Book Reviews

$SAGE

Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik and Rohan Shivkumar (Eds), *Project Cinema City*. Designed by Sherna Dastur. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013, 560 pp., ₹3,500 (Hardback), ISBN 978-93-82381-22-8

In some senses this should not be reviewed as a book at all. It is so much more than a book. It may be more accurate to call it a catalogue or residue of a number of exhibitions and public events; it is an archive of a project that unfurled over five years and involved more than 100 artists, filmmakers, architects, designers, academics, and other writers. Moreover, it is explicitly and defiantly a work-in-progress, a series of traces of a grand project that accumulated so much information, so many artworks, and public interventions, so much raw data and so many reworkings of that data that it became almost impossible it could ever end. That said, it is a glorious record: the book is a beautiful object, unfeasibly heavy and large, boldly designed, a visual treat that is reflective of and appropriate to the overblown nature of its subject matter: a city and a cinema of excess, of color, and of noise of all kinds.

The opening essay, by Madhusree Dutta, the driving force behind this ambitious project, provides a helpful starting point. As she explains, *Project Cinema City: Research Art and Documentary Practices* (henceforth PCC), which evolved between 2008 and 2012, "engaged with the multiple subjectivities related to cinema and the watermarks it has left on the body of a city that produces cinema on an industrial scale, namely Bombay/Mumbai" (p. 14). The project aimed to excavate the many types of processes and practices that inform "the cinemas the city makes, and also the cities its cinema produces" (p. 15).

In order to understand the logic and structure of the book, it is important to know its origins. The project developed through three main stages. It evolved from an initiative by Majlis, a Mumbai-based center for interdisciplinary arts and human rights, to create a digital archive of unedited footage of the city (to some extent drawing on *7 Islands and a Metro*, a film Dutta made on the city in 2006). This overlapped with participation in an exhibition for the World Social Forum in 2004, which inspired Majlis (Dutta) to collaborate with architects and designers at KRVIA (notably co-editor Rohan Shivkumar), in a bid to forge a multi-disciplinary exploration of how Bombay/Mumbai cinema impinged on urban living patterns. From this, the first iteration of PCC emerged, bringing together filmmakers, artists, architects, map-makers, and academic researchers to "create a prototype archive at the boundaries of disciplines" that would produce "a database of the sociology of cinema production in the city" (pp. 16–17). Work in progress, including nine documentary shorts, was shown at the Berlinale in 2010.

The second phase focused more explicitly on how artistic work might expand the potential of the empirical data that had been gathered to date, that is, what imaginative

insights might be opened up by practice-led artistic research. Thus, a year-by-year timeline of the entanglements between city and cinema, comprising snippets and fragments of anecdotes, facts, and fantasies (eventually published as *dates.sites: Project Cinema City, Bombay/Mumbai*; Tulika, 2012), became the launching pad for a series of artworks. Thirty-two artists, architects, and designers, ranging from well-known names to students, were invited to design a date-calendar for any one year of the twentieth century, drawing on the *dates.sites* research. In 2011, 60 luscious, digitally printed calendars were showcased alongside other outputs of PCC at the FTII in Pune. By this point, questions about scale—and audience engagement—were becoming key. As Dutta observes, exhibits that risked being exotic in Berlin were in danger of becoming mundane in Pune, which led to decisions to increase both scale and spectacle.

The third phase, out of which this book directly emerged, foregrounded the issue of how to place raw data in the public domain, while refusing closure and also engaging audiences in playful and interactive ways. Installations and events around Mumbai, including both street art and an exhibition at NGMA in 2012–2013 that toured several other cities, provided a culmination to the project's more ephemeral outputs, while the current book—and a more minimal website—offered some way toward documenting these.

Inevitably the book is torn by the contradictions inherent in its premise. Dutta sees it as detailing "the allusive journey of the project while refusing closures" (p. 23). But of course a book *is* a form of closure—and perhaps thankfully so for the editors/curators. This seductive object is, in fact, rather well organized, although that is not immediately apparent on first viewing/handling. It comprises 30 written essays that engage with the subject matter in direct or tangential ways; a dozen or so visual essays; and three sections that document the films and artistic outputs of the project as a whole. Interwoven among these are lush color photographs, drawings, and graphics that relate (directly or not) to the essays, films, and artworks; fascinating snippets of empirical data, for example, extracts from a series of interviews with women spectators of all ages and backgrounds, and delicious ephemera such as a small white envelope within which one finds—on cheap, pink paper—a blank "Format of Agreement (Artistes/Technicians)" as used in the film industry. The book is immensely tactile and visually alluring: heavy paper, vibrant colors, sophisticated design, and exquisite print quality. One has to gasp at its audacity.

Among the many enjoyable and informative essays, a few stand out: Jyotindra Jain's magisterial overview of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century hybrid visual culture of Bombay ("calendar art"); Paromita Vohra's reminiscences of life in Andheri East—and its changing fortunes—between 1992 and 2012; or Gyan Prakash's succinct account of his arguments about cinema, capital, and the city as originally developed in *Mumbai Fables* (Prakash, 2010). Some writings are simultaneously factual and playful, including the intriguingly titled "semi-fictional" story of land ownership and legal disputes around Bombay Talkies' former grounds at Malad (Prasad Shetty). Others ruminate on the reverberations of cinema on the dreams and aspirations of the city's citizens, from the composite backdrops of photo studios in the digital age (Renu Savant), to the limbo-land lives of low-paid or aspirant workers that service the film industry (Dutta). Other authors provide useful factual detail: a meticulous overview of the history of labor unions in the Bombay film industry (Shikha Pandey); a detailed historical survey of millworkers and their cultures (Meena R. Menon); an analytical

overview of documentaries on the city of Bombay (Nicole Wolf); and a less obviously relevant but nevertheless fascinating piece on cinema production in NE India (Neikolie Kuotsu). The danger is that, in the context of such plenitude, much useful material may get lost.

The visual essays work especially well within the format of this book, from a fictional 1920s comic strip "thriller" (Vishal Dar and Kaushik Bhaumik) to mappings of Bombay's historical theaters (Zubin Pastakia) or Dharavi slum cinemas (George Jacob and Sameer Tawde). And between these, one finds invaluable documentation of the art and film projects commissioned by and completed within PCC and shown at NGMA. "Research Art and Collaborative Projects" documents the calendars and sculptural installations; "Documentary Practices and Interactive Art" provides notes on the nine documentary shorts and four interactive artworks; and "Archiving the Cinematic City" catalogs the four curated works by Atul Dodiya, Pushpamala N, Anant Joshi, and Apurva Parikh and Rohan Shivkumar.

I can only review the book, not a project I did not see. Inevitably, given its scale, this magnificent book is flawed. For anyone who did not know the original PCC or see its exhibitions, it takes time and determination to understand how to navigate this tome. While any casual reader will enjoy serendipitous insights by grazing between images and texts, few will engage with the book in the depth it deserves. With something so visually seductive—and so large and heavy that it cannot be easily handled or carried—the problem is compounded: it is physically hard to read. While it is liberating and proper that the essays do not dominate or explain the images, they are not coffee-table fodder. Clearer signposting of the book's structure would have helped. A parallel website on which one could read the essays and experience the sounds and move-ments of the artworks would have been even more helpful. For me, PCC only came alive when I found footage of the NGMA exhibition online: the artworks' movements across the ephemeral spaces and noises of the city, and their evocative snatches of film songs and other sounds, connected me—in visceral and exciting ways—not only to my own memories and lived experiences of the "cinema city" over the past 35 years but to the project's achievement in lighting imaginative sparks between writings and artworks, across disciplines and between collaborators. The book cannot be an archive or database; it has to select and edit. In the present case, the perennial problem of the archivist is pushed to the limit: in a project as wild, anarchic, and recursive as this one, what to throw away? Ultimately, the book can be no more than a trace, albeit one whose form beautifully echoes its subject matter.

The book was a Herculean task and the three editors, and designer Sherna Dastur, have brought the impossible off with panache. As Appadurai notes in his foreword, this quasi-Situationist "act of *détournement*" (p. 10) is an intervention that will reverber-ate for years, and all subsequent attempts to describe and define the relationships between Bombay / Mumbai cinema and city will fall in its shadows.

References

Prakash, Gyan. (2010) *Mumbai Fables*. Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

Rosie Thomas
Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM), and the India Media Centre, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom