

Introduction

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What intrigues us about a photograph? What holds us? It is often the absence of a single, limited, controlled meaning, and rather, the excess of possible meanings. The photograph can seduce us by inviting us to create a meaning or narrative for it.

Chris Wright, 'Being led astray'.¹

Quite by chance this special issue of *Kronos: Southern African Histories* covers almost exactly a century. The serendipitous neatness of the period invites us to compare pictures drawn from its beginning and end: will they show clearly how not just the worlds, but also the world-views, of southern Africa have changed? Will they surprise us? Will they suggest to historians any important lessons – cautionary or revelatory – about the value of images to their work?

Let us look, for example, at a black and white photograph taken around 1915 in the Karoo (see page 42). No one would mistake it for an early twenty-first century photograph. The focus is soft and the photographer did not venture close to his subject matter. A railway line under construction from Prieska to Upington slices the frame in half. Just below the nearly flat horizon tiny figures of labourers and mules are converging on a point. Beyond, the veld lies wide-open.

Turning to 2012, we encounter a crisp close-up of a smiling, middle-aged woman against a stark white background (cover image). She is apparently in motion, dancing for the photographer. The colour photograph shows her wearing a blue T-shirt emblazoned with letters and a looped red ribbon. No one would mistake her for a denizen of the early twentieth century, not only because of her casual clothing but also because of her open expression; the camera is her friend. What stories might these two pictures be made to tell, ones that would help us understand the century separating them?

The laying of the railway track and the dancing lady suggest themes that might put into historical context the other photographs, as well as the essays, in this volume. Three motifs come readily to mind. One might be called simply 'hubris': the railway line exemplifies imperial pride in nation and technology. Another could be called 'heightened individualism': the ease of the smiling woman in front of the camera suggests an assertive individual who might even relish celebrity. A third theme comes not from the photographs themselves but from recent South African history: do these pictures cast light on what democracy really means?

Historians are trained to perceive and to feel comfortable with generalizations like the three above, even when we do not agree with them. We compulsively analyze documents, including pictures, in order to discover statements that the author or

¹ Chris Wright, 'Being Led Astray' in *The Impossible Science of Being*, quoted by Kathleen Stewart Howe, *First Seen, Portraits of the World's Peoples 1840-1810* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2004), 37.

photographer may, or may not, have intended to make. John Mason, for example, investigates below how Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of South Africa in 1949-50 – a splendid mix of halo-ed miners, savvy politicians, and modern Afrikaners celebrating an ethnic shrine – both reveal and conceal her political attitudes and dilemmas. Some historians also dare to assert the impact of photographs: Annabelle Weinand writes that pictures of AIDS patients, smiling and brave folks who look 'just like us,' have helped to reduce the stigma of the disease.

Most historians are probably not quite as comfortable with the implications of the epigraph that began this essay. If photographs have an 'excess' of meanings, rather than limited and controlled ones, and thus can 'seduce' us with their openness, as Chris Wright suggests, how can we trust them as historical evidence? Where does 'the excess of possible meaning' leave us as researchers who are, by definition, bent on recapturing and understanding past experience with maximum clarity?

Perhaps the best way to start answering these questions is to investigate how documentary photography may differ from photojournalism and art. Is the genre that is the subject of this special issue as trustworthy as photojournalism seems to be, with its promise of capturing a historical moment? Or is documentary photography as subject to interpretation as a work of art?

Defining Documentary Photography

Distinctions between the three photographic categories – photojournalism, documentary photography, art – have become blurry in these post-modern times. Most critics and historians now find it exceedingly difficult, and not particularly productive, to strain to fix a picture solely within one genre. In late 2012 the International Center of Photography in New York, for example, displays no qualms about spanning genres when launching a show of South African photographs under the label 'the aesthetic power of the documentary form.' In South Africa this blurriness is a post-1994 phenomenon, a sign that the urgency to document South African society disappeared with the end of apartheid, freeing photographers to explore questions of pressing personal importance like sexual orientation.² And yet, because most of the photographs in this issue were taken before 1994, it may prove helpful to look at the definitions that probably would have made sense to the people who took them.

In modern times, especially after newspapers began printing photographs in 1880, it was conventional to situate photojournalism, documentary photographs, and art photographs on a continuum. According to this model, the likelihood of multiple interpretations increases the more 'artistic' the photograph. At the other extreme, photojournalists would be seen as presenting historians with relatively unambiguous data; they are visual reporters intent on ensuring that their contemporaries know for example, what modern warfare looks like. When Kevin Carter and Greg Marinovich recorded the splayed and slumped bodies of AWB members, shot dead by Bophuthatswana soldiers in 1994, their pictures seem unmediated by their own attitudes toward this event. The images are wedded to a clear story line – the collapse of the AWB challenge to democratic elections. They give us access to a newsworthy story with compelling immediacy. Because the brave young photographers took

2 See Marc Epprecht's review of photographs by Zanale Muholi and Sabelo Mlangeni which provide 'public visibility to non-normative sexualities and gender identities among black people in South Africa.'

pictures on the spur of the moment to capture a drama, bagging it as if it were game, the pictures may even qualify as the historian's equivalent of forensic evidence.³

Moving to the next category, we see how hard it is to draw strict definitional limits around the term 'documentary photographer'. Let us use as a case study the work of Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, the Karoo photographer of 1915 discussed here by Giorgio Miescher. Duggan-Cronin was driven to capture, for example, a particular scene – a young man looking sideways while seated on a jerrycan (page 39) – for reasons that are not clear. Why did he decide to make a document at that particular moment and even stick it into an album? Without an overarching story like the photojournalist's AWB tale or a diary, it seems we will never know the precise answer, though the ethnic caption – 'A Herero native' – suggests that he simply wanted to record a typical appearance or, to use the regrettable parlance of the nineteenth century, a human 'type'.⁴

This photograph also merits attention because it is the only one here foretelling Duggan-Cronin's subsequent career as South Africa's pre-eminent chronicler of early twentieth century rural black life and, as you will observe in the last essay, an inspiration for the work of photographer Andrew Putter in the twenty-first century. Like Germany's August Sander, his own contemporary, Duggan-Cronin would later try to create a composite portrait of a society, a way of life. The human subject of each photograph, taken by either man, would exemplify a role or a group more than he or she would express personal idiosyncrasies. By the standards of the time, the 'Herero man' is not necessarily robbed of his personhood because his name is omitted, just as a 'coal carrier, Berlin, 1929' retains his dignity within Sander's frame. Over the course of the twentieth century the resolutely rural 'documentary photographs' of Duggan-Cronin slid into the category of museum-worthy 'art'. We are now acutely aware that they do not present 'the truth' but his own ahistorical vision of black rural life.⁵ They are as idealized as Renaissance pastorals of peasants filling basins at a spring.

Generally, though, in this South West African series Duggan-Cronin clicked the shutter not because he found the moment or the person typical, but because it was exceptional, as if he were saying, 'This isn't what I expected. Let's try to remember this extraordinary sight.' He took exclamatory photographs. Their imagined captions might read: 'I just saw General Botha, but not up close because he's important and I'm a common soldier'; 'what a laugh – there's a boat on the rails 500 km from the coast'; 'the form of a big rectangular house in the middle of nowhere surprises and delights my eye!' Documentary photographers, in short, may, like photojournalists, find scenes worthy of safeguarding because they are extraordinary.

Documentary photographers' factual preoccupation – with both the typical and the extraordinary – has been conventionally understood to set their work apart from art photography, which explores personal answers to universal questions like the relation between form and content. (Think, for example, of Man Ray jokingly photographing an eggbeater as if it were a male nude.) By the twenty-first century the

3 Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva, *The Bang-Bang Club, Snapshots from a Hidden War* (New York: Basic, 2000), xiv. The authors' statement 'I wanted to capture that fear' (1) strikes this reader as likely to be a more candid statement of their motivation than 'We were convinced that the only way to stop such killing was to show what those deaths looked like...' (58).

4 Some curators now argue that nineteenth century photographers were engaged in 'developing an ordered knowledge of the world' with 'exuberant pleasure in mapping physical differences' that reflected their curiosity and the scientific attitudes of their times, not simply imperial racism. Kathleen Stewart Howe, 'Facing the Camera', in *First Seen, Portraits of the World's Peoples*, 18-19.

5 Michael Godby, 'Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin's Photographs for *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa (1928-54)*: The Construction of an Ambiguous Idyll', *Kronos*, 36 (Nov. 2010), 54-83.

distinction between art and documentation has become blurred. And it is now hard to find people who would swear, as they once did, that the camera never lies. As the public display of documentary photography has spread from the pages of magazines and newspapers to the walls of art galleries and museums, so has awareness of how much the two genres share.⁶ We increasingly recognize that both kinds of photographers manipulate the form, content, and lighting of their compositions. Most people are now likely to appreciate Ansel Adams' clever analogy, albeit in the pre-digital age, for the photographer's manipulation and artistry: Adams likened the negative to a musical 'score' and the print to a 'performance'.

Today 'ambiguous' is the word used – too often – to describe the meaning of all three photographic genres. (Photographers tend to express this idea more elegantly than academics by noting, for example, 'the magic of the still photo; it leaves a bit of a mystery'.⁷) This current tendency conforms to a pattern established by powerful critical voices of the 1970s and 1980s, above all those of John Berger and Susan Sontag.⁸ In words unlikely to reassure historical researchers who use imagery as evidence, Sontag wrote, 'photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal', adding that 'photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.' Thus, she writes, probably striking fear into many historians' hearts, 'the knowledge gained through still photographs ... will be a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom.'⁹

Writing a few years later, Berger explained the reason for this lack of clear meaning, 'all photos are ambiguous [because they] have been taken out of a continuity'. Since photographs record only a moment, words are necessary to explain their meaning with maximum clarity. Berger concluded, 'Reportage photo-stories remain eye-witness accounts rather than stories, and this is why they have to depend on words in order to overcome the inevitable ambiguity of the images.'¹⁰ Historians who use photographs as evidence are, in effect, writing extended captions that reduce the ambiguity of the pictures without dispelling it altogether.

Interpretive fashions come and go. At particular times and in particular places a degree of consensus – not only about how to shoot an image, but also about what it means – seems to emerge. In the following section we will look at four examples of what could be called 'image regimes', that is, conventions for visualizing reality which were meant to serve particular purposes: the anthropological record, state propaganda, domestic portraits, and activist agendas. What can we learn about South Africa's twentieth century journey from each one?

Image Regimes

Before looking more or less chronologically at the photographic conventions discussed in this volume, we should acknowledge two precursors that do not appear. You will find here no nineteenth century anthropometric photographs of human

6 Erin Haney notes in her review of Pieter Hugo's work that the demand for South African photography continues to grow in American and European museums and galleries, as well as among collectors. Marc Epprecht makes the same observation regarding the 'global reputation' Zanele Muholi has acquired.

7 Bill Greene, Lecture at *The Boston Globe*, 6 Sept. 2012.

8 See also Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life, Social Documentary in America 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' (1975) in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print, Writings from 1816 to the Present* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

9 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor, 1989), 9, 23, 24.

10 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 91, 279.

specimens so disturbing to twenty-first century eyes, such as a naked, grim-faced Bushman man standing beside a measuring stick. It is easy to see that image as an unambiguous picture of European domination.¹¹ Neither will you find here deliberately artistic photographs, called 'pictorialist' in style, taken before the First World War when photographers composed portraits and landscapes in apparent imitation of paintings.

Instead this volume begins with the First World War itself. Duggan-Cronin's rather mild South West African photographs will have to stand in here as markers of its devastating impact. The war's carnage would damage the European chauvinism that had sustained the Scramble for Africa. In its wake would come challenges to the hierarchies – ethnic, racial, gender – that went along with this pride. One challenge to this hierarchical world-view came from the developing discipline of anthropology, whose twentieth century practitioners were armed not with measuring sticks but with notebooks and cameras.

The Anthropological Record

Twentieth century fieldworkers did not use photographs to *prove* theories, as some of their predecessors – like the anthropometrists of the nineteenth century – had done. In their eyes pictures simply did not have the power of proof. Their photographs, rather, *illustrated* what they wanted to convey in words. Jack and Eileen Krige used photography as aide-mémoires when they began their fieldwork among the Lobedu people in the early 1930s. The Kriges focused on everyday domestic life, and in the process kept mementoes of the early years of their own marriage. Their photographs bear signs of the couple's personal attachment to a place and its people. A picture of Mokope, a royal wife, for example, is carefully annotated in their photo album so that the viewer will notice the beer pot 'for the spirits', but Mokope is smiling at the photographer, with whom she manifestly feels at ease.

The intimacy in these photographs coexists with respectful distance. Personal connection was a robust part of the Kriges' preliminary visit and subsequent fieldwork, but in ways that were appropriate to their times and sense of propriety: familiar, engaged, and at the same time respectfully distant. The Kriges usually held their camera at a discreet distance from the subject at hand, even when the scene was homely, as when Jack Krige roasted and ate monkey nuts with two local men. The setting – a homestead, a kraal, a plain – is always explicit, as if it were an informant, too, and in some ways it was. Their subjects appear indissolubly associated with the land. The Kriges do not seem to have seen themselves as part of the land, at least not in the same way as they imagined the Lobedu belonged to it.

The sense of distance also came with the social scientific territory they entered in 1935 when they became students of Bronislaw Malinowski. Patricia Davison and George Mahashe draw our attention to the fact that professional structures greatly influence what one sees and records. To be precise, the Kriges were caught up in the demands of functionalist theory and the practice of participant-observation. As social

11 Michael Godby notes that one grimacing Bushman was in fact a prisoner in Breakwater Prison but later, when working for ethnologist W.H.I. Bleek, he was depicted 'in full human dignity'. Godby, 'Images of //Kabbo', in Pippa Skotnes, ed., *Miscast, Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996), 126. Other photographs made around the same time are today being rescued from condescension and recognized as fine portraits. See, for example, the work of Gustav Fritsch reviewed by Christian Joschke in this issue.

scientists they set out in search of general principles about an ethnically defined society. For example, non-Lobedu, particularly Tshangaan, people did not fit the functionalist paradigm because they were outsiders; they do not appear in the published photographs, though they were mentioned in the text. The Kriges' photographs have allowed Davison and Mahashe both to prise the personal and the idiosyncratic out of resolutely social scientific texts and to imagine how professional pressures shaped their perceptions. Their photographic archive reveals the nature of their encounter with the Lobedu more fully than their published photographs do.

When we enter the world of Johannesburg in the early 1970s, courtesy of another anthropologist, Martin West, we encounter images radically different from those of the Kriges. What startles at first is West's physical closeness to his subjects, members of African independent churches in Soweto and Pimville. Unlike the Kriges, West has taken high contrast photos of people at quite close range, frequently while they sing and dance. Motion does not bother him. In fact, West may prefer the blur as he's keen on capturing liveliness. These pictures are portraits neither of an ethnic group – the church welcomed everyone – nor of individuals, but rather of their faith.

The difference between these particular anthropologists of the thirties and the seventies cannot be due simply to the fact that the former studied a rural area and the latter a densely populated urban one. As Paul Weinberg notes, there are also modern technical reasons for the look West achieved: he worked with an innovative through-the-lens meter so he did not have to pause to read a hand-held meter; and he refused to disrupt a religious service at night by setting off a flash. West had a strong sense of orderly composition, facilitated by the tendency of worshippers to dance in circles or lines. What we are witnessing in his work is a different phase of the image regime we labeled 'the anthropological record'. West's work shares more traits with the reportage of a photojournalist, or even of an artist, than with the snapshots or aide-mémoires of the Kriges.

What West does share with the Kriges is an apparently trusting relationship with his subjects. The trust is invisible, but nevertheless highly probable. Even though his subjects are rarely shown interacting with him in these pictures – their expressions are blank in the few full-frontal pictures – we must assume that he enjoyed extraordinary access to their community. He would not have been allowed into those settings if he had not been generally accepted. West himself notes that he set out to win confidence by giving photographs as acts of friendship and by talking openly and honestly to people who had made it clear they resented being looked down upon. Because the church members were so bound up in their relations with one another and with the divine, we naturally become onlookers. We even look over the shoulder of a man reading a Bible.

Given that West was conducting research into spirituality, these inward-looking photographs are highly appropriate. They are appropriate for another, more political reason, too. At the time they were taken, African nationalism had been driven underground for the better part of a decade by banning and imprisonment. The Black Consciousness Movement was just beginning and would train its attention on small-scale, local black communities, like the people in West's photographs.

West's text and photographs are marked by a desire to show urban religious practice in a positive light, rather than as a negative 'reaction to conquest'. Within an urban setting, so frequently seen as a site of social degradation, West shows the faithful members of three independent churches dynamically and creatively forging

a 'positive synthesis of western and African elements.'¹² West's compositions – close-ups of bearded preachers in elaborate regalia of their own design, the camera angle lending them even greater dignity – express this 'positive synthesis' in compelling pictorial terms. His urban subject matter, as opposed to the rural setting of the Kriges, also marks the massive demographic shift that apartheid was designed to stop and reverse. While West was not making an overtly political statement in his text or in his pictures, he was attesting to the rightful permanence of these city folk.

State Propaganda

We take note of this 'image regime' by first conjuring up its opposite: images which could not be seen. After 1948 the South African state became infamous, of course, for strictly policing photographic images, right up until Nelson Mandela's release from prison. By 1989 the publication of his photograph had been forbidden for so many years that the *Weekly Mail* had to resort to an artist's sketch of his likely appearance when printing a front-page story about his rumoured release. To give another renowned example of censorship: *Drum* photographer Ernest Cole, from the late 1950s until his exile began in 1966, famously had to hide his camera when taking pictures in prisons and mine compounds, and his 1967 book *House of Bondage* was banned.

These stories of crude, and in the end futile, repression are familiar. What is less familiar is the kind of propaganda produced by the South African government during the Second World War. In this issue Suryakanthie Chetty discusses dramatic photographs she found in *Libertas*, the wartime propaganda magazine stylistically similar to the American weekly *Life*. Like *Life*, *Libertas* specialized in high contrast, sharply focused close-ups, and owed not a little of its inspiration to the world of advertising, including glamorous portraits of Hollywood stars.

The *Libertas* photographs celebrate the strength and beauty of young male and female soldiers. Even without their captions, the images exude pride in the armed forces assembled to defend the Empire. These soldiers – heroically lit from above or arranged in formidable rows – are a world apart from the tiny, low contrast, indistinct figures in Duggan-Cronin's often ironic snapshots. (The Allied soldiers' perfect massed bodies bear some resemblance to Leni Riefenstahl's photographs of ranks of Hitler Youth.) We are looking at ideal images of the heroic, the strong, the united.

While these images advertised strength, they derived from fear. South African support for the Allies was fragile. As Chetty observes, the Allied defeat at Tobruk in 1942 threatened to sap the country's martial will, already embattled by Afrikaner nationalist opposition. Women, in particular, had to be shown that it was glamorous to serve. Everyone had to be reassured that South Africa was dealing with its social problems, whether the existence of poor whites or poor blacks. In an effort to embrace everyone, *Libertas'* pictures and text told readers that the warrior tradition belonged to all South Africans, and that the battle cry 'Bayete!' was 'ours'. This inclusive vision of South African identity was certainly calculated, but not necessarily insincere. It is important not to read these photographs only through the lens of the 1948 election.

12 Martin West, *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City, African Independent Churches in Soweto, Johannesburg* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), 9, 203.

Domestic Portraits

'The magic of photography', Sophie Feyder writes, 'lies in its ability to "edit" real life and hide some of its limitations.' She finds the 1950s 'lounge' photographs of Wattville photographers Ronald and Terence Ngilima hovering between fantasy and reality. One reality was widespread insecurity, given that it was impossible for residents to buy a home in this new model township. Yet another reality was more pleasant: Wattville had privileged status as the site of relatively well-built council houses. This relative prosperity funded middle class fantasies. Profiting from the economic boom of that decade, the township's proudly employed residents could buy furniture and pay for portraits to decorate their lounges. Advertising and photographs, both visible in the pages of *Drum* magazine, informed their fantasies of glamorous modernity. One lounge scene brims over with post-war plenty: floral wallpaper, a record player, a fedora, a briefcase, teacups, and beer bottles. In all these lounge scenes we are far from both the social class and the spiritual concerns of the Soweto residents whom Martin West would photograph over a decade later. The Ngilimas' subjects are so artfully posed that they are reminiscent of nineteenth century European bourgeois portraits: the photographers' flash captures the sheen on a gracefully arranged taffeta skirt; the solemn subject is framed by the rounded shapes of heavy armchairs.

These photographs remind us of Edward Steichen's observation that portraits are made by the parties on both sides of the camera. Many of the Ngilimas' subjects choose to look at the camera with grave faces. They exude respect for formality. Not for them the smiling or even wide-open grinning mouths that were even then working their way into popular portraiture. They want to be seen as people of substance rather than carefree, fun-loving, or even profligate, the preferred image of some of *Drum's* own writers. If we look at the older portrait hung on the wall above one family (page 149), we see that the former style of portraiture – a hand-painted close-up photograph of an unsmiling face – has for the time being retained its appeal. In contrast, the smiling couple who are enjoying their plenty in the form of both tea and beer represent the wave of the future: they want the camera to record that they are having fun.

Activist Agendas

As Daniel Magaziner observes in his review below, South African photography has a renowned tradition of engaged social commentary. Activist photographers were not shy about articulating their values. We can read them, for example, in the pages of a special supplement of 'social documentary photography' published in 1983 by *Staffrider*. The tone of the few paragraphs accompanying the black and white photographs is impassioned. Because television cameras, billboards, and newspapers lied all the time, the text reads, it fell to photographers to 'project a vision of the realities they confront'. The photographers wanted to 'beckon the viewer to an alternative future', one better than the 'struggling South Africa' of the moment. They did so as a group because they believed 'collective efforts can say more than individual statements'. In their endorsement of 'collective' efforts to express 'realities', they were exhorting their viewers to 'hit back [against oppression] with cameras'.¹³ The paragraphs

13 *South Africa through the Lens, Social Documentary Photography* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983).

release three resounding salvos, emblematic of the times. The collective. Action. The truth.

The nineteen photographers who endorsed this manifesto were pushing the social documentary tradition represented in this volume by the work of Margaret Bourke-White – photographer of the halo-ed miners – into the realm of political activism. Mainly members of a collective named Afrapix founded in 1982 by Paul Weinberg and Omar Badsha, they styled themselves as ‘cultural workers.’ (This special issue of *Kronos* draws attention to the often under-acknowledged role of female photographers within Afrapix by profiling the work of two: Gisèle Wulfsohn and Gille de Vlieg.) Afrapix launched travelling photography exhibitions designed to stimulate young photographers. Besides deliberately founding ‘an alternative and accessible archive’, it also set out to document suppressed stories like the history of the labour movement. These activists believed South Africa’s story possessed such transparent clarity that they included virtually no captions in their 1983 pamphlet.

The international press became interested in the country’s struggles only when South Africa became a defined ‘story’, thanks to the work of activists like those in Afrapix. They were thus political players. Their photographs spread pictures of defiance around the globe: and so anti-apartheid demonstrations were, critic Holland Cotter notes, ‘calculatedly photogenic.’¹⁴ Because their storytelling wielded extraordinary power beyond South Africa, photographers came under increasingly strict government controls in the late 1980s. They were forbidden to photograph the operations of police and soldiers, and ran the risk of being assaulted and fined if they did so. Nevertheless, in order to counter egregious official lies, they felt driven to document the reality of, for example, police violence by photographing the broken and wounded bodies of young victims who stare at the camera with hardened eyes. The Afrapix photographers frankly enjoyed a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with democratic organizations and saw documentary photographers like themselves as ‘giving life’ to their campaigns. The times, they believed, did not call for objectivity, art, or multiple perspectives. They proudly defined their work as recording ‘the truth.’¹⁵

After 1994 it became possible for photographers to turn away from this unambiguous pursuit of a single, utilitarian truth and even to regret their previous, self-imposed limitations.¹⁶ As Guy Tillim now notes, ‘We [in Afrapix] were circumscribed by quite unified ways of thinking.’¹⁷ The anti-apartheid master narrative exerted overwhelming influence over what the photographer saw through the lens. The opportunity to express oneself individually without guilt has since flourished. Tillim, for example, took advantage of this new freedom by taking large format, colour photographs of the 2006 Congo election, recently on display at the Tate Modern (March 2012).¹⁸ As Joni Brenner observes in her review below, Tillim’s tone has shifted

14 Holland Cotter, ‘Images that preserve history, and make it’, *The New York Times*, 21 Sept. 2012, C29.

15 Paul Weinberg, ‘Apartheid – a vigilant witness, A reflection on photography’, in Willem Campscreur and Joost Divendal, eds., *Culture in Another South Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1989), 60–70.

16 Patricia Hayes implies that the tension between photographs as instruments, on the one hand, and as personal testimony, on the other, is alive and well in contemporary South Africa: she believes that it remains necessary to document human suffering ‘on a political and social plane’, so that something will be done about it, and at the same time to record intimacies – having to do with sexuality, anxiety, and death – at the level of the individual and the family. Patricia Hayes, ‘Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography’, *Kronos*, 33 (2007), 162.

17 Tamar Garb, ‘Figures and Fictions: South African Photography in the Perfect Tense’ in Garb, *Figures and Fictions, Contemporary South African Photography* (London: Steidl and V & A Publishing, 2011), 43.

18 The other photographers in the Tate Modern exhibit demonstrated how the definition of documentary photography has broadened by portraying – both in large and small format, and in black-and-white as well as colour – power stations in the United States, portraits of individuals in Lebanon, and everyday scenes in a small Russian city.

radically from urgency to a quiet sense of 'time out of time'. He is certainly not alone in choosing to explore new stories in new ways. The previous year the Victoria and Albert Museum had put on a South African show 'Figures and Fictions' (the published volume is reviewed by Ruth Simbao in this issue) filled with individual explorations of sexuality, personal identity, beauty, as well as social issues like urban and rural poverty. And the archives have changed, too. As Kylie Thomas notes, photographs that used to be archived by their subject matter are now to be found filed under the names of the photographers, a highly significant shift from collective purpose to individual authorship, and perhaps even fame, as fine artists. The 'collective' as an ideal unit of cooperation has been shattered.

Documentary photography may have changed its focus over the past eighteen years, but it has not gone away. Thomas says it has been 'realigned' and adds a startling and disturbing fact: documentary photographers now tend to be absent from scenes of violence, like the necklacing of suspected thieves. She concludes that photographers, among other South Africans, have lost their old certainty about which events are historically important and therefore worthy of documenting. She then suggests that this vagueness is lamentable. Photographs can and should remind us that the past is not really past. The violence of today, in other words, is connected to the violence of yesterday. We need to look in new ways at those old pictures taken by activists before 1994. In doing so we might discover evidence of 'structural violence' that is rooted in time and place. We would thus avoid dismissing horrific events like the necklacing of thieves or foreigners as 'senseless'. We need to think 'historically about the present' and photographs might help us to do that.

It has always been a challenge to express trauma without driving viewers away. Thomas asks whether the 'affective excess' that comes from seeing the body of a badly beaten man is just the sort of catalyst we need to 'consider what these events mean for us in the present'. But is there not a real danger that sustained exposure to extreme images can deaden their emotional impact?¹⁹ Many of us would endorse Hannah Arendt's suggestion in Thomas' epigraph that pictures deepen our understanding when they move us. Isn't there a point, though, beyond which we close down? Extreme situations like the pre-election violence of the early 1990s can actually alienate people, including photographers. (According to Annabelle Weinand, Graeme Williams took to photographing AIDS patients because he needed respite from the horrifying experience of photographing street-fighting.)

Thomas suggests that recent patterns of violence against refugees in South Africa suffer from the lack of an explanatory master narrative as potent as the one explaining the 'struggle': because they are not framed and promoted by a compelling overarching story, they are relatively easy to ignore. The extreme violence, coupled with the lack of a comprehensible narrative, acts to anaesthetize the broader public. This deplorable situation begs the highly provocative question: what intellectual or political context is necessary for photographs to provoke empathy?

Two essays in this volume concern the devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic. Here we see the old activist fervour and the persistence of the collective endeavour, as well as the ease with which the urge to document can be joined to ethical ends. Miller, Smetherham and Fish campaign 'to promote wider awareness'. They, like

19 Sontag once believed that 'repeated exposure' to events through photographs make them become 'less real', but by 2003 she was no longer sure. She concluded that photographs may retain the power to shock and haunt, but that it is only narratives that 'can make us understand'. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105, 89.

photographer Gisèle Wulfsohn, use portraits to acknowledge people's dignity: they include their subjects in planning the photographs; their pictures reveal 'depth and complexity' to viewers who might need to be reminded these traits exist even in suffering people. The empathy felt by the three 'authors' towards the 'grannies' grew over the course of their project, and they expect their projected book will have a similar impact on readers. The revelatory force of Eric Miller's photographs are also a sign of the persistent power of the apartheid-era racial separation of space: people still need pictures to make known to them what they do not normally see in daily life, so they can engage emotionally.

We have observed that most people who know they are being photographed are participating in their self-presentation. They may have chosen attractive clothing and arranged their facial expressions in pleasing ways. Eric Miller has taken this participation one step further by portraying the 'Nevergiveup' grannies 'as much as possible as they wished to be seen' and by asking the grannies to inscribe their own photos. After three years of interviews and photography sessions an ensemble of his photographs was put on display at the District Six Museum. There the grannies danced for joy and 'became part of the installation.' The process of documentation did not stop: Fish's students recorded images of the grannies encountering their own images in the museum.

Photographer George Mahashe gives a different, more academic meaning to activism. Influenced by the extensive literature critiquing the arrogance of 'the anthropological gaze', Mahashe mounted a show at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in 2012 that used the Kriges' photographs as well as his own local knowledge as a Molobedu.²⁰ He wanted to turn the tables on curators and academics by making the anthropological regime the subject of scrutiny. He also wanted to encourage people to 'take custody' of images by making their own prints from the Kriges' negatives. He intended to generate awareness about 'gaps in the social sciences' by personally regaling people with non-academic stories while they developed the photographs. Mahashe quite simply wants to change the way people look at photographs: to recognize that they are productions rather than authoritative statements of fact.

Empirical historians can only hope that badly needed correctives to colonial arrogance do not lead to an open field for highly subjective interpretation. The profession is unlikely to tolerate anyone saying, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, that when he uses a picture, it means only and precisely what he chooses it to mean.

Conclusion: Humility and Empathy

Since photographs are loaded with an 'excess of meaning', the historian has an important role to play: in effect, he writes extended captions that help to ground them in past reality. How should he ideally approach this task? With humility. Why should he bother? Because photographs have a peculiar power to break through received wisdom and allow our imaginations to enter into a sympathetic relationship with people and situations beyond our experience. Photographer Andrew Putter recounts the birth of that sympathy in the story of his own seduction by the pastoral pictures of Duggan-Cronin.

²⁰ The catalyst for Mahashe's show was his own 2010 exhibition '*Gae Lebowa*' which had been criticized for perpetuating an 'ethnographic gaze' in post-apartheid South Africa.

Why humility? One reason might be that there are still, as an art critic recently observed, ‘epic discoveries’ to be made about the photograph. One of them concerns the proper role of the commentator. We have yet to determine, she wrote, ‘how much help [the photograph] needs from other sources, like words, to earn the outsize measure of truth we afford it.’²¹ As John Berger suggests, photographs without words cannot tell stories because they record only a moment. It follows, then, that the historian bears the huge responsibility of connecting the temporal dots, of supplying information about the un-photographed moments before and after the shutter clicked. She must do so in a way that does justice to world-views as well as practical realities, then and now, that she does not share. By ‘justice’ I mean not only striving for accuracy, but also avoiding condescension to the extent possible.

This is necessary because the historian is only one of the parties involved. Since the invention of photography 173 years ago, we have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that a photograph is the ‘meeting place’ of photographer, viewer and subject.²² The meaning of a photograph derives from a dialogue, usually unspoken, between those three. And, of course, the ‘meeting place’ is constantly shifting as time passes. Thus, each party to that dialogue needs to respect the perspectives of the others, or risk imposing a highly idiosyncratic reading.

The value of approaching a photograph with humility – that is, without assuming a magisterial, quasi-imperial voice in asserting its meaning – comes home if we revisit the three themes with which this essay began. First, hubris. It is not wrong to regard Duggan-Cronin’s photographs as opening a window on South Africa’s sub-imperial hubris in 1915. Nevertheless, one runs the risk of failing to see that the photographs advertise the comical aspects and even the absurdities of war. By the same token, the photographs of South Africa’s young soldiers during the Second World War advertised their beauty and strength, but the pictures derived from fear of national weakness, resulting from indifference or even hostility to the war effort. We risk condescending to both photographer and subject if we assert their intentions based simply on our own contemporary reactions. An image regime – and picture – naturally contains contradictory messages.

If we look at modern portraits for evidence of our second theme, a heightened sense of individuality, we can certainly find it. The camera has moved closer to its subject and captures increasingly relaxed, or even playful, facial expressions and postures of people who often choose to be accompanied by their possessions. At the same time their poses and those prized objects can appear surprisingly similar, as if the subjects were animated by a rather narrow range of commercially-induced ideals. Tamar Garb has recently noted this conformist tendency in the choices made by women posing in their underwear for Jodi Bieber: in a ‘depressingly conformist’ way they ‘seem to hanker after the very perfection that [Bieber’s] project is seeking to undermine.’²³ The pictures confirm our second theme, but they also contradict it. They illustrate characteristic consumer desires: to conform and at the same time to look distinctive.

21 Martha Schwendener, ‘Strange Tales Casting Wide Nets’, *The New York Times*, 17 August 2012.

22 Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 7.

23 Garb, ‘Figures and Fictions’, 70.

Have the photographs in this issue made visual sense of South Africa's epic journey toward democracy over the past century? Yes, they have confirmed that master narrative; and they have revealed the birth and transformation of South African nationalism, that is, the changing sense of what it means to be South African. But we have also been warned about a danger: emotional overload can blunt the energy necessary to follow through on all the promises of hard-won democracy. If voters are passive or do not care about the fate of their fellow citizens, will the inherited inequalities be adequately addressed?

We need to be wary of the seductive powers of photography, which are as real as their capacity to deaden. Sontag warned thirty-five years ago that we have entered a point in world history when our appetites are stimulated by images of things we are meant to buy, and that our sensitivities to 'injuries of class, race, and sex' are anaesthetized by those same images. Cameras, she wrote, define our realities 'as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers).'²⁴

It would be a mistake, though, to underestimate the extraordinary power of photographs to foster empathy. Sontag seemed to do just that when she linked their power to sentimentality and failed to mention empathy at all: 'the knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist.'²⁵ Photographs offer 'an invitation to sentimentality', she went on, because '[they] turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past.'²⁶ And yet, readers of this special issue can probably conjure up a picture that changed the way they look at things, one that opened up their minds, and not just their feelings, to other possibilities and experiences. When Andrew Putter shared his own experience of the revelatory power of Duggan-Cronin's photographs, he was saying they brought light into his understanding and allowed him to see his own face in those of others. That is no small achievement.

We need each other: photographers need historians to write captions that help to unlock meanings in pictures;²⁷ historians need photographers because they offer a precious and humane link to our ancestors on either side of the lens.

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24 Sontag, *On Photography*, 178. Jenny Gordon seems to counter Sontag's attack on sentimentality by quoting with approval Lionel Abrahams' testimony to David Goldblatt's achievement: 'He can see into the intimate and innocent centres of personal life without losing his vision of our history and its accusations.'

25 Sontag, *On Photography*, 24.

26 *Ibid.*, 71.

27 Hlonipha Mokoena notes below that Zwelethu Mthethwa's photographs open 'yet unexplored connections between the past and the present', though they sometimes require interpretive help from historians and intellectuals.