

SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE LITERARY ERA OF THE SOPHIATOWN RENAISSANCE.

by

Ntongela Masilela

for Michel Lazarus

Photography promises an enhanced mastery of nature, but photography also threatens conflagration and anarchy, an incendiary levelling of the existing cultural order. . . In 1967, a young Black South African photographer named Ernest Cole published a book in the United States called *House of Bondage*. Cole's book and his story are remarkable. . . He encountered his apparatus, probably the last physiognomic system of domination in the world, with a descriptive strategy of his own, mapping out the various checkpoints in the channels of apartheid.

- Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive", October, 1986.

The recent publication of two anthologies consisting of photographs defining and articulating the cultural climate of the 1950s, *The Fifties People of South Africa* and *The Finest Photos from the Old Drum*, both of which have been compiled and edited by Jurgen Schadeberg, has to constitute one of the most remarkable achievements in cultural retrieval and historical restoration ever attempted in South Africa. For this outstanding restoration process, one cannot sufficiently thank Schadeberg, though later on particular reservations will be registered. The enormity of the achievements is multiple and various: first, this duet of books re-establishes beyond doubt, and despite the diabolical efforts of the Apartheid State to erase from our cultural memory the splendour of this decade by means of destroying the social and cultural space of Sophiatown and by means of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, that this was a historical moment of inimitable brilliance and high efflorescence; secondly, it argues for the emergence of a national school of photography, probably for the first time in Africa, which was contiguous with the first major black literary season of creativity; thirdly, it indicates the irreplaceable importance of Bob Gosani in our national tradition of photography, as well as the centrality of Henry Nxumalo within the literary season of the Sophiatown Renaissance; fourthly, its publication makes possible the tracing of photographic lineages from Alfred Khumalo, G. R. Naidoo, Peter

Magubane, Lionel Oostendorp, Bob Gosani and others (documentary and photo-journalism photographers for the Drum magazine) to Omar Badsha, Paul Weinberg, Jimi Mathews, Lesley Lawson, Wendy Schwegmann and others (the Afrapix photographic collective of the 1980s, whose photographic work is assembled in the book of 1986: South Africa - The Cordoned Heart: Essays by Twenty South African Photographers).

One thing that this duet makes clear is that it will not do to refer to this rich sample of our photography under the rubric of the Sophiatown Renaissance for that defines a literary logic, rather than a logic immanent to photography itself. There is a defining logic in the structural form of our photography which has to be searched for and established. That logic should establish the historical unity of our photographic tradition. Perhaps that logic is to be found in *The Finest Photos from the Old Drum*. But the historical context of that logic is first of all defined photographically and through photographs in *The Fifties People of South Africa*. Among the establishing photographs of this extraordinary latter book are those of the late great Henry Nxumalo, the founder of serious investigative reporting in South Africa and the spiritual father of the Sophiatown Renaissance writers (Drum writers). Though much has still to be uncovered concerning this remarkable man, the photographs of him assembled in this book show him to have been a person possessing a profound social conscience and a man of high moral seriousness. From his face radiates a warm passion of concern about his family and about the direction the country then was embarking upon which was to lead to the disaster of Sharpeville. His Bethal report on the exploitative nature of the farm (labour) system in South Africa (embellished with photographs taken by Jurgen Schadeberg), which moved the conscience of our nation, is undoubtedly a high moment in our intellectual culture: its ethics of political and cultural commitment has rarely been surpassed. The upcoming publication by Jurgen Schadeberg of Henry "Mr, Drum" Nxumalo, an anthology of photographs on Nxumalo, will hopefully make it possible to draw a deeper assessment of this astonishing man.

The Fifties People of South Africa attempts to capture the boundary between high art and mass art: that is, it defines the structure of popular art. Contiguous to the high art of literature and photography, rubbing bodies and sharing space with them, is the mass art of popular music and boxing. Perhaps the one art form that attempted to bridge the distance separating high culture from mass culture by constituting popular culture, was jazz. The gestation and development of urban culture in our country, especially jazz, indicates the deep cultural affinities between black South African urban culture and black American urban culture. Hugh Masekela, who developed his musical brilliance in this 1950s milieu, was to confirm the deep rootedness affinities between the two cultures by being able to make a transition from one to the other without any complications. In a way,

this book is a great threnody of the black urban culture of the 1950s. In fact, the book traces the cultural configurations in the formation of a black middle class in our country. This book makes clear that the formation of the black middle class in South Africa is not of recent vintage, though many have supposed it to be so. The appearance of this anthology of photographs in 1987 is apropos in a way, in that it displays what we could call, following Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital, the very capital on the basis of which the United States and other Western capitalist countries are desperately attempting to forge a consolidation of a new black middle class culture in South Africa. That these countries have to a large extent succeeded is apparent to some of us in exile when we examine the pages of Tribute magazine, perhaps the most intriguing popular magazine in Africa today. It could be said with justification that if Drum magazine reflected the formation of cultural capital within a particular urban space, the Sophiatown Renaissance phenomenon represented the formation of this cultural capital, then, undoubtedly, Tribute displays its metamorphosis thirty-years later. The similarities between black American magazines like Ebony and Essence, on the one hand, and Tribute, on the other, is very arresting. This should not be taken to mean that some of us in exile are not enthusiastic about the appearance of Tribute, on the contrary, we only seek to indicate a new historical conjuncture, which this magazine captures relatively well.

What is very surprising, or perhaps not so very surprising given the ideological representations articulated in the book, is the total absence in this text of photographs of the economic infrastructure which subtended the forms of cultural capital displayed photographically. In other words, there is complete absence in The Fifties People of South Africa of the photographic imagery of the black working class which was very much crucial in the cultural politics of the 1950s. This absence is not only a historical mis-representation and ideological mystification, but it also has the effect of weakening the photographic narrative of the book. What could have more fascinating would have been the juxtapositioning of the photographs capturing the formation of cultural capital and those representing the producers of economic capital (the black proletariat): the dialectical tension and contrast between the two, photographically, would have enhanced the pictorial narrative flow. Such a representation would have given a deeper cultural context of the politics the text attempts to articulate photographically. Perhaps this great absence was determined by a sentence standing by itself appended at the bottom of page 259: 'The contents of this book have been restricted in terms of the South African Emergency Regulations'. Here one must make a serious criticism of Schadeberg in that he has not dated the photographs in this book and has not designated as to who took them, though he does state vaguely in the Foreword that those taken between 1951 and 1953 were by him, thereafter for three years were by him and Bob Gosani, and from 1956 onwards were taken by Peter Magubane, Alfred Khumalo and G. R. Naidoo.

Also a short biographical and a bibliographical sketch on these photographers would have been helpful for scholarly purposes.

Nevertheless, the book is commendable for its ample representation of the politics and the political figures of the 1950s. Serious political manifestations of this decade opened in 1951 with the Defiance Campaign. What could be more entrancing than the photograph showing the leaders of the African National Congress, of the Indian Congress and of the Communist Party standing together in display of political unity during the Defiance Campaign of 1952! This photograph must be one of the most important documents in our political history. It is governed by the same iconography and stylistics as that apparent in the photograph of 1951 showing the African National Congress meeting in Bloemfontein. Most probably both photographs were taken by Jurgen Schadeberg. The photograph of Lilian Ngoyi, addressing a meeting during the Defiance Campaign in 1952, has remained indelible in our cultural memory. There are many other photographs recalling the politics of the 1950s: the young Oliver Tambo fetching Chief Albert Luthuli from Germinston railway station in 1959; Patrick Duncan after his release from prison for his participation in the Defiance Campaign; the indomitable A. W. Champion, who in the 1930s was one of the leaders of the Industrial Commercial Worker's Union; the leader of the Pan-Africanist Congress, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe; Walter Sisulu, photographically captured in a reflective mood; and the young Nelson Mandela addressing a group of women pass demonstrators in 1959.

Given the prominent role of the Church in the liberation politics of the 1980s, it is gratifying to note that as far back as the 1950s the Church has been playing a singularly important role. Probably the name that signifies the historic importance of Church politics is that of Father Trevor Huddleston (who assisted in the formation of many cultural activities, and who upon his returning to England in the late 1950s was one of the founders of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London). From Huddleston to Bishop Desmond Tutu and Reverend Dr. Allan Boesak is not a great distance, though the nature of Church politics since then has undergone a profound metamorphosis. One of the most memorable photographs in the annals of our national iconography is that of Father Huddleston with two small children holding on to his frock taken by Peter Magubane. This photograph displays the extraordinary brilliance of Magubane. Its multivalent forms of symbolic representation are prodigious.

If *The Fifties People of South Africa* presents to us photography as social history, the *The Finest Photos from Old Drum* argues for photography as an art form. Schadeberg is to be thanked for making it possible for the first time to seriously evaluate the prodigious talent of Bob Gosani by amply displaying his photography in the latter book. Gosani's ample representation in this book would

seem to indicate that the decade of the 1950s, photographically speaking, was the moment of Gosani in our cultural history. What has to truly be regretted though, is that Schadeberg has not given us a scholarly biographical sketch of Lionel Ostendorp, Ranjith Kally, Victor Xashimba, G. R. Naidoo and others. Despite this limitation, it is possible tentatively to postulate a few theoretical constructs on Africa's first national school of photography. The *Finest Photos from Old Drum* reveals that what had earlier seemed to be only Peter Magubane's idiosyncratic predilections (since they found massive representation in his work which was to hold a pre-eminent position in the public sphere), were in fact fundamental and salient characteristics or features of a South African national school of photography: the universal theme of the reciprocal relationship between motherhood and childhood; the contrast between the wisdom of old age and the petulance characteristic of young age; the oppression and suffering of women; and the extraordinary intense beauty apparent on the faces of old women. It is remarkable to note how Bob Gosani constantly or incessantly reverts to these thematic structures in his photography. With these themes Peter Magubane and Bob Gosani have founded and established a particular tradition in our national photographic culture. To say this, is not to foreclose the presence of other pictorial traditions within our national cultural texture: the photographic oeuvre of David Goldblatt, which by any standards is very prodigious, indicates a different thematic strain. The series of photographs, published recently by Goldblatt in the American photographic magazine *Aperture* (late 1987), is a remarkable sequence of extraordinary power, in that they attempt to present photographically the historical logic behind the present disintegration of the ideology or philosophy of Apartheid.

But it is the unity of themes defined by Magubane and Gosani which makes apparent the existence of a national school of photography. Jurgen Schadeberg also, although in a problematical way, now and then participates in this thematic patterning, giving it his particular inflection. Problematical, in that Schadeberg's real and central theme in his photography is youth and its supposedly intoxicating freshness, and also in that Schadeberg's numerous photographs on boxing announce the German tradition in a particular form of photography established by August Sander. Though unquestionably he is a part of our national photographic culture, Schadeberg stands at an ambivalent tangent to it. But also Gosani and Magubane give different inflections to this particular thematic unity: the former leans toward an expressionist mode and the latter towards a realistic mode. Equally between them, there are vast differences in compositional structure and iconographical configuration. Despite all this, the structuring logic of their photography is the theme of womanhood. Schadeberg, at least in the photographs in *The Finest Photos from Old Drum*, takes this theme of womanhood to excessive lengths, to the point of objectifying the black female body. The American photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, has recently been

involved in a controversy, because of his tendency to objectify the black male body and reify the historical relations of its particular social space.

In as much as *The Fifties People of South Africa* poses the question of popular culture by its very minimal representation in the text, our dominant national school of photography, as exemplified in *The Finest Photos from Old Drum*, poses the question of the position of women within our national culture. No doubt these questions are historically interrelated.

It is interesting to note that the very 'nationalness' of our national school of photography does not preclude it being a part of an international photographic culture. Our national school's resemblance to, and affinities with, international visual culture makes obvious its anti-nationalistic militancy: the very fact that it was a cultural movement consisting of various nationalities. It is remarkable how Magubane's brilliant photograph of 1957, 'The Lost Children of the Golden City' recalls Louis Bunuel's great documentary film made in Mexico, *Los Olvidados* (1950); and it is astonishing that the formal qualities present in Magubane's 'Death in the Dark City' are very qualities characteristic of some of photographic work of Mexico's great photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo. These allusions make clear that there are deeper cultural affinities between African cultures and Latin American cultures, than there could ever be between African cultures and European cultures. In South Africa, this historical fact will become unavoidable when the San (so-called Bushmen) and the Khoi-khoi (so-called Hottentots) cultures are re-situated at the center of the cultural formation of a 'new' South Africa, where they incontrovertibly belong. Then, the supposedly illegible will forcefully become legible.

Deeply embedded within the covers of *The Finest Photos from the Old Drum* are the photographs of a major talent: who was/is Lionel Oostendorp? Unfortunately Schadeberg does not provide the necessary scholarly information. There can be little doubt that Oostendorp in the 1950s was a major force of creativity. His seven photographs in the book display a profound sense of plasticity. They each unravel a compelling narrative structure. On another occasion it will be necessary to comment more extensively on his very solid photographic skills. Suffice to say in this context that his riveting photograph of 1955, 'School's Out', conjures images of Henri-Cartier Bresson's famous photograph of the 1940s taken in Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partitioning: both exemplify Bresson's concept of the 'decisive moment'. On the other hand, a photograph like, 'Political Time-Bomb', is immersed in religious motifs and connotations. Oostendorp's work stands in fascinating contrast to the work of Magubane and Gosani. His photography argues for the presence of a multiplicity of visual traditions within our national school of photography in the 1950s. Oostendorp certainly deserves to be published in a separate and single volume consisting only of his own

photographs. Other photographers like, Ranjith Kally, Alfred Khumalo, Victor Xashimba, Gopal Naransamy and Barney Desai will find their rightful place in our cultural history when the whole phenomenon of the Sophiatown Renaissance is hopefully definitively unveiled by future generations in a liberated and future democratic South Africa. Today in 1988 is still too 'early' to know the possible configurations of that unveiling