

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

Photojournalism formed itself in those early days through a process of documenting history. War artists were precursors to war photojournalists. Landscape artists and streets artists once sat on site with their pencils and paints, as some courtroom artists still do today. In 1914, my great grandfather, Tinus de Jongh, painted Dam Square at the behest of the HM Queen Wilhelmina, which today forms part of Beeldbank Stadsarchief (an archive of urban images) in Amsterdam. When de Jongh came to South Africa, he built a caravan and headed from his home in Kenilworth, Cape Town to document the Victoria Falls.

At the same time de Jongh was roaming South Africa's landscape, an American, Arthur Elliot, using a quarter-plate camera, captured the Cape's domestic architecture (and some of its early inhabitants). Besides the beauty of these extraordinary images, their historical value is unquestionable. The Elliot Collection is one of the most remarkable photographic collections in the world. They can be viewed today at the Cape Archives, or in the book *A Cape Camera*.

From terrestrial photography to celestial technology

If the art world saw revolutionary change in the years approaching and just beyond the turn of the 20th century, photography has seen even more radical change in the last 20. In fact, it's fair to say that the symbiosis of photographic images and digital dissemination has turned photography, especially the documenting of news and politics, into a form of activism. A photograph by its very nature seems to carry a political message and, compared to a painting, can do the job at lightning speed. The power of a photographic image is further leveraged by the speed of transmission through the printed medium, first by mail, then by fax, and then massively enhanced by the advent of computer code, land and satellite based networks and, now, smartphones. Today pictures are transmitted around the world at the click of a mouse or a fingertip on a personal, handheld device.

It's entirely reasonable to suggest that a single photo changed South Africa's political landscape. The first that comes to mind is a dying 13-year-old, gunned down by security police, and carried by a fellow student whilst his sister ran alongside. The image of Hector Pieterse (who was dead upon arrival at a nearby clinic) was photographed by Sam Nzima in the winter of 1976. Interestingly, Nzima has recently re-acquired copyright for his iconic image.

Sandy Matham-Bayley, a lecturer at the Cape Town School of Photography, believes that Peter Magubane's images from the Soweto uprising collectively remain the most poignant apartheid era photographs to this day. "I also think that the earlier images from the Women's March in 1956 started the pressure for reform – an unforgettable sight of women standing peacefully shoulder to shoulder. We have such a rich visual history that it almost seems unfair that we default to one iconic image. But," Matham-Bayley adds, "it just goes to show the power of the single image."

Contemporary photography in South Africa

Matham-Bayley, once an 80s activist, also lectures in visual literacy and holds a Masters in documentary photography. Although she says Nzima's image transcends the events of Sharpeville and "now symbolises our global struggle for human rights" she emphasises "to the younger generation that's the start and end of it, sadly." Jumping to the present, Matham-Bayley notes a sea of changes gripping the modern industry, some forces buffeting the trade whilst others are literally tearing it apart.

Since 1994, both the way media is produced and how it is consumed has seen cosmic shifts. "We live in a visually rich, albeit cluttered world...and it's getting more cluttered by the nano-second. My sense," she adds, "is that we are sitting at an interesting juncture of how we use images to educate, and the challenge this holds as the clutter explodes for both educators and practitioners. Our history has been richly captured by photographers through the years yet the same images are perpetuated in textbooks. Scholars are not taught to interrogate images or to be curious about the 'messages' (through no fault of their own but perhaps because educators themselves have not been taught visual literacy skills), images are simply used as references to events. A similar challenge faces photographers: how do we make images that cut through the clutter? If our world is becoming byte sized (a picture and a few hashtagged words) then never has the need to be visually literate been more important than it is today."

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 Pieterse 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 1993, 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."



Nelson Mandela votes for the first time in his life, Ohlange school, Inanda. Photo: Paul Weinberg



President Nelson Mandela at the launch of the land redistribution pilot programme. Photo: Paul Weinberg

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 Avusa (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.

