# REDISCOVERING THE (EXTRA)ORDINARY:

## MISSED EXPERIENCE AND SOUTH AFRICAN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

ANDRÉ WIESNER


### Abstract

Under apartheid, activist and commercial photographers confronted violent, traumatic events, and their exposure of these to the wider world played a key role in bringing about the downfall of the state. Post-apartheid, documentary photography has generally taken a different direction, orienting attention to the surrounding society, and making good on all manner of missed experiences. In their move to peripheral situations, photographers dignify the culture-making of ordinary folk. The persons in the photographer's gaze are frequently those caught in the shock waves of hostilities (Guy Tillim), afflicted by a dread epidemic (Kim Lubdrook), or exposed to a diffuse condition of endangerment, like violent criminality (David Southwood). Photographers are themselves in a way fatally endangered from afar and their attempts to visualise what is out of frame can be seen as a form of self-defence and passionate search in a bid to come to terms with trouble. The essay probes the post-apartheid state of documentary photography and its current directions.


André Wiesner is lecturer in the Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town; e-mail: Andre.Wiesner@uct.ac.za.

## The Great Traditions

In the year 2000 a young photographer called David Southwood held an exhibition that to some would have looked rotten with *fin de siècle* decadence. It featured an assortment of men and women in whom flickers of Southwood's manner and morphology could be glimpsed, and was entitled, "People Who Other People Think Look Like Me." Coming ten years after Nelson Mandela's release from prison, and six years after South Africa's landmark elections in 1994, the exhibition could be taken to epitomise the liberated, post-political sensibilities that flourished as the country shed its pariah status in the world at large and self-congratulatingly began reinventing itself as a new and improved Rainbow Nation. But coming after about two decades of low-intensity civil war at home and South African military operations in neighbouring states, and set against the backdrop of the country's long history of social conflict, with all the socio-political problems that history has entrained into the present, Southwood's installations could perhaps be read more easily than that: as the navel-gazing isolationism of a sheltered art-world elite. Southwood describes himself as a documentary photographer. Given that traditionally "documentary" is the antipode of "art" photography, this self-contradictory self-definition only makes him that much more puzzling. What beast was this, come to Bethlehem to be born?

Two years later, Southwood held an equally perplexing exhibition. Consisting of images of such bric-a-brac as a deserted picnic bench, a roadside signpost, caravans at an industrial site, and residential and office blocks, it went under the title, "Nothing in the Particular." As a critic asked, "What in the world does he mean?" (Roper 2002). Southwood's title shows that he was expecting viewers to ask the same question of the exhibition as a whole. The answer it offered seemed to speak of an artist who had gathered up images haphazardly with little thought about their purpose, other than the phatic aim of staying in touch with the viewers. What's it about? A shrug of the shoulders: Whatever.

Southwood's work seems distant from the photographic discourses that have furnished the image-repertoire by which South Africa is better known in the international world. His photography is a far cry from that of the scores of photojournalists who covered the apartheid state's tempestuous demise in the 1980s and early 1990s, or work associated more specifically with figures like Peter Magubane, Gideon Mendel, Mxolise Moyo, Jimi Matthews, Wendy Schwegman, JudaNgwenya and Lesley Lawson, among others.

Socially and politically engaged, the latter group variously identified itself with the cause of the anti-apartheid struggle, producing a rich photographic archive on forced removals, conditions in the black townships, migrant labour, the hardship of oppression and popular resistance to it (Weinberg, undated; Godby 2004; Frederikse 1986). This tradition of social documentation is best instantiated by the work done by Afrapix, a leading photographic agency and collective that functioned between 1982 and 1992. With its roots traceable to *Staffrider* and the expression this magazine gave to leftist cultural and political debate after the Soweto uprisings of 1976, Afrapix was founded in Johannesburg by Omar Badsha, Paul Weinberg and others. As Weinberg wrote, the meeting resulted in "an important resource for the alternative press and socially concerned groups," but its deeper significance lay in their adoption of "a new kind of approach," namely that "collectively we can

say much more than individually" (Weinberg, undated). Dubow characterises these activist documentarians of the anti-apartheid era as the "Across the Barricades generation" (1998, 24), an allusion to *Beyond the Barricades*, which he hails as "a landmark publication of its kind" (1989, 24). Edited by Badhsa, Mendel and Weinberg, the collection is frightening and emotionally draining testimony to the times: street protests; policemen with quirts; trucks overturned in flames; a woman raising both fists at a military patrol vehicle.

David Southwood's images appear equally remote from the work – and daredevil ethos – of the more ideologically ecumenical groups of photographers who reported on apartheid chiefly in the course of their duties as professional news providers for local media or worldwide agencies. The most notable representative of this class of documentarians was the so-called Bang-Bang Club, a nickname bestowed generally on the photo-reporters who operated in the thick of township violence (hence Bang-Bang) but usually reserved for a clique of four aces – Ken Oosterbroek, Kevin Carter, Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva. "Unlike others," Hanno Hardt writes, "photojournalists – to be effective – must seek the proximity of unfolding events, including the hazards of social unrest, revolution, or war. Consequently, they often risk their lives and sometimes pay the ultimate price in their pursuit of the perfect picture" (2001). This was to be Oosterbroek's fate: he was shot dead on assignment during a gunfight in Thokoza township in 1994 (shocked, Silva apparently rushed over to take a photograph and "was annoyed that Ken's hair was in his face, ruining the picture;" Marinovich and Silva 2000, 3). In the same year Carter took his life, "haunted," he said in a suicide note, by "memories of killings & corpses" (Marinovich and Silva 2000, 247). The remaining photographers went on to write *The Bang-Bang Club*, a memoir of what their subtitle calls "a Hidden War." "We discovered that the camera was never a filter through which we were protected from the worst of what we witness and photographed," they say. "Quite the opposite – it seems like the images have been burned on to our minds as well as our films" (2000, xiv).

While Marinovich and Silva play down the mythology associated with the "club" (2000, xiv), its legendary mystique continues to be felt among South African photojournalists. For some, this works to the detriment of photographic newsgathering; for others, the fabled four are a benchmark for gauging the *brio* of the contemporary generation.

Joao Silva is a friend of Kim Ludrook, African regional photo editor of European Pressphoto Agency (EPA) and the winner of the South African Fuji Press Photographer of the Year award in 2006. For Ludbrook, Silva has been an inspiration, representing qualities of professional spiritedness he admires. "In the apartheid years, your average photojournalist was a pretty hard-core character – working 22 hours a day, living off cigarettes and adrenaline. But it's calmed down a lot ... For me, journalism is a passion, a way of life. The younger photographers coming through the woodwork now are shooting great pictures, but it's generally a business to them." Although he is stoically wary of creeping New Order corporatism, Ludbrook is excited by the opportunities that have arisen since the end of formal apartheid. "Those days are largely over," he said. "The Bang-Bang's finished" (2007).

If this is so, then the question arises: What happened when it ended? More particularly, what became of those who continued their photography or arrived

when the Bang-Bang was done and gone – who appeared belatedly after the great age of collectives endowed with a righteous mission or the brother bands marked by initiatory scars, scars that gave proof of their toughness and the withering tests they had endured? Underpinning this is another question, then others, too. The Afrapix and Bang-Bang photographers witnessed, and bore witness to, violence, atrocity, disaster. History was happening before their lenses, History was being made. They, too, through their images, contributed to the changes that transformed a nation. As they took their photographs, they were making History; they were, themselves, History happening. In Hardt's words, they sought "the proximity of unfolding events."

So, generally, what might be at stake in seeking such proximity? What could this action be trying to do? To take a photograph, certainly. But what are some of the things involved in the action of taking that photograph, of enunciating photographic discourse? Moreover, what challenges confront photography when events drop from view – as it came to pass when the tumultous events of apartheid oppression and resistance ceased to be? (Their absence perhaps retroactively casts into relief something that is at issue in situations where photographers faced a fully present, incandescent event.) Then again, the clock did not stop ticking in South Africa in 1994. Time, politics and history carried on. The Bang-Bang may have stopped, for instance, only to re-emerge in different guise in the country's crime wave; nor is Ludbrook an isolated voice when he points to a new "war of its own" (2007), South Africa's HIV-Aids pandemic.

My contention in this essay can be simply put, and it tries to provide a basis for addressing both the general question (how has documentary photography shifted, post-apartheid, and what is its state of play now?) and the particular one (what might be at stake in seeking proximity to troubling events?). If it is possible to make certain generalisations, post-apartheid documentary photographers can be seen as working through missed experience, and doing so in different, yet intersecting, senses.

They are taking up *missed opportunities*, ones denied to them by others (by restrictions within the apartheid system or those imposed externally) or by themselves (adherence to various orthodoxies, entrenchment in social position), or ones that were otherwise not widely available in the past but which effloresced later. These shifts are manifested in the changing scope for, and internationalisation of, the production, distribution, and consumption of their work.

Inasmuch as they address the past's present-day consequences, and developments that occurred after political liberation lifted barriers and the new polity gained momentum, they are responding, be it in a critical or celebratory, nation-building mode, to the *return of the social repressed*, to situations and forces which past configurations concealed, kept at bay, hatched as legacies, or would not, or could not, countenance as possibilities (experiences thwarted, postponed, or as-yet unrealised, missed, in relation to their future becoming); one such instance is the preoccupation with urban transitions. In addition to the focus on the contemporary, photographers, in keeping with the societal self-examination stimulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings on apartheid atrocity, are coming to terms with historical conflict, culpabilities, grievances, and race and gender ideologies, hence *revisiting the past's unfinished business*. Jo Ractliffe's *Vlakplaas: 2nd*

Picture 1:
From *Other People Who Other People Think Look Like Me*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour



Picture 2:
From *Nothing in the Particular*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour

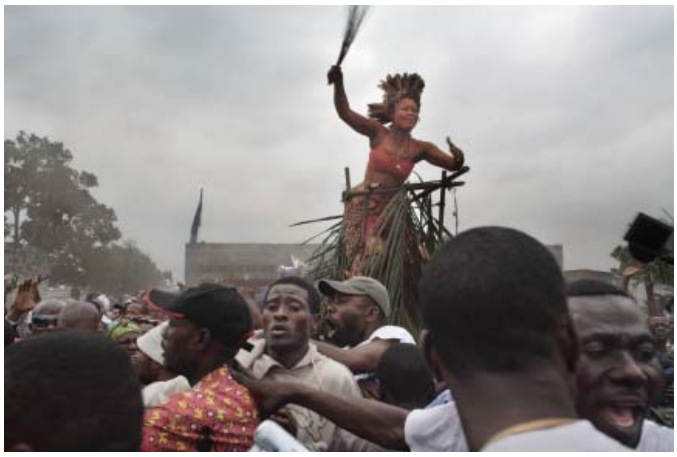


Picture 3:
From *Joburg Series*

(courtesy of Guy Tillim)

Original in colour





Picture 4:
Civil Unrest during
Congolese Elections

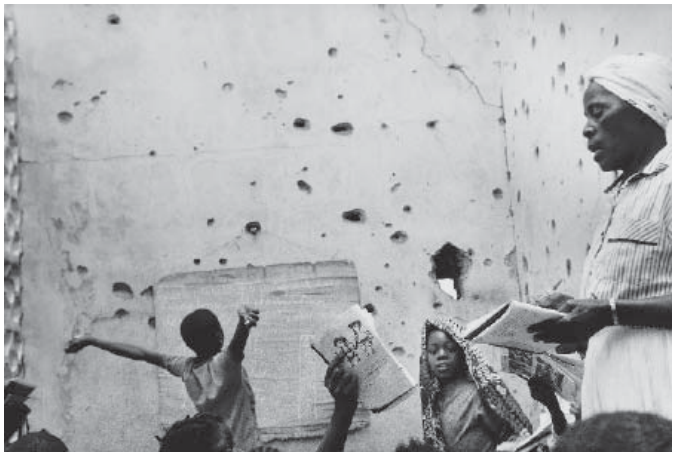
(courtesy of
Guy Tillim)

Original in colour



Picture 5:
From *Cuito, Angola*

(courtesy of
Guy Tillim)



Picture 6:
From *Cuito, Angola*

(courtesy of
Guy Tillim)

*July 1999* (a reference to an interrogation quarter run by a black-ops security unit) is a strong illustration of the tendency (Josephy 2002).

Most generally, in addition to, and often precisely *as*, directly socially relevant documentation, photographers are, as Ludbrook said, "looking under South Africa's skin" (2007), exploring subjects that differ from the headline-grabbing ones which before had been the dominant motifs (though, as Afrapix co-founder Omar Badsha insisted, by no means the sole concerns; 2007) of an earlier generation. In this respect, photographers since the 1990s have turned to topics of a kind deprioritised as urgent matters in activist circles, deemed as having lesser newsworthiness by mass media, or occluded from public view by apartheid hegemony (again, missed experiences). Matt, Mießgang and Mistry (2006, 15) characterise the move as an "expedition into the unspectacular," referring to the waysides and spaces off-centre of dramatic, and readily dramatisable events.

For the authors, shifts have occurred not only in topic choices, but in the indirectness with which they are communicated: a point to underscore. The unspectacular, to tease out a less evident meaning, is that which challenges, resists, or is impervious to, operations of spectacularisation, to making situations (as against physical forms and behaviours in the path of the lens) visible. On the one hand, the trend to the unspectacular is, following a period of *Angst* and violence, the embrace of everydayness, *motivated* by desires to expand coverage of the society's living spaces, and, in some ways, *obliged* to do so, given the defusion of prior turbulence. On the other, the trend, as a related or separate search, endeavours to "find traces of social force fields and existential cataclysms in apparently peripheral phenomenon" (Matt, *et al*. 2006, 21); that is to say, the move to the unspectacular continues to seek the proximity of history-making events, only now in a more mediated, displaced manner. (Contemporary photographers, Godby says, look for "less immediate, less obvious activity" as subject matter; 2004.)

This can happen by design, for example, when a photographer chooses to investigate how high-profile issues have had fall-out in the lives of ordinary citizens, how central, extraordinary events have borne effects in comparatively ordinary, peripheral sites – a challenge to photographic narration, if not insuperable. But it could happen, alternatively or simultaneously, that searching for proximate, near-at-hand visualisation of events can proceed *only* by way of displaced, intermediated scrutiny of peripheral effects because, for the photographic gaze, this circuitous approach is the sole means of configuring the march of events as visually comprehensible. The entities appearing before the camera shed light into its lens, but, falling in the photographer's cone of vision, the occurrences are marked by opacity, by a sense of untraceability: fragments of a delocalised presence. There is, says Victor Burgin, "something missing which is not seen ... [which] does not belong to the visible" (Swanepoel 2005, 202). In terms that are broadly analogous to the search for manifestation which this "missing" quality provokes, Sartre writes:

> *Everything happens as if I wished to get hold of a man who runs away and leaves only his coat in my hands. It is the coat, it is the outer shell which I possess. I shall never get hold of more than a body, a psychic object in the midst of the world* (Sartre 1958, 393).

David Southwood (who served at the outset as a means for bringing the differences between the past and the new into relief) demonstrates, in his images and

career history, many of the ways in which post-apartheid photographers are working though missed experience. Born in 1971, he earns a living as a photographer in an internationalised, multimedia environment. Southwood has taught township street photographers, taken a job at a newspaper, and made images for magazines, websites, and galleries. He has sold work to the Finnish Museum of Photography, and was amongst a trio of Capetonians who won the Third International Bauhaus Award 2004 for the project, "From Township to Town – Urban Change in Victoria Mxenge."

"I want to make pictures that describe a built environment or a psychological state, that become more useful over time, so that, after I die, people can reflect on a time that is past," he said; indeed, what fascinates him "is how photographers who're reaching the end of their lives view the act of photography: as you get older, you must want to make yourself visible forever" (2007).

His exhibitions "People Who Other People Think Look Like Me" and "Nothing in the Particular" certainly differ from the great traditions, and their concerns with personal identity and the marginalia of the commonplace – "I put my faith in the quotidian" (2007) – make him representative of the "expedition to the unspectacular." "Photographers are now far less interested in big events and declamatory themes," he explained: "After the need to tell stories about The Enemy ostensibly diminished, so people turned to more introverted themes" (2007).

Representative of this trend, Southwood is, additionally, representative of the trend-in-the-trend: the struggle with the unspectacularity of the un/spectacular, the struggle to phenomenalise and to make apperceptible, to bring into view, a missed encounter with an always-deferred actuality that is not in the order of visibility. This struggle is a condition of photographic enunciation, but his two exhibitions offer an artistic meditation on it, exploring its stakes and the criss-crossing threshold between photographic saying and unsaying, the chiasmus between visual expression and inexpressibility, meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Working its way through Southwood's meditation is something else, a contemplation of death: the Other's agony and/or menace, messages from beyond the horizon of thinkability.

In these terms, the differences between his work and previous traditions are ambiguous. Though there are markers of departure from the latter, even an oppositional reaction to them, the departure is in certain ways equally a return to the question of trauma that was given in earlier coverage of oppressive, often cataclysmic, situations. They are invoked in his still and eventless images, present in the mode of absence.

Southwood carries a heavy burden of representation – and not only in his work, but, indeed, as a figure in this essay. It is time to examine in more detail what he is representing.

## Orders of Visibility

Speaking in 1993 as the country stood on the verge of democracy, David Goldblatt articulated a key problem facing photographers. They had been "deprived of the central focus of their work," he said: where they had previously contended with an enemy whose "nature and identity" was not in doubt, there "was now a confusion of forces" (Dubow 1998, 25). Ludbrook echoed the sentiment. "For a while we virtually didn't know what to do. We were assimilating to this new

country, to barriers opening, and we were wondering how to deal with it, how to tell the stories, and what exactly The Story was" (2007). As Svea Josephy writes in a survey essay, the question in the 1990s was: "Does South African photography depend on apartheid for its lifeblood?" (2002, 7).

Evidently not; nevertheless, shifts there were, noticeable in contemporary photographers" choice of subject matter, their themes and preoccupations, and the interpretative demands their images bring to viewers (Godby 2004; Josephy 2002). Interacting with these were changes to documentary practice as a medial activity located in networks of production, distribution and reception. A panoply of sanctions, travel restrictions and cultural boycotts were lifted and South Africans rejoined the world stage, where their work has been exhibited with acclaim in museums and galleries in Europe, Africa and the United States (Godby 2004). Moreover, increasing numbers of them have been working, whether as lone guns under commission to local and foreign media or as agency staff photographers, not only in the world at large where wars, strife, natural disasters, or human-interest issues are to be found, but in neighbouring states and greater Africa as well. Guy Tillim, widely regarded as one of the country's frontrunners, is a prominent example of this trend, having undertaken projects on, among other matters, child soldiers in Sierra Leone and the community in Cuito, a town in ruins after lengthy civil war in Angola.

Along with domestic change, heightened contact with other African countries, be it through the waves of emigrants and refugees to South Africa or through travel and cooperative ventures, has led to greater consciousness of pan-African solidarity. Ludbrook, whose managerial district for EPA stretches across most of the continent, spoke of the need for citizens, its documentarians, to transcend Us versus Africa apartheid paradigms and identify themselves primarily as Africans, a position reflected both in the concerns he expressed about Western perceptions of Africa and in measures he and his staff take to ameliorate them in their reportage (2007).

The intensified internationalisation of local documentary praxis coincided with developments in the field of global communication systems over the past two decades. Although it was ironic, as Godby points out, that many photographers who had formerly devoted themselves to documenting the cruelties of apartheid suffered loss of livelihood when, come liberation, South Africa left the world spotlight and demand for their work dropped (2004), their plight can also be seen in the context of the wider-ranging phenomenon of so-called compassion fatigue, in which primarily affluent audiences weary of images of the wretched of the earth and turn to a media diet of self-improvement and material pursuit. Be it cause or effect of the commercial shifts in global media, or the result of a feedback loop, the phenomenon has reduced the markets for what Lubdrook called "hard-hitting" stories and, particularly, long-format photo essays. Conversely, he believes that disintermediated self-publication on the Web – a medium to which many photographers have been drawn, going further yet to adapt their work as audio-tracked podcasts – holds the key to the form's survival, even though the strategy's financial viability is uncertain and it has a twist in its tail. An issue of *LIFE* gave privileged visibility to a select few photographers, taking them to millions of viewers, but to the cost of a welter of other photographers: a few seen by many. The Web democratises visibility, only to diffuse it in a plethora of sites: the many seen by few (2007).

Digitality has been a mixed blessing. Professionally affiliated photographers who had mastered analogue cameras over years had to re-tool their expertise to suit digital technology, setting them back in relation to younger peers for whom it was second nature; purists in the realm of commercial wildlife photography, used to waiting for an animal of choice to hove serendipitously into view, are scandalised by the lush – and lucrative – digitally manipulated cornucopias of fauna and flora that make a mockery of their pains (Fox 2007). Photographic status structures have been affected in other ways, too. Though South Africa enjoys unprecedented media freedoms and transformation policies have buoyed the rise of black entrants into photojournalism, the country has not been immune from worldwide trends in media, and multinational takeovers of local newspapers, for example, have resulted in staff rationalisations and juniorisation of employees. Such bottom-line practices have worked hand in glove with the commercial accessibility of digital camera technologies and the sense that they level the playing field between "pro's and schmo's". In this logic, "pro's" tend to seem ever suspiciously like luxuries.

Where the documentarian's professional standing is at threat in one context, it has been boosted in another – private galleries, which stage exhibitions and serve as agents for retailing work worldwide. Southwood spoke of their "rising power" in the field, as against their rarity in his early career, depicting them as make-or-break citadels of influence and prospective fortune (2007). The development presents well-known ethical issues around the commodification of imaged subjects and the channeling of social documentation into areas of élite connoisseurship (Badsha 2007). Alternatively, producing images for galleries does not preclude them from being disseminated to wider publics, and galleries enlarge scope for creative freedom and an intensification of artistic skill, partly as a result of the level of scrutiny that is brought there to photographic displays (Tillim 2007).

The "rising power" of galleries is a symptom of, and stimulant to, the erosion of borders between the art world and traditional documentary practice, albeit that in terms of practitioners' interaction among one another, the blurred distinction appears confined to the "upper echelons," but elsewhere still in place (Southwood 2007). The tendency is bound up in a changing political economy of visuality, where the issues of what is visible to whom, and under what conditions of intermediation and reception, make for a context in which the odds of *being seen* (in different senses) are as likely as *being missed* (in different senses). The trend – like the others discussed – is mediated by this economy and in turn mediates it.

For Josephy, a result of liberation was that the country's "exposure to global culture introduced Postmodern and post-structuralist critical discourse into South African image-making" (Josephy 2002, 5). The discourses of Postmodernism, along with practices associated with them, intertwine with other cultural-ideological debates, a confluence that has seen innumerable reorientations in documentary expressivity. While the shifts have been many, their *leitmotif* can be summoned by a single phrase, one recalling "the expedition to the unspectacular" – the rediscovery of the ordinary. In an essay with that title, Njabulo S. Ndebele wrote, "the spectacular documents ... it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details" (in Matt *et al* 2006, 25).

Issued in 1986, Ndebele's pronouncements were widely debated in local cultural circles, and three years later he returned to these ideas in "Redefining

Picture 7:
From *Aids Orphans*

(courtesy of
Kim Ludbrook)



Picture 8:
From *Aids Orphans*

(courtesy of
Kim Ludbrook)




Picture 9:
From *Aids Orphans*

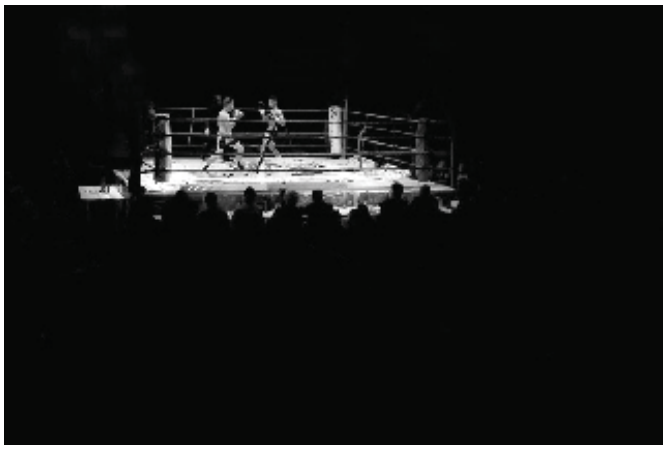
(courtesy of
Kim Ludbrook)





Picture 10:
From *Township Kick Boxers*

(courtesy of Kim Ludbrook)



Picture 11:
From *Township Kick Boxers*

(courtesy of Kim Ludbrook)



Picture 12:
From *Nothing in the Particular*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour

Relevance," repeating his case that "protest literature may have run its course" (1989, 40). Originating in the 1950s and 60s as a means of "articulating grievance" and "highlighting ... general instances of oppression," this literature had produced a stock of "themes, characters and situations which were welded into a recognisable grammar" (p. 42-3), so much so that the literature, and its informing impulses, had become "a socially entrenched manner of thinking about the South African reality" (p. 40); derived from, and ultimately dependent on, the system of apartheid, such thinking inadvertently reproduced the alienating creative and psychological strictures that were endemic to the very thing it sought to resist.

Crucial to Ndebele's argument are the twin motifs of occultation and preferential visibility. That which is politically relevant is that which "contribute[s] dramatically to the struggle," he says, adding for emphasis that the "operative word here is 'dramatic'" (p. 47). Demonstrations and strike action are good examples of the dramatic (p. 47). So, too, is the central occurrence around which Ndebele builds up his essay: a mine fired 23,000 black workers. Although by Ndebele's estimate the dismissal stood to affect some further 100,000 family members, in a public discourse governed by the habits of protest literature "we concentrate on the 23,000 men, the most observable proof of injustice," even as "[t]he other hundred maintain a blurred presence, seldom becoming a serious factor in analysis"; the latter, as he puts it, were "not there at the scene of the action" (p. 41). Dramatic events are politically expeditious. Occurrences like strike action, for instance, or the sacking of workers, are "dramatic" in the colloquial sense (they involve upheaval, carry emotional impact), but chiefly in a stricter sense: that of dramatic productions.

The "socially entrenched manner of thinking" which Ndebele criticises thus establishes a scheme of preferential visibility and, correlatively, one of "occulation"; it homes in on certain elements of the real to the exclusion of others as it follows the course pre-set by its rhetorical programme, privileging things that are colloquially "dramatic" and which, dramaturgically, are dramatisable. Strike actions are charged moments of resistance. The dismissal of the miners is a high-impact event. These events are *important*; important, too, for their potential for visualising their invisible, but immanent, contextual determinants, what Goldblatt termed "the forces that shaped our society" (Dubow 1998, 22). On the other hand, the "blurred 100,000" are not at "the scene of the action," but caught in its fall-out zone, their lives reverberant with the thunder of distant events. To document them is, in one line of reasoning (the main emphasis in Ndebele's treatise) to address them as subjects in and of themselves, thereby democratically expanding public discourse to grant them a place in the sun. In a related (but implicit) line of reasoning, to consider them is both to treat them empathetically as people though whom a disaster has passed and, in addition, to take them as reflectors of that disaster – in the way that, so it is said, the eye registers a star better by glancing askance of it. The strike, the retrenchment, are specifiable occurrences, localised in sites which are deemed epicentral, finalised as discrete episodes, distinct as opposed to "blurred," perceptible rather than hazily dispersed: constitutable as allegorically loaded events played out on a stage, encompassable by the gaze.

The implication is self-evident: the full story was not being told. Focussing on the dramatic(al), despite its politically useful clarity, meant that experiences were being missed, inasmuch as this clarity obscured from view the ramifying, accumulating, force of events, and inasmuch as the patterns of focus stereotyped people of

colour as victims and as persons given purely to reacting to situations engineered by their oppressors rather than being culture-makers in their own right. In a similar vein, Mofokeng has expressed his dissatisfaction with "propaganda images which reduced life in the townships to perpetual struggle" (Josephy 2002, 7), while Josephy explains that concentration on "the master narrative of the struggle" marginalised "the everyday narratives of ordinary people" (p. 7). According to Matt, the call is to explore "the little stories" and go "beyond the clichés of ethnic conflict" (Matt 2006, 9), or what Godby (2004) – quoting anti-apartheid photographer Lesley Lawson – called "the aesthetics of flags and fists."

Rediscovering the ordinary: so, for example, Denis Farrell documents, over several months, the goings-on at a school for *sangomas* (traditional healers) or how a centre for juvenile offenders is trying to rehabilitate its charges by having them care for pets, while Kim Ludbrook, as an after-hours personal project, photographs motorcycle clubs – this in addition to his work addressing the country's HIV-Aids pandemic and extremely high crime rate, two of the less small-scale topics that have preoccupied many a documentarian. Santu Mofokeng (2001) depicts desert landscapes as well as the intimate vagaries of township life – a matron sweeping the hearth of a shanty with a reed broom, a group of youths playing golf amid the rock and long grass of a hillside, a couple embraced in a slow dance. He has also dwelled on themes of spirituality and religious ritual, as have Zwelethu Mthethwa, Andrew Tshabangu and Paul Weinberg; the latter's "turn to religious subject matter," Michael Godby says, "represents one of the more radical changes in direction of any photographer" since the advent of democracy in 1994 (2004).

Accompanying the trend away from overtly political concerns to cultural micro-narratives ("the little stories"; Matt 2006, 9) has been a renewed emphasis on place, habitat and spatiality, and in this respect contemporary photographers can be seen to be following a path cut out by the veteran figure of David Goldblatt. Lauded as South Africa's pre-eminent photographer, he has since 1961 been exploring the country's history as it expressed in its architecture. Of the younger generations, Mikhael Subotzky and Pieter Hugo, for instance, have produced exhibitions on small towns in transition, Guy Tillim and a host of others have done this in regard to inner-cities, and Southwood, in addition to other architectural projects, has engaged in long-term documentation of a marketplace near Cape Town. Themba Hadebe's study of Johannesburg is truly long-term, since he hopes to spend the next 25 years doing it (2007).

In the available literature on current South African documentary, writers – unsurprisingly – take 1994 as the starting point of a new practice and compare it to apartheid-era photography (this essay has been no different). At bottom it is a way to bring contemporary reorientations into relief. Changes there have been plenty since 1994, and writers construe them in different ways in relationship to the past – as mainly differences (Godby 2004), as deep-seated alterations (Josephy 2002), oppositions (Matt *et al* 2006), or even essentially as continuations (Badsha 2007). My own concern is to explore the ways that latter-day photographers like Southwood, "rediscovering the ordinary," continue to address traumatising realities of the kind that photographers faced under apartheid.

## The Extraordinary Bullet

When Ken Oosterbroek was killed in Thokoza in 1994, he was not the day's only casualty. Greg Marinovich, too, was struck by a bullet during the shootout. One would expect this to count literally as trauma, but his sensation at the time, as he recounts it in *The Bang-Bang Club*, was rather different: one of "utter calm" (2000, 2). He explains,

> *This was it. I had paid my dues. I had atoned for the dozens of close calls that always left someone else injured or dead, while I emerged from the scenes of mayhem unscathed, pictures in hand, having committed the crime of being the lucky voyeur* (Marinovich 2000, 2).

Photography is famously and paradoxically a way of *not* being at a scene. "Photographing," said Sontag, "is essentially an act of non-intervention" – "the photographer stays behind his or her camera" as "real people are out there killing themselves or other people"; he or she instead "appropriates" their image and adopts a relation to them that seems like knowledge and power but is more akin to self-prospering, self-deluding reductiveness that objectifies the others for viewers' desensitised delectation (1978, 11, 3 *et passim*). Marinovich flip-cycles through these tropes. Where others had suffered, he had succeeded: a scopic pervert, intact, immaculate, witnessing their agonising fragmentation, in the thick of things yet remote in his own situation, criminally unconcerned, and leaving with the trophies for which they had been sacrificed, an unequal, guilty transaction finally made good when his come-uppance arrives in the form of the bullet.

In this reading, photography maintains distance. The photographer is far away, better yet, above it all, a hovering, inviolate subject detachedly objectifying others. In a different reading, photography is a self-revolving circuit ("got it: no, that's not it") of self-defence and passionate search.

Self-defensively, the photographing agent subjectifies itself in a position of controlling lordship, transcending the other in the image's objectifications: captured, taken, shot. Looked at, his/her returning gaze bereft of force ("a psychic object," Sartre said), the other is put into eye-lowering bondage, known, yet, even so, felt to elude the image-maker's projections: missing with important secrets.

Thus the passionate search begins, or recommences. The photographing agent attempts to make a look appear, a gaze coming from elsewhere; that is, to *re-subjectify* the other, to unconceal his/her/its interiority. The agent's attempt is, conversely, to grapple with states of being-looked-at, being reachable by the world and solicited by it; that is, to *objectify* itself, to come to terms with its being for others. In these processes, the movement is to internalise a missed experience, to labour on it, and to externalise it in viewable production. What is troubling is given shape and dimension, taken in and cast out: a way of doing something about it, indeed, a way of *being*, somehow, at the scene.

How, then, is Marinovich's "utter calm," the bullet's assuagement, to be read? Others suffered; he fed off them. They gave their lives; he took pictures. A guilty transaction, equalised by the bullet. Yet, needless to say, it must be borne in mind that Marinovich is terrified by what he sees – dread which the bullet in some way relieves. In this regard, the bullet repairs a guilty *substitution*, an unfair exchange of places. His implication is that the atrocities visited on the others around him were

not just occurrences incidental to his life. They were "close calls" that could have struck him but hit others instead. They took a fate that could have been his, a fate the imminence of which appeared to gain likelihood after "dozens" of such calls: a mounting destiny, a lightning bolt striking at him in his scattered peregrinations but, by dint of his "lucky" dodges, always landing on "someone else" instead. That "someone else" has suffered *in his place* and *as him* – as the guilty one for whom the bullet was always meant.

So what does the photographer intuit in this suffering, dying stranger, the stranger made strange and heart-breaking minatory by his ordeal, but a *memento mori*, speaking obscurely about that which is of himself and common to them both? Across the abyssal separation between them, the photographer intimates, over there, in the other person, mother, father, sister, brother, kinsman, friend, beloved – self. Out there, in the visible other, something invisible is happening, seen through a glass darkly, "blurred" – as Ndebele put it – in a spreading, opaque background exceeding the clear dramatic(al) construct which with the person is framed. This person is the "evidentiation", the indexical sign and displaced reflector, of a turbulent, disastrous fatality that resists spectacularisation (to invoke terms earlier in use). Heavy with palpable reality, the occurrence exists, is "encounterable". But, as an event for the traumatised enunciator, it is always-already deferred. It is happening; it *can't* be; it has happened, hasn't happened yet (Felman and Laub 1992; Felman 2002; Blanchot 1986).

"[S]omeone *else*" endures suffering: undergoes it and/or surmounts it. This endurance is a call to the observer. It is plea, solicitation, a call for concern – for compassion, help, grief, tribute. Moreover, for the observer, it is a *cause* for concern. Over there, in the other, are us, we, me. The call is, therefore, also a question. How would *you* bear this bitter load of mine? These "dues" (as Marinovich said) which



Picture 13:
From *Nothing in the Particular*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour

Picture 14:
From *Other People Who Other People Think Look Like Me*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour



Picture 15:
From *Case*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour



Picture 16:
From *Case*

(courtesy of David Southwood)

Original in colour



I pay on your behalf? What is your mettle? Pursued by a dread fatality, Marinovich is not simply evading it. In his forays and his photography, he is actively pursuing it in the violence he sees, moving in close, escaping out, moving in again: working through missed experience, a missed encounter.

"There is no easy way of looking at suffering," Guy Tillim wrote, but "stereotypes go a long way towards softening the blow" – easily legible, facile "currency" whose sameness "ultimately alienates the viewer" (photographer, too) and reinforces "a presumption that you understand the reference" (Tillim 1999, 51). The effect of this non-understanding (this *missing*) is that stereotypical imaging "places the viewer outside an experience or event, saying, 'Look how different this is from your world'"; a non-stereotype "tries to say, 'Look how much this is the same'" (p. 51). Tillim's piece was accompanied by an image of two refugees in Zaire, the one standing to the side and back of the other, both staring pensively beyond the frame as if scanning for an imminent threat, its fearsomeness evoked in their shadowed eyes. They were photographed high-angle, looming upwards, and their alignment one to another forms a pyramidal shape. It is one of Tillim's compositional motifs, discernible in his *Joburg* series – where skyscrapers in the background often triangulate into towers of Babel of a sort, reaching towards lowering clouds – and his image, taken in election-time unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, of a woman dancing above a crowd at a pyramid's vertiginous apex, the clouds diaphanous with fitful electric charge.

The refugee picture was meant to illustrate Tillim's belief that the photographer should attempt to convey "what is common among us," "find within himself ... an understanding of what is shown that is sympathetic, caring and fearless" (p. 51). But in interview with him a different story emerged. Even that image no longer lived up to his manifesto, and he spoke of it with scepticism. "You try to communicate an [out-of-frame] context so that viewers can understand what's inside [the frame]," he said. "You create a ground where they can stand and look around ... If you get low underneath people and they happen to be thin or well-positioned, you give them a looming stature that gives the picture drama." In the case of the refugees, had Tillim risen to his feet to photograph the two boys, he would have been looking down at them and they brought forward below the horizon-line, losing the impact which the actual image has. Kneeling down or standing up would make all the difference to how, indeed what, context was evoked, and he compared the image to that of the Congolese woman. Jostled in the mob below her, and with her visible for only a few seconds, he had no choice but to photograph her from where he stood. "That I was there was a sort of miracle ... An extraordinary moment" (2007).

The refugee image, he said, was "slightly disingenuous," and more was at issue than his physical posture. So was his ideological one, what he called "the conventional projections of what it is to be, say, a refugee." The image "purported to look into their souls. You could see the fear in their eyes. But *was* it fear? Was it the accumulated stress of the two years they'd spent walking from home? What do *I* know about their emotions? Are [the image's readings] my projections? ... What do I know about what is to be a refugee? How could I even *begin* to understand what was going on there? Is it fear? Is it stress? Is it ... what?" (2007).

As part of a wider project commissioned by Omar Badsha, Tillim pursued his self-interrogating, other-encountering search for "what is common among us" across the wastelands of a worn-torn Angola, an investigation that resulted

in 2001 in his exhibition *Cuito, Angola*. Although the country was still at civil war when he undertook the project, Tillim (an intrepid photographer) eschewed direct imaging of military conflict, its central sites of "eventiveness", and explored rather its devastating peripheral effects, seeking to bring to view "something that, from its appalling duration and extent, might proper be called the condition of war" (Godby 2004).

The series features a literally shell-shocked town – shops crenellated by bombardment, a block of multi-storey flats with its facade sheered off, entire and top-to-bottom, to expose the rooms within as if the structure were made of gigantic breeze-blocks. Almost everything in the built environment, such as it is, has been chipped and pockmarked by bullets, traces of an omnipresent but out-of-sight war and, for all the speechless destruction, testimony to a mad, ferocious systematicity emanating out there from the space of disaster. Amid the chaos, Tillim detects bizarre patterns and geometries, trying to construe this angry, hieroglyphic tongue and fathom the nature of the Other that utters it.

There are few human figures in these images. Most seem thoroughly *de*humanised: mannequin-like entities sliced by shadows thrown from a staircase; an ancient woman, squinting on a dust-blown veranda, who has just plainly had enough. Juxtaposed against the cityscape in the same way that Tillim registers the closeness between, say, a checker-board configuration of holes and the wallpaper patterns above it, the inhabitants look at one with their desolate surroundings. But then again it depends on how one interprets these ambiguous juxtapositions. Is the wallpaper nullified by the bullet holes? Or does it preserve and assert its values against them? Several of the figures quietly demonstrate heroism. Here, a boy playfully limbers up a torture-rack of a wall. There, a teacher instructs from a notebook in a make-shift classroom where a rug pegged into a crater acts as blackboard. Insofar as the photographer himself exists in the disaster's radius of threat, his subjects help to tame his concerns. They are exemplary; they are, to recall Tillim's manifesto, "fearless."

On the one side, active theatres of combat, headline events, the diffuse "condition of war," events and states beyond visibility, across a horizon: the extraordinary. On the other, the war's peripheries, its detritus, its people enduring (undergoing/surmounting) suffering in their rock-bottom everydayness: the ordinary. The photographer is concerned *for* them and *by* them (brother, sister, self), put at issue. They are the space askance of the dark star, the displaced, visible reflectors of the extraordinary. They are the traces of a cataclysm that has come and blindly *looked* at them, saturating them with its inscriptions. In those strangers over there, he – *qua* other-subjectifying, self-objectifying photographing subject – finds alter egos who have been looked at *in his place*. To look at them, to unconceal their secrets, is to sense an undoing being-for-others in the presence of a look rising behind them and through them, the disaster come looking blankly in one's own way. In that Nietzschean aphorism, when you look in the abyss, the abyss looks into you. (*What is your mettle?*) Expressed in schematic thinness, to essay mastery of such radical unmastering, the photographer stages a two-fold movement, moving from the ordinary to reach the extra-ordinary – to reach it, summon it, somehow jam the genie into frame, look *back* at this look –and returning from the extraordinary to the ordinary, to scan it for guiding exemplars who can show the way beyond devastation. Take it in, tame it, cast it out: fearful/fearless.

Kim Lubdrook lives in a country where, as he said, HIV-Aids is post-apartheid another "war of its own" (2007). He is the father of two small daughters: Will this dread disease be their future, too? As father, he has grown empathetically paternal to *other* children, spreading the range of concern *parentis in locum* beyond the home. Where before children would perhaps have been ignorable things beneath the belt-line, they are now more *visible* to him, as are other parents, visible to him and *as* him, him and his own. Whether it is that they are already living with Aids or are menaced by it as a future possibility, what Ludrook sees when he looks at them is an abyssal fatality: it looks back into him. (*What is your mettle?*) He wants to do something about it, to help those already affected and in some way ultimately to contribute to stopping the epidemic, and he does this by the symbolic-performative means of documentary photography: symbolic in that it is a visually signifying rehearsal of an encounter and, entwined with that, a classic action of advocacy, public exposure and appeal.

Where is this nemesis to be found, to be dealt with punishing blows? Where is to be *seen*, made palpably visible (phenomenalised) and available for aggressive address? As an illness, Aids is locatable in suffering bodies, near-to-hand particularities, yet even so, an internal condition invisible to the naked eye of an observer. As an epidemic, a general contagion, Aids is locatable and viewable in the millions affected by it, which is only to return to the former problem. Indeed, as epidemic Aids is a transmission and a transmissibility, a ramifying field of spreadability, a jumping-across of the space between people – as when a spark passes between two electrical poles – and a growing potential for that jump to occur: a body count and an interstitial voltage. As both a spreading-spreadability and something happening in a body, Aids is everywhere and nowhere, its very name and nature a subject of furious political debate. To recall David Goldblatt's remarks as the old order ended and the new began, "Whereas before there was an enemy and no one was in any doubt about [what it was] ... there was now a confusion of forces" (Dubow 1998, 25).

Ludbrook's website exhibition *Aids Oprhans* is a sensitive, anxious study, powerfully soliciting concern for the bereaved children, these particularities who are seen marooned on a rug – putrid dolls to the foreground of them, and, to the back, within a cavernous room, headstone-like arches of sunlight from the opposite windows further evoking the absence of their parents – or who are seen tangled over one another in sleep while a juxtaposed newspaper headline celebrates the orphanage's anniversary. The images of such particularities attempts, too, to summon forth the amorphous epidemic. As Ludbrook's photo essay unfolds, the recurring images of children asleep in a cluster begin to shift in tenor. Initially they convey snugness, a sense of the protectedness extended over them. But other references seep in – the many, many empty shoes; the naked, bundled cadavers Ludbrook photographed in *The Unknowns*, a project on unidentified dead paupers in mortuaries; mass graves.

The essay is troubling, and in another exhibition, *Township Kick Boxers,* he can again be seen to be attempting a work of exorcism – taking in, casting out – in a country where Aids and poverty bleed into each other. Ludbrook records the boxers' progress through their training and culminates in a report of the final tournament. Something more is at issue here than sports coverage. Of his use of black-and-white,

redigitised from colour, Ludbrook said, "It has gravity to it. It's the truth, it can't be wrong, this is reality" (2007). The essay's figures are *strong*, exemplarily so, with a contained powerfulness enhanced, given mass, by black-and-white. Some drive is being staged, being fused with substance, substantiated. Among the closing images is one of the tournament fight itself. In an oblong of shining light, anchored yet adrift in an enclosing ocean of darkness, two men confront one another in a boxing ring head-on: a sited, focal, aggressive encounter.

David Southwood's exhibition photography confronts precisely *this*: the confrontation, the face-to-face, look-to-look encounter with an enemy. In his work, he, too, stages an encountering of a missed experience, obliquely rounding in on deferred events but at the same time directing his artistic attention to the very processes by which he does this, the processes of looking and making meaning. The titles of his exhibitions – philosophically charged despite the shoulder-shrugging dudishness of the one and the whimsy of the other – invite one to regard them in exactly that light: "Nothing in the Particular," "Other People Who Other People Think Look Like Me." The former seems to nullify its own exhibition, not to mention *en passant* the history of documentary signification, declaring that there is no greater, or even lesser, meaning to be construed by photographer or viewer from its magnificently composed chunks of pointlessness. There is nothing more to these vignettes of dead-end ordinariness than what you see: accept as is.

"[But] I don't think we'll make that mistake," said the reviewer Chris Roper, referring to the title's multiple ironies. Its stated negation is an implicit affirmation that meaning there is. It lures viewers into hunting after the opposite of what Southwood says, the *everything* in these particularities, so as to enjoy imaginary possession of their latent plenitude. Let it be said, for people who grew up in South Africa in the late twentieth century, seeing these images is likely to be moving, a recognition not of conventional South Africana but even more unremarked bits and pieces – a surprised, self-welcoming rediscovery of the ordinary. Southwood's image of a roadside picnic bench is a case in point. It re-evokes ritual family camping trips and stop-overs made at these benches for relief, snacks, and prolongation of the journey's childish pleasure. Initially the photograph seems, indeed, to resemble the kind of album snapshots that might have been taken there.

But the re-evocation is revocation. The compositional symmetries assert themselves, disrupting one's imaginary captation. The dangling bark-strips look flesh-like, the landscape, inscrutable. The place feels remote in its pastness, as does the socially ingrained family-album perception one has brought to it. The cool-drink bottle on the table is a small, "authorially" intrusive index of globalisation, change. "You adopt nostalgia," Roper (2000) noted, "as a defence against seeing the present." The title effects a re-negation of its affirmation, from nothing in the particular to everything and back to nothing. Better yet, Nothingness in the particular. If it is meant instead as "Everything in the General," even that is drained. A devotee of August Sander, Southwood has produced an archive of social types, but the point of view, the governing consciousness, to which this hieroglyphic bric-a-brac would be intelligible, is not known.

Inviting and declining possession of what is imaged, the exhibition foregrounds the chiasmus of enunciation/interpretation, this criss-crossing threshold between meaninglessness and meaningfulness, implying that meaninglessness *is* its meaning

– the fated Nothingness of photographer/viewer in regard to the indwelling quietness of things (a picnic bench that will endure, unnoticed odds-and-ends that will outlast us all). In short, the exhibition stages an uncanny (*unheimlich*) *anamorphosis* in what is visible. It offers "concreticity", only to desubstantiate it when the image dispossessingly reconfigures to reveal an abyssal gaze that looks out, in these homely scenes, at the viewer/photographer: absence in presence, a look obliquely encountering a look. And isn't this the logic, yet in more conceptually elaborated form, of "Other People Who Other People Think Look Like Me"? The subjects Southwood has dragooned into it – put against a wall, flash lit in conforming postures and expressions – are not only his alter egos, him flickering over there in them, but people with a twofold aspect. They are looked at by Southwood; they are looked at by the Other, who has, of course, looked at Southwood and known him in ways he cannot fathom. At the mercy of the Other who can make of him what it will, he then *looks*. Looks, and makes image after image of his alter egos, tracking down this capricious, infinitely extraordinary freedom that through them surveys him.

Reading Southwood's photograph of a beachfront, Roper describes its "lines of every-decreasing lines of safety" from podium to water's edge to breaking waves:

> *There's something ominous about this progression. Finally, on the real horizon, a line of black ships, the emblems of commerce on the ocean, of technology's power over nature. But it isn't actually the final line. Tumbling above these ... lines of humankind's defiance of nature, of "what's out there," are ominous, roiling black clouds, a reminder that all these sociological formations are fragile. The "what's out there" is what makes this a very South African picture* (Roper 2002).

Departing from older traditions of documentary and rediscovering the ordinary, Southwood, for all that, is in certain respects continuing their extraordinary pursuits. South Africa's history, its trauma, is not absent in his work. It is present obliquely, resonantly, evoked from afar. Sometimes, though, not from *that* afar. In one of his other exhibitions he photographed some particularly ordinary objects. They were mangled bullet casings, discharged not at recreational practice ranges but at the country's myriad of murder scenes. Extricated from the dead as forensic evidence, evidence of an abyssal look hitting an alter ego, Southwood worked on, through, them, illuminating and taming a secret horror (*Case*).

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