

“BLACK SKIN AND BLOOD”: DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY
AND SANTU MOFOKENG’S CRITIQUE OF THE
VISUALIZATION OF APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Patricia Hayes’s insightful readings of Santu Mofokeng’s photographic work in South Africa. The paper operates from the premise that photography is a technology of visualization that both draws on and establishes a visual economy through which events and issues are materialized in particular ways. This allows the paper to pose questions and develop understandings about Mofokeng’s work in terms of the way certain factors coalesced to enable a particular representation of black South Africans in the global image economy. Central to this is the role of assumptions about exposure and visibility in relation to violence, assumptions that Mofokeng’s work, as a critique of conventional documentary work, explicitly contests. In exploring the invisibility of everyday life, Mofokeng expands notions of documentary photography and photojournalism. This paper demonstrates this point by connecting Mofokeng’s work to a contemporary controversy in European photojournalism to highlight how a more complex understanding of documentary photography is necessary.

Keywords: Patricia Hayes, Santu Mofokeng, visual economy, documentary photography, photojournalism.

Patricia Hayes’s reading of Santu Mofokeng’s photography repeats the observations of a famous photojournalist who was looking through Mofokeng’s color transparencies that recorded the death of an ANC activist: “There is nothing as beautiful as black skin and blood! It makes a beautiful contrast.” As Hayes notes, Mofokeng includes this overheard remark in every narrative of his life. His desire to return to the inhumanity of this person’s concern with aesthetics over ethics is understandable, not least because it embodies the rationale for Mofokeng’s distance from, and continuing critique of, documentary photographic practice in apartheid South Africa. At the same time, this remark reveals something about documentary photography that is too often overlooked in the standard critiques of this practice. In this commentary on Hayes’s insightful readings of Mofokeng’s work, I want to consider Mofokeng’s practical critique of documentary practice and to connect it to a contemporary controversy in European photojournalism to highlight how a more complex understanding of documentary photography is necessary.¹

1. What constitutes documentary photography is a difficult question, and how it relates to or differs from editorial photography, news photography, reportage, and photojournalism is much debated. For the best account of the historicity of documentary as a genre, see John Tagg, *The Disciplinary*

Photography (meaning lens-based imaging in either chemical or digital formats) is a technology of visualization that both draws on and establishes a visual economy through which events and issues are materialized in particular ways. The notion of economy is central here, and following Deborah Poole’s lead, I want to argue that the idea of a visual economy is superior to the notion of visual culture for thinking through the questions raised by Santu Mofokeng’s work. For Poole, the idea of economy calls attention to the way “visual images [are] part of a comprehensive organization of people, ideas and objects.” This organization involves three levels: the organization of production comprising the individuals and the technologies that produce images; the circulation of goods, meaning the transmission and publication of images and image-objects; and the cultural resources and social systems through which images are interpreted and valued.²

I cannot consider all these dimensions here, but this understanding helps us pose questions and develop understandings about Mofokeng’s work in terms of the way certain factors coalesced to enable a particular representation of black South Africans in the global image economy. Mofokeng was part of Africapix, itself an agent in the visual economy of the anti-apartheid struggle. For most photographers in Africapix, as for most photojournalists then and now, their work was about exposure, in the political as much as the photographic sense. It was motivated by the imperative to make things visible as part of the ethos that the violence of apartheid must be seen. As Hayes writes, this desire to expose, make visible, and see was part and parcel of the positivist norms of documentary photography, particularly in the work of both the majority of Africapix photographers and the members of the well-known Bang Bang club.³ Behind this desire was an implicit yet powerful conception of how images work, that exposure and visibility are the preconditions for an empathetic and humanistic reaction that would prompt international political action.

This conventional rendering of documentary and photojournalistic practice helped establish a dominant and much repeated representation of the anti-apartheid struggle. As Mofokeng has observed, the stylized images of white policemen (preferably more than one) beating black youths was demanded by agents of the international audience—the picture editors who purchased this work daily—because of the belief that their publications’ viewers were aroused by little else. This recursive yet mostly unverified set of expectations produced a particular and necessarily limited understanding of the struggle that foreclosed the possibility of other visualizations. This is a dynamic common to the photographic homogenization of “Africa,” and is evident in such things as the mother-and-child icons of famine coverage, the HIV/AIDS pictures of the diseased patient or the grieving relative, and the vast sea of humanity imaged in refugee camps, where anonymous bodies are made synonymous with an entire continent.⁴

Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), chapter 2.

2. Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

3. Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva, *The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War* (London: William Heinemann, 2000).

4. For analyses of famine icons, see “Imaging Famine,” at <http://www.david-campbell.org/pho>

Mofokeng was an important internal critic of this pictorial hegemony. His status as critic did not derive, however, from being an “African” photographer whose ethnicity, nationality, or race constituted the possibility of a different mode of representation. There were many “African” photographers in Africapix and other collectives who readily contributed to the international demand for particular struggle pictures. This fact complicates the not uncommon lament that a large part of the responsibility for the impoverished international image-economy lies in the shortage of indigenous photographers who can contribute to it. Although there are many benefits to be had from drawing upon and employing non-European photographers in the coverage of global issues, the belief that their identity automatically delivers a contrasting aesthetic is open to serious question.

Instead, Mofokeng’s critique of conventional documentary practice derives from his notion that rather than the violence being in the seeing it is in the knowing. This has a number of dimensions, but begins with Mofokeng’s status as a photographer whose practice challenges the assumption that there is a direct relationship between the visible and the real. As Hayes observes, Mofokeng presents “another order of things” that ruptures realist expectations by opening the space for the uncanny and the supernatural. Interestingly, some of that stems from prosaic considerations, especially the fact that without fast transport he could not get to sites of conflict as quickly as his photojournalist colleagues (getting the story first being an indispensable part of their craft), and that as a junior member of staff with limited darkroom privileges he found himself working with exhausted chemicals that contributed to the diffuse style of some of his images.

Most important, though, was that Mofokeng approached his photographic practice with a different ethos, one that was concerned with that vast but unstable concept “everyday life.” Working to a different temporality, and dealing in photographic essays rather than single images, Mofokeng photographed aspects of ordinary township life that went largely unrecorded in the images submitted to the international image economy. But he does so in a most unusual way: his images involve, as Hayes writes, a “lack of sharpness, blurring, or the highlighting of extraneous detail or objects in a scene.” He does this because for him the everyday is partly comprised of the invisible. By literally and figuratively “chasing shadows,” Mofokeng was shifting an understanding of the realm of the real from a simple materialist conception to one in which the concept of *seriti* materializes a different understanding of the real. Indeed, Mofokeng conceives the everyday itself as comprised partly of what is invisible, so that what is or can be exposed must move beyond the realm of what can be captured by realist photography. In this sense, his work is not just about the putative relationship of the visible and the real but about the nature of the real itself.

Central to Hayes’s reading of Mofokeng is the argument that in opening up another order of things Mofokeng is involved in the “desecularization” of both politics and photography in South Africa. Hayes proceeds with caution here because again the linguistic resources are not quite up to the task. While wanting to complicate the idea that Mofokeng was dealing simply with the issue of religion

[photography/imaging-famine/](http://www.david-campbell.org/photography/hiv/seriti/); and for the analysis of HIV/AIDS photography, see “HIV/AIDS,” at <http://www.david-campbell.org/photography/hiv/seriti/>

and spirituality in South Africa, Hayes nonetheless notes that for both the regime of apartheid and the practice of documentary photography there was an unintentional collusion around conceptions of the material. The apartheid state mystified the conditions of its repression through false representational practice, and documentary photography responded by seeking "alternative expository 'truths' . . . [that] drove out the possibility of things that were beyond material reality." It is not just that Mofokeng photographs religious practices, rituals of faith, or people who are healers; it is that those photographs are themselves ambiguous in their presentation of everyday life.

Part of the issue here might be the question of whether a clear-cut distinction between the secular and the religious is easily sustainable. This question is too large a topic for this commentary, but the political theorization of William Connolly is worth noting in this context. In his book *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, Connolly resituates debates about faith by noting, "it is impossible to shuffle the visceral register of intersubjectivity out of politics."⁵ Although these are neither Hayes's nor Mofokeng's terms, Connolly's concern with things that exist beyond the purview of a simple positivist rendering of the social intersects with both their interests in refiguring the nature of the real. Connolly also argues that "if you construe metaphysics to be any reading of the fundamental character of things, it becomes clear that every positive cultural interpretation is inhabited by a metaphysical dimension."⁶ In this way, as much as the secular appears to involve the elimination of all things metaphysical, it is equally, though not obviously, made possible by a series of its own metaphysical commitments about the order of things, both visible and invisible.

This suggests that in both Hayes's reading and Mofokeng's photographs there is a tendency to draw too tight a contrast between alleged opposites. Hayes, for example, argues that there is a distinction between the "vulgar visibility" of realist documentary on the one hand, and the cloaking and masking that re-evokes the supernatural, on the other, as though forms of cloaking and masking were not integral to realist documentary. Mofokeng, despite challenging a positivist order of things, nonetheless relies on a conventional understanding of documentary when he notes "If I bring in light I create, it's not documentary." That's an exceptionally strict—indeed, restrictive—conceptualization that would in fact exclude most contemporary documentary and photojournalism where a number of alterations short of manipulating content are professionally permissible.

This brings us back to the photojournalist's quotation with which this commentary began. Highlighting as it did the aesthetic considerations even in a news photograph, that quotation reveals how the objectivist and positivist rendering of documentary and photojournalism overlooks and underplays features characteristic of the technology. This is a tension not easily, nor even desirably, resolved. A recent controversy in European photojournalism demonstrates how understanding of this practice is still governed by objectivist and positivist interpretations of photography and its history.

5. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 52.

The World Press Photo award of 2007 for the news picture of the year went to British photographer Tim Hetherington for his shot of an American soldier in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan.⁷ Propped up against the side of a bunker and wiping his brow in an exhausted manner, Hetherington's soldier recalls similar images by Larry Burrows or Don McCullin taken in Vietnam. Hetherington's photograph in itself was not a controversial image, though it is worthwhile noting that it was submitted as part of a series of pictures that resulted from an assignment in which the photographer was embedded with U.S. forces. The single image was then removed from Hetherington's series during the World Press Photo jury process and placed in the main category for the overall award. However, a commentary on the jury process published by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin on *foto8* in March 2008 set off a significant debate.

As a photographic duo known for their conceptual and critical documentary work, Broomberg and Chanarin had been part of the World Press Photo jury for the selection of the 2007 prizes, and based on this experience they commented on the 2008 awards.⁸ In an online essay they questioned many elements of the entire process. Part of their conclusion is worth quoting at length:

In the final analysis we were chasing between a French landscape, a dead guerrilla, an HIV positive mother and an American soldier. A strange task. Rather predictably the majority vote went to Tim Hetherington's soldier. Yet comparing so many diverse images and ultimately declaring one of them a winner feels meaningless. Do we even need to be producing these images any more? Do we need to be looking at them? We have enough of an image archive within our heads to be able to conjure up a representation of any manner of pleasure or horror. Does the photographic image even have a role to play any more? Video footage, downloaded from the internet, conveys the sounds and textures of war like photographs never could. High Definition video cameras create high-resolution images twenty-four photographs a second, eliminating the need to click the shutter. But since we do still demand illustrations to our news then there is a chance to make images that challenge our preconceptions, rather than regurgitate old clichés.⁹

Unsurprisingly, this charge of regurgitating old clichés brought much debate and a sharp response from Tim Hetherington. Despite his being one of the most intelligent and committed photographers working on long-term assignments, Hetherington's response was striking for the conservative way in which he defended conventional practice: "If photographs do not reflect something of an objective truth, then nothing does, and we are left with an endlessly subjective, nihilistic understanding of the world."¹⁰

7. See "Picture Power: Tim Hetherington," *BBC News*, February 14, 2008, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7240590.stm (accessed July 17, 2009).

8. After their time on the World Press Photo jury, Broomberg and Chanarin went to Afghanistan with the British military and produced a piece of work called "The Day Nobody Died." Consisting of exposed light paper pieces each seven meters in length, this was as far from conventional photojournalism as it is possible to get. To see the work and its background, go to their web site at <http://www.choppedliver.info/> (accessed July 17, 2009).

9. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, "Unconcerned But Not Indifferent," *foto8*, March 3, 2008, at <http://www.foto8.com/home/content/view/377/216/> (accessed July 17, 2009). All the photographs discussed are reproduced here.

10. Tim Hetherington, "By Any Means Necessary," *foto8*, May 9, 2008, at <http://www.foto8.com/home/content/view/451/216/> (accessed July 17, 2009).

However, this formulation locks us into a philosophically unsustainable trap and overlooks the larger questions raised by Broomberg and Chanarin. They posed these with reference to another photograph that received some recognition in the World Press Photo awards:

There is one more photograph to consider. It was knocked out of the competition late in the bargaining then brought back at the end for an honourable mention. The photograph depicts a hand painted shooting target, probably made by a member of a German army unit, depicting a lush, green landscape placed in the arid Afghanistan landscape. The photographer highlights the juxtaposition and through this visual strategy suggests that this is perhaps a portrait of a European psychological landscape projected onto the foreign, barren one. An interesting question about the nature of the war starts to form . . . this mode of image-making transforms the photojournalist from an event-gathering machine, into something slightly more intelligent, more reflective and more analytical about our world, the world of images and about the place where these two worlds collide. As Tod Papageorge, photographer and professor of photography at Yale University recently remarked in a live debate at the New York Public Library, “If your pictures are not good enough, you aren’t reading enough.” Perhaps this re-working of Capa’s oft repeated mantra offers a clue towards a new language in photojournalism — one that presents images that are more aware of what they fail to show; images that communicate the impossibility of representing the pain and horror of personal tragedy.¹¹

Santu Mofokeng’s photographs are very much part of this new language in global photojournalism even if they are not currently recognized as such. But the terms in which they are presented, and the terms in which debates such as the one discussed here proceed, demonstrate that photojournalism suffers a near permanent condition of anxiety and crisis, a condition that is a product of the nature of photojournalism and that is thus unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Indeed, if this condition were to vanish, then photojournalism and those who respond to it would have lost the capacity to engage the very challenges Broomberg and Chanarin’s essay poses.

If documentary photography and photojournalism is to remain a technology that raises issues, it is always going to be riddled with tensions. Think about how often one hears photojournalists say that they are merely recording the scene before them, yet at the same time they are driven to do so by a concern to bear witness. The result is their trying to conjoin an ethos that is both disengaged from politics but committed to ethics. We can highlight these tensions by means of any number of questions. How can a process of mediation avoid partisanship? Given the impossibility of objectivity, can legitimacy be created? Is the humanitarian focus of “concerned photography” up to the challenge of modern conflict and late-modern inequality? Can these tensions be negotiated in a commercial world coping with an economy of indifference among northern media consumers?

We also see these tensions in the World Press Photo jury process, where some charged with making the decisions were worried about the way some photographs are constructed, yet Hetherington’s winner was praised by others for being “painterly” (which was exactly the same observation made about the 1997 win-

11. Broomberg and Chanarin, “Unconcerned But Not Indifferent.” The photograph under discussion is Christoph Bangert, “Army sniper practice target, Kunduz, Afghanistan,” and can be seen at <http://www.foto8.com/home/content/view/377/216/> (accessed July 17, 2009).

ner, Hocine's photo of an Algerian woman after the massacre at Bentalha).¹² In the end, a process in which 81,000 photos are reduced to 17,000 in a week on the way to selecting a single winner of the main prize is inevitably going to be overdetermined and itself riddled with tensions. So we have a technological craft that is unavoidably comprised of tensions being judged in a process that inescapably magnifies those same conceptual conflicts.

However, we shouldn't wish those contradictions away, because in the spaces they create lies the possibility for political engagement with the events, issues, and subjects being portrayed. Christoph Bangert's photo of the German army practice-target in Afghanistan, rightly highlighted by Broomberg and Chanarin, is both literal and conceptual—much like the Hetherington winner in fact, and certainly like many of Santu Mofokeng's images. All of them deserve awards, require contextual understanding, and are read as signifying something more than what appears in the frame. Perhaps, then, the problem, insofar as we can identify a single problem, lies in loading a single still image with the status of the real? If that is the case, perhaps it's a problem that is concerned with the circulation, reading, and valuation of photographs in and out of context, rather than a problem with the photographs per se? And perhaps that is a question we should continually debate but avoid answering with a single conclusion.

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12. This image is reproduced in my article (from which these concluding paragraphs are drawn), "Photojournalism: Living with Questions and Tensions," *foto8*, at <http://www.foto8.com/home/content/view/397/216/> (accessed July 17, 2009).