with which the film concludes – the rap song starts with the end of the film and accompanies the credits. The rap music's style is today's urban style, as described by Vohra, and the quotes within it sound like echoes: distant but resonating.

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<sup>82</sup> The space between screen and spectator could be further theorised following phenomenological approaches to film, such as Vivian Sobchak's. For an early writing in this realm see: Sobchak, Vivian. 1984. "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (1984): 283-300.

<sup>83</sup> Most chat-room voices are by women; non-fiction conversations are with young women and men though.

#### 4. Or, Just stories

What strikes me is how UNLIMITED GIRLS seems to practice a citational history of feminist filmmaking or filmmaking in the realm of the women's movement in India, though other filmic reference point could certainly be found as well. To engage in non-fiction filmmaking at this specific point in time, which I claim to be a turning point, means that the notion of legacy was very present. Legacies and what one inherits can be a burden. Inheritance can also be a choice though; it can have myriad effects on one's own ways of relating to the past. Here I am speaking from my experiences of listening to people's declared legacies and key films to affiliate oneself with or to reject. I found that an entire history of women making films was too often not appreciated within their larger national and international film culture. I also found that some very intriguing examples were left out completely of most narrations and others sat rather uncomfortably in between those that were said to cause a logical lineage.

Can past film works be re-animated? Can the aesthetics and politics they proposed but which went unnoticed be re-located, addressed anew in the now and be worked with for the benefit of the contemporary? What made them marginal within an already marginal film culture?

I want to retell two documentary moments:

In 1976 Nina Shivdasani Rovshen (aka Nina Sugati SR) won the FIPRESCI film prize at the Berlin Film Festival with her film CHHATRABHANG.<sup>84</sup> The film had been screened earlier at the Critic Week and the Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival and was shown at other highly valued festivals in Europe where it was distributed by the Freunde der deutschen Kinemathek e.V. for 12 years. CHHATRABHANG was also shown at a few festivals in India but never found distribution or a cinematic release there. Although so highly praised in film circuits for its innovative approach and cinematic language, it has not become a landmark film, neither in fiction nor in non-fiction, nor in narrations of early women directors and their work. CHHATRABHANG and Nina Shivdasani Rovshen's other films were recently "excavated" by Shai Heredia, a filmmaker and curator who founded Experimenta, a festival for experimental film in India, during her research on the history of experimental cinema in India.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> CHHATRABANG (The Divine Plan), D: Nina Shivdhasani, 80 min., colour, 35mm, India 1976.

<sup>85</sup> I thank Shai Heredia for letting me use her conversation with Nina Shivdhasani. Her research and commitment to setting up Experimenta, as an individual with little financial and organisational support, is an invaluable endeavour. It takes part in creating spaces from where new cinematic explorations can happen and from where histories defined through North American and European experimental work can

Nina Shivdasani Rovshen had a background in fine arts (painting) and had been trained in film at the California Institute of the Arts, where she realised two of her earliest films and where she started developing her approach to film. After returning to India she read a few lines in a daily newspaper about an incident of caste hierarchy in a village in Uttar Pradesh (North India). A water well that provided food for the untouchable population in the village went dry and the few Brahman people, much less in number, refused to share their water supplies of which they had plenty. As she describes in her conversation with Shai Heredia, the filmmaker wanted to make a film that would reach a broad range of audiences, while also being extremely committed to developing a very individual process of filmmaking. With a five-page draft of her idea she received money from a non-governmental organisation, which supported work in rural areas and which helped her to start her research process. The film was shot in Jogiya village (UP) by working with the village locals. Shivdasani explained how she kept the overall story line obscure to the villagers and would only tell them how to enact small scenes, thus how she “choreographed” the entire film. At the same time, her lay actors were bringing in their own life experiences in acts of improvisation, and thus shaped the narrative and its appearance in the way they realised certain scenes, in the how and what they said.

Shai Heredia: So in terms of working with the villagers, how was that, what were the power dynamics of that relationship actually? How did you communicate what you were trying to do or trying to get out of them?

Nina Shivdasani: I would tell them that I'm making a *gaon ki kahani*. That it's a story on the village. I didn't give them any details, I wouldn't tell them what the story was, I would just explain particular scenes. For instance when she went to beg for water from the Brahmin woman I just told her that you are going to her, and you are going to put down the vessel, the lota, and that she's going to fill it with water. So Seela told me, 'but I haven't been there, I can't go into that area. I've never entered that area; she won't let me enter that area'. So I told her, 'don't worry I'm with you'. And I spoke to the Brahmin woman that she's going to come and ask for water and you have to fill her vessel with water. And the Brahmin woman told the other Brahmin woman... When I went to the rural areas I didn't know how I was going to direct them. This was the first time Seela was going to the Brahmin household with a vessel and asking for water, so to me that was amazing because these people never entered each other's areas and that also contributes to the social change. The actual making of the film brought the village people together who had never met each other. The Brahmin men had never met Jugnu and the other ...so the film brought them together in a different context. And that I'm sure had some repercussions on their relationship later with each other. I remember the scene where they collect at the corner and they go to the gate and in steps they kept the courage to go ask for water. So at every point I'd tell them to talk about it and I filmed them from different angles...in the sense I choreographed the whole film. I used the rural area as my landscape and I used the spots in the rural area that were interesting visually and I would position those characters in those visual areas and compose the frame...as if I painted over the landscape with my characters. It was like choreographing it. Not the whole thing, only each scene that was being filmed. (...)

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challenged. See <http://experimenta.in> (last accessed 1.08.2012) for information on this research and the festival.

S.H.: it's obviously coming from their own real stories.

N.S.: Yeah, most of what they have to say is what is on their minds, and they know their own truth.<sup>86</sup>

The fascinating process of a literal crossing of caste borders that Shivdhasani achieved through her filmmaking, taking a risk by directly intervening, makes her approach much more than a cinematic device. While I am struck by her often patronising address of “the villagers” as “the essence of India” which needs to be addressed “simply” and through the “pictorial”, a kind of projection that is also translated into using the “rural area as my landscape”, the liberty of leaving spaces for experimentation and moreover the representation of Dalit<sup>87</sup> women standing up for their rights to elementary resources, an image on screen that was rare if not altogether absent at the time, acts cinematically seems antidotal to that impression and attitude.

I also realise how working with other people's conversations leaves me with an interpretation or a thinking that only derives from this one interview, a film critique and the actual film. I am here talking and thinking with the conversational space that Shai Heredia created with Nina Shivdhansani. The given interview itself is different through the questioner asking differently and my working with it varies from how I work with my own conversations as I lack further information additional to what is spoken about. No background sounds, no before and after, no other means to get a sense of the person in question and what informed her filmmaking.

What comes through very strongly in Heredia's interview is Shivdasani's dedication to her filmmaking process. After a three-week shooting period that followed her research she spent one year editing the film entirely by herself. Not starting from a script she describes her extended process and filmmaking ethos of watching her material 3-4 times before she starts editing as imageology.

N.S.: “The editing process is the most fascinating process, it reveals things that you didn't know about when you went into film and it gives you little hints, how to put it together and a film can be structured in 10 different ways and come out with 10 different meanings. And you have to really be careful that you do it the way, the meaning that you want to emerge or the meaning that is the most poignant that the film requires to bring out the concept then you have to edit it according to that. I think my editing process has come from my painting process, in that I study the images and let the images tell me what they are about and then I arrange or...I don't take out any bad takes because I feel even a bad take tells me something. So I arrange all the shots, assemble, like what is known as an assemblage. Everything is there in front of me and I work in the process of taking out, subtracting.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Nina Shivdhasani Rovshen in conversation with Shai Heredia (June 2005).

<sup>87</sup> The film still names them Harijans and mentions their conversion to Buddhism.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

The film moves from fictional enactments to documentary commentaries, to news clips stating incidents of injustice, to talking head shots of testimonies. Shivdasani also includes the poetry of a local village person. Sehdev Kumar Gupta writes in his film critique of a rawness that renders something familiar into something that we don't know yet and how there is a movement between crass representations of poverty and a "cheeriness" that for him becomes "revolutionary".<sup>89</sup>

CHHATRABHANG was made at a time when the Parallel Cinema started to take off in India, a school of filmmaking which was entirely shaped by male directors. The film works with a participatory approach, which had not been used before. Through this method and by means of Shivdhasani's individual editing process, a new filmic expression is created. Yet, it appears to fall out of genealogies and needed to be unearthed by Shai Heredia to now find its place in another history that continues to be written.

So why then does CHHATRABHANG fall out of genealogies, why did it not lend itself to become a legacy, a reference point? How could its intervention into the highly politicised caste issues not become a point of discussion that resonates? Why is a certain kind of fiction and experiment easily aligned with documentary mode films or the documentary film community while others do not enter that constructed frame? Why does it not belong to a discourse of feminist filmmaking? How and around which issues and forms does a community build itself? What are possibly taboo subjects at specific times but maybe still prevailing? There could of course be numerous reasons for the existence of this film on the margins; it being made during the time of Emergency being one possible angle of explanation. But, my aim is not to find proof for this. My endeavour is however to give the film another present, of which many are possible. The drive is to make it resonate into current concerns and critiques of authorisations of *real* issues that need to be dealt with, of particular forms and experiments that still lie within the realm of acceptable experimentation or fall outside of it.

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Deepa Dhanraj started making films in 1979. Based in Bangalore, thus slightly removed from the centres of Delhi and Bombay, she worked and still does, very closely with women's organisations, nationally as well as internationally. She told me about

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<sup>89</sup> Gupta, Sehdev Kumar 1976. CHHATRABHANG - *hesitant hope of liberation*, translated and republished in Film Papers of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Forum of new Cinema, no page number.

feeling like a dinosaur when looking at all those histories and changes and how surprised she is when people ask her, “are you still working on women?”. Together with Abha Bhaiya, Navroz and Sunita, who formed the film collective *Yugantar* in 1980, Deepa Dhanraj travelled through the country with all the paraphernalia needed during the early 80s to project 16mm films for women’s groups all over the country.<sup>90</sup> After their first two films on labour – reflective of the movement’s politics and Marxist analyses and how “getting into film or whatever medium came was a result of all the activity of being in the movement” - they decided to embark on a fiction film.<sup>91</sup> It turned out to become one of their most successful projects at that time, popular with many different groups and cutting across classes, and yet, in the many histories of non-fiction film that I was told about or that were temporarily constituted in for instance retrospectives, it did not take its space.<sup>92</sup>

Initiated by a dowry murder case they started working on a script with the women’s group *Stree Shakhti Sanghatana* based in Hyderabad. While tackling an area, which became one of the crucial issues for the women’s movement during the 80s, they were also committed to the exploration of a collaborative filmmaking practice. The very process became part of their activism. With little opportunity to even take a second shot, decisions had to be made quickly and the film be edited with little material available. Deepa Dhanraj regretted not having documented a process which was at the same time challenging, asking for compromises and yet carried the energy of something novel, of a particularly moving time and process, the moment of a turn that others also articulated when speaking about the late 70s and early 80s.

“What was very unique and new was to see, even in the film practice, how participatory you could be. How one could maintain participation, not control. How much could we bring them on board at all kinds of stages in the film? We acknowledged that we had the apparatus, we had the camera, even the information but where could they influence the process. It was very hard to show rough cuts and then talk about how the narration should go. And there is also the difficult part where you may have one analysis but the group has its own position, often determined by local factors and their own political dynamics. So there has to be a very respectful relationship and there may have been decisions that aesthetically made a mess of the film, or even politically may have been a bit difficult. But once we were committed to the participatory process you had to take it to its end.” (Conversation, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2002)

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<sup>90</sup> I had met Deepa Dhanraj during very initial stages of my research in 1999. The direct and indirect quotations or references here are however all taken from a conversation on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2002.

<sup>91</sup> Those films were: *MOLKARIN* (25min, 16mm, Black & White, Marathi, India 1981), on the unionising of domestic workers in Poona; *TAMBAKOO CHAKILA OOB ALI* (25min, 16mm, Black & White, Marathi, India 1982) on the struggle of the female tobacco factory workers in Nippani. In 1983 Dhanraj made *SUDESHA* (30min, 16mm, Colour, Hindi, India 1983) which follows directly from the themes of the three *Yugantar* films by portraying a woman who was an activist in the Chipko movement. See: Bhushan, Madhu 1988. *Activism and Art. A Dialogue with Deepa Dhanraj*, in: *Deep Focus*, Vol 1(3). P. 34.

<sup>92</sup> The shift from 16mm to video did of course also lead to less 16mm projectors being available and the screening of 16mm films becoming more difficult and rare.

Next to the *newness* of the process Deepa Dhanraj also stressed the “tremendous need to communicate”, how consciousness raising was novel, how talking about family and violence was new, how at that time you had not seen women rolling *bidis* in front of the camera or even just talking. “Just listening to her talking, the way she spoke” was what made the film *YEH SIRF KAHANI HAI? (IS THIS JUST A STORY?)*<sup>93</sup> so “compelling and charming” and extremely successful with all kinds of women’s groups, even though from a current stand point it could seem “very naïve, with very cardboard characters”. The possibility to address a subaltern status in that manner seems to have made the film accessible with different social classes, it came to provoke discussions and subsequent activities: it stirred multiple reactions.

I will attend to the specific time period during and post the Emergency, its very own demands and its relation to Third Cinema manifestos, which swept over from Latin America, in my next chapter. But connected to that time and what I also take from Deepa Dhanraj’s account and found confirmed through other conversations is that very particular relation between the image and the real at that point in time. I want to emphasise the point and the situation when realness of an image stems from that moment of excitement after representations of a lived reality that one has been missing finally appear on screen. The realness here lies in the newness and in the political importance that a representational act gains within a struggle. In this case the fictional mode expanded the presence of female characters in fiction as well as in documentary and created an effect of the real which consequently raised immense enthusiasm and reactions across classes. Furthermore, the experimental character of new cinematic experiments in terms of their representational images and the kinds of narrations they offer, seem to exceed the issue, both the political message or urgency and the hitherto felt lack of representation, and hence does not only fill a gap but creates its own political excess, through an expansion of the real.

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Spaces for film practices and aesthetics often need to first be created and named, to be taken and recognised as such before individual works can be appreciated within those spaces, to maybe grow out again and create new platforms. The history of documentary filmmaking in India and the participation and position of women within

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<sup>93</sup> *YEH SIRF KAHANI HAI? / IS THIS JUST A STORY?* (25min, 16mm, Black & White, Telugu, India 1983.)

that also shows that it took the women's movement and independent women or women media collectives to first create and name a space within which film production by women could be seen and appreciated. As soon as I choose a particular lineage, I am of course losing a lot of other valuable film examples and figures that have taken part in this, often uneven, process. When I asked about personal histories and influential legacies but also conveyed to me uninitiated by my own questions, my interlocutors often told me who they thought was the most crucial person or woman filmmaker for me to talk to, speaking from their experiences of apprenticeship or their personal, film aesthetic and political likings and affiliations. Often mentioned was Meera Dewan's film *A GIFT OF LOVE* made in 1982 depicting a collective suicide by women jumping into a well as an anti-dowry revolt<sup>94</sup> and Manjeera Dutta who, as was often stressed, managed to work very independently of any funding bodies. Further there are women like Sehjo Singh, Chandita Mukherjee, Suhasini Mulay, or C.S. Lakshmi who founded the women's archive *Sparrow* and got known for her film *THE FLYING BIRD* (1989). Vasudha Joshi, whose film *FOR MAYA* I addressed in my introduction and that I feel is under-appreciated, started filmmaking in 1988 (*VOICES FROM BALIAPAL*) as I mentioned in my introduction. Vijaya Mulay needs to be mentioned as a pioneer, in terms of her own filmmaking that began in 1967 with *THE TIDAL BORE*, but also concerning her position within governmental film and educational institutions and her early active involvement with e.g. the Federation of Film Societies of India (founded 1959) and being the first female president of the IDPA (Independent Documentary Producers Association).<sup>95</sup> Throughout the 80s more and more women used film cameras, from the late 80s onwards also video cameras, to deal with issues very closely related to the women's movement which was one of largest and fastest growing new social movements at that time. For example in 1986 six women came together to form *The Media Storm Film Collective* in Delhi.<sup>96</sup> The development of *Media Storm* and their own reflections on their work, its context and form appeared exemplary of how on a larger scale filmmakers came to be critical of how a new space created can itself also become programmatic and through its dogmatism recreate stereotypes and institutionalised power structures. Critiquing one's own gaze of the Other provoked the

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<sup>94</sup> *A GIFT OF LOVE*, D: Meera Dewan, 17 min, B&W, 35 mm, India 1982. The film was produced with Films Division.

<sup>95</sup> Vijaya Mulay was the first woman filmmaker to receive the V. Shantaram Award for Lifetime Achievement for documentaries at the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) 2002, i.e. from the Government of India. She is also known for her short animation film *EK ANEK AUR EKTA* (7min, animation, colour, India 1974) which is known to many, especially those growing up during the 70s and 80s.

<sup>96</sup> *Media Storm* was formed by Sabeena Gadhihoke, Shohini Ghosh, Ranjanin Mazumdar, Shikha Jingan, Sabeena Kidwai and Charu Gupta.

film *A Hidden Story* (1995) by Ranjani Mazumdar and Shikha Jingan while later the different members continued to develop their own individual expertise, expanding the realm of gender and feminism.<sup>97</sup> A process of categorisations has in India been immensely supported by international funding agencies, which have put women's issues and later gender on their agendas. From within the women's movement critical voices bemoaned their activism for getting stuck in 'cases' as I will expand on later. The term woman filmmaker has thus gone through various phases, through institutions and funding bodies, filling the prefix 'woman' with different meanings, political and aesthetic wise. As I referred to in my introduction, many women filmmakers today are reluctant to own the term for themselves. They perceive it as a restriction to their cinematic language and politics. The first part of my work will continuously address those felt limitations and various reactions to that, while explicitly trying to expand those through the figures of the real and the political.<sup>98</sup>

Emphasising on the two documentary moments I described here assists in speculating on what else they could have added to our present or what they in fact do once we make them contemporary by showing or discussing them in the now. It is thus an intervention into writings of film histories by claiming that while film works are born out of a particular time and place, we can re-animate their potential time and again. Each viewing and each new interrogation of a film, each time it is brought in contact with other works, it is like uploading film history into the present, making it part of the here and now, as opposed to relegating it to a bygone past. Each viewing is thus always empirically singular. Further, reflecting on those film examples is also connected to the pleasure of research that is in finding the unexpected, the not yet known, new possible relations. Looking at them now and writing about them, bringing them into existence yet again and maybe posing other questions about them is hereby invested with a contemporary political interest – the relation between the real and feminism and thus the relation between the real and the political. Kaja Silverman writes about how a spectator is "lit up" by a film or artwork. Here, I would like to do the reverse. I would like to light up those buried film works. As films they receive light in order to be projected, but they are also lit by questions arising from the contemporary moment. Hence, I chose the two examples CHHATRABHANG and YEH SIRF KAHANI HAI?, to "light

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<sup>97</sup> A HIDDEN STORY, D: Ranjani Mazumdar & Shikha Jingan, 58 min, color, Video, India 1995.

<sup>98</sup> For a summarising report of parallel though different women film hi/stories in a European (here Germany, Berlin) context see: Schulte Strathaus, Stefanie: The point however was to change it - from feminist cinema to the queerness of the institutions? A report from Berlin. 3. *Berlin biennale for contemporary Art*. Catalogue. Berlin. 2004. p. 268-276.

them up”<sup>99</sup>, proposing that they can support other film works that followed later despite the fact that they did not constitute their direct or conscious ancestors.<sup>100</sup>

## 5. Conversations

Ways of working are embedded in contexts, they are defined by or work against actual and discursive institutions and they comprise choices, which are linked to aesthetic and political goals. What does a way of working produce other than its product? Is there excess in producing through collaboration, with transparency and via processual conversation?

I met with Paromita Vohra during the very initial stages of my research in 1999. I sensed her dedication to her own work as much as her thinking and engagement in the wider context of documentary filmmaking in India. Thus, several months before I started the main part of my fieldwork I asked her via an e-mail letter whether she could imagine me participating in her current film project and taking out time for longer conversations between us at various steps of the production. I proposed stages of the film production that I wanted to follow up more intensely, thinking that these might be the most fruitful for me, and where I could possibly be useful for the production as well. As discussed in my introduction, one of the basic premises of embarking on this research was to make my questions transparent and to also share the development and changes throughout my research with everybody involved, an agreement that was partly also a condition set out by filmmakers expressed through comments such as: “You have to say your opinion now, you can’t just be critical later”. Paromita responded with an interest in my research and a general agreement to cooperate while also explaining that my participation had to be decided on concretely while the project was happening and that during shooting and intense editing phases it may be difficult for her to have an extra person on board but that she was open to regular conversations. Her response was similar to others I received, a generous openness about my participation as well as having to work with unpredictability. This was already telling of the kinds of conditions these non-fiction films were produced in. They were mostly low budget, working with a relatively small team and on a working schedule which could change any time and thus demanded everybody’s ability to react to new situations and schedules. While my initial idea had been to participate in one or two projects, I soon decided that this wasn’t the most workable and productive way of spending my

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<sup>99</sup> See Silverman, Kaja 1997. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Routledge. P. 19.

<sup>100</sup> Conversations with Nanna Heidenreich and her comments have helped me clarify these thoughts.

research time. Assistant positions which would have allowed me to work closer by a film project, often required local experts. On the one hand, my participation thus stayed flexible and allowed me to react to events that seemed of importance while on the other hand it needed to be worked out continuously. Keeping track of the production processes of the main projects I wanted to follow up was thus essential. As with other media anthropology research and also related to being in an urban context, the so-called *field* had to be continuously constructed and negotiated.<sup>101</sup>

What did I want to know and what were the moments of production where decisions were made? How would ethnography of media practice actually look like? During shooting phases, a lot of time could be spend waiting and helping with transcriptions and logging was a straightforward possibility to contribute some labour to a project, although, after many hours alone with a TV and my laptop, I also found myself wondering about how productive this kind of participation was for the research process.<sup>102</sup> What were the parts of filmmaking practice where one really felt at the nick of things? It was very clear that it was not just a matter of the mere 'being there' and being open to the surprises of a research context as an open 'field', but finding myself evaluating 'usefulness' when different parties were involved also seemed inappropriate at times. I generally moved between not letting the concerns I brought with me predetermine the kinds of knowledges I met and an understanding of the criticality which does not aim at a critical description or analyses of that which is supposed to be naturally found, but hopes for a critical intervention which constitutes itself through a researcher coming into a multilayered field as a political subject but also reacting to questions developed throughout the research and acting politically and ethically via this process of adaptation. My own research practice quickly confirmed that the famous phrase of the 'multi-sited' field can not mean an understanding of a field which still carries with it an understanding that the researcher merely needs to find the 'right', even though multiple and complex, connections and influences to reach an ever more complete and true representation.<sup>103</sup> My search aligned itself with work in anthropology and outside this academic discipline which can be described as an activist approach to

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<sup>101</sup> See Appadurai, Arjun 1997. *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Marcus, George 1995. 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography'. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24. P. 95-117

<sup>102</sup> See Dornfeld, Barry 1998. *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*. Princeton University Press. P. 5ff. His is an early example of media anthropology that describes very well this process of 'what to take part in', also admitting that considerable time is spent on waiting.

<sup>103</sup> John Hutnyk's and Ursula Rao's workshop "Transgressions" at the EASA 2006 in Bristol (UK) raised interesting questions towards this search for a yet new understanding of the field, or anti-field. Although from the field of art history and therefore a different corpus of research, my thinking has also been inspired by Butt, Gavin 2005. *After Criticism. New Responses to Art and Performance*. Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell.

ethnography in the sense of a 'strategic intervention' in Donna Haraway's sense. Further and as stated earlier I strongly connected to what AbdouMaliq Simon calls "...a practice of being attuned to faint signals, flashes of important creativity in otherwise desperate manoeuvres, small eruptions in the social fabric that provide new texture, small but important platforms from which to access new views."<sup>104</sup> What interested me was thus also instances of the making of a reality as a political endeavour and this I would argue demands a fine tuning of ethnographic research to the many fields of intensities which lets itself be affected by the 'faint signals' of the emergence of the not yet imagined.

If one of the aims of media anthropology is to research and theorise media practice but to also account for the theory that lies in practice, it seemed necessary but also impossible to clearly delineate what media practice actually is when media practice is lurking in almost everything we do. In my case researching and media practice itself often meant talking.<sup>105</sup> Talking as in a conversation that I record, chatting in the editing room, discussing a decision to be made on the phone or exchanging opinions via email, a form of writing that often seemed more talkative and yet attains its own quality of exchange. Next to watching partly edited material, rough cuts and final films in various places and for different occasions, at public screenings or for myself at a TV screen in an office, in somebody's home or on my laptop, media practice became a lot about conversing *on* practice while being practice itself. Media practice was speaking about scripts, rough cuts, audience reactions, dream projects, political contexts. The talking also became what seemed most useful to the filmmakers with whom I spent considerable amounts of time. After an initial phase of getting to know each other's work, most filmmakers also took initiative by calling me up, inviting me as a test audience for rough-cut screenings or sending me script notes they had been working on for me to comment on them. There were always production parts which didn't allow for my participation and I remember a few Sunday morning phone conversations where Paromita conveyed to me the development of the overall structure of the film, at times her worries about how to deal with the immense load of material and how to work fiction and non-fiction together. She would then also inquire about how my research was proceeding, whom I had met, which films I had seen and how I related to them.

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<sup>104</sup> AbdouMaliq 2004: 12.

<sup>105</sup> Alex Juhasz's analyses in 1995: *AIDS TV. Identity, Community and alternative video*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, convinced me most through its theorising via describing production meetings where women with very different backgrounds spoke about their views, preferences and what they rejected. Here I would like to thank Fay Ginsburg who introduced me to Juhasz work, which has at this point been a very crucial inspiration.

Looking at this now and appreciating the continuity of relationships like this, I see a very fruitful development where research relationships turn into friendships while professional relationships become clearer and where recognising each other's ways of working gets strengthened.<sup>106</sup>

One day at the Dadar studio Agneetar, Paromita and I had arranged for a longer conversation after her day of editing. We took the women's compartment of the local train, crowded as usual during rush hour, from Dadar further out to Andheri. We walked to a restaurant through streets, which were slowly emptying out after the evening market activities and people's commuting home was coming to an end. I remember it as quite a typical urban atmosphere at dusk. The heat, the crowds, the pace and the intensity of the day was still present and yet slowly fading; the air cooled down just a tiny bit, lights were turned on one after the other and passing through housing complexes one could hear the sounds of cooking activities. The mixture of people in the local trains and walking on the busy streets made these daily experiences in Bombay very different from those I had in Delhi. Walking to go to places, instead of a routine evening stroll in one's small neighbourhood park appeared more as a Bombay activity to me. We set out for a restaurant Paromita had suggested in Andheri East. There were mostly men, only a few families and couples, maybe due to alcohol being served and the late hour. We were the only 'unaccompanied' women in the locality but after the initial curious looks at our appearance we were able to have a long undisturbed conversation over dinner, touching on various issues around making films in general, writing, how we related to current politics and to which histories we felt connected. A dinner conversation which was also an interview, recorded, later transcribed and now material that I converse with, parts of which were updated by later meetings or questions and conversations over email.

Paromita Vohra told me, along the example of an exhibition dealing with women in India from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1947, including the freedom movement, how she felt very remote from these histories and how she found that these large national narratives prevailing in India would make it hard for women who fought for their rights within smaller frameworks to be regarded as icons. Additionally, women who have become

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<sup>106</sup> See the introduction of Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, (2002) *Media Worlds. Anthropology on new terrain*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 8ff, which also references Ginsburg's notion of cultural activism and George Marcus' notion of the 'activist imaginary'. Both scholar's elaborations on the parallel activities and *complicities* of the researcher and the filmmaker or artists have been very crucial for my research and writing.

icons for the Indian women's movement were now associated with moralistic ways of lives and thus young women would not find linkages to these histories and people. While she saw a positive move in having to find one's own path and while UNLIMITED GIRLS consciously keeps on questioning how aligning oneself to movements could possibly close one's politics and lead to merely following agendas, she emphasises the lack of moments, movements, people and ideas to identify with or refer to, histories for herself and for others to relate to. Equal and fruitful linkages between generations seemed then absent to her, instead it was personal arguments and internal politics that one was often confronted with. She termed the lack of older people in her life in terms of support to develop her ideas as a 'crisis for [her] entire generation'.

PV: Why do you want somebody like that in your life? You want to be able to have the strength to be honest about things. You want to be able to speak to somebody about your confusions, politically or personally; and to arrive at a solution by articulating those. If you are always forced to a corner of not revealing everything, then how do you resolve it? You have friendships. I am lucky. I have very extraordinary friendships in which I can be honest. But having somebody older who you feel has experienced those things really makes a difference. (22<sup>nd</sup> May 2002)

We started questioning whether this was a global phenomenon, how the wish for mentors, the wish for the 'wisdom' of someone older could also in some way be an old-fashioned idea and how we grew up with this being associated with boys and older men, through films, literature and at times one's own experience. At the same time, we agreed on how this so-called generation gap between women was easily used by the media for a mockery of feminism and a furthering of a split.

PV: The culture of criticism in India is not one of conversation; it's one of 'I got you'. It's always like that in screenings. When you want a mentor, you want somebody to keep a conversation with. It doesn't have to be hierarchical. (22<sup>nd</sup> May 2002)

Paromita Vohra often stressed the importance of her strong informal network with her peers, which nourished her work and politics and went beyond a filmmaking and a local Bombay context through her work experiences in various fields (fiction script writing, short stories, holding workshops and teaching) and through her international work experience through her participation in the international film project A WOMAN'S PLACE which included filmmakers from the US, South Africa and India and for which Paromita had directed the contribution from India<sup>107</sup>). A WOMAN'S PLACE had been significant for her due to experiences of a discussion culture within Indian film circuits, which at that point seemed less open to her. With reference to post screening discussions, Paromita illustrated her experiences with audiences who were prejudiced towards new attempts in style. Discussions would take place along parameters of what

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<sup>107</sup> A WOMAN'S PLACE, D: Paromita Vohra, 40 min, colour, Video, India 1998.

film languages and which messages could be understood by the 'masses'. The implications of discourses like these, which often sounded similar to state as well as private TV programming rationale but which also stemmed from a Marxist activist endeavour to stir the masses as a political entity against the supremacist nation-state will receive more attention in chapter two. The limitations inherent in the tendency to homogenize *the audience* as well as seeing the viewer as a receiver rather than as a participant seem evident. They limit the expansion of formal aspects of filmmaking and they ultimately limit the development of movement politics.

Paromita's wish for a situation where her assistant would become known for her own work and abilities rather than as her assistant made her emphasize transparency, open discussions; a general sense of collaboration was a working atmosphere that she was striving to attain. While she expressed fascination with and knowledge of the history of documentary filmmaking in India, she also mentioned difficulties in discussing with honesty and trust, the different points of view regarding film styles, one's approach to political filmmaking or the ethics of dealing with ones' subjects, with other filmmakers. During a film conversation after the screening of her film Q2P (2006)<sup>108</sup>, she interestingly referred to the development of her own film style, acknowledging how she herself was revisiting and maybe addressing and negotiating different of certain documentary modes that she had initially rejected.<sup>109</sup> Working oneself through different formats and reworking a format one had initially rejected may however be very different if it occurs from a situation of choice rather than a working context where a specific form is felt to be unquestioned and elevated as the only true form of political filmmaking (see chapter two). Characteristics of apprenticeships and thus ways of learning are surely intertwined with understandings of politics where one's political thinking and acting is transmitted and developed as much through the political matters being discussed as by the ways of working and discussing with others and how the process of arriving at opinions or further questions is political in itself.<sup>110</sup> The wish to create a discursive working process rather than a predefined outcome was expressed by Paromita within our conversations, in her writings and it is an underlying formal aspect of UNLIMITED GIRLS. The script and production meetings I participated in supported

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<sup>108</sup> Q2P (Toilets and the city), D: Paromita Vohra, 54 min, Digital Video, colour, India 2006.

<sup>109</sup> The screening took place 6th December 2006 at Goldsmiths College, University of London, as part of the Visual Cultures Department's lecture and screening series.

<sup>110</sup> This could further be elaborated on with respect to different perceptions of learning or training and the different kinds of knowledges that get supported through a radical pedagogy approach. Related discussions take place regarding new definitions of what an Academy can entail and how it can understand itself as a training institution or a critical practice.

this approach. While certain steps within the production needed the director to develop ideas and take script decisions on her own, a very intense exchange with her editor and script adviser on the development of the script and editing was visible, characterising thereby a particular openness to the whole production process from which I profited as well. This is not to idealise nor would I be able to or want to judge the fulfilment of a collaborative openness that is being aspired. The strongly emphasised aspiration to open dialogue and a collaborative processual working as a team and the structural set up, such as team meetings that potentially allow it, is however crucial. In a text where Paromita Vohra critiques the limited politics when perceiving film as merely media advocacy, thus as a representation of pre-set ideas, agendas and arguments, she also refers to the difficulties of putting her claims into practice, using the example of media workshops with teenage girls. In her eyes her first attempts failed, as the participants produced more or less replications of a prescribed political correctness as well as mainstream MTV aesthetics.

“... In the second year of working with the girls’ media group, we abandoned much of our anxiety about how pedagogical we were being, and whether we were addressing all the right feminist points, though we did so in an innovative way. We replaced most of the workshops with creative ones: open-ended, conversational, expressive. At the end of the year, it was quite clear that the work which emerged had a tremendous honesty in it, but more importantly, a certain integrity and intelligence. Yet, I cannot imagine going to a funder and describing the project as it played out in the second year, and coming away with anything resembling a cheque.” (Vohra 2006: 209)<sup>111</sup>

A ‘non-hierarchical’ approach, based more on trusting people’s skills and interests was also the reason why Paromita Vohra so easily accepted the offer by the women’s organisation *Sakshi* to make a film on feminism. One of the NGO directors saw parts of the project *A WOMAN’S PLACE*. On the basis of this she decided that Paromita would be the right person to realise the film they had in mind. Impressed by not having to prove various credentials beforehand and by the extreme honesty and transparency while negotiating with the NGO, Paromita felt she could engage in making a film commissioned by the NGO, which independent filmmakers often felt was a difficult task due to dissimilar approaches to film as a political tool or film as a cinematic exercise that demanded a more open approach.

PV: To me it was the extremely non-hierarchical situation in which she asked me, because in India you constantly have to prove who you are, where you are coming from, what your politics are, what you know; it’s exhausting and it’s boring, because it does not get into a conversation. It’s all about this feudal posturing and none of it is about really politics. So Naina just came, talked to me and said, ‘do you want to do it’ and I said ‘yes’, and that was it. There were no power assertions of any sort. I just responded to her directness. Maybe I’ll be wrong, maybe

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<sup>111</sup> Vohra, Paromita 2006. *Separation Anxiety: the schisms and schemas of media advocacy, or 'Where are you tonight, Langston Hughs?* In: Wilson, Shamillah, Anasuya Sengupta & Kristy Evans (Eds). ‘Defending our dreams. Global Feminist Voices for a new Generation’. Zed Books Ltd. p. 201-211.

after two months I'll regret it, but so far I don't. I really feel it was good for me that I did it. The other thing I felt, you know, when I hear somebody say 'I am not a feminist', I get really upset. I just think, 'why are you not'? Those two were really the reasons why I wanted to do the film. (13.04.2002)

Paromita Vohra mentioned that *CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ* (1961)<sup>112</sup> inspired the way she wanted her interviews for the film to look like and feel like. In a later email she explained that she liked how the film's interviews were "deeply personal, full of emotions yet very intellectual".<sup>113</sup> Let's, for a moment, make a direct link between Jean Rouch's cinema verité experiment, groundbreaking at its time, and *UNLIMITED GIRLS*. Rouch provoked people on the streets of Paris in the summer of 1960 by asking them: "Êtes-vous heureux?" (Are you happy?). Paromita Vohra alias *Fearless* meets women and men of different generations in the streets of Bombay and Delhi, at train stations, schools, libraries or online chat rooms and asks them: "Are you a feminist?" At times this real and imagined questioning resonates during the conversation as if asking further. "And how does this impact on your life, your choices, your way of seeing the world?"

*Fearless* sets out for an explorative journey. She meets women like Urvashi Bhutalia, the co-founder of the publishing house *Kali for women*, Sonal Shukla, the director of the *Vacha women's library*, an independent researcher working on gender issues in the Kashmir conflict, the founding woman of *Shakti Shalini*, an activist organisation seeking to support women in violent marriages and following up dowry death cases. She also meets *The Handas*, a young modern couple, who speak of what they mean by independence and how nevertheless 'we comes first then I', *Kanchan Gowre*, then the only woman taxi driver in Bombay, a novice priest who would leave the church if it would not accept his belief in feminism, and many college boys and girls, some outspokenly feminist, some hesitant, some unsure about how feminism could fit into their realities. A quality of passing by and catching fractions of conversations is created. The camera often takes on a social position and is placed as if being part of the conversations taking place or it takes *Fearless*' place in the encounter. The meeting of people is casual, though the talking and listening is attentive, gradually adding on more perspectives rather than proving a point or an argument through an expert position. Each interlocution attains similar importance; there is no immediate formal

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<sup>112</sup> *CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ* (*CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER*), D: Jean Rouch, 85 min, 35 mm, B&W, Paris 1961. By now there are numerous writings on what I still find one of the most fascinating examples of documentary filmmaking. See e.g.: Feld, Steven (Ed./Trans.) 2003. *Ciné-Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. This book entails scripts notes and conversations between Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. Readers could refer to Ginsburg, Faye & Himpele, Jeff (Eds.) 2005. "Cine-Trance: A Tribute to Jean Rouch (1917-2004)". In: *American Anthropologist*, vol 107, no. 1, March 2005.

<sup>113</sup> Email response 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2004.

hierarchy or creation of authorities through the conversations. The conversations stand somewhat apart from how talking head interviews or narratives are often used in documentary film: neither the expert who gives an authoritative view nor the lay person who is deployed to give an 'authentic' subjective voice. Like Meena Menon and Vina Mazumdar who added their subjective and singular perspectives and orientations towards chosen historical moments and their memories of those, other conversation partners also receive importance through the ideas and choices they present. Talking to the founding women of *Shakti Shalini* is less to introduce the organisation than to talk about their individual choices that led to their work. They become central to the overall argument of the film through their attitudes to politics and life, the conditions they live in and the activism they choose or don't. Hence, their personal politics reflect on the larger questions of ideologies and movements and how singular lives stand with or next to them.

"Objectivity consists in inserting what one knows into what one films, inserting oneself with a tool which will provoke the emergence of a certain reality ... This is the objectivity one can expect, being perfectly conscious that the camera is there and that people know it. From that moment we live in an audio-visual galaxy; a new truth emerges, cinema verité, which has nothing to do with normal reality." (Jean Rouch in Eaton 1979: 50)<sup>114</sup>

I see a similar sense of objectivity through provocation by the camera's present in what constitutes the main conversations in UNLIMITED GIRLS. They are provoked by Fearless' curiosity and her 'going out and looking for a history' of feminism and how it continues to leave traces. Points of view and political choices are clearly more important than what is usually understood as 'objective' representation, while the personal becomes a route for broader contemplations. In a cinema verité fashion, it is the reflections that we are asked to relate to or participate in, provoking a ciné-reality which provides exactly that kind of discursive space, a space for reflection which can then again exceed the cinematic and live on in the spectator's thoughts. What is exercised could thus be less an *epistephilia* as in the drive for gaining access to a field of knowledge fulfilled through talking head information, but an *epistephilia* as a reflecting on knowing.<sup>115</sup>

The chat room, actual and iconic in the film, adds another layer of thinking to this. Rather than viewing oneself being interviewed and discussing the film material with the other film participants as in Rouch's example, placed in a preview cinema, the chat

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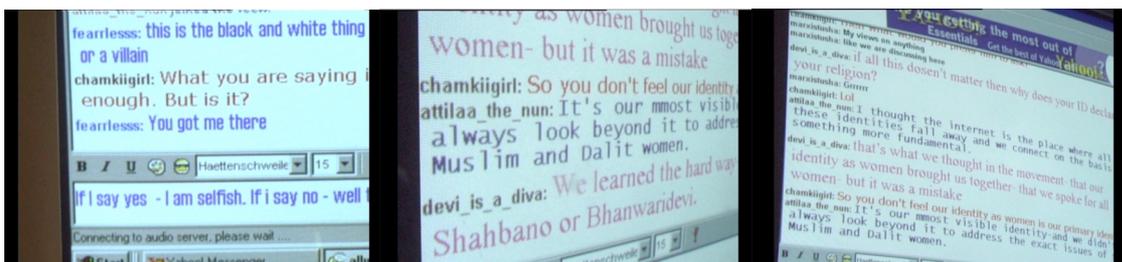
<sup>114</sup> Cited in Eaton, Mick 1978. "Ciné trance – the vision of Jean Rouch", interview by Dan Yakir. In: *Film Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 3, spring 1978. The gap I left includes: "When I have a camera and a microphone I'm not my usual self, I'm in a strange state, in a cine-trance."

<sup>115</sup> For a reading on *epistephilia* as a desire to see reality represented see: Cowie, Elisabeth 1999. "The spectacle of Actuality", in: Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Eds.) 1999. *Collecting visible evidence*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press. P. 19-45.

room is that other zone *Fearless* returns to, to exchange views on what she had encountered. Here we literally have a “room full of voices” from *Marxist Usha* to *Anarchist Ann*, we hear and read women discussing passionately.<sup>116</sup> In many layers, the format of the film thus creates spaces for open discussion, viewpoints being raised and contested. The film thus easily appears as a wish fulfilment for the director who misses exactly those kinds of spaces but on a broader level. Also, I am reminded of the reduction of freedom of speech and the lament about the decrease in the actual spaces of debate and democratic exchange that was expressed in many conversations I had with filmmakers. A real and imagined space is thus constructed, which gives way to think, a cine reality that might set a spark in the spectator’s heads.

CHRONIQUE D’UN ÉTÈ and UNLIMITED GIRLS go decisively different ways when it comes to the overall filmmaking process and the cinematic format developed. The attitude to conversation and provocation for a new relation between the image and the real and the active use of a cinematic reality does however bear similarities. Paromita’s inquiry into feminism, her love for popular culture and the resulting form of addressing an audience has to lead to different formal decisions, but both experiments remain linked in their strong desires to liberate imaginations. Jean Rouch’s attitude to filmmaking as a ciné-trance, his relation to surrealism and his later practice of an anthropological *partagé* further differs from how Paromita Vohra works with and develops her film form from the conversational texture she employs.

“As my research progresses from the classical to the obsessive modes – from reading and interviewing important figures to talking to everybody I met, it became clear to me that the conversations were the interesting things – to document an idea not just by external examples and ‘proof’, but by the interior, fluid, personal engagement with it. And so the entire structure was predicated on this idea of a conversation. Conversation presumes knowledge and it takes certain things for granted. It is an exploratory, clarificatory exercise. It has wit and hopefully,



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Chat room sequences.

<sup>116</sup> Paromita Vohra wrote the chat room conversations with Hansa Tapliyal, a filmmaker and scriptwriter friend. Quotes from her interviews are used and fictional comments added to them.

honesty rather than posturing, but it also has elements of performance.” Paromita Vohra, *The Lost Art of Conversation*<sup>117</sup>

Conversation becomes more than a process, a method of research or a useful tool in organising one’s arguments in a film. And - as so often during the years I was fiddling with how to write about, with or in relation to the films and filmmakers I was fascinated by, I am struck by similarities. There continued to be numerous links between the researcher’s and filmmaker’s thinking about what research meant, about forms of acquiring so called material, about forms of presentation, about the politics involved and about fiction and non-fiction, academic standards and theoretical fabulation, about knowledge production and potential critical participations.

Through the process of working with the many conversations I had recorded, that I recalled and that continued via e-mail and face-to-face, I became ever more aware of how conversation is language. This seemed at first banal but soon it became obvious that each choice of speaking contains more than the said. There is poetry and politics in talking and thus there are many levels of how one communicates in conversations. My elevating conversations from a form of research into a theory producing practice occurred thus through multiple layers.

This immediately translates into film languages. Each language has its own aesthetics. No language is innocent. Hence, I started from the presumption that no non-fiction format derives naturally either from its material, a camera or a cameraperson’s hand. With each format there is a choice involved. Choices are made with a particular understanding of what non-fiction may do or should do or how that understanding could be pushed further. At times choices link to notions of what an imaginary audience may be able to relate to, what they would accept as intelligible but also how one may be able to stretch their receptiveness as well. And importantly, there are demands of certain times and places, particular engagements with the every day, just as much as with the larger social and political questions one is surrounded by. For some, notions of objectiveness are crucial and for others the personal reaches the utmost level of authenticity and through that the quality of the real. Not starting from a theoretical position or defined assumptions of what this bespoke notion of the real defines or entails, I can state that much: I perceive the real as an open figure, a figure in process,

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<sup>117</sup> Vohra, Paromita *The Lost Art of Conversation*. <http://www.upperstall.com/unlimitedgirls.html>, last retrieved Dec. 10<sup>th</sup> 2003.

in process as it relates just as much to empirical realities as to what can be evoked in fabrications. I look at non-fiction films with an eye to what kind of real they are giving space to, believing, as mentioned, that this is never a natural given. In this manner of trusting that films can produce and 'bring forth' the real and a public that can perceive it, I will certainly be closer to some theoretical arenas than others, but do not claim to be speaking through them.<sup>118</sup>

## 6. Trapped

NW: Concerning your choice of people to interview or talk to for your film, did you feel you had to be very careful with whom you were talking and whom you would leave out?

PV: Yes, a lot. And in the end I made my choice in the most material way. Some of it is determined that I was going to do fiction and I knew I could not have the budget to interview more people. I felt that this was a better use for the money, than trying to interview 12 people instead of six, because anyway I couldn't interview 93. I mean if I could not go to Mysore and if I could not interview a feminist from the North East, then I don't see why I should have to go to the South to interview feminists there, if I don't have the budget. Then I think it doesn't matter, I really feel that. I know that in a screening when someone is accusing me of this, which they are going to do obviously, and I am going to say this, then they'll be like, 'oh, right'. I am going to get the same accusation that Ponni<sup>119</sup> gets. That, 'you are an upper class, English speaking woman, outside of the movement, and you make these histories'. All I can say is, that I have tried my hardest to not make *the* history of feminism. That's why when I chose people, I chose them only for the things that they say and not the histories they represent. (conversation 13.04.2002)

At this point, Paromita stressed her approach to the politics of writing history again, here more related to the power that lies in acts of representation. The often extremely heightened awareness and seemingly unavoidability of class, caste and religious categories is something that I met as worries, as frustrations, as points of reflection in many conversations I had. Who is entitled to represent whom? A question that accompanies filmmakers' practices to varying degrees when being positioned as an 'upper class English-speaking woman', questioning how one could be integrative of rural experiences, different religious backgrounds as well as chosen sexualities outside the mainstream while not being tokenistic. Paromita Vohra's confidence grew with her project and in the end she decided that the idea of the film would be strong enough despite not being 'representative'. Still, questioning and reflecting on how the 'very urban feel' of the film would be received, how issues of caste and class could be embodied in the film style and content and how to avoid provoking laughter at a police man because of class issues, stayed throughout the film production process and was a constant concern when showing the assembly or the rough cut to me and others. She

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<sup>118</sup> The ability of film to bring forth a new audience is of course strongly related to a Deleuzian philosophy of cinema. See Gilles Deleuze' writing on the 'time image' in Deleuze, Gilles 1989. *Cinema II. The Time Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>119</sup> Ponni is a young woman who was interviewed for the film and who, together with her friend Richa, organised screenings of queer sexuality films.

later reflected on the various presentations of UNLIMITED GIRLS and its implication on precisely all these questions, categorisations and creations of camps of the self and the other for a dogmatic politics. Next to the reactions she cherished and had hoped for, of people getting into deep, anxious or excited discussions, and people expressing that they would leave the film with ideas for reflecting on their own lives, she writes about agonistic responses after screenings:

“One person even sent me a four-page academic article about how my film was elitist, as was my persona. *Therefore, by implication, the film could not be a valuable political document because after all the ‘real’ India is in the villages and the rest is, I guess, maya, illusion.*

Identity politics has its roots in a very important tenet of equal but different, not same; it resists the power structures of caste, class and gender within progressive politics. In fact, it often seems to have become a peculiar form of wielding power: as if, now that your box has been recognized, you dare not leave it. *A sense that we must forever work along the lines of what has been codified and ordained; blurring these lines is not permitted. It creates an effective medium of conservative caution – the focus is on what should be said, and who should speak for whom.* This process has a militaristic aesthetic, and it effectively disallows the most fundamental questions of form, essential both to feminism and art – now that we know what we want to speak of, *how shall we speak of it? How do we join what is individual and human in us with the universal, the socio-economic common identity we each embody?*

As importantly, if I am not permitted to speak of others’ stories, does it mean by implication that I need never listen to them? Or that I tell them with a comfortable disclaimer, acquitting myself of responsibility? Optionally, if speaking of my own experiences is a political indulgence and so to be eschewed, then what am I? Someone set apart from the need for change and accountability? *These questions and uncertainties are a natural corollary of change. But it seems to be enough to plug these anxieties rather than to use them as a means of developing a deeper conversation.*

It is almost as though a checklist has been created on which you can tick off a set of identity representations, rather than plunge into the messy questions: how do we speak of heterosexuality without undermining same sex relationships? How do we speak of Hindu identity without ignoring Muslim women’s issues? *When does anxiety about not speaking for others translate into not speaking of them?* How do we find a way for the many identities within us to form a fluid whole; that there is a little of me in you and you in me, loved, hated, othered, that we imbue in each other?<sup>120</sup> (italics by N.W.)

Addressing anxieties but also working from the fluidities of subject positions seems to demand an awareness of histories and legacies but at the same time, to not let those limit the questions we want to ask. It’s a claim to speak in dissonances rather than attempting a false political correctness. Working against a ‘militaristic aesthetics’ is hereby a major drive for Vohra’s film practice. The loadedness of how to be representative on the one hand and the limitations through thinking of images merely in terms of representation of the other seemed to be addressed by many, though often less defined, in ‘the need for a new language’. The aforementioned inheritance of valuing art or film according to how authentically it represents the Indian nation, receives another layer when looking at the histories of how the idea of the nation-state is entangled with gender. This is not the place to make a distinctive contribution to

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<sup>120</sup> Vohra 2006: 206.

those complex discourses, much has been written about it, but for me it is the specific kinds of relations between movement politics and filmmaking, between feminisms and film form that bear a particular potential for expanding the political.<sup>121</sup>

Radha Kumar describes the fractions that occurred after India's independence. She names loosing a common enemy as one cause but also credits that in any situation the question of gender in India has been an immensely complex one and had till independence not been politically defined.<sup>122</sup> In terms of constructing a movement it fell behind the larger struggle for independence. Though only an episodic account of the various women's movements in India, Kumar's illustrated book *A history of doing* shows I think very well how through various battles which women's groups have taken up, such as the agitation against *sati*<sup>123</sup>, against rape as well as the issue of personal law versus a secular civil law, the issue of representation has for a long time been a central matter of discussion within singular women's organisations and the wider associations between those groups. She however also refers to the exploitation of the 'representation issue' for traditionalist and communal ends.

"Counter movements against feminist (or women's rights ideas) began to be initiated by sections of traditionalist society, which took the more normal course of using an anti-feminist discourse based on demands for religious or cultural autonomy. (...) However, where earlier such attacks would have led to a wave of sympathy for the feminists, from the mid-eighties on they were accompanied by a public, and increasingly sophisticated, critique of feminism. Interestingly, the arguments against the feminists were remarkably similar to those advanced against social reformers in the nineteenth century: that they were westernized, upper-class and urban, and therefore ignorant of, and unsympathetic to, traditional 'Indian' society."<sup>124</sup> (Kumar 1993: 159)

Establishing categories of 'real Indian/women' versus 'the feminists' thus gets used to bypass the actual violence and hence becomes a part of and fosters an abuse of women within a wider discourse that links gender and the nation, i.e. constructions of

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<sup>121</sup> For more detailed analyses of discourses of nation building, nationalist discourse and womanhood, family, Hindu traditions etc. please refer to the large and prolific scholarship such as: Chatterjee, Partha 1994. *The nation and its fragments: colonial and post-colonial histories*, Delhi: Oxford University Press. Chatterjee, Partha 1989 'Nationalism and the woman's question', in Sangari, Kumkum & Vaid, Sudesh (Eds.) 1989, *Recasting women: essays in colonial history*. Delhi: Kali For Women. Sarkar, Tanika 2001. *Hindu wife and Hindu nation: gender, religion and the pre-history of Indian nationalism*. Delhi: Permanent Black. Menon, Nivedita (Ed) 2000. *Gender and Politics in India*. Oxford University Press. For a related media anthropology discussion please refer to Mankekar, Purnima 2000. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics. Television, Womanhood and Nation in Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari 1993. *Real and imagined women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.

<sup>122</sup> See Kumar, Radha 1993. *A History of Doing. An illustrated account of Movements for Women's Rights*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. P. 1ff.

<sup>123</sup> A Hindu ritual which worships a widow, which can lead to her sacrificing herself or being forced to sacrifice herself, which then happens through her being burnt. Therefore sati is most often defined in a short circuit as widow burning. Kumar however refers to the possibility of only worshipping and opposing the actual act of burning. She also refers to the use of sati as a colonial means to justify having to 'civilize' Indians and their barbaric customs, as well as and again related, sati as a means for traditionalists using the 'Hinduism in danger' slogan to defend sati for communal ends. This is certainly a very complex issue that I cannot discuss in a qualified manner here. See also: Kumar 1993: 172ff.

<sup>124</sup> Kumar 1993: 159.

the nation, of religion, of ethnicity via gender definitions. Often it is situations of crises which bring the use of gender in nationalist discourses closer to the surface, something, that again became shockingly clear through the extreme violence against women during the carnage in Gujarat.<sup>125</sup> The workings of, for example, shaming the other through humiliating and abusing their women is a distressing history that the Indian subcontinent has also lived through during partition. The subsequent use of rhetoric based on these strategies against women's appearance in public is interestingly addressed in Paromita Vohra's recent film *MORALITY TV AND THE LOVING JEHAD: A THRILLING TALE* where a member of the RSS talking of a "Love Jihad", in his view painstakingly planned by the Muslim community, is set next to the media's very own workings of humiliation as well as the police's aggressive reaction to couples in public parks.<sup>126</sup>

Kumar however also points out parallels to the 19<sup>th</sup> century antagonism between reform and tradition, elite and 'the real Indians'. Numerous aspects thus play into the above-mentioned critique of an intellectual elite which stands against 'the rest of the nation', implying that they know nothing about that rest.<sup>127</sup> Layers of colonial and postcolonial histories, different alignments made, hierarchies strengthened or constructed next to the stark differences in opportunities and access to education. While it is not my task here to prove the opposite or verify these accusations, their real and imaginary existence seemed to impact filmmaker's choices and anticipations as well as actual audience reactions as is prolifically elaborated in the above quote by Paromita Vohra. The depth of these accusations and the unavoidability was also simply expressed in:

„We are a very hierarchised society, backed up with unequal relationships. As a filmmaker, whatever you do, you are tied up in power structures“ (R. Mazumdar, conversation 7.October 1999)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See: *How has the Gujarat Massacre affected minority women? The survivors speak. Fact-finding by a Women's Panel*. Published April 16<sup>th</sup> 2002. Info on report by International Women's Organisation

<sup>126</sup> *MORALITY TV AND THE LOVING JEHAD: A THRILLING TALE*, D: Paromita Vohra, 29min, Digital Video, colour Indian 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Madhu Kishwar's famous text 'Why I do not call myself a feminist' in: *Manushi*, Nov-Dec 1990, no. 61) could be further looked at here in terms of her critique towards a colonial attitude of western feminists on the one hand and an easy taking over of -isms stemming from an entirely different history of women's movements by Indian women. In Kishwar's view this leads to a stereotypical understanding of western feminism as well as neglects the real life experiences of women in India. The relation between an ideology and its relation to a lived-in reality, thus contextual social practices, is interesting here and also adds to the various demands of authenticity.

<sup>128</sup> Ranjini Mazumdar is a member of the women's media collective *Mediastorm* mentioned earlier in this chapter. She is a filmmaker as well as a cinema scholar. See: Mazumdar, Ranjini 2007. *Cinema: An Archive Of The City*. New Delhi: Permanent. Black.

A consequent self-effacement and its impact on documentary filmmaking is something I want to elaborate on later in more detail, but would here like to start looking at the power exercised through the idea of the nation.

Mary E. John stresses what has been called the “silent period” of the women’s movement, where the situation of Indian women was relegated to what was wished to become an egalitarian Free India and a welfare state “which resulted in the effective containment of pre-independence initiatives and an apparent quietism for close to three decades of postcolonial Indian history”.<sup>129</sup> In her conversation with *Fearless*, though in a part which is not included in the final film, Urvashi Bhutalia talks about the impossibility to speak of equality in the Indian context without qualifying what it really means in very specific circumstances.<sup>130</sup> The prevailing deep hierarchy would create immense contrasting conditions for people to live in, which made her prefer to speak of “rights rather than equality”. Mary E. John’s critique of the women’s movement articulating its politics only with the nation-state as its main reference point could be understood and taken further as a rather problematic or limiting politics when the phrasing of political aims as *rights* is dependent on the position of the subject’s identity as a citizen within a nation-state and within its constitution of the law.

She writes that:

“... one often hears of the “co-option” of the women’s movement by other forces such as the Hindu Right, the state or certain NGOs. This gives one the impression that the women’s movement had “a pure” beginning of its own, which only subsequently, that is to say, at some later stage, came to be taken over by different, contrary influences.”<sup>131</sup>

She expands on her critique of what she sees as a simplified view later when she asks, “How did the 1970s become a “beginning”, a point of origin for the contemporary phase of the women’s movement?” and that from the

“crises of legitimacy suffered by Congress from the end of the 1960s, which produced fundamental revisions in the Nehruvian model of politics and planned development (...) the *coding* of the Indian nation as socialist, guided by aims of national self-determination, still shaped political discourse to such a degree that these were also formative for a number of oppositional struggles. What must be presented as a crisis at one level, I am therefore trying to suggest, was also a re-legitimation of the state at another – as primary organ of governance, and source of potential well-being to its citizens. It was thus possible, and considered necessary, to question the state, expose the hollowness of its claims or the vested interests it harbored, while at the same time demanding certain accountability through the rights of

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<sup>129</sup> John, Mary E. 1999: “Gender, development and the women’s movement: problems for a history of the present”. In: *Signposts. Gender Issues on Post-Independence India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. p. 108.

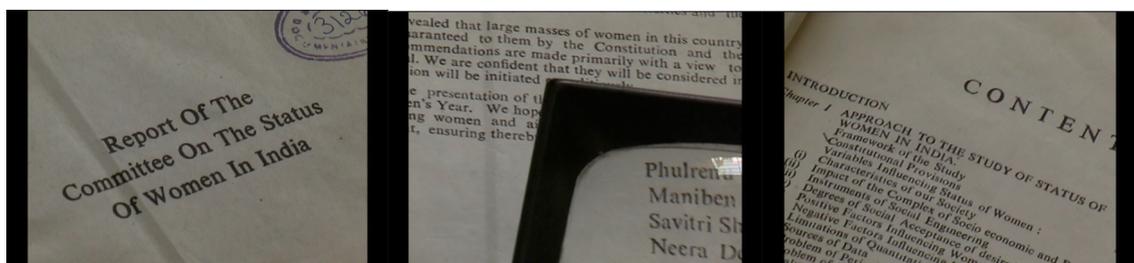
<sup>130</sup> Urvashi Bhutalia is one of the founders of *Kali for Women*, the first and only publishing house for writing on and by women in India. Conversations with her at the Delhi book fair as well as in the *Kali* office, where she talks more generally about the development of feminism, shares her thoughts on the recent status of feminism in India and talks about the founding ideas and current position of *Kali*, are part of *UG*. These conversations are part of the material I transcribed.

<sup>131</sup> John 1999: 102.

citizenship. However critical the institution of patriarchy was to become in the self-understanding of the women's movement, especially among autonomous groups, the Indian state has been the movement's constitutive site of contestation, or so I would like to contend.<sup>132</sup>

John takes the example of the 1974 produced Report *Towards Equality* on the status of women in India. While the result was indeed a "brain shattering" (Vina Mazumdar) experience for all women involved, the consequences or claims made from these findings were articulated as needs to strengthen Indianness, "suggesting measures to enable women in general, and rural and poor women [as authentic non western and national identities, John 1999: p. 107 earlier on] in particular to play "their full and proper role" in the making of the nation".<sup>133</sup> The politics of the report and subsequent social movements, to which John also counts the radical feminist movement (at that time), is thus mainly formed and articulated in terms of duties of the socialist state and thus the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. Whereby citizenship is further divided into group identities.

I see the questions that arise from John's self critique concerning a lacking discourse of self-defined difference close to how Paromita Vohra expands on the problematic of filmic representation. How do we not ignore the realities that nation-states and their various forms of governance still, or at times ever more so, exercise, and yet leave a reactive attitude and foster a thinking not confined by the limits of the state. How might speaking, theorising and practicing activism from autonomous spaces, from singularities and desires – not as an entertainment annex but as an intellectual source – sideline questions of representation and notions of the authentic Indian woman? What is thus the larger political context for 'chasing a mythological notion of reality' (Shohini Ghosh) and what could filmmaking, which seeks the potentialities in the truth that lies in fiction offer to this discourse?



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Report of the committee on the status of women in India.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 107.

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In 1997 Reena Mohan was still scolded for her fictional approach.

“There is (also) a certain notion of what a fiction and a documentary is going to look like and what the treatment for it is, and not that fictionalising could be in a documentary mood. People have blasted me for that.” (conversation with Reena Mohan, 21. February 2001)

For her film SKIN DEEP, one could call it a docu-fiction, Reena Mohan worked the many research interviews that she did with mainly urban middle class women into six fictional narratives.<sup>134</sup> She created characters acting like collective voices, speaking of, commenting on and performing women’s reactions to ideals of beauty and youth. The film addresses their traumatic experiences of feeling too fat, too dark, too old. During her research and filming, Reena Mohan did not only find that women would become very self conscious or stop talking and revealing their intimate worries as soon as the camera was on, but she herself started censoring her material acknowledging the vulnerability of the women she talked to.

“How fair is it to force her to speak, am I right to be expecting her to reveal herself, where does it border on voyeurism. Its that whole aspect of their vulnerability, because they will have to live with these images for the rest of their lives.” (Reena Mohan, conversation 21st February 2001)

Creating characters like the plastic surgery character, the model, the dark skinned woman and the fat woman allowed her to be non-didactic and yet to raise all the issues she wanted to have in the film. Reena Mohan divided the reactions to the film into filmmaker and non-filmmaker audience. While regular women, college girls and boys used the film as a catalyst to address increasing anxieties and pressures through the ever present ideal of beauty, filmmakers accused her of cheating and reacted with harsh criticism, which was also raised in some press articles. Her final credits expressing “thanks to all the persons who contributed to the truth of that fiction“ was not enough safeguard to convince her filmmaking peers of her solution to an ethical issue when it came to the filmmaker’s subjects’ privacy. While her formal references to contextual aesthetics like using stylisations of doubling as in photo studio practice, and performances referring to Indian goddesses and female mythological figures takes great care to locate the film in the visual cultural context of its main audience, what is critiqued is “a laziness” for not finding authentic characters who would have said what the filmmaker wanted them to say on camera.

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<sup>134</sup> SKIN DEEP, D: Reena Mohan, 83 min, colour, Beta SP/PAL, India 1998. The film was researched and produced over the course of two years. Paromita Vohra wrote the script and also played one of the characters.

Divided audiences are also what Madhusree Dutta experienced with *MEMORIES OF FEAR*, a film addressing domestic violence and seeking to find a form which does more than representing victims.<sup>135</sup> In one sequence a young girl is preparing a Rangoli painting in the yard of their house together with her grandmother. The girl is playing, singing, enjoying the festival preparations when drops of blood fall to the floor. Her grandmother and mother soon decide that she is now too impure to be witness to the preparations and must leave. Violence is enacted against a play, a dream, a relation to one's body. Similarly, violence is enacted when a teenage girl travels by train and is exposed to boys' 'eve teasing'.<sup>136</sup> Two more fictional stories which mark rising anxieties and consciousness about being a woman are set in between talking-head accounts of women having experienced domestic violence. Madhusree Dutta regretted that although the film won numerous prizes, the kind of violence she showed or tried to analyse was, to many of her activist colleagues, not violent enough to be political. The address of what became one of the main topics of the women's movement during the 80s and 90s, through so-called 'minor incidences', was for some bypassing the real issues, the real violence. Experiences during a girl's socialisation and fear or intimidation as a social condition rather than a singular event of violence, thus a broadening of the analyses to a public sphere as well as to family realms of which mothers are also a part, was not easily accepted as a valid contribution to the political engagements with violence. Through the choice of editing fiction and non-fiction parts loosely next to each other *MEMORIES OF FEAR* restrains from merely emphasising the graphic victim accounts nor does it try to give explanations to each singular case. The filmic aim is broader, exploratory, withstanding a predefined understanding of what the real issue is, using truth and fiction of every day stories as a widening of perspectives, a re-orientation and a sensitisation maybe to other unspoken realities. Madhusree Dutta also developed other forms of working with fiction. Her experimentations with theatricality and enactment in documentary film, that I have referred to already in my introduction, expand and explore documentary material through confrontations with the melodramatic. Following her films such as *SCRIBBLES ON AKKA* (2000)<sup>137</sup> she experimented further with melodramatic forms to also address questions of migration, citizenship, inheritance and communal violence in her recent non-fiction feature *7 ISLANDS AND A METRO* (see introduction).

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<sup>135</sup> *MEMORIES OF FEAR*, D: Madhusree Dutta, 57 mins, colour, 16mm, India 1995.

<sup>136</sup> Eve-teasing is used rather euphemistically to talk about molestation of women by men.

<sup>137</sup> *SCRIBBLES ON AKKA*, D: Madhusree Dutta, 60 min, 35mm, colour, India 2000.

What is then a certain legitimate border of what constitutes non-fiction filmmaking and when is it crossed? Why is one kind of experimentation with fiction applauded and the other condemned for either cheating or not being *real* enough? Why is creating one fiction film with female lay actors as in the case of the often cited film by Shabnam Virmani *WHEN WOMEN UNITE* (1996)<sup>138</sup>, no doubt a very valuable film and political project, perceived as valuable activism and the other as not addressing the real violence and therefore not being political enough? When is the political a mere synonym of an understanding of rights that is emptied out, lacking explorative and open analyses? What I am suggesting is not an easy dismissal of the benefit that identity and rights politics have realised but that nation-states and social movements that become implementers of policies may fail on the one hand to address the continuous new production of subjects without rights, and on the other hand, that creative explorations of diverse subjectivities foster an understanding of the political that is not complacent in remaining within the 'limits of the possible'.

The definition of authentic subjects, real issues and real urgencies, that find their authentic representations in film, might hereby play into a politics that easily becomes a standard rhetoric. Thus, if the real as a natural given in filmic spaces sits next to a discourse of rights that is predefined and governed, not shaped by diversities but by rooted definitions and instrumentalised by spokespersons and representatives, the playing with an expansion of the real as a creative and imaginative cinematic practice could interfere in a 'distribution of the sensible' that defines what is heard and seen, not listened to or rendered invisible. Perceiving the real as an effect of an explorative film process rather than a presentation of agendas and issues thus lays stress on a cinematic potentiality. What potential can we imagine from a film practice that believes the real to be something which is constantly to be looked for, as something that subtly interrogates what we are presented with as realities? Although we are by now very used to myriad experimentations of how the image and the real can be related, very accustomed to articulate governmentality within or enacted by notions of truth and also how those can be pushed and challenged, what remains to be tackled is how we can go further than merely stating this and make it more valuable within the context of each experiment and beyond that.

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<sup>138</sup> *WHEN WOMEN UNITE. THE STORY OF AN UPRISING*, D: Shabnam Virmani, 80 min, colour, Video, Indian 1996

## 7. ... in Culture

Radha Kumar describes how there was a shift in orientation and the kinds of feminisms of women's groups in the 80s to more positive aspects of women's lives and she addresses how political gatherings expanded their activities to cultural practices.

"... from now on solidarity and intimacy were increasingly, and more joyously, expressed through non-verbal forms, especially music and dance, than through words."<sup>139</sup> Kumar comments on the separation of those spheres of practice and on how cultural practices enhanced communication across differences but then also refers to:

"The bad sides of this separation between verbal and non-verbal communication were more complex: the relegation of the verbal to the public-political sphere re-inforced the dichotomy between the political and the personal, so that neither informed the other, and thus ideas of personal ethics and behaviour could not be lifted into political life, nor vice versa. The fact that it was not felt to be necessary to articulate the lessons learnt from non-verbal communication meant, similarly, that the sphere of the verbal was so severely restricted that the development of feminist ideas was stunted and their impact on political life was minimized: so that, more often than not, feminist politics had little to sustain itself of. This, in turn, meant that feminists tended to fall back on orthodox political ideas and methods in a detrimental fashion."<sup>140</sup>

While during the 80s there was a search for alternative feminist practices also in traditions of folk or mythic stories, a working out of resistant strategies from cultural practices seemed to be absent. In no account that I have read so far on the broader developments of the women's movement, is filmmaking mentioned as a political practice apart from the following: "by the early eighties feminism had branched into a series of activities, from the production of literature and audio-visual material to slum-improvement work, employment-generation schemes, health education and trade unions."<sup>141</sup> And while Kumar for instance raises a critique that more women in journalism altered the presence of women's issues but still failed to change the nature of journalism, I never found comments on how the fact that video was easily available as a medium since the early 80s and was indeed increasingly used for documentary filmmaking, has had an impact on feminist thought and practice.<sup>142</sup>

"We were all part of the very incipient women's movements that began at that time [post Emergency], what we called the independent women's movement, and getting into film or whatever came *because* of all the activity of being in the movement. That was the idea. It wasn't like today, where you look for subjects or themes which exist and they exist because of a body of research or activism and you come in and literally accept that analyses while you have not contributed to creating that analyses or framework, but it's an existent common sense position. That is what I see as a difference today – there is a group, which is creating the analyses and the framework and there are the people who are the media or writers, but this crossover

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<sup>139</sup> Kumar 1993: 144.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 148.

<sup>142</sup> Kumar calls for a more subjective reportage, turning ones attention away from events' reports, p: 151ff.

position, the dual membership is rarer today. At that time you saw yourself as a *participant*, not as a commentator.” (Deepa Dhanraj, conversation, 7th June 2002; emphasis mine)

At several points during our conversation Deepa Dhanraj stressed that her thinking through different times was not to make generalised statements about generation gaps and dividing the then and now. On the other hand, her comment evokes reflections on the consequences of what Paromita Vora also discusses as the pitfalls of media advocacy or what also links to what by many is called the NGO-isation of politics, movements and filmmaking. In a thought provoking paper, Malathi de Alwis addressed the changes in feminist activism and generational conflicts when young women do feminism as a 9-5 job, trying at the same time to look at the different demands on today’s women and the implications of their none the least feminist choices of living alone and being economically independent.<sup>143</sup>

The thread of thought that I would like to keep here though is related to the concept of participation in this context. How do we participate? How art or film works exercise participation is of course too big a question to be dealt with here. But – what it seems to link back to here is the question of ‘Who is the feminist?’, ‘Who is the real feminist?’ and what kinds of lives, works, and films does that demand?

We meet the fictional character in UNLIMITED GIRLS in her drifting morning thoughts and deciding to search for love. Via “Allyouneedislove.com” she enters a feminist chat room. Soon she herself has to reply to whether she sees herself as a feminist.

*‘I don’t know if I would call myself one [a feminist], too much of a label ...’ ... in practice, doesn’t it really mean joining a group and meeting agendas?’*

A question, the music gets louder and pushes the narrative further.

While the director clearly sees herself as a feminist, she was surprised to be perceived as an outsider from another filmmaker colleague and therefore well suited to making a film on feminism ‘from the outside and with some distance.’

When does one *really* belong? What are the criteria to be aligned? How do we create alliances if not via ideologies, institutions or defined groups? How to respect and work with people’s wishes to belong? Raka Ray in her analyses of the women’s movement in India and the splitting and heterogeneity of groups in Bombay quotes Madhusree Dutta from another interview albeit referring to the success of the Bombay Hindu-nationalist party Shiv Sena:

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<sup>143</sup> I am referencing from notes taken from Malathi de Alwis presentation (unpublished) that she gave as part of the AAA conference in Chicago in 2004.

“... when ordinary women outside of feminist circles come to them, they may or may not get help, but they ‘definitely do not belong; now our [i.e., feminist] weakness is we did not realize this desire to belong’, but the Shiv Sena did.” (Ray directly and indirectly quoting Dutta)<sup>144</sup>

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PV: The film is being made for young people who feel insecure about feminism, people who are in the first sequence of Wilson college, who then can say: ‘look, there is a history, I can go out and find it if I want to’, but most importantly, ‘I have begun questioning and I shouldn’t stop questioning’. Those are the two things I wanted to bring in. And if I can do that, then I feel the film is successful.

NW: So you think this group of young people as your audience?

PV: Primarily.

NW: And is this because of Sakshi or?

PV: It’s for both reasons. Sakshi wants it for young people and NGOs and college screenings. Because young women in NGOs also don’t have that same kind of background as Urvashi is pointing out. I don’t know if it would make young feminists in NGOs more feminist. I really can’t say. But I think it can make college kids more so. I think it will really make girls look and think again. (13.04.2002)

UNLIMITED GIRLS for me has a potential audience much larger than college students, though its form certainly appeals to younger people. I also value the choice of the NGO to ‘target’ young people as well as the directors search of a format that transports histories and politics in a non-didactic, playful way, as an important political move in the light of various modes of how the young (media) generation is perceived or neglected. The efforts of documentary filmmakers in screening their films in schools and colleges, conducting workshops and organising youth festivals stand next to, and are at times direct reactions to debates about the re-writing of history books along single narratives of Indian history privileging a Hindu-nationalist perspective as well as they are responses to mass media education which stressed fast and effective media in contrast to a slow, bureaucratic media practice by state actors widely perceived as boring and ‘not suited for modern India’.<sup>145</sup> The aforementioned communication gap between generations of alternative social movements, experienced as a major lack by a younger generation, stands next to perceptions of an ‘apolitical youth’ as well as the very active engagement of for example the RSS to politicise those that are voters and active supporters to come.<sup>146</sup> Here future scholarly work seem promising to look at how, besides music television channels that cater to a young urban audience, the core programs such as soaps and game shows are specifically written for the (Hindu) family.

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<sup>144</sup> Ray, Raka, 2000. *Fields of Protest. Women’s Movements in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

<sup>145</sup> Debates on schooling and education were part of reflections on necessary interventions after the carnage in 2002. Several educational events on communalism, also through audio-visual media workshops, took place.

<sup>146</sup> I am referring to a post screening question and answer session with the film director Sudhir Mishra and Producer of Pritish Nandy Communications Ltd. at the *International Forum of New Cinema, International Film Festival, Berlin 2004*.

## 8. More possibles than realities

*There were seven of us on the floor, all women – me, Ramona, Shirley, Bitti, Priya, Naina and Rukhsar. There was someone in the corner room but she kept changing, so I won't count her.*

*But that was later. First, in the monsoon of 1992, there is only me, the two girls in the corner flat, who are never home because of bosses or boyfriends or something, and the family across from me—Shivaleela and her many children. I never quite figured out how many children. They seem interchangeable to me, all their heads shaped like grapes, or perhaps there are twins who create this optical illusion. Despite their small heads, they cry ferociously. Each Sunday morning, I wake groaning to the sounds of their favourite TV show, the Hindi version of *The Jungle Book* whose theme song is lustily belted out by a child: “Jungle jungle baat chali hai, pata chala hai/ chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai, phool khila hai.” (“there's a rumble in the jungle, a new flower is born and it's wearing undies!”). I hear the kids voices echo the last phrase in delight – “chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai, phool khila hai!” Undies are something of a theme with Shivaleela's family. Her husband, for instance, wears brown VIP Y-fronts. I know this because he displays them of his own accord, on his own self every evening when I come home from work. Holding a steel tumbler of rum, he leans against the doorframe, regarding me with slow bewilderment and generic affection as I sidle past in the narrow corridor, and furtively opened my lock. Each night is a contest – will I get in before he gets me? Just as I think I have almost made it he catches the tail end of my quickly thrown half nod- half smile and says, just as he has the previous night – “Kya bhabi, aaj bahut dinon baad?” (So sister, long time no see?).*

*(...) Technically PMGP is not a chawl – that Bombay landmark of one-room tenements with common bathrooms and a communitarian balcony corridor. It is blocks of very low cost housing for people who had earlier lived in a slum near a factory they call Aeltee. I later realise they mean L & T (Larsen and Toubro). The slum has been uprooted by the construction of a new road and they had been relocated to this neighbourhood – a working-class enclave in the middle of an upper-middle-class area. My neighbours are people that development experts called Project Affected Persons or PAPs.*

*But no one actually asked the PAPs what kind of house they wanted to live in. When the Congress Party was celebrating the centenary of its founding, Rajiv Gandhi – the party's head and Prime Minister at the time – announced a billion-rupee grant to Bombay for slum redevelopment, improvement and urban renewal in Bombay city. Of this bounty was our colony built and so christened PMGP or Prime Minister's Grant Project. Clearly the housing was designed more for middle class people – yes it was only one room, but it did have an attached bathroom and a marked off privacy from the neighbours and to my middle class heart this made it different from a chawl. But to working class people this was no good. They could not afford the monthly charges for water and electricity and maintenance. They didn't like living this way, all separated off and hemmed into a 10' by 12' room. If they sold coconuts or utensils, it was pretty hard to carry their stuff up and down the stairs. Besides, it wasn't close to where they worked. So it was that they found another slum or chawl on the other side of Aeltee, rented out their rooms and in a strange twist of development, became the more powerful party of a Leave and Licence Agreement, while middle-class folks like me, supplicant and resentful, moved our mattresses and cardboard boxes in, all the better to live the Bohemian Life. (...) (from *No Man's Land*, short story by Paromita Vohra)*

Until the time I started visiting Paromita Vohra in PMGP to participate in script meetings, conversations over dinner, helping out with transcriptions or watching assemblies with her team, new tenants had arrived and left again.

*They are all on their way to something better, there is a desperate optimism in the street. The new inhabitants change the locality. Dosa and telephone shops are opening, catering to another clientele. With the increase in television channels and real job opportunities for this young clientele, the temporary inhabitants of PMGP move upwards to other areas – to locales in Andheri West.*

*“Moving back here?” I ask. “Oh, no. I can’t do that. I mean once you’ve moved to the West, you can’t move back to the East. People will look at your number and when they see it begins with 8 instead of 6, you could lose work.” (No Man’s Land)*

The first time I arrived at PMGP, it was in a three-wheeler. I did not know exactly where to go, which building to enter and on showing a sign of wanting to ask someone, people there seemed already to have guessed whom I was going to visit in their neighbourhood. With particular certainty, the young men on the street showed me the house and told me on which floor the film person I was looking for lived. The second time I could hear them talk that this ‘angrezi walli’ coming here again was obviously also doing some film business. Thanks to Paromita’s trust and openness, I spent afternoons alone in her one-bedroom flat working on a few transcriptions of her footage. Dealing with a not very predictable VCR, I got to know her neighbours as well, as Paromita had told me I could ask them for help and that I could also leave the key with them when I left. Another filmmaker friend lived close by in a similar housing complex in PMGP and invited me over for a lunch break at her one-bedroom flat. After some time I knew the vendors along the street, faces of some of the boys playing outside, the particular atmosphere of the house. When glancing into the neighbours flats, as their doors were open at times, it was easy to see that Paromita’s one-bedroom flat had of course a very different inside, differently equipped with furniture, books, film material, differently decorated. At the same time, her flat also had a permeable texture, a certain transparency towards street sounds, light, wind, the noises of conversations and cooking vessels from the neighbouring flats.

Paromita Vohra’s assistant was staying with friends, close to the Lokhandwala market, Andheri East, for the duration of the film project. I spent a few days in this apartment as well, doing transcriptions and logging. There was hardly anybody in the streets here. When stepping outside of the house one stood at a wide road busy with ongoing constructions and passing traffic at rush hour. The street was leading to a series of modern housing complexes and a new Multiplex cinema in one direction and to a lively market street with Levis, shops selling pasta and other branded goods in the other. Except for the guards downstairs I never saw anybody else in that building. It had an elevator and new windows so one didn’t hear much noise from outside when closing them and thus the flat seemed to lack a soundscape; I think I heard the humming noise

of the fridge. As I didn't have a key to the flat, I could not leave in between work and ordered lunch from the nearby market. Maybe that's why sitting there for a full day appeared very quiet and isolated. At least that's why I remember how different it felt spending time there or in PMGP, how different ones sensuous relation to one's environment could be in the various places, how particular those working atmospheres felt. Maybe I find this worth mentioning because I have been changing desks uncountable times during the process of this project and have been only too aware of how unspeakably the textures of my surroundings enter my texts. Later I received an e-mail from Paromita telling me that she was about to move houses and that she could hardly imagine not going back to PMGP every night to sleep; that she liked her new house for being very light and spacious, but that it was middle class.

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"In our overzealous bid to turn our radical backs to a hopelessly retrograde popular culture, have we forsaken some of the most vital and organic elements of our dramatic tradition – the passions, the myths, the dreams, the humour, the simplicity?" (Madhu Bushan 1988: 34)<sup>147</sup>

*A door with a hand made sign saying 'God bless you'.*

*Two women greet each other emphatically with kisses.*

*"Sita!"*

*"Geeta!"*

*A rather upper middle class living room, 'western style' looking.*

*"That's my daughter," says one woman while her daughter is bringing drinks.*

*"So sweet!" responds the guest.*

*"That's why we call her sweety."*

*"Beti, what do you want to be when you grow up?"*

*"I don't know auntie. Maybe a doctor, or a teacher, or maybe a feminist?"*

*The women are shocked and look at each other in desperation.*

*Superman appears in the living room: "Your daughter wants to be feminist, don't get your knickers in a twist. Call moi!"*

*And says to the girl: "So - you want to be a feminist?"*

*Sweetie nods emphatically with her head.*

*Superman: "You want to be ugly?" – The girl appears in long, uncombed hair, thick glasses and unsexy clothes.*

*Superman: "You want to be alone?"*

*Sweetie stands alone in the doorframe while others are dancing during a party.*

*Superman: "You want to be cold and hard boiled?"*

*The armchair where Sweetie had been sitting – we see a blue velvet cloth with an egg on it, making a squeaky noise and equally squeaky saying: "Sorry."*

*Superman mockingly: "Feminist, feminist."*

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<sup>147</sup> Bhushan, Madhu 1988. "Activism and Art. A Dialogue with Deepa Dhanraj". In: *Deep Focus* Vol.1 (3), p. 32-39. P. 34.

*Sweety sits, back in shape, in her armchair. The background music is classical Indian music, typical for ads. Superman: "So - Still want to be a feminist?"*  
*Sweety shouts assured: "Never!"*  
*The jingle in the back goes: "Supermans school for la-a-a-dies."*  
*The mother writes out a cheque for superman.*  
*Cut to Superman standing against a pink wall with a young woman dressed in mini skirt on each of his sides.*  
*"Got a case of feminism?"*  
*The girls: "Don't worry"*  
*"Just hurry."*  
*Both: "Call us!"*  
*Superman: "And be rescued." Loud devilish laughter.*

UNLIMITED GIRLS' film narrative is interrupted by three commercial breaks. A passion for and knowledge of fiction film formats and its ways of production was very visible during the fiction shooting days. Paromita liked acting herself and enjoyed directing according to the imaginary scenes thought out, playing around with acting and the dialogues. She mentioned experiencing a certain security through having more control of the shooting process. Unlike during the non-fiction parts when her cameraman would finally decide how to frame people while she talked to them, though they worked out the wished-for framing together, she could check each single frame before the shot was taken and thus make precise choices.

N: What was initially behind the idea for the commercials?

P: It was just fun. And then there's also the idea to approximate the format of popular media more. But I also just think it will be fun for young people and they'll identify with it. I mean, it's possible to be very sarcastic and very bitter in that form in a way you can't be with something else. Because it's out of place to be bitter about people; still, I think people are sexist and there are sexist adverts that make me angry. But, in the end it's more fun to say it in this way, than interviewing somebody talking about how ads are sexist. Like 'ya, ads are sexist'. So, you make some sexist ads. There is this dilemma of the three women; it's a classic thing. On the one hand you are using an image that's completely sexist, at the same time you want to critique it, I have thought about it a lot.

N: Whether you should use these images of the three women in mini skirt?

P: Yes, my aim is that it should be revealed for what it is, by putting it in a context. I don't know whether that's happening, I hope that's what's happening. But, I just love popular culture and I decided to mix up things a lot, for fun. I felt that, if you can caricaturise feminists, you can caricaturise sexists, you can caricaturise people, and most of the time people have a good laugh. And I think this whole point about consumerism, it's much more interesting to do it in that form than to go out and make a statement. (13.04.2002)



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra. Fake commercial.

A documentary film team thus became a full-fledged fiction film team, albeit low budget. Production meetings were held at Paromita Vohra's place, filling her one-room apartment with the main team members discussing practicalities, which props were needed, which actors one had seen at parties who had the appropriate looks. Many more people were needed for make-up, costume, acting, additional sound, catering etc. Anjali Punjabi, a friend and film colleague of the director, took over the organisational production site, finding the right and affordable studios to shoot, the technical equipment needed and setting up the shooting dates.<sup>148</sup> While the original ideas and scripts for the ads came from the director, details, practical realisations, questions about how close to stay to the conventional ad format in terms of length and style were discussed in production meetings with the whole team and between the director and her editor, the director and the production manager. A few actors were working professionally for television, some of them were friends of the director's sister who was 'a TV person', the rest were friends of members of the team, many of them volunteering for a day or two.

In many different ways UNLIMITED GIRLS refers to and displays a visual culture that characterises contemporary urban spheres in India. The film visually quotes representations of the ideal, often Hindu, woman in commercials, mainstream movies and television through inserts and background images.<sup>149</sup> As evoked earlier in the text, nationalist recasting of womanhood evidently has implications for women's representations in public spaces. 'It's out of place to be bitter about people' and 'it's possible to be very sarcastic and very bitter in that form' speaks of ethical standards for the re-presentation of whoever one captures in one's film; directly targeting people and laying them bare in front of the audience is 'out of place' as well as 'not interesting to watch'. Commercials thus open up a space for criticism by retaining one's ethical standards but furthermore they demonstrate the discursive violence enacted upon women by violently acting upon the format itself. Paromita Vohra mentioned that she took her using and re-working the ad format to be an aggressive response; they are thus a formal aggression against a visual culture within which women are experiencing themselves, against a discursive metonymy of the nation and womanhood which unfolds itself not 'merely' on discursive levels but in violent practices against women. In the light of an underlying and evocative narrative in the film, which looks at the politics

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<sup>148</sup> Anjali Punjabi had various working experiences in straightforward fiction film making, e.g. working with Meera Nair. She and Paromita Vohra had established a close working relationship and Paromita had written part of the voice over for her film.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Rajagopal 2001 who describes a neo-liberal economy and its indexical and iconic presence.

of constructing an Indian nation as a Hindu nation, the decision to name the two women Sita and Geeta can be looked at as a political one. The two prototypical Hindu names Sita and Geeta, standing for the ideal Hindu woman and wife, embodying chastity, respect and obedience, and thus representing the custodian of the family and subsequently the nation, make the advertisement a 'realistic' one and constitute a sub-textual critique of a media practice which renders 'the rest' of the nation invisible. At the same time the choice might again hint towards the director's work being embedded within a larger film cultural context in its reference to Ramesh Sippy's 1972 film *Seeta aur Geeta*.

The above described ad format is re-cycled for the director's own political ends and for the pleasure of watching. And, by working oneself into the technologies of the format and thus revealing them, the exposure of its violence is 'fun to watch' but concurrently the violence is fought at its basic structure of truth production. Consequently, the appropriation of the ad format critiques and simultaneously exceeds the mechanics of experience simulation within mainstream media. Together with commercial posters in the urban public sphere, quoting commercials hinting at lavish Hindu marriages, a promotional show with Barbie, Paromita Vohra quotes mainstream media practices of simulation and segregation and reacts to those not through socio-realism but through another fiction. A fiction that seems to have the potential to retain the space of the psychological real while critiquing its often authoritarian and sexist use.

While the documentary scenes in the film make apparent the different levels of violence enacted upon women of different class, caste or religion and distinguish between discursive brutality and experienced realities of violence, they also delve into the more subtle mechanics of inequality hidden within 'modern' notions of coupledness, love and constructions of the self evolving from this. However, a critique of individualism enacted as selfishness and the simulation of freedom through consumerism does not unfold from a distant, moralistic gesture and not through a didactic style.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> After watching the assembly and the rough cut of UNLIMITED GIRLS, I stumbled over a sequence which seemed to juxtapose images of a Barbie show in a Delhi shopping mall with photographs of wives burnt by their husbands or in-laws to lead over to the organisation's work of legally supporting these cases. I pointed out to Paromita that I felt the juxtaposition was falling out of the overall formal style of the film as this to me seemed the only place where one could possibly talk of a moralistic judgment of the Barbie cult and the connotation of the ideal woman and beauty attached to it. Paromita however did not feel that sequence in conflict with the rest of the film. In the final film the Barbie scene became shorter and was separated through graphics from the photographs.

UNLIMITED GIRLS emerges itself in popular culture and deals with serious questions, which arise for a generation in the midst of change within Indian civic society. Questions of romantic love are addressed and pleasure is embodied in the film. Hence, UNLIMITED GIRLS appears to be successfully treating popular culture as suggested by Gyan Prakash in “losing oneself’ within the objects of popular culture”<sup>151</sup> to merge the inside and the outside, thus to target popular culture not from an ideological distance but approach and critique it on emotional and intellectual levels and thus confront the Gramscian “intellectual’s error”.<sup>152</sup> Through this format Paromita Vohra not only engages in truth productions inherent in popular culture but also in technologies of truth that rule as claims of purity and completely reject popular culture and artistic experiments within a documentary film discourse which, despite being criticised and rejected as moralistic, purist and unappealing, asserts its claim as a defining moment of political documentary filmmaking. While the radicalism of this style at its time has to be acknowledged, as I will show in chapter two, a negation of it here does not translate into not wanting to ‘make political films’ anymore, but rather constitutes an effort to work towards a format which overcomes seeing pleasure and real politics as antipodes.



Source: Nicole Wolf. Production images of UNLIMITED GIRLS, while shooting fake commercials.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in: Pinney & Dwyer 2001. p. 19.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. Pinney & Dwyer are valuing conference comments by Prakash and quoting Gramsci.

Instead of falling into a dichotomy of either celebrating popular culture as liberating or condemning it as oppressive or a mere “stylistic of connivance”<sup>153</sup> with hegemonies, an engagement with and incorporation of its possibilities to address people, thus critiquing it from the inside appears as a fruitful and necessary move for documentary film practice, political movements, and academic understandings. Additionally, it supports an analysis and a practice which moves away from a dichotomy between the masses and the elite, the ones already ‘converted’ and the ones that ‘have to be preached’, to approach the “discourses of class, gender, and nation [as] vital structuring principles in popular culture in India” and how these are “reconfigured at specific historical moments.”<sup>154</sup>

UNLIMITED GIRLS mixes genres: a fictional story line, archival footage, TV images, movie sequences and ad images, visuals of contemporary urban spaces, animation and graphic sequences which show a vast list of women’s organisations, events, reports etc. Passing through these formats, whereby each format adds yet another layer to other and together they comment on each other’s truth production, allows for alternative connections to be made. The various formats and images get twisted as they can attain different connotations within the larger framework of the fictional story. They are located as if in quotation marks, thus questioned by being situated in unfamiliar formal realms, with different mechanics for encoding. As a result the film gives the impression of drawing on the archaeologies of images which are foremost in connection to a local Indian context, but then causes turns, questions, redefining them for alternative ends. The fake commercials and the graphics add yet other, completely different kinds of images to the available indexes of non-fiction images available. Supported by the chat room, actual and iconic, the easy move but consciously chosen play between formats seems to also allow for different kinds of emotions, for seriousness, playfulness, anger, sadness, pleasure and happiness.



Source: UNLIMITED GIRLS, by Paromita Vohra.

<sup>153</sup> Mbembe cited in Pinney & Dwyer 2001: 16.

<sup>154</sup> Mankekar 2000: 18.

The meta-narrative of the fictional character, which works as a performative thread and keeps the story together, is always in a questioning mode and provokes reflection. Exercised is a constant working with difference and a questioning of hierarchies, power assertions and ones own standpoints. A critique and partial position towards lived experiences of violence and injustice remains, but truth claims are painstakingly dismantled or made impossible.

The voice-over is thus a personal voice which uses its personal quality less as a means of authentication and more for a wider exploration. On a formal level UNLIMITED GIRLS employs familiar technologies of truth through genres and formats. As exemplified by the fake commercial, the governmentality of a format, a language, a document is revealed in its mechanics by connecting them to their political use and the narratives they are connected with in the media context the film is embedded. This citational practice seems to go with and support the chosen content and its treatment. The combinations, the criss-crossing and the intertwined questioning, lead to continuous irruptions on a formal basis, not leaving one format on top of a hierarchy of ideologies of verisimilitude. The possibilities for relations to stories, formats, characters, ways of questioning, laughing or being angry are aplenty. Realness will lie in the plural singular choices of joining, or as Paromita herself may phrase it:

“Art becomes a meaningful political space only if it is emotionally viable to people – and it is so only if it is a place where they can make meanings of their own, instead of merely consuming those that they are given. Moreover, it is a place where we allow nascent ideas to exist and slowly grow; a place of constant renewal and change, which should not be harnessed in an instrumentalist manner, working against its very grain. As feminists, as political people and activists, we have to accept the responsibilities of art along with its delicacies, and its particular ways of understanding reality. We need to allow it to fill us with a sense of possibility, the easier to imagine a different world and fantasize the details of how this world will be.” (Paromita Vohra 2006: 210)

My overall argument is thus that UNLIMITED GIRLS uses a cultural space, the space of filmmaking, to find new relations to different languages that popular culture and documentary formats supply. The form that Paromita Vohra develops creates its own forms of realness, in its way of addressing histories, questioning and making proposals for a feminism to relate to, proposing a pleasurable politics that does not fail to critique either. The stakes are thus double-bind: an intervention in form and in understandings of politics via tackling what is commonly perceived as the real in feminist filmmaking and therefore as real politics. The film thus clearly argues for making fruitful the real that gets trapped in stories when relegated to the cultural realm only without

understanding their ways of telling as passionate possibilities to expand what is conceived as real, real politics, real issues, real participants, real feminists.

## B. How political can you get?

“The privilege to the so called documentary film is that it is not obliged to create the *feeling* of the real, and this allows it to treat the real as a problem and to experiment more freely with the variable games of action and life, significance and insignificance.” (Rancière 2006: 17f)<sup>155</sup>

“One director of a film festival, who had invited the film and said he liked the film a lot, found it a bit too long and said, ‘your narrative development, your dramatic structure needs to be worked on. It’s not right, you don’t build up the drama’. I just looked at him. It’s true, but that’s why I chose a completely or so called non-dramatic situation. The threat of demolition happened only when we were shooting and if I would have stayed with the spirit of what I actually wanted, I should have edited it out. But I myself got succumbed, and panicked about the form. But I was thinking that he was looking for a nice narrative on this situation.” (Surabhi Sharma, conversation 25<sup>th</sup> April 2002)

### 1. Mise-en-scène

*Jari Mari.*

*The camera follows a carrier who is walking up some steep stairs. The soundscape is dominated by the loud engine noise of a plane. Then a view from a hut on the hill down onto the roofs of Jari Mari. A young boy, standing outside, almost filling the entrance to the hut, looking in and waiting for his mother to give him instructions. She sits in a corner inside, everything seems tightly arranged to make good use of scarce space. The woman is rinsing clothes in a bucket and asks her son whether he knows how to hang them. “Hold on”, she says, “take this”, and she hands over a big blue sheet to him, they wring it together, holding and rolling it from both sides, inside and outside their hut.*

*“Won’t fall down, will it?” she asks him, though with a confidence in her voice that it won’t.*

*Then her son helps her collect all the dirty vessels in the house and she continues sitting in the corner, cleaning the vessels now.*

*“How many years ago did you come here?” Surabhi Sharma<sup>156</sup>*

*“Lets see now ... must be about 20 years.”*

*“Did you come to Bombay after your marriage, or before.”*

*“No, it was after my marriage, not before.”*

*“What did you think of Bombay when you came first?”*

*“It all seemed very new,” She smiles towards the camera, while she continues to clean, the camera is staying with her and her work.*

*“Compared to the village?”*

*“Really lousy. I mean I was taken aback by all the big buildings.”*

*“Did your father-in-law work in a mill?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“In which one?”*

*“He was in Sri Ram mill. And his brother worked in Century mills.*

*The camera is moving between focusing on her talking and close ups of her hands foaming the vessels meticulously.*

*“What did your husband do?”*

*“At the beginning he was fine. First he used to work as a load carrier. Then we moved to Govandi to my sister-in-law’s place.”*

*“What did he do there?”*

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<sup>155</sup> Rancière, Jacques 2006. *Film fables*. Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers. (*La Fable cinématographique*, was first published in France, 2001 Seuil Editions.)

<sup>156</sup> Most conversations are in Hindi, except for a few with government workers. The dialogue text is taken from the English subtitles.

*"He worked in a dairy, he never had a stable job, so I had to run around, I said I can't depend on him, if I work, the kids will eat. So I began doing domestic work."*

*The camera passes around the hut, a small Hindu shrine in red light, plastic and metal vessels on shelves, a plastic bag filled hanging from the ceiling.*

*"Why did you opt for domestic work? Why not work in a factory or workshop?"*

*"Before my daughter's birth I worked at MIDC."*

*"What did you do there?"*

*"Sweeping and mopping. I left home at 5 in the morning to catch the bus at 5.30. Because it took me half an hour to walk downhill, work began a little before 6. Broom in hand and that mop with the long handle."*

*"Until afternoon?"*

*"Yes, till 2pm. The bus would come and pick us up at 2pm. If my replacement didn't come I had to stay till 10pm. The pay was good. But working 2 shifts meant that the kids were alone and hungry."*

*The camera is very close on her hands brushing the floor.*

*"That's why I quit"*

*Then a cut to her walking through a narrow lane, entering one of the households where she works, makes food and cleans. She cleans another floor. The house is more spacious and the able ways of her handling housework in her own living space becomes even more striking while nothing is made of it.<sup>157</sup>*

Several sequences like the one above are spread throughout the film. Surabhi Sharma described them as unified spaces, constructed like *mise-en-scènes*.<sup>158</sup> Several women who live and work in *Jari Mari*, a slum colony adjacent to Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji international airport, are introduced by talking about their living conditions, about moving from the village to Mumbai, about their families, their children and husbands,



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

<sup>157</sup> Sequence of: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, D: Surabhi Sharma. India, 2001, 74 min. DV. Hereafter called JARI MARI. The sequence occurs early on in the film and introduces one of the main female protagonists which Surabhi Sharma portrays.

<sup>158</sup> This was mentioned several times and will be elaborated on later. I met Surabhi Sharma first in 1999 when she was in the research process for JARI MARI and again in 2001 when she was editing the film. Most of our longer and recorded conversations happened throughout my longer research stay in 2002; specific date and place will be indicated. While Surabhi was at that time working on AAMAKAAR. THE TURTLE PEOPLE (D: Surabhi Sharma, India, 2003, 75 minutes, Digital Video), and while I attended several editing sessions and met her frequently at Chrysalis studios in Andheri West, many of our conversations went back to JARI MARI and thus took a retrospective quality. Comparisons were thus made with a film that had already been made and received, but also with a film that Surabhi perceived more of her own film, as parts for the 'turtle film' had been researched and filmed before she got into the filmmaking process. The title of the 'turtle' film might not reveal that apart from working styles there are interesting overlaps to JARI MARI concerning the impact of global market economies and state policies on disenfranchised local communities.

about water, food, threats of demolition and about how they organise their lives around work: searching for work, finding enough work, being able to work and maintain a family. Next to brief interviews with other inhabitants of *Jari Mari*, men and women, and two governmental workers, the main characters of Surabhi Sharma's film reappear and thus each sequence adds other fragments of their lives. Those episodes are conversations, which include the director's short questions rather than just editing out the answers. Even though they are concrete and direct questions, there is a certain reduced manner in the way of asking, a kind of staccato that appears to produce a particular effect. On the one hand, there is a haunting quality to the very matter of fact telling of what become stories of year-long hardship, daily struggle and the search for strategies to confront, bypass or work with constraints and violence enacted by state policies, market dynamics and often personal misfortune. This misfortune also occurs through patriarchal family structures. While it is never clearly stated, the women who present their stories for the camera never conceal that most of them followed their husbands to then take on full responsibilities for their families once arriving in Bombay. But, as in other cases, these stories are not dramatised towards a particular event or argument, matters are raised as if in passing. On the other hand, the nature of the questions provoke a certain matter-of-fact, almost rhythmic style, with an even stressing of each detail that gives a particular depth and breadth to each story. There is a firm insistence, a meticulous continuation of questions that are seemingly basic and yet their answers very telling. The short questions seems to provide a space for the responses and the subjective languages of the women who are the subjects of the film come to the foreground. Also, space is given for our attention to the continuous practice of labour. These are not in-depth portraits revealing intimate information about people, but rather a portrait of *Jari Mari* itself. Nevertheless, through the described quality in the conversations, the women stay with the viewer as separate characters, each with their own biography which nevertheless refers to structural conditions of migration, labour and poverty. General aspects of life in *Jari Mari* get repeated with each of the



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

characters and yet their individual coping strategies, their singularity, remains equally strong. A platform for talking is created which establishes a conversational equality between the filmmaker and her interlocutors. Hereby they are not addressed as victims and the conditions of living and working can be addressed individually and with respect. The aspect that “a person becomes more than just a worker after you have spent lots of time with someone”<sup>159</sup> is also what the filmmaker wanted to translate into the film. Surabhi Sharma’s research consisted of spending several months visiting *Jari Mari*, first accompanying two friends who had been working in the neighbourhood for five years and had studied the impact of globalisation on women’s health, and later by establishing her own contacts.

Working from ethnography and taking a critical approach to ethnographic representation was part of her concern. It became her way of responding to her political endeavour to portray something that would otherwise never be mentioned in the media or, for that matter, even in an independent documentary film project, unless something, an event, were to happen that would awaken people’s attention.

JARI MARI – the film – is thus developing a continuous flow of labour, in this case mainly labour related to textile next to other daily labourer jobs. The film passes through the lanes of Jari Mari, as it were, filled with small cramped workshops for sewing, checking garments or other small parts within a chain of production, or for preparing and packing goods ready for export. Situated within that flow are those brief portraits of women labourers. The precariousness of the women’s situation becomes very clear. Sequences with a man starting to cry in front of the camera because there is no work and no food at home – a chance meeting as the man saw the film team and made them aware of his story being “worth listening to” (Surabhi Sharma) -, or workers demonstrating against announced demolitions and the closure of a factory as the



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

<sup>159</sup> Surabhi Sharma, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2002.

owner's reaction against unionising activities, stress this precariousness. Yet, these are the sequences that Surabhi later thought of as not entirely fitting into her actual idea of the film and they are not inserted into the narrative to dramatise the film nor the situation, nor to create a coherent and rounded story or to formulate an argument more briskly. They do indeed fall out of a certain rhythm of sequences, which concentrate on observing labour in Jari Mari and what Surabhi Sharma calls the mis-en-scènes with her main female protagonists. But the normality, the everydayness, the constant and remaining presence of precariousness is in the foreground as a constant factor.

In the following chapter I want to dwell on the particularity of those constructed spaces and how they allow the telling of one's story and hereby create filmic spaces that I deem as realms where the political is expanded.

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*"To be apolitical was to be a Non-Indian"*

Vina Mazumdar in UNLIMITED GIRLS, referring to the period of India's Independence

To speak and write about 'the political' can be and in many ways must be an engagement with the myriad theoretical approaches to the term and the myriad ways of these are contested, rethought, fought over. I am here decidedly not approaching audio-visual material through political theory but I am engaging with the politics of a critical anthropology (as discussed in my introduction) and with questions regarding film and art's stakes in contemporary civic life. I am consequently not starting with a definition but I continue to attempt—following my reflections on the politics of what is perceived as 'real' in chapter 1—to develop the political as a discursive space through the material I work with, the films, the conversations and the various context within which I encountered them.

There are in this case the many concrete instances of political events, of a colonial history, of independencies, emergencies, state control and revolutions, supremacist governmentalities and resistant tactics. There are clearly stated political arguments in films. And, there are brutally clear cases of censorship and interruptions of screening events, both of which are hindering the coming into existence of a temporary public/political sphere by denying debate and dispute to occur.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> The interruption of film screenings by either the local police, self-appointed non-state actors or members of the BJP or Christian groups has been of increasing concern during the last few months

There are, at the same time more ephemeral moments of the political. But, an event, an image or a sound bite can often consist as much of the concrete as the ephemeral. While there may be no effect that can be captured and measured, there are traces that films leave on their way, while being researched, filmed, edited and screened to a series of different audiences. Films get touched by an audience, as Laura Marks phrases it.<sup>161</sup> They also touch us, when we dare to listen. They touch a nerve, they leave a trace, they raise a question, they make something covered visible or choose to acknowledge opacity, or they change our vistas in other unexpected ways. Films create imaginaries.

I speculate that there are moments when films are sensing the necessity to alter terms of conduct and thinking, to alter ways of looking. If so, they have a potential to expand what is perceived as political society by impacting on the very notion of what constitutes the political. I am of course not at all alone in speculating that. For the documentary there is a long history of arguing and theorising the political efficacy of film, from seeing film as a revolutionary tool, a medium for awakening the masses to instigate change in individuals. There is lately again a lot of talk, exhibiting and conferencing on art and the political.<sup>162</sup> All this proves that the relation between politics and film, or art for that matter, needs to be constantly reiterated. From the point of view of subaltern studies, for instance, the narrow definition of a political society as one encompassing state institutions that have been initiated via British rule, has been heavily criticised. The need to look at “political society as that which is messy,

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(September 2007). Interruptions of screenings, demands for DVDs to be handed over, are mostly justified with a film or an art work (see attack of student Chandramohan’s final assessment art work at Fine Arts Faculty at Baroda, 9th May 2007, see under [www.cities.expressindia.com](http://www.cities.expressindia.com) - Ahmedabad, page one; see also report of PUCL: <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Academia/2007/ms-university.html>) being ‘objectionable’ as stirring national unrest through depictions that would hurt the religious or other ‘sentiments of a community’. The same line of argumentation is usually repeated and clearly focused towards silencing critique towards any governing body, a majoritarian community, religious ‘sentiments’ and their morality codes. This takes place at colleges such as the incident in Kerala showed: “Five students of St Joseph’s College of Communication at Chengannassery in Kerala were expelled last month for making a film on homosexuality.” (NDTV (online), 19<sup>th</sup> May 2007). The interruptions of Sanja Kak’s documentary *Jashn-e Azadi* (How we celebrate Freedom) is also debated on [www.kashmirfilm.wordpress.com](http://www.kashmirfilm.wordpress.com). On other incidents and a critical reading of those state interventions see also: Sengupta, Shuddhabrata 2007. *A Modest Proposal to End All Controversies on Freedom of Expression in India*. 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007, [www.kafila.org](http://www.kafila.org).

<sup>161</sup> Marks 2002.

<sup>162</sup> For an extremely invested response (and raising of questions) to the urgencies of the contemporary moment and the possible implications for art practice in whatever medium, see Enwezor, Okwui (Ed) 2006. *The Unhomely. Phantom Scenes in Global Society*. 2<sup>nd</sup> International Biennial of contemporary art Seville. [http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site\\_en/about.htm](http://www.fundacionbiacs.com/site_en/about.htm), last retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2007.

contentious and often unpalatable”<sup>163</sup> has been raised. I am thinking along similar lines and yet take different paths as I am looking very specifically at selected film examples which I believe carry a potential, are at the nick of time when it comes to thinking the political differently. When they participate in the messy and contentious, they do so often through their individual manner of address. They address issues, questions, events, restless pasts and possible futures, multiple audiences, citizens. And while I do not claim to give answers to all of the above, these thoughts constitute a horizon that I keep in mind when looking at those very contextual correlations of film and the political. I think they need to be looked at attentively, as sometimes films might convey something that we cannot hear yet.

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## 2. On Becoming Political – Part I

N: You had earlier mentioned, when we talked in Bombay, that there are several filmmakers, like Ranjan, Reena and Sanjay, whose work you appreciate a lot and that therefore their comments on your film were very important to you.<sup>164</sup> One person commented on JARI MARI that you should have used a personal voice over, is that right?

S: Maybe you are referring to what actually someone else said. That friend wanted a voice over to be able to make a connection, because he thought that this is a loose film. But although he is a very close friend, he has never said that to me personally, which is why I am deeply disappointed. But yes, he said it should be crisper, shorter and with a commentary. The voice over should do the telling because as it is now, it's not telling anything. But as I had actually got some of my ideas of the ethnographic from him this comment for me was heart breaking. (laughs)

N: Like you completely misunderstood everything ...

S: Yes, you know that, the whole critique of how ethnography was exoticising the Other. All those notions; I was trying to deal with that. Anyway, that's a tragic story. (we both laugh)  
But Ranjan and Reena were continuing their criticism. For one they were saying that this kind of a structure is not too relevant today, it is too long winded. Ranjan said that, nothing happens till the 22<sup>nd</sup> minute and that all the strong moments like massaging the baby and the man who lost his job, these are interspersed with so much of nothing happening.



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

<sup>163</sup> Chatterjee, Partha 2004. *The Politics of the Governed, in most places of the world*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 77.

<sup>164</sup> The references are to the cameraperson Ranjan Palit and the directors Reena Mohan and Sanjay Kak.

And I kept thinking about that criticism, but I clearly wanted those moments to be the fewer moments and the nothing happening as the larger text.

N: I understand what you mean, I think, to shift the focus...

S: yes, so I think I was a bit disappointed.

N: Reena was saying that you should have had different starting points with each person, and that being a classic documentary format, a way of introducing people while not repeating. The classic is often also seen as entailing cut-aways, to juxtapose and connect images and to construct the story more.

S: Yes, Reena's point was what actually Jabeen has also addressed when we were editing.<sup>165</sup> Like 'ok, now we know that people come from the village and settle in Bombay, why do we have to go including that with every one?' And I would always begin with that question. I wanted to underline this idea of what is called migrant workers, of people who have left due to sheer necessity and have been here for years now, but they still identify themselves as migrants and I wanted to stress that this connects to the entire policy of labour. I knew it was repeating, but I think I quite like that repetition.

Maybe I am leaving too much to the viewer, but I think at the end of the day there is no ambiguity in all those things that I have repeated and underlined.

N: But like you said, the abstraction in the film happens only outside, outside people's homes and outside their stories somehow, there is no direct juxtaposition that articulates an argument.

S: Each decision I was taking was actually against my training or my experience of viewing documentaries, of what I was taught; even though real training in documentary one hasn't got. And yet, everybody was saying that I was doing a conventional documentary format. Am actually now pretty confused. Even I have started calling my film a typical documentary - (we both laugh) - but at that point each decision was negating certain trajectories.

N: We also talked a bit about that current tendency to take a more personal approach and how that can become a dogma and that you didn't want to do that either.

S: Oh yes, that's a slightly different point. It's yes .. (pause)... like a certain dogma about being experimental in form. So when I think about it, what I did has by far been told by everybody to not at all be experimental with form but actually making mistakes in conventional documentary filmmaking. Which is a way of looking at it, maybe, I think not, but I sort of understand that. There weren't leaps that I was taking. Let's say like *SCRIBBLES ON AKKA*<sup>166</sup> could very clearly be seen as experimenting with form. I was, I think, fooling around with conventions, rather than experimenting or bringing in new ideas, tweaking around conventions. But I don't know what is more important. Barely a decade back there was a dogma about theme and content and the form was immaterial and now it's to be experimental, in a certain way, and not about the theme and content.

(...) Its like now we know about the poor. Now only if something completely unacceptable is happening you make a film, or you need to go there. But I still don't think that there are any documentaries, which are just documenting this kind of every day life.

When I talked about the idea to people, Reena was the only one who liked the way I was describing it a lot. Everybody else said, 'you know, this does not sound cinematic at all'.

N: People thought it was not cinematic because nothing is happening?



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

<sup>165</sup> Jabeen Merchant edited JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES.

<sup>166</sup> SCRIBBLES ON AKKA, D: Madhusree Dutta, India 2000, 60 min, 35mm.

S: Yes, that and that it didn't seem like having a focus. It's a bit like saying I want to give you a pictorial experience of Jari Mari. Somebody said it actually, also positively, and I felt uncomfortable with that also, he said that 'I feel I have lived there for a while'.

N: Can you expand why you felt uncomfortable with that?

S: Yes, it's easy no? It's like, now I know how it is in Jari Mari and now I can go back to my work. That is actually my own main problem with my film. Nobody is on the hook, everything is hinted at and implied, but it doesn't pinch you at any time. (Conversation in Bangalore, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2002)

At the time of our conversation Surabhi Sharma was in the final editing phase for AAMAKAR. THE TURTLE FILM and yet much of our talking went back to JARI MARI and thus took a retrospective quality. Comparisons were thus made with a film that had already been made and received, but also with a film that Surabhi perceived more of her own film, as parts for the 'turtle film' had been researched and filmed before she got into the filmmaking process. Talking more generally about her filmmaking practice or about her current projects was often via JARI MARI and the film's life seemed to be continuously expanded, by talking and developing further some of its core ideas.

The above is a small excerpt taken from several longer conversations, which allows for connections to be made to several crucial instances of what may tentatively be called the independent documentary film scene in India. This 'scene' is of course an extremely heterogeneous group but, nevertheless, there are shared ideas and a range of discourses known to most filmmakers, even if their understanding of those might still entail many varied shades of grey. At the time of my research it still seemed possible that most documentary filmmakers knew each other at least by name, having either studied at the same institution, worked in the same city or seen each other's films.<sup>167</sup> The filmmakers Surabhi Sharma referred to that she valued the critique of those senior to her. Similar to Surabhi Sharma, some of those senior colleagues were also FTII alumni and thus from a similar film education background.



Source: JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, by Surabhi Sharma.

<sup>167</sup> As I explained in my introduction, I am here mainly referring to filmmakers who are located in Delhi or Mumbai. Soudhamini (chapter 3) is an exception, but as she studied in Pune at the NFTII, she is familiar with and known by those cities' film communities. Surabhi Sharma moved to Bangalore within the period of my research, continued working in Mumbai and has now moved back to Mumbai. I am thus well aware that I am by no means speaking for the whole of India.

In conversations about specific films or developments more generally, arguments or opinions would often be phrased through a discourse that distinguished a classical documentary format from an experimental, 'arty' one. Even more common was to distinguish between 'issue based' and 'non issue based', the latter allowing for a more explorative style, while the former seemed to raise expectations of a very set film language and that it was clearly anchored in a 'real issue'. As introduced with reference to histories of feminist politics those categories are linked to perceptions about what a 'political documentary' looks like, how it speaks to its audience and what its main purpose is. Another history crucial to these debates will be attended to below. At the same time, there was of course a widespread awareness of the limitations of those very categories expressed through what I have previously called the urgency of a "need for a new language". It is this urgency that I would like to look at more closely. JARI MARI, Surabhi's first feature-length documentary, the film and the conversations I had with Surabhi about its making and how she later reflected on it, became for me one of the moments that stood quite significantly for this particular search. The comments she received on her film seemed to further support a moment of emergence, a moment filled by a drive for developing other ways of looking. And yet, compared with the formal choices of UNLIMITED GIRLS that I elaborated on in chapter 1, Surabhi engages in very different kinds of negotiations, she negotiates the legacy of the history of independent documentary filmmaking in India in another way. JARI MARI deals with similar fields of discourses as UNLIMITED GIRLS did, like the postcolonial, the Indian nation-state, the politics of representation, the position of the filmmaker and the construction of filmic subjects and audiences, but explores another language for this. While chapter 1 was driven by a wish to re-animate a history of images and stories that have so far received too little attention, here I am trying to re-examine a history of documentary filmmaking in India that for many will be closer at hand. A history that has made itself more present, a history that is a fruitful reference point for some and that was at times perceived as a too heavy burden for others. JARI MARI appears to walk along it to find other vistas, close by and yet with a potential to be crucially different.

### 3. Of becoming and holding a nation together

GRAVE MISCHIEF HAS BEEN DONE BY IRRESPONSIBLE WRITING! SILENCE IS GOLDEN!  
(State slogan in the streets of Delhi during Emergency)<sup>168</sup>

“ ... to expose the injustice of the system, but also to point out its vulnerability in the face of the united strength of the masses – this is the recurrent theme of the guerrilla film.”  
(Anand Patwardhan 1984: 446)<sup>169</sup>

Many filmmakers mentioned that placing themselves within a history of anti-colonialism and the struggle for Independence was a legacy that impacted on seeing themselves and their filmmaking or art within a collective. While individual filmmakers have different family backgrounds, different experiences of the birth of the independent nation-state and the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and different political and historical affiliations, many of them belong to an upper caste and class context. Both aspects can be reasons for the often mentioned self-effacement vis-à-vis the larger need for transformation of the nation, albeit understandings of the kinds of transformation would surely be many. The strong presence of the nation-state as a frame of reference within which the individual as a subject citizen serves a larger purpose is hereby a consequence that I would like to keep as a thread of thought running through the following lines. While I cannot do justice to a more sustained analysis of Indira Gandhi's politics and its legacy, the act of officially declaring Emergency in June 1975 and thus all civic rights being suspended and violated, the brutality with which Indira Gandhi followed her “Timely Steps”<sup>170</sup> to “March[ ] to a better tomorrow”<sup>171</sup>, certainly provoked a rethinking of people's relation to the Indian nation state.<sup>172</sup> A large number of political activists raising their dissenting voices were arrested, killed and many went underground.<sup>173</sup> Regime critical writing was censored and thus a state monitored ‘silence was golden’. The repression and pedagogy of a visual and narrative culture,

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<sup>168</sup> Tarlo, Emma 2003. *Unsettling memories. Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. London: Hurst & Company, p. 26. Tarlo explains how slogans like this justified the censorship that was practiced by the press during Emergency. Tarlo's is an excellent, informative and thought provoking anthropological study of the various narratives during and after the Emergency. Hereby her book also discusses practices of memory and forgetting within the realm of the Indian nation-state and its democracy.

<sup>169</sup> Patwardhan, Anand 1984. “The guerrilla film, underground and in exile: A critique and a case study of WAVES OF REVOLUTION”, in: Waugh, Thomas (Ed). *Show us Life. Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, p.444-464. For a list of films and activities of Anand Patwardhan, see [www.patwardhan.com](http://www.patwardhan.com).

<sup>170</sup> Tarlo 2003: 27.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>172</sup> Emergency was declared by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed upon the advice of Indira Gandhi and was continued after each six month period until Gandhi called for elections in January 1977, which she lost in March 1977.

<sup>173</sup> See also Dutta, Madhusree's (2000, unpublished paper): *Making of the Nation and Political Documentaries*. Dutta gave me a three-page version of her text article during my research in 2001.

expressed in the above quoted state slogan, was also the immediate context for what many would call the birth of the independent political documentary film in India. This is not to argue that everybody was until that point in agreement with the *Films Division* (FD, see below) as the governmental voice, the official version of what the realities and goals of *Mother India* were. But it was often repeated by filmmakers that Indira Gandhi's cultural policies supported the documentary in two ways. First, by making good amounts of funding available and the *Films Division's* production booming while still allowing for some dissonances; later, by silencing all critical voices and forcing them to go underground.

Much could be said about the history of documentary filmmaking in India before the Emergency, but here I will only briefly sketch fragments that I see directly related to my overall project. I want to for instance lay stress on the involvement of the documentary format in the process of the imaginary of the nation from very early on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interestingly in competing directions. Vinay Lal argues that “[t]he Indian independence movement, led in the 1920s and 1930s by Mohandas Gandhi, was the subject of the first concentrated phase of documentary filmmaking.”<sup>174</sup> He continues, however, that through the *Cinematograph Act* censorship was introduced in 1918 and confirmed by the *Indian Cinematograph Committee* in 1928. This meant that films like *Mahatma Gandhi's March for Freedom* (Sharda Film Co), *Mahatma Gandhi's March, March 12* (Krishna Film Co), and *Mahatma Gandhi returns from the Pilgrimage of Peace* (Saraswati) could only be publicly shown after the Government of India Act in 1935.<sup>175</sup> Srirupa Roy on the other hand mentions “short films on real events” from 1902 onwards, as well as non-fiction films later on supporting the Indian nationalist movement, stressing however that:

“the impulse of social remaking did not interrogate the authority of the colonial state, and the aim of ‘educating and enlightening’ the people continued to reproduce assumptions about the Indian people as colonial subjects rather than as citizens of a sovereign polity.”<sup>176</sup>

With independence, the *Films Division* (FD in the following) became the leading governmental institution for commissioning, funding and distributing documentary films.

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<sup>174</sup> See Lal, Vinay 2005. ‘Travails of the Nation. Some notes on Indian Documentaries’. In: *Third Text*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, March, 2005, p. 177.

<sup>175</sup> See also Barnouw, Erik and S. Krishnasway 1980. *Indian Film*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Oxford University Press, New York. And: Chowdhry, Prem 2000. *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Lal quotes from both texts: Barnouw & Krishnasway, p. 43-58. Chowdhry, p. 17-38.

<sup>176</sup> Roy, Srirupa 2002. ‘Moving pictures: The postcolonial state and visual representations of India’. In: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 36, 1&2. Sage Publications, p. 233-263. P. 239.

It developed directly out of the British *Film Advisory Board (FAB)* that included *Information Films of India* and *India News Parade* and which during its last years focused mainly on war propaganda films to foster an atmosphere for Indian soldiers to support the British in their war against Fascism. The governmental institution that, from shortly after Independence onwards, was to be the main body funding and distributing documentary films derived thus seamlessly from a colonial establishment and included filmmaking employees who were trained in the style of world war documentaries.<sup>177</sup>

In her very valuable analysis of a selection of visual representations of the Indian nation, Srirupa Roy stresses on the task that the FD tried to fulfil during its early days, namely to educate the people who have just left behind their colonial subjecthood. How to become the 'ideal Indian' and how to become a citizen of a modern nation-state were questions the FD was grappling with. Within the different rubrics of short film production, such as Art and Experimental films, Biography and Personality Films, Classroom films and Children's Films, Educational and Motivational Films, Defence Ministry Films, Export and Tourist Promotion Films and The Visit Films, stress is laid on the 'much-needed' progress of India and on how the state is guiding its people on their way to becoming a real modern nation, thus "conceptualising both 'the people' and 'their needs' in different ways".<sup>178</sup> The films are hence seen as instructing a yet uninformed audience about how to support the project of nation building, either as a farmer tilling the field, a mother caring for her family, a school child studying and learning the national anthem. Thus, each individual's duty to make the project come true should be awakened, albeit under the overall protection and quite literally the guiding eye of the pastoral nation-state.

The section that Roy leaves out in her analyses is 'Art and Experimental films', though the films that I want to briefly mention and which may belong to this category may also fall out of her time frame of analysis. In contrast to the flavour that is now attributed to *Films Division* productions, the sixties have recently been rediscovered as an exciting 'Avant Garde' period. Shai Heredia has given particular attention to this time and names the then Chief Producer Jean Bhowmagary as instrumental in the commitment to exploring documentary film aesthetics and expanding the notion of the non-fiction

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<sup>177</sup> Dutta 2000: no page numbers.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 243. Roy does not give any attention to a series of stylistically extremely innovate films made during the 60ies and early 70ies. In chapter one I have already referred to Shai Heredia's research on the experimental within *Films Division* productions.

film through experimentation. He created an institutional frame for a modernist film movement that stands for an autonomous antidote to western histories of experimental film and has the potential to intervene in the writing of those genealogies. The filmmakers Pramod Pati, Vijay B. Chandra, S.N.S. Shastry and Biren Das are mentioned in this context.<sup>179</sup> B.D. Garga attended to the period of the 60s more from the perspective of documentary filmmaking and describes the lively film culture and innovative language that was developed by filmmakers such as Falli Billimoria and Sukhdev.<sup>180</sup> Looking more closely at those cinematic innovations stands in relation to my own endeavour to expand meanings of the 'experimental' that I address in more detail in chapter 3. However, the fact that those mentioned experiments needed to be "excavated" by Shai Heredia from the FD archives, alludes to that this kind of aesthetically progressive atmosphere had mainly, though not exclusively, gone lost after the Emergency. In how far the pushing of film aesthetic through this named 'Avant Garde' entailed a stretching of the political confines of the governmental institution as well, needs however more attention.

For now I want to stay with the FD's agendas that seem to dominate its position in the current context, including its heritage that its officials have emphasized during the last decade. The FD's biannual film festival, now called the *Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films* (MIFF),<sup>181</sup> had been – and including the below described incidents still is - a very important film occasion for documentary filmmakers. It attracted a large number of film and non-film audiences, allowed for encounters between national and international filmmakers and thus created a platform which was appreciated by many. FD thus remained an important reference point for filmmakers, as until recently it maintained a monopole on the Indian documentary. In February 2004, however, the Indian state, through Films Division, provoked and ironically supported a kind of re-birth or re-energising of an independent documentary film movement through the controversies on its various layers of censorship practices directed towards national documentaries. I will further expand on this in my conclusion.

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<sup>179</sup> For more information on Heredia's research "Excavating Indian Experimental Film" see: <http://experimenta.in/>, last accessed 1.08.2012. See also Chapter 1.

<sup>180</sup> See Garga, B.D. 1987. "The Indian Documentary. Synchronous Sound and Fury", in: *Cinema in India*, Vol. 4, October-December, 1987. P. 25-29. See also his new publication Garga, B.D. 2007. *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non Fiction Film in India*. New Delhi: Penguin.

<sup>181</sup> See [www.filmsdivision.org](http://www.filmsdivision.org) (last accessed 1.08.2012), where one can get a taste of their self-presentation logo and search through a now well maintained digital archive of FD films for which Amrit Gangar has been very instrumental.

While also post Emergency several filmmakers had realised their films with FD<sup>182</sup>, only a few of the filmmakers I worked with during my research were directly involved in this or other governmental institutions. Soudhamini, whose films will be at the centre of chapter 3, carried out her fiction film project GOING TO SCHOOL (2001), shot with village lay actors, with FD.<sup>183</sup> She stressed on how she needed to convince a “more visionary” director of Films Division at the time. Anjali Punjabi, who realised her first film on the medieval saint-poet Mirabhai, A FEW THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, through FD, talked jokingly yet with emphasis about the “traumatic” moment when she saw the “Films Division of India presents” logo at the start of her film premier.<sup>184</sup> This reaction can probably be best understood when considering that up to 1996 each movie theatre screening was preceded by an obligatory FD short film in order to ‘educate’ the Indian audience. While it is a widespread view that only few people paid conscious attention to the actual content of those films, the term documentary or short film and above all the FD logo and the general tone of their films was widely known. Most independent filmmakers agreed that this did not do good service to the general perception of documentaries as it fostered a common opinion that documentary films were boring, didactic, visually unappealing with no entertainment value and very removed from people’s actual lives. Anjali Punjabi’s experience during the production process was a generally supportive but bureaucratic and institutional atmosphere. She was able to choose her own cameraperson, Mrinal Desai, who also shot UNLIMITED GILRS, while the rest of the film team was made up of Films Division technicians. This meant that even during shooting schedules, which in her case included travelling to Rajasthan, a 9 to 5 working day was respected regardless of filming opportunities and tech and lunch breaks were always maintained. Those working conditions understandably did not allow for spontaneous reactions to unexpected situations. The rare opportunity to work with 35mm was however a challenge and Anjali Punjabi deemed the overall process as a very valuable professional experience for herself.

My own experience with FD was varied as well. At first I was astounded, as I walked upstairs in the FD building, to see hallways paved with rusty film cans and filmstrips

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<sup>182</sup> Meera Dewan’s A GIFT OF LOVE (1982) e.g. is a FD production. Filmmakers such as Chandita Mukherjee, but also feature filmmakers like Sai Paranjpye, Mani Kaul, Mrinal Sen, Satyajit Ray and others produced films with FD.

<sup>183</sup> GOING TO SCHOOL, D: Soudhamini, 30 min, Digital Video, colour, India 2001.

<sup>184</sup> A FEW THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, D: Anjali Punjabi, India, 2002, 30min., 35mm. The film won a national award during the Mumbai International Documentary and Short Film Festival (MIFF) in 2002.

hanging out loosely. I was also amused at how I had to argue with one administrative employee who was to accompany me when I watched films and very surprised that I actually wanted to see them all the way through and remember his matter of fact question: “Shall we fast forward, then we’ll be faster?” I also received a lot of interest in my research from individuals working there, some of them suggesting films to me although often interpreting my focus as one of ‘film son women’s issues’, and I was given the opportunity to view most of the films I knew of being within the FD archive.<sup>185</sup>

During an interview with Bankim Kapadia, who was chief producer of FD until February 2002, he made the following presentation of the FD:

B.K: Films Division is a flagship for making documentary films in India. It is also a fifty-two year-old organization. We have produced such a good number of filmmakers. Once the person was fresh from film school we would promote them. Very good filmmakers, either commercial or artistic, have made documentaries for Films Division at some or other juncture in their life. So that is kind of sustaining. Films Division takes us through those topics, which no one wants to make. No one wants to make a film on Dengue fever or a hydro project, how it is benefiting to farmers. It is more anti-establishment films, which are made. *It is very easy to throw the stone and break the glass, to construct the glass it takes a very long time.* So Films Division is the only set-up which promotes the documentary filmmaker and which promotes the developmental causes of the nation on the whole. It is the only set-up run by qualified filmmakers. Whoever comes here, needs to have a diploma in cinema. We know the art and craft of filmmaking.

N.W.: How would you view the changing concerns of Films Division, changing main topics, issues and questions that are important at different times? And how do you choose projects, are some proposed to you?

B.K.: There are ways of getting the topics. Either by Films Division or governmental agencies or the topics come from the general filmmakers outside. We don’t shy off facing any controversial topic. But we want both the parties to clarify their stand. Then it makes sense. And then we leave it to the audience to judge what is right and what is wrong. That makes sense because the filmmaker is not a person who will conclude. It should be open to both the parties to understand the problem and both the sides of the coin and then one can make a judgment, decide what line of action they should take. So many of such films we have taken up and a lot of variety of subjects. You know India is a vast continent and we have ample subjects. At times we are in a dilemma what to take and what should not be taken.<sup>186</sup> (*italics N.W.*)

Throughout this project I am concerned with ways of telling and I theorise from the art of conversation. In this particular case it was very difficult to get beyond a series of official statements.<sup>187</sup> The ‘beyond the official’ that I read from this interview, reminds

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<sup>185</sup> I want to especially thank Amrit Gangar for his help and many illuminating conversations. His knowledge about the FD archive is simply impressive. At the time of my research he started to create the FD online databank, which can be accessed through their website.

<sup>186</sup> Conversation at the Mumbai FD office, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2002.

<sup>187</sup> In relation to perceptions of the ‘real Indian woman’ I want to refer to the first meeting I had with Bankim Kapadia, though not for a formal interview but during the smaller Delhi version of MIFF in 2001. It was then that I first told him about my research. He commented that the women I was talking to were a “1% elite” and some of them not even “real Indian women”, but “half American or European, going to parties etc.” Also, that there needs to be a “certain tolerance level” on the side of women as well. This was again in

me of how Srirupa Roy writes about the 50s' Film Division's production.<sup>188</sup> I recorded the interview and next to my recorder and a telephone that was ringing a few times during the approximately 40 minutes, Bankim Kapadia's extremely large, wooden desk was most strikingly completely empty. The emptiness, the size of the desk and the portrait of a Hindu guru hanging behind the desk stuck in my mind and seemed indicative of Kapadia's rank in the hierarchy of governmental workers. But, I was equally struck by Kapadia's expressed humbleness and his way of taking the blame. In our conversation he laid stress on his disappointment with not making progress on, and not receiving any governmental support for the realisation of his dream of a documentary-only TV channel. But, rather than critiquing a lack of interest or vision, he immediately blamed himself for most probably lacking the right way of going about it. His gesture, though maybe of minor importance, now reminds me of Roy's stress on the still developing nation and its citizens. In this light, Kapadia positioned himself as a citizen or employee of the state which hasn't fully become yet.<sup>189</sup>

But, what am I practicing when arguing from those details without making an attempt to ask further, to find out more, like I did with my other interlocutors. This encounter emphasised that I was mainly working with 'subjects' with whom I shared a lot of common ground and that much of my argumentation arises precisely from this research condition. While I would certainly not always agree with political viewpoints, in most cases I found similarities in the kind of search for expanded notions of the political. In my presentation here, Bankim Kapadia thus easily becomes a mere representative within a certainly too monolithic narration of a governmental understanding of documentary filmmaking. He repeats that the FD, as the audio-visual arm of the Indian state, is a tool for the progress and harmony of the nation. Roy emphasises how the nation-state is represented as the safeguard for keeping the diversity of the undoubtedly 'vast continent' together.<sup>190</sup> As Bankim Kapadia said, the FD takes on the task of 'constructing the glass', other than 'throwing the stone', which is what he finds the 'anti-establishment' films are doing, by which he refers to independent documentary

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response to how most people at FD understood my project: Researching the status of women in India; admittedly a welcomed tough complex theme with foreign journalists or development workers.

<sup>188</sup> Roy, Srirupa 2002. "Moving pictures: The postcolonial state and visual representations of India". In: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 36, 1&2. Sage Publications New Delhi, Thousand Oaks/London, p. 233-263.

<sup>189</sup> This is particularly ironic as just before MIFF 2002 Bankim Kapadia was suspended for "alleged possession of assets disproportionate to known sources of income", *Times of India*, Mumbai, 01. February 2002.

<sup>190</sup> Roy 2002: 244.

filmmaking, possibly suspecting that those were my main interview partners. Thinking about communal violence during the last 50 years and the current social and physical segregation of Muslim communities all over the country, but most blatantly in Gujarat, Roy's analysis of how the FD praises the multiculturalism of the subcontinent on a purely superficial, folkloric level and how the constitution of a gaze, the 'seeing like the state', seeps into every day conduct and talk, is thought provoking, to say the least.

What I want to emphasize is that the realness of the official and ideal FD film contains, or is in fact, the prophetic. The FD's task is to accomplish audio-visual stories of the nation to come, though how that projection looks in detail today needs further examination. It however remains a prophecy whose politics are clearly defining the relations and hierarchies between the state and its citizens. The "logic of the action" (Rancière)<sup>191</sup> is predefined and its authorship declared. It is for the subject citizen 'to see like the state' and hereby this subject is prefigured and given her place.<sup>192</sup> In what follows this subject citizen will be shown otherwise, albeit not fully escaping to be preconceived.

#### 4. Third Cinemas

"The recognition that the world is divided into classes whose interests are opposed to each other results in a new approach to filmmaking. The filmmaker is forced to take sides. On the one side are comrades and fellow workers, and on the other, the enemy. Especially in documentary cinema, this polarization of subjects is extremely acute and the strategies developed are very different from those developed by so called "objective" and "sociological" filmmakers." (Anand Patwardhan 1984: 446f)<sup>193</sup>

The police violence on November 4<sup>th</sup> 1974 against demonstrators who supported the Bihar movement, a student and peasant-led non-violent resistance movement, was an occasion where the filmmaker very much became "a person who concludes", rather than letting both parties "clarify their side" (Bankim Kapadia). This demonstration in

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<sup>191</sup> Preceding the quote with which I commence this chapter, and throughout *Film Fables*, Rancière elaborates on how fiction film as well as much of documentary bypassed cinema's potential to come closer to 'real live', but continued to tell stories whose verisimilitude is based on a 'logic of action', thus a simple cause and effect story line, the building up of suspension that then needs to be released, or a clear Manichean set up of characters. Rancière 2006, p. 17.

<sup>192</sup> Roy 2002: 238.

<sup>193</sup> Patwardhan, Anand 1984. "The guerrilla film, underground and in exile: A critique and a case study of WAVES OF REVOLUTION", in: Waugh, Thomas (Ed). *Show us Life. Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. London: The Scarecrow Press. For a documentation of the films and activities of Anand Patwardhan, see [www.patwardhan.com](http://www.patwardhan.com).

Patna (Bihar), during the immediate pre Emergency months, came to stand as a marker for state violence as well as for the resistance movements against it.

WAVES OF REVOLUTION (1974)<sup>194</sup> was produced from within this “climactic moment”<sup>195</sup>. Its contexts of production and distribution and the function this film took as a political tool, paved the way for a certain view on politically committed filmmaking or rather came to stand for *the* ‘Indian political documentary’ form. It clearly came out of a very precarious moment that resembled revolutionary contexts. Its purpose was to “hold up a mirror” and “strip off their [the state’s] mask of superiority”.<sup>196</sup> The director Anand Patwardhan himself felt that soon after the Emergency the film lost its function, due to changing ways of supremacist politics as “more selective and sophisticated in its repression”<sup>197</sup> as well as changing social movement practices and politics that developed after the Emergency. Nevertheless, WAVES OF REVOLUTION, together with his later films like PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE and BOMBAY, HAMARA SHAHAR (BOMBAY, OUR CITY) formed and coined a film language.<sup>198</sup> They became reference points for the birth hour of a non-fiction film being decisively produced as a critique of the state. They stood for a ‘militaristic aesthetics’ (Anand Pathwardhan) that exposes.

The definition of political documentary filmmaking contained within a statement like the following: “With dominant ideology disseminated at all levels of society it becomes the urgent task of the guerrilla filmmaker to expose it”, is clearly related to, and indeed stirred by, the Latin American wave of Third Cinema manifestos, which inspired a whole generation of documentary filmmakers.<sup>199</sup> Its revolutionary spirit and embodied message of a clear departure from entertainment or state patronised filmmaking, also encouraged Indian filmmakers, including women filmmakers.<sup>200</sup> In a conversation with Shikha Jhingan and Ranjini Mazumdar, they both talk about how the founding of their women’s film collective *Mediastorm* in 1986 was still very much instigated by that filmic

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<sup>194</sup> WAVES OF REVOLUTION (KRAANTI KE TARANEIN), 30min, 1974, B&W, India.

<sup>195</sup> Pathwardhan 1984: 452.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid. 447.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 444.

<sup>198</sup> PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE (ZAMEER KE BANDI), 45 min, 1978, B&W, India. BOMBAY OUR CITY (HAMARA SHAHAR), 75 min, 1985, colour, India.

<sup>199</sup> See: Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino 1971/1997. ‘Towards a Third Cinema. Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World’. In: Martin Michael (ed), *New Latin American Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, p. 17-27. Rocha, Glauber 1965/1997. ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’. Ibid. p. 13f.

<sup>200</sup> See Shohat, Ella 2003. “Post-Third-Worldist Culture. Gender, nation and the cinema”. In: Dissanayake, Wimal & Guneratne, Anthony R. (Eds). *Rethinking Third Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge.

aggression against the state which WAVES OF REVOLUTION had exercised, namely a camera work and editing style that aims at revealing injustice and in their case forms of oppression against women (although their film practice also departed from that). Different aspects within the development of the documentary film scene in India, that I have referred to in chapter 1 and will expand on below, led to Jhingan's and Mazumdar's reflections on a sense of crisis that they expressed at the time of our meeting. They realised in the course of their career how a militaristic aesthetics could replicate a filmic language of the state as well as the narrative framework that the nation provides and thus consequently disallowed to get beyond a pre-given politics and perception of the public.

It is however necessary and revealing to go back to the so-called hour of birth of the independent Indian documentary and to take seriously the very Third Cinema ideas of the 'camera as a gun' and the film as a participant (see the below quote) in the political struggle, at that point in time and this specific political and media context.

"(...) In '74 I ended up joining a non-violent anti-corruption student movement in Bihar (Northern India). On Nov 4 the movement had organised a huge rally in the capital, Patna, and my job was to take photos to expose the expected police atrocities that would be unleashed on the non-violent demonstrators. Instead I got friends to contribute two Super 8 cameras, which we brought to Patna. The violent reprisals were captured on Super 8. Later another friend joined in with his newly acquired second hand, hand-cranked Bell and Howell camera and so we shot in 16mm. The Super 8 footage was then projected on a small screen and filmed from behind on 16mm to achieve a "blow-up". All this material formed the film "WAVES OF REVOLUTION" but just as the film was being completed a State of Emergency was declared in India and the film went underground. Many of my colleagues were jailed but I managed to smuggle the film out of the country in bits and later managed to get a Teaching Assistantship that would allow me to do a Master's in Communications at McGill University in Montreal. This is where I re-gathered the bits and finally completed the film and began to use it as a protest against the imposition of dictatorship in India. When the Emergency ended two years later I returned to India. (...)" (Anand Patwardhan, online interview held 22. & 23. August 2004)<sup>201</sup>

The excerpts of Anand Patwardhan's master thesis on the making of WAVES OF REVOLUTION, published in Waugh's early anthology of documentary filmmaking, express an urgency of the moment, stressed by a particular rhetoric which comes close

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<sup>201</sup> Anand Patwardhan's response to Mike Green's question of how he got into filmmaking starts with: "I had a scholarship to study Sociology at Brandeis University in America in 1970. At the time we were all very active in anti-Viet Nam War protests and I borrowed a camera from the Theatre Arts Dept. and shot my first footage on 16mm. I returned to India in '72 and worked in a rural development project where I made a short filmstrip for a rural clinic. We were trying to motivate tuberculosis patients to continue long term treatment so I used a still camera and a cassette tape recorder to make the filmstrip." The entire interview can be found on: [http://newcafe.org/partners/guest/motet.cgi?show+The\\_D-Word+29+1-](http://newcafe.org/partners/guest/motet.cgi?show+The_D-Word+29+1-) (last retrieved, 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2007)

to the Third Cinema manifestos written by filmmakers such as Fernando Solanas, Octavio Getino or Glauber Rocha, a crucial internationalist film movement that fostered an important south-south solidarity in the spirit of the Non-Aligned movement. Patwardhan's description of the shooting conditions, the scarcity of actual film material, the difficult circumstances for editing with regard to facilities and working 'underground' and very importantly the kinds of film distribution that were always part of the film itself, are all very close to the demands of what constituted political filmmaking at the time. His accounts of screening events when touring in the US and Canada, where the film created a platform for discussions, a reason to meet and exchange views, a source of information or provocation, and often a place to organize, are as recognisable as being of their time and its alternative media environment as well they are striking when one tries to think back to the conditions of a very different media context. The importance of travelling with one's film and setting up screenings where post screening discussions and possibly political activities are being developed or money is raised, belonged as much to the filmic practice as to the politics of making it. It is this stress on the entire process that we encountered with Deepa Dhanraj and her film collective Yugantar's early work as well.<sup>202</sup> When films "... are seen with rapt attention, followed by animated debate, which occasionally leads to direct political action" and "... fund raising and information exchange were the main results of showing the film"<sup>203</sup>, this might come closer to the kind of participation and the 'dual membership' that Deepa Dhanraj saw missing today:

"You knew that you were part of the movement, so when you actually came to making the film, that was like say one product. You were a participant not a commentator."<sup>204</sup>

The many spaces before and after the film and how those very much belong to a film work is but surely an aspect of not only documentary or politically motivated film that is however still prevailing, albeit expressed differently, deploying a different vocabulary. The concerns I heard during rough-cut screenings or when Surabhi Sharma takes the critique to her film very seriously and argues about what is at stake for her, seem to be very much a participation in political society. The political effects that filmmakers see in their making and screening of events might be very different today, depending on the context of their causes. A film's capacity to provoke a thoughtful discussion, which

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<sup>202</sup> Deepa Dhanraj stressed the importance that PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE had for her and others of her generation, as it presented parts of the political activist circle of the time, including some members who died during the Emergency and after.

<sup>203</sup> Patwardhan 1984: 461.

<sup>204</sup> Conversation, 7th June 2002.

creates a sense of immediacy and urgency within a given context, might demand a different language that agitates, a different kind of cinematic speech and form of address.

When Surabhi Sharma showed JARI MARI at a college for Mass Communication, her long term filmmaking process and the connected formal approach of her project stood in stark contrast to the student's training in working within various media spheres, which also includes forms of documentary filmmaking. The size of her budget and her time management was one of the first questions from the student audience to the director. After the screening, students were distributing booklets about their *Student Media Day*. The booklet was titled *Blitzkrieg* and various sections of it with *HoloCast*, *GeSTEPO*, *Auschquiz*, *Final Protocol* etc..

„The strategy of 'Blitzkrieg' based on speed, co-ordination and movement aims at 'hit and move instantly'. These are the qualities that we as media students need to imbibe through the plethora of events.“ (From the student booklet)

The students expressed that the vocabulary was chosen to emphasise a media work philosophy of efficiency and progress which they saw as a direct and critical reaction to the slow, cumbrous state apparatus, which produces 'boring, old-fashioned programmes'.<sup>205</sup> A similar opinion led the young directors of a then newly founded production company *Digital Talkies* to state that, "we don't want to produce political films, we want to make films about our lives".

Deepa Dhanraj in her conversation with Madhu Bushan, expressed a critique and self-reflection, which is close to Ranjini Mazumdar's and Shikha Jhingan's concerns in 2002, albeit already raised at an earlier moment in time.

Deepa Dhanraj: "In India what has also happened is that we got stuck with the form of socialist realism without the environment of revolution – which bred this form in the first place. If you look at Soviet Russia, just after the revolution, the Soviet State decided to deliberately use film as an educational tool. Whether it was starting party policy or disseminating information, filmmakers were seen as workers who were furthering the cause of and making the revolution. Many film forms, which they created then, have become radical genres, which 'political' filmmakers have

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<sup>205</sup> I only had a short conversation with two students. I can therefore not fully interpret the event and do not want to tokenise it. However, they stressed that they wanted to use the vocabulary without its package of politics and would not see this as problematic, also hinting at how in the 'West' people would utilise a Gandhian vocabulary in a rather casual manner. Apart from the media philosophy that this incident stands for, it is also an example of popular culture phenomena of non-knowledge that is seen on numerous occasions in the 'West'. An admiration of 'Bollywood' for its entertainment value without any awareness of occurring Hindu cultural nationalist agendas is but one example. I am grateful to Nanna Heidenreich who helped highlighting this point.

used and are still using in toto. Socialist realism is one of them. Here in India, the prevailing ideological climate is reactionary and we seem to have got stuck with these forms without the historical circumstances (...). Today by and large the films only illustrate the individual filmmaker's political position and does not move into the realms of political activity. (...). While I am against the propagation of any single ideology, I do regret the fact that there is on the other hand no generative climate for dialogue and debate, only individuals working in isolation. Don't you think so?"

Madhu Bushan: "Yes there does seem to be no creative plurality. In fact it appears to be that all seeming attempts of plurality are in reality contained within a given notion of politics and change – of oppression and liberation."

Deepa Dhanraj.: "The reason for why I feel for not many individual filmmakers attempting to break out from this standard mode is the insidious and unspoken peer pressure from the Left – which is still a strong reference point. ... Take e.g. my film *Sudeshha* [a portrait of a woman who was an activist in the CHIPKO movement, N.W.]. A quiet film about how someone lives. But it was dismissed as not being 'political'".

(Deepa Dhanraj in conversation with Madhu Bushan, 1988<sup>206</sup>)

The vibrancy of a socio-realist film language is questioned in its efficacy to bring about a politics that can stir discussion, evoke new perspectives rather than representing cases. A certain vision is declared to be lacking together with an absence of debate amongst film practitioners. Also, a too fixed idea about what is perceived as political, which reminds one of criticisms I was referring to in chapter 1, namely, a scepticism towards the political efficacy of fiction and a trusting of the political in the socio-realist.

When I spoke to Ranjini Mazumdar, Shikha Jhingan and others expressing similar concerns, documentary filmmaking had already gone through more than a decade of funding from development agencies. The depoliticisation that occurred when making a film on 'the status of women in India' or later 'gender issues' as part of agendas, often set by headquarters in Europe or the US, was addressed by most women filmmakers I talked to and added immensely to their scepticism of being, again, categorised only as 'women'. But the increasing importance and spread of social movements and NGOs, together with the non-existence of cultural funding for documentary filmmaking, impacted on other thematic areas as well. The development sector being the only financial source for filmmakers, their films fell in danger of becoming representations of NGO 'issues' and loosing its potential that may stem from a non-mainstream position.

"I think we are still too obsessed with information, giving a background and contextualisation. Sometimes people don't think about form. There is not enough play, not enough humour, certainly not enough experimentation, it is much too serious. We distance ourselves from corporate films, from propaganda, from state documentaries, we all say we are not doing that and yet in many ways we do that very same. Also women have." (Reena Mohan, Interview 21<sup>st</sup> February 2001)

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<sup>206</sup> Bhushan, Madhu 1988. "Activism and Art. A Dialogue with Deepa Dhanraj". In: *Deep Focus*, Vol. 1 (3), p. 32-39.

With 'guerrilla cinema' (stressing a political underground activity), the 'logic of the action' is clearly the logic of the revolution. 'Militant aesthetics' are to agitate the vibrant masses of workers, peasants and citizens against the state. Clearly located in a Marxist ideology, the demonstrating, revolting masses are part of a chosen political narrative. While in contrast to Louis Malle's *CALCUTTA* (1969)<sup>207</sup>, which was shown during the same *Robert Flaherty Film Seminar* in Boston in 1976, *WAVES OF REVOLUTION* "presented the Indian masses as vibrant and fighting to overcome their circumstances"<sup>208</sup>, they remain subjects of the revolution. Without the context of the revolution, the tactic of exposing and revealing follows another author's agenda, a NGO's, a social movement's, a filmmaker's concept of the story. A stress on groups or communities which become units within the story of development or the government's policies was also supported within a common style of a group interview.<sup>209</sup> Either one person would talk but be surrounded by many others, or many people would be responding to the question of the filmmaker. While it is often the case that people are the opposite of shy of the camera and that this results in a gathering of people at a shooting occasion, it still remains a choice to shoot precisely like that. Who and what is presented within a community or group context can thus reinforce class or caste perceptions and divides. This choice has thus particular effects on how a situation is addressed and how people are presented, as members of a group.

An initiative to create another source of funding, which wanted to be more removed from developmental agendas and support the idea of documentary film actively participating in and creating a public sphere, was the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT). Its first round of commissioning, the film series *India's Quest* that I mentioned in my introduction, provoked films that clearly brought new assets into the realms of documentary filmmaking (such as *FOR MAYA* by Vasudha Joshi or *A SEASON OUTSIDE* by Amar Kanwar<sup>210</sup>). Rajiv Mehrotra worked very closely with the Raqs Media Collective on possible conceptual frameworks for a new funding source like this, which through an agreement with the national TV channel Doordarshan also wanted to

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<sup>207</sup> *CALCUTTA*, D: Louis Malle, 99 min, 35 mm, colour, 1969.

<sup>208</sup> Patwardhan 1984: 495.

<sup>209</sup> Pendakur, Manjunath names this as a characteristic feature of the Indian Documentary, an argument which cannot be upheld for current films. See: Pendakur, Manjunath 1995. "Cinema of Resistance: Recent Trends in Indian Documentary Film". *Documentary Box*, No. 7., publication of the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival.

<sup>210</sup> *A SEASON OUTSIDE*, D: Amar Kanwar, 30 min, Digital Video, colour, India 1998.

ensure that each film produced under PSBT would be broadcast there. One of the few publications on Indian documentary was realised under this umbrella as well. *Double Take: Looking at the Documentary* includes articles by film practitioners on the different aspects of making documentaries.<sup>211</sup> Additionally PSBT film festivals were part of the plan, and realised. At the time of my research, many filmmakers look at the overall results of works very critically. Filmmakers who would show me their 'PSBT film' would at times excuse themselves, not wanting to raise too high expectations as these were 'just made for TV'. While I cannot judge the vast number of films that have been produced since the late 90s within the schemes of PSBT, the tight time and financial framework it imposes seemed initially to restrict a commitment to experimental and exploratory output and work counter to PSBT's call for a "new vocabulary and activism at the very heart of broadcasting in India"<sup>212</sup>. There seemed to be a peculiar mix between almost overemphasising that films should develop 'innovative forms' and anchoring the commissioning cycles to agendas that appeared very instructive and thus possibly foreclosing a creative treatment.

With their third Commissioning Cycle for instance, *Ideas that have worked*,

"PSBT is looking for in-depth, incisive films of intellectual vigor that will explore the work of individuals and/or the unfolding of projects, initiatives and process that will inspire and help guide audiences to realize their individual and collective potential to make a real difference. We intend for the films to be both inspirational and implicitly educational, each looking at the work of a single individual and/or set of ideas. They will need to be structured and focused to explore the problems and predicaments that were sought to be addressed - the qualities of leadership and the techniques, processes and structures that were used to triumph over them. They will need to consider the aspects that have ensured their sustainability even as they continue to evolve. We hope the films will empower audiences to embrace the possibilities and rewards from passions that reach beyond the self to make an enduring, significant and positive impact on others."

(<http://www.psb.org/past-comm-ideas.html>, last retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> September 2007)

Similar to the above, most commissioning cycles have an educational outlook and are located within the Indian nation-state. But, they offer a possibility for first-time filmmakers and more established ones to realise a small-scale film and thus potentially propose a platform for new energies to arise that instigates filmmakers to a different kind of seeing, to a seeing that is not predetermined by commissioning calls and their definitions of purpose and impact.

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<sup>211</sup> Raqs Media Collective (eds.) 2000. *Double Take: Looking at the Documentary*. PSBT, New Delhi.

<sup>212</sup> <http://www.psb.org> (last accessed 1.08.2012)

How do filmmakers participate in a continuously changing media and social movement context? What are the kinds of films that participate in a public sphere or even allow new publics to come about? What could be 'new' audio-visuals that intervene in contemporary political society that expose what we cannot yet see? New kinds of audio-visuals where filmmakers listen to what falls outside the 'logic of the action' and thus make their spectators see and hear otherwise? How can this be an act of listening that takes seriously and revitalises the by now famous implications of Spivak's question: 'Can the subaltern speak?'<sup>213</sup>

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## 5. On and in Form

"For militant filmmakers in the Third World, where resistance to oppression is an immediate concrete imperative, formal preoccupations necessarily become secondary. Revolutionary form becomes a by-product of revolutionary content and not the other way around."  
(Anand Patwardhan 1984: 445)

"Realism can function in any of a number of ways including, but not limited to, the confirmation, perpetuation and reflection of bourgeois, patriarchal reality. It can testify to alternative, marginal, subversive or illegal realities; it can critique the notion of reality. To portray the world with a realistic film style does not necessarily imply that one believes that the reality portrayed is fixed, stable, complete or unbiased, although it probably means that one has an opinion about what this reality means, feels like, how it functions, or how it can change. To see a representation of something that occurred in the real world is not necessarily to confuse that image with reality.  
(Alexandra Juhasz 1994: 176)<sup>214</sup>

There is no film without form, no documentary language that derives 'naturally' from its material. A space, a time, a historical context, an urgency, might evoke a certain form, genre or aesthetic approach, but certainly the kind of dialogue between all participating agents of a film contains an argument, an attitude, a political position of various kinds. Hence form is always political. In chapter 1 I discussed the politics in verisimilitudes, in what is constructed, conveyed and perceived as the real; or, to put it differently, in what is perceived as intelligible, what makes 'sense'. A film form can thus provide a structure for evidence or constitute evidence in itself, namely in the intelligible 'logic of its action'.

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<sup>213</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in: Groosberg, Larry and Cary Nelson (Eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 271-313

<sup>214</sup> Juhasz, Alexandra 1994 "They said we were trying to show reality – all I want to show is my video: The politics of the realist feminist documentary". In: *Screen* 35: 2, p. 175.

In the following I would like to support and remind of Juhasz' discussion of how a whole range of socio-realist feminist documentaries was bypassed. In Juhasz' view socio-realist styles were rejected because they were condemned as 'naïve', as coming from uninformed makers 'who don't know better' leading to Juhasz asking herself whether she must "feel embarrassed, stupid or apologetic for liking and using these formal strategies?" The prevailing argument that provoked this critique was that 'real' feminist politics could only be found and expressed through avant-garde film techniques which formally articulate and hence show their questioning of ideologies transported in cinematic realisms.<sup>215</sup> While Juhasz' concern stemmed of course from a specific US American context of feminist film history, I does reflect a need to complicate assumptions of epistemological groundings and political affect of specific forms. When I think through the socio-realist birth of the Indian documentary and the many encounters during my research which spoke of some or the other critique or indeed fatigue with this style that some started to perceive as a burden, it is in this vein of caution, i.e. to not too easily relegate it to realms of naivety. It is to not too easily dismiss its valuable contribution when it comes to thinking through the many layers of how film is potentially political, and to then possibly critique it on different grounds. I hope hereby to look at the politics of realism and form in a different light and thus add another perspective to what was developed in chapter 1 while also shifting my attention to political effects.

I have earlier stressed on the notion of participation, the act of literally placing a film in the midst of a political debate and I believe that one can abstract from this literal act of organizing and rethink a film's participation on various other levels. In this way the participation a film provokes brings forth, as in bringing forth a public event, a 'problemspace'<sup>216</sup>, an irritation, a thought, an address of a subject and maybe a new audience.

Also when I read that: 'A crew comes together. The making of guerrilla cinema is a political act and every production meeting is a political meeting' (Anand Patwardhan), I can on the one hand dismiss this on feminist grounds as precisely these underground guerrilla movements did not have much space for the 'real' participation of women, but at the same time I can take this call at face value and acknowledge how it evokes "ways of doing and making" in film that can indeed "intervene in the general distribution

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.: 176.

<sup>216</sup> Enwezor quotes this term from David Scott in his introduction to Enwezor (Ed.) 2006, cf. footnote 8

of ways of doing and making”<sup>217</sup>. I am for instance reminded of the importance of collaborative practices during film productions but also of smaller scale situations where Surabhi Sharma and her editor Sujata Narula painstakingly questioned each image for its value and hereby engaged, on practical and philosophical levels, with larger question concerning the possible stakes in a chosen image or a film. At times I observed an almost magical coming together of technical decisions, decisions of beauty (like, which is the nicer shot), the overall narrative of the film and the aim to give appropriate filmic space to a subject. Those moments spoke of a necessary joining of levels of technicality, larger political beliefs and cinematic likings, often through a coming together of many different people bringing in their viewpoints; from friend’s advices during research, to the camera and sound person, the editor or the musician developing a soundscape. To foreground the sound of labour in JARI MARI but to also work with abstracting ambient sound becomes a very decisive part of the overall film and an intervention into how a spectator can listen to a place like Jari Mari. Filmmaking is thus always and intrinsically a collaborative practice, although collaboration might be practiced and be key to varying degrees.

To come back to form, however, when Patwardhan writes for WAVES OF REVOLUTION that “the result was a hazy, flickering, off-center, scratched image of people being attacked by police”, which “... In a sense [...] symbolised at once all the trials and difficulties our film and the Movement as a whole were up against”<sup>218</sup>, there is film aesthetics at play, which intervenes in the contextual “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière). The announced revolutionary form seems thus not a mere “by-product of revolutionary content” (Anand Pathwardhan)<sup>219</sup>. It is a choice for a film language that conveys immediacy, authenticated by its being in the midst of it: The direct struggle creates the effect of realness, the realness of the revolutionary moment.

But, a media and political context which now easily absorbs ‘off-centre, scratched image[s] of people being attacked by the police’ can render a similar formula into a mere representational exercise. We are very familiar now with war journalists standing in the middle of the field and cameras, appearing as if they just managed to catch a violence enacted. We have gone through debates on how this often creates a spectacle of the victims and fosters voyeurism in the viewer while telling us very little

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<sup>217</sup> Rancière 2004: 13.

<sup>218</sup> Patwardhan 1984: 456.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid: 445.

about the crises we are watching on screen. At the same time one cannot speak of 'the death of all images' but needs to address if and how some images seem to not stir transformation or reaction in viewers any more. The 'looking at' and seeing visual evidence does often have very little to no implication at all.<sup>220</sup> An editing style which juxtaposes perspectives to reveal an injustice or a linear narrative around a political event might just sit too comfortably within a common enough 'logic of the action', a common distribution of what is said and not said, seen and not seen. A radical intervention into new forms of subjectification might not be at stake when one is "looking for a nice narrative" (Surabhi Sharma) on a grave situation.

Surabhi Sharma: Because nothing dramatic is happening it's just not been documented. There is no riot, there's no starvation death, something which needs to be documented and is documented. This is too mundane and so it's just invisible. I feel it's completely invisible in the print media and TV, but it's also not very present within our documentary scene. (...)

N: But you also said that there were unexpected moments, so called dramatic events, when you actually went shooting.

S: Yes, the demolition that took place while we were shooting was a surprise. The first day we were shooting nobody was willing to talk and they said, 'come, there is a public meeting happening'. I first thought, 'I am not interested in public meetings', but then people told me, 'our houses are going to be demolished'. So just the urgency expressed by everybody, you pick up on that and you say, 'how can I not shoot it'. So we went.

NW: And also during the editing you decided to eventually leave this in the film as well?

S: Yes, but if I would have stayed with the spirit of what I actually wanted, I should have edited it out. But I myself got succumbed and panicked about the form.

Relating to the above dialogue, but also to our conversation placed at the beginning of this chapter, there is a compelling realness in the actuality of political events. And there are again conventions, a common sense, about what is perceived as a political event, in contrast to "nothing dramatic is happening". Also, the construction of a political event through a "nice narrative" seems to evoke an actuality and is thus often disguised as not being overburdened by any form, although often filled with melodramatic tropes. The political event assumes authenticity for itself. This is, in brief, the argument that the revolution is necessarily real and that politics lies in the event. Thus, the politics of the event has a direct path to the real and a socio-realist portrait that presents and makes the political event gain a privileged right to claim the space of the political. I would argue that "watching so much of nothing happening", as was said of JARI MARI, does not proceed along those lines, but redistributes questions of urgencies, events and the political.

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<sup>220</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff made a similar argument during the *Cinema and Media Studies* conference in April 2006, relating to the wide spread of videos and photographs revealing the conditions and torture practices in Abu Ghraib.

Narratives of political and violent events are often constructed in a linear form leading to a climax of dramatisation and possibly an anti-climax, a release or 'conclusion' by referring to what social movements or other political actors have already started doing. By their logic of narrative they create a feeling of the real, although 'real life' might actually not be like that, not linear, not moving towards a climax. Similarly, victim accounts are often unquestioned in their realness while they deploy the fictional device of the melodramatic. Needless to say, there is a lot of fiction in socio-realist forms and works of fiction 'work' by creating senses of realness. Thus, as Rancière argues, a lot of cinema, of fiction and non-fiction has actually not used the potential of cinema, namely that, following Jean Epstein: "Cinema is life, a story is a lie."<sup>221</sup>

N: Madhusree asked you whether you felt inhibited because now you were dealing with real people. Other than in your diploma film, which was clearly fictional and which she felt was more experimental, playing with people and their ways of being in urban places. She felt *JARI MARI* looked like you were scared to ...

S: ... to experiment with form too much?

N: yes ...

S: Again, when she said it, I felt yes, that is true. I was quite inhibited in really playing around with form. Now in the pregnancy film, the only way it will work is if I am completely uninhibited. But here, I wanted actually that traditional documentary filmmaking approach, of the camera being the recorder and the listener, I like that. But then - so much of the detail was irrelevant for the core issue and I discussed it a lot with Jabeen, and I insisted on keeping it.

Because, hey, this and this person is not just a worker. When she says that, 'twenty years it has taken me to build this house', it's as related to her story. And somebody else who repeats 'my husband left me', you know, how can I leave that out?

I was constantly trying to create this, almost like realism, realism in cinema, to just give that space. This is why even the way we cut, not wanting to pull out of a space, unifying a space and making it a real time space, not abstracting within that private space at all. This is why when I do abstract, when I do have a plane inside a private place, it doesn't work. The planes work when I am outside people's houses.

N: Because then it's a completely different cinematic space.

S: Yes, then I am willing to abstract. But there was no way I was able to abstract somebody as real as Lakshmi Bhai. Every choice I was making was to make real that moment. So yes, almost like, oh god, I don't know, a social-realist way, you know?

*(We both start laughing)*

That Surabhi Sharma does not "treat the real as a problem" (Rancière) seems to become a problem for her. It creates a discomfort, maybe similar to the one Juhasz expresses, but resulting from a different history of documentary filmmaking and contextual connotations of categories linked to this specific context and its formations of belongings. Without wanting to freeze *JARI MARI* and the director's endeavours within a, in any case, loose and fragmented context of documentary filmmaking in India, I perceive the film as negotiating legacies of conflicting discourses.

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<sup>221</sup> Epstein cited in Rancière 2006 : 1.

The filmmaker Swati Dandekar, who had seen David MacDougall's DOON SCHOOL CHRONICLES (2000)<sup>222</sup>, for instance, talked in 2002 about how an Indian filmmaker might not have taken up a boarding school environment and aspects of growing-up as a topic, as it is not an 'issue'. The shadow of a history in which film is clearly a tool, either for the becoming of the Indian nation or for exposing the injustice done by this very same nation-state and thereby reminding the state of its function and of its citizens' rights, was at that point hard to circumvent for many filmmakers, though surely not exclusively. Autobiographical films or the placing of oneself in the centre of a film conflicted with the self-effacement of an intellectual elite which is in any case accused of capitalising on the 'rest of the nation' and having failed to represent it. Self-reflexivity comes in when one is critiquing precisely one's own effort to represent. A project on pregnancy, women and their relation to their bodies, for which Surabhi Sharma was doing initial research and initial shootings with friends during my research stay, was felt to be very difficult for her as she saw a danger of being "too self indulgent" and to have chosen "an upper class topic". Filmmaking for a collective process of transformation was thus an inherited purpose of filmmaking, which decided on whether a content matter was worth taking up and on how a message could be brought across. A statement like the previously quoted 'there are too many issues to be dealt with here, we have no time for aesthetics' that I still encountered during my research, would now be harshly contested by many. On the other hand, the pre-figurations of an audience that might not be reached by non-traditional formats, is still prevailing and therefore the 'function' of experimental work still doubted even by filmmakers clearly critiquing the reduction of political films to pamphlets. Interestingly, the above conversations also imply a perception on how an outlived film formula should progress, what it must mean to be experimental; a thought that I would like to take up again in chapter 3.

„When I was 17 I saw HAMARA SHAHAR and knew my vocation“ (Surabhi Sharma, 06. June 2002)

Surabhi Sharma worked as an apprentice for Anand Patwardhan. After a college course in Mass Communication she had continued her film career with a 3-year Diploma Course at the NFTII in Pune. Though non-fiction was never really taught or much discussed during her film studies, she went to the Institute with the aim of

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<sup>222</sup> DOON SCHOOL CHRONICLES, D: David MacDougall, 140 min, Digital Video, colour, 2000.

working in non-fiction. She still named Anand Patwardhan as a filmmaker she carries high respect for, especially for his consistency in building an alternative archive of the city Bombay. At the same time, through her way of working she departs from his filmmaking style.<sup>223</sup>

Surabhi Sharma is dealing with a need to expose, to reveal something that is invisible in the media, and her concern is directed towards a specific subject citizen. While maybe hesitant to “go the whole way”, in her form of “fooling around with conventions” there is a fine-tuned difference emerging that carries the potential to shift the registers and is thus worth expanding on. JARI MARI maybe stands at a crossroads of a momentarily expressed need for a new language and the moment of its emergence. Surabhi Sharma’s processing of the history of documentary filmmaking in India is a very different one than Paromita Vohra’s. While Vohra’s first step is a complete leaving of a socio-realist form and taking the liberty of playing with and citing forms, Surabhi Sharma’s progression and experimentation attempts to work along the poetics of the socio-realist form which have become conventionalised and institutionalised, and to arrive at other politics from there.

“A longstanding lamentation in contemporary thought wants us to bear witness to the programmed death of images at the hands of the machine for information and advertisement. I have opted for the opposite perspective and have tried to show that the art and thought of images have always been nourished by all that thwarts them.” (Rancière 2006: 19)

Maybe not a ‘death of all images’ but certainly a fatigue and a questioning of the efficacy of a long prevailing form characterised how many filmmakers reflected on the independent documentary film. My dwelling on those moments of doubt that some even called a crisis in the politically motivated non-fiction film is to stress on the simultaneously arising moments of emergence. Talking of a moment in time is not to locate the new precisely there, but rather a zooming into many moments where doubts occur and are articulated, where images are thwarted and nourished again. It is to utilise the energy of something emerging before it falls back into being a convention, of the socio-realist or the experimental. Attending to how images and film languages are revitalised is to look for manifold understandings of progress. It is an interest in the processes that potentially define spaces of transformation and which in hindsight are often named a *turn*. What I see as being investigated, departed with and fostered

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<sup>223</sup> I want to add that I am not making an argument about Anand Pathwardhan’s work here which would need more attention to his different activities in relation to film as well as the development of his film making style.

again, are relations between filmart and politics, filmmaking and activism, all of which contain practices of participation and intervention. The prefiguredness of a 'logic of action' and consequently of a subject that acts within this logic, has been critiqued as it was deemed to necessarily remain within the 'limits of the possible'. In what follows, I wish to enlarge selected cinematic moments which I see as potent approaches to the processes of subjectification which might thus permit the listening to proposals of how the logic can be dismantled and the possible be given a boost.

## 6. Talking heads or, on becoming political part II

*Kamlabai Gokhale, Born 1900, Pioneering actress of the Marathi Stage, the First Woman of the Indian Screen. Lives by herself in Pune. (text on black screen)*

*Take one – a preparatory pause –*

"I greet my audience with folded hands. I stand before you, Kamlabai Ragnath Gokhale, 88 years old, blind in one eye and lame in one leg. Yet I feel a confidence within me. The best of wrestlers can not win ... if he is not in form, but my faith is strong. I want to show my young audience seated here what I used to do many years ago and I am sure I'll succeed. Like the good farmer who worships the black soil that nourishes him, I, too, pay homage to the profession that has nurtured me."

*Kamlabai sits back on her chair, black background. Then cut to a view out of her Pune flat, out to open fields.*

Reena Mohan's *KAMLABAI* (1991)<sup>224</sup> starts with Kamlabai Gokhale introducing herself to an imaginary audience. Only then we get to see other everyday traces of Kamlabai. We remain in her flat, watch while she is seemingly unaware of the camera or when she speaks directly to the director or the cameraperson, performing her life as an actress and her everyday activities. The 16mm camera adds not only a grainy quality and a depth to the visual texture but also makes for long takes which change their frames only by zooming in or out. The image is framed as if waiting for Kamlabai, she



Source: *KAMLABAI*, by Reena Mohan.

<sup>224</sup> *KAMLABAI*, D: Reena Mohan, 45 min, 16 mm, colour, India 1992.

leaves or enters the frame of the image. The calm and reduced form of the film emphasises the beauty of Kamlabai and gives her immense dignity even when she has to reach for her crutches to be able to walk or when she sits on the kitchen floor grinding. The rhythm of long takes and simply staying within the space of her flat, watching photographs and having Kamlabai move between her memories and her being in the present when commenting on the director's "wild hair" or her needing to marry soon, seems to carry the breadth of life-long experiences. As if in passing, we hear about her mother's struggle with a violent husband, how acting was better than prostitution, or how a female fan fell in love with Kamlabai, when she was dressed as a man for her role, and how Kamlabai leaves it open "to your imagination" (Kamlabai) whether this young woman was attracted by a man or a woman. Ample space is given for the subtle details of an 88-year old woman's life.

K: Don't make me crane my head to look at you. Move a bit.

RM: There?

K: Where else?

RM: But you look so lovely from here.

K: A good line to knock me on the head with! (*She sits on her bed, bangs her head softly, slow movements, and laughs*) Hey you, Bengal. What are you up to? Shall we stop?<sup>225</sup>



Source: KAMLABAI, by Reena Mohan.

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<sup>225</sup> Kamlabai refers to Ranjan Palit's Bengali background. Ranjan Palit shot KAMLABAI as well as SKIN DEEP with Reena Mohan and is surely one of the most refined camerapersons for documentary film in India.

CUT

“You throw bombs, commit atrocities and then you malign Behram. Why? What have we ever done to you? (Batao?)

Off voice of the filmmaker Madhusree Dutta: “Isn’t anyone able to go to work?”

“We’ve all lost our jobs, even workshops have shut down. I have no husband – I used to earn 10 rupees. But it’s been two months now.

Off: What do you do?

“I carry sand, or sell fish, or bananas. I’ve five children. How can we survive? (Batao?)

I have no mother or father or sister. Go here, and they fire. Go there, they arrest you. What’s a woman like me supposed to do? If others were doing well, one might borrow some money. But even good businesses have been ruined. If our people stir out, the police get suspicious - - we can’t move about freely. Even the better shops are closed.

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.

We are brothers and sisters –

How long will you keep us this hostility?

Tell me, why are you bent to destroying this country?”

The final lines are shouted with enormous emphasis and seem even more punctuated when spoken in Hindi/Urdu – *Tum Bhai, hum bhai. Tum Bahin, hum bahin.* (‘We are brother and sisters’) Also the in-between *batao – tell me* – which is not always subtitled, stresses the direct address and anger of the woman speaking directly into the camera. This scene is part of the opening sequence of Madhusree Dutta’s film *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA*, a 30-minute film, which was shot immediately after the second wave of the Bombay riots in 1993. As it was an instant reaction to the violence, Madhusree Dutta told me that she didn’t even know the cameraperson before she met him right at their shooting location. A woman from Behrampada, a Muslim neighbourhood heavily affected by the riots and demonised in the media and by its neighbours, speaks directly towards the camera, in a close up, her voice is full of anger.

What is the space of dignity that can be given to someone in a situation of utter despair?



Source: *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA*, by Madhusree Dutta. Opening sequence.

What is transmitted here is an urgent desire to be listened to, a relentless demand towards the listener rather than a victim asking for empathy. It is an insisting voice that stays with a spectator; it did with me. A voice that interrupts the construction of a story of retaliation which unfolded in the media. The main part of the film works via juxtaposing voices from the Muslim neighbourhood and their Hindu neighbours. The latter iterating that they are scared because they never know when “these people” (meaning the Muslim community) will attack, that they are sure that “they themselves burned their own huts” and feeling overlooked by the government, as it is “them” who get support and amenities of all kinds.

CUT

Surabhi Sharma: I left out a larger chunk with Kala, the one who says “just drop a bomb on our heads”. I actually wanted to begin the film with her.

When we met first, with that very dispassionate voice she gives you a narrative of her life.

So she says:

“I got married when I matured.

After one year” – she does not remember ages or dates at all –

“after one year I got the first child.

After the second year, the second child.

After the third year, the third child.

After the fourth year the fourth child.

After the fourth child we went off to Bombay and stayed on the pavement, which is when my husband left me. And we moved to a rented house, which is where my second daughter died.

After she died we moved to this house.”

So everything is marked by a death, a birth, or a sickness. In my proposal I have written that this would be the beginning of JARI MARI, this very tight close up of this woman and this completely dispassionate way of how she gives you a life history.

But again, this was too conceptual. When we got down to filming that later, she went into far more detail. (Surabhi Sharma, conversation 6<sup>th</sup> June 2002)

What does it mean to listen to how someone speaks? What constitutes being an attentive witness to the poetics of how something is put forth? Can we listen to a life experience, an understanding of the self, to urgency? Is there something in talking, and in listening, that works against the political oppression that can be exercised by a subjectification? Can we hear tactics of resistances or signals of transformation?

In chapter 1 I suggested a relation between cinematic forms which are open to the surfacing of multiple effects of the real and an approach to the political question of rights that does not foreclose its subjects by a process of representation. What I see at stake here is another political space, an ethical space for subjects and their multiple

logics of action. A cinematic space that arises in conversations and ways of telling which give way to listen again to what we think we have heard and understood many times. An intimate space to listen to ways of talking which is neither an intrusion nor a voyeurism, but that provokes the removal of a distance that renders a person a mere representative of a story. Can a cinematic space really be given that allows a film subject to locate her or himself by speaking rather than being located by a storyteller, a filmmaker, an educator, a revolutionary or the state? Can subjects be perceived other than fulfilling the entity of a citizen, which immediately prescribes their rights and duties and how they need to attain those? Can communication thus start from listening without assuming the course of the story, without decoding metaphors through the means one brings along for an understanding that wants to reach a totality? Can we take note of a victim of violence or a woman living through informalised labour without her becoming a representative of an issue or serving a predefined politics and activism?

S: I am always, before the camera is rolling, just chatting a lot (...) and that I think creates a certain ambience, which becomes usable and has some depth to it.

N: You also consistently left your questions in. Was there also the idea to make yourself present?

S: Hm, let me think. I am trying to figure out what was the complete rationale behind that. One, the kinds of questions I was asking were not proper interview questions, so on a very basic practical way, if I had to edit the interviews without those questions, there would have been too many gaps. (...) The second reason why I wanted the questions is, again, – I don't know whether it is even relevant, but for me it is core. I like when a person is speaking, but also when a person is listening to a question and then answering, I find that there is some weight to that. It's not like one rapid fire answering and not that through some kind of personal urge the person is talking to the camera. It is never like that. And there I would have been very uncomfortable to make it seem that I was there and there were all these women just dying to speak their hearts out, which in certain situations, as a form, might really work. Like, maybe if I was to go into a riot situation, then people just speaking to the camera without me asking, that might work, I don't know.

But as a form I am always uncomfortable with having people just answering, because that also means that you have to have cut-aways.

N: Like cutting out and abstracting what is said and taking it out of the actual conversation it belongs to, editing it next to something outside the conversation?

S: Yes, also, there's a pause before you answer, there's a pause at the end, and I like all of that. But its not about a self-reflexivity, I didn't want to erase myself, but on the other hand I am not important to the story at all.

(...) When I hear interviews, in which I am as much in as the other person, I don't like that.

N: It becomes too strong.

S: Yes, it's too strong and so in the editing it was a very conscious way of dealing with the sound.

N: I am just thinking about my own recordings. They would be very hard to use because I can never get myself to not do this confirming kind of humming, or I repeat words at the end of the other person's sentence. But then, it's nice when I listen to them, because one hears the presence of both people. And also, like you said, even if the other person is quiet, there is a

presence, next to the background sounds which also very much support to bring back the kind of atmosphere of a conversation.

S: Hm, its true. It's funny for me, it's a familiar activity but still strange, because its turned around.

So if to give a sense of atmosphere or to make apparent a thinking space, a relation between speakers and what drives them, is an attempt to give some depth to a person and a body of work, is it to authenticate? Maybe it is to make clear how talking is momentarily and singular. But also that there is nevertheless value to what and how things are said, and not said, which extends beyond this moment. If form in film is political than certainly forms of talking are political. Forms of talking develop a particular way of addressing the person one is talking to or a spectator watching a film. Conversations and the varied forms they can take are themselves a choice of address, a particular though open genre for addressing a reader or a spectator. They might provide an instance to enter a line of thought, a possibility to add to the unfinished quality of the said.

When I write it is often like having further conversations with those past conversations. I am trying to find out what the realness of those conversations was and what they may be able to convey to others who read them. Many years after the famous Writing Culture debate, we have gone through several critiques of authenticating devices, of the notion of 'giving a voice', of dialogical ethnographies. Some devices of self-reflexivity had turned into mere navel gazing or tokenisms, others remained in this state of ambivalence and hesitation which occurs when creating knowledge from experience, from individual and singular experiences of seeing, hearing, sensing and talking. During my project as well, there were textures of talking and they were different when sitting in a large institutional office or an editing studio in Andheri West, a middle class neighbourhood whose sound-scape connected it to JARI MARI, through the noise of the plane engines which now interrupt my recordings. Recordings taken in the studio where Surabhi Sharma was editing often have liveliness and a presence of work. People came in, asked questions, we chatted with the producer or the editor. An atmosphere was building up towards an editing session, talking about what had been done and what was going to happen. There was time to talk but within a set time frame. Often it is also time itself we talked about during our conversations, like the time we have for talking, time for the film, our various schedules, time for a shot, and thus time as media practice and research. When I visited Surabhi in Bangalore, time was

different, it almost wasn't there, it wasn't spoken about or didn't impose itself. Without romanticising it and knowing that I was lucky that those days could be fitted into Surabhi's schedule, the conversations we had in Bangalore have an expanded quality. They gave me time to get back to things we had talked about earlier. The recordings give a sense of the time of the day, like the mornings busy with vendors passing along the streets, people ringing to drop something by, cars driving past. At other times, it seems like midday, with bird sounds but otherwise a heavy calm in the air. There is one especially long conversation which gets interrupted from time to time by phone calls or us making tea but where we keep coming back to continue talk. Our voices are becoming more and more relaxed, we talk slower but concentrated, also a bit tired maybe, laughing, there seems comfort and joy in just exchanging thoughts, absorbed attention as well as small distractions and hesitations. There is always a sense of knowing how precious those moments are but also how we try to connect what we do with a larger scenario, to not get lost in the chatter but to remind ourselves of the possible relevance of keeping on thinking about things that seem minor. There are those uncanny moments of talking about talking and my thinking that step-by-step I get a grasp of the scope for a drive to create new ethical spaces for the protagonists of a film. That drive seems obvious and clear, and yet, through repeated conversations about research and looking through rushes and choosing shots and editing and thinking very seriously through comments made to the film, there is gradually much more at stake. There is a whole history to take along and a present to intervene. That history is a history that I have tried to sketch, postcolonial predicaments and film histories. Surely, not every editing decision is a reflection of those histories. But the seriousness in making space for subjectivities and 'learning to learn' from minor tactics that might be expressed in, for instance ways of talking, attain more weight through direct and indirect references to a history of documentary filmmaking which one wishes to expand.

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"We should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not

understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness.” (Rancière 1998: X)<sup>226</sup>

Deepa Dhanraj: I am a great believer in the talking head. I find it very compelling. The ways of speaking and even the ways of speaking by women who are not literate, their ways of telling stories. Actually a lot of work has to be done on that. How or what kind of language we use to speak about yourself. How do you create a self-conscious energy?

What NGOs and feminists have done with these so-called representations or what it is to be liberated and self aware, that has influenced women’s languages in the villages. It’s very interesting linguistically what they use for what, very amazing, very subtle, in English it’s very difficult to get. It’s also connected with an alien image of what it is to represent yourself and how you do that. You know, how do ideas penetrate your consciousness and how do you absorb these things. Speech is the most important thing, how do you talk and what do you choose to say about yourself and not say. (...)

They don’t give interviews but what we look for is the sound bite. Or you look for an analytical, very articulate political response, they don’t talk like that, they give you stories, so you have to either take the whole story or leave it. (laughs) There is an organic way of story telling and I am trying to make it an interview – its not going to work. It’s like two different forms intervening.” (Conversation, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2002)

When listening to talking or to how someone speaks we can thus be confronted with either not being able to communicate or imposing a way of talking. Or we listen to what we want to hear and we hear the words that we know and that we ourselves are familiar with, we create our own comfort zone. Academic conferences often give the opportunity to experience what is heard and felt as valuable or ground breaking contribution, and often this seems very close to the already known or expressed in familiar terms, while equally innovative points might be raised in a less canonical manner and either not heard or dismissed. What Deepa Dhanraj is hinting at is how through time, through governmentalities and institutionalisations language changes have become naturalised. A hegemony in speaking or what is perceived as speech is constantly reiterated. This comes back to Spivak’s famous question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ as well as to the problematic expressed in Rancière’s terms: Certain talking remains outside of hegemonic distribution of the sensible and disagreement often being overlooked or seemingly resolved without the overall logic of facts, politics, injustices, hierarchies and being threatened by that. A standardised normality and logic, becomes the way to speak without being listened to as it goes via a de-subjectification. A standardised understanding of what it means to be liberated or to progress is expressed in terms of rights and NGO policies. How can we stay within disagreement? How can we remain within differences in talking, in that realm of ambivalence, in errantry as Glissant might call it?

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<sup>226</sup> Rancière, Jacques 1998. *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

“How do you make a film about that act of listening to women?” (Deepa Dhanraj, *ibid.*)

Speaking in film terms, this is then not a giving up of authorship but allowing for ambivalence and an intervention of another voice in the ‘distribution of the sensible’. It is not denying that people are sometimes eager to talk to another person, a filmmaker, a journalist or to a camera, but also to question who is eager to hear, who wants to know, and how in turn this impacts on speech.

Surabhi Sharma’s is partly a search for a different kind of relation to an Other, who is close by and yet set apart through class, caste, economy, spatial arrangements of the city Mumbai. It is a wish to understand otherwise, to take individual lives out of a larger story. Her desire seems to be a continuation of the creation of an alternative archive of a city, other images opposing the representations of ‘shiny’ India, of a globalised glossy visual culture of ads and mass media. But while the broader picture of a global economy should be evoked, her endeavour is to not present the subjects of her film as mere actors within this story but to give space for a presentation on ‘their own terms’. The ‘on their own terms’ is here quite literally a path of developing a way of story telling through their ways of talking, taking cues from how the women speak, the individual accents they set. As stated above, the desire to present people ‘on their own terms’ necessarily carries ambivalence, contradictions and runs the risk of falling into yet another search for the authentic subject. The strength that I see here lies however precisely not in an authentic representation, a socio-realism that argues through exposing, but I perceive Surabhi Sharma’s approach and her move from her context of filmmaking in a different kind of listening. It is a listening that admits also that one doesn’t know, but still a letting oneself into stories. The chosen film form shows a lot of the director without her being physically in the film.

Through filmic tactics of the fictional, the creation of contained *mise-en-scènes*, a cinematic space is created that intervenes in the logic of a socio-realist talking head genre and engenders a realm for the multiple realness of a person. But maybe even more importantly and what I see as well in *KAMLABAI* and in *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA* is a realm that lays stress on the act of engaging, of listening, of trying and also of failing, of the very act and process of navigating around another person’s grammar of talking, and living. This might be a working upon and with ‘disagreement’ and maybe a gesturing towards other locations of crisis and conflict that need our attention.

Is this a feminist filmmaking practice then? During our conversation Deepa Dhanraj talked about, with a slight regret or sense of lack, that there wasn't really a tradition of women filmmakers engaging in developing feminist film aesthetics like she found in Germany and also in the US. She spoke quite fondly of the humour of the German filmmaker Roswitha Ziegler whose films she had seen through the Bangalore Goethe Institutes (Max Mueller Bhavan). This was similar to voices, which wondered why I was doing my research in India as I was interested in experimental explorations of the documentary format, and to the often expressed scepticism towards my questions on the feminism in filmmaker's approach to filmmaking. I want to certainly restrain from a simple division between a masculine military aesthetics of juxtapositions and Manichean argumentations exposing the good and the bad. But I do want to point out the many different strategies I saw within women's filmmaking practices for exploring different formats. They had and have an exciting quality of the emerging which is, rather than merely being 'the not yet there', an argument and a politics in itself. They are often hidden through their ways of distribution and by not aggressively trying to be visible.

Working with popular culture and fiction, working from ways of talking, rethinking the politics of the melodramatic or finding new ways of the autobiographical and the essayistic are clear indications of this. And speaking of the emerging, I also consciously try not only to stay with an interpretation of what is there but also to see the politics of my writing to enlarge what is on its way. I want to stress on minor tactics and ways of participating and intervening, stress on their potential and hereby expand moments of the new. Again, there is the ambivalence between naming and foreclosing a practice that I am especially wary of, knowing how all 'my subjects' work actively against being placed. The listening to and working upon what I see as singular and individual cinematic proposals for multiple subjects and the expanded field of the political, is thus my own ephemeral way of participating in this desire for a fruitful uncertainty.

## Intermediate notes on emancipation

“That is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between they who look and they who act, they who are individuals and they who are members of a collective body.” (Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* 2004: 8)<sup>227</sup>

“ ... I want to show that however revolutionary this political tendency may appear, it actually functions in a counterrevolutionary manner as long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat ideologically and not as a producer.” (Benjamin, Walter: *The Author as Producer* 1934)<sup>228</sup>

The drive for a different kind of subjectivity for those who become the protagonists of a film appears to provoke very different tendencies in film style. The critique of and reaction against a form which objectifies and creates uniform subjects to fit the cause of a political agenda, hence where the storytelling technique aims at constructing protagonists who fulfil pre-set roles, is an active critique if it simultaneously creates a desire to invent cinematic spaces for singularities.

The following story is a road movie, the portrait of a woman truck driver in Gujarat. My aim is, here again, to see how the making intelligible of a particular realness carries the potential for a politics. These intermediary notes, a portrait of the film MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER, are further about relations, relations to subjects and to audiences. They also reflect on the relation between information and opacity. Here I will also ponder upon possible endings and will be thinking again about ‘real feminisms’ and who belongs. Finally, these notes will argue towards imaginaries and their potential for politics. Those could be a film protagonist’s imaginaries, a filmmaker’s or even a writer’s.

Sherna Dastur called MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER “her first *real* film”. Trained at the *National Institute of Design* (NID) in Ahmedabad, where Sherna Dastur also took a one-year film course, she worked as a Graphic Designer and a filmmaker. She had, until we met, directed eight documentaries, most of them focusing on tribal populations in India and funded by national aid organisations. Yet, she was not very eager to talk about those films. They did not seem to matter and at the same time they mattered a

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<sup>227</sup> Rancière gave this lecture at the Summer Academy in Frankfurt, August 2004. Full text retrieved from: <http://www.v2v.cc/node/75>, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2007, p. 8. In the following cited as Rancière 2004b.

<sup>228</sup> Benjamin gave his lecture in 1934 at the *Institute for the Study of Fascism* in Paris. The text I use was published in: *New Left Review* 1/62, July-August 1970, and retrieved from <http://newleftreview.org/?page=article&view-135>, p. 3.

lot. Sherna took them very seriously but in a very different category.

“Before the Gujarat earthquake there was an earthquake in Maharashtra. I made two very specific films about the use of local building materials for the people there. There was no confusion about why I was making these films. (...) A lot of the new housing that had been built by aid groups after the earthquake was really alien to the people. But they had also lost faith in their own local material, in their own skills. So I really believed in what the films were trying to say. They worked and were shown in most of the villages in the districts. The songs we made for one of the films were played on local buses in the district. These films were useful, I felt good making them, but I had no illusions that I was making them for myself. They were very clearly a vehicle to communicate a point. And I see nothing wrong with doing that either.” (Conversation 13<sup>th</sup> March 2002)<sup>229</sup>

To realize her film on Manjuben<sup>230</sup>, the “only woman truck driver” as was claimed regularly, at least in north India, Sherna Dastur spent nine years preparing, even once travelling on the truck together with her protagonist. Such a long period was required for Sherna Dastur to gather the right kind of financial support to realize what for her had become a very important. During this time she also built up a relation to Manjuben who from the beginning liked the idea of being filmed and also agreed to having a small film crew travel together with her for one week. After several offers by funders and subsequent discussions about the kind of film this was to become, Sherna Dastur had rejected all offers from NGOs and women’s organisations. She felt that those organisations wanted her to make “a proper feminist film”, presenting Manju as a feminist, which in her eyes she was clearly not, or not in the manner this term had been predefined. Sherna Dastur felt that none of that would do justice to the “life philosophy” of Manjuben and rejected the money. Her application to the *International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam* (IDFA) was finally successful, albeit not supplying her with a very large fund and so the shooting had to take place within six days and the project remained partly self financed. Although she had presented her idea to IDFA and her application was successful precisely for what it was, she still wondered whether her film would be political enough, whether there might be different expectations and whether IDFA and its audience might ultimately find the film escapist.

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<sup>229</sup> I met Sherna Dastur first in the editing studio Agneetar in Bombay while she finished editing MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER. Later we also met in Delhi, where she lived and completed the film, next to graphic design projects she was working on. Most of the direct quotes are taken from a long conversation that took place on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2002 in Delhi, which followed our viewing of the rough-cut version of the film.

<sup>230</sup> Manju is the name of the truck driver, the ending –ben refers to bahin (sister) and makes Manjuben into sister Manju, an informal way of addressing.

A casual gathering at a filmmaker's place in Andheri: Most people present were working with documentaries in some way or the other. I talked to someone about having seen parts of a work in progress by the director Sherna Dastur. Sherna Dastur was at that time not really known in this circuit and people became curious about where she was from and what she was doing. I talked about how I was very intrigued by the director's approach to remain very reduced in her portrait of what was then said to be the only woman truck driver in North India. There were very mixed reactions. Scepticism was raised about the possibility of presenting a person completely outside of her family relations, to not situate her. Others found difficulties with "hiding" the problems she must be facing when on the road, the dangers involved as a woman and life within a very male dominated realm. Questions about how she could have managed to so radically step out of the norm came up. And, whether it was possible or a lost opportunity to not focus on how she succeeded or how she indeed struggled with her different every-day. By the end of a very engaged discussion about how a character needed to be introduced and presented to an audience, and how thus a story like that would convey something crucial to an audience, there was a kind of epilogue to the conversation which was filled with signs of relief and admiration for "someone doing something different."<sup>231</sup>

The film had thus already created a space for discussion outside its immediate production, before it was fully completed and screened. It provoked a dynamic dinner party conversation in an atmosphere where different views could be discussed and possibly rethought. A woman truck driver was clearly a very interesting topic to take up. But was it an issue? Was one obliged to throw light on the hardship and the struggle? Was it possible to stay with a portrait, which within the living conditions of most women of that class was surely a mere fantasy? Was there a hidden truth behind it, which as a

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<sup>231</sup> Tejaswini Ganti theorizes from script meetings discussing possible adaptations of Hollywood films for Hindi Cinema formula films in her article: "And yet my hearts is still Indian" (In: Ginsburg F.D., Abu-Lughod L., Larkin B. (Eds) 2002. *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, p. 281-300). She refers to Owen M. Lynch 1990. *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles and his discourse on emotions in India, where he describes as a general feature that emotions do not refer to internal states of a person but relationships with others, an argument that Ganti can support with the way Indian producers add emotions to Hollywood films to "make them Indian". The argument might be worth following up in the case of documentaries without culturally essentialising film aesthetics. The relevance of relations for the constitution of the self could similarly resonate with a "being-with" that Jean-Luc Nancy proclaims in 2002. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford University Press. Lines of thought that I cannot fully defend here yet, but which might be fruitful concerning the trend of personal style non-fiction films and for the writing of another history of autobiographical films coming out of different genealogies and developing a filmic I as a "being-with" from those locations. See also my: *Inconvenient Witnessing – Productive Silences. Concluding Remarks*.

filmmaker one would have to investigate and reveal? How would I have dealt with it? All those were questions asked and played around with. The discussion itself became a space of *possibles*, linking the past, present and future.

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“As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself.” (Glissant 1997:192)

The above exchange of opinions resonated with conversations I had with Sherna, during the time of the making of the film, on the ambivalence between her own ideas about what kind of film it was to become and the expectations that others might have towards it. We met at Studio Agneetar, where at the time Bishaka Dutta was editing and later Paromita Vohra worked on UNLIMITED GIRLS.<sup>232</sup> Sherna Dastur was then in the final stages of editing MANJUBEN. We talked during breaks and initially she was most sceptical when I told her about my project, most of all because she would not be able to “tell me anything”. She emphasised that she was “the last person on earth to know about this” as she was not working within a network of documentary filmmakers and was very sure that she would be the wrong person to talk to as she was not a “woman filmmaker”. Not belonging to a film circuit and not being bound by any –isms when making this film, was something she felt strongly about.

“For this film I have fewer standards to aspire to and no organisations to align with and less problems with having an ‘agenda’ on the whole. I’m trying to look at it as something that I am doing without a context in that sense. Of course it has a context of living in this country, of course it has a context of where it is being done. I have been incredibly insular and that’s a terrible thing, maybe.” (conversation 14<sup>th</sup> March 2002)

Thus, I also found myself dealing with being positioned, my work being located and I will be confronted with people’s reactions when they read my version of their stories. I am thus often in an allegorical relation to the filmmakers, where one constantly attempts not to abscond from the responsibility towards one’s subjects while at the

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<sup>232</sup> I did not follow the making of Bishaka Dutta’s IN THE FLESH (53 min, DV, India 2002), but we had several conversations about the film and her choices to give spaces of self representation to the sex workers she was basing her film on. During post screening discussions that I attended stress was put on bridging a divide between the subject and the spectators, arguing against moralizations, demonisations or exoticisation of women working in the sector of paid sex. The film was part of a larger project on sex workers and issues of sexuality of the Mumbai based NGO Point of View (POV) that Bishaka Dutta was heading. Unfortunately I cannot go into the details of their work here, as the area of filmic presentation of sexuality and their different argumentation and moralities or anti-moralities would be a book by itself. See also TALES OF THE NIGHT FAIRIES, D: Shohini Ghosh (74 min, DV, India, colour, India 2004), which focuses on the sex workers’ unionizing in Calcutta.

same time being concerned with one's own agenda which, as I have put forward at the beginning, often overlapped with the filmmaker's concerns of being situated within the larger realm of film and politics. In most cases, as it happened with Sherna Dastur, if both sides opened up to the particular interests and what was at stake for the other, we would arrive at being able to relate without needing to totally understand or even agree. Nevertheless, how do I now make it all fit into my story, my logic of action, my choice to place these films, filmmakers and their thoughts on their projects into an imaginary space of potentiality, a potentiality in emergency and emergence? The attempt is surely a continuous oscillation between letting myself be engulfed by the matters and techniques of the work I look at and how it is located through their makers, to somehow make myself vulnerable to what perspective it might offer, to then confront it with my questions and political desires.

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"I was married at 16, I didn't know what it meant. I realised later. I told him I didn't want to stay with him. I want to travel. I want to fulfil all my desires. I am not the kind to stay at home. I had a great desire to earn money. So I told him. I divorced him. ... My ambition is to make money and then to travel." (voice over from MANJUBEN)

Most of Manjuben's self-presentation conveys a very self-assured person. Manjuben's agreement to collaborate in the making of the film and the relationship they had built did not prevent her from giving the director a hard time during the shoot. Sherna Dastur recounted how she had to continuously position herself towards her film subject. If she would behave too "woman-like" Manjuben would not take her seriously and act macho; if she would be too "man like" Manjuben would feel threatened. She often expressed how she was obsessed with that woman truck driver and fascinated by her life choices. „We - and even in the West - are too conditioned; she just lives for her desires.“

While there is often a too easy assumption concerning the power relations and politics of representation which automatically puts the film subject into a subjected position, here it becomes very clear that although a remaining class and economical hierarchy exist, Manjuben takes on a particular element of control over her own representation and the process of filmmaking. A related dynamic, albeit through different constellations, was at place in Sabeena Gadhihoke's film THREE WOMEN AND A

CAMERA.<sup>233</sup> The women photographers she portraits belong to the same socio-economic background as the director and are themselves dealing professionally with representation and thus most aware of that image space and how to make use of it. It is an element that already came up with KAMLABAI as much as with I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA, although the performance of the subject directs the overall film form to different degrees. Rahul Roy recently talked about how through his filmmaking approach, which interestingly has found its place as an observational form within the European ethnographic film festival circuit, people use the camera as an opportunity to raise issues they may not do without that material interface, like a wife talking about her unemployed husband while the camera is rolling and directed towards it and thus indirectly telling him her opinions.<sup>234</sup> There is furthermore the aspect that people have become very used to TV film teams coming around to “pick up a story” and have become accustomed to a particular news language. Crucial differences lie in how the filmic telling is done to fit to what how a situation is understood, or perceived to be understood, or how the filmic space is allowed to be deployed for an extension of a self and thus an expansion of spaces of the possible.

“The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.” (Glissant, Édouard 1997: 190)

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Source: MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER, by Sherna Dastur.

<sup>233</sup> THREE WOMEN AND A CAMERA, D: Sabeena Gadhihoke, 56 min, DV, colour, India 1998.

<sup>234</sup> This was discussed during a workshop on Indian documentary film, as part of the 2008 Freiburger Filmforum. The filmmaker Rahul Roy was then referring to his films, WHEN FOUR FRIENDS MEET/ JAHAN CHAR YAAR MIL JAAYHEIN (43 min, DV, colour, India 2000) and SUNDER NAGARI / CITY BEAUTIFUL (43 min, DV, colour, India 2003).

"If the image is pre-verbal, cinema is post verbal. At the outer pale of words - sound, silence, movement, stasis, reflection. Explosion of content." (e-mail note by Soudhamini, 15th June 2002)

"Unlike my earlier films, there is no struggle for rights - rights to the sea, rights of women, rights to the forest, there is none of that in it. Manjuben was not in the process of a struggle. She had figured it all out long ago. As long as she was economically independent, and the breadwinner of the family, she could do pretty much all she pleased. For her it was a simple equation: money = power = freedom. She looked so much like a man that she didn't have any real issues with being a woman on the highway either. So I didn't feel bound to make this equation more complex than it was. Or to put in my own preconceived notions or value judgements of having to communicate a certain kind of thing. She had gone beyond her struggle and so I could go beyond it too." (Conversation with Sherna Dastur, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2002)

Manjuben sits on the side of the road, behind her the front wheel of her truck, the sound of passing trucks in the background. A close up and she speaks into the camera:

*"As a child – I liked danger. I was always getting into trouble. The business I chose is also dangerous. These are known as my 'danger wheels'."*

- and she looks confident and proudly into the camera and says with special emphasis

*"This is a dangerous business."*

She looks towards the road, a truck is passing.

*"I had 8 trucks ... sold them all.*

*If I had kept them, I would have lost all my hair. When I got my first truck, I drove it myself. In ten months I bought another. I earned so much then."*

During the roughly 15 minutes before the above sequence, which is Manju's first direct address to the camera, we are very much 'on the road'. The film starts and ends with images resting on the movement of trucks. The gaze is on the road, trucks driving towards and away from the camera, and the sound passing in similar rhythms, often ending in silence, a quiet nothingness. We see and sense the heat of the road and anticipate the risk when heavy loaded trucks overtake each other and when we pass a burnt out frame of a truck lying in a ditch. The first sight of Manju is of her driving, first at the steering wheel of her truck, then on her motorbike. After that, she prepares and chews tobacco in the company of her male colleagues, gives orders, complains about jobs not being done but also jokes confidently with her employees.



Source: MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER, by Sherna Dastur.

When she glues a large Hindu iconographic poster on the wall of her office, she comments:

“Half Shiv, Half Shakti – like me. - We really need a goddess of wealth.

Both male and female powers are in me.”

But to quote this passage seems to almost make a point that the film successfully avoids, namely to make her represent ‘the beyond-gender truck driver’. Her comment comes in passing and is left soon again in the overall passage of the film. The verbal narrative is very sporadic, especially during the first part of the film. Manju recounts incidents of being seen as a young boy by the police. A policeman wanted to fine her before he realised that he was talking to a woman and then quickly released the arm he had put on her shoulder as a male-to-male gesture.

“Forget 100, he didn’t even ask for 10 rupees.” She says, laughs and leans back.

She also talks in a very matter of fact manner about how people most certainly talk about her once she has left a conversation and how some might wonder whether she is man or woman.

The main body of the film is the visual narrative of an ongoing journey. While Manju talks about her desire to travel, the camera is next to her in the truck or follows the traffic from the roadside. Long extended moments of travel, of routes taken, of moving, passing, of coming and leaving – continuous movement is stressed. The use of the soundscape emphasises the overall pace of the film through a passing truck slowly fading out into silence and the sound of the horn slowly fading back in. There is calmness in those movements, which overcomes me as the spectator, a flow that one, might, surrender to. Sherna Dastur commented on how the sound should support an overall approach and therefore how she worked on it together with her sound recordist, „to make it more evocative rather than realistic.”



Source: MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER, by Sherna Dastur.

The film asks one to listen to the void of sound after a truck has passed and to listen to its richness instead of to the emptiness of an end. Sherna Dastur added that even before shooting they were „thinking of open and compressed spaces“ (e-mail response, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2002), thus formally attained oscillating movements.

Short narrative breaks are spread throughout the film. The few talking sequences are anecdotal rather than confessional, similar in style to Manju's encounters with the police. Scenes where the camera is glancing briefly at Manju in her office, having *chai* at the dhaba on the road, having her portrait taken at the photo studio, being served food by her mother or meeting her girlfriend, are interspersed within the larger narrative and visual frame of travelling. There is no locatable starting point, even less an obvious showing of a place of home. Yet, Manju dreams, together with her girlfriend who a married woman, of both of them living together in Delhi one day. She talks fondly of taking her other female friends on a holiday once a year but the sequence with her girlfriend remains one singular long shot. Sherna described:

“My intention was to not to give a feeling of completeness to the sequence or end it ‘formally’ - so that it feels like a moment that should have lasted longer, also like a stolen moment in the whole scheme of things - to make it resonate a little into the next thing that happens.“ (e-mail response, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2002)

Although other ‘breaks of the journey’ are longer, they are not full sequences or unified spaces. Their spatial conceptualisation, in comparison to the road-space seems to constitute them as cuts. Various aspects of Manju's life are suggested; they resonate for a little while when back on the road but are never explained or taken up again. Manju mentions how her mother was very angry with her when she cut her hair, but the dispute is left at that, then we move on.

Sherna Dastur describes how she understood Manjuben and what she called her “life philosophy”. The cinematic form she created developed in response to this:

“For her it's a simple equation of money, power, independence; that's all.“

Even though the film is only 50 minutes long and while other people involved in the film suggested making it longer and adding more information, there seems to be a lot of space for contemplation. There are sequences where the camera merely rests on Manjuben while she is driving, carefully manoeuvring the truck when she stops or when she stands beside the road in the evening and watches or when she takes a nap. The

fragments of information receive space to expand; space, it seems, for Manjuben as well as space for the spectator.

The camera looks at a passing truck, wind shaken reed in front.

“If you are a man you take a wife.  
When you are tired, your wife will take care of you  
Who will wait on me?  
When I am tired I just go to sleep  
Who will ask how I am feeling?  
Will anyone care?”

In the narrative of films that I am proposing here I am reminded of Meena Menon who in UNLIMITED GIRLS talks about the importance of “making choices outside the tide, making choices that society doesn’t really give you”, and a chat room conversation about being alone. I also think of the women in Jari Mari who work without calling their labour work, as it is irregular or not recognised as such. Yet they are the ones who take care of their families. Within a curated film programme those moments may talk to each other and comment on each other as much as the moving grass looking ahead to Soudhamini’s film IT RESTED in the following chapter.

“I don’t see why we have to impose this grammar of hierarchy on images. We can’t constantly be apologising, or calibrating images for possible meaning and limiting ourselves in the process. Maybe it takes being a little selfish. You are connecting and reacting to the subject and that’s what matters. Rather than trying to be politically correct all the time, you could try to behave or react in a manner that aligns with or feels correct to yourself.” (Sherna Dastur, Conversation, 14. March 2002)

When I visited Sherna Dastur at her place in Delhi we first watched the rough cut of Manjuben. Most decisions had been made then but she was still pondering upon two possible endings.

The camera is in the position of the truck driver and looks down onto the grey surface of the road, the trees on the side are vanishing with the frame and slowly the whole screen fades into white.

„What else to do - nobody can say anything to me“ – Then fade into white screen. Credits.

Or:

„What else to do - nobody can say anything to me. My father died and they asked me to earn the money, they need me.“ ...

We discussed the very different effects of both versions and came back to considering received feedback that stressed that there needed to be more information. Those

opinions were often linked to the film being funded by IDFA and hence the question whether an international audience would get the meaning of the story and that the expected “Third World bits”, the struggle, the deprivation, the sad parts, were missing. Connected to those concerns Sherna Dastur considered the above-mentioned longer option for the ending as possibly serving a demand for more information and a strong statement. She stressed though that she herself was convinced of the exact opposite and that the longer, more informative version would actually not suit the coherence of her narrative style. In the end she decided to stay with the shorter version. She felt content with the result but nevertheless referred to how much more political other films funded from IDFA were and that she was worried that people would find the film random or “escapist”.

Here I am reminded of Surabhi Sharma’s realization after the screening of *Jari Mari* at international film festivals, such as the *Yamagata Documentary Film Festival* and other European festivals, that her idea, approach and construction of the film stemmed very much from her context of living in Bombay and its media environment, but that showing it outside and moreover in the “West” might too easily serve existing stereotypes of a “poverty ridden Third World”. Connected to this, though also related to possible reactions from within the Indian context, Surabhi similarly reflected on the implications and tone of her film’s ending. It shows one of her protagonists massaging a baby, a source of income for this woman that she had not revealed to Surabhi until the final day of the shooting:

„We were discussing whether we should end the film with a baby. It was very risky to have a baby at the end - we really didn’t want to evoke something like hope, like ‘finally it’s not so bad’. I was conceptually very uncomfortable with it, but in the flow of the film I think it works. The sequence was rich not because of its words, just how she speaks, how she is laughing at me. We were also joking and saying that people in the West might think, ‘they are killing that baby’.“  
(we both laugh)

(Conversation with Surabhi Sharma, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2002)



Source: MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER, by Sherna Dastur.

Sherna Dastur's worries were also linked to considerations during the editing phase when she thought about revisiting Manjuben for one more interview in which she would ask more 'women questions'. She never did go back and additionally decided not to use most of a long conversation with Manjuben, which had a very intimate quality and in which Manjuben talked more about her love relationship. She also left out the poster image of the two women goddesses that they had shot, saying that this was too overtly making a statement about homosexuality and thus left the aforementioned take of Manjuben with her girlfriend without further comment.<sup>235</sup>

"I think you can tell honestly. I am perhaps using the word honesty in the wrong context, but I think you can tell with a certain level of sincerity. You are not doing it for X or Y reason. You are just doing it because you feel sincerely about something. It could be about anything. If you tell with sincerity, then the person who is watching it will get something of it. And if they don't, it shouldn't bother you that much. I am sure I am going to get a 1000 questions. I am sure a lot of people will say that I have escaped a lot of issues. Don't you imagine that being a feedback? 'We need to know more.' If I had thought like that, this would have been another film."

Although Sherna Dastur saw herself outside of a network of documentary filmmakers she still negotiated similar discourses. What resonates in the description of her shooting and editing process is the need to be almost blank of those discourses in order to create a working space that can function outside the expectations of filmmakers, activists or any other audience. She expressed a needed link of any viewer to the sincerity of her attitude, which differed from her earlier films where she „wanted to bring across a point“ and therefore was „on an information search“.

"In this film, it was like you were doing something for no other reason than why it would work at that particular point and in that particular place. And you were not thinking what it was saying in the larger context and not connecting it to what happens later on in the film. I mean working like that is very scary, to let yourself say that, 'I want to put this shot here and I am just putting it for its place here'. But then later you realise, that there is coherence in the whole thing if you have been trying to be honest throughout. And there is a lack of coherence when you try to put something in because the shot looks good, or because she is saying something that is earth shattering and it needs to go in as information or you are doing it for other reasons than just the fact that it feels right."

We talked more about that certain approach and how it could be circumscribed, navigating terms such as honesty, being in the present, taking risks, rather than staying safe with shooting information and content. At the same time, Sherna clarified that choices arise from long periods of working with the material, thus qualifying what could too easily come across as intuition or free floating creativity linked to ideas of the artist's genius.

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<sup>235</sup> She agreed with Manjuben to edit out this shot if the film was shown on national Television in India.

Her remaining doubts sometimes seemed like the hangover of a legacy, which in its heightened form was expressed as the before mentioned: “There’s too many problems here in India, we don’t have time to think about aesthetics”. As I have stressed earlier, this attitude lies next to and is interdependent with a view that the so-called global south delivers content and deals with ‘the urgency of the said’ rather than having time and leisure to indulge in poetry. Again, I am not repeating what in many ways seems to belong to a past moment, to re-establish a dichotomy between social realism or agit-prop activist filmmaking and art, poetry or sophisticated film aesthetics. But there are legacies, which are not easy to throw overboard, which at times maintain a self-censorship and which leave traces that have repercussions. The extreme version of needing ‘politics without form’, and therefore also denying socio-realism a form, relegates aesthetics to a certain realm and deprives certain people from aesthetic endeavours and pleasures. Those can be the subjects of a film as a case of poverty or exploitation as well as a pre-figured and hence impoverished audience that needs a clear message. It seems like an often made and long overcome argument, but nevertheless, hierarchies embedded within it come back and to remind oneself of all the implications this discourse supports is for me to be able to open up the many layered perspectives of politics in film.

In his lecture *The Emancipated Spectator* Jacques Rancière recapitulates his findings when reading workers’ letters from the 1830s describing their leisure time. Those were as much of the “aesthetes who enjoy the forms, lights and shades of Nature” as “of the philosophers who spend their time exchanging metaphysical hypotheses in a country inn and of the apostles who set out to communicate their faith to the chance companions they meet in an inn”. While to my ear this also runs the risk of romanticising, the point that Rancière makes is “a sense of likeness and equality”.

“The chronic of their leisure meant a reframing of the very relationship between doing, seeing and saying. As they became “spectators”, they overthrew the distribution of the sensible which had it that those who work have not time left to stroll and look at random, that the members of a collective body have no time to be “individuals”.”

And thus:

“Worker’s emancipation was not about acquiring the knowledge of their condition. It was about configuring a time and a space that invalidated the old distribution of the sensible, dooming the workers to do nothing of their night but restoring their forces to work the next day.”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Rancière 2004b: 8f. Rancière makes his argument from the realm of theatre. He critiques a view of the theatre spectator as the passive onlooker that needs to be made active by the performance and made into

While Sherna Dastur's incentive and the aim of her film is to relate to what she sees as the "life philosophy" of Manju, she is clearly not attempting to achieve an authentic representation of this woman's life in the sense of picturing as many aspects as possible of her every day or possibly of other people's views on her choices and way of living. The realness does not lie in proving whether Manju's is a success story or whether she is 'actually' struggling, as the revelatory spectator which wants to reveal a 'truth' behind her story, would have it but. The realness of her story lies in how she presents it. The film very much joins Manju at the level of her own image of her life, her desires, her dreams, her imaginaries. The film gives complete space to and takes seriously a life philosophy, adding a cinematic realness to it. Hereby the film appears to further expand this philosophy or, utilising a Bergsonian train of thought, makes it retrospectively possible.<sup>237</sup>

The potential in this expansion that I would like to stress, is on the one hand in the particular relation to the subject and in allowing a self-chosen opacity from the side of the subject and the film, through the subject's own choices and denials of information but also in the film's formal pace and movement which further supports Manju's singularity and her desires for her life. On the other hand, this creates a form of address to an audience, which I perceive as egalitarian in Rancière's sense. The address takes place by offering a form of storytelling, which does not convey a message, does not teach an ideology or alert to a struggle, it does not try to emancipate. The story of a road movie, to my mind, becomes an invitation for associating and dissociating oneself, for creating new stories, translating what we look at into our own desires and imaginaries. In this sense, it takes its various audiences as already emancipated. And as they further create stories, they participate in expanding the 'limits of the possible'.

Risking that I am fulfilling my own desire as a writer who wants to believe in precisely

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a political collective. He comes to state that the spectator is always already active but that at the same time the theatre audience remains precisely that and that their activity resides in being "story tellers and translators". (p.10)

<sup>237</sup> I am referring to Bergson's view on the real being before the possible, rather than the possible being a free-floating entity that precedes the real. The real makes something retroactively possible, therefore the possible contains in it the past, the present and the future. For an anthropological study this provides an interesting link to the contextual. In relation to film this could be argued further with reference to Deleuze regarding the 'newness arising from the surface of the screen' as well as art and film being able to 'call forth' a new audience becomes important. Pearson, Ansell Keith & Mullarkey, John (Eds) 2002 *Henri Bergson, Key Writings*. New York: Continuum.

that potential of images, namely not to be 'representations of' but to blast those limits and the hierarchies given through those, I want to suggest that MANJUBEN is then a work by 'the author as producer' in the Benjaminian sense. MANJUBEN as much as UNLIMITED GILRS and JARI MARI dwell and labour on the tendency of their techniques, albeit to very different ends.

*"An author who teaches a writer nothing, teaches nobody anything. The determinant factor is the exemplary character of a production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, an secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use."*<sup>238</sup>

Could there thus be a link between *technique* as the place where political tendency and quality of work gets aligned with what Sherna described as 'being in the present'?<sup>239</sup> Aligned to a form of concentration and an overlapping of the relation to one's subject and the acts of elaborating on one's medium?

While both, Benjamin and Rancière, argue for and from an autonomy of cultural practice and stress the necessity to first clearly distinguish between politics and cultural practice to then come back to how specific political aesthetics are, Benjamin asks the readers or spectators to become co-workers, while Rancière stresses that:<sup>240</sup>

*"... knowing that words are only words and spectacles only spectacles may help us better understand how words, stories and performances can help us change something in the world where we are living."*<sup>241</sup>

For the context I am writing with here this may translate into perceiving the bespoke films as cinematic exercises within which their politics are strongly entangled with the medium they work with. The resulting works thus do not speak to a pre-figured mass audience, a collective of workers, a community of slum dwellers, voters, communalists or feminists. They address film spectators who engage with the particular realism they watch, on the projected screen of a college, a cultural centre, a film festival, or on a TV screen at a private house or a bookshop, on their own individual terms. They will be active as spectators and might participate as those in talking and thinking with what they saw and heard, during a filmmakers' dinner party, a Q&A or when travelling back

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<sup>238</sup> Benjamin 1934/70: 6.

<sup>239</sup> Technique for Benjamin is a concept that "gives us the dialectical starting point from which the sterile opposition between form and content can be overcome. The concept of technique also indicates the way to determine correctly the relationships between tendency and quality ..." Benjamin 1934/70: 2

<sup>240</sup> I am not claiming a deep analysis of either Benjamin or Rancière, nor how they relate and differ, however the similarities in the specific texts I quote I found striking and they helped me to articulate the larger potential of the work and context I write about. My main investment lies in that material.

<sup>241</sup> Rancière 2004b: 10.

home in company or by themselves. That screening event might have allowed for a space that falls outside of their every day, a space outside their usual attention, even if not within the black box of a cinema or the spectacle of a theatre but with a borrowed VHS or a spontaneously set up projection. That screening space might be a space slightly set apart but nevertheless offering possibilities for association. In most cases those spectators are at the same time citizens, political subjects, citizens in the sense that they take part in complex and contentious political societies. Whether it is possible that they “change something in the world in which we are living” (Jean-Luc Nancy) we will only know once it is real.

A very clear focus on medium specificity and efficacy and a reflection on the current visual culture context that one lives in was expressed by Sherna Dastur; the need to act on many different levels of cultural practice was something that attained heightened importance in 2002, following the violence in Gujarat.

“ (...) I found for myself that if I am making a film I don't want to be bound by making an overt unidimensional political statement. I feel I can make it better in another form, which is much simpler, accessible, much clearer. For me a film has to be a journey, as much for me as for the viewer. It wouldn't have a strong statement because I can't make that kind of film. I have been very happy to make posters that are clearly against right wing politics or against the breaking of a mosque to build a temple.<sup>242</sup> I don't think I would make a film in the same manner. There is politics in everything, in the way you see, the way you shoot anything. That certainly is there. What I mean is something that is clearly asking for a change, clearly putting a message across, I don't think I can do that in a film.“

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The three interlocutors that I have introduced at more length – Paromita Vohra, Surabhi Sharma and Sherna Dastur - have raised doubts or scepticism in terms of how their own work might fit into what I was looking for. Continuing to think and talk, trying to explain and rethink what my initial approach to my research was, how it kept changing but how it was also a search for meanings of politics and feminism, made for more interesting conversations and thickened and complicated particular reasons for individual choices. After rejecting as a fixed category first, with all three filmmakers there was a point when we reinvestigated what feminist politics could actually mean, for

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<sup>242</sup> This refers to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6. December 1992, which was followed by communal riots in Bombay in December 1992 and January 1993. See: Nandy, Ashish; Trivedy, Shikha; Mayaram, Shail & Yagnik, Achyut 1995. *The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self. Creating a Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

us and for our work. Talking in the specific thus always brought us closer to singular understandings of politics and to thus arrive at positions through doubts, questions and debate. At the same time, working processes of this kind also created filmmaking practices and cinematic spaces which approached film subjects as well as audiences as equal and emancipated in not foreclosing a meaning, a message, a politics.

To conclude: After I responded to Sherna Dastur's question about why I would find her film 'political', namely by not being overtly political, she stressed:

"That's actually the crux of what I am trying to say. I have thought about it, it's just that it wasn't so clarified. The moment that things become overly clarified, the moment you are trying to push something, it becomes a problem. This film was more personal for me. This woman has so much more freedom than I do, in a sense. For her it's a very straight equation. That was exciting, it was terribly exciting. And that certainly is politics. But if I had started from politics, I think I would have ended up with a film that is a little different. My seeking her out for those reasons couldn't have become a statement I was making. I have a feeling that if I had approached it from that point of view clearly, then I would have included much more information than I needed. I would have felt the need to force in a sense of struggle, simply because one is trying to make that point. Here one is just trying to get a feel of her life, simply, at a very honest human level."

## PART II – A. The ground in one's pocket

### Imaginary

“Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing it into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realised.

Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.

Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.”  
(Édouard Glissant 1997:1)

Often, when I start writing about several films that I perceive as being related, I am imagining a film programme. In the first chapter I called it a writing of another minor film history. In that case it was a history made through a selection of films working in between fiction and non-fiction, using the fictional for attaining another documentary mode and hereby another notion of the real. In the second chapter there was a tracing back of socio-realism and a highlighting of the varied form and possibilities of the ‘talking head’. Placing Sherna Dastur’s *MANJUBEN TRUCKDRIVER* as an ‘in-between’ could herein be understood as a curatorial choice to connect different kinds of film programmes. In what follows I am placing two films by the filmmaker Soudhamini, *IT RESTED* (1989) and *PITRU CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS* (1991), as cinematic ‘ancestors’ of *RASIKAN RÉ* (2003) by Pooja Kaul, while understanding ancestry in the most positive and independent sense. What exactly I mean by that should become clear in the course of the chapter.

Acknowledging ancestry, as in relating to the past to make it productive for the present, is what I started in part one, namely by paying attention to certain kinds of film histories and how they impact on the now and possibly on what is to come. I also see the films that will constitute the main body of part II in relation to a postcolonial predicament, thus a legacy that gives a contextual expansion to questions of time and history. The real and the political which constituted figures for chapter 1 and 2 will here be addressed directly and indirectly by dwelling more consciously on history. The films’ tendencies very strongly imply their *what* and *how* they show and tell. Hence, History

itself becomes my subject, as in exploring the films' own making of history and their own creating of forms of historicity. Certain previous endeavours will be repeated, such as the search for adequate representation and the simultaneous desire for a new language.

Similar to the earlier chapters the relational approach to one's subject is vital. But, what is related to here includes cultural practice itself, namely a joining with music or painting is exercised. The work of translation in filmmaking will thus be highlighted and specific ways of translation be explored for their potential. The drive that I see very strongly in both Soudhamini's and Pooja Kaul's works, is a negotiation of questions of grounding, a desire for a new kind of belonging, which I associate with Glissant's "overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity". It is in both cases an appreciation and a questioning of what particular traces of history can provide, what are the pluralities that make us feel we belong and how it is possible to craft images from those thoughts. In this, I see also a risk taking, as the very act of allying with past practices is loaded and politicised. Further, their filmmaking is also a dwelling on pace and duration, on lived-in and cinematic levels of time, ultimately on heterogeneous time. Thus, a "knowledge becoming" (Glissant) that encompasses the past, present and future.

## 1. Excess ethics in translation – IT RESTED<sup>243</sup>

"... "becoming other" to create a theory of translation as productive transformation by expansion rather than instrumental communication." (Godard 2000: 60)<sup>244</sup>

This starts with a riddle.

*A 16-mm image of a lush green field; the grass moving erratically as provoked by a strong wind. Vocal music. Two young women, maybe sisters, stand next to each other inside a mud cottage. They look straight into the camera, both with a confident expression. One steps forward performing a dance sequence, her hand movements are like sign language. She steps backwards again and then forwards three times, then stands still next to her mute partner. They both start smiling, as if playing a game or hiding a secret and both making a gesture towards the camera, which seems to say: "So?"*

(Opening sequence of THALARNDHADHU (IT RESTED), by Soudhamini and R.V. Ramani)

The only factual information we receive in IT RESTED is that its images were taken in

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<sup>243</sup> THALARNDHADHU (IT RESTED), D: Soudhamini, 24 min, 16 mm, colour, India 1989. Camera: R.V. Ramani.

<sup>244</sup> Godard, Barbara 2000. "Deleuze and Translation". in: *Parallax. Translator's ink*, 2000, Vol. 6, no. 1, p. 56-81.

the Kalrayan Malai, Kolli Malai, and Pacha Malai Ranges of Tamil Nadu in Southern India. That is what initially connects these images. There is no oral or visual narrative or a specific formal development which explains where we are, what we see and where we might reach. Instead we follow different kinds of movements: a man ploughing a rice field, a woman cleaning wheat, children walking past a house, people labouring carrying stones and mud from a mine, musicians playing instruments, singing, children playing stock games and women sitting and clapping. The camera puts us into an observing position when it looks past the back of a woman gently rocking her baby to sleep in a cloth hammock. We participate in smiling when we see an old man shyly laughing when he is filmed while singing. Moving from one image to the next is direct; there are no 'in-between shots', no linkages, or passages from one to the other, except that the speed of the woman's arm while rocking links to clapping hands or the movement of separating the chaff from the wheat. The somehow raw quality and pace of the film moves along a certain rhythm. These movements of practices however, come to a halt a few times in the stillness of people looking straight into the camera. Their faces enact a direct gaze that addresses and connects but offers neither talk or expression, nor explanation. The spectator's smooth following of the rhythm of movements within and through the images is further disturbed by asynchronous sound. There is a constant overlap of sound, a disjuncture between images and sound that occurs continuously. The sound simultaneously holds the images together while also inferring a rupture.

I met Soudhamini<sup>245</sup> in May 2002 at the campus of the FTII in Pune. She was then showing her latest documentary *SAGA OF A POET* (2001)<sup>246</sup>, as part of the Institute's summer *Film Appreciation Course*. It was afternoon, we sat outside in a pavilion, having tea, I think.



Source: THALARNANDHU IT / RESTED, by Soudhamini. The riddle.

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<sup>245</sup> Soudhamini is the full name which the filmmaker uses, as is often the case in South India.

<sup>246</sup> *SAGA OF A POET*, D: Soudhamini, 62 min, Betacam, colour, Tamil, India 2001. Documentary film on Subramania Bharati (1882-1921).

Other filmmakers, who knew of my interest in experimental documentary forms, had pointed out to me that Soudhamini made “different kinds of films”, i.e. that her work was different formally, and I was therefore very curious to meet her. Recalling this conversation, I think of filmmakers telling me about how life and work at the institute often felt very separated from everything else outside. Students’ filmmaking evolved through the many other films they would see and often one’s own pre-occupations and thereby often attained a certain solitary or internal focus that for some fostered the development of one’s language while also being looked at with self-criticism as to the comfort of this privileged situation. I spent a few days at the institute to see Diploma films of filmmakers I had worked with in Delhi and Bombay and to research in the institute’s library. To me the institute felt like part of a different time zone though I also visited it during a quiet summer time, which surely added to that impression. I was delving into history by watching films from the archive and anecdotes from student life there were resonating in my head while having lunch at the canteen, meeting librarians who had been working there for many years, waiting in offices with piles of paper being stacked on chairs and tables and sitting by myself in a large cinema hall with empty rows of wooden seats folded up. On the other hand, this place with its sheltered atmosphere was also where hunger-striking students were protesting against a commercialisation of the institute, against a tendency to train people to function as technicians within Bombay’s film industry.



Source: Nicole Wolf. FTII Pune, 2002.

Also, it is a place where in 2002 students were threatened by RSS related groups because they were accused of having burned an Indian flag during a party. Until 1998, when the *Satyajit Ray Film School* in Calcutta opened, FTII had been the only national film school. During conversations with Surabhi Sharma we talked about the politics of the place and how she had no illusions of the place in itself fostering a political engagement. Like many others she was rather sceptical of a deployment of strategies such as going on hunger strikes as on the one hand, some of the student's claims remained too tied to their own needs and on the other hand, the problem of the institute being shaped by a larger national and later market agenda had a much longer history and needed to be addressed in more complex ways. Cynicism or rather frustration with and critique of a revolutionary gesture that has only kept enough power to raise short lived attention in the media was raised by the many filmmakers and Institute alumni I met. Thus, there in the pavilion, Soudhamini talked me through the development of her filmmaking. I first related the intensity of my conversation with Soudhamini and its very strong focus on form to that certain detached aspect of the place. The image of a very spacious, lush green and quiet campus and of a two-hour conversation in the pavilion stayed with me, though I later found this quality to be an intriguing aspect of the conversation itself, repeated in various different locations. Soudhamini explained to me her specific interest and approach, which she was seeking through relating to other cultural practitioners; an interest that she had shared at the time with the cameraperson R.V. Ramani. After having made *BANNI BAI AND HARIKATHA* (1988)<sup>247</sup>, a film with a dance performer whose practice was still "in the ambit of what [she, N.W.] knew", Soudhamini was interested in engaging in the discourse of "looking at the Other".

What this discourse of "looking at the Other" comprises is shaped differently in each context. Soudhamini wondered whether *IT RESTED* was "cultural anthropology without academics" and whether I would agree with that, this being my disciplinary background. Indeed, what *IT RESTED* immediately reminded me of was Trinh T. Minh-ha's *REASSEMBLAGE* (1982)<sup>248</sup>, albeit its shooting conditions were very different and *IT RESTED* gives no presence to the filmmaker other than through her editing choices, while Minh-ha's voice-over is very crucial to what was her first film. More than that, even though I stressed an interdisciplinary approach, I had a disciplinary heritage, which most of my interlocutors commented on, some with interest, others asking for my

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<sup>247</sup> *BANNI BAI AND HARIKATHA*, D: Soudhamini, 30min, 16mm, Colour, India 1988.

<sup>248</sup> *REASSAMBLAGE*, D: Trinh T. Minh-ha, 40 min, 16mm, Colour, 1982.

positions vis-à-vis anthropology's colonial background and still others being bewildered or amused that they themselves should become 'subjects'. Thus, there were legacies of colonialist gazes which violate, disciplinary gazes which freeze in time and categorise, documentary gazes which objectify. The many layers of violations are made starkly clear in a sequence of Nishta Jain's film CITY OF PHOTOS (2004)<sup>249</sup>. Through its gentle but brisk poetics, the film unfolds for us the many desires and imaginaries, conventions and ways to transcend those, which are part of having one's picture taken. By delving into the practices of selected photo studios and glancing over manifold photographs, histories, places and dreams surface from old black and white as well as contemporary digitally manipulated pictures.

"You get your photo taken when you have and when you hope. But when things get so bad that it's the last thing you would do, then someone comes to take away your photo. -

Like the Britisher who posed you studio style. He must have wanted to shock the world with your story – the Madras famine of 1877."

A black and white photograph is blended in. A picture of a group of people, maybe a family – close to starvation. Famine ridden bodies and yet made to pose, sitting on and below a bench and looking into the camera with hollow eyes, one of them seems to even manage to smile.

"Such an artistic grouping of the near dead. It pulls a rug from any picture of every seemingly happy family. - How long did you have to keep still? And in this stillness so like death, did you know you were being made immortal? Had you ever seen a camera? In the city of photos what would have been your fantasy?" (voice over by Nishta Jain)

What I want to remind of is the extent to which visual cultures could and can embrace the colonial state as "ethnographic state"<sup>250</sup> (Nicholas Dirks), which sees people not as citizens but as subjects. This is to also acknowledge the traces of my disciplinary histories, the loadedness of gazes and the continuing urgency but also potential in looking otherwise.

For me IT RESTED also evoked extended discussions on ethnographic film. How it had to defend itself on the one hand to be equally 'objective' than academic texts and how it was critiqued on the other hand for 'objectifying'.<sup>251</sup> Adaptations within mainstream

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<sup>249</sup> CITY OF PHOTOS, D: Nishta Jain, 60 min, DVD Video, Colour, India 2004. For CITY OF PHOTOS Nishta Jain received research funding from the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) in Bangalore and further financial support through the Jan Frijman Fund which is connected to the IDFA. During the research process Nishta Jain worked very closely with Smriti Nevatia, who also wrote the quoted commentary. They both continued to collaborate on film and writing projects. For scholarship on colonial photography in India please refer to: Pinney, Christopher 1997. *Camera Indica. The social Life of Indian Photographs*. London: Reaktion Books.

<sup>250</sup> Dirks, Nicholas quoted in: Chatterjee, Partha 2004. *The politics of the governed. Reflections on popular politics in most places of the world*. New York: Columbia University Press. p 37. Chatterjee quotes from: Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>251</sup> Discussions comparing visual ethnography with written ethnography and searching for how films could attain an equally analytical level, dominated some writing but were equally contested and perceived as inappropriate, dead-end contemplations which did not regard the visual in Visual Anthropology. In my MA dissertation: *Searching for the Visual in Visual Anthropology* (unpublished) I have attended to a history of

media like the “Disappearing world” series on UK TV Channel 4 often employed an anthropologist as the expert. A film team would thus enter the ‘unknown and remote’, often inhabited by tribal communities still living ‘traditional’ life styles but being under threat through the entry of ‘Westernisation’. The increasing critique to simplified and teleological representations of complex issues of transformation was very much in line with the problematic ascribed to written anthropology at the time. Here the camera was seeking to freeze people in time, portraying them as a homogenous group that was contaminated by the outside world. Thus change was denied and the filmmaker became the expert, teaching the audience the very different ways of living; thus the exotic and unfamiliar was brought into people’s living rooms. I do not want to rehearse the entire range of critique nor the rich development of forms as reactions to those that have been raised against exoticising representations that can take place vis-à-vis all kinds of subjects but merely stress a background that I also had in mind when watching IT RESTED for the first time. In the Indian context similar presentations occurred through the Films Division’s mandate to present and educate people about the cultural multiplicity in India that was held together by the nation-state. As stated earlier, the representation of a folkloric character of tribal life replicated an ethnographic gaze. The main intention of those official portrays of India’s tribal populations was to show how they are intact and heterogeneous cultures adding to the ‘unity in diversity’. Whether the NGO but also independent documentary film sector has fully succeeded in finding other forms of representations is questioned by filmmakers themselves as are endeavours to ‘hand over the camera to the other’ where results remain within the developmental sector and thus the promised democratisation through easier access to technology is not fulfilled.<sup>252</sup> Those are realms that I see IT RESTED negotiating, albeit

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Visual Anthropology which could commence with the studies in ‘Visual Communication’ by Sol Worth and John Adair, lead through experimentations in visual language by Robert Gardner’s controversial film FOREST OF BLISS (90 min, 35mm, colour, US 1985, and Jean Rouch (see chapter 1) and come to Faye Ginsburg’s ‘parallax effect’ with which she acknowledges Indigenous media and filmmaking and its possible impact on ethnographic film and media anthropology. David MacDougall’s eloquent defence of knowledge production through the multiple senses in ethnographic film are one further expansion to these discourses. This journey of discourses has been one crucial backbone to this project. See: Ginsburg, Faye 1999. “The parallax effect: The Impact of Indigenous Media on Ethnographic Film”, In: Gaines, Jane M. and Michael Renov (eds) *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. MacDougall, David 2005. *The Corporeal Image: Film, ethnography and the senses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. For an extended bibliography in this regard see also the introduction of Ginsburg et al. (Eds.) 2002.

<sup>252</sup> Nancy Adajania’s film KICHRI EK KHOJ (IN SEARCH OF KICHRI), 48min, Video/Beta format, colour, India 2000 (Hindi/ Korku/ Marathi; subtitled in English) problematises how implementations of governmental support for tribal populations can pass by the actual needs of those, and how malnutrition, lacking health care and poverty stands in stark contrast to the folkloric presentations of tribal life and the state’s and non state actor’s paternal care for those populations. (*Kichri* is a rice and lentil dish, in this case referring to a simple dish.)

not directly and by ultimately choosing a different path.

But how does one move closer to those encounters with another? How does one work with that briefly sketched background, yet not just remaining in a critique?

In *Habitations of Modernity* Dipesh Chakrabarty re-narrates a family story of the filmmaker Mrinal Sen.<sup>253</sup> He remembered his family's relation to a school friend of his, a Muslim boy who later became the famous Muslim Bengali poet Jasimuddin. The family had included Jasimuddin as their own son, except the small detail that they did not let him eat together with them. Chakrabarty recounts Sen's mother's sadness when asked about this practice but also her plea for understanding from Jasimuddin of the larger political context of their customs. What Chakrabarty points out through that story and what I want to further lay stress on is a "deafness to the other that structures"<sup>254</sup> one's thoughts and gestures. Chakrabarty talks of this every day story as allowing us to be:

"witness to a historic Hindu Bengali *deafness to the call of the other*. This deafness was as constitutive of ethnic distance as may be the more explicit elements of violence. It was a mark, indeed, of one's participation in the politics of ethnicity. To be deaf to the call for justice in Muslims' historical demand for a home embodying their own imagination of dwelling was to express *prejudice*, however silent that expression may have been."<sup>255</sup> (italics N.W.)

He continues calling upon "the practice of proximity, that is, the practice of relating to historical and contingent difference by acknowledging and negotiating it"<sup>256</sup> to conclude with that:

"[t]he explorations of history and memory show that only a capacity to a humanist critique can create the ethical moment in our narratives and offer, not a guarantee against the prejudice that kills, but an antidote with which to fight it. History must, like literature and philosophy, imbibe this spirit of critique."<sup>257</sup>

I attend to this, first to address the broader and remaining politics of our relations to the Other and later to speak of the potential of film to create those demanded ethical spaces. I am hereby also enlarging a specific contribution from the scholarly realm of Subaltern Studies. Speaking of the filmmaking practice that I see participating in thinking through the pluralities of modernity in India, it seems impossible not to acknowledge the Subaltern Studies group's writings. In addition, my project very much started from a critique of historicism in relation to the writings of film histories and is in this indebted to one of the core issues of what constituted the group's coming into

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<sup>253</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2002. *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. p. 145ff.

<sup>254</sup> *ibid.* 147.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.* 148.

existence. Further, I understand an anthropologist's project of working against what Chakrabarty calls the "rough translations"<sup>258</sup> of terms, or in Spivak's wording, to work against the violence enacted through a "generalizable semiotics that write our lives".<sup>259</sup> Their concern is to address what gets lost in processes of translations where terms such as the modern, the political, the new, are applied or transferred to locations that are said to be in the "waiting room"<sup>260</sup>, meaning they are thus 'pre-political', 'pre-modern', 'traditional'. So that:

"The idea is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it."<sup>261</sup>

Now while I choose to relate to some of the major concerns of the Subaltern Studies group, I am not placing my project firmly within that framework. In my relation to their work, the same question then seems to arise for the films I write about and what is discussed within the Subaltern Studies group itself. How voluntarist can one be in relating to a past, a tradition, a school of debate? How far are we obliged to engage and negotiate with what we object and how do we do that productively? What I have at the back of my mind are heated discussions, writings that are wary of the Subaltern Studies' critique of modernity playing "straight into the hands of Hindu cultural nationalists."<sup>262</sup> And furthermore, that their discourse not only practises Othering towards 'western modernity', thus working with a similar fixed notion of what that entails, but also falls short of addressing a history of communal violence by focusing on a 'pathology' or 'alienation' that arose through colonial and postcolonial western imperialism and its imposition on the modern nation-state.<sup>263</sup> With the state monitored violence against the Muslim population in Gujarat in 2002, it became strikingly clear for many that this response was falling short of explanation and a critical enough confrontation of Hindu nationalist politics – and culture – that 'kills'.

This is not the place to enter deeply into those discussions. However, what I need to address is my position towards the writings of history and the creations of forms of historicity. I will argue that PITRU CHAYA and RASIKAN RÉ are negotiating their

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<sup>258</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford Princeton University Press. P. 17.

<sup>259</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 2000. "Translation as Culture" in: *Parallax 14, Translator's ink*, p. 13-24. P. 17.

<sup>260</sup> Chakravorty 2000: 8.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>262</sup> Chakrabarty 2002, p. Xxi.

<sup>263</sup> Nandy, Asish 1983. *The Intimate Enemy. Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

relation to what can be called traditions through translations that I perceive as creating particular excess. My own project sits possibly closest to what Chakrabarty calls “provincializing Europe” as an:

“ ... understanding that “we” all do “European” history with our different and often non-European archive opens up the possibility of a politics and project of alliance between the dominant metropolitan histories and subaltern pasts. Let us call this the project of provincializing “Europe”, the Europe that modern imperialism and (third-world) nationalism have, by their collaborative venture and violence, made universal. Philosophically, this project must ground itself in a radical critique and transcendence of liberalism (that is, of the bureaucratic constructions of citizenship, the modern state, and bourgeois privacy that classical political philosophy has produced), a ground that Marxist shares with poststructuralist and feminist philosophy.”<sup>264</sup>

In the first part of this project I have addressed the limitations of exploring the realm of the political only through the framework of the nation and how that history and still retained self-definition is perceived as a straight jacket by filmmakers as well. However, this project cannot expand and give adequate response to more in depth discussions of the pros and cons of the nation as a political and legal frame.<sup>265</sup> My interest in the political is here however invested in alternative forms of subjectivities which transcend identity politics that are enacted by most nation-states.

Before I go deeper into the kinds of cinematic historicities proposed, I want to first return to the notion and practice of encountering the other. Hereby I acknowledge the project of a member of the Subaltern Studies group as working against dichotomous debates and indeed addressing the overlapping regimes that have been and continue to be ‘deaf to the other’.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Chakrabarty 2000: 42.

<sup>265</sup> For an in depth discussion and critique of the Subaltern Studies group’s address of communal violence and a more detailed attention to the specifics of the Indian nation-state please refer to: Ohm, Britta 2007. *The Televised Community. Culture, Politics and the Market of Visual Representation in India*. Online Publication: opus.kobv.de/euv/volltexte/2011/46/pdf/Ohm\_Britta.pdf. I want to thank Britta Ohm here for sharing her thoughts and work, which often constituted the ‘other side’ of my project.

<sup>266</sup> Trying to bridge scholarly gaps seems most obvious in Chakrabarty’s ‘critical’ tribute to Ashish Nandy (Chapter 3: Modernity and the Past: A critical Tribute to Ashish Nandy, in: Chakrabarty 2000, p. 38-47.) Nandy, on most of his writings and critiqued for this, places his argument on the definition of a ‘pure, authentic subaltern subject’ that is contaminated by the West and hereby replicating a discourse that is in quite similar rhetoric deployed by Hindu cultural nationalism. Maybe it is due to the negotiations that Chakrabarty attempts that he repeatedly talks about ‘blindspots’ that cannot be theorised. While I agree with an autonomy in the sense of areas that remain not to be understood, his placing those blindspots in the larger political sphere seems to make them into a mystic sphere which in the face of very transparent political orders or non-orders (see: “We have no orders to save you”, title of HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH report referring to the non-interference of the police during the carnage in Gujarat. See conclusion for more detail) appears escapist or in opposition to Chakrabarty’s commitment to investigate the ‘prejudice that kills’. The reasons and implications for this blindspot would however need further analyses of Chakrabarty’s writings.

How does IT RESTED 'respond' to or bypass the aforementioned legacies, how does it solve its problem of representation? How does it listen to a call from the other? Similar to Trinh T. Minh-ha's REASSAMBLAGE, IT RESTED does not start from language communication or from listening to another's speech act. While communication would have been possible as the filmmaker, her team and the tribal population living in the Tamil Nadu Hill Ranges that they were working with, all spoke Tamil, the focus is here not on ways of speaking as a form of self-representation. The Language of communication that the film team chose as a starting point is on the one hand body language through work and other daily practices and on the other hand a relation to the songs and stories actively sung and narrated by the respective community, albeit in an archaic dialect which was not spoken otherwise. The film's working method thus developed out of an attempt to relate to practices that were similar in kind, i.e. cultural and work practices, and yet different in their specificity, without the effort to translate. Working from and with the filmic material and technical possibilities available at the time, instead of perceiving these as lacks or failing cohesive representation, seems related to that approach and shaped the project in similar ways.

N: This level of practice that you talked about, the starting from the filmmaking craft, do you see that happening in IT RESTED already, the way you worked with the 16mm format and its possibilities?

S: Right. It's entirely connected with that. We used what was available and the form was tripping from there. I always think that the film is extremely well edited – we worked very well as a team, me and the editor, we worked madly closely; it was completely non-verbal, but much slower, very precise. And these cuts are like that because it was a spring-wind Bolex, that's all the shot could last, so it's really just impression. And then the non-sync recorder, it will be at sync but not stay in that, so you have to accommodate that and it becomes a style. It's only if your instincts are all there, when you are with the material, that you can actually bring that out.

N: All that lends itself to lots of theorising. I am thinking of anthropology and self-reflexivity in form through ruptures ...

S: *laughs*. Right. And the intervals between the mute women?

N: ... the frictions like for instance the continuing clapping leading over to another scene and the non-sync arrangement between this practice and the sound, it's like being honest about the distance that is there without adding an extra distance in a way. Like not trying to project something onto these images or derive specific meaning from them.

S: Right. (*She sounds more assertive*)

N: Like finding a particular pace but not pretending that you got it right, following it ...

S: Right. There was no notion of a script. I tried to read Levi Strauss and the word that got stuck in my mind was 'bricolage'<sup>267</sup> – you must know this. But this was not like that, actually the culture was very much intact in its own way. I thought, 'that's not going to help me.' (...) Only in the last sequence I physically just put one girl on her own, away from the girls in a circle. That was

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<sup>267</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss brought this term into Human Sciences through his work *Pensée Sauvage*, (1962/1990. Agora.) Translated into English in 1966 (*The Savage Mind*, Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press). 'Bricolage' is used to describe mythical thought: "The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual 'bricolage' - which explains the relation which can be perceived between the two." (p.19)

because of giving a sense of dislocation.

N: Some parts for me carry a strong sense of performance; especially the two women which you just asked about. Their particular humour is very intriguing.

S: They were mute girls. (...) When I was editing I wanted to put these three scenes together. Actually the way we edited, we would finish each thing and move on, we would never come back. I wanted very much to keep moving. Amitabh, the editor proposed to split it up. We left that till very late, but till today I am not completely satisfied. But they didn't flow together, because they were too lengthy and too complete in themselves. But we had never done it like that in the rest of the film. *The whole thing is not of change but moving through a culture. Then why do you need to come back, why do you need a reference point or why do you need the repetition?*

N: If you repeat it for me the aspect of performance becomes even stronger. They take over a special position in the film, it seems to want to make a point.

S: Right, and the rest of the film is not making any point and this is too pointed. But the point is not specific, so it escapes. There is also a development because her dance changes. (...) So there is still that notion of linearity, which in this film is really important for me; that the linear is not that constructive. Nowadays everybody is talking of the linear like it's so passé and, 'how boring', but it's not. It depends on what you are moving to, and - it's like what you said, you can have major disjunctions between. (...) There are whole shifts from one sequence to another and the passage is invisible. I love it for that. *Change happens, you don't have to labour over change; you don't have to reach a certain point.*

N: So that change is within the structure and the ruptures build within the linearity?

S: Yes, and that's actually madly fresh for me. *Each thing is new, all along the way. It's not like means and ends and the passage, you know.* It's not about suffering to reach somewhere. What if you could just move like that, I love that. (Conversation, 9th June 2002, italics N.W.)<sup>268</sup>

IT RESTED is invested in translation. It translates diverse cultural practices into a cinematic language and it translates technology. What happens during that process of translation? What gets mediated through that filmmaking practice? And can the 'means with ends' be escaped?

For delving more into translation I borrow reflections from the linguistic realm but then clearly move outside it. I start from a deconstructive basic understanding that translation never starts from an origin and I propose that neither do the films I chose work with that notion but they take part in an unending process similar to the Duchampian "writing in the infinitive", thus producing "difference that continuously writes itself".<sup>269</sup> Translation has been said to provoke multiple outcomes. It produces other meanings, differences, gaps.

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<sup>268</sup> All direct quotations are taken from this recorded conversation, unless otherwise stated. See below for more information on this conversation which took place in Madras.

<sup>269</sup> Maharaj, Sarat in: Tawadros, Gilane 2004. *Changing States. Contemporary Art and Ideas in an Era of Globalisation*. London: Institute of International Visual Arts. P: 195. In the same book's Chapter: "Modernity and Difference" p.190-196, Sarat Maharaj and Stuart Hall are in conversation. They bring out some very crucial approaches to the practice and theorisation of translation referring to what they see as the most influential writers on translation, like Benjamin, Bakhtin and Derrida. Their exchange of approaches and ideas stands in relation to thinking art and ideas with cultural difference. While Stuart Hall takes a more linguistic approach and acknowledges its limits when staying with the untranslatable, Maharaj draws on the mentioned connotation of translation in the political context of South Africa. He also inquires into the potential of art, including the sonic, to make the untranslatable 'visible'.

Discussions also revolve around the untranslatable, the lack that occurs during processes of translation.

“One has always to think of cultural production of any kind as a reworking, as inadequate to its foundation, as always lacking something. There is always something which is left out. There is always mistranslation because a translation can never be a perfect rendering from one space or one language to another.”<sup>270</sup>

My main interest here however lies in the *how* of translation, at times the *why* and the excess that arises from acts of translation, thus the productiveness of the particular ways of translating in and through the film works I cite. I therefore understand translation more as an encounter of two or more realms of cultural production, two equal fields of practice that meet.

“Any statement which has a meaning for another human being is therefore grounded in more than what it says – its excess – but is also less than what you want it to say; it is the result of arbitrary closure.”<sup>271</sup>

IT RESTED translates practice in specific ways. What are the specifics of its ‘arbitrary closure’? It develops its time from the pace of the cultural practices it records and from its tools of production. A spring-wind 16mm Bolex camera demands briefness, stillness, rupture or stoppage when winding it back. The non-sync recorder makes sound and image stay in sync for a moment and then part again. Thus, we already see children clapping while we still hear the sound of hammering. Sound is thus belated and foreshadows what might be seen in the images coming after one or two seconds. It is then through the sound that scenes overlap. Practices are happening simultaneously and at a similar rhythm and yet they are broken, interrupted.

For the spectator, these practices are linked through the overall pace of the film. The dissonances seem to ask for an attentive looking, they prevent an even flow. Does looking closer then provide a better understanding, a coming closer? We recognise the two women coming back twice. They, next to the asynchronous sound, interrupt the flow otherwise. They also give a sense of ‘knowing already’, yet their performance changes, the dancers become more confident, their questioning: ‘So?’ more poignant. A performance similar to what the other protagonists are performing for the camera? A game? A play with knowledge? A riddle to solve?

The film surely gestures towards the pace of its subject. Its form comes into being

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<sup>270</sup> Hall in: Tawadros 2004: 192.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid: 194.

through its Relation (Glissant) to the pace of people's practices, to the wind blowing, a bus moving, to vocal and instrumental music. It offers the viewer 'moving through culture' as a continuous movement with asymmetries and dissonances and change being inherent rather than an obstacle. This particular way of understanding movement and change was articulated by Soudhamini in hindsight during our conversations. Here, the act of translation is however not an attempt to reach a natural rhythm, an authentic pace that would then lead to a formal understanding of Otherness, although there is reference to ritual through a marriage ceremony.

Sarat Maharaj, when discussing translation with Stuart Hall, starts from political lives under Apartheid where "... the issue of translation was immediately both a violating political act and a political process of resistance."<sup>272</sup> The act of being made, talked about and looked at, to fit into manageable forms or representations, leaves images as violating, which imply the total knowledge of the Other by looking at her. In a Levinasian sense, this dissecting look exposes a vulnerability of the Other.<sup>273</sup> Here it is the refusal to fit, the not explaining oneself, not to be understood and to remain silent in the encounter that attains the potential of subverting these violations. In Glissant's poetics this rejection to be totally grasped is the political potential in opacity.

"Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. (...) The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms."<sup>274</sup>

I also see film formats themselves able to resist being fully described and analysed. In an attempt to 'focus on the texture of the weave', I want to hint at the opening riddle as a gesture towards leaving parts untranslated, an enactment of questions and opacities. As mentioned above, the images of IT RESTED are haunted by colonial and other histories of representing Others by legacies of mediations and translations.

How does IT RESTED work with that space of ambivalence between the act of hearing/ listening/ seeing and understanding or not understanding? I propose that it develops its form directly from this oscillation. It bypasses its legacies in the sense of not responding to critiques of representation with counter-representations. There is here no

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<sup>272</sup> Maharaj in Tawadros 2004: 192.

<sup>273</sup> See: Butler, Judith 2003. "Explanation and exoneration, or what we can hear", in her: *Precarious Life. The Power of Violence and Mourning*. London & New York: Verso. Butler refers to a Levinasian approach to the Other, the relevant Levinasian reference would be: Levinas, Emmanuel 1969. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

<sup>274</sup> Glissant 1997: 190.

'giving a voice' to the Other but an acceptance of not-knowing without this lack leading to in-difference. The film works upon an engagement with the look of the filmmakers and the camera. It plays with the ambivalence of the un-translatable and the excess in the process of translation.

The film thus becomes an exercise in approximating Others without spoken language but through their forms and pace of cultural practices that one seeks to respond to through form. A documentary approximation to empiricism without truth claims. A working with image-making not as approximation of a reality but as an engagement with what the image can evoke. Soudhamini also talked about working with images of direct gazes for their strength to make 'everything else dissolve', to dissolve the look of the camera, the technology. Can that direct gaze then dissolve the framing and the knowledge that the spectator might subsequently assume? Can the faces escape the territorializing look and instead provoke a space between the screen and the viewer for different encounters and knowing otherwise?<sup>275</sup>

If IT RESTED develops and produces its own pace, its own time and duration, if it presents us with riddles and offers us direct gazes without knowing, hence stages its non-knowledge or moves with it while committing to respond, then we could include it in our repertoire of film works which impress through their potential to open up ethical spaces. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words and related to her elaborations on ethics:

"It is this act of hearing-to-respond that may be called the imperative to translate."<sup>276</sup>

I would like to keep this thought and take it over to the next film.

Soudhamini wrote to me, that the act of making me a copy of IT RESTED brought back many memories of making it; as if it had become a history for herself and now flashed back. In addition, at some point during our conversation, she was very certain that she could not make a film like that anymore: "I am happy we did it, but I couldn't go now and ask people for a song, I couldn't relate to people like that anymore".<sup>277</sup> It is curious

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<sup>275</sup> I also see this related to the re-enchantment that follows an unmasking that Michael Taussig elaborates on in: Taussig, Michael 1999. *Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative*. Cambridge: Stanford University Press.

<sup>276</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 2000. "Translation as Culture" in: *Parallax 14, Translator's ink*, p. 13-24. P. 22.

<sup>277</sup> For her film GOING TO SCHOOL (30min, Video, colour, India 2001), shot in the same Tamil Nadu

maybe that the deaf girls and IT RESTED as a whole seem to invite being related to and simultaneously reject communication, like an offer for us to move on. Hence, next to its implications for ways of looking and knowing, its very being in the world foreshadows reflections on historicity.

## **2. PITRU CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS or, the taste of difference in duration<sup>278</sup>**

“What characterises gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture in other words opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human. [Gesture is the (N.W.)] third type of action alongside the other two: if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.” (Giorgio Agamben 2000: 56)<sup>279</sup>

“Just a very quick note to say that in Bangalore I was talking to a wildlife expert and he told me quite by chance that an elephant is very sensitive to low frequency sounds. It can hear frequencies below the range of what the human ear can pick up, and in fact it picks it up with its feet, even as the sound travels under the earth!!!!  
I know we used some of the lowest octaves in mdrs voice with the elephant shot quite unconsciously. Thought you may like to know.” (e-mail note by Soudhamini, 14<sup>th</sup> October 2007)

We move from 16mm images to 35mm. Later the attention to the play between film and video image will be important. These images carry a different depth; an impression that is fostered by many long takes and wide angle images. The overall film makes much more use of tele- and wide lenses, collapsing and widening space. The camera is mostly a still one, staying with an image, a dialogue or a movement in the background for its full duration and thus creating a very slow editing pace.

An elephant scene. I am hesitant. ‘An elephant in an Indian film?’ I almost see the reader’s disturbed wondering but continue writing precisely because the image bypasses possible stereotypes, bypasses representational and discursive assumptions that might be evoked. More emphatically I would say that it frees the elephant from that

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ranges, Soudhamini shot the film like non-fiction but worked with lay actors from the locality who enacted a scripted story line.

<sup>278</sup> PITRU CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, by Soudhamini, 100 min, 35 mm, colour, India 1991. Camera: R.V. Ramani

<sup>279</sup> Agamben, Giorgio 2000. *Means without End. Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 56.

'image of thought'.

The elephant's feet, like two trunks, in a close up. The camera moves up along the massive corpus, which slowly fills the whole screen. Then back to its feet and legs. The body parts are very close to the camera but it is less the texture of the skin that fills the image than the mere matter of the elephant, its size, its expansion; a groundedness, a way of occupying space with its own time and sensibility. The elephant first stands on a field, later it walks along a street where trucks and busses pass with different speeds. The image carries heterogeneous time as a matter of fact not as a contradiction or ambivalence. The parallel soundscape is a vocal piece of M.D. Ramanathan sung in very low octaves. Several other sequences imply a similar sensibility: A long sequence of a man cycling along a road at night; a man standing at the doorframe of a train that is passing through landscape.

When interviewed for studying at the Pune film institute, Soudhamini already knew she wanted to make a film about M.D. Ramanathan, a Carnatic musician who was born in Kerala but trained as a composer and singer in Madras where he worked and lived throughout his life. His particular practice however fell outside the canon of South Indian classical music. "That guy possessed me. I couldn't stop listening to his music. It's still like possession, not relation. On finishing the film I still hadn't distanced myself from him." Soudhamini said she could never cut into a song; each song in the film had to be played out in full length and determined the length of a sequence.<sup>280</sup> Although Soudhamini wanted to resist being fully determined by the music, she extended the visuals of sequences like the above "just for one more moment". PITRU CHAYA. SHADOW OF OUR FOREFATHERS became a film "inspired by M.D.R." (film subtitle).

While on a residency in Munich in August 2006, Soudhamini visited me in Berlin and we talked more about the particular quality of MDR's music (I will take over Soudhamini's reference to M.D. Ramanathan with MDR). Soudhamini talked of her fascination with MDR's disregard of compositional rules that had been canonised when South Indian folk music became Classical music and through that also a practice devoted to religion, practiced within a collective and towards the gods. The rules also

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<sup>280</sup> Much to the shock of the TV producer (ZDF, Kleines Fernsehspiel) who had commissioned the film after having seen IT RESTED. The extremely long takes are surely the extreme opposite of most of television's fast editing aesthetics, albeit this particular slot remains one of the few spaces for independent productions which at times stretches the formula of television films.

defined which notes a composer was to use, while MDR chose “foreign notes” consciously, notes “that did not belong” (Soudhamini) to the standard repertoire to create a sense of difference within his musical composition.<sup>281</sup>

PITRU CHAYA develops its language through two streams, two sensibilities or two different realities which in the film enter a cinematic dialogue. One stream, like the elephant scene, becomes a visualization of MDRs music or rather an affirmative relation to his composition. Soudhamini mentioned that if there were any personification of MDR in the film, it would be the image of the elephant.

The second stream, intertwined with the first, stages a theatre group:

Three men exercising, rehearsing, playing at a very wide beach during sunset. They are in the far back of the image. First, a singer rehearsing extreme octaves stands in the foreground. Then, the three men continue with handsprings and jumping in the very back of the image, while we read as subtitles:

First voice: We met at the video screening the other day.

Second voice: Yes.

F: Did you know Ramanathan?

S: Just heard of him. My teacher used to say after his death there is no one left to sing in the lower octaves.

F: So you know music?

S: I've been learning for some time now

- Pause -

A similar dialogue again; same content in slightly different order.

*Sings – Sa ...a ...*

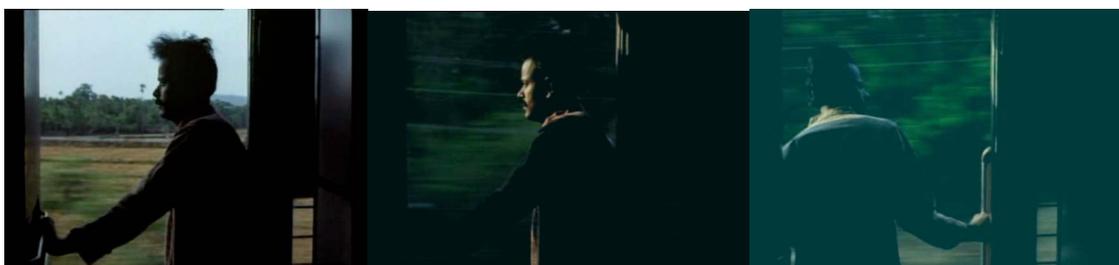
F: I don't know much about music, it is in the theatre that my involvement lies.

Another scene: The theatre group sits in a scarcely furnished room watching video tapes with students and relatives of MDR talking about how they experienced him and his music.

And: they walk in circles on the beach rehearsing a minimal dialogue.

Also: A woman looking through a photo album and giving brief and very factual information: ‘this is in Delhi after a concert’, ‘this is when he received an award’.

And then: Newspaper clips, but we can't read them.



Source: PITRU CHAYA. SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, by Soudhamini.

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<sup>281</sup> Soudhamini also stressed a difference between South and North Indian music, the latter stemming from Mughal times and being practiced within the court-room, not the religious realm as was the case for classical South Indian music.

Soudhamini had started interviewing family members, students and colleagues of MDR and thus prepared a 'classic' documentary film on an artist.<sup>282</sup> She soon decided though that she could not use the interviews as representations or authentications of MDR's life and work. PITRY CHAYA is therefore not a documentation of a musician's life. The film is a showing of an archive, but not its content.

If IT RESTED develops its cinematic language by its relation to cultural practices, PITRU CHAYA does this too, but works upon translating relation itself and producing Relation. I deploy the capital Relation here to suggest a closeness to the wide and complex connotations that Relation takes in Glissant, though it will not be possible to do full justice to his elaborations.

"But Relation is not to be confused with the cultures we are discussing nor with the economy of their internal relationships nor with the projection of their external relationships nor even with the intangible results of the intricate involvement of all internal relationships with all external relationships. Nor is it to be confused with some marvellous accident that might suddenly occur apart from any relationship, the known unknown, I which chance would be the magnet. Relation is all these things at once."<sup>283</sup>

Or:

"Relation relinks (relays), relates. ... they do not add up to anything clearcut or easily perceptible with any certainty. The relinked (relayed), the related, cannot be combined conclusively."<sup>284</sup>

PITRU CHAYA moves through musical practice; the film is carried by its soundtrack. We could speak of one stream as a long meditation, an abstract homage to MDR's very specific composition which implies a particular experience of his music, an obsession maybe. The sound and visual layers of this stream evoke a passage. Another stream of images approximates the music differently. Enacted by the theatre group it attempts to relate, does not relate, ignores even, leaves it aside completely to then return to it and thus to change terms of understanding. Again, there is lack and untranslatability, and there is excess as well. Music often escapes knowledge and the film does not attempt to understand it as in capturing different possible interpretations. Instead it makes the thinking with Relation and the very texture of ways of relating into its particular narrative.

How do these two different sensibilities come about? Soudhamini's interview recordings are video, the rest is shot on 35-mm and thus the two different sensibilities

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<sup>282</sup> See chapter two on how one section of Films Division was designed for portraits of national artists in an attempt to create presentations of India's cultural heritage.

<sup>283</sup> Glissant 1997: 170.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid: 173.

are partly material. More importantly though, they are different ways to hear and to listen, to relate and to not relate, different acts of performance and image creation, different ways of knowing and dissimilar ways of communicating? Soudhamini chose this group of actors precisely for their more problematic relationship to MDR's music and thus confronts her own way of relating. Both streams are in a formal dialogue with each other, they talk against and with each other, they provoke a Relation between what Soudhamini called a dominant sensibility (within the Tamil Milieu) and another, illegitimate sensibility, one marginalized by this very milieu. A relation that the film, according to Soudhamini, reverts by making MDR the centre and rendering others illegitimate.

One sequence consists e.g. of the theatre group enacting a sequence from the Ramayana, which proposes a relation to death and hereby a dominant sensibility as a way of dealing with death and how death is often expressed and dealt with in creative practice, where the creative practice becomes a form of bereavement. In one of our conversations during Soudhamini's visit to Berlin, we tried to further dissect the two sensibilities. Soudhamini spoke then about working experiences with other actors as well, whom she found too often tempted by re-enacting the familiar, familiar sentiments. The dissimilar ways of performance, between the theatre group and the sequences implying the composed sensibilities of MDR, could be distinguished as the former deriving their art from Being, while the latter experiments with and indulges in acts of Becoming.

How can you make an elephant, a music composition, a history, an Other your own without containing it? How to Relate but not to capture? The elephant is initially and for a long time not shown in full size, only later when he walks along the road we see his whole body moving. Soudhamini stressed that she wanted the elephant to show a clumsiness but also to transmit the sense of "becoming large" and an ambivalence:



Source: PITRU CHAYA. SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, by Soudhamini.

“large but tender, something that you can become as well, like watching a sense of large”.

The subtitles during this scene also talk of death and thus they stand in relation or juxtaposition to the theatre’s enactment of death. There is an immense presence and at the same time the entire screen gets filled with just a body, evoking a simultaneity of presence and absence, like too many things to say and nothing at the same time, a mere presence that is not filled - “a container”, a zero.

“Duration is the ‘field’ in which difference lives and plays itself out. Duration is that which undoes as well as what makes: to the extent that duration entails an open future, it involves the fracturing and opening up of the past and the present to what is virtual in them, to what in them differs from the actual, to what in them can bring forth the new.” (Grosz 2005: 4)<sup>285</sup>

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I perceive those moments and encounters with the cinematic, the dissecting look, the zooming into formal choices or particular scenes, which happened during conversations I had with filmmakers and which get further extended when I listen again to the conversations that I recorded, as different forms of cinephilia. Often the situations when filmmakers would take the time to show their work and one would get into long conversations about details of their work felt like an extreme luxury. The zooming into these bodies of work comes back to me when I sit with them now, watch them on my TV, rewind, play forward, start getting into the minutes of singular scenes that become very familiar and try to articulate why they seem so precious to me and how I can make their potential visible or readable even further. The way I work with them is to take them in and out of these particular time zones where I encountered them first and often with their makers.



Source: PITRY CHAYA. SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, by Soudhamini.

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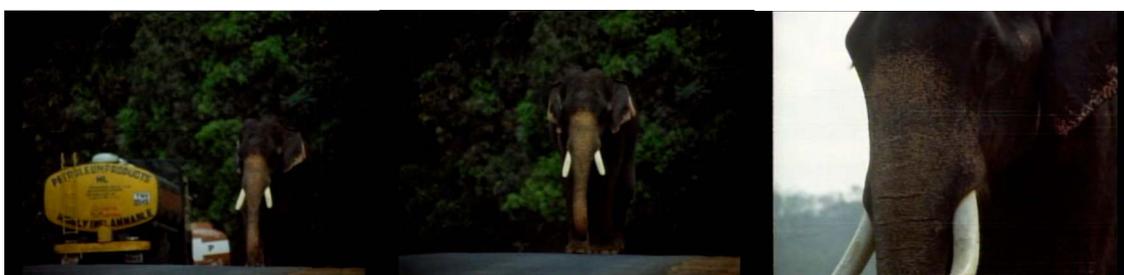
<sup>285</sup> Grosz, Elisabeth 2005. “Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming”. In: *Parallax. Unbecoming*, 2005, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 4-13.

I try to detach the films from these afternoons, deconstruct and not authenticate my experience and at the same time when I write about the experience these films can evoke, life is fed back into them and they can't be 'isolated' (Glissant).

Talking of cinephilia, a cinematic screen experience was often not how I saw these films for the first time and how I continue to see them when they enter into my writing. I rarely saw those films in a dark cinema hall with an immersing big screen but the various viewing situations were cinematic, or constituted a cinematic event, in their own ways.

Each situation brings a film into a new present, each viewing creates its very own relation between the viewer and the film, whether in a governmental office, a women's library, a filmmaker's living room, on my laptop when travelling on the train or when I show them to students or other audiences. Each viewing event creates a small "cinema as a place where movement experiences stay still".<sup>286</sup> The viewing and later the talking about it become moments of stillness from which I profit in order to rest between locations and thoughts. The zooming into a sequence and the consequent writing out of scenes and thus literally enlarging them, making them longer in my text than they actually are, becomes a peculiar ethnographic moment in itself in the sense of writing about small and minor occasions to enlarge them, working from the small and the every day to larger questions.

I saw PITRU CHAYA first on video at Soudhamini's house in Madras where she hosted me for the entire day while I watched her films, chronologically as I recall. We had short breaks after each film and one long conversation that I recorded at the end. I came on a night bus for one day.



Source: PITRU CHAYA. HADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, by Soudhamini.

<sup>286</sup> Here I quote Ulrike Oettinger from the Arsenal film programme (July 2005). This gives me the opportunity to acknowledge how I benefited from witnessing film programs and an understanding of the curatorial with the cinematic at the cinema Arsenal in Berlin. Numerous film histories are created there. See: [www.arsenal-berlin.de](http://www.arsenal-berlin.de).

I didn't know the city Madras and came there only to meet Soudhamini, to see her films and to talk. It was Sunday. It was hot outside and we stayed inside the whole day. There wasn't much traffic on the road outside the house. My recorder tells me there were the usual crows and other birds I can't identify. I remember this day bearing a particularly intense and also detached energy. I moved from one film to the next and we extended the images by talking. A different time zone emerged again. Slow and fast at the same time as we move through more than ten years of work, indulge in the luxury of zooming into minute details and coming back to how the political and the cultural imply each other. Bombay, Delhi, Gujarat<sup>287</sup> seemed far and yet left a lot of question marks when we touched upon how all this related to critical cultural responses to supremacist politics. The day full of conversation and films and our engagement in the politics of form created their own relation to these outsides, a pause to think and engage, an escape?

N: After I got into it, it felt like it could still go on, it could be longer.

S: *laughs* ... Right ... are you sure? *laughs*

N: *laughs* ... Well - the scenes with the theatre group are not easy to engage in first, one needs that time. The visualising parts are quite hypnotising, I think. *Laughs...* In the end you are completely into how they work with each other and you just go with it.

S: You know, even I have that sense of incompleteness in that film (...) first I wasn't in a state of mind to enter it into festivals and it never took on a life on its own (...) But as soon as I finished it I had such a strong image in my mind, that we have to physically bury this film under the earth (laughs) and either I or somebody else would pick it up later. Like this is not for the present; it was such a strong image. Instead, later I entered it into the Bombay festival, it travelled in Kerala and I recorded all the conversations we had after the film screenings. Also, I kept some of the images I didn't use in the film. I wanted to do something maybe called 'The MDR tapes' and the film would just be part of this, the film would be the text and it would include a whole lot of other people so that the film becomes archival material. Then it's not extending linear, but it's like layering, its very much there in my mind. It had this slightly archaic quality, not from this time at all. I don't know what it is.

N: When I finished watching it, it was like it demanded more. Maybe by its openness and the investment it asks for, I didn't immediately think about a meaning but more my reactions to the scenes, like participating ... maybe like, yes maybe like it's an archive to use not to look at.

S: I wonder why it is?

The film works with incompleteness and produces it too, like an open ended archive. The evoked potential for endless responses seems connected to what Soudhamini called the two sensibilities and how they together create a fragmented narrative. I wonder whether one could approach these images through yet another level; like zooming in yet a little closer. I will think through those streams via Laura Mark's use of

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<sup>287</sup> The peak of violence extending over two months (from March to May 2002) in Gujarat had just come to an end.

Peircian semiotics, adapted and further worked upon by Deleuze.<sup>288</sup>

I would then propose that the visualisations such as the elephant scene come close to a Firstness – “a mere quality”<sup>289</sup>. But if Firstness is only “red, bitter, tedious, hard, noble”<sup>290</sup>, then the walking elephant or an extended shot of a man cycling could also bring Secondness into these images. I want to argue though that the soundscape, the music as mere form, keeps Firstness in these images or hinders these images from becoming perception images as in an image that “attempts to organise the affect of the images” and “narrows it down”.<sup>291</sup> Or, that there is a continuous oscillation between First and Secondness, between the affection image as a sign of possibility, “a mere may-be” (Peirce) and the perception image.<sup>292</sup> Consequently, our ‘understanding’ of the scene would not arise from what we bring to the images as common knowledge, about, say, elephants. Due to the music, a certain directness of the images, the close-up, the focus on the materiality of the skin and on largeness as such, these scenes are transported into another Secondness and taken away from their dominant meaning. The theatre actor’s stream would constitute Secondness as in action-images: the actors performing, rehearsing, listening to video-tapes, experimenting with relating to the music. Both streams would then play upon Thirdness, the realm of interpretation, symbolism and clichés.<sup>293</sup> Hereby Thirdness would be of that kind which tends back to zero, the zone where sensibility is not divided into subjective and objective, a zone where the becoming-other occurs in the experience of time and form. The play of two kinds of images, two sensibilities, two different ways of relating to music would then create a zone which does not separate a subjective and objective understanding of music or other cultural practice but makes space to create an experience for Relation

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<sup>288</sup> In the following I am referring to Laura Marks’ writing on falsified documentaries “reconstructing traces of the real” in relation to war-ridden Beirut. Marks writes on selected film works through Deleuze’s references to Charles Sanders Peirce, Henri Bergson and Michel Foucault. As mentioned earlier I am not embedding the film work I think with deeply in one or the other film philosophy or theory, but see my own thinking related to and surely influenced by the sense of perceiving the real ‘implied’ in images rather than presented. Marks explications of Peirce’s image divisions have given me another vocabulary to express the potential I see in PITRU CHAYA, that I would like to acknowledge. See: Marks, Laura 2000a. “Signs of Time. Deleuze, Pierce, and the Documentary Image”. In Flaxman 2000 (Ed) *The Brain is the Screen*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. p. 193-214.

<sup>289</sup> Marks 2000a: 196. Marks quotes from: Peirce, Charles Sanders 1950. ‘The Principles of Phenomenology’, in: Justus Buchler (ed). *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*. New York: Harcourt, Brace. P. 77.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid: p. 197.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid: p. 196.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid: p. 198.

as such: "Relation is movement" (Glissant)<sup>294</sup>. Soudhamini's wish to have everything present in the image and at the same time rendering the elephant a container, a free space to relate to, seems to express a similar desire for an image space of possibilities, of a "mere may-be", a sense of possible newness. There seems to be a very striking and potent quality in music, an image, a history, an Other maybe, that gives us plenty and yet does not determine what we make of it.

By including feedback into the film, namely by incorporating an audience already, like the theatre group, Soudhamini wished to make it more accessible to others. The offered paths to access seem to lie in sensing (Firstness) and reading (Secondness) off the images and the sound, and from their working together. Both ways of relating to the film could thus be invitations for responses, invitations to find new ways of relating to the 'shadows of our forefathers'. With shadows one might associate an oppressing darkness or a too heavy weight of moral obligations relayed through a past. Soudhamini stressed on how that was one aspect of how tradition and in her case a Tamilian cultural background or context of living could feel like, but that here she was consciously choosing her title PITRU CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, to stress on how shadows also contain that which is nurturing and that which provides a cool place to rest. There is thus an implied negotiation which deals with one's location and the need to continuously be allowed to relocate or to relate in different ways. Hereby I see a formal production of historicity, of ways to think of history. A historicity that does not search for authentic traces to prove an origin and is far from fostering single interpretations of what our forefathers left. Rather an understanding of cultural practice that leaves parts undefined, unexplained and untranslatable while treasuring others in order to relate to the present and to be able to think about the future. A recognition of history and a touching of traces of tradition to then leave again. The choice of touching the work of a composer who positioned himself outside the canon, escaped the strict rules of classical composition and inferred difference into his music, who therefore himself intervened in the "distribution of the sensible", is hereby vital.

" ... an aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms. ... The dream of a suitable political art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as vehicle. It is the dream of an art that

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<sup>294</sup> Glissant 1997: 171.

would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations.”<sup>295</sup>

### **3. Lovers of Life for heterogeneous time or, How we might relate in the future - RASIKAN RÉ<sup>296</sup>**

“I think the film is quite concerned with how you move into the future. It’s about having the ability to draw upon this whole well of the past, to have those keys available to you as enrichment. Like sitting in a bus and looking out – you can have that without the aid of all this of course, but with that sense of connection it might resonate in so many more levels, maybe it deepens the experience that you have anyway, like the fact of having a past experience makes you sit better in your chair.” (Pooja Kaul, conversation with author, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2005)

Questions remain. When “[is] any mention of tradition silenced with the remark that that is just essentialist golden-ageism”?<sup>297</sup> When is a past used for the writing of a History or for an acknowledgment of the present being “out of joint” (Chakrabarty)? Or, when is a History and tradition made to explain and justify single identities and when can Relation to traces of tradition subvert the very same for a Being as fragmented and in difference?

*“I was always looking for stories in pictures,”* narrates Kedar from his childhood experience. A sentence as a working tool, central to how the storyline of RASIKAN RÉ (O LOVER OF LIFE) takes shape: subtle and via fragments dispersed throughout the film. The story reveals the tender attraction between the young woman Madhu and Kedar, a 40-year old man and Madhu’s new neighbour in an urban apartment block. During one of their few meetings Kedar narrates how, as a young boy, he misread the meaning of a painting that was hanging in his childhood room. Pooja Kaul, the filmmaker, said she wanted to add this scene as a moment of self-reflection. During one of the conversations I had with Pooja Kaul, we seemed to arrive at a parallel admittance of maybe reading too much into images. Nevertheless, we accepted our mutual enthusiasm for this, in art and in critical writing. We share a concern with the above questions, if so from different angles and at times from different places. We also seem to share a belief in the potentiality of the image and a desire for the moving

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<sup>295</sup> Rancière 2004a: 63.

<sup>296</sup> RASIKAN RÉ (O Lover of Life), D: Pooja Kaul, 33min, Digital Video, Black and White & Colour. 2003 India.

<sup>297</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 2000. “Translation as Culture” in: *Parallax 14, Translator’s ink*, p. 13-24. p. 17.

image to partake in a pushing of the 'limits of the possible'. 'Reading stories in pictures' thus becomes the key; "in some way it offers how to read the film, it is a film about reading stories." (Pooja Kaul<sup>298</sup>) In a similar spirit, my writing is driven by questioning how to write with film, how to translate the conceptualising that films achieve into words or how to think beyond the thought that they offer their viewers. Can writing be a translation with excess?

Here it starts with the sound of street vendors in a contemporary urban environment in India. *Black and White*. A family scene in a middle class apartment and a girl looking for economics textbooks. Among the many books, her mother finds an old folder with miniature paintings. Then a flashback, in colour. Pooja Kaul said: "For me it was very important that it started from the present and from someone. It needed very much to start from this reality and then go, because the film is about the present."

The film carries three different kinds of image qualities: Black and white, some very sharp and clean, others rather dirty or harsh; colour images, the edges fading out like when looking through a filter<sup>299</sup>, attaining the quality of found footage; a few images, or moments rather, in very lush and intense colours: once a palm tree, once the rough structure of bark against the bright blue of a sunny sky, midday light maybe. Different film materialities, different time zones, different ways of looking.

Later we follow neighbourly conversations about the monsoonal rains to come, attempts to communicate across the modern housing complexes. A blouse has to be dyed for the wedding of Salima, Madhu is studying for her exams, a girl working for the household is asked to make tea, the grandmother preparing beans:



Source: RASIKAN RÉ – O LOVER OF LIFE, by Pooja Kaul.

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<sup>298</sup> This and all following direct quotations of Pooja Kaul are taken from a recorded three-hour conversation on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2005 in London, unless otherwise stated. I met Pooja Kaul first in Delhi in May 2002 when she was still working on RASIKAN RÉ. Most conversations however happened in London. Various meetings during autumn 2006 extended the discussed issues further and thus influenced my writing.

<sup>299</sup> These were filmed with a Digital camera through a Hazelblatt photo camera.

Family scenes on a roof terrace of an urban housing colony in Delhi. We also witness brief conversations inside the flat, mundane scenes of the every day, the looking out of the window or down from the roof terrace to observe who is moving in next door. A few more spaces and dialogues which narrate the fictional storyline are spread throughout the film.

This line is frequently interrupted and left behind when the film pauses to look attentively at the inner and outer architecture of people's homes. We move along narrow staircases, into corners of flats and onto spaces between modern housing complexes. Like Madhu who knows the pace of the men ironing their customer's shirts, the camera comes to a brief halt for a meeting to happen, it follows the particular urban rhythm. We see the proximity of the houses when we gaze through windows, curiously glance down the roof terrace and along the road. "Disparate stories transpiring in different houses", "a picture emerges of lit windows, people in houses playing out their lives"<sup>300</sup>. Much time is spent with a late night walk through empty streets and to the corner pan-shop<sup>301</sup>, also with sitting in a taxi, driving along extended empty fields into the city. Repeatedly we pass a tree with a shrine. We pass it very early in the morning and can observe how it is visited for morning rituals, water being poured over a Shiv statue, a *betel*<sup>302</sup> leaf being left there; also when a boy on his cycle stops there to pick up peacock feathers. An 18<sup>th</sup> century tree like there are many in Indian cities. It stands solidly in the middle of the street which seems to be built around it, to conserve it, covered in an early morning fog quite typical for Delhi.



Source: RASIKAN RÉ – O LOVER OF LIFE, Pooja Kaul.

<sup>300</sup> From Pooja Kaul's film project outline.

<sup>301</sup> Pan/ Paan is a betel leaf, which can be filled with different kinds of spices (masala) to be eaten after food.

<sup>302</sup> Specific three bladed leaf used for worshipping.

RASIKAN RÉ is a short fiction film which works via documentary modes. “Shot like fiction but with a documentary eye on life” (Pooja Kaul). Pooja Kaul learnt filmmaking first via her Masters Degree in Mass Communication at the Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi; for a long time it was the only degree for training people in documentary filmmaking and many of the filmmakers I met in Delhi had once studied there. Pooja Kaul continued her film training at the London Film School. The project for her film school degree became an essay film on Amrita Sher-Gil, a female modernist painter who lived in Paris and Hungary for parts of her short life (she died at the age of 28). Pooja Kaul followed Sher-Gil’s route in Hungary, shot while travelling and the final film became a reflection on Sher-Gil’s life, her being in exile, and how her different locations of living became part of her work.<sup>303</sup>

“I like to think of the storyline as a spine, in order for you to see the detail, like an underpinning and then you see.” (Pooja Kaul)

The story figures more like a sketch of a plot, which provides the space for details of matter. Like opening windows to make the viewer look while the looking itself takes centre stage and the story told is merely a way of connecting. When the film leaves its own narration to move over to an attentive looking, it gives way for minute and extended ethnographies of urban spaces and in this way the grid of a fiction film provides ever more space for documentation.

Pooja Kaul had not been familiar with Soudhamini’s work, when I told her that I saw similarities in their approach to filmmaking and what drives them. The more I engaged in both works, the more I saw PITRU CHAYA as an ancestor of sorts of RASIKAN RÉ, imagining it, here again, as an invisible backbone. While both films stand as unique works and no doubt suffice by themselves, they also add to each other and hereby enhancing an unfolding of potentialities that lies in their enigmatic qualities.

“If you can use any mode and device that you think is suitable for what you want to say and if this repertoire is accessible for experimentation, that to me is Avant-Garde.” (Pooja Kaul)

When watching RASIKAN RÉ we gradually come to an understanding that its narrative cues are taken from miniature paintings and the ragas to which these particular

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<sup>303</sup> WINTER TRAIL, D: Pooja Kaul, 20min, Digital Video, colour, UK 2002. Pooja Kaul also made a short ‘making off’ of WINTER TRAIL.

paintings relate. Only towards the end of the film though these paintings are presented like citations, like loose evocations of sources: A man leaving a woman, a woman approaching a man, women sitting in a pavilion, a woman going out in the rains while others try to call her back, a palm tree, a shrine at a tree. During a brief sequence that stays very separate from the rest, a music teacher sits with his student and we are offered another hint at the working of the music which, next to the documentary urban soundscape forms part of the sonic layer of the film, while the lyrics often repeat, or “accelerate” (Pooja Kaul) the filmed image. Provoked is a layering of meaning through repetitions, towards an intense awareness of life.

“As though an idea twice emphasised would intensify the experience of *rasa*.” (Pooja Kaul)

The *Ragamala* paintings, literally garlands of ragas, relate to the main feature of North Indian classical music, the ragas<sup>304</sup>. These are a subset of usually five to eight notes with a set of rules and a particular mood that should be created. Each Raga has a name, a character (devotional, erotic, bold, valorous, or tragic etc.) and comes with a time of the day or season when it is best performed (6am to 9am early morning raga, 9am to noon, etc.). Thus, one Raga can be performed for one up to three hours. The musician might start off with a word or syllabus and merely gesture towards a full song but then expand on one part only. Improvisation in Indian classical music is accordingly not perceived as the development of a theme but the building of a structural character or a particular modal form. This building works upon the inherent potentiality of the raga but the musician chooses which facets should be revealed in the process of the unfolding of a raga.<sup>305</sup>

For the creation of *Ragamala* paintings, music, poetry and the paintings do not relate to each other through a technical procedure. No direct correspondence is found, nothing like the colours matching the notes of the scale or symbolising specific moods. There is however an analogy, “certain rules and embellishments are implemented in an act of creative improvisation”<sup>306</sup> and looking at the painting should evoke in the viewer a particular mood derived from the raga. Poetry is often written into the framing of the paintings and stands next to the music as the ‘basis’ of the paintings. As Pooja Kaul

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<sup>304</sup> *Ragamala* paintings were painted across four centuries (15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> ct.). I want to note here that I do not claim art historical knowledge on these or other traditions of miniature paintings; my interest lies in the process of how these get translated into this particular contemporary short film. For this I have mostly drawn on conversations with the filmmaker and Ebeling, Klaus 1976. *Ragamala Paintings*. Basel, Paris, New Delhi: Ravi Kumar.

<sup>305</sup> Lath, Mukund 1998. *Transformation as Creation*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan. p. 37.

<sup>306</sup> Ebeling 1976: 16.

explained, the three elements together create a presence through the practice of repetition and layering of a mood or a story. Further, a particular raga can comprise a subset of different 'nayaks' and 'nayikas', a variation of heroes and heroines, which together make a continuum of characters<sup>307</sup>. With nine moods we come to a set of 36 paintings.<sup>308</sup>

*"He is in contemplation and his eyes are closed. He is seated in an attitude of yoga. Of parallel beauty, says Harivallabha, is Kedar in his habits and poses."*

From a Dhyamantra (poetry) accompanying a Ragamala painting for Kedar, a raga for performance at night.

*"When the light flashes, she twists her body. Her passion is excited by the sight of the closely-grouped leaves of tamala tree. She is Madhu-Madhavi."*

From a Dhyamantra (poetry) accompanying a Ragamala painting for Madhu-Madhavi, a mid-morning raga.

Lalit, an early morning raga, is seen as a man leaving a woman's bed at dawn.

Desi is a woman who approaches a man herself, Bhairavi an early-morning worshipper at a shiv-linga (a shrine with a statue of god Shiva).<sup>309</sup>

However, for Pooja Kaul it was important that this tradition of cultural practices involves rules that are not painstakingly followed. If found more useful they should be left aside to move on to something else, maybe something new.



Source: RASIKAN RÉ – O LOVER OF LIFE, by Pooja Kaul.

<sup>307</sup> This could be investigated further in relation to gender constructions. Each character can move through different types and thus characteristics. Kedar, the loner, need not be an opposite to the female heroine but Madhu 'the one who lives strongly' and the morning raga (Madhu-Madhavi), might later become a 'Kedar'; a possible suggestion at the end of the film.

<sup>308</sup> Ebeling 1976: 16ff.

<sup>309</sup> Poetry inscriptions are taken from Pooja Kaul's film project outline.

“Sometimes they leave out things or even change the grammar. It’s very loose, with a carefreeness which I think comes from a confidence in their ability to maintain the guiding principle. They don’t hang on to it. I wanted the film to reflect that. That you feel the rule but you also feel a letting go. When the rain comes, the film follows a painting in a strict sense and then it opens out in a purely documentary scene – as though the film forgot its own rules.” (Pooja Kaul)

Why would we want to relate to these miniature paintings or, why translate them into a cinematic language?<sup>310</sup> The filmmaker says she “learnt looking” from these paintings, where what is assumed to be the centre of an image, like a pavilion, is sketched with a few strokes and a small fly on the side is painted in detail, with dedication and presumably several hours of exercising craft. A looking thus that questions where our gaze should come to a halt and hence distributes anew centre and margin. A looking that maybe makes space for parts standing in a different relation to the whole, like the fiction film where the narration gives way to ethnographies of spaces and where arrivals merely hold together the durations of travel and movement. The miniature paintings stage the mere act of inhabiting a space, which Pooja Kaul wanted to transport into her film by expanding this very attention into an urban present and cinematic space.

We talked about the process of making *RASIKAN RÉ*, retrospectively. During this time in London, Pooja shared with me her fascination with the paintings and the long process of internalising them. We talked about her drive for finding a new language and her ongoing interest in what modernity can mean today in an urban Indian context. At times we extended each other’s sentence, like pushing each other’s thoughts forward while talking from different backgrounds. But we also both guided the conversation according to our interests. I picked up on Pooja’s hesitant mention of the communal violence in India. Political conflicts and religious violence in different places pass through our conversation as well as the film as the outside and the contexts that expand meanings. We now talk about History and the politics of writing, re-writing and claiming Histories more concretely. It is self-evident that this is not just the case of the Indian subcontinent. Violence is exercised through and gets supported by crude rhetoric and image politics on an international level for the Histories of ‘civilisations’, nations, communities and religious movements. Histories are written to prove a lineage

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<sup>310</sup> Unlike in the contemporary art scene in Pakistan, in India miniature paintings have not been taken up that extensively for further artistic exploration. The tradition survives partly in popular culture and as items for tourism. For recent discussions on experimentations with miniature paintings by Pakistani artists see e.g.: Green Cardamom (ed.). 2006. *Beyond the Page. Contemporary Art in Pakistan*. Asia House, Green Cardamom, Manchester Art Gallery, Shisha.

of what it means to be Indian, what it means to be Hindu and how both identities are identical and thus exclude any Other. I have already in my introduction referred to the specific inquiries into South Asian visual culture contexts which have been essential and complementary to my own project. Here, I thus want to merely remind the reader of a context in which media and image making creates Hindu cultural nationalisms. I will later also turn my attention more specifically to how the extreme extent of the communal violence in Gujarat and its mediatisation led to a heightened 'conflict of discourses'; a point of condensed conjunction which provoked a sharpening of questions about how to make a critical difference or how to 'bear inconvenient witness'.<sup>311</sup> For the moment I want to keep the focus more precisely on what might be the critical difference in filmmaker's writing or re-writing of histories. What is the critical difference in their, and my own, voluntarism in referring to history, to a past or to a cultural practice? Or are these even the right questions to ask?

"What is to be done? [...] Perhaps the uncertainty of what is to be done today is so great, so fluctuating, so indeterminate, that we do not need even to do this: raise the question. Especially if one already knows what is right to think, and that the only issue is how one might then proceed to act. [...] 'What is to be done?' means for us: how to make a world for which all is not already done (played out, finished, enshrined in destiny) nor still entirely to do (in the future for always future tomorrows). What will become of our world is something we cannot know, and we can no longer believe in being able to predict or command it. But we can act in such a way that this world is a world able to open itself up to its own uncertainty as such. These are not vague generalities. [...] Where certainties come apart, there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match." (Jean-Luc Nancy 2006: 350)<sup>312</sup>

What is to be done in response to, as a critique of or as a 'necessary antidote' (Chakrabarty) to supremacist instrumentalizations of History, histories and traditions? What is to be done when origins get created, myths authenticated, birthplaces defended<sup>313</sup> and pasts glorified, when history is rewritten, straightened and unified? Pooja Kaul called the political and cultural atmosphere around Indianness 'a minefield'. But, at the same time there is my own implication, the need and potential to ask questions which go beyond a research context. My interest in questions of time,

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<sup>311</sup> Hoskote, Ranjit 2004. "Bearing Inconvenient Witness. Notes in Pro/Confessional Mode". In: *Crisis/Media. Sarai Reader 04*. Delhi: The Sarai Programme, CSDS. p. 2.

<sup>312</sup> Nancy, Jean-Luc quoted in: Kelly, Susanne & Stephen Morton 2006. "What is to be done?" in: *Capital (it fails us now)*. Critical Reader in Visual Cultures #7, oe & b\_books, Simon Sheikh (Ed). p. 340-351. Susanne Kelly and Stephen Morton have been involved in a long term project posing the question "What is to be done?" to theorists, artists and others.

<sup>313</sup> This refers to the dispute over the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya as birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. On 6th December 1992, the mosque was attacked and communal riots in Bombay in December 1992 and January 1993 followed. See: Nandy, Ashish; Trivedy, Shikha; Mayaram, Shail and Achyut Yagnik. 1995. *The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self. Creating a Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

historicity and the related realm of belonging similarly derives from a problematic and silencing relation to history in Germany, from definitions of origin and cultural affiliation for regulating legal citizenship and belonging in Europe, from dominant discourses around 'us' and 'them' with authoritarian claims to truth. There is thus my own desire in thinking of those terms, loaded, violated and usurped, otherwise; thinking otherwise for an active opening out, for possibly finding other terms when reading stories in pictures.

Authoritarian rhetoric of loss and fear, of what rightly belongs to 'us' and was conquered by Others, is thus something that cultural producers cannot neglect. On the contrary, with the need to think of transformation and belonging differently arises the need to think of history. Next to nationalist recourses on tradition for a single identity of Indianness as Hindu identity are then cinematic attempts to think of ones location differently, to work with and upon relations of transversality based upon difference.

"I had one little hesitation with the scene where a woman is worshipping at a Shiv shrine. The paintings, if anything are an Islamic tradition, they came from Persia to India and were patronised in large measure by the Mughal empire, the patrons were very substantially Muslim. Again, that's one of the contradictions or developments of India, that the content matter of this style of painting is often specifically Hindu, like the shrines which we also see in the film. The real preoccupation of the paintings is of course love and sensuality, any reference to social set-up is well at the margins, at the corner of the frame. In many ways they are about the internal life of characters. I just wish more Indians knew about the fact that these are originally Islamic. If we knew how symbiotic or how amalgamated, assimilated our culture really is, just that knowledge would begin to solve a lot." (Pooja Kaul)

Pooja Kaul wanted to react to a sense of loss and find a filmic form that is foremost interested in a looking that exercises awareness towards life and articulates relation. Can referring to those miniature paintings thus be a way of 'unworking history' (Chakrabarty)? Is there productive excess in translating them formally into a cinematic language? A practice against a rooted grounding that naturalises in order to expand and expel, against grounding that neglects to look and listen, but knows already?

The paintings themselves defy the idea of an origin because no initial date can be found and their source can, if at all, only be shown to be an amalgam of several cultures.<sup>314</sup> Is the film spectator aware enough of details like the habitualness of a Hindu family preparing for a Muslim wedding and the depiction of a Hindu ritual as just a morning ritual at the tree with a shrine, details which seem to attain importance if the aim is to articulate particularities which are inclusive and embrace the amalgamated as

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<sup>314</sup> Ebeling 1976 mentions Jain traders having imported paper from Persia to Gujarat, Persian miniatures coming to India, influenced by Mughal art and inscribed with Sanskrit complements.

the specific? Further, if the loss that is often so vaguely bemoaned is a loss of relation and of a looking attentively, is then taking up these paintings as cultural artefacts less a looking at the past as a search for signification, but more an understanding of “history that separates us from ourselves and that we have to go through and beyond in order to think what we are”<sup>315</sup>? Thus, can history be the Other that we ‘listen to’ to move within our presents being alert to the future? History as the Other that we relate to, not to find certainty in a root or a prescribed identity but to approach it in its singularity. Hereby, we would return to the aforementioned ethical space of responsibility, similarly to what I argued in connection with *IT RESTED*, the “listening to respond that is the imperative to translate” that G. C. Spivak speaks of.<sup>316</sup> To respond with an attentive looking for a space of reflection, to ‘open ourselves up to uncertainties’ (Jean-Luc Nancy).

The cues that *RASIKAN RÉ* borrows from the paintings are on the one hand narrative tropes and characters or emotional states of being. But more significantly, the film meets the music, its poetry and how these become paintings, on a formal level:

There isn’t a fixed methodology of translation and yet connecting is vital.

There is no search for a true meaning in these paintings.

No explanation of a painting, a past, or a present but recognition of past experiences, moods and stories to be acknowledged as a reminder. As Pooja said in relation to certain images coming back like a chorus in the film, like ragas, to bring back a moment “for the mere pleasure of memory” (Pooja Kaul), for recognition.

Improvisation here is not the development of a theme but a process of unfolding, the building of a structure, like a spine. No completeness but gestures. *RASIKAN RÉ* works through a non-normative structure and translates cinematically a gesturing, a building structures, leaving rules for new things to come and a way of attending to detail and thus giving time and duration to spaces. Street corners, lanes, staircases, trees and open fields, but also early mornings, the rainy season and the urge to run outside when the rains arrive, these become events and get individuated, they unfold their energy through time. This particular construction between the paintings and music which give cues for a fragmented narration and the extended individuated urban spaces do not

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<sup>315</sup> Deleuze on Foucault’s notion of history in: Deleuze, Gilles 1999. “Life as a work of Art”. In: *Negotiations 1972-1990*. New York: Columbia University Press. P. 70-96. p. 95.

<sup>316</sup> Spivak 2000: 22.

only give a sense of heterogeneous time, but constitute a different kind of temporality, a different kind of distribution between time and space, the seen and the unseen. It switches our coordinates of looking and understanding.

The act of relation, the extension of past practices without instructions, the mere knowledge of duration and the awareness of a continuous becoming could then be another Grounding; a myth-making without the search for origin but providing an open sense of connection, of historicity. Thus the ‘comfortable sitting in one’s chair’ that I quoted, would then be an enabling grounding. I do not mean a sitting comfortably, like a leaning back, not a cinematic experience that absorbs you, lets you forget and protects your identity through a retreat in nostalgia. But a cinephilic absorption that creates its own space and evokes and agitates from there. A sitting in a locality from where you can look out of the window as an act of ‘integration to then disperse’, where the outside with all its changes and transformations can be brought in and where thought can happen that thinks about how we want to relate in the future.

What I read in those pictures then is that RASIKAN RÉ offers us rich imaginaries for thinking conditions of existence. Through its particular kind of looking it activates Relating, a relating to the past, the present and ultimately a gesture towards the future. It exercises cinematically a tender awareness towards life. By touching upon notions of time and historicity it offers a thinking of belonging in modernity. Its dedication to the present and the cinematic allows the proposal of a politics without foreclosing it; the enigmatic gives a thinking plenty, and in colour.

“The image of the palm tree has the most lush colours because that is the moment of realisation. It is the moment of the tasting of *rasa*, the juice of life, which the paintings and the music exist for; when there is an aesthetic union, as they say. Like when there is a wonderful concert or a dance performance, that moment of meeting between the performance and the audience, when you are transported. And in the film, when she sits there and looks at the painting, there is that awareness of life, that moment when art and reality come together, so she looks out of the window ....” (Pooja Kaul)



Source: RASIKAN RÉ – O LOVER OF LIFE, by Pooja Kaul.

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I speculate that the 'varied poetics' that I explored are engaged in a risk taking for they seek to address the 'overstepping that grounds a unity-diversity'. My own exploration of those practices and reflections are inspired by a search for multiple possibilities of dissent. They are also directed by what has been expressed as a 'need for a new language' that is contextual while not culturally essentialist. What I am proposing is then a contextual form of cinematic experimentation that is directed towards new languages or what could tentatively even be called an Avant-Garde.

There is a cautiousness and precision that often struck me with the works that I am citing; a heightened awareness of one's context and an embedded practice. This embeddedness was certainly not a mere reference to local aesthetic traditions, since of course international film histories inform the projects as well. With the term 'embedded', I allude more to a seriousness and a taking care of how one's work would be part of a larger picture, however fragmented, diverse and in process this was. At times this could also be a hindrance, like a root that ties you down. But the reactions then never consisted of completely moving away or total rejection, though quite surely one would find those examples as well. But, what to me surfaced more and more as a strength, was a practice of thought and making that could be called a practice of *recycling*. In a very practical and literal sense, I perceive recycling as a careful investigation of which parts of presumably old and out dated remnants can be used and made useful for the present, by utilising those parts for something new. At times this could mean finding a useful though forgotten tool that can additionally be twisted and expanded and in the process we may find yet other mechanics and purposes, at other times we may need to neglect what parts were used for and maybe consciously redefine their purpose. The problematic of this voluntarism may still not be adequately answered and no definite response is given to the outcome of those practices.

All the way through this project, I have referred to studies on South Asian visual culture realms which have been a necessary background or point of relation for my project. Many of those have themselves stressed on the intertextuality of different kinds of images and visualities and how those neither work merely as representations of a politics that is made elsewhere, nor how they neatly work with each other but might be

contradictory, ambivalent or in messy relations to each other. What most recent studies support though, and what I have tried to lay stress on as a context that the makers I talked with and whose films I relate to, are working in and reacting to, is a sense of a supremacist Hindu nationalist narrative that characterises and makes visual culture contexts. This is paired and enhanced with a neo-liberal market oriented language which is as much local as transnational, and can easily be aided by the making of politics that circulates through images internationally.

A sense of conformism and of usurpation, a taking control of public and private visual political spheres is thus an urgency that filmmakers who are constructing narrations, histories, ways of telling and multiple forms of realness, can intervene in. It is in this frame of thought that I see the force of cinematic practices which reclaim certain images, aesthetics, audio visual cultural practices to re-complicate, syncretise and make uneven what has been made to fit into a single rhetoric. In my chosen examples, there are steps towards seeking out practices which have already been in uncomfortable relations to a canon and others which have been explained to make sense within a genealogy and thus need to be reclaimed for the non-sensical. These filmic gestures are often small experiments which do not interpret history and past practices but translate those for the sake of injecting difference back into what is made to conform and for constructing other kinds of truth. Pooja Kaul suspected that some might find her practiced awareness of those particular ways of looking “too gentle for a politics”. But then, she affirms, that for her the negotiation of “the fabric of every day life”, was the only way to intervene in a texture that is predetermined otherwise.

Again, while I am stressing the filmmaker’s and film’s commitment to their multiple contexts, I do not want to retain those practices only within the contextual and particular. The postcolonial predicament that the notion of recycling may also connote is thus not to again ascribe a certain Avant-Garde practice. Rather, my academic and political ambition is to stress on an energy in their kinds of Relation, that Glissant describes as the chaotic, the processual, the errantry that is still not arbitrary, thus a recognition of what the often stated “need for a new language” entailed and what in turn those new terms that emerged in this process of recycling offer to a much wider imagining of the political. It is thus also a movement of deterritorialisation that accounts for cinematic practices that integrate to then disperse and for a writing that seeks to recognise the particular in its creative acts of manifold potentialities.

Ultimately it is to stress those moments of theorising that I noticed when 'grounds are carried in pockets', when a film practices 'how we might relate in the future' or when ways of looking 'distribute anew relations between parts and the whole' and stress 'the amalgamated as the specific'.

## **Inconvenient witnessing - Productive silences. Concluding remarks.**

*The owner of a photo studio in Ahmedabad (Gujarat):*

*“These are photos of the houses that were burnt down.*

*This is in Behrampura, where they burnt down a studio.*

*That’s opposite Bombay Hotel, the colony was set ablaze with burning tyres.*

*That’s when people in Chandoli were killed in police firing.”*

*The voice of the owner of a small photo studio on the side of the road in Ahmedabad fades slowly out while more photos of houses, destroyed, burnt and in debris, of people wounded and bodies killed, are handed over the counter of his studio.*

*The filmmaker Nishta Jain asks:*

*“So you closed down the studio and were taking photos outside?”*

*“Yes. In any case there was curfew all over. I went around taking pictures.”*

*Nishta Jain speaks in a voice over to photographs she is shown and that the camera takes in a close-up: “Priyaas took these pictures for the survivors of the communal massacre in Gujarat. Compensation requires evidence. Photos of the victims with their burnt and broken houses.”*

*Fade into a photograph of a woman standing in the midst of the debris of her house.*

*“She might have chosen a garden backdrop or a plain one at Muskaan Studio. But this is not a backdrop she chose.”*

*Phones ringing in the background - references to the organised spread of the mobs attacking Muslim houses, shops, entire neighbourhoods.*

*Another image of a home in ruins: “This house must have had photos hanging on its walls. When and if this house is rebuild, where will this picture be kept?”*

*Then the photographer shows another picture of a Muslim priest and explains how he had to have his photo taken to prove his loss, though otherwise he would be against photography.*

*“In your studio you deal with order, each hair in place, the grease on the jacket just so, no unwanted shadow or object. But here you find yourself composing chaos.” the voice over of Nishta Jain while slowly skimming through a photo album with more visual testimony of the carnage in Gujarat. When closing the album we see that it says ‘Memoires’ on its front cover. Then, images of empty houses juxtaposed with traffic policemen regulating the street chaos.*

*A photo studio garden backdrop hanging by itself, left alone.*

*Then brief sequences of people posing in front of romantic nature backdrops, looking a little lost to my eyes.*

Nishta Jain’s CITY OF PHOTOS (2004) attains a compelling tone and rhythm that exercises a layered reflection of the very different kinds of portraits she passes or abides throughout the entire film.<sup>317</sup> Layers of dreams, desires or fond memories, but also conventions of beauty and postures of the feminine, the masculine, romance and family, from very early days of photography to the recent digital in manipulations, are unfolded and come to be seen as the many surfaces that an image holds together. Surfaces which render the image enigmatic and which start to “disturb us the longer we look at it” (Nishta Jain in the film). The sequence above is one next to many others in the film. It stems from the filmmaker’s and her collaborator’s (Smriti Nevatia) reflecting

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<sup>317</sup> See chapter 3 where I have introduced the film.

on and making a particular choice to include a violent event and the images it produced within a film that could have bypassed it. By including this event and citing those testimonial photographs within a narrative that endorses the multi-layering of each singular image, a careful treatment and a pause in front of those pictorial memories of violence is enacted. The cinematic space that is given to those photographs and their relation to the shut down photo studio, attained a crucial ambivalence for me that seems allegorical to how I myself look at those disturbing violent months as well as their before and their after. To me CITY OF PHOTOS replicated a tension that I found when looking at the politics of documentary filmmaking at the time of 'Gujarat', which similar to other events has become an idiom.<sup>318</sup> I found tensions, conflicts and silences. Silences which can also stem from a shock but which I would here like to focus on as an intellectual conflict of discourses. Within Nishta Jain's film, those photographs are embedded in a larger historic narrative and a meticulously crafted and complex approach to photography. Similarly, the silence that I want to talk about and the way I stress on the violence in Gujarat as a catalyst is only valid or potent when seen in connection to a longer history. A history of documentary mode images that I have attempted to sketch right through to hereby develop a discursive context that allows for an attention to how the thinking and debating on film got sharpened in a particular moment, but did not come by surprise either. I stress this to keep in mind the problematic of giving a hierarchy to events as in defining what is 'more urgent' and hereby to risk being ignorant to 'the permanent state of emergency' that allows those culminations of violence to happen. This is parallel to how on the one hand the extent and the extreme violence in Gujarat caused an utter shock to many, but also to how the political atmosphere as well as a doubts regarding the efficacy of the oppositional forces, including social movements, were actually not unknown.

For me, the closure of the photo studio in Ahmedabad during the time of the curfew in the early months of 2002 left an impression of curtains drawn, a closure, a cut, an interruption, a caesura. Thus falling curtains which are akin to the studio backdrops that open a space to imagination, that promise to open a view onto that what we wish, another world to inhabit. But the curtains closed, we are left in darkness, no lights, no

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<sup>318</sup> There could be confusions with the earthquake that happened a year earlier in Gujarat and caused a large number of victims. To refer to Gujarat in terms of the earthquake only has become an unsettling strategy within a Hindu nationalist logic of repressing the other 'Gujarat', a rhetoric of forgetting by reducing that which is spoken about, an obscene playing out of a logic of a hierarchy of victims. In this context I am referring to 'Gujarat' as an idiom specifically (but not in the sense of refusing to acknowledge the earthquake) in relation to the communal carnage against the Muslim population in Gujarat.

shades.

The photographer decided to close and leave his studio. He went out to take pictures of 'real life', in the Agambian sense of "bare" or "naked life".<sup>319</sup> He takes pictures of the victims of a planned and systematic massacre against the Muslim population in Gujarat, who in this moment and through those attacks are stripped of all their rights as citizens, and thus are rendered unrecognisable as victims in the frame of the law. They are in the Agambian sense *homo sacer*, individuals who exist within the (national) law but only by means of their exclusion from it, thus not protected by it. It is this moment that poses the most challenging question towards any documentary mode image making—because of the sheer extent of violence and the way it is rendered unaccountable—, it thwarts it entirely, to come back yet again to a strong defence of the necessity of those images which dare to confront the real and listen relentlessly.

Gujarat was for me a beginning and an end. It is here in my writing an initial anchor and a point to dwell upon for concluding notes which are understood as leading on to further questions and debates. The queries that arose for the filmmakers, and for me, throughout the months when the violence in Gujarat started, spread, slowly calmed down but left their wounds, sharpened earlier questions and reminded one of the necessity to continue enquiring and listening. Therefore, by concluding with this moment of condensation, I wish to deepen the points I made throughout the previous chapters, I wish to give another edge and urgency to the narratives that I have sketched and the contexts I described but, most importantly, I want to lay a final emphasise on the potential I see in those film works I pointed out. This also allows me to return to the claim I made concerning the methodology that I have been seeking to enhance throughout. Namely, that my going 'there', my seeking out of those Indian women filmmakers, was not to merely gather material and was not with the aim to write a story about them. I think I have also done that – written about them. But, for one, I hope that my writing can contribute in enlarging the 'possibles' that are proposed through the many moving images and sounds and the many sincere thoughts, worries and desires expressed by them. And, the other motivation for my methodology or overall approach to an anthropology of politically committed documentary film in India, and at this specific point in time, was to seek out theory from 'there'. It was the aforementioned wish of "learning to learn" in the Spivakian sense and to open myself to

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<sup>319</sup> Agamben, Giorgio 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

new, radical, potent thought from 'there'. The ideal aim would then be to not only bring those thoughts back to my own immediate living and working context but to work with those for a wider benefit. The suggestion may be obvious: Much of what drives discussions on image making in India (in this case speaking mainly of the circuits in Delhi and Mumbai) is relevant and fruitful far beyond their immediate contexts. Not only because parallels to political atmospheres globally, before but even more so after 9/11, are close at hand.

But, I also want to include my wariness of my own capitalising on 'the crisis'. As I have indicated in my introduction in relation to Sameera Jain's PORTRAITS OF BELONGING, the realm of communal politics and the question of how to address those in and through film has been present in my research project from very early on. On the other hand, I never phrased my project in this way only and it just so happened that the main part of my research took place throughout the first half of 2002. From the incident in Godhra (see below) and the subsequent "retaliating" (as it was justified through the side of the Gujarat government) attacks on the Muslim community in Gujarat, onwards, most of the conversations I had with filmmakers would start or eventually lead to 'Gujarat'. It was impossible not to talk about it and not to reflect on its consequences. When I returned to Europe and started giving papers at academic conferences and also when talking to people outside academia, I felt that I suddenly fitted 'better' into call for papers and a generally growing and at times problematic interest in the relation between film or art and violence/war/crisis within academic and cultural production contexts. It seemed that this topic didn't need much explanation whereas to 'only' write about documentary filmmaking in India most often required an explanation as to why this could actually be interesting. This also spoke for the above-mentioned intertwined relevance of different localities and related to the fact that a supremacist post 9/11 discourse replicated the logics of othering that shapes communal discourses in India as well, and that the politics of image making in a highly medialised age was understood not only to be more complex but also needing radically different ways of tackling. But I also started to wonder how neither to tokenise the events for a writing of 'filmmakers' responses to crises', nor to argue for the exclusivity of these events to silence or write out other times of war and crises, nor violence that is experienced by many on an every day basis during so called normal times. It was also a moment of similarities where politically engaged filmmaking and academic or other critical writing has to ask itself the same question: whether it merely perpetuates specific modes of presenting and

packaging crisis and whether thus its response has a limited capacity to intervene in what I have now frequently taken on from Rancière, 'the logic of the action'.

"In the celebration of crisis as the chief justification for endless news coverage, do we not perpetuate specific modes of presenting, and even packaging, crisis – modes that are, in turn, determined by our investments and compulsions in the arenas of power and influence? And is not the faculty of critique, the critical consciousness, a casualty of such pre-programming? When the script is already in place, testimony laid out in prescribed formats, where can the act of bearing inconvenient witness be accommodated?"<sup>320</sup>

But as Hoskote also continues, there is a responsibility embedded in the very notion of critique, a responsibility to listen that I have also expanded on in chapter 3. The kind of listening and the consequent response that one can give through different media is what is at stake. How can a space for the other as well as for an engaged thinking about the many kinds of crises be created cinematically?

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The mute is not moving when it is trying to express, But when it admits that there is too much to express, Then silence is a lesion in speech.  
(Soudhamini, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2002, e-mail note)

In the context of this thesis I will not go into the details of the Gujarat carnage, the scope of the violence and the various approaches of reportage and interpretation in the mass media and its heightened relation to the political arena. After the immediate reactions of several Human Rights organisations through fact-finding reports, special issues in magazines such as *Seminar* ('Society under Siege')<sup>321</sup> and *Communalism Combat* ('Genocide Gujarat 2002')<sup>322</sup>, as well as scholarly work which has addressed the carnage, I will rely on the reader's knowledge or interest to read further about those.<sup>323</sup> While I write the now weekly news magazine *Tehelka*, with an online presence that covers their print versions, published a special edition of what they call "The most

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<sup>320</sup> Hoskote, Ranjit 2004, 'Bearing Inconvenient Witness. Notes in Pro/Confessional Mode'. In: *Crisis/Media. Sarai Reader 04*. Delhi: The Sarai Programme, CSDS, p. 4.

<sup>321</sup> Sethi, Harsh (ed) 2002. "Society under Siege". *Seminar* 513. May 2002. New Delhi

<sup>322</sup> Anand, Javed & Setalvad, Teesta 2002. Genocide Gujarat 2002. *Communalism Combat*. Hate Hurts, Harmony Works, March-April 2002, year 8, no. 77-78.

<sup>323</sup> I have previously referred to: *Compounding Injustice. The Government's Failure to Redress Massacres in Gujarat*. Report by Human Rights Watch July 2003; *An Inquiry into the Carnage in Gujarat*. Concerned Citizen's Tribunal, Gujarat 2002. The National Human Rights Commission Report, 2002. For testimonies of the brutal and systematic violence against women, including pregnant women which also supported the argument that the calamities were to extinguish a whole community, see: Agnes, Flavia (ed) 2002. *Of lofty claims and muffled voices*. Bombay: Majlis. And: *Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat*. Report by the International Initiative for Justice, December 2003.

important story of our time”: *The truth about Gujarat 2002. In the words of the men who did it.*<sup>324</sup> Though the journalistic style is debateable and could, especially within a context of taking apart the authenticating devices and effects of documentary images, be discussed further, the detailed and blatant admissions of the planned and orchestrated massacre by “rioters, bomb makers, rapists, killers, the police” and several responsible politicians on an entire community, stresses the extent and the political nature of those calamities.

What I find very crucial though and what links to my line of thoughts on the logics of talking and the hegemonising tendencies of certain ways of telling, is how the 'counter' narrative of a 'necessary' retaliation had succeeded in becoming a main narrative. Namely, it almost became common sense to start telling the story of Gujarat by first mentioning 'Godhra', namely the burning of the Sabarmati Express train coach S-6 shortly after it left the Godhra (Gujarat) train station. This train carried around 1700 *kar sevaks*<sup>325</sup>, who since the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the building of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, are also called *Ram sevaks*, thus Hindu activists. Narendra Modi, the then chief minister of Gujarat, argued that the incident was a pre-planned Muslim attack and thereby justified his 'revenge' as a 'mere' response. Although the pre-planned nature has been contested through various testimonies and detailed investigation of the train incident, the following violence was thus very quickly explained as revenge and coined as a way of presenting the events which seeped through as a common sense narrative so that many, also the Gujarat condemning voices who addressed the events, felt obliged for reasons of 'objectivity' to start with 'Godhra' when talking about 'Gujarat'.<sup>326</sup> This was thus also a context where the need to 'hear both sides' and to not 'hurt the sentiments' of one community for the 'harmony of the nation', the argument often utilised for censoring critical sequences of films, was stressed with the clear consequence of a silencing effect. Here I am also reminded of how Judith Butler writes about the moralistic silencing of an intellectual engagement and analyses in the immediate post 9/11 US and how reduced analyses and censored media impacts and structures public sentiments and thus forecloses a process of mourning that is

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<sup>324</sup> *The truth about Gujarat 2002. In the words of the men who did it.* Tehelka, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2007. See: [www.tehelka.com](http://www.tehelka.com). I thank Britta Ohm for making me aware of this issue.

<sup>325</sup> The term originates from Sanskrit and is constituted by kar (hand) and sevak (helper).

<sup>326</sup> This line of argument and the consequences for an understanding of democracy is prolifically analysed in Ohm, Britta 2007. "Narratives of the Underbelly of Democracy" in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol - XLII No. 49, December 08, 2007.

nevertheless able to account for and interrogate the broader political climate.<sup>327</sup>

I am then also confronted with the ambivalence and the need to look more closely at sentiments, as I want to fiercely acknowledge sentiment and emotion as in the pain that is individual and public, as in grief and anger that one experiences towards injustice, exclusion, against the brutal ignorance and the aforementioned prejudice that kills. Sentiment was also a strong point when in chapter 1 I talked about passionate feminism and the importance to relate to figures and histories 'emotionally'. A passion and desire for another politics is ultimately the entire drive for my project. What Butler's reflections on the post 9/11 US made clear is the structuring and pre-defining of what kind of sentiment is morally allowed, a prescription thus of the 'logic of the action' that interferes in private as well as public ways of grieving and mourning. It is precisely the question of how to intellectually link one's personal grief with the wider context and the politics of pain and suffering that is at stake and which I argue is a path taken by recent documentary filmmaking in India. To explore the politics of sentiment is further emphasised and challenged vis-à-vis experiences of trauma and the questioning whether the process of making and the audio-visual experience of film can have a healing effect. This again was one decisive instant in the thinking about possibilities of reacting to Gujarat through audio-visual media, through filmmaking or other artistic practices.

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At the end of February 2002 I was thus in the midst of following up ongoing film projects and so were most filmmakers I worked with more or less engaged in their current works. When the violence in Gujarat started, many filmmakers, especially those in Bombay, drew connecting lines to the Bombay riots in 1992/93. But it soon became clear that Gujarat was different in terms of extent, planning and in the way it was seen as 'an experiment' to be repeated, thus in the degree to which Hindu nationalist politics had reached a peak. The reference that was drawn by filmmakers to the incidents in Bombay in the early 90s and what I want to lay stress on here as well, is that in 1992/93 at least two filmmakers, women filmmakers living and working in Bombay, went immediately into the situation, almost literally, to film and analyse what had

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<sup>327</sup> Butler, Judith 2003. *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London & New York: Verso. See especially the chapter: 'Explanation and Exoneration, or what we can hear', p. 19-49.

happened.<sup>328</sup>

The art critic Geeta Kapur has stressed that almost a dozen documentary films have been made on the Gujarat genocide and that thus it provoked more filmic responses than any other communal violence up to this point. I certainly do not want to dispute that by now there are numerous documentary films that have reacted to the carnage.<sup>329</sup> Suma Josson for instance has again reacted only a few months after the violence had descended and thus continued her analyses in 1993 with her film *GUJARAT: A LABORATORY OF HINDU RASHTRA* (2003).<sup>330</sup> More than this however, what I found striking and what for me became the characteristic atmosphere of the Gujarat and immediate post-Gujarat period, was a particular silence, a potent silence as I will come to explain. This will appear strange to the reader, as I have throughout argued for and continuously stressed the lively conversations and active making of films and as there are by now indeed myriad responses to the carnage.

Intense talking and debating surely continued in 2002; manifold activities were initiated as I will expand on below and filmmakers continued their practice. But, when talking about Gujarat, when addressing the urgency to react to the prevalent political climate and when thinking further about whether and how this could take shape through filmmaking, I often listened to conscious choices to be silent which in this case meant to not respond through image making. In several conversations it was considered whether 'to go there' (to Gujarat) and in many cases I experienced this was responded to with saying 'no' to filming in affected places, and by some with saying 'yes' to going but in order to work in relief camps. My point is less to prove this particular silence I talk about as in comparing numbers or evaluating film works that have been made until now. What I want to stress and elaborate on is a certain pause that I found prevailing in the immediate aftermath of Gujarat. I want to concentrate for a moment on decisions to 'not go there' or to 'not yet go there' and capture the violence that was enacted, to focus on reflections on what kind of response the situation demanded. There were pauses in our talking when we came to speak about 'the events', there were breaks in editing when we talked about the latest TV news or about experiences of people

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<sup>328</sup> I have mentioned *I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA* by Madhushree Dutta in chapter 2. Another film is Suma Josson's *BOMBAY BLOOD YATRA*, 60min, video, colour, India 1993.

<sup>329</sup> The one film most known internationally is probably *FINAL SOLUTION*, D: Rakesh Sharma, 218 min, Digibeta, India 2003

<sup>330</sup> *GUJARAT: A LABORATORY OF HINDU RASHTRA*, D: Suma Josson, 50 min, Video, colour, India 2003.

coming back from relief camps or fact finding commissions, there were reflections on possible film projects that seemed useful one day and were abandoned the next day for they seemed to be redundant, not saying enough, repeating news reportage or capitalising on the suffering of the victims. In short, many emphatic exclamation marks seemed to be added to the before expressed statement: “We really need a new language”. And in this enacted scepticism, I see a “...change in the nature and pursuit of politics itself” that is partly “generational”<sup>331</sup> as Kapur describes it, but that cannot merely be defined through that. However, I here align with Geeta Kapur’s argument that I understand as a change in the self-understanding of the filmmaker and artist as citizen, namely that the very notion of citizenship becomes interrogated rather than being perceived as a pre-given identity.

What was most important at that point was that the Gujarat carnage in 2002 marked a change in politics, and in the politics of visual cultures, in it being intensively investigated by television, and thus the engineering forces and responsible perpetrators being revealed. The fact of knowing has however not led to their persecution but quite the opposite in the case of the responsible chief minister Narendra Modi, as he was democratically re-elected in the Gujarat state elections following in December of the same year (2002). This raised questions about the media simultaneously over- and under stating and the potential of images and news being over-exhausted. Rajagopal argued for the importance of looking at the very specific use of the media before and after Gujarat, to not perceive it as a mere continuation of violent events affecting the nation and its democracy. He stressed that the BJP was ultimately successful in using media and religion to integrate the local and national level while its opponents on the other hand have failed to do so.<sup>332</sup> A phenomenon that enhanced and complicated questions of reach and audience for independent filmmakers coming from an urban, middle to upper class, English-speaking background. The ever-present discussions and self-criticisms of ‘preaching to the converted’ or just the continuous questioning of the ‘purpose’ of one’s filmmaking, however broadly this is perceived, are necessarily sharpened when the reach of Hindu-nationalist ideologies in cultural, religious and political realms and towards people of all ages is starkly evident.

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<sup>331</sup> Kapur 2006:111.

<sup>332</sup> Rajagopal, Arvind 2003. “Gujarat’s ‘Successful experiment’”, *Open Democracy*, 20.03.2007. p.2. last retrieved 23.10.2003 <http://www.opendemocracy.net>

Hence, the undoubtedly well working structure of supremacist forces through their family of organisations (the Sangh Parivar)<sup>333</sup> and the media, further challenged discourses about individual artistic aims and positioning versus the necessity of collective political struggles and media as a tool for empowerment within social movements. At the same time, there was an understanding that even though one might have reasons to critique the kinds of TV news on the carnage or one was suspecting that their interest would soon diminish after an extensive attention, it was also clear that the issue was not one of mere exposure now. Extensive coverage and thus knowledge of the planned and state supported nature of the violence was accessible even though it could not provide a sustainable critique. Thus, to engage in mere counter representations was not enough. It seemed to bypass one's own need to understand the different workings of the political and to write another script of intervention. The question of 'what is the critical difference in our language' was a directly and indirectly phrased one. It was closely connected to the aforementioned sense of being stuck in a "revolutionary form without the very context that bred this form in the first place" (see chapter 2, conversation between Deepa Dhanraj and Madhu Bushan). The presence of news reportage which replicated documentary devices such as victim accounts or authenticating devices through reporters being 'in the midst' of it all, was for some filmmakers like a mirror held to reflect on their own image practices. The limits of a socio-realist style, which constructed a black and white argumentation through a rather didactic form of address was doubted even more. On the other hand, many stressed that this was a situation that could not be seen 'in shades' and thus the mode of addressing a spectator became ever more crucial in this situation. Similarly did the urgency of listening to the other and creating spaces for subjects which did not merely fill in the role of the victim to be looked at to make room for singular subjects to which one had to be answerable.<sup>334</sup>

On many levels, Gujarat, its political and media context, did make earlier discussions even more poignant. In chapter 1 I discussed the instrumentalisation of gender for the project of the nation and how active Indian feminists themselves critiqued their politics for remaining within that framework, this leading to definitions of the 'real' Indian woman, real problems and what is political (enough). I have subsequently critiqued how

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<sup>333</sup> Sangh Parivar, literally translating as "Family of Associations", with Sangh standing for organisation of Hindu unity and Parivar for family, is an organisation that comprises the political, cultural and religious wings of Hindu nationalism.

<sup>334</sup> See also Butler 2003, the chapter 'Indefinite Detention', p. 50-100.

the use and perception of film as mere representation of precisely this logic hindered the view onto the politics and other possible forms of realness that were and are creatively imagined through non-fiction films toying with the fictional, and the real. In the case of Gujarat and especially in relation to arguments that Gujarat was an attempted genocide, the extreme brutality against women and the systematic killings of pregnant women and unborn babies, has been stressed. Also, female victims would often not dare to file reports to protect the honour of their families or indeed to protect themselves and their families from further attacks. The complexity of how women and the violence against them are implicated in communal conflicts was thus heightened as was the question of their representation. Anybody speaking in relation to the position of women was immediately located as speaking from their respective religious background, whether practiced or not.

It has also been argued that the production of documentaries 'on Gujarat' was enhanced through the now wide spread accessibility of recording technology and the subsequent possibility of a less intrusive manner of filming. I found, on the contrary, that although filmmakers valued the possibilities that video and even more decisively digital video (filming and editing devices) had altered and increased a flexibility, spontaneity and provoked often radically different working processes, most filmmakers I worked with were very aware that this did not change the act of taking somebody else's picture.

"I have come to a point at this moment that I'll be as intrusive as possible. Because by saying or claiming that, look I am not intrusive, I am lying, and I am lying to my benefit, so I am going with all my paraphernalia and in that, whatever I can catch I catch. You do intrude, the camera is the most imposing equipment ever discovered. Anyway, the documentaries are more fiction, every documentary has a fiction to speak." (Madhusree Dutta, Interview 28<sup>th</sup> February 2001)

The easiness with which one could or could have made horrific images of the carnage indeed increased a radical passivity, a refusal to contribute to more shocking images.

At the same time this was linked to questions of accessibilities of film languages as well as to the actual reach of documentary films. How to perceive efficacy when it comes to film at such precarious times? How to not preach to an audience but create public spaces in which films, their makers and their 'emancipated' spectators (see Intermediate notes) could meet to acknowledge trauma and pain while also reflecting beyond that?

Hence, manifold questions were rearticulated and the continuous compulsive

questioning attained ever more importance. How can an audio-visual response go beyond mediating pain and violence and provoke further responses? And which responses is one hoping for: pain, compassion, anger, fear, hope or even mobilisation? What would it mean to mobilise an audience at this moment? How can the silence and trauma of victims, on the one hand highly and graphically visible but at the same time rendered invisible within political discourse and legal structures, be revealed? How can a reliving of pain that occurs when people retell their stories be dealt with responsibly through media trained people? There was a heightened investment in how the transformation of one's own anger, wanting to point out perpetrators and the details of atrocities that took place, transmitted into an editing style working with juxtapositions, would replicate violence, aggressiveness and transmit into a language of war. Similarly an extreme urge to protest, and anger stayed with many. How to reclaim or expand the democratic space that one observes as increasingly shrinking? How to create a political culture that is not just a response?<sup>335</sup> How to foster debate and the need to clarify one's positions? Or was there a need to merely have a clear standpoint that many were missing from political parties at that time?<sup>336</sup> How to address a history that is not spoken about when the very idea of history is instrumentalised and loaded? How to intervene by writing multiple histories? How to ultimately negotiate religions and secularisms? And how to confront a 'contaminated' visual culture context, how to recuperate the visual? How to render the image passive itself so as to reinvestigate it and exercise a constant questioning of whether it contains and speaks of that which we are accustomed to reading from it?

There were many discrepancies and ambivalences which were on the one hand openly discussed, while on the other hand the normativity of hegemonically structured discourses made it impossible to connect those in practice. Thus it is my argument that a loaded and complex conflict and the contingent search for a new language that expresses and critically engages in these conflicts resulted in silences, silences as sentiments and intellectual critique, on individual and collective levels. The silence that I talk about is possibly the in-between of confronting 'a wake up call on many fronts' (Deepa Dhanraj) and the 'silence as a lesion in speech' (Soudhamini). Circling around

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<sup>335</sup> As a parallel critique and self critique of forms of activism confronting the Narmada dam projects see: Kak, Sanjay 2004. "Politics in the Picture. Witnessing Environmental Crisis in the Media". In: *Crisis/Media. Sarai Reader 04*. Delhi: The Sarai Programme, CSDS, p. 325-329.

<sup>336</sup> Deepa Dhanraj stressed in a conversation how she came to appreciate that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) ([www.cpim.org](http://www.cpim.org)) was the only state political body, which issued a resolution paper at this point.

those pauses, reflections and decisions of ‘not to go there’, I am reminded of the famous Bartleby phrase “I would prefer not to”.<sup>337</sup> My making relations to other theoretical realms is here again not to universalise a particular context or to prove or analyse it through a theoretical corpus, but to emphasise the theory that arises from so-called material, from the conversations, the films and the silences, and to evoke its potential to align with other attempts that refuse to accept a sovereign political discourse, a mainstream ‘logic of the action’.

The potentiality that I suspected during the months following the Gujarat carnage but which arrived from a history of conflicting discourses was for instance enhanced by considering Lyotard’s language philosophical reflections on the structural phenomena of inability as a remainder in the process of becoming. What resonates with my own thinking is an inability that is provoked through conflicting discourses within hegemonic structures, an inability that first hinders a practice and results in speechlessness but which at the same time bears constructive potential and newness.<sup>338</sup> The notion of silence I speak about is not valued as a retreat into inactivity either, but as a ‘not yet’. Bartleby’s “I prefer not to”, though ultimately it confuses and leaves an impression on the authorities, ends in him being carried away. The “I prefer not to” as in momentarily deciding to not go to Gujarat and capture the violence that occurred was also accompanied by the question of whether continuing with one’s ‘usual steps of activism’ would stand as an acceptance of a genocide as ‘just another riot’. The fact that it was not and that other interventions were needed, fostered a holding back of a definite answer, of a yes or no. To not go there, for different reasons, was thus not a refusal to engage but a refusal to engage in the terms of conduct that were given at that very moment. Thus, I see the currently much debated and written about notion of potentiality and the potency of a radical passiveness, the Agambian simultaneity of a ‘potential to speak’ and a ‘potential not to speak’, in relation to the possibility to think this simultaneity for the context I describe and to go beyond what might empirically be understood as sequential practices.<sup>339</sup> I would like to follow this approach to stress and

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<sup>337</sup> Gilles Deleuze writes about the famous Herman Melville story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* from 1853 in his essay “Bartleby; or The Formula” in Deleuze, Gilles 1998. *Essays critical and clinical*. London & New York: Verso, p. 68 – 90.

<sup>338</sup> Lyotard, Jean Francois 1988. *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. I owe this reference to discussions within the Graduiertenkolleg *Repräsentation–Rhetorik–Wissen* at the Europa Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) / Germany, and here specifically Dirk Setton’s project which in his interrogation of the figure *infantia/infancy* endorsed directions of thinking which supported my reflections on the particular silence I encountered.

<sup>339</sup> See: Giorgio Agamben 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford

understand silence here not as a psychoanalytical analyses of trauma and shock, but as a philosophical terrain and an intellectual conflict.

The potential in taking a second look at silence is also made prolific in Brian K. Axel's work on the different ways of expressing silence in the Punjabi language and in relation to experienced violence by the Sikh community, as well as the thinking about a future Punjab state. He distinguishes between *chup* as "a silence that has been imposed", and *sanaata* as an "ambient stillness and a loneliness"<sup>340</sup>. The Punjabi *Shahid* he sees as "another figure of silence" and as a potent name "for, behind what is named, there is the unnameable, the unspeakable". Thus, "the manifold figure of silence signifies the possibility that Punjab comes to be produced, repeatedly, at the intersection and interstices of diverse and contradictory instances of discourse." While I do not want to go into detail of this specific example and while my entire argumentation goes against endorsing new state formations, I take from this the potentiality of silence in front of a "regulated form of otherness".

The momentary silence and refusal to do the expected, and a sincere scepticism and self-reflection on how to respond signifies a path to acknowledge the extreme violence, to also set it in close relation to every day violent moments and atmospheres, to admit the limits of one's own available language. But it also stands for a continuing search for how to take responsibility, how to be answerable and how to respond otherwise. Ultimately, how to expand the 'limits of the possible', in film languages, in activisms, in social movements as positions and spaces for debate. It is "[a] privileging of the question, even, or particularly, when no answer is forthcoming."<sup>341</sup> It is also another moment to not only link to varied theoretical reflections that bear relations to my particular research context, but to connect to the many other silences that are too easily dismissed. There are silences that connect back to the notion of 'bare life' that I have brought in when speaking of the position of Muslims being at the same time in and outside the law of the Indian nation-state. This being 'homo sacer', i.e. life exposed to death, is also provoked by the conflation of citizenship (not only, but paradigmatically) in Europe with the nation's definitional frame, which renders people –

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University Press. Especially "Bartleby, or On Contingency", p.243-271.

<sup>340</sup> These and the following quotes are taken from Axel K. Brian's conference paper *Terror and Unknowability*, presented at the 2003 AAA (American Anthropologist Association) meeting in Chicago (US). I thank Axel K. Brian for sending me his paper after the conference and allowing me to quote from it.

<sup>341</sup> Axel, K. Brian acknowledging Arjun Appadurai's conduct of scholarship.

migrants – ‘illegal’, in other words, excluded from the law and thus deprived of rights. The French political thinker and one of the editors of the magazine *Multitudes*<sup>342</sup>, Yann Moulier Boutang, refers to this problematic of reducing rights to being synonymous with the law, and an understanding of citizenship as equivalent to national belonging in terms of a critique of the political and, respectively, related forms of expression: the intelligible ones and those rendered 'invisible'.

"We must never look only to the tip of the iceberg: the institutionalized forms, or the word of the people, the way in which they speak, supposing that, as soon as they aren't saying anything, they aren't acting. On the contrary, it is the interpretation of the silences that interests me: to seize the silences, the refusals, and the flight as something active. In our relatively sophisticated democracies, the idea that conflict is a part of society is habitually admitted. But we treat conflict as a simple sign of something that is amiss: in principle, conflicts would render a service to the system, permitting it to have permanent self-regulation. These are, we say, measures of security. To me, this functionalist vision is false because it is antisubjective. When people refuse something, there is a positivity."<sup>343</sup>

### **Positive refusals**

In the situation that I characterised as the pause of a sceptic, filmmakers have in various ways reformulated their cultural practices while interrogating possible responses that refuse a logical chain of how to react to ‘the crisis’. The sensitivity to form in their responses is hereby crucial.<sup>344</sup>

There were ongoing film projects which were re-assessed through the filmmaker’s heightened awareness of identity politics, towards the need to be representative of the diversity of the Indian population. Being especially careful with symbolisms or the use of colours, worrying about ambiguous imagery or editing styles, and interrogating implications of funding sources attached to specific communities were habitual practices that were shaped by an extra awareness.

If it seemed difficult to receive funding for a film on Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), which was mostly inhabited by Muslims, would one search for Islamic funding sources? Would that corner one’s project into a single narrative or was even that worry an

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<sup>342</sup> <http://multitudes.samizdat.net>

<sup>343</sup> Boutang, Yann Moulier 1999. *The Art of Flight: An Interview with Stany Grelet*. last retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007, from: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=03/02/07/1350202>. A special thanks to Nanna Heidenreich for making me aware of this extremely productive relation.

<sup>344</sup> See: McLagan, Meg 2003. “Human Rights, Testimony, and Transnational Publicity”. In: *The Scholar & Feminist Online*, published by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, last retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007, from: <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/mclagan.htm>

acceptance of a mainstream discourse which rendered the Muslim community problematic? How to portray the kite festival for which Gujarat is famous in a film on popular culture after the carnage in 2002? Madhusree Dutta for instance decided to include TV news images of the carnage for her film *MADE IN INDIA*, in which she addresses different aspects of popular culture in India.<sup>345</sup>

Apart from the aforementioned decisions to contribute to the activity of fact-finding commissions or help out in relief camps, filmmakers formed city groups to discuss what was to be done. The filmmaker's initiative *Aaj Ke Naam* (In today's name) in Delhi directed their expertise towards organising workshops in schools to train and advice students to produce their own images around questions of communalism, cultural diversity, nationality and religious backgrounds.<sup>346</sup> *Insaaniyat* (Humanity), an initiative in Bombay, brought together independent filmmakers, Bollywood script writers, professionals working in ads, theatre people and others with the aim to fund cultural practices through lectures, producing small TV clips, organising festivals, which would be made by and thus also be oriented towards a broader range of audiences, while also using the facilities, cultural and financial capital of some of their members. A youth festival around the theme of cultural diversity was organised by *Majlis* (A Centre for Rights Discourse and Multidisciplinary Arts Initiative)<sup>347</sup> and the artist's collective *Open Circle*. Under the name *India Sabka* (all our India/ everybody's India) nine different workshops were set up to engage young people in the history of communal violence as well as the pluralism in India and how to 'protect', 'build and create' a majority which buttressed this plurality. The workshops included fiction writing, developing scripts for video works, performance and acting, music and other cultural activities. With the Shiv Sena in Bombay directly impacting on the urban public sphere and people's public movements, efforts to reclaim public spaces and street interventions through for instance spraying on walls, outdoor screenings, distributing small political art pamphlets at train stations seemed particularly meaningful.

Another approach to the impulse to keep record, to create an alternative archive that could fill gaps or counter representations of the mass media, but which could also resist a final mediatisation, and speaking with the above somehow remain in the 'not yet', was the *Shared Footage Project*. As a spontaneous initiative in May 2002, three

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<sup>345</sup> *MADE IN INDIA*, D: Madhusree Dutta, 38 min., DV, colour, India 2003.

<sup>346</sup> I would like to acknowledge and thank Saba Dewan for many insightful conversations in this respect.

<sup>347</sup> [www.majlisbombay.org](http://www.majlisbombay.org)

filmmakers (Neeraj Sahay, Hassath and Guralp Singh, who has written and spoken extensively about this endeavour at the time<sup>348</sup>) developed this political project that initially stood for the debated concerns around political movements and independent, activist filmmaking and their responsibility in creating sustainable alternative public spheres. The idea of an archive that could contribute multiple stories and histories seemed a possibility that served an analysis now and that could be revisited later. The project was to confront the pitfalls of a fractionated opposition and the split of civil organisations by bringing people with various backgrounds together under a momentary common cause and being open about the format and the extent of individual contributions. It therefore had the potential of building a bridge between individual creative work and collective political efforts, entailing an openness to form and confronting the issue of ownership and authorship. However, from quite early on there were also discussions concerning the group's politics of presenting victims, a questioning of the urge for "immediate forms of testimony that resist mediatization"<sup>349</sup> and a simultaneous acknowledgement that no testimony was formless.<sup>350</sup> Additionally, the openness of the project and the initial precondition concerning the accessibility of the material caused, for some, anxiety about the possible misuse of the material. Thus the larger questions of how to make such an archive productive and protect vulnerable persons and issues were laid open without immediate solutions. *Majlis* later started *Godaam (Storeouse) – a Digital Image Archive*. They digitalized and thus made accessible their own text and film footage archive which comprises very diverse areas from the conflict in Kashmir to material reflecting on the changing politics and textures of the city Bombay and are active in engaging in the very notion of an archive and how it can productively haunt contemporary political questions.

"It (Goodam, N.W.) attempts to ascribe new meanings to the vocabulary of collecting and cataloguing images and texts, one that is active with multiple nodes of interaction in the processes of collection, dissemination and production."<sup>351</sup>

The artist Tejal Shah, who works in various media including photography and video, went to Gujarat one month after the violence started and engaged in recording

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<sup>348</sup> For instance at the Crisis/Media Conference organised by Sarai in Delhi in 2003, see <http://www.sarai.net/resources/event-proceedings/2003/crisis-media>, last retrieved Oct. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>349</sup> Quote from the call for contributions for the Sarai Reader 04 "Crisis/Media". The final reader can be downloaded from the Sarai website at <http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/04-crisis-media>. Last retrieved Oct. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

<sup>350</sup> See McLagan 2003.

<sup>351</sup> [www.majlisbombay.org/godaam.htm](http://www.majlisbombay.org/godaam.htm). See also <http://pad.ma/> where this archive is now located. Last retrieved August 10<sup>th</sup> 2012.

women's testimonies with a feminist activist group<sup>352</sup>. While she initially thought of recording those testimonies audio-visually, she soon decided to put the lens of her camera on the floor to only record sounds, to protect and respect people's security and anonymity. Additionally, she shot photographs of empty destroyed property in rural areas of Gujarat. Next to writing reports to raise national and international awareness, the wish to express her concerns and politics in her own language as an artist was here as well challenged by trying to understand how one can "re-present a situation of genocide without capitalising on obvious shocking images of the carnage" (Tejal Shah)<sup>353</sup>. She also expressed that this situation was made even more complex as she was identified as an outsider to the local effected community, through her class and sexual identity as a queer woman.

After several months of pause in her artistic practice during which she concentrated on activist engagements, her choice to create a sound piece appears as a conceptually strong response on various levels: While she saw it "resonat[ing] conceptually with the kind of deliberate political attempt to misreport and render [politically] invisible the events unfolding in Gujarat", her emotional and intellectual response to not only seeing but hearing and listening, to the particular ways of how women would speak, pause, how voices would resound, carry an urgency or blankness, was invested in revealing the texture of testimonies given while not seducing an onlooker with too familiar ways of visually presenting those women. Tejal Shah worked with documentary and artificial sound and developed a composition that engaged conceptually with the question of response. She thus worked upon possible associations with familiar every day rural sound (birds, bells, trains, the postman, TV news bites) and connected and juxtaposed those to abstract notions of a dream or coma. A multi-linear narrative is evoked where the listener moves from literal to abstract language, and thus away from realist representation, breaking a documentary style while still documenting experiences. Tejal Shah expressed her aim as wanting to implicate her audience, to implicate it physically and intellectually, for an experience of urgency, an emotional stirring. As the sound

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<sup>352</sup> This activity produced: *Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat*. Report by the International Initiative for Justice, December 2003.

<sup>353</sup> We had several conversations and one in Berlin that I recorded (12<sup>th</sup> March 2003) and from which I am using direct quotations. This conversation was also edited for a published version: "Transitional Zones: Nicole Wolf interviews Tejal Shah". In: *n.paradoxa. international feminist art journal: 'out of order'*. Volume 12, 2003. London: KT Press. p. 59 - 67. During Tejal Shah's visit to Berlin for a solo art show, she managed to align with a group of different women in Berlin, including myself, to set up two evenings for the presentation and discussion of the carnage in Gujarat. Present was also Anissa Hélie, who was then director of *Women living under Muslim Law* (London).

piece is part of the installation MEMORIAL, the listener literally and physically enters the sound-piece, associations with the layered sounds and the texture of the narrative are thus made while moving within a confined room. Particular at its time, a few months after the carnage, this sound piece seemed successful in producing its very own language and format, dealing with violence that was very close by and yet abstracting it, working with it, while also leaving a sense of unknowability. The specific sense of realness that is created achieves an agitating tone. Its display in a dark room within the installation further allowed for the spectator's own mind space, for mourning, for anger, possibly for instances of transitions and abstract ways of 'healing', terms that Tejal Shah worked with when conceptualising the piece. The many varied responses the artist got from different audiences, also reflected her negotiations of practical and discursive spaces around art and activism, her endeavour to link those while both seemed to insist on their own languages. Her installation was then first displayed within a week called *Reclaim our Freedom*, for which NGOs and local people from Gujarat had come to Bombay. It drew an art audience as well as a non-art audience into the gallery and Tejal Shah received immediate, often very emotional reactions from people who had been directly affected by the carnage. People started talking to the artist about what they had experienced.<sup>354</sup>

Many filmmakers stressed, especially in hindsight, the fact that through Gujarat their talking to each other increased tremendously. I remember that already during MIFF 2002, filmmakers who either showed their films or just went to see works stressed that opportunities to see each other's works were rare. They also stressed that while they appreciated seeing international work, they found it engaging and important to see what their colleagues in Delhi, Bombay or also Calcutta, Madras, Bangalore, were occupied with. The establishment of the above-mentioned city groups as an immediate reaction and the ongoing discussions around the *Shared Footage Project*, apart from the mere fact that email lists were set up which increased their members continuously and which allowed everybody to address many filmmakers in different parts of the country all at once, made for lively cross city exchanges. It is those activities that I don't see as a contradiction but as precisely the outcome or parallel effect of the silence I

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<sup>354</sup> For another artistic work dealing prolifically with sound and the politics of being deaf to the other, though not directly addressing Gujarat see: [www.raqsmediacollective.net](http://www.raqsmediacollective.net): Raqs media collective, *A Measure of Anacoustic Reason*: "As the world turns, so does the deaf ear of power. Watching, not listening, the marksman locates a target. Bang Bang.", for installation description and images from the Venice Biennale 2005 see: <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/anacoustic.html>

locate in the many refusals to engage in familiar film making practices or to align with existing social movements or NGOs. It is also exactly that energy field that I see linked to moments of potent silence that are still occurring, from time to time, when it comes to thinking about Gujarat.

But to first remain with one side of this proclaimed energy: When during summer 2003 the Indian government (then BJP led) wanted to implement, via Films Division, a clause that would demand a censor certificate for each Indian documentary in order to enter it to MIFF, while international films were exempted from that clause, more than 200 filmmakers from across India came together under the *Campaign against Censorship*. The implementation of the clause was first withdrawn but the actual selection process for the upcoming festival in February 2004 clearly showed that:

“... films critical of the state on communal violence, environment, politics, globalisation, sexuality related issues had to be kept out. Moreover, if the filmmaker was in any way associated with the campaign, that too became a reason for his or her film to be kept out.”<sup>355</sup>

The solidary activity that resulted from this was remarkable. Within a very small time span filmmakers self organised a film festival that ran parallel to the governmental MIFF 2004, and across the road from its venue. Films that had been rejected by MIFF and others that were accepted but withdrew their participation out of solidarity were screened at the alternative festival. The festival attracted an immense amount of visitors, engaging discussions and additional debates followed screenings and panels were held on the issue of censorship and documentary filmmaking. In this way *Vikalp*, *Films for Freedom* was born as a festival, as travelling film packages, as a platform for filmmakers to engage with each other's work, and as *Vikalp* city groups that started to create archives, alternative screening venues and continued diverse engagements in the ongoing practice of censorship.<sup>356</sup> It is far beyond the capacity of this project to engage in the diverse arguments around questions of censorship as well as the ongoing discussions as to the nature of *Vikalp* or the documentary film movement in general. After the initial enthusiasm, voices raised concern regarding the sustainability of the immense energy and activism that was stirred around the first *Vikalp* festival in 2004. The continuing incidents of censorship and the aforementioned interruptions of

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<sup>355</sup> Roy, Rahul, *Does big brother ever stop watching you?*, <http://www.delhifilmarchive.org/rahul.htm>, last retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007.

<sup>356</sup> Several conferences on censorship were organised: Sarai international colloquium: *sensor – census – censor*, December 2006, [www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net). *Fearless Speech and Fearless listening. The encounter with censorship in South Asia*, 21-26 February 2006, held at the Max Mueller Bhavan (Goethe Institute), Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi. See also the publication: The Delhi Film Archive 2004. *Resisting censorship: celebrating freedom of expression. A report*. Delhi, September 2004.

film screenings where the respective films have not received the Censor board's certificate or are found as potentially offensive to the 'morality of the average Indian', as a chairman of the CBFC has phrased it<sup>357</sup>, as well as other forms of interventions into freedom of speech and artistic expression, is of major concern to many and needs much more attention than can be provided here.

But, the investment in those discussions and continuing initiatives of setting up new screening spaces, in bookshops, colleges, cultural centres or recently also claiming cinema spaces for the release of documentary films are crucial to be acknowledged. They provide a significant context and are also part and parcel of the politics that are embodied in the actual film practices and the commitment that filmmakers have towards their particular kinds of languages. There never seemed to be an illusion as to what their efforts were up against, but there is also a belief and stamina in the continuous creation of new public spheres, via film languages and the many spaces they are conceived, shared and discussed in. The increasing regulation within realms of the visual leads to a particular attention towards the filmmaking itself, a self-reflective stance that can never see art for art's sake but which then even more recognises what is at stake in image production.

The spirit of a collective though diverse movement and the alliances that were made in moments of silence and reflection as well as bursting activity are now providing a different platform for documentary filmmaking practice in India. The spaces that were created during recent years supported a self-understanding and a ground from which a new diversification of film practices can arise. There are consolidations of individual approaches and experimentations with styles and genres and there are new experiments by yet another 'new generation'. Thus, there are many more imaginary chapters that could be added here. The currently evolving practices that move in between art and documentary film is one area that opens out new and productive arenas for filmmakers and artists working with documentary modes. There is also an exciting development of a contextual history of autobiographical films as a relatively new form of documentary filmmaking in India. While there have been earlier examples of First Person films, the films recently made seem more assertive in their presentation of the filmmaker subject who was earlier defined through nationalist as well as developmental agendas, as an educator or a revolutionary. The autobiographical is

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<sup>357</sup> See also Roy 2007.

now surely another angle through which histories and recent political arenas are explored. At the same time, the narrative anchor often remains the wider socio-political realm, which is looked at in a relational manner.<sup>358</sup> I want to argue that what is developed are subjectivities that are as manifold as the contexts filmmakers live in and hence that they have to be subjectivities which seek to find their routes and places precisely in the many differences that are lived and negotiated day by day. However I want to conclude through another path by commenting on those new subjectivities, the certainties and uncertainties that they open out to, and their stepping out of a history that frames its visual language, and possibly its politics, merely within nationalist discourse. The mere possibility of Gujarat and the reflections on possible failures in social movements and oppositional politics also led to intense reinvestigations of Partition, a history that produced a present where almost everybody can tell a story of a loss of home, of violence being experienced, of an uprooting. To address the unspeakability of Partition was by many thought as crucial to be able to think of and through Gujarat.

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“Where I live is a building made of bricks and cement. I won’t call it my home though. My home exists in the terrains of my mind and in the maps of shared experiences. I find it crisscrossing through the moments that I snatch from the streets and conversations that are somewhat familiar, and restful. But then I also see it in all that I thrust aside every now and then. Saba sometimes I cannot make out if I am trying to remember or if I am trying to forget. I have become picky about what I want to put in my memory-drawers.” (excerpt from voice over reading a letter in: TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS)<sup>359</sup>

TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS by Monica Bhasin starts with the sound of a moving train and the mechanic clatter of a film projector being set off. There is thus immediately a layering and the crafting of a space between the image and the filmmaking, the image and the viewer, between history and the now. A certain tone is established that stresses the cinematic and its particular possibilities of looking. The film maintains that ambience, a constant awareness of how we look at, listen to and speak with what we see and hear. The inaugural text plates refer to the partition of the

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<sup>358</sup> To name just a few examples of such recent filmmaking: THE HOUSE ON GULMOHAR ROAD, D: Samina Mishra, 29min, DV, colour, India 2005; SITA’S FAMILY, D: Saba Dewan, 60 min., India 2003; SNAPSHOTS OF A FAMILY ALBUM, D: Avijit Mukul Kishore, 63 min., India 2005.

<sup>359</sup> TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, D: Monica Bhasin, 35 min, MiniDV/Pal, colour, India 2005.

Indian subcontinent in 1947 but also to the many “splintered lives” that people live in many places in those “partitioned times” that we inhabit (from the film text).

A house, a home, that is gradually taken down in Bhogal, a resettlement colony in New Delhi, established in 1947, becomes a red thread that leads through the film. The step-by-step dismantling of the house, accompanied by a soundtrack of hammering on stones, ends with a final crash of the last ruins of the fundament and leaves the image in greyness of dust. The beginning of the film also shows archival footage which references the initial enthusiasm as to the creation of two new nations but also the soon following mass movement of people, the forced migration accompanied by looting and rioting. There are an estimated 20 million people losing their homes, on their way to build new ones. Throughout the 35 minutes film we come to see several border lands: empty fields with border stones on the India-Bangladesh border, wired fences and surveillance posts at the India-Pakistan border, a river that intervenes in the border becoming a well defined line, which disrupts and renders *nonsensical* the concept of a border as its shore changes its reach continuously. Each place is connected to a story of memories of the time of partition or what one was left with after, spoken in regional languages.

“Last night I dreamt of this river. Come monsoon and it swells with defiance. Playful, unruly and rebellious it refuses to circumscribe the land on its either side. It runs amok upsetting all and assuming nothing except its own freedom. Seeing it make a mockery of its given role of a boundary, even I want to re-draw my maps every season.” (*Voice in Hindi, Sequence at India - Bangladesh border (Padma River)*)

The film alters between steady images which carry movement in them, like the camera looking out of the moving train and the landscape or the rail tracks passing by quickly, or fixating its look with a close up of the wheel of a driving truck. And there is a more shaky camera which integrates the filmmaker’s own pace of approaching a place, a locked door, a border stone that stands on forbidden land that is only accessible if moving through it, where the film team was not allowed to stop. Thus there are different paces but a continuity of movement. There are also roots of trees, almost hanging in the open, as houses and walls around them are destroyed, but nevertheless they seek their ways in unwieldy terrains. There are torn down walls, stones and debris.

I was struck by Monica Bhasin’s brief response when during the post screening

discussion of her film at the Royal Geographical Society in London<sup>360</sup>, one viewer picked up on the many lines that the film features: electricity cables, metal wires, rail tracks, lines created through window frames in busses and trains. She asked the filmmaker whether they were intended as connecting or dividing lines.

To this suggestive question, she simply replied that: “They are lines.”

It is this cinematic quality that shows things so clearly for what they are, that becomes important again and that I want to stress on. It is this attentive looking at things that we deem to have understood but where through a sincere re-looking we can question our common sense knowledge and reinvest the every day with new meanings. Hereby the use of lines is not a metaphor, not a symbol, but it is an opening out of the many layers of thought that can be related to lines. Like an elephant is an elephant and at the same time tells us about empty spaces (see chapter 3), about largeness, about how to relate, lines are lines, and in this are their manifold histories and, what we can make of and with lines in the future.

For the development of her film narrative, Monica Bhasin collected stories through reading on Partition and through talking to many people recounting their memories. People living in different regions in India and people who had migrated to the US and who she met during her time of studying film at the School of the Art Institute Chicago.<sup>361</sup> The stories that she tells in the film are constructed via those many narratives she read and listened to. Again, fiction is used to speak of collective memories and at the same time those collective voices, precisely by not being attached to one individual real person, open out a space for singular relations to be made by the viewer. The connections that were made throughout Monica’s research, between her and her interlocutors and amongst her interlocutors, are as much part of her film as the



Source: TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, by Monica Bhasin

<sup>360</sup> The screening took place 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2007. I had organised it in collaboration with *Green Cardamom*, a London based non-profit arts organisation. Thanks to Hammad Nasar who made this possible.

<sup>361</sup> Monica Bhasin also has a background in documentary filmmaking from the Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi.

many stories that people remember and narrate or keep for themselves after the screening. There are thus again myriad spaces around the film and different ways of how the film attains lives outside its actual screening space.

TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS also entails precisely chosen references in the music it employs and it's being in conversation with the partition stories of Saadat Hasan Manto.<sup>362</sup> Through a conscious choice for the lyrical lines of the Bhakti singer Kumar Gandharv (see below) there are evoked and yet clear comments on that which cuts across boundaries, boundaries of compositional techniques, of religions, of philosophical approaches to being. Thus a commitment but also critical investment in one's repertoire and the creation of singular archaeologies that probe single narratives of history.

*The soul will fly away alone  
leaving behind this spectacle of worldly carnival  
like the fallen leaves of a tree  
it is difficult to meet again  
don't know where the leaf will fall  
Where the gust of wind will carry it away  
(subtitles from the film sequence with Kumar Gandharv's song)*

When collective memories are narrated through different regional languages and voices, there is a subtle attention to their ways of speaking, of remembering, of wanting to forget, of speaking to a faraway relative or maybe to oneself. Their different textures are evident but they become part of one narrative without absconding from confronting each other's experiences of violence. Related to my above proposed argument of a potent silence vis-à-vis Gujarat it is intriguing to follow the intricate and thorough look at stories and iconographic images that make the fabric of partition and how it is remembered, thus the questioning look at borders, walls, doors, at trains, at homes and settlements. But, before the film ends with the final irruption of the house in the Delhi



Source: TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, by Monica Bhasin

<sup>362</sup> Manto, Saadat Hasan 1997. *Mottled Dawn; Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

resettlement colony, there is a radio voice passage from the time of Gujarat.

“In continuing communal violence 46 more people were killed pushing the death toll to 252. It has been reported that armed groups fought pitched battles in Ahmedabad and some of its neighbouring towns. In the last three days over 250 houses and shops have been burnt across the state. As many as 212 bodies of men, women and children who were victims of the violence in Gujarat, were buried in graveyards at Dhudeshwar, Sarkhej and Sarangpur during the last three days. Conditions in the city of Ahmedabad are said to be extremely tense and indefinite curfew has been imposed in as many as 20 police station areas. Kishangarh town in Ajmer district also saw many people injured...”

Monica Bhasin was very clear that her attempt with TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS was to re-instate a dignity to the many stories that Partition provoked and to create a ground from which to think further. The passage on Gujarat falls conceptually and aesthetically out of the rest of the film narrative and the depth of inquiry that it provides. When preparing for the post film discussion we watched the film together, with Monica explaining to me the backgrounds of many of her cinematic choices, she ‘admits’ not “having had a language yet” to talk about Gujarat. While some people found the Gujarat part not fitting into the overall film, she wanted to keep it in. For me, this admittance and the showing of “not having a language yet”, again, become extremely potent. It is on the one hand the confrontation of the unknowability and on the other hand the choice to continue to address precisely that.

This choice attains a particular importance as it is in relation to the films evocation of a thinking further from Saadat Hasan Manto’s proposed notion of a No Man’s Land. In his short story *Toba Tek Singh*, partition is understood from the place of a lunatic asylum. The inmate Bishan Singh of the Lahore asylum claims his original home to be Toba Tek Singh, although nobody is sure where this was really located, nobody understood his gibberish language and Bishan Singh himself is confused as to whether it would now belong to India or Pakistan. When the point comes for him to choose India or Pakistan, he chooses to remain in the no man’s land between barbed wires marking the borders to either side.



Source: TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, by Monica Bhasin.

Through its dissecting look at borders TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS seems to invest in the potential that can still be found in Manto's proposal of a No Man's Land, in his imaginary construction of a land that is beyond any nation-state. It is in his case squeezed in between barbed wires and the question is whether this exilic state of mind can foster a thinking about how else a no man's land or an "everybody's land" could be. Amar Kanwar brought in the term „everybody's land“ in a conversation we had on precisely the figure of *No man's land* and how it might be too linked to the retrospective. But it is, as in the other examples I have been discussing, the commitment to a history and a re-investing in traces of the past that are buried under moralities or conformities of languages and political discourse, with a view on how those traces can support a speculating for the future that I see exercised in TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. Thus not a nostalgia for a no man's land but taking from it the refusal to adhere to a given logic, a refusal to choose from that which is given as options, and momentarily opt for the nonsensical.

Manto my memory plays tricks with me!  
 It seems I too did not cross and instead  
 sang songs of longing in the streets of Lahore  
 Manto look your Bhishan from Toba Tek Singh  
 grew roots where you left him at Wagah  
 Between lofty guards and barbed wires  
 Partitions of hearts and lands are still being done  
 But see more people have found that no mans land  
 On which he has long stood!  
 And listen they too are saying 'oper di gur gur  
 di moong di daal di bedhyaane di laltain  
 aaf di hindu te musalmaan di dur phite mu (gibberish)!  
 (Punjabi voice, *sequence at Wagah border*)

Monica Bhasin's film thus helps me to conclude my thoughts and to remind us of the politics that the varied film languages and their makers are striving for and proposing. The newness that I see in them is a new investment of the filmmaker subject in the production of the film aesthetics and narratives. It is a subject that renders obsolete the



Source: TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, by Monica Bhasin

opposition of subject and object, private and public, not by making the private public but by collapsing both in the very form of their speaking. This is on the one hand in the choice of images and narratives which are subjective and yet collective at the same time, it is in careful attention to every singular image without assuming that it might represent what the filmmaker herself sees in them and in its transformation into a form of addressing the spectator that allows for multiple associations to be made. As previously stated, the filmmaker does not see herself as the one who exposes and explains but who takes part in thinking about the contemporary, at times via history but always for a future.

I have explained, though definitely not all-encompassing but in fragments, the film historical and political contexts in which documentary film was seen as a tool for change, for the nation and its citizens to become or the critique of this very nation albeit staying in a developmental logic. Those contexts imposed their own logic of speaking and their ways of relating image and seeing, the visual and knowing. The films I chose to discuss, and many more that I could not include here, cut across, in my view, those political and aesthetic contexts. They link to other aesthetic histories that have been defined as irrelevant for the purpose of progress and development and they lay claim on popular culture visual realms. In this they link to but also create new relations between seeing and knowing, they re-expand the repertoires of seeing.

It has been claimed that India's visual culture is rich with other ways of seeing. Christopher Pinney has frequently elaborated on popular visual practices and proposed the term of "corporetics" as a "counterhistory of visibility".

"Rather than create an anthropological enclave of darshan-related practices, I am interested in the continuities and resonances with an emerging counterhistory of visibility that is in the process of destabilizing and provincialization (and in the process revealing as historically and sociology fallacious) authorized dominant-class visualities in Europe, America, and elsewhere."<sup>363</sup>

Similarly, it would be reductive and in opposition to the incentives of this project to argue for a return to a notion of 'popular Indian ways' of looking exercised by the films cited. But when Okwui Enwezor speaks in defence of the documentary, that, "[a]bove all it is the concern with the other, the fidelity to a truth, that the documentary ceaselessly constructs and deconstructs,"<sup>364</sup> I want to claim that the "counterhistories

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<sup>363</sup> Pinney 2002: 359.

<sup>364</sup> Enwezor, Okwui 2005. "Documenta 11, Documentary, and the 'Reality Effect' ". in: *Experiments with Truth*. Catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition *Experiments with Truth*, 3 December 2004-12

and presents of visuality” that I attended to, contain rich proposals that meet this concern of the documentary forms. They also defy a “choice between universal and cultural specificity, for there are also rhizomatic pathways (simultaneously implying similitude and difference) that establish a field which is less than universal and more than local.”<sup>365</sup>

What I propose is that in their image making they exercise a specific yet wide reaching contribution to precisely the above-mentioned fidelity to a truth, a fidelity to the documentary eye that continues to question and construct realness. This contribution, I argue is a particular ‘Being-with’.<sup>366</sup> A being-with and seeing-with passions, histories, ways of talking, imagining, desiring, a being in Relation with the choices of composing, painting, remembering, a being with the sensical and the nonsensical. Ultimately a Being-with the other, for Making Real what might not yet be within the limits of the possible.

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March 2005. The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. p. 97-103. P: 101

<sup>365</sup> Pinney 2002: 359.

<sup>366</sup> Nancy 2002.

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## Filmography

- 7 ISLANDS AND A METRO, D: Madhusree Dutta, 100 min, Digibeta, colour, India 2006
- AAMAKAAR. THE TURTLE PEOPLE, D: Surabhi Sharma, 75 min, Digital Video, Colour, India 2003.
- ANNAPURNA, D: Paromita Vohra, 1995, Betacam, 25 Min. (Non-Fiction)
- BANNI BAI AND HARIKATHA, D: Soudhamini, 30min, colour, 16mm, India 1988.
- BARF, D: Saba Dewan, 54min, video, colour, India 1997.
- BOMBAY BLOOD YATRA, D: Suma Josson, 60min, video, colour, India 1993
- BOMBAY OUR CITY/ HAMARA SHAHAR, D: Anand Patwardhan, 75 min, 1985, colour, India
- BORN AT HOME, D: Sameera Jain, 60 min, Mini-DV, colour, India 2000.
- CALCUTTA, D: Louis Malle, 99 min, 35 mm, colour, France 1969.
- CHHATRABANG, D: Nina Shivdhasani Rovshen, 80 min., colour, 35mm, India 1976.
- CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÈ / CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER, D: Jean Rouch, 85 min, 35 mm, B&W, Paris 1961.
- CITY OF PHOTOS, D: Nishta Jain, 2004, DVD Video, colour, 60 mins.
- DELHI DIARY 2001, D: Ranjini Mazumdar, 60 min, Betacam SP, colour, India 2001.
- DELHI-MUMBAI-DELHI, D: Saba Dewan, 63min, video, colour, India 2006.
- DHARMAYUDDHDA/ THE HOLY WAR, D: Saba Dewan & Rahul Roy, 40min, video, colour, India 1989.
- DIL CHAHTA HAI, D: Farhan Khan, 183min, HD, colour, India, 2001.
- DOON SCHOOL CHRONICLES, D: David MacDougall, 140 min, Digital Video, colour, 2000.
- EK ANEK AUR EKTA, D: Vijaya Mulay, 7min, animation, colour, India 1974.
- A FEW THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, D: Anjali Punjabi, 30min, 35mm, India 2002.
- FOR MAYA, D: Vasudha Joshi, 38 min, Video, colour, India 1997
- FOREST OF BLISS, D: Robert Gardner, 90min, 35mm, colour, US 1985.

A GIFT OF LOVE, D: Meera Dewan, 17 min, B&W, 35 mm, India 1982.

GOING TO SCHOOL, D: Soudhami, 30min, Video, colour, India 2001.

GUHYA, D: Kirtana Kumar, 55 min, Video, colour, India 2000.

A HIDDEN STORY, D: Ranjani Mazumdar & Shikha Jingan, 58 min, Video, colour, India 1995.

THE HOUSE ON GULMOHAR ROAD, D: Samina Mishra, 29min, DV, colour, India 2005

I LIVE IN BEHRAMPADA, D: Madhusree Dutta, 46 min, Video, colour, India 1993.

IN THE EYE OF THE FISH. R: Raqs Media Collective, 30 Min, Video, colour, India 1997.

IN THE FLESH, D: Bishaka Dutta, 53 min, DV, colour, India 2002.

WHEN FOUR FRIENDS MEET/ JAHAAN CHAR YAAR MIL JAAYHEIN, D: Rahul Roy, 43min, DV, colour, India 2000

JARI MARI. OF CLOTH AND OTHER STORIES, D: Surabhi Sharma, 74 minutes, DV, 2001.

KAMLABAI, D: Reena Mohan, 45 min, 16 mm, colour, India 1992.

KHEL/ THE PLAY, D: Saba Dewan & Rahul Roy, 100min, video, colour, India 1994.

KICHRI EK KHOJ / IN SEARCH OF KICHRI), D: Nancy Adajania, 48min, Video/Beta format, colour, India 2000.

MANJUBEN DRIVER, D: Sherna Dastur, 52 min., Digital Video, colour 2002.

MEMORIES OF FEAR, D: Madhusree Dutta, 57 min, 16mm, colour, India 1995.

MOLKARIN, D: Yugantar Film Collective, 25min, 16mm, Black & White, Marathi, India 1981.

MORALITY TV AND THE LOVING JEHAD: A THRILLING TALE, D: Paromita Vohra, 29min, Digital Video, colour, India 2007.

NIGHTS OF PROPHECY, D: Amar Kanwar, 77min, video, colour, India 2002

NOTRE MUSIQUE, D: Jean-Luc Godard, 80min, video, colour, France, Switzerland 2004.

PITRY CHAYA, SHADOWS OF OUR FOREFATHERS, D: Soudhamini, 100min, 35mm, colour, India 1991.

PORTRAITS OF BELONGING: BHAJ MIAN, D: Sameera Jain, 30 min, Betcam, colour, India 1998

PORTRAITS OF BELONGING: SAGIRA BAGHUM, D: Sameera Jain, 30 min, Betacam, colour, India 1998.

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE / ZAMEER KE BANDI, D: Anand Patwardhan, 45 min, 1978, B&W, India

Q2P / Toilets and the city, D: Paromita Vohra, 54 min, Digital Video, colour, India 2006.

REASSAMBLAGE, D: Trinh T. Minh-ha, 40 minutes, 16mm, colour, US 1982.

RASIKAN RÉ – O LOVER OF LIFE, D: Pooja Kaul, 33min, video, colour & Black and White, India 2003.

SAGA OF A POET, D: Soudhamini, 62 mins, Betacam, Tamil, India 2001.

SCRIBBLES ON AKKA, D: Madhusree Dutta, 60 min, 35mm, colour, India 2000.

SUDESHA , D: Deepa Dhanraj, 30min, 16mm, Colour, Hindi, India 1983.

A SEASON OUTSIDE, D: Amar Kanwar, 30 min, Digital Video, colour, India 1998.

A SHORT STORY ABOUT TIME, D: Paromita Vohra, 10 min, Video, colour, India 1999.

SITA'S FAMILY, D: Saba Dewan, 60min, video, colour, India 2002.

SKIN DEEP, D: Reena Mohan, 83min, Beta-SP/Pal, colour, India 1998.

SNAPSHOTS OF A FAMILY ALBUM, D: Avijit Mukul Kishore, 63 min., India 2005.

SUNDER NAGARI/ CITY BEAUTIFUL, D: Rahul Roy, 43 min, DV, colour, India 2003.

TALES OF THE NIGHT FAIRIES, D: Shohini Ghosh, 74 min, DV, India, colour, India 2004.

TAMBAKOO CHAKILA OOB ALI, D: Yugantar Film Collective, 25min, 16mm, Black & White, Marathi, India 1982.

TEMPORARY LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, D: Monica Bhasin, 35 min, MiniDV/Pal, colour, India 2005.

THALARNANDHU, IT RESTED, D: Soudhamini, 24 min, 16mm, colour, India 1989.

THREE WOMEN AND A CAMERA, D: Sabeena Gadhihoke, 56 min, DV, colour, India 1998

UNLIMITED GIRLS, D: Paromita Vohra, 94min, DV, colour, India 2003.

VOICES FROM BALIAPAL, D: Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit, 40 min, 16mm, India 1988.

WAVES OF REVOLUTION / KRAANTI KE TARANEIN, D: Anand Patwardhan, 30min, 1974, B&W, India.

WHEN WOMEN UNITE. THE STORY OF AN UPRISING, D: Shabnam Virmani, 80 min, colour, Video, Indian 1996.

A WOMAN'S PLACE, D: Paromita Vohra, 40 min, color, Video, India 1998.

YEH SIRF KAHANI HAI? / IS THIS JUST A STORY?, D: Yugantar Film Collective, 25min, 16mm, Black & White, Telugu, India 1983.

## Abbreviations

BJP	Bharat Janata Party (Party of the People)
CBFC	Central Board of Film Certification
CSDS	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
FIFI	Forum for Independent Film and Video
FAB	Film Advisory Board
FD	Films Division
FUR	Foundation for Universal Responsibility of his Holiness the Dalai Lama
IDFA	International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam
IFA	India Foundation for the Arts (Bangalore)
MIFF	Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films
FTII	Film and Television Institute of India (Pune)
NID	National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad)
PSBT	Public Service Broadcasting Trust
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Corps of Volunteers)
Sangh Parivar	Family of Organisations (cooperative Hindu nationalist Hindu network of RSS, BJP, Bajrang Dal, and Shiv Sena)
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association
SIDH	Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas