

FOREWORD

This magnificent book is structured around a remarkable project that was five years in the making and culminated in an exhibition that made its way around India during the year 2012 – a project that brought together students of cinema with social critics, artists, art critics and historians. The linking thread of the book and the project is what I might call a real Bombay breakthrough in how to write about cinema, life, work and art. The breakthrough is that these contributors do not try to contain the visual world of Bombay/Mumbai within the genre of any specific critical or representational genre. Rather, they allow the cinematic city to inhabit and overflow their own individual works, as well as the boundaries of the project as a whole.

This innovation is what Guy Debord, the great French media critic and political activist, called the technique of the *dérive*, a rapid passage through various urban ambiances that aims to explore and intervene in the psychogeography of the city, a technique that aims to break through the monotony of the capitalist city by seeking experiences by chance and then building out of them an alternative experience of the possibilities of the urban. This technique is part of the movement called the Situationist International which also gave birth to the idea of '*détournement*', an artistic practice that transforms existing works into new works without either plagiarism or irony.

The work of the Cinema City group may be seen as a Situationist move, no longer in the context of Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, but of Bombay in the 1990s and in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Like the Situationists, the Cinema City group is not concerned with art as a comment on the city but as a product of the city, a lens into urban life and a re-situating of its already existing visual elements. In this regard it has something in common with Dadaism, Surrealism and other art movements of twentieth-century modernism in Europe.

But the resemblance to earlier movements ends here, because Bombay/Mumbai as a cinematic city occupies its own space and time. And the contributors to this volume are saturated in this space and time. Their individual contributions bear a surface resemblance to conventional scholarly urban criticism and art practice. But what these works collectively accomplish is to capture Bombay's visual excess.

This excess is both provoked and framed by Hindi cinema in Bombay, which is connected to the city of its active production in a way that no other urban milieu (including Hollywood) has ever been to the cinematic images that it produced. If we ask the apparently silly question – why did Bombay produce Bollywood? – the answer is not so obvious. For one thing, everything about cinema came to it from outside: stars from Punjab and Uttar Pradesh; scriptwriters and lyricists from the small towns of the Gangetic belt, especially from its Urdu literary spheres; actors, directors and producers from elsewhere in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bengal and beyond. So what did Bombay provide? It provided a unique hospitality to the *mise-en-scène* that all cinema requires – that is, to that combination of cinematographic, physical, human, aural and compositional elements that is 'literally' put in the scene.

This volume captures the special capacity of Bombay to be the 'stage' or 'scene' for elements of finance, language, celebrity, narrative and song that came, in almost every case, to the film industry from elsewhere in India (or sometimes even outside India). Thus the city is the screen for a series of shots, which the chapters and images of this book may be seen to be. They do not reflect or represent the city, but they are animated, framed and composed by the city. In this sense, it is not only those Hindi films that are 'about Bombay' that capture the sense of the city. All films that come out of the industry are products of the same *mise-en-scène*, which is the evolving city itself.

And this city is an unruly enterprise that cannot be fully contained either by film or by film criticism alone. The *mise-en-scène* leaks out, into the lives of cinema houses, book stores, billboards, studios, cabarets, magazines – any site or object that can accommodate visibility. It is this visual excess, this leakiness, this spillage of the visual beyond the many frames that seek to contain it, that this book most powerfully captures. This is thus a truly cinematic book, as well as a true Bombay book. It is an act of *détournement*, a brilliant collaborative effort to capture Bombay by resembling, in its own visual variety and varied takes, something of the excess of this greatest of cinematic cities.

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