

CARMEN CONCILIO

A ONE-DAY *DERIVE* IN JOHANNESBURG

*Ivan Vladislavić's and David Goldblatt's Photo-Text
between Flânerie and Psychogeography*

ABSTRACT: Among the South African writers, Vladislavić's interest in the Fine Arts and the Visual Arts leads him both to relate literature to photography and to cooperate with artists in various projects. His well-known *Double Negative* 2012 (2010), a novel accompanying the photographic album by David Goldblatt, *TJ. Johannesburg Photographs 1948-2010*, has already attracted the attention of another writer/photographer, the New York based Nigerian novelist Teju Cole, and several comments by South African critics, among them Johan Jacobs and Stephen Clingman. It is an extremely interesting example of an attempt at creating a dialogue between the complementary arts of poesis and images. *Double Negative* and *TJ* create a double-bind dynamics of reading/gazing through two works, two media, two languages, two semiotic and rhetorical systems that also guide the reader through the History of South Africa between pre- and post-apartheid, up to the threshold of the digital era. The aim of this contribution is to position ourselves along the horizon of the interpreters of the photographic art (with Benjamin, Barthes, Sontag) and to detect the various possible intermedial interrelations (Debord, W.J.T. Mitchell) between the "fictional" narrative and the "real" photos, between the ethical and the aesthetic vision of two major contemporary South African artists.

KEYWORDS: South African Literature, Photography, Post-Apartheid, Vladislavić, Goldblatt.

This essay intends to analyse the special resonance and reverberations between David Goldblatt's 2010 photo album *TJ. Johannesburg Photographs 1948-2010*,¹ and Ivan Vladislavić's novel, *Double Negative* (2010),² clearly a work of fiction, which were marketed together in a single package, and as post-apartheid messengers (Graham 2016, 193-222). This converging, artistic project places itself as an answer to the hateful laws of apartheid, which used to partition and censor people (ethnicities) and spaces (geographies), arts, discourses, languages and media. In contrast, the two artists produce an

¹ David Goldblatt passed away while this article was being completed, on June 25, 2018.

² They won the Kraszna-Krausz Photography Book Award 2011. As a standalone novel, *Double Negative* won the University of Johannesburg Creative Writing Prize 2010/11. Vladislavić won the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize at Yale University in 2015 (Reid and Graham 2017, 5).

original, contrapuntal photo-text (Concilio 2017). More than one critic stress Vladislavić significance in the intersecting networks of the South African literary and artistic field, and his constant thematization of visual arts, art and artists in his work not only as a writer but also as an acclaimed editor (Reid and Graham 2017, 4). The two artists' works do not merge, nor overlap, they are rather metagraphic. The novel, therefore, does not necessarily write about the photos, nor does it provide a caption to the photos. It writes over them, or, even, against the photographs.³

Considering that the earliest forms of human narrative were rock paintings and that, according to Amitav Ghosh, with the age of the Internet we are back “in a time when text and image could be twinned with as much facility as in an illuminated manuscript” (2016, 84), we have fortunately returned to an epoch of reunification and merging of word and image, back to a normal mode of combined and intermedial discourse and visualization. This parallel, dialectic, contrapuntal and multimodal discourse is exactly the one produced by and through the cooperation of the two South African artists.

The two artists'—co-operative rather than collaborative (Graham 2017, 57)—gaze and way of looking at reality seem to converge in the representation of the ordinary in the otherwise “extraordinary” lives of black people in South Africa, during and after apartheid; or, in the representation of the extraordinary lives of poor, or impoverished whites, living in the suburbs. There was nothing ordinary in the lives of black people under the apartheid regime, so that any moment of normal, or dignified, or happy life deserves noticing, while on the contrary, it was considered shameful and dishonouring for whites to live under certain standards of middle-class decency. Similarly, the so-called “coloureds” were forcedly removed, shuffled across the country, deprived of home, dignity, and identity.

The second, major interest the two artists have in common is zooming in on architectural details: from the grandiose, monumental scale, to the smallest incision, or ephemeral decoration in the urban landscape of Johannesburg, its various neighbourhoods and its suburbs. Thus, Vladislavić's narrative texts and Goldblatts's photographs have a sociological afflatus and a special architectural and urban vision.

Their similar gaze cast onto the South African reality and landscape draws us towards what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum*:

- the *punctum* is a detail that attracts or distresses me (Barthes 1980, 40);

³ See “Symposium: Ivan Vladislavić, visual culture and the globalization of a South African artworld.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 1 (March 2017): 3-201. <http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/jcla/52/1>. Last accessed 13.11.2017.

- the *punctum* is a certain shock, disturbance, wound (41);
- the *punctum* is received right here in my eyes (43);
- very often the *punctum* is a “detail,” i.e. a partial object;
- the *punctum* shows no preference for morality or good taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred (43);
- the *punctum* is lightning-like, it has a power of expansion (45);
- the *punctum* may prick me (47);
- the *punctum* is a something that triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is significant (49));
- an essence of a wound (49);
- the *punctum* is not coded (51);
- the *punctum* is what I cannot name, a symptom of disturbance (51);
- the *punctum* is an addition, it is what I add to the photograph (55).

The *punctum* is a formal aspect of the photograph, only it is almost a chance that it is there, it pierces the eyes of the onlooker, it does not belong there. Perhaps, what is perceived by us as the *punctum* in David Goldblatt’s photographs is what William Kentridge sees as “the absurdities, the idiosyncrasies in David Goldblatt’s work” (Kentridge 2017, 205): namely “a ballerina girl in Bocksburg. She is in her new tutu on her points . . . in this harsh Transvaal light, with the hard-edged pergola shadow against which she is dancing” (205),⁴ or “A picture of a man sitting in his hotel room in Hillbrow with a little piece of paper stuck on the wall and a strange message written on it” (205). The almost invisible writing in an otherwise empty room with high white bare walls, ironically claims THE BIG BOSS (J.M. Dippenaar, municipal official, in his apartment on Bree Street, in the city, 1973; *TJ* 2010, 200). Or even, “The Lecon bottle next to the policeman in the café in Pretoria looking up at us.”⁵

The matching of a novel and a photo album obliges the reader to switch from the one to the other: scrutinizing words and images, browsing to and fro, from album to novel and vice versa, to possibly en-vision Johannesburg and its people and to try and place it besides Paris, London, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, New York, as a photo-genic capital of our modern and contemporary world.

Another well-known Johannesburg-based visual artist, William Kentridge, expresses the same dilemma of how to introduce and represent Johannesburg as World capital. About his film entitled *Johannesburg. 2nd*

⁴ “Goldblatt’s photograph, *Girl in her new tutu on the stoep*, is image #31 in his book *In Bocksburg*, Cape Town: The Gallery Press, 1982. Note that in 1988 Kentridge interviewed Goldblatt for a BBC documentary, *In Black and White*, in which Goldblatt discusses what he sees as the significance of this photograph (Hirson 2017, 298, n. 16).

⁵ “The photograph is titled *Young policeman in a café, Pretoria, Transvaal, 1967*. Lecon was an orange-flavoured beverage” (Hirson 2017, 298, n. 17).

Greatest City After Paris (1989), his friend, the poet and novelist Denis Hirson writes:

Johannesburg, the city where William has always lived and worked, was—and to some extent still is—a city mightily walled-in with all its wealth, separate as an island from the surrounding territory and secured in a multitude of ways against needy outsiders; a city also sealed off, visually and mentally, from the primary source of that wealth—the seams of gold bearing conglomerate deep underground (2017, 5).

To this image of an introvert, besieged and unlovable city, Kentridge himself adds, while answering Denis Hirson's question "Do you think Johannesburg as an ugly city?":

I can think of sections of it which are irredeemably ugly, sections of Louis Botha Avenue going through Orange Grove where it is not decrepit enough to be an interesting decrepitude in the buildings, they are not small enough or grand enough to be of interest. Then there are parts of the centre of the city with beautiful Art Deco buildings, some in good condition, some in complete decrepitude, that are beautiful. There are very pleasant living conditions of beautifully made gardens and tree lined streets, and then the peri-urban and mine-dump areas, which have a beauty that I really like although they are conventionally ugly. And then there are the areas which are townships and squatter settlements further out from the city. Which is a whole other world, a very alien world. ... I wouldn't have used the categories 'beautiful' or 'ugly' for that. There were other categories that would be appropriate (2017, 16).

Kentridge's works include charcoal drawings and animations, patches or lines of colour sparsely added on the black and white figures of a shadow-theatre-like quality. This complexity of forms and media—an artistic signature that merges drawing, theatre, film—might be the best answer to such a difficulty in portraying Johannesburg and putting it onto a planetary map as art cities such as London, Paris, and New York.

When discussing photography and literature, or better photography in literature, Ivan Vladislavić expresses perplexities and doubts about this intermedial merging and mixing of photos and texts, this multimodal exposition:

Notebook, 2003. The most compelling motive for including a photograph in a fiction is to discount it. There are forty-four plates in André Breton's *Nadja* and not one of them clarifies a thing. The snaps from Koos Prinsloo's family album seem more unreal, more obviously *made up* than his fictions. In Sebald, the images are cut down to size and drained of authority. They are always less than or more than illustrative; they do not live up to the text or they carry an excess that demands an explanation. Their purpose is less to define than to disrupt, to create ripples and falls in the beguiling flow of the prose. They are pebbles and weirs (2012, 54).

In contrast, in the fiction of *Double Negative*, it is the photographer, Saul Auerbach, who expresses doubts about the possibility of capturing the lives of people through narratives as well as through photographs.

If I try to imagine the lives going on in all these houses, the domestic dramas, the family sagas, it seems impossibly complicated. How could you ever do justice to something so rich in detail? You couldn't do it in a novel, let alone a photograph (Vladislavić 2013, 60).

Thus, the question about art, its subject-matter, seems to be “How to do justice to something so rich in detail” as reality is. Art seems here to work as subtraction, reduction, cropping; it is inadequate. In the novel, the task that the photographer sets for both the narrator and himself is to answer that question.

The answer about a possible supremacy of words over images, narratives over photographs is not achieved, if not through a combination of signifier (written text) and signified (displayed photo) that only can produce sign and signification. A way to produce such a juncture and suturing principle seems to be through a practice that oscillates between *flânerie* and psychogeography. To establish such a reference to Vladislavić's text means to acknowledge his (self-admitted) debt to the French literary avant-gardes of the Nineteenth century,⁶ namely the Lettrists and the Situationists,⁷ or psychographers. Thus, the present reading privileges this aspect of the specific situational quality of the literary text, while acknowledging the pre-existing critical literature on *Double Negative*.

Perhaps, Vladislavić and Goldblatt are both *flâneurs* and psychographers at heart, while Johannesburg, its neighbourhoods, its suburbs and its satellite townships is the Southern capital city and location of their literary and photographic errands and wanderings. What the two artists show is that Johannesburg can become a place of fantasy and imagination as well as of personal experience.

In *Double Negative*, the perfect example of Vladislavić's “creative mode of art criticism” (Reid and Graham 2017, 6), two fictional artists meet and start to explore the city according to the typical modes of psychographers. The young protagonist, Nev Lister, is asked by his father to spend one day with a famous Johannesburg photographer, to see if this elder and affirmed companion can teach him anything. Nev is very similar to the prototypical French psychographers, for they, too, were unemployed and broken, living on their parents' dole. Gilles Ivain (1933-1998) was certainly such a

⁶ In South Africa he was part of a neo-Dadaist group in Johannesburg: Possession Arts.

⁷ David Atwell defines *Double Negative* as a “situational metafiction” (1993, 20). Quoted in Graham James (2016, 3).

prototype, and Nev Lister abandoned his University studies and at present has a job as street signs painter.

Gilles Ivain and his friend Guy Debord (1931-1994) were the practitioners of the *derive*,⁸ a way to drift and wander through the *ambience*, which a city (Paris) might offer, following random labyrinthine routes, stopping at pubs, getting drunk, and meeting casual customers, passers-by, visitors. For an *ambience* is the ensemble of the buildings of a city quarter, its dwellers, its casual passers-by, its atmosphere and mood, all its possible encounters, and even its smells and sounds. The *derive* needs a guide, and Guy Debord was such a figure to Ivain, and often this practice was better accomplished in larger groups: three being considered the best possible number of participants.

In Vladislavić's novel, Nev, incited by his father, has the photographer Auerbach as a "guide" (Vladislavić 2013, 59) for a one-day *derive* through the city of Johannesburg.⁹ To his surprise, on that occasion, the photographer and Nev will be accompanied by a third man, a British journalist, named Gerald Brookes (for the French psychogeographers, if the third man in the group is unknown, so much the better).

The three men then drive up a hill, from which they have a perfect view of the city. And, there, this little group of psychogeographers from the South, starts a game. In describing the view, Auerbach's "pleasure in the exercise" of naming places "becomes infectious." Brookes, the British journalist, "took some noisy photographs and hopped about, laughing and steaming. He was redder than before." Then, they drink a Fanta, sitting on the ground, "like a gang of schoolboys playing truant. William and Henry and Ginger" (Vladislavić 2013, 59). Here the language is explicitly allusive to a ludic behaviour. The adjective "noisy" probably refers to the mechanical shutter of the analogic era, or to the new shutters of digital cameras that simulate the noise of the older ones. And, this ludic philosophy was exactly the most important attribute of the *derive* for the French Situationists back in the 50s. The *derive* was the game they were playing all their life.

The proper names mentioned, "William and Henry and Ginger," might be an allusion and a homage to a photograph by David Goldblatt: (Ginger and friend, Twist Street, Hillbrow. June 1972. *TJ* 2010, 183). The photo

⁸ "A mode of experimental behaviour kinked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambience. Also used to designate a specific period of continuous deriving" (Coverley 2010, 93).

⁹ The *derive* is "a) in time—constant, lucid; based on influxes and above all eminently fugitive. b) in space—disinterested, social, always passionate.—It can be latent, but movement always favours it. By no means it can be equivocal." *Potlatch* n. 17 (1954-57), 1999, 39. (Vazques 2010, 15; *my translation*).

portrays two white men, one in shorts, and with a black formal jacket, evidently borrowed from the other, who, in turn, is wearing formal black trousers, with a black tie and hat, and is left in his white shirt by his friend. Both of them smile and embrace, while standing in front of a modest shop selling detergents and advertising Pepsi.

In the playful atmosphere that mirrors the playful photograph, the British journalist proposes a real game: “I’d love to know what’s going on behind those doors. Can you imagine! You’re the man for it. Saul! Pick one at random and let’s see what it turns up. Throw a dart at the map” (Vladislavić 2013, 62). The journalist uses exactly the language that the Lettrists would use: “random” actions, a bet, and the reference to the map is all the French artists and intellectuals, under the name of Situationists, would look for. It is interesting that he proposes the game, for he is the foreigner, the outsider, the odd man out.¹⁰ Perhaps, his figure in the novel is an indirect homage to Ralph Rumney (1934-2002), the only Englishman among the Situationists.

A keen interest for the map, the city, its people is what characterizes the three men in South Africa as well as the Lettrist group in France. Their game is a new kind of cartography, of writing the city (O’ Toole 2017, 14). At the cry of “Action, Gerry, action!” as if they were going to shoot or act in a film, and “after joking about church spires and water towers” they choose a house, and call Nev: “Come, come,’ said Brookes, ‘you mustn’t be too careful, that would defeat the object. Eany, meeny [...]” (62). And once Nev made his choice, too, Brookes said: “That’s the spirit” (62).

Brookes’s language might sound obscure to Nev, for they do not know each other and, consequently, cannot rely on complicity. His language seems to be allusive to the practice that was popular among the Lettrists and Situationists, based on quick decisions and movement, random choice and high spirit (“the game they had started, 62”). Moreover: “There was a lighter mood in the car now that we were setting off on an adventure. On safari, with Auerbach to cut the spoor” (62). The term “adventure” and also the reference to hunting are typical of the Lettrists’ language. For the *derive* transforms the landscape into an imaginary wonderland. Pretending to be heading to a castle, or being in a spy story, or meeting magic people was part of the experience of an *ambience*.

The *ambience* the three South African men find is a back-yard room in corrugated iron, where a woman, Veronica, in high heels, nurtures two babies. Her shoes are described as “silver sandals with a wine-glass heel”

¹⁰ In real life, Goldblatt did experience such a ludic episode (Jacobs 2016, 257, n. 6): ‘I actually sat on a koppie with a friend looking out over the roofs of Bez Valley and Judith’s Paarl, and I said, wouldn’t it be fascinating to just pick out a place and then go down and see what’s inside it, which is exactly what we did’ (Law-Viljoen 2011: 350).

(67). This image of a poor, modern Cinderella is an encounter turned into a fable, a tale, a transfiguration (*détournement*)¹¹ that accommodates Nev in the legacy of the Lettrists' club.

The narrator stays behind, in the garden, and observes Auerbach at work. Then, he describes the picture through a detailed *ekphrasis*, and says: "I know this because I have seen Auerbach's photograph. Probably you have seen it, too, and my description is redundant, or worse inadequate" (69). And yet, if we, readers, move to the *TJ* photo-album and look for such a picture, we don't find it.

However, Goldblatt, provides photos of women lying on their beds, or of parents and children portrayed in their one-room houses. Most often, these mixed families are under a fine injunction for living in "WHITE GROUP AREAS." Among these photos of interiors and family portraits, one colour picture of a whole family of four, all in bed and intently reading various pages of a newspaper has a revealing caption: "(One of the first non-White families to move into the White Group Area of Hillbrow. The influx of people became a flood which the Government was unable to stop and it eventually declared Hillbrow an officially Grey Area. August 1978. *TJ* 2010, 208.)" That photo shows how economic, social and legal life conditions were inextricably interconnected and unavoidable. They were the trap, translated into a one empty concrete room, in which those people lived.

Nev's narrative *ekphrasis* does not match one single photo in *TJ*, it rather fictionally conflates various photos by Goldblatt, or simply, imaginatively, plays with that Cinderella-like figure on Emerald Street, as psychogeographers would do. Most of the women photographed by Goldblatt have, in fact, bare feet.

In reality, the woman had lost a third son, while having a brazier burning in the room, the previous winter. The photographer becomes the storyteller, the only one who had access to the woman's room and to her language, for they whispered in Afrikaans between them. He takes a picture of the woman with her two twins, with the photo of the triplets behind her. Browsing the web, as suggested by the narrator, is useless, for the photo is not there, either (O'Toole 2017, 17). That "picture-within-a-picture" is actually one of the typical features of Auerbach's photos.

This passage about Veronica's life is crucial in the text, because the narrator's knowledge of reality only depends on the photograph. We might say that this is a way to acknowledge the fact that a photo has a much more

¹¹ "*Détournement* of pre-existing aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of these means" (Coverley 2010, 95).

potent narrative power and capacity than words. Photography is and provides a hierarchically superior narrative. Or, at least, any photo contains and triggers stories of a deeper reality.

Another attribute of the *derive* is “attention to the interiors, a practice which crosses the threshold, the border of the visible, between closed and open spaces, at a real distance from any assimilation to *flânerie*” (Vasquez 2010, 66; *my translation*). Another major difference between the two practices is that *flânerie* needs a crowd and spaces for the merchandise to be put on display. The *derive* privileges deserted spaces. The *derive* is also rapid and quick, contrariwise to both *flânerie* and romantic wanderings.

Auerbach, too, in the novel, as well as Goldblatt in the reality, is the one who manages to cross the threshold and penetrate the interiors of houses, rooms, private lives and stories. Nev, on the contrary, is nervous, shy, and undecided and remains in the outside as a spectator. But there are two important categories that Auerbach, the photographer, shares with the Lettrists and they are his social and political ethics and his critique on architecture and urban planning.

To quote the Lettrists, “Good adventures can only occur in nice quarters,” and nice quarters influence the mood, temperament and life quality of their dwellers. “It is true that even decadent areas can be perfect for a *derive* although scandalously undesirable for living, where the regime imprisons masses of workers” (Vasquez 2010, 70; *my translation*). As a consequence, the Parisian artists thought that a revision and reformulation of the architectural tradition, thanks to a contribution from all the arts, would be able to transform and improve people’s happiness.

South Africa and Johannesburg metonymically, are respectively a country and a city where architecture and urban planning had contributed to the fracturing and partitioning of people and places, not only according to social class divisions, but, most dramatically, according to racial discrimination. Johannesburg urban features and infrastructures certainly were not meant to contribute to people’s happiness; sometimes, not even in whites only areas. Once more, William Kentridge’s words come to the rescue, to confirm such a vision:

Of course, when one goes through Johannesburg every day one thinks, God, this is ugly, some of it. The mixture of bad design, bad building and things done on the cheap without thought and planning. In some places that makes for interesting local colour. In Orange Grove and along the Louis Botha strip it just makes for the death of a sense of the city (2017, 57).

What is crucial in the association between the Parisian Lettrists and the two real South African artists—and is also present in William Kentridge—is

a deep and true socio-political concern, almost the same sociological, convergent gaze.

On their Literary Magazin, *Potlatch* n. 7, the Lettrists published an article entitled “They are destroying la Rue Sauvage”:

The Rue Sauvage, in the XIII arrondissement, which provided the most moving night sight of the capital, between the railways of the Gare d’Austerlitz and some unkempt fields along the Seine (rue Fulton, rue Bellièvre) is framed—since the past winter—by some of those debilitating constructions that are lined in our peripheries to give lodgings to sad people (Vazques 2010, 50; *my translation*).

Similarly, in *Double Negative*, when Neville Lister “lists” the most typical among Auerbach’s photos, he writes: “While driving through the city they pass by the Hillbrow Tower, Whites only benches, separate entrances, a uniformed servant eating her lunch on the kerb. ‘Auerbach’s subjects’, observes Neville” (Vladislavić 2013, 55).

It is true, these definitely are Auerbach/Goldblatt’s subjects: architectural aberrations that also include the Telkom microwave tower, the Soweto cooling towers, the cylindrical tower of Ponte city. Apartheid was very much a matter of architectural barriers, and the social engineering of a historically divided society are the subject matter for both artists (real and fictional ones). William Kentridge shares this view of Johannesburg, a city that inhibits the artists’ skills and limits imagination, while inhumanly transgressing the unimaginable: racism.

The separation of lived experience, which is still enormous in South Africa, was even larger before—between what a black person would live through and what a white person would live through—and this meant that the sense of being able to embrace the whole city, of feeling that you could write about the whole city, was never easy, was never there. [...] It’s not about the skills of particular writers, it’s also about the blocks that were there in the South African World (2017, 59).

While reading *Double Negative* and browsing through *TJ*, one is able to match details that not necessarily coincide completely. The street cleaner having lunch on the kerb is a male worker in the real photo, not a female as written in the fictional narrative.

(Lunch Hour, Pretoria Street, Hillbrow. 1966. *TJ* 2010, 36). The *punctum* is there, in the real and published photograph, and well expresses the poetics of borders of the visible. A black street cleaner is sitting on the kerb, at the edge of the pavement with his back to a tree. Behind him, male businessmen are having lunch, reading the newspapers, laughing, comfortably sitting in the open air, in front of a restaurant. Thus, three layers are visible to the viewer who shares the central and frontal perspective of the photographer,

providing depth to the photo. In the foreground we can watch in full view the street cleaner: humble, dwarfed, and almost hidden, on the edge of the kerb, but also on the edge of society. Behind him, white businessmen are enjoying their lunch break, and are being served by a black waiter in a white jacket and cap. The black cleaner perches on the border of our field of vision, while he is invisible to the background actors. Clearly, social injustice and inequality, architectural barriers, and unfriendly constructions are central to Goldblatt's po/et(h)ics.

Both Vladislavić in his writing and Goldblatt in his photography have contributed in creating a space on the world-map for the visualization of Johannesburg as a capital city. Perhaps this operation has a cosmopolitan afflatus and intent, but most of all it allows visibility to its architectural peculiarities, or even obscenities, and its social life, after decades in which Johannesburg and metonymically South Africa were erased from global consciousness. Their work is resonant with that of psychogeographers.

HILLBROW. (The Post Office, now the Telkom, microwave tower, Hillbrow. May 1975. *TJ* 2010, 126); (*Highrise* Prospect Street, Hillbrow. December 1973. *TJ* 2010, 125). With its Highrise, Hillbrow exactly matches that description of one "of those debilitating constructions that are lined in our peripheries to give lodgings to sad people" (Vasquez 2010, 50). In the 70s it was meant as an apartheid-planned whites only area, but soon became a grey area, peopled by various ethnicities and also popular among gays and lesbians. Then, poor and unemployed blacks increased in number and the area soon decayed, becoming a place of rubbish and oblivion.

Nev, in the novel, does not need too many words to describe what the photo by Goldblatt looks like. The gigantic bulk of the building with its beehive of flats only hints at insect-like lives, ant-like lives. The swimming pool and the recreation area look so artificial as to seem uncanny and inhospitable. Nature is severely absent, apart from a couple of small trees that provide neither shade nor aesthetic pleasure, small and inconsequential as they are. Although it is intended for the happiness of people, this building does not provide relief to the eye: no solace, no beauty.

Nev and Auerbach seem sensitive to those ugly apartheid architectures that determine the mood and temperament of the people living there, exactly as the Lettrists were aware of the ugly living conditions of the Parisian proletariat. Their explicit protest is translated by Vladislavić into an implicit, passing comment. However, the corresponding photograph in *TJ* (2010, 125) by Goldblatt gives the contrapuntal visualization of such a reality.

When Nev first watches Auerbach's photo album, he does so, mimicking the reader. The hero is sitting on his bed with the album on his knees and is browsing through its pages:

The images were familiar and strange. I kept looking at a hand or a foot, a shoe, the edge of a sheet turned back, the street name painted on a kerb. Have I been here? Is this someone I'm going to meet? I turned the pages with the unsettling feeling that I had looked through the book before and forgotten (Vladislavić 2013, 38).

Nev lives in Johannesburg and recognises familiar places and people—*ambience*. If we, as readers, look at Goldblatt's pictures, carefully looking for and slowly detecting those details, as they are listed by the narrator, what we find is a sociological look.

HANDS (D. Goldblatt, On Pullinger Kop. November 1963. *TJ* 2010, 42). This image has grace and beauty, the symmetry of girl (forefront) tree and building (background) is masterful, be it staged or natural; the white dress and its tailoring on the child and her doll are symbols of innocence, cleanliness, well-being. What strikes us, or pierces us in Barthesian terms, the *punctum*, is first of all the high fence, such a common feature of Johannesburg architecture, surrounding the turf. It both protects the child and severs her from the building (her home?). Second, her playful loneliness is odd, almost oppressive. Finally, in spite of all those details, her ambiguous gesture, a shy attempt to wave at or to stop, or even to ask the photographer to wait is more meaningful even than her fixed gaze.

FEET AND SHOES. (In a department store, probably John Orr's, on Von Brandis Street. June 1965. *TJ* 2010, 32). In this picture all the white, middle-class women look all alike in style and attire, their clothes and shoes make them look like a little army: both the statuary attendants and the shoppers who are marching out of the shopping mall. We easily recognize the fashion of the sixties in the coiffure and the clothes. Yet, what strikes us is the conformism, the homogeneity of the scene, particularly from a social perspective. The absence of black and Asian women implies a narrative of hegemony, of exclusion and of separation.

FOLDED SHEETS (The bedroom of Mashayela Maseko, traditional healer, 1131 Senoane. October 1972. *TJ* 2010, 81). One bedroom among a series dedicated to interiors, with its torn and lacerated sheets, its bare brick walls, its candle on the side table is Spartan, essential, minimalist, like a monk's cell, and speaks loudly of a story of humble conditions, a dignity that is hardly bearable. It is the room that we expect to find in townships.

(Richard and Marina Maponya, Dube. 1972. *TJ* 2010, 93). The next bedroom, by opposition, is characterized by symmetry and neatness, carefulness, with its white light and its folded blanket, and with its central, smiling picture of the married couple creates a *mise-en-abyme* of middle-class self-awareness in a black household. This image of decorum and

ordinariness, in imitation of the European style, speaks of economic success and possibilities for blacks, too, in the heydays of apartheid.

These two spaces clearly reveal temperament, moods, and feelings. The first obscure and grey, the second luminous and bright, even excessively white, and if we had to decide on what side happiness stands, I think we would not have doubts.

STREET NAMES ON A KERB. (*Slegs Blankes*, Europeans Only, Bus Stop, Derby Road, Lorentzville. December 1973. *TJ* 2010, 51). In the next two pictures, the name of the street is painted in black on the kerb. It is hardly visible. Therefore, this is an almost-negligible detail. Nevertheless, the name of the street and the date in the caption provide the photo with its indexical, documentary value. These pieces of *realia*, however, are not the focus of the picture. The most striking feature in the first photo is the less-visible, white-painted sign on the bench, warning people that this is a bench for EUROPEANS ONLY. The bench and the photo denounce apartheid. “Europeans” stands for whites in general, but here the painted sign specifies that they must be of European origins, so to be sure to exclude the coloureds, the Asiatic people and the blacks.

(ASIATICS/COLOURED. *ASIA TE/KLEURLINGE*. Bus Stop, Bree Street, Mary Fitzgerald Square, Newtown. February 1974. *TJ* 2010, 129). A similar image frames another such bench, this time meant for Asiatics only, thus showing the deterministic and essentialistic fragmenting and fracturing of South African society. The bench marks a bus stop in a completely empty place where three massive, cylindrical and ominous cooling towers stand and shoot upwards.

(Protest by members of the Detainees’ Parents Support Committee against detentions without trial by the security Police, Lower Park Drive, Parkview. 25 December 1981, *TJ* 2010, 215). A next photo also shows the name of the street written in black capitals along the kerb. It also shows a fairly small, lateral human figure, dwarfed by the vegetation, smaller than plants and signposts, protesting against detentions without trial: one of the legal, violent practices under apartheid. Her token and only poster, asking rhetorical questions, such as “Security Police imprisoned 170+ people. For what? Why?”, speaking the Foucaultian language of punishment, is almost insignificant and goes unnoticed in the wider picture, no matter if she is a mother, a sister, a wife, a daughter of a detainee, or simply one sympathetic militant. The date in the caption tells us that it is Christmas day (25 December 1981), this indexical indication explains why the location is in the proximity of a Lutheran church, rather than the Court. But it also speaks of a very peculiar way to celebrate Christmas, alone, on a street corner, with grief in her heart, rather than joy.

(Steven with his *Sight Seeing Bus*, Buxton Street, Doornfontein. 1960. *TJ* 2010, 34). This photo, among a group of children-at-play portraits, shows at first sight an image of material culture in the early days of consumerism, in an urbanised environment. Four children stand in front of a corner shop advertising Coke and Fanta. Some of them are well dressed, while the Steven named in the caption stands there in his dishevelled diapers, holding the string of his apparently brand new, little inflated toy-bus. The toy is in neat contrast with the dark bulk of a street cart with its decrepit and improvised structure and its strange small wheels. The street name on the kerb occupies the lower right angle of the photo, but what risks to pass unnoticed is the poster on the side of the street cart announcing: “Chief Luthuli will address ANTI PASS RALLY on Sunday 31st May, at 10 am, at FREEDOM SQUARE.”¹² Thus the photo completely changes perspective: from an image of local colour, children playing in a proletarian urban area, to a socially and racially crucial document of the 60s, when civil and human rights were daily infringed and pass laws where opposed and violently denounced and questioned in South Africa. Freedom Square, now Walter Sisulu Square, is in the heart of Soweto, the black township, notorious for the 1976 police massacre of school children. Thus, children in the photo, looked at nowadays, are particularly meaningful and connect to a future in the past that the photo could not foretell and now can neither be forgotten nor avoided.

In conclusion, all these examples demonstrate how Goldblatt is able to grasp the macroscopic and the microscopic. And in terms of what is at the borders of the visible, he portrays loneliness and emptiness, those absent, those excluded, those marginalised, so that frozen moments of happiness look precarious and strange.

Nev, the protagonist of *Double Negative* selects details that prick his eyes. His vision of the *punctum* might or might not coincide with what pricks us. As has been already said, Goldblatt/Auerbach is a photographer of details. In this way, browsing through the pages of the album, Nev and the reader share the same experience, inevitably paying attention to the same borders of the visible. Hands, feet, shoes, the folded ends of a sheet, the name of a road on the kerb. To Nev this is a kind of *dejà vu*.

Through the examples here provided we notice that the double talk of Goldblatt's photographs and Vladislavić's novel show a sociological and architectural concern, in one word we could say their engagement is ethical,

¹² “At the ANC annual conference at the end of 1952, there was a changing of the guard—The ANC designated a new, more vigorous, president for a new, more activist, era: Chief Albert Luthuli. [He] had staunchly resisted the policies of the government” (165). “Chief Luthuli had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize” in 1960 (Mandela 1995, 337).

before being aesthetic. On his part, Nev, the protagonist, after spending some years in London, in exile (Jacobs 2016, 243), to avoid military service, comes back to South Africa for its democratic elections. He has become a photographer now, but he chooses to portray thresholds, liminal spaces, for he only photographs people before their front doors, gates and walls. In this respect, he dissociates himself from the psychogeographers, who provocatively and programmatically wanted to cross thresholds. Nev concludes his narrative recounting a game his father used to play with him. He had to lie down on the back seat of their car with his eyes shut and guess where exactly he was driving to. He was so good at the game that he “had unlearned the art of getting lost” (Vladislavić 2013, 245). What he had learned from that repeated game is the “lucid *derive*,” theorised by Wolman, “where you walk without getting lost” (Vasquez 2010, 70; *my translation*). In the end, Nev, too, is a psychogeographer of the South.

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