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Bede Scott

> Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror.
> — Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster"

Although it is often described as a thriller and demonstrates many of the characteristics that we typically associate with this genre, Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel *Sacred Games* can, in places, be surprisingly unthrilling. For long stretches of time, nothing of any real significance transpires; and much of the narrative serves to impede, rather than facilitate, the progress of its most thrilling plotline. It is certainly true that there is no shortage of spectacle here—whether it takes the form of a brutal gangland massacre, a terrorist bombing, or a police siege. Yet we are also exposed to the routine violence and criminality that, for many people, has become an inescapable feature of everyday life in Mumbai, the Indian city of 22 million that serves as the novel's primary setting. In what follows, I suggest that this conjunction of opposing categories gives rise to a dominant "structure of feeling" (Williams, *Marxism* 132) that not only influences the novel at the representational or mimetic level, where all the action takes place,

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but also penetrates the deeper reaches of form, genre, and style.[1] More specifically, I argue that the concurrence of both spectacular and mundane forms of criminality within *Sacred Games* produces an affective state that is equally heterogeneous, combining the categories of the sublime and the stupefying, the astonishing and the boring. And this feeling—which I align with Sianne Ngai's notion of "stuplimity" (277)—ultimately infiltrates the discourse itself, creating an unsettling slippage between the narrative's more significant episodes (or nuclei) and those that constitute mere filler.

Before we begin, we might briefly consider some other crime narratives that have sought to dissolve the boundary between the public sphere and the private, the historical event and the everyday occurrence. In 1987, the Subaltern Studies historian Ranajit Guha published an essay entitled "Chandra's Death" that would go on to acquire a foundational status within the field of postcolonial studies. Based on a fragmentary document he discovered in the archives of Viswabharati University, Guha's essay describes the accidental death of a young woman—a member of the disadvantaged Bagdi agricultural caste—in rural Bengal in the year 1849. The woman in question, Chandra Chashani, had been conducting an "illicit love affair" (136) with her brother-in-law, and when this transgression led to an unwanted pregnancy, she was offered the choice of either aborting the child or being ostracized from the village in a punishment known as *bhek*. Along with her female relatives, Chandra decided on the former course of action; and with this purpose in mind, they procured "a herbal medicine which had to be taken thrice a day . . . together with some horituki (a wild fruit of medicinal value) and two tablets of bakhor guli (a preparation of herbs and rice used to induce abortion) diluted in lime water." In her subsequent statement, Chandra's sister described the tragic consequences of this decision. "I prepared a paste of the medicine with my own hands," she said,

> and administered one dose of it to Chandra at a quarter past the second *pohor* of the night [around 12:45 a.m.]. . . . [As a result, the] foetus was destroyed and it fell to the ground. My mother picked up the bloody foetus with some straw and threw it away. Even after that the pain in Chandra's belly continued to increase and she died [roughly two hours before sunrise]. Chandra's corpse was then buried near the [river's] bend by my brother Gayaram, his brother-in-law, and my mother's brother Horilal. I administered the medicine in the belief that it would terminate her pregnancy and did not realize that it would kill her. (qtd. in Guha 136)

According to Guha, this document reveals the limitations of traditional historiography, which has been "designed for big events and institutions" (138) and "tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths." Moreover, the fact that the episode was translated into judicial discourse, in the form of a legal deposition, makes it particularly elusive. Although we are offered a number of statements that constitute "direct speech" (139), Guha observes, "it is speech prompted by the requirements of an official investigation into what is presumed to be a murder":

> The narrative in the document [thus] violates the actual sequence of what happened in order to conform to the logic of a legal intervention which made the death into a murder, a caring sister into [a] murderess, all the actants in this tragedy into defendants, and what they said in a state of grief into *ekrars* [a legal term for confessions or acknowledgements of guilt]. (140–41)

As a way of challenging these reductive judicial processes, Guha advocates a "critical historiography" (138) that is capable of "bending closer to the ground [so as] to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time." And in this particular case, he argues, such a methodology would involve recontextualizing the document (and the alleged crime it describes) by situating it within "the life of a community" (142), where "a multitude of anxieties and interventions endowed it with its real historical content," and by seeing it not as an *ekrar*—not as an admission of legal culpability—but as "the record of a Bagdi family's effort to cope collectively, if unsuccessfully, with a [personal] crisis."[2]

If historiographical discourse traditionally ignores "the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths" (138), and judicial discourse typically reduces the complexity of crime to "a set of narrowly defined legalities" (140), then we must look elsewhere for a more complete picture of historical episodes like the one Guha describes. In a fascinating aside, Guha identifies a potential source in the "narratives of crime" (*récits de crimes*) that were widely read in France during the nineteenth century (139). These journalistic descriptions of actual cases, he writes, made it possible for the "common murder . . . to cross the uncertain frontier which separates it from the 'nameless butcheries' of battle and make its way into history" (139–40). Guha quotes Foucault here and refers, more specifically, to his 1973 essay "Tales of Murder," which discusses the case of Pierre Rivière, a Norman peasant who murdered three

members of his immediate family in 1835. If we turn to this essay, it is easy to see why Guha favors such popular journalism as an alternative to standard historiographical and judicial discourse. According to Foucault, the purpose of the nineteenth-century *récit de crime* was to "alter the scale" (204):

> to enlarge the proportions, to bring out the microscopic seed of the story, and make narrative accessible to the everyday. The first requisite in bringing about this change was to introduce into the narrative the elements, personages, deeds, dialogues, and subjects which normally had no place in [it] because they were undignified or lacking in social importance, and the second was to see that all these minor events, however commonplace and monotonous they may be, appeared "singular," "curious," "extraordinary," unique, or very nearly so, in the memory of man.

By privileging "minor events" in this way, Foucault concludes, such narratives "make the transition from the familiar to the remarkable, the everyday to the historical," and thus serve as a crucial "point of intersection" (205) between these disparate spheres.

In *Sacred Games*, we find a similar collision of contraries. On the one hand, over the course of 947 pages, we are made to endure all the banality, repetition, and monotony of crime and criminality in the city of Mumbai, while on the other hand, we find ourselves confronting the periodic rupture of the ordinary in the spectacular form of terrorism and communal violence. In this essay, I explore both sides of this apparent dichotomy. I begin by discussing the minor crimes—the petty burglaries, the routine corruption, the domestic disputes, and so on—that occur within the pages of Chandra's novel. I then address the episodes of exceptional criminality that also feature here: namely, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, the communal violence that took place in Bombay (as it was then known) in 1992–93, and the retaliatory bombings that occurred on 12 March 1993 and killed 257 people.[3] For much of the novel, I argue, our hero—the police inspector Sartaj Singh—oscillates from one extreme to the other, encountering both the banal and the extraordinary, the boring and the spectacular, before he finally manages to reconcile these traditional antitheses. The emotion that Sartaj experiences as a consequence of this dialectical intermingling could best be described by invoking Ngai's notion of "stuplimity" (as formulated in her 2005 work *Ugly Feelings*). According to Ngai, classic theories of the sublime fail to account for the "experience of boredom" (8) that has become "increasingly intertwined with con-

temporary experiences of aesthetic awe." "Stuplimity," a portmanteau that combines both the stupefying and the sublime, is the term she uses to delineate an aesthetic response in which "the initial experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not terror or pain . . . but *something much closer to an ordinary fatigue*" (270). And as we will see, this is precisely the mood that dominates the conclusion of *Sacred Games,* allowing these opposing realities—the stupefying and the sublime, the mundane and the spectacular—to infiltrate the very tissue of the narrative we are reading.

Catalytic Crimes

At a superficial, proairetic level—the level of action and plotting—*Sacred Games* clearly qualifies as a thriller. In the novel's opening pages, Sartaj Singh, the world-weary police inspector mentioned above, discovers the dead body of a local gangster in a nuclear fallout shelter, and at the behest of the Indian security services, he launches an investigation into the case. Why had the legendary *bhai* (gangster), Ganesh Gaitonde, returned to Mumbai in the first place, and what was he doing in a bunker that had been designed to withstand a nuclear apocalypse? During his investigation, Sartaj discovers that in recent years Gaitonde had fallen under the influence of a radical Hindu religious figure, Swami Shridhar Shukla (also known as Guru-ji), who has managed to smuggle a nuclear bomb into Mumbai with the intention of detonating it in the center of the city and thereby ushering in a millenarian "golden age" (838). As one might anticipate, however, Sartaj eventually manages to locate the nuclear device and, in so doing, ensures the survival of the city he loves and reinforces the generic allegiance of the narrative in which he figures.

But there is a good deal more to *Sacred Games* than the plot I have outlined here. In his classic essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes draws a useful distinction between nuclei (those occurrences that "constitute real hinge points of the narrative" [265]) and catalyzers (those occurrences that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating" the nuclei). According to Barthes, nuclei are "the risky moments of a narrative" (266)—the places where discoveries are made, disasters averted, and nuclear devices disabled—while the catalyzers "lay out areas of safety," places where the energy of the narrative dissipates and nothing of any genuine consequence transpires. In the preceding synopsis, needless to say, I have cited only one or two of the novel's most essential nuclei; yet as any reader of *Sacred Games* will know, the

space between these crucial occurrences is heavily freighted with catalytic detail. On more than one occasion over the course of the novel, Sartaj becomes trapped in the "congealed mass" of a traffic jam (88), the "compacted clog of rush-hour traffic" (227), and one could argue that these delays serve as an intradiegetic correlative for the rather clogged nature of the narrative itself. Take the following passage, for instance:

> A party of Municipal men were working on a hole in the road. They weren't actually working, they were standing around the hole looking at it, and apparently waiting for something to happen. Meanwhile, a vast funnel of traffic pressed up against the bottleneck. Sartaj was somewhere towards the front, on his motorcycle. He was hemmed in by a BEST bus and two autos, and there was nowhere for anyone to go, so they all waited companionably. The bus was crammed full of office-goers, and the autos were taking college students to their classes. Young boys were working the stalled traffic, selling magazines and water and gaudy Chinese statues of a laughing man with his hands above his head. A pair of maimed beggars went from car to car, tapping their stumps on the windscreens. (945–46)

Of course, a scene like this is not without significance; but any meaning it does generate is inevitably "attenuated . . . [and] parasitic" (Barthes, "Introduction" 266).[4] We could remove this passage entirely or alter every sentence, every detail, and the basic narrative structure would remain unchanged, for none of these magazines or water bottles or gaudy Chinese statues contribute anything of real value to the story we are reading. Like the traffic jam itself, all these catalyzers do is prevent the narrative from moving forward, forcing us to turn our attention to the inconsequential, the banal, and the boring while we wait "for something [of significance] to happen."[5]

We find the same aesthetic strategy employed elsewhere, too. Relatively early in the novel, Sartaj and his partner are waiting (once more) to apprehend some gangsters who are suspected of having murdered one of their accomplices; and, in order to kill time and fill space, they begin to trade grievances. Among other things, they complain about the municipality, the price of mangoes, the traffic, collapsing buildings, clogged drains, bad movies, unwatchable television, interstate quarrelling over natural water resources, US interference in subcontinental affairs, the depiction of the police in the aforementioned movies, and of course, "the job, the job, and the job" (296). "When you had complained enough about everything else," our narrator says, "there was always the job, with its unspeakable hours, its monotony, its political complications, its thankless-

ness, and its exhaustion." As readers, we are already familiar with the monotony of Sartaj's professional duties, not to mention his fatigue. On page 19, for example, he is assigned to investigate a murder case that we are told, quite candidly, will not be "especially interesting." The neighborhood where the crime occurred, a slum by the name of Navnagar, is "very poor, and dead bodies there were just dead, devoid of any enlivening possibilities of professional praise, or press, or money" (19). And this indeed proves to be true. As far as Sartaj's partner, Katekar, is concerned,

> a Bangladeshi boy had been murdered by his yaars [accomplices], but so what? It was a minor case with minor possibilities, and it could easily be investigated on paper, just like the municipality lorries which on paper ran punctually every morning. Nobody would mind too much if this case was left undetected, and so it was silly to be out here [in Navnagar] suffering [the] odours and the odiousness of these foreigners. (78)

This minor case with minor possibilities, devoid of any larger significance, will eventually be solved; but like so much else in the novel, it hovers on the very edge of "tellability" (Ryan 589) and contributes almost nothing to the primary plotline that we are supposed to be following (the one involving the dead gangster and the threatened destruction of India's largest city).[6] And the same thing could be said of all the other routine crimes that clog the narrative: the "everyday matters of blackmail, thievery, [and] murder" (614) that are "perfunctorily investigated and [almost] never solved" (429).[7]

At the microcosmic level, as we have seen, this inconsequential filling (magazines, water bottles, gaudy Chinese statues, and so on) has practically no influence over the underlying structure of the narrative. However, when entire scenes assume a largely catalytic function, they create conspicuous deviations in the novel's plot trajectory. To some degree, of course, all plotting involves a series of deviations from a straight line; without these irregularities—these anomalies—there would be no intervening substance to prevent the beginning of a narrative from collapsing prematurely into its end. "Deviance," Peter Brooks writes, "detour, an intention that is irritation: these are characteristics of the narratable . . . of *fabula* [story] become *sjužet* [discourse]" (104). The desire we experience as readers, Brooks argues, like the "desire" of the discourse itself, is ultimately "desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance . . . which is the plot of narrative." Such deviations are, then, essential to the

diachronic unfolding of any narrative, yet again it is a question of degree; and in the case of *Sacred Games*, these digressive tendencies become one of the novel's governing aesthetic principles. Consider the morgue scene, for instance, which takes place in chapter 4. In the classic detective novel or police procedural, this scene serves a crucial function. It establishes, in the form of a dead body lying on an autopsy table or a steel refrigerator tray, a point of intersection between two different narratives: the narrative of the crime, usually murder, and the narrative of the investigation.[8] For this reason, the morgue scene typically occupies a privileged position within the narrative and often provides the detective with something of forensic (and narratological) value—a way of moving the case (and the plot) forward. In *Sacred Games*, however, Sartaj's visit to the morgue to view the dead bodies of Gaitonde and his female companion, Jojo, is ultimately futile and a complete waste of narrative energy. Once more, this is something that Sartaj's partner correctly anticipates: "The man was dead, Katekar said, and he and the woman would remain dead, so there was no need to go near them now, none at all" (90). Ignoring this advice, Sartaj passes at least half an hour—and five pages—in the morgue before rejoining his colleague outside. Although he assures the pathologist that seeing the dead bodies has been "very useful" (95), on reflection he decides otherwise: "Now the desire to see the bodies, which only a little while ago had seemed so coherent, seemed bizarre. What had he learnt? Sartaj had no idea. *It had all been a waste of time*" (emphasis added).

It should be pointed out at this stage that I am not simply referring to the odd superfluous scene here; I am actually describing the majority of the novel. For, alongside the story of Sartaj's investigation, we are also offered a detailed, analeptic account of Gaitonde's rise to prominence within the Mumbai underworld. This tangential plotline, which is narrated by Gaitonde himself and occupies at least half of the novel's 947 pages, carries us from "A to C . . . [by way of] L, M and Z" (526). The dead gangster's story is engaging, to be sure, and beautifully told; but for the most part it operates not on the syntagmatic plane of the (primary) narrative, moving the plot forward in a horizontal direction, but on the associative or paradigmatic plane, which always moves sideways, at an oblique angle, bringing us no closer to the final predication of the narrative sentence. In this regard, the trajectory of the novel could be said to resemble the squiggle that Balzac, citing Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, uses as his epigraph to *The Wild Ass's Skin*:

Figure 1. Epigraph to Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, vol. 1, 1831.

But why should the plot of *Sacred Games* follow this pattern? Why should a novel that is supposed to be a thriller consistently privilege the paradigmatic over the syntagmatic, deviance over directionality? In his incisive reading of Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842–43), Brooks provides us with a possible answer to these questions. As the nineteenth century became increasingly "standardized and boring" (155), he argues, writers began to explore a new "urban topography and demography" (147), one of "crime and social deviance." In Sue's case, it is clear that he regarded the Parisian underworld, the "social inferno" (153) in which he chose to situate his *roman-feuilleton*, as "the last refuge of the narratable" (155). That was where his stories were to be found, among the various reprobates, the prostitutes and thieves, who in those days populated the Ile de la Cité; and as a consequence, these wayward and degenerate figures came to embody two different types of deviance—one social, the other narratological. As Brooks writes,

> Deviance as a question in social pathology offers an opportunity for tracing its arabesque figure as plot. That "arabesque"—the figure found in *La Peau de chagrin* [*The Wild Ass's Skin*]—represents the opposite of the straight line: it is the longest possible line between two points, or rather, the maintenance of the greatest possible deviance and detour between beginning and end, depending on the play of retardation, repetition, and return in the postponement and progressive unveiling of the end. . . . If the wretched of the earth are Sue's preferred subject, it may be first of all because . . . they are eminently the stuff of plotted story. (155–56)

In *Sacred Games*, the various criminal figures (and above all Gaitonde himself) also constitute "the stuff of plotted story." They, too, embody both social and narratological deviance. Yet as we have observed, the stories they generate in such abundance often contribute very little to the narrative's primary plotline. Instead, these episodes of routine

crime and violence assume a catalytic quality, creating paradigmatic subtrajectories that consistently lead us away from, rather than toward, the spectacular conclusion we are anticipating.

Stuplimity

As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, however, episodes of exceptional criminality can also be found within the pages of *Sacred Games*. Situated more obviously in the public sphere, these episodes form part of a larger, historical narrative that will already be familiar to many of the novel's readers. In December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque located in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, was illegally demolished during a rally held by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Constructed on a site that also carries religious significance for Hindus, the mosque had long been "the pivot for leaping political parties, the target for processions of thousands, [and] the standing sign for ancient wrongs" (Chandra, *Sacred* 383). In the days following the demolition of the mosque, communal violence erupted in urban centers around the country, leading to the death of an estimated 900 people in Bombay alone.[9] The majority of the dead were Muslim, and in many cases, they had been killed with the direct complicity of the police.[10] In retaliation for this violence, Dawood Ibrahim, a legendary figure within the Mumbai underworld, organized a series of bombings in the city that took place on 12 March 1993, killing 257 people and injuring roughly 700.[11] As a young police officer, Sartaj had witnessed the 1993 bombings, and he finds it difficult, even years later, to reconcile this spectacular event, this terrifying rupture of the ordinary, with the everyday crimes he typically solves. On one occasion, for instance, while searching for a missing *chokra* (street kid), he remembers "that day, that long-ago Friday in 1993" (519), when he had found himself "walking on blood, splashing through it," in the immediate aftermath of the explosions. Although he tries, repeatedly, to "concentrate on the problem at hand" (the missing *chokra* in the red T-shirt), he is "unable to rid himself completely of [these] memories," and of his fear that Mumbai may be about to experience another episode of apocalyptic violence. "What use was it to be concerned with the everyday matters of blackmail, thievery, [or] murder," he wonders later in the novel, "when this enormous fear billowed overhead?" (614):

> It was an abstracted danger, this grim notion of a sweeping fire, it was unreal. But with its cold drip of images, it crowded out the mundane. Sartaj blinked. He was at his desk, in his dingy little office with the weathered benches and untidy shelves. [Another police officer] was hunched over a report. Two constables were laughing in the corridor outside. There was a little pool of sunlight from a window, and a pair of hopping little sparrows on the sill. And all of it was dreamlike, as gauzy as the wafting of early morning. If you let yourself believe in that other monstrous thing, even a little, then this ordinary world of bribes and divorces and electricity bills vanished. . . . It got eaten up.

In this passage, as elsewhere, Sartaj oscillates rapidly from one extreme to another. On the one hand, he experiences an overwhelming fear of nuclear annihilation ("this grim notion of a sweeping fire"), while on the other, he forces himself to concentrate on the mundane reality of his daily life ("this ordinary world of bribes and divorces").[12] Try as he might, he is simply incapable of accommodating both the exceptional and the routine, the spectacular and the boring, without one of these categories invalidating or precluding the other. Images of a nuclear apocalypse, we are told, "crowded out the mundane," leaving no space whatsoever for the banal substance of everyday life. Or to put it another way, we might say that Sartaj is struggling here to reconcile the nuclear (this time in the narratological sense of the word) with the catalytic: "his dingy little office . . . the weathered benches and untidy shelves."

Of course, there are clear correspondences between this dynamic and the act of reading itself, which also combines the exceptional and the routine, the nuclear and the catalytic. In other words, every narrative fluctuates between episodes of intensity and episodes of relative quiescence (Barthes's "areas of safety"), where nothing of any real significance seems to be happening. This shifting dynamic in turn influences our experience as readers: episodes of greater intensity within a narrative typically solicit more attentive or avid reading than the intervening low-intensity passages. As Barthes observes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the classic readerly narrative "bears within it a sort of diluted tmesis" (10):

> we do not read everything with the same intensity of reading; a rhythm is established, casual, unconcerned with the *integrity* of the text; our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or to skip certain passages (anticipated as "boring") in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote: we boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations . . . . [I]t is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the

> pleasure of the great narratives: has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, *War and Peace*, word for word? (10–11)

Needless to say, one does feel inclined to read every word of *Sacred Games*, but we may not read every page with the same "avidity."[13] And in those passages or scenes that could be described as low-intensity—where the paradigmatic function of the discourse overrides its syntagmatic function, or where the catalytic eclipses the nuclear—we may find ourselves anticipating more eagerly the action that lies ahead. This is, after all, a thriller; and it is a fundamental requirement of the genre that it should privilege the proairetic over all other codes. Yet for long stretches of time, we are obliged to focus our attention on episodes of minimal significance: a two-year sojourn in the Arthur Road jail, a mystical enquiry into "the nature of the self . . . and the universe" (609), even the ill-fated production of a Bollywood movie. And it is during these episodes, as the narrative explores the outer reaches of relevance (the discursive equivalent of weathered benches and untidy shelves), that we first encounter the phenomenon of stuplimity.

In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai uses the term "stuplimity" to describe the way in which boredom or fatigue has become "increasingly intertwined with contemporary experiences of aesthetic awe," hence her neologistic conjunction of the stupefying and the sublime. Some of the examples she offers, in order to demonstrate this tendency, include Gertrude Stein's 922-page *The Making of Americans* ("an experiment in both duration and endurance" [Ngai 253]), Samuel Beckett's late fiction (which manages to be "simultaneously astonishing and deliberately fatiguing" [260]), and the "exciting [yet] enervating" (264) work of Georges Perec, John Cage, and Gerhard Richter. According to Ngai, such a contradictory aesthetic gives rise to an equally contradictory emotional response, involving a combination of affective states that, in traditional theories of the sublime, have always been regarded as mutually exclusive. She describes this hybrid feeling as a "concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; [a mixture] of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue" (271). I am not suggesting, of course, that *Sacred Games* is simply boring, or that it could be easily classified alongside Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1997) or the meticulous inventories of Georges Perec. However, I do believe that its governing aesthetic principles can be aligned, in several key ways, with Ngai's notion of stuplimity. For one thing, as we have seen, the narrative of *Sacred Games* is particularly vulnerable to clogging, whether it be in the

form of unnecessary catalytic detail (magazines, water bottles, gaudy Chinese statues) or equally unnecessary paradigmatic digressions (the morgue scene, for instance, which even our hero describes as a complete "waste of time"). Such clogging or coagulation is, for Ngai, one of the characteristic features of stuplimity. Although "repetition, permutation, and seriality figure prominently as devices in aesthetic uses of tedium" (263), she notes, writers "have achieved the same effect through a strategy of agglutination—the mass adhesion or coagulation of data particles or signifying units."[14] In the case of *Sacred Games*, this steady accretion of extraneous material serves to elongate the discourse, ensuring that the space between the beginning and the end should be filled with as much (narratological) deviance as possible; and this, too, is a typical feature of the stuplime narrative. Like the feelings they generate, Ngai argues, such narratives often have a "remarkable capacity for duration" (7), an ability to fill page after page with particles of meaning whose functionality or value within the narrative as a whole approaches the zero degree.

Over the course of *Sacred Games*, Sartaj struggles to reconcile the spectacular nature of communal violence and nuclear annihilation with the mundane reality of his everyday life ("this ordinary world of bribes and divorces"). Only at the very end of the novel does he experience a genuine sense of stuplimity, when the sublime finally merges with the stupefying, the spectacular with the boring. It is early evening, and Sartaj and his colleagues have at last managed to locate the nuclear device that has been smuggled into Mumbai. Once they arrive at the scene, a "two-storey bungalow" (874) in a neighborhood known as Chembur, the police and the security forces immediately establish a command post some distance from the house itself. And this, we are told, is where Sartaj chooses to stay for the rest of the night, thereby missing the dramatic conclusion of his own narrative:

> Sartaj never saw the bungalow. . . . He was content to sit in the glow of the laptop screens and watch the [sky] change colour outside the window to the rear. Someone had once told him, he didn't remember who, that the fantastic colours in Mumbai's evening came from all the pollution that floated over the city, from all the incredible millions who crowded into a very small space. Sartaj had no doubt it was true, but the purples and reds and oranges were still beautiful and grand. (875)

Meanwhile, sixty meters away, "behind a screen of trees," the raid itself is taking place: Sartaj hears "a series of pops, and then another, phap-phap-phap, phap-phap-phap-phap. And then a last little boom. . . . [And] with those little banging sounds far away, apparently the world

had been saved" (876–77). After more than 800 pages of preliminaries, then, we have finally reached the novel's climactic episode, the spectacular event that will provide the closure we have been seeking for so long, the ultimate discharge of meaning that will justify—or bestow value on—everything that has gone before. Only, when this climactic event does eventually transpire, it takes place just beyond the representational range of the narrative we are reading. Instead of witnessing the raid directly, we are obliged to join Sartaj in contemplating the color of the evening sky. And rather than experiencing the thrill that the novel's generic affiliation ostensibly promises, we are subjected instead to our narrator's inexplicable sense of fatigue: "Sartaj tried to discover some enthusiasm within himself . . . but he just felt sleepy. He noted his own curious lack of excitement about the prospect of being saved, and thought it was probably just exhaustion . . . . Probably I will feel something tomorrow. But right now I think I will just sit here and feel nothing" (876). This apathy, this anticlimactic fatigue, is difficult to understand without recourse, once more, to the concept of stuplimity. When we encounter a combination of the sublime and the stupefying, Ngai argues, our "initial experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not terror or pain . . . but *something much closer to an ordinary fatigue*" (270). And this is precisely what Sartaj is experiencing here—not a transcendent state of sublimity, not the kind of tranquility that we might associate with Kant's notion of sublime apatheia, but a much more adulterated feeling, one that combines the overwhelming nature of the spectacular with the deadening qualities of the boring, the sudden irruption of the extraordinary with the inescapable banality of the everyday.[15]

A False Ending

In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, the protagonist, Julien Sorel, challenges an aristocrat by the name of Charles de Beauvoisis to a duel. Once his challenge has been accepted, the two men immediately set off for the "secluded spot" (285) where the duel is to take place. The adversaries, each accompanied by a second, are travelling in the same carriage; and given the purpose of their journey, Julien is rather surprised when the conversation on the way proves to be "extremely pleasant":

> [Monsieur de Beauvoisis and his second] were talking about some dancers who had had a great public success at the ballet the previous evening. The gentlemen alluded to some spicy details about which

> Julien and his second, the lieutenant of the 96th, knew nothing whatsoever. Julien was not so stupid as to pretend to know; with a good grace he admitted his ignorance. His candour pleased [de Beauvoisis's] friend—he told them the stories replete with details, and told them very well.

As for the duel itself, the melodramatic focal point of many a nineteenth-century narrative, it "was over in a moment." Julien "received a ball in the arm; they dressed it with handkerchiefs; they damped these with brandy; and the Chevalier de Beauvoisis very politely begged to be allowed to take Julien home in the same carriage by which they had come." In this scene, as D. A. Miller observes, the discourse undergoes a process of displacement; it moves sideways, like Balzac's dilatory squiggle, gravitating toward the banal periphery of the narrative. Or to put it another way, rather than focusing on the episode's nuclear core (the "risky moment" of the duel [Barthes, "Introduction" 266]), it allows itself to be distracted by the surrounding catalyzers, those "areas of safety" where no one ever gets hurt and the conversation is always pleasing.[16] On the one hand, Miller writes, there is "something like a scenario" (261):

> a sequence of actions whose order is presumed to be known in advance. Logical expectations are invoked: it is hard to imagine any telling of a duel . . . in which the actual shooting would not be the logical climax or ending of the account. Cultural expectations are aroused as well: semantically, a duel would seem naturally to involve motifs of honor, risk, fear, shame, and so forth. On the other hand, narrative attention is distracted from what logically and culturally "ought" to happen; and it is instead focused on what retards or frustrates the articulation of the scenario, on peripheral details and incidents that the scenario neither demands nor accounts for. The very contours of the scenario run the risk of dissolving under the pressure of so much "irrelevant" material.

The correspondences between this episode and the raid scene from *Sacred Games* ought to be clear. In both cases, the discourse defies its own generic imperatives by renouncing the spectacular, the dramatic, and the meaningful, in order to concentrate on their opposites: those "subsidiary notations" (Barthes, "Introduction" 265) that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the [various nuclei]." As Miller indicates, this catalytic material not only carries a minimal significance within the narrative as a whole, but it also "frustrates the articulation of the scenario" itself, very nearly causing what really matters (the raid, the duel) to dissolve altogether under the pressure of such ir-

relevance. Very nearly but not quite; and that is the point I am trying to make with regard to *Sacred Games.* The spectacular may be sidelined here, the raid may be concealed "behind a screen of trees," but it is not entirely evacuated from the narrative. Instead, as I have suggested, this shift in narratorial focus ultimately brings about a conflation of these two categories—the sublime and the stupefying—so that the spectacular becomes a constitutive feature of everyday life (no longer "crowd[ing] out the mundane"), and the everyday in turn merges with the spectacular, creating something that is both extraordinary and banal, both astonishing and boring.[17]

We see this conjunction quite plainly in the scene described above, but we also see it operating in a more subtle way in the novel's final lines. Early one morning, we are told, having arrived at the police headquarters,

> Sartaj got off his [motorcycle]. He put his shoes up on the pedal, one by one, and buffed them with a spare handkerchief until they shone. Then he ran a finger around his waistline, along the belt. He patted his cheeks, and ran a forefinger and thumb along his moustache. He was sure it was magnificent. He was ready. He went in and began another day. (947)

And there the novel concludes. On the face of it, this passage would appear to be entirely unremarkable. Sartaj arrives at the police station; then he polishes his shoes and makes sure that everything else is in order, running a "forefinger and thumb along his moustache," before going inside. But the fact that these are the novel's final lines gives them an underlying significance that belies their superficial banality. All endings, by virtue of their being endings, assume a certain intensity; they demand our attention in the same way that beginnings do. Over the course of a novel, we may read with varying degrees of avidity, but the conclusion will almost always be read as closely as possible, for this is where the final predication of meaning occurs, where the narrative circle is closed (one way or the other) and where the major hermeneutic and proairetic sequences are typically resolved. Even if Barthes is right when he implies that no one has ever read *In Search of Lost Time* or *War and Peace* word for word, it would be difficult to find someone who had not read their final lines (having made it that far) with due diligence. Endings also typically involve a shift in register, whereby they assume the kind of semantic resonance—often lyrical or contemplative—that we have come to expect from last words, even if what is actually being said at the literal level is quite mundane. This is what Viktor Shklovsky

describes as a "false ending" (56), and it is precisely how Chandra brings his novel to a close.[18] Nothing could be more banal than this description of Sartaj arriving at the police headquarters, shining his shoes, carefully grooming himself, and then walking inside to "beg[in] another day." But because of the fact that it is situated at the very end of the narrative, because this is the conclusion we have been pursuing all along, each one of these catalytic occurrences takes on a nuclear quality—and the passage as a whole assumes the kind of semantic resonance that Shklovsky associates with the "false ending." Thus, the extraordinary manages, once more, to infiltrate the everyday; and it is entirely appropriate that it should do so, for in contemporary Mumbai it has become increasingly difficult to disentangle these two categories.

During the last half-century, as the anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao observes, Bombay has been transformed from a "city of risk" (5)—of "speculation and entrepreneurial spirit"—to a "city at risk," one that is "marked by spectacular [as well as] quotidian violence." The communal violence that erupted in 1992–93, following the destruction of the Babri Masjid, clearly belongs to the first of these categories, as do the many terrorist attacks that have occurred since the so-called Black Friday bombings of 1993.[19] However, it is also important to acknowledge the episodes of routine criminality that may not always make it into the newspapers: the corruption, the domestic violence, the extrajudicial killings (an estimated total of 589 during the years 1993–2003 [Belur 204]), the burglaries, the kidnappings, and so on. Over the course of *Sacred Games*, Sartaj gradually manages to reconcile these antithetical categories, and, in doing so, experiences a feeling that could be closely aligned with Ngai's notion of stuplimity: a counter-intuitive yet immediately recognizable combination of the stupefying and the sublime. This feeling in turn infiltrates the narrative itself, so that episodes of nuclear intensity (such as the climactic raid in chapter 24) merge with catalytic passages of utter insignificance, and purely catalytic sequences (such as the description we are offered in the novel's final lines) are invested with all the intensity, all the prestige, and all the danger of the nuclear. For Barthes, nuclei constitute "the risky moments of a narrative," the places of tension, of potential catastrophe, while catalyzers "lay out areas of safety," places where nothing particularly bad can happen because nothing of any consequence can happen there at all. In *Sacred Games*, however, this reassuring binary collapses, allowing danger to merge with safety, the extraordinary with the mundane, the spectacular with the boring. And in a narrative of this kind, a

narrative where there are no longer any "areas of safety," where the nuclear and the catalytic have fused with one another, even an action as banal as shining your shoes or grooming yourself can quite easily bring everything to an end.

Notes

1. The phrase "structure of feeling" is derived from the work of Raymond Williams, who uses it to describe the "specifically affective elements of consciousness" that could be said to characterize any given historical period (*Marxism* 132). According to Williams, the "best evidence" (*Politics* 159) of such feelings can be found encoded within "the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing"—in the affective and aesthetic qualities, the phobic and philic impulses, that achieve a certain salience within a work of literature.
2. Although Guha's masterful essay has been particularly influential within Indian literary studies, it is possible to identify similar tendencies elsewhere, too. In 1984, for instance, the South African critic Njabulo Ndebele delivered a lecture in which he argued that the "history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle" (41). According to Ndebele, the sheer visibility of apartheid, the spectacular nature of its systemic "violence and brutality," has given rise to "a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation." Under the circumstances, of course, this would appear to be a perfectly valid response to the flagrant inequities of apartheid; and Ndebele is careful to acknowledge as much in his lecture. However, he also argues that it is necessary to move beyond this melodramatic emphasis on spectacle by "rediscovering the ordinary" (57)—by making the "ordinary daily lives of people . . . the direct focus of political [and literary] interest." Responding to Ndebele's lecture some thirty years later, Saikat Majumdar also emphasizes the need for "narratives of postcolonial reality" (178) to situate themselves within the world of the quotidian and the uninteresting, thereby "reclaim[ing] banality as an aesthetic form" and acknowledging the significance of boredom for the vast majority of people who live their lives "far from the glare of the spectacle."
3. In 1995, the state government of Maharashtra, led by the right-wing Shiv Sena party, officially changed the name of the city from Bombay to Mumbai, thus privileging the language, culture, and history of the city's Marathi majority. (For a particularly illuminating analysis of the identity politics underlying this transformation, see Hansen 1–6.) In this essay, however, I alternate between the two names to avoid anachronism.

4. In a perceptive essay on the role of waiting (anticipation, deferral, delay, and so on) in the contemporary detective novel, Theodore Martin argues that this particular scene demonstrates the fact that waiting is not merely "an empty space of disappointment" (180), an "absence or a void," but the "temporal form of our inchoate, unfolding present." In other words, the traffic jam gives Sartaj "a different way to measure present time": "Forced, finally, to slow down, Sartaj is no longer waiting *for* something. The experience of the traffic jam instead hints that the wait is the basic condition of everyday life—the time that governs each passing day" (181). Although this interpretation is perfectly legitimate and provides a good example of the way in which any scene, however banal it may be, is capable of generating symbolic meaning, the traffic jam still carries no proairetic significance within the narrative and does nothing whatsoever to move the plot along.

5. Ross Chambers's description of narrative "clogging" comes to mind here (117). "What is at issue in [the] clogging of narrative," he writes, "is a certain reversal of proportion and emphasis between narrative structure, with its reliance on story and its beginning-middle-end grammar of closure, and the paradigmatic or listing dimension of discourse that spins out a narrative enunciation in time, employing devices like description, parenthesis, asyndeton, digression, so that the supposedly secondary comes to occupy the foreground of attention, and the hierarchizing distinction between the relevant and the pointless, on which the story depends, begins to lose its own cogency."

6. By "tellability" I mean, very simply, the quality that makes stories worth telling, the "prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the 'normal'" that characterizes all successful narratives (Brooks 103). For a useful summary of this concept, see Ryan.

7. In an essay on the aesthetics of the "non-event" in contemporary South Asian literature (27), Megha Anwer makes a similar observation, arguing that *Sacred Games* "shrink[s] from climactic moments, evading the event in favour of desultory non-events and the quotidian." Unlike Anwer, however, I explore the way in which the novel ultimately achieves an amalgamation of the eventful and the non-eventful, the spectacular and the boring, in the form of stuplimity.

8. I am paraphrasing Tzvetan Todorov here, who in a 1966 essay famously observed that the classic detective novel "contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation" (44). According to Todorov, we can characterize "these two stories by saying that the first—the story of the crime—tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it'" (45).

9. For a vivid description of this violence, see Chandra, *Sacred* 383–87.

10. A 1998 commission of inquiry led by Justice B. N. Srikrishna found that the Bombay police had not only failed to prevent anti-Muslim violence during the 1992–93 riots but had actually participated in such atrocities by "shoot[ing] people dead or actively direct[ing] the [Shiv] Sena mobs" (Mehta 81).

11. For a detailed account of Ibrahim's life and career, see Zaidi, especially 223–31. In the foreword to this volume, Vikram Chandra acknowledges that much of *Sacred Games* was based on information provided by Zaidi, who served as his Dantesque "guide into the underworld" (ix).

12. Sartaj's fear of nuclear annihilation may not be restricted to the specific threat he faces here. In the aftermath of the nuclear tests conducted by the Indian Army in 1998 (codenamed Operation Shakti), Ashis Nandy published a sobering essay in which he explored the "psychopathological" (14) consequences of the Indo-Pakistani arms race. The ideology of "nuclearism" (15), he wrote, "seeps into public consciousness, [creating] a new awareness of the transience of life. It forces people to live with the constant fear that, one day, a sudden war or accident might kill not only them, but also their children and grandchildren, and everybody they love."

13. Although the danger of boredom may be particularly acute in such cases, it is an affective state that underlies the production (and consumption) of all literature, however interesting it may be. "The ideal dynamic between writing and reading," Patricia Meyer Spacks notes, "depends in part on boredom as displaced, unmentioned, and unmentionable possibility. The need to refute boredom's deadening power impels the writer's productivity and the reader's engagement. In the best of all possible arrangements, an author's energy and a reader's reciprocate, establishing a 'dialectics of desire'. . . . But the implicit contract between creator and responder—the promise 'I will interest you' corresponding to the demand 'you will interest me'—remains, like other contracts, subject to default. The writer may fail to engage the reader's interest [or] the reader may refuse to be interested" (1–2).

14. One could also relate such agglutination to Sara Ahmed's notion of "stickiness" (*Cultural* 89), a term she uses to describe the way in which certain objects, bodies, or signs can become "saturated with affect" (11), be it positive or negative. According to Ahmed, this accumulation of affective value not only binds objects, bodies, or signs together, but may also create a blockage, preventing them from "moving [on] and acquiring new value" (92). Stickiness, she writes, "involves a form of relationality, or a 'withness,' in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together. One can stick by a friend. One can get stuck in traffic. Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are

about blockages or stopping things moving" (91). For more on this subject, see Ahmed, *Promise* 230–31.

15. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai is careful to distinguish between the philosophical notion of apatheia, as it relates to the Kantian sublime, and the sense of boredom that accompanies the feeling of stuplimity. While apatheia signifies the complete absence of emotion, and is therefore experienced by the subject as neither "pleasurable nor unpleasurable" (269), boredom "involves a deficiency of affect that is reflexively felt to be dysphoric—stultifying, tedious, irritating, fatiguing, or dulling." "Given the *sluggishness* associated with boredom," Ngai writes, "the difference between the two types of affective deficiency becomes clearer when Kant . . . contrasts 'affection[s] of the strenuous kind,' which merit characterization as aesthetically sublime, with 'affections of the languid kind,' which are barred from the sublime and, as Kant notes, 'have nothing noble in themselves'" (270). For a more detailed discussion of sublime apatheia, see Kant 132–33.

16. Such tendencies are also typical of the digressive mode of writing that Ross Chambers has labelled "loiterature" (xi). According to Chambers, the classic "loiterly" (37) narrative constitutes a site of "endless *intersection*" (9), its narrator's attention being "always divided between one thing and some other thing, always ready and willing to be distracted." The loiterly style, he writes, is "inevitably episodic . . . [and] digressive" (31); it is "more concerned with the, often obscure, 'coherence' of experience . . . than it is respectful of patterns that are more strictly designed and thus 'cohesive.'"

17. The connection between such stuplimity and the historical narratives I mentioned at the beginning of this essay is worth emphasizing. In Guha's essay, he suggests that our historiographical perspective should be expanded to include not only "big events and institutions" (138) but also "the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths." By "bending closer to the ground," he argues, such a perspective would allow us to retrieve the fragmentary particles of historical significance that constitute the "residuum of a dismembered past" (139). Similarly, in his essay on Pierre Rivière, Foucault praises the nineteenth-century *récit de crime* for the way in which it made historical narratives "accessible to the everyday" (204) by including material that had previously been considered too "undignified or lacking in social importance" for such a purpose. In both cases, we have an argument that relates to historiography; yet it is one that also carries narratological implications. Rather than simply focusing on the "nuclei" of history (or of narratives more generally), we are being encouraged to acknowledge the peripheral catalyzers that endow these stories with their "real historical content" (Guha 142). And we see a particularly fine example of this in the passage from *The Red and the Black* that I have just cited. Here, as

Miller indicates, we are drawn away from the major event at the center of the narrative (that is, the nucleus) and toward the "peripheral details and incidents" (261) that would ordinarily be neglected in the retelling of such a scenario. Moreover, if we include Ngai in our discussion, it becomes clear that this conjunction of the historical event and the everyday occurrence, of the nuclei and the catalyzer, also acquires an affective dimension—combining the "sudden excitation" (271) of the former with the boredom or fatigue that we are more likely to associate with the latter. And this brings us, in conclusion, to *Sacred Games*, which I have found particularly instructive for the way in which it accommodates all three of these perspectives: the historical (where the exceptional merges with the mundane), the narratological (where the nuclear merges with the catalytic), and the affective (where the sublime merges with the stupefying).

18. According to Shklovsky, such endings are "usually fashioned from a description of nature or the weather" (56), but have nothing to do with the actual resolution of the narrative. Instead, they provide the illusion of closure by offering us a (vaguely metaphorical) description of autumn leaves, say, or an "indifferent sky."

19. In 2003, for instance, two car bombs exploded in the center of the city, claiming 54 lives and injuring 244 people. Three years later, in 2006, the Mumbai suburban railway system was the target of another bombing, this time a series of seven explosions that killed 209 people and injured 700. In 2008, in a coordinated assault that was televised around the world, ten members of the Pakistani terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba subjected the city to four days of shootings and bombings that would ultimately kill 164 people (including the chief of the Mumbai Anti-Terrorist Squad [ATS]) and injure 308. And most recently, in 2011, a series of explosions in three different locations within the city claimed a further 28 lives and left 130 people injured.

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