DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

IDEOLOGY AND THE IMAGE

Ivor Powell

THE "STRUGGLE" **in this country was not just a fight for a better and democratic society, a righting of the practical wrongs wrought by apartheid. It assumed the status of a kind of a holy war. It might have taken place in a specific geographical region, but its meanings, its drama, were played out in psychological realms on a world stage. The "struggle" became a morality play, a symbolic and redemptive confrontation of good and evil, fascism versus the democratic impulse, black versus white, humanity versus the inhumanity of apartheid.**

It was of course a lot of other things as well — both more and less than this. But the image of the freedom struggle in this country became for the world at large a kind of test case or limit for definitions of humanity. What such investments of morality meant in concrete terms is that news about and images of South Africa, especially insofar as they were consumed in the world outside, were forced into a very particular mould. They had to be, overwhelmingly, exemplars of the morality play that was South Africa. By the same token, though from the internal perspective, they had to represent and enact the "struggle", they had to partake of the purity of the morality play, conform to certain rules of how South Africa was to be depicted, be shot through with the predecided meanings of this country's history. There was very little interest, as many a journalist, photographer and social analyst discovered to his or her cost, in anything else.

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Consumption of "the South African story" became increasingly, especially during the 1980s, a kind of a ritual, something that grew more, not less meaningful with repetition. The same "story" — an example that leaps to mind is the confrontation of youth and police and the detention of youth around 1985 — could be told every night on overseas television screens for three months at a stretch without the proverbial short attention span of the media audience ever reaching its limit...

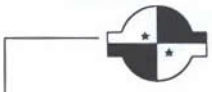
News and documentary accounts became something the viewer or consumer participated in; the essence was the familiarity of the drama that was depicted. South African images had to have a certain look or a certain "story" to be of interest to the world at large. In the crudest version, they had to have evil, brutal, whites, usually in uniform, almost always armed, oppressing the heroic and innocent black majority. But, as time went on, the semantics became increasingly subtle, increasingly metonymic. It was enough that whites should be living behind barbed wire, that black poverty and suffering should be portrayed in itself, or black militancy: the rest of the story was carried by the implication. But the fact remains that in the world at large,

the South African story was like a perverse, infinitely repeatable bedtime story for kids. Tell me the story about bad Hendrik and his police again, Mum. Bang bang at the children. Steal their homes and their dignity. The way they put Saint Nelson in jail...

The world simply wasn't interested in what was really going on, in the total picture, in the subtleties and ambiguities and ironies of the situation. It took many thousands of corpses in Natal and later around the hostels on the Witwatersrand before the IFP/ANC conflict began to be so much as noticed by the international (or for that matter the local) media. Even today there is minimal interest in it either locally or internationally, at least minimal when you consider that this particular conflict is of such severity as to rank this society as the most violent in the world. The notion of what the police reports used to call "black on black" violence just doesn't fit into the preconception of what the South African story is or ought to be. Instead the major focus these days in terms of the South African fiction that is the morality play is the shaping of the new South Africa by the twin titans Mandela and De Klerk - now suitably canonised by their recent joint Nobel Peace Prize. The rest is of more or less nuisance value only, except of course for the white right wing, those unredeemed sons and daughters of Verwoerd: significantly, they still have a place in the story.

What has all this got to do with documentary photographers in South Africa? Just about everything, I think, and this for the simple, incontrovertible, but usually unacknowledged, reason that during the years of the struggle, the major market for local photographic production on the cutting edge was not local but international. This was especially the case in the years of the emergency, but on both sides of the declared emergency, legislatively endemic press restrictions served to make the situation more or less the same anyway. In essence, if you were going to record the political realities of the South African situation, you were going to have to sell overseas (or be sponsored from overseas) if you were going to survive as a photographer at all. But, as I have already argued, if you were going to sell overseas, you were in general going to have to produce a fairly specific and circumscribed set of images. You were going to have to feed into the "free world's" displaced psychodrama that was its perception of and interest in South Africa.

Thus far I have been talking about the imposition of values by the outside world on the South African reality as though it was simply an imposition. Of course, this was not the case. The dominant perception of South Africa in the foreign media was symbiotically connected to the struggle inside the country and to the work of the liberation movements in exile. The rendering up of South African history as something superhistorical was in the first place the result of the work of the South African opposition — and, let it be said, it was possible only because the reality really was horrific enough to justify such interpretation.



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To put this in another way, the sense of the struggle outside this country and the sense of the struggle inside the country dovetailed pretty neatly, and weren't really different things in the first place. But, and this is the real point to be made, both were fictions — not in the sense of being false, but in the sense of being dramatised, pointed, partial versions sustained by subscription.

For photographers inside the country, particularly those centred around Afrapix, Dynamic Images and the various other collectives that grew up in the 1980s, photography became overtly, and in common with the other artforms and disciplines within the media, a "weapon" of the struggle. It was seen as something to be explored not on its own terms but in a precensored kind of way to instrumental ends. Concretely what emerged was an orthodoxy that was as rigorous as it was politically useful and effective — as it was oppressive and artistically dangerous. Photographers I have discussed the matter with recall specifically the 1982 Culture and Resistance conference held in Gaberone as a watershed. It was here that the term "cultural worker" first gained currency in the South African context. And it was here that the first collective exhibition of "struggle" photographers was staged.

As documentary photographer Paul Weinberg interpreted the significance of the festival in his contribution to the proceedings of the 1987 Culture in another South Africa conference in Amsterdam: "Participants learnt a new language — artists were not above the struggle but part of it. All people who worked in culture shared a common identity..." What Weinberg does not specify, but what critics of the process inaugurated at the Botswana conference are quick to recall, is that this "common identity" was imposed by the "collective" in what now appear as very specific and narrow terms.

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For instance a then compelling argument was put forward, heavily under the influence of Marxist theory, that the role of the cultural worker was to portray individuals as representatives of "the people" or the masses. The task of photography as a weapon of the struggle was to deindividualise — the dominant jargon of the time to move away from the bourgeois myth of individuality — the masses, and instead make them into tokens of the people. Thus would be served the analysis of the South African situation as a class struggle of a special type.

I don't want to make any kind of judgment here, on the aesthetic which was generated out of this sense of the theory of photography, beyond noting that the yoking of art to the political struggle mani-

festly did work. The desired end was achieved: the South African story and its images did play an incalculable role in forcing political change towards democracy in this country.

I do want to note though, two things. One is that the dominant spirit of collectivism which pervaded the 1980s led to a widespread, though temporary, dismissal of such photographers as David Goldblatt — probably the country's most distinguished and, despite all, most influential photographer — as being a bourgeois apologist, a crypto-revisionist, etc. Goldblatt's sense of the uniqueness, the textures and ambivalences within the real — the totality of vision that could be deeply sympathetic and savagely critical at the same time — such qualities were precisely those which were more or less systematically suppressed by the sense of the artist as cultural worker.

The other point is that inside this spirit of collectivism was generated a radically populist sense of what photography is and what it ought to be. It was in a sense built into the dominant theory that the end goal of photography in the mode would be towards a democracy of the image, towards what was later termed community photography. Hence the idea which in the later 1980s gained a powerful currency of taking the project of photography out of the hands of specialists and instead — through training, workshops, the creation of community art centres, the provision of materials etc. — working towards the empowering of the population at large through the medium of photography. From the point of view of the world outside, it is the perfect distillation of the South African story, the story whose subject tells itself.

This is, broadly sketched in, the context of South African photography which we inherited when the whole ball game changed in 1990. It is one which, to a very significant extent, is conditioned by overseas expectations and, relatedly, to an equally significant extent by the constraints of locally generated theory.

It had some very important and very tangible effects on the styles in which photographers characteristically worked and in the dominant semantics of the pictures they made. Looking at the photography of the immediate past in any detail is a task way beyond the scope of this article but let me make a few, broad and general points anyway.

The first is that particular ranges of subject matter were favoured, others more or less excluded. It was for instance rare in the extreme during the 1980s to find pictures (outside of government propaganda) of an emerging black middle class or images betokening any kind of consumer-oriented wellbeing. I have on numerous occasions watched, on jobs in the townships, photographers moving to the other side of the road in photographing a march or other event just to avoid getting an affluent house or an upmarket motor car in frame.

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By contrast shacks were a favourite subject, shanty towns an obsession and images of rural poverty a stock in trade. A huge body of work, in retrospect, focuses on people in their living environments, contrasting the simple dignity of the sitter with the abjectness of the living environment. The basic narrative here rests on a dramatic interplay between the fullness, the richness of the human visage and the spareness, the alienation, the inhumanity of the living environment. Alternatively, a variation on the same theme focuses on the tokens of noble, but pathetic and poignant attempts to humanise such forbidding and reduced circumstances. In nearly every version stark light contrasts serve to create transcendent dramas out of the everyday circumstance. If these are characteristic urban strategies, an equally large body of work places black subjects in the rural landscape and is concerned with spelling out, either through formal ploys or through subject matter, the bondedness of the African people with the African earth. There are of course many variations, shades and nuances on both of these metasubjects, but here I want only to note that they are equally romantic — however realist their subject matter may seem.

Another two-faced photographic coin is that of the black South African as victim and the black South African as representative of the inexorable tide of historical resistance. The first version has the subject either looking to camera with eyes empty of expression, numbed by history, or with gaze averted, letting the impoverished background substitute for the emptied-out eyes.

The second is the documentary of popular resistance, the myriad images you have seen of simple faces and raised fists, the many thousands of human waves you have seen marching across the entire picture frame, joyous in their resistance, or angry, but always, in terms of the picture frame, triumphant, an unstoppable surge.

Then we have the vast body of both news and documentary photographs which show blacks as actual victims. Of the forces of the state, the police, the SADF, the militant thugs of Verwoerdian fascism. Or simply a victim of white power and privilege: Emma Maseko, the domestic worker gnaws on a dry bone while madam and master stuff themselves with gross-out steaks on the other side of the wall, that sort of thing.

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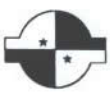

I am not wanting to be flippant here, nor to deny the reality these images were portraying. I am merely wanting to insist that, from the point of view of photography as a discipline, the effect of political overdetermination was to not only circumscribe ranges of relevant subject matter, but also to turn photography, to a very significant extent, into a

series of illustrations to a story that had already been written. You only have to compare any of the collections of pictures published from *Drum* magazine of the 1950s and 1960s with any of the collections published in the 1980s to be hit over the head with the point. In the *Drum* collections the range of the photographer's interest in his or her society is remarkable. Beauty queens rub shoulders with boxers with slick dudes and gangsters, with the most terrifying of apartheid bureaucrats, with police brutalities, with telling images of removals, etc., etc., etc. The whole of life, in a word, is represented. In the 1980s collections of "collective" photographs you can turn 10 or 20 pages without any gearshift at all.

I might be labouring a point, but I think it is worth noting here that the 1980s collections - *Beyond the Barricades, The Cordoned Heart*, etc. — were nearly all sponsored by foreign interest groups.

There is a lot more that could be said about the photographic aesthetic and context we have inherited from the 1980s — perhaps should be said. For one thing, there were always photographers, both within and without the "movement", who broke the rules: Goldblatt of course, who, while creating some of the most memorable of the protest images which have come down to us, nevertheless never subscribed to the sense of photography as a weapon, continuing to pursue more subtle and humanistic strategies; Omar Badsha, who while central as a figure to the mainstream documentary school, nevertheless pursued more open-ended strategies in his own work, registering for example in his Grey Street series, a convincing range of emotion, reality and ambiguity; and others too.

However, the broader situation we have inherited in the documentary was to be very significantly shaped by the mainstream developments I have been discussing above. It has led to something of an impasse. On one hand the interest of the world at large has substantially shifted in the wake of the political developments of 1990. While its version is still heavily mythologised, it is no longer as simple, nor as starkly contrasted as it used to be.

Perhaps more importantly, though relatedly, the practice of photography is less thoroughly mystified than it was in the past. We no longer expect, as was routine in the 1980s, for commentators to adopt the reverential tone that Cornell Capa of the International Centre of Photography, for example, did in a blurb to the *Cordoned Heart* collection: "We give thanks to the photographers... for their courage, passion and compassion in bringing us truths about South Africa that deserve to be known..."

These days, in other words, it is not enough that a photographer merely be South African. The photographer has to make convincing images of a situation that is swiftly moving out of the realms of mythology and into hard and compromised fact.

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Which is where the other hand comes in. On the other hand South African photographers have, in general, failed to meet the challenge. Though I have not personally seen the show a recent exhibition of documentary photographs shown at the National Gallery in Cape Town might be worth recording at second hand. The terms of the project had a group of community based photographers being given grants to produce images of their communities, specifically in the hope that new perspectives might emerge.

By all accounts they failed to do so. The overwhelming impression of the show that resulted was that the viewer had seen it all before, that old habits of perception and conception were strangling the looking process, that there was nothing new to be learned from a project specifically designed to uncover the new.

It is a sad commentary but I believe it reflects the reality, the lack of real direction in documentary photography today. The reality is also reflected in the fact that while the focus of the international media on South Africa is as strong today as it ever was, there is less and less work to go around. In advance of elections, the international media are tending to send in their own people rather than rely on South African photographers.

It is reflected in the fact that the most successful images and photographers coming out of this country at the present time are of the hard news, being there, seeing-the-bodies-burn school. It is not accidental that photographers of this sort — like Greg Marinovich and Jaoa Silva — are being there with equal success in places like Somalia and Bosnia Herzogovina. There is not much difference these days. Where all this leaves us is hard to say. In one sense it is a process of natural attrition. The situation which pertained in the 1980s was, and must be acknowledged as being an artificial one, and the fact that so many onetime documentarists are out of work or have moved into news is to some extent merely a symptom of normalisation. So too is the sudden largescale withdrawal of the once freely flowing conscience funding which used to be available for community arts projects, and also the almost complete absence of exhibition venues.

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Nevertheless one cannot help feeling that an opportunity is being lost. The potential for developing a vibrant, reflective — and surprising — tradition of documentary photography which the community direction promised may well have slipped irretrievably away. A lot will depend, now we are on our own, on whether a new government believes it can promote something new. ●

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