

Ivan Vladislavić's Aesthetics of Detritus in “Autopsy” and “Propaganda by Monuments”

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine detritus as a central trope for post-transitional South African society, an idea that, I argue, has particular relevance for Ivan Vladislavić's second short story collection, *Propaganda by Monuments*. As a point of departure, I use Leon de Kock's idea of the “democratic moment” – the moment of radical globalization coinciding with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the crumbling of apartheid bureaucracy. In this new “democratic” age, cultural detritus – remnants, fragments and addenda – begins to circulate and litter transnational contexts, finding its way into the unlikeliest of spaces, producing cultural resonances, echoes and cross-talk. In *Propaganda by Monuments*, detritus carries exotic charges of meaning, and allows for alternative ways of seeing the urban landscape in the new democratic era, in which the nation state has begun its process of dissipation. As such, *Propaganda by Monuments* can perhaps be read as a prelude to Vladislavić's third collection of stories, *101 Detectives*, in which the detritus has been swept away, and polished surfaces are angled towards the protagonists, and the reader, narrowing their margins for subjectivity and self-styling.

KEYWORDS

Ivan Vladislavić, “Autopsy,” “Propaganda by Monuments,” aesthetics of detritus, post-transitional South Africa

Introduction

Leon de Kock locates the “democratic moment” at a particular historical juncture, in which “[t]he convergence of globalization with the fall of the Berlin Wall, at roughly the same time that South Africa began to enter its democratic period, literally changed the world in which democracy had been imagined” (75). In this new “democratic” age,

The national stage, which had loomed so large in the age of the modern state, now became a mere matinée show, a mere moment in the polyphonic strobe-play of the postmodern world, in which multiple resonances of the global and the local, the national and transnational, or ensembles thereof, mixed offerings and recombinations, increasingly became a dominant rhythm.

(75–76)

Ivan Vladislavić’s collection *Propaganda by Monuments* engages with the complexity of the post-transitional context primarily through the trope of detritus. “Detritus” is comprised not only of the material leftovers of radical social transition (such as monuments to the old regime), but also the linguistic and cultural bits and pieces, assemblages and odd assortments which float in from elsewhere, affixing themselves to new objects and insinuating themselves into new scenes. What Vladislavić’s collection reveals is a fascination with cultural flows and convergences – that which has come adrift, unfixed, unmoored, that which remains unassimilable in relation to the new frameworks of meaning, and that which has been recycled into more usable, contemporary forms. This process of cultural transposition may be described as a bending or disruption in a locale’s native gravitational field of meaning. As sites of large-scale cultural convergence, or sites with a higher specific gravity of cultural meaning, cities register the symptoms of socio-political flux most acutely (Murray xv). The stories “Autopsy” and “Propaganda by Monuments” are especially pertinent witnesses to the mutable city, since

they are set in epicentres of radical socio-political change, namely Johannesburg, Moscow and Pretoria. Importantly, it is through the marginal, eccentric perspective of the stories' narrating consciousnesses that we perceive the striking ironies, ambivalences and suggestive meanings that arise from the detrital.

Conceptualising detritus

In Vladislavić's oeuvre, detritus comprises a unique conceptual category whose defining quality may be most accurately encapsulated in the idea of the "tomason," as it appears in *Portrait with Keys* (175):

A tomason is a thing that has become detached from its original purpose. Sometimes this detachment may be so complete that the object is turned into an enigmatic puzzle; alternatively, the original purpose of the object may be quite apparent and its current uselessness touching or amusing. It may be a remnant of a larger fixture that has been taken away, or it may be a thing complete in itself, whose purpose has been forgotten.

As seen in "Propaganda by Monuments," this "larger fixture" may be both a physical monument and the ideological metanarrative that authored it. Crucially, tomasons are implicated within their socio-political contexts; they are the residue of the centrifugal and centripetal processes of semiotic inscription and material assemblage: "Tomasons thrive in the man-made world, in spaces that are constantly being remade and redesigned for other purposes, where the function of a thing that was useful or necessary may be swept away in a tide of change or washed off like a label" (*Portrait* 175–76). As Vlad, the narrator of *Portrait with Keys*, suggests, tomasons, by virtue of their liminal existence as the indeterminate left-overs of historical forces, may be imagined as prisms that refract perspective, casting light on a marginalised historicity: in this way, "the obvious, useful facts of the city recede and a hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface" (176). Vladislavić's writing shows how the disruptive and perspective-shifting potential of detritus proliferates under conditions of social change, operating across, and also infiltrating, a wide range of semiotic modes, including the built environment, visual culture, music, and, primarily, language.

The presence of detritus and its circulation in Vladislavić's writing can be framed as the expressions of a carnivalesque aesthetic, an idea that resonates closely with the unsettled, often jarring, socio-cultural environment set in motion by the "democratic moment." In *Propaganda by Monuments*, in particular, the dynamic of detritus takes on aspects of the Rabelaisian carnival, the great medieval feast of "becoming, change, and renewal," a space that is "hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (Bakhtin 686). This celebration of natural process demands ever-changing, playful and undefined forms, presenting us with a world turned upside down. In Rabelais's carnival milieu, that which is marginal becomes integrated into the social dominant. This "suspension of all hierarchical precedence" (686) manifests in the mingling of the elevated and the puerile, of praise and abuse, until these ideas become inextricable (690). Framed within the notion of the carnivalesque, detritus emerges as an intermediary between the frequently opposed processes of birth and death (691). In the moment of the carnival, the real or ideal boundaries between these phenomena become suspended, thus prompting larger or unforeseen connections. In the case of "Autopsy" and "Propaganda by Monuments," this process can be seen as the unmooring of symbols of monumental and ideological significance and their (mis-)translation into "foreign" contexts under the inchoate and carnivalesque conditions of postapartheid and post-Soviet urban landscapes.

While Vladislavić's *Propaganda by Monuments* offers space for the carnivalesque to flourish, the text remains committed to the "tomasonic" possibilities of detritus – that is, their ironic and allusive suggestions – and avoids a characterisation of detritus as either something opposed to the numinous concept of "purity," or as something akin to the "abject." Rather, detritus is the product of the "inchoate quotidian" (Titlestad and Kissack 15), a site of excessive meaning and a dynamic and ateleological field. In this sense, detritus is charged with an obdurate ambivalence, endearing anachronism and kitschy fascination; in relation to its more purposeful surroundings, the cultural-historical (in-)significance of the detrital object is brought into sharp relief. Ultimately, detritus comes to stand as a signifier of both the solemn and the ridiculous.

Vladislavić's writing also engages with the notion of the detrital via an interrogation of the dualities of durability and transience (Culler;

Sandino). For example, the ambiguous character of Simeon Majara, in the third narrative of *The Exploded View*, takes objects that are essentially detritus, such as street curios and abandoned medical supplies, and shrewdly crafts them into saleable art objects. This act of “making durable,” or moving an object “from one system into another, by the sweat of your brow” is recognised by Simeon’s friends, who seem both to praise the artistic efficacy of this practice and to criticise its potentially exploitative aspects (*Exploded View* 146). Similarly, in *Double Negative*, the newly-emerging suburbs of Woodmead and Sunninghill, at the “unfinished edge of the city,” seem to be defined by the clutter of construction sites, making it difficult to determine whether the suburbs are sites of burgeoning wealth or dereliction: “It was hard to say whether things were half-built or half-demolished” (165). In “Autopsy,” and particularly in “Propaganda by Monuments,” we see the “durable vs transient” dynamic sliding in both directions as monuments become shebeen ornaments and serviettes, and sequins acquire the status of relics.

A further instance of Vladislavić’s aesthetics of detritus is observable in the ubiquitous piling up of disparate and detrital objects, which may be seen as an objective correlative of “plot loss” (De Kock, *Losing the Plot*), a loss of telos or ontological certainty that may extend from the individual consciousness to the socio-political sphere. In *The Folly*, for example, as Mr Malgas’s personal investment in Nieuwenhuizen’s project intensifies, so too does his sense of identity become more precarious (Gaylard, “Fossicking” 65). The intrusion of a variety of objects signals a kind of narrative “excess” which, like Nieuwenhuizen’s house, never seems to quite come together. The huge variety of household elements including “Willow-pattern Frisbee. Mickey and Minnie, blessed by Pope (Pius). Pine cone. Crucifix, commemorative, balsa-wood and papier mâché” (*Folly* 76), gives the reader insight into Malgas’s increasingly dishevelled psyche. A similar phenomenon can be seen in *The Restless Supermarket*, where the proliferation of corrigenda and “bad English” in Aubrey Tearle’s Hillbrow becomes, for him, the sign of a society coming apart at the seams as the old socio-political order comes to an end. Given the “relative indeterminacy of the relation among [...] narrative elements,” our interpretation of Vladislavić’s stories therefore “rests in our capacity as readers to combine the signs into pathways of meaning. In a sense,

readers are brought down to ground level and forced into an improvisational mode of collaborative interpretation” (Titlestad and Kissack 23).

“Autopsy”

In “Autopsy,” the narrative is presented from the perspective of a particular and eccentric consciousness, who acquaints us intimately with Vladislavić’s Hillbrow as a constellation of seemingly incongruous elements: a space where the local and the international, the mythical and the mundane, blow through alleyways like dried leaves. As such, “Autopsy” can be seen as a prototype for Vladislavić’s later novel, *The Restless Supermarket*, which visits, and expands upon, many of the locales and subjects presented in the short story. Regarding Vladislavić’s *The Exploded View*, Gaylard and Titlestad claim that the narratives in the novel traffic “in the spaces between the structures of meaning that individuals inhabit and the agency they exert” (8) – a conceptual space largely similar to the one occupied by detritus. This trafficking is also strongly present in “Autopsy,” which, like *The Exploded View*, “opens up a new and liminal zone of meaning and identity, an in-between in which ‘an itinerant form of becoming’ displaces conventional ontology based in received static binaries” (Gaylard and Titlestad 8, quoting Helgesson).

The particularity and idiosyncrasy of the narrating consciousness in “Autopsy” is made apparent by the story’s opening word: “Um” (Vladislavić, *Flashback Hotel* 147). As Elaine Young has argued, the narrator-protagonists in *Propaganda by Monuments* “are distinctly real people who belong [...] to a recognisable empirical context” (114). Indeed, we find ourselves at the Potato Kitchen in Hillbrow at “suppertime, Friday, 15 May 1992.” This precision pervades the narrative, and accords the story a textured, sticky “South Africanness.” At the same time, the narrator’s fixated notating ultimately leads to an overproduction of particulars that cohere only to portray Hillbrow as a hyperreal and “ecologically alienated” (Gaylard, *Marginal Spaces* 14) urban backdrop, whose outlines are defined by a gaudy tableau of takeaway shops, pharmacies and laundrettes. This narrative overproduction, as well as Hillbrow’s deference to commercial add-ons, reminds us of Jean Baudrillard’s statement, that “[w]hat society seeks

through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it" (374). The story's title may refer to the narrator's close observation of his situation – seeing with one's own eyes, as the etymology of *autopsy* indicates – but the subject or purpose of the autopsy remains unclear: is the narrative an autopsy (or postmortem) of apartheid, memory or desire? Anatomical imagery forms a leitmotif in the narrative, but, as with the narrator's other observations, this imagery seems to amount only tangentially to a larger or more meaningful metaphor. The anatomical references appear primarily to contribute to the piling-up or over-determination of minute descriptions in the story. Ultimately, Vladislavić's Hillbrow ends up looking like an assemblage of organs without a body, a kind of inverse of the Deleuzian concept of the "body without organs." But, appropriately, the elusiveness and marginality of meaning in "Autopsy" may be, as Gaylard has it, the most constant feature of Vladislavić's fiction.

Although the narrator-protagonists in *Propaganda by Monuments* belong to a "recognisable empirical context," they are at the same time also "self-consciously detached from their kind, almost revelling in their marginality and subjecting all around them to the same oblique, often sardonic, gaze" (Young 114). It is through this eccentric and frequently amusing perspective that the litany of notations and observations gains momentum behind the narrator's pursuit of the King. The narrator's miniature odyssey initiates a poesis that can "be understood as a subversive 'way of operating' in the commodified and rationalised city-space; as resistance to the panoptical power of the state and capital" (Graham 337). Through this pursuit, "walking is conceived as an exemplary means of opening oneself to difference" (Graham 339).

The disorientating effect of Vladislavić's juxtapositional aesthetic is made evident when the glamorous and the quotidian rapidly alternate as the narrator announces that "the King Himself came out of Estoril Books, shrugged His scapular girdle, and turned left" (*Flashback Hotel* 147), signalling the deified figure of the King emerging from the decidedly sublunary book outlet. We find further quasi-religious imagery when the narrator digresses to the moments before the King's appearance. The narrator turns his attention to his potato, and describes it as being "embrocated" and "poulticed" with various condiments, as if it is something to be salved and healed of affliction. It is perhaps appropriate, therefore, that the narrator describes his potato as being

“carved into quarters like a colony or a thief” (147), gesturing toward the Cape colonial era, and the history of colonial conquest as a whole. Thus, a multitude of contexts come to settle upon the potato, which, like Hillbrow itself, is garnished with “extras” and appropriately encapsulated in disposable packaging. Although the narrator chooses a table on the pavement so that he “could be part of the vibrant street life of Johannesburg’s most cosmopolitan suburb,” this cosmopolitanism is subsequently deflated by “street-children squatting at the kerb [looking] preternaturally cold and hungry with their gluey noses and methylated lips” (148). To these sardonic observations (again reinforcing the pervading sense of ecological alienation), the narrator adds that “[o]ne of the little beggars was an Indian. Apartheid is dead” (148). Here we see a distorted kind of equality in which poverty has ostensibly been redistributed across the colour line. Indeed, the narrator finds himself in the “new improved South Africa,” as if it were a new formula for a soft drink. He is also literally being shadowed by an umbrella apparently sponsored by Coca-Cola, a further reference to new forms of cultural and material imposition and influence in the post-transitional space.

The spectacle of odd cultural convergence is also evident in the description of the King “[b]undling himself up in his diet.” Here, the word “diet” reminds the reader of older, ecclesiastical or more specialist usages: “diet” as a day’s journey or an excursion, diet as “the ordinary course of the church,” or diet as the regular congress of the estates of a realm, often with reference to the Germanic empires of the nineteenth century (“Diet”). The unexpected appearance of “diet” in this context not only highlights the free intermingling of the mundane and the divine in Hillbrow, but also represents one of the many Germanic echoes and interpolations in the narrative, inviting us to draw parallels between Germany’s unification and South Africa’s own approaching democratic moment. The seemingly dissonant presence of the word “diet” also exemplifies what Stefan Helgesson identifies as the Duchampian aspect of Vladislavić’s prose, where words are presented as “found objects” which can cause unpredictable resonances with their surroundings (qtd. in Titlestad and Kissack 16). Nevertheless, later references to “choreographing” and “Las Vegas Motel,” along with the narrator’s metaphor of memory as a vinyl record (147), establishes an impression of the King as Elvis. As such, the King is an exponent of Baudrillard’s “escalation of the real [...] a *resurrection* of the figurative where the

object and the substance have disappeared” (369; emphasis added). The King seems to be the object of the narrator’s “transferable desire” (Baudrillard 376), a kind of non-referential figure whose allure for the narrator is never quite clear. Hillbrow itself also seems to lack orientating references for its own urban identity, as the narrator suggests when he states, “I paused on the threshold of Tropical Fast Foods, in the shadow of the electric tree, suddenly off balance. Where am I? Or rather: Where was I? Hollywood Boulevard? Dar es Salaam? Dakar? The Botanical Gardens in Durban?” (149). Again, it is apt to refer to Baudrillard’s claim that “genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models [...]” (366). At this moment, the narrator seems to find himself in a miniature Las Vegas, replete with a “poker machine,” a “jukebox,” “red neon” and a “turntable.” In the midst of this, we find the Griller of Tropical Fast Foods preparing an appropriately biblical “halo of unleavened pita bread” (149). It is therefore clear that Hillbrow embodies Aubrey Tearle’s Alibia – not because the city seems to represent nowhere in particular, but because it is “anywhere in general” (Vladislavić, *Restless Supermarket* 80).

Watching attentively as the King eats his yiro while browsing through magazines, the narrator remarks that “the tip of [the King’s] tongue simonized the curve of His lips with mutton fat” (151). Although the verb “simonize” – to apply a brand of American car polish – is appropriate to the King’s sleek, automotive appearance (150), we are also reminded of “simony” – the traffic in ecclesiastical preferments or sacred things (“Simonize”; “Simony”). This is also fitting, considering the predominance of commercialism in Hillbrow. In fact, when the King finishes his meal, the detritus he leaves behind becomes a set of divine artefacts: “I hurried after him, pausing momentarily to pluck: the *Stern*, which He had left open on the counter, the corners of the pages impregnated with His seasoned saliva; the (napkin) bearing the impress of His brow; and the sequin. (I have these relics still.)” (152). In this scene, we see that the napkin becomes a veritable Shroud of Turin. It is also in front of Tropical Fast Foods that the parenthesised Americanisms that litter the text come to replace the South African usage, i.e. “(fries),” “(napkin),” “(sidewalk)” (150–52), expressing what James Graham identifies as “the Americanization of the inner city” apparent in *The Restless Supermarket* (Graham 336).

One of the story's most enigmatic scenes takes place after the narrator follows the King to the Plus Pharmacy Centre and Medicine Depot. Accompanied by the pharmacist – who bears “less than a passing resemblance” to mid-century American starlet Jayne Mansfield – the King pulls a “royal-blue pillowslip embroidered with golden musical notation and silver lightning bolts out of the front of His pants” (152). He then sweeps from the shelves into the bag an excessive array of miscellaneous items including “Nineteen bottles of Borstol Linctus, sixteen bottles of Milk of Magnesia, twenty-two plastic tubs brimming with multi-vitamin capsules (100S), fifty-seven tubes of grape-flavoured Lip-Ice [...] three tubs of Radium leather and suede dye with handy applicators, a jar of beestings and a box of Grandpa Headache Powders” (152–53). Clearly what is registered in this scene is a case of gross over-production and over-consumption. Perhaps the King's pillowslip – or “bag of tricks” (155) – is like the Omniscope in Vladislavić's story of the same name: a reliquary into which various bits and pieces can be placed in order to divine something larger or more profound. Or perhaps these items amount to nothing more than whimsical and comical excess, becoming meaningless by virtue of their sheer abundance.

The city's Grey Area offers a variety of themed food retailers and pharmacies. If these primary emblems of consumer culture can be taken to represent a global simulacrum, their close proximity on the Johannesburg street also points to what appears to have become an absurd capitalist cycle, an escalation of the incongruent signification of commerce. Occupying a more marginal position in the space of the street are hawkers of block-mounted reproductions of iconic figures, such as “James Dean with his eyes smouldering and Marilyn Monroe with her skirt flying” (154). In addition to these internationally-recognisable images, the King also passes reproductions of “Himself as a Young Man.” The reference to “reproductive system” (154) suggests that, like James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, the King is part of a seemingly self-replicating system of myth – a globally marketable, intelligible and desirable exemplar of American glamour; but a glamour which nevertheless struggles to transcend the kitschiness of the block-reproduction itself. Here the location shifts to the Wurstbude, where the King orders “Currywurst” – which Aubrey Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket* calls an “ersatz, jerry-built portmanteau” (59). The King's

announcement, "*Ich bin ein Johannesburg*" (*Flashback Hotel* 154), riffs on Kennedy's famous *Ich bin ein Berliner* declaration at his Berlin Wall speech in 1963, yet another resonance of the German democratic moment in a South African context. The implied connection to the "The Dead Kennedys" in "Propaganda by Monuments" suggests that the physical death of mythical figures is no hindrance to their survival. The incongruity of the King identifying as a *Johannesburger* perhaps indicates that nationality itself has become something productive and consumable, similar to the Frankfurter, Hamburger and Debrecziner.

Forming an incongruous presence in the midst of this varied but empty commercial space are several "hawkers of baobab-sap and the mortal remains of baboons" (155). Thus, in the centre of the (formerly) Europeanised and "cosmopolitan" Hillbrow appears something distinctly (South) African – the sale of *muti* – prefiguring the wide-scale Africanisation of Hillbrow. A similar palimpsestic surface is registered in Willy's Bar – once Julius Caesar's Restaurant and Cocktail Bar, now a less-than-grand imperial vestige. Inside the bar, the narrator claims that he and the King "felt like blacks, because of the way He walked. Everyone else felt like whites" (155) – which highlights the narrator's marginality. The reference to the narrator putting on his "spectacles and fossick[ing] about in the bag of tricks" (155) establishes links to gold-digging: the search for gold by digging out crevices, or "by scanning an area for fragments overlooked by others" ("Fossick"). "Fossicking," it would seem, is not only the sole preoccupation of the narrator, but also of the reader of Vladislavić's narratives who, as Gaylard has it, is given the opportunity to fossick "in the neglected regions of the psyche" ("Fossicking" 69). In this sense, "Autopsy" resembles the King's bag of tricks – something to fossick about in. Alternatively, the story could be understood as inscribing a landscape that has been mined of its meaning, with only the fragments – the detritus overlooked by others – that are left with some trace of value, the only value to be found in what they imply.

The stripped space of Hillbrow is most starkly portrayed in the description of the cold front, anticipated in earlier scenes. Here it ascribes to the setting a decidedly wintry barrenness:

A chilly wind blew over the ridge from the Civic Theater. It picked up a tang of Dettol from the City Shelter and Purity

from the Florence Nightingale Nursing Home. It swept sour curls of sweat and burnt porridge out of the Fort and wrapped them in dry leaves from the gutters. Tissue-paper and handbills tumbled over the flagstones. The wind coughed into the microphone.

(156)

Here, the Hellenic-sounding Civic Theater is overwhelmed by signs from other, distinctly South African contexts being blown in by the wind. The image of the blackjacks sticking to the King's white socks (149), the "caraway seed lodged against [his] gum between canine and incisor" (151), coupled with the "dried leaves from the gutters" in the current scene, amplifies the sense of winter, of stasis that precedes rebirth; perhaps inviting some hope for the political rebirth of South Africa, but perhaps also undercutting it. However, the King soon "insinuates" himself into a circle of Golden City Gospel Singers, at which point the narrator is compelled to seize him by his arm. The King shrugs him off and begins to disappear, showing the elusive – and illusive – nature of the narrator's errant object of desire, whose existence is attested to only by the artefacts – such as the sequin – that he keeps from the encounter. Finally, the narrator is mobbed by the charismatic Golden City Gospel singers, and loses all sight of the King.

The "Appendix" in "Autopsy" is similar to the story's beginning, in that it presents a moment that is both miraculous and mundane: "The very next morning I saw Steve Biko coming out of the Juicy Lucy at the Norwood Hypermarket. I followed him to the hardware department, where he gave me the slip" (157). The playful ambiguity in "he gave me the slip" implies elusion, or the possibility that Biko gives the narrator a receipt, suggesting again how the mythical has been resurrected and employed for the purposes of commerce. "Autopsy" illustrates the poetic possibilities within the confluences of cultural and spatial flows, where the juxtaposition of new elements leads to symbolic interference and diffraction, creating a breach, or an opening out, from the stripped, maze-like space of Hillbrow into new territories of meaning. In "Autopsy," we can see that "[t]o recognize the interconnection and overlapping of supposedly discrete spaces is to open them to the possibility of mutual reinterpretation, to the transformative potential of what Henri Lefebvre calls 'differential space'" (Graham 341). This process is initiated through walking – through traversing the margins of the monolithic city-

space and noting its incongruities, cracks, fault lines and minute slippages. In Vladislavić's story, the reader becomes not only a "textual flaneur" (Graham 342), but also an urban "zama zama" – an illegal or unauthorised miner, fossicking in the spaces overlooked by others, scanning for fragments that perhaps bear the precious lode of meaning. The act of fossicking is therefore particularly resonant in the Johannesburg context, since much of the city's history lies underground. In its illustration of a space in which signifiatory practices have been dispersed and de-anchored by the processes of global commercial culture following the democratic moment, "Autopsy" can be seen as a jazzy improvisation (Titlestad and Kissack 18) – a riff – on the city that makes the reader discern its urban texture like braille.

2. "Propaganda by Monuments"

In "Propaganda by Monuments," we move away from the magnified Hillbrow presented in "Autopsy" to an exploded view of the democratic moment as it is acted out on an international stage. "Propaganda by Monuments" brings into dialogue two highly resonant spaces of transition, Moscow and Pretoria, through an exchange initiated between two individuals. The story begins in 1992, when Moscow is reverberating with the rupture following the fall of the Soviet Union, and the transformation of the metropolitan landscape to establish the new democratic order is well under way. At the same time, South Africa is experiencing the preliminary tremors of its own approaching democratic moment, and finds itself in an era in which "reality itself was becoming loosed from its moorings" (Clingman 635). This kind of unfixing characterises the democratic moment as a whole – the moment in which conceptual boundaries are dissolved, reframed, or find themselves overlapping. It is the moment when cultural detritus – remnants, fragments and addenda – begins to circulate and litter transnational contexts on a wide scale. As seen in "Autopsy," it is the metropolis that registers this state of flux most acutely. However, "Propaganda by Monuments" focuses more closely on the political and transnational aspects of the democratic moment. In both South Africa and Russia there is a politically-motivated drive towards greater cosmopolitanism but, in this narrative especially, there is also a revelation of the "torsion between [such cosmopolitan spaces] and the physical detritus of the

losses they involve” (Gaylard 6). This torsion is intimated by the observations of the characters in the narrative, namely Pavel Grekov and Boniface Khumalo, whose idiosyncratic perspectives obliquely reveal the objects and monumental spaces through which the capillaries of political power converge and diverge. The characters’ fascination with the marginal and the detrital is “[p]recisely what enables a cognitive mapping of wider geospatiality, partly because the local can be situated within a bigger region, and partly because it uncovers the distant discourses, the general, the national, the global history, that penetrate and partly condition the local” (Gaylard 6).

The complex dynamics of detritus in “Propaganda by Monuments” have two facets, the first comprising the cultural-linguistic connotations of Grekov’s and Khumalo’s letters. In the letters, English is used to transcend political boundaries in order to facilitate exchange. However, the writings of both authors exhibit a free mixing of ideological imports and “tangentially relevant” cultural knowledge (Popescu 125), which suggests that language is a site of large-scale cultural appropriation whose complexities seem to exclude the eventual “monumentalisation” of English: both authors’ letters ultimately become lost in translation. The second facet of this aesthetics mirrors the first one, but is applied to the material-political sphere: like language, the built monument itself ends up being an unstable and highly eclectic site of meaning. Both Russia and South Africa are presented as spaces undergoing transition, but they fail to mirror one another in the fate of their monuments. In Russia, the monuments’ socialist meanings are exploded when they are subsumed into the new capitalist economy, without any reflection taking place on the losses incurred. In South Africa, the losses incurred during the large-scale social remodelling following the new political dispensation are evident in the demolition of the blocks of high-rises in the centre of Pretoria. The notice written by the proprietor of the Salon Chantelle (142) suggests that private business is able to relocate itself despite the demolition of its premises, suggesting a superficial socio-economic change that is predicated on mere demolition.

Importantly, both of these facets are subject to the idea of cultural (mis)translation, which entails not only the unexpected juxtapositions, ironies and ambiguities generated during the characters’ communications, but also the ambiguities that are left over when ideologically significant objects (monuments) are “translated” into other

forms through demolition or re-appropriation – themselves the usual correlatives of social change. Cultural (mis)translation is the aesthetics of detritus, the aesthetics of the margin. It is a carnivalesque aesthetics of dissolution, transposition, re-appropriation, sanctification and de-fetishisation in which new meanings, possibilities and resonances become apparent. “Propaganda by Monuments” shows this process in play. As Nuttall argues, the invitation is not only to address “what happens to meaning as it is borne across languages, genres or semiotic modes,” but also to consider “what movements of cultural form and the techniques for mapping them appear in worlds structured increasingly by cultures of circulation. In other words, as Gaonkar and Povinelli so usefully put it, we need ‘to foreground the life *of* the form in question rather than reading social life *off* it’” (Nuttall 106). As I will attempt to demonstrate, “Propaganda by Monuments” consistently elucidates the instability and unpredictability of symbolic re-inscription following social change.

At the beginning of “Propaganda by Monuments” we are introduced to Pavel Grekov, a translator for the Administration of Everyday Services in Moscow. We are told that, although his command of English is “fractious,” Grekov’s forte is in fact translating broken English into “indestructible Russian” (122–23). Therefore, Grekov is presented as an agent for translating and transculturating various items of cultural “detritus” into Russian. Such disparate artefacts include an itinerary from Jamaica, a transcultural menu, “several love-letters full of double entendres,” instructions for assembling a Japanese exercise bicycle, poetry by a Malawian dissident, and lyrics by the band “The Dead Kennedys” (123). That such items tend to “wash up” on Grekov’s desk points towards the radical cosmopolitanism following the democratic moment, where even national mythologies, such as that of J. F. Kennedy, begin to circulate freely in a global marketplace, a circulation further intimated by the King’s Kennedy-esque utterance in “Autopsy.” However, when Grekov encounters Khumalo’s letter from Pretoria, he has difficulty assimilating some of its cultural markers into his own frame of reference. Inspecting the letter’s surface, Grekov interprets the old South African Airways logo as “some sort of winged mythological creature, a crude representation of Pegasus, perhaps, or a griffin with a human face” (124), and a stamp as depicting “steppes.” If the perusal of surface signs throws up the indefiniteness of cultural translation, it is the

reading of Khumalo's (heavily annotated) letter that reveals even more interesting ironies and misconstructions.

Khumalo, who proposes the purchasing of a monumental head of Lenin, begins his letter by addressing the "Ministir of Foreign Affairs" as follows: "I am greeting you in the name of struggling masses of South Africa, comrades, freedom fighters, former journeymen to Moscow – you may know some [...]" (131). Khumalo's greeting is somewhat incongruous within the post-Soviet context that he is addressing, and exhibits the ideological refuse of social "revolution." However, he goes on to state that he is also greeting in the name of his "boergious countrymen known up and down here at home." Khumalo's letter therefore exhibits considerable ideological ambiguity, in that it contains a mix of socialist and capitalist language. This becomes most apparent when, on the one hand, Khumalo wishes to hold "publicity stunts" for the opening of his business, and invite Russian trade interests, the Small Business Development Corporation, the television networks and Lucky Dube. On the other hand, he also wishes to invite South African Marxist organisations and trade unions, and, in an odd reinscription of its original meaning, to dedicate the statue of Lenin to "the Working People of Atteridgeville by Kind Masses of Russia" (132). In other words, Khumalo's revolution will be televised, which signifies either a transition from socialism to capitalism, or some unaccountable melding of both. Consequently, the festive tone of Khumalo's letter can be read as carnivalesque, in that the boundaries between ideologies seem to break down, allowing for free intermingling. Furthermore, because Khumalo's letter proposes a transaction, we also see the context of the marketplace come to the fore. Elaborating on types of carnivalesque spaces, Bakhtin states that "[i]n the marketplace a special kind of speech was heard, almost a language of its own, quite unlike the language of the church, palace, courts and institutions" (689). In the letters we see a special kind of language in which various linguistic and cultural elements interact in a fluid way, and consequently generate suggestive insights about which elements of global culture have come to inform newly opened cultural spaces. There appears to be a peculiarly American tone to Khumalo's letter, prompted by Grekov's mentioning of Texaco, and then reinforced by Khumalo's use of phrases such as "Fantastical benefits may amount to all of us" and "pedestals galore" (132). Ultimately, Khumalo's discourse of liberation becomes subsumed by the spectacular, globalised discourse of advertising.

In addition to the cultural and ideological assortment of Khumalo's text, Grekov's annotations (which he adds in his unofficial capacity, 129) clearly show that he misinterprets many of the cultural markers in Khumalo's discourse (O.K. Bazaars becomes "baas," petroljoggie becomes a brand name like "Texaco," chipniks – a snack – becomes "prostitutes"). According to Popescu, "Despite the English(es) they allegedly share, the letters exchanged between Moscow and Atteridgeville bear the cultural, ideological and, most visibly, physical marks of their producers" (144). The fuzziness of the translated letters arises from the result of "cultural debris" that derails the meaning of the letters (127). This notion of inchoate cultural translation is also strongly apparent in the second letter, addressed to Khumalo from Christov. Grekov, acting as both the letter's official and unofficial translator, has effectively hijacked the letter with his own annotations, in an attempt to converse with Khumalo directly. In addition to his "eccentric" (*Flashback Hotel* 122) English vocabulary, "[Grekov's] translation brings in the debris of other tangentially relevant cultures (British, American), as a sign of the imperfect globalizing character of English" (Popescu 125). Expressions such as "cocksure," "okey-dokey," "eager beaver" and "boots and all" indicate that, like Khumalo, Grekov has assimilated a variety of cultural-linguistic elements into his idiolect – particularly elements from former and current imperial superpowers, Britain and the United States. As Popescu notes, such a usage indicates the instability of a globalising language, but also bears a carnivalesque flavour of instability. Like the comical architectural episodes following the Russian Revolution (depicted in the "Lunacharski and Lenin" section of the story), so too is Khumalo and Grekov's exchange characterised by miscommunication, but also experimentation. Both characters seem to find some common ground in English, intimating the possibility of English becoming a monolithic, global language of communication; but the disjunctures in their discourse also reveal the problems inherent in that project. For example, both characters attempt to reach out to one another through cultural stereotype, evident through Khumalo's outmoded notions of Russia and Grekov's ideas about South Africa. Nevertheless, if this internationalisation is prompted by the global exchange of commodities, facilitated by the democratic moment and embodied in the proposed exchange, it nevertheless exceeds these formal boundaries: it is motivated not by mere commerce but by a genuine interest in cultural exchange:

What is doing in the Transvaal? Do the cows and sheep graze of the veldt nearby free from harm? Much has been said and supposed vis-à-vis socio-political machinations of reformism in your motherland of which I am always an amateur or eager beaver as they say. But the horse's mouth is what you are. Your tidings have captivated me boots and all. Please correspond.

(138)

Grekov ends the letter by depicting a charming scene of cultural melding: "And who knows how long ago hence we may eat beefsteaks and drink vodkas – our patriotic highball – in V.I. Lenin Bar & Grill of Atteridgeville!" Grekov seems to embrace cultural hybridisation, but at the same time avoids a commercial cosmopolitanism by proposing such unpretentious activities as eating beefsteaks and drinking vodka in a bar and grill.

Like the conceptualisation of language presented in the letters, the built monument also ends up being a variable and highly eclectic site of meaning. The idea of the manifold monument is figured when Grekov approaches the head of Lenin, which the narrator describes as having

Kindly eyes, if not quite grandfatherly, then more than avuncular; but as the mouth came into focus, beneath the sculpted wings of the moustache, the whole face changed, it became severe and irritable, it took on the cross expression of a bachelor uncle who didn't like children. And then, quite unaccountably, as he came closer still, the face foreshortened into friendliness again.

(126)

Indeed, despite Lenin's imposing reputation as the father of communist Russia, Grekov cannot help but admire the workers' "gleeful daring and lack of decorum" in their preparation of the head's removal. One worker skates around "on the great man's icy dome like a seasoned performer," and another slides "audaciously down the curvature of the skull, unloosing a shower of scurfy snow from the fringe of hair." The atmosphere of irreverence is compounded by children playing around the scene, oblivious to the event of the monument's removal. Grekov, the only person there who has specially come to see the removal, notes how "soon people become bored of the making and unmaking of history," and remembers the "hundreds of thousands who had taken to the streets to

watch the first monuments fall" (127). The removal of the head of the revered Lenin thus becomes as unspectacular an event as the daily removal of refuse. As illustrated by one of the drillers to whom Grekov speaks, the bronze statues are "melted down and reshaped into useful objects like door-knockers and railings"; the ones of stone are "crushed into gravel and scattered" on paths in public parks. Monuments of marble and granite are "sliced up for tombstones and carved into monuments of the new heroes – only smaller, of course, to accommodate the new noses and ears" (128). Some, like the head of Lenin, having been produced by famous artists, are preserved in museums. In this sense, the monuments become stripped of their social significance in the process of being subsumed into mundane items. Those relegated to the space of the museum are removed from their original public contexts, thus potentially diminishing the public's engagement with them within their everyday routines. Thus the monuments undergo a process of semiotic atomisation, in which their supreme social significance evaporates as they are transposed into the order of the quotidian. In this sense, Vladislavić invites us to imagine the monumental as recyclable waste.

Finally, the head of Lenin is hoisted off its pedestal, and it bounces "playfully on the air, like a child's ball." The head is then placed on the back of the lorry, looking backwards, with the workers "posed on the rigging around the head like revellers on a Mardi Gras float" (129). These proceedings convey a distinct carnivalesque feeling, and underline the fluidity of the Russian milieu-in-transition: a place where the formerly-unmovable edifices of socialism are unceremoniously cleared away for the new. Nevertheless, this final gesture of unfixing presents the mutability of the immutable as a kind of spectacle, inaugurating an era of endlessly replaceable history. However, as Grekov looks at the departing statue, "there was such a forbidding set to the bottom lip that Grekov took his hands out of his pockets and stood up," thus bearing witness to the continuing potency of the historical trace.

The above processes of political-material translation are paralleled in Pretoria, as seen in the section centring on Khumalo, although the two spaces do not mirror one another exactly regarding the fate of their monuments. Khumalo, for example, is in the process of constructing his own "monument" in the form of his Boniface Tavern, which is itself an

odd site of cultural convergence, as it takes Khumalo's first name, Boniface, from St Boniface, an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon missionary. Nevertheless, Khumalo decides that his establishment needs "a change of clothes," so he models his decor on the taverna ambience that he saw in a place called "Nero's Palace" (141). At the Benoni Hyperplant, Khumalo splurges on various Mediterranean paraphernalia, which stereotypically serve as the trappings of global capitalism in South Africa. However, a new name for his tavern befitting the political change in the country still presents itself as a dilemma. When Khumalo thinks, "[t]he way of all flesh was fleeting, whereas decor had to last" (141), he states what is possibly the very premise of monumentalism: the "decor" must be a stable, resilient transmitter of ideas. He discards the names "Napoleon" and "Richelieu" for his tavern, before reading about the removal of statues in Russia. This inspires the name "V.I. Lenin," and Khumalo hopes to acquire some statues of his own to "string some coloured lights from" (141). Clearly, for Khumalo, any object with an ideological charge can be repurposed for the cult of the commercial.

Similarly to Moscow, Pretoria seems to be a city whose landscape mirrors the transitioning of a political structure – only in this case the change seems to be due to the departure of private business. As the narrator notes of the former premises of the Salon Chantelle in the central business district, "[t]he building site looked as if it had been bombed, and the impression of a city under siege was borne out by the empty streets" (142). In the midst of the rubble, however, Khumalo sees an old man salvaging bricks and tiles, and asks whether the old man is building his own place, selling the bricks, or if he is a builder. Here, we see the prosperous Khumalo contrasted with the man scrounging among the detritus, whom Khumalo pelts with (rather glib) questions about how the man uses the bricks. The old man responds with, "[t]his rubbish belongs to no one," and spits at Khumalo's feet, seeming to show contempt for Khumalo's suggestions for the commodification of the rubble (143). In this exchange, Khumalo, a former struggling worker on a quest to obtain a statue to glorify his social ascendance, has become the very figure of commodifying forces. The tension between Khumalo, who has command over a modicum of capital, and the brick scavenger, who must make do with the scraps of social change, speaks of remaining, and perhaps intensifying, socio-economic tensions.

The last part of "Propaganda by Monuments" is set in a square, in this instance the highly resonant monumental space of the declining centre of apartheid. The monuments and facilities are described as being in disrepair, but only at surface level. As is written in Khumalo's first letter, apartheid appears to be merely "crumpling" – developing a few creases – as opposed to crumbling, perhaps suggesting that the process of social change has stalled. In fact, when Khumalo inspects the head of J. G. Strijdom, he describes it as having a "serene" appearance: "As secure on its pedestal as a head on its shoulders" (144). This contrasts with the "expression" on the statue's face during Khumalo's prior visits, when it "had a look of stupefied terror. It was the face of a slow-footed pedestrian, a moment away from impact and extinction, gaping at the juggernaut of history bearing down on him" (144). It seems therefore, at least from Khumalo's perspective, that the forces which were once intent on removing the Strijdom head, singing "Sutha sutha wena Strijdom!," have dissipated. Although the Strijdom monument is spared the fate of the head of Lenin, its serene countenance nevertheless suggests that social change in Pretoria is merely an inversion of that in Moscow. In other words, capitalist infrastructure may have been demolished, but the symbolic infrastructure of apartheid remains in the centre of the city, implying an ideological continuity with apartheid. Politically, therefore, Russia and South Africa – to use the worn phrase – end up being two sides of the same coin. Mirroring Bakhtin's idiom, the two countries' monumental statements of progress end up being Janus-faced: ironic and ambivalent. This ambivalence illustrates that, in the drive towards the monumental, there is always something left over: the detritus which contradicts the "progress" claimed by the "new" hegemony through destruction or construction.

"Propaganda by Monuments" presents a complex intersection of language, culture, politics, ideology and the built environment, each with its own converging subset of semiotic modes. In this story, meaning can be traced as it is conveyed across these semiotic modes, which themselves can be seen as stages within a circulatory dynamic between the concepts of "monument" and "detritus." In the story, language, like the built monument, is a conduit of meaning, which itself takes the form of a charge which can be transposed, transmuted or destroyed. The radical globalisation of the democratic moment amplifies this dynamic to encompass greater cultural distances and scales. Most

importantly, however, is that, like “Autopsy,” “Propaganda by Monuments” is anchored in the perspective of the marginal. Both Khumalo and Grekov are itinerant agents of cultural exchange and translation, appropriating the English language – insisting upon their own fractured and fractious vocabularies – to fashion their own language of the marketplace. It is therefore appropriate that the original sense of “fractious” seems to have been the disposition to “make breaches” (“Fractious”). Indeed, Grekov, as the unsanctioned translator who breaks protocol in his sincere desire to establish a personal and cultural relationship, and Khumalo, as the newly-emancipated, capitalised and internationally-engaged African, both breach their pre-designated identities, as well as the fixed meanings of the English vocabulary. It is through their consciousnesses that we see the monumental becoming the contents of the dustbin – rendered senseless – but also vice versa.

3. Conclusion

“Autopsy” and “Propaganda by Monuments” can be read as narratives retrieved from the cusp of the global post-transitional moment, and simultaneously as literary-aesthetic embodiments of that moment. Through the frame of the marginal and the everyday, the stories represent societies experiencing tremendous social change, particularly through cultural atomisation, re-combination and re-appropriation. In this state of social flux, taking place in between the de-centring and re-centring of models of social organisation, detritus gains primacy as a poetic medium: a means for the subject to realise its desires within the everyday, a means of punctuating, seeing and reading the space-in-transformation, and a means for articulating the cultural static that this transformation proliferates. In both stories, the unfixing which characterises the democratic moment displaces the cultural historicity and specificity of the locales depicted in the narratives. At the same time, the detritus that results from the democratic moment is appropriated by the characters for their own ends and detritus becomes an idiosyncratic syntax for reading and writing desire. Aesthetically, this dynamics of detritus manifests simultaneously as a gritty, realistic texture, and a feeling of whimsicality and humour in the way that detritus is appropriated. Interestingly, it is the loss of this texture that

makes of Vladislavić's latest collection, *101 Detectives*, a notably more austere reading experience than that of *Propaganda by Monuments*. What *101 Detectives* avers is a highly globalised world organized increasingly around instrumentalised spaces such as the office, hotel room and conference centre. The sleek, clean surfaces of stories such as "Exit Strategy" comprise indifferent spaces which seem to be in stark contrast with the idiosyncrasies of the protagonists that inhabit and contend with them. In similar fashion, many stories take shape through the contradiction of global travellers who exhibit less modality, less *movement* or traversing, than the characters of Vladislavić's previous works. If the act of walking has been superseded by the use of road networks and airlines, the spaces of city and dwelling are also less idiosyncratic and unpredictable; they are less punctuated with the detritus, creative malapropisms and unresolved ironies of social flux. In this sense the collection largely takes on the aesthetic of the airport departure hall, where cultural differentiation becomes an afterthought, or accessory, to instrumentality. The characters who traverse this world of indifferent surfaces may not undertake such relatively grand gestures as walking the city, but they do raise an eyebrow.

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