

Road No 6. Calcutta - Mumbai

All the great roads of the world have their own music – a certain rhythm and beat that gives structure to the enormous distances involved. Speed and scenery combine in a relationship that ultimately gives the road its special character, and something that a strip of tarmac ought not to be able to claim: a personality.

The music of great roads is a combination of sight and sound, a strongly cinematic projection in our minds. A road movie can filter our perceptions; it can lie about the filthy tarmac and substitute reality with myth; fabricating stories of which the inhabitants of the dusty roadside are completely unaware. Yet to feel the pulse of a road can also mean something quite different – a longing to create a metaphor for all journeys – to overcome great distance by learning the hard way, to never stay in one place, to be unable to hold on to anything. And to accept oneself as no more than a transient part of a transient world.

The tone of the Indian national road number 6 is a kind of booming Hindu-Pop, with forward-rushing drums and droning, high-pitched female vocals. Songs of love and strife, and strife and love – the drug of the truckers, when the days are long and the road is straight – for another 2400 kilometres. An Indian beat, calm and merciless at the same time.

Road number 6 isn't heavy with legend; it cuts across a whole sub-continent so rich in myth that it can afford not to overdo it on this strip of tarmac. But this road is everything that a road can be, alternating wildly: wide as a motorway after Calcutta, then narrowing without warning into a village lane; briefly imagining itself as an idyllic avenue, only later to wind thinly through the highlands. It lulls you to sleep in the heat of the afternoon, as you drive onwards across a parched, empty landscape. The feeling of total uneventfulness is deceptive – brought to an abrupt end by the wreck of an unfortunate lorry. Hardly anybody travels from Calcutta to Bombay voluntarily.

Across India in eight days – an experiment in perception, an experiment on oneself. The sub-continent flew past the open window of our “Ambassador” taxi as we travelled along at between thirty and sixty kilometres an hour – a 100 hour-long road movie, a viewing marathon. Over and over, the images sank into the sub conscience – with no hierarchy, in no particular order – just a stream of consciousness that couldn’t be stopped.

There was nothing to structure what we had seen, no “story”, no event, and no line of enquiry – none of those handicaps that journalists and photojournalists usually have to face, when they settle on a theme and then document, interpret or reveal that piece of reality in a way that has already defined. The magazine *Brigitte*, for whom we were travelling, didn’t want such limitations. Instead, total freedom of choice, a complete frankness about our experience. What to pick from everything flying by? How to piece everything together? Where to focus for a brief moment in time?

An experiment of this kind cannot be totally free of preconception though. Too many images of India are already stored in our minds: European, colonial, pitying, idealising. They travelled with us, over 2400 kilometres, like an endless photo-tapestry: a woman in a shining red sari carries firewood on her head over parched earth. Grace in poverty – the genre picture of a developing land.

Even if our perceptions are not structured by any preconceived idea, then the eye can still follow the temptation of the senses, and create an exact reproduction of this aesthetic of India –reminding us of a travel brochure, or a call for donations or an advertisement for a Yoga class.

Andreas Herzau’s photographs, however, do not show us this colourful, opulent, aromatic and tender India, and, because of this, his images initially appear distinctly “un-Indian“: cooler, more distant, more modern, more broken – “de-indianised“ almost.

The people along this road don't exist for us, for the observers. They don't turn towards us, they don't allow us a close-up. Nor do they notice us, as they hurry on by without a second thought about the conundrum they're creating for us.

All we can do is to try and decipher the signs, to discover tiny glimpses of order in this great Indian confusion. Often the people appear to be part of the scenery, a street or city scene, a pattern, a shape. The steel construction of the bridge in Calcutta. The cubist puzzle of a flower market. The silhouettes of the women on a stone bridge. The henna decoration on the foot of a bridegroom.

Sometimes these people-patterned-landscapes convey a feeling of metropolis and modernity, that sits more easily with our perceptions in the west. All along road number 6, cities of between 300,000 and two million inhabitants conceal themselves behind the harmless black dots on the map. Those who travel across the sub-continent recognise the confused message: India is no metaphor for poverty, but an enormous, self-aware country. And the speed of our journey is to some extent inverted: this is a country that appears to be on an unstoppable journey, and it seems to know where to.

On this journey to Bombay, India's *Bollywood*, all associations with film prove to be ambiguous. For fans of the road movie the road itself could be the film. For India's lorry driver however, this Indian road movie is a reality – one that he tries to escape through movie soundtracks. So what is real? Assumptions of reality and its construct lie one above the other, no solution in sight, except this: that we all live in our dream factories, observers as well as those being observed.

Calm and merciless – the Indian beat. After It tells you that death is part of your journey. On road number 6, fear produces its own aesthetic. The wrecks of lorries seem like great beasts that have lain down at the side of the road to die. In Bombay there is a blackened iron grill, the cremation of an unknown mill worker. In a city of 16 million people, what could be more normal and everyday, than death?