



ARE YOU READY FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP, MR PRESIDENT?

Gaddafi surrounded himself with bodyguards. Sarkozy had a hissy fit. Berlusconi was all smiles. The photographer Platon on what happened when he came face to face with the world's elite

INTERVIEW Tim Teeman PROFILES Hugo Rifkind



PLATON

Colonel Gaddafi made Platon so uncomfortable, “I felt the evil seeping into me”, the 43-year-old photographer says. “I get so close to people, that kind of darkness is tangible. Sometimes I see demons. It takes a long time to get rid of.” In his studio in SoHo, New York, a blown-up print of the Libyan leader – decked in luxuriant robes – stares balefully down at the visitor. On another wall looms President Clinton, whose portrait, taken for *Esquire* after the Monica Lewinsky scandal, led commentators to note how his tie was pointing unapologetically towards his crotch. “Mr President, show me the love,” Platon had shouted to elicit the pose, to the horror of Clinton’s aides.

Platon’s 20-year career photographing the rich, famous and infamous led him in 2008 to ask David Remnick, his editor at *The New Yorker*, whether he would commission him to photograph the world’s leaders. The result is a book, *Power*, and the misadventures of the handsome, impish Platon in capturing his subjects are delicious. Most of the pictures were taken in a makeshift studio behind the lectern of the United Nations during a meeting of the 192-nation-strong General Assembly in 2009, a space that would typically contain a scrum of bodyguards and hissing presidential assistants.

The experience, Platon reveals, has led him to his “next phase”: photographing the powerless and those seeking to overthrow some of the leaders featured in the book. He and his friend, the photographer and film-maker Tim Hetherington, killed in Libya in April, used to joke mordantly that while Hetherington photographed the carnage of war, Platon photographed the presidents who waged it.

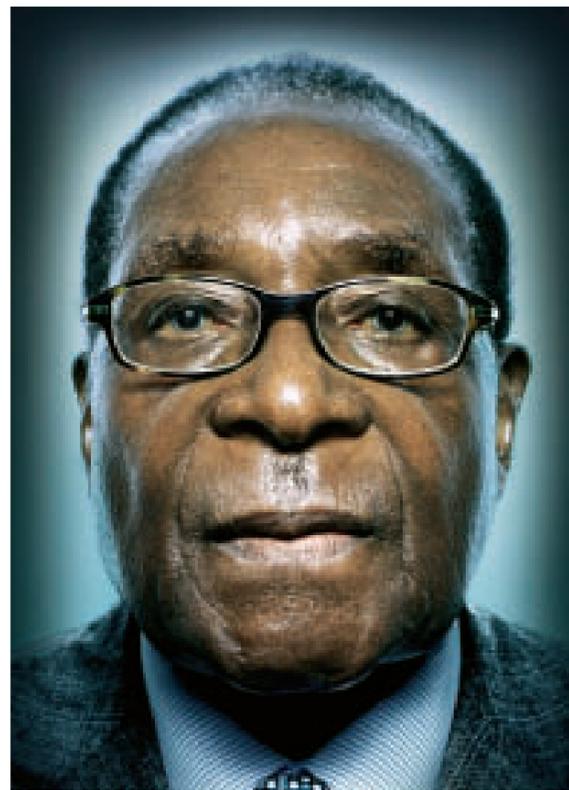
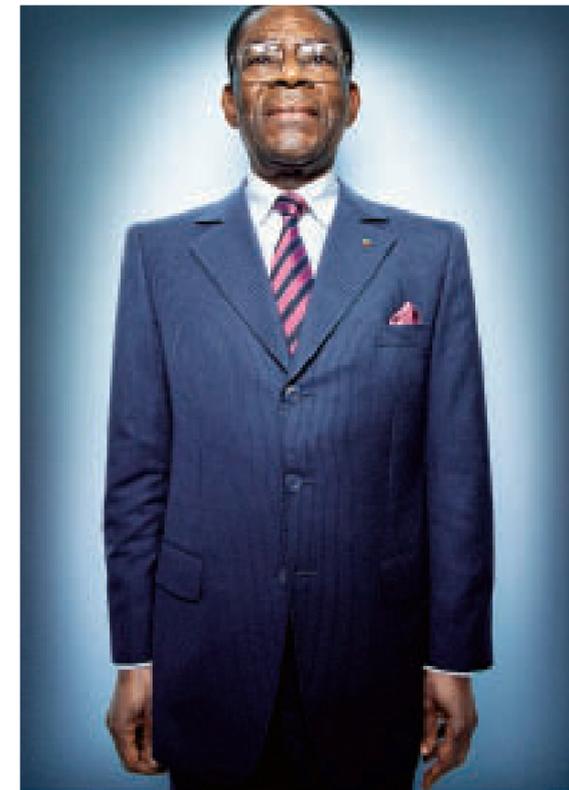
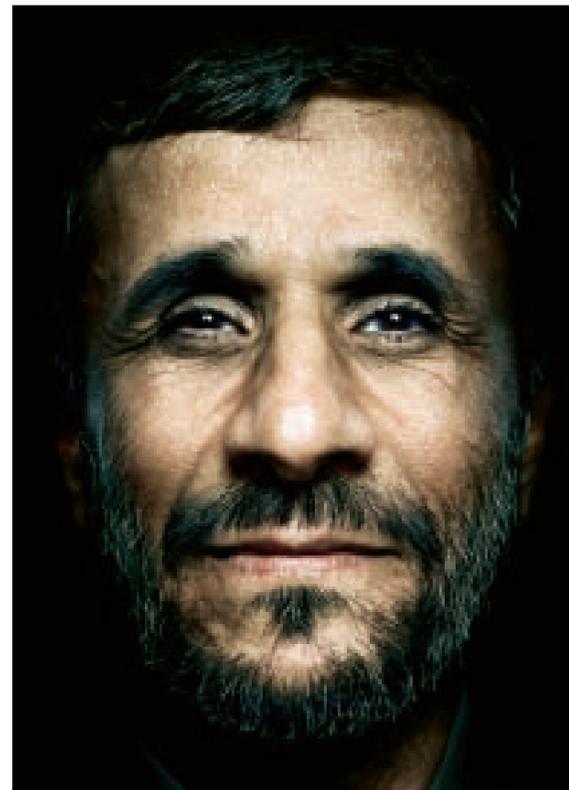
“I have a healthy disregard for power,” Platon says. “I’m not intimidated by it. If someone says, ‘Don’t cross this line,’ I’ll cross it. We’re not subservient to heads of state; they’re our servants. Power is a mirage. These photos are about capturing the global

Vladimir Putin. Prime Minister, Russia

(previous page, left) A former KGB officer, Putin has become a political behemoth, keen topless fisherman, and the obvious potential winner of any Andrew Marr or Gollum lookalike contest which Moscow might hold. Notable for his parsimony, he was recently pictured at home, on a tatty beige sofa, wearing a fleece.

Silvio Berlusconi. Prime Minister, Italy

(previous page, right) The weathergirl’s friend, Berlusconi has clung on as his country’s Prime Minister for a decade, and often looks destined to cling on until he has slept with almost all of it. According to *Forbes* magazine, only 117 people in the world have more money than him. Billions, despite his best efforts, have more hair.



Muammar Gaddafi. Leader of the Revolution, Libya

Gaddafi seized control of Libya in a military coup at the age of 27, and has been dressing as his own First Lady ever since. A bloody tyrant and friend to global terrorism, he was briefly rehabilitated by Tony Blair. His fortunes have taken a turn for the worse since then. Still, he’s not in Venezuela.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. President, Iran

Ahmadinejad has theoretically ruled Iran (don’t forget the Supreme Leader) since 2005. Since his dubious win in the 2009 election, his position has been wobbly, with some suggesting the mullahs have an eye out for a new stooge.

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo. President, Equatorial Guinea

Known variously as “El Jefe” and “gentleman of the great island of Bioko, Annobón and Río Muni”, Obiang has ruled Equatorial Guinea for over 30 years. He calls himself a living god; others call him a cannibal. A coup headed by Simon Mann and unwittingly involving Mark Thatcher failed in 2004.

Rupiah Banda. President, Zambia

Not to be confused with Hastings Banda, the (dead) dictator of Malawi. Having taken over as Acting President after his predecessor suffered a stroke, Rupiah Banda went on to win a hotly disputed election in 2008. Regarded as a safe pair of hands, in 2009 he made global news after being urinated on by a monkey.

Robert Mugabe. President, Zimbabwe

A fêted freedom fighter turned loathed despot. In power since 1980, Mugabe’s efforts to seize white land since 1997 have turned a bread basket into a basket case. In all this time, nobody has conclusively established whether he’s going for a Hitler moustache or he’s just really bad at shaving.

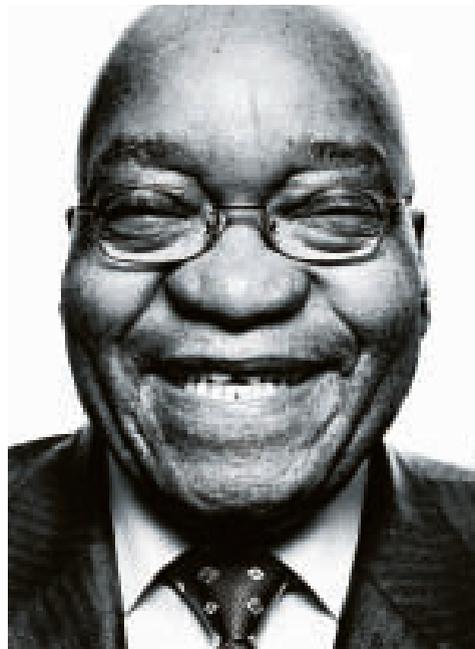
administration that manages our lives. I wanted to get into their eyes, photograph them at a human level, not on a podium. I wanted to reveal something of their inner spirit. All these dudes sit on the toilet once a day, they all suffer heartache, have joy, share tenderness – even the bad ones.”

Platon, who uses a Hasselblad with traditional film (“It picks up more detail than digital”), used the same background for all, a white photographic sheet, with a light placed behind his head. The leaders sat on the wooden apple box that Platon has used to pose his subjects for six years. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi “glided in from the side, as if in perpetual motion like Fred Astaire, perched his bum down and, caked in make-up, gave me that Hollywood glamour look – ‘Dahhling, I’m beautiful and I know it’; it’s *La Dolce Vita*, Monte Carlo – and then, after a few frames, glided out the other side”. France’s President Sarkozy was in a terrible mood after facing near-universal opprobrium after closing illegal Roma encampments. “He refused to shake my hand, then screamed at the top of his voice: ‘*Qu’est-ce que c’est? Je déteste la photo!*’ Then he stalked off. I felt sick with nerves, but had to keep it together for the next head of state.”

Platon’s portrait of Vladimir Putin, which won the World Press Photo 2007 portrait award, was shot in Putin’s dacha outside Moscow, which Platon likens to a “fortress out of Cold War James Bond”. While waiting for Putin, President at the time, Platon needed to charge his flash gun. He went to take a plug out of the wall. “Suddenly there was a lot of shouting. The plug I was about to take out was attached to a red phone with a single button on it – Putin’s ‘nuclear’ phone. I could have accidentally disarmed Russia: a good thing or bad thing, you decide.”

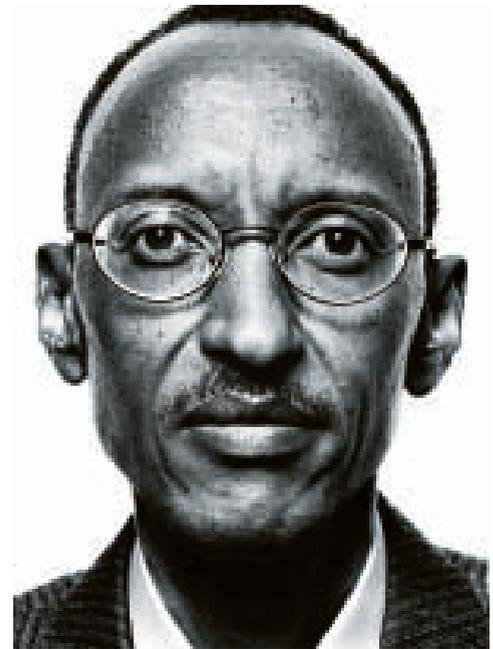
The stress of the day led him to cry in front of Putin, “which meant he saw not ‘Platon, the photographer’, but a pathetic shadow of a man”. Platon had noted that one of the rare pictures of Putin looking anything less than granite-faced was at a Paul McCartney concert in Red Square. “I said, ‘I’m a big Beatles fan, are you?’ ‘Yes,’ Putin replied. ‘What’s your favourite song?’ I asked. ‘*Yesterday*,’ he replied.” Platon laughs at how “trippy” the moment was. The Beatles emerge as his universal icebreaker. Clinton’s favourite song is *Eleanor Rigby*, Nick Clegg is “obsessed” with *A Day in the Life*. Only George W. Bush dissented. “I asked if he was into the Beatles and he said no,” Platon continues. “Then he pointed at himself and said, ‘I’m George W. Bush, born and raised in Texas. I don’t hang around with those swirls.’”

At the UN, Barack Obama’s team swept past Platon – “A blur of men whispering into their lapels, sniffer dogs, the guy with the briefcase and the nuclear codes, then Hillary” – and, as the President took to the stage, another



Jacob Zuma. President, South Africa

Best known prior to his presidency as the man who thought you could avoid HIV by having a shower (a detail that emerged from his 2005 trial for rape, in which he was acquitted), Zuma surprised many by not being all that mad in government. Notable for his habit of garnering ever more wives (five, at the last count).



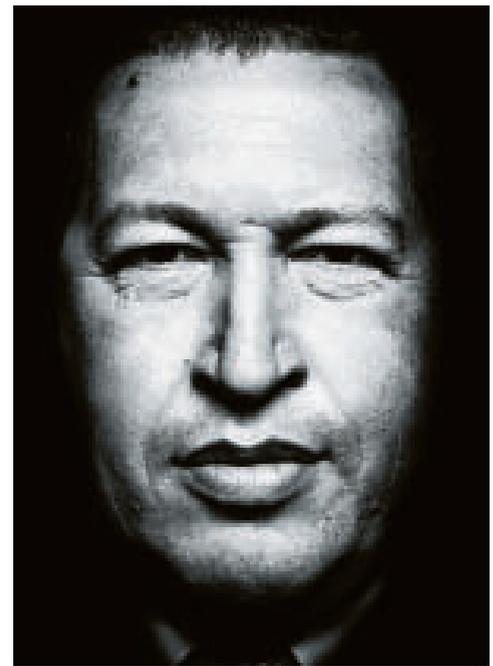
Paul Kagame. President, Rwanda

On the plus side, Kagame’s presidency, since 2000, has pulled Rwanda further out of the quagmire of genocide and dysfunction in which it sat. On the minus, he runs a repressive state, and has ravaged the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo as part of a long-running war which has killed millions.



Barack Obama. President, United States

America’s first black President, born in Hawaii and with a birth certificate to prove it. Despite his confidence at the podium, his image is tarnished by a lingering sense of geekiness, as evidenced by his awkwardness on the dancefloor, and the way he used to keep his BlackBerry in a holster.



Hugo Chávez. President, Venezuela

A former army officer once imprisoned for his part in a coup, Hugo Chávez has been President of Venezuela since 1999. In office he has steered his country to the left, and has emerged as a vocal critic of what most people call the West, but he calls the North. He also broadcasts his own radio show every Sunday.

entourage, 300-strong, approached Platon: Gaddafi's. The photographer was "mesmerised" by Gaddafi's famous bodyguards – women in green army uniforms – and how "He was moving in slow motion, his eyes black slits and his eyebrows studded with tattoos to make them look thicker. The two entourages collided. It was chaos. This was Gaddafi's way of saying, 'I will sit for Platon, but only when Obama is talking.' It was an act of defiance. He sits nonchalantly, tilts his chin up. I can't work out if he is the smartest man in the room or the craziest. He had torn-up scraps of paper for his speech with writing four inches high in crayon. He threw the UN rule book away during his speech. Unseen by everyone except me, it hit Ban Ki Moon [the UN Secretary-General] on the head backstage." Is it hard to photograph cruel or despotic leaders? "Some of the people I photograph make me physically sick, but I'm there to document a moment," Platon says.

He only got 15 seconds and two frames with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (in the first Chávez blinked, the second was perfect), whereas he had an hour with current Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who looks as swoonsome as Cary Grant. (Platon shows me the Christmas cards that have landed from the Kremlin ever since.) "With every sitter, imagine me attaching a rope to their heart and tugging it open. I'll talk casually and tell them what to do: 'Sit like this, move forward, lift your chin.' Their aides are normally shocked, because nobody ever talks to leaders in that way.'

Iran's President Ahmadinejad was surrounded by a roiling scrum of flunkies, but allowed himself to be tugged by Platon to the apple box. "This mass stop-start procession began with him and his entourage. It was like I was pulling 300 people. The picture is so still and quiet, but there is pandemonium happening around it. Liberals criticised me for making him seem too human, but by making him human it makes the way he exercises power that much darker." President Mugabe was "very dapper, sombre and absolutely cold. When I shook his hand I got the chills. His skin had this bizarre, fine quality, like it had been ironed. When he walked away, the next head of state refused to sit on the apple box, 'because there's blood on it.'" The (few) female leaders, like Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, notes Platon, "were no different to the men, although they were better prepared: they had blusher in their pockets. The men were more insecure, asking if their ties were straight."

Platon is presently immersed in photographing the students at the heart of the Egyptian uprising, the families of dead US soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, Burmese rebels and, imminently, Russian anti-Government activists. "After 20 years photographing the most powerful, I want to photograph those robbed of power and



**Cristina Fernández de Kirchner,
President, Argentina**

The 55th President of Argentina, and the widow of the 54th, CFdK has been in power since 2003, following a pattern set by the Peróns. Considered a fashion icon by some, a sartorial disaster by others. Hillary Clinton once ordered an investigation into her mental health.

give them the same reverence," he says.

He took the first official portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese political campaigner, after her release from 15 years of house arrest last year. "There were 90mph car chases to avoid the police. We sneaked the film out in our underwear. I asked her what music she liked. 'Mozart to lift me up and I also secretly love Bob Marley and the Grateful Dead,' she said. I asked if love was the most important thing to her. 'No, kindness,' she replied. She is angry about what is happening to the Burmese people but has no personal bitterness."

Platon agrees he is a restless workaholic, saying that suffering from dyslexia as a child meant he had to "work six times harder" to achieve good exam results. His was an "idyllic" childhood, spent initially in Greece (he was born Platon Antoniou) with his father,

'When Mugabe walked away, the next head of state refused to sit on the apple box, "because there's blood on it"'

Jim, a Greek architect, and mother, Carol, an English art historian, "so my younger sister Zoe [a publisher] and I were brainwashed with good stuff". What he calls the "tactileness and body-space invasiveness" of the Greeks, combined with English reserve, are qualities he relies on. He was set to become an architect "but my maths wasn't good enough", so, influenced by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Picasso and Van Gogh, he studied photography at Central St Martins College of Art and Design.

In his twenties, Platon began photographing celebrities for glossy magazines. An early mentor was John F. Kennedy Jr, the publisher of *George* magazine, who died in 1999. "He had known his father as his father, not JFK, and always said to me, 'Show power from the inside.'" Platon has a shelf of celebrity keepsakes – David Beckham's sock, Willie Nelson's half-full whisky bottle – but insists he never becomes friends with his subjects: "It would compromise me." (However, Dustin Hoffman sweetly sent his mother 200 white roses on her birthday, with a card that said, "From your secret American admirer," after Platon told him she was a huge fan who had recently lost her husband.)

He keeps detailed diaries which he may distil into a book. When he was 29 he was "beaten to a pulp" in Muswell Hill, North London, by a "random nutter". As he lay in hospital, muttering, "Why me?", the woman in the next bed chided him, "Young man, terrible things happen to people all the time. You can become bitter or use this as a gift." Platon chose the latter. "It gave me a sense of empathy. If somebody has been hurt I see it immediately."

Platon admits he was "selfish" before having his children, Polly, 5, and Jude, 3, with wife Rebecca, whom he married 8 years ago just after arriving in New York. "I used to cut anyone from my life who got in the way of work, but having a family changed me." The death of his 66-year-old father in 2003 left him "feeling as if there were just a few drops left in the bottle of life". "Mortality is huge for me. Time is limited; I'm in my prime. I love life so much I can't bear the idea of it fading."

In farewell the anecdotes keep tumbling: when Arnold Schwarzenegger encouraged Platon to call him "Schnitzel"; the artist Richard Serra snarling, "Keep your f***ing mouth shut and take the f***ing pictures." Then, Michelle Obama, sitting for her first formal portrait at the White House. "Right, my love, I want your soul," Platon instructed her, then realised his "massive breach of protocol. I apologised for being disrespectful. She hugged me, and whispered in my ear, 'Platon, when it's all said and done, I'm just Michelle.'" ■

Power is published by Chronicle Books on June 1, and is available for £20.69 (RRP £22.99), free p&p, on 0845 2712134; thetimes.co.uk/bookshop