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Writing photography's archive of apartheid: theories and methods for understanding the work of David Goldblatt

Bester, Rory

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to re-imagine traditionally formulated understandings of apartheid-era South African photographic practice. This is done from the perspective of the present, and encompasses the multiple lives of photographs over time. So while attention is given to the photographic act itself, the focus of this thesis is on the lives of the photographs after their taking. Through acts of translation, rumination, circulation, repetition and visibility, the different iterations or lives of the photographs accumulate in public in different forms, and across different media, including magazines, newspapers, exhibitions, books, journals, documentary films, prizes and awards, fellowships, music albums, and portfolios.

In focusing on the multiple lives of photographs, the thesis is an account of the complexity of photography's visual languages and arguments. In unfolding its argument this thesis challenges traditional and existing concepts about photographic practice, as well as introducing, adapting, and mobilizing a further set of concepts. These include Walter Benjamin's ideas on translation and Jacques Rancière's thinking around politics and aesthetics. Other concepts, notably rumination, visibility, circulation and repetition, are derived from general definitions but applied to the thesis in novel ways. This conceptual framework enables an analysis of the multiple lives of photographs as they gain and lose power, change register, inhabit different forms, and become part of visual arguments.

The thesis is divided into three parts: Witnessing, Translation and Archive. In consecutive order, and in simple terms, these three parts offer a critical engagement with traditional understandings of South African photography as witnessing, a re-imagination of this same photography as translation, and then put into practice, a curatorial translation of two archives that encapsulate the multiple lives of things. While it makes reference to a number of South African photographers, each part of the thesis is grounded in some aspect of David Goldblatt's photographic practice. His photographic output between becoming a full-time photographer in 1962 and the end of the apartheid era, as well as his revisiting of apartheid-era bodies of work and books in the post-apartheid period, in many ways reflect the complexity of the multiple lives of things. It is through the life and work of David Goldblatt that other aspects of apartheid-era South African photography are re-imagined in this thesis.

In the first part, the thesis offers a critical discussion of traditional understandings and interpretations of apartheid era photography as a form of witnessing. Derived from the photograph's apparent indexicality, and by implication, its truth, witnessing focuses attention on one particular moment in time – when the photograph was taken – and elevates the status of that moment, often to the detriment of more complex understandings of the multiple lives of photographs.

In the second part, Walter Benjamin's concept of translation in literature is applied to photography to offer a view of photographs as acts of translation, not only at the time of making but also in an on-going processes of translation over time. Extending photographs beyond witnessing, by reading them as translation, opens the door to highlight the photographer's on-going rumination, and its effect in forms of circulation, repetition, and visibility. The introduction of photographic rumination is productive because it shows how the reproduction of photographs over time is not only because of the innate power or aesthetic appeal of a photograph but also because they are capable

of making contributions to public deliberation. In different forms, and under different guises they advance and evolve ideas in public. This part of the thesis underscores the dynamic status of the photograph within visual argument and public deliberation.

The third part of the thesis encompasses two visual timelines, different in their origins, but both connected to the pre-eminent South African photographer and focus of this study, David Goldblatt. More than mere lists, these timelines are curations of photographs that appeared in public over periods of time. The first timeline is a curation of the public circulation of Goldblatt's photographs in magazines, newspapers, exhibitions, books, journals, documentary films, prizes and awards, fellowships, music albums, and portfolios. The second timeline is a curation of the photography that appeared in *Leadership* magazine, where Goldblatt played as influential role as photo editor and creative director. Through the different timelines, the thesis reveals a new understanding of Goldblatt's photographic practice as rumination and argument. This accumulation and repetition of photographs over time is central to an argument about the role of photographic circulation and visibility in on-going public deliberations. With the visual timelines the photographs are re-curated in order to make a visual contribution to an argument, in this case a thesis argument.