Mumbai's Architecture: The Shifting Lens

Gautam Patel

Thank you for the kind invitation to be here this evening. It is a very special privilege.

There is a marvellous photograph of this man whose work we honour and remember today. It is on a website in his name, and in it we see a smartly dressed, clean-shaven man in his 20s or 30s, sharp-featured, with a full head of hair, bespectacled. It is in some strange, ineffable way familiar: young men at Oxbridge all seemed to look like this. They went off in different directions, some to become Cold War spies and double agents, while others, like this one, worked for years in far flung outposts of the tatters of what was once the British Empire. The photograph shows us a man with a wry sense of humour, a coruscating intelligence, and infinite gentleness.

I did not know Foy. But I knew *of* him, and I knew who he was. I used to see him now and then barrelling along Altamont Road on his Vespa scooter. He knew my parents, and their friends. My memory, a fleeting one, is of Foy on crutches or with some limb in a cast or a sling. I have been assured this is reasonably accurate: he was incredibly accident-prone, always falling down, or tumbling off that Vespa. Perhaps the exhibition of his photographs explains why. Being given to

spotting scenes like this is not, I think, conducive to two-wheeler or even biped stability.

These are truly special images; at least they are to me. The reasons are many. Some of them, I think, are flat-out Magnum class. There is that near-magical freezing of 'the critical moment', *le moment critique*. This is not always motion-frozen-in-time, and not a reference to the done-to-death images of the slender, androgynous young Indian semi-nude male form — so lasciviously described by EM Forster and more infamously by JR Ackerley in *Hindoo Holiday* — swanning off some pedestal into a water body. What Foy caught, in that split-second before it was lost, was slices of a city in constant transition, a place straining against the ties of its past.

No artist — I use the word in its broadest sense to include every narrator whatever the chosen form — can ever be entirely unmoored from his or her roots. Foy's background almost certainly informed his concerns and sensibilities, and sensitivities — and that humour I mentioned earlier, and which I will again. This was a family originally of Danish descent, and wandering seems to have been genetic. It seems his great grandfather set off from Denmark for England, but having got there, seems to have missed one tide and caught another, for he promptly set sail to points east and wound up in Bombay. The British remained impervious to Danish charms. Georg Nissen wended his way to Gujarat and, somewhat incredibly, into the army of the Maharaja of Baroda. He and his family built a military career there. His grandson left Baroda. Foy was born in Pune, educated here in Bombay at the Cathedral & John Connon school, went up to Cambridge where he took a master's in art, and then, for the next several decades, was the British Council's representative in Bombay.

So much for the potted biography. I am ashamed I could find nothing at all about the women in Foy's life.

In Bombay, his home was a salon in the old sense: writers, playwrights, ad men and theatre and movie people, historians and others of every stripe went in and out of his South Bombay home. Foy wasn't, technically, from Bombay, in the sense this was not his birthplace. But he was *of* Bombay. He made Bombay his. And he did this in a quite spectacularly quiet, special fashion. He pounded the streets. On foot, going where few would or did, certainly seeing things few noticed, and photographing these in a manner I don't imagine anyone else has done. Not with this relentless dedication and commitment anyway. Hordes of photographers, many of far greater repute, came to the city and took photographs of it. We know these names. Many are legend, and we recall without effort their names: Raghubir Singh, Raghu Rai, Steve McCurry. But they passed through. Foy was here, and he pursued the city as no one else. Why did he not achieve renown as a photographer of the city in his lifetime? I do not know. Certainly there is nothing in these photographs to justify that elision. In a recent issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Teju Cole was ecstatic about a Bombay image by a big-name photographer.[1] I thought it was an utterly unremarkable photograph, to the point of being pedestrian. Many of Foy's images on display today are vastly superior. Perhaps the reason is that Foy was in pursuit of something more fundamental, something beyond the photograph.

Foy's estate has left to the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation not only his prints and many negatives, but also his cameras. I had the good fortune to see this kit. There's an old Nikon FM, and an early Canon. His stock lens seems to have been a 50mm lens — more on this in just a minute — though there are a couple of medium-length telephotos. I did not see a zoom. This tells me that Foy wasn't given to the instant gratification made possible by today's extreme length zoom lens that go all the way from a wide angle to a high telephoto.

He used fixed focal length lenses, and he used them on film, shooting mostly Ilford stock. In the days before digital cameras, and the ability to delete a bad image, this meant he had to make almost every shot count. And it also meant he had to deal with contact sheets and be selective in his prints. Plus, if things didn't work out, it meant going back to the same spot again and again and again — and each time seeing it differently.

The choice of a 50mm lens is interesting. This is not the 'favoured' lens of photojournalism and street photography, which is a 35mm lens that captures more of a scene, has greater depth of field — greater sharpness across the frame and from here to infinity and all the rest of it. The 50mm is what is called a 'normal' lens, and often thought to be, for that reason, boring. It is supposedly close to what the eye sees, but the eye actually sees much more in the periphery. The 'normality' of the 50mm frame refers more, I think, to what the mind processes from what the eye has delivered. It is a lens that is said to render a field of view that appears 'natural' to a human observer, best approximating human visual perspective. The fabled manufacturer, Zeiss, says that its 50mm lens is 'equal to the human eye'. So here we have one concept: natural. What this lens does is to force the photographer to move, to find a superior framing, to keep it 'natural' while evading ennui.

The word 'lens' was borrowed in the latter half of the 17th century from the Latin name for the lentil: *lens culinaris*, and this was because of the curved shape of the lens. The French — of course — use another word: *objectif*, suggesting truth or impartiality. An article in *The Atlantic* says that while this term is used for telescopes and microscopes, one of the earliest uses of *objectif* for photography is from Jules Verne in 1874. This is what the article says:[2]

> A group of Americans stranded in the South Pacific take a photograph of the horizon. One of the castaways, Herbert, discovers a speck on the photographic plate.

> While he first assumes the speck to be a defect in the lens, he realizes that the photograph reveals a ship on the horizon of their deserted island. Unfortunately for Herbert and the other castaways, they soon discover that the ship is crewed by dangerous pirates. *The lens purports to show the world as it really is, but that's also a goal it can never reach.*

Here then is the trifecta of the photographic vision: normality; truth or impartiality; and perennial un-attainability.

Cast your mind back for a moment to the photographs we saw, and which some of us will certainly re-visit. By the way, I do hope the JNAF will put some of these images out in a book, or posters or prints. I am sure each of us will have a particular favourite, or set of favourites. Purely as photographs, as an art form, some are truly spectacular: light, rhythm, mood, texture, patterns.

But many can approximate or even better these qualities. What makes these images special is something else: grace, warmth, gentleness, humour — yes, that wry, sometimes wicked, humour — pathos, and an unquestioning acceptance of the city and its people.

Most of all, and this is important from my personal perspective, these images are non-judgmental. They do not find their subjects wanting, no matter what the activity in which that subject is engaged when he or she passed through Foy's lens.

But look again at the images and see where Foy went. He did not promenade. He did not saunter or stroll along the fabled Queen's necklace or aim at skylines or grand vistas. He ventured, quite literally, *into* the city, into its crevices and interstices, onto its parapets and narrow ledges and perches. This is truly the architecture of this city. Not the overbearing sweeps of concrete blocking out the sky, but down on the streets and on the stairs and in the first floor windows, for this is where the city really exists: in the cracks and crevices and

interstices between the built form, that is where the people of this city make their lives, go about their common tasks, their daily rounds. A man sits in the shade of an equestrian statue of the Prince of Wales. A face peers out of a window. The light falls on a seated statute under a graceful balustrade at the Asiatic Library, or on the brilliant white busy moustache of a man in an Irani café. One of the city's itinerant ear cleaners attends to a customer on the plinth of a closed stationery shop. A wanderer dozes in the sun outside the Asiatic library. Brahmins at Banganga go about their morning rituals with their sacred threads, and, in another shot, youngsters are angled in a line at the edge of tank.

But pause. Notice too, not just what we see, but what we do *not,* that which is wholly *absent* in these images. In not one of them is there any violence. I do not mean just a depiction of an act of violence, a riot, stone-throwing, bus-burning. I mean the absence of the photographer's rage, his outrage at what is before his camera. And it is this lack of rage that gives Foy's images their special quality of kindness, of being a humane view of a city and its people.

Foy Nissen's Bombay is one we have all but forgotten.

I saw these images early one morning in preparation for this talk. When I thought back on what I had seen, something niggled. There was, I felt, something I had missed. It took me some time to track it down. It is this. There are very few grand panoramas of the sea, that one element that defines this city and its architecture as nothing else does. The photograph of Chowpatty from high above, or the one of Marine Drive are really not seascapes or skyline shots. The bulk of the imagery turns *into* the city, because that, for Foy it seems, was what it was all about.

Foy's passion translated into something unique. His walks were explorations, travels in search of an understanding, not voyeurism. Hence, his appreciation of the value of the things

he photographed. He foresaw, I think, the imminent change and the inevitable loss. He was seeing a city in transformation. This was not the studied, grand-plan change of the old City Improvement Trust, of Ballard Estate and Hornby Vellard and Marine Drive. This was a much more jagged transformation, one of depletion, loss, lack of concern, chasing something else entirely.

There are today here conservation architects and restoration specialists all of whom will, without exception, acknowledge their debt to Foy. He was the progenitor of built heritage conservation in this city, and from this city, the rest of the country. Shyam Chainani, with whom I had the privilege to work, along side Cyrus Guzder and others, for many years gave legislative structure to that conservation movement, but it was Foy who jump-started it all.

The importance of his work lies most of all in his ability to humanise the built form, and therefore to underscore the value of continued preservation. This is not mindless conservation, but conservation with purpose; the purpose being the people of a city.

How to keep this? To paraphrase Gerard Manley Hopkins, is there a key to keep back beauty, to keep it beauty, to keep it from vanishing away? I do not know if we have an answer to this, or ever will.

The lens has shifted. We no longer want to look within the city. Our modern built form will not allow it. We grow ever higher, crowd more densely together. We are told we must aspire to this, to self-contained villas-in-the-sky with their infinity pools and on-floor parking, all with promised views — of what? If we're unlucky, that promise will not be kept. We will wind up (as the hapless purchasers of one builder's apartment block have) with grand views of another building's podium parking, giving the later building's chauffeurs and car cleaners quid pro quo grand views of our living rooms and

bedrooms. If we do strike gold, what will we see but empty views of endless skies and seas to the east or the west? We are asked to persuade ourselves that it is this emptiness that counts, and not life down there at street level.

In the same poem, *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*, Hopkins wrote six words that resonate through time: *And wisdom is early to despair*.

Indeed it is. The very scale of our construction is dehumanising. Travel down the eastern express freeway, look west, and you have the tragedy of our times. There are in view buildings of apartments that look like pigeon holes and cubby holes, jammed together, rising on and on upward. How can one not feel like a small, insignificant cog in a setting like this?

This is robbery. It is a robbery of the individual. It is the theft of identity. The faux promise of an apartment in the sky is a delusional attempt to escape the city at our feet.

It is also an explicit and unwise rejection of the one thing that shines through in every one of Foy's images: that gloriously unconcerned, constantly forgiving, eternally tolerant, always bemused intimacy of life on the street, life not as a construct of an individual's isolation, but as part of a collective, conjoint, participatory existence.

Am I romanticising this too much? Is there not a validity to the aspirations of those beneath to, as they say, rise above? But that engenders another dialogue: the question we refuse to confront, that 800-pound Godzilla in the city — just who is it exactly we're building for, and what are we building for the people? What vision of so-called betterment are we imposing on those who live, literally, lower down with no consultation, no dialogue? Even our vocabulary is patronising: why should we speak of 'rehabilitation'? There is an assumption there of a starting point of despair and hopelessness, of deprivation, and the suggestion seems to be that pushing people into greater congestion, at higher levels, and isolating them from their own

communities is an improvement; and that it is not possible to build better, more generous and better-appointed living space without this densification and clustering. I believe that to be a myth, but perhaps that is a discussion for another day.

Embedded in Foy's images is a vision and a caution. He tells us to be careful, to be mindful, to see what we put at risk. I do not believe we have been faithful to that vision. The loss is ours and it is a monumental loss. This will always be true: that visions of utopia and dystopia are separated only by myopia.

Foy's images matter. They remind us not just of what we had, and should have kept, but also of the permanence of loss. Foy said he did not believe there was any such thing as a 'definitive' photograph; that split-second image itself suggested, he said, the ensuing dialogue. Many of us today cannot escape the feeling that with the vanishing away of the many things of beauty Foy saw, that conversation has ended.

So it is understandable that while we delight in these photographs as photographs, we also feel wistful. Ours is the sadness of a wanderer remembering a land to which he knows he can never again return.

Thank you.

ENDNOTES

1 Cole, Teju: *A Too-Perfect Picture*; The New York Times Magazine, March 30, 2016. Available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/magazine/a-too-perfect-picture.html. Last accessed on March 10, 2019

2 Daigle, Allain: *How the 50-mm Lens Became 'Normal'*; The Atlantic, May 13, 2018. Available online at: https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/how-the-50-mm-lens-became-normal/560276/. Last accessed on March 10, 2019.