# What is out of sight and un-foreseeable:
# Pieter Hugo's filtered images

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This article is a continuation of my exploration of photography with reference to the dialectics of historicity and expectation, archive and performance, absence and presence, theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility — what reveals and conceals itself. Here the focus will mainly be Pieter Hugo's recent "postcolonial" exhibition of photographs *Messina / Musina* (2007), which are interpreted according to recent theories of photography, including Michael Fried's (2008) compelling discussion of photography according to the tradition of antitheatrical critical thought and practice.

**Wat buite sig en on-voorsienbaar is: Pieter Hugo se gefiltreerde beelde**
Die artikel is 'n voortsetting van my verkenning van fotografie met verwysing na die dialektiek van historisiteit en verwagting, argief en vertoning, afwesigheid en aanwesigheid, teatraliteit en antiteatraliteit, sigbaarheid en onsigbaarheid – wat sigself onthul en verbloem. Die fokus is op Pieter Hugo se onlangse "postkoloniale" uitstalling van foto's, *Messina / Mesina* (2007), wat geïnterpreteer deur resente teorieë van fotografie, ingeslote Michael Fried (2008) se boeiende bespreking oor fotografie volgens die tradisie van antiteatrale kritiese denke en praktyk.

*For Michael Godby*

The presumed "logic" the image thus presents, its naturalness or its "truth," is brought about by form, a structure, in which all the elements seem to fit, and that is called the rhetoric of the image (Grootenboer 2005: 12).

This article is a continuation of my exploration of photography with reference to the dialectics of historicity and expectation, archive and performance, absence and presence, theatricality and antitheatricality, visibility and invisibility — what reveals and conceals itself. Here the focus will mainly be Pieter Hugo's recent "postcolonial" exhibition of photographs *Messina / Musina* (2007), which I interpret according to recent theories of photography, including Michael Fried's (2008) compelling discussion of photography according to the tradition of antitheatrical critical thought and practice.

From the perspective of a photograph's insecure status as index of the "what-will-be", characterised as both irrefutable fact and mendacious factitiousness, this study questions whether Pieter Hugo's photographs can move beyond the realm of ethnographic theatricality and quasi-forensic foresight; further than the auspices of spectacularly preemptive evidence (it looks like this, therefore it will be like this). Always already fascinating spectacle and auratic lure, destined for upmarket art galleries and museums, Hugo's large-scale photographs transform the banality of class and race into art.

Moreover, perhaps in the vein of Damien Hirst's "spectacular" artworks, Hugo's photographs confidently blur art and science, transmuting systems of classification into objects of contemplation and aura. According to Walter Benjamin, aura is "the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be" (Benjamin 2003: 254) and, whether in science or art, this involves economics and power (cf Schoeman 2010). But as powerful instruments of aura, truth and semblance, capital and hyper-reality (capital *is* simulated hyper-reality), fact and fiction can they make visible what tends towards the invisible: the "intractable supplement of identity, what is given as an act of grace", to cite Roland Barthes (2000: 109 qtd Fried 2005: 565)?

## Fixing gaze and figuring stereotype

The gazes of Betty Sambu and Patrick Munyai in Hugo's photograph *Betty Sambu and Patrick Munyai of Zack Jack Security in her bedroom at an abandoned military base* (2007) (Figure

1), from his exhibition *Messina / Musina*, entangle us in a web of secondary gazes: those of the stereotypical celebrities posted on the wall behind them. We are looking at Betty's and Patrick's "that-has-been" undercut by the more distant — the several times filtered — "that-has-been" of the celebrity images.



**Figure 1**
**Pieter Hugo, *Betty Sambu and Patrick Munyai of Zack Jack Security in her bedroom at an abandoned military base*, 2007.**

Yet one tends to doubt whether the celebrity images even index the human presences that were in front of the camera, because both "presence" and image are so clearly manufactured. And this bears on Betty and Patrick themselves: once filtered through the filtered images behind them, Betty and Patrick are separated from their corporeal referents; and because of this separation the photograph seems to lose its *eidos* — which, according to Roland Barthes (2000: 15), is death. What then is archived in this photograph? In lieu of an existential *eidos* or *Dasein* (roughly, the human being primordially absorbed in practical activity in the world, cf Fried 2008: 48), is it the future Betty and Patrick, fixed quasi-ethnographically as foreseeable image stereotype, bluntly projected as both particular and universal — "entities within-the-world purely in the way they look" (Fried 2008: 48)?

On the one hand, "[b]eing an indexical trace of the body before the camera" this photograph promises "to return the represented body to some kind of authentic state"; on the other hand, the ultra-thin celebrity images within the image only put the lie to the "apparent truth value of photography" (Jones 2006: xiv). Does this complex paradox open the way to a fabricated facticity, all the more compelling because we need lay claim only to appearance — among other things, "the basis of racism and other kinds of stereotyping", according to art historian Amelia Jones (2006: xv)?

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## For the foreseeable future

The contributors to the recent publication *Photography theory* (2007), edited by James Elkins, explore photography according to a few key concepts. Three of these stand out: Roland Barthes's well-known, melancholy idea of the photograph as yoked together with the "that-has-been"; the photograph as "future orientated and interrogative 'what-will-be'"; and the photograph as unreliable or uncertain index of a real referent or object. It can be argued that every photograph bears elements of these three concepts, in a similar sense that, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, *every* sign includes elements of the familiar triad icon, index, and symbol (cf Elkins 2007: 131).

With reference to Hugo's photographs, I want to highlight the idea of the photograph as "future orientated and interrogative 'what-will-be'", to cite Margaret Iverson (2007: 105). But I want to highlight this future orientated aspect of photography, which Iverson calls *performative*, as inseparable from both the melancholic "that-has-been" traits of a photograph and its uncertain indexicality. To my mind, the interesting thing about Hugo's photographs is their uncertain (unintentional?), interrogative performativity of the everyday, in which individual past ("that-has-been") shifts uneasily to future ("what-will-be"), image stereotype. Here, in the moment of becoming an image, the everyday threatens to become flattened out as ethnographic theatre — "reuniting case and *tableau*", to cite French art historian George Didi-Huberman (2003: 32) writing about the intricate and reciprocal relationship between photography and psychiatry in the late nineteenth century.

On the one hand, the images' unadorned facingness, to borrow Michael Fried's (2005: 569) term, and matter-of-factness, would present us with irrefutable fact: this *was* there (it still *is* there); what we see *indexes* something *unadorned* and *objective* about the *future* "never-ending 'thereness'" (Jones 2006: xv). On the other hand, this matter-of-factness is performed, adorned, framed, and aestheticised — even "pretty"; for "ugliness" captured in "beautiful" colour photographs cannot help being pretty, in spite of the photographer's intentions (cf Hardy & Lehan 2007).

Because of their large scale, and their high-priced printing and framing, Hugo's matter-of-fact, colour photographs declare: this is art, designed for high-end galleries, designer museums, and affluent patrons. To borrow from Fried's 1967 essay "Art and objecthood" — in their obtrusiveness Hugo's images demand that the beholder take them seriously (cf Fried 1998: 155). Their pronounced *presence* (cf Fried 1998: 151) obliterates all intimacy, distancing the beholder — making him or her into a subject and the subject of the work into an object to be looked at (cf Fried 1998: 154). Hugo's large scale images *expose* their subjects, and *pose* their subjects as *art objects*.

## Framed and hung on a wall

In his latest book *Why photography matters as art as never before* (2008), Michael Fried discusses ambitious photography by photographers such as Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Thomas Demand, Rineke Dijkstra, Hiroshi Sugimoto and others with reference to, amongst other things, his 1967 essay "Art and objecthood". Fried retains the basic gist of his earlier ideas, which have been criticised by postmodern writers for their ideological, modernist bias, but shifts the emphasis from modernist painting to contemporary photographs that are intended to be "framed and hung on a wall, to be looked at like paintings" (Fried 2008: 14).

But whereas in his 1967 essay Fried was critical of literalist or minimalist art for *distancing* the viewer, in his book on photography distance is recast in a positive light; here the distancing

effect generated by the predominantly large scale photographs by Demand, Höfer, Struth, and Sugimoto is seen as antitheatrical as opposed to theatrical. In "Art and objecthood", distancing transforms beholdership into an experience of the artwork in a theatrical situation, premised on the subject/object relation; in Fried's book on photography it translates as the exclusion of the beholder from the antitheatrical artwork, which is seen as a world apart. I am not certain whether the latter is the case with Hugo's confrontational photographs, which, in their *hollow objectification*, seem to veer towards theatricality — and, by extension, stereotype.

Even whilst being matter-of-fact, these photographic portraits are posed; they conform to image stereotype. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan (2004: 36) writes:

> Portrait photography tries to make an inner form, a (negative) shadow, expressive: a developed image which renders the corporeal, a body-real, as a real body. Uncertain about what this body looks like or how substantial it is, we perform an image of it by imitating what we think we look like. We imagine what people might see when they look at us, and then we try to perform (and conform to) those images. These ideas are based on what we think we see when we look at people we believe we resemble — beggars, sultans, dog owners.
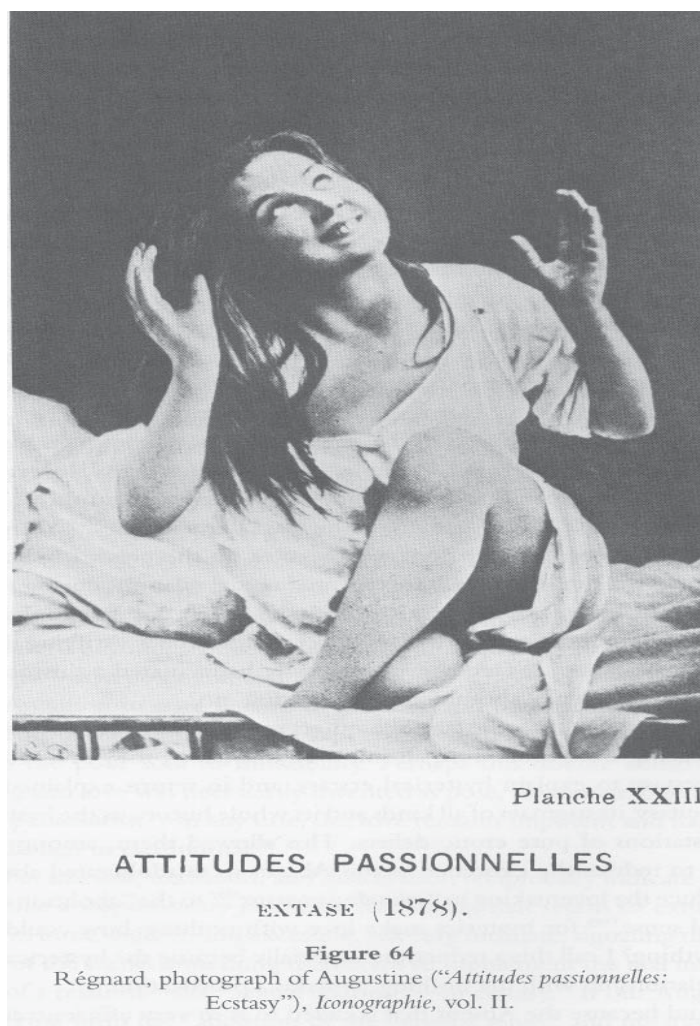


**Figure 2**
**Paul Régnard, photograph of Augustine ("*Attitudes passionnelles*: Ecstasy"), 1878.**

In his book *Invention of hysteria. Charcot and the photographic iconography of Salpêtrière* (2003), Didi-Huberman speaks of photography's "capacity of foresight", something inseparable from its quality of "facticity". Focusing on Jean-Martin Charcot's notorious photographic documentation/invention/theatre of "hysterical" female inmates of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris during the nineteenth century (Figure 2), he (2003: 61) writes: "Facticity is the double

quality of that which is *in fact* (irrefutable, even if contingent) and that which is *factitious*. It is a paradox of mendacious irrefutability". He writes: "To see an entity is already to foresee an action" (Didi-Huberman 2003: 33) — and one can add, it means foreseeing an action performed for the benefit of being seen. Didi-Huberman's (2003: 61) notion of "the paradox of evidence" presented in a photograph, its theatre of fact and fiction, has special bearing on Hugo's photographs — especially if we take seriously their pseudo-objective or quasi-ethnographic facticity, their pretend matter-of-factness, designed to be hung and seen on a wall.[1]

## Facing flatness

For example, Hugo's *Jan, Martie, Florence and Basil Meyer in their home* (Figure 3) faces us with an uneasy archive of the matter-of-fact everyday — an "intimate", if austere, portrait of a family sitting in their living room, decorated with family photographs, frilly curtains, and bronzed artefacts. Their banal "that-has-been" existentiality is on display with the same matter-of-factness as the objects that surround them. Why do I feel uncomfortable in the face of such objectifying matter-of-factness? Is it due to the photograph's neutral objectivity (this family exists or existed somewhere on the margins, in a place called Musina, situated just South of the Limpopo River, which forms the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe), or is it due to the photograph's kitsch theatre — its posed "what-will-be"?



**Figure 3**
**Pieter Hugo, *Jan, Martie, Florence and Basil Meyer in their home*, 2007.**

The flat matter-of-factness and surface facingness of Hugo's photographs recall a long line of photographic predecessors. The banal still-lifes (Figure 4) recall William Eggleston (Figure 5).

**Figure 4**
**Pieter Hugo, *At the Goeie Rust retirement village*, 2007.**



**Figure 5**
**William Eggleston, *Memphis*, c 1971-4.**

The frontal portraits bring to mind August Sander (Figure 6), Dianne Arbus (Figure 7), Roger Ballen (Figure 8), Rineke Dijkstra (Figure 9), even Zwelethu Mthethwa (Figure 10) or Nontsikelelo Veleko (Figure 11), whose photographic portraits opportunistically partake of ghetto and urban chic respectively. Hugo's portraits also appear to consciously imitate Alec Soth's photographic portraits (Figure 12) — apropos large-scale flatness, facingness and banal everydayness.



**Figure 6**
**August Sander, *Sisters*, 1927.**



**Figure 7**
**Diane Arbus, *Identical twins*, 1967.**

And both the still-lifes and the portraits call to mind the austere b/w documentary photographs of industrial buildings and constructions by Bernd and Hilla Becher (Figure 13), which Michael Fried (2005: 569) discusses with reference to the frontal pose, and which are preceded by Walker Evans' photographs of decaying urban facades (Figure 14). In this regard, Dan Graham's minimalist, photographic archive of typical American suburban, serial houses (Figure 15), which anticipates British photographer Paul Graham's austere, quasi-documentary series *Houses Portraits* (1979-80) (Figure 16), also springs to mind.[2] To more or lesser degrees, these

photographers confront us with complex images of the everyday, every aspect of which faces us or strikes us head-on as fact and fiction, art and artefact, archive and performance, construction and deconstruction, history and expectation.



**Figure 8**
**Roger Ballen, Johan and Bertie, Brothers, Western Transvaal, 1987, from Platteland. Images from Rural South Africa, 1994.**
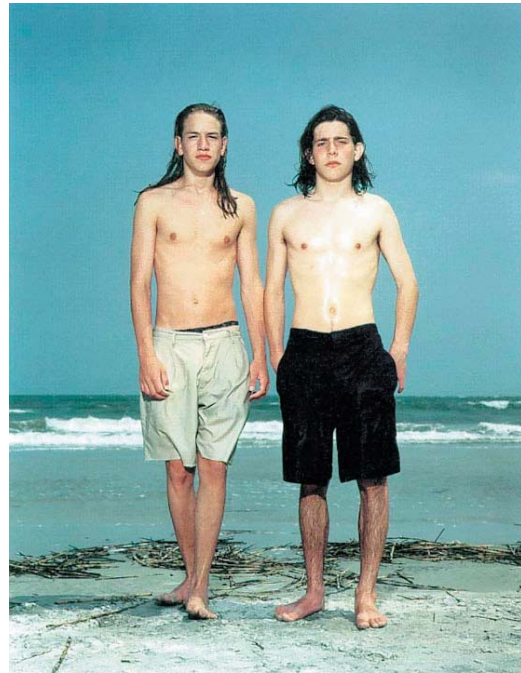


**Figure 9**
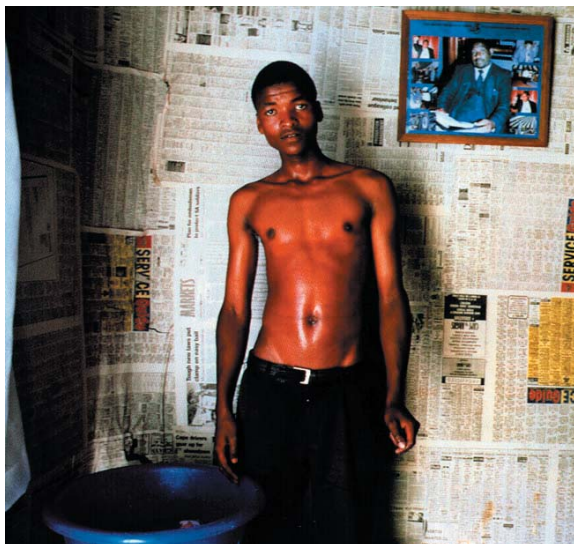**Rineke Dijkstra, *Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA*, 1992-1996.**



**Figure 10**
**Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Untitled*, 1999.**



**Figure 11**
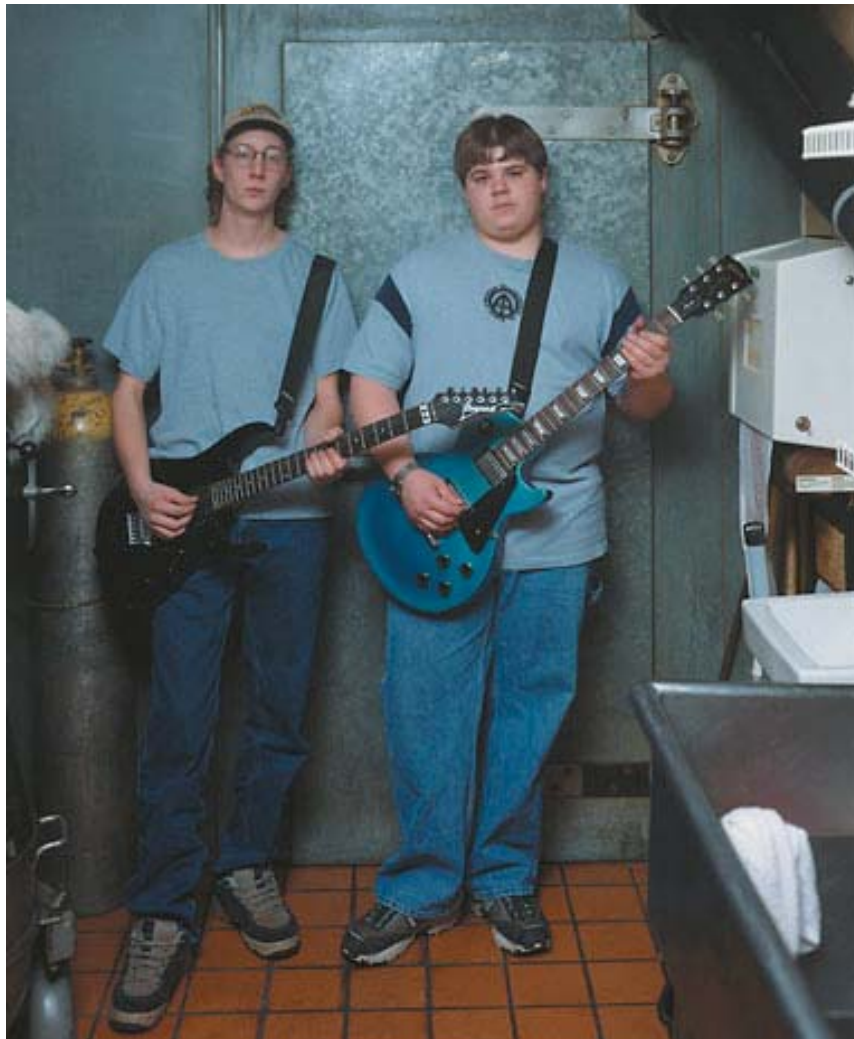**Nontsikelelo Veleko, *Kepi in Bree Street*, from the series *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*, 2004.**

**Figure 12**
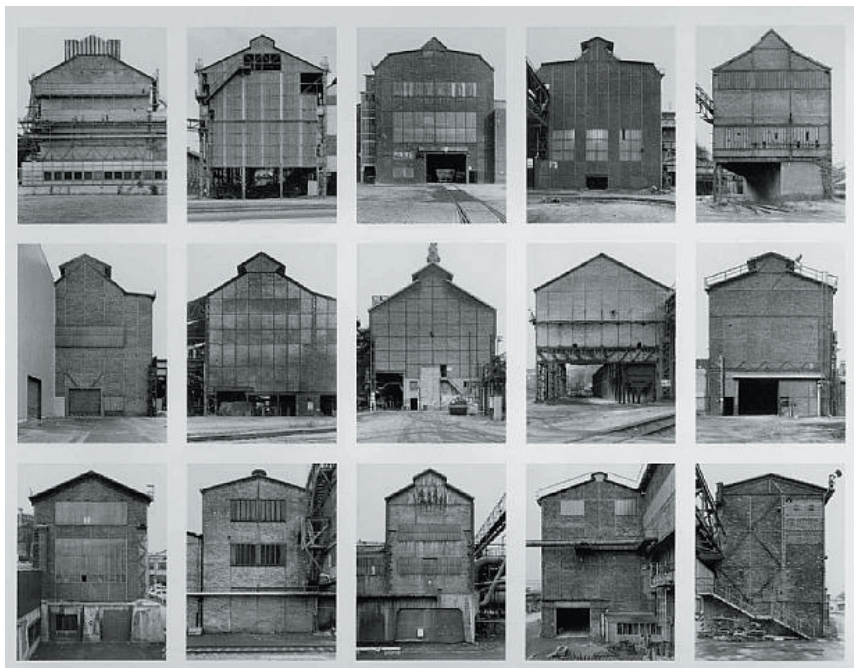**Alec Soth, *Kenny and Bill, Bad Newz, Grand Rapids, Minnesota*, 2002.**



**Figure 13**
**Bernd & Hilla Becher, *Industrial facades*, 1984-94.**

**Figure 14**
Walker Evans, *Billboards and houses in Atlanta, Georgia*, 1936.



**Figure 15**
Dan Graham, detail from *Homes for America*,
1966-7; Figure 16: Paul Graham, *Houses portrait
#10, 1979.*



**Figure 16**
Paul Graham, *Houses portrait* #10, 1979.

What remains to be seen with regards to Hugo's photographs is whether they can defeat or displace ethnographic theatricality, quasi-forensic foresight and the trappings of art and spectacle. To what degree do these photographs partake in the opportunistic processes of colonialist and racist objectification and othering, prevalent in nineteenth century photographs of "the other" (Figures 17 & 18) (cf Hight & Sampson 2004), ambiguous traces of which can still be found in images by Sander, Arbus, and Ballen? To what extent do Hugo's photographic portraits provide us with an "island of safety" (Lebovics 2006: 62) — similar to the one created by ethnographic photographs of others or "freaks" — from where we can scrutinise the "fascinating" other without risk of contamination (cf Sontag 1979: 31-48)? And can the photographs elude or deconstruct the phantasmagoric lure of art and capital, especially given the fact that clearly they have been constructed to be seen as art?

**Figure 17**
**Claude-Joseph Désiré Charnay, *Hova Queen and Attendants*, 1863; Figure 18: Claude-Joseph Désiré Charnay, *Madagascans*, 1863.**



**Figure 18**
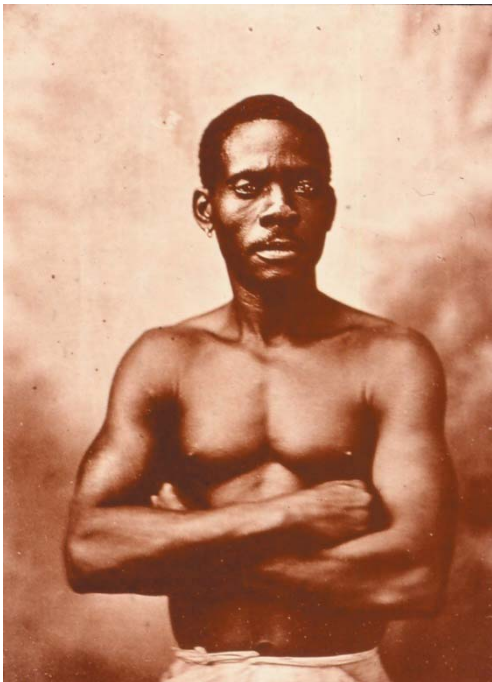**Claude-Joseph Désiré Charnay, *Madagascans*, 1863.**



**Figure 19**
**Sully, *Portrait of a man*, c 1870.**



**Figure 20**
**Pieter Hugo, *Sam, Klein Karoo*, 2003.**

## Constructed to be visible

In my lectures on photography I compare Sully's *Portrait of a man* (c. 1870) (Figure 19) with Hugo's portrait photograph *Sam, Klein Karoo* of 2003 (Figure 20). My students are asked to

identify the similarities and differences between the two photographs, according to pose, the gazes of the models, the mise en scène or putting on stage, as well as the titles of the two photographs.

Some students interpret the pose of the man in Sully's photograph as a sign of inner dignity and strength, a refusal to be fully possessed by the camera, while other students interpret the pose as a sign of defensiveness, born from vulnerability. In contrast, Sam appears relaxed; though he is also half-naked, students argue that he appears less exposed, and seems to conform less to the racial stereotype of the savage.

When it comes to the gazes of the models, students are divided. The far-off stare of the man in Sully's photograph is sometimes seen as a sign of lack, signalling the slave's acquiescence to the controlling gaze of the master. Other times, students regard it as a mark of the man's being elsewhere and inaccessible to us.[3] In contrast, the direct gaze of Sam is seen as a manifestation of his individuality, dignity and personhood in the world.

When it comes to the mise en scène of the two photographs, students seem to agree that the man in Sully's photograph has been displaced from his "natural" surroundings to the artifice of the photographer's nineteenth century studio; he is "othered" and put on display, like an artefact in a museum. In contrast, Sam is seen to be "at home" in his "natural" surroundings; he is photographed where he is to be found, and is not displayed as an object of curiosity.

Students tend to think that the respective titles of the two photographs are revealing with regards to the photographers' different gazes, filters, or intentions. Sully's man is anonymous; he is a racial type, as projected by a nineteenth century white, European male photographer. On the other hand, Sam is given a name, an identity, a sense of self. He is a singular individual. Students view Sully's man as filtered through a self-serving, colonial gaze; Hugo's photograph is seen as complexly postcolonial.

I wish to complicate my students' different points of view, by intertwining Sully's and Hugo's photographs from the perspective of Michael Fried's discussion of photography according to antitheatrical critical thought and practice. Rereading Barthes, and extending his involvement with Diderot's eighteenth century writings on absorption and theatricality, Fried makes a case for a reading of photographic portraiture as inherently theatrical or performed, yet inscribed with the possibility of antitheatricality — that is, of a gentle "to-be-seenness" that denies complete accessibility (cf Fried 2005: 553 & 2007: 504).

## Against complete accessibility

Fried's argument is complex and nuanced, but essentially it involves a privileging of the imaging of absorptive states — of appearance in disappearance; of the presence of absence; of inaccessibility — in opposition to images which appear blatantly designed to be seen. In contrast to performed and confrontational theatricality, which empties out the subject, and presents it as wholly available *all at once*, antitheatricality infuses an image with something "held back", "something interior" (Barthes 2000: 113, qtd Fried 2005: 571). According to Fried, the antitheatrical photographic portrait stages "the scene of representation" and "the act of presentation", without undoing "the magic of absorption" (Fried 2007: 504). As such it is a meta-image or self-aware image (cf Mitchell 1994, Schoeman 2007, Stoichita 1997) that reveals itself — its own coming to be — even as it conceals itself. The absorptive meta-image renders the *time* of representation, as well as *being and nothingness in time*.[4]

One of the key ways in which antitheatricality is guaranteed is in the representation of figures wholly absorbed in an activity, an example of which is Jean-Baptiste Chardin's painting

*A lady taking tea* (1735) (Figure 21). Acknowledging his debt to Fried, Christopher Braider emphasises "the *concentration* the subject involves and how this in turn determines our relation to it". He writes: "What we see is in fact the curious absence entailed by her absorbed attention to her task, a recentring of the universe which, by excluding us, extracts itself from our field of vision, becoming the indelible trace of its own disappearance" (Braider 2004: 65). Like the woman in Jeff Wall's *After "Spring show" by Yukio Mishima, chapter 34* (2000-2005) (Figure 22), the lady "*eludes* us in the very form by which she seems to be given".



**Figure 21**
**Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Lady taking Tea*, 1735.**



**Figure 22**
**Jeff Wall, *After "Spring show" by Yukio Mishima, chapter 34*, 2000-5.**

Can we speak of absorption in images which face us, such as Hugo's frontal, in-your-face portraits? Can images of people looking directly at us imply "the magic of absorption"? Can the performance that portrait photography involves still face us with the mindfulness — the being elsewhere and the being in time — that only oblivion to spectatorship can make manifest? More pointedly, can the motif of absorption restore to Hugo's essentially theatrical, confrontational images what Barthes (2000: 109 qtd Fried 2005: 565) calls the "intractable supplement of identity, what is given as an act of grace"?

## What is unforeseeable and what is grace

For Hugo's in-your-face photographs to escape from the bind of ethnographic theatricality and quasi-forensic foresight, they must acknowledge the essential "failure of representation to offer up the [other] as a coherent knowable entity" (Jones 2006: xvii). Perhaps this self-reflexive acknowledgement of failure (the failure to see and comprehend completely, once and for all) is what is at stake in his mutually harrowing and sublimated photographs of the preserved bones of the mass killings at Marumbi (2004) (Figure 21). Typical *vanitas* images, in the tradition of seventeenth century Dutch still-life painting, the photographs *allegorise vision's entanglement with what must remain out of sight and other to being*. Stripped-down, absorptive, still-life images, in which thereness is shadowed by what is not there, they have the potential to pierce us with our own unforeseeable future death and flattening out — as images of something and nothing on display (cf Stoichita 1997: 279).



**Figure 23**
**Pieter Hugo, *Bodies covered in lime to preserve the evidence of the mass killing at Murambi Technical College, Murambi*, 2004.**

But because these photographs of death show that they cannot show (although showcased, death clearly remains out of sight), they allegorise the essential paradox of the photograph; convincing and deceptive signifier of "that-has-been", which never was, except as an image.

Rather than providing immediate accessibility to the real, the photograph mediates and configures the here and now, as always elsewhere (in photographs life is elsewhere, to borrow a phrase from Rimbaud and Breton). As Craig Owens (1996) has shown, the photograph has this in common with the figure of allegory, which always points elsewhere, to a fullness or totality it itself cannot contain. Allegory implies consciousness of the signifier's failure to meet up with the signified — "and, being distanced from its desired meaning, it turns and reflects on the conditions of meaning and representation" (Dilnot & Garcia-Padilla 1989: 44). In Hugo's photographs of mass killing, the signified — the truth and meaning of death — is allegorised as an allegory, which signifies something else. The signified killing can only be visualised rhetorically and allegorically through representation (cf Grootenboer 2005: 153).

Hugo's images of mass killing preserve, index and archive the paradoxical visibility and invisibility of personal and social history and identity; the presence of absence (cf Runia 2006, Schoeman 2007). The photographs — which are reproduced images as well as material objects of mass death (cf Azoulay 2001: 20) — preserve the preservation of the crime. As the title of the illustrated image denotes, the photograph is an image of bodies covered in lime to preserve the evidence of the crime but the demarcation between lime and representation is ultra-thin.

In preserving (covering) a crime, the photographs turn away from us and become something else — inaccessible; cloudy. The photographs of the crime of mass killing are themselves culpable of the crime of looking and depicting (cf Sontag 2003). Making present what is absent in the photograph, they obscure and displace. The more clearly they visualise death, the cloudier the photographs become. And cloudy images allegorise our cloudy looking, which is itself displayed as an allegory (cf Benjamin 1998: 232, Schoeman 2005 & 2009).

Allegorising allegory, which is characterised by absence, fragmentation, fissure, dispersal, displacement, im-possibility, difference and otherness (a different otherness to the pernicious, colonialist othering implicit in Hugo's theatrical *Messina / Musina*) as opposed to a metaphysic of presence,[5] Hugo's photographic still-lifes of death, of being and nothingness, negate their and our blatant opportunism. Turning the tables on the desire for closure and exposure misleadingly staged in the photographic portraits, they subvert the false consciousness (phantasmagoria) of totality (the presence of meaning). What they just barely leave over and out of sight is the fractured promise of grace; the absorptive being emblematised by the death's head, which is rhetorically denied by Hugo's overblown photographic portraits.

**Notes**

1.  What is seen purportedly functions as forensic evidence but because the camera lies and the person photographed performs and, moreover, in the context of Hugo's photographs, because the image is an art image, the evidence can only be quasi-forensic. It only looks like evidence.

2.  "Since 1965 Graham has shot photographs of typical one-family homes in ordinary American suburbs. These photographs were premiered in 1966 as a slide show in the exhibition 'Projected Art' at Finch College Museum of Art, New York. That same year Graham designed his photo-text article 'Homes for America' which addressed the issue of such row houses as a new form of urban living. In this work, designed as a magazine article, Graham examined the potential variations in style and color of serial housing. Originally the work was to be published in a major magazine like *Esquire*. At the end of 1966, a mutilated version was published in *Arts Magazine*. The accompanying text was given priority and most of the photographs cut. In the sixties Graham saw the medium of the magazine as an appropriate forum for the presentation of his works, which were situated outside the established art institutions. In his photographs, Graham intentionally ignores certain techniques and uses standard, cheap color prints, like a 'photo journalist'." <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/homes-for-america/>. Accessed 18 July 2010.

3. The slave's acquiescence or being elsewhere may be nuanced by way of J M Coetzee's imaging of the master and slave dialectic in his book *Foe* (1986), in terms of the power of speech and its shadow, non-speech.

4. I am alluding to Sartre's dialectic of being and nothingness as adapted by the Dutch art historian Hanneke Grootenboer in her book *The rhetoric of perspective. Realism and illusionism in seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting* (2005). Grootenboer discusses the illusion of "being" in realistic still-life painting (that is, being represented as actual reality and representation as having its own being or thoughtful, absorptive agency) against the background of the painting's nothingness, its being nothing more than painting. In this sense, according to Grootenboer, like truth, painting's being is nothing more than an allegory. What Grootenboer says about seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting resonates with the dialectic of being and nothingness of photographs, which can interpreted as essentially still-lifes. Both photographs and still-lifes confront the viewer with his or her own absence. As with the "eyeless sight" rendered in still-life painting (staged "as if no one is there to see it"), "the empty gaze of the camera" (Grootenboer 2005: 167) absents the viewer, causing the "absorbed scene" to be simultaneously flat and deep, visible and invisible, being and nothingness. What the implication of this is for an interpretation of photographic portraits vis-à-vis photographic still-lifes will be teased out below. Fried's (2008) interpretation of photographs, such as Jeff Wall's, is precisely premised on their being staged "as if no one is there to see it".

5. Characteristic of symbolist and high modernist aesthetics, Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (though their late work and deconstruction by Derrida might suggest otherwise), as well as recent theoretical writings by authors such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) and Eelco Runia (2006).

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