Conference Report

Musi Kahimbaara, Daniéle Knoetze and Sikho Siyotula

BETWEEN DEMOCRACIES 1994-2014. Remembering, narrating and reimagining the past in Eastern and Central Europe and South Africa

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On the generous invitation of conference organiser Dr Judy Peter, two staff members and three students from the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria were privileged to attend this conference on remembering in Eastern and Central Europe and South Africa, held at the University of Johannesburg from 13 to 15 March 2015. The conference represented a remarkable collaboration between scholars from and /or scholars working on these two not-so often compared or juxtaposed parts of the world. The reason for Dr Peter bringing Eastern/Central European and South African memories, monuments, memorials, public histories and art into a single scope, is the trajectory shared by both regions of having become democratic only after the end of the Cold War, hence the dates: 1989-2014.

In democratic South Africa, within the framework of postcolonial discourse, African modernity and the global south, it is easy to polarise the global south against a global north; that north being a homogenous Europe. *Between Democracies 1994-2014. Remembering, narrating and reimagining the past in Eastern and Central Europe and South Africa*, serves as a reminder of the nuances, ambiguity and contradiction within the idea of Europe and Africa and moreover, the value of nuance, ambiguity and contradiction in the era of globalisation.

Through presentations dealing with a number of themes, the conference explored the democracies of Eastern and Central Europe and South Africa. While similarities and relationships between Eastern and Central Europe and South Africa may have been more ubiquitous during apartheid, the Cold War and the reign of so-called totalitarian regimes from the mid-twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first

century, they are arguably less so after the fall of legalised apartheid, the end of the Cold War (characterised by the fall of the Berlin Wall), and the formation of the so-called democracies that followed these events.

The conference's keynote addresses by Salim Vally from the University of Johannesburg and Klara Kemp-Welch from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, contextualised South Africa and Europe socially, politically and economically and in so doing aptly set the foundation for the speakers that followed. Globalisation, wealth distribution and inequality, mass migration of labour, xenophobia and nationalism, the re-writing of histories, the repositioning of cities and rapidly changing landscapes are some of the similarities that were explored during the conference from a visual cultural perspective.

Vally's address, 'Sowing the wind: the apartheid past in the post-apartheid present', mapped out post-apartheid South Africa and stressed the importance of visual cultures on South Africa's road to freedom. Vally argued that in the era of globalisation, with its emphasis on the quantifiable, innovation and global competitiveness, there is the danger of 'throwing out the baby of humanity with the bath water of what is considered irrelevant subject, knowledge or programme'. To be clear, a placing of all emphasis on the justifiability of outcomes and knowledge sweeps away the nuance of complexity and contradiction, creating the illusion of a simple and one dimensional linier universe in which, if anything has a number, it is somehow valuable. Such an era is in contradiction to the South African constitution invested in understanding the value of diversity. Vally also argued that a one dimensional linear universe becomes a springboard for xenophobic stereotype and latent social conflict.

Vally warned that if 'we' in the south, particularly in the economic south, are not to become economode photocopies of the advanced north, the emphasis on quantifiability of outcome needs to be reassessed and resisted. He added that, if we do not insist on the importance of the humanities, they will simply fall away. Despite the notion that it is the humanities and the arts that may open up space for the development of a new historical community, Vally, following Neville Alexander, also believes it has the ability to go beyond the glib rhetoric of social transformation, nationalisation and African Renaissance to the critical problem of wealth and inequality. Vally concluded that the ascension of power is not the end of history as Francis Fukuyama had proposed, or the national question for that matter, since in democratic South Africa representation and the re-writing of history in particular are still relevant. We must therefore again turn to the arts; this, according to Vally is where we can find answers.

The second keynote address, by Klara Kemp-Welch, 'Strawberry fields of post-socialism: labour and migration in contemporary European video art', as if in reply to Vally's address focused immediately on the aesthetic, particularly representation in the medium of video. The address began with an overview of the popular politics of xenophobia and its related manifestations and/or mutations in British class society, namely in reality and documentary shows like the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC)'s *Here come the Romanians* about eastern European labour migration to Western Europe and Channel 4's *Benefits Street*, a documentary that follows the lives of the residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham, one of Britain's most benefit-dependent streets. With this overview of mass media intervention and incitement to debate, Kemp-Welsh opened up the field to a critical evaluation of artistic uses of video as a medium by artists as opposed to its mainstream counterpart by national broadcasters like the BBC and Channel 4.

Kemp-Welsh proposed that while it seems that the once clear borders between news and reporting documentary television and video art are less and less distinguishable in formal terms as television becomes increasingly sophisticated, it is also clear that the freer forms of video as a medium remain crucial to attaining more equitable representations of labour migration in the case of the examples explored. Kemp-Welsh suggested that mainstream media coverage of European migration polarised public opinion, excluding nuanced or 'grey zones', and in this way became an impediment to rather than a spring board for debate. She further found that the techniques used were comparable to other coverage of migration around the world like the Sahara migration media coverage on sensation achieved through easily consumable individual human interest stories. The focus on the plight of individuals, however, fails to examine the political and economic framework that explains the courses of migration in any depth. Kemp-Welsh noted that in the desire to prioritise the objective, transparent reality of a journey, a journalist's participation in the event is supressed – moreover, the viewer's situation and potential complicity in the unequal economic arrangements that drive migration in the first place is overlooked.

Through what can be seen as a comparative study of mass media and artistic representation Kemp-Welsh showed that while mass media programs can also claim to some extent to talk about the hidden view, revealing the motivation of those observed in this way, giving them a voice, often subjects seem to retain a greater sense of agency when they are not transparent or one dimensional in the ways that the mass media representations become. Through various techniques of abstraction, inclusion of the artist making the video and participation of the subjects that are the focus of the video in its editing, Kemp-Welsh found that

artistic representations of labour migration remained mysterious: 'we are not given enough information about them to even slide into sympathy'. Kemp-Welsh likened the mystery retained in the selected artistic representations of migration to Edouard Glissant's notion of 'the right to opacity'. Glissant understands opacity as a defence against understanding in the hierarchical, objectification common in interactions between the 'West' and its other. Glissant criticises the western demand for transparency; he calls for giving up the obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of nature and instead calls for the right to opacity for everyone. Kemp-Welsh argued that through art and its abstraction the right to opacity is maintained in artistic representations.

Kemp-Welsh concluded that while the focus of her address is on migration in Europe the reality is that the majority of labour migrants to Europe still come from outside Europe. Global mobility in a world with newly open borders, the most potent symbol being the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the construction of the borderless European Union (EU), also results from the desperation of multitudes to overcome the increasingly militarised divisions of economic and political power between Europe and Africa and North America and its other neighbours. Globalisation, according to this view, is less a smooth state of the free flow of people, as many utopian narratives of the 1990s had imagined, than a fractured geography of borders that divide the uninterrupted transmission of goods and capital from the controlled movement of people.

With this conclusion, Kemp-Welsh echoed Vally, that the globalised world is one that concerns itself with the transparent, the innovative, competitive and quantifiable outcome. Here the transmission of goods and capital becomes a priority over human vitality and freedom. Vally highlighted the importance of art on the road to freedom. In the case of South Africa, he also emphasised that in context of the challenges of globalisation, art is needed now more than ever. Through a comparative study of mass media and artistic representation through the medium of video, Kemp-Welsh showed how artistic techniques of abstraction may resist globalisation's emphasis on quantifiability. In this way, the right to opacity is protected and with this opacity minorities maintain a sense of agency. The agency of minorities and oppressed and marginalised people remained an overarching framework throughout the conference, alongside other major themes.

From the way the conference dealt with the issues of apartheid, post-apartheid, memory and identity it became clear that something like post-apartheid does not belong to any group of people or nation. It also became clear that the problems society had pre-1994 are still with us today, perhaps just in another form, hidden

by the name or idea of post-apartheid. Memory and history as the main focuses of the conference are two ideas that go hand in hand. Since history is so important for society to build a collective identity, history becomes vital in one's own self-identity. The problem arising out of this is that history, as it seems, is almost always fixed in time as well as biased and subjective. As a result history (and then memory) seem to be problematic areas.

Most of the speakers at the conference felt that investigating art works, in any form, can challenge this 'new' apartheid. Through art one can open up debates and challenge established regimes in societies. It is twenty years since the fall of apartheid in South Africa and it seems as if we are still struggling with the same issues, still talking about discrimination and racism. Because artists seem to realise that this is a concern that must be dealt with, especially through the arts, it becomes a platform for vigorous debate.

Prof Karen von Veh, another convenor of the conference, spoke about dealing with this 'fraught past' in South Africa and mentioned a few artists who challenge it. The artist Diane Victor stands out for producing art that seems to be opening up debates around South African identity, especially white South African male identity. The white Afrikaner male seems to stand in contrast to what one usually sees in traditional artworks of Afrikaner nationalism. These men, as portrayed by Victor seem to be de-humanised and stripped of all pride and dominance.

In her paper titled, 'Politically no longer acceptable', Nkule Mabaso explored how art has been used in South Africa to represent the progress that the country has made towards becoming a functioning democracy. Globally-speaking, we live in an age where democracy is lauded as the only politically viable option for the just and fair governing of a given society. It is presented as the only legitimate system that offers the possibility for real peace and multicultural acceptance when in reality it functions by repressing and denying any forms of antagonism against its ideologies. It might be said that democracy's major flaws are that it discourages historical reflection and represses minor histories or any alternative historiographies altogether. Mabaso cited Žižek who states that democracy is a 'necessary fiction' or fallacy that oscillates between tolerance and fear, and which explains away one undemocratic internal decision after another.

In South Africa, the recent, state-sanctioned disruption of parliament by the South African Police Service (SAPS) on the orders of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), as well as the removal of an opposition party from Parliament by the SAPS, were denounced by the media and segments of the public as being

unconstitutional and unjustifiable. Mabaso made the point that despite disparaging occurrences such as these (which could be seen as an indication that South Africa has some way to go before it can satisfactorily refer to itself as a fully functioning democracy), South African art has lost much of its previously overtly-politicised subject matter.

Mabaso asserted that where once South African art proudly dabbled in matters of the political, it now seems to shy away from making any kind of definitive political stance or commentary out of fear of appearing anti-democratic or anarchistic. Mabaso discussed the controversy in 2011 that surrounded Brett Murray's depiction of South African President Jacob Zuma's genitals in the infamous painting, *The Spear*. Mabaso cited Stevens who stated that by depicting South Africa's president in such a way, Murray 'tapped into both a historically produced taboo, and a vast colonial apartheid archive of racist iconography.' In other words, it is necessarily significant that Murray, a young, privileged, white South African man painted Zuma's genitals. If we are to recall subsequent events, we should remember that the ruling party reacted to this revelation swiftly and with perceived hostility. As Stevens put it, 'these deep histories of racist representations of black bodies and African sexualities provided an entry point for the ANC to mobilise public anger.'

In many ways, the ANC was allowed credibility in the way it reacted to the painting because of the politics surrounding South Africa's recent past and because, at the critical moment of redefining the country's master narrative, the ruling party placed itself squarely in the centre of bringing about democracy in South Africa. In this way, an offence against President Jacob Zuma meant an offence against the ANC, which translated as an offence against South Africa's democracy. Many detractors of the ANC's reaction to the painting noted that it should not be in the government's power to decide which art is acceptable and which is not. Such interference on a social level could easily be perceived as being comparable to the kind of censorship that took place during the apartheid era.

We might recall that in 2010 Ayanda Mabulu, a black South African male artist exhibited a painting, *Ngcono ihlwempu kunesibhanxo sesityebi* (*Better poor than a rich puppet*) which similarly depicted President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. This work hung in public galleries abroad for two years before Murray's painting received exposure. However, Mabulu's painting was virtually ignored by the media and did not seem to invoke the ire of the ruling party. Only after *The Spear* gained prominence was a new light shone on Mabulu's work (and even then the light was rather dim).

Mabaso pointed out that this event has only served to win over the hearts and minds of South Africans; however, very little significant change has taken place on a physical level. In other words, while the ANC won the admiration of South Africans in 1994, its victory did not necessarily translate into the economic and social emancipation of its previously marginalised groups. In South Africa, currently, the idea of democracy seems to have greater manifestation in the memories and identities of its citizens than in any physical sense. We have to ask ourselves that if the advent of democracy was not supposed to have ensured equality and empowerment for all South Africans, then what has it all been for? Is there genuine change or a way of convincing citizens that we are indeed in a better position than we were in the past? Either way, it would befit us all as South Africans to re-evaluate what democracy means to us, twenty years after its advent.

Given our exposure predominantly in the South African curricular system, it is not surprising that the presentations that we as South African student observers could engage with more comfortably during the conference, were the ones dealing with South African themes. The complexity of history and the challenges of finding responsible and accountable comparative perspectives, was impressed upon us as we were fascinated, intrigued, discomforted and compelled by new information. The presentations on Eastern Europe not merely broadened our horizons. Getting to know the work of Yael Bartana and Deimantas Narkevičius, for example, so perceptively contextualised in the presentation of Eva Kernbauer and having been introduced to the now forlornly modernist World War Two memorials of the former Yugoslavia, irrevocably changed the *mise-en-scène* for reflecting upon our own history. Yet it made us realise that really engaging with histories from different parts of the world on an equal footing, moving from asymmetrical to investigative comparison, is hard scholarly work.

Having brought the new democracies of South Africa and East and Central Europe into one conversation, the conference presenters illustrated the productivity of rigorous co-production across regional as well as disciplinary boundaries and indeed the remarkably insightful ways in which art does open apertures, as Vally had appealed for in his keynote address. The next step planned by the conference organisers is to enhance their co-production with an art exhibition which will be well-worth a visit.