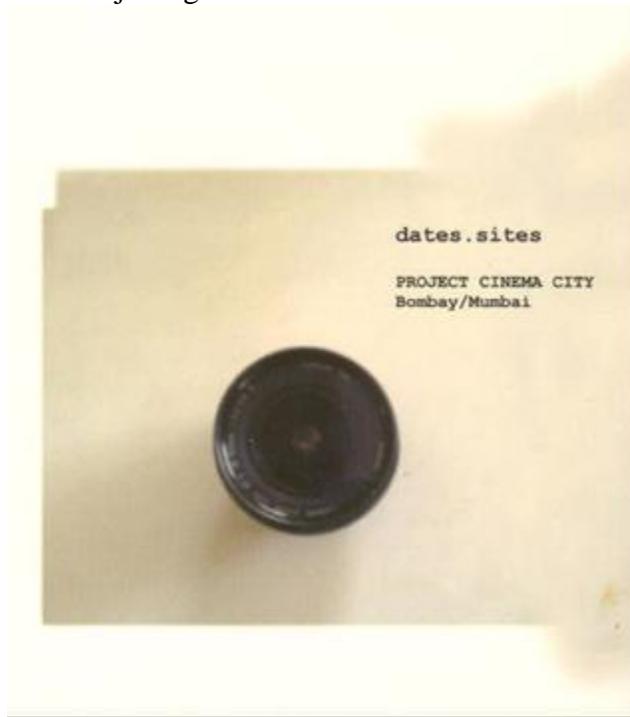


Through the eyes of a city

Baradwaj Rangan



dates.sites: Project Cinema City: Bombay/Mumbai

A book as unusual as *dates.sites: Project Cinema City: Bombay/Mumbai* is best described through the words of Madhushree Datta, who came up with the concept and authored the text. “This volume presents a timeline of the city of Bombay/Mumbai in the 20th century, anchored to its most adored public institution — cinema.”

The book, thus, “is divided into sections by decades, and the decades in turn are divided by a series of calendars designed by visual artists, filmmakers and designers.” But even that isn’t enough to tell you how extraordinarily this volume has been produced, how sumptuously it has been designed. Where most histories of Bombay cinema begin with Dadasaheb Phalke and *Raja Harishchandra*, made in 1913, *dates.sites* goes back to 1897, when, we’re told, the “first motor car arrives in Bombay (three years after its invention in the west),” and “the Health Department undertakes drastic measures to control the [plague] epidemic: forced evacuation, razing bamboo huts, police searches, isolation and detention.”

These nuggets of text — and all text is nugget-sized — appear in a column bisecting the page, and behind the words is a faded photograph. The facing page is a sea of white, with just a photograph of waves in the middle. (It makes sense, therefore, to mention Shilpa Gupta, who did the design and graphics with Dutta.) The oddest, most fascinating visual elements crop up on the pages — old two- and three-*anna* stamps; a decidedly PETA-unfriendly 1908 calendar from Royal Bengal Tiger Couch; a postcard marked March 27, 1927; a 1939 calendar from Devi & Co. Bodice Works Ltd., which manufactured “underlovelies for ladies;” a 1946 calendar from

Rolls Royce (“Star of India: The king size car”); a wartime cartoon that declares “German news is generally false;” and most hilariously, a 1958 calendar from Mother India Harvesters & Farm Implements featuring Nargis in that now-iconic pose from the film of the same name. A thought bubble above her says: “I hope nobody realises that I have done that.” Behind her are crop circles.

War footage

And coursing through these images is a scrupulous listing of events — how, in 1901, newsreel footage of the Second Boer War was released at Novelty Theatre; that, in 1933, film songs as independent entertainment began when Vinayakrao Patwardhan starred in the film *Madhuri*; that, in the 1930s, female stars were paid at least twice what the male leads were paid (this fact is circled, as if by pen); how, in 1942, profits in the film business increased as the number of films produced dropped significantly, due to the imposition of restrictions on length (11,000 feet) owing to raw-stock shortage, given that most of the film stock was going towards producing war propaganda films for the British government; how, in the 1950s, the Bombay State Prohibition Act gave rise to the “generic Christians of loose morals in Hindi cinema,” while also initiating the trend of naming comedians after liquor brands like Johnny Walker...

Occasionally, there’s the acknowledgement of the narratives on other cities: “Calcutta in Ritwik Ghatak’s *Komal Gandhar*,” and “Madras city and the Tamil film industry in K. Balachander-scripted *Server Sundaram*.” Gradually, we move on to the launch of Amar Chitra Katha in 1967, pause at Nissim Ezekiel’s poem *Irani Restaurant Instructions* (Please/Do not spit...), and end at the millennium’s close, with the opening of a bowling alley at Phoenix Mills compound, “beginning an era where land reserved for manufacturing industry would be taken over by the service industry and entertainment outlets.”

A more frightening change is suggested by the 1975 calendar from Trojan Horse Rubbers and Condoms, which features the caption: “Why cry over spilt milk?” The visual is the famous Raja Ravi Varma painting of Vishwamitra refusing to accept Menaka’s gift of the infant Shakuntala. Amidst guffaws over the juxtaposition and the creativity, we are reminded that such an ad, today, would tear the country apart.

Dates.Sites

Project Cinema City Bombay/Mumbai: Madhusree Dutta; Tulika Books, 35 A/1, Shahpur Jat, New Delhi-110049. Rs. 995.

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