IDC School of Design
अभिकल्प विद्यालय

IIT Bombay

Report on:

Experimental short documentary film

Spirit

[रग]

Project by:
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Guided by:
Prof. Bharat Parmar

Project Approval

This project report titled "**Experimental short documentary film: Spirit (रग)**" by **Harsh Karani**, roll no. **22M2276**, is approved for partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Design Degree in Communication Design, IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay.

Project Guide:
Prof. Bharat Parmar

Internal Examiner:

External Examiner:

Chairperson:

Date: **27th May, 2024**

Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where other's ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any ideas, data, facts or sources in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause of disciplinary action by the institute and evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Date: 27th May, 2024

Place: Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Name: Harsh Karani

Roll no. : 22M2276

Acknowledgements

Abstract

" **It is the city that never sleeps, never stops for anyone,
Only a sleepless city starts turning strange and stranger,
Only a unstoppable city marches into the chaos,
Numbed and battered, is this what we call the Spirit?** "

This project presents my take on the idea of 'Spirit' of Mumbai, capturing its complexities and absurdities through the medium of experimental short documentary film. The primary objective is to master storytelling through sounds and visuals, eschewing traditional narrative and dialogue.

I aim to convey the city's spirit in an immersive and thought-provoking manner. The project approaches to experiment with audio-visual medium and understand the nuances of non-verbal storytelling.

Contents

Why a short documentary film?

If one Om is 17 years, then how many Oms in one light year?

Kamal Swaroop's 'Om-Dar-B-Dar'

Alejandro Jodorowsky's 'The Holy Mountain'

I aspire to become a multidisciplinary creative director, adept at working with a diverse array of visual and storytelling mediums. These mediums span from graphic novels and films to animation, posters, and both digital and board games. Through my previous experiences with various mediums, including graphic novels, comics, animation, and collaborative short fiction film project, I have gained insights into (differences in) their processes, strengths, and limitations. I wish to delve deeper into the medium of film-making, as it is a dominant visual storytelling medium, to enhance my understanding and capability of it.

My fascination with films began in childhood, a common experience for many, but it evolved during my bachelor's studies in architecture. I developed an appreciation for a wide range of films, particularly those that stand out for their unique approach. I was and still am enamoured by some of the surreal imagery in films such as Alejandro Jodorowsky's "The Holy Mountain" and Kamal Swaroop's "Om Dar-B-Dar." These films inspired me to explore the potential of conveying complex stories, emotions, and abstract concepts through audio and visual imagery.

To gain comprehensive hands-on experience in film-making and to learn the art of conveying emotions, stories, and feelings through the audio-visual medium, I have chosen to create a short documentary film. This project will allow me to immerse myself in every aspect of film-making and further my understanding of this powerful medium.

Film on what?

'The Beatles: Get Back' is majorly driven by the story and antics of the subjects

Please excuse these disorganized thoughts.

'San Soliel' poetically questions the theme of Memory and reality

Subject vs No-subject

Typically documentary films, document a subject. A here subject could be a person, a group of people, an event, an object, a process etc. Though are a few documentary films that do not have a strong subject (eg. 'Baraka' by Ron Fricke), but they are not very common.

In my observation and understanding of documentaries, it often happens that a strong/unique subject drives the movie. A strong subject combined with linear storytelling in the form of narration and interviews can sometimes make the documentary work on its own. Such documentaries are also often made not for the art of film-making, but sometimes just for putting out a message. While they are effective in sending out the message clearly, making them isn't best to learn storytelling. Documentary movies without strong subjects, tell a idea or a story or the theme of movie relying completely on fragmented dialogue, sounds, and visuals.

Since I wanted to learn storytelling and how to convey emotions and ideas through audio and visual imagery, and not rely on any dialogue or narration for storytelling, I chose to not have a strong subject for the movie. Not having a strong subject gives the freedom to develop multiple ideas and stories within the theme, and then makes you develop ways to represent them visually.
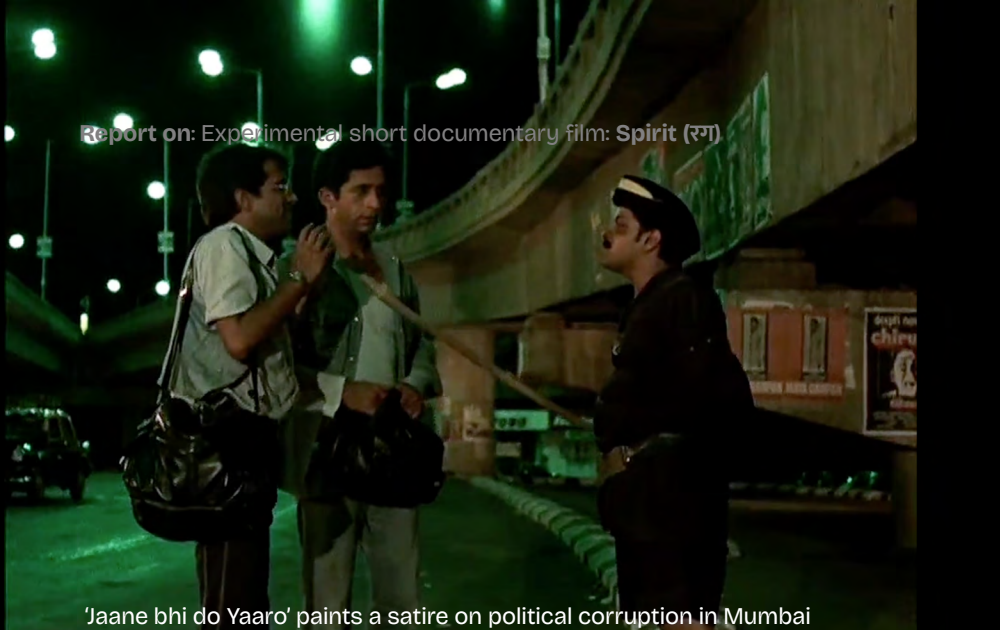
'Jaane bhi do Yaaro' paints a satire on political corruption in Mumbai

'Satya' makes you empathize with the Underworld Of Mumbai

What is the theme?

I have stayed in suburbs of Mumbai since my childhood (not Bombay, since I was born in 1996 and Mumbai was renamed in 1995), but being a person who didn't travel much in childhood my experience of Mumbai was majorly around my neighbourhood and places where my relatives lived. I was prominently exposed to 'Mumbai' and its complexities only during my bachelors in architecture.
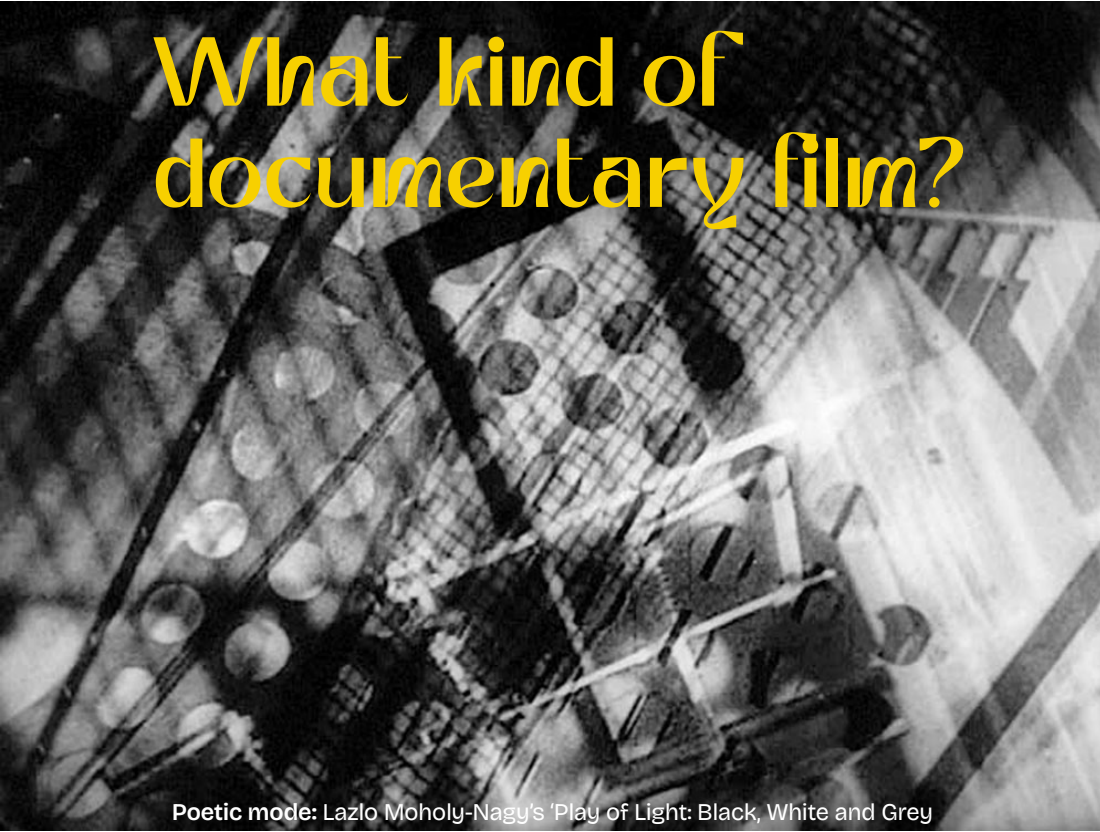
'Mumbai' sprung out from simply a place on map to a personified character with the stories, complexities, its history and its uniqueness. I observed and read about Bombay and Mumbai from movies, travels, stories from writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, and started to form my idea of the city.

Mumbai is often described to have a 'spirit', that never sleeps, that always keeps going. Questioning this 'Spirit' of Mumbai I wanted to try to find it and try to show how I see it.

> "
> It is the city that never sleeps, never stops for anyone,
> Only a sleepless city starts turning strange and stranger,
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What kind of documentary film?

Poetic mode: Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's 'Play of Light: Black, White and Grey

Expository mode: David Attenborough's 'Our Planet'

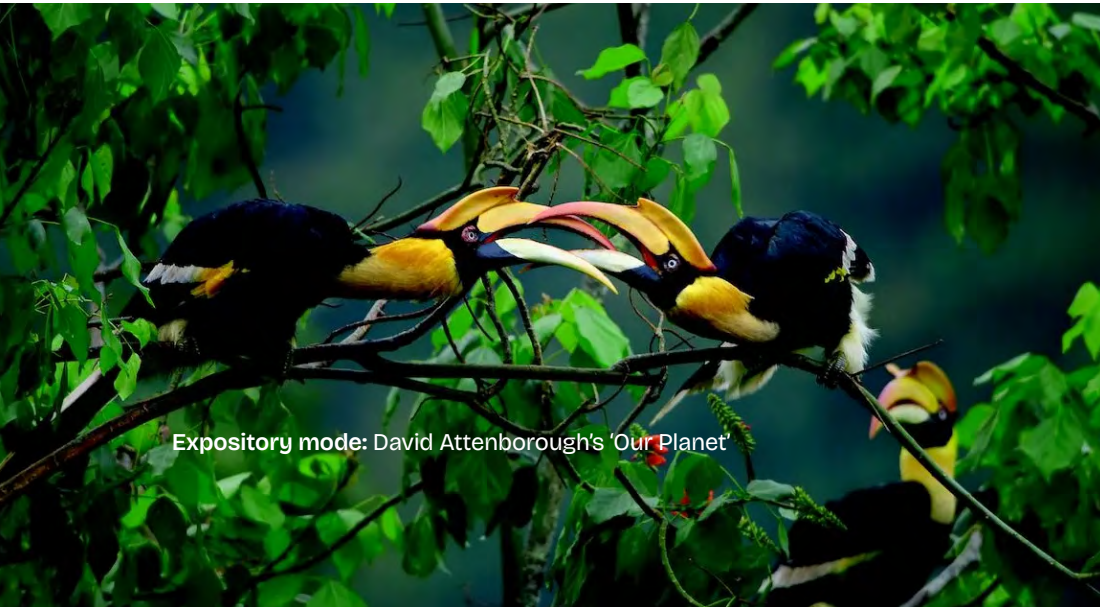My study was with an intent of understanding types of documentary films, their nature and form. Simultaneously, I started to conceptualize the idea for the film and its nature, form and subject. Elaborated as follows:

Study: Types of Documentary films:
In "Introduction to Documentary", Bill Nichols categorized documentary film styles broadly into six primary modes, each with distinct characteristics, form and storytelling approaches. These modes are:

Poetic Mode:
The poetic mode emphasizes visual and acoustic rhythm, tone, and texture, deviating from traditional narrative structures. It prioritizes the aesthetic experience, using associative logic and abstract imagery to evoke emotions and moods rather than presenting a straightforward story. This mode often draws inspiration from avant-garde and experimental film-making.

Expository Mode:
The expository mode is characterized by a voice-of-God narration that directly addresses the viewer, often providing an argument or perspective on a specific issue. This mode prioritizes clarity and direct communication, using supporting visuals and interviews to reinforce the narrative. It aims to educate or inform the audience, making it a common choice for historical documentaries and newsreels.

4

Observational mode: An Insignificant Man by Vinay Shukla & Khushboo Ranka

Participatory mode: Jennie Livingston's 'Paris is Burning'

Reflexive mode: Ron Fricke's 'Baraka'

Observational Mode:
The observational mode, often associated with cinema verité or direct cinema, seeks to capture reality as it unfolds without interference from the filmmaker. The camera acts as a passive observer, aiming to present an unbiased and unmediated view of the subject. This mode relies on long takes, natural lighting, and synchronous sound to maintain authenticity.

Participatory Mode:
In the participatory mode, the filmmaker actively engages with the subject, often appearing on camera and interacting with the subjects. This approach acknowledges the filmmaker's influence on the events being recorded and often includes interviews, conversations, and other forms of direct involvement. It highlights the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the documentary process.

Reflexive Mode:
The reflexive mode draws attention to the documentary's construction and the filmmaker's role in shaping reality. It questions the authenticity and objectivity of documentaries by exposing the filmmaking process and the choices made in presenting the subject. This mode encourages viewers to critically reflect on the nature of documentary representation and the inherent biases involved.

Participatory mode: Sacha Baron Cohen's 'Borat'

Performative Mode:
The performative mode focuses on the subjective and personal experiences of the filmmaker and subjects. It emphasizes emotional and social impact over factual accuracy, often blending personal narratives with broader social issues. This mode invites viewers to engage with the documentary on an emotional level, using the filmmaker's personal perspective to explore larger themes and societal questions.

Bill summarizes all the different types of documentary films in a table form as shown on the side. While having a bit of clarity over styles and forms of storytelling in documentary films, it isn't quite easy sometimes to categorize them rigidly, and we may often find that a film or parts of film can belong to multiple categories or flow across categories.

Table 6.1

Documentary Modes

Chief Characteristics

—Deficiencies

Hollywood fiction [1910s]: fictional narratives of imaginary worlds
—absence of "reality"

Poetic documentary [1920s]: reassemble fragments of the world poetically
—lack of specificity, too abstract

Expository documentary [1920s]: directly address issues in the historical world
—overly didactic

Observational documentary [1960s]: eschew commentary and reenactment; observe things as they happen
—lack of history, context

Participatory documentary [1960s]: interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history
—excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive

Reflexive documentary [1980s]: question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes
—too abstract, lose sight of actual issues

Performative documentary [1980s]: stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse
—loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; "excessive" use of style.

Table source: 'Introduction to documentary' by Bill Nichols

Split-screen opposite Dutch angle tracking shot from 'Man with the Movie camera'

Split-screen edit breaking the fourth-wall and showing the filmmaker himself, poetically, over the camera itself.

Study: Watch, consume and absorb

While all the movies I have watched over the years have contributed to my understanding of the film medium, influencing this project in a subconscious and indirect way, there are a few specific films that provided direct references and formed a solid foundation for my documentary. Below, I will briefly elaborate on some key movies that have significantly influenced my film:

Man with the Movie Camera by Dziga Vertov:

Since a movie camera, filming and movies in general were a novelty in 1929, when Vertov made this movie, it was pure experiment with the conceptual idea of capturing the dynamic of a 'person' a film-maker with the movie camera who films everything, everywhere he goes.

The movie flows in between forms, from majorly being a documentation of life in Soviet Russia, in observational mode. The movie still flows into few parts which are staged like the reference to the film-maker and shots of his eye as a reference to him observing hinting at reflexive mode of operation, while the editing seems to be a mixture of poetic mode and reflexive mode. The filmmaker also experiments and invents techniques in filming and editing such as multiple exposure, fast motion, slow motion, freeze frames, match cuts, jump cuts, split screens, Dutch angles, extreme close-ups, tracking shots, reversed footage, and stop motion animations.

Two scenes one of chicks in factory and other of crowded Tokyo subway juxtaposed with each other in 'Baraka' connected with a background score

Marker uses a footage from a fictional Japanese film in 'San Soleil'

Baraka by Ron Fricke:
Baraka is one of the best examples of a poetic documentary film. The film artistically combines stunning cinematography with a rich sound design to tell the story of life on earth, without a single dialogue. It demonstrates the power of just combining moving visuals with immersive audio, to convey meaning and emotion that transcends any language or dialogue.

The movie is primarily a poetic documentary, owing to its emphasis on visual and auditory rhythm. The movie also goes into observational mode while shooting the subjects without interference from the filmmaker. The movie uses Sound as the spine to create a rhythm and connect visuals to form a narrative.

San Soliel by Chris Marker:
The film is in a video-essay format, that combines a string of narrated letters with stunning visuals from travelling around the world. Breaking the boundary of conventional documentary, it uses footages from other fictional films along with documented footage with innovative editing and narrative structure to create a mosaic of images and ideas, encouraging viewers to draw their own connections.

'Sans Soleil' questions memory and reality and demonstrates in how reflexive nature of documentaries can merge the personal with the political, pushing the boundaries of the genre.

8

'Glas' beautifully documents process of glass making and makes a commentary on industrialissation, without using any narration, dialogue or text.

IN HI KO
ان ہی کو   इन ही को
LIFAFA
लिफाफा

'In Hi Ko' feels like is a editing excercise of connecting footages from different movie to form a narrative helping music

'Pushkar Puran' is plays with commentary and layered story telling

Others:
Other notable mentions of the movies/videos/series that formed a good references for me are as follows:

Documentaries:
Glas by Bert Hanstra
Daybreak Express by D.A. Pennebaker
Shoah by Claude Lanzman
Way of Looking by John Berger
Paris is Burning by Jenne Livingstone
Play of light: black, white and grey by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy
An Insignificant Man by Vinay Shukla & Khushboo Ranka
Ram ke Naam (In the name of God) by Anand Patwardhan
Reasons by Anand Patwardhan
Pushkar Puran by Kamal Swaroop

Movies:
The Holy Mountain by Alejandro Jodorowsky
Om-Dar-B-Dar by Kamal Swaroop
Manto by Nandita Das
Satya by Ram Gopal Verma
Salaam Bombay Raghuvir Yadav
Jaane bhi do Yaaron by Kundan Shah

Music videos/bits:
In Hi ko by Lifafa
City of God (beginning) by Fernando Meirelles & Kátia Lund
Copulations by Peter cat recording and Co.

In a Gist

It is challenging to categorize documentary movies into rigid modes, as they often fluidly incorporate multiple styles. Just as surreal fictional films (eg.- Alejandro Jodorowsky's "The Holy Mountain") use dense imagery within a frame to tell stories, documentaries can convey complex narratives through layered sequences crafted with the poetic mode, utilizing editing of footage and sound.

The observational mode aims to capture reality as it unfolds without interference from the filmmaker, leaving much to chance. This mode is commonly adopted in films that are exploring or searching for something in its natural form, allowing events to occur organically without the filmmaker's influence.

Nature of my film

Moving away from a strongly subject-oriented documentary, I am exploring the theme of discovering the 'Spirit' of Mumbai. This approach necessitates relying on chance encounters to capture the events and visuals that convey the essence of the city.

I envision my film utilizing a blend of poetic and observational modes of documentary filmmaking. The observational mode will guide the shooting process, capturing Mumbai in an unfiltered, spontaneous manner. During editing and compilation, the poetic mode will take precedence, shaping the film into a fragmented, lyrical piece without narration or dialogue. This approach will allow the final form of the movie to be poetic in nature, emphasizing on conveying the emotion through audio visual sequences.

As a filmmaker, I am rediscovering and viewing Mumbai from a stranger's perspective—distant and purely observational—while searching for or questioning the city's spirit. Through my observations, I aim to reconstruct the feeling of Mumbai using a sequence of footage captured during my explorations of various parts of the city.

Developing the film and the process

Rhythmic sound of Sugar cane juice vendor's machine

Traffic in front of CSMT station

Conception
Adopting the poetic mode, I approached the movie as an exercise in capturing rhythm through visuals and audio, juxtaposing them to create meaning. I curated a list of events, places, and elements that I felt could encapsulate the 'spirit' of Mumbai as I saw and felt it.

Some of the places things from the list were, Dhobi ghat, Dharavi Slums, Labour workshops in grant road, Dadar flower market, Byculla bhaji market, CSMT station, Marine drive, Girgaon chowpaty, Muhamad ali road, Byculla zoo, Dadar station, Kala Ghoda street, etc These locations provided a rich tapestry of sights and sounds, each contributing to the complex and vibrant spirit of Mumbai.

Direction
Having never made a film entirely by myself and harboring a fear of shooting, this project was a significant challenge for me. It took time to fully embrace the process of roaming the city with the intent to capture events, activities, and spaces as I see them. I had to become comfortable with the trial-and-error method.

Allowing chance and opportunity that is provided, to guide the film and having no solid script added to the fear of shooting. However, once I got comfortable with it, I stepped into an observer mode, who without interference just would observe and find new ways to capture hustle, events, objects, sounds and other things around me.

11

Technical Aspects

I chose to shoot the movie on an iPhone 12 Mini, which provided the freedom and accessibility needed for spontaneous shooting in line with the film's nature. To gain better control over exposure changes caused by the auto-focus feature of the built-in camera application, I used the Blackmagic Camera application versions 1.2 and 1.3 in the later stages of the shoot.

magic Camera application versions 1.2 and 1.3 in the later stages of the shoot.

Most of the shot taken are hand held, as having a gimbals or any heavy device drew attention towards me broke the observer mode. I used H1n recorder to collect a few ambient sounds, but majority of the sounds were collected from the iphone while shoot on camera.
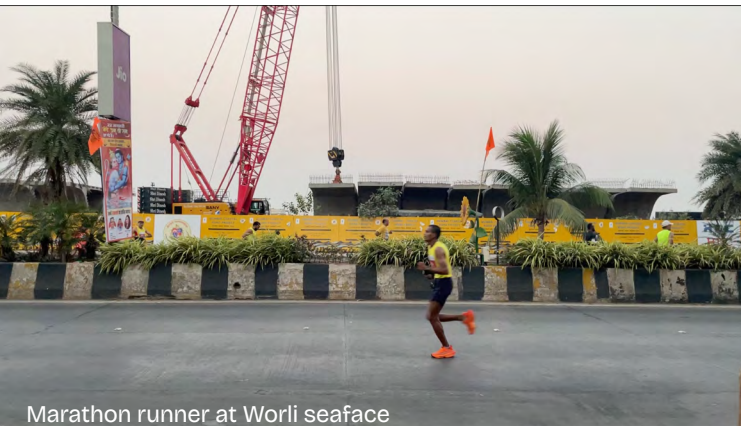
Marathon runner at Worli seaface

Marathon runner at Worli seaface

Dhobi ghat

Shoe-shine shack on platforms

Rare view of CSMT platform less crowded in morning

Kali-peeli driver at traffic

Streets of Dharavi slums

Byculla vegetable market

Marine drive

Traffic in Mumbai

Dadar flower market

Bhajan session in local trains

Common man by RK Laxman's statue

Traffic from top view

An unconscious man on busy street

Editing

A challenging part of editing was just selecting what footage is working in the flow of the film and what isn't, as there was roughly 600+ minutes of total footages. Edit of the movie was a constant practice and task in itself, as the narrative was constructed using how well two footages would go with each other, either visually or sound.

I had started to try out small edits of the clips after each day of shoot, just to get into the practice of constructing completely different narratives with similar set of footages through editing. Majorly the bridge or continuation was either visual movement, or sound continuation. I applied montage theory by Sergei Eisenstein to construct story out of just sequence of footages.

Sound editing

I relied majorly on the sounds that came naturally from the footage, but there were some places where I had to add sounds just to create a continuity in the sequence. I utilised the music that I found naturally in footage and added a studio version of that music just to bridge the next sequence while the lyrics of the song along with images formed a cohesive narrative.

Footage of marathon runners stitched with people running for a local train
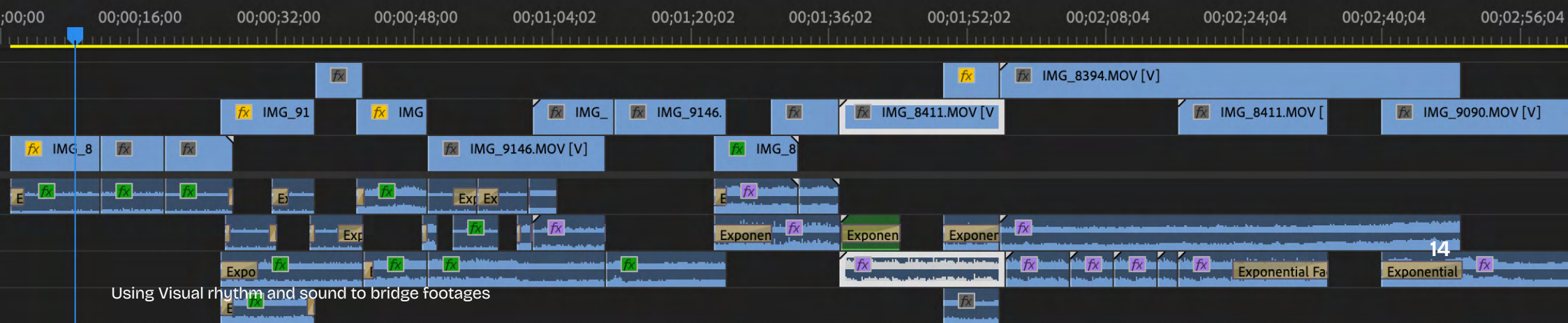
Using Visual rhythm and sound to bridge footages

'Yeh Kahan aa gaye hum' from Silsila was a song that was captured in a footage, which I used to lead the film into a short montage of the footage corresponding to show strangeness of the city of Mumbai.

Typography & Poster

Owing to my sense of Mumbai, I was leaning towards 'Art Deco' style of fonts as homage to Art deco related to Mumbai's cinema houses and films. But their clean geometric design didn't carry any essence of 'Spirit' in it. The final font that was chosen Latin script was 'Kostania' designed by Ekahermawan which has a blend of geometric simple characters with a wavy rhythmic twist to it.

I chose to keep the name of the film in Marathi as well, since its the movie is about Mumbai. The devanagari font on the other hand was chosen to 'Teko' from Google fonts library, a simple elongated rectangular with rounded edges, to not sacrifice on the readability of the devanagari script.

Colour chosen for Latin script was retro warm yellow as a reminiscence of yellow typography from a lot of old Bollywood movie posters, while the devanagari script is kept in white, to distinguish it as a different element from the Latin script and retain the of the script.

Poster Design

Font Options and trials

Challenges, Learnings and Reflections

Never having made a film before and being apprehensive about shooting, undertaking film-making for my final project was an immense challenge. The lack of a solid script and limited experience with editing heightened my anxieties. However, with the intent to practice and grasp the audio-visual medium, I learned to trust the process. The most difficult challenge for me was developing confidence in my instincts and understanding, and not fearing failure, as the only way to learn was through practice and trial and error.

Michael Rabiger's statement, "In documentary, shoot first, apologize later," became a crucial revelation point for me in understanding the medium. The trial and error in editing clips taught me a lot about the rhythm of the movie, sound design, and narrative construction purely through audio-visual elements without a script. By stitching fragments of footage together to generate a narrative that conveys feelings and emotions, I gained confidence in delivering abstract narratives without relying on a solid subject or narration.

As this is my first attempt at documentary shooting and film-making, there is still much to learn in terms of the craft, including cinematography, sound design, editing, and especially color grading (which I did not implement well). Despite this, I believe I achieved a unique perspective on Mumbai through this experimental approach.

References

Books/articles:

Introduction to Documentary by Bill Nichols, ISBN 0-253-33954-5 (cl : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-253-21469-6 (pa : alk. paper)
https://www.timeout.com/film/best-documentaries-of-all-time

Documentaries:

Man with the movie camera by Dziga Vertov
Baraka by Ron Fricke
San Soleil by Chris marker
Paris is burning by Jennie Livingstone
Borat by Sacha Baron Cohen
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