

in fact, precipitated its political transformation. Far from imparting a feeling of superiority, as Freud and Kris argued, it figures as a fundamentally political gesture displacing the object of ridicule to a sphere beyond the community.<sup>66</sup> In contrast to Gombrich and Kris, who argued for a shift from image magic to representation embodied in caricature, the visual economy of derision examined in this paper seems to undermine any such binary configuration. The imagery of deformation is as much part of the political iconography of the ruler as it is symptomatic of a painstakingly modern political thought. The aggressive drive, said to be curtailed within the aesthetic sphere in caricature, in grotesque armor does not aim at the portrayed, as in images of infamy, but is instead bent back from that sphere at the public as an image of terror, thus revealing the entanglement of representation and image magic.<sup>67</sup> Provoked to extreme reactions such as surprise, shock, fear and amusement, the viewer is paralyzed in awe, his laughter expressing not superiority, but powerlessness.<sup>68</sup> Preserving this fundamentally double-edged character, caricature is part of a visual history of deformation that exerts the power to both exalt and condemn its object, all the more if the one may not be told apart from the other.

66 Cf. Freud, Sigmund: *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten = Gesamelte Werke*, vol. 6. Ed. by Anna Freud. London 1948 [=1905], pp. 160–177; 204–205; 228–229; Kris 1934 (as fn. 1), pp. 458–459; Kris, Ernst: Ego Development and the Comic, in: *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 19 (1938), pp. 77–90, here: pp. 81–83. Freud and Kris based their account of the comic on Bergson's analysis of laughter as a *geste social*: Cf. Bergson, Henri: *Le Rire. Essai sur la Signification du Comique*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Paris 1991 [=1900], pp. 4–7; 14–16; 102–103; 134–136. However, in contrast to Bergson, masks of shame and grotesque helmets indicate less a communal mechanism or the enforcement of a legal order, but a political ritual delineating the confines of the community.

67 For this cf. Bredekamp, Horst: *Repräsentation und Bildmagie der Renaissance als Formproblem*. München 1995, pp. 7–8; 28–29; 65–67.

68 For the late medieval discourse on perception, demonic possession and *perturbatio* cf. Klemm, Tanja: *Bildphysiologie. Wahrnehmung und Körper in Mittelalter und Renaissance*. Berlin 2013, pp. 247–270.

David Freedberg

## From Defamation to Mutilation

Reason of State and Gender Politics in South Africa

Gherardo Ortalli's *La Pittura Infamante* of 1979<sup>1</sup> was of much wider relevance to the modern history of the relationship between politics, imagemaking, and the defamation and mutilation of images than its explicit chronological range might suggest. It inspired large portions of my articulation of the broader political and psychological functions of images in *The Power of Images* of 1979.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I will discuss the relevance of the topic for the broader sociology of images, and allow it to go beyond its usual European orbit. Although Ortalli himself was aware of its applicability to other periods, he explicitly abstained from drawing any broader conclusions, in favor of a strictly historical analysis of the medieval phenomena. He dealt largely with a specific legal use of images, often by the authorities themselves, intended not only to defame the persons they represented, but actually to punish the images, especially when the traitors or criminals they showed were absent.

Ortalli's *immagini infamanti* were thus more of a top-down than a bottom-up phenomenon, whereas this essay may seem to be about the opposite – the even more familiar phenomenon of an image intended to defame from the bottom up by the people themselves, and that is eventually punished and executed, so to speak. But in the end this may be misleading too. It turns out, as we shall see, that such cases were often orchestrated from the top, and that the eventual destruction of the image was in many ways intended to *save* the reputation of the person represented rather than to destroy it.

1 Ortalli, Gherardo: *La Pittura Infamante nei Secoli XIII–XVI*. Rome: Jouvence, 1979.

2 Freedberg, David: *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Although Ortalli was very clear that his book was about a legal practice that was both juridically and penally normative,<sup>3</sup> for the rest his definition applies very much to the particular case I will present. He showed that the aim of the medieval and early Renaissance defamatory image was to strike the human subject in his individual dignity and honor by displaying his image to the derision and disdain of the community. In it he was deprived of the necessary attributes of his social status, and sometimes even of those even more elementary attributes that are particular to every human being (such as the parts of the body, for example). Ortalli noted that “to strike at an individual via his image meant using a symbol for a concrete purpose, following a method that was especially congenial for a still largely illiterate context, and one that was – precisely for this reason – all the more attentive to figurative representation, capable of conveying a rich series of messages and information”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in a society in which the image offered a particular good vehicle for news, information and persuasion – just as ours has become perhaps more than ever before – the defamatory image had a particularly strong effect.

All this offers a remarkable parallel to the South African case I will describe. It offers a striking example of how a single image may stand at the center of a complex array of political, political, legal and aesthetic issues, culminating in iconoclasm. Many similar examples of images that begin as defamatory – or are construed as defamatory – and end in being destroyed, whether spontaneously and illegally, or by design and legally, can be found elsewhere as well.

The context of this case contains a personal trajectory. I had returned to South Africa for the longest period since I’d left as a young political exile in 1966. Since then I had only gone to the funerals of my parents in the early 1980s. The country had totally changed. Although the socio-economic fault-line was as strong as ever – if not stronger – and fell, as it always had, along the major racial divisions, the moral and ethical situation had been transformed. For the most part, people seem to have genuinely changed their views from the old apartheid days. No doubt there were also pragmatic motives for such change, especially amongst the minority white population (3 million vs 30 million) but even so it was clear that people, on both sides, had worked hard to overcome, or even submerge, the old racial prejudices.

3 Ortalli 1979 (as fn 1), pp. 7 and 13.

4 “colpire l’individuo attraverso la sua immagine significava utilizzare il simbolo per giungere ad un fine concreto, seguendo una via molto congeniale ad un ambiente nel complesso ancora largamente illetterato ed analfabeta ma (in parte proprio per ciò) assai attento alla rappresentazione figurata, in grado di cogliere in essa un ricca serie di messaggi ed informazione...”. Ortalli 1979 (as fn 1), p. 25.

When I left South Africa, the main opposition party, the African National Congress (ANC), had gone underground, and its military wing, the *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the Spear of the People, operated largely from outside. The South African Communist Party, which largely supported the ANC, and still more radically revolutionary groups like the Pan African Congress (PAC), also remained deep underground. Even people like myself who were not involved in any dangerously subversive activity were suspected of somehow being Communist operatives in the struggle against apartheid. Censorship was tight; one could publish nothing against the government, and when they weren’t directly banned, texts were widely censored and mutilated by cutting or blotting – both in newspapers and books.

On the other hand, despite many restrictions on them, the visual arts played a significant role in the resistance to apartheid.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to entirely suppress the will to representation, indeed the will to make art, especially in the context of the expression of opposition to perceived or real repression. Hence the relative abundance of strongly political imagery, even in the worst days of censorship of the apartheid era. In a society still with a large proportion of illiteracy, pictures served their traditional functions. Poster art was quite widely available, in the townships and more generally underground. But satirical images were rare, and even mild pornography was strictly banned. The Immorality Acts of 1927 and 1957 (“Sexual Offences Act”), which criminalized sexual association between the races, was rigidly enforced. Whites lived in fear of blacks, of miscegenation, and particularly of the supposedly rampant sexuality long associated with the black Other.

When I returned to South Africa in 2012, all this had changed – or so it seemed. The ANC was in power; *Umkhonto we Sizwe* was legitimized. Mandela was elevated to near-sainthood, the reputation of Bram Fischer, the Afrikaner leader of the Communist Party of South Africa was freed of its stain and rendered heroic. My friend Raymond Suttner, who had been sentenced to twelve years in prison simply for distributing pro-ANC pamphlets, was now writing a book on the imagery of the struggle and of Mandela himself. Howard Smith, a former schoolmate, was running the finances of the Cape Province Communist Party. There were some alarming signs, of course: I remember a chilling conversation with Suttner about another hero of the struggle against apartheid, Ben Turok, who was an ANC member of parliament, and had voted against the proposed Secrecy of Information Act, and was about to be disciplined for not voting with the party. I lamented this breach of democratic right; Suttner sternly said to me

5 See, for example, Newbury, Darren and Albie Sachs: *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria, South Africa 2009; Williamson, Sue: *Resistance Art in South Africa*. New York 1990; Pepper, John: *Art and the End of Apartheid*. Minneapolis 2009.

“you can’t be a member of a Parliamentary caucus and vote against the party. Being a member of the caucus is like being in the army. Making a revolution is not a game.”

The old puritanism, so to speak, was back. Even so, art flourished in the new South Africa – and by this I mean not only the much-acclaimed work of William Kentridge, son of one of Mandela’s lawyers, Sidney Kentridge, but also the myriad lesser figures who produced more radical art. But what now of political art, of politically focused art?

Of course there was much of this too. John Peffer had written a fine book called *Art and the End of Apartheid*, which set out both the achievements and the setbacks to art in the years largely between 1976 and 1994.<sup>6</sup> In it he described several instances of the slippage between censorship and iconoclasm, both before 1994 and in the wake of the first free elections in South African history in that year.<sup>7</sup> Later, an allegedly pornographic work, Mark Hipper’s show about children’s sexuality in Grahamstown in 1998 entitled *Viscera*, had been the target of censorship efforts, to little avail. Deputy Home Affairs minister Lindiwe Sisulu, daughter of revolutionary hero Walter Sisulu, had wanted to ban it on the grounds of child pornography. Already in that year, the CEO of the Film and Publications Board, Nana Makuala, made it clear that Sisulu could advise but not impose decisions. Even in this earlier case, the close link between politics and pornography – or allegations of pornography – remained clear. Perhaps it is everywhere so.

During my return in 2012, I was the guest of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, beautifully located at the center of the Cape’s prosperous wine country. I grew to know Aryan Kaganof who, along with his wife Nicola Deane, had long been the target of potential censorship for their bluntly sexual works, and had for some time had a blog on similar works that were targeted for their alleged pornography. At this point Kaganof was also making films about the struggles in the townships, and distributing cellphones to the people, so as to enable them to make their own films about what was happening: about riots against the police, about necklacing, about tensions between supporters of President Jacob Zuma and his rebellious follower, the firebrand youth leader Julius Malema, who was soon to be expelled from the ANC. The National Gallery of South Africa had gone from being a very traditional place to one that showed advanced art, art often inflected by the history of racism in South Africa. At the Stellenbosch Institute I agreed to give a seminar on my old topic of censorship and iconoclasm, given the history of such phenomena in the country, both before and after apartheid.

6 Peffer 2009, (as fn 5).

7 Ibid., pp. 219–240 (in Peffer’s chapter on censorship and iconoclasm).

At the end of the seminar on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 a group of students and professors at the University asked me to give a similar lecture at the University to the body of their students, for a reason that I would not have anticipated.

The Town Council of Stellenbosch, the Art School and a number of organizations had decided that it would be a good idea to show art in the streets of the town. For the most part, the works weren’t explicitly political at all: on the contrary – they were traditional and relatively subjectless abstract or figurative large sculptures. Some were quite mediocre. Within a few days, a number of these seemingly innocuous works were attacked. A month or so before my talk, for example, three students had tried to push over Angus Taylor’s *Grounded I* and *Grounded II* before they were stopped. What troubled the people who’d heard my first lecture was the fact that many of the Stellenbosch students – who one thought had grown more liberal, in accord with the general liberalization of their racial views – had come out in *support* of the attacks on the public works of art. And they did so for reasons that I had not yet encountered previously in my studies of iconoclasm. They argued that the art was invading public space, that the public had not been asked permission to have works of art put up the streets – and that, in any case, the proper place for works of art was in a museum.

This seemed to me to be sufficient reason – and sufficient context – to agree to talk to the students and their teachers about the history of resistance to images, from censorship through to iconoclasm. I had gone to Cape Town to meet Sue Williamson, who had long been engaged in the artistic struggle against apartheid. There we happened to run into Brett Murray, a well-known protest artist who had produced many ironic, sarcastic and satirical works about the South African situation over the previous two and a half decades. When I met him on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the first waves of an intense artistic and political controversy were just beginning to break. Murray had just painted a portrait of President Zuma, based on Viktor Ivanov’s iconic image of Lenin. It showed the president gazing prophetically to the future, stretching his arm out towards the viewer, and poised to move forward. Painted in a restricted palette of red, black and yellow, it was, by any reckoning a strong image. At first glance it seemed authoritative and leaderly enough for the President of South Africa. But then one saw that his trousers were unzipped, and that his penis hung out from his open fly (fig. 1).

A week later, on May 10<sup>th</sup>, the painting was put on display in Johannesburg in an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery entitled *Hail to the Thief II* (following an earlier 2010 exhibition at the Goodman Gallery entitled *Hail to the Thief*). This was a clear reference to the widespread perception of corruption in the government and at the highest levels of the ANC. As in the case of almost all the *pittura infamanti* described by Ortalli, the work immediately attracted attention. News of it spread widely, and its reproduction was ensured by the use of the social media and of cellphones.





1 | Brett Murray, *The Spear*, acrylic on canvas, 185 × 140 cm, 2012, Johannesburg, Goodman Gallery. (Farbtafel 1)

The fact that people take pictures of pictures with their cellphones even before they actually look at them, that is, even before they devote any significant degree of attention to them is a phenomenon of our new post-digital world. Pre-occupation with disseminating an image now precedes attentive visual interest in it. The German term “handy” is an appropriate one for this prosthetic extension of the eye.



2 | Zapiro, *Go for it, Boss!*, Sunday Times, 9 September 2008.

As for Murray's picture itself, every South African viewer would immediately have grasped its satirical intent in its blatant allusion to the President's exuberant sexuality. Painted just before Zuma's marriage to his sixth wife, the work surely referred to his well-known history of polygamy, seduction and alleged rape. At his 2006 trial for raping the young HIV-positive daughter of an old ANC comrade, Zuma insisted that the sex was consensual and that by showering after sex he had minimised the risk of contracting HIV. In response, the cartoonist Zapiro drew several cartoons in 2008 showing Zuma with a shower growing out of his head that roused ire in official ANC circles (fig. 2). Already in 2011 a lawsuit, precisely for defamation, had been taken by the ANC against his 2008 cartoons showing the *Rape of Lady Justice*, which Zuma had declared to be degrading and offensive to his dignity. Now, hearing of the threats to censor Murray's painting, Zapiro produced a cartoon based on *The Spear*, this time with a shower in place of the penis (fig. 3).

But it was the painting itself that aroused the fiercest controversy. Here was a picture in which efforts to censorship on grounds of reason of state conveniently coincided with efforts to censor what could be – and was – regarded as pornographic. It is not surprising that some of the proponents of this image should have cited Mapplethorpe's famous *Man in a Polyester Suit* of 1980 in its defense. But that work too had been the subject of a famous lawsuit and effort at suppression during the American “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The fact that

<sup>8</sup> The literature is now vast. For an overview, see, for example, Bolton, Richard: *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York 1992; Freedberg, David: “Censorship Revisited,” in: *Res 21* (1992).



3 | Zapiro, Painting of Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed creates an uproar, Sunday Times, 20 May 2012.

the photograph also showed a black man with a super-sized organ was less of an issue than it now became. Rarely had politics and pornography coincided quite so firmly. But here too the precedents are not hard to find, as, for example, in the late twelfth-century reliefs revealing the sexual organs allegedly of Federigo Barbarossa and Beatrice of Burgundy on the Porta Romana and the Porta Tosa in Milan.<sup>9</sup> But here in South Africa the relationship between pornography and reason of state took on a yet further dimension.

Things moved swiftly. No one could have doubted the satirical intention of Murray's painting. As every South African knew, its title alluded to the military wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation"). It was bound to be incendiary, and was immediately perceived as such. The next week, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, the Goodman Gallery received a letter on behalf of the ANC demanding that *The Spear* be taken down, and threatening a lawsuit if not. On May 18, the General Council of the ANC, along with Zuma and several of his children, sought an injunction to have the picture removed from display at the Goodman Gallery and from the website of *City Press*.

While politicians, political spokespersons and ministers both of government and religion insisted that art should not be allowed to insult people with impunity, most artists – of all colors – felt that the ANC's action went too far. Two days later, on May 19, the Goodman Gallery announced that it could not "give up its

9 Even though Ortalli 1979, pp. 67–70 was prudently non-committal about their identification and use – pornographic insult or apotropaia? Of course they could have been both.

right to decide" what art will hang on its walls. "For this reason", they said, they were "opposing the application brought by the ANC and President Zuma for the removal of the art work".<sup>10</sup>

The basis of ANC lawsuit was that it violated the dignity of the President and his office, as well as of the government, the ANC, and all Africans. Zuma's own affidavit claimed that it impugned his dignity "in the eyes of all who see it". He said that "he felt personally offended and violated" and that it showed him as "a philanderer, a womaniser and one with no respect".<sup>11</sup> On May 21<sup>st</sup>, the Film and Publications board sent five classifiers to the show at the Goodman Gallery, and the National Prosecuting Authority announced a case of *crimen injuriae* against Murray. The Minister of Public Works declared that the picture was sadistic, an insult not only to the President but to millions of South Africans. Other cabinet ministers joined in on the attack. The leader of one of South African's largest Baptist churches said that the artist deserved to be stoned to death. Murray had insulted the entire nation. He did not understand, it was said, the culture of the majority of South Africans.<sup>12</sup>

Matters threatened to become dangerous. The ANC's call to ban *City Press* was eerily reminiscent of the old days of the white apartheid regime, in which the banning of people and press formed a regular element of repression and censorship. The Minister of Education called for a boycott of *City Press*. Piles of the newspaper were burned, recalling the bookburnings that so often accompanied censorship in the past, from the Reformation to the Nazi period and after. Such events have frequently been a violent and visually spectacular prelude to iconoclasm.

To many South Africans, and certainly to ordinary visitors to the country (who can hardly have failed to note the controversy), the reaction of the ANC seemed excessive. One might have thought, if one were not well-acquainted with the sensibilities at stake, that the ANC and its supporters in this matter could have ignored the picture entirely, and allowed it to enjoy its temporary satirical notoriety, before letting it sink into the typical oblivion of second-rate works of art (as one might have claimed it was). Or its target (and his allies) could have made some coolly dismissive remark, like Canadian premier Stephen Harper's aides who, when confronted with a picture of their boss showing him in a nude pose with a dog at his feet, simply said that that he was really a cat man. Of course

10 Smith, David: Zuma Sues Art Gallery over 'Offensive' Portrait: Explicit Image Violates His Dignity, Says President; Painting's Supporters Hail 'Democracy at Work', in: *The Guardian*, 22 May, 2012.

11 Ibid.

12 May, Jackie and Andrea Nagel: "Ban the Spear, Stone Its Maker," in: *The Times* (South Africa), 22 May, 2012.

the wags wondered why Zuma and his allies didn't just say that the size of his organ might be construed as a compliment.

But the dignity of the president was impaired. Freedom of artistic expression was at stake. The usual inconsistencies emerged: on the one hand, the politicians said it was hardly worth calling a work of art; on the other, by the very act of attempting to censor it, they acknowledged its power, even in the case of yet another derivative work such as this. The Minister of Justice opined that "if that is called a work of art, it is an insult not only to the President but to any human being".<sup>13</sup> It might indeed have been more sensible for Zuma and the ANC simply to have ignored it, thus showing just how little so derivative a work counted. On the other hand, perhaps its effectiveness was precisely predicated on its derivative-ness, and on its recall of historical examples. Indeed, the ANC might well have made something of the way in which Murray, by appropriation, had exploited earlier images in the struggle against apartheid *against* the very protagonists and inheritors of that struggle. But the image of Zuma stood at one of the most dramatic – though not perhaps unprecedented – intersections of aesthetic and political issues that I know of, certainly in modern times. Let us examine the context more closely.

There were two critical political issues at stake. It was not just a matter of *lèse majesté* or even personal insult. Surely Zuma was above being so sensitive to the implicit satire – for it clearly *was* political satire – of this work. On the other hand, it is true that political figures, however powerful, often turn out to be much more sensitive than most of us would expect to the forms of misrepresentation on which satire depends. But this was not the point. It would have been a rather naïve reaction to the work under the current circumstances. What was at stake was much less obvious, but no less politically critical – indeed much more so.

While freedom of expression was widely regarded as one of the great achievements of the new South African constitution, of which all South Africans were immensely proud, *The Spear* was being put on exhibition in the very weeks preceding the election for the new leader of the ANC – and therefore for the person who would *ipso facto* become the next president of South Africa. Zuma's election to this position was already at risk. He'd disgraced himself in the eyes of many (but not all) for his sexual behavior, as well as for the graver allegations of rape recently dismissed in South African Court. He and his government were seen to be ever more corrupt (that the very title of the Goodman Gallery's exhibition was *Hail to the Thief II*). Malema was constantly threatening Zuma and his allies for not having been radical enough, for living in the lap of luxury while the poor were starving, and so on; the economy was facing a major downturn.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, "Art Attack," in: Cape Times (South Africa), 21 May, 2012.



4 | Women protesting assault on president Zuma's dignity, Foto: Lisa Dewberry.

More than ever the ANC needed to shore up Zuma's position. The emergence of so allegedly insulting an art work thus provided an almost ideal opportunity to drum up support for him. But how?

An obvious pretext emerged within days. At this point, it was not so much pornography but gender politics that became elided with reason of state. Although the public emphasis was on the assault on the President's dignity (which many claimed, implicitly or explicitly, should trump freedom of expression), what better way to gain support for Zuma than to insert this case into the whole history of racist prejudices about black male sexuality? A picture such as this, it was claimed, was clearly predicated on the age-old clichés about the sexuality of blacks – not just about the superior sexual prowess of black men, but also about their sexuality as indices of their primitive and barbaric status, of their separation from the restraints demanded by culture. Such prejudices were of course ingrained in the history of Africa.

The case was set underway, and so were the protests. These were well orchestrated and often large. In this way, the controversy went beyond a satire on the President's well-known sexual behavior and an alleged affront to his official and personal dignity. The picture was turned into a colonialist, racist defamation of all black people – "a violation of the black body by racist South Africans over the



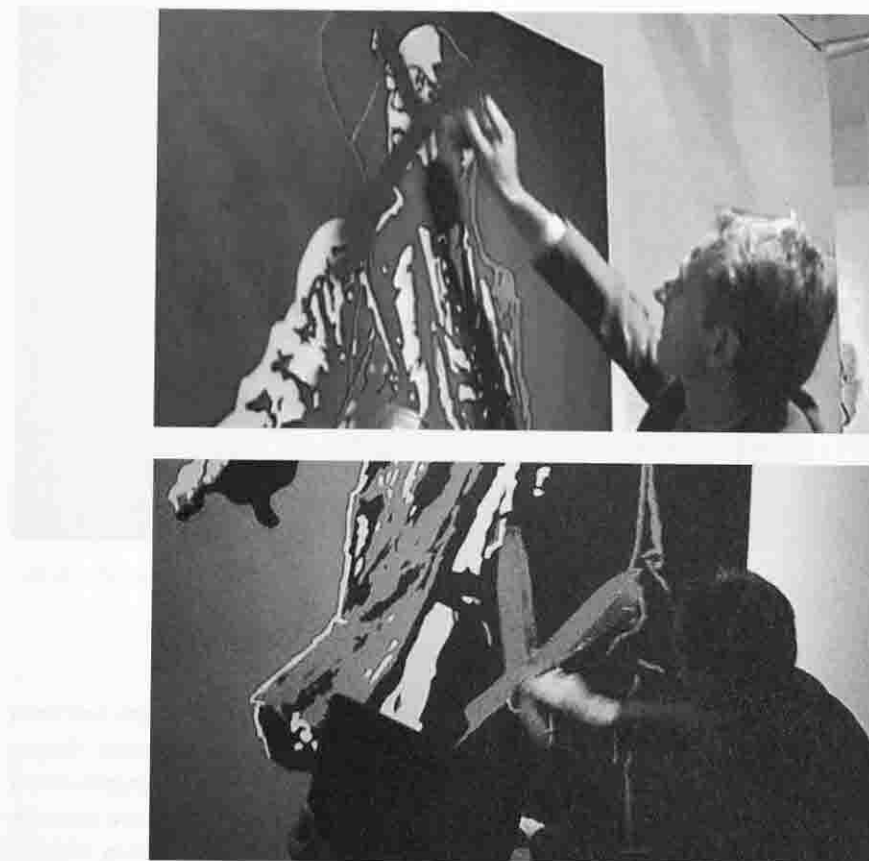
centuries,” added the Minister of Education.<sup>14</sup> Thousands appeared before the courts with posters to this effect. Brett Murray, once a fierce critic of the apartheid regime, was demonized as a racist. It was said that no white man would ever be portrayed that way. Freedom of expression, newly-enshrined in South Africa’s constitution, had to give way to respect for the president (even though the constitution provides for no guarantee of his dignity), or for black culture (where the nude male organ was always covered, and where respect for one’s parents excluded such pornographic forms of representation, and so on). What was remarkable was the fact that large numbers of women protested against the picture as well (fig. 6), in favor, in other words, of the lawsuit – although a number of black women to whom I spoke felt that the satire was entirely merited, and that it was high time that the President’s behavior be exposed for what it was: fundamentally sexist and disrespectful of women.

But their voices were lost in the commotion, and in the ways in which the picture was instrumentalized by the ANC. Its lawsuit became “a matter of great national importance”, as one of the judges on the case herself declared – just as the ministers of religion and politics had already anticipated when they turned the insult to Zuma into an insult to an entire nation.<sup>15</sup> Once more a painting stood for a vast political and sexual issue.

Indeed, when I told Howard Smith, for example, of my dismay at the way in which the picture was being used for political purposes, at how the efforts to censor it seemed at odds with the new constitution, he grew angry. When I suggested that what to me seemed an all too justifiable satire of Zuma’s behavior surely did not constitute an insult to an entire race (though I suppose he could have said that it used a terrible cliché to make that insult), he dismissed my proposal as either racist itself, or as somehow buying into the whole ancient prejudice of kaffir sexuality, or simply being insensitive to the racial divide which the picture threatened to open up again. On 21 May, the columnist Gillian Schutte wrote that “The point is that this is not the president’s penis. It is the grotesquely huge Black male ‘dick-ness’ that resides somewhere in the deep collective consciousness of the White psyche – a primal and savage ‘dick-ness’ that was entrenched about 500 years ago as a White supremacist plot to control the world of women and racism. ... [it suggests that] this, is the essential ‘nature’ of the Black man, because, although in a suit, the unzipped dick confirms his failure to gain access to ‘cul-

14 Merten, Marianne: “Cosatu Says ‘Yes’ to Call to Boycott Spear ‘Purveyors,’” in: *The Star* (South Africa), 26 May, 2012.

15 England, Andrew: “Painting of Zuma Defaced as Anger Rises; South Africa,” in: *Financial Times*, 23 May, 2012.

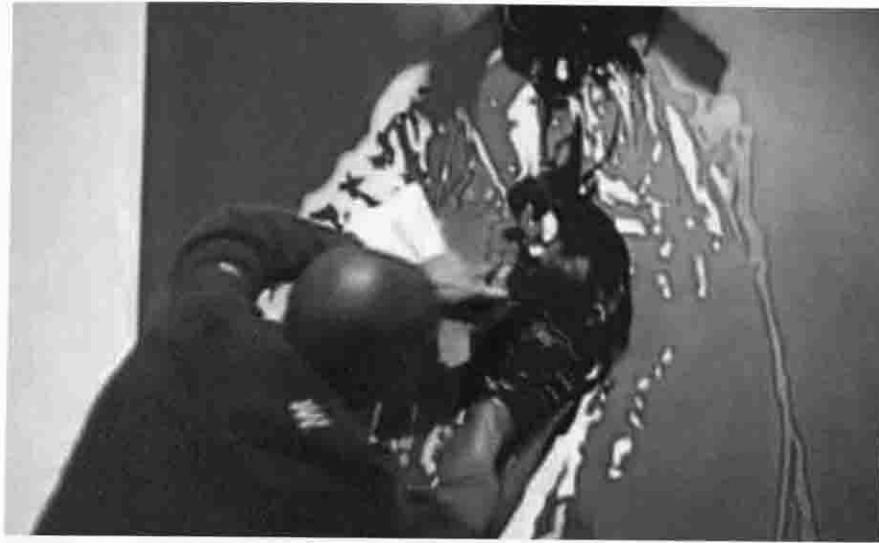


5, 6 | Barend la Grange defacing Murrays *The Spear* at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 23 May 2012, Iman Rappetti/Enews via AP.

ture”.<sup>16</sup> Many old friends wrote to me to this effect. Cabinet members and then many others referred to the well-known case of Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot woman who was exhibited in London and Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century for her steatopygia,<sup>17</sup> and suggested that Zuma was being treated in the same way.

16 Schutte, Gillian: “The President’s Penis,” 21 May, 2012, see the website of The South African Civil Society Information Service: <http://sacsis.org.za/s/story.php?s=1302> (last accessed: 24 April 2015).

17 For a recent guide to the now-large bibliography, see Crais, Clifton C. and Pamela Scully: *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. Princeton 2009.

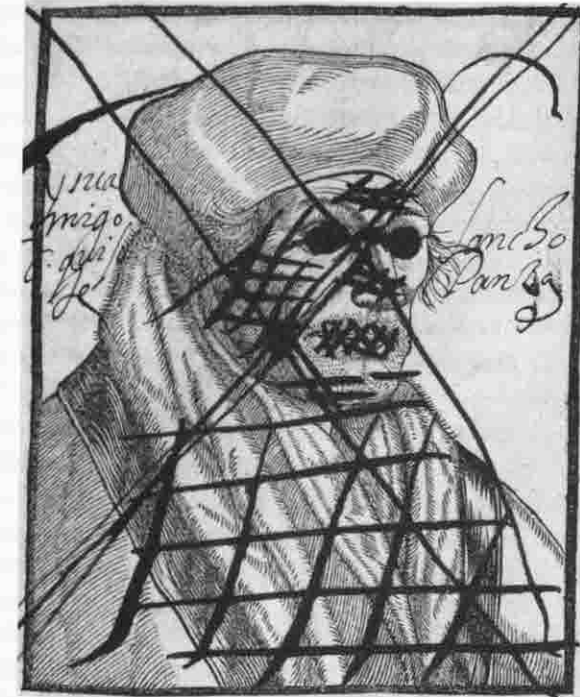


7 | Louie Mabokela defacing Murray's *The Spear* at the Goodman Gallery, 23 May 2012, film-still of e-tv, News Channel.

I was put in my place. My sense that the uproar about the picture had been stirred up simply as a pre-election ploy was called seriously into question. I began to have doubts whether I too was not just falling into some white bourgeois set of assumptions, oblivious to the deep insult offered by a work that drew on such ancient prejudices. But it seemed hard not to acknowledge the ways in which a picture was being exploited for blunt political purposes.

I called Suttner's wife Nomboniso Gasa, who had been Chair of the South African Gender Commission before being fired by Zuma and his henchmen for being corrupt herself; and she affirmed precisely what had worried me from the outset. Despite all the pride in the new national Constitution, this was precisely the time when Zuma and the ANC were attempting to reinstitute the old tribal courts. It was a move that effectively called into question the authority of the new Constitution, and the notion of equal rights for all citizens of a united and multi-racial South Africa. In other words, it called into question the authority of the very national courts intended to execute the Constitution. The matter was of concern to many, not least because it would be detrimental to the status of women. The tribal courts would enact ancient laws that regarded women as chattels of their husbands, reenact old dowry systems, and render women more subject to male decisionmaking in the domestic and property spheres – at least.

So it was here too, very precisely, that reason of state trumped sexual politics, that the reclamation of gender rights clashed with a radical commitment to



8 | Woodcut of Erasmus in a censored copy of Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia universalis* (Basel: Heinrich Petri 1550), Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, p. 130.

autochthonous political claims – claims that were paradoxically predicated on the rejection of the very racist views on which the preceding society depended. The irony was supreme, the paradox damaging, at least to the rights of women. But speaking with people like Nomboniso reassured me that the need to repair old racist insults should not be and need not be by way of a self-serving interpretations of the ways in which a clearly satirical picture encapsulated ancient sexual slanders.

But of course the court case – and the protests – continued. The old sexual clichés about race were exploited to reinforce them. ANC Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe told supporters outside the court that the fight would have to be won in the streets.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Grootes, Stephen: "Spear Rhetoric Puts 'Us' and 'Them' Back in the Picture," in: *Business Day* (South Africa), 1 June, 2012.



On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012, the day after Gillian Schutte's piece appeared, I gave my lecture to the Stellenbosch University students. It was entitled "Iconoclasm Past and Present". The auditorium was packed. My aim was to speak, as requested, about the backgrounds to the recent attacks on public art in the streets of Stellenbosch. But as my timeline will have made clear, between the invitation and the event, the whole Zuma episode had exploded. By then I had the strong feeling that there was a danger, as indeed so often in the past, that efforts at censorship could erupt into iconoclasm. The matter of freedom of expression had receded ever more into the background as the point was made, ever more heatedly, that if art was insulting, it should not be tolerated. In fact, as I'd long ago written in *The Power of Images*, censorship, in its efforts to mutilate, erase, or destroy offensive images, was often actually tantamount to iconoclasm.<sup>19</sup>

At the very moment I sat down, a student jumped up, waving her cellphone saying that just as I was speaking Brett Murray's painting had been attacked and mutilated.

It had been a quiet morning at the Gallery when a white man in an elegant black suit entered the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, calmly took out a paintbrush and a small pot of red paint, and put a giant cross, first over Zuma's penis and another over his face (figs. 5–6). A staff member asked him what he was doing. It all seemed to happen in slow, even dignified and deliberate motion. As a certain air of puzzlement rather than agitation settled over the scene, a much younger black man came in, and before anyone could react, was daubing heavy black paint over the picture (fig. 7). Whereas the white man was not manhandled – a fact noted swiftly enough – security guards moved in, handcuffed the black man, and whipped him upside down – much rougher treatment than had just been meted out to the white assailant, who was then arrested as well.

Both were let out on bail soon enough. Barend La Grange, a 58 year-old Afrikaner, stated that it was important that a white man show resistance to the racism implied by the picture, while Louie Mabokela, a young taxi-driver from Limpopo said that he came from an artistic family and had simply wanted to see the picture.<sup>20</sup> At that point, many of the opponents of the picture jumped on the convenient bandwagon of declaring that something so pornographic could not possibly constitute art, and that the work thus merited its fate – the second oldest iconoclastic cry of all.

The first, of course, is embodied both in the Second Commandment of the Jewish and Christian religions, and in the Islamic Hadith – namely that one

19 Freedberg, David: *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago 1989.

20 Maphumulo, Solly: "Strangers Who Ruined Portrait; 2 Men, Red Paint, Black Paint... And Zuma Vanishes," in: *The Star* (South Africa), 24 May, 2012.

should not have images at all. Imagemaking is the basic prerogative of God. Mere humans should not make them at all – in the Jewish and Christian case because they are idolatrous (any figurative image risks being worshipped, especially dangerous if the God is a jealous one), in the Islamic case because only God is capable of investing images (including human beings, poorer images of himself) with life and liveliness. Such positions are not just theological. They encapsulate in the most profound of ways the ultimate basis for the fear of images: that they are somehow alive, that they contain within them a force, a form of vitality, that transcends their pure materiality. From the earliest times on, one of the fundamental iconoclastic motivations is to make as clear as possible that something that seems lively or, indeed, a living representative of what is shown in an image, is nothing more than a form on a piece of wood or stone. One destroys it – or erases its eyes, or removes its limbs – to show that it is powerless, that it cannot see or move or affect us in any of the ways that sight or movement imply.

The notion that images are nothing more than pieces of wood and stone was a consistent anti-image argument during the great periods of Byzantine iconoclasm in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and recurred with great vehemence during the Protestant revolution – particularly in its Calvinist form – during the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But another version of the perception that images are somehow alive, despite the fact of representation, had manifested itself even earlier on. The notion of the presence of the represented in the representation itself is one of the oldest of all. The ancient Romans held it as a matter of political doctrine that where the image of the Emperor was, there too was the Emperor. You had to respect the image of the Emperor as if the Emperor himself were actually present. It is almost as if the opponents of Brett Murray's picture clung to this ancient doctrine, at the same as somehow believing that a merely satirical representation was in fact a breathing and pornographic one.

Such suspicions about the status of images also underlay medieval concerns about grotesques and other forms of imagery regarded as inappropriate; but it was during the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation that they reached fever-pitch, and that censorship and iconoclasm merged most often. For example, both official and amateur censors often crossed out the eyes or whole face of Erasmus (fig. 8), the wisest of religious thinkers during the sixteenth century, on the grounds that he was either too Protestant or too Catholic (in fact, despite his insistence on reform and change within the official church, he never went over to the other side). The Index of Prohibited Books was set up. It banned unapproved literature or recommended censorship. Bookburnings followed. Images too were banned. Throughout Europe attacks were launched on images because they were deemed either idolatrous, or too licentious, or both. (Already in the eighth century, Pope Gregory the Great had the best classical



9 | Brett Murray, *The Spear* (defaced), acrylic on canvas, 185 × 140 cm, 2012, Johannesburg, Goodman Gallery.

statues thrown into the Tiber, either because they were the idolatrous gods of pagan antiquity, or because they were too licentious – usually nude statues of female gods, of course). The censors of those times would have approved of the various South African calls for a boycott – if not the destruction – of potentially insulting images, as well of the calls for a boycott of the *City Press*. The parallels with past cases of censorship, and the censorship that leads directly to iconoclasm, could not be more striking. And as so often in earlier episodes, iconoclasm reflects – or masks – major cultural divides.

The varieties of iconoclasm are many, the motives disparate, but all in one way or another related to the *fear* of the body in the image, the body that somehow lurks in representation. This lies at the basis of the political fear of

images as well as the sexual one (the image is not just invested with life, but with carnality – especially but not only in the case of images of women). In the French Revolution the images of the old order were torn down. They showed the once vivid but now dead tokens of the monarchy; the same for the destruction of the statues of the Tsars during the Russian Revolution. The power of the rulers went along with their images. At the far end of that revolution, the overturning of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 was accompanied everywhere by the overturning of the images of Stalin and Lenin; the same for the statues of Mao in China. In fact, the modern instances can easily be multiplied, from the pulling down of the statues of the Shah of Iran in 1979 to those of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. Two years earlier the great Buddhas of Bamiyan, statues that in the eyes of the Taliban were idolatrous representatives of another religion, had been blown up.<sup>21</sup> Then there are what seem to be purely pathological assaults on images such as those on Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* in Amsterdam in 1975, the great Rembrandts in Kassel in 1977, and the 1982 attack on Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue IV*.<sup>22</sup> In the latter case, however, it does seem as if the title alone may have provoked the iconoclast to show that he was precisely *not* afraid (indeed he attacked the picture with the very bar used to keep visitors at a distance, as if to demonstrate that no one, least of all he, need to be afraid of a mere painting – and that that if one hit it, it wouldn't strike back).

In all of this motives are never really clear – as little as in the case of the mutilation of *The Spear*. Often the motive is to draw attention to oneself or to a political cause. Here the political may well overlap with the pathological, as well as the sexual. When Mary Richardson attacked Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* in 1914 she declared that her aim was to draw attention to Mrs. Pankhurst and her suffragist cause; many years later she said that she did not like the way male viewers

21 Some of the Mullahs offered the argument that the images were idolatrous; others acknowledged that they had been blown up for the sake of publicizing the Taliban cause. In the case of the attacks by the Islamic State (ISIS) on the great early sculptures in Nimrud, Mosul and elsewhere in late 2014 and early 2015, one finds the same conflation of motivations and pretexts. The attacks, recorded on video, are accompanied by commentaries saying that the idolatrous monuments of the past must come down; but at the same time it is clear that the element of publicity for the Islamic State cause plays a possibly even more significant role. ISIS has shown itself to be all too aware of the propagandistic use of images of terror and destruction. Their videos of the destruction of ancient art are calculated – even staged – to offer the maximum of visual and emotional effect. These are issues I raise in a forthcoming survey of recent iconoclasm in the Middle East entitled “Iconoclasm in the Age of Digitization”.

22 For all these examples, see Freedberg, David: *Iconoclasts and Their Motives*, Gerson Lecture. Maarssen Montclair, N.J. 1985.

“gaped at it all day long”.<sup>23</sup> This entanglement of motives for an attack on an image may well also have prevailed in the case of *The Spear* – but perhaps even more complicatedly so.

Every powerful image rouses deep emotions. It does so not just because of what or whom it symbolizes, but because of the degree to which it involves the viewer’s body and feelings. It draws tears easily. The fact that the ANC’s lawyer burst into tears on the first day of the hearing against the picture was surely not only attributable to the judicial tensions of the day or the legal complexities of the case.

In the case of *The Spear of Africa*, just as so often in the past, there was a conflation – not just a convergence – of censorship and iconoclasm. But there was a further conflation, too: of the effort to mutilate or destroy the image and execution of the body represented on the image, as in the case of the *immagini infamanti*. When one couldn’t find the traitor, or one wanted to publicly defame his image, one actually executed his representation, as in the case of the images that were hung and decapitated outside the Bargello in Florence for several centuries, or the famous six drawings of the traitorous *capitani* of 1530 by Andrea del Sarto.

The ways in which the defamatory images of Zuma were attacked also raised an age-old question about iconoclasm itself, that of the degree to which such attacks are spontaneous or organized. At first sight the attacks in the Goodman Gallery seemed spontaneous. “It was spontaneous on both their parts. They both just happened to be here at the same time”, said Mabokela’s lawyer.<sup>24</sup> In a useful inversion of the usual presuppositions, the white man said he did it out of shame for the nation’s history of racism; the black man said he did it because it wasn’t really art at all.

But how true were these expressed motivations? Indeed, it all seemed too good to be true. As we now know, very often the motives, both personal and collective, of iconoclasts is to draw attention to themselves, or to the work itself, by attacking it. It is often, as I wrote in *Iconoclasts and their Motives*, a desire for publicity – and in this case, if not a desire for publicity for the perpetrator, then surely a desire to publicize the ANC, the case for Zuma and so on – all by way of emphasizing that in South Africa this was, after all, a racist image.

We may well be inclined to think that the fact that these two attacks occurred more or less simultaneously was not coincidental. One of the most commented upon aspects of the attack was the fact that the TV cameras were on throughout, and showed the whole episode happening as if in slow motion. For what seemed like an age, no one seemed to interfere with these aggressive acts at all. The racial

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Mapumulo 2012 (as fn 20).

implications of the attack on this image were immediately obvious. And the TV cameras that kept rolling made very clear the different treatments of black and white.

The issue of whether an assault on an image (or group of images) is spontaneous or organized, or whether the individuals who seem to be solely motivated by hostility to the image are in fact set up to attack it, is as old as iconoclasm itself. When Protestant rioters stormed into Antwerp cathedral on the night of August 21, 1566, the fury and destruction seem to be a spontaneous outburst of popular anger against images. For years historians debated whether the fury was indeed spontaneous or not; but it is now generally agreed that the apparent spontaneity of the attacks was orchestrated and planned by astute political figures who knew how to mobilize popular support on their side.<sup>25</sup> After all, the basic fears and emotions images so often arouse are easily aligned, as I’ve tried to suggest, with political motives.

In 2003 I wrote an article for the *Wall Street Journal* about the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad.<sup>26</sup> In it I jumped to a conclusion that will not surprise readers. I wrote about the event in terms of popular hostility towards the symbol of a hated ruler. I described the ways in which even a mute image of wood and stone (as the Reformation iconoclasts always referred to images of art) could be insulted as if it were a living body, as if the hated leader were somehow inherent in it; and that by destroying it one somehow destroyed the leader himself.

Then I discovered that the whole event had been orchestrated by the US Marines. I had failed to learn from my own study of older episodes of hostility to images that such episodes are not always the product of spontaneous outbursts of rage.

So too in the case of *The Spear*. In this instance, however, the picture was attacked not because it showed a hated leader, but because it supposedly insulted him and the whole nation he represented, indeed the whole race of blacks. In any event, whether the attacks were spontaneous or organized, the entire brouhaha had substantial benefits for a leader who was losing political traction. No wonder that the actions of the iconoclasts should here too have met with considerable approval.

One can debate at length the degree to which freedom of expression should give way to respect for human dignity; whether presidential dignity is more or less fragile than ordinary human dignity; at what point a justified satire on the

<sup>25</sup> Freedberg, David: *Iconoclasm and Painting in the Revolt of the Netherlands 1566–1609*. New York and London, 1988.

<sup>26</sup> Freedberg, David: “*Damnatio Memoriae: Why Mobs Pull Down Statues*,” in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 April, 2003.



president's sexual history turns into the perpetuation of ancient racist and colonial prejudices; whether the best way to overcome such prejudice is to acknowledge how little sense it has in the modern world, and therefore to ignore it; whether a work of art should be suppressed in the interests of managing a certain degree of social unrest; whether *City News* editor Ferial Haffajee was justified in the light of the interests of public safety and the fear that the work (however unjustifiably) fed into ancient prejudices that still festered, in suppressing a work that she had for some time supported.

What is clear is that the fate of *The Spear* forms part of a long history of fear and antipathy to images, and testifies to an acknowledgement of their powers. The age-old emotions it stirred up mobilized thousands of people. But in a reversal of the old view that an assault on an image is an assault on the person it represents, the metaphorical attack on Zuma (in the form of a painting) led to an attack on the painting itself.

For a while the Goodman gallery closed its doors, but the lawsuit proceeded. On almost the first day, when the ANC's advocate burst into tears as he set out the ANC case. It was as if to give the impression that the racial dimension not only of the picture, but also the pressures of having a White and Indian judge preside, were too much for him).

At around this stage, the Committee of Young Communists announced that the defacing of the portrait was people's justice, and that the attackers should be awarded the Order of *Ikhamanga*, usually assigned to excellence in the arts, journalism and sport, for bravery.

Slowly both *City Press* and the Gallery gave way. The editor of the paper Ferial Haffajee apologized to one of Zuma's daughters, and removed the picture from the paper's website. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the day I left South Africa, Haffajee wrote "*The Spear* is down. Out of care and as an olive branch to play a small role in helping turn around a tough moment, I have decided to take down the image." The power of images could hardly have been more clearly manifest. "When we published an art review which featured *The Spear* as one image, I could not have anticipated that it would snowball into a moment of such absolute rage and pain," Haffajee acknowledged.<sup>27</sup>

One can debate at length whether Haffajee, in suppressing a work that she had for some time supported, was actually justified in her argument about the interests of public safety and about the ways in which the work (however unjustifiably) fed into ancient prejudices that still festered. But at least she acknowledged that "of course, the image is coming down from fear too... The atmosphere

27 Haffajee's original apology is no longer available on the City Press website, but is quoted in several sources, such as Waal, Mandy de: "City Press Buckles to ANC Demands--and Threats," in: Daily Maverick (South Africa), 29 May, 2012.

is like a tinderbox: City Press copies went up in flames on Saturday. I don't want any more newspapers burnt in anger. My colleague has been removed from a huge trade union congress and prevented from reporting". And so on.

The Secretary-General of the ANC and the owner of the Gallery met to announce that the ANC would withdraw its case if the Gallery agreed not to display *The Spear* any longer.

A press conference was held on May 30, at which the Goodman Gallery and the ANC announced a deal that would include the removal of the painting from the gallery's website as well. The ANC case against the Gallery and the call for a boycott of *City Press* was dropped. The Gallery denied that it had agreed to remove the image.

Also on May 30, The Film and Publications Board rejected all jurisdictional arguments and age-rated the picture to 16+.

The defamation case against Zapiro sputtered on for a few more months. On October 17, damages were reduced from the initial claim of R5million to R100,000; on October 24, five days before the trial in the Johannesburg High Court was to begin, all charges were dropped. The only requirement was that his cartoon should be accompanied by an advisory warning. An appeal is under way.

"The row has been good for business at the gallery" noted *The Guardian*.<sup>28</sup> How much the value of the work rises, even in its damaged state, remains to be seen.

I was disappointed. I had my old South African feeling: surely there was more muscle to the resistance than this.

The picture is not seeable anymore in its earlier state. When I was asked to write an article on the destruction of the painting in the leading - liberal - South African art journal, I was not allowed to publish the original version of the picture. The kind of resistance embodied in the picture collapsed - a huge disappointment to many of us.

Murray has been consigned to relative oblivion, either - despite his history of protest - as a racist, or as plagiarist, rather than an appropriator of an old image for satirical purposes. In the light of modern critical standards this seems a harsh conclusion. Politics have won out over the art.

Indeed when I told another old schoolmate of mine, now resident in the US, about the case, he was impatient. It was unimportant, he averred, in comparison with the much larger political issues facing South Africa today - but how wrong he was! This was a picture that had mobilized the masses in protest against it, that had mobilized the ordinary intelligentsia in its favor on the grounds of freedom of

28 Smith, David: "Jacob Zuma Goes to Court over Painting Depicting His Genitals," in: *The Guardian*, 21 May, 2012.

expression and the new South African Constitution (of which everyone was so proud), that mobilized the sophisticated intelligentsia against it again. It showed that the mere picture of something could be felt as offensive, that the president, like the Emperor, or even Christ himself, was somehow present in his picture, and therefore liable to personal insult, just as in the old cases of *damnatio memoriae* and the *immagini infamanti*, so often used as a stand-in for the absent criminal or traitor. The ANC rightly realized that the picture had to be taken down from the web because otherwise it would be reproduced *ad infinitum*. And it demonstrated, quite contrary to what Ortalli had written in that silent period between the two great reproductive revolutions – the flourishing of photography and the arrival of the digital revolution in the media – that the very fact of the possibility of instant reproduction had made the aura of images all the more frightening to the masses, and all the more exploitable and capable of instrumentalization by the elite, at the expense of the very people whose cause was recognized by the work. Such are the many lessons – or rather, just some – of the remarkable case of *The Spear of Africa*.

Hana Gründler

## „Ein Kampf mit der Sicht“

Antlitz, Kunst und Erhabenes bei Emmanuel Levinas

Der litauisch-französische Philosoph Emmanuel Levinas war trotz der Vielfalt der Themen und der faszinierenden Breite und Tiefe seines Schaffens, das vom Alltäglichen bis zu den Grenzerfahrungen der Existenz rangierte, zeit seines Lebens bemüht, der Überzeugung Ausdruck zu verleihen, dass die Ethik und nicht die Metaphysik die erste Philosophie sei.<sup>1</sup> Dieses absolute Primat des Ethischen, das Betonen der ethischen Verantwortung, die jeder von uns gegenüber dem Leid des Anderen hat, stellt den unhintergehbaren Kern seines Philosophierens dar.<sup>2</sup> Die Kunst hingegen, scheint in seinem Werk eher ein Schattendasein zu führen, und wenn sie doch zur Sprache gebracht wird, dann, so der geläufige Tenor, in ihrer ganzen Negativität und vor allem als etwas, das dem Ethischen entgegengesetzt sei. In Levinas' Schriften finden sich in der Tat viele Passagen, in denen der Philosoph eine kritische, zum Teil gezielt polemische Position an den Tag legt, wenn er sich zu Fragen des Schönen, der (plastischen) Form oder der bildnerischen Repräsentation äussert.<sup>3</sup> Wenn im Folgenden dennoch der Versuch

- 1 In einem Gespräch mit Philippe Nemo betont Levinas ausdrücklich: „Die Erste Philosophie ist eine Ethik.“ Levinas, Emmanuel: Ethik und Unendliches. Gespräche mit Philippe Nemo. Wien 1986, S. 59. Im Folgenden zitiert als EU.
- 2 Wer hauptsächlich deontologische oder utilitaristische Ansätze der Ethik vertritt, wird Schwierigkeiten haben, Levinas' Position, die primär auf der Untersuchung der Relation des Von-Angesicht-zu-Angesicht beruht, als Ethik zu definieren.
- 3 So etwa in seiner frühen Schrift *Die Wirklichkeit und ihr Schatten*. Vgl. hierzu Levinas, Emmanuel: La réalité et son ombre, in: *Les temps modernes* 38 (1948/1949), S. 771–789; Levinas, Emmanuel: Die Wirklichkeit und ihr Schatten, in: *Die Unvorhersehbarkeiten der Geschichte*. Hg. von Alwin Letzkus. Freiburg und München 2006, S. 105–124. Die seit der Antike immer wieder problematisierte Interdependenz des Schönen und des Guten sowie – aus epistemologischer Perspektive – des Wahren stellt Levinas in *Die Wirklichkeit und ihr Schatten* radikal in Frage. Vielmehr