

https://dspace.org/

Dream castle: Genius loci

Benadé, Rudi

2018

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26161

Benade, Rudi (2017) Dream castle, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26161>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

Genius Loci

Rudi Benadé

Reflective Essay for the Master of Arts in Creative Writing

I'm already later for work than the statute of limitations on reasonable excuses will allow when the nose of my car runs headlong into the treacle-thick queue of stop-start traffic outside my apartment block. I can see from the particular rhythm of the inching that the lights must be out up ahead and since my Johannesburg is, in practical terms, limited to the twin veins of Oxford and Jan Smuts and the suburban capillaries through the Parks, I shoot a swift taxi-inspired violation onto oncoming traffic and slip into the side roads.

But an inexplicable tartar of hatchbacks and SUV's on 1st avenue east, which is almost always clear of traffic, makes me brave the main road again. The blue flash of lights in the distance, just before the Zoo Lake bends divert me toward Oxford. A good five minutes are wasted waiting for a Corolla to turn, before realising it has broken down and there's no one inside. At least once during the trip do I encounter the eerie phenomenon of the 'phantom jam', wherein traffic suddenly dissipates for no apparent reason, as if someone was just pranking the city. All the accumulated obstacles serve to make me later, but none are so devastating to justify a new out-of-the-ordinary excuse - a spontaneous sinkhole, or head-on collision with a jetliner making an emergency landing, for instance.

As I recalculate my route, I see Joburg General, now Charlotte Maxeke Hospital, sleeping on the top of Parktown. I'm not really close, but you can see it from miles around. When we lived in Northcliff you could see the lights in the windows at night and the smoke from the incinerator during the day, and it represented a half an hour drive. I remember distinctly the day I first really thought about it - even though we had already driven past it hundreds of times on the way to school, it just suddenly occurred on the horizon. After a mental double-take, I asked my mom, "Wait, what is that giant wall that's been there my entire life and that I'm only noticing this instant?"[1]

Could there be a more hubristic act of environmental vandalism than the cut-and-fill of a precipice and the laying of a dead mass, flat as a carpenter's level, over the falling hills?

[1] Or something similar.

It's Joburg's own Table Mountain.[2]

The drastic flatness and apparent environmental indifference of Charlotte Maxeke hospital is no accident. Its design was approved, like most of the grand public architectural projects of the last sixty years, by secret Broederbond members who had been installed in key procurement departments of Universities and other public offices. Architects, who were not ignorant of this fact, appeased Apartheid ideologues by enabling segregated facilities, overt design elements like separate

[2] I've heard people refer to Ponte City as Joburg's Table Mountain[a] but that title used to go to TopStar Drive-in but in the mid-2000s it was re-mined and carted away in dump trucks. This fact is the source of much heartache for architects of my generation. If you know any architects, you'll know they can get oddly sentimental about man-made mountains and ugly, toxic things that exist in real life but look like they belong in science fiction. For my parents, who still remember the first TVs in South Africa, TopStar was for a while the preferred venue for cinematic experiences and, from the faraway look my mom gets when I ask about it, it seems there may have been opportunities for me to be conceived there. It was an icon in the minds of many South Africans for many reasons. Pilots, for instance, coming in to Joburg used to use it as a beacon for their approach. Now that it's gone expect them to plough into Carlton Centre on the regular. But nostalgia for the mountain or the makeshift drive-in on top is severely misplaced and ignores several key truths. (The Provincial Heritage Authority of Gauteng tried to register it as a heritage site, for god's sake.) The first is that it was a mine dump and was never meant to be there in the first place. I've always considered it, as with most things in Joburg, a tragicomic accident of the economics of gold. It's amusing that this massive mesa sprouts up as an afterthought of a certain gold price and at another, much higher price point, it sort of disappears overnight (in geological terms). It's not amusing if you must live and work near one of these septic pyramids however, because the second truth is that they are full of radioactive particles and carcinogenic agents, and that the only thing more dangerous and unhealthy than having a giant mound of mining waste sitting at the edge of your city, is doing anything to disturb it. The third is that this and other mining 'tailings' were, like so many man-made structures in the city, became glorified fences between the wealthy white and poor black neighbourhoods of the early twentieth century.

[a] I understand they mean it in terms of their central roles in their respective skylines, but the idea is ridiculous*.

*(Ponte is Johannesburg's rotten tooth, if anything.)

restroom and accommodation for blacks and white. The ‘modern monumental style’ of structures like Joburg Gen and the Civic Centre was not mandated as such but was certainly appreciated as it perpetuated a myth of power: brown brutalist forms, over-long and over-tall, that conjured imagines birth rights, ideas of racial supremacy and declared control over fundamental branches of epistemology, education, language and in this case, medicine.

But there is also a a general unrelenting, uncompromising tendency in this type of architecture that wants to exert dominance even over natural forces. Come rain, sun, the earth itself; Johannesburg General would lie where it wanted to.

As I’m driving I think, not for the first time, that the post-democratic government could have torn it down and started fresh, at least knocked down parts of it and renovated. Of course, what I don’t yet know, is that tonight, the 2nd of March 2017, the roof over the reception area will collapse, injuring five. The first I will hear of it will be from my sister, a pathologist on call at the time, messaging that in case I read the news, not to worry that she was okay. There will be reports that some staff may still be trapped underneath so I will try not to sound flippant, but the slow sleeping through the slab of millions of water droplets over several decades causing an eventual structural collapse will be, in this instance, a small architectural irony.

After one too many spontaneous obstacles in a single drive to work, one could be forgiven for thinking the City was conspiring against you, but in South Africa that feeling of sentient antagonism isn’t just paranoia. Much of Johannesburg was designed with a vendetta.

Johannesburg is a geographical oddity in that it is a major metropolitan city *not* based near a large body of water. Spawned from the gold reef it presents planning oddities that sometimes only make sense if you read the metaphorical footnotes. Initial development directly followed the most easily accessible portions of the gold reef. Urban development became split right down the middle by the reef. One can see it in the bend and kink of Main Reef Road, all the way from Roodepoort to Randfontein, as the mine barons establishing more suburbs to the north, away from the dust and cyanide slimes dams, while the other side of the reef was allocated to the poor, temporarily of course, in case it turned out that the gold extended

southward. Time becomes visible in the northward sprawl, like a forehead wrinkles and crow's feet, and the antagonistic nature of apartheid-era buffer zones is indelibly marked on the city - the strange idea that you can use coloureds as a human shield between white and black. The city is conflicted, not only between north and south, east and west, but it also has a distinctly vertical quality: As above, so below.[3]

This heritage is undeniable to any architect. For example, at various firms during my career I have found myself working on Constitutional Hill projects and each time we discover more underground tunnels. It turns out that there are narrow corridors under the ramparts of the Old Fort[4]. I say 'it turns out'; most senior staff are aware of them, and they are not really a secret, but every time a new consultant comes on board and independently mentions the tunnels, one has to double check that they mean those tunnels and not some other newly discovered tunnels.
You know, the ones with the oddly enamel smooth walls and the trapdoor that leads to yet more tunnels? We've been assured by our contacts at the Hill that no, prisoners were not smuggled in and out through these tunnels. this is just a chamber for ammunition. Occasionally someone confuses these with the tunnels that connect

[3] In Neil Gaiman's fantasy novel *Neverwhere,* several major cities are home to their respective iconic beasts inspired by their prevailing urban legends, lurking in the underground. After numerous verbal reports of alligators, and apparently, the odd seal, in the sewers of New York throughout the early 20th Century, a published account[a] finally cements the idea as part of the cultural mythology of the city, which manifests in Gaiman's novel as a brief mention of 'The Blind Alligator King'. Similar tales from 1851 London, of wild pigs or hogs in the sewers of Hampstead, lend Gaiman the inspiration for the climax of his story in the form of a massive foul-tempered boar.
These apocrypha are like the net result of all the fears and self-loathing of a citizenry - the idea that a regionally appropriate thing[b] is grown vast and monstrous by consuming excrement which itself is made somehow supernaturally mutative by the sins and corruption of the urban millions.

[a] In 1959 Robert Daley publishes *World Beneath a City* in which he relays an anecdote from the superintendent of sewers tracking down the reported 'colony' of gators and killing them using poisoned bait.

[b] According to reports (some verified, some less so), Tehran has giant rats, Tokyo has spiders, Berlin has or has had a bear,* and so on.

*If Joburg were to have a creature living multiple layers below that which already lives below, that also sums up the collected anxieties and hatreds of a pretty disparate people, it would be malignant worm or a serpent of some kind. The deepest-living lifeform known to humankind is a worm discovered in our own mines and nicknamed Mephistopheles. Tsafendas spoke of a demon tapeworm that urged him to assassinate Verwoerd, which in turn echoes the psychiatric phenomenon in Zulu and Xhosa culture of 'amafufunyana' - voices from the stomach which afflict those who have ingested necrotic worms etc.

[4] The "Old Fort" moniker is practically a euphemism, considering the structure served as a prison for all but six years of its existence up to its decommissioning in 1983. Built by Paul Kruger in 1893, it was intended to jail white criminals and British invaders. The Apartheid Government briefly held Nelson Mandela there twice however, considering him too dangerous and influential to be held with other black prisoners.

the Rissik Street Post Office with Park Station, and those apparently *were* used to smuggle prisoners. So the imagination wanders. People begin to suspect that the entire city rests atop a chthonic, possibly infinite, maze.

It's an uncanny sensation, that suspicion. Once your mind starts playing with the idea you can start to feel the ground beneath you become cavernous. Like J.G. Ballard's Space Station[5], the more you explore the idea the more exponentially explorable it becomes until there is a whole historical universe of secret police and disappeared MK's under out feet.

There is enough imagined material in Joburg (and actual history) to allow architects and grizzled anti-heroes to call it "The City" and to talk about it breathing. There is a sense of a population acting, greater than the sum of its parts, like it's a thing, an almost sentient but inscrutable entity.

It seems the greatest praise one can offer a setting is that it acts like a character in its own right. I hear this most often about London in the work of Dickens[6]. According to Nick Hornby, Dickens invented over thirteen thousand characters; that's a rate of a character a day for his entire working life. Thirteen

---

[5] In J.G Ballard's *Report on an Unidentified Space Station* a group of travellers make an emergency landing on an abandoned space station. The station exhibits anomalous behaviour; it has a much larger gravitational field than would be implied by its small size. The story is written as a series of 'survey reports', recording new information discovered by exploring the station and an updated estimate of its overall diameter. Each report of the survey surprises, as the estimated diameter increases exponentially. The nature of the station changes with each additional entry. What starts as a 500-metre-wide satellite quickly expands to vast transit facility of a mile wide, then further to ten miles as they open doors to apparently bottomless elevator shafts, and further still to the size of a small planet. Only after the 6th entry, and when the station is estimated to be in excess of 50 000 miles across, do the travellers detect evidence that suggests the station is finite. The writer exhibits hope at the prospect of returning home, yet these hopes falter immediately as they discover the station only approaches the finite through the traveller's will and ambition to explore. The relentlessness of the structure is profoundly depressing to the traveller.
Finally, the travellers come to accept that the station contains the cosmos and the story ends with the travellers becoming filled with joy and a sense of duty, overwhelmed by the enormity of the station, and subsequently electing to worship it as a god.

[6] *"Of all Dickens' characters 'none played as important a role in his work as that of London itself"*

thousand is twice the population of Clarens for god's sake[7]. Character making was a full-time activity for Dickens, so it's not unreasonable to see the city as one more. Dickensian London has become so entrenched in various formats of popular culture, animated and live-action movies, TV shows etc., that even someone who hasn't recently read a novel has a fully formed image of it. Gloomy, pea-soup fog, flat caps and that personality revealed through dialogue, the vernacular accuracy Dickens achieved by 'tramping', dressed down and walking through the city while meeting odd sorts of people and eavesdropping on others.

I don't think a city becomes a character just by virtue of a vivid or memorable description. Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that every character should want something, even if it's only a glass of water. I imagine that when someone claims a location is a character it's not meant to be interrogated. Rather they expect a pensive tilt of the head from whoever is listening and then for them to leave it at that. But let's assume a setting can act like a character in the strict sense; in a useful sense. Disembodied as they are, it is their motivations (in as far as a building or a city block can be said to 'want'), however abstruse and ineffable, that give them the agency of character. What would Johannesburg look like if it were a character, what does it want, from whom does it want it?

I'm thinking about what Johannesburg wants and as I pass my old primary school I'm starting to get worried. If you'll allow me some biography, I was born in Mowbray road in Greenside, and after a few years in Auckland park and Northcliff, I found myself living, for over ten years, just the road from my conception again. My first home out of my parent's house was an apartment across the Greenside Woolies. For years I was convinced I was going to be one of those parochial Afrikaners who live and die within a 10km radius. For someone with that fear, a morning drive through Joburg can be harrowing. This very road, with the Zoo Lake swimming pool on the left and the Cape Dutch gables of my school on the right, was a bi-weekly torture. They used to frog march us along to Zoo Lake swimming pool, where I made

[7] Clarens is a small town in the Free State. It is not usually referenced as a unit of population measurement. It's not usually referenced as anything but I was there a couple of weeks ago so there it is.

a habit of sputtering ineffectually behind a crush.[8] [9] [10] There is an encyclopaedia of disappointments, missed opportunities and sadnesses on this route and a new one is retrieved daily for my own private embarrassment.

I recently returned to the school for a kind of reunion. While the outside had remained consistent, by driving past it daily, the inside was nothing like I remembered. Not because they renovated some of the old buildings, built new courts and facilities, in fact, despite the expansions it seemed like the whole place had shrunk. Whole fields that took hours to run barefoot from one side to another were now crossed in a few brown brogued steps. Classrooms that I had sat at the front of, and felt like an auditorium whenever I hadn't done my homework, were now practically reduced to broom cupboards. I expect this is probably due to the changing proportions of my body, and one's mental model of the world is scaled from these proportions.

Not to get alarmist about it, but this is a quality shared by the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining.* In the film, the architecture plays a central role in creating the sense of unease and in framing the Hotel as a malignant force. Exterior scenes that are expansive and sweeping make the Hotel seem tiny; Executive producer Jan Harlan stated in an interview: "*the interiors don't make sense. Those huge corridors and ballrooms couldn't fit inside. In fact, nothing makes sense."*

This is not to say I believe the school to be malignant. The school doesn't want to *possess* anyone - it just wants them to show up by the time the first bell rings and not

[8] Louisa Munnik, the new girl, who showed up to P.E. in a white one-piece that turned so quickly transparent in the water that the sight of it made me drown so nearly I had to be Heimliched by Juffrou du Toit.

[9] Ingrid Rossouw, the girl who once publicly turned down my valentine's flower because, in an ill-advised fit of creative spirit, I'd picked the weirdest flower I could find - a sort of flowering aloe, globular and rouged like some alien phallus - and placed it adoringly on her desk. When she returned from lunch to find the thing she erupted with a passionate 'ew gross' and prodded it off the desk and onto the floor with the tip of her ruler.

[10] Geraldine de Villiers, with whom I very briefly had a relationship with, conducted entirely by correspondence and a knowing look in the hallway, before the inevitable breakup letter of which I only remember the line: 'I can't do this anymore'.

leave before the last. No one is being attacked by the topiary.[11]

But it's also not a stretch to say it is, as Toni Morrison calls Sethe's house in *Beloved: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children."* Because the school's stated intent in holding a reunion is, to quote from the invite, 'to see how far you've come', and yet, this shrinkage raises an unease, reminiscent of that old local fear, that the extents of my world, the distance I've travelled from Mowbray road, is much smaller than I had realised, and I'm somewhat resentful of the school for raising it.

I think about the ring road, meant to create a hard-line enclosure, as I cross Empire and approach the Civic Centre, the most belligerent wall in a city that loves a wall. I've been obsessed with this, the seat of the Joburg City Council, ever since conducting my architecture thesis on it in 2010. The sandstone and gravel-clad behemoth just occurred to me one day, like it had landed from outer space. Like it had arrived from a planet of bureaucrats. I still think that it's going to get up and walk away one day.

The building would make a perfect stand-in for 'The Place That Sends You Mad' if anyone were ever to make a life-action version of the *Twelve Tasks of Asterix.* Amongst all the usual feats of strength, winning a wrestling match, throwing javelins and so on, Asterix and Obelix come to their 8th Herculanean task, namely, retrieving a Permit A 38 from an apparently ordinary administration building. What seems like a simple task quickly expands to a multi-level run-around for multiple applications to be made for applications for permits permitting other permits, before Asterix short circuits the brains of the administrators by handing them his own made-up Permit A 39, collapsing the entire system.

The Civic Centre is an inherently more sinister structure though. It rests on the crest of Braamfontein, separating the northern suburbs from the CBD and the mandated industrial south. The architects initially pitched a more modest structure

[11] Because there was no topiary. [a]

[a] But there was a pair of twins! Twins* in matching uniforms!

*And they were less than pleasant!

and no one is certain why all the offices were eventually compressed into the long narrow wall along Hoofd Street.

It's no accident that it looks like the literal embodiment of Apartheid separation. Both the Civic Centre and the old RAU Kingsway campus buildings were designed by Willie Meyer and there are convoluted lines that bind him to some deep Afrikaner nationalism. Meyer, for instance, worked under Gerhard Moerdjik, the architect of the Voortrekker Monument, which was heavily influenced by the Monument for the Battle of Nations in Germany, the structure that the Nazi's used to justify their racial superiority and claim on national domination. We need not retrace my daily commute all the way back to the Battle of Blood River.

These Boer totems are hiding in plain sight. Buildings like The SABC building in Auckland Park, that obelisk that defies all notion of zoning and height limits, Unisa in Pretoria, another exercise in the architecture of khaki spaceships. Somewhere an Afrikaner Broederbond member poured over floorplans[12], awarding projects to its own clandestine members or to non-Afrikaans architects who were happy to roll over

---

[12] This is surely the most mundane cruelty of Apartheid Johannesburg, the idea that a bureaucracy is inflicting suffering as a deliverable on a boring to-do list. In that respect Joburg is like the 2012 horror *Cabin in the Woods,* a parody of the haunted house genre. The premise of the film is of five teenagers who visit a typical horror movie cabin, which is inevitably set upon by the zombified puritanical rednecks who used to live there. Four years is surely enough time for me to get reckless with spoilers[a], so I can reveal that the cabin is in fact a farce and that the entire attack is orchestrated by a number of down-to-earth lab technicians in order to perform an age-old, and now quotidian ritual of sacrifice to the gods of horror whom they refer to as The Ancient Ones. The teenagers are selected for their apparent conformity to classical horror archetypes (virgin, whore, fool, athlete and scholar) and are fed a mist of mind-altering drugs through the cabin walls in order to hinder their rational thinking and increase their libido.
What is initially a satire of the trope and the genre hacks who perpetuate it, the film eventually has its human flesh and eats it too, as the virgin and the fool discover the truth and unleash the entire archive of horror movie monsters on the facility in retribution. The environment is made indirectly sentient, it heads off attempts by the teens to escape, but in that technicians Gary and Steve are literally pulling levers to move the plot forward, much as the broederbond were checking off adequate facilities for *blankes* and *nie-blankes.* It is a literal cinematic representation of the cynicism we, or certainly I, feel toward national and metropolitan policy.

[a] I say that, but I recently discussed the Alan Turing biopic *The Imitation Game* with my brother-in-law and it seems people differ on the appropriate durations of spoiler moratoriums. Though neither of us had seen it, I had heard that the film had received criticism for downplaying Turing's homosexuality and eventual suicide, (apparently by eating a cyanide laced apple), to which my brother-in-law, (whom I love), huffed and grew positively affronted. "No Spoilers!" he shouted (un-ironically I'll add), and proceeded to sulk. Did he think Turing, who died in 1954, was still alive?* I maintain that there are no spoilers for actual history, considering that it is generally public knowledge that the allies won the war and we are not all of us speaking German currently, but I concede that one must tread carefully in these things.

*My wife heard this story and called a spoiler warning before revealing that I am frequently perceived as condescending.

for a commission.

Clive Chipkin, Lindsay Bremner and others formed the activist group Architects Against Apartheid (AAA) in 1986, opposing the practice but at their first attempt, the Special General Meeting of the then Transvaal Provincial Institute of Architects, their resolution to make it unethical to design any buildings which restricted users based on race, was dramatically voted down by 300 votes to 200. The ability to wield the city as if it was one's own private fantasy land must have been too much for architects to resist.

As a species, Architects are greedy for creative power. I remember that when *Inception* was released, clips of it were played in a design lecture at Wits. Leo DiCaprio sums it up when he tells Michael Caine: *"The chance to build cathedrals, entire cities, things that never existed, things that couldn't exist in the real world."*[13] What he calls "pure creation", is for an architect the opportunity to turn their inner mind, their values, their character into a whole city.

Apartheid era architects who opposed the ethics of the AAA were similarly seduced by the ability to create ridiculous monoliths[14]. This is no apology on their behalf. Like Leo's character, they irrevocably altered the fabric of the city so that a hostile agent could confuse, frustrate and disable its residents.

If the infiltration and manipulation by architects in *Inception* are like Apartheid-era indulgences, then the character of post-Apartheid Johannesburg is more like the 2010 Pixar film, *Inside Out*,[15] with all the hallmarks of a mind at odds with itself. For

---

[13] The film, let's remember, follows a team of corporate spies who use an experimental machine to enter a dreamer's mind while they are sleeping with the goal of stealing information. As a subconscious defence mechanism, the dreamer in realises something is off, and creates soldiers (or 'projections') who seek out the infiltrators and aggressively expel them from the dream. So, the spies enlist the services of an architect and task her with designing the world of the dream to make the geography confusing to the dreamer, thereby delaying their projections from finding the intruding thieves. The scene where Ariadne, the architect, is introduced to the process of building dreams is remarkably familiar to a real-world architect. Changes to the world can be made in the extreme, and the way she achieves a rapid expansion is by mirroring columns to make a hallway, rotating city blocks upside-down.

[14] (and big bags of cash).

[15] The main characters in the Pixar film are the anthropomorphised emotions of a 15-year-old girl: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust; and they influence her through a control console in her mind's headquarters, itself situated above several islands representing her personality hovering above a cavern. The emotions are in constant conflict, believing they each serve a crucial purpose, but an argument between Joy and Sadness destabilises her interior world, forcing one of the islands to crumble into the cavern.

example, the other day an Uber driver dropped me off in Parkhurst and told me that 4th Avenue is what he thinks money looks like. He was from Angola and his brother, who lives in the CBD, sponsored him to move here and make a living as a driver. When he arrived at an apartment in town he was too scared to use the lifts. Before he came to the CBD, a couple of years ago, he'd never seen a skyscraper up close before, or at least not that many all at once. Johannesburg was at once an unfashionable backwater for me and an intimidating metropolis for him, an antagonist for both of us.

There is a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like duality to its districts. A simple expression of supply and demand economics, fenced in by top-down Apartheid era zoning, finds the wealthiest suburbs in Joburg, and of course South Africa, situated next to the poorest townships, as labourers, domestic workers are drawn as close to financial centres as they were allowed and now can afford. The result is a painfully apparent representation of a divided city.

Alexandra, nicknamed 'Dark City', was neglected for the decades by the government and survived with no basic infrastructure, electricity or sewerage services. Is it not rendered dystopian then by the imagined reality of Michaelangelo towers and the 'beacon of light' of Sandton City? It's as if two distinct cities with different fashions, architectures and cultures, overlap in the same physical space, as they do in China Mieville's *The City and The City*. Citizens of one city train themselves not to see the other city right in front of them, and to even accidentally acknowledge something from the other city is to incite an existential anxiety.

To think of a city as a character is a way to break down that discomfort. The human, a social creature, with a mind evolved for interpersonal interactions, creates a personification with whom he can reason and relate. There is an awe or a fear of an enormous, enigmatic environment - a city, a technology or a great natural body - generated out of the inability to understand its vastly interconnected systems and structures. So anthropomorphism can be used as a mechanism for expressing the inscrutable motivations of agents and forces of the physical world.

The way we think about people is imbedded into our understanding of everything. Kevin Lynch outlines the process whereby a person way-finding in a city gradually creates an image or identity of a city in their mind. First they record nodes

or landmarks of a city. These function as a synecdoche for the whole; Eiffel tower for Paris, for instance, the Statue of Liberty for New York. Then multiple landmarks are connected through routes. One connects times square to central park via 5th Avenue, followed by the slow expansion outward from these routes into the fine grain edges of the city. I remember seeing a study on the sequence of our human eye movements when recognising a face and it seems the pattern works in a similar way. The eyes travel back and forth over the three edges of a triangle connecting the other person's eyes and mouth, the distinctive features, hair, glasses, nose, eyes, a certain way of carrying the jaw. We become accustomed to the tone and manner of a particular individual's speech, even if it's heavily accented. Subconsciously, we record the actions of those close to us and we can predict behaviours or notice even the smallest change in mood. To anyone else, it's just a single word, taken at face value. I assume the same intimate understanding exists for long-time residents of cities or districts. Small changes are immediately perceived, like a slightly out-of-character 'Hello' that tells me my mother has had a bad day. It's a feeling you get, when winter announces itself with a five degree drop in temperature and suddenly the entire morning commute is delayed by ten minutes, as if the entire population conspired to press the snooze button. Norwood oversleeps and you can sense the grogginess in Greenside.

Achal Prabhalla seems to have this same esoteric knowledge. In *Yeoville Confidential,* almost like Dr Frankenstein cobbling together his monster, Achal builds Yeoville into a foreboding character by cataloguing the myriad ways in which it seems to attempt to dispossess him of the desire to live there. He writes: *"It's not a nice place for the walking classes at any time of day, especially after dark. Women fear they'll be parted from their cell phones, and grown men prefer to walk in groups. The streets are poorly lit, and it's not because the lamps are being stolen - suspended at a height of twenty feet off the ground, it's hard to imagine how they could be."*

Then a 'snooty Mozambiquan tailor' tells him never to give up hope of moving to Sandton, despite Achal's insistence he has no intention of doing so. A gunshot shatters his attempt to turn a lunch with sceptical friends into a lesson championing the normalcy of the place. There is a feeling of persecution by disembodied systems

and processes that make up the city. A Kafka-esque[16] insidiousness is at play as he writes: "*Even as I whine about the self-appointed immigration squads of Yeoville, Berea, and Hillbrow, the truth is, they are but cogs in a vast machine.*" Johannesburg, like antagonistic structure in *The Castle* is both a literal fortress and the mysterious institution that operates therefrom. He's thrown into the back of a police van by a drunk policeman under vague accusations, and this seems to be the story beat of a thousand narratives: *"the residents of Yeoville, who - for the most part - seem to be quite happy to endure occasional police torture in exchange for residence in Johannesburg.*"

I would go further. Like the central twist in the H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, it may even be the so-called 'value add' of an area like Yeoville or Alex to be antagonistic. In the novel, the Martian invader makes short work of humanity and its guns and artillery, until it is brought down by the lowliest microbes. It is our suffering from disease and infection that earns us our immunity and our right to exist on this planet. To survive in Yeoville, Hillbrow, Alex, Diepsloot, is a badge of honour. In fact, citizens surviving against a hostile infrastructure may be the city's defining characteristic. In a video essay for the YouTube channel *Nerdwriter,* Evan Puschak makes this case for the city of Gotham. Quoting Batman historian, Will Brooker, he says: *"The defining characteristic of Gotham must be that* ***there is always crime****."* *"…Because Batman is, on one key level, the man who fights crime. One is always perpetuating and creating the other."*

In the early TV serials of the 1940s, and the Adam West Batman TV show, the settings were almost exclusively interiors, shot on sound stages with budget constraints in mind. It was only when Gotham City was presented to scale in the life action films of the nineties, with skylines and districts with distinct features and mythologies, that the city '*began to breath as a character.*' In the Tim Burton and Anton Furst imagining of Gotham in 1989's *Batman,* the city was a kind of nightmare vision, the prevailing fears of worsening crime taken to the hyperbolic: "*as if hell burst through the pavement and grew'…*

[16] Actually, the reference to Kafka seems to fall short in a South African context. Apartheid era laws and petty ordinances, the corruption of the police subsequent post-Apartheid administrations, the complete subversion of facts in the form of fire-pools, has been more bizarre and belligerent than anything in *The Trial.* We ought to be calling Kafka 'Johannesburg-esque'.

Since Batman is a vigilante we, the readers or viewers, need for there to be a subversion of the social contract in Gotham, a corrupt or overwhelmed police force, before we can forgive him for taking the law into his own hands. An extraordinary criminality is the only thing that justifies his extraordinary actions of a billionaire putting on a cape in order to punch people in the middle night. Gotham creates crime so that Batman has a reason to exist.[17]

The same is true of Superman. It's significant that Superman's alter-ego hails from a town called Smallville in rural Kansas and that his arch-nemesis is Lex Luthor, a real estate magnate from the mega-city of Metropolis. All Luthor's devious schemes involve real estate speculation: in Superman (1978), Luthor buys desert land in Nevada and plans to use a nuclear detonation in the San Andreas fault to turn that into prime beach-front property; in Superman II (1980), he betrays Superman for control of Australia; in Superman Returns (2006) he plans to build a new continent. The writers and directors have faced frequent criticism for making the character of Superman so benevolent and powerful he becomes boring; writers have had to devise various storylines that depower him, e.g. kryptonite. I would argue that Luthor, an ordinary human, wields the city of Metropolis like a weapon, because it doesn't matter how strong or fast you are, you can't punch a city and you can't halt the intangible and inevitable crawl of urbanisation.

Similarly, the defining characteristic of Johannesburg must be that it's very infrastructure is hostile, so that we, as its residents, always have a fundamental injustice against which to rebel.

Speaking of, as I get finally get to work, there is a gathering of about a hundred EFF members to pass before I can get into the basement. They're not scheduled to

[17] Metropolis and Gotham are also more than just this teleological function, and, argues Puschak of Gotham, unlike a real cities they can't be mapped out. "It's a city that is performed." We only know spaces like Arkham Asylum and Crime Alley from encounters that take place there. Rather it is an entity that arises from all collected incarnations and only in the minds of the audience. But I disagree with Puschak that real cities aren't performed. The Joburg that manifests in my mind from the memories of sweeping playgrounds of my childhood and the imagined infinite tunnels of the underground, is a creative non-fiction performance of a real city.

march yet so some of them are sitting on the public benches outside the office. I'm amused by the conviviality of the situation, the red berets and sunglasses, practically lounging in the sun, politely waiting for the Metro police escort. Once parked, I greet them with a friendly 'good morning'. None of this is unusual. There is at least one protest in Braamfontein per week. The simple proximity of COSATU to the mayor's office, (right across the road) invites it. Pikitup and Conhill right there, all the student housing and of late, the east gate of Wits leading onto Ameshoff, makes the district into a sort of powder keg.

Last year, after Blade Nzimande announced that university fees could be increased by up to 8% this street was a warzone. It seemed innocuous at first, when students first stepped out of the east gate of Wits out onto the streets of Braamfontein. I was sitting on the pavement of De Beer drinking flat whites with a friend when a wisp of tear gas tickled my nostrils. I'll never forget the sight of Anina, a colleague, strolling along the pavement, hands in pockets, unaware of the rubber bullets that ricocheted around her. Later on from the muffled sound barrier and apparent safety of our glass fronted shop, we watched a Nyala ran rampant down Reserve street, students scattering in front of it only to return giggling and smiling once the threat had passed –like a hundred Jerry's to a single Tom. Some of the kids who arrived later seemed eager for the Nyala to arrive so that they could wear their protest bandanas in earnest. I had a taste of the adrenaline too and it was exhilarating, like a playground game of kissing touchers.

During a quiet spell, we'd ventured out to see if it might be safe to drive out of the basement. We peeked out from behind a corner, down Jorrisen and saw that a bus had been stalled and was being surrounded. The mass of students rocked the bus back and forth, before forcing the driver out. A lone protestor strode upon the roof and I knew what would come next.

We had consigned ourselves to waiting it out back in the office, when the smoke rolled past the shopfront. Billowing – I'd never had cause to use such a word in real life before. We stepped outside again and when I saw the flames eating the tires I was surprised at how dramatic and visceral a reaction I had. I felt nauseous, but not only from the chemicals of molten plastic and rubber in the air. It was a palpable ideological revulsion at the wanton property destruction. Is there any more

apt depiction of an education crisis than a school bus on fire?

Johannesburg is featured in the background of a surprising number of Hollywood movies, but hardly ever in its current time and state.[18] Instead it is frequently typecast as a future dystopia, as in *Dredd* (*2012*), *Dark Tower (2017)* and *The Giver (2014).* For that day of rioting it seemed Braamfontein needed no film crews or production artists to play the role.

The violence and destruction of the 2016 riots seemed different to the protests of previous years, and I find myself sounding and feeling more conservative and cynical than I like and so in backlash to my own backlash I force a sympathy. Why, comes my retort, are we so outraged by the loss of but one bus, and not more outraged about the daily loss of a million professionals who could not afford to study? Weep for them, not for the inert laboratories and libraries. They are just embodiments of colonial systems. I have heard statements to this effect in nearly these words.

It is as if the iconoclasm that started with the renaming of streets and airports, the removal of statues, is running out of icons and so, after decades of antagonism built into the grid, the oppressed, disadvantaged and disenfranchised have begun to wage a war with the city itself.

And whereas human antagonists are singular, in that they can declare their intentions succinctly in a villainous monologue, the city made character possesses a multiplicity that allows it to be a different adversary in a million stories. It is the Lex Luthor to rural god, an illicit hate group with the capacity to approve council plans, a Kafkaesque enforcement, an alien invader and a lifetime of lesser humiliations all at once.

[18] In a video essay *Vancouver Never Plays Itself,* Tony Zhou explains that Vancouver offers tax incentives for Hollywood films to use it as a setting and that this has turned it into a generic stand in for nearly every major American city, miscellaneous eastern Europe, somewhere in India, future Chicago, Shanghai and so on. Vancouver, says Zhou, “is a location, not a setting. A place with talent and scenery, but almost no film identity of its own.”

Bibliography

Snopes. (2017, March 1). *Alligators in New York Sewers*. Retrieved from Snopes: http://www.snopes.com/critters/lurkers/gator.asp/

Greyling, S. (2015, November 9). *What ever happened to Top Star Drive In.* Retrieved March 1, 2017, from JHB Live: http://www.jhblive.com/Stories-in-Johannesburg/article/what-ever-happened-to-the-top-star-drive-in/7751

Jones, B. (2012, February 13). *A Tale of One City: Dickensian London.* Retrieved from CNN: http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/07/world/europe/uk-dickensian-london/

Ballard, J. (n.d.). *Report on an Unidentified Space Station By J.G. Ballard.* Retrieved from Paradise Row: http://www.paradiserow.com/usr/library/documents/main/j.g.-ballard-short-story.pdf

Feloni, R. (2014, October 16). *Pixar's Rules for Storytelling.* Retrieved from Business Insider: http://www.businessinsider.com/pixars-rules-for-storytelling-2014-10?op=1

Harlan, J. (2012, October 29). *How We Made The Shining.* Retrieved from The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/oct/29/how-we-made-the-shining

The Guardian. (2016, November 6). *Swedish cinemas take aim at gender bias.* Retrieved from The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/06/swedish-cinemas-bechdel-test-films-gender-bias

Brink, B. (2012, June 12). *Framing the role that South African architects played in supporting or opposing the apartheid state.* Retrieved from Unisa: http://hdl.handle.net/10500/5805

Wyze, P. (2014, September 9). *Gotham state of mind: what do comics tell us about cities?* Retrieved from The Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/sep/09/gotham-new-york-what-do-comics-tell-us-about-cities

Zhou, T. (2015, September 9). *Vancouver Never Plays Itself.* Retrieved from Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/138807572

Puschak, E. (n.d.). *The Evolution of Batman's Gotham City.* Retrieved from Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF-wVFTR0fg