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*Cultural Geographies* 2009; 16; 403

DOI: 10.1177/1474474009105055

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# cultural geographies in practice

## Liquid city: reflections on making a film

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In 2007 I completed a documentary film *Liquid city* on the theme of water and urban infrastructure in Mumbai. Having written about cinema – principally on the representation of landscape in European film – it was a major challenge to actually make a film for the first time. After my first visit to Mumbai in 2002 I began to reflect on the centrality of cinematic culture to the city and also wondered whether my research could be developed through the making of a documentary. I had already made some experimental footage of the city from moving trains and also taken many photographs that began to suggest some kind of visual narrative structure for the city that might be arranged around the themes of water, infrastructure and urban landscape.<sup>1</sup>

My first ever impressions of the city were shaped nearly 20 years ago by Mira Nair's extraordinary evocation of street life in her film *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). Other influential encounters with the city include the Bombay/Mumbai section of the inaugural *Century city* exhibition held at Tate Modern in 2001, which featured a number of striking documentary films and video installations, and the powerful exploration of water politics in Dev Benegal's film *Split wide open* (2000).

During the planning stage of the project I watched with interest many examples of documentary films made in India. These ranged from European impressions such as Louis Malle's *L'Inde fantôme* (1968), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Notes for a film on India* (1968) and Roberto Rossellini's *India: Matri Bhumi* (1959) to more recent work by Indian film makers such as Anand Patwardhan's powerful account of a slum under siege in *Bombay our city* (1985) and Paromita Vohra's pithy exploration of gender and sanitation issues in *QTP* (2006).

The pre-production phase of the project began in the summer of 2006 and involved assembling a London based team of Andrew Harris (research and production coordinator), Krystallia Kamvasinou (camera) and Johan Andersson (assistant producer). All three brought their own experience to the development of the project: Andrew, having recently completed his PhD on Mumbai, had a wealth of research contacts and practical experience in the city; Krystallia, having already made documentary films was also an architect and academic who had engaged extensively with the theme of landscape in her work; and Johan, as administrator for the UCL Urban Laboratory, was able to assist with the funding and institutional context for the work.



FIGURE 1 Andheri, Mumbai (2006). These giant water pipes cut through the city and are also used as elevated walkways by the city's poor. (Photo by Matthew Gandy.)

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As the film project took shape a series of themes began to emerge: the role of water in everyday life including activities such as the carrying of water and the intricate organization of laundry washing; the diversity of infrastructure needed to provide water ranging from buckets, taps and standpipes to vast water installations such as dams and reservoirs located many kilometres from the city; the growing control of water access on the urban fringe by organized crime; the distinctive presence of water in the urban landscape ranging from ceremonial tanks to rivers, creeks and the remnants of mangrove forests; the increased threat of flooding derived from extensive concretization, lack of drainage and the spread of informal settlements into some of the most precarious locations across the city; and contrasting visions of the city's future and the meaning of 'modernization' in its broadest sense.

In order to tackle these issues I decided to focus on four main groups of interviewees: academics, engineers, activists and ordinary voices from the locations where we were shooting. In practice, however, it became immediately apparent that these categories were not so clear cut: street-level encounters, for example, often yielded insights far more significant than many published sources whilst engineers often confounded theoretical conceptions of the state and its relationship with civil society. A documentary film, like any piece of academic writing, normally has an intended audience. In this case I felt that there were three key groups of people I wanted to reach: first, an interested general public, and especially the people of Mumbai; second, an academic audience, some of whom might choose to use the film for pedagogic purposes; and third, a cinematic audience who had some interest in documentary film making.

The film opens with a sequence of paintings by Sudhir Patwardhan – a local artist who has focused his work on the rapidly changing landscapes of the urban fringe. I took the idea for this opening scene from the depiction of New York City in John Cassavetes's *Gloria* (1980) where paintings set to music provide a dramatic segue to aerial views of the city itself. Though my panoramic views of Mumbai had to make do with the tops of residential towers I nonetheless sought to juxtapose ways of seeing or conceiving the city as a larger entity interspersed with everyday experiences. The first part of the film is focused on the use and meaning of water in the city where we encounter the power of water as a focus of anxiety for all but the wealthiest strata. In a telling observation, one of the interviewees, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, contrasts the 'vertical city' of modernity characterized by its hidden underground networks with the 'horizontal' or 'infrastructure free' city of informal settlements where everything is 'fully available to the gaze.' The film explores a series of specific encounters with water: slum dwellers explain their precarious access to municipal stand pipes and other sources; a local politician reveals the involvement of gangsters and organized crime on the urban fringe; and environmental activists describe the intricate set of structural and social barriers affecting access to water. In the second part of the film the emphasis shifts to some of the wider dilemmas facing the city: the ability of engineers to meet future needs in what the UN predicts will be the largest city in the world; the intensifying threat of flooding; and pressures to adapt urban planning and infrastructure provision to new political constellations associated with the global economy. The premise of a water crisis, as the educationist Nirupa Bhargar explains, is true but it also provides a convenient pretext for decisions such as the mooted privatization of the city's water supply system or other forced 'modernizations' that may serve to worsen an already serious situation.

From the outset I wanted to ensure that the film was a genuine collaboration between London and Mumbai. An indispensable element in the production process was our connection with the Mumbai-based organization PUKAR – Partners for Urban Knowledge and Action Research – a grassroots research collective that operates independently from the formal university sector though it benefits from an international network of scholars, activists and artists.<sup>2</sup> I asked PUKAR if they could suggest a suitable local assistant for the project and they put us in touch with Savitri Medhatul, a film maker who had also studied engineering. Savitri brought three critical skills to the project: first, her facility with Marathi and Hindi allowed us to conduct interviews with a much wider range of people; second, her experience in managing small-scale film projects helped us to complete the project on time; and finally, her connections with the municipal water supply department enabled us to film in highly restricted locations such as reservoirs and water treatment plants amid heightened security fears following the bombings of July 2006.<sup>3</sup> Other key connections in Mumbai were our sound designer, Amala Popuri, who ensured that the audio quality of the film was consistently maintained even under difficult shooting conditions. Amala also brought her own understanding of intricate soundscapes combining ambient noise with radio transmissions and other sources to the final editing phase of the project. We were also extremely fortunate in having a superb driver, Balakrishna Rai, who could navigate his way through the vast metropolis as we completed our hectic interview schedule. A critical feature of the post-production phase was my decision to bring Savitri and Amala to London and allow an on-going collaboration between London and Mumbai. I wanted to avoid a scenario where material is simply extracted from its local context and then handled by a post-production team unfamiliar with the wider rationale of the project.



FIGURE 2 Colaba, Mumbai (2006). Indu Chitkote and Shadoq Qureshi during a break in filming. (Photo by Matthew Gandy.)

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On 6 December 2007, almost exactly one year after we completed the shooting, the film was given a public premiere at the Max Mueller Bhavan in downtown Mumbai followed by an uptown screening at the Rachana Sansad Academy of Architecture a couple of days later. These mostly local audiences, including some of our interviewees, provided an opportunity for me to see whether the film had achieved its aims. The screenings were followed by question and answer sessions that focused very intensely on both the content and purpose of the film. An important criticism raised by one of the interviewees after seeing the film was that I did not state clearly what the city should do in order to tackle its water and sanitation crisis. My response, which I still believe, is that it is not appropriate for a London-based academic or film maker to present a set of prescriptions for a city in which there is no shortage of ideas or expertise. There is in any case a plethora of ‘developmentalist’ interventions on the future of Mumbai that actually offer very little insight into the life of the city. My decision not to include a commentary so that my own voice is absent, even from the interviews, underlies a sense of wanting to step back from the subject matter since my aim has not been to proselytize but to raise questions, provoke discussion and provide a unique record of this remarkable city in transition.

In conclusion, I think there are four key lessons to be learned from the experience of making a film in comparison with other types of academic research. First, a project of this kind involves

a larger and more diverse team of people than is common for most academic projects. Second, the budgetary and time constraints pose a much greater risk of failure in comparison with most forms of academic research because filming schedules cannot easily be repeated or postponed. Third, the planning is complex and involves a greater range of responsibilities than is usually encountered in an academic project. And finally, there is a need for flexibility on the ground in order to respond to opportunities or difficulties that may arise. On one occasion, for example, we stopped by the heavily polluted Mahim Creek and noticed a huddled group of figures in the distance sitting under tarpaulin sheeting between two giant water pipes. The dramatic setting seemed reminiscent of a Sebastião Salgado composition and we tentatively approached them to ask if we could have permission to film only to discover that they were not a displaced family at all but a maintenance crew from the municipal water department who were more than happy to be interviewed.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Matless for encouraging me to write this essay and also Andrew Harris for his input at every stage of my work on Mumbai.

## Biographical note

Matthew Gandy is Professor of Geography at University College London and Director of the UCL Urban Laboratory.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 2006 I obtained a small grant from the UK based AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) for a project entitled *Liquid city: water, landscape and social formation in twenty-first century Mumbai*. The work was funded under a distinctive AHRC initiative called the *Landscape and Environment Programme* led by the geographer Stephen Daniels. The film was also one of the first projects to be completed at the newly created UCL Urban Laboratory which has brought together faculty and students from a diverse set of disciplinary backgrounds. Since its completion in 2007 the film has been shown at a number of conferences and festivals including the London Documentary Film Festival held at the Barbican in 2008. For further details on some of the themes explored in the film see Matthew Gandy, 'Landscapes of disaster: water, poverty and urban fragmentation in Mumbai', *Environment and planning A* 40 (2008), pp. 108–30.
- <sup>2</sup> Other Mumbai based NGOs who played a critical role in the film were SPARC (The Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres), CRIT (Collective Research Initiatives Trust) and VAK (Vikas Adhyayan Kendra).
- <sup>3</sup> Since the devastating anti-Muslim riots and retaliatory bomb blasts of the early 1990s the city of Mumbai has faced heightened concerns over its security rooted in the political manipulation of community tensions by right-wing fundamentalist groups and acts of revenge linked to international criminal networks. This sense of anxiety has been raised more recently through the bomb blasts on commuter trains in July 2006 and the most recent set of coordinated attacks on high-profile targets in December 2008. As a result of these threats it is extremely difficult to gain permission to film the city's most

important water infrastructure – especially dams, reservoirs and water treatment plants – though these do feature in the documentary.

**Liquid city:** (2007 UK/India; 30 minutes; English, Hindi and Marathi with English subtitles).

Directed and produced by Matthew Gandy

Assistant director: Savitri Medhatul

Camera: Krystallia Kamvasinou

Editors: Savitri Medhatul, Krystallia Kamvasinou

Sound designer: Amala Popuri

Research and production coordinator: Andrew Harris

Assistant producer: Johan Andersson

Copies of the film may be obtained from the director or from the UCL Urban Laboratory.

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/urbanlab>