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# Billy Monk: Love in a loveless time

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## Abstract

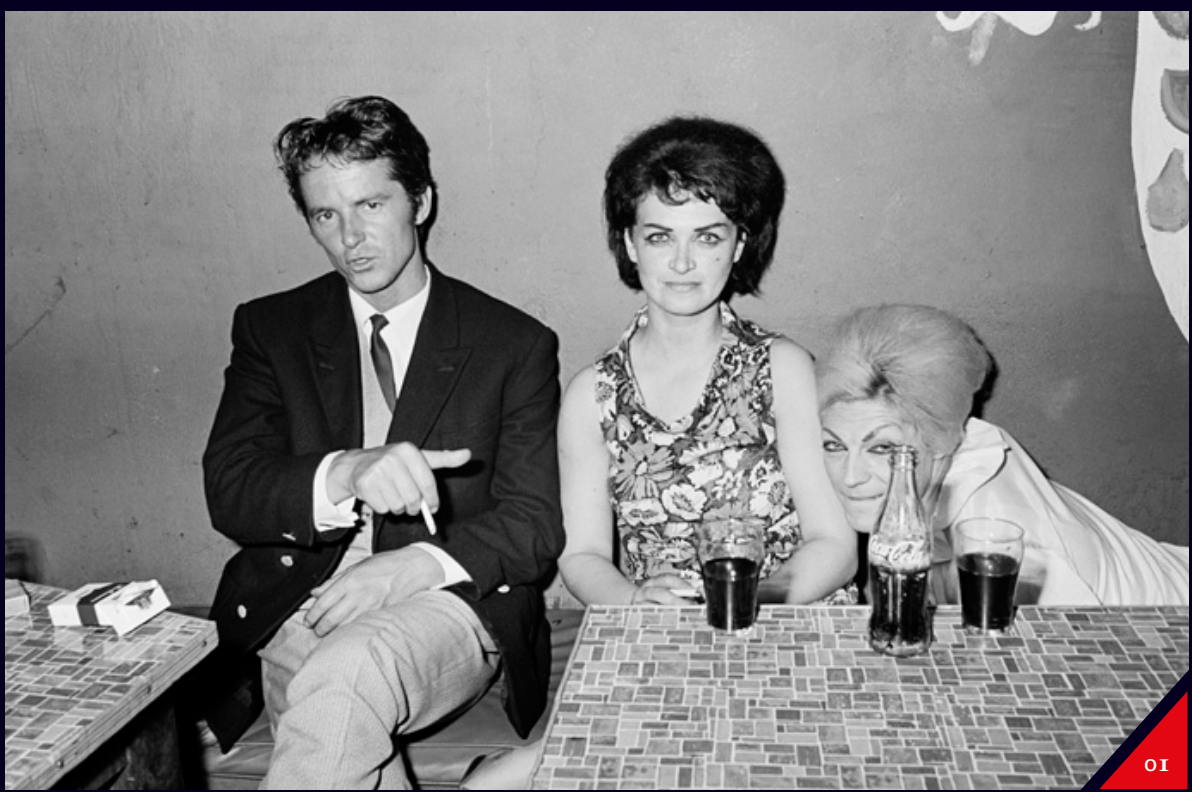
The story of Billy Monk is in parts inspiring, tragic, chastening, and challenging. Achieving posthumous fame and international provenance, Monk's photographs reveal a striking lacuna in the image repertoire of South African photography. All too human, Monk's life is the stuff of legend. However, it is Monk's photographic eye which is the primary focus of this first sustained critical study of the artist's *oeuvre*. My thesis is that Monk's work embodies a prosaic tenderness and honesty that is rare in a society - overdetermined by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid - in which human life has largely been re-presented through a pathological and spectacularised optic. His work captures love in a time of lovelessness.

**Key words:** love, lovelessness, fear, denial, irresistible-unlovable/resistable-lovable, the ordinary, the spectacular.

## Billy Monk: Love in a loveless time

In 2005, I broached the question which forms the seam of this paper: *How to rethink the human in South Africa and how, as a constitutive part of the process, restore the capacity for love?* (Jamal 2005). Implicit in this assumption is the recognition that in South Africa humanity remains deferred; that love as the embrace of others remains fraught given the psychological divide between peoples produced through colonialism, apartheid, and the current post-transitional moment, which - in the instant that it claims a new-fangled fraternity, a fraternity caught in the mystique of globalisation - nevertheless perpetuates what JM Coetzee (1992:97) terms 'fear and denial: denial of an unacknowledged desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and fear of being embraced in return by Africa'.

Coetzee's view, presented in his 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech' (1987), remains compelling because of the raced optic it invokes which, irrespective of whether it resists or dissimulates reciprocity, nevertheless maintains a division between sight and its object. This division, for Coetzee, stems from 'fear and denial,' triggers which, whether acknowledged or not, continue to overdetermine the way a continent and its peoples are represented. If there is no reciprocity, this is because the optic that enables a sighting has,



**Figure 1:** The Catacombs.  
31 July 1967.

factored within it, *an occlusion or elision of the human*. Such is the pervasiveness of this occluded and displaced optic – one aggravated and honed all the more by the culture of the simulacral – that it seems to me that the deferral of the human may have become permanent. Because of the depth of the internalisation of the division or separation on the basis of constructs such as race or ethnicity, this optic has proved well nigh impossible, in the Nietzschean sense, to *overcome*.

That Coetzee (1992:99) should state that ‘South Africa was as irresistible as it was unlovable’, affirms the more the degree to which the recognition of the country’s hold upon its citizenry, the theatre of its interactions, was, in Coetzee’s words, pathological. While, in my view, Coetzee’s perception remains cogent, I nevertheless seek, by inverting what I perceive to

be a dangerous if apt prognosis, to argue that South Africa is *as resistible as it is lovable*. In other words, that it is possible to resist the pathological matrix which overdetermines the South African imaginary and find the means to embrace that deemed unlovable. In support of this wager I will consider the photographs of Billy Monk, taken in the night clubs of Cape Town’s dock area between 1967 and 1969, which, in my view, embody this epistemological and somatic turn.

It should be added, here, that others have sought to effect this turn, amongst them Njabulo Ndebele (1994:67), who in his study *South African literature and culture: rediscovery of the ordinary* notes:

The greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of



**Figure 2:** The Catacombs.  
31 July 1967.

South African oppression, structures which can severely compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from these laws. It means extending the writer's perceptions of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing.

Ndebele sets the tone and the vectors for this paper. That – 18 years later at the time of writing – the challenge Ndebele poses has not been satisfactorily achieved does not in any way diminish its salience and its force. By conceiving photography as a mode of writing – as a cultural practice that, in Roland Barthes sense, is intrinsically *writerly*, reflexive and poetic – we can begin to reconsider its agency and affect as a means of deconstructing a received ethic and aesthetics of

resistance, and, so doing, reconfigure its role in 'extending... perceptions' of what can be photographed, 'and the means and methods' of photography. That Ndebele subtitles his study the *Rediscovery of the ordinary* is critical, given its implicit challenge to the spectacularisation which formed the mainframe of apartheid and the resistance movement; a spectacularisation which has become the order of the day, overdetermining our perceptual, aesthetic, and affective drives in the current era.

In countering the pervasive drive toward spectacularisation, key to the apartheid optic, theoretically synthesised in the 1960s by Guy Debord, I posed a series of questions which served as riders to the core concern with the human and with love:

How ... divert the psychic and epistemic constraints that repress the unthinkable and unspeakable and how to make this – emergent – otherness the harbinger of an ethically revisionary project?

How ... sustain this ethic in a society caught between national and global imaginaries: between persistent – pathological – dualities and their simulacral cessation?

How, in spite of the disfigurement of the human, to inculcate a spirit of play?

How ... redefine the ordinary on behalf of the numinous (sublime) or the awkward and experimental (queer)? (Jamal 2005:20).

In 2013, these questions remain pressing. From my perspective at least, the optic and epistemology which informs and shapes the representation of the South African cultural imaginary remains governed by what Coetzee (1992:98) in his 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech' termed 'pathological attachments'. Given the putative shift from the ghetto of the apartheid imaginary, and the equally putative shift to a transnational and global neo-liberal imaginary, one might have mistakenly assumed that the ethics and aesthetics which inform a South African imaginary has shifted, and yet it seems to me that there remains a persistent return to the pathological optic, one in which South Africa – and by extension matters African – remain mired in sorrow and lack.

The matter is far more complex than this, of course. My concern here, however, is merely to alert the reader to a pathological optic and through an engagement with the work of Billy Monk construct a vision which is not merely contrary, but which opens up the debate in the name of a poetics of love which Albie Sachs invoked in 1989 in 'Preparing ourselves for freedom.' Like Ndebele and Coetzee, Sachs acknowledges the

desire to overcome psychic divisions. While the logic of resistance for Sachs is sound it remains reactive. As Sachs (1990:146) states in his 'Afterword' to 'Preparing ourselves for freedom':

We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, We know what we struggle against. It is there for all the world to see. But we don't know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African?

While I am well aware of the limits of nationhood as an epistemological category, I nevertheless recognise the pertinence of Sachs's question, all the more so given that it is a question which we as cultural analysts have continually failed to address. Hence, when invited to give a paper on South African portraiture at *Figures & Fictions: The Ethics and Poetics of Photographic Depictions of People* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2011), I found myself returning to the abiding matter of the reconceptualisation and reenvisioning of the South African figuration of the human, and its ongoing occlusion. I wanted, furthermore, to ask why love proved secondary to lovelessness in the representation of the human subject. To ground the debate I found myself returning to John Noyes's essay, 'The Place of the human,' in which he notes:

To write in a particular place about the location of theory and the concept of the human is to enter a reflexive mode where the writer is at the same time writing culture and, in the process, testing the conceptual limits of key ideas on culture ... [T]he key to understanding how conceptualisation relates to the moment of its performance, that is how in the act of theorisation, a specific constellation of ideas comes together to define and delimit the individual's position in a particular social and historical order (in Jamal 2005:49).

The 'location' regarding this paper is Cape Town then (1967-69) and now, the 'writer' – in this case the photographer – is Billy Monk. The objective of this paper is to account for how and why Monk translates the hegemonic values of the time and how he does so in a non-reactionary and non-antagonistic manner, the better to elide the constraints of the time and invoke an other and untimely moment which not only rethinks the human, but does so *in the name of love*. That Monk, in my view, remains rare in achieving this vision has everything to do with the quality of his reflexivity as a being in the world, with his eschewal of a prescriptive and ideological stance, and with his insistence upon the sublimity of the moment captured. For, contrary to the indexical and narratological approach to the visual transcription of the human, pervasive in South African cultural practice, Monk intuitively recognised the immense value of the photographic fragment freed from causation and accountability. It is for this reason, this rare elision of the synoptic, that Monk was able, after Noyes, to rewrite culture and test 'the conceptual limits of key ideas on culture' (Noyes 2000:49). As Noyes (2000:49) notes, the key is to recognise the link between the conceptual *and* performative, to grasp that which is understood *and* performed in the instant of cognition, and how this instant redefines one's location in 'a particular social and historical order.'

Born William John Monk on 11 January 1937, Billy Monk has come to embody the archetypal outsider; thuggish, virile, brutally compelling yet gentle, compassionate, with an acute sense of what made people tick. He worked as a bouncer at nightclubs in the dock area of Cape Town, such as The Catacombs, whose trade included foreign sailors. Armed with a Pentax, Monk slid into the unguarded imaginaries of his subjects, and, with the confidence of an artist sold his vision of their shared worlds back to them. The exchange

was built on trust and remained clandestine. No thought was ever given to their eventual national and global provenance. Monk's first exhibition was held at Johannesburg's Market Gallery in 1982. Monk died without seeing the outcome. He did not make it to the opening; en route to viewing the exhibition he got involved in a fight and was shot fatally in the chest.

By championing the work of Billy Monk as that which is singular and rare I am, of course, reaffirming the degree to which South African photography in general remains conceptually and performatively caught in a pathological system of reflexivity; that South African photography persists in sustaining an optic and episteme which delimits and sustains an established and prohibitive system of ideas on culture. My job, however, is not to malign the works of others, rather, it is to provide a goad for further reflection. Furthermore, my job, all importantly, is to account for why Billy Monk, to this day, remains the benchmark for those who seek to visually rethink the human in South Africa and restore the capacity for love. For if Noyes and Ndebele are correct, there is no other way to achieve this other than through recognition of the imbrications of the conceptual and performative, or, the cohabitation of passion and thought, Romantic bedfellows rarely found in the works of South African photography which, all too commonly, is informed by mock familiarity or chilling and insouciant objectivity; in other words, contra the Romantic impulse, by a prescriptive and/or punitive Realism.

South African photography, in other words, infrequently veers away from the Real as an objective and ideational category. By conceiving the site and sighted as a document, and order of things *subject* to photographic record, South African photography rarely penetrates the objecthood of things. Such is the haste to explain or account for the thing seen, to infer its content,





**Figure 3:** The Spurs.  
27 February 1968.

define its position, direct its stance, that the imaged fails to exist in and for itself. The sighted is presented for the camera, and, by extension, the Debordian 'society of the spectacle' for which the camera becomes the tool and medium. That Billy Monk eschews and by-passes this trend makes him remarkable. That his works have not been satisfactorily recognised – given their resistance to cooptation – reveals the extent of their rarity. The challenge Monk's work poses is crucially an epistemological and imaginative one: His work radically reconfigures how one tells stories, communicates the lives of other, generates fraternity, and sustains warmth in a loveless time.

In the paper initially written for the *Figures & Fictions* conference, I began by addressing the marked absence or suppression of Billy Monk's provenance and cultural capital. I reflected on why, over a span of 30 years, Monk's photographs had failed to be effectively recognised either as central to resistance culture or post-resistance culture. That Monk was being reappraised at the time – the first international exhibition of his works appearing at the 2010 Brighton Biennale while in 2011 his works were the subject of a major retrospective at the Stevenson galleries in Cape Town and Johannesburg – in no way diminished the force of my position regarding the *untimeliness* of Monk's work and the belatedness of their reception. I have since been informed that Monk is to feature alongside David Goldblatt and Ernest Cole at a major North American exhibition, the details of which are as yet undisclosed. Furthermore, the first monograph of Monk's works has been published by the Stevenson gallery, securing, in print form a heightened international awareness of the significance of this neglected artist. In short, Monk's provenance is now assured. That said, my view remains that the photographer's significance is unsatisfactorily understood, and the root of the problem lies in the failure to develop a

probing thesis on the link between conceptualisation and performativity, and the historical axis of location and culture which makes such knowledge explicable.

Barring Michael Godby's (2010) 'Nightclub Photographs', Goldblatt's (2011) foreword, 'The spirit of Billy Monk,' and Lin Sampson's (2011) justifiably well known 1982 essay, 'Now you've gone 'n killed me ...', republished in the Monk monograph, nothing of any great critical import has been written on the photographer; the monograph proving nothing better than an excellent photo book, the assumption presumably being that Monk's images do not require words, that the truth of the images is self explanatory. I cannot concur. Nevertheless, Goldblatt's foreword proves an excellent in-road into thinking about Monk's work. Beginning with a commonplace perception, Goldblatt (2011) notes: 'You can look at Billy Monk's nightclub photographs as competent but essentially simple snapshots taken with the agreement of their subjects or at their request, by an enterprising bouncer looking to supplement his income. And you might well be right.' Certainly they appear to be 'competent but essentially simple snapshots,' but in Goldblatt's (2011:7) opinion 'they are very much more':

It is mysterious but true that if people of equal photographic skill are asked to photograph the same subject, they will invariably deliver distinctly different photographs. Another bouncer in the same place would not – almost certainly could not – have made Monk's photographs. Monk's non-judgemental, even cool-eyed awareness of the photographic possibilities of the bizarre pervades the work, and yet this awareness is never denigratingly exploitative. There is a strongly empathetic spirit throughout. The chemistry between Monk and the clubbers is evident in the openness with which his subjects sit, stand or perform. These are photographs by an insider of insiders for insiders. If inhibitions were lowered by the seemingly vast quantities

of brandy and Coke that were imbibed (there isn't a beer bottle in sight), trust, nevertheless, is powerfully evident. Not simply in the raucous tweaking of bared breasts, or the more guarded but evident 'togetherness' of two bearded men, as well as the open flouting of peculiarly South African sanctions such as prohibitions on interracial sex. It is also present in the quiet composure of many of the portraits. People seemed to welcome and even bask in Monk's attentions.

Goldblatt's interpretation, in my view, is the first truly probing engagement with Monk's work, for while Sampson's piece of gonzo journalism captures Monk's subcultural celebrity, the writing, while riveting, errs on the side of notoriety and tabloid scandal, in effect simplifying the photographer's life and work.

That Goldblatt (2011:7), furthermore, is able to recognise the technical feat involved in capturing the images – 'the exposures are good ... those were the days before point-and-shoot cameras with automatic focus and exposure controls' – affirms the more the challenge that faced Monk. All importantly Goldblatt recognises the mystery of a singular perspective; one which allowed for the transparency of a human encounter without at any point forgetting the criticality of composition. As Jac de Villiers – comptroller of the sale rights of Monk's images and key to Monk's re-emergence – notes in his contribution to the monograph: 'in 1969, Monk stopped taking pictures,' the reason being that 'Polaroid film had become the vogue for social photographs and he had little feeling for this instant product' (in Goldblatt 2011:11). This combination of the aesthetic representation of the human encounter and its technical expression reveals much about the élan or spirit of the photographer and the historical moment which informed his task. The world within the world which was Monk's location and subject – or as Goldblatt puts it, *photographs by an insider of insiders for insiders* – inherently resists the emergent

and by now spectacularised vogue of the instant product. In a society – South Africa under apartheid – that sought to objectify the world, to reduce its people to objects, and to amplify the technical means to do so, Monk's resistance is as ethical as it is existential, as metaphysical as it is mysterious.

In *Slow man* (2005), Coetzee indirectly illuminates Monk's choice. The central protagonist of Coetzee's novel, Paul Rayment, reflects:

The camera, with its power of taking in light and turning it into substance, has always seemed to him more a metaphysical than a mechanical device ... As the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid, as veins of darkness on the paper began to knit together and grow visible, he would sometimes experience a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation. That was why, later on, he began to lose interest in photography: first when colour took over, then when it became plain that the old magic of light-sensitive emulsions was waning, that to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue (Coetzee 2005:65).

If 1969 proved the turning point for Monk – the body of work for which he is known was shot between 1967 and 1969 – this is certainly, in part, because of the shift in technology and the emergence of the 'doctored, untrue.' For Rayment this shift marks a move from the metaphysical to the simulacral. For Monk, according to Jac de Villiers, it marks a lack of feeling for the 'instant product' which, as Coetzee (2005:65) reminds us, amounts to 'a *techne* of images without substance ... without residing anywhere.' It is the instantaneity of the object, its dissimulation of



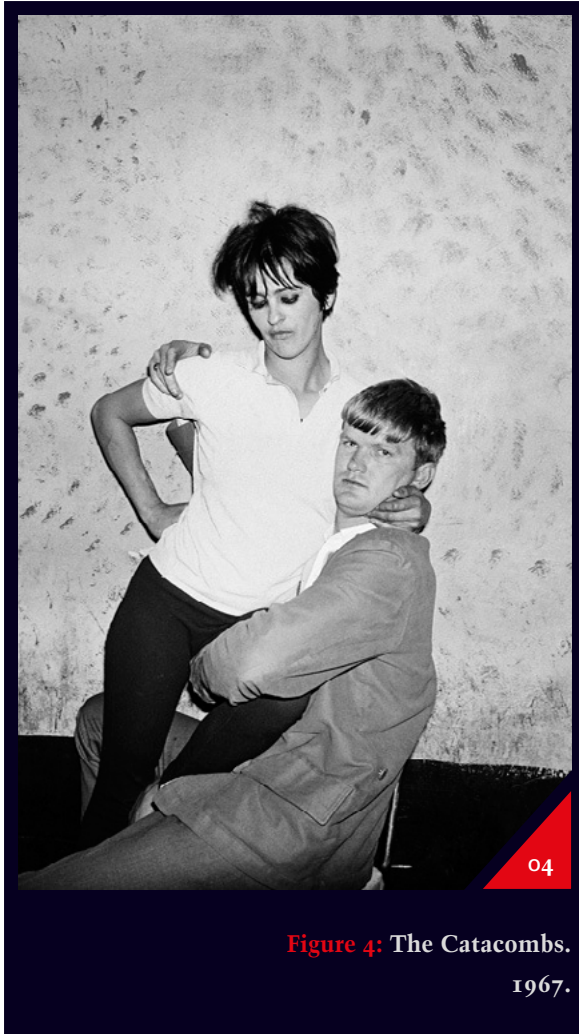


Figure 4: The Catacombs.  
1967.

presence, and its inherent drive towards the dispersal of locality through its hyper-real spectacularisation which Monk presciently resists. This emergent simulacral reality – one which cannily reinforces the chilling objectification and emptying of being which drives apartheid – is, of course, a reality that is global, and, today, culturally and perceptually *de rigeur*.

For Marwood, the 'I' in Bruce Robison's cult classic *Withnail and I* (1987), the end of the 1960s marked a 'drifting into the arena of the unwell' (Robison 1987:13). Whether existential, perceptual, cultural, or historical, the end of the 1960s, strikingly pictured by Monk in the night life he captures in *The Catacombs* and *The Spurs*, marks the end of an era. That it is also at this point that the Cape Town dock area,

Monk's hub, becomes containerised, and with it the central multi-racial hub, namely District Six, is on the verge of being gutted and its people scattered, speaks worlds about the death of privacy and self-determination, and the rigidification of South Africa's policed society of the spectacle.

As Henry Trotter notes in *Sugar girls & seamen: A journey into the world of dockside prostitution in South Africa* (2008), the mid-to-late 1960s marked a seismic shift in dock culture in Cape Town. Recalling an interview with Vincent Kolbe, Trotter (2008:227) notes:

Vincent said that when he was a young man he jammed with international musicians in dockside joints – such as the Catacombs – where race wasn't an issue. Growing up around District Six and the harbour, he learnt the value of transience, cosmopolitanism, hybridity and improvisation. The dockside community stressed openness and interdependence, suitable qualities for a people sandwiched between two oceans. But their outward-looking gaze went against the nationalist focus of apartheid. While Cape Town coloureds felt a sense of global connectivity, the white regime obsessed about land possession, ethnic rootedness, interior treks and racial purity. It vaunted laager-style insularity and the metaphor for the nation, and it elevated blood and skin colour as the arbiters of identity, not connections or imagination. Such claustrophobic nationalism rang hollow for Vincent because the maritime connections he grew up with were more important than the national bonds promoted by the up-country regime. Even way down at the Southern tip of Africa, dockside communities were exposed to global ideological, cultural, genetic and stylistic currents through passing seafarers. This mattered to their sense of identity and belonging.

Trotter's reading, via his informant, stands as an invaluable in-road into Monk's world. All importantly, Trotter conveys the immense currency of a secular

worldliness – the value of transience, cosmopolitanism, hybridity and improvisation – qualities markedly absent from the staple of South African cultural production, precisely because of its sickly obsession with identitarian politics. As Trotter (2008:227-228) cogently adds:

What's important to note here is that the docksiders' sense of connection was substantiated through human contact. They did not identify with foreign peoples or cultures simply through radio, TV, films or advertising – purely imaginary media. They met real people from overseas and catered to their intimate needs. This made their sense of mutual identification organic and authentic. It was not the product of cultural imperialism (such as American broadcasting) or the result of propaganda (such as Communist pamphleteering). It was simply the natural result of living at a global cultural intersection. Thus the old docksiders were some of the most cosmopolitan people in the world – ironically, not because they necessarily wanted to be so, or because they were well-travelled, as most were not. Their cosmopolitanism was an accident of their environment. Their constant interactions with foreign transients who were economically important to their livelihoods opened their minds to a world beyond South Africa. They didn't plan on it; it just happened because they sustained themselves within a transnational milieu.

While Trotter makes no mention of Monk's photographs, he nevertheless makes a strong case for their significance as ciphers for a world at the cusp of its superannuation: for with the onset of containerisation, the shift from the Victoria and Alfred Basin and Duncan Docks – now the V&A Waterfront and Africa's most sought after shopping mall and leisure district – to Ben Schoeman Docks, along with the gutting of District Six, we arrive at the destruction of a vital socio-economic and cultural contact zone. The enormity of the impact of these shifts cannot be underestimated. That Monk

was able to leave a photographic record of this transnational and transcultural moment – before its erasure and subsequent commodification – affirms the more its value: his photographs capture the humanity of this moment, a humanity distinguished by openness and connectivity, and an innate 'sense of identity and belonging in the world'. That his images do not compute with, or serve as objective correlatives for a received and orthodox resistance culture, surely explains the lack of significance affixed to them in the years that followed the official collapse of apartheid. Notwithstanding '*From the Bridge to the Catacombs Club*', an exhibition of Monk's work at the National Gallery in 1993, Monk's image repertoire was not deemed worthy of canonisation. Rather, Monk's is a world simply left to disappear on its own accord or, better, assume its absent-presence in the South African cultural imaginary.

While deemed a Cape Town underground 'legend,' Monk's visibility is oddly momentary. Rather like Walter Benjamin's actors, Monk's images enter fleeing. For Sean O'Toole (2009:6), in his essay 'Mad Bad Monk', Monk's photographs are 'paper-thin slivers,' evoking the ephemerality of the image, but also their initial traffic as scalped mementoes of illicit intimacy. His photographs, we are told, were sold to the 'sugar girls,' seamen, and other paying customers who frequented The Catacombs and The Spurs. Their initial presence, therefore, cannot be removed from the age-old reality of Cape Town as a port city, way-station, or liminal zone, between East and West. Frequented by mariners from across the world as well as by local landlubbers in search of a world outside the oppressive optic of apartheid, The Catacombs and The Spurs emerge as ciphers for an untold story, or, a story which could not be publicly told. Irrespective of journalistic interventions – Jac de Villiers wrote about Monk in *Vrye Weekblad* in 1991 – it is this

presenting of a world that could not be figured – *photographs by an insider of insiders for insiders* – which explains the deferred, peripatetic, and momentary presence of Monk's photographs.

Here, one cannot over-emphasise the significance of the maritime locality. That Monk was able to capture a transnational hub prior to its liquidation, a hub which positioned Cape Town as the core intersection between West and East – the Atlantic and Indian Ocean economies – reaffirms the more the historical significance of the artist's work: Monk's photographs mark the end of an era – beginning in the 1500s – in which Cape Town was known as a *tavern of the sea*, a location and culture which was 'the natural result of living at a global cultural intersection' (Trotter 2008:228). Of the 'escorts,' 'sugar girls,' or dock-side prostitutes who figure in some of Monk's photographs, Trotter (2008:229) notes: While money was the global commodity, these women also had to 'traffic in many other types of cargo, such as language, DNA, diseases, drugs and romance. By the very nature of the job they perform, they must become traffickers in culture'. Hence, in the late 1960s, at precisely the point at which South Africa withdraws from the international arena, Monk celebrates another freightage: transnationalism and transculturalism; qualities and values which are the hallmarks of a secular worldliness which, even today, prove to be elusive, finding little room in the doctored-yet-still-parochial national imaginary.

The apartheid regime thoroughly recognised this threat of connectivity and hybridity, seeking in 1966 to quash fraternisation through the Immorality Act:

Premises, particularly in the Coloured and Indian quarters of this city, to which contact men, pimps or taxi-drivers, hansom-cabs and rickshas may take you for liquor or women, are to be

avoided; you are liable to be drugged, assaulted and robbed in these places. Sexual intercourse between whites and non-whites is a serious criminal offence in South Africa. Marriage between whites and non-whites is prohibited by law (cited in Trotter 2008:8).

It is this shift away from South Africa, and Cape Town in particular, as a nexus of globalisation, and, concomitant with this move, the increased isolation of the society from the rest of the world, the better to entrench the apartheid zeitgeist, which leads to the spectacularisation of privacy and privilege; the emptying of the subject through an enforced public conformity. That it is precisely this very shift that distinguishes the global neo-liberal zeitgeist affirms, ironically, the ideological and aesthetic appeal of apartheid. Street artist Banksy's indictment – ONE NATION UNDER CCTV – reaffirms precisely the globalisation of a ghettoised and punitive imaginary. What Monk feared and resisted defines who and what we are today. This, in turn, reaffirms the more the anomalous and untimely power of his work; its capacity to hold onto the human in the moment of its passing; its power to sustain love in the instant of its extinction.

Taken by a bisexual bouncer, the epitome of the liminal figure, Monk's photographs served as a kind of underground currency. The initial reason for their existence is clandestine: the photographs surface, I imagine, in the breast-pockets of mariners, amidst the private emporia of sugar girls, or, in the case of other local inhabitants, as secreted trophies of some private resistance. Thereafter the images are filed, as negatives, where they languish in Monk's vacated studio for ten years before being discovered and reprinted by Jac de Villiers and Andrew Meintjies. An exhibition of 42 of the images of that period follows in 1982 in Johannesburg. We are told the images were unanimously

fêted, the entire collection bought by the South African National Gallery. It is then, in 1982, twelve years after the images were filed away, that they become the subject of Lin Sampson's moving essay 'Now you've gone 'n killed me.' These, we are told, were Monk's dying words. They are not of course a reference to the first exhibition of his works, which he failed to attend, given that he was shot to death – rumour has it – while defending a friend in a brawl regarding the rights to articles of furniture. Nevertheless, the phrase – 'Now you've gone 'n killed me' – does invoke yet another occlusion, for, barring the National Gallery's 1992 exhibition, nearly two decades would pass before Pam Warne, curator of the SANG would return Monk's photographs to the public in her exhibition titled *Jo!* in 2009. For O'Toole (2009:6), Monk was to prove Warne's 'star act', and I, a visitor to the exhibition must concur, for it was then that I discovered Monk's work for the first time. Barring Lin Sampson's critical intervention in 1982, once again a lull follows, the images receding from view, and, while celebrated, barely critically recorded. However, Warne's 2009 showcase did prove the beginning of a major turnaround, for in 2010 Monk's work appears at the Brighton Biennale and in 2011 becomes the subject of retrospectives at the Stevenson galleries in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

What are we to make of this repeated appearance and disappearance of Billy Monk's photographs? They seem to flicker in the mind's-eye, incite pleasure and interest before vanishing. How to explain this curious occlusion? Perhaps history plays its part. Perhaps, because their first professional recovery in the 1980s, while inciting interest, proved too risqué? After all, this was the time of apartheid and the Immorality Act, a time in which images of cross-racial fraternisation were taboo. But then, what of the post-apartheid moment when the images resurface, only to be

stopped up once again? For as noted earlier, Monk's images neither feature as figures of resistance art, nor as images of a prescient post-resistance moment in the very jaws of psychic oppression. It seems that it is only now – a moment neither reactive nor post-reactive, a moment after Arthur C Danto when history buckles and disintegrates and the lie of provenance and value eviscerates – that Monk's images have assumed a certain cultural credibility. Why this belatedness? Why over well nigh three decades have Monk's images existed under erasure: as cultural phenomena manifest yet cancelled? Perhaps it is precisely because Monk's photographs, after Danto, were subject to exclusion by the master narratives of oppression and resistance, existing as it were 'outside the pale of history' (Danto1997:xiii), and that it is only now, with the collapse of received hegemonic systems and the new-found openness that Monk's cultural capital finally emerges, albeit through the ongoing control of de Villiers and through a powerful commercially driven gallery. Then again, it is even here, in this post-historical and radically relativised moment that, all the more, one should remain aware of the absorption and dissipation of Monk's work. For as Danto (1997:5, emphasis added) notes, the art of the contemporary moment has

no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won, no sense even that it is at all different as art from modern art generally. It is part of what defines contemporary art that the art of the past is available for such use as artists care to give it. *What is not available to them is the spirit in which the art was made.*

Without insisting upon Monk's art as that which exists 'beyond the pale of history,' I wish, nevertheless, to reaffirm the rarity of the work, its anomalous force, which in my view cannot be satisfactorily returned





Figure 5: The Catacombs.  
12 March 1969.

to us, given the promiscuity of contemporary taste and its delinquent disregard for a metaphysics of presence.

What compels me, furthermore, is neither intrigue nor scandal but the *inevitability* of Monk's occluded fate. If Monk's images failed to be canonised as ciphers of resistance or post-resistance it is because they bypassed or were suppressed by the cultural cognoscenti operational in these particular times of struggle and putative liberation. Then and now there remains little interest in a human condition and its aesthetic representation that is purged of resentment – the historical and cultural project, distinguished by the internalisation and projection of guilt, shame, and punishment. So much so that today, in this so-called post-historical moment we find not the overcoming of this project but its further spectacularisation as simulacra: so that now we absorb our pathological inheritance in

removed and anaesthetised forms, hence the affective emphasis on style and the objectification of content. What reigns is an order of things, and I fear that Monk's fate – on the cusp of his global reception – will likewise be subjected to that nullifying order.

So to return: Were Monk's images prescient or belated? Did they tumble into some black hole? Were they some dark matter, the gravity of which could be discerned, but whose luminescence was not apparent? Then again, perhaps it is a matter that the guardian of these images, their comptroller or factor, who was reticent to divulge their value? Without further hesitation, let me enter upon what I think has been going on: Regarding Monk's fate, a system of policing has been in place for some time, a system endemic not only to apartheid but its aftermath, post-apartheid, and what, today, I term South Africa's phantom democracy.





06

Figure 6: The Catacombs.  
1968.

To understand the nature of this endemic culture of censorship let us return to the late 1980s, 1987 to be precise, when JM Coetzee publishes his 'Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,' a speech putatively on behalf of freedom which Coetzee conceives as improbable, unfounded, absurd, given that the very freedom courted is chimerical. For Coetzee, the root of the problem is 'a failure of love.' 'To be blunt', he adds, the love of the hereditary masters of South Africa 'has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed toward the land ... toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers' (Coetzee 1992:97). What is patently absent here is that central to the vision of the *Figures & Fictions* conference: the human or *The Ethics and Poetics of Photographic Depictions of People*.

What is it that makes it so difficult in South Africa to depict people? More specifically, why is it that in the depiction of people – and here I am speaking of a hybrid racial and cultural configuration – have South African photographers chosen an equivalent abstraction affixed to representations of land, birds, or animals? Or, why, in the vaunted attempt to capture the singularity of personhood have the images of people devolved into the symbolic, iconic, distanced; or the ruses of otherness or sameness?

For Coetzee the answer lies in a *failure of love*: the intrinsic lovelessness of South Africa's optic. Coetzee damagingly goes on to explain the sleight of hand of the reform movement whose call for fraternity by-passes the criticality of liberty and equality. Why; because 'the vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement ... is a

yearning to have fraternity without paying for it' (Coetzee 1992:97). That Coetzee has been proven correct on this matter is not my point. Rather, my point concerns what Coetzee (1992:98) terms the 'pathological attachments' which have shaped systems of oppression and resistance. It is 'the crudity of life in South Africa,' he declares, 'the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, [that] make it as irresistible as it is unlovable' (Coetzee 1992:99).

What I wish to draw the reader's attention to is the perceptual register – intrinsically negative, pathologically optical – which has informed, and continues to inform, the way in which South Africa's stories, and its image repertoire, has been recorded and received. A perversely mutinous denial of love – a fascination with lovelessness – has informed the making and consumption of South Africa's photographic archive. Therefore, to state that South African photography remains overdetermined by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid is, frankly, an understatement. Such has been the punitive hold which these interlinked systems have maintained over the South African imaginary, it is impossible not to acknowledge the degree to which these systems, and their current variants, have scarred, infected, and critically shaped the photography unleashed because of, or in spite of, these systems. Reactive in affect, moral and/or polemical in content, South African photography serves as an archive for the very illness which informs and drives it. Distinguished by the pathological, South African photography has never truly embraced a world that exists outside of this toxic mainframe; this failure, after Danto, stems from an incapacity in South Africa to generate 'the unimaginability of future art,' precisely because of the inability to live in a present uncontaminated by spectacularisation (Danto1997:xiv).

This failure, which Coetzee (1992:98) notes in South African literature, and not its photography which is my concern here, harbours a longing 'to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence,' a longing to 'take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation.' Here lies the key to this debate: What does it mean to speak of a true occupation? Can one speak these days of truth? Given the currency of the simulacral – hardly. Yet Coetzee's goad remains critical: what is South Africa's photographic occupation? My counter is that there is no occupation outside of the lovelessness which has informed, arranged, and sold South Africa as pathology. I should note here that Coetzee recognises his complicity in this failure; that despite his recognition of lovelessness as key to the writing and imaging of South Africa's story, an aporia or annulus exists: a failure, in other words, to capture the wellness of being human. And yet, he recognises, we long for such a moment of insight, access, indeed, sublimity. Homi Bhabha (1994:181) describes this sublime moment as a moment beyond 'the sententious or the exegetical ... the hybrid moment outside the sentence – not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified'.

In achieving this fleeting yet critical moment we arrive at what Coetzee deems the true occupation of the arts. Other than Billy Monk, only one other South African photographer immediately comes to mind, and that is Santu Mofokeng. I am not of course asserting that these are the only photographers who, according to Coetzee and Bhabha's schema, achieve this. Rather, I am proffering a wager; asking that we think about how and to what ends the ethics and the poetics of the human figure is captured. That Monk and Mofokeng are utterly different in their concerns and focus is another matter; yet what strikes me is that both

succeed in their attempts to restore a 'true' occupation to the matter of photography. And by 'truth' I re-invoke Coetzee's views in *Slow man*, Goldblatt's foreword to the Monk monograph, and the photographer's own misgivings regarding the quick-fix of the instantaneous and simulacral. Furthermore, it is here that I must return to the core of my rumination: That South African art, art that stems from South Africa – be it its literature, its plastic arts, or broadly, its image repertoire – persists, rather like the housekeeper in Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) – the black and white Lutheran half of that film – in scratching the putrescent sore in its palm; or, if not conscious of this miserable act, that it exists as the art of sleepwalkers. In other words, South Africa's art remains loveless, incapable of 'a living play of feelings and ideas' (Coetzee 1992:98), and as a consequence, exists as an art without a true occupation.

While vast and disputable this claim must remain my point of engagement. However, my interest is not to rehash views which I have played out elsewhere; rather, what compels me is why Billy Monk's photos by-pass this gulag of fixations. That Monk depicts an illicit world in the very moment of apartheid is not the point. As Foucault, Blanchot, Deleuze, and others have reminded us, the illicit has always proved the foil for the normative: the inside requires an outside if a system of regulation and policing can reproduce itself. Of course, Monk, like the patrons of The Catacombs were surely aware that the roles they occupied, primarily as punters and consumers of monetarily driven sexual exchange, or other forms of illicit pleasure, were as rigged as any other privative or racially overdetermined system. The glaring binarity is evident in the image of a policeman engaging the attention of a dwarf at The Catacombs. Then again it is the comic absurdity of that image that serves as its tell: Monk was no Diane Arbus or Roger Ballen riveted to and

mortified by the freakish, odd, or strange. Rather, this seemingly odd image, with its weighted reminder that the abnormal and the normal, illicit and policed, were in fact on thoroughly familiar terms, surely compels us to reconsider what in fact Monk was doing. And here Trotter's (2008:227) view is, for me, most vital in reviewing this matter. By insisting upon the humanity of the dockside world, its 'transience, cosmopolitanism, hybridity and improvisation', the organicity and authenticity of 'mutual identification' (Trotter 2008:227, 228), Trotter allows for a greater 'openness and interdependence'; qualities that slip the morbid noose of fixed relations and categorical imperatives.

Further, as Goldblatt notes, there is no disputing the beauty of Monk's photographs: the framing of the instant, the presencing of his subjects within the fragmented makeshift places in which they are caught. One looks not only at the people imaged, their expressions, couture, self-stylisation, rather, one is as aware of the dishevelment of each of these aspects. The environment, like the figures captured, are caught in a moment of wear and tear that defies the iconic and its Apollonian pretensions, giving us, rather, a Dionysian dance with the distensions, fallibilities, tenderness, hunger, longing, exhaustion, that comes from being driven and informed by what TS Eliot called the butt-ends of our days and ways. Excessive, supplementary, they are images caught in a moment Sampson (2011) terms the cutting edge, a moment as easily excisable as it is containable. If they defy what Sampson (2011) terms flab, space, pretension, it is because they defy received systems of perception: how a subject should look, should be framed.

It is perhaps that moment when the excessive meets the ordinary which gives Monk's images their potency; they manifest ordinariness irreducible to the chic dicta of the banal; an ordinariness of life caught in a



**Figure 7:** The Spurs.  
29 December 1967.

binged dissipation, a release from the constraints of an overly conscious – indeed monstrous – self-possession. That said, it is not blind drunkenness and debauchery and, after Rimbaud, the wild derangement of the senses, that Monk captures. Rather, it is that moment, neither epic nor tragic – a moment Brecht sought to still the better to reflect upon it, the better to graft upon it his particular political spin – which returns us again and again to the rollicking tenderness of the incidentality of Monk’s images. There are no big pictures here, no portentous freezing of a moment, no narrative overdrive which could explain the artist’s oeuvre. As snap-shots Monk’s graphic depictions, like the series by Richard Billingham, titled *Ray’s a Laugh*, are not shut-up the better to secure a certain sanctified closure and

ethical legitimacy. Of Billingham’s glaring disclosure of his parents lives Gordon Burn (2009:362) notes:

It is a brilliant [photographic] essay on the psychopathology of family life which is also brave enough to suggest that destitution – more: squalor and degradation – can produce images that are not only not ugly, but actually galvanising and beautiful.

If Monk’s photos, like Billingham’s, are not shut-up or closed off, the better to reinforce a critically consensual moral approval – or disapproval given the moment – it is because, in the instances of dissolution he captures, there is also something naked, celebratory, fulsome, positive: loving. It is this fullness of heart which makes Monk, after Baudelaire, a photographer of modern life.

For Baudelaire (1972:77), the painter of modern life was Eugène Delacroix, ‘a strange mixture of scepticism, courtesy, dandyism, fiery will, guile, despotism, and, withal, of a species of particular kindness and restrained tenderness that always accompanies genius’. These qualities, I feel, apply to Monk. In reading Lin Sampson’s (2011) text on Monk one arrives at a comparably complex conclusion. I am not asserting that Monk is Delacroix; rather, in signalling a link in temperament, and a way of seeing and feeling such a temperament could generate, I am asking that we consider Monk as an anomaly, disinvested yet connected, for good reason. Sampson – like Goldblatt – is not interested in setting Monk apart, but locating him within the moment he captures, for given the complexity of his temperament, it is the recorded instant which the temperament reveals – in which that temperament discovers itself – that matters the more. For Sampson that temperament, emphatically, alerts us to worlds which exist beyond received codes. After Nietzsche, one could say that Monk’s photographs are untimely:

subject to their time yet bizarrely outside of their time. That Monk's photographs possess the appeal which they do today is in no way merely because they were anomalies then: they remain anomalies now. Irrepressibly present, immanent, Monk's photos never objectify their subjects, never reduce them to emblems, symbols, or symptoms of some gnomic deep structure. If his subjects are neither revealed nor hidden this is because they resist the sententious and exegetical.

Monk's photos exist in and for themselves, and, so doing, make no claim to the fullness of a present or the nagging lack that is absence. Neither objective nor nostalgic, neither reflexive nor coolly matte, Monk's photographs challenge not only the limits of the technology which produced them but the codes to which criticality might reduce them. If Monk's photos are gaining a wider appeal today I would hope that this is not because of their technical finish, framing, retro culture and style; their disturbingly cool perpetual presence; or their scandalous subversion of the oppressiveness of South Africa's policed culture at the time. Rather, I would hope that what a viewer is compelled by is their radical immediacy, honesty, and effortless disregard for the very scopophilic drive which infects all acts of seeing and all acts undergone in order to be seen. The phenomenological is a register and optic I would apply to Monk's photos: they see without wishing to probe; record without the cool distance one associates with the document and the documentary. Which once again raises the question: what is it that makes Billy Monk distinctive and staggeringly rare?

Others have reflected upon this question before me, notably David Goldblatt (2011), Lin Sampson (2011), Michael Godby (2010), and Sean O'Toole (2009); others, still, will emerge to refine what remains a piecemeal critical perspective. For what is immediately apparent

is the paucity of critical response: *not enough has been written and thought about Billy Monk*. The monograph published by the Stevenson Gallery certainly contributes to a much needed revision and adds to the debate that will open up and explain the scandalous riddle of Monk's absent-presence in the South African cultural imaginary. My wager is that Monk continues to function as a lacuna in the symbolic order that overdetermines South African aesthetics; that unlike most he escapes this overdetermined system because he captures the wellness of being human in a time – then and now – which photography has largely failed to capture. Further, he does so because his photos are never shaped in a manner that wholly encodes them: Monk is no Mannerist. Caught in a mortal coil his figures are never raced; sexed, yes, but raced – not quite. Monk's images return us to a living play of feelings and ideas which for far too long has been suppressed in the instant of their acknowledgement – only to be deferred.

## Note

Since the writing of this essay the control of the Billy Monk estate has shifted from the Stevenson Gallery back to the family.

Permission for the publication of the images used in this article was given to me by the executors of the Billy Monk estate, David and Collette Monk.

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