

The streets and the gods of truth

Sello Duiker reflects on the influence of the past on young artists in South Africa and pays tribute to the inspiration of street culture.

It is hard to believe that 10 years of democracy have passed since the new democratically elected government came into power in 1994. While growing up in the turbulent '80s, it seemed as if the reign of terror and oppression would never end. But like most things it did.

Thinking back, I remember what kept us going through those dark years: the hope that one day we would all enjoy the fruits of living in a democratic society. Thinking back, my immediate inclination is to make a list of the political luminaries who inspired us by their dedication to the struggle: Luthuli, Mandela, Biko and Sisulu, to name only the most obvious ones. But perhaps there was another subtle force that gave us hope, at least for me – and that was art.

The first time art ever consciously made an impression on me was in high school when I learned about Bushmen paintings. It suddenly occurred to me that art even in its simplest form, has the ability to make us aware that there is something beyond the mundane. It can force us to search inside ourselves for meaning.

This was an important realisation because censorship was so pervasive during the draconian 1980s, that it felt as if we weren't ever really talking about what was happening to and around us. Under the blanket of censorship the township was boiling with confusion and frustration, waiting to explode. The situation did explode – in bursts of toyi-toying, protests and vigilantes and chanting bitter invectives against the government.

It never ceased to surprise me how humorous and creative many of the activists could be in the midst of the oppression. There was struggle poetry and voices like those of Wally Serote and Sipho Sepamla, which rang with compassion. During that time of brutality, Breytenbach's delicate love poetry to his wife reminded me that we were people with

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feelings, dreams and aspirations, even though the township was like a war zone where neighbours were forced to spy on neighbours, children ran wild and participated in gruesome necklace killings. It felt all the more as though our voices were being smothered, the light sucked out of our eyes as we watched our elders being humiliated by security policemen and other figures of authority.

1986 and 1987 were particularly difficult years – curfews and raids were the order of the day. Where did one go for refuge? Where did you go to keep your dreams alive, to re-awaken a sense of well-being when there was so much despair?

My own natural reaction was to read as much as I could. It was the only way to survive: it offered me a form of escape. I felt I had to learn to articulate the disturbing silence that was being forced upon all of us – a state of being which I called “The Madness”. There was no information coming from the regime about what was happening in the country, so I had to make sense of things in my own way.

I threw myself into poetry.

I started wondering about the visual artists. What did they have to say about the state of affairs? How were they responding to The Madness?

That was when I stumbled across the angst-ridden work of Jane Alexander. Who can forget the eerie *Butcher Boys*? Their overwhelming presence looming over you much like the omnipresent regime who somehow always knew how to silence dissident voices. These ghouls with repulsive faces and oppressive bodies were creatures which could only have been inspired by something as vile and inhuman as apartheid. The *Butcher Boys* personified to me the grotesqueness of apartheid and the absence of dialogue we were trapped in.

There were works by lesser known township artists like Mvemve too, which reminded me of where we came from. These pastel drawings often



depicted shebeen scenes or familiar township pastimes like kids playing football in the street. They were a tribute to happier times, when Sophiatown – that island of social and cultural harmony in the turmoil of Jozi – was still a reality.

In the face of all the confusion I started writing poetry, earnestly trying to find a voice; my voice. And then in the early '90s, a musical revolution began stirring in the townships, particularly Soweto. Youths began to celebrate township life in a way they had never done before. In retrospect it is clear that it was an attempt by young people to articulate their township experience and make sense of what it meant to grow up under apartheid. A musical genre called kwaito was born.

At house parties, in selected discos and on a few adventurous radio stations, the music would be played while the music industry snubbed it. Hijackings, fast life, crime and boys lusting after girls were some of the themes that kwaito explored. Kwaito spoke to its audience in their own lingo, a mishmash of different vernaculars, English and tsotsi-taal, known as “scanto”.

The very nature of kwaito was irreverent and controversial. Often songs didn't have much in the line of lyrics, but sex always came up in some form or another. Community leaders were quick to criticise kwaito for glamourising thug life and for encouraging youths to be preoccupied with sex. But in a country where young black people had been denied a voice for so long, it was hardly a surprise that they would again rebel – in a very different way, but much in the same spirit as during the 1976 uprising.

In a country with one of the highest rape rates in the world, it should have come to no surprise that young people were sending out mixed messages about sex. Perhaps those early kwaito days with their songs, invariably about specific female body parts, were presaging the HIV/Aids crisis that we



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are now experiencing. Already then we should have known that a deadly disease was killing us furtively. Now I mourn for the artists we have lost to Aids.

Ten years into democracy and township life has changed profoundly. There has been a substantial exodus of intellectuals, artists and people with education, creating what ironically could be called a brain drain from the townships to the suburbs. Yet kwaito continues to grow, reaching and touching its suburban cousins, Amabourgeois – the “chosen” beneficiaries of the new democracy. A new kind of lingo has evolved, somewhere between the leafy Johannesburg of the northern suburbs and the townships.

Some people said kwaito was just a passing phase and would soon disappear. But it has not happened. On the contrary, next to hip hop, kwaito is the biggest selling music genre among the youth, and cross-over kwaito artists like Mandoza continue to popularise the music within unlikely sectors of the population. Kwaito continues to explore new themes, like Aids awareness and getting an education. Boom Shaka’s smash hit *Thobela* ushered in a new creative interest in the township and about urban life. Sure there is still the bling-bling obsession with material things and money, but perhaps that is the inevitable result of the American invasion of youth culture everywhere.

Kwaito obviously spoke to the youth then, and still speaks to them now. It certainly spoke to me. My interest in it stemmed from my self-discovery as a writer. Kwaito made me aware of using language, particularly English, in a localised way. At Rhodes I discovered the incandescent writings of Dambudzo Marachera and Bessie Head. I enrolled in ’95, the year after the historic first democratic elections. We were still basking in the euphoria of the honeymoon period.

Campus was alive with energy and excitement.

Perhaps as students we naively felt anything was possible. For me it was the true beginning of my creative awakening. Hippos, security police and sirens waking you up at obscene hours of the morning slipped to the back of my mind. I was falling in and out of love, making friends and discovering the meaning of the word democracy that was still a little awkward in my mouth. I ended up starting a poetry society with two friends, called *Seeds*. With hindsight I can admit that it was more about drinking copious amounts of wine and trying to impress girls than about words. But once a term we did manage to publish a collection of poems.

It is hard to draw a line between the verbal and the visual. In my second year at university I discovered Gerard Sekoto’s work. In my fiction and poetry I now strived for the lyricism of his *Song of the Pick*. The vivid colours, the forms and the sense of rhythm in his earlier work, done while still in South Africa, inspired me to use language exuberantly.

Unfortunately, Sekoto, seeking his muse far from his motherland, left the country like many artists and writers, including Arthur Maimane, Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba who died alone and forgotten in a cold city. One of the best side effects of the 1994 elections has been the return of our exiled artists, musicians like Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, and writers like Keorapatse Kgotsile and Zakes Mda.

I celebrate the efforts of all those committed artists, writers and musicians by relishing the freedom to create and “write what I like”, to quote Biko – because our freedom came at a price. How many bodies disappeared in mass graves? What happened to activist heroes like Tsietshi Mashinini and his young comrades of 1976? It seems as if history has swallowed them along with apartheid. Let us not forget them. Let us not forget current injustices.

Perhaps art should be regarded as a social barometer. What better way to find out what is happening in any country than to look at what its artists are doing. Gratefully we have moved away from protest art and struggle poetry. We have finally started to tell our own stories, “warts and all”, without feeling political pressure to keep silent about certain aspects and overemphasise others. And that is humanising, if nothing else.

So when the opportunity arose to write my own story – for I believe emphatically in the personal before the public – I grabbed it with both hands.

At the beginning of 1997, after completing a first degree, I found myself in Cape Town, a student at one of the advertising schools. It was different from the rugged streets of Soweto, where hawkers sold you bogus goods and roasted mealies could be bought on a street corner. I lived in Sea Point, quietly going about my activities as a student.

The people on the streets of Sea Point always had something to say, something to gossip about, even something to warn one against. There were 13-year-old drug pushers, undercover cops, pick-pockets, even members of the Moroccan and Russian mafia. There they all were, part of a vibrant and ever-changing Sea Point; some in business, some out, some suffering extortion and others bribing cops.

Among the bustle of people making a living by any means necessary, I noticed another ignored member of street life: the street child. For some reason street children seem to stand out more in Cape Town than elsewhere. Unlike in Johannesburg, where the mass exodus from the CBD has left the decay, the underclass and other undesirables – street children included – behind in the inner city, Cape Town’s street children are very much part of the

city. So I couldn’t but notice a number of them on my way to college every morning, sleeping huddled together under threadbare flea-infested blankets, neglected and left to fend for themselves. After three months certain faces became familiar to me. “Heita, hoesit, away,” we would begin. I was slowly opening myself to them, and as much as I chastised myself, I couldn’t resist the urge to spare them my change.

It soon became useful to know some of theseurchins, especially when walking down certain streets at night where, rumour had it, these kids were waiting for an easy prey: a careless reveller, drunk after an evening at the club. They were always testing me. Sometimes when they were high on glue and buttons, they would swear me rotten, and even threaten to hit me, but they never did. I suppose it was just their way of saying, “I’m not just any kid”.

And then one day I followed a small circle of street children into their world. For three weeks I helped them look for a lost friend. Time enough for me to discover, that when you live on the street, the world is often a harsh, cold pavement with greedy pigeons competing for food with you, and a dangerous bully around the corner, ready to bludgeon you.

While the world sleeps and other children lie snugly in their beds, these kids sniff glue, smoke buttons and anything else that would make them forget that childhood is passing them by. They are aggressive as a matter of course, tough and street-wise. Fights erupt easily, and they usually last until someone bleeds or concedes defeat.

In the 1980s the street was where township kids went to look for justice and heroes, where one found one’s tribe and a street ethos that became a way of life. It was where township children learned about protest, kangaroo courts, vigilantes and necklacing. It was where dusty roads erupted into a cloud, with the stamping of feet echoing through the air. It was where impulse and energy thrived, where the generation gap boldly defined itself. Mothers and fathers, tired of protest, returned from work only to find their sons and daughters seeking their gods of truth on the street.

There is a legacy of street fighters and icons, people who have given the street experience credibility. Street culture still permeates our townships. There are bomkhosi, itinerant mealie ladies who pepper the air with their cries as they walk by. There is street football and bhati for girls. There is knowing your neighbour by watching how their kids behave on the street. And there is a sense of community as everyone grows up together. But the city streets are different. There is also the dark side of street culture. Some children are at the complete mercy of its darkness. *Thirteen Cents*, my first novel, is about their long nights.

Life is still turbulent today for young people, but unlike the ’80s, it is not because of an unjust and cruel political system. It is harsh and confusing for many, particularly on the street, because despite our democratic system, not enough has been done yet for the poor and the homeless.

Perhaps this is where art has its place today.

One of its roles is to attempt to openly and freely capture the myriad details that make us, here at the most southern tip of Africa, unique. But even while we are celebrating this wonderful gift which the last 10 years brought with it, let us not forget, that the role of the artist, the musician, the poet, the writer is to wander the streets, to keep being ever wakeful to notice and to voice what is often easier to push out of sight and out of mind, like the kid curled up in the corner, an old blanket hiding his face.



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