

**PROJECTS / PROCESSES**

**NEW DIALOGUES WITH  
ANALOGUE: INDIAN  
EXPERIMENTS ON FILM**

MRINALINI VASUDEVAN



# PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**New Dialogues with Analogue:  
Indian Experiments on Film**

Mrinalini Vasudevan



SERENDIPITY  
ARTS  
FESTIVAL



A still from the India on Film workshop programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Harkat Studios.

# **India on Film**

***Curated by*** Harkat Studios

***Venue*** Old Goa Institute of  
Management

## Curatorial Note

**Curatorial & Production Team** *Aditi Kashyap, Michaela Talwar, Namrata Sanghani, Sapan Taneja, Sheba Alexander, Tanya Dixit*  
**Lead Curator** *Karan Talwar*  
**Curator** *Harkat Studios*

It happened about a decade ago—“film” as a medium was discarded by the film industry, almost overnight. Decades worth of knowledge, equipment and processes were put aside and the craft of “making” a film was sealed shut in boxes, forgotten in storage. The digital age brought on the beautiful democratisation of the moving image, but there was one casualty: its medium.

An entire generation of makers slowly realised that along with the tools of the craft, they also lost a large trove of meticulous artistic processes, built with each successive maker. “Would a painter be able to make the same work without oils and canvas?”, quipped one young filmmaker.

*India on Film* explores the interrelationship between the art and craft of making on “film” through a series of film screenings, workshops and installations. The intent is to highlight the shift caused by the dismemberment of a medium through changes in narrative techniques by celebrating experiments on film from the Indian subcontinent. It gives the medium centre-stage and highlights the deliberation in the “making” of moving images.

The curatorial spreads its net wide and takes you through works from a multitude of conscious filmmakers who work in the Indian context.

This programme acknowledges the work of the many artists and researchers who have consistently contributed to the discourse – the work of Experimenta India, Amrit Gangar, Films Division of India, the many independent film clubs across India and all the proponents of Cinema of Prayoga who have informed and guided us in presenting *India on Film*.



A still from the India on Film workshop programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.  
Photograph by Harkat Studios.

# **New Dialogues with Analogue: Indian Experiments on Film**

**MRINALINI VASUDEVAN**

*...however initially abstract and illegible the image we see may appear, celluloid film's flecks, blurs and scratches can be made to invoke not only a general sense of how time and history wear upon the image, but also the specific material conditions and emotions evoked by the particular context of its production, travels through the world, and associations with the artist.*

- Tess Takahashi, "Writing the World: Medium Specificity and Avant-Garde Film in the Digital Age"<sup>1</sup>

In an age saturated with manicured digital images, automated editing apps, easily available filters, and quick downloads, Harkat Studio's "India on Film" project wished to take its participants and viewers back to these "flecks, blurs, and scratches" marking past and contemporary experiments in the slow, laborious (at times messy, at times meditative) practice of analogue filmmaking. Spanning three rooms and part of a corridor at the old Goa Institute of Management, Ribandar, bulk of the project space was divided between an area for film screenings and one where a temporary film-lab was constructed for twelve amateur filmmakers and film enthusiasts. The latter group spent the eight days of Serendipity Arts Festival 2019 creating short handmade films from 16 mm reels of found footage, sourced from Chor Bazar, Mumbai, which contained a curious amalgam of scenes from old Bollywood films, tourism films, wedding films, documentaries, and even pornography. These were presented at the end of the festival along with five one-

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minute films (made with 50 feet of 16 mm stock) that had already been shot in Goa on Soviet Krasnogorsk-3 cameras and developed and processed at the Kodak Filmlab, Mumbai. Shot by aspiring practitioners whose scripts had been previously selected by Harkat, these films were either silent or with digitally synced sound, and pertained to a range of themes in colour and black-and-white. Some were specific to Goa—one accompanied a family touring the historic temples of the state while another explored local traditions of baking the ubiquitous pao (bread). One provided a meta-framework by filming couples taking selfies on the beach. Another looked at urban loneliness and desperation and yet another focused on the problems of labour and unemployment through abandoned factory spaces. Added to this programme's assortment were three 16 mm handmade films, produced earlier during Harkat's workshop in Mumbai with Bernd Lützel of LaborBerlin.<sup>2</sup> These films explored social and environmental concerns while self-reflexively thinking through the ways in which images and after-images are created. Like the workshop films, the makers played around with the actual surface of film (through pigments, paint, and scrapes), the use of exposure and cuts that were done manually, and music that was added digitally. These different sets of amateur films were placed in the context of a larger body of celluloid works by established Indian practitioners, shown on 35, 16, and 8 mm<sup>3</sup> projectors which had been bought from abroad or assembled in Mumbai.

Besides the screenings, general visitors could get a hands-on feel of film and projection through a set-up that enabled them to splice and attach found footage onto an existing reel into a narrative of their choice and play the stories on a 16 mm projector. The 16 mm booth transformed selfies, an instant favourite of the digital age, into an analogue film across twenty-four frames. And a phenakistoscope installation took viewers back to older devices that were the precursors to film cameras and modern-day GIFs.<sup>4</sup> Finally, through a set of 16 mm handmade films created by the Harkat team, using 7266 black-and-white reversal stock, and developed with caffenol (a concoction of coffee, Vitamin C, and household ingredients), the project experience was taken beyond the immediate space of the old Goa Institute of Management. Through

projections in different parts of the festival complex, the films were screened along with live music by the rap artist Sofia Ashraf, who drew on influences and sources ranging from silent cinema to music videos. By incorporating Ashraf's practice, the project aimed to translate celluloid into a performance that reached out to a wider cross-section of public.

Taken together, these various aspects of "India on Film" threw up vital questions and insights related to the medium, technologies, and interdisciplinary engagements of film—an art form that even in the digital age continues to draw its name from the material that gave birth to it—with photography, paintings, and performance art. Through this essay, I wish to look at these questions as part of a broader framework of debates pertaining to "analogue versus digital film", a comparison that keeps coming up in conversations among filmmakers, scholars, teachers, and students who are grappling with the transition. Part of this interest in the revival of analogue has to do with the importance and glory bestowed upon it by "experimental film" collectives and movements. Here, I will explore the connotations and relevance of the term, the theories and alternative approaches associated with it, and the works of many of its key proponents and practitioners in India who were featured in Harkat's curation. Finally, I will discuss the rationale behind including Harkat's work within the space of the Serendipity Arts Festival and analyse this project as an extension of the studio's long-term engagements in promoting the craft of analogue film. In this, it shares interests with other Indian and international initiatives who are keen to preserve historical works and processes associated with celluloid cinema while encouraging new endeavours in this field.

### **Caught in Two Worlds**

The last two decades have witnessed growing concerns about the rapid demise of celluloid cinema and its replacement by digital processes. This transition had already started with the emergence

of video in the 1980s<sup>5</sup> and the introduction of digital editing and projection by the late 1990s and early 2000s. Celluloid was increasingly seen as an expensive, labour-intensive, combustible, and environmentally unfriendly material. This coupled with digital technology's speed, easy portability, ability to store and process more data, and improved image quality, meant that the battle to keep analogue film alive was going to be difficult. But as Tess Takahashi notes, even as film practitioners and industries the world over began to prepare themselves for this shift, the period also saw the rise of a number of niche festivals, exhibitions, studios, and intellectual groups invested in sustaining analogue film experiments and spearheading a rebirth of the medium. Besides the support shown by well-known mainstream American directors such as Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese, and Christopher Nolan (who insisted on shooting on 35, 65, and 70 mm) and British artists like Tacita Dean (known for her installations at the Tate Modern), there was the return of a more intimate genre of handmade (individually processed, edited, and projected) films. While the revivalist movement had its roots in America, England, and Europe, it soon spread to India with the emergence of alternative film forums and artists' labs like Experimenta, Bangalore (started by Shai Heredia in 2003) and Harkat Studios, Mumbai (started by Karan Talwar in 2014).

Without necessarily taking a side in the “analogue versus digital” debate, it is important to understand the socio-cultural, aesthetic, and emotional factors and perceptions that still make celluloid attractive for filmmakers. The history of filmmaking has, for the longest time, been a history of celluloid cinema —its material practices have dictated the way works are conceptualised and how they engage with actors and audiences. Even as the move to digital has taken place in terms of technology, various key concepts related to visualisation and narration have been carried over and practitioners are yet to develop a radically different way of thinking “digitally”. Aesthetically, the celluloid image is valued for its texture, depth of colour, and sharpness of film grain which is sometimes championed over digital pixels that tend to make frames bleed into one another. Additionally,

filmmakers enjoy the intense physical engagement required to work with the medium and the challenges entailed. The limited availability of film stock demands a superior level of training, focus, and discipline while shooting; this stands in contrast to the excesses and indulgences allowed by digital footage. The long-drawn out process of developing and editing film leaves more room for contemplation. The final product is also vulnerable to the surprises thrown up by photochemical effects, an unpredictability many filmmakers find exciting.

Over and above these matters, there is an intrinsic faith in film's close ties with nature and human touch, its "purity" and its ability to record reality more accurately than the twice-removed digital. The latter can be manipulated more easily, thereby destabilising our notions of indexicality and truth claims. The magic of observing the effects of light on film can be traced back to mankind's longer fascination with recorded images and the sense of wonder first evoked by photography in the nineteenth century. The camera has always served as the mechanical negotiator between the photographer/filmmaker and the world. However, in a strange twist of fate, the nature of image production that Walter Benjamin felt had taken away the "aura" of art in "the age of mechanical reproduction" has regained an "aura" found lacking in the digital image. Film has thereby become a precious outmoded material, laying claim to the qualities it once challenged: authenticity and an artisanal touch. Closely associated with the latter is the idea of authorship: by reaffirming the role of the individual filmmaker and the tight control he exercises over the physical craft, the handmade analogue film has brought back a modernist braggadocio in a postmodern age when authorship has come to be questioned.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reviewing Experimental Film**

The attempts to reclaim individualism and "high art" through a revival of analogue film are tied to the circuits of the avant-garde that have encouraged these practices over the decades. This leads us to the



A still from the India on Film workshop programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Harkat Studios.



category of “experimental film”, which rose with other “avant-garde arts” in Europe in the 1920s and has since then been used to define cutting-edge work in different countries and periods. Harkat curator Karan Talwar, who described the Serendipity screenings as a programme of “experimental film”, was clearly interested in assessing the term in the Indian context. In this, he was influenced by the work of filmmaker Shai Heredia and the writings of film scholar Amrit Gangar who coined the phrase “Cinema of Prayoga” to define this field.<sup>7</sup> These words require unpacking, and come with their own set of associations and contradictions. They provide important guides to understanding how alternative film practices have developed in India, but sometimes run the risk of simplifying the circumstances and motivations that have shaped these projects.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at the category of experimental film in its broadest sense, it seems to occupy a space in India not unlike that in Euro-American cinema. Experimental typically applies to films produced outside of mainstream industries and market-driven aesthetics such as those of Hollywood and Bollywood. Their primary goals are to render the personal visions of their artists/makers and to promote interest in new/older technologies rather than simply providing entertainment and generating revenue.<sup>9</sup> Besides, experimental is also associated with independent cinema. Since these projects are often low-budget, driven by a single member or a small team, and are self-funded or draw on bodies/grants outside of the major studios, their makers enjoy greater creative freedom. Finally, experimental films look to overturning established genres and techniques of filmmaking.

The selection of Indian fiction and non-fiction analogue films shown along with Harkat’s amateur handmade films reflected many of these features. Created by a range of practitioners who received formal training in analogue film, media, and art either in India or elsewhere (in institutions such as Bangalore and Sophia Polytechnic, Film and Television Institute of India, AJK Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia, and Bard College) or learnt on the job, these works were either backed by their makers (as in the case of Ashish

Avikunthak) or funded by public and private organisations such as Films Division of India, PSBT, Experimenta, Jhaveri Contemporary, Reitberg Museum, Xandev Foundation, and LaborBerlin. Majority of the films were experimental documentaries that challenged the colonial Griersonian notion of presenting objective perspectives on specific subjects through Voice-of-God narrations. As highly personalised works, they were shaped by auteuristic styles and preferences. They questioned conventions through insertion of fictional elements, narratives guided by memory and subjective voices, meta-filmic frameworks and subtle criticisms of the very politics that funded the projects. In terms of techniques, they played around with form through use of montage, collage, animation, stop-motion, and experimentations in filmic sound and music. Some of the works were palimpsest-like, juxtaposing and bringing together different kinds of analogue film and video material along with archival and contemporary footage. Others moved between mediums, borrowing references, metaphors and methods of representation from arts like theatre and painting to create new layers of meaning.

In terms of experimentation, they also presented what may be deemed alternative Indian ideas and storytelling practices, as put forth by Gangar in his book *Cinema of Prayoga* (2006). Gangar felt that the terms “experimental film” and “avant-garde” were too rooted in Western concepts of cinema and innovation and “inadequate for the full comprehension of the complexities occurring at the radical margins of Indian cinematographic modernity”.<sup>10</sup> Guided by what Mani Kaul had said, he pointed out the problems of the word “experimental” since it seemed to indicate that there was uncertainty in the mind of these makers, whereas this was rarely the case. “Avant-garde” on the other hand was a military word that did not capture the “intuitive”, “congenial”, and “emotional” quality to the kind of inventive work coming out of India.<sup>11</sup> “Prayoga”, however, was a more multifaceted term that implied design, device, plan, use, application, exhibition, and representation. This was more in tune with the kind of artistic, meditative practice espoused by Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, and G. Aravindan who were among the early



Stills from the India on Film programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Harkat Studios.



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pioneers of the parallel cinema movement. This kind of cinema drew on traditional Indian myths, folklore and art forms and chose non-linear narratives, fragmented plots and personalities, and cyclical notions of time to dislodge Western concepts of linear progression and neat perspectives. While I am not fully in favour of this theory or distinction (since experimental films in the West have similarly toyed with notions of time and space), Gangar's writing does provide a useful backdrop to analyse many of the works showcased by Harkat.

### **Films Division and Its Legacy**

Gangar and other film scholars trace the rise of experimental cinema in independent India to the exciting work done under the Films Division of India (FD) in the late 1960s and early 1970s by filmmakers such as S.N.S Sastry, three of whose films were shown by Harkat—*Yet In Him We Trust* (1966), *I Am Twenty* (1967), and *This Bit of That India* (1972). This was a dynamic phase in the life of the nation and the history of Indian cinema as it saw the setting up of the Film and Television Institute, the National Film Archives, the Film Finance Corporation (later NFDC), and the International Film Festival of India. These cultural institutions set the foundations of training in celluloid practices and exposed people to alternative movements in world cinema including Italian neo-realism, French new wave, and socialist films from Latin America and the Soviet Union. Alongside, there was new leadership at FD with the appointment of Jean Bhowrnagary (a UNESCO media official from Paris) as Chief Advisor, the perfect “unbureaucratic bureaucrat”<sup>12</sup> to change the profile of the organisation. It was part of the government's efforts to revive FD from a stupor it had fallen into under the burden of colonial newsreel influences and the demands by various ministries. With the hope that the unit would produce more original films that appealed to a young nation and that would probe problems even as it documented progress, FD and its makers were given more creative liberty.

This phase of “inventiveness and an inter-disciplinary approach

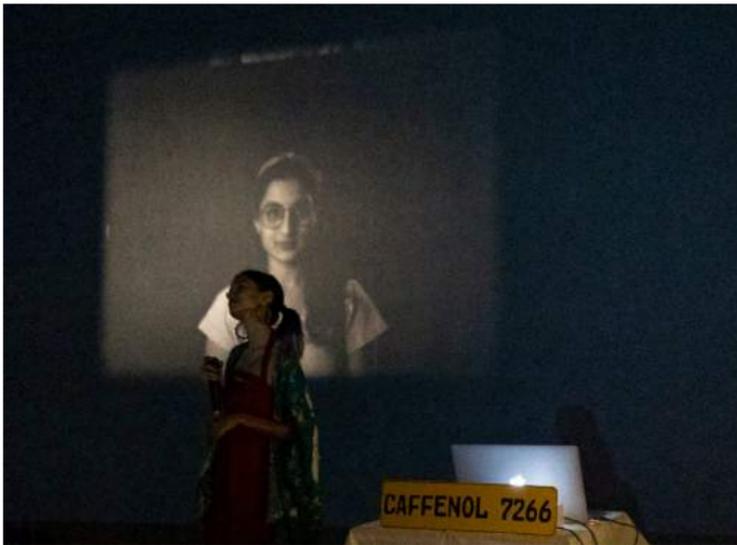
to non-fiction film”<sup>13</sup> is clearly seen in the work of Sastry who collaborated with musician Vijay Raghava Rao and photographer H.S. Kapadia. Shot in black-and-white 16 mm, Sastry’s films are unusual documentaries that seem to focus on subjects of national growth and welfare but become experiments in form and content that challenge this apparently pro-establishment veneer. In *I Am Twenty*, the classic talking-heads format is used to interview a group of young people from different classes and regions of the country, all of who were born in 1947 and reflect on the nation’s achievements and failures in its twentieth year of independence. The political is seen through the lens of the personal as they openly express their views on education, careers, hobbies, romance, marriage, life goals, citizenship, identity, and freedom. These conversations are intercut with general scenes of cities, villages, trains, factories, dams, farming, homes, offices and festivities. Even as the nation embraces modern industry and enterprise, Sastry points to a few disillusioned and critical voices that are well aware of its backwardness on many fronts. The scepticism is also built into segments where clips of leisure, celebration, and development are intercepted by those of poverty and gruelling labour. A similar kind of cross-cutting is seen in *This Bit of That India* which is shot on educational campuses that highlight the nation’s investment in science and technology. Official tones and instructions by researchers and teachers are suddenly interrupted by student voices complaining and revolting. The shots of men and women freely interacting, dancing and flirting on campuses along with flower power songs is contrasted with sudden scenes and sounds from a play (*The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca) where a domineering matriarch mourns the suicide of her virgin daughter. The coexistence and clash of tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and sexual and intellectual liberation, are represented in an arresting montage of images. Besides these documentaries, Sastry was also allowed to make wildly experimental works such as *Yet In Him We Trust* which is a short silent sequence of frames that use cut-outs of faces, shapes, and symbols in abstract collages to comment on our blind and enduring faith in God and his creations.

These films make for an interesting case study since they show how some of the initial Indian experimental films in analogue emerged not from alternative spaces and ideologies but in negotiation and collaboration with state funding and government bodies. One of the characters in *I Am Twenty* comments on how he sees the young nation as an “experiment” and would like to be a part of this project. This seems to echo the voice of the filmmaker who sees a parallel between aesthetic and nation-building practices and the triumphs and risks involved in both.

As a contemporary take on these early Films Division works, Harkat also presented Avijit Mukul Kishore and Rohan Shivkumar’s *Nostalgia for the Future* (2017), a film that explores the construction of national identity and modern citizenship through the discourses of architecture and urban housing. Covering various private homes and public spaces—Lakshmi Vilas Palace (Baroda), Villa Shodhan, and Sabarmati Ashram (Ahmedabad), the Lutyen’s complex and government flats (Delhi), administrative buildings in Chandigarh, rising real estate in New Bombay—the film adopts an unusual tone and layered look. Shot on 16 mm and digital video, it contains archival material from FD and Bollywood but also has new sections shot on celluloid that replicate the feel of 1960s and 1970s film. Instead of a paternalistic authoritarian voiceover, a softer poetic narrative voice is used, interspersed with personal interviews that bring alive the lived experiences of places and make clear the ideologies and natural forces that shaped them. Through self-reflexive scenes of recording, the film also foregrounds its gaze and brings the makers to the same level as their subjects, contrary to standard practices followed by older state and independent documentarians. In both form and content, this film represents a self-aware engagement with celluloid and national history.

## Reimagining the City

Even after Bhowmashree’s term ended at the FD, the unit continued to back filmmakers of an experimental bent, especially those



Stills from the India on Film screening programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photographs by Harkat Studios.



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associated with the parallel cinema movement, such as Mani Kaul who shot *Arrival* (1979) on 35 mm. Providing vignettes of migrant life and labour in Bombay and its outskirts, the film takes us through construction sites, busy streets and markets, crowded railway stations, cheap restaurants, tanneries, meat-hacking factories, and godowns. Long tracking shots are followed by rapidly edited scenes; panoramas give way to close ups of human faces and objects; architecture both frames and interrupts the compositions. True to his auteur style, Kaul refrains from linear narratives and neat endings, instead providing viewers with fragments of haunted faces and bodies that comment on the struggles of the working-class in the city.

*Arrival* compares interestingly with two other city films screened by Harkat—Panchal Mansaram's *Devi, Stuffed Goat and Pink Cloth* (1967) and Bernd Lützel's *The Voice of God* (2011). Unlike Kaul's work which is gritty and political in content, these other films are more interested in an aesthetic play of form and depictions. Shot on 16 mm, Mansaram creates a "collage of motion"<sup>14</sup> out of everyday street scenes as the protagonist walks along the seafront in Bombay, observing fairground performers and games, roadside shrines, shop signs, posters and hoardings while occasionally stopping to take in the sea breeze and waves. The frames replicate a visual flânerie with colours and sounds rendered in an impressionistic fashion. Lützel uses Kodak Super 8 and 35 mm and the techniques of stop-motion and long exposure to create heady scenes of the unending flow of human activities and traffic on Mumbai's streets. The baritone voiceover in Sanskrit by Harish Bhimani (who was the voice of Samay/Time in the popular Doordarshan *Mahabharat* series) attempts to uplift this docu-drama to cosmic levels, only to be mockingly put in check by a mechanical voice playing public safety alerts on loop.

This coming together of the divine and the profane finds new evocations in the films of Ashish Avikunthak whose *Kalighat Athikatha* (1999) and *Brihnnala ki Khelkali* (2002) are set in the Kolkata neighbourhood and house where the filmmaker grew up. These spaces contain the hauntings of time and memory, captured

through a haptic effect on 35 mm film. Avikunthak is interested in local rituals and performance traditions, be they sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the dance of the Bahurupi (a man dressed as Kali) or the actor in a Kathakali outfit playing a Shakespearan Caliban who mocks at our postcolonial obsessions with the bard's language. These grand divine and literary appropriations play out against a backdrop of scenes of daily life in the city as the passage of time and movement continue in a cyclical pattern of birth, death and transformation. This interest in the theatre of the local and divine is also seen in Amitabh Chakraborty's *Kaal Abhirati* (1989). Shot in real time, the non-linear narrative captures an artist and his fragmented encounters with various people he meets as he roams the corridors of his house and the lanes of his neighbourhood and city. The scenes resemble theatre being enacted and unfolding on film. Death, dressed in white garb, appears from time to time, as the artist is born and reborn. These later reimaginings of urban spaces and life take celluloid away from realism into mythic forms and tales, a distinctly Indian feature that Gangar feels defines the "Cinema of Prayoga".

### **Artistic Underpinnings**

Keeping in mind this close interaction of celluloid and the other arts, a section of "India on Film" screened experimental films made by painters along with ones that creatively brought alive artistic lives and techniques. Among them were Akbar Padamsee's *Syzygy* (1970), and Ashim Ahluwalia's *Events in a Cloud Chamber* (2016) that recreated Padamsee's lost film of the same name. Padamsee's works on analogue film were aesthetically radical: art historian Nancy Adajania refers to them as "new media overtures" that existed before the genre and term became popular.<sup>15</sup> These films emerged from the Vision Exchange Workshop that was established by Padamsee at his Nepean Sea Road home in 1969 with a Jawaharlal Nehru fellowship. Working with friends Bhupendra Karia and Krishen Khanna, Padamsee set up a darkroom for experimental photography, an etching press for printmaking and facilities for editing and projecting film. Influenced

by artist Paul Klee's pedagogical diagrams along with new work on coding and programming done by the likes of Bela Bartok, John Cage, Karlein Stockhausen, and Ianis Xenakis in the '60s, Padamsee became interested in patterns and abstract art created by chance and happenstance; he was not bothered about pictoriality and narrative. This is evident in *Szyzygy*, an 11-minute silent film with black-and-white stop-motion animation where a series of dots, lines and numbers generate forms and shapes.

Unfortunately, we have no idea what the original *Events* looked like since the only print created through a colour reversal process was misplaced in the 1970s. From interviews with Padamsee and those who attended the first few screenings, we have a sense that it was a six-minute film, shot on a 16 mm Bolex, and "featured a single colour image of a dreamlike landscape".<sup>16</sup> The artist tried to recreate one of his oil paintings by using projected light through differently coloured filters and stencils instead of applied pigments. This was done through a laborious process of shooting each coloured section separately and then superimposing the entire footage to create a composite image. With this knowledge, Ashim Ahluwalia set out to revive Padamsee's vision and created a loving tribute to the aging artist. Shot on Kodak Super 8 and 16 mm, Ahluwalia put together the film with videos shot by his own grandfather, archival footage from FD, photographs of Padamsee's exhibitions, and home videos of the artist at his residence. *Events* feels like a lost film made with seemingly lost pieces of celluloid. It is more a memory project than a standard documentary biography; its tone is derived from an uncertain narrator who half remembers things and from a maker who has no clear reference to what he must reimagine. It overturns the idea of art outliving human lives since it is as much about the fragility of celluloid as it is about mortality.

The vagaries of memories and dreams are also evoked in Payal Kapadia's *Afternoon Clouds*, a fiction film shot on 35 mm that provides brief glimpses into the lives of an elderly woman and her maid. A chance encounter on the staircase with a sailor from her village takes



A still from India on Film programme at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Harkat Studios.



the young girl back to recollections of a lost love. But her thoughts get shrouded both literally and metaphorically by the clouds of insect repellents being sprayed in the building. In her use of light and shadow and rich tonality of colour, Kapadia's frames seem to evoke the painted compositions of Arpita Singh. While the attention here is more to quiet life and detail, a different kind of painterly touch emerges from the large canvas in which Amit Dutta shoots *Nainsukh* (2010), his tribute to the eighteenth-century Pahari artist who worked under the patronage of the princes of Jasrota. The film uses Nainsukh's miniature paintings to recreate scenes from his life amid the ruins of historic palaces and forts in the Kangra valley, and builds an immersive sound design through bird call, the rustle of leaves, the flow of water, and traditional songs and instruments. Here painting serves as not just source material but also dictates the patterns of storytelling: smooth tracking shots or long takes on a wide screen accommodate different characters and layers of activities. Dutta wields the camera with as much steadiness as a landscape painter uses his brush. The original sketches by Nainsukh are interspersed between the cinematic scenes, as two mediums are welded together to take forward the stories. The framing of nature and village life in stark black-and-white celluloid makes the image look like ink drawings in the opening frames of a third unusual biography that was screened by Harkat—*An Old Dog's Diary* (2015). Shot on 16 mm and Kodak Super 8 by Shai Heredia and Shumona Goel, the film draws a portrait of the artist F.N. Souza through his writings, paintings, photographs and time-worn images of the objects, rooms, and surroundings of his home. A Passion of Christ procession scene, captured on grainy home-video like footage, brings to life Souza's childhood memories of Saligao and serves as a symbol of his tortured soul and struggle with religion. The fragments and vignettes juxtaposed in a non-linear fashion serve as a metaphor for the fragmented life of the artist.

## Loss and Preservation

Heredia and Goel's work brings us to one of the closing films of Harkat's programme—*I Am Micro* (2012), a black-and-white film that ironically uses the digital to remember analogue film. Made on a 35 mm DSLR, it returns to the subject of the demise of celluloid and provides a moment of pause and contemplation amid all the discussions that have been building up so far. Slow tracking shots take us through now defunct film laboratories, abandoned offices, and dark and dilapidated godowns. Old files, rusty machines (cameras, splicers, and projectors), chipped teacups, faded posters, and dusty furniture add to this atmosphere of debris. We catch occasional glimpses of a low-budget film crew shooting. On the audio track, Kamal Swaroop, one of the doyens of the Indian alternative cinema movement, reflects on his own career and the larger struggle between “arthouse” and “commercial” cinema, “his abstracted voice acting as a free-floating signifier of the ‘micro’”.<sup>17</sup>

Much like the film and Shai's ongoing work with *Experimenta*, Harkat's project aims to draw attention to these micro/parallel voices that have withstood the dominating force of mainstream Hindi cinema to create a counter movement of their own, in collaboration with avant-garde experiments in fine arts and theatre.<sup>18</sup> With regard to the hopes of reviving celluloid practices, the situation is more complex. As *I Am Micro* reflects on the last vestiges of celluloid cinema, the tone is as much about nostalgia as it is a reminder of a larger social and industrial history attached to the material medium of cinema. This is a history associated with the National Instruments Laboratory (the first and only manufacturer of still cameras in India), Hindustan Photo Film (India's only film manufacturing public sector company), and many other similar industries and associated professions that have closed down or disappeared in the last two decades. In the gap left behind, much of the material, technologies, and knowledge associated with celluloid float around and survive in vintage and second-hand markets of circulation and through networks established by the odd few hobbyists who still wish to

tinker around with old machines and forms (Karan Talwar discovered one of his projectors through one such man who works as a tailor in Dahisar and repairs projectors on weekends). While Kodak, Ilford, and Fuji continue to produce and distribute motion picture cameras worldwide, and the Kodak Filmlab in Mumbai was re-established in 2018 to cater to the needs of Indian filmmakers still committed to celluloid, the understanding is that the greater bulk of analogue practices will survive only through continuing collaborations with digital. Even film schools can no longer afford to train students in pure celluloid, but can at best include the occasional course or workshop for those still interested in working with the medium. Those who wish to preserve and celebrate older Indian works on celluloid must turn to programmes run by the National Film Archives, Shivendra Singh Dungarpur’s Film Heritage Foundation, and FD Zone.<sup>19</sup> And for those invested in the “flecks, blurs and scratches” of handmade films in India, the explorations will require the continuing support of niche art festivals such as Serendipity and studios like Harkat who are already planning more 16 mm workshops with LaborBerlin and hope to take their projects to Oberhausen and other foreign independent film platforms in the coming years.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tess Takahashi, “Writing the World: Medium Specificity and Avant-Garde Film in the Digital Age”, in *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age*, edited by Scott Mackenzie and Janine Marchessault (Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 459.

<sup>2</sup> LaborBerlin is an artist-run lab with facilities for processing, editing, printing, and projecting films on 16 and 8 mm.

<sup>3</sup> 35 mm is the oldest variety of film stock and has traditionally been used for big-screen feature films. 16 and 8 mm were introduced in the 1930s and cater to low-budget filmmaking and home videos.

<sup>4</sup> The phenakistoscope was the first widespread animation device, invented around 1833, that created a fluent illusion of motion. The installation consisted of a sequence of images arranged on a disc, which when spun showed a rapid succession of faces, adding up to a single moving image.

<sup>5</sup> Video camcorders such as Betacam and VHS-C were frequently used in the 1980s and 1990s, especially by documentary filmmakers in India. For more on this, see Guilia Battaglia, “*The Advent of Video Technology*”, in *Documentary Film in India* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 109–128.

<sup>6</sup> The points in this section have been derived from interviews with established and amateur film practitioners who were featured in “India on Film.” Additional sources include Takahashi’s essay and *Film in the Present Tense*, press kit for the International Symposium on Current Developments in Analogue Film Culture (October 20–27, 2017), organised by LaborBerlin ([http://www.laborberlin-film.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PressKit\\_long\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.laborberlin-film.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PressKit_long_ENG.pdf), accessed February 15, 2020). The argument about authorship is complicated and does not deny the presence of authorial vision and control in digital filmmaking.

<sup>7</sup> Experimenta, “Cinema of Prayoga”, <http://experimenta.in/cinema-of-prayoga/> (accessed February 19, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Gangar refers to a wide range of political and creative work under the category of “Cinema of Prayoga”. While filmmakers like Mani Kaul and Ashish Avikunthak have agreed with Gangar’s categorisation, this is not a term championed by all the filmmakers discussed by the scholar and included in Harkat’s programme. As has been pointed out later in the essay, the theory emphasised uniquely Indian forms of storytelling; but many makers drew on influences and training from the West. Even the aspects of filmmaking were not always defined by “prayoga” or independent meditative practice. In the case of the FD films, it was the demand to present a large amount of material within

a short-length format and the need to present criticisms in guised forms that often inspired inventive approaches.

<sup>9</sup> However, this does not mean that experiments have not been tried within more commercial domains.

<sup>10</sup> Amrit Gangar, “The Moving Image: Looped, to be Muk!—The *Cinema Prayoga* Conscience”, *MIRAJ*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2012), 192.

<sup>11</sup> Amrit Gangar, “The Moving Image: Looped, to be Muk!—The *Cinema Prayoga* Conscience”, 196.

<sup>12</sup> Ritika Kaushik, “Sun in the Belly’: Film Practice at Films Division of India, 1965–1975”, *BioScope*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2017), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Avijit Mukul Kishore, “You’ve Told Me That Three Times Now! Propaganda/anti-propaganda in the Films Division India Documentaries”, *MIRAJ*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2018), p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> <https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2014/04/29/mansaram-at-a-space-gallery-toronto/> (accessed May 5, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Adajania, “New Media Overtures before New Media Practice in India”, in *Art and Visual Culture in India*, ed. by Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai: Marg, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Murtaza Vali on *Events in a Cloud Chamber*, <http://futureeast.com/news/26-nov-24-dec-2016-events-in-a-cloud-chamber-at-jhaveri-contemporary> (accessed February 5, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Debashree Mukherjee, “The Politics of Making Uncanny: Two Recent Experimental Films from India”, *Art Papers*, Issue 37, No. 1 (2013), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> The location of Harkat’s project inside the old GIM which was hosting two other shows on alternative histories of Indian photography and art (*Look, Stranger!* curated by Rahab Allana, and

*Counter-Canon Counter-Culture: Alternative Histories of Indian Art* by Nancy Adajania respectively) highlighted interesting connections and parallels.

<sup>19</sup> The Film Heritage Foundation, Mumbai, set up in 2014, preserves negative reels of old films and conducts workshops for film restoration. FD Zone is a curated programme, started in 2012 by the then Films Division Director General, V.S. Kundu. It organises free weekly screenings of old and new documentaries and animation films at the Films Division's Mumbai office.

## Biography

**Mrinalini Vasudevan** is Senior Assistant Editor at *Marg*, one of India's longest running arts journals. She has a background in English Literature and Arts and Aesthetics and is interested in urban studies, popular culture, cinema and advertising. She has contributed articles and reviews to *The Hindu* and *The Four Quarters Magazine*, edited a book on Jamshedpur for Tata Steel and conducted a workshop at the O.P. Jindal Global University's Editing in Practice course.

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# PROJECTS

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