Lyric Documentary:

Santu Mofokeng's photography is marked by documentary's spectral remains, writes ***Leora Maltz-Leca***

FROM LEFT Santu Mofokeng, *Ludmilla Woloschima Makarowa of Russia at the 55th anniversary celebrations in Ravensbruck, Germany*, 2000, silverprint. © Santu Mofokeng and courtesy Lunetta Bartz/MAKER, Johannesburg; Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Portland Place, London*, 1906; William Hope, "spirit photograph", c. 1930

In a rare lecture at Yale University on 11 March 1964, Walker Evans presented what he called his "aesthetic autobiography", parsing his life's work and the genre of documentary photography he had been so instrumental in shaping.[1] What he had to say about the latter was, however, far from complimentary. A brief but unsparing exordium to the Yale faculty launched Evans's presentation: "the term 'documentary,'" he declared, "is inexact, vague, even grammatically weak."[2] To sharpen this hazy designation, Evans proposed supplementing it with the attribute "lyric". Reading off the first index card of his talk, Evans conceded to his audience that: "I owe you some discussion of my title 'Lyric Documentary' – Came to me out of dissatisfaction with 'documentary' – my personal style – vague inexact adjective etc – even grammatically weak." The photographer's second card delivered the punch: "When I added 'lyric' I had the quality I was after."[3]

According to John Hill, who attended the Yale lecture, both the monikers "lyric" and "documentary" had been in circulation for some time. Hill explains that: "Twenty-six years earlier, in March 1938 (shortly after Evans shot his canonical *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) Thomas Mabry, director of MoMA, had written to Lincoln Kirstein – apropos Kirstein's forthcoming exhibition essay – cautioning the critic to clearly distinguish Evans's work from that of all other photographers, both "documentary" and "lyric".[4] Whether Mabry himself devised these twin terms, or was merely borrowing Evans's phrasing, it is clear that from the moment of documentary's genesis in the 1930s, artists and critics alike were already wrestling with the constraints implied by the word, and seeking to embed photographs such as Evans's either *between* the two beacons of "lyric" and "documentary" or, as Evans would ultimately do, to lodge his practice *in* the contradictory amalgamation of the phrase "lyric documentary".

So what was "lyric documentary"? For Evans, the concept was apparently concretised in hand-coloured postcards from the opening decades of the twentieth century. Two dozen of these cards, culled from his collection of several thousand, comprised the latter half of Evans's Yale presentation. Loosely documentary in their recording of small-town scenes, these postcards had yellowed into nostalgia by the 1960s, investing them with a lyrical edge.[5] The initial part of Evans's lecture, by contrast, posited a fascinatingly discrepant, non-photographic lineage for lyric documentary, appointing Leonardo da Vinci the "father" of the newly minted genre, and citing his mechanical and embryological drawings as documentary in their "cleanliness" and "detachment," lyric in their line.[6] Andreas Vesalius's anatomical drawings served as Evans's next example. Giovanni Battista followed, then Jan van Calcar. Palladio's eighteenth-century engravings joined the trajectory, which continued through William Blake and Charles Audubon. A digression into painting turned up Constable, Goya, Degas, "very much Guys", Daumier, "very, very much Lautrec", Hopper and Alvin Coburn.[7] Evans's friend Ben Shahn was credited as "practically reinventing [lyric documentary] in his early work."[8]

Evans claimed James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov as literary purveyors of lyric documentary, reading aloud to his Yale audience a lengthy passage from Nabokov's *The Gift*, which detailed precisely the kind of street scene Evans himself was so fond of. It described the end of a street "crossed by the wide ravine of the railroad …" enveloped in "a cloud of locomotive steam [which] disintegrated against its iron ribs."[9] And it is with this *steamy* quality, and with the photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn, that I want to pause to consider the aesthetics of vapor that Evans was so beguiled by. Singling out Coburn's work as exemplary of lyric documentary, Evans applauded his image of Portland Place as "a marvelous example of the sort of thing I'm talking about."[10] Although veering dangerously close to Stieglitz's misty pictorialism, or what Evans disparagingly labeled "decadent lyric", it is nonetheless this picture's distinctive blurring of the landscape – its shroud of obscuring mist – that functioned for Evans as the visual hallmark of lyric documentary.[11]

Santu Mofokeng, *Near Maponya's Discount Store, Soweto*, 1987, silverprint. © Santu Mofokeng and courtesy Lunetta Bartz/MAKER, Johannesburg

The Vaporous Mists of the Lyric

Here we come upon a certain bristling, it would seem, between Evans's derogatory verbal description of documentary as "inexact and vague", and the fact that it is precisely these same qualities of imprecision and fogginess that he wants to salvage as its trademark features. And this is perhaps the point: that the semantic looseness of the term documentary that Evans found "dissatisfying" might well be exactly what constitutes the genre's potential strengths. So what initially appeared as Evans's rationalist rejection of the word documentary for its so-called "grammatical weakness" may in fact be a backhanded embrace of precisely that amorphousness.

Evans's need to invent the category of "lyric documentary" reveals not only his recognition of documentary's pseudo-objective pretensions, but also the failures that subtend it: the potential collapse of vision itself – its obscuring, its smudging – that point in the horizon where vision founders and disintegrates into the fog of blindness. And as Evans intuited that documentary's defects are fettered to vision's own shortcomings, Santu Mofokeng's critique of documentary plies that same border between the visible and the invisible. Indeed, if there is any photographer who could today claim the legacy of Evans's lyric documentary, it is Mofokeng.

Master of the misty landscape, Mofokeng's stock and trade are the lyrical forms of shadows and nebulae, apparitions and spirits. His *Chasing Shadows* is perhaps his supreme work of lyricism, identified as such by several critics, but we can surely extend that description to much of Mofokeng's oeuvre. Even when the spectral is no longer the manifest subject, Mofokeng's photographs are haunted by signs of the ghostly. His tremulous forms betray the precariousness of that which seems given, disclosing the wobbly illusion by which we tame the flux of the world into polite solids.

Mofokeng's Counter-Documentary

Just as Evans was drawn to the contradictory union between the documentary and the lyrical, invoking it against simplistic defences of photography's transparency, or its use as a record of veracity, so too Mofokeng has seized on the lyrical as the means to combat the limitations of the genre, tactically reconfiguring it for a post-colonial, post-apartheid context. In so doing, Mofokeng claims the unfulfilled futures that Evans presciently articulated when he affirmed in his Yale lecture: "What I believe is really good in the so-called documentary approach in photography is the addition of lyricism."[12] Mofokeng hereby inserts his work into an Evansian tradition, critiquing it, to be sure, but salvaging its central tenets. Despite his quarrel with documentary, Mofokeng has not abandoned the fraught genre, but rather burst it open, employing the lyrical as a means to expand and render more complex what he saw as the South African tradition's narrow and repetitive range of images.

Mofokeng's embrace of the mists of the lyrical forms part of his larger dissent from documentary's strictures. To this end, he replaces documentary's strivings towards objectivity – evident in David Goldblatt's work for instance – with a radical subjectivity, injecting his photographic "research" with spectral self-portraits, snatches of his own shadowy presence and records of his journeying body.[13] These penumbra of self testify to the photographer's presence at the scene, underscoring the constructedness of the image. By describing *Chasing Shadows* as a "metaphorical biography", moreover, Mofokeng collapses the boundaries between photographer and subject, spurning documentary's traditionally external narrative voice by folding in his own subjectivity, just as he does in his writings.[14] In thus pressing the "vagueness" that has long haunted documentary, Mofokeng so inflates the genre that his lyrical photographs may present us with documentary's spectral remains.

Yet to spectralise documentary is merely to excavate documentary's histories. For Jacques Derrida, every work has its ghosts, so at one level, Mofokeng's chasing of shadows insinuates an exorcism of Evans, the figure most identified with documentary's American genesis.[15] More broadly, though, history itself has long been figured as ghostly or spectral. Take Hegel's concept of *geist* – his notion of each historical period as haunted by a zeitgeist – which is nothing if not a statement on the ghostly caste of historical discourse. But if history in general is spectral, so much more is the genre of documentary, imbricated not only in colonial histories, but also in the haunted South African landscape itself.[16] With his photographs a stomping ground for ghosts and skeletons, death and dying are themes that Mofokeng has explored allegorically, in memento mori images, and in the most personal of ways, in portraits of his dying brother Ishmael. Nonetheless, both avenues point to the imbrication of photography in death, evoking the mortification which Roland Barthes has famously described, along with the medium's role in preserving phantom memories.[17] In this way, Mofokeng's spectral content is tied to his spectralisation of medium; and his ghosts flit freely between the two registers.

Mofokeng's embrace of the otherworldly and apocalyptic, informal religion and syncretic spiritualities functions as another means by which he disputes documentary's claims to veracity, and the rationalist tradition that subtends the genre, particularly in its ethnographic forms. Calling to ghosts is always a form of destabilising rationalism; crucially, it does so precisely by interfering with perception, with the empiricist trust in the visible as evidentiary. Post-enlightenment, the borders of vision have traditionally been aligned with the borders of belief. Mofokeng's photographs skirt these limits, flirting with the woolly fringes of what is visible and what is not, often through smoky obfuscations and distortive blurrings. Speed renders that which is usually observable, indiscernible. Darkness, similarly, blankets the perceptible world. Indeed, the authority of documentary hinges on its evidentiary claims, on producing an image in service of disclosing a certain truth, usually of social ills of one sort or another. (Documentary says: let me show you, so you can believe.) Mofokeng disrupts such confidence in the regime of the optical by troubling vision, or agitating our trust in it, so that the entire notion of visual documentation is cast as suspect. This is Mofokeng's scathing critique of documentary, one which builds on Evans's own: an exorcism of documentary's ghosts executed not only by taking on the genre itself, but also by impugning our trust in the stability of the visual that subtends it.

The Ghost at Vision's Edge

Because ghosts hover at the margins of perception, the ghostly is the sign of vision's edge. They become ciphers for the frontiers of seeing, or the limits of the camera. This is surely why the new medium of photography was ushered into Euro-American culture by the figure of the ghost, developing in tandem with the feverish obsession with spiritualism and spirit photography that swept America in the late 1850 and 60s, and then Europe from the 1870s. Indeed, photography has long nurtured an unholy alliance with the spectral. Spirit doubles and counterfeit figures crowded into early photographic prints, as mystics and seers swore that the camera would reveal what the naked eye could not. For many, the new medium proffered itself literally as a medium – an instrumental surface of contact between worlds – mediating between what could be seen and what could not. Then too, its purpose was documentary, loosely speaking: to record that which was invisible.

Yet in spirit photography, it was precisely the photographic appearance of the apparition that testified to its existence. With Mofokeng, by contrast, vision itself is destabilised so that no appearance is to be trusted. In this epistemological uncertainty, Mofokeng's work departs strikingly from Goldblatt's: while Goldblatt's lifelong reckoning has been with an unwavering aesthetics of presence, or what he calls the "is-ness" of objects, Mofokeng chases what he identifies as the "isn't-ness of things."[18] Thus abandoning any form of objectivism, Mofokeng reveals the ghostly lineage of his work by gesturing to photography's own apparitional histories: its spectral doublings, misty emanations and auratic glows. Mofokeng's blurred, otherworldly gleams equally illuminate the strange light of documentary's rationalist pretensions, alluding to the repressed histories of superstition and fantasy that lie at the heart of the Western visual tradition. This cross-cultural genealogy links Sotho and other local strains of belief implicating photography in shades, *isithunzi* and the taking of spirit, with parallel Euro-American associations between the spirit and the photographic image. It is in this spectral half-light that we remember that one of the earliest mass advertising slogans for photography in 1860s America was "Secure the Shadow, Ere the Substance Fade", or Soujourner Truth's famous line: "I sell the shadow to support the substance".

Santu Mofokeng, *Ishmael Inside Motouleng Cave, Clarens*, 2004, silverprint. © Santu Mofokeng and courtesy Lunetta Bartz/MAKER, Johannesburg

The Melancholy Cast of the Lyric

Examining Mofokeng's archive of images, it is clear that the effects of the lyrical – doubling and obscuring, mistiness, sfumato blurring – frequently function also as the signs of the ghostly, the handprints of death. This is hardly surprising considering that the lyric has long been locked in an embrace with the tragic. For Walter Benjamin, of course, the nineteenth century was the last great age of lyric poetry, with Baudelaire, "his lyric poet" of the metropolis, its exemplar.[19] But in Benjamin's view, Baudelaire's lyric poetry verged on *trauerspiel* or tragedy, so that as one critic put it: "Baudelaire's lyric is best understood as a form of mourning play, driven by a lyrical mood of despair before transience."[20] Here transience – signaled by the same haunting effects of fleeting shadows and ephemeral smoke – functions as the mark of melancholy, provoking a despair brought on by the impermanence of life itself. Death once more rings in the lyrical, whether in the guise of the ghostly or the transient.

In this way, the visual forms of the spectral and the lyrical are often nearly identical. Ghosts are commonly linked with fog and swirling air, visual denotations of the breath that is associated with the curling shape of *geist* or spirit. Ghosts, similarly, appear in hovering mists, or manifest in an otherworldly spark of electricity – as when Ishmael's jacket reflects light in the form of a cross. The longtime conjunction of the electric spark and the ghostly provides another way to read Mofokeng's auratic streaks. Indeed, when Mofokeng's lexicon of spectral visuality morphs into blurring and streaking, it comes to insinuate not only the slipperiness of truths – photographic or otherwise – but that the eye is being outwitted by the speed of the otherworldly; that vision is too plodding to keep pace with the lightning tempo of the moving body – hence the constant galloping after shadows.

Santu Mofokeng's relationship to Walker Evans, and his fulfillment of Evans's prescient vision of lyrical documentary, is hardly coincidental. For if we triangulate David Goldblatt into this photographic dialogue, Mofokeng's brand of lyrical documentary emerges not merely as a long-distance relationship patterned on dynamics of identification and difference, but as a remarkably proximate association grounded in a material lineage that runs via Goldblatt, for whom Evans is a touchstone figure. Goldblatt's aesthetics of formal austerity and lean objectivism revealed Evans's vision of documentary to a generation of South African photographers. For Mofokeng, who worked with Goldblatt in the 1980s, the foundational force of the American's work would have been delivered to Johannesburg in a fairly immediate fashion. Building on this local tradition of Evansian documentary, Mofokeng has pushed the genre into the full richness of its lyrical potentialities, actualising those chimerical futures that Evans himself once envisioned.

1. Walker Evans quoted in John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary*. Göttingen and London: Steidl, 2006, 12.
2. Walker Evans, "Lyric Documentary" in Jeff Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*. Göttingen: Steidl and London: Thames & Hudson, 2009, 103.
3. Handwritten notes on index cards reproduced in Rosenheim, 30.
4. Hill, 12.
5. Evans's extensive collection of vintage postcards was highlighted in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2009 exhibition, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*.
6. Evans's transcript of "Lyric Documentary" reprinted in Rosenheim, 103.
7. Evans in Rosenheim, 106.
8. Ibid.
9. Vladimir Nabokov quoted by Evans in Rosenheim, 106.
10. Evans in Rosenheim,109. Coburn's photograph, *Portland Place, London* (1906), was commissioned by Henry James for his *Collected Works*.
11. Evans quoted in Hill, 13.
12. Evans in Rosenheim, 105.
13. Santu Mofokeng in Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews* Vol 1. Milan, Italy: Edizione Charta/ Fondazione Pitti, 2003, 621.
14. Mofokeng quoted in Obrist, 619.
15. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994.
16. South Africa is hardly the only terrain of the ghostly, as Mofokeng's haunting image of the pond of ashes at Auschwitz attests.
17. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, 1981.
18. Goldblatt as quoted in the wall text for his retrospective at the Jewish Museum, New York, 2010. Interview with Santu Mofokeng, Johannesburg, 16 January 2011.
19. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Trans. Harry Zohn, London: Verso, 1997.
20. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. New York: Routledge, 1998, 138.

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