PHOTOGRAPHERS’ PERSPECTIVES

on the life and times of the South African image and where it’s taking us

Members of the press congregate to photograph Nelson Mandela shortly after his release from prison in 1990. Photo: Paul Weinberg
Photography has a fascinating back-story in Southern Africa. In the late 19th century Thomas Baines, a British artist, and James Chapman, an explorer, hunter, trader and photographer, made for the Victoria Falls – Baines to paint it, and Chapman to photograph it. The pair aimed to be the first people in the world to document this wonder, which had just been discovered by Sir David Livingstone. As it turned out, Chapman’s camera malfunctioned at the operative moment, and so the first images of Victoria Falls were immortalised by the artist. The photographer lost the scoop of a lifetime.

By Nick van der Leek
Along with the meteoric rise and acquisition of social media, is the rise of freelancing. Not merely freelance photography and photojournalism, but the rise of the independent contractor. A free agent means individuated sentient citizens, adaptable, diversified, serving multiple clients, and broadcasting their own media and branding into the social media ether. This potentially makes activists of us all, as we’ve seen in the Arab Spring. For some time now there has been talk of a South African Spring, especially around the ongoing unrest along the Platinum Belt post Marikana.

The future of South Africa’s image
When you Google ‘iconic Apartheid photos’ the two that stand out are Hector Pieterson and Nelson Mandela with Francois Pienaar. Of course the one ushers in the ghastliness of Apartheid, and all its ghosts. The dying child is painful, filling one with despair and outrage. The other is affirming; it inspires and uplifts. Mandela symbolises the triumph of hope and altruism in an unjust world, and the possibilities for freedom and grace in an unfair society.

Invictus is arguably the best (and only) mainstream vehicle that captures this positive South African narrative. Directed by Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman plays the great man, and Matt Damon does his best as Francois Pienaar, the Springbok rugby captain circa 1995. The movie is based on a book by John Carlin. Carlin was bureau chief for South Africa’s The Independent newspaper from 1989-1995. In 1995, Carlin wrote and presented a BBC documentary on the South African Third Force, his first television work.

Carlin’s response, when asked to contribute to this article, was – like Invictus – similarly affirmative. “Overall I think there is a lot to celebrate about the SA media over the last 20 years. I see the fearless and principled way a number of the newspapers, in particular, have stood up to power and I feel proud to be a journalist. As for my personal journey on the 95 World Cup story, I am not sure how it fits into your general picture here. But I guess what it did was reinforce my sense of how utterly pivotal the figure of the leader can be in a country’s evolution. Mbeki and Zuma shared the principles and strategies of Mandela but had either of them been ANC leader and then president at that very delicate time of transition it is entirely possible that South Africa’s history would have taken a radically different course, that instead of peace you’d have had chaos. Mandela’s capacity to put himself in his enemy’s shoes and his understanding of the power of respect, charm and symbolism to win hearts and minds was as unique as – back then – it was essential. The rugby World Cup of 1995 was the most visible expression of his political genius and the consummate moment of a life dedicated to bringing the best out of his compatriots.”

The photograph of South Africa’s first democratically elected president wearing the Springbok jersey, says Carlin, “summed it up quite beautifully.” It is photographer’s who must do this summing up. It’s their job to tell the stories, but to do so, they have to be in the story (and thus, part of the story). Paul Weinberg, senior curator of the Visual Archives at UCT, did just that. “When Madiba voted for the first time in his life at Ohlange High School, Inanda, Durban, 1994, I was there, as the official photographer for the Independent Electoral Commission. I had thought I was the only photographer in the room,” Weinberg enthuses, “but two photographs have subsequently emerged. One from the side by an international observer and another from above, where the SABC camera was positioned. This was my five seconds of fame. Countless people told me they had seen me on TV as Nelson Mandela voted and I crouched below him to take this image.”

Greg Marinovich, one of four photographers of the famous ‘Bang Bang Club’ says, “The issue of democracy has shifted from a very clearly defined goal of universal franchise, and an end to the discrimination and violent implementation of apartheid, to a less easy to define goal of correcting massive economic inequality that has shades of race yet is not based on race. Human rights are still routinely ignored by both the state and big capital, subservient to profit before justice.”

Nick van der Leek is a freelance photojournalist with an unconventional background. Instead of journalism he studied law, economics and brand management. His writing career started online, as a blogger in South Korea and a citizen journalist for Seoul-based Ohmynews International. After cutting his teeth at Avisa (now Times Media), he became a full-time writer and photographer, and today publishes in titles such as GQ, Country Life, Fitness and Finweek magazines. He is currently working on a futuristic dystopian novel set in Scotland.