

# 'Buddhas Made of Ice and Butter'

## Mimetic Visuality, Transience and the Documentary Image

Anne Rutherford

### MUMBAI, VERTIGO AND MIMESIS

At the first step into the Mumbai subway a bolt of heat shoots up from the swirling crowd like a blast from a furnace. You keep walking. It is peak hour, and a few million people converge on the two central terminuses of Mumbai Metropolitan Railway. You are walking against the crowd. A mass of steamy bodies surges toward you. Even as you move precariously forward, the energy of your momentum is overpowered, tugged backwards by the crowds streaming in the opposite direction. Dizzying rhythms pulse through your body in waves of heat and energy, cross paths and tug you in contradictory lines of force. The centre cannot hold, it threatens to fragment and drag you backward with the vectors of the crowd.

To slide into the slipstream of the city, to feel the vertigo of the metropolis – documentary maker K P Jayasankar first described this experience of vertigo to me. As a young man, newly arrived from the village, he would go to the terminus and walk against the crowd in a kind of delirious rehearsal of modern life – putting oneself in the eye of the storm until the storm seeps into the rhythm of one's own body. It is no coincidence that this film-maker and his co-director Anjali Monteiro developed a philosophy of the image that places emphasis on the 'Heraclitan river', the transience of all phenomena and an attitude of 'humility' toward the limits of that which one can know and control.<sup>1</sup> Their film-making practice puts the boundaries between the self and the world into play. Monteiro and Jayasankar speak of a vulnerability to the image, a sense that, rather than the image confirming their own sense of mastery over it, of certainty or plenitude, it somehow conveys to them an awareness of their own finitude and susceptibility.<sup>2</sup>

In the subway, proprioception, so fundamental to the stability of vision, denies the mastery of the ocular. Rhythm, movement and tactility

1 Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic philosopher best known for his doctrine of flux. In Cratylus' account, Heraclitus said that 'one cannot step into the same river twice'. Paul Edwards, ed, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Macmillan, New York, 1967, p 479

2 Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the film-makers are from an interview conducted in Mumbai in November 2003.

blur the boundaries between self and other in a prototype of embodied mimetic visuality, a kind of perceptual experience that brings the 'subject' into proximity with the 'object'.<sup>3</sup> This sense of porosity between oneself and the perceived object recurs again and again in *Saacha (The Loom)*, Monteiro and Jayasankar's film about the transformation of Mumbai with the closure of the cotton mills in the 1980s. The film traces the demise of the rich working-class culture of the Left – literary, theatrical, artistic, political and social – that grew up around the mills and the ongoing changes to the public spaces of the city that have occurred with globalisation and the expansion of the middle class. These transformations are experienced in the film through this blurring of boundaries in a way that draws the viewer close to the rhythms of the city. In their filming of Mumbai, spaces and objects are not neutral but imbued with memory and feeling, and the process of filming is one of allowing oneself to become immersed in that feeling and be touched by it; as Jayasankar puts it:

... one can discover fragments of one's memory in every space that one encounters ... and you are looking for those fragments that begin to instil in you a cinematic experience.

3 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, New York–London, 1993, p 20. This proximity between the perceiver and perceived is pivotal to the concept of mimetic experience, a kind of embodied perception that opens itself up to tactile sensory experience.

4 See for example, Theodoros Angelopoulos, who says of location shooting: 'I believe something special happens on location, in the real place ... when I am in the place I have set the film, all five of my senses are working. I become more completely aware. I therefore feel I am living the experiences I want to film.' Quoted in Andrew Horton, *The Films of Theo Angelopoulos: A Cinema of Contemplation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997, pp 199 and 106. For a further discussion of this encounter in Angelopoulos's work, see Anne Rutherford, 'Precarious Boundaries: Affect, Mise en Scène and the Senses', in *Art and The Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*, ed Richard Candida Smith, Routledge, New York–London, 2002.

To Monteiro and Jayasankar, these fragments evoke what they describe as compassion with and for the image itself: 'it's beginning to feel some kind of closeness to that object'. Jayasankar speaks of a 'pact' with the image that allows them to be implicated in it:

[the image begins] to talk to me and to others around me. That's a pact that one is signing – give it a chance to speak. It's a small fragment somewhere and when it's seen, it doesn't speak to anybody. But when we bring it up on the screen it begins to speak to me and somehow universally to the other. It may not give up all its secrets in one go, but at the same time it can begin to tell me about my own vulnerability as a viewer and a maker and about my own finitude. Implicating oneself is allowing that image to point to that vulnerability.

### DOCUMENTARY AS AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTER

This kind of conceptualisation of the image and the film-maker's engagement with it is rare in the rhetoric of the documentary image, which Jayasankar describes as being 'like a black box and in that space itself there's not allowed any kind of introspection'. In documentary thinking it is as if the technical vocabulary of the camera – to shoot, to take – has appropriated the conceptualisation of the filming process and marginalised the moment of looking as the primary encounter. To capture the vitality of the act of filming demands that one uses the camera to see, not just to take. In the context of fiction film, one can find attempts to come to grips with this encounter with the image, particularly in the context of location shooting, and a closer exploration of the cusp between documentary and fiction could be a productive site to explore the implications of this encounter for documentary.<sup>4</sup>

Monteiro and Jayasankar describe the moment of looking through the viewfinder as an affectively saturated encounter with the image.

Jayasankar says: 'it's not that they're just pictures – one is seething with a lot of pleasure when one is actually looking there...'. In *Saacha* this pleasure is palpable.

The film intersperses footage of the city with a series of interviews with a painter and a poet about their work. The poet Narayan Surve alternately recounts stories from his working-class childhood in Mumbai and recites his poetry that twists and turns these anecdotes into small fables of struggle, survival and wit. The painter Sudhir Patwardhan reflects on his own artistic practice and his evolving relationship with the city and the Left. Despite these apparently conventional voice-over techniques, the images shown are not an indexical illustration of the spoken text. The film-makers' own construction of the city as a film has as much integrity as the interventions of the painter and the poet. All are in a kind of dance with each other. This relation between sound and image is often unexpected and follows tangential rather than literal trajectories. As Surve talks of the 20-month strike of 1983–84, which broke the back of the textile industry and led to the closure of many mills, the sound and image start in parallel sequence but begin to diverge in ways that allow the image not to illustrate the voice but amplify it, adding another dimension. Surve remarks on the differences between European workers and their Indian counterparts whom he describes as half workers, half farmers. As he tells of the mass exodus of Indian workers to their villages, which left the factories abandoned with no one to carry on the strike, the camera begins panning across the idle factory machinery. As the poignancy of this belated realisation sinks in, it moves in to close-ups of a wheel shrouded in cobwebs, a dusty bolt, and comes to linger on a roughly woven bag hanging on a rafter. As the camera moves in closer, the empty bag drifting idly in the breeze takes on the poignancy of the moment and the affective charge of the deserted factory. This pivotal moment in the industrial and cultural history of Mumbai is remade as a mimetic encounter with the viewer.

At another point in the film, as Surve recites one of his poems about 'the struggle for daily bread', the image of the looms takes over the visual field. Shuttles jolt up and down, cross-arms swing back and forth, leather straps slide across the beams, spindles jiggle and twirl. The clatter of looms is heard on the soundtrack, but it is the visual rhythm that articulates the spoken word with a rhythmic undercurrent that embeds the voice mimetically in the pace and vigour of factory labour.<sup>5</sup>

The first thing one notices about *Saacha* is the sensory qualities of the image. In a musical montage of rhythms, the relentless churning of machinery in the textile mills frames coils of cotton that unwind languorously onto a spindle and workers' faces are masked by twisting strands of thread like enormous cats' cradles. The film captures and releases fleeting moments of sensory intensity – light passes across piles of coloured jujubes glistening in a glass case in a café, drops of water light up momentarily on a table, reflecting passing traffic, deep-red tomatoes and baskets of green chillies shine in the sunlit street market, baroque gargoyles keep silent watch as endless feet stream up a staircase behind elaborate brass balustrades out of the railway station. The life of the city is built up out of a multitude of such small fragments – out of moments of sensory experience the film weaves a fabric that has the texture and the rhythm of the city. *Saacha* is experienced as much as a love affair *with* the city as a documentary *about* the city.

5 Visually, as a kind of 'symphony' of the machine, these segments of *Saacha* have an affinity with Dziga Vertov's spinning factory machines in *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929). However, the relationship between sound and image makes the sequence much more complex and subtle.



Workers' faces masked by the warp of the loom

Despite its focus on sensory qualities, the film never spins off into lyrical play in the manner of many of the great city films.<sup>6</sup> It is a politically committed investigation of the cultural history of Mumbai. The intellectual work involved in this investigation is not separate from the affective work of cinema. The dualist oppositions so familiar in documentary rhetoric, which would see an exploration of cinematic possibilities as antithetical to the signifiatory aims of documentary, do not seem to operate here.

Sudhir Patwardhan, interviewed in the film, describes a sense of fragmentation that followed the demise, in the 1990s, of any ideology of the Left that could provide an 'integrative grand narrative within which to frame the city and its people'. He describes the overpowering albeit exhilarating experience of the city crowds, as he travelled on the trains every day. He identifies a conflict in his painting between two poles – the desire to 'allow the city to flood into [his] work' and the struggle to focus on the individual, a way to bring the city and its people into a single frame. Patwardhan's aim is to grasp this life without imposing on it any overarching meaning, and to capture the emotional charge of the city on canvas.

*Saacha* also takes up this challenge to represent the city and its people. The film does not attempt to mould the image into a grand narrative. Fragments coexist and comment on each other. This is not didactic montage but carefully structured by rhythm and association, using the strands of the loom as a guiding metaphor to structure the film itself. There is a sense of humility to the complexity and multiplicity of the city. The city *is* – the relentless traffic churns on, the gargoyles sit silently on the railway terminus, feet stream up the railway bridge, crowds move through the streets.

6 The classic lyrical city films would include films such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) or Jean Vigo's *A propos de Nice* (1930).



'Baroque gargoyles keep silent watch'

- 7 Miriam Bratu Hansen, "With Skin and Hair": Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940', *Critical Inquiry*, 19, 1993, pp 437–469, p 447
- 8 Siegfried Kracauer quotes Gilbert Cohen-Séat, *Essais sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma*, Paris, 1946, in *Theory of Film*, ed Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997, p 45
- 9 Belá Balász, *Theory of the Film*, Dover Publications, New York, 1970, p 185
- 10 Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism', in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, Arnold, New York and Oxford University Press, London, 2000, p 344
- 11 Laura U Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000, p 104

### **THE SELF, THE MATERIAL WORLD AND THE AURATIC POWER OF THINGS**

Monteiro and Jayasankar's sense of a pact with the image has an affinity with some of the early theorists of cinema whose work was infused with a passionate engagement with realism and also with the possibilities of the cinematic image. Siegfried Kracauer declared that film 'brings the material world into play' and the image speaks.<sup>7</sup> Kracauer quotes Cohen-Séat: 'And I? says the leaf which is falling – And we? say the orange peel, the gust of wind.'<sup>8</sup> For Belá Balász, the close-up reveals 'the hidden life of little things'<sup>9</sup> and, for Walter Benjamin, the camera opens up the optical unconscious, 'hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and experience'.<sup>10</sup>

Laura Marks has highlighted the continuity between what she describes as the 'anthropomorphic' analyses of critics, such as Balász and Kracauer, and the interrogation of spectatorship in contemporary film theory that attempts to come to terms with the 'unsettling (auratic power)' that derives from the 'ability of film and video to make contact with things' material presences.<sup>11</sup> In focusing on the 'embodied nature of the cinematic viewing experience', Marks has outlined two different understandings of vision – an optical model, which describes vision in terms of mastery and control, in which the viewer 'isolates and comprehends the objects of vision', and haptic visuality, a '*mimetic visuality*' that implies 'making oneself vulnerable to the image'.

It is important to distinguish here between two different understandings of mimesis. The first is commonly used in documentary rhetoric to

claim a copy or mirroring function for the documentary image – in other words to assert the indexicality of the image. The second use of the term, as elaborated by Michael Taussig, describes a mode of perceptual experience in which the viewer experiences a sense of bodily tactile contact with the object perceived, a blurring of boundaries between self and other.<sup>12</sup> It is this concept of mimetic visuality, with its assumption of proximity between the viewer and the object, that Marks brings to bear in this demarcation between two modes of vision, and it is this understanding of mimetic visuality that informs the investigation of the ‘auratic power of things’ in the cinematic image.

Explorations of ‘auratic power’ have enacted a major paradigm shift in film theory away from the text-based analyses informed by semiotics with its fundamental focus on meaning. Documentary’s self-positioning, as pertaining to a fundamentally different logic from other cinematic genres, has held it largely immune from the productive, invigorating challenges thrown down by the interrogation of spectatorship and the rethinking of realism in the realm of fiction.<sup>13</sup> The spectator’s experience of the ‘auratic power’ of things is, however, pivotal to untangling some of the tougher problems of contemporary documentary thinking, because it takes the question of realism away from an exclusive focus on indexicality. Opening up the question of the auratic recognises the implication of the perceiving subject in the material world and shifts focus to the relation between that subject and the object perceived. This awareness is prefigured in Kracauer’s concept of realism, which ‘is bound up with the problematic of the subject (rather than simply film’s referential relation to the material world)’.<sup>14</sup>

The question of the self is by definition excluded in the notion of indexicality, which postulates a relation between the image and the thing, a residue that derives from the contact between the thing and the implement of filming. The contact that the concept of indexicality describes is a causal, technical one. The contact between the viewer/perceiver and the thing or image, so central to mimetic perception, is irrelevant to this ontological preoccupation, which assumes that we can make deductions about how things exist or have an identity autonomously in the world, regardless of how we perceive them. Self is not implicated in the nature of the material world.

This positivist understanding of the material world forms the bedrock of unquestioned assumptions in conventional documentary thinking, even in contexts where ‘self-reflexivity’ is supposedly embedded in documentary practice. In the debates on self-reflexivity, the question of the self is often limited to the acknowledgement of the subjective point of view of the film-maker and the potential impact of his or her presence on events unfolding at the moment of ‘documenting’. Trinh T Minh-ha has written of how the function of self-reflexivity is so often reduced to one of ‘harmless decoration’, suppressing its potential as ‘processes to prevent meaning from ending with what is said and what is shown’.<sup>15</sup>

In the work of Monteiro and Jayasankar, this questioning self-reflexive mode goes beyond simply acknowledging the influence of the film-maker on events that unfold before the camera, and reaches to the heart of the conceptualisation of the image and the understanding of the nature of the material world itself.<sup>16</sup> The blurring of boundaries between self and object/other, characteristic of mimetic experience, is central to the idea of

12 Taussig, op cit

13 This relative exile from the body of contemporary film theory is replicated by theoretical work that duplicates the supposed dualism between documentary and fiction. See, for example, Robert Stam’s *Film Theory: An Introduction*, a putatively comprehensive survey of film theory that has no entry on documentary theory. One exception to this exclusion is Trinh T Minh-ha, who writes of these unproductive boundaries: ‘a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction’. See Trinh T Minh-ha, ‘The Totalizing Quest of Meaning’, in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed Michael Renov, Routledge, New York–London, 1993, p 99. See also Lesley Stern, ‘Paths that Wind through the Thicket of Things (Things in the Cinema)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1, 2001, pp 317–55.

14 Hansen, *Theory of Film*, op cit, p xvi

15 Trinh, op cit, pp 101–4

16 Monteiro and Jayasankar compare the assumed linear unity of meaning to Humpty Dumpty, whom they ridicule for his claim: ‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, nothing more, nor less’. A Monteiro and K P Jayasankar, ‘Let a Thousand Meanings Bloom’, in *The Economic Times*, Mumbai, 24 November 1996.

'vulnerability to the image'. Monteiro and Jayasankar see a challenge to indexicality as central to their practice, which takes up the open-endedness of meaning – celebrated by Trinh – by refusing simple unitary meanings:

It's certainly contesting the whole idea of image as evidence, image as indexically-linked to reality in a referential one-to-one fashion but trying to explore how that image itself has more layers and meanings than one could ever hope to comprehend all at once. (Monteiro)<sup>17</sup>

Monteiro says that the image cannot be contained or controlled easily and they 'don't know where it will lead [them]'. Jayasankar says:

... one is looking for images that do not yield up their volume or their meaning so quickly, but lure you into looking at it and lure you into the pleasure of the image itself.

Jayasankar argues that this idea of layering cannot be reduced to the idea of indeterminacy:

It sounds very closely similar to a postmodernist celebration of polyphony but I don't think we're working with that – it's not to say it's a celebration of some kind of semiotic democracy of images. As documentary film-makers one is walking the tightrope of having to use the image as evidence as well, because one is committed to certain struggles, to a certain kind of resistance to immediate forms of power. But at the same time how does one do it, keeping in mind the image, the pleasure or the aesthetic principle that goes with constructing those sort of images? How does one also take into account the cinematic? In that sense it is not just a celebration of a certain kind of relativism but it's also trying to bring together these two concerns.

### **POSTCOLONIAL DOCUMENTARY, TEMPORALITY AND BUDDHAS MADE OF ICE AND BUTTER**

This commitment to 'implicating the self' in the image is not separate from an intellectual commitment to an interrogation of the self in culture, as Monteiro elaborates:

... how does one look at the idea of difference itself – identity and difference – because it is difference from the other that allows one to constitute oneself as a thing or as something given, and that difference at times becomes a sense of threat in relation to the other. So I think it has a lot to do with questioning the boundaries of the self and other, realising the fluidity, questioning the way we look at differences, whether it is oneself as a living thing or a non-living thing – oneself as a normal being versus another or someone who may be 'deviant'. One element of compassion is an ability to enjoy differences, to be able to not feel threatened by them.

Srivani Mulugundam has written about their work in the context of other postcolonial film-makers in whose films the reflection on questions of identity plays a central role.<sup>18</sup> While Monteiro and Jayasankar emphasise the grounding of their work in the historical context of national politics, their approach to documentary diverges from that of many of their compatriots. Their concern with challenging the self is in part a reaction

17 This approach to a fragmentary meaning has interesting resonances with André Bazin's notion of the 'fact image', which, according to Laleen Jayamanne, 'is slippery because it is fragmentary, only partially visible, like the rock over which water flows'. Jayamanne writes that Bazin's 'fact image has a certain semantic autonomy within a sequence and can harbour sensory forces that cannot be reduced to the logic of action'. Framing Bazin within the temporal terminology of Gilles Deleuze, she argues that 'an image event infused with the senses ... before action can take shape in it ... opens up a hitherto imperceptible sense of duration in bodies, objects, and even the cosmos' and is 'an inducement to thought through the activation of imagination and memory'. Laleen Jayamanne, *Toward Cinema and its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis, 2001, pp 139-43.

18 Srivani Mulugundam, *Narratives of Development: A Critical Analysis of Alternative Documentaries in India*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hyderabad, 2001

to the constraints within which the tradition of Indian documentary developed historically. Social realism, with its emphasis on instrumental reason, came to play a pivotal role in the Nehruvian project of modernisation, which led to only certain kinds of documentaries being produced. Monteiro says that 'in our context the documentary has been seen very narrowly. Films Division has set the benchmark for a long time in terms of what a documentary is or should be.' In these films, neither authorship nor an assumed indexicality was questioned; as Jayasankar puts it:

Documentary film in India comes with this very normative position from which you speak, which is either you are producing evidence or as an author your position is quite strong. [In our work] one is also looking at what is that position from which one is speaking. Is that a secure position and is it not very important to subvert that position at the same time?

Their work has interesting resonances with the films of another Indian documentarist, Amar Kanwar, who also starts from an interrogation of the self to develop a recognition of the heterogeneity of audiences and to work with this recognition to develop modes of documentary communication that work *with* multiplicity rather than attempting to control it.<sup>19</sup>

Monteiro and Jayasankar emphasise the hybrid cultural positioning of their work: as Monteiro explains:

I don't know whether as modern urban Indians we could still talk about ourselves as situated within some 'Indian culture' because our whole education and upbringing [and] the language we speak is globalised in many ways.... In some sense [we are] of course also situated within [the Western philosophical tradition].

But their work also contests 'the whole dualist tradition where one dichotomises between mind and body, thought and feeling, form and content'. In fact they have at their disposal a different tradition in which, as Monteiro argues, 'a lot of the cultural forms don't work with those kinds of dualities or that kind of indexical relationship with a real world out there – whether it is music or dance forms or even the stories that one has been brought up with'. So we are trying to explore a movement away from that way of looking at oneself and the world and the image and the word.

Their commitment to work in a non-indexical way confronts the question of how to do this in their own cultural context. Some of their solutions draw on the precepts of Buddhism to develop a philosophy or ethics of the image. In Jayasankar's words:

... we are committed to ... the Buddhist idea ... that one could not allow desire to overtake one's relationship with the world but nor can one renounce that world and go to the other extreme. So the Buddha is ... striking a middle path that takes into account that everything is *dukkham*, misery (*sarvam dukham*), and everything passes, is transient (*sarvam kshanikam*), so we're trying to look at that image ... as a layered entity.... And also the idea that you make Buddha icons with ice or butter, knowing that they would melt away, but there's this pleasure of constructing that image on the larger horizon, that it's transient, it's going to go away, but at the same time, you build them all the same. So you're looking for that kind of image that embeds in it this idea that it is at once real and unreal, at once desire, pleasurable to look at, but at once it's pointing in the direction of one's own finitude, one's own vulnerability.

<sup>19</sup> Kanwar says: 'when you see the multiplicity that exists in your own reality you have to accept that similar multiplicities exist everywhere'. See Anne Rutherford, "Not Firing Arrows": Multiplicity, Heterogeneity and the Future of Documentary: Interview with Amar Kanwar', *Asian Cinema*, 16:1, Spring-Summer, 2005. There are other contemporary Indian documentary makers working in various ways to challenge this normative position. See, for example, the work of Madhushree Datta, Mani Kaul and others.

Buddhas made of ice and butter? This idea holds a key to a philosophy of the cinematic image that challenges the nature of the image, of indexicality and the self in its relationship to the material world. By putting temporality into the conceptualisation of the image, the image becomes ephemeral, loses solidity, just as it undermines the solidity of the self in relation to it. With the emphasis in conventional documentary rhetoric on the function of the camera to record and preserve, documentary takes up the role of attempting to fix a moment in time, to still the flux of time, the Heraclitan river.<sup>20</sup> A conventional indexical approach to documentary aims to contain any variability of that moment by capturing and pinning it down and attaching to the image a sound that delimits variable interpretations. In this way it closes potential meanings within the narrowest possible range, pins the spectator to the intended meanings and holds the experience of the film tightly within that ambit of meaning. The focus on indexicality is not separable from an implicit understanding of temporality, or more explicitly an attempt to control temporality.

*Saacha* works with the temporality of the image to avoid the ossification of the viewing process that characterises conventional documentary. The relation between sound and image is not parallel but plays out in syncopated rhythms as sound and image are staggered, at times converging and then diverging. This staggered complementarity disrupts the parallel logic of indexicality that attempts to fix the signifier into a signified at the moment of its reception and curtails any possible reverberations beyond that moment. The experience of the auratic encounter with the image for the audience relies on the amplification of a moment – its dilation to registers of experience that go beyond those implied by the concrete content of an image. By allowing the image to speak, to have its own space, to come alive, the audience is allowed to take in the image, its feel, its texture, its rhythm, to come alive with it, to yield to the environment of the image in the mode of mimetic visuality. The film opens up the mutability of the material in its reception – this thing born of a living relationship with the viewer, by nature transient.

In *Saacha*, transience plays out thematically in the film and is also embedded in the conceptualisation of the image and the city. As Jayasankar puts it:

Both of us were acutely aware of the processes that are taking place in the sense that it's like the Heraclitan river, that you can't step into it twice. How does one begin to represent the world around us keeping that as one of the presiding principles? We thought we would primarily look at processes that threaten to transform in some ways. We revisited or re-shot the same kind of situations in more than one way. One example would be the lady who is selling tomatoes on the street. When it appears in the beginning, it's more a business-like image and when it comes back there's some kind of dark turbulence about it. So we were looking at city and space and personal memory and representation as not given or static, but at the same time dynamically transforming and we were more interested in that process that's at work there.

The directors implicate themselves in these processes of transformation by describing their film as partly 'a reflection on our own history as first-generation migrants to the city', considering the changes that have taken place since the 1970s when those involved in the Left had a strong sense of hope and possibility for change and the now much more complex

20 Michael Renov, op cit

contemporary circumstances. The film explores these processes of transformation and 'the need to keep that hope alive':

What we tried to do is to celebrate what we feel is really like the spirit of a city like Mumbai. However adverse the circumstances somehow people get on with their lives. That's something we tried to explore visually – all these very visual public spaces which are under threat and are now being swept aside by the forces of globalisation and supermarkets and the malls and the burgeoning upper middle class that is so intolerant of other forms of life like the hawkers or people like that.... (Monteiro)

The awareness of transience and temporality is also embedded in the structure of the film; it weaves complex rhythms of the city as it moves through different time-spaces – from the contemplative oasis of an Iranian café to the hurly-burly of the street, from the electronic dazzle of upmarket consumer stores to the relative calm of the street market.

By translating these ethical precepts of the self and the relation to the material world into a philosophy of the image, Monteiro and Jayasankar's work throws into relief the ways conventional documentary is also founded on assumptions about the self and the world. Documentary conventionally affirms the mastery of the self over the world and meaning and does so through the relationship it constructs for the viewer with its image and by extension the relationship the camera/image and sound create with the thing. The idea of a middle way, a third way, is key to understanding how these precepts find their way into filmic form in *Saacha*. Jayasankar talks of not renouncing the image – he says 'you do what you have to do' – but not grabbing the image either. Monteiro and Jayasankar talk of bringing the rhythm of the body into the camera, of lingering. Monteiro describes this as a non-predatory relationship with the camera, and Jayasankar says that 'it's a much more contemplative stance vis-à-vis that image, sometimes taking the risk that you might lose it altogether but not in a hurry to capture what's happening'. They both acknowledge their pleasure in the calm 'rhythmic stillness' of Chris Marker's work.

By drawing these insights into an aesthetic mode, they create a film that has a particular quality of feeling that is uncommon in documentary. It seems to stem from this non-dualist approach – not renouncing but not grabbing. Somehow in this third way the image has an integrity, is allowed to speak, and we the audience are allowed to listen to it, to engage with it, to relive the encounter of the film-makers. Somehow, the cinematic qualities of sound and image are allowed to exist side by side with an exploration of a cultural milieu, a history and a politics. The viewer is able to find a place that does not deny but does not entirely surrender to the tug of the city, that moves with it, absorbs its rhythms and feels the life-stream of the city. The accumulated encounters with fragments of sound and image work their way into the spectator as a form of mimetic innervation.

21 Radhika Subramaniam, 'Urban Physiognomies', in *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*, eds Ravi S Vasudevan et al, Sarai: The New Media Initiative, Delhi, 2002

## DOCUMENTARY AND MIMETIC INNERVATION

Radhika Subramaniam has written of the fast-paced montage cacophony of Bombay cinema as an allegory for the city, for 'the jostle and press of the Bombay crowds'.<sup>21</sup> She draws on Walter Benjamin's discussion of



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Irani*. Patwardhan 'constantly shifts the focus of his painting from the dynamic, overwhelming rhythms of the crowd to the relative calm of intimate studies of individual workers'. Reproduced with the kind permission of Sudhir Patwardhan.

the tactile and kinaesthetic properties of a distracted habitual incorporation of the city as a model, arguing that a 'physiognomic reading of the city requires the lexicon of the crowd ... close, enlarged and shifting, not distanced, stable and contemplative'.<sup>22</sup>

22 Ibid, p 13, p 9

- 23 Miriam Hansen explains innervation as 'broadly, a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers'. Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street', *Critical Inquiry*, 252, winter 1999, pp 4 and 10. Benjamin understood this as a two-way process, 'not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form', but also the possibility of the reverse. The concept of innervation is linked here to Benjamin's concept of the 'optical unconscious' as the condition of possibility for this innervation to be brought into play. Hansen points out the associations between Benjamin's 'innervation' and the mimetic 'psychophysical correspondences' that Kracauer explores. (Hansen, *Theory of Film*, op cit, p xxvix.) It encompasses both 'a decentering and extension of the human sensorium beyond the limits of the individual body/subject into the world ... and an introjection, ingestion or incorporation of the object or device' (Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema', op cit, p 10).



The film is made up of small fragments of the city: Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai

*Saacha* works with the lexicon of the crowd and with the tactile and kinaesthetic texture of experience of the city but is constructed in an entirely different idiom from the Bombay cinema. As fragmentary as it is, *Saacha* does not build its sequences through the distracted mode of perception that comes with shock effects and the jarring of fast cutting to stimulate the perceptual rhythms of the city. Nor does it take up the other pole of the perceptual/experiential dyad that Subramaniam cites – 'distanced, stable and contemplative'. The film carves a middle ground – it is calm, to some extent contemplative, but by no means distant. It is close, enlarged and works with the shifting, transient nature of the city, but not to produce a distracted, fractured mode of experience. There is a sense of yielding to the environment – the characteristic of 'mimetic visuality'. The film goes into the sensory tactile quality of the city spaces, its rhythms, but rather than the jostle of distracted shock, it works through this mimetic visuality to produce what can best be described as 'mimetic innervation', an awakening, an enlivening of the senses, a bringing of the full sensorium into play in the experience of the film.<sup>23</sup> It produces what Benjamin himself proposes as a third way, the antidote to the anaesthetic effects of distraction that deaden the contemplative modes in modernity. The film brings both the city and the viewer to life.

The redemptive possibilities that Benjamin evokes in the concept of mimetic innervation find congruence with the middle way that Jayasankar draws from Buddhism. Walter Benjamin and Michael Taussig have both given their accounts of the degradation of the mimetic faculty in industrial modernity. It might not perhaps come as a surprise that tools for thinking mimesis outside the dualist concerns of Western philosophy

are to be found in the archive of Buddhist ethics and aesthetics. This formulation of mimesis offers a secular way of thinking about modes of experience that do not assume the overarching supremacy of the individual self, and as such challenges the uncontested self assumed in much documentary.

While there is congruence between this third way and the notion of mimetic innervation, each has a different inflection. Monteiro and Jayasankar's work has embedded within it a whole set of problematics specific to their cultural context, while also connecting with debates on documentary occurring in a more globalised forum. *Saacha* draws on a set of vital ideas, an aesthetic reservoir that feeds into their film production in a vigorous and intuitive way. This substratum may not be deciphered explicitly on the surface of the film but leaves its residue in a quality of feeling that resonates through the film and whose implications should reverberate through the theorisation of documentary.