Prelude

The "ethnographic fiction" to follow is based on three journeys to Bangalore (Bengaluru). The two last ones (both in 2013) were part of the second *Memories of Modernity* project, including artists, academics and master students at Malmö University and Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. Its intention was to blend academic and artistic approaches by means of a series of “transdisciplinary interventions” in the city of Bangalore. A preceding *Memories of Modernity* project (2005-2007) had been carried out in Durban, South Africa, in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu-Natal. These experimental encounters are much more complicated than one may immediately imagine. Art and Academia are sovereign states, governed by their own rules and standards, and attempting to please the two of them, may well result in the expulsion from both.

I don’t particularly fancy the term “ethnographic fiction”, but for the moment I don’t have a better one to describe the kind of transdisciplinary interpolation I am trying to pursue. The idea of combining and possibly merging ‘ethnography’ and ‘fiction’ emanates from another artistic research project, *The Truth of Fiction* (2007-2010), in which I interrogated ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ in the recent social transformation processes in South Africa and Argentina, using both ethnographic and literary methods. That interrogation from *a writer's perspective* (which was one of the premises) brought me in the end, to my own surprise, to the crossroads of Literature and Anthropology. The resulting text turned out to be in the format of an academic dissertation, yet stretching the boundaries by incorporating elements of reportage, essay and memoir (Hemer 2011, 2012a). 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 discipline and format. Therefore, it was a great relief to go back to writing fiction. Last year I completed a
major literary project, a novel trilogy,¹ and the sudden freedom from inhibitions certainly sparked my imagination. I would not claim that these projects have run in parallel, but they have definitely informed each other, and in retrospect I can clearly see how they are really two different forms of interrogating a common thematic. Fiction writing to me is primarily 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? These were crucial questions for my dissertation, and the somehow discouraging answer seemed to be: No, they are different practices and equally valuable only insofar as they remain separated. However, the Fiction and Truth project actually also had “literary” offspring: “Hillbrow Blues”, a text that was first written and published in Swedish and later elaborated and published in English (Hemer 2012b). I was invited to contribute to a literary anthology and the editor’s insistence inspired me to write something I most likely would not have written without a sharp deadline. The first version was conceived while I was working on the South African case study, more specifically on a chapter about “writing the city” (Johannesburg). So, it was a way of approaching the same material from a slightly different angle. 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 (an anthology to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the yearly Time of the Writer Festival in Durban, in which I had participated in 2007). That was a greater challenge: It is the first literary text I have written in English.

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. […]

¹ The Argentina Trilogy: Cosmos & Aska (2000); Santiago (2007); Misiones (in press)
Obviously, the above 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 component 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 this case, before and after the transition.

When embarking on the second Memories of Modernity project I really did not know what my contribution would be. It was my second journey to Bangalore and it was very different from the first one, ten years earlier. Then I had been a reporter, and being a reporter 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, which will give sense to the story, a revealing new understanding. And you are *hyperactive*, interviewing people, absorbing information like a sponge. On my second visit, by contrast, I deliberately refrained from doing anything a journalist would have done.

Yet, it still nagged me that the reportage I wrote in 2003 was never published. So, on my return to Bangalore I got the idea to finally have it published, as a testimony of the emerging IT metropolis of the first years of the new Millennium (a time that somehow seems very distant today) and to juxtapose this journalistic text to another, fictional one, based on my impressions ten years later. *Bengaluru Boogie*, as correspondent to the Hillbrow Blues, and possibly one in a series of similar ethnographic fictions. (In the end I decided to only use the unpublished reportage as a reference.)

The breakneck feature of the new hybrid text is the protagonist’s change of sex, which came quite naturally at that very specific moment in India (January 2013). It is not necessarily a literal (physical) one, although a former “he” has obviously now
become a “s/he”. Swedish has the new neutral pronoun “hen” (between the male “han and the female “hon”). English does not, as yet, so “she” and “s/he” are only distinguished in writing, and so is my invented form “hir” to replace “his” or “her”. This creates an interesting difference in nuance between the Swedish and English versions (this time written in parallel), and it is by all means a disturbing difficulty, which gives new meaning to the term *third person*. I leave it to the reader to decide what it may entail.

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*The City*

**Bengaluru Boogie**

Ten years later s/he is another person. The altered perspective does not entirely have to do with the change of sex, but the manifestation could not have been timelier, with the daily gruesome new disclosures of ‘the Delhi case’, The gang rape of the twenty-three year old physiotherapist student and the demonstrations of protest all across the subcontinent have been breaking news ever since hir arrival two weeks ago. As a woman (hermaphrodite) s/he is being seen with other eyes, but s/he is also seeing other things than last time, because s/he is looking for other things. Jyothsna talks about the metropolis of the drowsy millennium as the “pre-broken Bangalore”. Then s/he, that is he, was only here for three or four days, at the end of a twelve-day condensed grand tour Bombay-Ahmedabad-Varanasi-Delhi-Bangalore-Delhi, whereof all-in-all at least two full days were spent at Delhi airport, which the coldest winter in forty years had wrapped in coal smog and fog. S/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 was in the company of Madan, whom he had met a week earlier at the disastrous conference in Varanasi, where they had both felt out-of-place; an instant friendship of the kind he used to make on his travels, mutually beneficial, as it were to turn out. Madan had recently 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". The Star Wars allusion indicated that he saved the prehistory for later, moving straight into the second round of the global Internet race, the one that had just started, about the mobile and the wireless; a round in which Asia had already taken the lead. The hardware producers Japan and South Korea were in the forefront, but the emerging powerhouses were of course China and India with their giant markets; they were the ones to generate the coming veritable explosion (the third stage of the digital revolution). The first night in Bangalore, Madan had taken him to an outdoor concert with the violinist virtuosi Lakshminarayana Subramaniam and Jean-Luc Ponty and afterwards they went to a party at the house of Rajesh Reddy, the executive director of July Systems, who had just got back from San Francisco, his other home, to which he commuted once a month. A mix of old and new pop music streamed from the digital jukebox on the S-shaped bar, where bourbon and Drambuie were blended on the rocks in heavy glasses, the soft conversation moved from complaints over the increasingly hostile climate in the US to jokes about America’s lagging behind in the digital race, “they have only recently discovered SMS” (giggle). S/he could recall the scene because he had described it in his last reportage, that is s/he did not remember, but that was the way he had reconstructed it, with exactly those significant details, the clichés of the IT metropolis, juxtaposed to the pilgrim town by the Ganges, whose murdering cold by contrast still evoked chills of discomfort. *Death in Varanasi ...* People froze to death by the hundreds, while the pilgrims continued to perform their morning rituals in the cold and highly polluted water and the gold-diggers poked for tooth fillings and nose jewelry in the ashes of the funeral piles; he laid awake a whole night in a shivering fit at the pension whose name s/he does not remember (why didn’t he ever memorize hotel names?) thinking about death in Varanasi.

He wrote his last reportage on commission, and received a decent honorarium, but it was never published. He waited for the next number of the journal, then the next
and the next again, until it was too late to offer it to someone else. It was not his best reportage, but it still nags him that it never went to print. Ten years later, s/he is also reading what he wrote with other eyes; that which had been in the forefront, the very point about “India’s Catch 22”, that the competitive advantages over other developing economies would cease the moment it started to move up the global IT chain, blah blah, now appeared to be trivial, or even irrelevant, whereas the second register of the reportage, which was then in the background, points towards that which now preoccupies hir: the latent holocaust, group psychosis, the outbursts of unfathomable bestiality. Ten years ago the pogroms of Gujarat were fresh in the minds of victims and perpetrators, he had been taken to the cleansed residential areas in Ahmedabad, but without paying much attention to what he saw, without trying to induce the evil genius loci. There were no traces, no bloodstains, no stink of stale clotted horror (as the one that would nauseate him many years later in Rwanda, where the mouldering clothes of the murdered had been put in neat bundles in the pews), but it still astounded hir that he had not been more profoundly stricken by the moment. Obtunded, or simply absent-minded? On the verge of the second Iraqi war, anti-Islamic rhetoric permeated the public debate, security controls were as rigorous as in the US (or Israel, where he had never been), and although he may have intuitively grasped that in India the exception had been the rule ever since the disastrous partition in 1947, the mother of all pogroms, it was only many years later that he would realize the full extent of the hecatomb, no, it was still unfathomable, just like the gruesome popular festival in Rwanda, or the extermination of Europe’s Jews and Gypsies ... Unfathomable, but not unintelligible, Arjun Appadurai dissects the logic of genocide with chilling exactitude in Fear of Small Numbers; the majority’s fear of the minority that stands in the way of the completion of wholeness, and which must be destroyed, because if proportions were inverted, tables turned, the former minority would do exactly the same. India has no memorials over the butchered; nobody wants to be reminded because everyone is compromised, more or less; even the untouchable.

Large-scale violence is not simply the product of antagonistic identities, the violence in itself is one of the ways in which the illusion of fixed and charged identities is produced and maintained ... The minority is the symptom, but the underlying problem is difference itself. Therefore, the purpose is the elimination of difference; that is the hallmark of today’s large-scale predatory narcissisms ... Remember Philip Gourevitch’s statement about Rwanda: Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community-building.
India overwhelms hir. “An assault on all the senses”, as the reactionary Naipaul so accurately has put it, s/he does not know where but has it from a reliable source. Ten years ago he had experienced the ambivalence, too, but now it is physical, a dyspnoea, a threatening nervous breakdown. The crowds, the sweat, the odours from exhaust pipes and sewers, the hands that furtively stroke hir body, the exposure in the auto-rickshaws that fearlessly crisscross in the constant rush-hour traffic, a wonder that it is at all possible to travel unhurt, just a few dents and scratches in the paint, like caresses, a word that connotes carcass … car-casses, car-kisses … Every transport a strenuous enterprise, Nandi Durga Road, where the pension is, an almost insurmountable barrier; once back at Droog House s/he is so exhausted that s/he stays in hir room the rest of the day. In the reportage he had likened Bangalore to a botanical garden traversed by motorways and regardless of whether it was an accurate metaphor or just another cliché, it is completely out of place now, ten years later, when the number of inhabitants, the human mass, has grown from sixty to a hundred lakhs, and the cars, motorbikes and auto rickshaws must have tripled or quadrupled; the few sorry trees left along the extinguished pavements look like the burnt trunks that miraculously survived a forest fire. Out of place, yet predictable. Banal (like the contrast to Varanasi); The Botanical Garden, Lal Bagh, is Bangalore’s only
attraction, according to *The Lonely Planet* (but he never visited it then); an extensive oasis, in the centre of which Gondwana raises its bald pate of gneiss, three, maybe four billion years old. Immemorial, without memory.

Now s/he is in Bangalore to participate in a conference, *Mediating Modernity in the 21st Century*, for which s/he himself is one of the organizers. The city changed name in 2006, but s/he never heard anyone pronounce the revived Bengaluru. It is not laden with ideology like Bombay – Mumbai, where M still might signal Hindu nationalism, whereas B (as in Bom Bahía) connoted cosmopolitanism rather than colonialism, although Bengaluru does signal *Kannada* nationalism, while Bangalore remains inseparably associated with the British Empire, the garden city of its retired servants. In fact, although s/he does not realize that yet, it is two cities that have lived side by side and only merged during the second part of the 20th century, *the City and the Cantonment*, which turned its back on the City … Cantonment, *containment*, the English enclave imported their house servants from Madras, not Mysore … The origin of coordinates is somewhere in Cubbon Park, but the borderline between the twin cities is nowadays an invisible seam, like the difference between Tamil and Kannada for the inexpert; the subcontinent’s forty languages and almost as many scripts is yet another warp in the composite fabric. Hardly any traces remain of the old Bengaluru, before the English conquest; a fragment of Tipu Sultan’s fort, embedded by the bus station and the market (the rickshaw driver had never heard of it); an air of the eternal market’s extravagance, the cones of spices in the warm register of the rainbow, the sea of guillotined flowers, but the light of their petals does not banish the stink of putrid oil; the basic colour is russet to black.

“Let it wither!” says Vasanthi, who is coordinating a Swedish-Indian collaboration project on Cultural Heritage. A metropolis that did not forget would soon be buried in its own memorials. But Bengaluru’s amnesia is exceptional! It is not denial, or suppression, but blindness, self-delusion, *simulacrum*. The symbol is Singapore. Hir only image of Singapore is the one that William Gibson engraved in reportage in *Wired* in the mid 90s: *Disneyland with a Death Penalty.*
S/he witnesses the demonstrations against the sexual violence on TV, not in the streets of Bangalore, the cries for capital punishment for the arrested perpetrators, the youngest in particular, the one who has committed the most ghastly violation, an iron rod in the vagina. The editor's column in *The Times of India*, which is hung in a bag on the door handle to hir room every morning, makes a comparison of the last month’s two globally mediated tragedies: the gang rape in Delhi and the school massacre in Connecticut; Obama’s decisive and upright behaviour versus the gawky Manmohan Singh, but also the lack of protests against the weapon industry and easy access to firearms versus the wrath and indignation of the Indian middle class. But those who protest in the streets, says writer and activist Harsh Mander, are at the same time indifferent to the street children who get raped every night. Mander gives an open lecture on “Unequal India” in the location that a few days later will be the venue of the *Mediating Modernity* conference. He defies his middle class audience by comparing today’s India with the US American South in the 1960s. The elite school’s reluctance to accept quota-based admission of Dalit students is like the resistance against the Civil Rights movement and the desegregation of the schools in the South. The same confusion of privilege and merit; the horror of putting your children in the same school as the children of the servants, to find out that the gardener’s or the housemaid’s kid is smarter than your own. The listeners unashamedly confirm Mander’s observations by their comments and questions. No anxiety of showing your colours here, as opposed to South Africa. (At a dinner in the home of one of the design teachers at Srishti, where all housework is carried out by servants, the hostess smiles and remarks that “this is the privilege of living in India”). But the challenging question is left hanging in the air, s/he is not sure what hir own answer would be: Are you prepared to understand – and forgive – the juvenile rapist in Delhi?

The next evening, William Dalrymple gives a lecture at the National Gallery of Modern Art about the last moguls; one and a half century, from 1707 to 1857, which the History books describe as a period of decay, that is, times characterized by miscegenation and cultural mélange. *The white mogul* are predominantly Scots, transferred from the Empire’s Western outpost in
North America, who fall in love with India to the extent that they take Indian wives and convert to Islam. As radical as Richard Burton and in any case the negation of hir preconceptions about Brits in India. That is, hir conception of British colonialism is marked by the experience of Durban, and of Kenya.

Now, all of a sudden, the concept Anglo-Indian, a term that encompasses all children of Indian mother and European father, attains a different meaning. Even the offspring of Frenchmen, Dutchmen and Germans are Anglo-Indians, just as all immigrants to Argentina travelling with Ottoman passports became turcos. When s/he asks how many they are, nobody seems to know the answer, not even an estimate. It is almost like asking for the number of Brahmins.

In six months s/he will sit at hir late found favourite place, Indian Coffee House on Church Street, pale blue walls, wooden tables, laminate-clad wooden benches, waiters in white, classical Mysore garment (s/he believes), heavy belts and ornamented headgear, like loosely tied turbans; the cashier in round steel-rimmed glasses looks like a teacher, or intellectual. At the table in front of him, by the opening to the kitchen, a barefoot man puts his signature on the bills before the waiters take them to the cashier. The guests are all old or middle-aged men, alone or in company, immersed in soft conversation or reading the paper, one is playing with his mobile. The posters on
the walls could have been the retro props of a hipster bar, but these have most certainly hung there since before Independence: a proud bearded man and a plate with roasted coffee beans, a fine type, a fine coffee, both are Indian. The coffee is exquisite, and so is the dosa, hir simple lunch.

The third journey settles over the second, nuancing the picture ... it will wonder hir that s/he gets so little out of the on-going sojourn, in spite of its three week duration, s/he will explain it partly with the isolation at Droog House (next time s/he is staying at Elanza Hotel on Richmond Road and the city is accessible in a completely different manner), partly with hir insufficient preparations, s/he is not well-enough-read ... As a reporter he could be unprepared and still find his way, by intuition and improvisation, but now there is no compelling force, unlike ten years ago s/he is not doing any interviews, none of that dialectic generated by the hyperactive reporter mode, a state of mind that requires solitude, he would never have been able to work in pairs, not even with a photographer, because every social concession would disturb his concentration ... Now it is something else that s/he is after, uncertain what exactly, perhaps impossible or not even desirable, it remains obscure six months ahead, when s/he recapitulates this already distant now. Then, as now, s/he worries about the insensibility, it is no doubt a form of blunting, or habitual blindness and numbness, as devious as alcoholism; blasé is the wrong word, because s/he is still curious, radical also in a conventional political sense (more radical now than ten years ago) ... Even though s/he sets hir mind on absorbing, registering, remembering all the significant details, it is as if the impressions pass hir perception without a trace, the travels of recent years merge in hir memory, muddle, fade. Is there simply a limit as to how much you are able to remember? He used to assure himself that everything was there, somewhere, subliminally, below the surface, in the darkroom of consciousness, like undeveloped film ... But keen eyes and ears were never his distinctive characteristics, his foremost asset as a reporter was the reflection, the surprise association, the ability to think in new directions, new even to himself ... Boldness requires a certain innocence, an undaunted ignorance, too much preparation prevents audacity ... The revisit six months from now will strengthen hir conviction that s/he is on to something important, both in terms of the form, the ethnographic fiction, and the subject, the phantom of partition and the silence about the unhealed wound. But hinting is not enough, s/he has to go to the marrow ... At the table next to hir, two Muslim men are sitting forehead to forehead in their white skullcaps, beside them, with his back to hir, a man in jeans and a t-shirt that says Shakespeare & Company Network of Writers, maybe a Westerner or Anglo-Indian ... That would be another alternative, an
ethnographic study of the Anglo-Indian minority, a comparative study of marginalized hybrid communities in racially and culturally segregated societies; Anglo-Indians, South Africa’s “coloureds”, the creolized Swedes of Misiones ... Then three young women sit down at the table to his left, and behind them a man reading a Kannada newspaper (he assumes; it can just as well be Tamil, but not Hindu, because he recognises the South Indian characters, rounded in order not to destroy the fibres of the palm leaf). It is a fine point from which to observe and reflect, nobody pays hir any attention.

Why are the middle classes so angry? Arjun Appadurai, led by his stunning Slovenian wife, is shorter and darker than s/he had imagined him. He is the keynote and draw of the conference, but that is not the reason for his visit to Bangalore, the conference has on the contrary been timed according to his schedule; he is invited by the Tata group's National Institute of Advanced Studies, and he speaks to a full auditorium on the subject Corruption as Participation in Neoliberal India. Appadurai distinguishes the traditional vertical corruption, the one that consists of gifts and tips, from the modern, global one, which is horizontal and fraternal. India is a cash economy. Credit cards are scarce, half the population is unbanked (a peculiar word, s/he loses hirself for a moment in search of a Swedish translation) ... The motif for economic liberalization of the '90s was more transparency, but the result was the opposite. Today half the economy is informal. Here is of course a correlation. The cash economy is, according to Appadurai, a more important explanation to contemporary India's peculiarity than all the cultural factors put together. But, why this sudden fury? There are two things that make the upwards-striving middle classes take to the streets to demonstrate: Sexual violence and corruption. It is partly an anger turned inwards, frustration over dependency, over being so intrinsically involved in the corrupt transactions, horizontal and vertical. India is a beast that has wakened and started to move – not the wise elephant that venture capitalist Gurcharan Das envisioned ten years ago, in contrast to the East Asian tigers; the elephant who moves forward steadily and surely, pausing occasionally to reflect on its past and enjoy the journey – but a monster whose face the world has barely begun to divine.

The middle classes strive for the obscene opulence of the richest ten percent, while at the same time trampling on the likewise upwards-struggling dalits. The caste hierarchy is multiplex and unfathomable (incomprehensible to an outsider), with new alliances that allow a certain social mobility, corruption is the sphere of
convergence ... a charismatic interruption in the bureaucratic routine (did he really say that?) ... Corruption as opposed to communalism? The violence against the Dalits, the casteless, is perpetrated by those second lowest on the ladder, the low-castes who are not favoured by reservation. Inciting communal violence is an efficient way of diverting the frustration of the poor and preventing the low-castes from rising against the high-castes. Muslims, the majority among minorities, Pakistan's alleged fifth column, is the national scapegoat, but in Bengaluru the eruptions of communal violence have also occurred along linguistic lines, Kannada against Tamil and Urdu.

In the hotel room s/he zaps between the TV channels, all Fox News lookalikes. The Delhi case has had to stand aside for the breaking news about a killed frontier guard in Kashmir; beheaded, as far as s/he can decipher from the agitated commentators who stir up the hatred and demand retaliation. In one of the channels, the foreign minister tries hard to fend off the fiery interviewer's accusations of indulgence towards the arch-enemy. It has not occurred to hir until that moment that the resentment rests so immediately underneath the surface, s/he can sense the latent holocaust; the reversible pogroms that are only waiting for the signal to be unleashed; if he were to imagine the possibility of a nuclear war, it would be here. People are as easy to set fire to as matches. S/he remembers those exact words from his reportage from Istanbul in 1998, during the Öcalan crisis, when people burned spaghetti in the streets prior to Galatasaray's draw with Juventus in Champion's League. One of his Kurdish informants used the phrase to evoke the riots in Smyrna/Izmir, the population swap between Greece and Turkey, a minor scale parallel to India's partition, when twelve million people were replaced across the new border and one million murdered. Is it possible to imagine anything worse than the ethnic (or religious) narcissism, the excuse and prerequisite for genocide? A deceptive simplification, perhaps, fundamentalism vs. cosmopolitanism ... maybe cosmopolitanism from below is just illusory wishful thinking, like Anarchism's faith in human altruism, the fundament of libertarian socialism ... But what else could one rely on? The terror balance of self-interest.

Ten years earlier he had travelled in a flying saucer. Electronic City, the largest in the corridor of IT parks, IIIT-B, India's cutting edge academy for IT engineers, an already faded hyper-modernity rising over the stalls and cartridges of the rudimentary subsistence economy, but on the interior a space station, manned by the rebels against the Empire. Open source against Microsoft's monopoly (long before
Facebook and Google). *The Linux Spirit*, like the electronic frontier of the early ‘90s, the California ideology, but with a social conscience.

It was easy to imagine how old Everett Rogers on his tour around India’s tech parks had been taken in by these young enthusiastic engineers and entrepreneurs. India’s road to the future seemed as obvious as appropriate: *the informatization strategy*. The last five years had implied a greater change than fifty years of independence, was the mantra that could be taken for an incantation. But “informatization” never became an accepted sequel to industrialization. And what happened to the expected exponential growth of internet tea shops, community centres and local radio stations, that would spread the blessings of the IT metropolis to the villages and light up the compact rural darkness? He did not see anything of village India then, and s/he hardly does now either, but s/he cannot avoid the slums, just a few blocks from Nandi Durga Road. "In Bangalore even the poor make an impression of prosperity", was one of the statements in his reportage. That sentence is the only one he shamefully regrets.

*Basement Theatre*

The transformation is simple. A long purple *kurta* over white cotton trousers, white cloth shoes, a shawl over head and shoulders, a little eye-shadow, and eyeliner under the eyes. But when s/he at last gets half a day on hir own, she puts away the
shawl and the make-up, to stroll in the district Shivajinagar, ten minutes rickshaw ride from the hotel. Inspired by Appadurai’s notion of “cosmopolitanism from below”, s/he feels part of the millennial urbanity like a stranger among strangers, an unusual but not unknown element in the multitude. Here s/he wanders undisturbed, but there is nowhere to go; the mosques are forbidden, as are the Hindu temples with their towers of smurf-like multi-coloured idols; and s/he would not step into the dark of any of the few bars even if someone invited hir. There is a smell of oil, of dismantled engines and gearboxes, the canal is a dry ditch, clogged with garbage, refuse (what’s the difference?), sewage, the sweet human smell, s/he comes to think of a book title, The Deodorized Skunk, an insignificant work from the late 1960s, a completely misplaced association, baroque, a defense against the galvanized reality around hir, like the lens of the mobile: he used to be a good photographer, or could have become, with his restored Leica M2 from 1962 which he bought in Stockholm in 1976 at the prize of 1200 kronor, which at the time corresponded to three hundred Dollars and today would be the equivalent of three thousand or more. He used to slosh about in the dark room at the School of Journalism, 25 ASA on Portriga Rapid, melancholy pictures from his monk-like existence in a summer house eighty kilometres north of Stockholm, in the years to come it would be slides from his travels in Africa and Latin America. The camera ceased to function in 1992 on the shore of Lake Tanganyika; he had shot a whole film on villages that had been taken over by baboons, and on chimpanzees in Jane Goodall’s reserve, where one of the males had made a charge at his Italian travel companion, but nothing had been exposed on the unwound film, and afterwards – now – it is as if that journey never took place, or was a dream. After the Leica he had a cheap Nikon that caught everybody’s attention every time the shutter opened and closed, then a couple of digital cameras that both broke down after less than a year, and ever since he made do with the mobile, but never got the feeling back for photography. The overflow of instant images has blunted the gaze, or the will, s/he has never even held a video camera in her hand, a limitation, no doubt, like the aversion against social media, s/he really hates Facebook, intensely and irrationally, an eccentric whim, maybe preposterous, but not a matter of snobbery; no nostalgic lamentation over worldly shallowness or demystification, only light-hearted sadness at mediocrity ... S/he has no pretentions to be more than an observer, a tourist, although that word is so circumscribed by contempt, both for vulgar charter tourism and as a metaphor for the new mobile elite, as opposed to those who are displaced by force, or who can’t move, tourist and vagabonds (or which was Bauman’s dichotomy?), The people s/he
meets in the alleys of Shivajinagar, who hardly notice him, or at least don’t turn their heads, are they even vagabonds, or for ever banished to this periphery? Swarming, stinking Shivajinagar, an Anti-Singapore in the heart of the IT metropolis, the remains of the vast semi-slum that the English called Blackpally, of which the most muddled parts were levelled to the ground after the plague to give space for Fraser Town. On the other side of the railway lies Cooke Town, where both Jyothsna and Ayisha live.

The Globalization of Indifference. The new Pope, Francis, is to be credited for that expression, but it could just as well have been Harsh Mander's; the very visible limit for the empathy of the middle class, in India as in Argentina and in the entire brave new world ... Cubbon Park has been fenced in, to shut the masses out; in the middle class metropolis, plebeian democracy is a private nuisance. But no matter how one entrenches oneself behind fences and walls, the mass still permeates with its noise and its smells – like an entropy of diversity – if only as scenery outside the toned car windows on the way to the office or the private school.

Hir own indifference is challenged daily, but not until s/he returns in six months will anyone reach behind hir shield. A beggar girl follows hir high pace a couple of blocks, s/he does not routinely whisk her away as s/he usually does, sometimes without even noticing, but s/he has no change, only 500 rupee bills. The girl senses hir indecision, and sees through hir dissemblance; to escape the humiliation s/he stops at the first best street shop to buy eight different ayurvedic soaps. When s/he gets the change back s/he gives the girl 30 rupees – 60 cents! – and regrets it the moment the girl disappointedly slouches away. Why didn't s/he give her fifty, or a hundred, or five hundred? S/he can’t scatter money about, that would serve no purpose, but why couldn’t she surprise the girl – and hirself? That elusive meeting with a dirty, snotty-nosed beggar girl, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, perhaps a cunning scrounger, will be his only close encounter with anyone other than the reserved colleagues at Srishti – with the exception of rickshaw drivers, but then the relation is strictly regulated by the situation, a non-relation, a transaction, eventually even without negotiation, according to the meter, but the girl whose hopes he raises to immediately dash shall grieve hir the rest of the third journey.

Six months from now the rapists are convicted, the rebellious spirit has vanished and the media are already saturated by the upcoming election campaign, with Hindu fundamentalist and opposition leader Modi’s measures and statements as the serial
story. S/he shall seriously doubt hir own usually reliable judgment when one of the colleagues at Srishti, whom s/he had instantly found very likable, comes out as a devoted Modi supporter. "If India as a whole were to be governed like Gujarat, it would be a completely different country." She sounds like an echo of her husband, who at dinner the night before had explained China’s advantage over India by its racial homogeneity and strong central power. The suggestion that caste might have something to with it had been whisked away with a sigh resembling a snort. In the original Hinduism, caste was like a guild, something you acquired, not something you inherited. The distortion was, like every other ill, due to the Muslim invasion. In the beginning of time there were no minorities. Everybody was a Hindu. As a matter of fact, he had declared, India was more divided now than before Independence, because of the Reservation policy. “For how long are we as Brahmns going to pay for our forefathers alleged wrong-doings?” “Instead of lifting the Dalits to a higher level, the standard is lowered for everyone.” The usual arguments about flattening and vulgarization, the propertied classes’ defence of their hereditary privileges … S/he does not want to write her name, in case she is going to read it, although she would immediately recognize herself anyway, and she is moreover not at all ashamed of her opinion, on the contrary, but maybe s/he wants to retain hir first impression, which s/he always used to trust. The wife had been silent during dinner, while the husband swaggered, s/he had not for a moment identified her with his unvarnished fascism, but then the day after, in the car to Srishti, she is not only an echo of her spouse, but even worse. The sweet little mouth, which s/he had associated with a little girl, becomes the jaws of a trooper. Modi, the butcher from Gujarat, prime-minister-to-be in the world’s largest democracy. If that happens, Jyothsna is going to emigrate. Maybe regardless of the outcome of the elections. She can’t stand being a woman in India, every time she goes abroad she can feel her entire body relax, becoming herself … S/he understands what Jyothsna means, although s/he can only imagine what it would be like to live here; s/he is white, twenty years older, and not a woman, too big, too manly, a butch or a tranny … everywhere else in the world s/he would be more vulnerable as a third gender, but not here, where the hermaphrodite is less offensive than the young woman who does not prove her subjugation by avoiding the men’s glances or stepping aside when they meet. The glances s/he receives may be defamatory, but not threatening, and most often simply indifferent; s/he is neither nor, invisible, harmless, neutral, like the untouchables who undisturbed plundered both Muslim and Hindu homes during the mutual massacres of the Partition; whereas the women, the vessels of religious
chastity, were forced to commit suicide, or executed by their husbands and fathers, rather than ending in the arms of the enemy. The concept of honour killing attained henceforward a very concrete meaning. Wells filled with dead women, the last ones to jump in survived if there was not water enough to drown them all.

S/he finds hir way to Ayisha in Cooke Town with certain difficulty. The rickshaw driver calls for instructions several times from hir Swedish mobile, the journey ends up being more expensive than a taxi ride, but taxi drivers are even worse at finding their way, Bengaluru is a labyrinth where all districts have the same street names – first, second main street, second, third cross street – but at last s/he arrives and is welcomed in the stairwell by two waist-high dogs that would have scared hir stiff if s/he had met them in the street, and after that, in the evening sun on the balcony, to hir complete surprise, by Asu, Kevin’s wife, whom s/he hasn’t met in many years. S/he knew that Asu was coming to Bangalore, to participate in the same conference, but s/he had no idea that she and Ayisha were old friends; Ayisha had lived in Turkey for a year in the mid nineties. They tell hir a fantastic story; when Ayisha and Asu’s younger sister were hitchhiking in northern Anatolia, they were picked up by a man who took them to a deserted place up in the mountains. He could have been a rapist, a psychopath, a murderer, but all he wanted was to show them the view over the Black Sea. When they return to the valley below, an earthquake has ploughed through the landscape and buried the village where they had spent the night. The man who saved them is now Asu’s brother-in-law, although her sister divorced him a long time ago. They have a grown-up son in Istanbul.

Ayisha’s short films tell stories of people who live in the interstices, Anglo-Indian neighbours, the Nepalese garage guard, the Indian-Burmese dancer Ram Gopal; she calls them quasi-documentaries, but they are considered too arty for documentary film festivals. The raw material are restored 8mm films, vanished colours, a very special nostalgic nimbus, her parents first journey abroad from the newly independent India gives a flashback to the family film screenings of hir own childhood, the purring projector, the moment of awe, a very efficient way of tying the family together, the envied community, the sibling solidarity whose glossed over conflicts s/he was luckily unaware of … The interstices, the passages, fragments of stories, abstract, tangible; it strikes hir that these observations in the margin are the ones that narrate the history of Bangalore, a permanence in the transformation, as the comfort s/he feels in front of Ayisha’s computer, watching hir films, one after the
other, like an endless loop which s/he wishes will never stop, while Ayisha and Asu are talking in low voices and moving around the room, as if s/he weren’t there.

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