

# UTOPIA AS A PERSPECTIVE:

Reading historical strata  
in Guy Tillim's documentary photo essay Jo'burg series

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## **i. Introduction**

This essay examines the Jo'burg series by Guy Tillim (1962-) which represents a post-apartheid cityscape between 2003 and 2007. Born in Johannesburg in 1962, Guy Tillim started his professional career in 1986 and joined Afrapix, a collective photo agency strongly engaged with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. He also worked for Reuters from 1986 to 1988 and then for Agence France Presse from 1993 to 1994. He has received numerous awards including Prix SCAM (2002), Higashikawa Overseas Photographer Award (2003), Daimler Chrysler Award for South African photography (2004) and Leica Oskar Barnack Award for his Jo'burg series. In addition, his works were exhibited in both South Africa and Europe. The Jo'burg series highlights Tillim's critical approach to documentary photography in terms of subject matter, format and the portrayal of people. This series was chosen as an object of analysis out of other important works by equally significant South African photographers, such as Ernest Cole (1940-1990), Omar Badsha (1945-), David Goldblatt (1930-) and Santu Mofokeng (1956-) since the Jo'burg series enables us to follow the historical development of South African photography. Here, the utopian theory originally re-conceptualized by German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and the sociological perspective of Ruth Levitas who extended Bloch's concept of utopia is applied to documentary photography to illustrate the dialectical relationship between photography and society and the Jo'burg series to examine how post-apartheid Johannesburg was imagined/represented by Guy Tillim.

First, the concept of utopia and the relation between the concept and documentary photography is described. Second, the development of 'documentary photography' in South Africa during the years of apartheid regime, approximately from the 1950s to 1990s, is explored to trace how the formal and conceptual style of Guy's photography have been informed by his involvement in a collective photojournalists' association, Afrapix. Third, Tillim's critical approach to the history of photography and South Africa as well as the meaning of built environment as social fabric is examined with accounts of the social context and historical development of the city of Johannesburg.

❖ 1 For Guy Tillim's biography refer to <http://www.africansuccess.org/visuFiche.php?id=201&lang=en>  
(Viewed on December 1st, 2013)

❖2 Garb, Tamar (ed.). *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2011, p.8.

❖3 For example, "Utopia/Dystopia: Construction and Destruction in Photography and Collage" which features photo montage and collage was held at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2012. Similarly, Whitechapel Gallery in London held a group show, "The Sprit of Utopia", in 2013.

❖4 Jalving, Camilla. 'Utopian in the Eye of the Beholder: A Theoretical Perspective.' In Christian Gether. Et al. (eds.), *Utopia & Contemporary Art*. Exh. cat., Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag in association with Arken Museum of Modern Art, 2012, p.30.

❖5 Original title of the book is *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia*.

❖6 Nakamori, Yasufumi, Et al. (eds.). 'Imagined Worlds: Dialectical Compositions in Photography and Collage.' In *Utopia/Dystopia: Construction and Destruction in Photography and Collage*. Exh. cat., Houston: Yale University Press in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2012, p.33.

❖7 Jalving, *op. cit.*, p.30.

❖8 Jameson, Fredric. *Archeology of the Future: Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005. xi.

❖9 Noble, Richard (ed.). 'Introduction: the Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art.' In *Utopias*. Exh. cat., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press in association with the Whitechapel Gallery, 2009, pp.12-19.

❖10 Jalving, *op. cit.*, p.30.

❖11 *ibid.*, p.31.

❖12 Bloch, Ernst. *The Principal of Hope*, Translated by Neville Plaice et al. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, p.7; p.12.

This essay seeks to elucidate not only the crucial role which South African photographers played during the years of anti-apartheid movement but also the way in which Guy Tillim "questioned, manipulated and revived its visual codes and blended them with contemporary concerns, complex and fundamental issues of race, society, gender, identity," all of which has been a significant element in forming the subjectivity of photographers today.

## 2. Utopian Theory

The term of utopia/dystopia is being used with increasing frequency in contemporary art practice. In particular, the concept of utopia propounded by German philosopher Ernst Bloch, due to its comprehensive principles, provides us with an "interpretative lens; that is, as a way of reading work and praxis that emphasized the performative and society-changing potential art." By the same token, it grants us to re-examine not only the dispositions of documentary photography that aims at social reform, but also the documentary photographs in the Jo'burg series by Guy Tillim.

The term of utopia was introduced by Thomas More (1478-1535) in his book *Utopia* (1516). More described utopia as *ou topos* by combining the ancient Greek word *topos* (place) and the prefix *u* (no) and/or *eu* (well), which literally means 'no place', the place does not exist, and/or 'place of well-being.' The concept of utopia has since traveled through various disciplines, historical periods, and genres, the meaning of the term shifts contingent on the area of knowledge and praxis. In the context of early twentieth-century political revolution, utopianism was often conceived by Marxist thinkers as "a driving force of political shift from capitalism to socialism/communism" with the lack of any conception of agency or political strategy. During the Cold War, for instance, utopianism was thought of as analogous to Stalinism. In a similar manner, modernism's master plans such as Le Corbusier (1887-1965)'s rational urban planning projects and Oscar Neimeyer (1907-2012)'s modernist architecture for urban planning of Brasilia met harsh criticism as utopian idealism that does not have root in any existing social issues. Thus, utopia, initially regarded as a geographical location, has evolved into "more abstract concept as a means of seeing, thinking, and acting."

Further, Ernst Bloch re-conceptualized utopia as a more comprehensive principle in his publications *The Spirit of Utopia* (1921) and three-volume work *The Principal of Hope* (1954-1959). For Bloch, utopia is not simply a literary genre. He maintains that "utopia is the impulse that flows through any future-oriented expression in our lives, both in society and in culture in general: from daydreams to fairytales, travel accounts, dance, film, theater, architecture, painting, and poetry." Countering the Marxist's concept of utopia, he contends that utopia is not merely a desire for drastic social change without considering an existing social condition. Instead, Bloch argues that

‘utopia’ is a more concrete aspiration firmly rooted in an objective realization of the contradictions in a reality rather than an abstract, radical and unreasonable desire. To put it differently, “utopian impulse” as an expression of an “anticipatory consciousness,” which is immanent in human nature, derives from man’s capacity to detect issues in our immediate environment, “the just lived moment,” as a source of inspiration. However, this “anticipatory consciousness” as an innate part of human nature was rejected by sociologist Ruth Levitas (1949-), who instead proposed that the “utopian impulse” which underlies “anticipatory consciousness” is a historical and cultural construct.

❖13 Levitas, Ruth. ‘Utopian Hope: Ernst Bloch and Reclaiming the Future.’ In *The Concept of Utopia*. New York and London: Syracuse University Press, 2009, pp.103-4.

❖14 *ibid.*, p.88.

### 3. Photography recognized as a device for social reform

This section explores “anticipatory consciousness” in documentary photography as well as the dialectical relation between documentary photography and society. At the turn of the nineteenth-century photography was sustained in the service of recording vanishing people, city structures, and cultures in the face of growing modernization. In 1889, *The British Journal of Photography* stated that the “comprehensive photographic archive of the world should be created for its valuable future as documents.” Traditionally considered as evidence and an instrument of investigation, combined with a growing social reform movement in the late 1880s, photography was integrated into these campaigns as an indispensable element. Significantly, the development of photography as a tool for social reform was directly enabled and accelerated by the invention of the handy camera and half-tone printing technique in the late 1880s. In other words, the camera as a means of expression was democratized, and individuals were subsequently able to respond to social issues from their social standpoint via photography and publication.

❖15 Geo, Daniella. ‘Documentary Photography.’ In Lynne Warren (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography Volume 1 A-F index*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p.402.

❖16 Newhall, Beaumont. ‘Documentary Photography.’ In *The History of Photography*. Exh. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949, p.235.

❖17 Kaneko, Ryuichi. ‘How We See the World: Photography and the Documentary Style.’ In *Street Life: Chronicles of Europe by Seven Photographers*. Exh. cat., Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha, 2011. p.6.

❖18 *ibid.*

Documentary photography as genre was born when the capacity of photography gained social recognition as a means for social reform. Social documentary photography was first pioneered by Jacobs Riis (1849-1914), who captured the social reality of slums in New York, and Lewis Hine (1874-1940), who photographed the issues of child labor in Southern America. This was further developed in the USA during the 1930s under the auspices of government-sponsored projects as an immediate response to catastrophic economic downturn in 1929 during the Great Depression. A famous example of this is the photographic project by Farm Security Administration, which hired Walker Evans (1903-1975) and Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), Ben Shahn (1898-1969), Russell Lee (1903-1986) and Arthur Rothstein (1915-1986). In 1936, Photo League, committed to supporting working-class rights, was formed and directed by Berenice Abott (1898-1991), Paul Strand (1890-1976), W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978). Simultaneously, the Netherlands, Belgium and England saw the rise of the worker photography movement with the latter, in particular, attaining the greatest level of success with the Mass Observation project in the 1930s. Similarly, Beaumont Newhall (1908-1993), in his classic book entitled *The History of Photography*, wrote “the most genuine documentary photography

❖19 Warren (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.404.

❖20 *ibid.*, p.406.

❖<sup>21</sup> Kishi, Tetsuo. 'Hôdô-shashin no 3tu no nagare.' In *Shashin Journalism*. Tokyo: David-Sha, 1969, pp.42-3. For original texts, refer to Newhall, *op. cit.*, p.246.

features a photographer's sincere respect towards facts in reality and his/her aspiration for actively producing an interpretation of the world we reside.<sup>❖<sup>21</sup></sup>

Thus, photographers do not merely apply the camera's capacity to depict the real world as a candid image, but rather to prompt human actions and thus social change. Grounded on a rigorous intention and aspiration for reforming society and future betterment, it could be suggested that photography became a constitutive part of shaping and reshaping society.

#### 4. History of journalistic-photography in South Africa

Developed initially in early twentieth-century America, documentary photographic techniques, concepts and style have been shared by both professional and amateur photographers worldwide via print media such as *Life* and news agencies. More importantly, documentary photographers tirelessly incorporated those elements into each society to achieve their political and economic ends depending on the socio-political conditions. Similarly, in struggle for independence in Africa throughout the second half of twentieth-century, photography was mobilized to counter colonial propaganda as "a critical tool of resistance,"<sup>❖<sup>22</sup></sup> aspiring for the reshaping of an independent, national identity. Photographers, committed to the revelation movement, appropriated the very device that served to justify colonial ideology as a powerful weapon for political propaganda to dismantle apartheid regime. Thus, photography not only had a central role in the revelation movement, but was a constitutive element in the historical transformation toward de-colonization in Africa, including the demise of apartheid in South Africa. This section traces the historical development of documentary photography in the context of South Africa before looking at Guy Tillim's photo-essay works.

❖<sup>22</sup> Firtenberg, Lauri. 'Postcoloniality, Performance, and Photographic Portraiture.' In Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *The Short Century : Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*. Exh. cat., Munich: Prestel, 2001. pp.175-7.

The tendency of socially engaged photography in South Africa is reportedly rooted in journalistic photography, emerging in the 1950s as apartheid operation was further entrenched following the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948, and South Africa observed the emergence of documentary photography.<sup>❖<sup>23</sup></sup> The photojournalism nurtured during apartheid hugely owed its development to popular magazines such as *Drum* and *Zonk!*<sup>❖<sup>24</sup></sup> In particular, *Drum*, founded in 1951 and originally targeted towards a native black African readership, was instrumental in providing the space for negotiating a different mode of being and served to construct a modern identity. *Drum* rapidly gained popularity as it offered readers a new visual representation of their lifestyle, ranging from newsworthy events, the image of political leaders, celebratory images of emergent urban cultures, and investigative reports into socio-political situations that concerned black South Africans.<sup>❖<sup>25</sup></sup> This was nothing more than a projection of the oppressed aspirations for the reconstruction of an independent national consciousness that negated the

❖<sup>23</sup> Peffer, John. 'Photography in Africa: South and Southern.' In Warren (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.36.

❖<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

❖<sup>25</sup> Firtenberg, *op. cit.*, p.176.

stereotyped African identities formed by colonial photographers.<sup>❖26</sup> Further, by featuring photographers such as Bob Gosani (1934-1972), Alf Kumalo (1930-2012), Ernest Cole and Peter Magubane (1932-), as well as centering on German photographer Jurgen Schadeberg (1931-), *Drum* served as a vehicle to disseminate anti-apartheid views. Begun by Sharpsville massacre in 1960, *Drum* became a device to consolidate the resistance movement. With racial antagonism becoming increasingly paramount in South African society, political activism by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (hereafter ANC), and a series of political oppression exemplified by a forced removal of colored South Africans from liberal and culturally glamorous Sophia Town were laid out on its pages throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>❖27</sup> Hence, tied closely with the social project for counteracting apartheid power, *Drum's* political outcry was strongly discernible on its pages. Of note, international photo magazines such as *Life*, *Picture Post* and *Paris Match*, which were brought to South Africa, provided the photographers the conceptual source for the subsequent development of documentary photography such as the photo-essay style in South Africa.<sup>❖28</sup>

The photojournalism in South Africa from the 1950s and 60s set a foundation for the birth of a genre called 'struggle photography' in South African photojournalism between the late 1970s and early 1990s.<sup>❖29</sup> Struggle photography signifies photographic documentation that records conflicts and contentions between apartheid power and subjugated social groups from the vantage point of the oppressed. Initiated by the Soweto uprising by black students who conducted protests and sabotage against the state in response to social conditions, the photographers produced the myriad of struggle photography into which their political views were actively interwoven to support resistance.<sup>❖30</sup> The gradual relaxation of censorship on anti-regime photography by the state due to a pressure from international opinion in the early 1980s also facilitated a formation of a collective photographic association, Afrapix, initially conceived by Omar Badsha (1945-) and Paul Weinberg (1956-).<sup>❖31</sup> Modelled on Magnum Photos cooperative agency, this multiracial association, including both amateur and professional photographers aimed at assisting individual photographers committed to archiving the resistance movement and exposing the violence and brutality of the apartheid regime. They also held workshops and exhibitions for communities that had little access to information and skills due to the apartheid education policy.<sup>❖32</sup>

Struggle photography usually features black and white photographs as they were considered as appropriate for socially engaging photographs, were technically simple and affordable to develop and were mostly sought after and bought by news agencies.<sup>❖33</sup> Visually appealing styles were deliberately chosen to provoke anti-apartheid feelings within international communities. Photographers applied dramatic perspectives, and strong black and white contrast, and captured violent images that communicated beyond the limits of the format so as to render the urgency of situation. There was a narrow range

❖26 Garb (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.35.

❖27 *ibid.*

❖28 *ibid.*

❖29 Peffer, John. 'A Shadow: A Short History of Photography in South Africa.' In *Art and the End of Apartheid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p.254.

❖30 Krantz, L. David. 'Politics and Photography in Apartheid South Africa,' *History of Photography*, Volume 32, Number 4 (Winter, 2008), p.293.

❖31 Peffer, *op. cit.*, p.254.

❖32 Krantz, *op. cit.*, p.293.

❖33 Peffer, *op. cit.*, p.254.

of subject matter, focusing on everyday predicaments and social segregation which black Africans were experiencing. The upsetting and emotionally appealing scenes were also intentionally selected and photographed in black and white with a high-contrast effect, aiming to reinforce the dramatic scenes of protest rallies, and the intimidation experienced by black Africans under the regime. As a result, despite the photographers' intentions, struggle photography disseminated the misconception of black Africans as victims, using them as the evidence of one's political assertion.

❖ 34 Krantz, *op. cit.*, p.296.

❖ 35 *ibid.*

At the time of its foundation, Afrapix's activities were greatly supported by the South African Conference of Churches via the allocation of office space and purchase of photographs. The burgeoning demand for struggle photography from NGOs, such as the International Defense and Aid Fund (IDAF) in London as well as Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France Press, resulted in more involvement of photographers including Steven Hilton-Barber (1962-), Santu Mofokeng, Paul Weinberg, and Guy Tillim. As a result Afrapix grew from a staff of five to twenty-five.

❖ 36 Krantz, *op. cit.*, p.297.  
Hayes, Patricia. 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography,' *Kronos*, No.33 (November 2007), p.151.

By the mid-1980s a number of emergent photographers within Afrapix were employed by international news agencies. As they supplied their photographs each week to support networks in Europe, exhibitions accompanied by publications such as *South Africa: The Condoned Heart* (1989), *Beyond the Barricades: Popular Resistance in South Africa in the 1980s* (1989) and *Hidden Camera: South African Photography Escaped from Censorship* (1989) became an important vehicle to propagate anti-apartheid power. While the *Condoned Heart* was prepared by the Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa, *Beyond the Barricades* was a project conducted by Afrapix to document the resistance movement and counter the harsh censorship laws and restrictions on photography that the decree of state emergency of 1986 legitimized. Important works which galvanized international condemnation against apartheid atrocities and supported resistance movement were produced in this context, even though their political messages were often one-sided and prescriptive.

❖ 37 Garb (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.43.

❖ 38 *ibid.*

As more members with varied views joined in Afrapix, the members oscillated among different views regarding the treatment of subjects and its approach. For example, Santu Mofokeng criticized the tendency of struggle photography because it reduced the diverse experiences of black Africans in townships into one narrow definition. While maintaining his political stance, he set out to capture various aspects of the lives of black Africans. In the late 1980s there was a growing concern among photographers about the message which struggle photography transmitted to the international audience, and tension between visibility and invisibility. Members of Afrapix began questioning the lack of knowledge regarding communities and people they photographed, and the distance between the subject and the photographer as well as "huge gulf between the world audience of viewers and the photographed." The tendency

❖ 39 Krantz, *op. cit.*, p.297.

of contemporary documentary photography rooted in the 1980s was derived from the photographers' self-critique towards the manner in which they communicate the images of their subjects as active agents in the discourse of African modernity. Guy Tillim recalls about the tendency of 1980s photojournalism: "When I think about my work in the 1980s, I feel some regrets, we were circumscribed by quite unified ways of thinking."<sup>40</sup> John Peffer, a historian of African photography, also notes that those who engage with representing South African social situations through writing and visualization began addressing institutionalized state oppression. Similarly, photographers did not merely give a focus on depicting people's lives under apartheid but rather sought to interrogate the cause of subjugation by directing their attention toward spaces of everyday life and people's relationships with the objects and buildings that were constitutive parts of their lives.<sup>41</sup>

❖40 Hayes, *op. cit.*, pp.153-4; p.159.

❖41 *ibid.*, p.156.  
Garb, *op. cit.*, p.43.

The transformation regarding an approach to subjects and themes in photographs was interlinked with changing opinions among cultural communities. The cultural workers, as well as the ANC which declared that "art should be utilized as a weapon for resistance" at the Botswana conference of 1982, initially supported struggle photography but later began pointing out the limitation of its propensity. In particular, a paper questioning art and culture in the service of resistance as political weapons by an ANC activist Albie Sachs (1935-) stirred controversy within the artistic community. He articulated that the role of art is to reveal hidden contradictions and institutionalized violence in reality and that it impoverishes both the culture and struggle if art is to be continuously sustained in the service of resistance as political device. In short, he claims that culture embodies both our societies and visions of the nation, and that the future of South Africa has to be shaped by exploration for diverse means of expression.<sup>42</sup>

❖42 Krantz, *op. cit.*, pp.297-8.

Afrapix was polarized between two opposing groups and eventually disbanded in 1990. The closure of Afrapix and the diversification of themes in documentary photography might have been directly related to the changing political climates in South Africa from the end of apartheid of 1991 to the birth of the Prime Minister Nelson Mandela of 1994. The decline in demand for dramatic scenes of political rallies and conflicts prompted Afrapix photographers to find new themes and approaches for new markets such as art galleries and museums.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the legacy of struggle photography was inherited by the subsequent documentary photography in South Africa. In the following section, I shall explore the development of documentary photography in South Africa after the end of Afrapix in the Jo'burg series by Guy Tillim and how he imagined/represented the post-apartheid Johannesburg through his utopian lens.

❖43 *ibid.*, pp.298-9.

## 5. Utopian telescope: Analysis of Guy Tillim's Jo'burg series

In Jo'burg series, Guy Tillim captures contemporary situations by employing



❖44 Kishi. *op. cit.*, p. 34.

❖45 Enwezor, Okwui. 'The Analytical Impulse in Contemporary African Photography.' In *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*. Göttingen: Steidl in association with the International Center of Photography, 2006, p.37.

❖46 Lehan, Joanna. 'Guy Tillim: Things as They Seem Interview with Joanna Lehan,' *Aperture*, 193, Winter, 2008, p.60.



Fig.1  
Al's Tower, a block of flats on Harrow Road, Berea, overlooking the Ponte building ©STEVENSON

❖47 Lehan, *op. cit.*, p.64.

❖48 Murray, Martin J. 'The City in Fragments: Kaleidoscopic Johannesburg after Apartheid.' In G. Prakash and Kevin M. Kruse (eds.), *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, p.150.

❖49 MacLeod, Gordon and Ward, Kevin. 'Space of Utopia and Dystopia: Landscaping the Contemporary City,' *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 84, No. 3/4, 2012, p.155.

❖50 Enwezor, *op. cit.*, p.37.

a photo-essay style, which consists of sixty-one photographs. The photo-essay style, originally established by *Life*, is one of the styles of documentary photography that assemble a series of photographs documenting social events and human stories as a narrative. This style prompts consideration into events by fusing the reality captured in the photographs with social conditions and contexts. Together with the photo-essay style, Tillim employs juxtapositions of conflicting images to examine the causes leading to the dystopia-like living condition of habitants of high-rise apartments in inner city areas, such as Hillbrow, Yeoville and Berea in Johannesburg, to “narrate(s) long-lasting and closely linked historical configurations like colonialism, economic underdevelopment and patterns of violence.”

The urban phenomenon of post-apartheid Johannesburg is skillfully captured in the coexistence of contradictory images, all of which have symbolic meanings within the photographs. Fragmented images of modern architecture in decay, indexical to the capitalist development of contemporary global cities, and black residents who earned their livings outside official economic frameworks together render a more twisted historical configuration of current Johannesburg (Fig.1). This enables documentation of the contemporary inner city of Johannesburg

as fragments pulled from various moments in the past to construct a layered historical time line. In detecting both the decay and re-appropriation of these modern buildings by black residents, photographs from Jo'burg series enables us to observe how social memory is archived and retained in the cityscape of Johannesburg. Further, the photographs reject to render decaying architecture in any pathos, beauty or nostalgic feeling. Rather, the photographs indicate the trajectory of the current city formation/transformation and “rational reason for the decade.”

The physical decline of city in Johannesburg began when large numbers of white residents fled South Africa in panic in the face of the 1967 Soweto uprising, which facilitated the lifting of influx control in 1986. Consequently, a considerable number of black South Africans (80% of the population) flocked into the inner city from the surrounding township areas (13% of the land) where black South Africans were forced to live during apartheid. As white residents left their apartment buildings, owners of buildings began increasing rent and cutting the maintenance service for new black residents, which resulted in the physical decline of the buildings. Due to Johannesburg's two extremely different characters, it is often characterized as a conjuncture of utopian and dystopian spaces that are “physically proximate but institutionally estranged.” This part of the city in the photographs presents narratives of intentional negligence and abandonment without much official recognition.

A series of photographs in Jo'burg starts from the placement of a photograph

called “A Map of Central Johannesburg at the Inner City Regeneration Project Office, City Council, Loveday Street” and a photograph of a long distant view of the city under gloomy sky with high-rise modern buildings which symbolize the capitalist economic development of global cities (Fig.2 and 3). The focus of Tillim’s camera lens gradually shifts from the exterior to interior of buildings of an inner city residential neighborhood in Johannesburg (Fig.4, 5 and 6). The arranged flow of series of photographs generates a tension to stimulate a viewer’s imagination about how dystopia was anticipated when More’s utopia was imagined by the local government. The current post-apartheid urban development in Johannesburg originates from comprehensive urban development planning by former colonial administrators in England following the discovery of the Witwatersrand gold reef in 1886.<sup>51</sup> This period set the foundation for the coherent state intervention to a subsequent urban development plan regarding the control of the pattern of black settlement in urban environments, and private subdivision of land for urban use. Since then, Johannesburg’s urban planning functioned as an effective power apparatus to directly control relations between the state constituted by white elites and the black South Africans

❖ 51 Mabin, Alan and Smit, Dan. ‘Reconstructing South Africa’s Cities? The Making of Urban Planning 1900-2000,’ *Planning Perspectives*, 12:2, p.194.

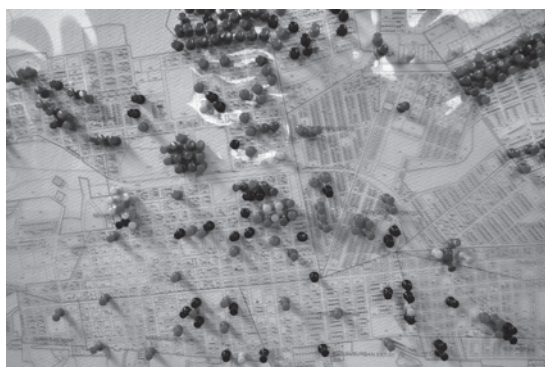


Fig.2 (Upper left)

A map of central Johannesburg at the Inner City Regeneration Project office, City Council, Loveday Street ©STEVENSON

Fig.3 (Upper right)

View of Hillbrow looking north from the roof of the Mariston Hotel ©STEVENSON

Fig.4 (Left middle)

San Jose, a block of flats in Olivia Street, Berea ©STEVENSON

Fig.5 (Right middle)

Manhattan Court, Plein Street ©STEVENSON

Fig.6 (Bottom)

The view from an apartment in Jeanwell House overlooking the intersection of Nugget and Pritchard Streets ©STEVENSON

❖ 52 Murray, *op. cit.*, p.150.

❖ 53 MacLeod, Gordon and Ward, Kevin. *op. cit.*, p.155.

❖ 54 Murray, *op. cit.*, p.148.

on the basis of socio-spatial construction, which was further entrenched by the Group Area Act of 1950, during the course of twentieth-century.<sup>❖52</sup> This rational city construction was inextricably linked with the aspiration for world city status in the face of growing global capitalism throughout the twentieth-century. As human geographers Gordon MacLeod and Kevin Ward explain, financial pressure caused by gradual deindustrialization in the 1970s and 80s and central government's financial cut for municipalities transformed provincial governments from the provider of welfare and public services into entrepreneurs to attract capital investment from the private sector. Moreover, the choice of projects was dependent on whether or not they efficiently maximized local economic development, and attracted more capital investment and revenue from tourism. In contrast, only a handful of projects were implemented to improve the social services and infrastructure required by the community.<sup>❖53</sup> New spatial management emerged under the auspices of a city council to renew social divide in post-apartheid Johannesburg, when new social reality that benefits and vested interests maintained by racial segregation were no longer sustainable became apparent.<sup>❖54</sup> A regeneration plan of a cityscape with skyscrapers, a symbol of capitalism and the growth of the city, and the degrading living conditions of the inner city prompt us to imagine the process in which the city is formed and are intricately intertwined with a range of factors including globalization, capitalism and long standing issue of racial segregation (Fig.7 and 8).



Fig.7  
Eviction by the Red Ants, Auret Street, Jeppestown ©STEVENSON



Fig.8  
Eviction aftermath, Noverna Court, Paul Nel Street, Hillbrow ©STEVENSON

❖ 55 Lehan, *op. cit.*, p.64.

❖ 56 Garb, *op. cit.*, p.59.

Unlike other photographers such as Zwelethwa Mhethwa (1960-), Pieter Hugo (1976-), and David Goldblatt (1930-), Tillim continues to use a 35-millimeter camera for photographing built-up environments to maintain his mobility during shooting as a way of penetrating himself into given environment. Tillim comments that “most forms of photographic practice are about locating oneself. The point is how well this location can be described.”<sup>❖55</sup> “Tillim gives form to the locality and condition of predicaments, as experienced ‘on the ground’ from a proximate and embedded vantage point.”<sup>❖56</sup> His approach is reflected in the procedure when he photographs his subjects, as one can observe the name of individuals included in many of the photographs' titles (Fig.9). He spent time to get acquainted with his subjects, not bringing a camera on his first visit. Moreover, his usage of a tripod also





**Fig.9**  
Pinky Masoe at her home in Sherwood Heights, Smit Street. The building's water and electricity had been cut off for four months ©STEVENSON



**Fig.10**  
Tshillo (right) and her friends share a one-roomed apartment in Cape Agulhas, Esselen Street, Hillbrow ©STEVENSON

allows his subjects to pose as they wish in front of camera's lens, denying the colonial gaze, voyeurism and stereotyped Africa that disturbs the construction of a positive self-image (Fig.10). This can be construed as his criticism on a typical outsider view of ethnographer and journalist. Unlike 'struggle photography', which shows the subjects as victims of apartheid, photographs from the Jo'burg series communicates the quotidian joys, energy, flexibility, adaptation and bravery of the residents, as an emergent diverse way of life (Fig11, 12 and13).

As has been examined above, this photo-essay suggests how the construction of post-apartheid Johannesburg showcases implicit dystopia via the juxtaposition of contradictory elements which is physical reminiscence of layered time. Deteriorating modern buildings together with nuanced images depicting everyday life of the residents "make constant reference to a much

❖57 Enwezor, *op. cit.*, p.37.

❖58 Bajorek, Jennifer. 'Flat Gazes, Uneven Geographies: Guy Tillim's Jo'burg.' In Leora Farber (ed.), *Representation and Spatial Practices in Urban South Africa*. Johannesburg: Faculty of Art, Design, and Architecture, University of Johannesburg, 2008, p.188.



**Fig.11 (Left)**  
Mbulelo's bar, Joel Road, Berea. Justice Sibanyone (centre) and his wife Monica (extreme left) ©STEVENSON

**Fig.12 (Left below)**  
Zimbabwean Innocent Mazeka's place, 402 Al's Tower, Joel Road, Berea ©STEVENSON

**Fig.13 (Right below)**  
Richard in the girls' room, Cape Agulhas, Esselen Street, Hillbrow ©STEVENSON



❖<sup>59</sup> Hayes, *op. cit.*, p.159.

❖<sup>60</sup> Enwezor, Okwui. 'The Indeterminate Structure of Things Now: Notes on Contemporary South African Photography.' In Tamar Grab (ed.), *Home Lands, Land Marks: Contemporary Art from South Africa*. Exh. cat., London: Haunch of Venison, 2008, p.35.

❖<sup>61</sup> Peffer, *op. cit.*, p.262.

❖<sup>62</sup> Firstenberg, *op. cit.*, p.175.

❖<sup>63</sup> Peffer, *op. cit.*, p.36.

deeper pastness.”<sup>59</sup> In short, the Jo’burg series makes comments on capitalism, the recurring issues of apartheid and the history of photography. The series provides us an interrogative telescope to gain glimpse of the consequence of the capitalist development, inequality in the construction of post-apartheid Johannesburg and deep-rooted issues of inclusion and exclusion. While avoiding a prescriptive approach, the Jo’burg series prompts us to look further into the hidden structural predicaments of the subjects who are enclosed by invisible mechanism of relation between global economy and post-apartheid urban development before imagining a better future and developing any utopian imagination.<sup>60</sup> Tillim’s Jo’burg series, therefore, set a basis for the “imagining a different Africa” so as to “redirect the eye toward a future transformation”<sup>61</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

To summarize, this essay has examined the propensity of documentary photography, the development of documentary photography in South Africa and Tillim’s photo-essay Jo’burg series representing post-apartheid Johannesburg by applying the utopian concept conceived by Ernst Bloch and the sociological perspective of Ruth Levitas who extended Bloch’s concept of utopia. We have observed that photographers’ aspirations to reform society for the better future by means of photography was firmly grounded on objective realization of existing social contradictions and injustice.

By the same token, as we have observed Tillim’s Jo’burg series, the diversity in subject matter and thought-provoking style is embedded in both South African photographers’ awareness towards the long history of struggle for representation in ethnographic archives and propagandistic use of photography, and the necessity to address “its weighty history” from the colonial period to post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, they are attempting to project new demand for representation from South Africans in the post-apartheid era. From this standpoint, photography is both an artifact and artifice in which layered meanings and values are projected, and the way in which a photographer as an ‘author,’ whose subjectivity is shaped and informed by the social context in which he/she is situated, engage with the specificity of social, economic and political conditions and attest to their place of orientation. Seen from this point, as Ruth Levitas has pointed out, utopian impulse for a better future is a social and cultural construction, not a human innate nature. On another level, due to photographers’ critical insights into existing social issues as a source of utopian impulse, photography has become essential in the formation of our society and construction of our future, rather than a mere device by which to record existing realities. Therefore, a further ethical responsibility of those involved in potential social change, such as photographers, artists, and museum curators, who represent photographs from a certain perspective, is continuously required in the future.

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