

Layers of Permanence: A Spatial-Materialist Reading of Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*

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In his introduction to the anthology *Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai notes a growing divorce – which he characterizes as a kind of “apartheid” – between academic and policy debates about globalization on one hand, and on the other hand “vernacular discourses” concerned with protecting cultural autonomy and economic survival at the local, regional, or national level. He argues:

a series of social forms has emerged to contest, interrogate, and reverse these developments [that threaten such autonomy] and to create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system....These social forms rely on strategies, visions, and horizons for globalization on behalf of the poor that can be characterized as “grassroots globalization” or, put in a slightly different way, as “globalization from below.”¹

Accordingly, Appadurai calls for academic research and cultural theory to engage with grassroots globalization – for instance, in the form of transnational advocacy networks – in a more serious way.

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In the particular context of literary studies in South Africa, Michael Green is one of the few critics to call for such a grassroots hermeneutic, in his essay on Phaswane Mpe's novel *Welcome to our Hillbrow*:

[M]ovements like the Treatment Action Campaign, the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS, the Education Rights Project, and the Concerned Citizens Forum, quite specifically try to give ordinary people a voice and some control over their daily lives without calling upon a nationalized sense of the political. If we are to read *Welcome to our Hillbrow* seriously in terms of an attempt to 'regain a capacity to act and struggle' in the post-nationalist political world of post-apartheid, then it is for some sort of alignment with these social movements that we could most profitably look.²

To Green's list I would add the more radical Anti-Privatization Forum and allied groups, as well as the local activists who have organized protests against failures in service delivery throughout the country in recent years.

Both Green and Appadurai implicitly argue for situating cultural production within a multifaceted context that includes the material conditions of that production; the social inequities that characterize those conditions under post-Cold War capitalism and neoliberal economic regimes; and the newly emergent social movements that attempt to challenge these regimes. In this essay I attempt to construct such a reading, which I describe as a "spatial-materialist" interpretation, of Ivan Vladislavić's third novel *The Exploded View* (2004). In doing so I hope to rectify what I see as a blind spot in much of the criticism of Vladislavić's earlier work – a failure or refusal to note the social and material spaces within which the work is written and in which the fictional events he describes take place.

The tendency toward dehistoricized or dematerialized readings is by no means exclusive to criticism on Vladislavić, but is in fact common in much recent South African literary and cultural studies. Emblematic of this vein of scholarship is the high profile work of Sarah Nuttall, whose recent writing relies on a rather depoliticized reading of the work of Walter Benjamin: she interprets the new urban fiction of South Africa through the figure of Benjamin's *flâneur*, which she defines as the "aesthetic bohemian, drifting through the city like a film director," and which "invites us to read the city from its street-level intimations, to encounter the city as lived complexity, to seek alternative narratives and maps based on wandering."³ Elsewhere, in a reading of youth culture and social space in the shopping mall the Zone at Rosebank, Nuttall observes a process that she calls "*the stylization of the self*", or "how people seek to transform themselves into singular beings."⁴

Nuttall's work gives us a valuable glimpse into the protean social networks at which Vladislavić's novel likewise hints, and at the rapidly changing processes by which subjectivity is formed in the new urban spaces of South Africa. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that, for Nuttall, styling the self is essentially a process of consumption, as evidenced in the "Books, CDs, comic strips, advertisements, food, urban design, and techware" reviewed in the pages of the youth-oriented *Y* and *SL* magazines.⁵ The unexplored implication is that the ability to shape one's own identity in the post-apartheid, postmodern city is contingent on a certain level of financial and educational privilege, and as Michael Watts notes, the "question of what the Y generation represents politically, of what a 'stylistics of the future'...means, remains enigmatic and elusive."⁶ While Nuttall acknowledges the aspirational qualities of this youth culture – it reflects where teenagers would like to be, not necessarily where they come from – and while she recognizes that the poor are made to feel unwelcome at consumer sites such as the Zone at Rosebank,⁷ she never addresses the question of how "stylizing the self" might play out for the desperately poor, for whom the world of the middle class might seem alien and unattainable.

Vladislavić's fiction, on the contrary, is highly attuned to questions of cultural production and identity formation *within* the material conditions, physical spaces, and continuing inequities of South African society. Yet most critics of *The Exploded View*, as well as critics of Vladislavić's previous works such as *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and *Propaganda by Monuments* (1996), focus on the linguistic and discursive aspects of Vladislavić's writing, while ignoring or underemphasizing the writer's clear preoccupation with physical and social space.⁸ This oversight is especially curious given the author's longstanding interest in architecture and urban space – revealed, for instance, in his co-editing the volume *blank___: Architecture, Apartheid and After*.⁹ Certainly the author *is* fascinated by language, words, and word games, but most of his critics largely fail to note (or at least understate) the relationship in his works between language, discourse, and *material* space. Vladislavić tells Warnes:

As people write about the making and re-making of South African cities, the question of what's changed and what hasn't becomes urgent. What the project [of editing the anthology *blank___*] confirmed for me is that the actual physical structures of apartheid are going to be difficult, if not impossible, to erase, and that we're going to be living within those structures for a very long time.¹⁰

As I note elsewhere, “a recurring theme in all of Vladislavić’s writing is that the disorientation and historical amnesia that characterize post-apartheid life and culture result at least in part from the contestation on several fronts of spatial configurations that reinforce older social formations.”¹¹ In this light, Vladislavić’s word games and puzzles should be read, not merely as attempts to elude the foreclosure of meaning, as Felicity Wood reads them, but also as attempts to map the rapidly shifting, labyrinthine social and physical geographies of the post-apartheid city.

This tendency is even more apparent in *The Exploded View*, the very title of which offers a spatial metaphor for itself. An exploded view, as the character Gordon Duffy explains, is an illustration of a building project in which each piece of wood, nail, screw, etc. is detached and floating as if in mid-air to demonstrate where the builder should place each piece.¹² This representational strategy becomes a trope for the novel’s own operation, which attempts to dissect what one character sees as the city’s “layers of permanence,” and to illustrate the complex interactions of people, material commodities, and social and physical space that constitute life in post-apartheid Johannesburg.

It is arguably even more important in South Africa today to take into consideration the material processes that govern the production, organization, occupation, and use of space than it was during the apartheid era, when the Nationalist government obsessively posited race as the predominant principle for such a spatial economy. Gillian Hart notes that “political liberation and emancipatory promises coincided with the ascendance of market triumphalism on a global scale, defining the terrain on which the newly elected democratic state came to embrace neoliberalism.”¹³ The ending of the government’s pathological preoccupation with race, the lifting of economic sanctions and cultural boycotts, and the ANC’s embrace of neoliberal or so-called “free market” economic policies have led to South Africa’s fullest integration into the networks of global capitalism to date. With this immersion into late capitalism has come massive unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a severe segregation of social space, albeit along class rather than strictly racial lines. It is difficult to drive through the suburbs of Johannesburg, for instance, without being struck by the degree to which post-apartheid architecture is one of barricaded exclusion against urban poverty and crime.

In the post-1994 era, then, it has become more important than ever in South Africa to take cognizance of the insights of Henri Lefebvre, who argues that “every society – and hence every mode of production...produces a space, its own space.”¹⁴ Lefebvre further notes that if “space is a product,

our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production.”¹⁵ Neil Smith poses the same idea succinctly as “the *political* question: how does the geographical configuration of the landscape contribute to the survival of capitalism?”¹⁶ The importance of these questions becomes increasingly clear in South Africa’s urban centers as privatization and fortification become the primary forces shaping development. In Johannesburg, for example, Lindsay Bremner notes that the businesses that have remained in the embattled inner city have become tightly controlled citadels, in which everything employees need – “library, restaurant, convenience store, travel agent, bank, crèche – can be found on its secured inner street.” As Bremner describes it, the corporations that have chosen to remain in the Central Business District “have, quite simply, dug in. They have staked out their turf and carved up the city into patrolled, flag-festooned, designer-paved, rubbish-binned corporate enclaves....For those inside, the city has ceased to exist; for those outside, the city is a pretty desperate place.”¹⁷ Steven Robins sees the same phenomenon playing out in Cape Town, where, by removing non-whites from the inner city, “apartheid spatial planning created the racialized grids upon which the template of the ‘postmodern,’ post-apartheid city could seamlessly settle.”¹⁸

The juxtaposition between barricaded affluence and devastating poverty and crime – readily apparent, for example, in the proximity of wealthy Sandton to impoverished Alexandra Township, and in the view of the shanty towns surrounding the power plant on the Cape Flats from the opulent campus of the University of Cape Town – is blatant evidence of *uneven development* in South African cities and townships. Neil Smith argues that uneven development is a strategic and integral part of global capitalist expansion: “Capital, rather than using the underdeveloped world as a source of markets, has instead used the Third World as a source of cheap labor, thus preventing its full integration into the world market.”¹⁹ Patrick Bond has argued further that “the *uneven development* of South Africa’s cities and black townships...was generally *amplified* during the 1990s transition to democracy, which was also a transition to ‘neoliberal,’ market-oriented ways of organizing urban policy.”²⁰

The Marxist tradition out of which these readings of the city derive typically sees the buildings and infrastructure of a city as “*capital*, set in intractable, immovable, and hence confined, space. ...But in turn, cities are spaces where contradictions in the capitalist mode of production therefore play themselves out most forcefully.”²¹ Smith likewise argues that a “spatial fix for the internal contradictions of capital” is impossible, but that “in the doomed attempt to realize this spatial fix, capital achieves a degree of spatial fixity organized into identifiably separate scales of social activity.” The

urban scale is probably the most visible of these and is “the necessary expression of the centralization of productive capital,”²² the limits of which are determined by labor markets and commute times. Recently, however, other theorists operating within the Marxist tradition have argued that new technologies and new postmodern forms of socio-spatial organization have decreased capital’s reliance on urban spatial fixity: “We now find that capital is no longer concerned about cities. Capital needs fewer workers and much of it can move all over the world, deserting problematic places and populations at will.”²³ This is nowhere more glaringly true than in Johannesburg, where virtually the entire infrastructure and labor force of a regional business and financial capital were uprooted from the Central Business District and rebuilt in Sandton over the course of two short decades.

David Harvey goes on to note that different fixed forms – political borders, built environments, etc. – have been “precipitated out of different historical moments and assume qualities reflective of social processes at work in particular times and places. The result is an urban environment constituted as a palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.”²⁴ Andreas Huyssen likewise uses the metaphor of “urban palimpsests” to describe contemporary Berlin; in debates over city planning, Huyssen suggests, a notion is emerging of “Berlin as palimpsest, a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while previous text is preserved, traces are restored, erasures documented.”²⁵ Amin and Thrift use a different variation of the urban palimpsest metaphor, arguing that “the spatial and temporal porosity of the city also opens it to *footprints* from the past and contemporary links elsewhere.”²⁶ The concepts of the urban palimpsest or the footprint from the past have suggestive implications for contemporary Johannesburg – for example, the mostly black but also coloured [mixed race] and Indian residents of Sophiatown were removed to the Meadowlands and other remote townships southwest of the city. The new whites-only area was officially renamed Triomf (“Triumph”), only to become a mixed-race suburb once again in the 1990s, and then renamed Sophiatown in 2006.

Lisa Yoneyama describes the challenge facing urban planners in cities marked by traumatic events as the “reregistering” or making visible of memory.²⁷ This challenge certainly confronts those who would rewrite the spatial codes of post-apartheid urban space, whether they be architects and urban planners or authors of urban novels. The postmodern phenomena of technological change, hypermobility, planned obsolescence, consumerism, commodification, and time-space compression all act to thwart this inscription of memory onto urban spaces. In this context, the impulse to *archive* and preserve the past must be seen not as contradicting the amnesiac

tendencies of late capitalism, but rather as *responding* to them by searching for cultural stability and identity through fixed spatial configurations. Huyssen asks: “What if the relationship between memory and forgetting were actually being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll?” He further notes that the Freudian “psychic processes of remembering, repressing, and forgetting in individuals is writ large in contemporary consumer societies as a public phenomenon of unprecedented proportions.”²⁸

These simultaneous palimpsestic and amnesiac qualities of postmodern/post-apartheid architecture and urban design pose unique difficulties to any attempt to represent or “map” urban and peri-urban spaces. In an analysis of such self-contained commercial citadels as Melrose Arch and Montecasino in Johannesburg’s north suburbs, Achille Mbembe argues that “postapartheid commercial architecture constitutes a mode of erasure all the more dramatic because it is accomplished with painstaking care against the duties to memory ritualized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”²⁹ He argues further that:

In the South African context, surfaces such as Montecasino and, to a lesser extent, Melrose Arch represent new genres of writing time. But this new inscription of time is paradoxical. For it to be possible at all, the built form has to be construed as an empty placeholder for meanings that have been eroded by time rather than remembered by it. That is why they are largely the manifestation of the failure of the racial city to assimilate the passage of time. While bearing witness to a demand that the past be forgotten, this architecture asks the spectator to forget that it is itself a sign of forgetting.³⁰

By “racial city,” Mbembe presumably means the urban spaces engineered by apartheid and segregationist social policy to be whites-only citadels. The implication is that, insofar as the racial city disavowed the African past and was designed according to principles of repression and exclusion, it anticipated the postmodern cityscapes described by Huyssen and others, though the palimpsestic qualities of such urban geographies have become still more pronounced in the past decade. Such paradoxical spaces, which both erase the past and leave visible the marks of that erasure, underscore the complexity of any attempt to archive or decode the past inscribed on and erased from those spaces.

South African artist and theater maker William Kentridge has devised a style of animation that, I would argue, is particularly well adapted to

registering the marks of erasure and forgetting on the post-apartheid urban landscape. In an interview, Kentridge explains how his style of draw-and-erase animation differs from traditional animation in which the object in motion is redrawn many times on separate sheets of cellophane:

With a technique of animating or drawing, the stages of a movement are drawn on the same sheet of paper, and the previous ones erased, so you have a visible trace of that journey around the table.... This is how the effect of erasure and the effect of imperfect erasure puts on to the very surface and into the heart of the drawing or piece of the film itself the fact of time passing, but also makes visible something that is normally invisible. One can perceive the multiplicity of the self passing through time, which would end up as a single self if the moment was frozen in a photograph.³¹

My argument in the remainder of this essay will be that, in *The Exploded View* as in his earlier work, Vladislavić develops the prose equivalent of Kentridge's draw-and-erase animation style – that is, he forges a mode of representation that can register the continual inscription and effacement of social relations onto the physical urban landscape through which his characters wonder bemusedly. This aesthetic of “imperfect erasure” operates in tandem with the trope of the “exploded view” in Vladislavić's attempt to dissect contemporary Johannesburg and lay bare the social and economic processes that create and intersect it.

The notion of the exploded view is introduced in the novel by the character Gordon Duffy. Perhaps because of his childhood obsession with his father's DIY magazines, Duffy possesses a “surgical ability to see how things fitted together,” but wonders how useful this is in a world now dominated by microcircuitry: “this skill seemed to him increasingly outmoded in the world he lived in. It was no longer clear even to the most insightful observer how things were made or how they worked. The simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom.”³² Nevertheless, Vladislavić takes up the metaphor of the exploded view as a representational strategy through which he exposes the multifaceted social and physical infrastructures of contemporary Johannesburg. This strategy extends to the very narrative structure of the work itself, which is not a unified novel in the traditional sense so much as four vignettes featuring four sets of characters whose paths interconnect in subtle ways. The four protagonists' careers are diverse and seemingly unrelated: Budlender in “Villa Toscana” is a statistician for the census; Egan in “Afritude Sauce” is a

sanitary engineer; Simeon Majara in “Curiouser” is an artist famous for his representations of genocide in Rwanda and elsewhere; and in “Crocodile Lodge,” Gordon Duffy's company erects signs and billboards, specializing in signs announcing the future use of construction sites. Yet each character's perspective allows us to see different facets of the complex cultural and material processes that make everyday life in the city possible.

Like Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, Budlender likes to make lists and catalogs; he also has a “passion for statistics,” and just as Tearle studies the phone directory to track changes and trends across the city, Budlender uses statistics as a means of archiving those changes.³³ The extent of his faith in the technologies of archiving are revealed in his notion that the most trivial facts must be “lodged somewhere in the circuitry of his memory,” though he is frustrated at his inability to recall those facts at will.³⁴ Another trait he has in common with Tearle is his keen awareness of the effect of architecture and other built spaces, as we see when he approaches a new housing development, Villa Toscana, on the northern outskirts of the city to interview a woman about her census form:

The boundaries of Johannesburg are drifting away, sliding over pristine ridges and valleys, lodging in tenuous places, slipping again. At its edges, where the city fades momentarily into the veld, unimaginable new atmospheres evolve. A strange sensation had come over [Budlender] when he first drew up at the gates of Villa Toscana, a dreamlike blend of familiarity and displacement.... [H]e was like a man in a film who has lost his memory and returns by chance to a well-loved place.³⁵

If the changes that have taken place in the city center reflect the grimy underside of uneven capitalist development, the new developments and “edge cities” that have sprung up in the far-flung outskirts of the city reflect in turn the glittering aspirational lures of postmodern/global consumer culture. Bremner has argued, for example, that edge cities are “the entry points for many into middle South Africa, providing instant access to the essence of the new South African dream” for the emerging black middle class.³⁶

The faux Tuscan architecture of Villa Toscana, like the mural of Alibia in *The Restless Supermarket*, embodies what Mbembe calls “an architecture of hysteria”: its evocations of an imagined European past are like the “remiscences” of hysterics, “repressed memories that fail to be integrated into the psyche.” Mbembe explains:

The architecture of hysteria in contemporary South Africa is the result of a painful, shocking encounter with a radical alterity set loose by the collapse of the racial city. Faced with the sudden estrangement from the familiar resulting from the collapse of the racial city, this architecture aims to return to the “archaic” as a way of freezing rapid changes in the temporal and political structures of the surrounding world. It is an architecture characterized by the attachment to a lost object that used to provide comfort....[T]he mark of the past here is only a trace, not a literal recollection.³⁷

This could be taken as a summary of Vladislavić’s depictions of Johannesburg in all his recent work, in which the traces of the past serve as mechanisms of forgetting rather than recollection.

For Budlender, the new faux European subdivisions pose a bewildering experience, but one which he finds strangely intoxicating. Returning from one of his many visits to Iris du Plooy, the woman at Villa Toscana with whom he grows increasingly obsessed, Budlender gets lost: “At first, he was irritated. Not just with himself for his carelessness, but with the whole ridiculous lifestyle that surrounded him, with its repetitions, its mass-produced effects, its formulaic individuality. But then this very shallowness began to exert a pacifying effect on him.”³⁸ The postmodern spaces of the edge city seem to resist the ordering compulsion that Budlender craves. As Michael Titlestad and Michael Kissack note about *The Exploded View*, “Cartographic plans...are constituted in the gaze of the planner, and link more directly to a desire for an ordered and predictable future than to the actual rivalries, expectations, conflicts, histories and vested interests that comprise the ways in which individuals inhabit cities.”³⁹ Like Egan in a later scene in the book, Budlender finds that there is “no elevated position from which he can control the shifts and disruptions of metropolitan life.”⁴⁰

If Budlender finds his lived experience of the city disorienting because of his inability to gain the ordered perspective of the cartographic overview, he encounters a similarly hypnotic disorientation from watching television, which he rarely does until he meets Du Plooy, a continuity announcer for SABC1. The music videos in particular, with their dizzying strobe of jump cuts and close-ups, cause him to despair for his culture: “Why did everything have to happen so quickly? So incompletely? It was nothing but bits and pieces of things.” In a passage that could have been written by Tearle, he complains about the images flashing across his television, an “endless jumble of body parts amid ruins, a gyrating hip, an enigmatic navel...sign language from a secret alphabet, fragments of city streets, images flaring and fading, dissolving, floating in airtime, dwindling away into nothing.”⁴¹

Given Budlender’s ambivalent relationship to the newly resurgent consumer culture, it is interesting that he develops an infatuation with du Plooy, whose job seems the very embodiment of postmodern surface and simulation. From his nights watching her on television, Budlender “became acquainted with the continuity announcers and the odd interiors in which they were displayed, generically decorative spaces with crimped and puckered surfaces, draped and folded satin sheens...in which they moved stiffly like overdressed mannequins, animated goods.”⁴² Budlender recognizes that within this space of pure artifice (which bears certain similarities to the faux-Tuscan architecture of the edge cities described above), identity is a fluid, malleable thing, and wonders if du Plooy had been honest on her census questionnaire about whether there was a man in her life: “But why should she be? It was just an exercise, after all. She might have made up a new persona for herself. She could be anyone she chose.”⁴³ Though Budlender does not make the connection, the notion that people might use the census form as a means of inventing their identity has destabilizing implications for his project of archiving and documenting the world through ordered facts and statistics.

As if acknowledging this shortcoming in the kinds of archiving practiced by Budlender and Tearle, Vladislavić turns in the second story, entitled “Afritude Sauce,” to the perspective of Egan the sanitary engineer. He recognizes ruefully that “Sooner or later, everyone figured it out: you were in the shit business.”⁴⁴ Though it provides fodder for his self-deprecating sense of humor, waste management is of course absolutely integral to the functioning of the modern city, and Egan’s perspective gives the reader a glimpse into the invisible material infrastructure and processes that undergird the city’s visible facades. Because he is involved in new housing developments from the earliest stages, he sees such developments as the product of layers of “permanence” – pipes and cables underneath the surface, houses that rest “lightly on their bases,” electrical poles, paving and brick, etc. “Permanence grew like a crust. Each layer added depth.” Furthermore, Egan compares the infrastructure of the city to the human body undergoing surgery: “Workers clustered around a manhole, surrounded by striped barriers under a makeshift awning of green canvas, would remind him of nothing so much as surgeons in the operating theatre.”⁴⁵

Egan is employed by the government building permanent houses for shack dwellers, and he is proud of the contribution he is making to the country’s transformation. Or at least, he wants to be proud of it, but he is forced to recognize the faults in that contribution by the complaints of the new residents who have already moved into the barely-completed homes. Many of the problems have nothing to do with Egan’s job, but he is required

to listen to these complaints by his employer in the name of “doing your bit for reconciliation.”⁴⁶ One woman, Mrs. Ntlaka, complains that the doorways are too narrow, there is no ceiling separating the room from the roof, one wall is cracked, the toilet is positioned too high for her feet to reach the floor, and everything is too small and generally “fucked,” the word she repeats with emphasis. Egan dismisses Mrs. Ntlaka’s complaints as the rantings of a “drama queen,” but they effectively draw the reader’s attention to the shortcomings of the post-apartheid government’s efforts to transform systemic spatial inequities.⁴⁷ Egan’s lack of empathy for the plight of the people who must live in the houses he helps build is symptomatic of a mindset that regards the country’s housing shortage as an abstract policy problem to be addressed by bureaucratic social engineering, with scarcely more regard for the needs of residents than was shown by the apartheid policies that created the housing crisis in the first place.

Furthermore, though Egan’s view of the city as “layers of permanence” provides a valuable insight into the material processes that constitute and produce those urban layers, it proves little help to him in navigating the new *social* geographies of post-apartheid South Africa. This is driven home when he is invited to a business dinner at Bra Zama’s African Eatery attended by five town officials and members of the Residents’ Association:

He had to wonder about the cosy relationship between the councilors and the men from the Residents’ Association. Who was the fifth man? Was it seemly that they should all be meeting like this? Who would be picking up the tab? But his questions lost their force in the face of a new certainty: this was the way the world worked and there was nothing to be ashamed of. It was all about connections, it was about who you knew.⁴⁸

At first the conversation is conducted mostly in English, and “Egan began to feel like one of the boys,” part of this complex new network of power.⁴⁹ But then:

Slowly, peristaltically, Egan felt himself moving to the edge of the conversation. They were talking mainly in Sotho now, switching back into English occasionally to include him....[H]e began to suspect that *nothing* important was being discussed with him. That the real purpose of their exchange, in which he appeared to be an equal partner, was in the sidelong chatter, the small talk he didn’t understand. It was possible, wasn’t it? That everything that mattered lay between the lines?⁵⁰

Note that Egan uses spatial metaphors to describe his sense of alienation – “the edge of the conversation,” “between the lines.” Meanwhile the adverb “peristaltically” implies another bodily metaphor, with the body here standing in not for the city, but for the networks of power that govern the production and use of space, at least on the small scale of this peri-urban town.

Several bottles of wine later, when one of his hosts spoons some of the restaurant’s trademark “Afritude Sauce” over Egan’s steak without asking, Egan wonders, “What did it mean? Was it a sign of sharing, of hospitality?...Or was he being ridiculed? Why did he even think this was a possibility? He could no longer tell the difference between kindness and cruelty.”⁵¹ His inability to decode the simplest of cultural signifiers points to another source of disorientation for many white South Africans, beyond the socioeconomic forces underlying postmodern time-space compression. Egan struggles with only partial success to find his way in a new social landscape in which the back-room deals that shape the physical landscape are conducted in languages he does not understand.

Meanwhile, Simeon Majara, the protagonist of “Curiouser,” faces another sort of identity crisis. A successful black artist, Majara struggles not with the linguistic multiplicity of the country, but rather with his own position of privilege in the midst of a continent full of poverty. He established his reputation with a series of works on the theme of genocide – first the Holocaust, then Bosnia, and finally in Rwanda. While visiting the site of a massacre in Nyanza, Majara meets a “cross-cultural adventurer” from Europe who has toured genocide sites around the world. When asked what he did, “Simeon could not bring himself to say he was an artist. The idea made him queasy. It suggested an intolerable common purpose with his fellow traveler.”⁵² His disavowal of his true profession suggests an unconscious discomfort with what could be seen as an exploitive or parasitical relationship to the subjects of his art.

Unexpectedly, he runs into similar discomfort with his follow-up project, entitled *Curiouser*. The title is a punning reference to the African masks, statues, and other curios that he cuts into slices and arranges on wall-size surfaces. The project was born when the owner of Bra Zama’s African Eatery asked Majara to design the new restaurant’s interior décor. He managed to buy several crates containing thousands of the masks and curios, some of which he turns into lamps to hang spookily on the walls of Bra Zama’s; the narrator notes that “he had chanced upon a talent for frightening people, for giving them goosebumps by doing violence to their ordinary clutter.”⁵³ This effect, incidentally, goes some way to explaining Egan’s discomfort during

the dinner scene in the earlier vignette; the two passages together reveal Vladislavić's awareness of the ability of architecture and design to affect social interaction in subtle ways.

After finishing the Bra Zama's project, Majara finds himself with thousands of curios left over, and thus he begins the *Curiouser* (or "Curio-user") project. His first installation in the series is simply a "wall layered with masks": "The sheer profusion was disconcerting, [Majara] knew, like a pavement display standing up on end. It made you feel that the room had toppled over on its side."⁵⁴ Then he turned to slicing wooden statuettes of animals into pieces, in a kind of "mechanical compulsion, a tirelessly repeated dismemberment." He soon finds that he "could graft the parts of different animals into new species, the head of a lion, the horns of a buffalo, the legs of a hippopotamus, exquisite corpses, many-headed monsters for a contemporary bestiary."⁵⁵ His artistic obsession culminates in the centerpiece of the exhibition, "Crazy Paving," which was laid out on the gallery floor: "It contained cross sections of twenty different species and covered a surface of nearly fifty square meters. It looked like an aerial photograph of a newly discovered planet."⁵⁶ At the closing party, Majara's friend John comments that he thinks *Curiouser* is about "reconstruction. ...It's about putting things together in new ways."⁵⁷

Then, however, the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn, when another party attendee accuses Majara of "dealing in stolen property" with the masks he bought on the street at a suspiciously large discount. Later in a private conversation, even Majara's friend Amy raises a similar concern, pointing out that "You carve up a cheap curio and put it in a gallery, and suddenly it's worth a packet."⁵⁸ He attempts to dismiss her point with abstract arguments about popular craft versus high art: "The curio is in one system and the art work in another. If you move an object from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow, you change its purpose and therefore its value." But Amy boils the matter down to simpler terms: "I can't help being aware of the balance of power, the imbalance, one should say. The way you live here [in affluent Greenside], the way the people who made these masks must live."⁵⁹ This conversation evokes the reluctant memory in Majara of a conversation he had at university in which a fellow student forced him to think about the "means of production" that go into the making of such a simple item as a can of soda: the miners who extract the aluminum from the earth, the factory workers who make the paint for the can, the sugarcane harvesters, etc. "These things had been put here by thousands of people, tens of thousands of people, bound together in a massively complex web of work, whose most surprising characteristic was that nearly all of it was invisible and unacknowledged."⁶⁰

Majara's reluctance to acknowledge these complex webs of work that underlie even the simple carved wooden animals he deconstructs in his work suggests a kind of postmodern existential despair, perhaps rooted in the consuming subject's extreme alienation from both his or her own labor and from the objects of consumption. His nagging discomfort is shared by Gordon Duffy, protagonist of the final section of the novel, "Crocodile Lodge." I discussed above his lament for the irrelevance of his intuitive mechanical skills in a world where "the simplest devices were full of components no one could see, processes no one could fathom." He goes on to wonder, after some hypothetical massive catastrophe, "What could be saved of our high-tech world? How many people knew what went into the manufacture of a fiber-optic cable, a compact disk, a silicon chip, a printing press, a sheet of paper? How was information coded digitally?"⁶¹

Furthermore, like Majara, Duffy is uncomfortably aware of the material derivation of commodity goods, as his thoughts reveal when stopped at a traffic light where street vendors sell their goods between cars. One of them is selling a miniature balsa wood schooner that "came sailing through the Highveld air. From a distance there was an illusion of intricacy and craft; from close up it was shoddily made, stuck together with staples and glue. A slave ship, mass-produced, he supposed, by children in a sweatshop somewhere in Hong Kong or Karachi or Doornfontein."⁶² These few lines contain an entire allegorical critique of consumer capitalism: that which glitters and appears to float unencumbered in the air is in reality rooted in a system of human sweat and desperate poverty. And by including Doornfontein, a manufacturing area in central Johannesburg (very near to Vladislavić's home, incidentally), at the end of a list of cities infamous for their sweatshops, the author implies moreover that South Africa is equally caught up in the massive web of transnational capitalism.

Vladislavić applies the same demystifying process to one of the characteristic features of the postmodern landscape, the billboard. Duffy puts them up for a living, specializing in billboards outside construction sites for new developments. In an essay on youth culture in contemporary Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall discusses billboards as one of many "urban visual forms, which embody concepts of the urban, of race, and of culture that have much to tell us about Johannesburg as it participates in global cultures of circulation."⁶³ Vladislavić's treatment of billboards does invite discussion in terms of surface images and simulacra. For example, Duffy wonders why the convention of labeling the illustrations of future housing developments as "Artist's Impression" has lapsed, and speculates: "Now that the fanciful images were practically indistinguishable from the photographically real, were more vividly convincing in fact than the ordinary world, disclaimers

were no longer required.”⁶⁴ Yet the novel also reinforces the material reality behind the production of those images; for instance, the Crocodile Lodge billboard had “taken a week to put up. It was on rocky ground, on a sloping stand beside the N3, and sinking the posts had been a performance. Josiah and his team were breaking rock with a jackhammer for a solid day.”⁶⁵

The novel’s grim conclusion likewise suggests a certain skepticism toward romantic ideas about the liberatory potential of information technologies. Whereas Egan views the city as composed of layers of permanence, Duffy views it as an intricate network of mechanisms and flows that he is able to “jack into” and navigate skillfully with the help of technology such as the radio traffic report: “Usually it was reassuring, this invocation of rises and dips and the states associated with them, a map of sensations keyed to his own body...It would soothe him to hear that each of the named intersections had become the hub of a failed mechanism, the end point of an incomplete trajectory, and that he was implicated in none of it, he was still on course.” The radio thus seems to function as an extension of his senses, linking his body not just to his immediate surroundings but to the larger network of the city. But his faith in the system is shaken at the beginning of the vignette, when, leaving the construction site, he hears the radio announcer report a traffic jam he is already stuck in: “But this afternoon, caught in the rush hour and sensing trouble up ahead, the measured words fell on him like a judgment.”⁶⁶

This inauspicious beginning to his evening foreshadows darker events, which begin when he realizes he has misplaced his cell phone – another piece of technology literally connecting him to larger networks. Turning his car around to look for it, he finds himself disoriented by its absence: “Twice in the space of a kilometer he thought he should call [his wife] to say he’d be late, and twice he had to remind himself that the phone was gone. A broken record player, he said to himself.”⁶⁷ Significantly, he has become another “failed mechanism” like that resulting in traffic accidents; even his short-term memory seems to falter without the technological crutch of the phone (which for many people doubles as a personal phone directory and appointment planner – that is, it doubles as a mnemonic aid). Fumbling in the dark for his phone at the construction site of the future Crocodile Lodge, Duffy is attacked by the occupants of a taxi-van that Budlender had earlier remarked as suspicious, but the license number of which he is unable to recall from the “circuitry of his memory” – yet another failed mechanism.

Read together, the stories in *The Exploded View* paint a portrait of contemporary Johannesburg as containing almost unfathomably complex interactions between fixed spaces (houses, office buildings, shopping malls, streets), movements (of people, commodities, money, information), and the

mechanisms that both facilitate and regulate those movements (traffic lights, fiber optic cables, cell phone towers). Vladislavić’s depiction of the city thus parallels certain aspects of Saskia Sassen’s analysis of the spatiotemporalities of globalization: “global economic features like hypermobility and time-space compression are not self-generative. They need to be produced, and such a feat of production requires capital fixity....As such, the spatiotemporality of economic globalization itself can already be seen to contain dynamics of both fixity and mobility.”⁶⁸

Compounding the complexity of Vladislavić’s portrait is the fact that the fixed spaces are not so permanent as they might seem, but are in fact subject to rapid transformations that render problematic attempts by the inhabitants of those spaces to navigate through them, as well as attempts to inscribe social memory on them. Indeed, the novel points out the utter inadequacy of any single existing mode of archiving and documenting the city’s past or present. Budlender’s obsession with statistics is emblematic: killing time in a restaurant straddling the freeway, he counts cars: “He counted women drivers, did the conversion. Cars for men, cars for women. Rivers of drivers. He stopped counting and let his eye dance across the trends: roof racks..., bull bars, trailers, spoilers, roll bars, bakkies, 4x4s. Entire lifestyles, dissolved in the flow like some troubling additive, like statistical fluoride, became perceptible to his trained eye.”⁶⁹ Yet his compiling of statistics equips him poorly for everyday life in the dizzying, shifting geographies of Johannesburg, where memories tend to follow the route of his attempts to recall the license number of that taxi: “There had been a motto too, in the back window, and a name printed by hand on the panel below. But all of it was gone.”⁷⁰

On a cursory reading, passages from *The Exploded View* like those quoted above seem to confirm Nuttall’s observations about the post-apartheid city. In a volume of *Public Culture* entitled *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, for example, she and co-editor Achille Mbembe propose reading the city “in terms of its extracanonical leakages, its lines of flight, its borderlands and interfaces”, and suggest that “a geography of fortifications and enclosures [and the] increasing demand for spatial and social insulation” need to be “counterbalanced by attention to other, varied responses to the city’s transformation, most of which reflect the complexities of class, race, generation, and ideology.”⁷¹ Yet as I have noted above, Nuttall does not so much “counterbalance” the focus on fortification and segregation, as bypass such concerns altogether.

Vladislavić does indeed suggest in *The Exploded View* that concerns with material spaces and social inequalities are insufficient in themselves for

understanding the invisible infrastructures that make the contemporary South African metropolis function. Yet the novel also implies that we entirely ignore these concerns at our peril. Majara is unable to indulge in “stylizing the self” without experiencing intense self-consciousness about the derivation of the material and consumer goods that enable that process of self-conceptualization. The sweat and aggravation experienced by Duffy’s work crew make it difficult to romanticize billboards as “the loci of a language of aspiration,” and impossible to regard them as signs within a closed semiotic system devoid of material referent.⁷² Egan’s being confronted by the residents of one of the ramshackle houses he has helped to build exposes the superficiality of much of the celebratory rhetoric of the “post-liberation” era. These and countless other examples in Vladislavić’s writing make it clear that without paying attention to the “layers of permanence” and the human toil that determine the way people occupy, use, and traverse urban spaces, any attempt to map alternative ways of understanding and organizing space will be deeply impoverished.

Notes

- ¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001) 3.
- ² Michael Green, “Translating the Nation: Phaswane Mpe and the Fiction of Post-Apartheid,” *Scrutiny* 2 10.1 (2005): 12.
- ³ Sarah Nuttall, “City Forms and Writing the ‘Now’ in South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 741-742.
- ⁴ Sarah Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 432.
- ⁵ Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self” 446.
- ⁶ Michael Watts, “Baudelaire over Berea, Simmel over Sandton?” *Public Culture* 17.1 (2005): 185.
- ⁷ Nuttall, “Stylizing the Self” 434.
- ⁸ See, for instance, Gerald Gaylard and Michael Titlestad, “Introduction: Controversial Interpretations: Ivan Vladislavić,” *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 5-10; Saffron Hall, “South African English in the Post-Apartheid Era: Hybridization in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*,” *postamble* 2.1 (2006): 13-29; Mike Marais, “Visions of Excess: Closure, Irony, and the Thought of Community in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket*,” *English in Africa* 29.2 (2002): 101-117; Susan Van Zyl, “Skyhooks and Diagrams: The Signing of South Africa in Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*,” *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 75-84; Christopher Warnes, “The Making and Unmaking of History in Ivan

Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 67-89; Felicity Wood, “Taking Fun Seriously: The Potency of Play in Ivan Vladislavić’s Short Stories,” *English Academy Review* 18 (2001): 21-37; and Elaine Young, “‘Or Is It Just the Angle?’ Rivalling Realist Representation in Ivan Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and Other Stories*,” *English Academy Review* 18 (2001): 38-45. Even Stefan Helgesson, who is perhaps Vladislavić’s most insightful critic, argues that “Rather than document change in a realistic mode, Vladislavić thematises language itself as the very material of understanding and being”; see Elaine Young, “‘Minor Disorders’: Ivan Vladislavić and the Devolution of South African English,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 777. I develop this critique at greater length in “Memory, Memorialization, and the Transformation of Johannesburg: Ivan Vladislavić’s *Propaganda by Monuments and The Restless Supermarket*,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 53.1 (2007): 70-96.

⁹ Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić, eds., *Blank ___: Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 1998).

¹⁰ Christopher Warnes, “Interview with Ivan Vladislavić,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 278.

¹¹ Graham, “Memory, Memorialization” 73-74.

¹² Ivan Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2004) 171.

¹³ Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berkeley: UP of California, 2002) 17.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 31.

¹⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 36.

¹⁶ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) xiii.

¹⁷ Lindsay Bremner, *Johannesburg: One City Colliding Worlds* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004) 57-58.

¹⁸ Steven Robins, “City Sites,” *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 411.

¹⁹ Smith, *Uneven Development* 157.

²⁰ Patrick Bond, *Cities of Gold, Townships of Coal: Essays on South Africa’s New Urban Crisis* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000) xiii, his emphasis.

²¹ Bond, *Cities of Gold* 6.

²² Smith, *Uneven Development* 135-136.

²³ David Harvey, “Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form,” *Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions*, ed. Nick Jewson and Susanne MacGregor (London: Routledge, 1997) 20.

²⁴ Harvey, “Contested Cities” 21-22.

²⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003) 81.

²⁶ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) 22, my emphasis.

²⁷ Lisa Yoneyama, "Taming the Memoryscape: Hiroshima's Urban Renewal," *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 129.

²⁸ Huyssen, *Present Pasts* 17.

²⁹ Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 402.

³⁰ Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity" 402.

³¹ Dan Cameron, "An Interview with William Kentridge," *William Kentridge*, ed. Neal Benezra, Staci Boris and Dan Cameron (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001) 67.

³² Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 190.

³³ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 5.

³⁴ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 22.

³⁵ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 6.

³⁶ Bremner, *Johannesburg* 42-43.

³⁷ Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity" 402-3.

³⁸ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 30-31.

³⁹ Michael Titlestad and Michael Kissack, "Secular Improvisations: The Poetics of Invention in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*," *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 14.

⁴⁰ Stefan Helgesson, "Johannesburg as Africa: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Exploded View* by Ivan Vladislavić," *Scrutiny* 2 11.2 (2006): 34.

⁴¹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 24.

⁴² Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 23.

⁴³ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 40.

⁴⁴ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 55.

⁴⁵ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 58.

⁴⁶ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 62.

⁴⁷ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 71.

⁴⁸ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 85.

⁴⁹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 85.

⁵⁰ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 86-87.

⁵¹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 90.

⁵² Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 105.

⁵³ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 120.

⁵⁴ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 140.

⁵⁵ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 137.

⁵⁶ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 138.

⁵⁷ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 125.

⁵⁸ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 145.

⁵⁹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 146.

⁶⁰ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 148.

⁶¹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 191.

⁶² Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 162.

⁶³ Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 432.

⁶⁴ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 187.

⁶⁵ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 174.

⁶⁶ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 159-160.

⁶⁷ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 164-165.

⁶⁸ Saskia Sassen, "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization," *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai 262.

⁶⁹ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 15-16.

⁷⁰ Vladislavić, *The Exploded View* 22-23.

⁷¹ Mbembe and Nuttall, "Writing the World" 365.

⁷² Mbembe and Nuttall, "Writing the World" 365, and Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 432.