Spaced Out: Visuality and the City in the Contemporary Indian Graphic Novel

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Abstract:

This article aims to examine spatio-literary intermediality in the contemporary Indian graphic novel, especially Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor and Amruta Patil's Kari. Drawing on the figure of the flâneur, and referring to theorizations and works by Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Michel De Certeau and Michel Foucault, this paper situates the argument pro intermedial encounters in a multiplicity of ways, for instance by engaging on the theorization heterosubjectivity vis-à-vis the contemporary Indian graphic novel; by referring to intermediality between form and content, where the act of seeing occurs not only in a physical space such as the city, but also within the pages of the graphic novel; by means of the way in which the graphic novel uses this heterosubjectivity as encoded within the urban city mediated through the figure of the Baudelairean/ Benjaminian flâneur and, finally, by charting these intermedialities in two contemporary Indian graphic novels, Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) and Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), set in New Delhi and Bombay respectively.

Key-words: Urban city, Indian graphic novel, flâneur, Corridor, Kari, intermediality, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Foucault, de Certeau, Deleuze

In a now-famous literary declaration, Virginia Woolf stated, "On or about December 1910 human nature changed" (Woolf, "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Browne", 1923). This shift was reflected in the move away, she wrote, from old certainties and old manners and customs. The change was particularly manifested in the perceptions and productions within society at large, as well as in artistic engagements that generally grapple with and attempt to make sense of these transformations. The genre novel, which arose in the 18th-century tied to political and economic changes that gave greater protagonism to the growing middle classes, has continued to suffer multiple and repeated changes in thematic and formal aspects. Used ferociously by the modern sensibility, the stream of consciousness technique was an early attempt to stage the nomadic subjectivity that emerges in the first half of the 20th-century as part of the process of democratization. In the second half of the century, many voices, like that of Michel Foucault, seized critically the changes suffered in the notion of identity, or rather a 'subjectivity in process', that prefers "what is positive, and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities,

mobile arrangements over systems. Believe(s) that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (Foucault, "Preface to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*", 2004: xv). The new ways of experiencing and seeing, which Virginia Woolf enunciates above, had taken body in the literary type of the *flâneur*, the man of leisure who idly strolls the streets of 19th-century Paris, as pictured in Charles Baudelaire's writings.

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world - impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are or are not - to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. (Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life", 1863)

As the "lyric poet of the metropolis", in Graeme Gilloch's terms, the *flâneur* gives voice to the "shock and intoxication of the shock and intoxication of modernity" (Gilloch, 1996: 314), inhabiting the theatrical performative space of the streets. The sensory body and visual memory of the *flâneur* is a living archive for the recuperation of those experiences, otherwise lost to time. Icon of bourgeois conspicuous leisure, Baudelaire's *flâneur* becomes for Walter Benjamin the representation of new modes of seeing and of the way modern subjectivity interacts and engages with urban spaces, that is, a reflexive commentator and observer, narrativises the many modern conditions of being.

Benjamin's *flâneur* is contemplated as resisting the dominant economic hegemony of the state while remaining complicit with a certain class and privileges, fundamentally a disinterested delight that transcends the material considerations of the beautiful. Thus, challenging consumer culture, the *flâneur* opts to gaze at upon a crowded city of individualised masses, whose architectural spaces lead to particular pleasures that than to the universalised and universalising forces that transform communal life into the political agenda of nationhood. It comes almost as a consequence that *flâneuring* would seem to be predicated more upon a kind of lostness, forgetfulness and strangeness:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for a quite different schooling. Then, signboard and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest [...] Paris taught me this art of straying [...] I cannot think of the underworld of the Metro and the North-South line opening their hundreds of shafts all over the city, without recalling my endless flâneries" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* 2005, 598).

Walter Benjamin's unfinished epic work *The Arcades Project* focuses on the figure of the *flâneur* and on the relationships between community members in the

metropolitan city. For early modern spectators, such as Engels, the city is "distasteful" and "Londoners have to sacrifice what is best in human nature in order to create all the wonders of civilization with which their city teems" and finds that "the greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference and unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs" (Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* quoted by Benjamin in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 167). Similarly, for Benjamin, the *flâneur* becomes endangered as soon as the arcades of the city enable the fluidity between interior and exterior, and the relationship between public and private through the exchange of merchandise. *Flâneuring* is, in this sense, an attempt to capture the sense of interior and private while providing an accessible public form by means of acts of narrative that recreate the visual experience of the city. The manner of such diegetic narrativisation replaces the labyrinth of streets by a performance that helps the audience discover and construct public space. The *flâneur* is, thus, the connoisseur of the metropolis, the philosopher as opposed to the expert, a facet evinced in literary representations where the author/flâneur constructs the imagined topographic spaces through acts of memory (De Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life* 1997).

This paper attempts to situate this argument in at least four kinds of encounters: a) the theoretical engagement with heterosubjectivity vis-à-vis the contemporary graphic novel; b) intermediality between form and content, where the act of seeing occurs not only in a physical space such as the city, but also within the pages of the graphic novel; c) the way in which the graphic novel uses this heterosubjectivity as encoded within the urban city mediated through the figure of the Baudelairean/ Benjaminian *flâneur* and, d) the charting of these intermedialities in two contemporary Indian graphic novels – *Corridor* and *Kari*, set in New Delhi and Bombay respectively.

Even though comics have been popular across India for a long time, and have taken many forms – mythological, humourous, political satire – the graphic novel in India is itself a novel construct, and has only recently begun to gain readership as well as acceptance as a serious genre within the publishing industry. Orijit Sen has been credited with publishing the first graphic novel as such (*River of Stories,* 1994), but Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) is the first Indian graphic novel in English that has found nationwide distribution. The protagonist, Jehangir, is a Baudelairean type, anonymous, passionately spectatorial, avid collector, and an enthusiastic flâneur who goes walkabout in the various nooks and crannies of Connaught Place, which with its many arcades is "about corridors and pillars," commenting on and observing people, collecting second-hand books, and useless objects such as old ink pens, film posters, ham radios, boxing gloves, rare LP's that "he doesn't listen to for fear of damaging the records", and reprography machines which no longer possess any commodity value (Banerjee, *Corridor*, 2004). *Corridor* is set strategically at the heart of what we know of as political Delhi. "Connaught Place", and at a bookshop owned by Jehangir Rangoonwala whose customers have names such as Digital Dutta and Ibn Batuta, all collectors of information, antiques, and microphilosophies. Like the other characters,

Jehangir inhabits what Chris Jenks calls "minatorial geographies" experienced by the flâneur as both an acknowledgement of the "ontology of the occupancy as an act of respect that honours the integrity of social sentiment that binds a community" (Jenks, 2005: 148), and is privy to the internal life of the subjects, as well as the innards of the city of New Delhi itself through the many arcades through which it shows itself.

Banerjee's work speaks about moving away from the restriction of closed structures, and being 'on the outside', a practice that has been on display in his project for the London Olympics, curated by the Frieze Foundation, titled "The Gallery of Losers", which visually depicts the dialectics of winning and losing and the championing of one against the other. The project, as his other works, questions the very notion of the hero and of the heroic. His protagonists are curators of everyday life. Banerjee expresses his desire to "[...] weave stories that are fact and fiction put together and be an enchanted curator, or put him a few notches below and be the enchanted museum guide. In that case, I borrow the form from theatre, but it's not theatre. I could call him a historian, but it's not history." (Pai, "Interview: Sarnath Banerjee", 1 Oct 2012)

It is in the graphic format as the *tableaux vivant* that the physical-material experience of the city is expressed through the materiality of the postcolonial visual space, where the authorial flâneuring role is borrowed by the contemporary reader, who in the act of moving through the visual space also becomes a wanderer/ flâneur, inhabiting a kind of digressive experience. Jenks further states of the *flâneur* that he/she is a reflexive being, capable of theorising as well as involved with 'seeing' as praxis:

The walker in *dérive*, who is therefore not orientated by convention can playfully and artfully 'see' the juxtaposition of the elements that make up the city in new and revealing relationships. The planned and unplanned segregations, the strategic and accidental adjacencies, and the routine but random triangulations that occur through the mobility the city provides, and depends upon, make for a perpetual and infinite collage of imagery and a repository of fresh signification. All of this conceptual re-ordering is open to the imaginative theorising of the wandering urban cultural critic and yet these techniques have come to be the province of the photo-journalist. The image of the city formed by the *flâneur* should be part of his/her reflexivity; it hermeneutically reveals both modernity and the projections, inhibitions, repressions, and prejudices of the *flâneur*. (Jenks, 2005: 155)

Anyone walking the city in order to experience it also consumes it through the act of walking/ wandering. Banerjee's protoganist wakes early morning to walk Central Delhi,and be the first to chance upon the lost and discarded artefacts of the city, thereby possessing the city visually while also re/constructing intermedial meanings and relationships between words, subjects and things. Thus, all *flaneuring* activity involves a slow immersion in new spaces that embodies hybrid crossings of alterity of otherness, where the *flâneur*, as Jenks notes above, recreates the city within his/her own reflexivity.

The second work presented in this paper, Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), set in 'smog city' Bombay, is subversive at many levels, but primary because it is the first Indian

lesbian graphic novel. With a writing grant from the French Embassy, Patil describes the period of her writing as a "one-track life," which she spent "[...] like a grazing cow, slow of gait, slowly ruminating. Looking at swans, looking at sunsets ..." (Patil, "A Woman Lives to Tell her Tale" *ArtIndia* 2012) through the eyes of memory, as she recollected her childhood geographies: "My parents got several things right. It was always emphasized that money would be spent on travel and nature adventures, not on clothes and toys ... the family was quite oblivious to material accomplishment. I don't recall any conversations about what I would do professionally, and what would be the best way to be wildly successful." (Patil, "A Woman Lives to Tell her Tale", *ArtIndia*, 2012)

The ontology of the literary city presented in *Kari* is a resistant move against consumerism and against the very notion of the traditional novel and of literary culture. The graphic aspect itself subverts the textual form and engages with the popular and the marginal. An account of a female *flânerie*, *Kari* refers to its own gender and graphic intertextualities by means of a panel allusion to Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. Patil mentions other varied influences such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *Tragical Comedy or the Comical Tragedy of Mister Punch*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, and Joann Sfar's *Rabbi's Cat*. It's no coincidence that most of these graphic novels involve the city and problematize the very act of looking, as a way of constructing space and experience.

The act of literary agency in *Kari* also involves a heteroglossic construction that employs a multitude of artistic and literary styles. Amruta Patil charts this progression as a move towards better capturing the numerous sights of the metropolis: "I was very keen to capture the grey, the claustrophobic busy-ness, the dreamscapes, and the subsequent release. One style seemed very inadequate. So, instead, Kari has experiments in ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images. Some, admittedly, work better than others [...] Then there are Mughal miniatures, Islamic decorative patterns, Japanese woodcuts." (Singh, "Amruta Patil and Kari: A Short Q&A", *Jabberwock*, 2008)

The intermediality implicated within the act of *flâneuring* between the streets of the city and the columns of the graphic novel present apposite resistances to frenzied consumption. *Kari* records the minutiae of the city of Bombay as Benjamin does in Paris: "Laz and I have been walking around the city at night, camera in hand, watching homeless people deep in slumber. They sleep on roadsides, under carts and benches, on platforms. Arms holding bodies, legs under legs, a defensive ball against the threats that whiz past at night. It is an appalling thing, this watching. If our subjects were wealthier, we'd be arrested for being peeping toms. As it is, our walk makes for arty b&w pictures of grim urban life." (Patil, *Kari*, 2008)

Patil herself learnt the art of watching while working as a museum guard in Boston. Commenting in an interview on the anonymity of the profession, as well as the many modes of *seeing* it offered, Patil says,

It was the penury of being an art student in the US that led to the museum security guard experience. Besides, being around mummies and medieval Madonnas seemed like a more interesting job than waitressing or working in a photocopy place. The feeling was not just that of being invisible, but of being almost subhuman. It's amazing how hundred upon hundreds of human beings can pass you by without making eye contact.... It made for a great vantage point for eavesdropping and watching. (Singh, "Amruta Patil and Kari: A Short Q&A", *Jabberwock*, 2008)

The description of the art student, ties in with Chris Jenks' understanding of the spectacle as commodity-form, always already appropriating the visual into the convention of the acceptable, and where the 'seenness' and the representational aspect of the "phenomena that are promoted and not the politics and aesthetics of their being 'see-worthy'." (Jenks, 2005: 155) It is here in the repudiation of unproblematic commodification/objectification or a resorting to stereotype, that one finds the intermediation between the graphic novel as a form separate from that of the comic, and the figure of the *flâneur* as one separate from the dandy. In this respect, both protagonists, Jehangir in *Corridor* and Kari, resist the spectacle through an engagement with the a) non-productive ways of culture (i.e. Jehangir's collection of old LPs and reprographs), b) the everyday banality of city-life (i.e. the description of the travel to and from office in *Kari*), as well as c) the use of surreal elements (i.e. the description of the gecko on the wall in *Corridor* and the Charon-like boatwoman in *Kari*). *Corridor* and *Kari*'s *flâneurs* are also practitioners of the underground:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins ... These practioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, are unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others to elude legibility [...] The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of the fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and infinitely other. (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1997: 93)

As a tale of the city "down below", *Kari* spawns illicit, secret desires, presenting the urban woman in the city in her various forms, working, suicidal, victim of household abuse, and yet resilient, observant, with a strong critical gaze. De Certeau further contends that against the totalizing sweep of the eye, the everyday hides a strangeness that does not surface, or only outlines itself against visibility. Analogising the act of walking to a speech-act in language, he enumerates a triple enunciative function of such act: a) it appropriates the space on the part of the pedestrian or the *wandersmänner* b) it is a spatially performative act, and c) it is connotative of the spatial relations between polysemic positions. As a pedestrian speech-act as against the generalised category of walking, He argues that it is present, discrete and phatic, and is therefore extremely amenable to intermediality and *ekphrastic* employment across sensory and conceptual categories (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1997: 98). Thus, in the graphic novels under study, *Corridor* and *Kari* characters express their self-reflexivity through anonymous and unseen activities, signing the streets with their very presence,

as de Certeau would contend, a seemingly small and futile activity that nevertheless stages a resistance to the hegemonization of public spaces and objects. The graphic format also encourages a certain temporal visual movement that combines advancing and tarrying through text and images, punctuating the wandering state as a form or resistance to speed, where the act of contemplating or 'sight-seeing' a particular event overtakes textual engrossment. As Banerjee remarks, "You can read ten thousand books about Bombay or see a bunch of Mario Miranda cartoons and get an alternate understanding" (Baradwaj, "The Sarnath Files", *The Hindu*, April 24, 2011). The *flâneuring* desire is precisely to reach such alternate understandings by the engagement in disinterested observation or in a banal momentary present encounter which in fact activates complex spatio-temporal interpenetrations.

These also take the form of itemizing things and objects that provide, by means of recollection, an intimate association with a particular place and time. Thus, for Benjamin, "collectors are people with a tactical instinct; their experience teaches them that when they capture a strange city, the smallest antique shop can be a fortress, the most remote stationery shop a key position […]" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1999: 489) Thus, photographs become a performative device, and act of reflexivity that preserves the memory of wandering and the gaze upon objects. The intermedial format of the graphic novel further enables a self-reflexivity that, in the case of *Corridor* and *Kari,* whose protagonists, Banerjee's and Patil's embody the performative aspect of collecting, uses images to foreground an aesthetics and a politics of resistance to commodified seeing.

Furthermore, in the case of graphic novels, the intermedial structure that combines text and images frequently employs non-linear sequences or "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2004: 334) where, in semiotic terms, symbols attempt to scape the territorial mappings of the printed page by means of a polybphonic dialogue with icons. For Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, these lines of flight oppose linear and arborescent structures of hegemotic order and convention, rooted in political and economic hierarchies and also on the imposition of a meta-history over the individual story, and naturally those of high art versus popular art, such as visual novels (comics, telenovellas, etc.). The very act of observation, the detached yet not indifferent gaze imparts a kind of hyper-storycization to the urban space of collectible petit-narratives evidenced in the greater recognition of one's own belonging, one's cityhood. This also evidenced in the capture of personal stories and through the act of witnessing, however transitory. The act of *flâneuring*, and the intermediality it shares in this case with the graphic novel, makes use of the simultaneous acts of de/re-territorialization, with the metaphor of reprography in *Corridor* and the trope of Charon the boatman in *Kari,* collecting souls and cleaning the trash, as instances of such wandering departures.

Sarnath Banerjee takes the notion of wandering/*flâneuring* even further in his second book *Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, whose title translated from Bengali *Hutum Pyanchar Noksha*, refers to the 19th century book by Kaliprasanna Singha. Banerjee's story reinvents the legend of *The Wandering Jew,* Cartophilus, in the figure of the merchant Abravanel Ben Obadiah Ben Aharon Kabariti who once lived in 18th century

Kolkata, and who recorded the scandalous affairs of its British administrators in a volume entitled "The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers". The novel draws liberally on drawn images, photographs, daguerrotypes and antique posters, a melange of materials mapping a structure of subplots and transhistorical city layers, where the narrator sets off in a quest to find the book, one of his childhood favorites, which his grandfather Pablo Chatterjee found at an old Jewish trinket shop in Montmartre, Paris, in the 1950s, and that his grandmother had given away after his death.
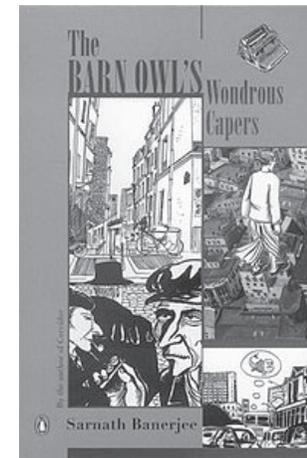
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Barn_Owl_novel_jacket.jpg

Thus, the city might be contemplated as rhizomatic structure, in its associations across strata, its assemblages, its schizzes and its *petit narratives*, similar to the ways in which the visuality of the graphic novel creates meaning across panels, not in a linear fashion but through aggregation of visual presences, constantly refigured and reiterated in various interpellative ways. In one such instance, one can look at the comparisons that could be adduced between Delhi and Bombay through *Corridor* and *Kari*. Here, while one city throws up its material treasures, the other refers to the lived experience of the city primarily through its people, leading to a dialectical tension between inhabitation and cohabitation. In both, the archival potentiality of collection and recollection, already referred to, becomes the site of transgression, where the conflict between past/future or ancient/modern is resolved through the spectacle of the present publicised and privatised in the figure of the *flâneur.*

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