

Cinema city

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PROJECT CINEMA CITY

Bombay/Mumbai

A Majlis Project

By Madhusree Dutta; Design and Graphics by Shilpa Gupta and Madhusree Dtta

Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2012, 238 pp., Rs 995

ISBN 978-81-89487-99-7

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Bombay was where cinema made its first appearance on the Indian subcontinent, when the Lumiere Brothers' 'Living Photographic Pictures in Life-Size Reproductions' were shown at the Watson's Hotel in Kala Ghoda in 1896. Since that originary moment, the city of Bombay/Mumbai has been irrevocably linked to the cinema — as an industry that supports thousands of people, as 'its most adored public institution' and perhaps most significantly, as the lens through which the city acquires its visual primacy in the imagination of the rest of India (and the world).

One of the outcomes of a artistic-cum-archival project called Project Cinema City conducted by the arts initiative Majlis, *dates.sites* takes this fundamental connection between the city and cinema as the basis for a decade-by-decade account of events that might constitute a 'cinematic history' of 20th century Bombay/Mumbai. It calls this a "timeline" — a word chosen precisely, Madhusree Dutta tells us, for its 21st century Facebook-and-Twitter-inflected connotation of stitching things from various sources into a personalised narrative of the self.

At first glance, it is a book that seems straightforward in its aims: a historical ready-reckoner, a vast compendium of facts about the city and its film industry, arranged chronologically. And it is that, at one level. But as you spend more time with it, it begins to reveal itself as a quirkier creature: an artifact in its own right, a space where facts about the transformation of land and labour, law and life in the city can share the page with cinema history, inflected by chatty, opinionated commentary — a list of 'Archetypal Urban Characters of the '70s ends with "Mother of all Indian men: Nirupa Roy in *Deewar*"; Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982) receives the somewhat catty three word description "Bollywood on Bollywood".

With a narrative as unconventional as this, there are as many ways to 'read' it as there are people. Some might want to dip into it at random, or pick a decade they're interested in. Someone else might choose to be guided by the cornucopia of images. The visuals in the book are of two kinds. There are found images, often in fragmented form — old photographs, postcards, advertisements, logos, letters and telegrams, magazine images, paintings — and also a series of 100-odd 'calendars' created by several artists as a contemporary homage to the long popular history of calendar art in India. Both kinds act as triggers to the imagination, sending the brain off in all sorts of associative directions. Most are anything but illustrative, working instead as a tangential narrative that can open up the text in new ways. On p.19, for instance, there is a series of images of sea and ships — what looks like a picture postcard, a stamped envelope dated 5-9-1972, a technical drawing of a ship. These bear no actual relationship to the early 1900s timeline on that page, but they do somehow alter one's appreciation of the fact that the foundation of Alexandra Dock was laid in 1905

"to meet rising traffic of goods and traders". Other images are more strictly historical. For instance, Abeer Gupta's calendar for 1949, 'Liberty', is a faux-advertisement for Liberty Cinema: 'Showplace of the Nation', with the Indian flag flying above it and the theatre-front displaying a poster of Mehboob's *Andaz*, which was indeed the first film shown at Liberty when it opened in 1949 as the first airconditioned theatre in Bombay that was devoted to Hindi films.

It is a volume that lends itself to randomness. Playing conscientious reviewer, though, I decided to go from beginning to end. I paused often, arrested by a particular constellation

of facts or images, but resisted the temptation to skip ahead. As I went through the sequence of events in chronological order, however, I kept finding myself wanting to draw diagrams that would somehow link up events in 2000 with events in 1914, or 1973, on a thematic basis: real estate, or land reclamation, the history of the labour movement or the history of popular performance — or create a map that would somehow contain, in the name of a neighbourhood — say 'Pila House', or 'Girangaon' — everything that it had ever been.

A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like

the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

So wrote Italo Calvino in his now-classic *Invisible Cities*, a book even more strange and wondrous than the one under review. Like the mythical Zaira, "city of memories", Bombay/Mumbai cannot tell its past; it can only contain it "like the lines of a hand". *dates.sites* might be seen as a Calvinesque effort to make that past visible, by mapping — in the words of *Invisible Cities* — the "relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past".

Certainly the text is sensitive to space in a way that few historical timelines are. Whether describing communal and caste riots, the newsreels shot after Tilak's death, or the arrival of migrants to the city, the timeline takes every opportunity it can to double up as a 'spaceline'. So we learn that from 1904 to 1910, Sunni Tolawalas and Bohra shopkeepers clashed over the route of the Muharram procession in Bhandi Bazaar. We learn that newsreels of Tilak's funeral procession on 13 February, 1920 shot it from Crawford Market to Chowpatty. We learn that Tamil migrants to the city in the 1920s mostly worked at construction sites or at tanneries in Dharavi, and later that Sikh refugees after Partition were accommodated in camps in Sion Koliwada and many of them started automobile workshops in the Opera House area, resulting in both areas later developing "a distinct Punjabi flavour".

The book's history of cinema in the city — its production as well as its consumption — is equally attentive to local geography. Iconic places might get a whole explanatory paragraph, like in a dictionary: eg. "Pila House—hybridization of Play House — a cluster of theatres staging Parsi theatre plays and Tamasha performances — bordered on the east by red light area of Kamatipura (names after the Telugu-speaking community of masons), and on the west by migrant courtesans and other entertainment artists at Congress House (named after the office of the Congress Party nearby—is at its peak at the turn of the century." But it is the visible revelling in anecdote that lifts the book from a staid recounting of facts into a storied, personal, almost gossipy register. So a typescript entry for 1975 reads: "The queue for buying [Sholay] tickets at Minerva Theatre, showing the 70mm print of the film, extends to a bus stop 3 kilometres away", followed by the 'handwritten' note: "prompting the bus stop to be renamed as Sholay stop".

dates.sites is a real goldmine of stories, allowing itself the luxury of the suggestive anecdote: the sparkling, free-floating detail unbound by the ponderous footnote. The text continually throws up real-life characters whose mythification in urban lore was immortalised by the cinema. The most well-known are mafia dons whose lives have been the source of endless film plots: Karim Lala, Haji Mastan, Varadarajan Mudaliar onwards, down to the post-



textile-mills era which saw the rise of Arun Gawli, Arvind Dholakia, Rama Naik and so on. The book also digs up more minor figures, like an Inspector Bhesadia whose crusade against *bath bhatties* (crude breweries) in Dharavi Creek in the 60s was apparently the inspiration for Amitabh Bachchan's originary demolition of the illegal liquor den in *Zanjeer* (1973). (Bachchan, of course, went on to demolish many liquor addas, in other cities as well — I remember the one on the outskirts of Delhi in *Trishul*.) My pick for the most fascinating real life character, though, comes from a much earlier era: "Flamboyant Tamasha artiste" Pathe Bapurao, whose first appearance in the timeline is in 1927, when he visits Ambedkar "flanked by two women dancers dressed in finery" and offers to contribute the proceedings of eight Tamasha shows to the Mahar Satyagraha Fund, a campaign for the entry of Dalits into temples. "Ambedkar rejects the offer on moral grounds." The second reference to Pathe Bapurao is in 1941, when he "dies in poverty". It is in this entry that we are told that he was born a Brahmin (Shridhar Krishnaji Kulkarni) and underwent "caste conversion in order to work in Tamasha and ... married a Mahar woman". A biographical film was made on his life by Raja Nene in 1950, and Falkland Road in Pila House was renamed Pathe Bapurao Road after independence. Most tantalising of all is this tidbit: "His persona influences several significant tragic poet-hero

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characters in later films such as *Devdas*, *Pyaasa*." Since *Devdas* was based on a 1917 Bengali novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, one must treat the Bapurao connection as a suggestive supplement at most.

But however provisional it might declare itself to be, a timeline is not the sort of text in which arguments can really be incorporated. So an entry for 1933 tells us that "Music director Madhav Lal used Chinese and Japanese singers from Safed Gulli (White Lane) (demarcated area for prostitutes with fairer skin than Indians) to create a 'Far East ambience' in *Hatimtai*". It has been suggested by other writers that Safed Gali acquired the name not from its prostitutes but from its customers: it emerged to cater to white soldiers. But a timeline, no matter how playful, does not allow the space for both possible interpretations to be included.

On the other hand, a timeline

enables unexpected juxtapositions, creating fertile ground for suppressed histories and new thoughts to emerge, just by being on the same page. On p 118-119 for instance, we learn that comedian Johnny Walker's "urban actor-character-actor prototype in the tramp mould" and Raj Kapoor's *Awaraz* date to the same year: 1951. Both were responses to Chaplin, sure — but how often do we credit Johnny Walker with creating the Indian tramp persona? Another example connected with the influence of foreign cinema: Italian neo-realist films shown at the first International Film festival of India (1952) are credited with influencing Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), while on the same spread we learn that Sohrab Modi's Technicolour extravaganza *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953) was shot on an "imported on rent" camera by Ernest Heller, cameraman of *Gone With the Wind*. The juxtaposition of these two facts, which might otherwise have been

neatly boxed into two very different histories, produces a vivid sense of the multiplicity of world cinematic style, and how Bombay filmmakers negotiated their places within that world.

Sometimes a juxtaposition serves as comment. For example, AIR's highhanded attitude to Hindi film music (leading to the rise of *Binaca Geetmala* on Radio Ceylon from 1953 onwards) is presented without judgement. But then you read of KA Abbas's daring effort to make a songless film (*Munna*) crashing at the box office in 1954, and it is quite clear that the nation-state's battle against the market can only be a losing one.

Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, both theorists of the urban mass culture that emerged in Europe in the early part of the 20th century, pioneered the study of cultural fragments and surface phenomena as unconscious revelations of the epoch. "[T]he quotidian landscapes of life — posters on the wall, shop signs, dancing girls, bestsellers, panoramas, the shape, style and circulation of city buses — are all surface representations of the fantasy energy by which the collective perceives the social order," writes anthropologist Brian Larkin in a wonderful essay on the materiality of cinema theatres in the Nigerian city of Kano. *dates.sites* is a Benjamian archive of the materiality of cinema in Bombay/Mumbai. Accessible, joyful and packed with possibility, this is a book every film-lover should have on her shelf. ■

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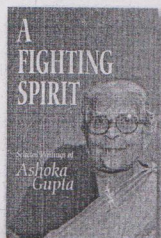


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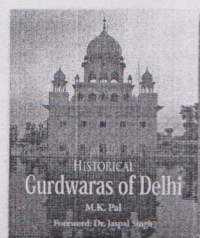
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