

## Post-struggle art: Its vicissitudes and atavisms Reconsidering the political value of Brett Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works

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This article revisits some of the controversies and debates that arose in 2012 over works by South African artist Brett Murray and his painting *The Spear* in particular. It aims to offer a more sober, profound and instructive evaluation of the painting and the larger body of works it was part of, displayed in the two-part exhibition titled *Hail to the Thief*. It undertakes an immanent critique of these works, assessing their appropriateness with regard to the liberatory aims and horizon of Murray's art practice, as well as staking out the level of analysis most fundamental to such an evaluation. It does so, first, by taking issue with two dominant readings and critiques of Murray's works in terms of unintended and unconscious messages that are found to be counterrevolutionary and racist respectively. Over and against such content analyses and criticisms, the article closes in on a more properly aesthetic form of politics embedded in the communicative mode, subject position and scenario of interaction performed by Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works. Although such aspects were mostly overlooked, the article argues that they are key to determining the liberatory potential of Murray's political art. In the end, the latter is criticised for still adhering to a rather conventional vanguardist model of art's political role—postmodern tendencies notwithstanding. The article argues that this is untenable from a liberational perspective mainly because of the maintenance of an epistemic hierarchy between critical art and its publics and the ensuing debilitating agential effects.

### Introduction: When art hits the fan of post-apartheid politics

With the heated controversy surrounding Brett Murray's painting *The Spear* in May and June 2012, public discourse in South Africa was animated for a month or so by a technical philosophical issue that usually falls within the purview of the rather marginal and esoteric scholarly discipline of aesthetics: the relation between art and politics.<sup>1</sup> Or, so it seemed. Discussion quickly—perhaps inevitably—diverted to more general sociopolitical issues and quandaries, mostly usual suspects in South Africa's contemporary political life: cultural rights versus freedom of speech, hate speech and censorship, liberalism versus traditionalism, constitutionalism and majoritarianism, predetermined respect versus meritocracy, elitism versus populism and so on.

Surely, provocation of intense public debate on such a wide array of burning issues can be seen as an accomplishment of sorts. One should, however, also properly account for the specific political conjuncture that allowed *The Spear* to play such an incendiary role. I here refer to much-noted suspicions that uncertainties regarding the re-election of South Africa's president Jacob Zuma—the butt of Murray's satirical painting—to the powerful position of president of the African National

1 For a chronicle of key developments of the controversy one can consult the Wikipedia entry on *The Spear* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Spear\\_%28painting%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spear_%28painting%29)). For an archive of the avalanche of newspaper reports, opinion pieces and cartoons devoted to the controversy, see <http://www.brettmurray.co.za/the-spear-opinions/>.

Congress (ANC) during the latter's national conference later in the year played a key part in the extraordinary rise to public prominence of the painting. It was alleged that Zuma's indignation toward *The Spear* was mostly feigned and cunningly used as a red herring to divert attention from his dubious tenure, painting himself as victim of racist attack as part of a clever strategy to rally the masses behind him (Dubin 2012, 20–21).

Although such realpolitical readings are warranted—in which Murray's painting is served up as canon fodder in the ruling party's power games—they fail to explain why it could be manipulated for such external purposes in the first place. Because to be sure, Murray's art practice lends itself perfectly to the role of instigator of controversy, as one that is provocative, subversive and explicitly political. In this sense, the row surrounding *The Spear* can even be seen to complete the work, superseding the artist's wildest expectations.

One could thus explain the unprecedented public debate on an art work in South Africa in terms of both circumstantial and intended factors creating a perfect political and media storm. Still, considering what was said previously regarding the art work's functioning in obscure political power games, it is important to emphasise that even if the painting's accomplishment is measured—narrowly—in terms of its success in engendering heated public exchanges, the latter must be viewed as mixed and ambivalent.

Moreover, as already noted, the downside of the controversy was that thorough, critical engagement with the painting quickly took a back seat, with the work being used as pretext for settling all kinds of other, broader issues and scoring easy political points. Critical scrutiny of the painting itself was also not helped by the highly antagonistic nature of the debates. The massive yet mostly orchestrated backlash of the ANC and cohorts against the painting was answered by the drawing of a laager around the artist, not only by fellow artists and art lovers but by pretty much everyone dissatisfied with the powers that be. In a game of victimisation and counter-victimisation, pathetic defences of the president's dignity by his sympathisers were matched by opponents' passionate expressions of unreserved solidarity with the artist, mostly in the name of the latter's political courage and the seemingly absolute principle of artistic licence.

Such unconditional solidarity among artists—notable exceptions notwithstanding—is understandable in the heat of the moment, considering, for instance, the threats of physical violence made against Murray. But again: it did not allow for much open, critical discussion of the painting itself, let alone the exhibition of which it was only one work among many, the type of political art practice which it exemplifies or, even broader, the political role of art in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, it seemed that among both critics and supporters, among artists, political players as well as commentators, art was sacrificed on the messy altar of post-apartheid politics.

This article does not intend to revisit the salvo of reactions, opinions and commentaries produced on *The Spear*. My aim, rather, is to offer a more sober, nuanced, profound and instructive evaluation of not only the painting, but also the larger body of works it was part of, the key art-political strategies at play in the latter, as well as their pertinence to the contemporary South African political context. Such endeavour is important because even though the media dust and political passions surrounding *The Spear* have settled by now, key underlying issues with regard to the relation between art and politics remain largely unresolved and continue to plague debates on contemporary art works that take up an overt political stance in South Africa.

I shall thus broaden the scope of the discussion beyond exclusive focus on *The Spear* and include all the works—eighty or so—displayed in Murray's two exhibitions titled *Hail to the Thief* and *Hail to the Thief II* (*The Spear* being included in the latter).<sup>2</sup> Apart from allowing for a better understanding and contextualisation of the controversial painting, it also helps to gain a better understanding of Murray's specific type of political art practice, described by himself as a satirical form of protest or resistance art (Murray 2012). During the public debate, the political merit of such satirical protest art was often dismissed offhand; for example, for being nothing but a pretext for being disrespectful and issuing insults. Alternatively, its value was taken for granted, if not extolled

2 The first exhibition took place in the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town in 2010, the second in the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg in 2012. See Murray's website for an overview of all the works included, <http://www.brettmurray.co.za/work/hail-to-the-thief-exhibition>. I shall sometimes refer to the body of works exhibited on these two occasions as Murray's recent work(s) or art.

as a necessary device to keep those in power on their toes and remind them that their power and privileges ultimately reside with the people. The latter function, however, is not the be-all and end-all of a politicised art practice and, as I shall argue, neither is it without its shortcomings.

At this stage, it might also be necessary to state that the particular normative perspective that will be adopted in this article is in line with the framework and horizon of Murray's own political art practice, with its firm roots in the so-called cultural arm of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement. One could specify this framework in general terms as a radical democratic one, one committed to the goal of the full liberation of society. As such, the article undertakes an immanent assessment of Murray's recent work. Even though the *Hail to the Thief* works are driven by Murray's deep disappointment in what he perceives to be current perversions and reversals of the liberation movement's emancipatory promises, this is clearly done with the aim of getting their delivery back on track.<sup>3</sup> The question then is how the specific art-political strategies used by Murray in his recent works should be assessed in terms of contributing to such goals, as well as its implications for the more general problematic regarding art and liberation in post-apartheid South Africa.

The article tackles these questions by working through different levels of analysis and criticism of the political value of Murray's recent works, with the aim of staking out the level most crucial to assessing their liberatory status. I start off by taking issue with what I see as the dominant way in which this status was determined, discussed and, mostly, rejected, namely in terms of its alleged messages and meanings. I consider two of the most prominent instances of such content analysis and criticism, which are all the more pertinent in that they are both issued from a radical political perspective. I shall first argue that in both cases, derivation of certain political meanings from Murray's work is problematic due, mostly, to insufficient regard being given to the specific formal and critical art strategies at work in the works criticised.

Secondly, I shall contend that this form of criticism constitutes only one possible approach to assessing the political value of Murray's work and, moreover, not the most crucial one. The article contends that the liberatory political status of Murray's work is not so much won or lost with its alleged political messages, but rather with the *artistic modes and critical procedures in which messages are communicated*. I take proper consideration and critical scrutiny of the latter dimension of Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works to be key to offering a more profound assessment from a radical political perspective and to conceive of alternative ways of achieving liberation through art in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Brett Murray: A struggle artist gone astray?**

I shall thus begin by looking at two responses to Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works that exemplify an influential type of criticism. It concerns a criticism that functions by identifying a certain political message in some of these works that is found to be deeply problematic from a radical political perspective. This is then taken as grounds for dismissing its liberatory potential. Moreover, both readings do so more specifically by digging beneath the "official" message of the *Hail to the Thief* exhibits: the perceived sell-out of the current protagonists of South Africa's liberation movement and the perversion of the latter's noble goals. Both lay claims to uncovering latent, subliminal, unintended messages. In the reading considered first (this section) it concerns a counterrevolutionary message; in the one discussed second (next section) a racist one. Because of the success of the latter, racialised reading in having dominated public discussion of Murray's recent work, it is worth to consider the former criticism first as it engages more closely with its official theme.

The first criticism was issued by renowned struggle artist Judy Seidman (2010) in a text that predates the exhibition and controversy surrounding *The Spear*. In it, she strongly condemns what she considers to be Murray's "misappropriations" of iconic posters from the anti-apartheid struggle, some co-produced by herself in the early 1980s during her involvement in the influential Medu Art Ensemble (Kellner and González 2009). Using a critical procedure I shall analyse and assess in more detail later, Murray made minimal yet crucial alterations to the posters' original captions with the result of inverting and undermining their original messages. For instance, in his adaptation of

3 In his affidavit for the court case over *The Spear*, Murray states as much: "what I am actually doing is articulating my vision of an ideal world in which I want to live. In this instance, that preferred ideal in the South African context is the Freedom Charter" (2012).

Medu's iconic poster of struggle hero Solomon Mahlangu with Kalashnikov in hand, Murray added to the quote of Mahlangu on the poster saying: "Tell my people that I love them and that they must continue to struggle" (dated 6 April), the words "for Chivas Regal, Mercs and kick-backs".<sup>4</sup>

According to Seidman, these and similar works completely miss Murray's official target of denouncing the corruption of the emancipatory struggle in the present, let alone contribute to deeper insight into its causes. As she argues, by having the posters "say the opposite of what we believed", and without giving due acknowledgement to their originals or indicating that they are adaptations, their main accomplishment is to cast doubt on the true, noble intentions of those who fought in the past for South Africa's liberation from apartheid. As such, they are said to send out the "sinister" message that "bad morals and greed formed the underlying motivation for our Struggle, that the roots of today's failure grow from fault lines integral to the Struggle itself", a view which Seidman denounces as "counter-revolutionary" and a "tired old stereotype". According to her, such presentation of the liberation struggle is untrue and distorts and obscures South Africa's cultural and political heritage.

Seidman's critique is thus that Murray's justified outrage over current practices of corruption and self-enrichment among some of those who were involved in the liberation movement, or who act as their rightful heirs today, is misdirected and gets lost in an overly generalising, conservative, cynical and politically debilitating narrative of the inevitable downfall of liberational politics, as if the latter's ultimate demise is inevitable, built into its genetic code as it were.

To be sure, based on Murray's own declarations concerning the *Hail to the Thief* works (2012) there is no indication that his disappointment in the current ruling elites made him do a U-turn with regard to his previous commitments to radical goals of social liberation.<sup>5</sup> Seidman, however, claims that his art says otherwise. Although she allows for the possibility that its alleged counterrevolutionary message might not be intended by Murray—she speaks of "an unfortunate by-product of the form he uses"—this does not make the adjusted posters any less problematic in her view. On the contrary, she considers such miscommunication on Murray's part as sufficient grounds for declaring his work an "artistic failure".<sup>6</sup>

My problem with this reading is that the specific artistic procedures applied by Murray are not only insufficiently taken into consideration, but also mistakenly so. For starters, I hold Seidman's attribution of a counterrevolutionary message to the art works in question to be far too literal, taking them—simplistically—at face value. I think a more complex reading is required, one more in tune with Murray's past political commitment, his declarations regarding the *Hail to the Thief* works, as well as the quite obvious use of satirical procedures such as distortion and hyperbole. If one does so, it would be more correct to take the distorted struggle posters to say not that South Africa's liberation struggle *really was* from its very beginning about material gratification and power (as Seidman does) but rather that some of its current beneficiaries *act as if it was*. Rather than Murray's own "sinister" views, the works can be seen to make explicit the assumptions behind the conspicuous consumption of the current elites, stating what these elites must—consciously or unconsciously—take to have been the real aim of the struggle if one is to make sense of their dubious behaviour. By misappropriating past aesthetic vehicles of the struggle for liberation, Murray's adjusted posters merely enact the struggle's misappropriation in real life—if not in words, then in deeds—by some of its current protagonists, as well as the inherent violence and disrespect towards those who sacrificed their lives for achieving genuine emancipation.

4 Murray's series of adapted struggle posters referred to by Seidman include the works entitled *Amandl'*, *The President and The Struggle*. She also mentions a similar series of adaptations of iconic posters produced by the Community Arts Project in 1984 stating key demands of the Freedom Charter. In this instance, Murray simply phrased these demands in the negative. For instance, he has one poster say that "the wealth of the country shall not be shared by all" (my emphasis). Finally, Seidman also refers to a work titled *The grave turners* that lists names of legendary figures in South Africa's struggle for liberation. Here, Murray interposed invented nicknames between the struggle heroes' names and surnames that suggest corrupted behaviour on their part (e.g. *Joe Mr Ten Percent Slovo*, *Steve Kick-Back King Biko* (my emphasis)). All works mentioned are dated 2010.

5 See earlier, note 3.

6 Note how Seidman hereby seems to make artistic success conditional on its efficacy in conveying intended messages to the public through appropriate choice and use of artistic forms and procedures. More space would be required to engage critically with such assessment criterion and its twin presuppositions of the calculability of art's signifiatory effects within reasonable margins of error, as well as the desirability thereof (e.g. in terms of allowing space for active interpretative participation in art works by the public).

In this regard, there is also insufficient appreciation of another, again more complex, artistic strategy at play in Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works: namely that of criticising something *by doing yourself what you criticise*. We saw that Seidman criticises Murray's adjusted struggle posters for being misappropriations. She does so, however, not only with regards to their content or spirit—i.e. the cynical reversal of revolutionary messages resulting in an “unacceptable meaning”, as she calls it—but also in the more narrow sense of not giving due credit to the original posters and its creators, the latter's aims and the context and mode of their production. On the latter grounds, she for instance accuses the work of plagiarism, questioning its status as a “legitimate form of artistic creation”. To be sure, the misappropriations performed by the adjusted posters are undoubtedly misappropriations in both senses indicated, and are therefore likely to be experienced as violation, alienation and insult, especially by those who have been closely involved in their production, such as Seidman. I would argue, however, that such effects are not to be taken as unintended and, further, as proof of the works' failure. On the contrary, they quite effectively drive home Murray's critique on an affective level by mimicking and making palpable in the sphere of art the violence done to past, authentic revolutionary processes and desires by current political elites. Or, still, the works artistically perform these elites' same lack of scruples in misrepresentation and manipulation.

One might thus say that the feelings of outrage experienced in relation to Murray's works are entirely appropriate and might presumably even be provoked deliberately through their formal presentation, rather than an “unintended by-product” of the latter, as Seidman suggests. Beyond the initial hurt, however, such feelings have to be directed at the right target which, I would say, surely is not the messenger.

### **This is your colonial unconscious speaking! (or is it?)**

Let me now turn to perhaps the most dominant reading in terms of the alleged message of Murray's work, even though it is initially focused exclusively on *The Spear*. It is safe to say that the latter painting of the president in social realist style<sup>7</sup>—geared towards heroising revolutionary leaders, with the typical pose of urgency and determination—with the clumsy, puerile superimposition of male genitalia on it, was meant as a dig at the well publicised, tumultuous love life and machismo of the president (Vetten 2014). It is one of a series of works in the *Hail to the Thief* exhibitions concerned with the relations between power, masculinity and patriarchy in general, and their presumed incarnation in Zuma's life and political career in particular.<sup>8</sup>

This official thematics was soon displaced, however, by racialised readings that mainly took issue with the painting's rendering of Zuma's genitals, reading it as an expression of racist and colonialist prejudice against Africans. Not only was *The Spear* condemned for the undignified, derogatory depiction of a black subject, it was also seen to affirm racist stereotypes of Africans as hypersensual beings, obsessed with sexuality, with the further suggestion that this makes them ill-equipped to practise politics as a presumedly disembodied, neutral and strictly rational affair. A similar accusation, phrased in more cultural terms, was that *The Spear* displayed typically Western prejudices against African sexual mores and practices of polygamy.

The effects of such racialised readings were not limited to *The Spear* alone, but impacted on the *Hail to the Thief* works as a whole. Suspicions were cast on the true motivations behind Murray's indictment of the corruption of current political elites. The latter came to be viewed as a racist attack on black politicians *as such*, with Murray's criticism being taken as an alibi for questioning the general suitability of black people for governance. To be sure, there were also many commentators

7 As is well known, *The Spear* is based on a 1967 Soviet propaganda poster by Victor Ivanov with the slogan “Lenin Lived, Lenin is Alive, Lenin Will Live”.

8 Other works that can be seen to express this sub-theme are a series of six or so coat of arms-like assemblages centred on a heraldic representation of a phoenix (or, in one instance, a lion) with pronounced male genitalia and with typically suggestive titles such as *Crown jewels*, *Morning glory* or *Traditional weapon*. One work that tackles Zuma along the same lines as *The Spear* is the work entitled *He's got balls*, an assemblage made up of a soccer ball, dollar sign and the inscriptions “Zuma” and “he's got balls”. One of Murray's adapted struggle posters (titled *The president*) discussed earlier in the article also takes a dig at Zuma's reputation as a womaniser. All works mentioned are dated 2010.

who dismissed such interpretations as typical instances of the race card being drawn as a means to divert discussion away from the ruling party's failures.<sup>9</sup>

Here, I shall deal mainly with one of the most elaborate scholarly articulations of this racialised critique by political scientist Peter Hudson (2012). Although initially pushed by the ANC and its cohorts, Hudson's reading of *The Spear* grants this critique theoretical legitimacy by grounding it in concepts of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Slavoj Žižek and, especially, Frantz Fanon.<sup>10</sup> Hudson's core interpretative move is to read the painting as a manifestation of what he calls—closely following Fanon—the colonial, or white, unconscious. He interprets the painting in line with Fanon's views that, within colonialism's libidinal economy, black men are unconsciously identified with their penises or, rather, *the penis*, as psychic archetype of licentious, unbridled, unthinking sexual desire. The contention then is that *The Spear*, in depicting Zuma's genitals as a way to allude to his alleged questionable sexual stances and behaviour and, in extension, his dubious moral integrity as political leader, heavily draws on such racist stereotypes for its critical effect, even if not consciously so. As such, the painting is accused of "hav[ing]...the gaze of the white colonial subject built into [it]", with Hudson even going so far as to say that it functions as "sublime object" of the colonial unconscious.

What makes Hudson's criticism all the more interesting is that it is embedded in a broader theory of art in post-apartheid society. Hudson holds art to be the space par excellence in which the colonial unconscious—which is said to have been collectively repressed by the white population after the formal end of apartheid in 1994—intrudes into public life and is allowed to do so, protected by the constitutional right to freedom of speech. Art—or, at least, certain art works such as *The Spear*—is thus said to function as a surrogate outlet for the expression and enjoyment of repressed white supremacist fantasies.

No doubt, Murray's own explicit declaration that he is not a racist<sup>11</sup>, will be brushed aside by Hudson by emphasising that the racism in question is not so much a personal, conscious thing. In typical psychoanalytical vein, he argues that based on the racist nature of what was painted, Murray must unconsciously view black people in a racist way—and again—despite official declarations of anti-racism or the intended focus of critique on Zuma. Taking the same psychoanalytic reasoning further, one might argue that in painting Zuma's genitals, Murray was not acting on his own, but that it was the "Big Racial Other"—as one might call the collective and mostly suppressed archive of racist representations, affects and prejudices—acting and painting *through* him or, still, on his behalf, holding his brush as it were.

More space would be required to critically engage with all aspects of Hudson's argument. Here, I merely want to take issue with some of the underlying assumptions concerning the relation between art and the political unconscious. My basic objection here concerns Hudson's theorisation of art as a cultural process where society's unconscious is expressed in rather unambiguous and transparent fashion due to what Hudson holds to be art's low "co-efficient of repression". Such a view not only underestimates art works as some of the most complex, reflexive symbolic entities among human artefacts, it also completely disregards proper consideration of artistic agency and strategy, simplistically identifying the use of racial stereotypes in art with the artist's actual, if unconscious, investments in them.

On the same grounds, one would, for example, have to criticise the performance of sexist stereotypes in radical feminist art as a sign of an unconscious subscription to such attitudes, and dismiss such art for this reason, as well as for allowing sexist sectors in society to "enjoy" their misogynist attitudes through such works. In short, what is not sufficiently appreciated in Hudson's

9 In this regard, some commentators found it symptomatic that there was far less, if any, outcry over Murray's work *Killed twice* (2010) which in a subtly provocative way serves as an indictment of the alleged betrayal of Steve Biko's legacy by current ruling elites (Corrigall 2012; Memela 2012). Feminist readings were also critical of exclusively racist readings for invalidating and even obliterating the critique of patriarchy. As Shireen Hassim puts it: "the elision of penis with blackness invisibilized the gendered dimensions of Murray's...critique" (2014, 216).

10 Other more theoretical instances of a racialised reading include interventions by Gillian Schutte (2012) and Achilles Mbembe (2012). The former laments Murray's usage of "an insensitive and cruel colonial construct" in critiquing of Zuma. The latter accuses *The Spear* of pretending "to critique contemporary forms of patriarchy with the categories used in the past to dehumanize the black man".

11 The main heading of his affidavit in the court case over *The Spear* reads: "I'm no racist" (2012)

all in all rather reductionist psychoanalytic reading is that the employment of stereotypes in art can be part of a deliberate, conscious politico-artistic strategy, as opposed to a mere, unthinking slip of the tongue, or brush in Murray's case. And if there is one constant in Murray's work over the years, it is the cunning play with stereotypes which are, moreover, not limited to one specific racial group.<sup>12</sup>

To be clear: this is not to deny the validity of Hudson's Fanonian claims concerning white racism, how stereotyping of the black body and subjectivity is still alive and well among certain powerful sectors in South Africa, although mostly operating in covert, cunning and sublimated ways. Rather, I take issue with too straightforward, almost schematic applications of such a framework to interpret complex phenomena such as art works. Such judgements require more detailed dialectical mediation with the artistic image concerned, the interplay with other, related works by the artists, the strategies employed and so on. For instance, the case has to be argued in much finer detail on what basis Murray's depiction of the president's genitals—which is done in a rather generic, even banal, way—should be taken to refer to all black men or even black "Man" in general. Or, still, how an allusion to the alleged promiscuous conduct of the president and, more generally, a suggestion of the complicity between masculinity and political power, can be generalised into a racist indictment of black male sexuality *as a whole*.<sup>13</sup>

It is tempting to regard such interpretative jumps from the specific to the general as based on an implicit, if problematic assumption along the lines that if a white artist makes an artistic rendering of a black man, especially with his genitalia exposed, *it cannot but* express unacknowledged anti-black racist attitudes, constituting an instance of the white unconscious speaking through and despite him or her. The latter can then further be seen to be based on the assumption that Murray, as a white person socialised in an extremely white supremacist context, must inevitably and mostly unconsciously have assimilated certain white, racist stances or references, and this despite his conscious rejection of, and resistance to white supremacy as anti-apartheid activist. Even though this rejection was not merely a principled, theoretical one, but was intensely lived as it had severe practical consequences for his day-to-day life and work situation—so the argument might be taken further—racist images and tendencies still somehow survived and remain active in Murray's unconscious, destined to pop out, so to speak, in an unguarded moment. Although consistent with the psychoanalytic approach, such reasoning comes across as rather deterministic and, from a radical political perspective, quite depressing, I would say.<sup>14</sup>

### Let's entertain...critically

Both Seidman's and Hudson's criticisms can thus be seen to follow a similar *modus operandi* in assessing the political status of Murray's recent work. Over and against the latter's official theme (the betrayal of SA's struggle for liberation by its current epigones), both make claims to unintended

12 One can think here of Murray's series of works titled *White like me*, which ridicules white people's hypocritical, superficial, ironic even, adaptation to their new minority status in multicultural post-apartheid society.

13 A variation of this racialised reading of *The Spear*—a potentially more warranted one perhaps—would be to locate an unacknowledged racist-colonialist attitude in Murray's failure to foresee that the painting *might be experienced* by recipients of anti-black racism and white colonialism as an insult to all black men, overriding all other indications that suggest otherwise. This oversight—which some will call irresponsible or reckless—might be found to be symptomatic of the colonialist attitude: the (superior) sense of being able to pass critical judgements on the "Other" in a unilateral, unrelenting way, without consideration of its possible injurious effects and with a sense of impunity. In creating *The Spear*, so the argument would go further, Murray was acting (albeit unconsciously) from such a colonialist subject position. Among other things, such an argument would need to account, first, for the problematic assumption of the possibility of predicting the public effects with sufficient certainty (see also Note 6). This, especially, since not all black South Africans experienced Murray's work in a racialised way (one black commentator, for instance, confided that the painting occasioned great delight among his housekeepers in mocking Zuma's romantic escapades and fitness for office). One also needs to account for the fact that responses to art works are never simply unmediated or first-hand and are more often than not shaped to a high degree by what one might call the politics of art's reception. The ANC's machinations with regard to *The Spear*—what Steven Robbins calls its "populist politics of outrage" (2012)—are a case in point here.

14 Surely, from an art-theoretical viewpoint, a lot more is to be said about the underlying claim that most important in the interpretation and reception of art is not so much what is said by the artist, but who says it—which, in a highly racialised setting, inevitably includes consideration of the artist's racial background and identity—with the nature of the messenger taking precedence hermeneutically over that of the message.

and politically problematic messages and dismiss its liberational potential on this basis.<sup>15</sup> In both instances, I have taken issue with what I regard as their failure to sufficiently and properly mediate the art works' contents with other important biographical, contextual, formal and strategic dimensions, which complicate straightforward interpretations in terms of a dominant, subliminal meaning. As such, my aim in the preceding sections was also to point to some of the shortcomings and limitations of different hermeneutic frameworks applied to Murray's recent works, i.e. *the ways in which* they attribute specific messages to the latter and some of its underlying assumptions.

I now want to move beyond discussion of Murray's recent art in terms of its implicit or explicit messages and focus, rather, on what one might call its *mode of messaging*. That is, not so much *what* is communicated, but the specific artistic, formal manner in which this is done, including the critical strategies utilised. This includes consideration of such aspects as the fact Murray's art *has* a relatively clear, intended message to begin with (notwithstanding claims of unintended ones), the "form" or type of the message, the manner in which it is delivered, as well as assumptions regarding the impact of that delivery. Careful consideration and profound discussion of the latter was absent from the public spat surrounding *The Spear*, if it was acknowledged at all. I aim to demonstrate, however, that this level of analysis is crucial for evaluating the liberatory status of Murray's recent art and the specific politics of art it practises. It allows one to expose a more properly *aesthetic* politics at work, one *inherent to, or immanent in* the formal and critical strategies applied, rather than expressed in Murray's explicit or implicit commentary on South Africa's contemporary political life.

Such an approach requires a more detailed formal analysis of the *Hail to the Thief* works, with particular focus on the main critical-artistic procedures applied. To be sure, a diversity of such procedures are applied in the body of eighty-odd works. Still, the largest set of works can be seen to rely for their critical effect on a rather strict application of an established subversive art strategy called *détournement*<sup>16</sup> in its original French context, the most common translations of which include diverting, redirecting, hijacking, misappropriating, distorting, twisting and embezzling. This technique was named, developed, theorised and applied by the Letterist International and, more well-known, the Situationist International, two radical art movements active in the 1950s and 60s. It concerns a procedure in which characteristic elements of the dominant order or, more generally, that which is criticised—forms, symbols, images, objects, texts, discourses, practices, strategies—are misappropriated in order to subvert their conventional meanings, values, aims or workings, exposing their problematic nature instead.

The bulk of the *Hail to the Thief* works can be seen to apply this critical procedure. The majority consists of mash-ups—in varying degrees of elaborateness—of iconic images, logos, symbols, slogans, printing fonts and graphic formats taken from nominally incompatible traditions and ideologies, including, mainly, socialism, capitalism, consumerism, traditional African tribal culture and South Africa's liberation struggle. The latter are combined in such way so as to assert their contemporary intercourse in post-apartheid South Africa and, especially, their damaging, perverse effects on the noble aura and ideological purity of the ruling elite and party which today still claim to act in accordance with past liberation struggles.

We already encountered this procedure in the works by Murray criticised by Seidman, i.e. his adapted struggle posters and name plaques of struggle heroes. In the case of the poster featuring Solomon Mahlangu I mentioned earlier, *détournement* is applied in a minimalist way by merely adding a couple of words to the original caption. It is applied most elaborately and formulaically, perhaps, in a series of coat of arms-type of assemblages. Take the work entitled *Viva viva* (2010), a heraldic composition made up of a communist star, a rising sun, a dollar sign and the slogan "Viva viva".

15 Note that both Seidman's and Hudson's criticisms—issued, respectively, from the perspective of liberational-revolutionary practice and critical race theory—do not object to Murray's critique of the ANC and Zuma. Rather, they take issue with the unintended *reactionary* messages allegedly caused by the way in which the official critique is delivered in his art, and which have either displaced its official critique or undermined the credibility of its place of enunciation.

16 *Détournement* is derived from the French verb "détourner".

*Détournement* is surely not the only art-critical strategy applied in the *Hail to the Thief* works. There are also highly metaphorical works such as a series of four sculptures, with one, for instance, depicting a pig taking another pig from behind and suggestively titled *The party vs. the people*—which is also exemplary of Murray’s strategic employment of the titling of works to generate critical effects. Then there is also a multitude of text-only works that express Murray’s critique of the post-apartheid regime even more overtly, with statements such as “when is enough enough”, “promises, promises, promises” or “President and sons (pty) Ltd”. The latter seem to be included in order to account for the unlikely event that the already quite explicit messaging by the other works could be missed.

As should be clear by now, all these critical procedures lend the *Hail to the Thief* works a highly discursive, textual, representational character. That is, it is easy to capture the works and their intended meanings in words, as I just did, with the actual aesthetic experience of the work not being essential. To be sure, it concerns objects that are carefully crafted and cleverly designed using an array of materials and techniques. Still, what is often considered to be the aesthetic dimension proper, i.e. that which resists unambiguous, discursive signification, is largely missing in these works or, at least, is almost entirely subservient to its didactic purposes, geared to get the critical point or quip across. *The Spear* is exemplary for this. As an oil painting on canvas it is one of the most traditional of the *Hail to the Thief* works. Still, the chosen medium is used in an instrumentalist way to convey a rather easily readable political message in its staging of an obvious opposition (say, between revolutionary heroics and the banality of sexual desire).

Such hyperdidacticism is in line with some of the links that are commonly made between Murray’s work and other artistic movements such as propaganda art and pop art (Van Wyck 2013). The *Hail to the Thief* works can be seen to combine the former’s political earnestness, partisanship and pedagogics with the latter’s light-headedness, irony and twisted sense of humour. The works’ straightforward communicative style and confrontational mode, moreover, also perfectly fit Murray’s own labelling of these works as resistance and protest art. The mentioned properties are well-suited to an art that wants to create outrage about what it perceives to be scandalous, with the ultimate goal of contributing toward putting a stop to it. Arguably, the latter aims would be poorly served by a form of art that does not communicate in direct, non-ambiguous fashion (imagine, for instance, a protest or satirical art work whose target is left vague or whose critique is ambivalent).

Still, even though Murray’s straightforward communicative style must undoubtedly be seen in continuity with South Africa’s tradition of struggle art, its relation toward it can be found to be somewhat more complex. One can detect a certain critical reworking or distance towards it, which is perhaps due to its pop art tendencies. As already remarked, Murray applies the technique of *détournement* quite rigorously, formulaically even, which makes his critical intentions rather obvious, too much so, one might even say, like lame jokes. As such, the *Hail to the Thief* works can be seen to offer a somewhat caricatural take on propaganda art. As if they want to disarm the latter’s revolutionary zeal and moral seriousness through exaggerated use of its canonical subversive procedures and conventions, its ultra-orthodoxy producing ironic, humorous effects. This also lends some of the works a highly gimmicky character. How else to describe a pair of knuckledusters made out of gold with a dollar sign engraved on it and the words “viva” printed in red on its outside?

Along these lines, we can also understand Murray’s specification of satire as “critical entertainment” (2012). That is, his recent works surely issue a quite damning political critique, yet they do so through invoking laughter and amusement, causing the underlying, deep sense of indignation and outrage to be softened by a certain frivolity, silliness or dumbness even. As such, one might also label Murray’s work as *post-struggle art*, a continuation of struggle art twenty-odd years after the formal end of apartheid, but with a self-reflexive twist and post-modern sensibility.

### **For they see not what is blatantly obvious**

Still, self-relativising artistic strategies are never applied in such a way in *The Hail to the Thief* works that they undermine delivery of their core critical punches. As such, they merely make their propagandistic slant less obvious and, perhaps, more palatable to contemporary publics. The clear message that is delivered in work after work is the bottom-line of critics of the ANC and

its allies—whether by opposition parties, so-called liberal media, “dissidents” or “independent” public intellectuals—namely the contemporary bankruptcy of the liberation movement, whether it is due to material greed, moral corruption or delusions of grandeur and self-righteousness. One can read, say, a pamphlet of the Democratic Alliance (the largest opposition party), a hard-hitting investigative piece of journalism in an edition of the liberal-leftist weekly newspaper *Mail & Guardian*, or peruse the political cartoons of South African satirist Jonathan Shapiro (aka Zapiro) and get the same core message and sentiment expressed in Murray’s recent works. For all the latter’s diversity, imaginativeness and playfulness, the critical messages and dominant affects expressed are surprisingly—perhaps disappointingly—familiar and uniform. They regurgitate in the artistic register a single oppositional political tune, one that is, arguably, increasingly predictable, sterile and depressing. And again, although this is done imaginatively by Murray, the latter’s role is limited to the visual and textual demonstration of oppositional ideas, instead of critically examining them or exploring alternative ones.

This resulting sense of overkill in terms of Murray’s critique is not just due to sheer volume, but also the way in which they were exhibited in the gallery spaces. Installation of the works resembled a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art; with an eclectic variety of art forms and media—paintings, silk screens, posters, sculptures, slogans, flags, etc.—all driving home the same critical point. As such, it seemed designed with the purpose of enveloping, immersing, *suffocating*, one might even say, the visitors, throwing critical punch after critical punch at them.

I propose to read this particular communicative strategy as pointing to a sort of loss of nerve on Murray’s part. That is, the drive to excessive suggestiveness and complete audience immersion seems to point to a deep sense of frustration, desperation, incomprehension even, that what he considers to be plain for all to see is not perceived as such and has not been able to generate sufficient public outcry and mass action to achieve radical, systemic change. Hence, I contend, the felt necessity to *overstate the obvious*—or, at least, what the artist deems to be obvious—to leave little room for interpretation and use all tricks in the political artist’s book—hyperbole, satire, humour, propaganda, etc.—to get people finally to see the light and resort to decisive action before it is “too late”.

In this, Murray’s recent works can be seen to exude the same exasperation of say, the average DA supporter in the face of the umpteenth corruption scandal of the ANC-led government and the lack of response from the majority of South Africans, especially from the poorest who are its worst victims, in terms of demands for accountability, good governance, disciplinary sanctions, voting preferences, etc. Or, just the same, the old school, radical leftist activist who is disillusioned with the lack of popular claims for the transfer of power to the people, the disbandment of elite politics and the establishment of grassroots, bottom-up organisational models. By resorting to the particular mode of messaging theorised previously, Murray seems to say to the public—again, in desperation—if you do not get it now, you never will.<sup>17</sup> As such, it seems to be driven by the presumption that if only “they”—i.e. the poor, oppressed, duped masses—could realise and grasp the hopelessly corrupted state of South Africa’s post-apartheid ruling order the way “we”—intellectuals, artists, leftists, radicals—do, this would be the first step in righting wrongs and getting the liberational political project back on track.

Surely, there is much to say against such a stance. One could, for instance, take issue with the fact that mostly absent from such oppositional reasoning is a thorough questioning of the reasons for the perceived state of silence, apathy or complacency of the majority of South Africans—the enduring

17 In this regard it is quite ironic, of course, that the intended, “obvious” message of Murray’s *Hail to Thief* works was in fact largely missed or, rather, ignored and side-stepped—excepting those already attuned to his critique. In this regard, the two interpretations I considered in the first two sections are cases in point. In Hudson’s case, however, the allegedly racist aspect of one of the eighty-odd works of the *Hail to the Thief* corpus is used to cast suspicion over all others. Seidman’s criticism, for her part, is also limited to a specific subset of works, but is potentially more damaging because it takes issue with what I claimed to be the dominant art-critical strategy of *détournement*—called misappropriation by Seidman—applied in the *Hail to Thief* works. On the one hand, however, this critique is mostly relevant to a subset of works that directly reference historical figures (e.g. struggle heroes) or texts (e.g. the Freedom Charter). Even in those instances, however, I have argued that what she takes to be the miscommunication of Murray’s official message due to the wrong employment of artistic form can only be maintained by a quite literalist reading that does not take into account some of the rather obvious artistic strategies used by Murray.

spate of so-called service delivery protests notwithstanding. Is it, for instance, not the case that the continuing impoverishment of a large section of South Africa's population, due mainly to a still largely unreformed colonial or racial capitalist economy and society, causes the latter to feel that they have too much to lose with a radical regime change, being too reliant for their basic survival on the benevolence of the sitting government—e.g. social welfare programmes or practices of patronage, however insufficient these might be—making them hesitant to translate their discontents in sustained anti-systemic political action? If so, then the main task of political art is surely not to go to ever great lengths to attempt to shake up the masses and enlighten them about dubious political processes of which they are probably mostly all too aware themselves.

One might, however, also find the usual problems thus “exposed” (corruption, bad governance and leadership and so on) to be too narrowly defined and symptomatic, perhaps, of liberal tunnel vision. They point to one aspect of South Africa's stubborn social problems, which is arguably only the tip of the iceberg sitting on a still largely untransformed, colonialist economy. Of course, corrupt political elites are partly to blame for the lack of transformation, but at least as much, if not more responsibility lies with a private sector that is overprotective of its ill-gotten gains, stubborn in its pursuit of ever bigger profit margins and obsessed by outperforming its international counterparts in adhering to global neoliberal dogma.

### Conclusion: Not again the vanguardist model of political art?

Still, assessment of the political value of Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works does not exclusively, not even most importantly, depend on passing judgement on the political analyses, positions or affects that can be seen to underlie both their explicit critical messages and mode of communication. Neither is the aim of this article to propose arguably more correct critical stances based, for instance, on more profound diagnoses of underlying causes of the stalling and reversal of the progressive transformation of South African society; or ones potentially more productive with regards to re-imagining such a project in post- or neo-apartheid conditions. To do so, would require more extensive and considerate social, political and economic analysis and argumentation.

It would also, however, divert from this article's key goal of assessing Murray's recent political art practice on a more properly aesthetic level, with the main focus on the politics immanent in the art forms and critical procedures used, its dominant communicative style, as well as assumptions concerning their social impact. It is in respect to these aspects that the liberatory potential of Murray's work can be found to be severely limited, as I shall argue in the remainder of the article.

Let us thus take another critical look at the direct communicative style of Murray's *Hail to the Thief* works as analysed above. There are several problematic aspects here from a radical democratic, liberatory perspective. For starters, it can be seen to enact an *epistemic hierarchy* or, still, a skewed, asymmetrical division of critical labour between the artist and his/her implied publics<sup>18</sup> that implies certain dubious assumptions on the capacities of both parties involved. Second, such hierarchies and divisions can be found to engender debilitating effects with regard to achieving the desired change.

In regard to the first claim, it can be argued that the overstated, dumbed down way in which Murray's critique is expressed in his works suggests a dim assessment of its recipients' capacities of comprehension.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, while the public's intelligence is underestimated, not to say insulted, the assertive way in which Murray's works propound their criticism assumes the artist to be on top

18 In what follows, I take the implied public of the *Hail to the Thief* works to include all those affected by (in whichever way) or concerned about (for whatever reason) the political developments criticised in them. To be sure, such determination can be found to be both too exclusive (it, for instance, excludes the politicians implicated in Murray's critique), too idealistic (it also omits the commercial art market) as well as too undifferentiated, brushing over the heterogeneity of the many different implied publics and their very different attitudes toward, and interests in, Murray's art and the issues it addresses.

19 I here implicitly rely on some aspects of Jacques Rancière's recent critique of traditional political art, which he mainly defines in terms of consciousness-raising, pedagogic art, and which he considers to have functioned as the most dominant paradigms of political art since the 1960s (2007; 2009b; 2010). To offer an overview of this critique, its key assumptions and taxonomic differentiations, its suggestions of alternatives, as well as some of its problematic aspects would exceed the aims and spatial limitations of this article. For this reason, I shall here merely cite Rancière's most explicit and harsh verdicts on traditional, consciousness-raising art works relevant to my own critique. Of such works, he says that they “presuppose the imbecility of the viewer while anticipating their precise effect on that viewer” (2007, 258). He also states that such works rely too heavily on “the authority of the imposed message” that, as he phrases it in his idiosyncratic manner, “enclose[s]...bodies within an estimation of their capacity”, an estimation, moreover, which he considers to be not very high (261).

of the cognitive hierarchy, with unique capacities of insight arrogated to her or him. Furthermore, based on the instrumentalist way in which the artist's insights are visualised and textualised by the *Hail to the Thief* works, one can deduce that these insights are then thought to have to be simply communicated as effectively as possible to those who are supposed to lack the artist's piercing critical understanding. The built-in subject position of Murray's works can thus be likened to that of a "knowing Master", speaking truth to both power and the "Other", the duped masses.

Based on the above, one could also say that the aesthetic politics performed by the *Hail to the Thief* works is a rather traditional *vanguardist* one, despite its postmodern overtones. That is, the political role of critical art works is still predominantly conceived not only in terms of providing correct, critical insight into a specific political state of affairs, but also as one of evoking specific affects such as outrage, betrayal or a sense of urgency, and all this through artistic representations and carefully engineered aesthetic shock experiences. Still in conformity with vanguardist procedure, these cognitive and affective functions of political art are then thought to create the right conditions for getting its public to undertake concerted action by freeing it from its supposedly confused and transfixed state. As I have argued, however, such a model is based on a highly lopsided, patronising even, *scenario of interaction* between artist and publics, with the former in the driver's seat, masterminding the entire process from art work to political action.

Secondly, it can be further argued in the case of the *Hail to the Thief* works—but also vanguardist political art in general—that the desired social impact of incentivising and empowering people to undertake action is undercut precisely by the epistemic hierarchy enacted by the works' dominant mode of communication. The latter reduces those it sees as its mission to enlighten and mobilise to passive receptacles of a pre-programmed message, their role being reduced to a purely reactive, absorptive one. This imposed passivity can be found to exert a negative, disempowering effect on the same public it aims to provoke into action because it erodes confidence in its ability to think, speak and act for itself, the latter capacities being monopolised by the critical artist.

As a counterpoint, one could imagine a more desirable practice of political art that does not claim to have privileged access to the political truth and does not underestimate its audience but, instead, demands more self-activity and work on the part of its publics. In this regard, we can revisit a point made earlier concerning the highly textual and, in contrast, negligible aesthetic character of the *Hail to the Thief* works. Concerning the question of political empowerment and activation through art, one could argue that it is precisely the aesthetic aspect of art works, i.e. that which cannot be determined and communicated unambiguously in narrative terms, that not only stimulates the public's self-activity but also allows the necessary space for this, both inviting and requiring participation of the public in the form of autonomous and creative interpretative work.

I thus mainly take issue with the hierarchical division of critical labour and agency enacted by the *Hail to the Thief* works. The latter must be found to be deeply troubling from a radical democratic perspective committed to the goal of liberating people from all sorts of bondage and dependency, including its intellectual variety. In this respect, one must question whether another round of vanguardist political art—even if dressed up in postmodern clothes—is at all necessary and desirable for rebooting and reinventing South Africa's project of liberation in contemporary conditions. We must express severe doubts about the assumed potency of a Murray-style political art practice to mobilise society to initiate processes that enact radical changes with regard to the political defects it exposes, mocks and wants to put a stop to so eagerly.

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