



The Enigma of the Banning of Mandela's Image

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Abstract

Often, we look at images and try to determine how and why they came into being and what they mean in our immediate presentness. And to lock their meaning and interpretation indelibly to the contemporaneous conditions of their making. But the more we look at them overtime- in their afterlife- the more they reveal themselves to us anew; the more they solicit us on different levels than our initial impulsive reaction to them. And the more

we discover their deep-seated significations that were not immediately evident in our 'first looking.' Significations that invoke in our imaginations that which is left unsaid about them. That is where the enigma of the banning of Mandela's image lies. It lies in how its duplicitous representation rendered it as an art historical subject. As such, this essay seeks to examine why this image matters now as art as never before.

'Knowing robs us of wonder.' – Chinua Achebe

What is it that we are made to look at in this image and with what effect? One's response to this question will be determined by the viewing experience that one brings to bear and the context within which one geminates his/her reading of this image. As we know, images assume different meanings in different contexts.

When Mandela's censored image was first published in the 1980s in the *Weekly Mail* it, in line with its censorship code by the apartheid regime, avoided showing the objective likeliness of Mandela's identity. Because he was regarded as the protagonist of the black liberation struggle. As such, the chief enemy of the apartheid state.

Provoking any semblance of an empirical relationship between Mandela's image and its spectators was regarded as treason. As a result, Mandela, invoking Barthes' notion of *stadium*, 'ceased to register a singular face of someone who lived his life as an autonomous subject.' He, instead, signified the collective experience of the oppressed South African black majority and a particular moment in its human history. It is this iconographic inscription that fixated this image wholly to the socio-historical conditions of its making.

In 2018, it re-emerged transfigured into a cover-image of Bryan Trabold's book *Rhetoric of Resistance*, which turned its pictorial vision into a miscegenation of a graphic echo of Mandela's face layered with an equally graphic canvas of prints, fonts, motifs of themes, headlines, by-lines and disclaimers that constitute a visual binary of written and spoken words that blur its already refrained exactitude as if to nullify if not to curtail even further the remaining pleasure of looking at it.

It is this 'border-reaching' dichotomy: its transmutation of words and image into a creation of a form of a new picturehood: photo-and-graphic image that inverts what we know this historical image to be. And that's what renders it a dialogic proposition with dialogic dispositions that are, conceptually, at a remove from the ones that occasioned the image that was published by the *Weekly Mail* decades ago.

In keeping with the thematic thread of the title of this book, this transfigured cover-image has been

repurposed as a mirror that reflects the adverse effects of the history of censorship on human liberties; the right to enunciate one's oppositional positions: to think and to critique without fear of censor or censure. A retrospection that accentuates the late Bishop Desmond Tutu's critical observation on history that shares kinship with the dialogic disposition of this book: 'we learn from history what we don't learn from history'. But also, or more fundamentally, this cover-image affirms the centrality of the visual to the culture of criticism which was arbitrarily and violently suppressed by the apartheid regime.

Most significantly, this essay recognises that the foregrounding of the ethical and moral inscriptions of this image is but one inevitable way of looking at it. But its overarching claim is that there are other multiple ways of looking at it that are left unsaid. That constitute its afterlife and that impel new ways of thinking about and of looking at this historical image as a productive rather than a reflective space. Ways of looking that urge the viewer to unveil other urgencies that can transfigure its fixation to a frame that locks it to a singular interpretation.

It is the 'pictorial turn' of the afterlife of this image that will occasion its reading and interpretation in this essay. One induces the notion of its afterlife because the banning of Mandela's image by the apartheid regime has, over time, turned it into an iconographic object. This afforded it a privilege of embracing multiple forms of creative processes and artistic practices of various cultural epochs while in exile. And this has in the process transmogrified it into various forms and styles that engendered it with multiple meanings and interpretations that unveiled the precariousness of its reality status. Forms and styles whose imaginative cachets can be located within art criticism. That is precisely where the cultural cachet and the enigma of the banning of Mandela's image lies.

To say that is to say there is a myriad of other ways of looking at this photo-graphic image's visual vocabularies that demand that one pays attention to the particularity of the particular characters of its pictorial elements that cannot be generalised or simply read in unison. Simply because their material structures have their own experiential and existential

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presence that impel the viewer to engage them to begin to understand, in Susan Sontag’s vein, ‘how it is what it is’.

An activity that impels the viewer to engender this image with its aesthetic discrimination to determine how its material structures suspend its judicial allegiance to a singular meaning. How that transmogrifies the historical to unveil the other of itself through these visual reflexes, its less definable style that intertwine creativity and reality with great artistic flair. Inscriptions that inscribe the imaginative portraiture premise that underlies the conception of this photo-graphic image.

An Imaginative Portraiture Premise

The conception of an imaginative portraiture premise in this photo-graphic image is underpinned by, in Martha Rosler’s vein, its ‘aesthetic-historical moment’. A moment that begins to form when one focuses not necessarily on *who* is pictured in it, but *how*. This can be realised if the viewer looks at it and thinks about ‘how the considerations of its sitter are collapsed into those of its form; into its material elements and formal principles’ (Rexer) and how they correlate to facilitate the generation of meaning-making mechanisms that have no historical imprints, but manifest in the viewer’s imaginations.

This assertion underpinned by the visual registers that are indicative of the fact that Mandela’s face in this portrait is not meant to overtly express the emotions of his political mind. For we are not confronted by a defiant political face that is clear enough to interpret.

Instead, we are presented with a face that is as invisible as possible; that is utilised as, using James Elkins’ words, ‘the canvas for design and decoration’. A face that is gestured rather than that which is laboured photo-graphically. That is appropriated as a worked artefact: as a cultural object that is tailored for artistic interpretation. That exists not in the realm of the visible, but in the theatre of the viewer’s imaginations.

The representation of the sitter as both the subject and object of this portrait is the recurring thematic of this essay. The gnawing question is when does a subject become an object, and an object the subject in portraiture? According to John Erith, this happens when ‘the personality and character of the sitter are not allowed to intercede the visual elements of a portrait.’ This visual register constitutes one of the characteristics of an imaginative portraiture. The same can be said that the foregrounding of Mandela’s face as the organismic character or a subdued graphic element of this portrait can be postulated as a visual strategy that forbids it from obtruding what the visual elements of this portrait seek to register.

That is where the artfulness of this portrait lies. It lies in its non-character centric proposition that nudges the viewer to look beyond Mandela’s solipsistic existence. To posit his portrait not as a concrete realisation, but as that which represents presentation. As a (re) productive site in which a transfiguration of a new visual language foreign to its historical context can begin to form.

These variables that inform this portrait’s experience of being and process of becoming that occasion the reading of this image herald new modes of address that conspire to bypass old, evidential standards of its history and can be perceived as interruptive, interrogative, as the blurring of the limitations of existing boundaries of interpretation if not as a means to call into question the agency of primordial unity and fixity of meaning-making mechanisms (Meredith). As a valiant quest to pull, push and stretch them to expose other representational and rhetorical strategies that bring to bear its discontinuities: its rapture and irruptions.

It is this structural openness that ordains this portrait as a secular image. That serves as an invitation to the viewer to fantasise in its imaginative space. To provoke looking and critical reading; to subject it to its own monologues and epigraphs, to its own subjectivities.

To embellish it with the syntax, diction, accent, tone and tenor of its own vernacular language. In fact, to do more than just that – to also philosophise and aestheticize it. To, ultimately, make its feelings feel.

To invoke the multiple sensory registers of this portrait is to invoke the imaginations of a critical reader capable of deciphering its divergent propositions and meanings thereof. Because as T.S. Elliot attests: ‘no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.’ The indefinite disposition of this portrait attests to that. To the field of vision that does not frame or compartmentalise its viewing experience to privilege a certain meaning at the expense of others. But instead, it impels the viewer to vouch for its own preferred interpretation to determine what is it that it is made to look at and with what effect. This is what renders this portrait a creation of a form of abstraction; that which we will not be able to fully respond to.

The possibility of contemplating Mandela as both the subject and object of this portrait – as a representation of a tenuous relationship between the real and imaginative reality – serves to show that there are many other lives of this image that encourage new thinking that implores us to reread and reposition it anew beyond its primordial impulses; to unchain it from its singular source of meaning. It is only after the attainment of this ideal that Achebe’s claim – ‘knowing robs us of wonder’ – can make our feelings feel.

Knowing Robs us of Wonder

Wonder is a thematic carried further in this portrait by the duplicitous forms of expression invested in the sitter’s veiled gaze that flirt rather deceitfully with the viewer as if implying, in Susan Bright’s words, ‘what you see is not what you get and what you get is not what you see.’ This portrait’s invocation of this inconspicuous play between what is revealed and what is disguised is a ploy to refute the tendency to place the viewer of black portraiture in a position of the ‘empirical knowledge’ that Achebe forewarned us about. A refutation of the threat it imposes to critical thinking; to imaginations. To the postulation of new aesthetic fictions and fantasies that underlie the subjectivities of the black body that have been conveniently overlooked throughout history.

The feeling of wonder: of amazement and admiration is evinced by this portrait’s ability to postulate this

historical figure and its momentous moment in South African history as an abstraction. By its capability to make Mandela flinch as he becomes impersonal and other before the viewer’s eyes. Comprehending that is crucial. If the viewer fails to envision that, it would have failed to comprehend one of the most imaginative investments of this portrait.

Imaginative investments that uphold this photographic image’s cultural worth and its status as an aesthetic object that draws the viewer’s sensory registers to the charm of its sublimity. To its awe. That herald a marked break with the documentary concepts that always already portray the black body as nothing more than that which represents a history of its human condition that is in a state of perpetual deferment. That mirrors moments of its vulnerability and that privileges its colonial ethnic biographies at the expense of its own subjective experiences.

Tamar Garb historicises the ‘primordial fixity’ that informs this entrenched viewing experience of the black body in her book *Fictions and Figures: Contemporary South African Photography* (2011). Garb writes:

‘From its earliest inception, photography in South Africa has depicted people. And it has filtered their representation through three dominant categories of representation: ethnography, documentary and portraiture, each carrying with it institutional and cultural associations. Frequently referenced is the anthropological and ethnographical past that has provided the conceptual framework through which Africa’s people have routinely and repeatedly been pictured.’

Contrary to the agencies of these practices, this enquiry employs gestural registers to break these spells of filters of black figuration that seem to have an eternal infatuation with the affliction of its wound.

Or is the black body forever invested in its pathology? Does it have a space, a room to wiggle to say what has been left unsaid about itself? Or is it forbidden the creative licence to rethink its own thinking, to reinterpret its own interpretation, to re-represent its own representation, to rewrite its own histories, to rediscover its own discontinuities? One wonders.

The urge to rethink thinking instigated by Chinua Achebe’s disapproval of the knowledge that is the

product of the tyranny of intellectual consensus that robs us of wonder is meant to posit aesthetics as the tent-pole of our common and collective humanity; a salvation of the culture of critical thinking innate in visual culture. Who better to caution us against the threat of the tyranny of intellectual consensus to critical thinking than Nietzsche:

If you are a philosopher, consensus does not always make you happy. The *consensus sapientium* – the agreement of the wise – might be evidence of the untruth. The fact that everybody seems to agree about something *isn't* always proof that we are right, it may do us good to think about the principles, the values, and ideals that underlie our agreement, not just to make the consensus more intellectually secured, but also to explore consequences we have not noticed (Appiah, 2001: 36).

The sequential concurrence of stimulus and response fermenting the thought processes of this essay that belies the contiguity of this image represents its marginal contribution to this endeavour. An endeavour that offers the viewer a reprieve to redeem, if not to reconfigure and reconsider, its blind allegiance to the authorised meaning and interpretation and received knowledge of this portrait. Not out of spite, but in pursuit of something divine: something more admirable that exists apart and beyond its historical adulteration. That posits it not as a concrete historical realisation but as a 'shadow trap' if not, using Ashraf Jamal's words, 'an aesthetics fiction.'

A Shadow Trap

The invocation of 'a shadow trap' in this portrait is premised on the echo of the shadow that disfigures the objective likeness of the sitter. Instead of being represented with a speaking face that one can relate and identify with in a human and realistic way. This portrait presents the viewer with an echo of a face as a filter of its figuration. And what the viewer is left with ultimately is a void of 'a shadow trap' that, borrowing from Rexer, 'mirrors that which it does not show'. The visual descriptor of a 'shadow trap' was introduced to South African photographic practice by Santu Mofokeng. He enunciated its conceptual premise in his seminal portrait, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Most fundamentally, through its visual strategy that elevates the tenuous relationship between the literal and the figurative.

This abstraction was valorised by Patricia Hayes in her essay, *The Violence is in the Knowing*. Hayes writes:

'There is a strong thematic in this portrait about things not being what they appear, achieved mostly through a lack of sharpness, blurring or of using exactitude to blur the very identity of things.'

Hayes's account of *Eyes Wide Shut* hinges on the sitter's gestural gaze: on its dynamic entanglement between seeing and imagining; between mindedness and absent-mindedness; between meditation and daydreaming. The viewer may have imagined the representation of the presence of absence, but not in the way that Mofokeng (pre)figured it in this black and white portrait.

Similarly, in Mandela's portraiture the notion of 'a shadow trap' is foregrounded by his sealed-off consciousness that acts like a human mask that simultaneously reveals and conceals the emotions of his mind. Mirianne Hirsch elucidates the peculiarities of this representational strategy in portraiture: 'as the sitter poses, the sitter assumes masks; as we read portraits, we project particular masks, particular ideological frames onto the image.' The interpretation of these gestural ambiguities in this portrait rely on the viewer's ability to come up with its own bodily metaphors; its own fantasies to peel off or to turn the veil that echoes the sitter's identity into account.

These filters of figuration attest to the fact that there is a way of looking at this image as that which represents representation. That which is infinitely variable. Of the photo-graphic sitter that exists apart from the homogenous whole to which it belongs. That is prefigured as an illusion; as that which exists in the figment of the viewer's imaginations. Mandela's portrait and Mohau Modisakeng's conception of self, as, using Ashraf Jamal's abstract descriptor – a 'vapour or husk' – alludes to the notion of an echo of a human shadow that provocatively turned our gaze to a creation of a form of the sitter that is a mysticism; a flitting illusion.

A gaze that renders this portrait a haunted space. There is certainly a certain kind of haunting to which the viewer of this portrait is subjected. This haunting is foregrounded by, plying Harrison's words, 'the precedent that its representation provides for a continued engagement in the context of the visible,

with that which is contingently excluded from being seen.' By the affect of the sitter that seemingly reappears and disappears before the viewer's eyes. Whose poetic gestations disavow its representation as a concrete realisation. It is this dialogic disposition inherent in this portrait that enunciates it as an impossible testimony. That is, in Tagg's words:

'Less than what we want and more than we desire, never adequate to our questions or to our demands, it hands us what we were not seeking and may have preferred to avoid. Inadequate and overwhelming compensation, impossible testimony.'

A poignant appraisal that alludes to what constitutes, in my opinion, the viewing experience of this portrait. A portrait that nullifies its own reading; that betrays the very idea of making it mean(ingful), or even before its meaning gets comprehended in the viewer's mind. Because instead of concrete particularity, it emphasises its ambiguous specificity. The suspension of the sitter's face in this portrait and its replacement with its echo echoes the affect of its ambiguous specificity; of the sitter that is trafficked as a flitting gesture of a 'shadow trap'. This goes to show that, in Djibri Mambety's words, 'visuals have no fixed roles, we give them orders to fulfil.' Similarly, the reading of this portrait is determined not by a singular experience, but by the sensory registers and multiple exigencies of various artistic and creative processes and contexts, situations and periods of life whose accumulative effects bring to bear the precariousness of the reality status of its gaze.

Despite the irrefutable historical imprints that occasion this portrait, the postulations that foreground its reading as, plying Harrison's words, 'a false consciousness in a space of consciousness', it demonstrates the capacity to evoke other meaning-making mechanisms which don't rely on the imprints of its historical origin, but on those that are manifest in the viewer's imaginations. Rexer captures succinctly the vein of this thought when he claims that 'Other images always solicit us on many levels, never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it.' It is these perplexing formulations and contingent propositions that shift and change, and of a visual proposition that is never wholly manifest that makes it impossible to confer a singular meaning to it.

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Rexer explicates the vein of this thought more eloquently. He writes:

'Our tendency is to make something of an image, to try to say immediately without thorough reflection, thorough aesthetic discrimination what it means and how it works and why it was made. Images are more disjunctive than we often thought them to be, and often frustrate our impulses. Other kinds of images always solicit us on many levels, never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it.'

This analysis endeavoured to show this image's capability to epitomise a reading that is receptive to unauthorised engagements that are impossible to seal. A conjecture that can be construed as a strategic decomposition of its linear and idealised interpretation.

Those who continue to speak of this photo-graphic image in a one-dimensional manner, may need to adopt new imaginative interpretations and aesthetic discriminations in order to comprehend the principles of organisation that are at play in it. Principles that purchase heavily on what cannot be seen, but imagined, what can't be secured intellectually, but felt. This is what makes this photograph, which solicits the viewer on different levels, a visual proposition that is beyond what some always already expect it to be: a representation of a historical record. This assertion constitutes the thread of the rhetorical strategy of this essay. And that's where the crux of its critique and cultural cachet lies.

Image-Making

Ultimately, the overarching endeavour of this analysis is to posit this portrait not as a reflective, but a productive space that represents image-making. That – like any form of visual art – prioritises sight. That urges the viewer to engage it visually and photographically; in order to, using Michael Fried's words, 'respond to it punctually, in the moment of viewing, to its internal complexities as a whole, in particular the carefully engineered structures of its gaze.'

To determine how the organisation of elements within the boundaries of its frame interact with each other to create an image. And to make its meticulous process of picturing – of alignment and manipulation of colour, space, written and spoken words as visible forms of its expression – mean.

To say that is to bear testament to the fact that there is a way of representing this portrait as a creation of a form of a visual that subscribes to art criticism. That is capable of suspending its historical account even if momentarily. For, according to Nigel Whiteley, the valuations of a historical portrait are 'often projected as a given and often they are neither discussed nor explained visually.' And, more often than not, a historical portrait serves a social or an expressed political purpose.

The same can't be said about the reading of this portrait in this enquiry. Herein one utilises a dialogic analysis to advance it as, to borrow Jae Emerling expression, 'an aesthetic experience that exists apart, without purpose, all but beyond history.' Therein lies its artfulness. Because it is claimed that the purpose of art is to be purposeless. Because it is that which we will never fully respond to. Indeed.

That said, the enigmatic lure of this portrait is its capability to defer the roots of its origins even if momentarily. Thanks to its censure, it managed to acquire methods of interpretation that are foreign to the condition of its inception. That subjected it to duplicitous, fragmented and abstract filters of figuration and forms of expression that have no allegiance to fixed interpretations. But that mutate at the speed of thought; at the speed of the figment of imaginations.

Out of its prolonged metamorphosis and hiatus, Mandela's censored image has come out of the cold

of censorship to be idealised. To embrace the warmth of human thought. The freedom it engendered. To rediscover its creative voice and tell its stories that have been left unsaid. And to be eulogized for its unyielding patriotism, instead. To be extolled for enriching our visual culture and its criticism. For reconciling with its nemesis. For showing us the colour of our collective future. For being many things to many – to both its detractors and admirers alike. But most of all, for instigating, in Bailey and Hall's words, an 'aesthetic unrest' that occasions its reading in this enquiry that runs counter to the affliction of the pathology of its history. An 'aesthetic unrest' which affords it new representational spaces, and instills in it new visual impulses and idioms that hypothesize it as an interpreter of the image and culture of an age.

Most significantly, it is the compendium of duplicities of bodily metaphors, of illusions and fantasies embedded in it that serve as proof that 'a practice exists within a discourse and yet it can transform it.' Emerling's testament is the tent pole of the thesis of this analysis. Indeed, it is a known fact that this portrait is an infamous creation of South Africa's tempestuous history, but its postulation in this inquiry has managed to subvert its detestable strictures to unveil the 'other' of itself that we are yet to be accustomed to.

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