

CHAPTER EIGHT

PULSING CITIES AND SEETHING INTERSTICES: POETICS OF MEDIATION IN GRAPHIC SCIENCE FICTION

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The poetics of a city is inadvertently built around ruptures immanent to the multi-modal continuums it ceaselessly strives to gain for itself, arcs that serve to show and represent the city. Before I proceed any further, an elaboration of this very aphoristic sounding articulation is both necessary and contingent to the scheme which this essay seeks to execute. The programme, in itself, will systematically seek to collapse any regulatory framework that might attach itself to the abounding postulations on visual aesthetics governing the framing of urban spaces, or seem to contribute towards their affective compass. In other words, I begin by a deliberate doing away of contexts, and treat the very practice of graphic mediation of cities as a braiding of eruption and implosion – a poetics of architecturality. Again, my emphasis here is not merely to stress a raw encounter which flouts syntactical laws integral to all acts of narrativization, that is, it struggles to remain a poetics. I will show how in the course of this essay, the definition of this encounter would undergo change, demanding radically altered comprehension of both the language of graphic science fiction and the way it represents and organizes space. Still, if there is something unpersuasive about this heralding position where an encounter between a particular narrative practice and a fragmented reality is seen as the starting point, it behoves that a pathway is set out before the reader. The dilemma stems from the notion that I would call “skin” and its relation to the parameters suggested by the title of this study, individually as on one-to-one correspondences and through overlapping connections. The notion of “skin” needs an introduction to set out its native anarchy and its opposition to what we normatively recognize as poetics of representation. But first, what do we understand as *poetics of representation*? We need an

answer if only to explore the tragic obsolete loop that such an answer will generate.

For this I resort to Nicolas Losson's thesis on the tension between two different registers of images during the performance of a cinematographic act. Although this directs our speculation towards a different visual domain, that of films, the importance of Losson's thesis lies in its recognition of a break in the cinematographic act itself. Losson's work underlies a resonating imperative with implications across multiple visual practices: "On the one hand, one had at any cost to *show*, on the other, to *represent*" (Losson 1999, 29). He explains:

To show means offering the view of that which has no locus other than the visible filmed. *To represent* means imitating, directing, figuring and/or narrating an action by inscribing it within a whole. The representation that naturally results from the act of showing is linked to the object of enunciation, while showing derives from the act of enunciation. (ibid.)

The contest, here, is more than an embroilment of facts, or postures of filmic attitudes, fault lines that are seminally expounded in Losson's essay, "Notes on the Images of the Camps". However, for Losson, as he moves along a problematic cinematic discourse, paying particular attention to films like *The Liberation of Auschwitz* and *Majdanek 1944* that are built around narrative elements reflecting on the "filmic existence" (ibid., 26) of the Nazi concentration camps, the pull between showing and representation is apparently resolved by a final choice of lensing an event through frontality, effectively plunging us, as Losson observes, "into a dimension that is always more demonstrative than representative" (ibid., 29). It is essential in Losson's scheme for the frontality of the face to emerge as it gets "constantly and systematically employed" (ibid.) in these films, "for showing was necessary, despite a loss for representation" (ibid.). I find this emergence of the demonstrative to be an uneasy rapprochement even when, according to Losson, we are able to detect a visible marker of an enunciating source. In *The Liberation of Auschwitz*, this is evident in the shots of a small group of children rolling up their sleeves to show the numbers tattooed on their skin. Obviously, someone off-screen is giving them the signal to hold out their tattooed forearms before the camera. Losson's essay never clearly articulates the jump from "long enumeration of facts" to the choice of frontality with its affective cusp of moral robustness and its "will to preserve the purity of the visible" (ibid., 30).

The choice of frontality as a system of representation is seen as an encounter of the most immediate kind—a moment of truth, a decisive,

fatal confrontation. One must understand that an engagement with the idea of frontality also means looking at the opposition it poses in relation to cinema's celebration of angularity as a means to achieve the spectacular. Frontality, then, is a position achieved through relentless reification and constant purging of the diffuse, providing "the most immediate possible presentation" (ibid.) of subjects. Here, we perceive that the essay has turned upon itself in rejecting the paradox it sets out at the beginning. Losson began by proposing:

[I]f the Nazi camps have a filmic existence that does not allow us to claim the existence of films, in the proper sense of the word, on the Nazi camps, but rather and at best, 'images of the Nazi concentration camps' liberation'—images, although of prompt ones, of the camps' aftermath. (ibid., 25)

Losson's "filmic" ontology of concentration camps initially conceived as an oblique and remote organ stressing the vestigial, spectral existence of Nazi concentration camps finally lays claim to the "rigor of confrontation" in cinema (ibid. 30). For the purposes of the present essay, let me state that the relevance of Losson's piece for my ideation is primarily reliant on the metaphor of the face that he provides and which he brilliantly sums up with a quote by Jacques Aumont: "Not truly temporal, it is caught in the flow of acts and events, it participates in the circulation of meaning" (ibid., 31). This constitutes one vital aspect in the formulation of my notion of the "skin" and its relation to representation, or more specifically graphic mediation of subjects with augmented realities. And when I say "augmented realities", I do not use the term as a broadly indicative one, signalling art forms in general bound to the traditional and clarifying goal of aesthetics which is to make one feel, "in privation and absence, certain past elements of life that through the mediation of art would escape the confusion of appearances" (Debord 1997, 90). I do not seek the comfort deriving in the distance from the anarchy of appearances, which is again a function of duration, of time, for my aim is to configure cities in graphic science fiction just like Latour's "sociotechnical imbroglios" (Latour 1991, 7). Therefore, a city can exist as I will show simultaneously on different temporal planes, and in each plane the images that we have of the city are hybrids, translations of each other, the processes never ceasing to operate. My notion of the "skin" and "eruption" is akin to a perforated membrane. In such a schema, the space of the body is freed from any cementing "compositional gestalt" (Rajchman 1998, 8), and an informal, polyphonic matrix is at play. More significantly, there is a departure from horizontal/vertical orientations, thus preventing its co-option with

modernist palimpsest models. Whatever is palimpsestic is also originary, in that each strata marks its own politics. An adequate analogy would be a gutterless double spread in a comic book. Both halves, incomplete without each other, but each visualized through conjoined yet divergent architecturalities.

The palimpsest, by definition, produces in the reader, actor, or viewer, the desire to cut through movements, postures, gestures, and attitudes, to take a glimpse at a center – of things or assemblages. The “skin-eruption” network that I propose here not only proposes an absent centre, but rather it must be understood as what Foucault, and I turn over to this analogy with the full intent of not being dominated by it, calls “dispositif” – a word in French that is either left untranslated or translated into English as “apparatus”. Foucault defines “dispositif” in the following way:

A thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic positions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. (Highmore 2009, 88)

This description is useful to the extent that it serves to map the expanding ecology of a spatialized universe, specifically of a city. The ecology I have in mind remains laced up, smeared with the essence of a globe, a bubble, and is best illustrated through the essence of Peter Sloterdijk’s “foam worlds”. Unlocalized, shifting, made inconceivable as objects, the foam worlds for Sloterdijk hints towards a theory of the amorphous and non-round pointing up “the paradoxes of the solidary space in the age of multifarious media and mobile world markets” (*ibid.*, 71). In Foucault’s model, it is the dispositif which generates the subject—“it is always the ensemble that is productive” (*ibid.*, 89). This is too much proximity, too much of a designing within social practice. Here is too much ideation of a policed territory turning out a matrix of regulations to be applied across social geographies.

The notion of an omnipotent, controlling, rational governmentality is only mitigated when Foucault reimagines the idea of society as a “complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of disturbance” (*ibid.*, 91). This becomes possible as Foucault claims with the advent of the question of liberalism. That is, what is the principle of limitation that applies to body politic such that things will occur for the best? Again, I see this as Foucault offering a rapprochement where the debate has not moved to premises of non-penetration by government rationality but centers on the degree such penetration is capable of. Also, an object for Foucault is spatialized insofar as the principles of

classification are found in its very structure (ibid., 97). In either cases, an internal-external bind operates. The exterior, once generated, made mobile, globalized as a technological veneer, and one mustn't forget this veneer is forged in by an internal disciplinary rationality, has several forms in Foucault's conceptualization of urban social space; most ideally, the police and the city. He remarks on the interrelationship between the two significantly point to the transformation of a particular form of policing into an overarching rationale, a rationale which eventually becomes the prototype or instrument for exercising power:

A state will be well-organized when a system of policing as tight and efficient as that of the cities extends over the entire territory. At the outset, the notion of police applied only to the set of regulations that were to assure the tranquillity of a city, but at that moment the police become the very *type* of rationality for the government of the whole country. The model of the city became the matrix for the regulations that apply to a whole state. (ibid., 91)

Drawing on Losson, Sloterdijk and Foucault collectively, I show exactly what those technics of spatial representation are, which my model proposes to eschew. Insofar as Foucault acknowledges the obsolescence of a governmental rationality that “will be able to penetrate the body politic to its most fundamental elements” (ibid., 91) and accordingly points to a more conforming “principle of limitation” (ibid., 91), an interventionary ethics, in a dialectic with governmental actions, his initial projection of a radiating program of government rationality giving rise to a general, intersubjective conduct of social functions is relevant to score the oppositional dialectic of my diagram. Comparably, while Losson's essay looks at frontality as a system of representation offering a reified “pure presence” (Losson 1999, 30), the existence of a “vanished interiority” (ibid., 31) vitally remains relevant in his exploration. In both cases, a systematic, networked flow of action is suggested, a specific dynamic that further supplements the management of visibility through an interior-exterior/centre-periphery economy. For Losson, it is the architecturality of the face – the locus of the face – that offers such dynamic play between internal and external geographies, mapped as they are, across the ontological functions of the face.

My model, on the other hand, is reproduced through a fomenting architecturality that “wobbles” and “shrinks” (Howells and Negreiros 2012, 177), doing away with all perspective grids. It is as Baudrillard notes the whole traditional world of causality that is in question as part of the climactic events following the end of the panoptic system: “the

perspectival, determinist mode, the “active,” critical mode, the analytic mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means” (Baudrillard 2006, 473). To pursue the subject a little further and staying awhile with Baudrillard’s formulation offering the very abolition of the spectacular, one can say my suggested paradigm for a poetics of representation is more like a spreading contagion: “no more subject, no more focal point, no more center or periphery: pure flexion or circular inflexion” (ibid., 472). It can be defined as a “viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence” (ibid., 473) smearing social formations, laced as it is with a chain of eruptions and implosions. It serves being a representational ethics, precariously conceived, for it resists and eventually subverts all frames of reference. It is also a desire to map out spatio-temporal contextualizations, and here lies my difference with Baudrillard. My intended poetics of representation is not reduced to a “kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal” (ibid.).

Now that I have defined the necessary conditions mobilizing my representational paradigm, I plan to apply this model within specific visual and narrative frames provided in the two select works of graphic fiction, namely, *Hyderabad: A Graphic Novel* (2014) by Jai Undurti and Harsha Mohan Chatteraj, and *Bangalore: A Graphic Novel* (2017) by Jai Unidurti and Praveen Vempadapu. *Hyderabad* presents us with alternate yet seamless temporal realities of its eponymous Indian city through the tale of a young researcher. What is remarkable is the notion of the simulacra that the graphic narrative constructs through its play with time. In fact, the graphic tale could be seen to project versions of the subjective self operating independently in two different temporal environments. It sets up a collapse into an uncanny realisation that it is not only the human self that can simultaneously operate in divergent time frames, but the cities are powered to do so as well. *Bangalore*, a collection of nine stories, excavate the urban myths surrounding the emerging technological capital. An initiative from Syenagiri, a Hyderabad-based boutique narrative studio, the book “from and about” Bangalore (now Bengaluru) follows in the footsteps of the unique city-centric storytelling initiative of 2014 which had Hyderabad as the subject matter. For my paper, I concentrate on the introductory tale by Appupen which explores a dystopic future set in Bangalore where the thin line separating humans from robots has vanished. My application of the stated representational paradigm quickly marks out two distinct advantages central to my argument: first, the medium of comics or graphic narratives is endowed with recursive agility, and second, it allows for democracy of voices. The first is intrinsically

related to the second, for the characteristic of recursivity gives birth to riddles and games that rely on “repetition, recognition of patterns and creative insight” (Murray 2015, 24). At the level of linguistic play this is what sets humans apart allowing them to make “infinite use of finite means” (ibid.), made probable “by the recursive power of language to refer to itself, and to embed idea within idea” (ibid.). Both my proposed texts, exploiting the intersection of words and images at play in the medium, conflate the two forms of recursion: one is a function of linguistics, extending verbal play, the other expressed through a visual poetics anticipated by my “skin-eruption” design.

The nesting or layering of narratives has the curious effect of naturalizing the innermost layers of the layered reality created by the graphiateur. The naturalization works at multiple levels of a narrative, but what is important to note is that it has the potential to foster entanglements between imagined realities, creating hybrid social spaces. Chris Murray makes this interesting observation with regard to Grant Morrison’s recursive strategies, and one that potentially has significance for the spatio-temporal mapping performed as part of *Every City is a Story*, a unique city-centric story telling initiative begun by Syenagiri, whose first production *Hyderabad*, uniquely encapsulates the studio’s motto of engaging with cities that “extend and exist in dislocations”¹. According to Murray:

Comics provide a unique opportunity to nest these different forms of recursion with one another, to merge them, producing a complex pattern of recursive structures at the level of the text, narrative and picture, immersing recursions within recursions. (Murray 2015, 25)

In *Hyderabad*, the recursive play in the opening sequence musters all the registers Murray hails in Morrison. The reader is accosted with a dizzying chain of fast-paced events. Sir Percy, big-game hunter, lands his time machine in a tar pit in the late Cretaceous age as he goes dinosaur hunting. Extraordinarily the reader discovers, this is for the second time in a month that such mishap has befallen Sir Percy. This is where the weave, or as what Groensteen refers to in his *The System of Comics* as the “braid”, becomes effective. The “braid” is Groensteen’s metaphor to understand how panels, in relative sequential linearity or distantly within a network, can be linked in series through non-narrative correspondences (Groensteen 2007, 7). It relies, as Murray explains “on the reader making connections by remembering parts of the discourse that they have encountered earlier, or if reading for the second time, projecting ahead to what is known to be coming” (Murray 2015, 26). The reader, through the discovery of Sir

Percy's relatively frequent time travel and on confronting an instance of quotidian vexation bursting forth onto the precincts of a hungry forest – "TEA AND CRUMPETS! THAT IS THE SECOND TIME THIS MONTH" – is at once sucked into a vortex which is truly implosive, a collapse, an uncanny telescoping of two grisly worlds. The world of the sola topee; the ventilating hat protecting the white European colonizer amidst the morass of brown bodies, their silent naked stares ricocheting off the white pith of the headgear; the glaring tropical sun making the violence of the stares transform into debilitating weakness as days passed in the clutches of an incurable loneliness. The terror is now filigreed across another spatial locale: an oppressively green Cretaceous forest. The gaze is trained by a more primeval counterpart, sizing up the lonely hunter. Precise, and sure footed, at the top of the food chain, it exists prior to any human code or discourse.

The spin-off set up by these contiguous visual registers has a reverse effect on the imperial fantasy of populating sparse landscapes of whiteness with manipulated images of the Other. The fantasy always ensures a performance that makes readers return to images of whiteness more intently. In other words, in this landscape of dreams, the promise of dialectic, or contest, always remains unfulfilled. There is no mutual looking or breach of boundaries. The spectacle is always centered on the imperial agent; intervention is his sole prerogative and everything else around him is a silhouette, pre-modern. He has the power to roam the zones of primitivism if only to valorise the essentialism informing his enumerative modalities. Sir Percy, one of "ex-queen's own guards" (Undurti and Chatteraj 2014), however, quickly loses these advantages. The jungle towers over the white man, gazes of the human and the primeval are interlocked and before long a hot pursuit ensues as one of the species of *Tyrannosaurus Rex* gets a sniff of food. Now it is Sir Percy being hunted, looked at as a variety of exotic food. He is a spectacle, a freak, which the Cretaceous land wants to quickly purge to emancipate its topos and reclaim its elemental disposition. But one can see too that this spectacle is short-lived, already caving in, and that the Cretaceous terrain has been a mediated network for quite some time. Its unreachable otherness has already been transformed into a patchwork of strange intimately colliding loops which makes any totalizing structural principles redundant. The monumental, the mythic, the tragic – the purifying vanguards of classic modernism – are thrown out, and what follows is a series of exchanges, or if one prefers, in the words of Vincent Kaufman, a game "that will not be a discreet activity limited in time and space" (Debord 1997, 59). The luxurious, deep-hued panels by Chatteraj create a

dizzying effect of rush, signalling an impending disaster. The series of movements quickly leads to a spatial and temporal transformation, seen here in the hunter's memory of an atrocious civic reality. The panel showing the hunter in flight assumes a truly hybrid status for the mental recall is actually triggered during an escape through a depression made by a dinosaur's feet which Percy mistakes to be a dirt road. The rough exit route cutting through the forest reminds him of the dishevelled municipal road in the British colonial province of Cawnpur (now Kanpur). This recollection which is deeply reminiscent of an essentialist Western notion that the development of society is conceivable only in urban life, through the realization of urban society (Soja 2003, 26), is a timely ploy to upset expectations that reach out for a purifying ethics, thus creating radically different ontological zones of the human and the nonhuman.

Sir Percy is bailed out in time by a unique time-travelling contraption, constituting the ubiquitous expeditionary force of Indian metropolises, the auto rickshaw; but not before the sequence of panels has arrived at its most recursive moment, putting into action "the infinite use of finite means" (Murray 2015, 23). Presented as an example of *mise en abyme*, the moment is also a confluence of divergent economies, and not the least among them is the economy present in the medium of comics.

For the purpose of this paper, however, the word economy must be unsettled with the addition of a qualifier. Keeping at abeyance the term's etymological ramifications stemming from the Greek *oikos* (house) and *nemein* (control), I plan to veer off from its designation, quite literally, of a form of "home rule" or management, and focus on its translating abilities. To be precise, "translating economies" is what I have here denoting the essentially hybrid nature of exchanges. These exchanges do not unilaterally take place across the divide between nature and culture, but often could be seen to operate in intersectional spaces within predictable and stable interests of the human society. The climactic moment of Sir Percy's retreat has several levels of such translations. It is a perforated membrane, a skin with cracks, forming narrative arcs propelled by fakeries that one must befriend if one wishes to meddle with the armor of the clean and proper self.

The presence of the auto rickshaw serves as a radical spatial multiplier. In fact, it is a locus of fake exchanges or corrupt translating economies that the *homo faber* must struggle with before he can gain entry into the machine. The eruption of the machine onto the Cretaceous scene is how Situationists would view the construction of situations beyond the modern collapse of the notion of spectacle. The reader discovers that the time-travelling auto rickshaw is not a spectacle after all, in fact, it is embedded

into a relay network, part of an interface that introduces elements of the quotidian. The driver haggles and draws both the reader and the fleeing Sir Percy into a special economy which runs into, and consequently triggers, slippery strategies derived from an intimately located psychogeography. Our realisation of the proximity of that urban territory is delayed by the driver's virtuoso technique of riddles and elisions. Not only does he overcharge Percy, but once he acquiesces, he instantly changes the rules of the engagement, and grudgingly whines that they must wait for more passengers to arrive so that the trip to the 21st century is a profitable one. This play of corruption and trickery, a quality which implies a dangerous lack of civic virtue, but which is also a survival tactic enforced on an urban topography of dispersal and contestation – the reader will soon realise his closeness to that landscape – stages what would appear to be an unthinkable, unseemly programme of hybridization marking the primeval Cretaceous terrain with a play of corrupt urban economies of exchange. Sir Percy could only make a futile show of anger as the auto driver makes him wait for another passenger to arrive, smugly initiating the concept of “share rides” in this unthinkable locale: “WHAT BADMASHEE [wickedry] IS THIS? GET ON WITH IT” (Undurti and Chatteraj 2014).

Meanwhile, the space of the Cretaceous and the guttural space of Undurti and Chatteraj's comics have taken on aspects of the perforated skin. By repeatedly pushing approximations of the spectacular into stereotypes of the quotidian, and by its corporeal economies of exchange configured as survival strategies, *Hyderabad* projects this dual spatiality on the proximate surface of the skin. At this point the skin is a nexus of multiple levels of circulation, marked and linked by circulation routes, intertwining geo-political and haptic exchanges, and also crucially dreams that instantiate themselves through migrations across ideas, images, subjects and objects. To analogically compare this elaborate play and to explore its dynamic intersection, Latour's conceptualization of “sociotechnical imbroglios” (Latour 1993, 7) serves up an astute correlation. For Latour, our “fabric is no longer seamless” (ibid.), and we rely on the notion of translation, or network to “shuttle” (ibid., 3) back and forth. He writes how the desire for analytic continuity gives rise to a state of perplexing hermeneutic slippage:

What link is there between the work of translation or mediation [creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture] and that of purification [creates two different ontological zones separately for human beings and nonhumans]? This is the question on which I should like to shed light. My hypothesis [...] is that the second has made the first possible: the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of

hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes—such is the paradox of the moderns, which is the exceptional situation in which we find ourselves allows us finally to grasp. (ibid., 12)

The auto lands Sir Percy in the 21st-century Deccan city of Hyderabad. Even before we realize the anachronism posited by the two panels showing swirls of movement and joined together by a diminutive shot of the gleeful white man relieved to escape unscathed from a close encounter, we are already located on the skin of Ashfaq's story. The dissonance of different spatio-temporal planes evaporates and we are unsure whether the presence of the ex-Queen's guard amidst a crowded street of an Indian metropolis is to be considered a matter of hyper-reality. Any perception that a page has been turned, almost literally; a threshold has been crossed, or for that matter a journey has been completed, is made impossible. This consideration is also brought about by a clever linguistic play; again, a riddle, a half utterance suggestive of ease and identification: "AH... HYDERABAD!" (Undurti and Chatteraj 2014).

Percy's purely subjective articulation commemorates not a passage of time, because in this psychogeography journeys have been already foreclosed, destroying the automatism of *durée*. What we are left with is a burst-open assemblage of space-time. It is as the posthumanist and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk's says "thinking in the foam" (Sloterdijk 2011, 75) where "discrete and polyvalent games of reason must develop that learn to live with a shimmering diversity of perspectives" (ibid.). The life of a doctoral student is put in a quandary by the lack of authentic sources on his chosen topic: "THE LIFE & TIMES OF THE POET ASHFAQ" (Undurti and Chatteraj 2014). As he discovers the clarity of Ashfaq's lines crumble under the charges of "INNUENDO AND HEARSAY" (ibid.), his thoughts about this elusive poet recall images from childhood and with them the riddling lines of the Sufi poet Fariuddin Attar from his famous mystical poem, *The Conference of the Birds*. Attar's poem chronicles the quest by a band of birds for the legendary arch-bird, the Simurgh. Expectedly, this expectation inherent in the finitude of a discovery and subsequent return is quickly swamped and denied of a proliferative agency. What proliferates in its place is again a matrix of surface economies. The contradiction inherent in the use of the phrase and the difficulty it offers to pre-reflective and perceptual identification is well brought out by Sloterdijk's critique of the modernist position:

The rabble of observers, who want to take everything from without and no longer understand any rhythm—have we not long since become part of them, in most matters and at most moments? And how could it be any

different? *Who could inhabit in such a way that they inhabit everything?*
(Sloterdijk 2011, 76; emphasis mine)

The maze of the young scholar's mind is redoubled as his consciousness starts nesting the lost poet's history, and more tellingly Ashfaq's thoughts. This intertwining of divergent mindscapes get inscribed on the maze of the city and within no time the young man is befriended and transported by the time-travelling auto rickshaw to the old Hyderabad of the lost poet. More significantly here, the young scholar's complex transit assumes importance regarding the question whether science fiction valorizes space in a way that validates its material reality. I find that this query when put before the collapsing "heterarchy" (Murray 2015, 26) of Undurti and Chatteraj has the dramatic possibility of pointing towards a lack of geography, even suggesting the "irreality" (Philmus 2005, 187) of space. The man's time in the old city again references the play of mean, banal, corrupting economies, and it is not simply a question of whether experiential space has been displaced in favour of a philosophic and geometrical labyrinth, but whether the inaccessibility of the real is what is not concealed by the ludic economies. Here one comes tantalisingly close to the immensity of the problematic unfurled by graphic recursive play.

In the old city of Hyderabad, the scholar finds himself at home. In fact, he is well versed with the politics of the "CHAI KHANA", the veritable hothouse for gossips, the tea shop, and offers to pay with a poem since his money is worthless in the present scheme of things. To this the waiter responds: "WE ACCEPT ALL MAJOR POETIC FORMS INCLUDING QUATRAINS, COUPLETS AND BLANK VERSE" (Undurti and Chatteraj 2014). The unfurling play of ludic economies continues guided by overlaps, repetitions, and multiple divergent relations. When the moment of anagnorisis arrives it is fearful, for it anticipates a deeper implication in a fantastic imbroglio of hybridization. As a matter of fact, the moments of discovery are twofold: first, when the questing hero realizes he is none other than the man he himself is searching, the elusive poet of his dissertation, now trail blazing the poetry dens of the luxuriant city: "I AM ASHFAQ... I HAVE LOST MY WAY IN THE GARDENS OF TIME" (ibid.); second, when the city speaks to him and gives him the role of a translator of its secret codes. In both these instances, Latour's paradox of modernity is self-evident. Ashfaq, the novice, must occupy a purifying plane to undergo his quest for the lost poet, there must be some distance adduced to this exercise, otherwise there will be no quest to commence. Likewise, a translator is there only because a prohibitive assemblage of cognitive registers exists. Without such registers existing in need of emancipation from their own centripetality, the translator is

readily thrown out. Having said this, one must note, that the quest necessarily entails a disappearance, the “lost” becoming “found”, while through the act of translation, the “unnameable” is “named”, realized, and emancipated.

In the narrative of *Hyderabad*, as I have already noted, such satisfactory determinacy and formidable extirpations are shunned in favour of a coeality assured by the processes of hybridization. Ashfaq, the poet, the scholar, and the translator, are coterminous presentation of a performance that constantly repeats itself through exigencies violence, trickery, and displaced resolution. In other words, tactical economies that, though are given spatialized registers of reception and mobilization, remain intractable, their immediacy only a fabricated virtuoso technique.

As the story moves towards its final immersion into the recursive loop, tales of master architects emerge, who were called upon by two emerging nations to build specimens of unbearable violence. Conceived as nationalist projects, the cities acquire the aspect of power grids, ready to canalize the jingoism that has been stoked into a duplicitous interweaving of wishes, thoughts, and images. Even before the horrors of the 1947 Partition have abated,² both the warring nations of India and Pakistan plan to unleash their cities over one another. The project of purification is supervised by tetrarchs with matching powers: Le Corbusier motored India’s construction of the absolute city, while it was Konstantin Doxiadis for the other nation. But both were united by their purifying impulses. If Corbusier was busy enacting a grand mnemonic encoding a culture’s cosmologies, and therefore, assigning a consistent materiality to the symbolism foregrounding a nation’s fractal consciousness, Doxiadis pursued his thesis that the “SEEMING RANDOMNESS OF GREEK SACRED ARCHITECTURE CONCEALED A[sic] ANCIENT, HIDDEN SYMMETRY” (Undurti and Chattoraj 2014).

In India’s case, however, as the narrative exposes, the clandestine machinations of a Public Works Department engineer suppressed the militant abilities invested in the glyphs of Chandigarh, Corbusier’s dream vision, from spilling over. “Sukrani”, as he named the city, was made from pilfering construction materials from Corbusier’s site, and from refurbishing urban waste materials. It was Nek Chand’s, the Works engineer’s hybrid creation that ultimately resulted in contaminating, and thereby mitigating the purifying, exteriorizing influence of modernist imagination fuelling the nation.

In *Bangalore: A Graphic Novel*, the introductory short comics by Appupen, titled “Bangaloids”, presents a situation where cognition and estrangement are at full play. The sequence of panels opens with a male

cyborg trying to rev up his energy cells through a mechanized power generator. The attempt fails repeatedly, causing him to look for his female partner who is similarly occupied in powering up her circuits. He looks out of a portal and the view shifts to a futuristic version of the city of Bangalore, towering over as an amoral, neutral, dizzying, highly-interconnected capitalist manifestation. Interestingly, this vision is “bemoaned” in the text: “I’M SURE THEY HAD A CHOICE... AT SOME TIME... HOW COULD THEY CHOOSE THIS FOR THEIR CHILDREN” (Appupen 2017). The lament reaches its climactic end when the male cyborg commits an act of self-annihilation. The suicide is effectively remedied and we come to know that this specific cyborgian being has “ISSUES” and the owner is within her rights to claim full replacement from the manufacturers. Despite the story’s repeated avowal of a domestic setting, and its suggestion of mimetic conjugal arrangement, this again is no surprise. N. Katherine Hayles makes the case clear:

About 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin. (quoted in Cornea 2005, 276)

What is actually jolting in Appupen’s comic is that it shows the long-forgotten catastrophe when human brain architecture was allowed to coexist with the architecture of cultural forms but no concession was made for human consciousness. The “humanness” jettisoned to that consciousness, ironically already believed to exist as culturally and socially narrated, assumed an inadequate affective cusp. A flotsam evocative of a decaying, corrupting economy. A close example would be Nek Chand’s patchwork city of Sukrana. The ethical unease generated by the vestigial presence of such affective traces reminding us of the “humanness” in cyborgian artifacts that has been left uncategorised is felt across both Syenagiri productions. The scenario invokes anxiety about the essence of humanness. The essence has been proliferating as what the Situationists would label as *ozio*: indolence, corruption, trickery, and the various economies of exchange animating the mean streets. Again, I must sound a cautionary note quickly because my proposition here may direct one to assume that I am trying to secure an unblemished map for humanness. The point I am making is about the potential emotional register of a reader when he or she comes across the panel showing the errant cyborg hanging lifelessly/motionlessly from the ceiling, apparently after committing an act of suicide. Are we able to detect the involvement of a viral, contagious human essence which makes this act of violence networked into a

phenomenon that is “simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective like society”? (Latour 1993, 6) Or, do we come against a more sinister suggestion exploding our pitiful illusions: that such sniffing about essences only go on to validate the ambiguous relief that follows after the death of pure consciousness. Only after such a catastrophe, the hybrids can take over and mediation ensues.

I conclude by tracing death, but more importantly perhaps, my envisioned trajectory of recursive play across a filigreed skin of narrations, discourses, and nature, is more hybrid than Latour’s imbrolios. For while according to Latour, we immediately stop being wholly modern “as soon as we” (ibid., 11) direct our attention to the conjoint processes of purification and hybridization, and “at the same time” we stop having been modern, because we become retrospectively aware that these two processes have “always already been at work”, an imperceptible delay, or a time lag becomes essential to stage Latour’s virtualisation. If, in both the graphic narratives discussed so far, the death and disappearance of the pure as an undiluted category is a prerequisite to imagine cities and their dwellers, then, what is contaminated is not the pure; it is its absence that is contaminated, and on death we build.

Notes

¹ “Every City is A Story,” *Hyderabad Graphic Novel Project* (blog), January 28, 2019 (10:49 p.m.), <https://hgnp.wordpress.com>

² The partition of the subcontinent, and the establishment of the two neighbouring independent states of India and Pakistan, was accompanied by an unprecedented scale of violence, rape and arson. The aftermath, on the one hand, saw the development of deep animosity, militant forms of nationalism on both sides, and, on the other, an equally pervading articulation of nostalgia which rued this bifurcation of siblings.

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