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Photographing a South African form of sudden death

James Sey

Abstract

In this article, I examine two press photographs of the same death scene – the bodies of two anti-apartheid activists murdered in Maseru, Lesotho, in 1985, taken as they lay together on the floor of a mortuary. The activists were murdered by an apartheid hit-squad under the command of Eugene de Kock. Extrapolating from a visual analysis of the two photographs – taken by different photographers – I investigate the relationship between particular photographic images of death and trauma, and the national forms such trauma might take. In addressing this question, I ruminate on the relationship between death and photography in general, on the epistemological status of photographs as evidential fields, and on the relationship between global and national image discourses. I focus on the propensity of such images – which may have been produced with a journalistic agenda in mind, to spur the viewer into political or civic action in response to the trauma they depict – to turn into various forms of aesthetic image.

Keywords: apartheid, death, photography, South Africa, trauma, TRC

Two dead bodies, lying side by side, on their backs. Blood from their gunshot wounds is flecked here and there on their faces and torsos, which, in the cropping of the photograph, is all that can be seen of the bodies (Figure 1). They lie against a nondescript background, perhaps a dishevelled bed, perhaps a gurney, perhaps a floor. Their clothes are disordered – the man, who lies on the viewer’s right-hand side, wears a dark shirt, unbuttoned, revealing a spare frame and hairless chest. The woman, who lies on the viewer’s left-hand side, wears a striped top which is raised to reveal her brassiere. The couple’s heads are at the top of the frame, and

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they face away from each other. If their eyes were open (they seem closed, the woman’s perhaps not fully) they would be looking out of each side of the frame. The photographer, photojournalist Ismail Lagardien, was close, standing almost directly above the couple, unsparing, inviting the viewer to stand in his place and ask the dead bodies to look back, to turn their heads. They will not.

The black and white image is blandly captioned, as befits an urgency to distribute across global press networks. The press agencies and the publications in which this particular image is reproduced each offer slightly different nuances to their captions, depending on their place in an ideological media spectrum, for the meanings of what is depicted:

_Maseru, Lesotho, December 21, 1985: The bodies of Jacquelin and Joe Quinn, 2 of 9 people killed in a raid on 2 houses in Lesotho’s capital Maseru early Friday morning. The Quinn’s one-year-old daughter was not harmed. Lesotho blames South African commandos for the raid but they [sic] South Africa denies it._
Another caption exists, for a different photograph of the same scene (Figure 2). It reads:

_They lie side by side in the mortuary their bodies half covered by a hospital sheet, their clothing in disarray: Jackie Quin and her coloured husband Joe. The couple were shot dead by a murder squad which burst into their home in Maseru on Thursday night. Seven other people attending a party at another house were also killed. The ANC claim Jackie Quin to be one of their members. Her grieving parents deny it. The couple’s baby daughter Phoenix survived the massacre._

Archivist Jo-Anne Duggan (2014) reads this second caption as follows:

This is the caption to a photograph that appeared in the [South African] *Sunday Times* on 22 December 1985. It’s a haunting image, starkly dramatic, shot at an angle by a photographer standing somewhere behind and to the right of his subjects, seeing them head first. Joe lies with his head turned to the left, eyes closed; he could be sleeping. Jacqui’s head is turned to the right, her eyes are half-open, her lips slightly parted; she could be waking.
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In this image, by another photojournalist, Trevor Samson, more context is provided in the frame. The upper left corner is dominated by cabinets closed with airtight lock handles, which suggests that the scene is shot in a mortuary. The bodies are shot in mid-range, fully exposed in the frame. Here, it is apparent that their bodies are half covered by a sheet – and, since this may be a mortuary, it may be a hospital sheet. As Duggan suggests, the photographer is behind and to the right of the bodies. The couple's orientation is completely different – the man, 'Joe' (real name Leon Meyer), faces away from the lens into the depths of the frame; his expression and features are not discernible. The woman, Jackie Quin, confronts the camera, her face an unambiguous death mask.

The caption cited above is published in the print version of the South African weekly newspaper, the *Sunday Times* (2015), so it bears something of the ideological imprint – at least, a hint of political conviction – of this particular newspaper. At the time, the newspaper considered itself an investigative bastion of left-liberal opposition to apartheid. While this may have been the case, the caption contains a raft of apartheid-era South African touchstones – or flashpoints, depending on one's ideological position. Is it necessary for readers to know, for example, that Quin's husband 'Joe' is 'coloured' – that peculiarly South African declension of racial terminology? There is certainly a 'murder squad' of uncertain origin (later proven to be members of the notorious Vlakplaas murder squad under the command of Eugene de Kock), and there is a claim by the African National Congress (ANC) – at this time (1985) still a political organisation outlawed by the apartheid government – that these murdered people 'belonged' to them. As in the first caption, mention of the orphaned infant child has most likely been included so as to draw immediate sympathy – or provide the 'human interest angle', to express some of the image's backstory in cynical journalese.

On one hand, these particular views of two ideologically motivated deaths (and several others that appear only as a footnote in the image captions) could be considered as an inevitable and deplorable outcome of a brutal political struggle. There were many such casualties in the war between National Party apartheid in its last paroxysms of power, and ANC-led political and armed insurrectionist efforts to defeat the white racist government and ideology. On the other hand, the meaning of these images could be generalised – that is, these photographs may be seen as representing a particular instance of a problematic general phenomenon in the history of photography, namely the imaging of death and trauma.

A question that therefore arises in relation to these two images of the same scene is a general one, perhaps coextensive with the history of photography itself: What does it mean to represent death in a photograph? A wider corollary to this question is the one that could be asked about the general propensity of contemporary image culture and globalised representation to circulate images of trauma, violence and
James Sey

destruction, from Isis beheadings and museum destruction to hostage dramas and police brutality.

But perhaps the photographs of the dead couple should not only be thought about in this generalising context. It has the potential to render the images too tangential, too ephemeral to such a consuming and globalised discourse of traumatic imaging. And yet the discourse of apocalypse that is the contemporary mode of the 2000s, is largely comprised of images such as these. Perhaps, then, one should look for a less grandiose meaning in these immensely poignant images. Perhaps they express something more specific – something like, to paraphrase Frank Gonzalez-Crussi (1987), a South African form of sudden death.

This is the reading given to Samson’s image in Duggan’s (2014) meticulous and compassionate account:

Some of those who saw this photograph must have been enraged, seeing it as a flagrantly disrespectful invasion of the rights of the victims and their families to privacy and dignity at a time when they were at their most vulnerable. There must surely have been heated debate about this issue in the newsroom. When does the right to know and to tell override the right to privacy? Questions must have been asked about what motivated the *Sunday Times* to publish this particular photograph. Was it because of the human-interest angle – a mixed-race couple at a time when marriages across the colour bar were forbidden and a baby that had survived a bloody massacre? Did the publication of the photograph imply tacit support for the ruling party’s ‘total onslaught’ or was the newspaper trying to drive home another message: that the struggle for liberation transcended the barriers of class, colour, and creed. Was the *Sunday Times* trying to bring home the horror of atrocities committed by the apartheid regime believing that it was in the public interest to override private sensibilities?

Duggan’s questions reflect a wider ambivalence, which Susan Sontag (2003: 11) remarks upon: ‘Photographs of an atrocity’, she says, ‘may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.’ The question here is not (or perhaps not only) the aestheticisation of an instance of what I am calling ‘sudden South African death’ in the documentary mode of the photojournalistic image. This remains the case even if the image is transformed into a spectacle by a longer historical view of it. And yet, venturing what the question is not in an effort to answer another question is unhelpful. Is the question then about the congruence between a form of the photograph and a particular kind of (South African) death?

The complicity, if that is what it is, between the photograph and death has been repeatedly pointed out and analysed. For example, in discussing the war photographs of Donald McCullin, John Berger (2013: 32) writes:
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McCullin’s … photographs record sudden moments of agony – a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief. These moments are in reality utterly discontinuous with normal time. … The camera which isolates a moment of agony isolates no more violently than the experience of that moment isolates itself. … The image seized by the camera is doubly violent and both violences reinforce the same contrast: the contrast between the photographed moment and all others.

Two aspects are prominent in Berger’s thinking here: the juxtaposition, achieved by the photographic medium itself, between duration and instantaneity on the one hand; and the seeming finality of the photographic moment on the other. It is the isolation of the photographic moment, he suggests, that manifests its violence as representation – since this becomes the form of the event. It removes the event from duration, and thus from origins, from narrative and from consequences. The photograph is thus an unreliable and unstable epistemological site. It may lay claims to forensic truth, to the evidentiary truth of the traumatic event, but this is undercut by its seemingly inevitable propensity to frame the event as an aesthetic documentation – a photographic modality with a very different agenda.

Sontag’s (2003: 68) analysis of this curious epistemological slippage is as follows:

Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticised if it seems ‘aesthetic’; that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography – to generate documents and to create works of visual art – have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do. … Photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful, as captions shouldn’t moralize. In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it towards the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, what a spectacle!

The photograph as a document therefore forms an unusually pointed instance of the ambivalence and anxiety around the moral and ethical responsibility that photographs of trauma ostensibly demonstrate. In retrospect, the photographing of a South African form of sudden death – people brutally killed for being opposed to the racist apartheid regime – is a particularly urgent manifestation of the documentary of suffering.

This characteristic ambivalence of the photograph is taken to a kind of logical conclusion in the collision between document and aesthetic in South African photography in the high apartheid era. Okwui Enwezor (2013: 20–45) argues that South African photography takes on a different character in response to the need to bear witness to – or document – apartheid.² He invokes a broad shift between a colonial/ethnographic visual imperative prior to institutionalised apartheid in 1948, and a politically oppositional use of the photograph to document and explicitly
condemn the system.³ Enwezor suggests that photography therefore obeys an overwhelming imperative to build a typically documentary visual language of recording and archiving the trauma of apartheid. This reflectionist visual model could be said to culminate in the war-zone photography of the so-called ‘Bang-bang Club’ – press photographers Ken Oosterbroek, Greg Marinovich, Kevin Carter and Joao Silva. While this model is familiar in the journalistic approach to visualising trauma as a socio-political revelation – a witnessing – it does not account for the sheer propensity of these images, which might be intended to spur their viewers into political action, but which actually transform into aesthetic images over time.

A good example of the aestheticising process is one of South Africa’s most iconic photographs, Sam Nzima’s image of the dying 12-year-old Hector Pieterson, shot by security police, in the arms of Mbuyisa Makhubo, fleeing the conflict during the Soweto uprising in June 1976. Almost in the mode of the Situationist détournement, the image has become absorbed into the fabric of a shorthand South African political discourse, now acting as a broad metonym for the freedom and future economic prospects of the country’s youth, acknowledged by the appropriate public holiday, ‘Youth Day’, on 16 June. Quite apart from the diffusion and dilution of the shock and trauma contained in the original image – a 12-year-old being murdered by police – it is now recuperable as a restaged advertising image, supposedly representing a swathe of history and identity politics. While this is not the Photograph-as-Fine-Art image that Sontag had in mind, it is representative of the entire transmogrifying process whereby the one becomes the other.

Yet why does it seem inevitable that the use of the image of death and trauma will become aestheticised in this way? Roland Barthes (2000[1980]: 32) addresses this very question:

_The camera obscura … has generated at one and the same time perspective painting, photography and the diorama, which are all three arts of the stage; but if Photography seems to me closer to the Theatre, it is by way of a singular intermediary … : by way of Death. … [H]owever ‘lifelike’ we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead._

Barthes’ point is doubly significant in the case of photography, like that documenting apartheid atrocity, which seeks to spark oppositional action to life through the power of outrage rather than denial. He adds: ‘The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed’ (ibid: 91). The removal of the image from time and from history, Barthes suggests, also removes it from political agency, placing it once again in the unstable epistemological terrain of a brute fact
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that cannot be refused nor transformed, caught forever oscillating between document and composition. Barthes’ (2000: 93–94) thinking on this point is also prescient regarding the increasingly central role photography plays in an image culture dominated by instantaneity and apocalyptic thinking:

But History is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time; and the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony; so that everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive *duration*, affectively or symbolically: the age of the Photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions …

Barthes’ prescience on this point carries a reminder that contemporary life is in many ways defined by a more or less globalised economy of images. What are the stakes for meaning, for the epistemological and aesthetic power of an image as much as its original documentary intentions, if it were, like the images of Quin and Meyer, a photojournalistic one? Can a fascination with the representation of trauma still hold a transformative political or epistemological power?

Science fiction author J.G. Ballard (1973: 8) asserts that what is required from fiction – and from art in general – is the reinvention of the real (that is, in the common sense of an external and objectively experienced reality) as fiction:

> We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods … The most prudent and effective way of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction – conversely, the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads. Freud’s classic distinction between the latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so-called reality.

Thus, perhaps what is at stake in the extreme forms of representation and the irruption of the real that images of trauma make manifest, is the role that art has played in society as a means of productively critiquing difference – primarily the difference between the subject and the Other.

As cultural production and social representation have become increasingly digitised, the concept of culture itself, the concept of technological representation and the representation of trauma, have converged. It could be contended that the idea of a dissolving of the boundary between the represented and the real is even a platitude. The boom in real-time broadcasting, citizen journalism, Twitter, reality TV and social media networks, means that affect is no longer invested in the breakdown of the boundary between real-life and art – or real-life and its representation in a photograph, but rather in the conflation of the symbolic and the real trauma, as well as in the conflation of visual or image culture and lived experience.
What the proliferation of images of trauma point to is the increased propensity of a globalised mediaverse to spread and replicate ideological effects; a proliferation that also points to the way in which such a mediaverse becomes a self-enclosed and self-sustaining symbolic realm, divorced to that extent from interventionist politics. This contextualisation of individual acts and image-records of trauma in a country’s politics has the effect, along with the media technologies which enable instant global communication, of flattening cultural and political difference and oppositionality. It is also, in one important sense, closed and all-consuming. Often, specific visual languages of trauma – such as the news broadcast, or even the terrorist video message and broadcast of intention, manifesto or hostage victim testimony – are still deployed in an ostensible attempt to make an ideological point. They take their place, instead, as image forms which have the photograph of trauma and death as an historical template. The global mediaverse plays its reciprocal part in instantly packaging and metaphorising the experience of terrorist acts.

In such an historical and socio-political context, I return to the question of whether there is anything unique about a South African version of photographically imaging sudden death. One way of doing so would be to think about South African institutions through which the experience and historicity of trauma are understood. For the sake of convenience, and because the institution is directly relevant to the photograph under discussion, I institute a symbolic point that deals at a national level with the trauma of apartheid. This moment is the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), begun in 1996 under the chairmanship of Archbishop and Nobel Laureate, Desmond Tutu. If the TRC is considered as South Africa’s institutional attempt to encounter and work through this trauma, then it might, in my view, be considered a failure. This seemingly peremptory judgement may be better understood by relating it to its express intention to be a channel through which South Africa’s national trauma could be addressed and its effects ameliorated. In an essay on a psychoanalytic view of the civic and political reconstruction process conducted through the TRC, Mary Tjiattas (1998: 68) comments:

Freud tells us that the traumatic event does not (necessarily) retain its original form in the process of retranscription. Presumably those witnessing the ‘abreaction’ are then in a privileged position: they can influence the meaning of the trauma, by providing alternative, more realistic understandings of it, they help, by allowing for the integration of traumatic experience, to reconstruct appropriate views of the self, and in so doing break the cycle of destructive repetitions, creating the space for rational deliberation and a measure of voluntary control over present and future conduct … But a necessary precondition for [this] is inspiring a sense of trust.

Here, Tjiattas subtly points to the problem inherent in the process of ‘retranscription’. The idealised process of healing she describes is dependent on a mutual sense of trust, but also an implied commitment to the ‘integration of traumatic experience’
through rational and voluntary means – a kind of contract, agreed upon in the public sphere – to engage with trauma, understand it, and in so doing to ‘break the cycle of destructive repetitions’. Tjiattas (ibid: 69) presents her misgivings about this model for the effective working through of trauma:

... a fundamental assumption of curative practices and procedures both clinical and social [is that] there is an intrinsic connection between telling or revealing or uncovering the truth and the desired outcome – overcoming of debilitating pathology, the instatement of a just and democratic social order. It is an assumption that is clearly made by the proponents of the TRC. However, it is not clear that it is an assumption that can be adopted with impunity ... Is it not conceivably the case that there are other important human goals that trump it under certain conditions? Moreover, are not the clearest cases those where complex and intricate social problems are at issue?

In tying together the stakes attached to confessing the truth and achieving the desired outcome, Tjiattas points to the difficulties both of recovering the ‘whole truth’ and of relating the beneficial effects of truth-telling to social problems that are more opaque and resistant to the process. Quin’s family submitted their testimony to the TRC in the aftermath of her death, at which the photographs took up their standard role as documentary evidence. At the same set of hearings came the amnesty evidence of her murderers, the Vlakplaas commandos. Their commander, Eugene de Kock, has recently (2015) been released on parole, with many of the crimes his unit committed still unsolved and accountability unassigned.

Returning to the images of Jackie Quin and Leon Meyer lying dead on the floor of a police mortuary, perhaps it is the case that one can no longer retain the context of what lies outside that frame and those newspaper captions. Faced with these images, I realise with a frisson that they are deliberately composed images, images about which aesthetic decisions of composition, lighting, context, inclusion, exclusion, camera angle and so on, have been made. What lies outside the frame – the surviving daughter, the political struggle, has been subsumed into the depths of a frame that invites the unconscious into it, but will not reveal it back. It will only reveal the deaths themselves, in images about which such choices have been made. As Barthes concludes (2000: 92):

Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, then it must be elsewhere, perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve Life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.
The term ‘documentary photography’ includes ‘social documentary’ (the photograph as an individualised, interpretive approach to recording images) and ‘photojournalism’ (the photograph as conveyer of direct information imbued with emotionally charged political content) (Enwezor 2013: 31).

2 Enwezor (2013: 33) identifies 1948 as the year in which a ‘truly South African photography’ emerged in direct response to the formation and consolidation of the apartheid state. According to Enwezor (ibid: 30), the National Party’s institutionalisation of apartheid changed the ‘pictorial perception of the country from a relatively benign colonial space based on racial segregation to a highly contested space’. This socio-political change prompted what Enwezor describes as a ‘visceral, direct, and social shift’ in South African photography ‘from a purely anthropological tool into a social instrument’. From its use as a socio-political tool, photography came to occupy a central discursive space in the documentation of apartheid. As Enwezor (ibid: 30, 32) states,

a defining feature of the struggle against apartheid is the paradigmatic role played by social and documentary photography, reportage and the photo-essay in documenting, recording, transmitting, and shaping a broad and complex understanding of the law, bureaucracy, institutions, and everyday life under apartheid. ... The pictorial records of apartheid – whether quiet pictures probing the seemingly mundane or the brash images of frontline photography – are not merely vehicles for presenting facts. They are above all ways of seeing and knowing, and, as argued by the photographers themselves, oftentimes a form of politics dedicated to exposing the underbelly of apartheid and its social conditions.

3 Enwezor (2013: 33) distinguishes between what he terms ‘engaged photography’, to designate the strategies of post-1948 documentary photographic production in South Africa, and the term ‘struggle photography’, to denote the heightened emphasis on resistance and defiance that culminated in the wake of the student uprising of 16 June 1976, and continued through the years of high apartheid (1980s to early 1990s). He defines ‘engaged photography’ as a form in which the photographer operates with a critical awareness of apartheid and seeks to represent and understand it; setting this against the idiom of ‘struggle photography’, wherein the photographer’s ‘explicit mission is to delegitimize apartheid’ (ibid.).

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