Book Review

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Impossible mourning: HIV/AIDS and visuality after apartheid

Kylie Thomas. 2014

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In her book, *Impossible mourning*, Kylie Thomas argues that although HIV/AIDS has been established as a central public discourse in South Africa during the last decade, the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS remain largely invisible. Moreover, the manifold losses, sorrows and deaths owing to AIDS are publicly unmourned. For Thomas (2014:9), the failure to mourn the '1,000 people who die of AIDS in South Africa each day' testifies to the fact that their lives were 'as invisible within public memory as their deaths'. As a significant resource to contest such forms, acts and discourses of invisibility, Thomas explores a number of artworks produced by visual artists. Accordingly, the 'book makes an argument for how visual forms of representation can allow for powerful, evocative and transformative modes of engagement with traumatic experience' (Thomas 2014:5). An exemplary feature of Thomas's argument is a discerning, sharp and sensitive awareness of the complexity of visual forms of representation. Thus while the book engages with a number of artworks to explore mourning and trauma, it is equally concerned with how people with HIV/AIDS are represented:

> I came to understand that the entry of people living with HIV/AIDS into the realm of representation could, and often does, only serve to compound their desubjectivisation .... [T]his book seeks to show how being named HIV-positive often interpellates a particular kind of subject, one that enters into representation to be unmade as a subject. Over the course of writing this book I have come to see representation itself as a problem, one that is bound both to recognition and loss (Thomas 2014:5).

The focus of Chapter One pertains to the self-portraits made by HIV-positive women with whom Thomas worked from 2001 to 2002 in Khayelitsha just outside Cape Town. These images formed part of a book project and international exhibition. On the one hand, Thomas notes that the global reach of the self-portraits can be regarded as an indication of the success of the project. On the other hand, the project is also critiqued for rendering invisible aspects of the lives and experiences of the women who produced the self-portraits.

The project sought to show the efficacy of anti-retroviral therapy (ART) and hence framed the self-portraits and their accompanying text as positive HIV stories that 'foreground the hopeful elements of each person's story' (Thomas 2014:6). For Thomas (2014:30), the positive framing of the self-portraits can be argued to act as 'a form of blindness'. To elucidate further, the women's life narratives are appallingly laden and incessantly punctuated by pain, suffering, abuse and violence and should not be subsumed under 'an overarching "message of hope"' (Thomas 2014:18). In this way, the project made the women visible to a global audience but simultaneously made their trauma, suffering and vulnerability to violence invisible. The chapter presents a compelling engagement with the way in which the dominant discourses regarding people living with HIV/AIDS render certain forms of their experiences invisible.

Chapter Two investigates the photographs of Zanele Muholi that depict lesbians who have been subject to corrective rape, as well as the portraits of women who have died of AIDS-related causes. Muholi's photographs bear witness to the various hate crimes, violence and abuses experienced by lesbians. Thomas contends that Muholi invokes tropes of memoralisation in her photographs to counter the state's erasure and exclusion of the experiences of lesbian individuals. Thus Thomas (2014:36) traces how a selection of Muholi's work 'draws on the conventions of memorial photography in order to secure a place for queer subjects within representation'.

Gideon Mendel, a photojournalist who has been documenting HIV/AIDS in Africa, is the focus in Chapter Three. Of particular interest is how Thomas analyses and explores the changes in Mendel's photographic practices. Mendel moved away from documentary photography to rather see himself as an activist conceptual artist. Thomas (2014:83) extols Mendel's work 'as a visual activist and his experiments with the development of tools for visual advocacy [that] also signals the urgency of his desire to draw attention to the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS'.

In Chapter Four, Thomas explores artworks by Diane Victor and Pieter Hugo that relate to HIV/AIDS and mourning. Victor renders her portraits of people living with HIV/AIDS in candle smoke on paper. These portraits are fragile and vulnerable to loss and damage. Consequently, the traits of Victor's medium are significant 'for their ability to convey the precariousness of embodiment and of life itself in the time of AIDS' (Thomas 2014:89). Thomas skilfully explores how Victor's portraits evoke mourning by providing a ghostly presence of the sitter that is subject to disintegration, erasure and disappearance.

Pieter Hugo's series of corpses photographed in the Khayelitsha morgue reveals that 'photography and mourning cannot always be paired' (Thomas 2014:102). Thomas's statement is critically focused on investigating and seeking to identify the individuals who are excluded from being bereaved. Hugo's photographs can circulate as art precisely because the individuals depicted are desubjectivised – 'What I see in seeing the corpses Hugo presents is not the human but the limits that have been drawn around what constitutes that term' (Thomas 2014:100). Thus a major reason that impedes the pairing of the photographs with mourning is that they represent non-subjects.

In Chapters Five and Six, the key engagement is concerned with how the difficulties in mourning the losses of AIDS can be understood in relation to the problem of mourning under apartheid (Thomas 2014:5-6). Two accounts of funerals that take place in the same graveyard are juxtaposed in Chapter Five. The first funeral took place in 1985 and was a mass burial of young people killed by police during apartheid. The funeral was a site of communal mourning and can be seen as a practice that helped strengthen social bonds. The second funeral was that of a young person who died of AIDS. In contrast to the public mourning of the first funeral, the second funeral is marked by the isolation of a grieving mother and the muteness of the community in relation to AIDS deaths. Thomas's (2014:109) enriching analysis of the two funerals is part of a larger argument that 'there is a fundamental relation between mourning and recognition and that failing to mourn the deaths of those who have died of AIDS is intimately bound to an ethical failure to recognize the value of their lives.'

The photographs and artworks of the murdered body of Steve Biko are discussed in Chapter Six in order to illuminate concerns about the trauma of the past and present. In an intriguing and erudite manner, Thomas (2014:8) affirms 'that the compulsion to make visible Biko's corpse is both a sign of our failure to mourn and an injunction to begin the ceaseless work of mourning for that which is irreparable'.

To sum up, Thomas is commended for her exceptional attentiveness to the complexity of visual representations of people living with HIV/AIDS. 'To image and imagine AIDS' (Thomas 2014:102) is to foreground how visual representations are enmeshed, entangled and enclosed in the discourses of 'African AIDS' – a continent that is marred by suffering, disease and death – that work in conjunction with visual codes to desubjectivise the individuals depicted. In so doing, the people living with HIV/AIDS are stereotyped as a monolithic group of people, devoid of a life beyond an HIV-positive status and thus devoid of personhood.

Instead of seeking to replace the negative images of people living with HIV/AIDS with a positive photographic code or schema for representing HIV/AIDS, Thomas (2014:9) has sought to explore how most of the representations lead to 'new or intensified forms of invisibility'. As already indicated, it is the invisibility of the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS that concerns Thomas. The call to focus on the experiences of the individual can be regarded as a tool to counter the dominant discourse of 'African AIDS'. Succinctly put, it is the experiences of each individual that hold the potential to counter the belief that people living with HIV/AIDS constitute an undifferentiated mass. Susie Linfield (2010:98; original emphasis) resolutely states that:

> In thinking about the Holocaust, it is not easy to think of six million corpses; but it is even harder, I would argue, to consider the experience of one young girl in droopy socks walking toward death. This does not mean that the six million are unreal: only that they *become* unreal when we forget the experiences of the individuals who comprised that terrible number.

Here Linfield reminds us that what is at stake in forgetting about the experiences of the individual who died of AIDS is that the deaths of all others may become unreal. The implications of Linfield's statement serve not only to resonate with Thomas's, but also to extol her exceptional work. Moreover, in the context of Linfield's thesis, Thomas's call for an expansive recognition and public undertaking to mourn the losses owing to AIDS is imbued with a level of urgency and importance.

Thomas's book challenges the reader to seek an awareness and understanding of the complex realities, the histories and socio-political contexts that are beyond the frame or border of the visual artwork or photograph of HIV/AIDS. This challenge does not only serve to enrich an analysis and interpretation of the visual representation, but also acts as provocation to awaken the possibility of making visible the experiences of the individual living with HIV/AIDS. The aim of doing so is not to redeem their anguish but rather to grasp or glimpse the possibility of mourning their lives, losses, suffering and death.

REFERENCE

Linfield, S. 2010. *The cruel radiance: Photography and political violence.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.