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Nelson

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# Nelson Mandela's Two Bodies

**Steven Nelson**

*What becomes a legend most? Nelson Mandela.*

—LISA JONES, "Mandela Diary" (1990)

FOR MILLIONS OF people worldwide, Nelson Mandela's passing in 2013 marked the death of an icon, one who expressed, more than any other, the twentieth century's struggles for freedom and equality that changed the lives of people worldwide. When Mandela died, as is the case with the loss of any world leader or celebrity, to express our grief and process our loss, we talked, we wrote, we tweeted, and we updated our Facebook statuses. In addition, seemingly countless Internet memes featuring Mandela's face paired with one of his best-known quotes—or at least one attributed to or equated with him—spontaneously appeared. These ephemeral, sometimes bizarre, infinitely reproducible objects, unlike the tweet or the Facebook status, mark a kind of affiliation

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around both Mandela and those ideals we hold to be self-evident from his charismatic character. However, these pictures are only the latest iterations of the innumerable images of Mandela, including photographs, paintings, drawings, statues, public murals, buttons, t-shirts, refrigerator magnets, and more, that have proliferated since the late 1980s (his image was banned in South Africa until then), and attest not only to the enduring iconic status of his person, but also to the tremendous power his myth exudes in the visual world.

Although Mandela's physical body, which has succumbed to the vicissitudes of age and sickness, is no longer here, his mythical body remains. This body is ageless, immutable, and invisible until it is given form through representation. However, Mandela has often teetered between regimes of visibility and invisibility. In part, this is due to the iconoclastic moves on the part of the apartheid government to ban

the circulation of the leader's image before the late 1980s (many commentators note that they had never seen a picture of Mandela before this moment). But additionally, it is because there are so many Mandelas—icon, commodity, figure of kitsch, etc.—that any single visualization of him as a “real” or “authentic” historical figure, one grounded in a particular place and time, **“What do pictures of Nelson Mandela want?”** paradoxically threatens to collapse under the weight of, well, the mythic body. In 2003, Sean O’Toole feared that this very thing might happen. Giving an overview of the graphic presentation of Mandela, he defined invisibility as being equally based on both the *lack* of images of the leader in circulation, *as well as* the explosion of images that would bury the “real” Mandela.

O’Toole emphasizes, if indirectly, the existence of Mandela’s two bodies, and he signals the weakness of the physical one, especially when pitted against the strength of the mythical one. In a similar terrain, on the occasion of Mandela’s receipt of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, Nadine Gordimer wrote the following lines as part of her tribute to him:

He could so easily have become legendary, his features recomposed as the ikon of hopes that never would be realized and a freedom that always receded as each wave of resistance within our country was crushed and seemed defeated, and the outside world was indifferent. But the people had a sense of his enduring what they knew: the harsh humiliations of prison were everyday experiences to black people under the apartheid pass law and innumerable other civil restrictions that for generations created a vast non-criminal prison population in South Africa. When he and his colleagues were sent to break stones and pull seaweed out of the Atlantic Ocean, ordinary people among the black population were being hired out by prison authorities as slave farm labour. His people kept him among them in the words of their songs and chants, in the example of the forms of resistance he had passed on to them, and in the demands for his release which were part of the liberation platform, maintained both by leaders in exile and the people themselves, at home. In such news of him that came out of prison, we came to know that this sense of himself was always part of all of this, of living it with his people; he received them through prison walls, as they kept him with them.

Gordimer's extraordinary passage gives great insight into the symbiotic relationship between the South African president and black South Africans. In it, black South Africans identify with their leader to such an extent that his suffering was their suffering; his liberation was their liberation. Conversely, Mandela's life was that of the black body politic:

**By the time Mandela had been released from his twenty-seven-year-long incarceration in 1990, he was considered a living legend, a man larger than life.**

their suffering was his suffering; their liberation was his liberation. In short, black South Africans believed in Mandela—as leader, perhaps even as a messiah—and he, in turn, believed in them. At the same time, Gordimer shares O'Toole's nervousness about the possible fate of the man of flesh and blood and unassailable morals—this man who, in her words, “belongs completely to a real life lived in a particular place and era, and in its relation to the world”—under the weight of a man of myth, one who is everything and nothing, one who belongs to no time and to all time.

It is the tension between these two bodies that animates this discussion of Mandela and the world of images. With this in mind, we might ask, following W. J. T. Mitchell, “What do pictures of Nelson Mandela want?” In tweaking Mitchell's provocative proposal a tad, I'm interested in understanding how we live with images of Mandela, how they move us, and what kind of worlds they build. In raising these issues, I take to heart Mitchell's supposition in *What Do Pictures Want?* that a picture “is a very peculiar and paradoxical creature, both concrete and abstract, both a specific thing and a symbolic form that embraces a totality.” If this is indeed the case, images of Mandela perform a myriad of functions, making various and varied demands on their viewers.

By the time Mandela had been released from his twenty-seven-year-long incarceration in 1990, he was more than a freedom fighter and Vice-President of the African National Congress. As a survivor of imprisonment, as a man who could turn the other cheek upon his release, as a man who continued to push for apartheid's end, despite Gordimer's own resistance to his mythologization, the newly released leader was considered a living legend, a man larger than life. Moreover, he attained worldwide celebrity, a status that was only more fully cemented by his role in the ongoing dismantlement of apartheid in South Africa, as well as by his 1990 tour of thirteen countries in Africa, Europe, and North America. While his trip was intended to further pressure the South African government to end apartheid and to gather financial support for the cause, it was also widely represented as a victory tour.



**Street art mural of Mandela (detail), June 20, 2013.**

Photo courtesy of [www.greatpicture.nl](http://www.greatpicture.nl). ©2013 ESFP

In the places Mandela visited, media outlets reported not only his every move, but also the reactions of the crowds that wanted the opportunity to see this living symbol of freedom and fortitude. Harold Love, a fifteen-year-old boy from Los Angeles, marveled at the sight of Mandela, stating, “You sort of felt like you were in medieval times, seeing a king.” Billy Rowe, a columnist for the *New York Amsterdam News*, insisted, “perhaps once in a lifetime, there comes a person whose gift is [so] God-like that his or her voice becomes heard as the voice of many. Nelson Mandela has been so gifted.” Someone in Boston called a local television show and asked, “Tell me something . . . when is this man Mandela going to walk on the Charles [River]?” The host responded, “That’s not on his schedule until tomorrow.”

More specifically, Mandela’s tour was an occasion for the expression of Pan-African and diasporic pride. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that thousands of Ugandans, who lined the streets for the twenty-one miles from the Entebbe Airport to Kampala “in an attempt to get a

glimpse of Africa's best known former political prisoner," gave the leader "a tumultuous welcome." In a photo essay in the same newspaper to mark the leader's visit to Los Angeles, one caption reads, "Signs of Power—African togetherness was displayed: Black South African Power united with African-American power is the true meaning of African diaspora." Here's Lisa Jones in an essay originally written for the *Village Voice*:

At times [Nelson and Winnie Mandela's] visit felt like the most joyous and historic reunion in years; a time akin to the early sixties, when the newly independent nations of Africa led black Americans to rethink their culture and politics in relation to the continent. The visit of the freedom fighter positioned us, for a minute, at the center of world politics. It made us the First Family. It gave us, once again (and perhaps for more than a minute) an accessible past, so that the African part of the equation suddenly made a lot more sense. And we bought the T-shirts to prove it.

Not only does Jones sketch the psychological and emotional importance to African Americans of Mandela's visit, she eloquently describes the indelible, familial identification that both Nelson and Winnie Mandela enable for the children of the diaspora. Jones's familial tie allows for a rekindling of the Pan-African bonds forged years earlier. Moreover, she alludes to the importance of the image in her quip about the t-shirt, a thing that would both commemorate and help the wearer to remember the historic event. Although mentioned fleetingly at a couple of points in the essay, the Mandela t-shirt also alludes to both Mandela's status as a living legend—existing, like most celebrities, at the intersection of fame, adoration, and commerce—as well as the wearer's participation in what one *Los Angeles Sentinel* reporter dubbed "Mandelamania."

The identification with an icon that the t-shirt allows is echoed in the artist Samuel Fosso's visual practices. Born in Nigeria and based in the Central African Republic, the artist has produced photographic self-portraits derived from studio photography since the 1970s. Coming

out of his earlier series that play upon notions of brand and lifestyle that pervade contemporary consumer society, in his 2008 series *African Spirits*, Fosso, mining a 1950s photo of a young Nelson Mandela dressed in traditional Xhosa white robes, recreates both the person and the image. In other photos in the series, Fosso casts himself as Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis—as well known for her Afro as for her activism—and Tommie Smith, who, immediately after winning the gold medal for his record-smashing two hundred-meter dash in the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics, raised his gloved right fist in a Black Power salute. He also inhabits Miles Davis, Malcolm X, Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, and Négritude luminaries Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire.

Like Jones's identification with Mandela, *African Spirits* points to an exploration of Pan-Africanist identity grounded in the political ideals of the 1960s, which stressed a shared politics of struggle for black people worldwide. Moreover, in Fosso's work, Pan-Africanist reclamation is quite glamorous, fully collapsing the public personae of his figures with global consumer culture. It is also shot through with nostalgia for the euphoria that followed African independence in the 1960s and early 1970s, struggles for civil rights in the U.S., and the rise of Black Nationalism that followed in its wake. *African Spirits*, like the work of a number of artists born in the 1950s and early 1960s, is a nod to the lifelong impact of these world-changing events that unfolded during childhood. Transformed from signs of hope and of pride, Mandela and the other heroes—important because of their political engagement and importance to black liberation (and black self-esteem)—become sites of performance.

While the photo of a young Mandela is indeed source material for Fosso, the artist's photographic performance does not point to Mandela's physical body, but instead it calls up the leader's mythic body, imbuing it with reverence (as is the case in pretty much all fine art appropriations of the leader's image), thereby attempting to encapsulate the leader's aura. Fosso's restaging brings to mind actor Idris Elba, who, in an interview where he discusses playing the role of the leader in the 2013 film *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, stresses that he wasn't trying to access Mandela's physical body. "It's about the aura to be honest with you." Elba continues, "The one thing to really try and capture is his presence, his aura." The same attempt exists in both Gordimer's and Jones's essays, as well.

Here, though, aura—if defined in popular parlance as that which contains the ineffable qualities of an individual—is only part of Fosso's engagement in this terrain. While he may indeed be trying to engage with this sense of Mandela's aura, the photograph also plays





**“African  
Spirits”  
self-portrait  
as Nelson  
Mandela.**

Courtesy of  
the artist and  
Jean-Marc Patras  
Galerie, Paris.  
©2008 Samuel  
Fosso

with another meaning of the term. The second, articulated by Walter Benjamin in 1931, posits that aura is a “strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be.” In this way, in his attempt to capture the essence of Mandela, to inhabit and merge with the young radical, Fosso actually distances us from the body of the leader. These two definitions engaged by Fosso’s work exist as two sides of the same coin. The image wants to pull us in, yet it wants to push us away. The picture helps elucidate O’Toole’s and Gordimer’s reservations about Mandela’s mythic body. However, as in

Fosso's picture, Gordimer's text attempts to get at the real Mandela and his unity with the body politic, but has a very difficult time keeping Mandela's mythic body at bay. In essence, Gordimer's writing and Fosso's photograph both partake in a struggle between the physical Mandela and the mythic one. Along these lines, Isidore Diala suggests, "Gordimer refuses an alluring narrative capable of vitiating Mandela's social relevance. Her insight is that the transformation of a historical personage into a mythic figure is an investment fraught with enormous social loss." As we see in Fosso's case, Mandela's mythical body eventually subsumes the physical one, and in this operation, the photograph functions as the basis for a larger survey on the South African president's iconization. While Gordimer and O'Toole do not want to lose Mandela—the authentic, historically grounded man—as Fosso's and so many other images of him show, the efficacy of pictures of Mandela depend on precisely this move taking place. What images of Nelson Mandela may want—what they, in fact, may need—is the evacuation of the authentic, historically grounded individual. They must jettison the physical, contingent body (which is not equivalent to getting rid of the idea of the man, his myth, and the politics that these signify).

Fosso's unwitting removal of Mandela's physical body in his work, and the paradoxical ways that the photograph functions, is perhaps one of the more explicit examples of how the imaging of legends works in a publicity-driven world that revolves around celebrity and commodity. Mandela's mythical body belongs to this world, indeed, to the public sphere, and the statues and city murals and buttons and t-shirts and refrigerator magnets and Internet memes and Instagram photographs exist independently of the man himself. Even during his lifetime, images of Mandela had myriad lives in the public sphere. Once his image was released into the public sphere—no longer capable of being quarantined by the apartheid regime—he became the representation of a collective unconscious, in which he became a "king," "savior," and—perhaps paradoxically—even "a family member." In this totality, Mandela's mythical body is rife for consumption.

It may seem uncomfortable—or even unseemly—to suggest that images of Mandela have taken leave of the man, that images have somehow led us to dispose of—or repress—the facts of his physical body. However, this distilling of the individual out of the image has been, in many ways, a hallmark of the representation of well-known politicians and celebrities for at least the past fifty years. While one could make the case that such a splitting has been in play in the images of the famous

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since the advent of film in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is in Andy Warhol's Marilyns, Jackie Os, and Elizabeth Taylors that this process became completely explicit. The artist's silkscreens of these figures abstract them, making a clear, irrevocable cut between their private lives and public personae. For Warhol, the abstracted face, the celebrity without a physical, individuated body, lays claim only to the subject insofar as they are readily identifiable, public figures. As such, these personages have been reduced to surface. According to Jonathan Flatley, these works are not the representation of faces, but rather the production of them. Following Jean Baudrillard, Flatley goes one step further by rightly making the claim that Warhol "simulated" them. Separated from the real, leaving physical bodies far behind, it would seem that there is nothing to know that isn't in evidence on the surface of the picture plane. Not private people, but public icons, Warhol's faces are inert, still, timeless, and immutable. They have no aura. They display no affect. In the case of the millions of images of Mandela, we might be tempted to draw the same conclusions. Along similar lines, might the myriad images of the South African president simply be blank pictures that don't need us? Might they be pictures that want (and give) nothing?

Part of Warhol's genius was in smashing together high art and celebrity culture, in highlighting the fluid line between representation and abstraction, in troubling the line between the handmade and the mass-produced, and residing in camp while narrowly escaping the denigrating label of kitsch. In effecting such a push and pull—not unlike Fosso's play with aura—Warhol's images laid bare, as Cécile Whiting notes, the connection between a public self and a brand. As public self and as brand, these images are there for our consumption; these images, like those of Mandela, exist in the world of commodities, a world in which brands—icons—become, to invoke Hal Foster on Warhol, "prostheses for our own mutant desirability."

Fosso's play with aura reveals the intricate relationship between camp, kitsch, and consumerism that structures contemporary life. And the metaphorical consumption of the brand effected by the artist, as well as the commercialism it implies, is the same as the literal consumption of Mandela kitsch. From the streets of South Africa to the souvenir shops of Senegal and beyond, Mandela ware is there for us to buy. In image and object alike, Mandela kitsch exists as an extension of our own bodies, our own selves. Kitsch today gives access to our nostalgia and opens onto narratives that are not about the object of kitsch, but rather an imaginary that does not distinguish the real thing that lies behind it. While kitsch has so often been denigrated as art's ugly stepsister, the destroyer of taste, or, to summon the words of Clement Greenberg, "the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture," these

objects nevertheless allow for commemoration and serve as prosthetic devices that function in a vast array of contexts.

For example, the Mandela refrigerator magnet that I admit to owning engages nostalgia for my own 1980s young adulthood, which was marked by cries to Western nations to divest in South Africa to pressure the nation to do away with apartheid (and visualized by the red armbands we all wore at our Yale graduation in 1985). It also speaks of my own construction of myself as a believer in progressive change. And it also articulates my love of consuming kitsch in and of itself, which, of course, makes me a really fun person. Kitsch might be a soulless thing that wants nothing but our money, yet it works from, preys on, and gives form to experience.

Kitsch moves towards—in a similar fashion to Warhol’s portraits (and similar to Greenberg’s bitter complaints)—a domain populated by images and objects without referents. In the case of Mandela, the simulated image, a context in which Fosso’s self-portrait exists in concert with t-shirts, pins, monuments, and refrigerator magnets, is without a “real” referent. Mandela’s physical body is not necessary for its functioning. The simulation feeds on the endless reproducibility of Mandela’s image and, by extension, the constant rearticulation and resurrection of the leader’s mythical body.

Many scholars and critics point to the ways in which our relationships to images are predicated on their interactions with viewers. And, as David Freedberg forcefully argues, we all too often repress or ignore the visceral power that we invest in the image. We possess pictures with our gaze; pictures possess us with their power. But what of the operations that take place in our practicing, if only visually, commodity fetishism? Quite simply, in consuming the image of Mandela, we gain at least partial access to the world that we imagine his mythic body—the Ideal of him—as occupying. In consuming images of Mandela, we enter the totality proffered, as Mitchell reminds us, by the “peculiar and paradoxical [creatures]” that are pictures. And it is the evacuation of the real, the move from the flesh and bones, the move away from the portrait, and the flight from mimesis that make our access to Mandela’s mythic body possible. And joined with this mythic body, we gain access to a world in which we can differentiate ourselves from a seemingly homogenous and homogenizing public sphere. Like a product, images of public figures allow for the construction of a subjectivity based on the thing produced. Concerning images of Mandela,

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**Street art  
near Plaza  
Cabestreros,  
Madrid,  
Spain. June  
3, 2012.**

The square  
has recently  
been renamed  
Nelson Mandela  
Square. Photo by  
r2hox. ©2012  
r2hox

in a world where politics and commodities share a common metalanguage (remember Lisa Jones and the t-shirts), to be a commodity is to desire to be desired. And it is the images' desire to be desired—and our desire to possess them—that is at the base of our interactions with pictures of Nelson Mandela. We want these images because we believe in the leader; we have subscribed to the myth for which his face has become a metonym. Because of this belief, the images move us; they not only play on our intellect, but also our emotions.

But, to be more specific, why are we drawn to Mandela? Why, unlike many other figures, has his popularity endured? Why do we find it so easy to consume, to relate to, and to reproduce his image? While his images function in much the same ways as those of other famous figures, while his images revolve around his mythic body, leaving his physical one behind, while his image is as (or even more) commoditized

that almost anyone else's, unlike figures such as Che Guevara, Martin Luther King, Jr., or even Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, we almost never see images of Mandela in suffering, sickness, or pain. Unlike King, Mandela wasn't assassinated. Unlike Che, he wasn't executed. Mandela lived. Mandela, in rising from prisoner to leader, won. Che and King are extraordinarily important in fact and in myth (and Che has become an icon of freedom and fashion), but they were martyrs.

This is not Mandela's fate. Images of the others engage the melancholia of loss and a desire for what might have been. This is not the same for images of Mandela. His images speak only to survival and ultimate victory. Unlike the others, we desire access not only to the mythic body of Mandela; we *also* desire access to a physical body that is out of our reach. For in doing so, diasporically and emotionally we would become whole, perfect subjects, ones who have been made whole through the power we invest in the impossible union of Mandela's two bodies. In this way, Mandela's mythic body, while timeless and placeless, purports to allow us under the picture plane, to access the "real" subject and to reverse the splintering of our own subjectivity that takes place in an undifferentiated public sphere.

As Jones intoned, for Africans and peoples of African descent—for so many, in South Africa and beyond—Mandela's victory was a family affair. Not simply familial, certainly not diasporically abstract, Mandela was kinfolk. In fact, Jones impishly quips,

Mandela smiles widely and seems so young. His silver Afro frames his face like a halo. A woman says out loud to no one in particular, "Look at him, look at him! He looks just like my grandfather." (This woman, our reporter realizes a few seconds later, is herself.)

His great skill in appearing to be one of the people, yet above the fray, has lent itself to almost religious veneration (and a conflation of the physical body and its aura and the mythical body)—so much so that to possess his image is not only to identify with a luminary, but also to feel that you are in the presence of a savior, which was one of the things that Gordimer feared most. But it is Mandela as myth *and* as man; it is the Mandela of Gordimer's construction that proffers this totality in which we are whole. This possibility is part of the power and the paradox of

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pictures. It is also part of the way we continue to lionize rulers through their images in an archaic, almost religious fashion. It is also part of faith. It is also part of love.

At the end of the day, Mandela may indeed be a commodity, a superstar, but in regarding his face, we are convinced of not only the redemptive possibilities of his image (and I would think that his images want this), but also of the transformative possibilities of images more generally. This, then, is what images of Nelson Mandela want. But what do we want from images of Nelson Mandela? Since his death, Mandela's mythic body belongs to a world of aspirations for freedom, for economic and racial equality, and it exists in a world that allows us—at least fleetingly—to feel whole. Finally, Mandela's mythic body opens the way for us to imagine that his moral imperatives are our own, and that, through an almost mystical merger of his mythic body with our psychic desires, we can fashion ourselves as subjects who stand on the right side of history. 🌐