Ecocritical Theory and Practice

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Recent Titles

Bhopal's Ecological Gothic

Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny

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Introduction

Bhopal, Disaster, Precarity

On 2/3 December 1984 methyl isocyanate (MIC), one of the world's most toxic substances, leaked from the Indian plant of the American pesticide manufacturer, Union Carbide, in the central Indian city of Bhopal. The immediate death toll was computed at about 30,000 and the number of injured, in the vicinity of 500,000 (mainly from genetic mutation-linked illnesses, inherited conditions and delayed onset of diseases due to exposure to the gas), thus making it the world's worst industrial disaster in human memory. The remainder of this story is well-known enough to not require repetition, whether it is the shoddy legal process that gave the victims meagre compensation, the failure of the Indian state, the abdication of Union Carbide of its responsibility, the quiet transfer of the Indian plant (Union Carbide India Limited, UCIL) to Dow which subsequently refused to accept the liability of the disaster and, of course, the continued suffering of several hundred thousand Bhopalis.

Numerous documentaries, some literary texts, advocacy and investigative reports and campaign materials have been produced in the thirty years since the events. Several eyewitness accounts have also been published over the years, some in the form of interviews in periodicals and newspapers. News coverage, especially around the anniversary, has been aplenty. Two volumes of photographs, by Raghu Rai and Francesca Moore, have appeared. Visual materials of effigies burnt annually in Bhopal as part of the continuing campaign for justice, pamphlets and newsletters from forums like the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal have contributed to the archive around Bhopal. These texts and the archive of suffering they constitute are the subject of the present book.

Literary-cultural studies embodying the "ethical turn" have addressed human rights, democracy, torture and environmentalism in the past few years. Such studies enable us to see the rhetorical and discursive strategies employed in fields like Literature, films or comics that generate cultural models of victimhood, trauma, personhood, the Human, civilization or development. Recent works like Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004), Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore's *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (2012) and Sophia McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore's *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (2016) are key instances of such studies. Studies of apocalyptic and dystopian texts, mostly eco-dystopias in cli-fi (climate change fiction/film) waste and "discard studies" (Susan Signe Morrison 2015) as well as cultural environmental studies (Tippins et al. 2010) are also part of this turn. The emphasis in such studies has been on the textual representations and their hidden or underlying social and political concerns that are immediate and often extreme. Aesthetic and narrative strategies that enable us to see these concerns and the cultural models of victimhood become, then, crucial for such work. This book is situated within such a tradition. It seeks to unpack how the world's worst industrial disaster might be studied in terms of the cultural texts produced about and around it.

The cultural texts around Bhopal's disaster exhibit motifs and themes such as information crypts, biopolitics (of the worst sort), secrecy, repression, landscapes of fear, haunting, abjection and violence. The abject, the uncanny, the monstrous are central to the discourses of disaster, survival and continuing disaster in Bhopal's texts about the events and the aftermath. Bhopal is an ongoing nightmare, a persistent haunting, and much of this revolves around poisoned bodies, genetic codes and the environment. There is slow death and social death in the non-recognition of this violence or the injured bodies, by either the UCIL and its owner-companies (Dow) or the state (India). The thanatopolitics—a politics geared toward the production of death, and the death of many—is frightening, and enduring.

In its iteration of these themes, the cultural texts propose implicitly a *Gothicization* of Bhopal. The texts embody and perform a Gothic, one that may be characterized as a disaster-Gothic or even a survivor-Gothic.

THE BHOPAL GOTHIC

Traditional Gothic texts invoked themes of a return to the past and transgression and often employed an aesthetics of fear. The inventory of motifs above is one that we have come to associate with the Gothic tradition, whether in European or global versions (for a collection of recent essays on the tradi-

tions and variant models of the Gothic in literature, science and popular culture, see Spooner 2007, McEvoy 2007 and Punter 2012). Timothy Jones has argued that

> The Gothic is something which is *done* rather than something that simply *is* . . . "Gothic habitus" is a shared way of understanding . . . the Gothic describes a way of writing, a way of reading, a way of thinking about stories, a way of imagining . . . a habitus that orchestrates the generation of various texts and variant readings. . . . (2009: 26–27, emphasis in original)[1]

I use the Gothic as a frame to read Bhopal—as event, as place, as effect—and its precarious culture well aware of this tradition, in order to argue for a *Gothicization* of the disaster, continued disaster and the haunting and terrifying suffering that haunts Bhopal and its residents even thirty years after the events. I take the above formulation of the Gothic "habitus" as a frame of understanding, a way of reading the texts around Bhopal. It is in no way to be taken as a conscious, culturally inflected, deployment of Gothic conventions by the producers of the texts themselves. Fred Botting has argued that:

> Gothic illusions of mortality and the sexed body emphasise bloody corpses, ripped flesh and oozing wounds. Its imagined return to the pulsing reality of the body evokes re-pulsion, a pulsion to the body and of the body, but also away from the body. . . . (2007: 203–4)

The Gothic as a genre deals with the "ruination of human identity," where the human becomes the "ab-human," "continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other." It "stages . . . a species of trauma . . . as the human body collapses and is reshapen" (Hurley 1994: 3–4). Botting and Hurley's formulations enable us to read injury, trauma (itself a term etymologically linked to "wounding") and misshapen human forms in Bhopal's cultural texts. It is the haunting and the precarity in Bhopal's texts, built around bodies, settings (environs, including soil and water bodies), cultural apparatuses when speaking of the prefigurations of the disaster, its progress and its aftermath that invites a Gothicized interpretation. The "Bhopal Gothic"—my shorthand term for the Gothicization of Bhopal—then, is a reading of Bhopal the city and the events occurring therein as approximating to Gothic themes and the aesthetics of decay, death and deterioration. It unpacks the thanatopolitical aesthetics in the representations of injured bodies, the events of the disaster and the enduring, prolonged aftermath.

Gothicization, let me hasten to add, links humans, organic nature such as water, plants and land, and the nonhuman (chemicals, such as MIC or phosgene). Gothicization is about *material* bodies, whether of the human or plant life, and their imbrication with the nonhuman. The process of Gothicization, therefore, is not simply about discursive ghosts or the narrative uncanny.

Gothicization is the iteration of material bodies, their insistence, within networks that involve corporate bodies, the human and the nonhuman. Such a Gothicization of Bhopal centers around and spreads outward, much like the MIC gas on 2/3 Dec. 1984, from the UCIL plant.

It is with industrialization and urbanization, Sara Wasson argues, that a "Gothicization of city space" occurs—she is referring to 19th-century London—with "urban centers . . . transformed by monstrous industry, economic exploitation and the isolation" (2014: 132). Wasson continues:

> A dominant theme of urban Gothic is the incorrigible fragility of modernity: even triumphs of the built environment are precarious, and the collapse of edifices is often a metaphor for the psychological crumbling of those who dwell within them. In urban Gothic, the triumphs of architecture and urban planning are fragile when faced with the destructive forces of entropy and human savagery: as Alexandra Warwick notes, the Gothic city "is also a place of ruins, paradoxically always new but always decaying, a state of death-in-life (Warwick 2009: 251). (132)

The events of 2/3 Dec. 1984 not only demonstrated the collapse of a modern factory's processes but also signaled the collapse of cultural protection and the institutional apparatuses designed to ensure the safety of the inhabitants. The "crumbling" that Wasson rightly gestures to is simultaneously about the collapse of the factory, the social relations, bodies and psyche of a city, that will forever be haunted by that night. As we shall see in the first chapter, the very processes, people and devices meant to work toward the modernization of the city contribute to this "crumbling" effect. However, the principle difference of the Bhopal Gothic from the kind that Wasson describes in the case of 19th-century London is that the decay and collapse of the factory is accompanied not by the psychological crumbling of the inhabitants alone (although this is a key condition of the survivors) but with the *material* decay of bodies and the environment.

Wasson proposes that Gothicized cities carry an "ancient poison" that causes the city's "inhabitants to deteriorate to earlier states of physical and moral development" (132). In the case of Bhopal, there is no ancient poison. In the industrialization of Bhopal, new poisons are injected into the soil and water, into bodies and the social fabric, in the form of UCIL. The deterioration of the inhabitants is dated to the UCIL's founding and subsequent disaster. Yet, thirty years later, the MIC and UCIL's other products do take on the characteristics of an ancient poison because these chemical products do not exit the system, the environment, the city. Bhopal *remains* Gothicized—perhaps a Gothic ruin or remains—because its today remains firmly embedded in its past, specifically the UCIL-driven past.

The Bhopal Gothic, while qualifying as disaster-Gothic or even a survivor-Gothic, is fundamentally an ecological Gothic because the texts continu-

ally point to the haunting of Nature—primarily soil, water but also the "natural" bodies of humans and animals—even as they examine the nature of this haunting by unholy liaisons, hybrid bodies, the monstrous, among others, that impact the survivors. These hybrids, hauntings and injuries are, as we shall see, the result of the global asserting/ingratiating itself into and uniting with the local. It is the uneven, disproportionate merger of global corporations with local structures that produces a hybrid monster such as UCIL. That is, Bhopal's texts generate an ecological Gothic when representing the injured bodies, the "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) and the unsustainable world/environs these bodies are embedded in, worlds that are themselves constituted by blurred borders and monstrous affiliations. The Gothic, as the pre-eminent form where we may find the human's encounter with evil or demonic global forces whirl the native human about, where there is transgression and the exploitation of innocence and the persistence of the uncanny, might be repurposed to examine the cultural texts around Bhopal. If the abhuman deformed, sick and decaying Bhopali (Indra Sinha's Animal in *Animal's People*, for instance) is the corporeal instantiation of the corporate-political hybrid that was/is UCIL-Bhopal, the injured and haunted *body politic*, protesting annually for better compensation, is its cultural and collective instantiation.

This monstrous, haunted body politic that is Bhopal, imbricates bodies, machines, chemicals with the state, corporate bodies and transnational capital. Stephen Shapiro has proposed that "capitalist commodification produces an intrinsically Gothic experience" (2008: 30).[2] Although this book does not *explicitly* address the role of capitalist modernity and the Bhopal disaster, it remains a subtext to the sections on "unholy liaisons," the haunting of bodies and nature by a product of industrial processes and transnational greed, the "in-corporated" nature of Bhopal and the mobilization of grief—what I describe as the *Gothicization* of Bhopal through UCIL.

Further, like Indra Sinha's Animal, like the mutant children and the twisted bodies of Bhopal's survivors documented in *The Bhopal Marathon*, the numerous documentaries and protest campaigns, who are "border entities" (Hurley 1994: 24–25)—between animal and human forms—UCIL itself is an abomination, a border entity. As the extended litigation demonstrates, it was neither an American company nor an Indian one, neither a global corporate house (Dow) nor the Indian state's factory. As the analysis of the effigies in chapter 3 demonstrates, the factory-as-abomination is an assertion of the uncanny, because it is both familiar and strange. Thus, the "Bhopal Gothic" as I employ it to read these texts, gestures at abominations, ruptured classifications, destroyed orders and blurred borders wherein categories and binaries of global/local, Indian/foreign, human/animal, savior/destroyer (UCIL as the savior of Indian agriculture) and life/death, break down. The precarious culture of Bhopal and its aftermath—and I take this to

mean the prefiguration of disaster, the event of the disaster and the aftermath of the disaster—is the collapse of available frames of knowing. The Gothic is a frame that seeks to explain and examine the anomaly that is Bhopal's spectrality, uncanny hauntings and monstrosity.

However, the injury, the trauma, the haunting of Bhopal's disaster- and survivor-Gothic is best approached, as this book demonstrates, through the frame of precarity.

THE CULTURE OF PRECARITY

The Gothic's dissolving, injured, quasi-formed and hybrid bodies (studied by numerous commentators, from David Punter to Kelly Hurley) in the Bhopal texts take the "form" of abject bodies. Their location in an ecosystem that does not sustain life—in fact, slowly drains them of life—is the subject of all textual representations. The Bhopal texts foreground a social ontology of the Bhopali, one that slides from vulnerability to helplessness, or a state of precariousness. It is an ecosystem and ecology wherein precarity is the order of the Bhopali day. The Bhopal Gothic in its discourse of injurability points less to the bodies of the victim than to the embedding of these bodies in specifically dangerous settings and environs, haunted by a toxic past. That is, the Bhopal Gothic of toxic haunting, specters of destruction, secrecy and repression is cathected on to human bodies *and* the body politic, both of which are, thereby, rendered precarious. Precarious subjects—individuals—constitute the precariat public sphere in Bhopal, even thirty years after the disaster. Bhopal instantiates a *precarious cultural condition* in its texts, from 1984 to the present.

Precariousness is the effect of an exposure to the world, which then inflicts injury (Butler 2004, 2009). Life requires a world that sustains life. As Butler puts it: "there is no life without those conditions that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person but the interdependency of persons" (2009: 19). Some lives are rendered more precarious, unliveable and their deaths less grievable than that of others (Butler 2004). Bryan Turner underscores the point that all ontology and life is social:

Who we are is a social process that is always constructed in terms of a particular experience of embodiment. Suffering (a loss of dignity) and pain (a loss of comfort, which we need in order to feel secure and confident) are always intertwined, and so vulnerability is both a physical and spiritual condition. Finally, our experience of the everyday world involves a particular place, a location within which experiences of the body and of our dependency on other humans unfold. (2006: 27)

All humans are vulnerable but only some of them are helpless, argues Adriana Cavarero (2011). Cavarero reminds us that it is "only in the newborn, where the vulnerable and the defenseless are one and the same" (20). But the defenseless are the ones who need active care. In the Bhopal texts this merger of the vulnerable and the defenseless becomes obvious. Helplessness is generated when vulnerable bodies are emplaced in the environment and settings that split open their vulnerability to cause injury. Helplessness is therefore the effect of a set of structural conditions, which in Bhopal's texts is documented as prefigurations of disaster. Exposed to the world, the vulnerable Bhopali was rendered helpless, and generations later, the helplessness haunts the Bhopali body and body politic. This is Bhopal's state of precarious exposure, and its ecological Gothic.

In the cultural texts on the disaster, precarious life is the centerpiece, but it is a precarity that is transmitted across generations. Thus, precariousness is not solely about the events of that night. Rather, it is an ongoing process of *endless* suffering. Adriana Cavarero argues that in torture the "centre of the scene is occupied by a suffering body, a body reduced to a totally available object, or, rather, a thing objectified by the reality of pain, *on which violence is taking its time about doing its work*" (Cavarero 2011: 31, emphasis added). Torture is not just the reduction of the subject to flesh but about the protracted extension of pain and concomitant slow erosion of the body's form, attendant dignity, sense of self and identity—what Cavarero calls "horrorism." Horrorism is the extended precarity of slow violence (such as the poisoning of water and soil), where vulnerability shades into helplessness, as is the case with Bhopal's victims. But this is not all.

Alongside Cavarero's definition of protracted suffering as horrorism, the Bhopal Gothic also terrifies. Posters, effigies and newsletters from the campaigns showcase the twisted, malformed bodies, the sicknesses and extended, intergenerational, i.e., transmissible, suffering—the legacy of 1984. If the protracted suffering is horrorist, the cultural texts inspire and invoke terror through the sheer emphasis on malformed corporeality whose causes and injuries are *simply not visible*. Horror, writes Ruth Anolik, "depends on the visible spectacle, the realized experience, to provide fear." Anolik elaborates:

Terror . . . is the *frisson* that is provoked by the invisible, by what lurks unseen in the dark. Therefore, I reasoned that the texts would likely provoke horror in response to visible disabilities like bodily deformity, and terror in response to invisible disabilities like sense disabilities and infection. (2010: 8)

Bhopal's visible suffering aside, it is its intergenerational and transmissible contamination that is the source of terror, and which makes its cultural texts, Gothic.

Traditionally, the Gothic texts "mark" spaces, whether urban, suburban or rural, through the presence of haunting bodies of ghosts, revenants, the possessed, or simply the Other (vampires, werewolves, among them). Dale Townshend writes:

> The Victorian Gothic . . . renders the architectural spaces of the earlier Gothic tradition considerably more capacious, daring to display the bodies of its inverts, degenerates, doubles and criminals in their sometimes secretive, sometimes bold perambulations across the urban spaces of the modern city. (Townshend 2014: xliii)

The Bhopal cultural text marks the space of the city as a space where such damaged bodies live. Documentaries, propaganda materials, feature films, photographs, eyewitness accounts all regularly "display" injured bodies. Cameras pan across the injured in their homes and alleys, and interviews are occasions for detailed accounts of the injuries. At the risk of being accused of marketing suffering-porn, these texts with their malformed, incapacitated and injured bodies play a major role in the Gothicization of Bhopal. From the quiet historic city described in almost all eyewitness accounts ("the city of lakes," and such epithets are commonly employed), the cultural texts now represent Bhopal as a Gothic space, haunted by its injured, damaged bodies.

The book moves from anticipations and prefigurations of disaster to the accounts of the events themselves (especially eyewitness accounts) to the aftereffects, aftermath and lingering consequences—what I call "haunting"—of the events. It sees the ecological Gothic as a frame of reading precarious lives and haunted spaces.

This book utilizes print and visual texts, but does not perform any ethnographic study by way of oral interviews (see Suroopa Mukherjee's work in this domain, 2010). It seeks not to aestheticize suffering or disaster, nor does it seek to supplant advocacy discourses and texts. It has a much smaller agenda: to examine how we can "read" the disasters in terms of its *representations* across cultural texts. Thus, the larger aim is to situate disaster and suffering within the remit of literary-cultural studies. It is however informed by the belief that certain aesthetic modes—such as the aesthetics of decay, deterioration and death that is akin to the Gothic aesthetic—are discernible in cultural representations of the disaster and the aftereffects.

The first analytical chapter examines the texts' representations of prefigured disaster. It demonstrates how disintegration, death and the entropic collapse of Bhopal is prefigured in the rhetoric of inherited vulnerability. The final events of 1984 merely *repeat* or *materialize*, with amplified disastrous effects, similar moments from before. It tracks the semiotics of disaster that, read backward from the events of 1984, foretold the disaster years before the

events. There is even a descent into irrationality in these texts' recall of the prefigurations, again suggestive of the Gothic.

The second chapter focuses on the narratives of the events themselves. Three principal discourses operate in these representations: the discourse of abjection, wherein the texts document the "making abject" of the city, the plant and the people; the discourse of helplessness in and around Bhopal.

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters that studies the "biopolitical uncanny" in the cultural texts. The uncanny consists of three identifiable dimensions. First, the secrecy and misinformation around the plant, its processes, safety measures and products that constitute the ecosystem of the world of Bhopal. Second, the texts embody a discourse of the monstrous. This monstrous is the hybridization of the local with the global, the monstrous body of UCIL, the Indian state and the world's corporate bodies. Alliances and incorporations constitute the monstrous. Finally, the chapter argues that Bhopal's texts point to the disaster as an autoimmune one.

Chapter 4 continues the examination of the biopolitical uncanny. This focuses on the residual effects of the disaster and the slow violence it unleashes in invisible, encrypted ways, upon the environs, bodies and psyches of the people. The chapter moves from haunted bodies to the state of the immediate environs, the family, and the effects of the disaster in the family. From the haunted families of the texts to the extensive haunted community and the city, the chapter opens out its study of the slow violence and lingering toxicity. Finally, it argues that Bhopal's texts document a haunted body politic.

The concluding chapter, 5, posits a postindustrial Gothic around the Bhopal factory and the haunted realms of the toxic-city. It argues that the UCIL ruin's polychronicity induces nostalgia, perhaps for a secular modernity the industry represents even today. It concludes with a section on the postindustrial uncanny in the representations of UCIL. It also studies the construction of an elegiac sublime around the ruins, and the public insurgencies of grief in the annual protests.

NOTES

1. Jones demands that we see Gothic-as-genre in a historicized sense, so that the newness in the genre may be noted. My purpose here is not to track the cultural production of a Bhopal Gothic, but rather to use the Gothic as a frame and critical apparatus to read the culture of precariousness, injury and haunting in Bhopal's texts. We do not come to these as *Gothic* texts wherein we expect certain themes, tropes and aesthetic forms. Rather, we read from within a Gothic habitus when reading these texts about specific forms of precariousness, the precariat public sphere and precarious bodies which then enables us to understand these themes and tropes. In other words, the Gothic is a way of reading texts dealing with precarious lives.

2. The social transformation effected by a shift to capitalist production, argues Shapiro, results in the making of folk-devils, a (re)turn to supernaturalism and magic and a resurgence in

religious beliefs: "Heightened supernaturalism emerges as a cultural marker of a region's initial appropriation by liberal political economy, but it also reappears with each new turn of the screw, even while the specific form of this discourse alters as the accumulated effects of each capitalist spiral make the prior one's 'Gothic-effects' less viable." (32) Reading texts like *Dracula*, Shapiro argues that "from a culturally materialist vantage, the redefinition of Gothic as a representational response by one core society to fears of losing place to another during times of capitalist phase-transition in the world-system provides a general framework that, in turn, allows for texts to reveal the specific tensions of their own moment." (35)

Chapter One

The Prefiguration of Disaster

The documentary *One Night in Bhopal* announces at an early moment: "In Bhopal, there is an ominous sign of things to come" (2004). The statement, albeit pronounced in retrospect, captures the theme of this chapter: the prefiguration and presentiment of disaster.

In traditional Gothic texts, time is dislocated through repetitions, hauntings, ghostly visitations, the sense of *déjà vu* and *presque vu* (literally, "almost seen"). Writing in retrospect, the Bhopal cultural texts suggest a sense of *presque vu* in the signs around the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) plant. This sense of *presque vu* is what the present chapter examines as the prefigurations of disaster in the cultural texts around Bhopal. While not strictly prophetic visions, the narratives seem to inevitably suggest that as early as the 1980s, signs were present in the everyday working of the plant that were ominous, and heralded doom. If the "Gothic has always had to do with disruptions of scale and perspective" (Punter and Byron 2007: 50), then the Bhopal cultural texts are loaded with instances of perspectives determined by ominous signs, and wherein scales of economy, survival and human management are disrupted. It is in these signs of disruption of both scale and perspective that prefigurations of disaster are "read." The degeneration of order—management, safety mechanisms, socio-cultural apparatuses—that marks the Gothic is prefigured in several signs in the Bhopal texts.

The designation 2/3 December 1984, Bhopal, is prefigured in the cultural texts, written after the events, dealing with the disaster in several ways. In the opening paragraph of T. R. Chouhan et al.'s *Bhopal: The Inside Story* (1994) they write, "these factors turned the pesticide factory into a ticking bomb that could explode at any time" (17). In Anees Chishti's journalistic eyewitness narrative he writes, "danger from the Union Carbide factory always lurked in the minds of people of Bhopal" (1986: 33). In the feature film, *Bhopal: A*

Conclusion

"Burial of an Unknown Child" as Icon

Numerous photographs exist from the Bhopal tragedy. Yet, if we were to consider what constitutes the single most iconic image that recalls the disaster, it would have to be Raghu Rai's photograph, "Burial of an Unknown Child" (Rai, *Exposure*, www.magnumphotos.com).

By way of a conclusion to a tragedy that has *no* conclusion, since the survivors continue to suffer from the horrific effects of the gas, I examine the iconic status of this photograph, and why it means so much to us.

If one were to contextualize the photograph in the cultural texts of Bhopal that this book has studied, then, one of the first frames would be that of the slums and poverty of the UCIL and its neighborhoods. All films linger over these slums, as already noted. While not exactly akin to "slum tourism," "dark tourism" and "poverty porn," the Bhopal environs are inserted into the visual economy of the contemporary. Uli Linke refers to signs of "urban poverty [that] are imagined, trafficked, branded, and consumed along transnational media circuits as signifying practices in a global panopticon of race" (2013: 1224). Linke proposes that "slum iconicities are not merely consumed as cultural exemplars or artifacts of non-European urban worlds but also interpreted as visual evidence of racial alterities" (1224). India and Bhopal represent in such photographs and visuals a certain "embedded injustice" (Ewalt 2011: 339–41) as a part of its very geography.

While this argument about a certain "tropicalism" ("representational practices that belong to those structures of domination that relegate entire populations [of the global South] to the economic and social margins of urban space," Linke 1225–26) is not to reject the global humanitarian efforts to help Bhopal's survivors, the visual rhetoric of the cultural texts does suggest

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"Burial of an Unknown Child" by Raghu Rai.

an alterity that is racially, nationally and geographically coded. It is the sheer otherness of Bhopal's contexts—amplified by the cultural texts' insistence on how safety measures and policies were radically different in UCIL plants in the United States and India—that frames the photograph. That is, Bhopal's previvors and poverty are slum iconicities circulating in global media circuits of suffering and aid as the Other face of industrial modernity: the photograph is framed within this set of iconicities.

There is a certain tenderness with which the hand brushes the mud and gravel around the child's face/head. The tenderness, standing as a sharp contrast to the horrors of 2/3 Dec. 1984, is gut wrenching because it also signals a *delicacy*, a *propriety*, toward the dead child which the child was possibly never accorded in the moments of dying. There is, in the act captured in the photograph, a fantasy or illusion of decorum which Bhopal did not possess or exhibit in the course of the disaster, nor was it allowed the victims and survivors. However, the bleached staring eyes of the dead child, the anonymity of identity sits oddly with the delicacy and propriety of the brushing hand. I suggest that what arrests us is this very conjunction of the delicate and proper with the grotesque. Following the work of Yael Shapira reading the "delicate Gothic," I suggest that Rai's photograph brings into unassimilable convergence "a radically purified ideal and a scandalous, spectacular grotesque" (2006: 9). The image of the respected, dignified body being treated with care is an odd reminder of the sheer grotesque nature of the deaths in Bhopal (everted physiologies, choking and coughing to death).

Further, the act of burial, signifying the hiding away of (one kind of) evidence of UCIL and Bhopal's disaster *breaches* the child's dignity in death. It exposes the dead endlessly in the circulation of Rai's image, even as the body itself is "shot" in the act of burial.

Images become icons when they fulfill certain specific conditions. Martin Kemp in his *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* defines a visual icon as "one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context, and meaning" (2012: 3). The associations that Rai's photograph could be varied, except for one specific state: this is the burial of an *infant*, and represents a life cut drastically short.

Rai's photograph is an instance of what historical biologists term an "extinction icon" (Turvey and Cheke 2008). The burial of the child marks the extinction of entire families, generations and communities of previvors—Bhopalis—due to circumstances over which they had no control. If, as Turvey and Cheke examine in the case of species extinction, the human causes of such extinction could be diverse (and disputed), Rai's photograph read in conjunction with the evidentiary documents of Bhopal becomes iconic for

athecting the entire faulty technological, administrative and cultural processes.

Rai also captures the ultimate and the ideal victim in the photograph: the child. Nils Christie (1986) proposed the following features of the "ideal victim": the victim is weak in relation to the offender; the victim is, if not acting virtuously, then at least going about their legitimate, ordinary everyday business; the victim is blameless for what happened; the victim is unrelated to and does not know the "stranger" who has committed the offence; the offender is unambiguously big and bad; the victim has the right combination of power, influence or sympathy to successfully elicit victim status without threatening (and thus risking opposition from) strong countervailing vested interests.

Victimhood is a form of communication, where the injured party needs to communicate the experience, argues Rainer Strobl (2010). For this communicative act to be meaningful, it requires a set of norms and cultural frames that bestows a special social status upon the injured. A person might regard herself/himself as a victim and the world agrees with this; a person may not regard himself/herself as a victim and is not regarded as a victim by relevant others; a person could regard himself/herself as a victim but not be regarded as a victim by relevant others; a person could not regard himself/herself as a victim but be regarded as a victim by relevant others (Strobl).

This is precisely why the child victim draws our attention: the child victim does not have a language to communicate in. The child victim communicates not by establishing claims but simply by being a child. The martyr as witness, we have been told by Jacques Derrida, does not always offer his story: he offers himself, his body as testament to his faith. This is the body of suffering that communicates as a body whose disintegrated state immediately warns of the loss of corporeal coherence in a being/person who has not yet attained corporeal coherence in any wholeness. This spectacle of the child victim is a version of horror fiction and film where the dissolving body is a staple image, writes Kelly Hurley (1994), with the difference being: the body of the child victim has not dissolved or been dismembered (though there are those kinds of images as well), but is always positioned at the cusp of such a dissolution. It is not the disintegration as much as the processes and moments leading up to the imminent, even unstoppable, dissolution that horrifies.

The child victim of specific crimes—abuse, murder, etc.—occupies a separate space. Here the victim (for instance the victims of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, or Jeffrey Dahmer) is, or had been, weaker than the perpetrator or offender. The victim attains victim status through this unevenness of agency and power. There is an individual who might be held to be guilty and who, theoretically, may be brought to justice for harming the person. Such victims are radically different from Phan Thi Kim Phúc OOnt (the Napalm girl in Nick Ut's Vietnam photograph) or Aylan Kurdi (the Turkish boy drowned as they sought to escape the IS) because, in their case, there is no single, identifiable individual perpetrator. Undoubtedly, child victims of serial killers attract sympathy and outrage which then is channeled against the perpetrators (if caught, as illustrated in the social outrage against Brady and Hindley). Thus there is a clear victim/perpetrator binary at work in such cases.

In the case of Phan Thi Kim Phúc OOnt or Kurdi or Rai's "unknown child," the moral status of the victim is amplified because one cannot find an individual perpetrator and only a perpetrator-situation. War, riots, natural or man-made disaster are perpetrator situations in which the child victims are produced and nobody can be brought to justice for their victimhood. It is the impossibility of ever acquiring justice for the child victim that makes Phan Thi Kim Phúc OOnt or Omran Daqneesh unique in terms of child victim status. These child victims are victims of the world at large, of systemic conditions and events.

The child victim is an ideal victim because s/he walks into, or is at, the "scope." S/he is at once the site of "skopos" and "telos." Samuel Weber (2005) makes the distinction between *skopos* and *telos*, where the former is the target and the latter the fulfilment of an action or set of processes: "Skopos is already, tendentially, the tele-scope, since 'the one who aims' is also 'the one who surveys.'" To survey, in this sense, is to command at a distance. Skopos then "designates not just the act but also the object of such watching: the mark or target." In wartime, the imminent victims are watched and then they walk into the firing range (Phan Thi Kim Phúc OOnt, Rai's "unknown child"). The child's victimhood results from being a target of opportunity, whether in wartime, natural disaster or industrial disaster. The child simply happens to be in a zone devoid of any resources for help or survival. S/he is scoped for suffering and/or death, so to speak. S/he is not an individual target, but is nevertheless the individual face of the event.

The image of the child victim becomes an icon precisely because there is no visible and identifiable perpetrator, no obvious reason for the child to be caught in the cross-fire or to die in a blaze of gas. Raghu Rai's "unknown child" does not need a context, or a frame: indeed, *it is* the frame through which we see the needless, casual deaths of Bhopal. The child is scoped into death.

Rai's iconic photograph defines death, because the child is dead. There is, also, a certain compositional unity in the photograph. As the child lies dead, a hand carefully arranges the soil around it, perhaps leaving the face open till the last. The strangely translucent eyes of the child frozen in death is in sharp contrast to the dynamics of the hand and soil around it. It is this binary of permanent stillness and moving hand ensuring a safe resting spot that engages us, and renders the photograph iconic.

Martin Kemp argues that icons should be at once specific and yet not so. Rai's photograph could at once both of the moment and not of it (219). Rai's photograph could be, to any age, to any disaster. It at once is the prototypical victim photograph and yet remains deeply contextualized as *the* Bhopal photograph. Adopting work from celebrity studies, I argue that Rai's photograph organizes an entire social imaginary around it (as Celia Lury has argued about Beckhams, 2012), an imaginary that draws attention to needless death, the anonymity of death and the absence of a future to that single child, although the child itself represents the aspirations of several. There are two discourses that intersect in the form of the photograph: the discourse of identity/identification and the discourse of death. The absence of markers renders the death of the child more poignant because it forces one to consider the ones who did not die with the child, and who might have looked for this one child. The anonymity of dying here seems to render the child, any child or every child. The restructuration of the process where the rest of the body has been more or less concealed with the face alone left open, for the moment. The discourse of identity intersects with the discourse of death in this brief moment before the final concealment of (even) the face, almost as though somebody waits for a last-minute identification of the corpse, a revelation of the true identity of the child.

Such a photograph originating in the Bhopal disaster not only becomes a symbol for the "unimaginable" but also structures our perceptions and receptivity to new disasters and new tragedies (Brink 2000: 135–36), or what we think of as a social imaginary. The iteration of Rai's photograph over the years is, I argue, the potential instrument of such reformation of the social imaginary. Iconicity here then is not about the death of *one* child, but what this death—and how it resulted—has *come to stand in for* and what it calls us to contemplate: systemic failure, precarious lives and lifelong ecological disaster. Rai's "unknown child" *represents* something *other than* itself, something more than itself. Its cultural iconicity lies in the photograph's ability to serve as a template for any and every tragedy, if one so chooses. Elsewhere brand studies scholar Celia Lury has argued that the icon enables us to make "abductive inferences about the possibilities of objects" (2004: . That is, when we reference an icon we immediately call attention to various qualities of the icon but also of all those objects with whom we connect the icon. That is, when an icon is transposed (like Che Tee-shirts, Shakespearean adaptations) or "abducted" to other objects, we infer *possibil*ties for those objects as well. Rai's photograph transposed into any context allows us, like any iconic photograph, to pay attention to qualities, processes that *could* produce similar conditions of child victims.

Celia Lury later argues that an icon becomes a source for the elaboration of 'the social imaginary or ground of abstraction as the possible field from which relations of similitude might be inferred" (2012: 254). If so, Rai's photograph forces us to generate a social imaginary of disaster, innocent victimhood, corporate greed and state indifference. It calls upon us to imagine potential disasters that generate such victims as the "unknown child."

The campaign cry for Justice for Bhopal says, "No More Bhopals," a cry reiterated every year. This is a verbal equivalent of the *continuity* of movement of Rai's photograph across time and space. The Rai photograph in its very act of iteration *cautions against the iterations of such events warranting similar photographs*: this is what makes Rai's photograph iconic.

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