

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 visibility, 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 Shield 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

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 *Szee 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.

