FILM FARE

The intersections between cinema and the city offer artists, architects, film-makers and researchers different zones to investigate the multiple lives of the projected image. **Sayandeb Chowdhury** provides a perspective on the success and failure of a show that purports to explore the big picture.

In the June of 1878, American photographer Eadweard Muybridge photographed a moving horse on a California farm, thereby capturing motion on picture for the first time. *The Horse in Motion* was not just a technological feat but a cultural feat too. What Muybridge effectively achieved was a transformation of the horse into a representational object and its movement into a new visual language. The relation between object and visuality, which had already been 'fixed' by photographic innovations in the early 19th century, underwent an irretrievable transmutation. Early cinema guaranteed that this transmutation between moving objects and their representation affected the very *representability* of early 20th century modernity. What was to be captured in motion and how became the defining questions of Modernism. And in these questions, the city became the focal point, the *raison d'être* of cinema itself. The growing European and American metropolises became the hubs of this new language of representation and a new culture of movie-making grew apace.

As cinema arrived, incubated within the economic-cultural logic of the spectacle, it ensured that the modern city was effectively represented. By the first decades of the 20th century, the metropolis (first in the West, and then in India too) was *written* all over cinema, as it was *inscribed* in and on most literary avant-garde movements. Since then, cinema and the city have bonded in a scopophilic union. As film scholar Martin Shiel writes: "Formally, the cinema has long had a striking and distinctive ability to capture and express the spatial complexity, diversity and social dynamism of the city through mise-en-scène, location filming, lighting, cinematography and editing, while thinkers from Walter Benjamin to Jean

Baudrillard have recognized and observed the curious and telling correlation between the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the city and the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the cinema."[1]

The exhibition *Project Cinema City* seems to have been born out of Shiel's words. Curated by filmmaker Madhusree Dutta and supported by KRVIA, NGMA and Majlis, the expansive show is an interpretation of the indices of alignments that cinema and the city share – alignments that are fixed and mobile, remembered and

whispered, mythologised and fetishised. Subtitled *Research Art and Documentary Practices,* the exhibition attempts to create several artistic positions – compliant and transgressive at the same time – within the larger body-politic of the cinema-city relationship. Dutta invited established and young artists as well as architects and researchers to create artworks that dipped into existing and new research on cinema's material culture, its histories (hidden and obvious) and its libidinal economies. The result is a slightly over-intellectualised but original artistic investigation into Mumbai's multiple selves and their modes of *inhabiting* cinema.

Dutta maintains that the exhibition, which toured Mumbai in the summer (from the 19th of May to the 29th of June) and Delhi during the monsoon (from the 17th of August to the 16th of September), is a work-in-progress. Dutta is right in arguing that Asian cities have a relationship with cinema that cannot be reduced to a generic understanding of the *cinematic city*. To that end, Dutta's ideas and industriousness are commendable. *Project Cinema City* is, however, not an actual archive. Neither is it a collection of material from the past

of Bombay. It is art, made and curated to refer to a host of materialisms around the cinematic city of Bombay/Mumbai. As the website for the exhibition states, "The interdisciplinary project engages with issues of labour, imagination, desire, access, spacing and locations, iconisation, materiality, language hybridity, moving people, viewing conventions, hidden processes and so on."

Clearly, this is no easy task, especially when there are no easy trade-offs, no usual representational trappings of photography or videography. The works here are as representational as they are self-reflexive. For example, *The Calendar Project* comprises 60 prints by various artists in which an year on a calendar corresponds to delectable moments in cinema and events in public life. One such imagined 1957 calendar by Kamal Swaroop featuring a 'Govardhan Umbrella' shows a kitschy Krishna figure dominating the top panel, trying to blanket the vertical nightscape of Mumbai from heavy rains, while a small cut-out of the famous scene from *Shree 420* (1955) depicting Raj Kapoor and Nargis under a black umbrella occupies the space below. The connections are immediate and

obvious. And autotelic. The associations in most of these calendars, between the explorations of social and mythological themes in cinema and a wide variety of products from tractors to condoms, work in a self-consciously ironic way, reinforcing the reach and riches of contemporary Indian art and its accomplished practitioners.

Bottom: Various artists. *The Calendar Project* (Detail). Installation view at the NGMA, Mumbai. 2012.

Below: **Atul Dodiya**. *14 Stations* (Detail). Oil, acrylic with marble dust and crackle on canvas. Installation view at the NGMA, Mumbai. 2012.
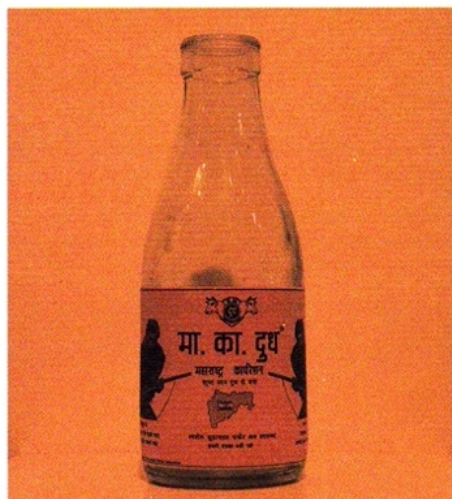
Left: **Shreyas Karle.** *Ma Ka Doodh* from *Fetish Objects Museum.* Bottle and label. Displayed at the NGMA, Mumbai. 2012.

Below: **Archana Hande.** *Of Panorama: A Riding Exercise.* Interactive video installation at the NGMA, Delhi. 2012.

Among the individual works, Anant Joshi's untitled sculptural installation features a table with rows of colourful mock fire-crackers that spin at intervals. The work suggests that Mumbai, with its cheek-by-jowl skyscrapers, is in a constant state of motion-induced tension and can explode any moment. Archana Hande's video installation *Of Panorama: A Riding Exercise* brings together the painted stasis of the on-set architecture of early cinema with modern technology. Footage of viewers in front of the work, captured using three cameras powered by pedalling a stationary bicycle, is projected on a screen. Cinema here is *inhabitable* as the spectator becomes the object of a series of gazes.

Pushpamala N.'s performance photography project *Return of the Phantom Lady (Sinful City)* is the second part of the *Phantom Lady* series. Unlike the first instalment, in which she worked on the hunter lady and her apparent doppelgänger in monochrome, this one, shot in colour by Clay Kelton, is about her rescuing an orphaned girl from Mumbai's gangsters. Unless one carefully observes the photographs and reads the text one is sure to miss that all the sites that Pushpamala dramatises are now under threat from real estate developers and some of them, like the Drive-in cinema in the Bandra Kurla Complex area, have already been razed while others are in danger of being demolished. What the *Phantom Lady* purportedly rescues is not an orphaned girl but the innocence of the city itself. Atul Dodiya's 14 large oil-and-acrylic canvases, titled *14 Stations*, each dedicated to a station on Mumbai's suburban train network and depicting a Bollywood villain, leave you a little cold. Dodiya is too talented and intelligent an artist to just do a series of paintings on villains. Shreyas Karle's *Fetish*

Objects Museum, featuring installations, sketches and sculptures, highlights the 'libidinal' amongst the popular and is quirky and clever, even risqué. The objects in their purported cheekiness try to host an imaginary relationship between human anatomy and the insatiable cinematic gaze for a post-everything language of fetish. While desire is understandable in its many manifestations, it is not obvious how Karle is portraying the management of desire *in* cinema, or the city.

The collaborative works are a mélange of research and art practices: some, like *The Western Suburb*, *Pipeline Network* and *Imaginary/Tactile* tease the viewer to an extent but never fully enough. Some are, however, clever. For example, Kausik Mukhopadhyay and Amruta Sakalkar's *Bioscope* is an installation that refers to the archaic roving bioscope of peep-hole photography but presents a plethora of permutations through date cards and images inside the peep-hole so that viewers can manufacture their own timelines/chronologies of cinema history. The *Table of Miscellany*, by Shikha Pandey and Paroma Sadhana, is an imaginative assortment of models of cinema books and magazines that *could have been* but could never be because in the film industry and the life that springs around it, everything is fleeting, everything is floundering, everything is ephemeral.

It is precisely the ephemeral nature of cinema's ecosystem that dominates the purpose and proclivity of the exhibition. The ticklish question of the evasive 'immortality' of visual imagery and the ubiquity of its reproducibility is what drives the art initiatives in the show. Archiving the contemporary is a complex process even as the meaning and matter of that very contemporaneity is suspect. Add to that the complex narrative of actual records, dates and celluloid annals, the unseen and unrecorded labour, the simulation of everyday desires and the insistence of the cinematic unconscious. *Project Cinema City* is not an easy exhibition to understand. It sets itself an ambitious target and at certain moments is unsure of its own limitations. But on the whole it is a rather rewarding exhibition, if not for what it does but surely for what it aims to.

END-NOTE

[1] **Mark Shiel** and **Tony Fitzmaurice** (Eds.). *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context.* Wiley Blackwell. 2001.