

South of No North: A Raw and Shredded Edge

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ABSTRACT

This paper situates South African photography – in particular the work of David Lurie – within a rapidly changing world; a world no longer defined by a tripartite structure – 1st/2nd/3rd – but one in which neat divisions have become blurred, in which new cultural fusions have become possible, and in which an urgent need has arisen to produce a cultural logic or ethic to survive a world condition in which change is deemed impossible and Capital is King. As this paper will show, it is not that easy to disentangle aesthetic and cultural concerns from economic and political ones. And, in the case of the photographs of David Lurie, we find an artist who, in my view, is developing an exciting extra-moral approach to the job of making a photographic record.

The following extract from an earlier essay on Lurie's work conveys what I think is going on in the photographers work and what I regard as a crucial and necessary inflection in photography today, an inflection I term a non-position, and, by extension, a non-art. I suggest that a Lurie image

shadows and complicates the tedious reversion to a golden age in photography, as well as the deadening ease that marks the emptiness of so many contemporary records. It is all too easy to fix the visual record of South Africa in a formulated phrase, to visually conceive the country as a diorama or reliquary for history's ills, or as a many coloured prism through which one refracts the 'new.' As a result, the photographer must develop what I would call an *ethical turn*; a way of seeing that is both immanent and full. Because it is as easy to define likes as dislikes, because we rarely question our taste, we must *invite the unease that allows a suspension of judgement*, thus enabling an openness and fullness of vision.

PAPER PROPER

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North and South are not merely ... concrete geographical locations, but metaphorical references: North denoting the pathways of transnational capital, and South, the marginalized populations of the world, regardless of their location.

Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura*

Billed as “fragments from the edge,” Lurie’s latest collection of black and white photos pull the focus on a boundary-line or “edge” of a known world that has shattered; an edge which calls into question the easy dichotomies we’ve set up between centre and periphery, or, north and south. As Arif Dirlik reminds us, distinctions such as north-south comes after the prior fragmentation of space into first, second, and third worlds. The end of this triad relates to the expiration of socialism and the mushrooming of first world economic power houses in so-called third world zones.

What David Lurie’s photographs address is those zones which the pac-men of multinational capital have failed to absorb and turn into outposts of indentured labour; those zones, territories, or peoples who, technically, wind up being ignored and forgotten, or who, resisting absorption, or failing to be absorbed, wind up as informal players or raw survivors on the fragmented edge of a fragmented global economic system.

This fragmented reality lived on a precarious and, technically, redundant edge, is not a place photographers choose to frequent, and it is certainly not one which they choose to record. If they do, then it’s usually to expose that blinded reality, to wrench the conscience of those, like you and I, who wind up looking at these worlds from within the sequestered rooms of first world centres. The people who occupy this raw and shredded edge don’t possess the honorific status of victims; they cannot be saved. And one of the simple reasons for this is that they are not perceived as caught in the cross-fire of legitimate war or illegitimate exploitation. In effect, they are deemed to belong nowhere.

This of course is nonsense: we all exist on this earth; we’re all located somewhere. But what I’m getting at is the ratings factor which designates some zones as perceptible places and others merely as imperceptible spaces. Frantz Fanon had a catchy phrase for these imperceptible spaces: he called them zones of occult instability. For Fanon, a revolutionary for whom art was useless if it wasn’t assigned to a struggle for liberation from colonization, this zone of occult stability was a place where the people dwelt; it was a place to which we had to come; a place where our souls would be crystallized and our

lives transfused with light. All of which is fine and dandy if one could make the necessary revolutionary adjustment. But this is not Fanon's world. Revolution as a principle and a spirit is deemed over. In this neo-con universe, or should I say enterprise, we are said to have arrived – very conveniently - at the end of the human. And as for God, well, like Mahatma Gandhi said of Western Civilization: it was a good idea.

What I'm getting at is that when looking at Lurie's photos, when trying to take them in – and my hunch is we can't – we find ourselves wanting. Lack cuts both ways. It is lack, or hunger, or the not having or not understanding or not feeling, which is triggered by Lurie's photos. If this is the case, it is because we too stand at a fragmented edge and cannot adjust ourselves to a reality so radically outside of our own melt-down or crack-up. The worlds of the perceiver and the perceived exist outside and beyond each other with no point at which they can be cross-referenced or even contrasted. Any attempt to do so amounts to nostalgia – a retro-Fanonian-funk.

My reading is doubtless a dismal one scripted in the aftermath of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, an insidious book in which resistance or political engagement is neutralized and zombified by the tentacular charm of Empire. Hardt and Negri do have a point though. If nationalism (the core for resistance to colonization) gives way to multinationalism (the core of global consumption and inertia) then what's left except joining in (if you thought you had a choice) and becoming another pac-man?

The question is: what are the affiliations in Lurie's photos? The figures in his photos certainly don't belong to any first-world club, unless one's thinks of gangsta-rap and evangelism as global cults and systems of international commodity exchange. I'm not sure. Certainly in the backdrops to some of the photos we find imagery which denotes the libidinal economy of first world desire, in other words, ads selling life-styles clearly out of synch with the rest of what we're seeing. But Lurie isn't trying to push the differences between the first and third worlds; he's not setting up a freak-show. Photographers who do that tend to kill themselves, or are so far gone they don't stop to think that maybe – just maybe – they should. But neither, of course, is Lurie some caped avenger hiding behind the mask of the lens, trying to convert us to some noble cause. Neither voyeur nor moralist – rare indeed! – Lurie sets us up for a fall we already know we're experiencing. It's not the reality he captures which is new, but the details.

We already know about the dark cult of gangsterism, the hardships faced by the poverty-stricken, the mind-numbing inoculations of drugs, the reality of the self-as-dejecta. If we know this it's not just because we watch TV, but because each of these realities – seemingly unfamiliar; shot in strange locales with different looking people – is also our own. If people don't seem to connect to the horror they're viewing, if they are not rising in protest, it's not because they don't recognize these realities. Any fool can and does. And, besides, we have the Global Justice Movement to remind us of the importance of challenging multinational capital and its devastating impact on vast regions of the world. The real issue is that E.M. Forster's famed adage – *only connect* – isn't enough, despite its increased currency today produced by brands such as Nike and global prosthetics such as the World Wide Web. For today connection is a reality that fractures at every turn.

Love has been replaced by lovelessness. This is not because individuals are cold and unfeeling, but because the contemporary social reality has ensured that all feeling, all connection, exist in passing as a kind of blip.

So scrap the touchy-feely moral factor. What do Lurie's photos *do*? Well, they certainly reveal, through sheer contrast, what Zwelethu Mthethwa's photos do. Mthethwa's photos of shack interiors are beautiful, his figures composed, the relationship between people and their surrounds beatific. The gorgeousness of it all is killing. Or, Mthethwa perfectly demonstrates the desirous effect of an aesthetic which works on its object and, so doing, draws light from the world depicted without truly illuminating it. If this is so, it's because Mthethwa is interested only in what he sees. In keeping with a rich tradition of Western narcissism, his imagery refutes the perceived in the instant that it is objectified. This of course also follows in the rich tradition of colonialism. Now Lurie, by way of contrast, cannot objectify the world perceived for the simple reason that he cannot quite hold it, or contain it, or name it, or give it a reason for being other than that which is recorded in the instant. Certainly there are moments of composure, and composing, on the part of the photographer, but it is achieved not during a moment of repose but in situ and during the trans-actual instant. One obvious reflexive example is the image of a graveyard in which the long shadow of the photographer echoes that of the gravestones, splicing the living and the dead in the split instant of image making.

I have talked about this trans-actual instant and what it says about Lurie's approach in a previous book of photographs on Table Mountain. Since I don't care to repeat myself, I'll pause on the matter and add that there is nothing new in this, but then newness is not the point, and neither is the reverb and reiteration of an established imperial aesthetic tradition. To read or take in Lurie's photos one must by-pass both the affects of high-art and documentary realism. One must imagine that they are not being recorded at all. This of course sounds disingenuous and absurd, but, allow me to continue. If connection is not the point; if understanding is impertinent; if the prick of aesthetic pleasure or the balm of moral sympathy are beside the point: then what is?

My hunch is that what matters is the human factor; a factor which is irreducible to feeling and to knowledge; a kind of cool mortality which exists outside the frame of the knowable; a dessicated structure of feeling (to quote Raymond Williams) which allows for access without connection; understanding without a mirror; beauty without a referent. Of course you could just say, this is Africa, what else are we supposed to expect? And of course, you could be right. Since Africa has – from the point of view of Europe – never been easy to absorb, and since lodged in our racist DNA is the belief that Africa breeds and feeds off its own chaos, it makes sense to treat the visions of that dark continent as doomed. And so, returning to Lurie's photos, one could say that they are just another very persuasive account of degenerate life down under.

All of this would make sense if you were prepared to wash your hands of any culpability. But, as Fanon has reminded us, the so-called black soul is a white man's artifact. In the case of Lurie's photos, which also register the marginalized lives of South Africa's coloured people, the distinction is not that easy, and, as I've said earlier, distinction is

beside the point. We can all recognize what Lurie is showing us for the simple fact that we've all experienced it in one way or another. For what Lurie is providing us is not a visual theme park or zoo where the unwashed and poor are housed. Rather, key to the photos, I think, is hunger, and hunger is something we all know. In the West it usually takes the form of greed and is experienced as lack, but its hunger nevertheless. So, whether one lives in Arif Dirlik's north, the heart of transnational capital, or the south, where the marginalized live, hunger is inevitable. And, as Dirlik blisteringly reminds us, all too often the south exists in the heart of the north.

Let's unpick the idea of hunger. As Sharman Apt Russell puts it: "You are built to be hungry and you are built to withstand hunger. You know exactly what to do." Russell's take is biological. My point, however, is that hunger is also psycho-social and defines the moral fabric of a society. In Lurie's photos hunger emerges as a desire for a place of one's own, whatever that means, whatever the location; as a hunger for selfhood through the most precarious and dangerous of fraternities, say, gangsterism or evangelism; the hunger for comfort, for the embrace of a son, the warmth of a bedcover and a cat; the hunger to be named via the traces of other names, in the case of a body chaotically tattooed; the hunger to sidestep the madness, move one step beyond.... In recording these hungers Lurie does not read them in the subjunctive mode, as something to be fulfilled in the future, but as hungers fulfilled in the fleeting instant. The only instant of a deranging madness and the will towards a world beyond is registered in an LP cover surrounded by the charred embers of a fire. In other words, that image serves as an ironic conceit which forcefully returns us to a present lived as an extra-moral heccaeity. The word is Deleuze and Guattari's and its point is to foreground a certain immanence which, I think, distinguishes Lurie's photos: an immanence and a raw beauty; a *thisness*. One image of a family comes forcefully to mind. In a haze of smoke produced by mandrax, crack, or tik, we see a little boy, a mother, a father, and, in the flanking image, the knocked-out figure of what may be the grandfather. No sense of the starkness or grievousness of the situation is registered. There is no plaintive look, no call beyond for rescue. In fact in none of Lurie's seemingly bleak pictures does one get this sense. Instead what we get is the ability to withstand hunger, no matter how fleetingly, how precariously. There is in the photographs a powerful knowingness.

This knowingness – and I am ironically reminded here of Raymond Williams depiction of 19th century English society; a society in which the self comes to know itself through the mirror of society – is, I think, the strongest quality in Lurie's photos. If he is depicting fragments from the edge, these fragments are also curiously intact. This intactness stems from what I perceive as a kind of extra-moral will; a will forged out of hunger which renders the subject innured though not immune to pain. Let me explain: as I understand it, the existences captured in Lurie's photo are by no means tragic; not because the photographer refuses to capture them in a tragic mode, but because tragedy, by virtue of its commonplace presence in their worlds, also becomes strikingly absent, as though it were willed outward and away. Because there is no internalization of pain (a common byproduct of Western *ressentiment*; the internalization of guilt and punishment), this means that the people whom Lurie captures seem always to possess exteriorized or

externalized personae or realities, so that, as though exfoliated, their pain appears on the surface and, as such, is also curiously erased.

One could say that this is a matter of acting brave even though one feels fragile, weak, or afraid. But this view, I'd venture, comes from those who have a vested interest in perceiving others, especially the so-called marginalized, as possessing no will to power; no capability of thriving; of knowing exactly what to do. Fanon hits upon this unconscious perception when, reversing the lore of colonialism as a civilizing mission, he notes:

On the unconscious plane, colonialism ... did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its psychology, its biology and its unhappiness which is its very essence.

Fanon's point is that colonialism as cultural and economic practice is a case of unmitigated violence. He is, in part, correct. However, in our current age of global capital, in which nations become negligible, citizenry by-the-by, and colonized selves removed –if not freed – from the shackles of a punitive history, what emerges is quite another manifestation of being in which the death instinct is not subject to the whims of a superior and exterior other; where the ego is not overdetermined by a foreign will; where joylessness is not a byproduct of an economic lack; and where biology and physiology is not circumscribed by the very real yet equally marginalized affect of western economic dominance. Hence my more affirmative interpretation of the affect generated by Lurie's photos.

If the figures in Lurie's photos convey no unrest, no shiftlessness, no revolutionary agenda, this is because they have learnt to inhabit a world whose fragmented relation to other fragmented spaces is able to thrive despite the sanctioned need for correction and improvement. This, you may argue, is a fantasy on my part. Perhaps; perhaps not. But who in their right minds will, generations after the damage wrought by colonization and apartheid, persist in the cultivation of a psychic disfigurement factored into those social projects?

Turning to Homi Bhabha, who challenges Fanon's revolutionary zeal, and who questions the fetishization of blackness within the Western metropolis, we find, nevertheless, the persistence of a mirror which I perceive as having been overcome, or at least strategically deflected, in the communities captured by Lurie. Bhabha:

The Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the *Socius*; its present, dismembered and dislocated, will not contain the image of identity that is questioned in the dialectic of mind/body and resolved in the epistemology of

‘appearance and reality’. The White man’s eyes break up the Black man’s body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.

Now, recalling my critique of Mthethwa’s doctored photos of black township interiors, in which the black figure is synthesized with their surroundings and thereby rendered whole (an aesthetic strategy which also synthesizes the mind and body of the black photographer), here, in Bhabha’s reading we find the reverse process in which both black and white minds and bodies are simultaneously fragmented, for if we are to sustain reason there must be primitivism, sanity, then there must be degeneracy. While this remains a typical divisive logic, one designed to sustain the high ground of Western exceptionalism and superiority, what is remarkable is that Lurie eschews this epistemic strategy as much as he eschews that produced by Mthethwa. And it is here, in this double negation – of integrity and fragmentation – that Lurie arrives at what I continue to consider one of the finest and most rare approaches to the capture and conveyance of life. As a “White” “Jewish” “Londoner” born in South Africa, Lurie could understandably have occupied the fraught space which Bhabha sketches, and, so doing, produced a compendium of images that signaled his dislocation in relation to the dislocated world he could have depicted. However, Lurie is not party to such easy diminishment of the complexity, beauty, or strength of lived worlds. In his art we find no desire or need to doctor the world the better to suture himself, or, conversely, no desire to find in the psychic discordance of others his own discordance. It is for this crucial reason that I consider his art (which I have also described elsewhere as a *non-art*) as one of the most significant contributions to the photographic world today. His gift, or better, his psychic acumen, lies in his understanding that to write the world in images today requires that one bypass the beatific sentiment of a Mthethwa as well as the pathological undertow of Fanon; that one also by-pass the knee-jerk centrality of whiteness; the fetish of masculinity; the morbidity of the death instinct and its facile playback in scenes of guilt and shame; that one broach a given encounter without circumscription and premeditation; that one make the world speak as it is, in its flawed and fascinating presentness; and that one do so without tainting that world with a history which invariably it inhabits, but which it does not necessarily seek to foreground, or sanctify, or render pathological.

It is for all these reasons and more that we should begin to seriously consider David Lurie’s art. If it has a logic, or after Bergson, a certain *élan vital*, this lies, I think in its repositioning of photography within the new age of Empire. In this age it is precisely resistance which is nullified and therefore resistance which must be resuscitated. This resistance, of course, is one informed by a postnational and transcultural vector. It is also one which recognizes the on-going potency of localisms, or local cultures, which, refracted and influenced by global markets, find themselves unable to sustain any notion of a pure indigeneity. This, for Lurie, is power for the cause, since he is no ethnographer and has never had an anthropological interest in some putatively intact other. Rather, after Arif Dirlik, one could describe Lurie as a “postrevolutionary.”

Dirlik’s point, like Hardt and Negri’s, is that despite the fact that resistant human agency

