

## Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express: Accessing and Remembering a Mythical City

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### Abstract

As a Pakistani who grew up watching pirated Bollywood cinema, I have an intimate but distant relationship with Mumbai on screen. I have been watching fewer Bollywood films lately and am also starting to forget the narratives of the ones I watched growing up. But I still remember certain details of my mythical Mumbai, as constructed by the Hindi films I consumed as a child and teenager. In my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023), I use Hindi film imagery of Mumbai's local railways as a means of transportation to this mythical city. The video is a comment on my relationship with this city, its trains, and the films that feature them. Intended to be played as a loop, much like imagery being replayed in one's mind, the video makes use of fragmented, glitchy footage from *Saathiya* ("Companion," Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* ("The Last Local of 1:40," Khanduri 2007), two films that feature the city and its railway system. In this essay, I reflect on the process of making the video loop and build on scholarship and works that explore how films depict and construct spaces, how they bypass bans and barriers, how they travel and transport viewers, and how they are remembered and forgotten.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, India, Bollywood, Hindi cinema, Mumbai, Bombay, trains

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## Introduction

Films are able to traverse borders and boundaries in ways that few objects can. I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, where films from India were banned. Yet, as was the case for millions across Pakistan, Bollywood was the first cinema I was introduced to. When I was growing up in the 1990s, we watched pirated films on VHS tapes at home, later switching to VCDs and then DVDs. In 2006 the Bollywood ban was lifted, only to be enforced again in 2019. Despite this, viewers can today watch Hindi films on streaming platforms. One way or another, movies have always managed to travel from India to Pakistan. I no longer watch many Bollywood films, but the ones I watched as a child and teenager continue to live and evolve in my mind.

Films transport viewers temporally and geographically. When watching Hindi films in Karachi, I would often find myself transported to Mumbai. These expeditions had no visa requirements. I could visit as often as I liked, for as long as I wanted. Years later, even as I have forgotten the plots of many films, I remember details of the mythical city<sup>1</sup> I have spent countless hours visiting. The prominent presence of the Mumbai Suburban Railways is one such detail about this mythical city—a carefully curated Mumbai constructed by the “family films” I watched growing up—that has lingered in my mind.

I use the Hindi film imagery of these trains as a means of transportation to the mythical city in my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023). The video, intended to be played as a loop, comments on my relationship with this mythical city and builds on my previous collaborative visual essay *Duur Pass* (“Near Far,” Naveed and Drabu 2022). It primarily comprises glitchy, fragmented footage from two Hindi films that prominently feature Mumbai’s local railways. These are *Saathiya* (“Companion,” Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (“The Last Local of 1:40,” Khanduri 2007). Through the video, I comment on the way in which films travel and transport viewers, how they are remembered and forgotten, and how they construct spaces.

I begin this essay by drawing from Ranjani Mazumdar’s work on Bombay cinema, as an archive of the city and urban subjectivities. I then define what I mean by my mythical Mumbai, and reflect on the disparity between this and the “real” city. In the next

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “mythical city” as Wim Wenders does in his documentary *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), to refer to an “ordered” city one knows from cinema, which is at odds with the “reality” of said city. Wenders says, “The more the reality of Tokyo struck me as a tour of impersonal, unkind, threatening, yes, even inhuman images, the greater and more powerful became in my mind the images of the loving and ordered world of the mythical city of Tokyo that I knew from the films of Yasujiro Ozu” (20:00).

section, I engage with Victor Burgin and Cormac Donnelly's work on memory, film, and alternative narratives. I then examine glitch imagery's role in the video and how artists have used this technique to deconstruct media texts. I conclude the section by detailing why I chose to distort the image and soundscape, and what is achieved by deemphasizing a linear narrative. In the third section, I analyze *Tokyo-Ga* (Wenders 1985)—one filmmaker's loving attempt to find Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo, two decades after the latter filmmaker's death. I also revisit the ideas of imagined cities I previously explored with Onaiza Drabu. In the final section, I analyze the two Hindi films, focusing on the role trains play in them and on how the movies construct Mumbai.

### The changing city

In her book *Bombay Cinema*, Mazumdar argues that cinema is “the most innovative archive of the city in India” (2007, xxxi). Bombay has seen rapid expansion over the past three decades, and this construction and restructuring has transformed the city on-screen too. The “cinematic city” also continues to evolve with technological advancements, and with changes in filmmaking conventions and trends. Mazumdar cites multiple examples from low-budget fringe cinema films from the early 2000s that create a “refreshingly different” cinematic archive through their inventive use of the urban space (2007, 210).

My yearning for my mythical Mumbai, on the other hand, is an emotional response, resistant to change. I acknowledge the changing face of the cinematic city in *Duur Paas* (Naveed and Drabu 2022), complaining like one does to a loved one who now seems like a stranger. Addressing the city, I write, “Tum badl gayeh ho; Kabhi aesa lagta hai main tumhe janta hee nahin hoon [You have changed; sometimes I feel like I don't even know you].” I then ask, “Bombay, Mumbai; Tumhe kis naam se pukaroon? [Bombay, Mumbai; what name should I call you by?]” I reference the city's name change to highlight how it is constantly evolving.

But the mythical Mumbai in my mind is stuck in time, struggling to remain unchanged. It is informed by the city that I witnessed and experienced in films in the 1990s and early 2000s. These were not films that I chose to watch myself. The decision-making fell on the elders in my family, who would usually allow us children to watch non-violent

love stories and family films.<sup>2</sup> Mazumdar notes that there was an “intriguing dislocation of the ‘real’ and the virtual city” in family films, which presented a sanitized Mumbai for Indian and diasporic audiences (2007, 110). While films such as *Satya* (“Truth,” Varma 1998) showed a grimmer Mumbai during the same time period, these were not accessible to me as a child and did not complicate my view of the mythical city.

*Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023) also explores my changing relationship with the mythical city and my inability to access this space with the ease that I could as a child. While *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) is the sort of family film I grew up watching, *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007), which I watched during my rebellious teenage years, is decidedly not. Both films are comedy dramas that center around a middle class heterosexual couple’s love story, but the latter has crude sexual humor and is set in a more violent city. While *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) presents Mumbai as a space where all of one’s dreams can come true overnight, it also attempts to construct a more “real” version of the city. The film even references actual events such as the 2002 Mumbai bus bombing.

By juxtaposing imagery from these films, I highlight the instability of the mythical city. As the content and concerns explored in Bollywood films have evolved, so has the city on-screen. The mythical city I experienced growing up now struggles to persist in memory.

### The remembered city

In the video essay *Can I Remember It Differently* (2022), Donnelly explores how the audiences’ relationship with film plots changes over the years. He revisits a plot point from *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002), a film he first reviewed as a budding critic for a small online magazine. Donnelly says that at the time, he wrote only four words about the protagonist, John Anderton (Tom Cruise), losing his son. But, he notes, the scene has “subsequently hit me hard” (2022, 1:23). This “fractured memory of a scene” has gained new meaning, “grafted onto the memory of a real event” (Donnelly 2022, 3:01). The actual event he describes is “a breathless 90 seconds” he spent searching for his son after losing him at the zoo (2022, 3:18). As a father, Donnelly can understand Anderton’s parental fears and helplessness.

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<sup>2</sup> By family films I mean both films that depict families and “traditional” family values, and films that are considered appropriate viewing for the whole family.

The Mumbai local trains I watched in films growing up have similarly become more significant to me of late. I believe this may stem from a desire to be transported to a city that is not only difficult to access for me as a Pakistani, but one that does not exist at all.

Donnelly quotes from *The Remembered Film* (Burgin 2004, 67-68):

*The more the film is distanced in memory, the more the binding effect of the narrative is loosened. The sequence breaks apart. The fragments go adrift and enter into new combinations, more or less transitory, in the eddies of memory: memories of other films, and memories of real events.*

The idea of fragments melding into new, transitory combinations informs the visual structure of *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (Naveed 2023). While visualizing the project, I overlaid fragmented imagery from two films. The multilayered, multiscreen image took the form of glitchy, corrupt footage. I also changed the speed of the clips to deemphasize a linear narrative. But an alternative narrative appeared. The figure of a man—originally Aditya (Vivek Oberoi) from *Saathiya* (Ali 2002)—seems to be searching for something, yet what he is searching for is unclear. I arrived at this imagery after experimenting with various sequences. Perhaps the image of a figure stuck in a loop reminded me of my own search for an elusive mythical city.

With the imagery, I attempt to visualize the glitches in memory. This approach draws inspiration from the works of early video artists such as Joan Jonas, who used glitch imagery in her video *Vertical Roll* (1972), and Dara Birnbaum, who reedited footage from the famous superhero show *Wonder Woman* (Cramer and Baumes 1975-1979) for her video *Technology Transformation/Wonder Woman* (1978-1979). I must also mention here the Pakistani installation artist Rashid Rana. His work *All Eyes Skywards During the Annual Parade* (Rana 2004) forms a large, pixelated image of a crowd excitedly observing a Pakistani military parade. Upon closer inspection, the viewer discovers that this image of nationalist fervor is constructed entirely of imagery from Bollywood films.

Much like the visuals, the soundscape of *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (Naveed 2023) has multiple layers. Mechanical train sounds play on repeatedly. These sounds continue, only briefly making way for a dialogue taken from *Ek Chalīs Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007), as featured in the song *Laree Chootee* (“Missed the Train,” Call 2007) by the Pakistani band “Call”. This is a rare moment of clarity in the video, where the noise makes way for narrative cohesion. This is because, even before I revisited the film for this essay and rediscovered the dialogue there, I had clearly remembered it

from the song “*Laree Chootee*.” The song would repeatedly play on television in Pakistan; the Bollywood ban was not in place at the time.

Burgin writes, “Films are today dislocated and dismantled even without intervention by the spectator,” (2004, 8-9). Nowadays, a “film” can be “encountered” through marketing materials, reviews, etc. (2004, 9). Years later, as the plot of *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) eluded me, the marketing material, in the form of a song, was the clearest source of narrative information in my mind. The dialogue in the song (and film) goes as follows:

*Mumbai, I had heard that a man here spends his entire life attempting to bring his destiny from the slow track to the fast track, but I never thought that in only 2.5 hours my destiny will go from the slow track to the fast track like this.*<sup>3</sup>

(Call 2007, 1:35)

The dialogue highlights an outsider’s perspective about the city. Even before arriving, he already knew it to be a space full of possibilities.

### The mythical city

*Tokyo-Ga* (Wenders 1985) starts with the opening credits and first scene from *Tokyo Story* (Ozu 1953). We first see shots of Onomichi, a city in Western Japan. We see the port. We see children walking by. And, finally, we see shots of a train. An extreme-long shot (ELS) shows the train moving through a mountainous area. The shot features some house roofs and an electricity pole in the foreground, the train and more houses in the middle ground, and expansive green mountains, with the sky peering from the side, in the background. After another shot of the train, we see a retired couple sitting in their home, packing up for a trip. They tell a neighbor that they are going to visit their children in Tokyo. After the scene, Wenders interjects with a voiceover about his own trip to Tokyo, in search of the mythical city he has seen in Ozu’s films (1985, 4:30):

*And such a sacred treasure of the cinema could only reside in the realm of the imagination. And so, my trip to Tokyo was in no way a pilgrimage. I was curious if I still could track down something from this time. Whether there was still anything left of this work. Images, perhaps. Or even people. Or whether so much would’ve changed in Tokyo in the 20 years since Ozu’s*

<sup>3</sup> I reference the song here rather than the film because it’s the song from which I first remembered the dialogue.

*death that nothing would be left to find.*

The first visuals we see from Wender's Tokyo footage is a low-angle shot of a newer bullet train in Tokyo. This is a visual very different from the trains in Ozu's films. A menacing music plays as the seemingly never-ending train continues to pass. Wenders cuts before we see the end of the train, effectively elongating it further. He then cuts to a busy cityscape that a train is moving across. We see tall buildings with billboards in the shot. We see more construction happening. And we see cars rushing along wide roads and across another overhead bridge. The image is chaotic. At one point, the traffic and three trains go in different directions. This is not Ozu's Tokyo.

Wenders describes not having the slightest recollection of his time in Tokyo. He says that he knows he was there during the spring of 1983 and he has footage to prove it. "These images now exist and they have become my memory," he says (Wenders 1985, 5:37). He wonders if he would better remember his trip had he been there without his camera. Throughout the film, Wenders tries to find Ozu's Tokyo. He also questions what is real and what is not.

In the essay *Duur Paas* (Naveed and Drabu 2022), like Wenders, I questioned how real a city is that I have experienced through films. This essay was where I first started working with glitch imagery and approaching the Mumbai in my mind as a construct. I briefly discussed two train scenes: one from *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) and another from *Life in a... Metro* (Basu 2007). *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) appeared in that essay only as a footnote.

Drabu, who grew up in Srinagar and Delhi, responded by reconstructing her Lahore. She used archival photographs and memories from the city as she had experienced it from poetry and literature before ever visiting it. We intimately knew these cities while growing up. Although the "real" cities were difficult to access, we would be transported to the mythical cities by words and imagery that transcended borders.

### The accessible city

I will conclude this essay with an analysis of the films *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007). Specifically, I will focus on the different roles trains play in the two Bollywood films and in my video.

*Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) tells the story of Nilesh (Abhay Deol), a young



man working at a call center in Mumbai. He misses the last train at 1:40 am after a night of drinking with his friends. A police constable tells him that he cannot stay at the train station. Nilesh then tries to catch a rickshaw back home, but the drivers are on strike to protest the arrest of a fellow rickshaw driver in relation to a bombing. Nilesh ends up wandering around the city with Madhu (Neha Dhupia), a young woman returning from her friend's engagement party, who is also trying to find her way back home.

Nilesh is an outsider in Mumbai. He is from Delhi. He complains about the 1:40 am train being the last. "That's why Delhi is Delhi," he says. "Not like here. The last local at 1:40, the first local at 4:10. If you walk on the roads, then this is the condition. And they want to make Mumbai Shanghai" (Khanduri 2007, 16:48).

The fact that Nilesh is an outsider is underscored multiple times. When it momentarily rains and then subsequently stops, he comments on the unpredictability of Bombay weather. When a car speeds down the road, almost running him and Madhu over, he claims that if they were in Delhi, he would have beaten the driver up. When dogs bark at him and Madhu, he points out that these are Mumbai dogs. "And if they were from Delhi, you would've gone into the alley and beaten them up, right?" Madhu jokes (Khanduri 2007, 17:22).

By the end of the film, Nilesh has a car, a Rolex watch, and an apartment. He also ends up with the girl. He is grateful that Mumbai didn't become Shanghai; missing the train was the best thing that ever happened to him. The city may appear unforgiving, but it can make dreams come true. As Mazumdar writes, the cinematic city is "an archive that is deeply saturated with urban dreams, desires, and fears" (2007, xxxv).

*Saathiya* (Ali 2002) takes a slightly different approach. The local trains play a big role in the union of Aditya and Suhani (Rani Mukherji) in this story too, but the film doesn't end after the romantic connection. The couple elopes after their fathers disapprove of their match, only to find that married life is full of struggles.

The film begins at the end. Aditya is biking through the city, on a high from having received some good news, when the police stop him and tell him to turn around. There's a diversion because of a hit-and-run near the railway station. It is revealed only towards the end of the film that it is Suhani who was hit.

When Suhani does not return home, Aditya, later joined by his friends, runs around the station. They check train after train in hope of finding her. These are the same local trains where Aditya first started flirting with Suhani; this is where he expressed his love



to her. It is at the train station that Suhani first broke up with Aditya after his father met her father in the way that “[Pakistani President] Musharraf met [Indian Prime Minister] Vajpayee Ji,” (Ali 2002, 39:53). And it is on the Kennedy Bridge, named after a British railway engineer, where Suhani is hit by a car.

The train has a prominent presence in the film. One of its key functions is that of a narrative device. As we cut between Aditya and Suhani’s love story, and Aditya’s search for Suhani after she goes missing, the train is used to transport the audience from one timeline to the other. Even in scenes where the transition happens without the visual presence of trains, we hear the non-diegetic sound of drums being played like a moving train (Ali 2002, 1:12:53).

I too employ the train as a means of jumping between memories of films in my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023). Similarly, as an outsider myself, who has accessed the city through cinema, I am drawn to Nilesh’s story even more after revisiting the film’s narrative. Nilesh, the proud owner of a brand new car, probably stops taking the locals after the fateful night portrayed in the film. Suhani and Aditya’s relationships, with each other and with the local trains, must also have evolved over the years. But, in the films, these characters, the mythical city they inhabit, and the local trains they take remain unchanged, frozen in time.

In a few years, I may again start forgetting the stories of Nilesh, Madhu, Suhani, and Aditya. Mumbai will continue to change, and so will its depictions in Hindi films. But, I suspect, my memories of the mythical city, accessible through the films I watched while growing up, and the power of a cinematic railway network that can transcend borders and bypass bans, will continue to stay and evolve in my mind for many years to come.

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