

Gabriel David Crouse  
*Portraying South Africa*

Today I am going to tell, or retell a version of a famous short story: *The Fall of Portrayal in South Africa*. My version starts a long time ago in school. My fine and exemplary history teacher did what so many do, he used a resource that would keep the students in a quiet state, of learning, allowing him to get on with something else, probably paperwork. For this purpose he chose exceptionally well. Many of you are probably familiar with the miniseries, *Shaka Zulu*, made in 1986. It's 9 hours long. We watched it for weeks. One of the moments that impressed me rendered a violent turn. Antagonistic groups line up across a ravine and hurl spears at one another, from a great distance. There is an exchange of words. It could go on all day without anyone getting hurt. And then Henry Cele, playing Shaka, grabs a spear, sprints to the enemy, stabs, kills, and unleashes the dogs of war. This scene depicts, in a sense, the *Ursprung*, technologically and strategically, of the Zulu empire.

What impressed me about this moment was the sense that Shaka, and here I refer strictly to the depicted character and not the historic figure, did not understand his own culture. Cultural norms cut off the possibility of Pyrrhic victory and decimation. Shaka, the depicted character, understood the act of throwing a spear at the enemy to intend the death of the enemy. He upheld the intention. He changed the means to realize the intention more perfectly.

But the intention of the exchange of thrown spears, and I here I refer strictly to the depicted culture, was to express aptitude at killing, discipline in the face of danger and the power of numbers. The intention was to leverage a preferable bargaining position. This is what Shaka doesn't get.

So on this reading, the audience is presented with a scientific disruption of a cultural practice – one that brings great advantages for the character who mistakes the performed intention for an absolute intention, because that character accesses efficient gains<sup>1</sup>.

This example is simple and fictional. It is also an idiosyncratically vivid rendition of an important limit.

The socially coded performances that we call culture are not winner-take-all games. I claim this is a broadly endorsed tacit assumption of the Humanities. In a cultural exchange everyone, goes the thought, stands to gain something. And, the thought goes on, real cultural exchange will always be vulnerable to disruption by agents who cut through the veil of implicit meanings.

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<sup>1</sup> This point ties in neatly with the preceding speaker, Dr. Peter Bauer, who analyzed the vulnerability of the art market to single-minded capitalists: those players in the market who only acknowledge the remunerable value of art objects enjoy a strategic advantage *vis. making money* over those who see the primary intention of art as anything but capitalist exchange.

That is the picture of a spear penetrating the veil of implicit meanings. That is the story of a spear. There is another picture of a spear immediate to the story *The Fall of Portrayal in South Africa*.

[The speaker enters Jacob Zuma into Google's image search engine, visible on the projector. Scrolls over to the section entitled: Painting]



Brett Murray's *The Spear* is probably the most recognizable painting made by a South African since '94. His depiction of president Jacob Zuma in a Leninist pose with Obama-esque colour schematization and, in the art critic's preferred term, an exposed phallus became famous overnight. Twice vandalized and the subject of a suit for defamation Murray found himself at the center of a cultural furor, he claims, unexpectedly.

The short story *The Fall of Portrayal* begins here, perhaps; the end is yet to come. Defacing, removing and burning public faces that were recorded by hand is a trend on the up.

These exchanges have had a clear effect on Brett Murray. In an interview conducted with him for the purpose of this paper he repeatedly stated that he has and will continue to paint just what he wants to paint, including Zuma. However, the record shows that while Murray continues to be exercised by the occupant of the highest office in the land of South Africa, natural for a satirist, he has changed into another gear. His wit bites in more coded ways, ways which resist the mass media's ability to decontextualize the cultural background of Murray's work and the tradition it

belongs to. He has, to an extent, cloaked himself in metaphor and materiality. And he is philanthropically active. To be clear, Murray always was philanthropically active, moreover a participant in the struggle – the change is in the new obligation to report that fact to manage a name and brand under attack.

This is something of a surprise to the critic. Critics tend to praise defiance in the face of vandalism and threatened censorship very highly. Vandals and censors – they are critics too, and critics love nothing more than withering other critics. Of course some critics will always agree with vandals and censors, but they will not be satisfied by sophisticated side-steps if they support foreclosure: Murray could never please them anyway. So it seems that an opportunity is missed by the artist: occupying the niche of undaunted culture-warrior. (The slack, to some extent, was taken up by Anton Kannemeyer).

The reason Murray and the like have foregone this potential kudos is that he respects, to some extent, the arguments his would-be censors make. He has, on some level, further developed respect for the dignity his painting lampoons. (He has also, on his self-assessment, deepened his understanding of and respect for the principle of free expression. That has meant acknowledging that his freedom is connected to the freedom of others to express ideas that Murray finds obnoxious). So even in this extremely disturbing case the idea that cultural exchanges are not winner-takes-all games gets some vindication: the vandalized artist benefits, learns from that<sup>2</sup>; the vandals stood to learn that a gallery is a space entered into on certain terms of bargain.

The bargain one takes on entering a gallery is that one forgoes one's usual sensibilities and sensitivities for the chance to experience something extraordinary. This idea at least, was made explicit in the follow up to the vandalization of *The Spear* and in the suit pursued against Murray. Local, socially coded, self-correcting mechanisms – culturally tokened “justice” when it works – worked.

However, Murray's portrayal of a South African is unusual.

1<sup>st</sup> – It is unofficial. It is commissioned, in a sense, by the gallery circuit which supports the authority of artists. This brings to mind an amusing story told by Stefan Hundt<sup>3</sup>.

His story is of an artist commissioned to do a portrait. The sitter does not approve of the work and refuses it. The artist then sues the sitter for payment for a work the sitter does not want. This absurd, though legally sound, turn of events highlights the usual complicity between the artist, the sitter and the client (in official cases the bank, university, arm of government ect.) They all work together to record the face

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<sup>2</sup> Also, the material value of the painting and of Murray's other work has, at an educated guess, also increased as a result of the scandal.

<sup>3</sup> *Inter alia* Hundt oversees the country's largest portrait competition: *The Sanlam Portrait Awards*.

of office. Like legs marching in opposite directions their failure to commission ends in acute embarrassment.

In Murray's case the portrait was never solicited. The media-market called the internet has made great purchase on Murray's *Spear* and when all of us in this room are dead it is likely that one of the most pervasively visible traces of Zuma to survive will be *The Spear*. The sitter never called on the artist. The artist does not seek the sitter's approval. Although Murray and Zuma are connected, a connection which will only deepen with time, there is a bright line between them that dissolves in official portraiture.

2<sup>nd</sup> – It now hangs in a private space. (In Germany).

The work is therefore compatible with South Africa's commitment to free *private* expression.

Nevertheless, it points to binary appetites that pervade the landscape of culture.

**There is a powerful desire to engage disruptive visual representations of public figures.**

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Those appetites are the main players in the short story called the *Fall of Potrayal*.

The setting of that story are spaces that SACO shares: universities; government chambers; and to a lesser extent corporate offices.

The most bizarre thing about this story is that it was recorded, at least one version of it was recorded, by Brenda Schmahmann, before anyone had heard of a hastag movement.

Her 2013 book, *Picturing Change*, traces the recent evolution of South African official portraiture and university visual tokens.

On another day I might have rehearsed the details and arguments of this book for your benefit. Today I précis: two "failures"; two "successes"

- Dorothy Kay, *Portrait of Cullen Bowles* (1962) Rhodes  
The first change pictured in Schahmann's book is towards Afrikaaner Nationalism. This change undoes itself, as we all know, over time. There is a more obscure counter-change: A Stellenbosch University sculpture dubbed "Pink Piet", made in 1944. It was abandoned and neglected until after '94. Why? The sitter, Johannes du Plessis, did not believe the bible is infallible ect. Also the pink marble would recall communist sympathy and homosexuality. A perfect low pressure system, sucking in vandals and censors.

Dorothy Kay's portrait is, on one level, a study in purple, pink and gray. In Schahmann's words the sitter's pose borders on the "effete". The brushwork is also suggestive and sensitive, rather than decisive and robust. This delicate painting clearly subverted the collocation of archetypal masculinity and power. The university could not bear such a whimsical representation of a Head Of Department. A photograph was used instead. Despite the privilege generally enjoyed by white males, these portrayals of powerful white men subverted expectations and were absolutely obstructed for decades. Now they are celebrated, and worth it.

- Christo Coetzee, *Portrait of Dr Hesse* (1994) UP  
According to the University of Pretoria this portrait was a "terrible disaster" and "unexhibitable", that Dr Hesse's own wife could not recognize him in the painting. In Shmahmann's words the stylization, characteristic of Christo Coetzee's work, "takes over so completely that it subsumes the person represented".  
Noteworthy in this exchange is the emphasis placed on the recognizability of the face of office. The institution demands not just that the office is upheld with dignity, but also that it is humanized by a particular face. The artist subverts that expectation at peril.
- Tanya Poole, *Portrait of Jakes Gerwel* (2002) Rhodes  
Tanya Poole uses the metaphor of climbing a mountain of robes in order to reach the face of office in traditional official portraiture. First this acknowledges the source of power not in the individual who holds office, but in the office that the individual happens to occupy. Second, at an aesthetic level, it is a manifestation of artists' interest in disguising the flatness of the painting by the *virtuoso* exhibition of finely textured lace.  
In Poole's rejection of this, quite literal, habit she notices the difference between the gaze and the glance. So much western art supposedly operates on the level of the gaze: you look deeply at a single work over a significant period. The actual work of the artist is predominantly to hide the work of the artist. That sets up the reward for the gaze. The only way to see a flicker of the artist's spirit shining through is a good long look.  
Who has time for that in the corridors of Rhodes administrative buildings? No one. So Poole goes for the glance. A large portrait almost entirely dominated by a face, no robes to climb, much larger than life, stimulates the pre-cognitive instinct in humans to attend first and above all to a human face. It's a WOW thing.
- Reshada Crouse, *Portrait of Winkie Direka* (2005) UF  
Reshada Crouse is my mother, placing this critic in a tricky position. Her portraits of Winkie Direka and Justice Richard Goldstone are well described in Shmahmann's book and I politely refrain from drawing that out here. I simply note this. The format of a two-dimensional

space, longer on the vertical axis than the horizontal, is so ingrained that on your computer's word processor and probably in your speech it is referred to as the "portrait" format or layout. The *Portrait of Winkie Direka* subverts that expectation. A simple change of frame. The result is potent.

The upshot of this brief adventure through the landscape of portrayal are four fronts on which winner-takes-all games can be limited.

1<sup>st</sup> Subverting social identity hierarchies that might otherwise be taken for granted: at all times in history there are social identities which are not readily collocated with power. Artists have very little control over the subversion of such expectations: more than nothing. Winner-takes-all games rely on uncompromisingly defined teams.

2<sup>nd</sup> Characterization of the sitters rather than the office. Winner-takes-all games depend on depersonalization.

3<sup>rd</sup> Disruption of the clichéd hermeneutic tracks of portraiture<sup>4</sup>. Winner-takes-all games depend on unwavering hermeneutic tracks.

4<sup>th</sup> Emphasis on the multivalency of tokens. Winner-takes-all games are preconditioned by absolute binaries.

On all of these fronts portraits have the potential to mount cultural defenses against winner-takes-all games: they can make it harder not to get the veiled meanings of cultural exchange.

[Question from the audience]: It seems like you can be summed up as saying that artists can complicate the relationship between a viewer and the subject of a portrait: is that right?

[Speaker pulls up Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, zooms in on dark-haired girl; then pulls up Velasquez's *Innocent X*]

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<sup>4</sup> Hundt describes this as a crucial motivator of the Sanlam Portrait Award.



Very well – one reason I took on this investigation is that I wanted to answer a question: what are the modern local equivalents of these portraits by Velasquez. What Velasquez has done here is make work so beautiful and subtle that the royalty of Spain, no longer the dominant European power it was but still mighty, and the Pope himself could do nothing but embrace and celebrate their portraits. My claim, made with caution since ideals of beauty are not strictly fixed, is that the portraits are not flattering. In my experience even the most self-aware and tempered people flare up in disgust when their own children are described harshly. “Say anything, but don’t dis my kids!” is the injunction. But Velasquez does so. In so doing there is one meaning readily understood by non-Royal viewers, (in all their magnificence they’re not perfect) and another by Royals (despite our imperfections we are magnificent) and those meanings are mutually recognizable across the lines of social identity.

This is the multi-valance point and it is very important. My search goes on for works that prominent South African sitters approve of despite, or even because, they are unflattering.

But it is not the same as, for example, an artist emphasizing a certain (to use the archetypal paradigm) feminine gloss to render a male sitter if, in the example, the sitter finds that gloss flattering. And so on.

But if you’re looking for a general thesis of this paper it might be this.

- 1) There is a powerful desire to engage disruptive visual representations of public figures.
- 2) There is a powerful desire to disrupt engaging representations of public figures.

Both of these appetites operate the story *The Fall of Portrayal*. Both of these features can be found in the same painting: a particular portrait can get in the way of itself as an uncritical exposition of power.

[Audience Question: Isn't that all very sophisticated. Visual literacy isn't always taught all that well in schools and so on. But more than that the real issues of dignity and respect and offense are very emotional and painful to many people. Isn't it too much to expect people to politely grin and bear all these icons of racism?]

At no stage have I suggested that icons of racism should enjoy prestige. As I say, I was looking for the *Las Meninas* and equivalent of Goya's subversive portraits, not of unthinking hagiography. To make this clear let me take a big step back.

There is a certain picture of Ancient Greece according to which the Philosopher pursues truth, and the student pursues the philosopher largely by imitation and following instruction. Call that a Platonic ideal of pedagogy. I don't think it is particularly useful here.

There is another, more messy version, centered around the word *agon*. Agony comes from that. So does protagonist. And antagonist. The pain and vindication of competition was crucial to that culture.

I believe that every artwork, portraits included, can be a site for contest, for a contest of interpretations and pains and pleasures: a site at which different individuals can meet in an attempt to change themselves and others. Not easy, no. Very hard. Sometimes, perhaps, unbearable. Nevertheless each site is different. Each case must be treated differently. Blanket rules do not work. Various heroic works would be missed out if a simple rule predefined what was offensive and what not – that is a big part of what makes art art.

So the public case-by-case treatment of portraits is preferable when good, subtle and surprising art is saved from the neglect it would suffer under a blanket rule. It is also good when unthinking oppressive tokens are consigned to historical museums or storage because the agonistic process is a human refinement.