Bengaluru Boogie: outlines for an ethnographic fiction

(This is my third visit to Bangalore. The last one was in January this year, and it is amazing how differently you experience the city depending on where you are based.)

My first visit in 2003, as a reporter, making the Indian IT capital a symbol of the emerging economic powerhouse. (Not a very original approach, at the time.) The reportage, written on commission for a journal, was never published. The second visit, exactly ten years later was as part of the Memories of Modernity project, and I tried to approach the city from a different angle, both thematically and methodologically, juxtaposing my first journalistic impressions to some form of literary understanding. My tentative discussion on ethnography and fiction will take as its starting-point my previous “artistic research” on South Africa and Argentina, in which I have investigated the same material by both ethnographic and literary means. I am especially interested in the relation between the two practices as related yet radically different means of exploring a near or distant past of traumatic violence.

The MoM project is supposed to be an experimental meeting between academic and artistic approaches. We all know that this is much more difficult than one may immediately imagine. Art and Academia are sovereign states, governed by their own rules and standards – and if you try to abide to both, the result may well be that you get expelled from both.

“Ethnographic fiction” does not sound as hip as “transdisciplinary intervention”. In fact, I don’t really like the term – but for the moment I don’t have a better one to describe the kind of transdisciplinary intervention I am trying to pursue. Ethnography and fiction are the two components I wish to combine and possibly merge into a new genre, or a hybrid genre. This idea has several backgrounds.

1. My research project on The Truth of Fiction – in which I interrogated what fiction can tell us about the world that science and journalism cannot.
The interrogation of ‘fiction’ and ‘truth’ from a writer’s perspective, which was one of my premises, brought me in the end, to my own surprise, to the cross-roads of Literature and Anthropology. The resulting report was presented and defended as a dissertation in Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo.

The final main text turned hence out to be in the format of an academic dissertation, yet stretching the boundaries by incorporating elements of reportage, essay and memoir. This was something that evolved in the process, in accordance with my ambition to find one form that was somehow congenial with the subject matter. But it was nevertheless a compromise, where the literary in the end had to abide to the academic format.

After 5 years of arduous academic discipline, it was a great relief to go back to writing fiction. After finishing the Fiction and Truth project I have completed a major literary endeavour, a novel trilogy. The two first novels published prior to the research project (2000 and 2007), the third will be published next year. I would not say that these projects have run in parallel, because I can only be engaged in one major writing process at a time. But they have certainly informed each other – and in retrospect I can clearly see how they are really two different approaches to a common thematic, two forms of interrogation. Fiction writing to me is primarily a form of interrogation, just like academic research.

But what about the experimentation? Where do these practices meet – and possibly converge? Is it even desirable that they converge?

The Fiction and Truth project actually also had “literary” offspring in a hybrid text, “Hillbrow Blues”, that was first written and published in Swedish and later elaborated and published in an English version. Its background is that I was invited to contribute to a literary anthology. At first I declined, explaining that I didn’t have any material in store and no time to produce new text, since I was immersed in my research project. But the editor was insistent – and I am happy that he was – because it inspired me to write something I most likely would not have written without a sharp deadline. The first Swedish version was written while I was working on the South African material, more specifically on a chapter about “writing the city” – that is, Johannesburg. So, it was a way of approaching the same material from a slightly different perspective.
In a way, language was the main difference. Swedish being my literary language, English the academic one.

The English version, which is more than a mere translation, was also written in response to a call – to an anthology to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the yearly Time of the Writer Festival in Durban (in which I participated in 2007). That was an even greater challenge: The first and so far only literary text I have written in English.

I’ll read the first paragraph.

It goes fast. Pretoria Street is shorter than he remembered it; he’s looking for the hotel on the right side whose name he has repressed, no, simply forgotten, but he doesn’t see any signs at all, nor any traces of bookshops, cafés or lunch restaurants. Lots of people in the street, mostly young men, no suits or ties, a few older women, no commerce, shutters closed, the entire Carlton Hotel shut down like a ghost tower, the garage doors locked with chains, but no roadblocks or burning oil drums... "The Nigerians and the Zimbabweans have ruined the place," says the taxi driver with a matter-of-fact distaste that reminds him of his first taxi ride in Joburg fifteen years ago, that time with a white driver venting his contempt over the black hordes that had invaded the formerly secluded city. He stayed in the hotel whose name he doesn’t remember, with a view to the street, noisy, without air conditioning, cockroaches in the bathroom but otherwise neat and tidy. Apartheid was already history, like Communism in Eastern Europe, TV showed Hill Street Blues dubbed to seSotho (he believes), interspersed with commercials for Ohlsson’s lager, the beer for the New South Africa in the making. Double-deckers ran like shuttles along Hillbrow’s busy artery, studded with shops, cinemas, bars and restaurants where you could have breakfast at any time of the day; a block or two further down were open-24-hours cafés and bookshops, some of them amalgamated into book cafés. At Café Zurich, he had met Ivan Vladislavić, then in his early thirties, editor at the semi-clandestine Ravan Press and the author of a well-received collection of short stories. He retained the memory of Ivan’s smile, leaning on the red PVC-coated sofa in the spacious venue. Café Zurich was to merge with near-by Café de Paris into the imaginary Café Europa, the centre around which Hillbrow’s and South Africa’s transition evolves in the eyes and mind of retired proof-reader Aubrey Tearle, the main protagonist of The Restless Supermarket (2001), a regular at the café and, in his own words, an incorrigible European, although he has never set foot outside South Africa. (…)
As I hope you agree, this is not an academic text. Yet, in bits and pieces it is identical with corresponding parts of my dissertation, which also has the elements of essay, reportage and memoir.

The difference is the element that would be defined as fictional; the stream of consciousness, the subjective distortion of reality (In the memory of the protagonist, the images of this taxi ride along Pretoria Street merge with other images into a slightly surreal cityscape... And, perhaps most importantly, there is the distancing device of the third person. That was something that I added in the English version – and I discovered that it really made a great difference. “He” is not “me”. I’m not exactly sure who he is – where he comes from, or where he is going.

So, it is a fiction. And it is ethnographic in the sense that it is conveying the experience of a real place, and an attempt at capturing the spirit of this place if you like. It’s not one journey, but a condensation of many journeys... and with two registers in time, a now and a past – a before and an after. In the case of Hillbrow, Johannesburg, South Africa, before and after the transition...

When we embarked on the MoM project – which is the second MoM project – the first was in Durban, SA – I really did not know what my contribution would be. (To be frank, I still don’t – I really don’t know what will come out in the end, and I am still in the beginning of the writing process, which is my way of exploring what it is I want to say.) It was my second journey to Bangalore – Bengaluru – and it was very different from the first one, 10 years earlier. Then I was a newly appointed senior lecturer at Malmö University and the motivating reason for this first trip to India was to present a paper at a conference in Varanasi.

But I seized the opportunity to be a reporter as well – and that determines your experience in many ways. You process the impressions with the purpose of turning them into a comprehensive story. You look for a clue, an idea, that will give sense to the story, a revealing new understanding ... And you are hyperactive, interviewing people, absorbing information like a sponge....

I wrote my reportage, I was paid - but it was never published – for reasons that I don’t know. (It still nags me)
While in Bangalore for the second time, I got the brilliant idea to finally have it published, as a testimony of the Bangalore of the first years of the new Millennium – a time that somehow seems very distant today – and to juxtapose this journalistic text to a new, fictional one, based on my impressions ten years later. *The Bengaluru Boogie* – as correspondent to the Hillbrow Blues – and possibly one in a series of similar transdisciplinary interventions.

But I’ll probably only use the unpublished reportage as a reference to the new text, and bring parts of it into the new hybrid context. As I said, I am not sure where this will take me. I’ll just read a few draft paragraphs.

Ten years later she is another person. The altered perspective is not only due to the change of sex, but the manifestation could not have been more timely, with the Delhi case, as the gang rape of the still nameless 23-year old female student is commonly referred to, all over the news every day since she arrived. As a woman (hermaphrodite?) she is looked at with other eyes, but *her* gaze is also different, simply because she is looking for other things than he did.

Jyothsna talks about the "pre broken Bangalore". It's a wondrous expression. She, that is, He was only here for three or four days then, at the end of his first journey to India, a condensed twelve-day grand tour Mumbai-Ahmedabad-Varanasi-Delhi-Bangalore-Delhi, whereof all-in-all two full days were spent waiting for cancelled flights at Delhi airport, the hub for domestic traffic, paralysed by the coldest winter in 40 years. He hardly remembered anything about Bangalore, except the nice weather - "the air conditioned city", an as worn-out cliché as "India's Silicon Valley". And not even the weather is persistent...

Ten years ago, he had been in the company of Madan, an easy-going ICT entrepreneur who accommodated him in the study of his two-room apartment in some lush suburban residency (she still had no idea of the direction). They had met in Varanasi, on a badly organized conference at poor academic level, where they both had felt out of place. Madan had just published his Asia Pacific Internet Handbook, the first comprehensive overview of the ICT development in South and East Asia, including Australia, with the subtitle "Episode IV: Emerging Powerhouses". Like Star Wars director George Lucas he saved the prehistory for later and started with what he called the second round of the global Internet race, the spread of the mobile and wireless, a round that had barely just started, in which Asia had already taken the lead. Japanese and South Korean hardware producers were in the forefront, but the real emerging powerhouses, the ones that would generate the veritable explosion (Digital Revolution 3.0), were of course China and India...
The first night had ended in the house of Rajesh Reddy, executive director of July Systems, who had just got back from San Francisco, his other home, to which he commuted every month. A mix of old and new pop songs streamed from the digital jukebox, bourbon was mixed with drambuie in the glasses on the S-shaped bar was served was serving bourbon and drambuie from the S-shaped bar, the conversation moved from complaints about the increasingly hostile climate in the US to jokes about America's lagging behind in the digital race, "they have only recently discovered texting".

She could recall the scene because he had written it in his last reportage, that is, she didn't remember, but that was how he had depicted it, in that specific significant detail, the cliché of the IT metropolis, contrasted against the pilgrim town by the Ganges, whose raw cold she did recall, the memory made her shudder with discomfort. People had frozen to death by the hundreds, while the pilgrims continued their morning rituals in the river fog... He had chilled a whole night at the pension whose name she didn't recall (why did he never remember the names of hotels?), thinking about Death in Varanasi.

(…)
India overwhelmed her. An assault on all the senses, as the reactionary Naipaul so accurately had expressed it. He had also felt the ambivalence ten years ago, but now it was physical, a dyspnoea, a threatening nervous breakdown. The press, the jam, the squeeze, the sweat, odours from sewers and exhausts, hands that groped her, the exposure in the autorikshas that fearlessly sick-sacked in the constant rush-hour traffic ... every move from one place to another an agonizing manoeuvre, Nandi Durgh Road, where the pension is, an almost insurmountable barrier; once back at Droog House in the afternoon, she is so exhausted that she stays in her room the rest of the day. In his reportage of ten years ago he had evoked the image of a Botanical garden transversed by highways and regardless of whether it was an apposite metaphor or just another cliché, it was completely out of date now, ten years later, when the population had grown from sixty to a hundred lakhs, and cars and rikshas tripled or more. The few trees that had been spared along the nonexistant pavements looked like the burnt trunks that miraculously survive a forest fire.

This is a very hastily translated text (this morning). I am actually writing in both Swedish and English ... Firstly in Swedish. Just like Hillbrow Blues, though this time in parallel.
The breakneck feature here, of course the change of sex... Not necessarily a literal change. Swedish has the new neutral – or third – pronoun “hen”. English does not – although I can write S/he. An interesting difference – and by all means a big challenge – giving new meaning to the term third person.