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## Book Review: Museum of Cinema

A review of the biggest book I've ever read. In the year-end issue of book review journal *Biblio*:

*Project Cinema City*

*Edited by Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik and Rohan Shivkumar*

*Foreword by Arjun Appadurai*

*Design by Sherna Dastur*

*Tulika Books, New Delhi, in association with Majlis and Goethe Institute, 2013, Rs. 3500 (HB)*

If you can imagine a book that combines the experience of an art exhibition, an archive, a seminar and a guided city walk -- all going on at the same time - then you've pretty much imagined *Project Cinema City*. This book, which won the Printed Book of the Year award at the first edition of the *Publishing Next* Industry Awards (September 2014), seems to want to redefine what a book might be. It is huge, a massive hardback *potha* that runs into more than 550 pages, and heavy - larger and heavier than any coffee table book I've seen, and with a hundred times more reading material, too. It is capacious, filled with many kinds of voices. It might be useful to think of them as multiple guides on that walk through the city of cinema: some have gone far ahead of you, and are describing the view from up there; some are telling long and complicated stories (which are fun in parts, but sometimes all you want to do is sit down); some are recording and taking pictures so you can later 'remember' what really happened, and some, inevitably, are talking above your head.

A less bulky (but no less stimulating) volume has previously come out of the *Cinema City* project and goes by the stylish no-caps name of *dates.sites*. I reviewed that, too, in these pages (*Biblio*, Nov-Dec, 2012). But while that was more a compendium of fascinating information that one felt no obligation to read at a stretch from cover to cover, this book is guilt-inducing from the word go. The Contents pages inform us that the book is divided into three sections, all with titles made up of terrifyingly vague buzzwords: 1. 'Mapping Imaginations: Terrains, Locations', 2. 'Performing Labour: Bodies, Networks', and 3. 'Viewing Limits: Narratives, Technologies'. As with most buzzwords that seem to settle and fatten on the meaty intersection of academia and art, there's nothing particularly wrong with each word on its own. But put them all together like this, and most people - I'd venture, even many potential enthusiastic readers of this book - will be longing to sit down.

Also, with apologies to the editors, who presumably thought long and hard about the categories and where each contribution fits, I confess I do not see why Meena Menon's piece on mill workers goes into 'Terrains, Locations' rather than 'Performing Labour', or why Paromita Vohra's piece is in "Performing Labour" rather than 'Terrains, Locations', or why one of the most enjoyable (and readable) things in the book - interviews with women film spectators who live in Bombay-- is divided into three sections. There are also some pieces in here that are not about Bombay, or not about its cinema, and (even if they're fabulous pieces of work) I don't quite see why they're here. I must also mention that after I said I would review this book, I realised that it includes the work of at least three people I'm on friendly terms with. This is the trouble with multi-contributor books. In any case, instead of puzzling over these matters any more, I'm just going to use the space I have here to discuss a few of the pieces I found interesting.

Avijit Mukul Kishore's 'Notes on Technology: At the Time of Going to Press' is a lovely, detailed account of shooting a documentary called *Kumar Talkies* (dir. Pankaj Rishi Kumar) in the year 1997, which was

“a major cusp in the history of film technologies”, with 16mm on its way out and digital video (DV) the new chosen medium. Kishore and Kumar set out to make a film that would marry both forms, and also had some old 8mm home movies they wanted to include. The piece describes the unbelievably complicated journey that followed with more warmth and clarity (and yes, inevitably, some nostalgia) than I've ever read anyone writing about technology with.

'Manufacturing Cinema: Control, Dispute, Workers' Rights', by Shikha Pandey provides a rare *longue durée* view of the film industry with reference to an aspect of it that we usually hear very little about: unions and the regulation of workers' rights. Pandey's piece is packed with fascinating nuggets about the industry's organisational history, and how the state's policy on popular cinema shaped the industry, creating artificial booms and busts and shaping labour supply in ways that we don't often think about. If you've ever been curious about the number of Bengalis who made their way to Bombay to work in Hindi cinema, for example, you might be interested in the ban on Indian films in East Pakistan in 1962, which led to a decline in Bengali cinema across the border in West Bengal, which in turn was part of the reason for an increased migration of talent from Calcutta to Bombay. For those who've followed the recent attempts by Bollywood screenwriters to organise for better terms, it might be of interest that the Film Writers Association, formed in 1954 by Qamar Jalalabadi, Ramanand Sagar and Sahir Ludhianvi, was the first film workers' collective to be registered under the Trade Union Act, with a majority of its initial members affiliated to “the communist-led All India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)”.

There are remarkable insights into how cinematic output is influenced by material conditions. Pandey tells us about the government's freeze on building new cinema theatres through the 1960s, and how the ban-induced scarcity of exhibition infrastructure made film producers dependent on exhibitors' whims for bookings. Exhibitors began to demand 'saleable' plots, making demands for particular stars. Payments to stars rose, growing to anywhere between 31% and 50% of the total production budget. When the ban on new theatres was revoked in 1969, Pandey points out, film production exploded: 199 films released in 1970, as compared to 89 in 1969.

Pandey's research into industry organisational practice is revealing. In the 1980s, the apex body for cine workers, the Federation for Western Indian Cine Employees (FWICE), formed in 1958, joined with the apex producers' body to form a Joint Dispute Settlement Committee (JDSC), to solve disputes in the film industry “internally”. Pandey demonstrates how the JDSC defends and maintains the industry's feudal basis, using the discourse of “outsiders” versus “film fraternity” to prevent cine workers from going to court. She also points out how in the 2000s, the secular, non-party affiliated FWICE has been challenged by the rise of a parallel cine workers union, affiliated to the militant right-wing Maharashtra Navanirman Sena. But the scenario is changing with the entry of corporate finance, international studios, and more foreign workers. Having broached this subject, though, the piece leaves us hanging: one wishes there was a more concerted effort to describe the kinds of conflicts that are currently ongoing.

A very different perspective on workers' organisations is provided by Meena Menon's lucidly written, semi-autobiographical account of the mills of Bombay. Menon is persuasive when she argues that much of the feted “spirit” of Bombay -- a hard-working place where public transport ran till late, large numbers of women went to work, and were safe on the streets and trains -- came out of the working class culture at the city's core. Migrant workers, mostly Marathi, built themselves a home in the city through organised networks of community - the gaokari mandals, the bhajan mandals, the khanawals,

and of course, the labour unions. Menon's account is important for its succinct synthesising of the city's transformation, from the perspective of what was once an influential leftist working class: one which sees itself as having lost "one generation to the mafia, and the next one to the Shiv Sena." The Bombay mafia and later, the political class that emerged partly out of it, have of course found representation in mainstream Hindi cinema. So has the police, and its strong connections with both. But an interesting thing that emerges from Menon's piece is the absence of mill workers from the city's cinema - or any depiction of the deep-seated class and familial links between mill workers and mafia members, between mill workers and police.

There is a richness that the intelligent, honest personal memoir is able to achieve, especially with regard to portraying a neighbourhood: a layering in lived time that the research paper, however impeccable, almost never manages. Paromita Vohra's memoir of becoming "permanently temporary" in Andheri East displays her usual flair for puncturing the platitudes that tend to gather around forms of life and community in this country. She manages to wield a sharp scalpel that spares neither the 'safe' middle-class family life, nor visions of the alternative non-bourgeois one. Vohra has a talent for turning anecdotes into symbolic bookends, and she does this very effectively with the Aarey milk booths and subway tunnels of Andheri. Seemingly random stories of encounters she's had over the course of two decades are carefully structured to produce a narrative about what the two Andheris mean in terms of the film world.

There are many, many images in the book: some leaping out at you, some skulking behind the door until you decide to notice them. It is absolutely impossible to do any justice to them here, but I particularly like Sameer Tawde's Slum Cinema photographs and Kalpit Ashar and Mamta Murthy's map-plus-photograph meditation on cine bazaars in Mumbai. There is also a plethora of images from The Calendar Project, under which 33 artists produced 56 date-calendars of different years in the twentieth century, mostly using found images and print from the public culture of that moment in the past.

Perhaps what is eventually most valuable about the book is the way that different parts of it are invisibly, chaotically in conversation with each other. To cite just one example: Bishakha's Datta's astute, thought-provoking essay 'F\*\*kland Road' speaks to Ashar and Murthy's visuals, as well as to the Parsi lady who grew up on Foras Road, and tells a tale of a drunken man outside Silver Talkies who thought she was a sex worker - and so "pinched her chest".

So long as you don't try to read this book from cover to cover, it's a wonderful mad museum of cinema. A single orderly visit will never be enough.

**Trisha Gupta**