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Under the influence of ... Dumile Feni’s 'African Guernica'

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7–9 minutes

In our regular series, “Under the influence”, we ask experts to share what they believe are the most influential works of art in their field. Here, artist/academic Sharlene Khan explains why she finds South African artist Dumile Feni’s “African Guernica” (ca 1967) hugely influential.

My relationship with the work

Standing in front of South African visual artist Dumile Feni’s “African Guernica” when I was 19 years old at the University of Fort Hare Gallery in 1996 felt like something between hero-worship and a pilgrimage. At high school, Feni was one of my “favourite” artists, in the way one speaks of favourites in one’s youth.

I loved seemingly tortured “expressionistic” artists like Honoré Daumier, Vincent Van Gogh, Francisco Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Cyprien Shilakoe and Feni. They seemed to understand the depth of human suffering. Their commentary undercut politics to question the very soul of human beings.

“African Guernica” – often spoken in relation to Spaniard Pablo Picasso’s equally haunting work commentary on the plight of war in his country – surpassed this for me.

Why it is/was influential

In recent years, the Tate Modern Gallery in London has a room with the two massive pieces of Leon Golub’s “Vietnam II” (1973) and Dia al-Azzawi’s “Sabra and Shatila Massacre” (1983). Both pieces, like Picasso’s “Guernica” (1937), deal with the trauma and devastation of conflict and war in very different

contexts. Golub's concerns the American invasion of Vietnam and Azzawi's the murder of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in Lebanon.

Looking at these works, I often thought about how Feni's work was part of the dialogue of political unrest and human suffering on display. But while Golub, Azzawi and Picasso's works all communicate feelings of chaos, conflict and trauma, Feni's work has always stood out for the feeling of insanity that he visualises metaphorically.

In Feni's painting we see a scene dominated by various animal and pseudo-human figures. A double-headed cow turns its back on us while it suckles a child at its teats. A grotesque naked squealing human figure, head a-kilter, seems to be splitting from itself with a third leg. Two groping figures seem to see each other and are alarmed. Another strange-armed figure is seated at a table as if awaiting a meal, while he seems to be begging at the same time. Yet another of these figures seems to be the harbinger of doom – perhaps one of the four biblical horsemen except his steed seems to be more of a comical cow.

Other animals (cows, ducks, cat, fowl) roam the landscape. These figures are stark white against a darkened background which contains repetitions of this maddened scene (as well as wandering figures). It is a visualisation perhaps of the seven deadly biblical sins, except there is no god to judge or save. Can this abyss be likened to our unconscious, the residual in which we seem to be a chaotic folk, a scene in which rational actions are furthered into the insane?

Human beings make art. We reason. We have evolved beyond the basic needs of survival. But in Feni's "African Guernica" we see exactly the tensions of an artist commenting on the insanity of reason which results in the oppression of one human being by another.

It was done in 1967 when the world was contesting race, gender, sexuality and neo-colonialisms. One assumes that Feni is commenting on colonial racism that by this time has become institutionalised as apartheid in South Africa. European colonial-modernist racist propaganda functioned on the rationalisation that certain groups of human beings were lower down the evolutionary chain. It operated on the "fact" of these groups' proximity to animals, that could therefore be regarded as animals, as devoid of human thinking and feeling.

Almost-but-not-right

Primitives were almost-but-not quite, almost-but-not-white, almost-but-not-right. Postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha reminds us that the slippage of this "almost-but-not-quiteness" was not merely justification that allowed the denigration and economic exploitation of certain bodies. But that it was a desire, an imagination that allowed a distinction between a higher order and the lower order, gave a group of people's its idea of itself through a "not-quiteness" of the Other.

This was a cultural supremacy that could enslave men and women and treat them as animals. It could create complex systems of colonial order across the globe in order to claim and access natural resources, including bodies. This supremacy could systematically control, segregate and annihilate millions of people.

It is not just the heinousness of the act of war and the resultant trauma that is atrocious for Feni living in a legislated system of human degradation. It is also the very mindsets and societal values that lead to a warped society where we no longer can separate human from animals. A society where animals may seem more humane than the folks they are meant to serve.

The stark whitened figures which are visually disjunctive with their background should read as "positive" images – white against black. And yet one wonders if they are rather voids, an outline of a thing that has become distorted in its "thing-ness"?

And what to say of the darkened figures in the abyss? Are they the colonised man that repeats at a distance actions which are not his own as psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon eulogises in "Black Skin, White Masks"?

Why it is still relevant

In a darkened Rhodes University Theatre in July 2016 a new staging of "Animal Farm" directed by Neil Coppen, features a cast of six young black South African women (Mpume Mthombeni, Tshego Khutoane, MoMo Matsunyane, Mandisa Nduana, Khutjo Bakunzi-Green and Zesuliwe Hadebe). George Orwell's 1945 story has become a classic, prophetic of the manner in which communist ideals devolve into capitalistic nightmares. The cast is utterly brilliant in their multiple roles – in the manner in which their bodies enact the animal characters and slide into present day critiques of democratic capitalistic governing models, in particular but certainly not limited to South Africa.

Several times during the play Feni's "African Guernica" comes to mind as exploitation and human abasement, first as tragedy, then, in its repetition, turns to farce. Great for comedy, for theatre, for visual art metaphors, much less funny in reality.

The power of Feni's "African Guernica" is not simply that he blatantly recognised the insanity of white colonial racist rule. Nor is it that he recognised how everyone in a warped system loses their "humanity". It is also not only that he visualised local conditions of human oppression, nor that, even like Orwell's text, it seems prophetic of days to come.

But rather, it is like the Goyas, Daumiers, Orwells and many other insightful creative intellectuals throughout time and in various societies, sensing the power and chaos that lurks in all of us to rationalise our ways as the next oppressors, the next supremacists, harbingers of truths, civilisation and order, even when madness unfolds before our very eyes.