IV. Strategies, Spatial Trajectories and Scenography: Micro-Mapping the Megacity in Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*

We now move onto a book that is more reader friendly than *That Rose-Red Empire* in the different ways it tries to document and communicate the city of Mumbai. Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* is a lucid and accessible, first-person narrative about the author's experiences of living in Mumbai for two years with his family. This part journalistic, part autobiographical account tells of the dirty politics, politicians and gangsters Mehta encounters, and exposes a different side of the film and entertainment industry. We learn of the religious feuds and instances of violence the city has had to live through, and meet Mumbai's 'aspirational' consumers as they relate their life in the megacity.[1] Readers are thus given glimpses into a largely inaccessible part of Mumbai as the author gives this clandestine world a discursive form. Anticipating the capricious and diffuse implications of present-day global mobility, Mehta advocates his book by urging the importance and need to understand Mumbai.[2] This over-arching grand project of 'understanding' contemporary Mumbai is a dominant strand running through Mehta's long and detailed journalistic report. The sub-title, "Bombay Lost and Found", indicates on the other hand, a subtle, more personal aspect of Mehta's narrative account. Mumbai is introduced to readers as a city the author first left (lost) to go to America and then returned to (found) again by writing about it:

1 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 31: "It is a population led to believe that every year they will get a little more than they had the previous year […] From the top (of the pyramid of aspirations), there is only one way to go – and it is a leap – outside the country altogether, to America, Australia, Dubai. To go from the Maruti to the Mercedes, from blue Jeans to the Armani suit, necessitates a move abroad."

2 | Mehta, "Urban India: Understanding the Maximum City (LSE Cities Publication)."

"So I wander the streets with my laptop [...] As people talk to me, my fingers dance with Miss Qwerty. But I have to pay. My currency is stories. Stories told for stories revealed – so have I heard. *Stories from other worlds, carried over the waters in caravans and ships, to be exchanged for this year's harvest of stories*. A hit man's stories to a movie director in exchange for the movie director's story to the hit man. The film world and the underworld, the police and the press, the swamis and the sex workers, *all live off stories*; here in Bombay, I do too. *And the city I lost is retold into existence, through the telling of its story*."[3]

Mehta invokes the existential necessity of story telling reminiscent of Sheherezade, who had to tell a story every night for 1001 nights only to keep herself alive. This has a twofold effect in that on the one hand, it adds a mystical-fairy tale touch to it: "Stories from other worlds, carried over the waters in caravans and ships". That is, we get a sense of Mehta as our storyteller, preparing us for a long session of storytelling. More importantly, it does away with the question of 'truth' as it wills the reader to acknowledge that life per se is available to us only in the form of stories. This is emphasized in the final flourish – "the city I lost is retold into existence, through the telling of its story". Of course, the city that the author 'lost' is a remembered city, of his childhood and from his occasional trips back from New York to visit India. It is a very personal idea of the city that he has left behind, shaped by numerous factors, social and psychological, and nurtured mostly by nostalgia. In order to 'update' his Mumbai, Mehta, based in New York as a journalist, moved back for two years to the city of his birth to write about it. The 'city narrative' is, however, embedded in the autobiographical frame of the author's story of how and why he moved back to Mumbai. The autobiographical strand is thus used to 'package and deliver' Mehta's extraordinary accounts of an unusual selection of people in Mumbai.

Methodologically, Mehta follows in the footsteps of American literary journalists, using immersion as a technique for inspiration for his writing. In the current chapter, I would like to take a closer look at the interaction between these two narrative frames – that of the immersive and investigative journalism and the autobiographical strand. As Mehta is the common denominator, it will allow us to reflect and comment on the position of the observer and spokesperson. In doing so, I do not mean to stretch the analogy to include traditional journalistic writing in an ANT framework. Rather, by reading this book within an ANT setup, my purpose is to firstly, collect and analyze different strategies of documenting and narrating the city. Secondly, I think it is possible to tease out the parts or techniques that endeavor to go beyond journalistic reporting in the hope that we may learn and add to our ANT framework through this exercise. Thirdly, by consistently problematizing the observer position, the chapter will underline the

3 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 38, my emphasis.

need to level the position of the observer-narrator and implicate it in the actor-networks. Documenting Mumbai is a task that most obviously exceeds the scope of a single man's perspective. My approach to an analysis of Mehta's narrative is based on the hunch that it is precisely the herculean nature of the task, which provides a sort of thrust to the movement of the author and his writing. That is, it gives direction to his analysis, shapes his narrative and the discourse it produces. Seen thus, Mehta's individual means of structuring and analysing become relevant for our analysis, as much as the places and people he interacts with in order to achieve his goals, and we will analyse these in the upcoming sections. In these midst, we may discover something in Mehta's narrative that goes beyond the plot and events in the spirit of Latour's ANT, to articulate not merely journalistic matters of fact but values or matters of concern.

The booming and bustling megacity, Mumbai, as the subject of Mehta's narration makes his journalistic account extraordinary of course. Its distinctiveness, however, comes from its explorer and narrator, Suketu Mehta himself, and the myriad possibilities of discovery and observation his specific position and identity enable him. That is to say that the author uses his strategy of immersion and his specific biography to create the empirical anchorage in *Maximum City*, and the weight of the book relies heavily on the creation of this anchorage – a *creation* of reality as a lived, experienced phenomenon, and then a transfer of this experientiality into representation. The phatic aspect of the means by which Mehta is able to achieve this 'experientiality' is, as we will see later in the chapter, not quite so explicit as in *That Rose-Red Empire* since the narrative only indirectly reveals how Mehta gets access to the people he interviews through social networking. The author also goes to some lengths to indulge in spheres of life in Mumbai that are lesser accessible in general such as interrogating violent criminals or the police who try to incriminate them. Here, Mehta's strategy of immersion and gritty realism functions as a sort of muckraking, but also shows a willingness on Mehta's part to extend his line of vision or to try to move beyond his upbringing and social or class barriers.[4] It is precisely such instances, where Mehta must overcome himself or is forced to see beyond his means, that our study will attempt to isolate and juxtapose with Mehta's more journalistic writing for it highlights how ANT affords us different insights than journalism, depending on the role of the observer and the extent of self-reflection he concedes to.

It thus follows that I must highlight Mehta's role in the generation of a very specific image of the city. Mehta portrays Mumbai as a 'maximum city' – of extreme exigencies and eccentric characters. For example, the city unfolds in

4 | We will see later in his book that this is not always as easy to practice for Mehta, as his social surrounding rushes to help them set up their life in Mumbai. In this manner we have constant reminders of the etiquettes that serve as a stronghold of his social standing in the Indian society he has entered again – this time as a 'foreign returnee' – an 'American journalist'.

part as a dark alter ego of Mehta's 'remembered' city and as a horrific *schauplatz* for terrible hate crimes and riots. A description of the book's discursive strategies shows a sort of commodification of the Indian megacity by the diasporic flâneur. This 'othering' of the city caters to a voyeurism, but conceals itself behind the rhetoric of altruistic concern over the plight of a 'city in crisis'.[5] This aspect will be used once more to indicate and support our critique of the neglect in Latour's ANT of the role of the observer, chronicler or spokesperson.[6] Nevertheless, on the other hand, Mehta's immersive strategy enables him first-hand, empirical access to Mumbai. It thus presents itself as a stimulating case study for ANT scholarship. The combination of journalistic enterprise and personal experience in Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai gives rise to a uniquely dense narrative of at least some of the city's myriad actor-networks, and may indeed represent a stepping-stone toward the articulation of matters of concern.

Mehta begins by highlighting and tracing the tension between Hindu and Muslims in Mumbai at the time he was investigating his book back to the 1992-93 riots sparked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Northeast India.[7] A substantial section of the book is dedicated to revisiting victims as well as the perpetrators of these events. The discursive structuring of bringing together their narratives exposes both, the victims and the perpetrators, as victims of higher opportunist political interests. The rest of the book, although structured into separate chapters or episodes, develops out of this episode as encounters with various persons and insights into the different institutions that were involved. The underworld is referred to as Black-collar work and we encounter various criminals as its avatars.[8] On the other hand, Ajay Lal from the Indian police force in Mumbai is a winner of the President's Medal for Meritorious Service in the Bombay bomb blasts case. As the story unfolds, Lal is revealed, quite

5 | Mehta takes on the role of a post colonial "subject" himself, "forming" the city. Thus producing what Edward Said has called "second-order knowledge". See Said, *Orientalism*, 52.; This is, in other words, the sort of "Western" narrative that "domesticates and distances that which it constructs as 'the other'." Rudiger and Gross, *Translation of Cultures*., 77; See also Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

6 | See for example: "All great cities are schizophrenic, said Victor Hugo. Bombay has multiple-personality disorder. During the riots, […] schizophrenia became a survival tactic." Ibid., 45. See also "[T]he awesome ability to act on someone else's behalf or to have others do your bidding, to sign documents, release wanted criminals, cure illnesses, get people killed." (59) In a conversation with a criminal named Amol: "'What will be the effect of this?' I ask Amol. 'Murders will cost two hundred rupees.'"(87).

7 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, See especially 40–5, but the theme runs throughout Part I of the book.

8 | Ibid., 185–254.

unexpectedly, as more of an exception than a stereotype.[9] Mehta's friendship with Lal reveals and unfolds not only the challenging life of a leading policeman in Mumbai, but also institutional processes and corruption, infrastructural limitations and unethical consequences. On the other hand, Mehta also confronts a personal ethical struggle as he becomes privy to the unofficial vigilantism and investigative or penal methods of the police in Mumbai.

Bollywood has stand-ins through Vinod Chopra (a director), Mahesh Bhatt (a producer), Sanjay Dutt (the criminally accused but highly successful actor) and Eishan (a "genuine struggler" in the industry).[10] To Mehta's credit, his interactions with them reveal the flipside of Bollywood showbiz rather than adding gloss to its glamour. Mehta's interactions with bar dancers, cross-dressers and prostitutes make readers privy to a more stigmatized amusement industry.[11] To counterbalance this charged narrative and to give a closure of sorts to his Mumbai portrait, Mehta follows the lives of an extremely wealthy Jain family who 'takes diksha', that is, sacrifices their 'worldly' life for religious reasons.[12] This is an ironic twist in this tale of the city. Everything that is aspired to by the characters so far encountered – money with all its comforts and luxuries – is renounced by this family in the name of a higher goal, that of Moksha, the salvation of the spirit. This desire for salvation of the spirit almost reads as Mehta's desire of salvation for his beloved city. On the other hand, it is perhaps a reminder of spirituality in the 'jungle' of the megacity, and of the possibility of radical change.

I have already begun to sensitize my reader to Mehta's strategies to order and narrate his experience of the city. The three main nodes in Mehta's city portrait, "Power", "Pleasure" and "Passages" represent Mehta's attempt to structure the excess that he encounters and experiences and can also be seen as three different means of access to the megacity. What quickly becomes clear when we read *Maximum City* as ANT is Mehta's treatment of people as a nexus of associations that provides him with a starting point to trace the actor-networks that carry him forward in his journey of discovery. [13] In the following section, we will continue this description of the literary and documentary strategies that Mehta adopts to render his experience. In a second step, the analysis of these strategies will help us map the book's spatial trajectories. The insights gained will, in the final section, aid in our evaluation of Mehta's journalism as a prospective ANT method.

9 | Ibid., 131–84.

10 | Ibid., 346–432.

11 | Ibid., 253–345.

12 | Ibid., 497–534.

13 | Ibid., See Contents, xi–xii.

Mehta's Strategies for an ANT Methodology

Tackling the City's Geography, 'Populating the Scenography'

"In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this."[14]

Italo Calvino's narrator in *Invisible Cities* is none other than the Venetian, Marco Polo, trying to describe to the great Chinese Ruler Kublai Khan, in vain, the cities he visited on his expeditions. He could be describing different individual cities, or offering different descriptions of the same. The narrator's doubts question the very idea of the accuracy of representation. In such a reading of Calvino's short book, the idea of 'true' descriptions is rendered impossible. In the quote, we get a glimpse of how Calvino contests the possibility of an accurate description of a city by emphasizing the 'petty' contribution made to representation by the perspective or methods of the describer.

In *Maximum City*, this inadequacy of 'methods' takes a more tangible form as we see Mehta grapple to find access to the excess that Mumbai presents, and ways to describe it. The first, most logical attempt is geographical orientation, implied by the map we come across in the first pages. This rather minimalistic and schematic map, however, could not be less useful; it visualizes Mumbai's island status, surrounded by water almost on all sides, but does not show its location in relation to the rest of India. The Gateway of India, a monument that recalls Mumbai's role as the port of entry into India during colonial times, stands lone and wayward as the only historical landmark appearing on the map. The other names are main stations on the western, central and harbor railway lines – the main and most effective means of commute and connectivity in Mumbai. The incongruity of this pairing reflects that of the non-descript map itself, which cannot even begin to define or describe what the physical space depicted, contains, and mocks our expectations from a geographical map. A more pragmatic problem of using maps in Bombay is linked by Mehta to the arbitrariness of the whims and caprices of the government in Mumbai: "The city is in the grip of a mass renaming frenzy [...] as a result, it becomes impossible to look to official maps and road signs for municipal directions."[15] The physical historical landmarks such as the previously mentioned Gateway of India, the Marine Drive, the Taj Hotel, Victoria Terminus now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, do still nevertheless function as mnemonic

14 | Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 9.

15 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 129.

sources. That is, as 'permanent' statuaries in the city's physical geography, for orientation in a city that is otherwise continually changing:

"The names of the real city are, like the sacred Vedas, orally transmitted. Many of the neighborhoods of Bombay are named after trees and groves that flourished there. The Kambal-grove gave its name to Cumballa Hill; an acacia – babul grove to Babulnath [...] The trees no longer exist, but their names still remain, pleasantly evocative until you realize what has been lost."[16]

This alternate geography gives rise to an 'unofficial' version of the city, an existence evoked by the city's denizens and their use of these personalized names for the city's areas. It is through such gestures that a city resists mappability and maintains a sense of elusiveness. Place names and people's stories, both permeate and survive in the urban fabric "like the sacred Vedas, orally transmitted", and find in Mehta, in his Mumbai portrait, a diligent collector and scripter. The place names, already emptied of their original meanings, gain yet further meaning in Mehta's narrative as authentic coordinates with which to map Mehta's movements as he goes about the city – Bandra where he works out of, the beer bars of Worli, the Irani restaurants of Malabar Hill and so on.[17] Although these 'coordinates' are intertwined with specific associations – of descriptions of the author's experiences and the people encountered in these places – they do not provide a very practical guiding register with which to navigate through Mehta's inexhaustible narration, and emphasize the difficulties in mapping the city. Instead, as earlier mentioned, the Mumbai portrait is divided into chapters, which are grouped into three sections called Power, Pleasure and Passages, and then individually broken down into sub-chapters.[18] This strategy of ordering and structuring the urban space and its representation will be examined in more detail further in the chapter.

As an opening, Mehta uses an autobiographical frame. This helps him embed the denser city narrative and thus ease access to it for the reader. Mehta's nostalgic narration of his experience as diaspora, 'in exile' from Bombay, additionally offers the reader a sort of personal connection to the story and a confidential rapport with the narrator. This is a vital function of the autobiographical strand for it establishes the empirical anchorage of Mehta's city narrative, and thus ensures authenticity.

A historical approach characterizes the next frame that we encounter. Mehta traces the trajectory of the renaming of the city – from its anglicized name, Bombay, to Mumbai, and combines it with the empirical strategy of

16 | Ibid.

17 | Ibid., see respectively 91, 269, 261.

18 | Ibid., See Contents, xi–xii.

research into the city's politics and related conflicts. Violence due to religious factors is a regular encumbrance of the Indian political scene; political success may often depend on how effective the political parties are in implementing violence as India's far right political party BJP and the more regional Shiv Sena in Maharashtra have reportedly done in the past.[19] Echoing the general tendency of research on the subject, Mehta retraces the reasons for the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in December of 1992, the Godhra riots in 2002 and the subsequent rise of right-wing fundamentalism in Indian politics, all to the Hindutva campaign.[20] The violent aftermath, which resulted from the demolition of the mosque and involved communal polarization of Hindus and Muslims, prepared the ground for what came to be known as the Gujarat Carnage.[21] On February 27th 2002, there was a fire in one of the coaches of the Sabarmati Express in which fifty-nine Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya were burnt to death. The incident was the starting point of statewide violence that came to be classified as genocide as it reached out into 20 districts of the state with the participation and support of the police.[22] The findings of the Citizen's Tribunal appointed to investigate the carnage revealed state and police complicity and connivance but despite the existence of thorough investigations, there has been a conspicuous failure on behalf of the Gujarat Government to act judiciously.[23] Due to the overall failure of the criminal justice system, the victims have not received adequate compensation. This episode in India's history is thus said to have revealed symptoms of fascism in a 'theoretically' democratic India and prefigured the "coming crisis" of India.[24]

19 | Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action*; The Bhartiya Janata Party or the People's Party is India's far-right political party. The Shiv Sena is a regional party that aligns itself with the BJP, and sees itself as the Army of the Maratha Warrior-King Shivaji. See "BJP-Website"; See also "Shivsena Party."

20 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 176.

21 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*.

22 | Eckert, *The Charisma of Direct Action*, 175.

23 | The National Human Rights Commission on state failure in Gujarat, dated May 2002, notes that there was a "comprehensive failure to protect the rights to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the people of Gujarat starting with the tragedy in Godhra on 27 December 2002 and continuing with the violence that ensued in the weeks that followed". As quoted in Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 188. There were, of course, other failures – that of government intelligence, or lack of transparency in the ensuing arrests and investigations. However, the innumerable issues related to the incident are matter for a separate discussion. For a comprehensive study, see Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*.

24 | Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, 228.

This chapter in Mumbai's history is first narrated as research, much like a journalistic study-report. It develops further, however, through his visits to the sites of the violence in Mumbai, and through the interviews that he conducts. A sizeable part of the book is dedicated to revisiting some of the victims as well as perpetrators of the 1992-93 riots that were sparked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The fact that the perpetrators are 'given a say' in the narrative is an outstanding feature of Mehta's report. This is the narrative instance I would like to begin with:

"A man who has murdered is not entirely defined by it. After he kills a human being, a large, perhaps the largest, part of him is a murderer, and it marks him off from most of the rest of humanity who are not; but that is not all that he is. He can also be a father, a friend, a patriot, a lover. When we try to understand murder, we mistake the part for the whole; we deal only with the murderer and are inevitably left confused about how he became one, so radically different from you and me. I want to meet the other selves that form Sunil the murderer and see what became of him after the riots."[25]

Mehta is making an iconoclastic attempt here to understand the 'murderer'.[26] The Shiv Sena man, Sunil, is observed to be an attentive father and a husband who values "democracy in the household", and therefore supports his wife's involvement in politics even though she runs for elections as opposition to the party that he works for.[27] In his role as immersive journalist, Mehta follows Sunil's life very closely and gains access to intimate knowledge about the criminal. Sunil's openness and willingness to befriend goes to the extent of inviting the author into his home to meet his family. Mehta is shown the various 'business' ventures Sunil runs, goes campaigning with him for a BJP-candidate for Parliament, finds out how much he earns in a month, and becomes privy to his personal aspirations and dreams as he reveals them to the author. Descriptions of Sunil's life and the author's conversations with him are dramatized and unfold alternatingly in reported speech (third person narration), dialogue and authorial commentary in first person narration. The dramatization results in an engaging narrative for the reader and is a style that Mehta generally uses throughout his book. The use of dramatized dialogue and montage of testimonies gives readers a seemingly

25 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 69.

26 | For another similar instance, see Mehta's characterization of the criminal named Amol, who can't imagine sleeping alone at night: "He (Amol) declares, "I've never slept alone in all my life. I need other people in the room." The big tapori is wondering how I can sleep alone, without my mother, without my wife, without babies in the room. He wouldn't be able to; the lord of lafda is scared of the dark." Ibid., 94.

27 | Ibid., 74.

more direct access to the person – it reduces the distance between reader and the experience being described. This generates a more vicarious experience of the city, while signaling an intention to maintain objectivity. The switch to Mehta's own voice, that is, to a first person narration enables him to maintain epistemic authority, which lends his subsequent evaluations more credit.[28] In terms of the documentary effect of such narrativization, Mehta's direct and rather intimate exchanges with Sunil magnify the authenticity of the experience and strengthen the account's empirical anchorage. If the author were truly consistent with this style, these insights into the other 'sides' of the murderer could enable an emancipatory mimesis of process. It *could* shift the reader's obvious moral or ethical stance towards Sunil. However, even as the author probes into Sunil's life in order to gain and give insight into the life of a criminal as a 'normal' person, this remains a rather superficial authorial strategy. The bizarre incongruity of the two extremes of Sunil's identity that Mehta's narrative highlights – as a 'normal' family man and as a 'murderer' – only aids Mehta to ostracize Sunil and the class to which he belongs. Mehta cannot overcome the perspective from which he 'sees', that of his own (higher) social standing and his profession. His previously unconventional sketch of Sunil is very quickly counterbalanced by a tempering and rather conservative analysis of the social and historical context that produces the class to which Sunil belongs:

"The new inheritors of the country – and of the city – are very different from the ones who took over from the British, who had studied at Cambridge and the Inner Temple and come back. *They are badly educated, unscrupulous, lacking a metropolitan sensibility – buffoons and small time thugs, often – but, above all, representative*. The fact that a murderer like Sunil could become successful in Bombay through engagement in local politics is both a triumph and failure of democracy [...] Most Bombay politicians need to mobilize huge sums of money for campaign expenditures. The salaries they get, the money their party officially sanctions for campaign funds, are a pittance, so they have to look elsewhere."[29]

The author's judgmental dichotomy between the Cambridge-educated inheritors and the class that Sunil represents hides behind the language of an immersive journalist trying to balance his participation and observation to render an objective picture. At first glance, his analysis does not judge Sunil personally but admonishes the system that engenders this class of "badly educated, unscrupulous [...] buffoons and small time thugs", and holds the richer classes and their neglect of the country's politics responsible. Studying the electoral roll from 1995 with a

28 | See "The Realist Paradigm" in Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, 97–132.

29 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 75, my emphasis.

journalist friend, Mehta notes that listings for a slum show all names marked as compared to listings for well-to-do high rises, which show that only 20 percent had voted: "This is the crucial difference between the world's two largest democracies: In India, the poor vote."[30] However, Mehta's particularly derogatory description of Sunil and other similar "new inheritors of the country" (see emphasis) is striking when seen alongside his journalistic language that presents objective, empirical data. It points us in our analysis to the ethical conundrums arising from Mehta's stance as well as the position from which he 'sees' and 'speaks'. On a more personal level, it would be justifiable to raise issue with Mehta's abuse of the hospitality and confidence extended to him by Sunil. Besides, while Mehta's language for the 'poor' is distinctly pejorative and condescending, the critical stance he reserves for 'the rich' almost goes unnoticed:[31] "It will take them a few generations, the new owners, to learn how to run their house and keep it clean and safe. *But how can we begrudge them that when we, who had been the owners for such a long time and had still botched it, handed it over in such disrepair*?"[32] Mehta's statement discloses explicitly the position of privilege from which this observer 'sees'. Even while he acknowledges this position, his stance is unable or unwilling to move beyond mere acknowledgement to a questioning of this position. Thus, the mimesis of process that may have been possible in these instances fails to manifest. This also fails to produce reflexivity in Mehta's urban enterprise. The bias of Mehta's insights arising from his privilege and other implications will be further discussed in the next section.

Such incongruous extremes become a dominant trope in Mehta's perception and description of Mumbai. A sense of abnormality is conveyed by the juxtaposition of 'extremes'. In other words, it is Mehta's perspective that portrays Mumbai as a city of extremes. This is realized, for example, in terms of Mumbai's social morphology. An almost stereotypical but recurring theme is the juxtaposition of extremes of poverty and wealth. While there are barely clothed children begging for food or working, others host expensive birthday parties, while yet another family literally 'throws away' their wealth in the process of *diksha*.[33] The abstinence of the Jain family forms a stark contrast with the

30 | Ibid., 68.

31 | See also Mehta's insert of civic activist, Gerson da Cunha's description for this same generation of "inheritors": "'The dregs at the bottom have become the scum at the top.'" Ibid., 77.

32 | Ibid., 77, my emphasis.

33 | See for example "Maybe they [the children in Madanpura, a slum] are working at construction sites, holding on their heads baskets of bricks weighing half again as much as themselves." (37) "There were a hundred kids in there; the hosts would have spent not less than 100,000 rupees – about $4,000 – on that party." (35) Mehta, *Maximum City*. For the episode on Jain family, see "Good-bye World", 497-534.

alternative lifestyles encountered by Mehta at the beer and dance bars. This sense of a city of extremes is visible in the disparity between the Jain family's piety and the violence of the murderers, or in the difference between the immaculately clean and eerily quiet house of Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan and the daily production of feces in the city or the "psychedelic chaos of the streetscape".[34]

Mehta's strategies of tackling Mumbai's geography that I have described so far also point to the difficulties in grappling the space he wants to represent. Ultimately, however, the ANT strategy of tracing networks is to be discovered in the most striking characteristic of Mehta's Mumbai portrait: the large cast of people that the reader encounters in it. Mehta's means of 'mapping' Mumbai is thus, to use Latour's phrase, to literally 'populate the scenography' with the people he meets. These function as nodes in the network and mark a sort of entry point for Mehta, for his activity of tracing networks. His means of articulating matters of concern lie in describing the networks that become visible to him through them. However, Mehta's means of populating the scenography and describing the networks differ from those of Sinclair, and will be discussed separately in the upcoming sections. The readability of such documentation is, on the other hand, maintained by categorically organizing his encounters with these people (which textually leads to chapters and sub-chapters.) Part I, for example, is called "Power" in which the sub-chapters accordingly deal with politicians ("Powertoni"), the police ("Number Two After Scotland Yard) and members of the underworld to whom he refers to as "Black-Collar Workers".[35]

His method of immersive, investigative journalism leads him to different spheres of life in Mumbai. His move from America (with his family) to live in Mumbai exposes life in the city on a daily basis in all its sundry details, toils and labors included.[36] Following the lives of individuals such as the Bollywood movie director, Vinod Chopra, enables access to institutions such as Bollywood, the movie industry, and the related exposure of institutional corruption. We encounter Chopra as a suppressed artist fighting to find a balance between his ideas, public expectations from the movies and the arbitrary guidelines of the Indian censor board. This episode involves a de-mythification of the industry through juxtapositions such as the grandiose image of blockbuster actors such as Amitabh Bachchan vis-à-vis his subdued personality in real life and a possibly

34 | Ibid., See respectively, 359–62, 127, 260.

35 | Ibid., Contents.

36 | Ibid., 3–38.

dying career.[37] Or the misleading promises of the glamour of on-screen life as compared to the everyday realities of Eishaan, the struggling actor.[38]

Some persons become a stand-in metaphor for sections of the population such as the sexualized and stigmatized bar dancer, Monalisa (often referred to as a "cut girl" with reference to her wrist-cutting). Or the likewise sexualized and stigmatized cross-dresser and married man, Manoj, who becomes Honey at night and works at the same bar as the dancer, Monalisa.[39] Ajay Lal is the avatar of the Bombay State police, described as "that rarity in Bombay: a cop who doesn't drink."[40] With his law abiding, tea-totaling nature, Ajay Lal is more an exception than the rule in the police force. This is, admittedly, a limitedly vicarious experience of the city as the testimonies of his cast of Mumbai denizens are represented diegetically (narrated in third person). When they are dramatized for a more direct rendering, they are always interspersed with Mehta's comments. Despite Mehta's presence throughout the narrative, his interactions with all these various individuals enables access to different spaces in the city. A hint of 'normalcy' is introduced through Babanji, the runaway poet. The son of a well-known chemistry professor in Bihar, a north-western state in India, Babanji runs away to Mumbai in pursuit of his dreams to write poetry, instead of following in his father's footsteps. He forms a ray of hope in this collection of rather eccentric characters, even more so than the religious Jain family. Though he lives a disillusioned life on the streets of Mumbai, there is a happy ending of sorts to this strand of the city narrative as we learn that he finally becomes united with his father again who comes looking for him all the way from Bihar, and is to return to his home with him.[41]

The following section continues the task of describing Mehta's literary documentary strategies. Specifically, I will show how Mehta uses the autobiographical strand as a story telling device, and that a closer analysis of this strategy reveals (i) the perspective from which the author 'sees' and 'speaks', and (ii) the influence of this perspective on the textual representation of the city.

37 | Ibid., 359–362. Similar examples include access to crime in the city through the murderers and "underground" gang members he interviews; or access to the world of a more stigmatized entertainment business of the bar dancers through Monalisa, and so on.

38 | Ibid., 385–93.

39 | See sub-chapter, "A City in Heat" ibid., 264–345.

40 | Ibid., 155.

41 | See sub chapter "Runaway Poet" ibid., 473–96. Another character who may be said to introduce this sense of normalcy is Girish, the software programmer who takes Mehta to meet some people involved in the riots in Mumbai. (page 41 onwards) Girish appears more or less consistently throughout the book, but he plays a major part only as a link to the Shiv Sena men.

Empirical Anchorage and Shifting Perspectives

> Bombay is in my mind because it has given me something to write.[42]

Contrary to Sinclair's fixed (insider) perspective in the previous chapter, we encounter here an author oscillating between what appears at first glance, to be two different perspectives. On the one hand, Mehta is an 'insider' to the terrain he covers, an Indian by virtue of his lineage and a childhood spent in Mumbai. Though the book rarely reveals it, he still has family in Mumbai and relies on them for the social networking that his immersive journalism requires.[43] On the other hand, he is an 'outsider' since he left India as a young man. He was educated in the USA, and now lives in New York. In the first part of the book, titled "Personal Geography", Mehta relates his background.[44] His experience as diaspora is narrated in first person as a 'looking back', and is overshadowed by feelings of exile and alienation towards his host country, America. I take the liberty of quoting the author at length in order to give my reader an impression of the rhetoric with which Mehta appeals to the sympathies of his readers in order to establish the empirical anchorage of his book.

"In Jackson Heights we reapproximated [sic] Bombay, my best friend Ashish and I. Ashish had also been moved from Bombay to Queens [...] We would walk around the streets of Jackson Heights, Ashish, his new neighbor Mitthu, and I, singing Hindi movie songs from the seventies, when we had been taken away; travelling back on music, the cheapest airline. On spring nights, the newly softened air carried news from home, from the past, which in Gujarati is known as the "bhoot-kal" – the ghost time. Three young Gujarati men on the streets, singing suspiciously [...] That was the true period of my exile, when I was restrained from forces greater than myself from going back. *It was different from nostalgia, which is a simple desire to evade the linearity of time*. I made, in the back of my school notebook, a calendar beginning early in the spring [...] Each day I crossed off the previous one and counted the remaining

42 | Ibid., 491. The "runaway poet", Babanji, speaks these lines about Mumbai just before leaving the city to return to his hometown in Bihar, but they could almost be Mehta's own sentiments.

43 | See for example "So when my uncle phones me one day and tells me about a family in the diamond market that is about to renounce the world – take diksha – I put aside everything else and go meet them." Ibid., 495.

44 | Ibid., 3–38.

days like a jail sentence [...] I existed in New York, but I lived in India, taking little memory trains."[45]

He refuses to let his sentimentality be dismissed as 'mere' nostalgia. Although, it is, indeed, nostalgia, in the sense that the author romanticizes the place 'left behind'. But the reminiscing feeds the memory of an India or Bombay 'left behind', starting anew each time as a cycle:

"For us, who left at the beginning of our teenage years, [...] we kept returning to our childhoods. Then, after enough trips of enough duration, we returned to the India of our previous visits. I have another purpose for this stay: to update my India, so that my work should not be an endless evocation of childhood, of loss, of a remembered India. I want to deal with the India of the present."[46]

His status as diaspora and the purpose of his visit to India this time is addressed explicitly and extensively. Its rhetoric reaches out to the reader on terms that are more sentimental and establishes a personal sort of author-reader rapport. It is perhaps a sense of caution on Mehta's part that the empirical anchorage of his enterprise hinges so insistently on his own honesty and reliability. It is a sign of his apprehension perhaps that all that which later appears in the book is possibly so estranging for the reader as to affect his credibility. To this end, Mehta introduces the ultimate trump card to gain the sympathy of his readers: that of a better life for his children. When their children were growing up in New York, the author's Indian mother tongue, Gujarati, was "rendered unspeakable" and their Indian food "inedible".[47] He wishes for his children to have the experience of "living in a country where everyone looks just like them" and "grow up with confidence" as "they will get a sense of their unique selves".[48]

Continuing in this strain of honesty and sincerity, Mehta makes no pretenses: "I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a non resident Indian."[49] With this he draws attention to his 'outsider'

45 | Ibid., 8–9, my emphasis.

46 | Ibid., 38.

47 | Ibid., 12.

48 | Ibid., 12–3. "A sense of their unique selves" sounds like an odd and an almost inconceivable thing to seek for in Mumbai, or even in India, especially by someone who is visibly Indian. We will see, however, how Mehta's status as diaspora does indeed make him and his family "special" in their social circle.

49 | Ibid., 10.

status. The appeal of the rhetoric of sincerity in this authorial strategy of repeatedly laying oneself bare to the reader gains Mehta the empirical anchorage for his enterprise. The sentimental autobiographical strand distracts from the fact Mehta uses gritty realism as a documentary strategy to spectacularize the city's underbelly. Revisiting the city one perhaps lost, metaphorically or physically, gangsters and murderers are not really the first choice of people to meet with. In the first chapter, "Personal Geography", Mehta rigorously works to establish his authenticity and credibility by giving insight into his life and family history. The author thus anchors his personal history within this narrative about the city, a trope that is carried throughout the book. The familiar, confiding tone of the narrator's rapport, his introduction of himself and his statement of purpose in this first chapter, creates intimacy with the reader and establishes Mehta as a reliable narrator.

Mehta's immersive-investigative technique entails that he establish himself in the narrative as a reliable narrator. The figure of narrator thus embodies his roles as experiencer, interviewer and scripter, and becomes his instrument of authentication. The paradox and dilemma of the documentary endeavor lies in precisely this composition, to create a reliable speaking instance, only to render its 'constructedness' insignificant through the strategy of its authentication. Through his encounters with murderers, politicians or prostitutes, Mehta becomes our "eye into the forbidden", making us privy to their lives, their dreams and aspirations, their language, the personal stories they tell, or how they are a part of the city.[50] Mehta's voice is always present however, weaving in and out between their voices, always tempering the narrative, to try to create a careful balance between the fascinating and the scandalous. His style is a sort of descriptive realism, making rather conventional use of realist literary devices such as story-like chronology, teleological construction and representation of events enhanced by recording of minute details of the surroundings, dress and milieu, or dramatization through dialogues.[51]

The overall narrative construct almost succeeds in distracting us from Mehta's shifting perspectives. I begin by isolating and describing the various positions Mehta establishes. In the autobiographical chapter, the author tells us of his father's exasperation with him as a young boy, unhappy in India and in America:

"My father once, in New York, exasperated by my relentless demands to be sent back to finish high school in Bombay, shouted at me, 'When you were there, you wanted to come here. Now that you're here, you want to go back.'

50 | Ibid., 347.

51 | Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*, , "The Realist Paradigm", 97–132.

It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: citizen of the country of longing."[52]

This episode implies a dispossessed, 'neither-nor' position in society. However, it is precisely this position that Mehta exploits to create two vantage points, and recognizing their potential, oscillates between them. At a basic level, this movement occurs between the positions of an 'outsider' (diaspora) and an 'insider' (Indian, by birth and physical appearance). However, as we will see later, these are themselves dynamic categories since within each, Mehta may be an 'observer' (carrying out research and analysis), or he may be an 'experiencer' (an immersive journalist). Anonymously, he is an insider, that is, an Indian insofar his physical appearance allows the deception. For, as the author's experiences reveal, he is an 'outsider' from New York, come to live in Mumbai only for two years, and is also treated thus by friends and acquaintances.[53] Thus, interpellation of the author by his social environment is also a major factor in controlling or adjusting the author's perspective.[54] His actions and perspective are often a direct response to how other people 'hail' him.

The extent of the influence of Mehta's life in America becomes visible when he analyses a situation in India and draws a comparison to a similar phenomenon in the US: "The Bombay Police see Muslims as criminals, much as some *American police view African Americans*."[55] In another section, to give a non-Indian (or American) audience an idea about the Indian politician Bal Thackeray's character Mehta says, "Thackeray, now in his seventies, is a cross between Pat Buchanan and Sadam Hussein."[56] Mehta's western modernist tendency to measure a city's

52 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 31.

53 | See for example "When we decide to put Gautama in a Gujarati-language school, our decision is met with amazement and sometimes anger. 'How could you do that to your son?' demands the lady down the hall. 'You'll ruin his life.' Then she reflects. 'It's all right for you, you're getting out of here sooner or later. If you were living here permanently you'd put him in Cathedral.' [...] The fact that we need a place only for two years counts in our favor; it means that when Gautama leaves, another place will be created, to be bestowed upon someone else in exchange for a favor or a donation." Ibid., 32–3, my emphasis.

54 | My reading is based on Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation of an individual into specific subject positions by a dominant ideology (ideological state apparatus) or by the social order of their specific time and culture. See Althusser, "Ideology And Ideological State Apparatuses," especially 174–5.

55 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 49, my emphasis.

56 | Ibid., 59. See also, "The cities of India are going through a transition similar to what American cities went through at the turn of the twentieth century." (76) Or, "It (computer programming) is a hospitable new world for the bright young slum children of Bombay, people like Girish, showing them the way out, like boxing or basketball in Harlem." (454).

wealth or development in terms of the city's lacking infrastructure underlines this perspective on Mumbai from the outside.[57] In order to understand and explain his experiences in Mumbai, Mehta adopts a journalistic stance, paradoxically distancing himself from the place while he reports:

"India desires modernity; it desires computers, information technology, neural networks, video on demand. But there is no guarantee of a constant supply of electricity in most places in the country. In this, as in every other area, the country is convinced it can pole-vault over the basics: develop world-class computer and management institutes without achieving basic literacy; provide advanced cardiac surgery and diagnostic imaging facilities while the most easily avoidable childhood diseases run rampant [...] It is an optimistic view of technological progress – that if you reach for the moon, you will somehow, automatically, span the inconvenient steps in between. [...] It is still a Brahmin-oriented system of education; those who work with their hands have to learn for themselves. Education has to do with reading and writing, with abstractions, with higher thought."[58]

Mehta's stance here portrays India as an anthropological subject. His mode is distanced, journalistic, as he describes the discrepancy between India's aspirations and realities. This quickly turns in the next passage as he talks of the "murderous rage" that builds in the mind when living in Mumbai, especially "when you've just come from a country where things work better, where institutions are more responsive." [59] The outburst is, however, quickly tempered and rationalized:

"As a result, in the Country of the No nothing is fixed the first time around [...] *Indians are craftsmen of genius, but mass production, with its attendant standardization, is not for us*. All things modern in Bombay fail regularly: plumping, telephones, the movement of huge blocks of traffic."[60]

Between the two quotes above, Mehta moves from being an outsider-observer to being an outsider-experiencer. The first quote hovers at a more abstract level and pits India's high aspirations as a country against the deficient facilities it actually provides. In the second quote, Mehta is moving closer into the city but maintains his outsider perspective, narrating his and his family's (immersive) experience of everyday amenities in Mumbai in comparison to those in America.

57 | Rao, "Embracing Urbanism," 377.

58 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 24.

59 | Ibid., 23–4.

60 | Ibid., 24, my emphasis.

Strangely enough though, as if to secure the 'native' benefit, he slips in the "us" (see emphasis).

Mehta recognizes his interpellation by the Indian society and culture that surrounds him. Here, his status as insider varies and his experience switches between being treated as a (financially privileged) "foreign returnee" or as 'merely one of the crowd':

"A whole network of recently met strangers gather themselves to help us find a school for Gautama [...] they energetically make calls on our behalf, even go personally to wheedle and convince. They paint us as *innocents abroad, foreigners unsophisticated* in the ways of school admissions."[61]

"The city is groaning under the pressure of the 1 million people per square mile. *It doesn't want me any more than the destitute migrant from Bihar*, but it can't kick either of us out. So it makes life uncomfortable for us by guerrilla warfare, by constant low level sniping."[62]

Mehta often weaves this kind of interpellation into an analysis of the city and its practices, as in the following episode about his initial day-to-day struggle and haggle over money:[63]

"Bombay is more expensive for us in the beginning of our stay there than later on. Newcomers find it a city without options – for housing, for education [...] *Every new place has a right to charge a newcomer's tax* [...] *A city has its secrets: where you go to shop for an ice bucket, for an office chair, for a sari. Newcomers have to pay more because they don't know these places*. We haggle over miniscule amounts that have no value for us [...] it becomes a matter of principle. This is because along with getting ripped off for 10 rupees comes an assumption: you are not from here, you are not Indian, so you deserve to be ripped off, to pay more than a native. So we raise our voices and demand to be charged the correct amount, the amount on the meter, because not to do so would

61 | Ibid., 32, my emphasis.

62 | Ibid., 23, my emphasis.

63 | Not all instances are quite so neutral for Mehta. A painful moment of such a kind comes when conversing with Girish, the programmer. Mehta is convincing Girish to forgive his sister for choosing her own groom: "I tell him to make peace with her. I tell him I myself had entered into a love marriage. He stops arguing and says, 'You're not from here. It is different for you.' He cuts off his words, but the implication is clear: I am a foreigner. I cannot understand Indian customs. Here is the difference between us, out at last in the sunlight." Ibid., 473.

imply acceptance of our foreign status. We are Indian, and we will pay Indian rates."[64]

His generalizations (see emphasis) quickly reveal his style of lacing personal experience with 'objective' research as a means to stabilize the effect of his shifting perspective, which may otherwise threaten the authority and verisimilitude of his rendering. Mehta's descriptions are staged strategically using the different positions and perspectives, which become visible through specific deictic markers such as "us" (Indians), or the "newcomer" and "foreign returnee" vis-à-vis "them" (Indians).

Mehta's status as an outsider becomes more obvious as his insistence on his Indian identity and 'inclusion' soon gives way to a deluge of antipathy for the city when the difficulties overwhelm him:

"From all around, people ask us for money. […] this fucking city. The sea should rush in over these islands in one great tidal wave and obliterate it, cover it underwater. It should be bombed from the air. Every morning I get angry. It is the only way to get anything done; people here respond to anger, are afraid of it. In the absence of money or connections, anger will do. I begin to understand the uses of anger as theatre […] any nostalgia I felt about my childhood has been erased. […] Why do I put myself through this? I was comfortable and happy and praised in New York; I had two places, one to live in and one to work. I have given all that up for this fool's errand, looking for silhouettes in the mist of the ghost time. Now I can't wait to go back, to the place I once longed to get away from: New York."[65]

Here is an echo from Mehta's childhood, of his capricious relationship with the city. Now that Mehta is in Mumbai, he cannot wait to go back to New York. Paradoxically, acknowledging his capricious relationship openly and truthfully strengthens the author's reliability, for there is a sincerity in Mehta's display of being first besotted, then disillusioned, as his feelings alternate between love, nostalgia, anger, antagonism, and even plain, outright hatred. If Mehta's shifting perspectives indicate opportunism on his behalf, it is this sincerity that ensures the author's authority, and sustains it throughout the book. In turn, this spectacle of emotions towards the city also strengthens the book's empirical anchorage, as it establishes and re-establishes the book's empirical referentiality repeatedly throughout the book.

64 | Ibid., 29–30, my emphasis. Further examples include the episode with the car park in his building (28), or the theft of his shoes outside a temple (30).

65 | Ibid., 30–1.

On the other hand, especially since his immersion in Mumbai involves his family, Mehta actually succeeds in reaching an existential level of experience of Mumbai. His participation makes him a phenomenological witness in this particular city even as it displays how Mehta's portrait of Mumbai is restrained and regulated by his specific social and economic situation.[66] In a different scenario, stepping out of a Hindustani vocal concert around the twelfth century temple tank in Banganga, an area restored and beautified by the urban planner's institute and international banks, the author is hit by the stench from the slums all around Banganga: "It was beautiful because the messy poor and their children had been kept out […] Bombay is both, the beautiful parts and the ugly parts, fighting block by block, to the death, for victory."[67] This pessimism could be dismissed as contempt, but it is not really a contemptuous analysis as much as it is proof of Mehta's restricted vision. Despite the sophistication of insight and empathy that the shifting perspectives could afford him, Mehta ultimately subjects the city space to the age-old simplification of rich, beautiful, poor, and ugly.

Tracing Spatial Ecologies: Mumbai 'Unfolding'

In Mehta's narrative, Mumbai emerges as a trope signifying, for the author, the nexus of 'home' and 'elsewhere', or 'self' and 'other'.[68] In this section, recalling Latour's ANT strategies of 'describing' and 'unfolding', we will see how Mehta instills certain dichotomies, which in turn 'unfold' Mehta's specific image of Mumbai as a city of extremes.

Mehta's descriptions of historical events (such as the riots) show how the very 'texture' of the city is affected. Through the polarization of the population and the city's politics – Hindus versus Muslims – we have a polarization of the city's space into strictly Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods. Accordingly, the city has become established as a site of these events, and as a 'spatial container' of the complex effects and heterogeneous ecologies that developed as an effect of these events. Mehta's descriptions of the city thus reiterate existing discourses that constitute the city as a site of global-local interactions, assemblages, flows or

66 | See for example his experience of organizing domestic help: "We learn the caste-system of the servants: the live-in maid won't clean the floors; that is for the 'free-servant' to do; neither of them will do the bathrooms, which are the exclusive domain of a bhangi, who does nothing else. The driver won't wash the car; that is the monopoly of the building watchman." And so on. Ibid., 21–2.

67 | Ibid., 127.

68 | See also Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness*, Introduction.

processes.[69] The global-local connections are not necessarily created by the cast of people appearing in the book, but rather by Mehta's own position as he moves to and fro between two countries in the comparisons and analyses he makes. However, we get a grasp of the real extent of contemporary urban actor-networks only at the end of the book, in an afterword from the author. It is 2001, he has moved back to Brooklyn and wakes up one morning to the grey cloud of debris from the burning World Trade Centre. As means of closure, Mehta lists a chain of events in Mumbai between 2001 and 2003, tracing a causal link between the 9/11 events in New York and the subsequent change in the nature of the gang-war in Mumbai.[70]

On the one hand, the voyeur and journalist in Mehta succeeds in teasing out a sense of novelty and spectacle for even Indian readers, drawing largely on the rather straightforward strategy of analysis of urban life that uses the lack of or defunct infrastructure as a measure.[71] Mehta's description of Mumbai as a city intimately and intricately associated with crime, gangster-dom and the underworld is also the image of Mumbai endorsed, solidified, and even glorified, by Bollywood.[72] Mehta's enterprise may indeed have been directly influenced by Bollywood's glamorizing of Mumbai's underbelly; the people whose lives he chooses to follow are "morally compromised people, shaped by the exigencies of city living".[73] The book unfolds as a tracing and describing of these 'exigencies of city living', in this specific city.

De Certeau's phatic aspect may be applied again in order to conceptualize the different forms of movement in the city that trace and create networks due to the stimuli thrown up by the city. The difference here is that the phatic aspect in this case does not so much refer to the physical act of 'walking' as it does to people's actions in a given urban space.[74] De Certeau's formulations specify these

69 | See for example Sassen, "Cities and Communities in the Global Economy"; Or Soja, *Postmetropolis*.

70 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 541–2.

71 | See also Rao, "Slum as Theory."

72 | See also Rao, "A New Urban Type"; For an exploration of the concept of "projected" city in cinema, see Barber, *Projected Cities*.

73 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 538.; As Ravi Vasudevan demonstrates in his essay, the effects of such representations of the city are strong in the case of a city like Bombay, which also actually forms the "real" site for the projected city in cinema. See Vasudevan, "Disreputable and Illegal Publics: Cinematic Allegories in Times of Crisis"; Mehta refers to this fact himself: "Bombay is mythic in a way that Los Angeles is not, because Hollywood has the budgets to create entire cities on its studio lots; the Indian film industry has to rely on existing streets, beaches, tall buildings." Mehta, *Maximum City*, 350.

74 | Georg Simmel has already foregrounded this idea in his understanding of the metropolis as a form of media that saturates the life of its residents and ultimately affects forms of social

interactions to refer to specifically state enforced 'strategies' of controlling the city and reactionary citizen 'tactics'.[75] We will see how, especially in the context of a city of the 'global South', such 'tactics' are 'creative attempts' by urban residents to overcome infrastructural deficiencies, and also to test or stretch legal margins. We will, therefore, follow Mehta in tracing the networks in Mumbai. In doing so, we also follow the spokesperson to reveal the specific topography his immersive experience generates of Mumbai.

The Pathways of People's 'Tactics'[76]

If de Certeau's conception of people's movements in the city as tactics is our point of departure, our next step must analyze the city in not only its physical aspects, but also position its people and their network-producing activities as a sort of 'unofficial' infrastructure that allows the city to function.[77] In our attempt to trace such informal self-reliance in Mehta's *Maximum City*, we quickly encounter a long trajectory of how things work at all in Mumbai, legally and illegally, starting from basic amenities such as a cooking gas connection. The supply of cooking gas in India is a government monopoly, which, however, does not sufficiently provide for everyone. As the author finds out, the problem is overcome by means of a fraud in which literally everyone is involved (willingly or forcibly):

"The only way to ensure a constant supply of cooking gas is to have two cylinders. Everyone runs a scam so they have two cylinders in their name; they transfer one from an earlier address or bribe an official to get a second one. Bombay survives on the scam; we are all complicit."[78]

Mehta's initial efforts to get a gas connection, officially and off the black market, are futile, so a friend sends her mother to accompany Mehta to a gas agency. They

interaction and formation of the social in space (which thus becomes "place"). See Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life."

75 | See ibid.; and de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially 51–5. With regard to the stimuli that the city throws up, they are significant mainly in their capacity to create these networks/associations.

76 | My use of de Certeau's terminology will, henceforth, not be marked as such, but I should stress here that the terms may be referred back to de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

77 | This has also been referred to as "invisible urbanism". The term refers to the phenomenon studied in anthropology, which stresses that it is necessary to study the city not only by its physical aspects but also by analysing the interactions of people living in it. See Simone, "People as Infrastructure."

78 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 25.

are refused, again, but this time, the mother who knows the ways of Mumbai steps in:

""He has two children!" she appeals to the female bureaucrats. "Two small children! They don't even have gas to boil milk! What is he supposed to do without gas to boil milk for his two small children?" By the next morning we have a gas cylinder in our kitchen. My friend's mother knew what had to be done to move the bureaucracy. She did not bother with official rules and procedures and forms. She appealed to the hearts of the workers in the office; they have children too."[79]

This tactic points Mehta towards a loophole in the system. A commercial tank of gas, which is bigger and more expensive than the household one, was easier and faster to get: "Once the workers in the gas office were willing to pretend that my household was a business, they delivered the cylinders every couple of months efficiently, spurred on by the vision of my two little children crying for milk."[80]

This description of the incompetence of the state to sufficiently deliver a basic facility, and then of people's tactics to overcome it, is a recurring representational strategy for Mehta's immersive experience of organizing the every day in Mumbai.[81] The tactics here are seen to automatically involve an 'unofficial' information loop which relies on word-of-mouth propaganda. The effectiveness of the tactic remains, of course, a bargain on the emotional empathy of the various people involved, and does not rely on the efficiency of the institution. On a separate occasion, when Mehta calls a club to ask for accommodation for an out-of-town visitor, he is declined. However, when an uncle with 'connections' to the people in the club makes a call, suddenly a room becomes available. Mehta's analysis of the incident is telling in terms of the means and importance of social networking in this vast mass of people:

"I had forgotten the crucial difference. There's very little you can do anonymously, as a member of the vast masses. You have to go through someone. *The reservations clerk needs that personal touch of a human being he recognizes*. It is the same with railway reservations, theater tickets, apartments, and marriages. It has to be one person linking with another who knows

79 | Ibid.

80 | Ibid., 26.

81 | For another example, see Mehta's experience in setting up his apartment: "For the month after my family arrives, I chase plumbers, electricians, and carpenters like Werther chased Lotte. [...] Then the phone department has to be called and the workmen bribed to repair it. It is in their interest to have a lousy phone system [...] All the pipes in this building are fucked. [...] The residents make their own alteration." Ibid., 22–3.

another and so on till you reach your destination; *the path your request takes has to go through this network*."[82]

The phatic aspect in Mumbai's networks comes close to a survival tactic. Where inherited municipal structures prove restrictive to life in the megacity (the bureaucracy that Mehta encounters), these informal tactics present themselves as creative potential. They are a conjunctive linkage not of footsteps, but of people with a strategically complicit understanding (and expectation) of the use of informal practices (tactics). The autonomy of these practices from state judiciary control indicates quite different notions and formations of citizenship in the city. In a fight over parking space in his building, Mehta quickly learns that certain categories as he knows them, or is accustomed to from America, have different footings in Mumbai: "This is a community of insiders, people who have lived in this building for a long time; they are asking the newcomer what right he had to claim his privileges. And they own the guards who are supposed to enforce those privileges for me."[83] It does not matter whether it is unfair or illegitimate. Here, the oldest resident of the building has the 'insider' advantage over Mehta when it comes to parking space, even though the slot was originally allotted to Mehta's flat. In a city where ownership of space is not only luxury but also power, this incident reveals, as Mehta is soon forced to acknowledge, a tactic, "an illegal usurpation of space and the defense of that usurpation through muscle power."[84]

This tactic, of gaining power through 'usurpation' using sheer 'muscle' force, reoccurs as a trope as Mehta links the local with the national. Mehta talks here of Sunil, the murderer's conquests and his achievements in monetary and political terms:

"Sunil will inherit Bombay, I now see. The consequences of his burning the bread seller alive. When the Sena government came in two years later, he got appointed a Special Executive Officer; he became, officially, a person in whom public trust is reposed. […] He is idealistic about the nation and utterly pragmatic about the opportunities for personal enrichment that politics offers. […] the fact that a murderer like Sunil could become successful in Bombay through engagement in local politics is both a triumph and failure of democracy."[85]

Such evaluations appear quite natural to Mehta and what for us ANT scholars is left wanting is some sign of self-reflection by Mehta, about his reactions,

82 | Ibid., 256, my emphasis.

83 | Ibid., 28.

84 | Ibid.

85 | Ibid., 75.

evaluations and his stance. Sunil's success feeds Mehta's estrangement in this space, and points to a fear of the boundless freedom of the city's unofficial, self-relying entities. His disillusionment with the city often renders Mumbai as a threateningly obscure urban space of uncertain ideals.[86] Asad bin Saif, however, who works in an institute for secularism in Mumbai and has reportedly seen humanity at its worst, instills hope in the narrative. When asked by Mehta whether he feels pessimistic about the human race, he replies "Not at all…look at the hands from the trains."[87] Mehta goes on to explain:

"If you are late for work in the morning in Bombay, and you reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands stretching out to grab you on board, unfolding outward from the train like petals. As you run alongside the train, you will be picked up and some tiny space will be made for your feet on the edge of the open doorway, the rest is up to you […] Your fellow passengers, already packed tighter than cattle are legally allowed to be, their shirts already drenched in sweat in the badly ventilated compartment, having stood like this for hours, retain an empathy for you, know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train, and will make space where none exists to take one more person with them. And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or […] Come on board, they say. We'll adjust."[88]

The normalcy of fighting existential conditions on a daily basis makes hope, compassion and humanity in this city of extremes a tactic for survival. It manifests as 'only' the simple act of 'adjusting' by the people on the train, but the act or the practice itself indicates the enormous importance of the solidarity behind it, as essential for 'survival' in Mumbai's urban 'wilderness'. When Arifa Khan, one of the pioneers of the women's group in the Jogeshwari slum, is asked whether she wouldn't prefer to live in an apartment instead of the slum with its open gutters, her answer reveals her fear of loneliness: "a person can die behind the closed doors of a flat and no one will know".[89] The self-reliance and sense of community that is fostered through Mumbai's alternate forms of informal settlements creates its own ecologies of relations:

86 | There are more such instances in the book. See for example the section on the movie director fighting with the Indian censor board, which thematizes the inhibition of the artistic abilities of the director. See also the budding actor's story. Ibid., 346–74 and 385–405.

87 | Ibid., 496.

88 | Ibid.

89 | Ibid., 55.

"Issues of infrastructure are not abstract problems for them […] we tend to think of a slum as an excrescence, a community of people living in perpetual misery. *What we forget is that out of inhospitable surroundings, people have formed a community*, and they are as attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village they have re-created in the midst of the city, as a Parisian might be to his quartier or as I was to Nepean Sea Road."[90]

Mehta analysis indicates the dynamic work of heterogeneous groups and factors in the creation of those very informal or 'unofficial' structures, through the use of which they define themselves as 'insiders', or citizens of Mumbai.

Mumbai's Slum Phantasmagoria – A Haven versus the Squalor

Mehta's description of the slums in Mumbai is a by now rather stereotypical trope that uses the city's slums as an empirical basis for understanding cities of the 'Global South' and global urban processes.[91] In this section, we will identify various themes that characterize Mehta's descriptions of the slums. On the one hand, these enable us to see how the city unfolds as a result of Mehta's specific way of seeing it. On the other hand, my discussion of these themes also demonstrates how Mehta renders Mumbai as a 'city of extremes'.

Arriving in Mumbai on a plane, the author and his son look down at the city just before they are about to land. Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai's coastline are of the geographical features that he is able to see from the plane, but they are scenic:

"If you look at Bombay from the air; if you see its location – spread your thumb and your forefinger apart at a thirty-degree angle and you'll see the shape of Bombay – you will find yourself acknowledging that it is a beautiful city: the sea on all sides, the palm trees along the shores, the light coming down from the sky and thrown back up by the sea. It has a harbor, several bays, creeks, rivers, hills."[92]

90 | Ibid., 55, my emphasis.

91 | See for example Davis, *Planet of Slums*; See also Rao, "Slum as Theory". This is, however, not a "new" phenomenon. In the 19th century, for example, we find that Friedrich Engels and Jacob Riis were already using slums as a trope for their urban analysis. See Engels and Hunt, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; and Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*.

92 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 14.

The observers are at just such a distance so as to render a picture that is not abstract. Nevertheless, and rather predictably, the scenic beauty is an illusion – of a view of the city from a distance (here a quick nod to de Certeau):

"On the ground it's different. My little boy notices this. 'Look,' Gautama points out, as we are driving along the road from Bandra Reclamation. 'On one side villages, on the other side buildings.' *He has identified the slums for what they are: villages in the city.* The visual shock of Bombay is the shock of its juxtaposition. And it is soon followed by violent shocks to the other four senses: the continuous din of traffic coming in through open windows in a hot country; the stench of bombil fish drying on stilts in the open air; the inescapable humid touch of many brown bodies in the street; the searing heat of the garlic chutney on your vadapav sandwich early on your first jetlagged morning."[93]

On the ground, the child's perspective quite accurately identifies the "visual shock" of Bombay – the juxtaposition of slums (which he naively calls villages) and high rises. The physical experience of the city on landing is, however, that of a sensory shock and the first idyllic impression of the aerial view of Mumbai is flooded over by a cascade of stark sensory stimuli. The place-specificity of these 'stimuli' (especially bombil fish and vadapav sandwich) and their vividness creates a strong contrast to the physically removed, purely visual effect of Mumbai, and intensifies the "shock of its juxtaposition". As this chapter proceeds, we will see that this trope of juxtaposition continues in Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai. Mehta employs it for exactly this purpose of creating the 'shock' that triggers the perception of the city as a site of extreme exigencies (to use the author's own word).

Another such juxtaposition that cultivates the image of Mumbai as a city of extremes is that of alternating and disjunctive descriptions of slums as idyllic retreats or rural havens on the one hand, and sites of urban squalor on the other.

"There are other villages all around the reservoir. One of them is so beautiful it inspires one campaign worker to say to another, "You want to get a place here?" Under *towering banyan trees*, strewn about with blue and pink plastic bags, is the *settlement, made of brick walls and corrugated roofs. Roosters and chicken run about on the grass.* In the distance, we can see the blue sea. Gleaming steel vessels are visible through the doorways; new ten-speed bicycles are parked out front. The inhabitants are well dressed. The children look healthy, and there are no open gutters. […] they have power and water connections."[94]

93 | Ibid., 14–5, my emphasis.

94 | Ibid., 68.

This urban scene may be marked by garbage (plastic bags), but it is also marked by material and immaterial accomplishments Mehta thinks are particularly relevant in the specific context of a megacity of the Global South. These include healthy children and their new ten-speed bicycles, and even more importantly, the availability of amenities such as power and water supply. The basic environment of this slum is, however, described using markers of the rural (see emphasis). The rural is not only a material setting, but can also be found in the values shared or upheld in these slums, and in their strong sense of unity. The slum dwellers do not prefer a flat in a building even though they have the means. Sunil, the murderer, tells Mehta, "My children can knock on the neighbour's door at 1 a.m. and get food. They can eat anywhere in the chawl [slum]."[95] Another criminal, Amol, adds, "In chawls we get all facilities."[96] As Amol continues to explain, we find out that "facilities" have a completely different meaning in the Mumbai slum, and points to a completely different worldview than the one Mehta shares. The word refers to a certain sense of freedom from bourgeois social constraints or the privilege of having people readily on call to accompany you to the hospital if one required.[97] This unity arises, ironically, from common toilets as Sunil explains: "When you go to the toilet, you have to see everyone's face."[98] It also comes from a common tap for water where women fill buckets and converse, much like a scenario at a village well.[99] These circumstances conjure an image of rural serenity right in the middle of the urban.

On the other hand, the slums are also rendered as 'phantasmagorias', almost sublimely uninhabitable places inhabited nevertheless by humans (and animals):

> "Raghav took me to a very large open patch of ground by the train sheds, a phantasmagoric scene with a vast garbage dump on one side with groups of people hacking at the ground with picks, a crowd of boys playing cricket, sewers running at our feet, train tracks and bogies in sheds in the middle distance, and a series of concrete tower blocks in the background."[100]

This phantasmagoria is also a site of horrific events, forming a sort of no man's land between Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods. The spot where the author stands is where two Muslims were caught and burned by Hindu attackers. Mehta recalls that only a week ago he had been standing on the other side of this ground. A Muslim had pointed out to him the spot where he now stood, saying, "That

95 | Ibid., 92.
96 | Ibid.
97 | Ibid., 92–3.
98 | Ibid., 93.
99 | Ibid.
100 | Ibid., 45.

is where the Hindus [riot attackers] came from".[101] Raghav, another criminal associate of Sunil's, continues the description of this 'wasteland', sustaining Mehta's degenerate image of the slums:

"Their bodies [Muslims who they burnt] lay here in the ditch, rotting, for ten days. Crows were eating them. Dogs were eating them. The police wouldn't take the bodies away, because the Jogeshwari police said it was in the Goregaon Police's jurisdiction, and the Goregaon police said it was the railway police's jurisdiction."[102]

The abject imagery is alienating. It threatens the outer margins of humanity, and as it evokes horror and disgust, it instils an urge to distance oneself from it, to undo the vision it implies. In terms of the book's empirical anchorage, a sense of the horrific gets attributed to this urban space, as does a notion of conflict. This 'othering' of the slums continues to gain momentum from further abject descriptions of the inhuman ways of their more criminal inhabitants:

"What does a man look like when he's on fire?" I asked Sunil […] (Sunil to Mehta) "You couldn't bear to see it. It is horror. Oil drips from his body, his eyes become huge, huge, the white shows, white, white, you touch his arm like this" – he flicked his arm – "the white shows. It shows especially on the nose" – he rubbed his nose with two fingers as if scraping off the skin – "oil drips from him, water drips from him, white, white all over."[103]

The questions is, especially as an opening line for a chapter, as unexpected as it is shocking, and the lack of inhibition or emotion in it elevates the shock. The dramatisation enables Mehta to distance himself from the exchange as he lets the perpetrator himself speak of his heinous acts. This may also perhaps be the only means possible for Mehta to communicate the violence in the testimony.[104]

The projection of Mumbai as a site of urban squalor by Mehta takes a more graphic turn in his descriptions of the slum as a literal and discursive space for 'shit':

101 | Ibid.

102 | Ibid.

103 | Ibid., 39.

104 | See also: "Those were not days for thought," he [Sunil] continued. "We five people burnt one Mussulman [Muslim]. [...] I knew him; he used to sell me bread everyday." [...] "We poured petrol on him and set him on fire." Ibid., 39–40; For more examples of violent inhumanity in the city in general, see descriptions of the torture of inmates by police (Ajay Lal's testimony) ibid., 199, 221.

"When the government sweepers come to clean the drains, they scoop it out and leave piles of it outside the latrines. I couldn't use the public toilets, I tried, once. There were two rows of toilets. Each of them had masses of shit, overflowing out of the toilets and spread liberally all around the cubicle. For the next few hours that image and that stench stayed with me, when I ate, when I drank."[105]

The disposal of excrement is, however, a problem not only for the slum-dwellers. The scatological references in Mehta's portrait of Mumbai present an aggressive and inescapable excremental reality that viciously plagues life in this city. So much so that the author resorts to martial terms such as 'battle' and 'defence' in his descriptions:

"Our early days in Bombay are filled with *battling* our foreign-born children's illnesses. Gautama has had amebic dysentery for two weeks now; he keeps going all over the floor and when he takes off his T-shirt it is painful to look at him; all his ribs show. The food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city, are contaminated with *shit*. Amebic dysentery is transferred through *shit*. we have been feeding our son *shit*. it could have come in the mango we gave him; it could have been in the pool we took him swimming in. it could have come from the taps in our own home, since the drainage pipes in Bombay, laid out during British times, leak into the fresh-water pipes that run alongside. *there is no defense possible*. everything is recycled in this filthy country, which poisons its children, raising them on a diet of its own *shit*."[106]

It is not just the food and water that is contaminated. Mehta and his wife contract granular pharyngitis caused by the pollution and high levels of dirt everywhere. The effect is dramatized further by the author's rhetoric of despair: "If we don't want it, we have to stop breathing in Bombay."[107] These scatological references are an essentially materialist description of the basest produce of human life. Its pervasiveness in Mumbai serves to magnify the absence of hygiene and cleanliness, that is, issues of sanitation that are linked with progress and modernity. Mehta's repeated use of the word "shit" (see emphasis above) indicates his despair, and is another of those moments in the narrative when he admits to his difficulties in coping with life in Mumbai. The issue concerning feces in Mumbai becomes omnipresent for Mehta, bordering on the obsessive as he finds himself challenged everyday anew, even as he looks out of his window "Every morning, out of the window of my study, I see men easing themselves on the rocks

105 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 53.

106 | Ibid., 28–29, my emphasis.

107 | Ibid., 29.

by the sea."[108] Prahlad Kakkar, an ad filmmaker, has also made a film playfully called "Bumbay", which deals explicitly with "shitting in the metropolis".[109] The World Bank has, apparently, also made its efforts to fight the problem by sending a group of experts to solve Bombay's sanitation crisis, who proposed building 100,000 public toilets. Mehta mocks the idea, however. He does not provide an alternative, but explains why the World Bank's solution would never work for Mumbai. Here, his personal experience delivers his argument:

"It was an absurd idea. I have seen public latrines in the slums. None of them work. [...] Indians do not have the same kind of civic sense as, say, Scandinavians. The boundary of the space you keep clean is marked at the end of the space you call your own. The flats in my building are spotlessly clean inside; they are swept and mopped everyday, or twice every day. The public spaces – hallways, stairs, lobby, the building compound – are [...] littered with [...] dirt of human and animal origin. It is the same all over Bombay, in rich and poor areas alike."[110]

Mehta's quasi-sociological explanations seek to once more rationalize his overwhelming experience of the Indian city and temper his reactionary emotional despair. Though his descriptions (discussed earlier) were grotesque, even vulgar, Mehta's rational language to describe the lack of infrastructure, the extent of poverty of the inhabitants in these slums, or the Indian civic sense evokes a certain sense of objectivity. Mehta's journalistic research and analysis stabilizes the effects of the abject and draws the reader back to acknowledge the urgent and essential nature of the pressures and demands of life in Mumbai.

Mehta's Metaphors and Matters of Concern

'Sone ki Chidiya' or 'Bird of Gold'

A number of metaphors are thrown up in the course of the book to refer to the city, which all lend their hue to Mehta's portrait of Mumbai. A relative of the Jain family calls it a "paap ni bhoomi" or city of sins.[111] The father of Babanji, the runaway poet, sees in Mumbai a "maya ki nagri" or city of illusions.[112] Mehta himself has told us that Mumbai is "a naturally capitalistic city – a vaisya-

108 | Ibid., 127.

109 | Ibid.

110 | Ibid., 128.

111 | Ibid., 502.

112 | Ibid., 489.

nagra – one that understands the moods and movements of money."[113] All these meanings, of sin, money, dreams and hope come together in the single metaphor of "sone ki chidiya" or a bird of gold.[114] A Muslim man from the Jogeshwari slum relates its story to Mehta, who interprets it as a Golden Songbird: "try to catch it if you can. It flies quick and sly, and you'll have to work hard and brave many perils to catch it, but once it's in your hand, a fabulous fortune will open up for you."[115] The metaphor resounds with the rhetoric of Mehta's depictions of Mumbai as a vaisya-nagra (capitalistic city), a city 'fallen' from its previous 'glory' (see emphasis in following), but also as a city in crisis.[116] Mehta's rational 'gaze' becomes visible when, for example, he compares two sets of pillars at the caves of Elephanta Island (that are also a part of Mumbai):

"On my right, the pillars commissioned by the Rashtrakuta Kings in the eighth century; in front of me, the new pillars built by the archaeological survey of India. *In one panoramic sweep, you can see the whole decline of culture in India*. The original pillars, built a thousand years ago, are delicately fluted and in proportion, curving gently outward like an infant's belly. The ASI pillars are stolid blocks of stone, each unmatched in shape and color and size with the other; at a glance you can tell they are wonky. They are devoid of ornamentation, which is probably just as well, since God knows what monstrosities their house sculptors would carve on pillars if they were allowed to. *What we could do so exquisitely in this country a thousand years ago we can't even attempt today*. We were making some of the greatest art of the ancient world. Shattered by invasion and colonialism and an uneasy accommodation with modernity, we now can't construct five pillars of equal proportions."[117]

The panoramic sweep of Mehta's 'gaze' has already historically inflected these differences in the architecture of the sets of pillars. The differences are measured against a modern yardstick of architectural aesthetics, his articulation aggrandizing the past and belittling the present. In documentary terms, the underlying emotional reactions to these differences are somewhat crude and misplaced. Even though Mehta tries to relativize these differences with explanations (invasion, colonialism, modernity), we sense his personal shame and indignity in 'seeing' these differences. Mehta implicates himself in the collective

113 | Ibid., 20.

114 | Ibid., 450.

115 | Ibid.

116 | See also Mehta's interview with architect and urban planner, Rahul Mehrotra, who reveals his plans to prevent the deterioration of Mumbai and boost its preservation in order to "save the city". Ibid., 121.

117 | Ibid., 119, my emphasis.

'we', but is ashamed and resentful through what he sees as the 'decline' of culture and skill in India. This instance highlights Mehta's specific treatment of the city as a 'diasporic returnee' by showing how, for him, the city is a link to 'the Indian', and must accordingly stand in as a representative of this 'Indian-ness'.

As a last episode in the book, Mehta's descriptions of the religious Jain family's "dramatic rejection of Bombay" lend the book a form of closure. [118] One expects the episode to mark an ultimate exit from Mumbai. Now that the family has given up their aspirations to wealth, there is nothing more to keep them in this "paap ni bhoomi" (city of sin).[119] We find out later, however, that one can never fully let go of this bird of gold; the city does not let go of its grip on a person so easily. A little later Mehta discovers that Sevantibhai, the head of the Jain family who has taken *diksha*, has a 'backup plan'. A trust fund of sizeable amounts has been set up for all four family members taking *diksha*. "'In case the children want to come back, they don't have to stretch out their hand to anybody. They can get a car, a house,' explains Hasmukh".[120] The episode of the family's religious rejection of their worldly life, appearing at the end of the book, offers the hope of redemption after an (exhausting) tour in a city of exigencies, greed and crime, only to deny it in the end through this revelation of Sevantibhai's 'back-up plan' (thus reinstating all the above metaphors for the city). This narrative composition displays Mehta's strategy of creating a tension in the narrative – that 'shock' with which Mehta renders Mumbai as a city of exigencies. The narrative tension reflects Mehta's anxiety concerning the city, which derives on the one hand, from his perception of himself (and his family) being imperiled by the city, and on the other hand, from his way of 'seeing' the city as being in a state of peril.

Actors and Networks in the 'Desert of the Real'

In reading Mehta's enterprise as a possible method for ANT, we have seen how a vicarious experience of the city can be enabled through the stories of a vast cast of persona, despite the mediation through an omnipresent narrator. The strategic use of the biographical strand and Mehta's frequent change of perspectives should be read, despite my critical stance, as tools of access to the scenography for the author and as a strategy of accessibility for the reader.

By providing access to Mumbai specifically through the figure of one of the diaspora, *Maximum City* highlights the many 'realities' of life in a 'third world metropolitan' as seen and experienced by someone who lives in New York: "I am new in the country still. It has not hit me till now, and I feel physically exhausted

118 | Ibid., 499.

119 | Ibid., 502.

120 | Ibid., 522.

[…] I am still reacting to the city as a foreigner."[121] Extensive descriptions of Mumbai's slums and their inhabitants in Mehta's narrative suggest that one read in them a sort of 'slumming' as it has come to be called. Passages often point to extreme poverty and human squalor as in the following where Mehta meets with a women's group called Rahe-haq in their office in a slum called the Radhabai Chawl:

"Much of the slum is a garbage dump. The sewers, which are open, run right between the houses, and children play and occasionally fall into them. They are full of a blue-black iridescent sludge [...] It's not merely an esthetic discomfort; typhoid runs rampant through the slum and spreads through oral-fecal contact. Pools of stagnant water, which are everywhere, breed malaria. Many children also have jaundice. Animal carcasses are spread out on the counters of the butcher shops, sprinkled with flies like a moving spice. The whole slum is pervaded by a stench that I stopped noticing after a while."[122]

It is a commodification, in other words, of Mumbai's poverty and exigencies, which caters to and indulges a 'Western' voyeurism. Such a reading itself is not a new insight – the phenomenon is ultimately a continuity of the imperialist tradition of voyeuristic and titillating travel literature of the 'empire'.[123] Slavoj Zizek has taken issue with this sort of 'derealization' tendency of Western media representations. He calls it a polarization that "even in these tragic moments, […] separates Us from Them, [a distance] from their reality is maintained: the real horror happens *there* not *here*".[124] In this sense, Mehta's descriptions sustain this 'derealization' or polarization that Zizek is talking about. However, urban spectacle apart, Mehta's descriptions of Mumbai's many 'tragedies' also make the book a significant pointer to the 'contemporary urban' in Mumbai – an indication that these 'real horrors' are closer to 'home' than one thinks.[125] In November 2008, Mumbai faced a series of terrorist attacks that received much

121 | Ibid., 37.

122 | Ibid., 53.

123 | For a review of various ethical issues related to "slumming" see Dürr and Jaffe, "Theorizing Slum Tourism"; For a critical engagement with the reductive view enforced by Western portrayals of slums and slum dwellers specifically in the Indian context, Sengupta, "A Million Dollar Exit from the Anarchic Slum-World."

124 | Zizek points out that in the media coverage during the WTC collapse, despite repeated mention of the death toll, there was very little of the "real carnage" being shown. This was in stark contrast to accounts of Third World catastrophes, the quintessence of which was "a scoop of some gruesome detail." Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 13, original emphasis.

125 | This refers not only to the 'West', but also to Indians who live in the security that their economic privilege affords them.

international media coverage and were termed, "India's 26/11" in allusion to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, but without the magnitude of the original event.[126] The events and subsequent media coverage nevertheless ripped away the image of Mumbai as a convivial multicultural place (or, at least the façade of Mumbai that Bollywood portrays).[127] Could it be that in Mumbai too, a 'passion for real' culminated drastically in the 'desert of the real'?[128]

The 'passion for real' is linked to the desire for the authentic. Authenticity thus becomes a function of the narrative that becomes entwined with the product – it is what makes a story economically feasible.[129] This is where Mehta's biographical strand and his immersive journalistic technique come into play again. What could make a more authentic story than a nostalgic 'ex-pat', bringing his family from New York to live in Mumbai, the city of his childhood, to retrace 'memory mines'? As a journalist, he follows the strategy of his trade to tame this steed and 'immerses' himself in the city he wants to report on. Mehta 'sells' it, however, as a reification of his love of the city of his childhood. If the guarantee of the writer's sincere intentions were to lie in his representation, my analysis shows that these intentions serve instead to camouflage discursive aspects of such quasi-anthropological studies. While it poses as a sincere and objective report, it is, in fact, a very subjective representation of the city. Arguably, a generic code is being subverted by including the testimonies of criminals. However, with its capacity to shock (in comfortable doses and from a comfortable distance), this trope is a marketable trait that adds that required dose of the sensational to make a good sellable book: "Gangsters and whores all over the world have always been fascinated by the movies and vice-versa; [...] they are our eye into the forbidden."[130]

Mehta aspires to a journalistic style in the articulation of his Mumbai portrait. There appears to be no surface and depth dimensions to his narrative, wherein interpretation may lie. Such aspects suggest, to remain very cautious in

126 | "Mumbai Terror Attacks Fast Facts – CNN.com"; See also, Arundhati Roy's excellent critique of the media during this period and her biting response to the event being called India's 26/11: Roy, "9 Is Not 11."

127 | Roy, "9 Is Not 11."

128 | I am alluding here to Schlote and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism," see especially 108–9; and to Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*

129 | Schlote and Voigts-Virchow, "Introduction: The Creative Treatment of Actuality – New Documentarism," 109.

130 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 347; Sensationalizing may, perhaps, also be one form of handling the trauma encountered or experienced. Think of works such as Capote, *In Cold Blood*; and Udwin, *India's Daughter*.

our own formulations, a notion of objectivity, for Mehta bridges the gap between 'seeing' and 'showing' through rational explanations or analyses.

Reading Mehta's method and narrative as an ANT, however, leaves us wanting. This is because the observer positions that Mehta assumes remain judgemental and omniscient. All things said and done, his remains a bird's eye view of things as it were, which is not able to push beyond the usual boundaries of journalistic observation and documentation. For ANT to deliver desired results, that is, gather matters of concern rather than fact, its spokesperson must implicate himself within the actor networks he traces, which in turn can set into motion a mimesis of process that draws the reader's attention to the method of discovering and experiencing the city.

My reading of his endeavor as ANT shows, nevertheless, that the level of interpretation lies in recognizing the author's rhetorical and representative strategies and the specific kind of topography they generate of Mumbai. This recalls the asymmetric relation between depiction and the 'real' thing (something on paper is not the 'real' thing – remember Latour's example of anatomy drawing).[131] In the larger scheme of things, this insight indicates the "tangling network of techniques of knowledge and strategies of power, so that any study of urban representations must remain sensitive and critical to the coding of power and knowledge.[132] On the other hand, 'real' territory simply must resist cartography: "the Cartographer's Guild struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following generations […] saw that the vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters."[133] The anecdote brings us full circle to Calvino, mentioned earlier, whose narrator Marco Polo wisely reminds us of the impossibility of accurately perceiving or representing any city. At the end, Mehta, too, acknowledges the *conditions of perception* that have modified his relation to the city: "After two and a half years, I have learnt to see beyond the wreck of the physical city to the incandescent life force of its inhabitants. People associate Bombay with death too easily. When five hundred new people come in every day to live, Bombay is certainly not a dying city."[134] Ultimately, Mehta's documentary 'access' (matters of concern) to the 'real' territory (scenography) retains something of the 'authentic' in the imperfections of its subjectivity and the contradictory and capricious stance of the experiencer. This admission – of the effect of the passage of time on the way he 'sees' and how he thinks about the city – hints at a possible mimesis of process in Mehta's

131 | Bernhard Schneider in Müller and Libeskind, *Radix, Matrix – Daniel Libeskinds Architekturen*, 120–7.

132 | Spivak in Mongia, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, 204.

133 | Borges, *Ficciones*, 325, original caps.

134 | Mehta, *Maximum City*, 537.

ANT-like procedure, and is thus finally that desired moment of self-reflexivity in his enterprise.