

The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Spring 2021*

Article 5

2021

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Recommended Citation

Kim, Jaehyun (2021) "Spectacular Interiority in Post-Apartheid South African Literature," *The Yale Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol2/iss1/5>

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Spectacular Interiority in Post-Apartheid South African Literature

Cover Page Footnote

Written for Stephanie Newell's course ENGL 015: South African Writing After Apartheid, December 7, 2020.

Spectacular Interiority in Post-Apartheid South African Literature

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ABSTRACT

Near the fall of apartheid, South Africa underwent a literary transformation. No longer bound by racialized dichotomies, South African authors rejected extreme narratives (called spectacular exteriority) in favor of nuanced, analytical, and personal ones. This paper argues that the extreme, spectacular representations remain an essential part of two works of post-apartheid literature, *Thirteen Cents* by K. Sello Duiker and *The Folly* by Ivan Vladislavić—however, with a twist. Instead of crafting extreme descriptions and events of society, the authors are more concerned with crafting extreme descriptions and thoughts of the characters' minds. Within these novels, characters experience graphic, subjective, and hallucinatory visions which call to attention the social struggles that remain on a less visible, more personal level after apartheid's abolition.

According to Njabulo Ndebele, a South African writer and literary critic, the end of apartheid brought about a marked shift in South African literature. The “brazen, exhibitionist openness” (Ndebele 143) of apartheid had created a society in which radical manifestations of racism, resistance, and social transformation were on full display. Within an environment of extreme realities, South African writers adopted an aesthetic of spectacular exteriority: the graphic, dramatic, and political depiction of setting, dialogue, characters, and morality (Ndebele 147). Near and after apartheid's end, its marks either gone or obscured, a transition began in which writers drew back from constructing the most extreme depictions of heroism and villainy, triumph and victimization, and moved towards exploring conflicts that centered on the realistic, “ordinary day-to-day lives of people” (Ndebele 156).

However, Ndebele's position is complicated by two interregnum and post-apartheid novels in which the tradition of spectacular exteriority, which Ndebele believes has outlived its usefulness, is crucial to their interpretation: *Thirteen Cents* by K. Sello Duiker and *The Folly* by Ivan Vladislavić. Nothing about how the characters approach and reflect on their conflicts with society can be construed as ordinary or real: Azure in *Thirteen Cents* dreams of a violent apocalypse destroying Cape Town, and Mr. Malgas in *The Folly* bonds with his neighbor by visualizing a nonexistent house. However, what separates these “spectacles” from spectacular exteriority is that they are only visions and hallucinations—not real events but products of the protagonists' creative imagination. In this way, Duiker and Vladislavić continue the “spectacle tradition” (Ndebele 151) but in a subjective, internal realm, making their technique not spectacular exteriority but *spectacular interiority*: the graphic, dramatic, political display of a character's thoughts and imagination. Through the graphic, emotional “spectacles” that are Azure's and Mr. Malgas' visions, Duiker and Vladislavić expose the persistence of apartheid's legacy of social extremes on ordinary, day-to-day lives long after its ostensible end.

In *Thirteen Cents*, Duiker uses spectacular interiority to encapsulate the brutality and invisibility of post-apartheid South African urban violence. Through the voice of Azure, a nearly 13-year-old orphan wandering the streets of Cape Town, Duiker presents a society characterized by hunger, drugs, and prostitution that spares no one—not even children. He illustrates the widespread participation in Cape Town's criminal activities through Azure's imagining that people change into pigeons or rats: “And some of them [kids] are so deep into their evil they can change shape. They can become rats or pigeons. Pigeons are also rats, they just have wings. And once you become a rat they make you do ugly things in sewers and in the dark. It's true. It happens. I've seen it” (Duiker 1-2). Anybody can be a “pigeon” or “rat,” Duiker's metaphor for anyone involved in criminal activity: “Fat pigeons that might be thugs or dirty politicians fly above me as I lie on the grass” (Duiker 22); “Pigeons, people, rats, they are all the same. At the end of the day they are just rats” (Duiker 31). Azure's association of criminals with rats and pigeons, some of the most recognizable urban animals, illustrates the more obscure elements of Cape Town's criminal society. While Azure's claim that he has seen people changing into pigeons is impossible and seems bizarre, it provides Duiker with a way to portray the criminal activity in *Thirteen Cents* as barely scratching the surface.

Recasting people as pigeons anticipates themes of deception and defies traditional perceptions of evil. Anyone in Azure's society can be a fraud, some outwardly and others secretly. Some, like gang leader Gerald and his henchman Richard, predictably deceive Azure (Duiker 62, 80). However, even Azure, someone who claims to be a street-toughened man at twelve, is surprised at those who leave or betray him—people he considers his friends, or at least not his enemies. He discovers that Joyce and Liesel, who cared for Azure, have been cheating and abusing him; Joyce has been stealing his money, and Liesel has been selling him contaminated marijuana (85, 167). Even Vincent, Azure's friend and role model,

abandons him (113). Duiker's indictment of seemingly trustworthy characters, many of whom are black or "colored" and are motivated not by racism but primarily their own survival marks a shift from apartheid-era authors such as Alex La Guma, who portrayed suffering through the explicit, white supremacist language of obviously racist characters (Ndebele 147).

Azure's creative imagination facilitates a complex portrayal of Cape Town, at the same time that it reveals his complicated relationship to it; in the process, he defies extreme portrayals of heroism, victimization or escapism, which, according to Ndebele (144), are essential to the aesthetic of "spectacle." After running away from Gerald and finding refuge in a cave, Azure has a series of vivid dreams. Through Azure's dreams, Duiker presents hope for the oppressed through the triumph of inner resolve over systemic violence. At the same time, he also reveals the contagiousness of violence when violent behavior is internalized into thought.

Despite repeated abuse by the adults around him, Azure defies his social powerlessness by looking inward, insisting to himself, "I'm getting stronger" (Duiker 64, 105, 115). Azure's individual resolve triumphs over toxic social structures through the image of the "T-Rex." Originally an image Azure's friend Vincent used to represent Gerald and his destructive power (70-71), in Azure's dreams, the T-Rex becomes Azure's dad, and something he is about to become himself. Throughout his dream, Duiker subtly shows Azure's transformation and acceptance of the "T-Rex" identity. He is initially afraid of the T-Rex, "I watch him destroying the city and feel scared" (142), then excited, "'Oh wait. I can hear T-Rex outside,'" (144), and finally becomes one himself: "I smack him [Gerald] with my tail" (144); "I go back inside to finish cooking my meat. When it's red and bleeding, I eat it" (144). The first dream ends with Gerald's death, but what is most notable is how quickly Azure adopts the "T-Rex" persona, especially the detail about him eating his meat "red and bleeding"—as if usurping and conquering Gerald.

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Azure's dreams also reveal how he has internalized the toxic power dynamics he seems to have overcome. Obsessed with violence, Azure has inherited the thoughts, attitudes, and behavior that caused his own suffering. In his dream, the people of Cape Town have their lips "sewn together with wire and they bleed," (Duiker 139), a pack of rhinoceroses "ram over people and injure them" (Duiker 139), and his path up a mountain is covered in blood (Duiker 139). Azure's "victory" over Gerald comes at the price of indiscriminate mutilation and slaughter, making his "victory" as

violent, if not more, than his previous suffering. Azure's violence eventually culminates in the destruction of the entire world:

The heaps of dead white bodies float like kelp. I look away as the water creeps closer. I start running towards the highest point of the mountain. Underneath I crush little frogs and lizards. Birds cry in the sky. There is just a cloud of confusion on the mountain. I run till I start seeing other people. They run and howl with panic . . . I hear boulders crushing everything, branches snapping like twigs. In the distance, I hear the agonising screaming of people being burned.

(Duiker 189)

Again, Azure reveals his obsession with violence—the whole world ends—and constructs a comprehensive sensory experience of death and mutilation. He *sees* dead bodies, *hears* birds crying, people running and howling and screaming, branches snapping, and *feels* frogs and lizards under his feet. Most tragically, Azure's numbness regarding death extends to his own parents. During his apocalyptic vision, he repeats, "my mother is dead. My father is dead" (Duiker 187, 188, 190), the repetition and shortness of the sentence revealing his emotional hardness towards loss. Azure's visions and imagination give him the agency to express both his resolve for inner strength and his unhealed trauma in a vivid way that the real world does not allow.

In *The Folly, spectacular interiority* is the means by which the protagonist tries to bring about social transformation in a world that does not seem ready for it. Through Mr. Malgas' unlikely friendship with Nieuwenhuizen, a newcomer to his neighborhood, and their attempt to construct an imaginary, lavish house from a pile of rubble, Vladislavić presents an internal spectacle that temporarily bridges the gap between the physical and social differences between Mr. Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen—but eventually collapses. In order to demonstrate the power of the imaginary house as a unifying agent, Vladislavić deliberately engages in not *spectacular interiority* but *exteriority* to initially present Nieuwenhuizen as, on the surface, incompatible with Mr. Malgas. Nieuwenhuizen has an unrealistic appearance: his face has "a crack of a mouth and a stump of a nose, with unfathomable sockets, craggy brows, and a bulging forehead dented in the middle" (Vladislavić 10). Even his movements are absurd: "His kneecaps bounced up and down as if they were mounted on springs and his head bobbed as if it belonged to a doll. He looked for all the world like a dummy manipulated by an amateur ventriloquist" (Vladislavić 24-25). Nieuwenhuizen's alien description—the excess of roughness in his face and dummy or doll-like movements—suggests an element of artificiality, falseness, and inhumanness to him and his actions.

Vladislavić furthers his spectacular exteriority through his depiction of Nieuwenhuizen's house. Initially, there is a misunderstanding between Nieuwenhuizen and Mr. Malgas. While Nieuwenhuizen knows that his house will be imaginary, he entertains Mr. Malgas' assumption that the house he constructs is real and assigns him meaningless physical tasks such as clearing his plot of land:

This subterfuge only confused matters further, because it felt transparent and foolish. Nieuwenhuizen chuckled under his bandanna and speared another load of grass on his fork. With

a flush of embarrassment darkening his tanned features, Mr went on raking. Mrs continued to speak to him, pointing out the folly of his ways, and the guile of His [Nieuwenhuizen], but he ignored her and after a while she went away.

(Vladislavić 67)

The pointlessness of Mr. Malgas' efforts is made evident by Nieuwenhuizen's open slacking and Mr. Malgas' willful ignorance. Together, they portray Nieuwenhuizen as a disingenuous and untrustworthy character and his house as a complete scam.

Even after Nieuwenhuizen confesses much of his house exists in his imagination, visualizing the imaginary house is difficult for Mr. Malgas, whose commitment to visualization puts him at Nieuwenhuizen's mercy and destroys all control over his own life. Whenever Mr. Malgas challenges the details of the house or fails to "see" it, Nieuwenhuizen gets defensive and condescends to him for struggling to acknowledge it despite its physical nonexistence:

'But let me tell you that I, for one, have to think about the new house all the time. Hardly a moment goes by that I don't think about it. I can see it before me as clear as daylight this very instant, even as I'm speaking to you. Can you see it? Hey? Can you name one little nook of it? Is it on a rack up here in the warehouse?' And he emphasized this final question rather crudely by rapping on Malgas' skull with his knuckles.

(Vladislavić 88)

Nieuwenhuizen's contemptuous mockery—"Can you see it? Hey? Can you name one little nook of it?"—for failing to see beyond the construction's material progress throws the reader off guard because he portrays something impossible as obvious and natural. His claim that he can "see it before [him] as clear as daylight this very instant" blurs boundaries between reality and fantasy, suggesting there is great significance and skill to the practice of imagining and believing in the house. But the more time Malgas practices imagining the house, the more he cedes control over himself and his life to Nieuwenhuizen. When explaining how to "see" his house, Nieuwenhuizen often talks to Malgas like he is a child, saying, "That's my boy" (Vladislavić 102) and "Good one Mal! You're getting the hang of it" (Vladislavić 114). Even without Nieuwenhuizen's guidance, Mr. Malgas devotes more and more time to practice imagining the house: sneaking into Nieuwenhuizen's plot at night (Vladislavić 111) and taking the day off from work (Vladislavić 120). Malgas' complete dependence on Nieuwenhuizen is perhaps best encapsulated when, having been expelled from the plot by Nieuwenhuizen for failing to "see" the house, Malgas bursts into Nieuwenhuizen's tent crying "Daddy! Daddy!" (Vladislavić 130). Malgas' dedication to imagining Nieuwenhuizen's house reduces him to a state of infancy, a pitiful sight compared to the self-sufficient adult he once was.

Having portrayed Nieuwenhuizen as physically alien and verbally manipulative, Vladislavić incorporates *spectacular interiority*: against all odds, Mr. Malgas successfully visualizes Nieuwenhuizen's imaginary house:

It shimmered, and shimmied, and emitted a halo of brilliant light. It faded, and was on the point of vanishing altogether,

but as Malgas' heart skipped a beat, it glowed again with new intensity and appeared to stabilize and solidify somewhat. It grew a landing, it excreted a film of crimson linoleum, it oozed wax. Then it gave birth to a flight of stairs, each riser condensing in the incandescent vapour and toppling in slow motion from the edge of the tread above it, shuffling languidly into place . . . A pool of yellow light seeped out, gathered itself, and extruded from its syrupy depths five strips of Oregon pine, which hovered just above the surface.

(Vladislavić 135)

The creation of the house is filled with the language of life—"grew," "excreted," "oozed," "gave birth to," "shuffling"—giving the house, an inanimate object, a magical, supernatural character. Observations such as the "crimson linoleum" and "five strips of Oregon pine" create the impression of real sight, and others such as "syrupy depths" go beyond sight to create a heightened sense of reality. This inner, imaginative success leads to interpersonal success, since the visualization allows Mr. Malgas and Nieuwenhuizen to "live" together in their little plot of land as best of friends. Nieuwenhuizen, for all his past condescension and frustration, says to him, "My faithful Malgas. I'm proud of you" (Vladislavić 140), and insists Mr. Malgas now call him "Otto," his first name (Vladislavić 143). Mr. Malgas' visualization of Nieuwenhuizen's house seems like a triumph because it dissolves his differences and validates his physical and psychological sacrifices to Nieuwenhuizen. It is a beacon of hope that seems to make possible even the most radical social transformations.

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However, their shared vision of the house does not last, discrediting Mr. Malgas' creative visualization and his friendship with Nieuwenhuizen. When Nieuwenhuizen's house suddenly crumbles before his eyes, Mr. Malgas' denial is as strong, in fact, stronger than his initial acceptance: "'I imagined it all,' he told himself firmly. 'None of it was real.'" (Vladislavić 170), dismissing illusion as delusion. The rest of the ending can also be characterized as an amnesiac return to normalcy. Like magic, Nieuwenhuizen also disappears: "He forked his limbs, spread his fingers, and in the twinkling of an eye was lost to sight" (Vladislavić 176). Mr. Malgas apologizes to his wife for deserting her to spend time with Nieuwenhuizen, and she accepts his apology as if nothing happened (Vladislavić 177). Through the deletion of Nieuwenhuizen and his house from Mr. Malgas' life, Vladislavić raises doubts regarding South Africa's post-apartheid prospects. Unlike *Thirteen Cents*, *The Folly* reveals the insufficiency of individual resolve to combat societal problems, portraying the end of Mr. Malgas' effortful imagination as a return to reality. For Vladislavić, the tension between the utopia of one's vision of society and the imperfections of real society are

continuous and central to the setting. The night before Mr. Malgas frees himself from Nieuwenhuizen's creative vision, Nieuwenhuizen says, "We are condemned to renounce and repeat, the head and the tail, the one barking and the other wagging, with the body of the same old dog between them" (Vladislavić 169). Calling to mind himself "the head, the one barking" and Malgas, "the tail . . . wagging," Nieuwenhuizen questions the effectiveness of solidarity alone to bridge significant differences and even suggests that this process of illusion and delusion will be repeated. By externalizing a shared, creative vision and then showing its temporary success and dramatic fall into oblivion, Vladislavić unearths the failure of an idealistic vision to unite society by simply ignoring the real-world obstacles that prevent it from being realized and raises doubts as to whether society will ever change.

Through *spectacular interiority*, the graphic, dramatic, political display of a character's thought and imagination, Duiker and Vladislavić comment on contemporary South African society in innovative ways. Through *interiority*, Duiker and Vladislavić reject heroic, victim, or escapist narratives in favor of more nuanced, conflicted, and personal ones that reflect the growing appeal of "sobering rationality" (Ndebele 152) and ordinary narratives in a changed South Africa. However, they continue the "spectacle tradition" (Ndebele 151) to indicate that struggle is no less real in a post-apartheid South Africa, where oppression is less visible but still there. The fact that Duiker and Vladislavić give Azure and Mr. Malgas supernatural abilities to face society shows just how constrained South African society still is. As South Africans continue to navigate their country's recovery from apartheid in their politics, economy, and social interactions, K. Sello Duiker and Ivan Vladislavić's pioneering of *spectacular interiority* as an outlet of both empowering characters and analyzing society demonstrates how some of the most powerful institutional change often starts with the written word.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Written for Stephanie Newell's course ENGL 015: South African Writing After Apartheid, December 7, 2020.

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