SOJOURNS IN OCCUPIED TERRITORY: WORKS BY BRENT MEISTRE AND JO RACTLIFFE

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Abstract

Landscape has often functioned as a threshold, a zone in which the similarities and differences between painting and photography are evident. At the same time, it has served as the barometer of photography's constantly shifting place in the art-historical canon; a measure of its ability, on the one hand, to be used as document and, on the other, to be deployed in the service of a conceptual approach to art-making.

South African photography has been explored (and over-explored) as a predominantly documentary form. However, in recent years, it has departed significantly from this trajectory. In this article, I present selected examples of photographic and video works by Brent Meistre and Jo Ractliffe, proposing that these works occupy a liminal zone in the field of South African photography, and, at the same time, signal towards photography as a documentary vehicle and as a conceptual tool. In her recent book and exhibition, *As terras do fim do mundo* (2009-2010), Ractliffe deploys the language of documentary, and specifically the genres of landscape and war photography, in order to present a project in which she interrogates assumptions about these two fields. In his *Sojourn* series, as well as in a number of video works, Meistre presents the landscape as both empty and suggestive, a site for performances that write the artist into the landscape in both humorous and deeply provocative ways.

> … a picture tends towards the generic category of landscape as our physical viewpoint moves farther away from its primary motifs. I cannot resist seeing in this something analogous to the gesture of leave-taking, or, alternatively, of approach or encounter
> Jeff Wall (2007:170).

Landscape has been deployed in South African art and literature as a vital referent of the political, of cultural values, of ownership, and of colonial history with its concomitant stories of migration, upheaval and loss. There are many reasons for the important place of landscape in the South African collective memory. Not least is the fraught history of the ownership of land in the colonial narrative. Prior to, and alongside African-European encounters, however, are the migrations and movements of various African tribal and ethnic groupings into and within southern Africa, the effects of which, even in post-democratic South Africa, have often been obscured in official histories of the region. These, too, have had a profound impact on attitudes to land and ownership.

In the catalogue of the exhibition, *The lie of the land*, Michael Godby (2010:61) observes that landscape owes its place in contemporary South African art in part to the modern history of representation in which European settlement in South Africa coincided with the popularity of landscape painting in Europe, as well as

to the related genre of map-making. Both genres represent 'a means of taking control of space' (Godby 2010:61). In the colony, however, landscape painting was cut off from its academic context in Europe, in which it had been associated with grand and ennobling (often religious) allegories. Instead, '[l]andscape art attached itself to contemporary, even scientific, concerns, such as exploration, exploitation and domestication of the land and … [evidenced] a patriotic relationship to the evolving political entity' (Godby 2010:61). In the twentieth-century, Godby (2010:120) observes, 'many African artists were concerned to celebrate their ancestral homelands … as they survived in the patchwork of semi-autonomous entities of colonial and apartheid political geography'. In the 1950s and 1960s, urban African artists such as Gerard Bhengu, John K Mohl, George Pemba and Gladys Mgudlandlu began painting landscapes that seem, amongst other themes, to point to 'the possibility of a land without settlers' (Godby 2010:120).[1] Works such as these are further indication of the importance of landscape as a measure of belonging to a place.

These are only some of the many strands of the dense fabric comprising the history of landscape in southern Africa and of relations to it. In each strand, landscape remains a site of both real and representational or metaphorical contestation. The advent of photography in the nineteenth-century – a medium that was primarily seen as being able to record history – complicates and supplements the ways in which that history is read, preserved and interpreted. It is into this fractured narrative that photography introduces a new set of concerns *vis-à-vis* visual representation: the complex relationship of the medium to "veracity" and "event", the ethics and responsibilities of social documentary,[2] the eventual slippage between "documentary" and "art" and what this means for the way in which history might be understood. All of these have become critical concerns in South African visual history.

Thus the *representation* of land has accompanied, reflected and interrogated the various *meanings* of land in South African history. Scholars working in the field of trauma studies have presented landscape as offering *lieux de mémoires* (sites of memory) that serve as markers of discontinuity – of the breaks, lapses or ruptures introduced into collective memory by various forms of trauma such as warfare or genocide.[3] In this theoretical terrain, representation of landscape is seen as being inextricably linked to particular (traumatic) events and moments. At the same time, it valorises memory above all other acts of imagination (including, even, "forgetting") in relation to the traumatic event. This accounts, in part, for the presence of the sacred in representations of landscape in South Africa, and particularly in photography.

This is *not* the sacred as it appears in the religious allegory of European painting with its representations of biblical narratives. Rather, it is a far more subtle representation of sacred spaces and rituals. For example, Gavin Jantjes ([s.a]:13) draws attention to photographic representations of the land in which the sacred and the secular are brought together. He refers to the artists' relationship to space in the work of three seminal South African photographers: David Goldblatt, Santu Mofokeng and George Hallett. Referring to Goldblatt's photograph *The Docrat's dining room (and bed room) before its destruction under the Group Areas Act, Fietas, Pageview* (1976); Mofokeng's *Birkenau – KZ2. Poland. The lake where the ashes of cremated inmates were thrown* (1999) and Hallett's *Great Zimbabwe* (1992), Jantjes ([s.a]:13) observes that, 'meaning is framed by location. It is reinforced through history and embedded in culture … [it] communicates something about familiar and unfamiliar places, where the profane and the sacred sometimes share space'. In all three instances, the sacred and the secular coalesce around the political, or, at the very least, around a site in which the political is manifest.

Place becomes sacred in the face of a catastrophe that severs people from the land in which they have made their home.

Jantjes's observation feeds into important debates about South African art in general, and photography in particular, given photography's proximity to, and role in, the political history of South Africa, and thus its connection to various acts and sites of remembrance (and, by extension, to trauma). To talk about photography of the landscape without keeping in mind this history and the broader history of the representation of landscape in South African art would be problematic. In South Africa (and indeed, in any place where there has been oppression of one group of people by another), it is impossible to speak of the landscape without reference to trauma and loss. Nevertheless, I suggest that a *departure* of sorts is possible and, in my discussion to follow of the work of two South African photographers, Brent Meistre and Jo Ractliffe, I show that there is evidence of a new "self-awareness" in South African photography *vis-à-vis* the story of landscape.

I do not propose that historical narratives in relation to photography (or landscape for that matter) be abandoned. Rather, I consider the possibility of a new interpretation not of history *per se*, but of the *making* of history; of the visual discourse that helps to make history possible; of the aesthetic structures that inform the making of history, and thus, of the ways in which photography's relation to the particular chronology that is southern African history is positioned. With reference to Meistre and Ractliffe's work, I consider how contemporary photography and video can articulate a particular relationship to time – a relationship that opens up a space not so much for remembering, reflecting upon, *recollecting* or *recalling*, but rather for circumspection.

Circumspection implies wisdom or common sense. In its Latin or Old French derivation, it means 'to look around' (*circumspicere*) – with the implication that when one looks around, one gains understanding about the matter at hand. Indeed, it is the very act of *looking*, far more than what one actually sees, that brings understanding. It is in this sense that I use the word "circumspection": as a looking around, as opposed to a simple looking at, or looking *back at*. It is a useful metaphor for the way in which photography can be used to articulate history, narrative and time. One might even argue more broadly that the postmodern moment in art is one in which an awareness of the various possibilities of *looking* are made explicit.

Certain South African photographers are in the process of re-evaluating the way in which photography can be deployed to look at the world and how it can do the work of representation (what its relationship to representation is). South African photography seems to be at a critical juncture where it catches up with its own possibilities of circumspection; where it can be used to articulate history and facilitate the looking at history in new and profoundly interesting ways. I situate Ractliffe and Meistre's work (along with a number of other South African photographers not mentioned in this article) at that critical juncture.

Ractliffe and Meistre both take up the referential power of landscape with an eye to the conceptual potential of this referent, although they do so in different ways. There are other photographers[4] whose work I would have liked to include in a broader discussion than space allows for here, but for now, I look at Ractliffe's *As terras do fim do mundo* (2009-2010), and, alongside his 2006-2010 *Sojourn* series of photographs, two of Meistre's short films titled, *The stranger who licked salt back into our eyes* (2009), and *The stranger who receded with the sharpened axe of reason* (2009).

Figure 1: Jo Ractliffe, *Mass grave at Cassing II*, 2009, silver gelatin print, 26 x 32.5 cm.
Image © the artist and courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Ractliffe's *As terras do fim do mundo* appears at first to fit easily into "aftermath photography" or what Ariella Azoulay (2001:245) describes as 'an action that takes place after the event. It perpetuates what can no longer be saved'. Ractliffe made this body of work during several trips to Angola over a period of two years, accompanied by ex-soldiers who had fought in the Border War. The images are, on one level, the results of an attempt to come to terms with the meaning of that conflict, both for the soldiers with whom Ractliffe travelled, and for the civilians who went on with their lives after Angola all but disappeared from the world stage as the cold war ended. To a lesser degree, the process of their making is also a means of coming to terms with that conflict for the photographer herself, although her relationship to the war is very different to that of ex-soldiers or Angolans. In *As terras do fim do mundo*, Ractliffe achieves an uneasy truce with this particular war. It is a war that has done what most wars do – left destruction and maiming in its wake (although since Angola is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, the destruction associated with the war has had a long shelf life) – and, through her work, Ractliffe enters the zone of aftermath ostensibly to record aspects of what it means for Angola to have survived or endured this conflict (Figure 1).

Figure 2: Jo Ractliffe, *Burnt trees near Indungo*, 2009, silver gelatin print, 36 x 45 cm.
Image © the artist and courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Yet, Ractliffe's journeys and the images that resulted from them illustrate something quite other than the traces of war or any coming to terms with it. Indeed, quite the opposite. Ractliffe (2010:7) remarks that in Angola she felt 'like I am in a place that has abandoned itself, is indifferent to the collapsing of time and history'. The crux of the matter lies in this statement: the collapsing of time and history occurs not only in her sense of the place that is Angola after the war, but also in the photographs themselves. This presents something of a dilemma. It means that the photographs are situated in what one might call a liminal zone *vis-à-vis* time and history. On the one hand, the causal and historical connection of the photographs to the places that they represent is undeniable. This is Angola after the war – a site, or a series of sites – of aftermath. These are images of places that bear witness to and carry the traces of, war; places where the activities of war have altered the landscape in dramatic and subtle ways. Sometimes these traces are undeniably military – bunkers, foundations of buildings, murals depicting political and military figures. Yet, sometimes they are mysterious – a stone cairn, a helmet, an object propped on a stick, or a sign in a shaky script. The photographs are imbued with as many or as few reminders as the landscape itself carries (Figure 2).

However, since the references to the war in the Angolan landscape are becoming more and more tenuous over time, the photographs seem to *stand in* for these traces that are inscribed upon the landscape but fast disintegrating or being erased by encroaching nature or human settlement. The war is thus referred to in the body of photographs in a way that the landscape does not entirely evidence, given the processes of forgetting or obliterating. These are not, however, images meant solely to record the traces of a war. They are about the unreliability of representation, and serve, in some sense, as references to something that is no longer present to be "seen". A Heideggerian notion of reference is useful here. Martin Heidegger (1996:70, emphasis added) argues that, 'in a *disturbance of reference* … the reference becomes explicit'. He compares this to *usability*: the usability of an object becomes conspicuous when the object is rendered useless (in other words, a pen's usefulness is only remembered when the pen no longer works; until that moment little thought is given to its usefulness). Heidegger (1996:70) goes on to say that when this happens, the *disturbance of reference* opens the way for *circumspection*, for thinking about reference, and about what is referred to: '[t]his circumspect noticing of the reference to the particular what-for makes the what-for visible and with it the context of the work, the whole "workshop" as that in which taking care of things has always already been dwelling'. Heidegger (1996:71, emphasis added) concludes this particular exploration of reference by attaching reference to being, or as he calls it, *being-in-the-world*, which 'signifies the unthematic, *circumspect* absorption in the references constitutive for the handiness of the totality of useful things'.

In her photographs, Ractliffe records the *disturbance of reference* in two ways: firstly she points to the encroaching "forgetfulness" of the landscape in relationship to its history – its slow erasure or covering up, over time, of that history – and, in so doing, she imbues them with a sense of the responsibility of referentiality. Secondly, (and this why I use the word "seem" here), in the photographs, the referentiality implicit in the kind of photograph conventionally known as "documentary" is disturbed. In other words, *As terras do fim do mundo* is, on the surface, about a journey to a place in which there was a war – a war to which the photographer herself has no connection apart from the fact that she is a South African and that this was a war in which the apartheid government was deeply mired. This is *her* journey. What she finds, however, is nothing that explains the war to her (she probably learns more about it from her companions than from anything she encounters in the landscape). Thus, in the images, she "fails" to document an event and its aftermath; rather, she becomes circumspect. The images bear testimony to what she refers to, but, in them, she does not – cannot – actually refer. Her "seeing" bears little relation to the kind of seeing that history (as a narrative of events past) lays claim to.

The circumspect quality of Ractliffe's photographs, or rather of the project as a whole, as presented in the book *As terras do fim do mundo* (2010), is suggested by the form that the book takes.[5] Ractliffe's captions appear at the end of the book, so that the photographs are first looked at without the textual explanation. The viewer may be perplexed by the many images of what appear to be signs in the landscape such as sticks, helmets and stones. The captions identify many of these objects simply as 'markers' that 'seem to have various functions' (Ractliffe 2010:115). Then there are the landscapes themselves. Offered to the viewer in grainy black and white, they are largely "unreadable" beyond the quiet representation of bush, or veld grass, or rocks, or spindly trees. But, through the repetition of names of places such as *Cuito Cuanavale* and *Cassinga*, and words such as 'bunker', 'minefield', 'ambush', 'battlefield',

Figure 3: Jo Ractliffe, *Mine pit near Mucundi*, 2009, silver gelatin print, 36 x 45 cm.
Image © the artist and courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

'base', 'cache', 'runway' (Ractliffe 2010) in the captions, Ractliffe disrupts this reticence. Without the words, however, the images can be read as a dense poetry of landscape and barely recognisable human encroachment. The space between images and words disturbs reference, allowing the viewer time for contemplation of what the process of recording, specifically through photography, might mean. The photographer, quite consciously, occupies this dense space in which she allows herself to be circumspect, to look, on the one hand, at the landscape she encounters and, on the other, to be bewildered; to have only the act of making images:

> [a]long the roads, in the towns, the debris of military vehicles, bombed and bullet-riddled buildings and destroyed bridges can be seen everywhere. Sometimes these remains are so actively present, their event so precisely articulated, that it feels as if the moment has only just passed. Like in those accounts of old sailing ships – ghost ships – that have strayed in the Devil's Triangle or some such otherworldly place, where sailors would come upon the vessel, evacuated of all signs of life except for perhaps a parrot or a cat, and the remains of still warm and only half-eaten plates of food.
>
> Sometimes I'm not even sure what it is I'm looking at. I am here without language. It is hard to read the signs (Ractliffe 2010:9).

What distinguishes Ractliffe's photographs from other kinds of landscape photographs is the way in which the photographer's awareness of the responsibility of referring to war and its aftermath is conveyed. Faced with this prospect, she seems simply to resist the responsibility. This does not mean that indifference on her part is conveyed through the images, but rather that she understands the impossibility of referential responsibility in relation to an event to which she is a latecomer. At best, in the images, Ractliffe can note strange disturbances in the landscape that may or may not refer to warfare. Thus, it could be said that in the images, she records her own "failure" to represent, a failure of referentiality. As such, the viewer's attention may be drawn to the implicit "disturbance of reference"; he or she might become circumspect about their function as photographs.

Ractliffe's work is thus situated at a critical juncture in the trajectory of South African photography. In making the work, the artist deploys the conventions of so-called social documentary: the apparently unmediated representation of the landscape, extensive captions with place names and historical details, and the overarching concern with the recording of an "event". But at the same time, the work is riddled with gaps, absences and mysteries. Firstly, the "omissions" are in the landscape itself. The landscape tells only parts of a story, and, in places, the story is almost indecipherable, a riddle that the photographer contemplates through both text and image. Secondly, it becomes clear (perhaps it even unfolded itself to Ractliffe as she travelled through the landscape and thought about the scope and significance of this project) that absences, disappearance, incompleteness, and even silence, are amongst the presiding tropes of this work (Figure 3). Ultimately the photographer "fails" (and understands that failure at the very moment that it happens) to refer to the very thing she set out to refer to, and hence, turns away from the thing, to look instead, at reference. This signals a very important photographic moment – one that Ractliffe has shown awareness of in her previous work. However, in this intense and sustained meditation upon a particular landscape in a particular historical moment, it is made explicit as a turning away from indexicality in relation to the photograph.

In Meistre's *Sojourn* series of photographs (2006-2010), the photographic impulse is quite different to Ractliffe's, but as she does in *As terras do fim do mundo*, Meistre foregrounds the tracing or marking of the landscape. In Meistre's images, the visual references to journeys (roads, paths, tracks, roadside fences, mile markers, gates, abandoned vehicles, road kill) across the landscape are more explicit than Ractliffe's (as I have suggested, in *As terras do fim do mundo*, Ractliffe's text in her introduction to the book and the extended captions make up for what the images do not explicitly refer to). Meistre's roads and fences, traced across dry terrain, are also named in his captions (for example, *Road from Brakbos, Northern Cape*; *Farm fence near Fonteintjie, Eastern Cape*), which reference the mapping and naming of the landscape associated with ownership, and the deep ties to places conveyed to posterity through the names that those places bear. In a text that accompanies the series, Meistre (2010a:[s.p.]) writes:

> [t]o point a camera towards land in Southern Africa is to draw the history of the continent to your eye. A history which is archaeologically layered, complex, implicit, but also a blind spot; a specular highlight on the retina, an aberration that deregisters the picture. Every tilt and pan is a political act, an act of representation, of framing, of remarking of boundaries and borders, the camera recording, re-constructing and complicating the ground. This, an un-representable no-man's land where we find it hard or even impossible to position ourselves.

Figure 4: Brent Meistre, *Road from Brakbos, Northern Cape, South Africa*, 2006, 42 x 62 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

For all the specificity of his geographical titles for the works, Meistre's images are slices of landscape, not recognisably one place or another – liminal sites in which nothing, apparently, happens. Knowledge that a place is Brakbos or Fonteintjie or Willowmore is only because Meistre has said so and not because the landscape pictured in his photograph shows the viewer anything that he/she might recognise as belonging to a specific place (Figure 4). And if one parses this further, the place names themselves are an exercise in opacity: in the naming process, there is often an attempt to distinguish one place from another by referring to a geographical feature. For example, *Fonteintjie* means "little fountain", but is one "little fountain" different to, distinct from, any other "little fountain"? Could one simply give every place in a vast landscape with a small fountain this name and hope that one "fonteintjie" might be distinguished from another? (Figure 5).

This disruption of *recognition* in relation to place is underscored by the insistent inclusion of boundaries in many of these images. Fences and gates, and even the roads and tracks start to feel like boundaries, especially given Meistre's insistent formal allusion to classical pictorial perspective with its foregrounds, slightly wavering middlegrounds, and receding backgrounds. But the point of these fences and roads is lost in the face of the implacable landscape: why should there be a fence

Figure 5: Brent Meistre, *Farm fence near Fonteintjie, Eastern Cape, South Africa*, 2007, 42.5 x 54 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

running through this vast, ostensibly empty landscape? To divide what from what? To keep who, or what, out, or in? To deter whose crossing? Why does this road start here and lead there? Why does this track suddenly end in the *middle of nowhere*? Herein lies Meistre's suggestion of a liminal space in which a journey is enacted on the surface of a landscape. The artist "uses" the landscape as a format onto which the trace of the journey is inscribed. This is not "usefulness" in the sense that one might use the term in relation to, for instance, agriculture or mining – certainly the landscapes that Meistre names have a "use" in this sense. But for the purpose of Meistre's photographs, usefulness, in this sense, is suspended, and what remains is a reference to usefulness, suggested in particular by one image in the series in which a road simply peters out.

By framing the image in this way, Meistre intervenes in the relationship between human presence and landscape – he sets up the work as a marker of human presence, but only insofar as the viewer is prompted to question it, to observe the *disturbance of reference* and hence to open up a space for circumspection. Meistre (2010a:[s.p.]) recognises the kind of "no man's land" that he, as photographer, ventures into. On the one hand, 'to point a camera towards land' is 'an

Figure 6: Brent Meistre, still from *The Stranger who receded with the sharpened axe of reason*, 2010, stop-frame animation, 4min 50 secs. Image courtesy of the artist.

act of representation'. But on the other, the land is 'un-representable' and confounds the desire to be 'positioned' somewhere (Meistre 2010a:[s.p.]).

In Meistre's films, in which he deploys the technique of stop animation, this disturbance is rendered more explicitly. Stop animation does not really "stop" animation in the way that motion is suspended in a photograph; rather, it points to the way in which movement unfolds over time. By introducing or incorporating the tiny breaks between frames, the viewer's attention is drawn to the film's unfolding of narrative as the film moves along a continuum in which one frame follows logically from another, in which one image is completed by the image that follows. In stop-frame animation, the viewer's attention is drawn to the suturing and splicing that are barely visible in film and completely invisible in the individual photograph (even if splicing of the photograph has taken place). So, as both film and photographic form, stop-frame animation can be used to foreground its own relation to time.

Meistre (2010b:iv) says that *The stranger who licked salt back into our eyes* (2009),

> recreates the history of the arrival of a stranger in a land where he has come to find himself and his love. The foreigner brings with him knowledge which is on one level enlightening but also burdening – a disability. With him he carries all his tools and crafts, the prostheses he needs to survive and carry on his melancholic search. Bound to the earth through his disability, he cannot escape his serpentine existence. He burrows through the landscape archaeologically,

> unearthing historical evidence with hints of apocalyptic revelations of what has brought about his fate.

The opening sequence in the film suggests that the stranger arrives by sea and the motif of a sea journey is repeated throughout. Even when the shots are actually of a landscape, the tracklessness of a seascape is alluded to, particularly in sequences in which the stranger "moves" across long *veld* grass (one could hardly call his movement "walking" – rather, he slides or rows, although not with any difficulty) (Figure 6). Meistre uses the journey as a narrative device that implies not only travelling but *arrival*. However, he uses it in more profound ways as a meditation on surface, to which, in his landscape photographs, Meistre can only gesture. The seascape is an ideal or idealised landscape in that it remains, always, pristine, unmarked, and impervious to traces. The Japanese photographer, Hiroshi Sugimoto (cited by Fried 2009:294), who has photographed seascapes since the 1980s, remarks that,

> [i]n the 'Seascapes' … there is no human presence. Because I try to depict the prehuman state of the landscape. It is as if I were the first man to appear on the planet which is the earth. The first man who I am looks around and discovers his first landscape, a marine landscape. Made solely of air and water. That is why there is no human trace.

Throughout Meistre's film, the stranger journeys across a landscape that comes to resemble a seascape, across which he must row his boat. But if a landscape were like a seascape it would mean that no trace remains, that one passes over the surface as a boat might pass across the surface of the sea, unremarked, the trace of the passage obliterated as soon as it is made. This is akin to the description of *smooth spac*e that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987:11) explain as,

> precisely the space of the smallest deviation: therefore it has no homogeneity, except between infinitely proximate points, and the linking of proximities is effected independently of any determined path … Smooth space is a field without conduits or channels. A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities that occupy space without "counting" it and can "be explored only by legwork".

In *The stranger*, Meistre undertakes this kind of "smooth multiplicity", but specifically in relation to the human presence on the surface of the landscape. His films are, quite deliberately, not empty of human presence. Rather, Meistre uses them to enact presence in the landscape (he describes the stranger's activity as 'serpentine'; as 'bound to the earth' (Meistre 2010b:iv)). The photographer Jeff Wall reflects on his own making of landscapes not as way of looking at landscape *per se*, but of trying to understand communal life. This is a startling statement, given that landscape is usually used in an attempt to understand not the landscape, but the way in which human beings construct space or think of themselves in relation to land. In support of his statement, Wall (2007:171, emphasis added) comments that,

> [t]o me, then, landscape as a genre is involved with making visible the distances we must maintain between ourselves in order that we may recognize each other for what, under constantly varying conditions, we appear to be. It is only *at a certain distance* (and from a certain angle) that we can recognize the character of the communal life of the individual – or the communal reality of those who appear so convincingly under other conditions to be individuals.

For an artist then, landscape can function as the distancing mechanism required for this kind of recognition of a 'communal reality'. In *The stranger*, Meistre dramatises

this effect, bringing it to the surface by addressing (albeit silently, even, in one sequence, in *sign* language) not only the viewer of the film, but an implied audience within the boundaries of the film. Each time the stranger (played by Meistre himself) appears, he is addressing someone, speaking from a microphone, or gesturing towards an invisible audience (in other words, not a *single* interlocutor but a *group* of listeners). This makes the soundtrack, a slowed down and altered version of the Swahili lovesong *Malaika* (Belafonte & Makeba 1965), both ironic and poignant.

In the final sequence of the film, an arm is interposed between camera and filmed subject matter. In the foreshortened view thus created, the hand is shown as measuring what looks like an ancient Greek monument. The visual trick of making something large appear small and bringing it closer simply by encircling the distant object with the fingers diminishes physical scale and "foreshortens" time. The ancient becomes immediate through a gesture – time and distance fall away by means of visual intervention.

This visual trick is even more explicitly rendered in Meistre's film *The stranger who receded with the sharpened axe of reason.* In this film, as in *The stranger who licked salt back into our eyes*, the marking or tracing of the landscape is played out by means of the arm that is interposed between viewer and landscape. It literally traces roads and boundaries, capturing the landscape in its circled fingers, making it, explicitly, an outline of the imagination, an extension of the human ability to gesture and, through the gesture, to take ownership of space. The long mountain pass that the hand traces is a dynamic symbol of arrival, or of the desire to arrive at some place, so strong a desire that roads are carved out of a mountain and stone walls are built along its precipitous edge to keep the traveller from slipping into the abyss. And yet, in the film, Meistre undoes this desire for arrival by, quite literally, running the frames backwards. The figure on the beach in the opening sequence is not like the primordial fish that comes out of the water to become a legged creature, but is shown sliding back into the sea, as though its birth is reversed. Even the soundtrack, which features Tom Waits's (2002) song *All the world is green*, is reversed, and the final sequence of the film shows the Bible being paged through from back to front, *Revelation* to *Genesis*.

These works by Ractliffe and Meistre recall the trajectories of landscape photography and social documentary, but open up an entirely new space for the photograph in relation to these overdetermined genres. Both artists appear to feel the inevitable tug of the past whilst re-examining the burden of responsibility that photography bears in relation to that past by offering circumspection as another mode of looking and seeing. Ractliffe and Meistre both signal the departure from a way of recording history in photography in general, and from the photographic representations of landscape in particular, that I argued for at the start of this article not in *what* they choose to photograph – for, as I have alluded to, land has a long photographic history. Rather it is their particular treatment of landscape, their recognition of the "failure" of photography to reference the land and to be "indexical" *vis-à-vis* the physical geography that lies before the lens.

Hence, both Ractliffe and Meistre suggest that landscape (the literal landscape as well as the genre in which they are both working) in South Africa, has entered the terrain of the liminal. In their work, the landscape is, of course, replete with meaning, history, political failure,

the sacred (it is filled with bones and memories of the past). But it is also *empty*, stretching away to the horizon, punctuated only here and there by strange markers of human presence. This emptiness bears no resemblance to the imagined pristine emptiness that the landscape painters of the nineteenth-century wished to suggest about southern Africa (an emptiness that Europeans were invited to fill). Rather, the kind of openness that Ractliffe and Meistre represent is in relation to the references of landscape and in relation to their autonomy as artists who work in the referential medium par excellence. Their work is, in the Heideggerian (1996:70) sense that I noted previously, a 'circumspect noticing of the reference to the particular what-for [that] makes the what-for visible and with it the context of the work, the whole "workshop" as that in which taking care of things has always already been dwelling'. In other words, it is in the noticing of reference, in taking note of what landscape – both *particular* landscapes and the visual genre of landscape – refers to, rather than in simply making *landscape photographs*, that Ractliffe and Meistre make their most important contribution.

Notes

1 For an earlier survey of black artists working in the genre of landscape painting, see Elza Miles (1997).

2 See, for example, Carol Bardenstein (1999) for a discussion of the various ways in which the conflict between Israel and Palestine is inscribed into the landscape.

3 It is ironic that David Goldblatt, a photographer who eschews any conceptual impulse in his work has, nonetheless, helped to prepare the ground for photographers such as Ractliffe and Meistre. While he has been described as a documentarian, Goldblatt has long eschewed this designation. It is, in his opinion, not helpful, since every kind and genre of photograph is a document. At the same time, he resists being labeled an artist. Thus, despite the deeply political *implications* (though not, as he has said, the *intentions*) of his work on the one hand, and its currency in the contemporary art market on the other, his first commitment is to the act of looking that photography entails.

5 *As terras do fim do mundo* is also the title of Ractliffe's exhibition that has been shown in venues in South Africa and abroad.

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