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Feeling the heat: photography under Apartheid

Roger Tooth highlights the different approaches of two extraordinary photographers – David Goldblatt and Ernest Cole – from Apartheid era South Africa



Forensic approach ... Mine Captain, City Deep, Johannesburg, 1966. Photograph: Copyright 2012 David Goldblatt/Goodman Gallery

London's Barbican has a major [photography](#) show on at the moment: [Everything Was Moving](#). My colleagues [Sean O'Hagan](#) and [Adrian Searle](#) have [reviewed it already](#), but what stood out for me, walking around the exhibition, was the work of two South African photographers. I found their stunning images moving and their telling content slightly overwhelming; I hardly needed to go on to the rest of the show which showed the work of 10 more photographers who documented their changing countries during the last century.

[David Goldblatt](#) is a white South African from a solid middle class background, while [Ernest Cole](#) was a black South African, who, by pretending to the authorities that he was mixed-race, managed to work slightly more freely as a photojournalist for a few years.

Everything Was Moving: Photography from the 60s and 70s
Barbican Art Gallery,
London
EC2Y 8DS

Starts 13 September
Until 13 January 2013
Details:
barbican.org.uk

Both photographers shot telling, historic images: some terrible, some touchingly amusing, but they approached documenting their country from very different starting points. In the end, Cole seems to have been able to get closer to his subjects, to the people who were suffering under Apartheid. His subjects are photographed looking under pressure, whereas Goldblatt's images are more forensic; cooler, perhaps. Cole's sweating schoolboy to Goldblatt's sleek mine manager.



A schoolboy in a classroom in Apartheid-era South

Africa. Photograph: Ernest Cole/Hasselblad Foundation Collection

The way these two photographers worked in their communities seems to be a model for an increasing number of photojournalists around the world. Of course economics and ecology are factors in this – it costs to send a photographer flying around the world – but there is a growing feeling that there is something empowering about putting a camera in the hands of a local person. It feels less patronising than sending in a western photographer in a khaki blouson to try and unravel the situation in a few hours.

A photographic agency called [Demotix](#) has been trying to harness local talent overseas with some success. However their photographers can't compete with the best international agencies yet, but in time, I suspect, more and more news images will be produced by local talent.

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