Londres, Bombay

By Patrick Keiller

In November 2005, I was asked to propose an installation for an exhibition provisionally entitled *Londres, Bombay: Villes du futur?* at Le Fresnoy: Studio national des arts contemporains, at Tourcoing, near Lille. Le Fresnoy is one of Jack Lang's *Grands Travaux*, an international academy for advanced film and media practice, with some legendary figures of European cinema among its visiting professors, and a venue for exhibitions and screenings. It opened in 1997 in a building designed by the architect Bernard Tschumi, a transformation of an earlier Le Fresnoy, a kind of fun palace that comprised, among other things, a dancehall and indoor skating rink. This is now the larger of Le Fresnoy's two exhibition spaces, a 1000 square metre hall with a 12 metre high roof apex and a mezzanine – known as the *Grande Nef* – that somewhat resembles a railway station.

I had visited Le Fresnoy in October 2004 to introduce *London* and *Robinson in Space*, which had been released in France, subtitled, in 2003. The screening was one of several accompanying Le Fresnoy's exhibition *La Ville qui fait signes*, its contribution to Lille's stint as European Capital of Culture in 2004. The city had subsequently announced a biennial, *Lille 3000*, and the theme of the first of these was to be the city of Mumbai.

I had not until then known of Mumbai's Gothic-revival architecture, the largest and perhaps most extraordinary example of which is Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly Victoria Terminus, the headquarters and end-station of India's Central Railway, one of the largest Gothic-revival railway stations in the world. It is said that over 2.5 million passengers pass through the station every day, and it is one of the main points of arrival for the migrants who have made Mumbai's one of the fastest-increasing and largest urban populations in the world. Bombay had been, in the past, the headquarters of Anglo-capitalism in India, and had since become the headquarters of a comparable mode of neo-liberalism. Perhaps the saurian qualities of Gothic-revival architecture offered a metaphor for its chaotic, monstrous economic growth, all of which might resonate with the fractal geometries of digital video.

I had not long since read Roger Luckhurst's essay 'The contemporary London Gothic and the limits of the "spectral turn"' (*Textual Practice* 16(3), 2002, pp 527-546) which identifies the present-day London Gothic as a response to some of the city's economic and political characteristics, in particular the legacy of London's unplanned growth and the "cruel and unusual forms of political disempowerment" re-established in the 1980s. Luckhurst also mentions W G Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, in which the protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, devotes many years to an encyclopaedic study of "the architectural style of the capitalist era", especially that of railway stations, which he regards "as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune".

I suggested that we create a moving-image reconstruction of the interior of Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in the space at Tourcoing. In March 2006, Le Fresnoy engaged the cinematographer Dilip Varma, who lives in Lille, to take on the role of producer. The pictures were photographed with a Sony HDW-900 in six days at the end of May by a team including Dilip and myself, according to a schedule agreed with the station administration. The exhibition (by then merely *Londres, Bombay*) ran from 12 October until 24 December 2006. 30 sequences of between 2 and 40 (average 10) minutes duration were projected on 30 double-sided screens arranged in the 40 x 25 metre space so that they corresponded to the camera views inside the actual station.

The installation's sound was designed by Pierre Gufflet, who developed a computer application that selected, mixed and distributed the sound of the 30 picture sequences to 47 loudspeakers hung throughout the exhibit. This recreated the spatiality of the station's sound from the 30 soundtracks, while avoiding the cacophony of 30 different station soundtracks playing at once.

As a manifesto for virtual building, the installation was unlike conventionally three-dimensional architecture. Although the screens were configured to correspond to camera viewpoints, each could be viewed from both sides, and most images were not of flatness, but contained their own perspectives. Some images were of details greatly enlarged. Many included archways or other connections between the various parts of the station, as these offered framed views, but in the exhibition these were the spaces through which visitors could not walk, so that the exhibition's architecture was an interlacing of actual and virtual space.

To respond more directly to the exhibition's title, I included a version of another ongoing project *The City of the Future*, a navigable DVD array of 67 films of UK landscapes in 1896-1903 arranged on a network of maps, within which I programmed a 20 minute sequence of 15 Biograph, Lumière and other films of London locations. This was displayed on a 10m wide screen in Le Fresnoy's second exhibition space – the *Petite Nef* – adjacent to and partly intervisible with the Mumbai installation. Viewers could depart from the programme and explore the rest of the DVD using a touch-screen.

Patrick Keiller's films include *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997). He is a research fellow at the Royal College of Art, with an AHRC-supported project *The Future of Landscape and the Moving Image* (www.rca.ac.uk/pages/research/patrick_keiller_234.html).