(un)FIXING THE EYE: WILLIAM KENTRIDGE AND THE OPTICS OF WITNESS.

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ABSTRACT

The University of Manchester
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Doctor of Philosophy
(un)Fixing the Eye: William Kentridge and the Optics of Witness.
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South African artist William Kentridge’s (b. 1955) work frequently employs optical tools, such as the stereoscope, to highlight the contingency and instability of witness. These visual tools become metaphors for the process of historicization in post-apartheid South Africa. Kentridge is best known for his animations that are filmed by drawing with charcoal, photographing, erasing, redrawing and photographing again, leaving a palimpsest of previous traces on the paper’s surface. Kentridge’s prints, drawings, puppetry, theatrical projects and performances are also addressed in (un)Fixing the Eye. Kentridge’s vast array of works narrates a history critical of the narrow and objective history of apartheid constructed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) official report. Furthermore, the metaphors suggested by Kentridge’s optical tools undermine the ideology that apartheid is in the past. It suggests the necessity of colonial narratives as well as issues of class and materialism, within apartheid as traces that are very much part of the present.

Each chapter of (un)Fixing the Eye uses a separate optical device to explore the narration of history in South Africa. To do so I draw from an eclectic group of thinkers: psychoanalytic models of melancholia and reparation, Jacques Derrida’s work on forgiveness, Hayden White’s theories of narrative and Jonathan Crary’s work on optical tools and perception. Chapter one argues there is an ironic and impossible condition of forgiveness and truth in the TRC. Using Kentridge’s Ubu Tells the Truth and its specific invocation of Dziga Vertov’s realist “kino-eye” and Alfred Jarry’s brutal and absurd King Ubu as metaphors of absurdity and truth represented through the movie camera, this chapter argues that there is an impossibility of truth in the TRC. Chapter two reads Kentridge’s Felix in Exile as a materialist response to the naturalized and ahistorical landscape tradition in South Africa. Felix’s use of the theodolite and sextant as mapping and navigation tools highlights colonial mapping practices and the history of property ownership, particularly in the mining industry. In this way these optical tools link colonialism and mining alongside of the violence rendered in the film, unearthing a history of colonialism and class issues in apartheid narratives. Chapter three uses X-rays and CAT scans as metaphors for the testimony in the TRC, as both require an expert to decode and contextualize the testimony. Kentridge’s films during the TRC use medical imaging technologies that are ambiguous and uncertain within the TRC’s discourse of truth. Chapter four returns to the camera, this time as a colonial image in Namibia, arguing its usage in Black Box/Chambre Noir creates a melancholic relationship between Enlightenment Europe and colonial Africa. In this melancholia, Kentridge’s history of the 20th century’s first genocide in Namibia links a tremendous number of global histories.

The focus in optical discourses, particularly the stereoscope is not new in Kentridge’s work but (un)Fixing the Eye considers a number of tools that have not previously been a part of this optical work in Kentridge’s art. It expands the political scope of Kentridge’s work to include colonialism and class issues, insisting on their place in the current political landscape. Ultimately this project argues that Kentridge’s work through a destabilized optical apparatus works both formally and allegorically as a way of conceiving of narrative and ideological critique in an expanded sense from the narrow confines set by the TRC.
DECLARATION

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INTRODUCTION: (un)FIXING THE NATION

Riddled in pain, a woman named Nandi dressed in a wrap skirt twists and falls to the cold earth of the South African rand. Followed by a series of frenetic cuts in the film, the viewer has witnessed the death of Nandi, one of the two central characters in William Kentridge’s 1994 animated film *Felix in Exile*. Kentridge renders a stark image of the landscape in his native South Africa. As Nandi falls she becomes covered in newspaper on the hard-pressed dirt in the open, seemingly endless terrain (fig. 1, 1994). As the newspaper covers her corpse, Nandi’s body disappears, but through Kentridge’s signature method of drawing the image, photographing the drawing, erasing, and redrawing, a palimpsest is built up on the image leaving a ghostly trace of Nandi’s death on the sheet of paper and in the film. As Nandi fades from the surface of the page, Kentridge replaces this action with a landscape far different from traditional European pastoralism. Instead, Kentridge renders a landscape marked by the scars of mining: industrial pylons, polluted slurry, property markers, and red cuts are drawn on the same terrain where Nandi died.

Kentridge’s drawing style in *Felix in Exile* typifies his animations, the body of work for which he is best known. *Felix in Exile* comprises one of his *9 Drawings for Projection*, involving three central characters: emblematic industrialist Soho Eckstein, his wife, identified as Mrs. Eckstein and his alter ego the romantic dreamer Felix Teitelbaum. In addition to the *9 Drawings for Projection* and other animations, Kentridge’s art works in a vast range of media including: theatre, opera, puppetry, tapestries, drawing, collage, sculpture, video, performance, and earthwork. At the core of this work is a constant sense of play between genres and media and within his work itself, the vast number of genres he works in, often in related themes conjures the image of Kentridge constantly playing in the studio. Even toys themselves appear
in Kentridge’s work. In the past Kentridge has appropriated his children’s toy soldiers, however the most explicit use of the toy within Kentridge’s project is the turn towards optical toys, which comprise a central theme of inquiry in \textit{(un)Fixing the Eye}.

Kentridge uses a number of optical toys (devices that produce an optical effect often intended for purposes of entertainment or scientific research) including phenakistoscopes, anamorphic drawings and most notably the stereoscope, used as a key metaphor in Kentridge’s 1999 film \textit{Stereoscope}.

Born in 1955 in Johannesburg, South Africa, William Kentridge grew up in one of South Africa’s most famous legal families. His family’s legal heritage and his Jewish heritage inform the production of his work. Kentridge is most well known for animations including his \textit{9 Drawings for Projection}, but he is also known for his theatrical and opera works involving his animations. Kentridge’s work has been well received from his first exhibition in Johannesburg in 1979; since then Kentridge has had four major retrospectives organized by the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels (1998), the New Museum of Contemporary, New York and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2001), the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea (2004), and most recently organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Norton Museum of Art (2009). Kentridge’s work has also been shown in a number of major international exhibitions including: Havana Biennial (1997, 2001), Documenta 10 (1997) which vaulted him to fame internationally, Johannesburg Biennale (1997), Shanghai Biennial (2001), Documenta 11 (2002), Venice Biennale (2005) and he has been awarded a number of awards including the Carnegie Prize (2000) and the National Order of Ikhamanga in Silver in South Africa (2007).\footnote{For a complete chronology of Kentridge’s work see Mark Rosenthal ed., \textit{William Kentridge: Five Themes} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).}
Kentridge’s optical toys become key metaphors for reading history and witness in *(un)Fixing the Eye*. *(un)Fixing the Eye: William Kentridge and the Optics of Witness* accomplishes this by locating the eye as a central theme in Kentridge’s work; while it invokes rich metaphorical associations with witness in post-apartheid South Africa, it is also firmly a part of Kentridge’s art making through the camera at the back of his studio to capture his animations. Invoking the eye also insists upon the centrality of its place in South Africa’s constitutionally mandated Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC), which attempt to create the foundation of an official history of South Africa under apartheid. The use of witness as official history invokes the eye in both the eye of the witness and in capturing the testimony in official reports, including television broadcasts. To *(un)fix* the eye suggests two things central to this thesis’ reading of Kentridge: one is to locate the importance of reparative work in Kentridge’s project, and the second is to suggest that the importance of the eye and its official narratives of witness it suggests in the TRC are destabilized, that is to say *unfixed*. Unfixing the eye becomes crucial; its destabilization of the eye’s perception fragments the process of looking and ultimately witnessing, but it also expands the focus of South Africa’s history beyond apartheid to consider a number of issues that come before and after it. In doing so, *(un)Fixing the Eye* reads the optical devices Kentridge uses as a method of historical critique within South Africa. To play as one would with the stereoscope (and implied in Kentridge’s use of toys, puppets and theatrical works) destabilizes the singularity and authority implied through the stability of vision and by extension the narratives of the TRC.

This PhD thesis reads Kentridge’s work as metaphor for these processes of history writing engendered by the TRC that are figured through the perception of the eyes of the witness. *(un)Fixing the Eye: William Kentridge and the Optics of Witness*
takes as its central claim that Kentridge’s use of optical toys and tools fragments vision to open the historical narratives of post-apartheid South Africa to a multiplicity of histories. Furthermore, this thesis argues that the outcomes of this fragmenting of vision become a form of history writing in itself. William Kentridge has described the difficulty of engaging the history of apartheid as a “rock,” whose size and weight is symbolic of the difficulty of engaging with it, saying that when faced head on, the rock always wins. This weight, symbolically represented in several of his film’s titles and imagery, is countered by Kentridge’s fragmenting of vision, suggesting that oblique strategies for addressing apartheid may be more effective responses. The fracturing represented in Kentridge’s use of optical tools resists the official and closed narratives of the TRC that frame apartheid as having a fixed history and a closed case after the Commission’s inquiry. Instead multiple narratives, like those pursued by Kentridge, suggest multiple lines of inquiry into problems of apartheid whose obliqueness may be able to address the problems of apartheid without dealing with the overwhelming difficulty of direct and singular projects. In doing so, this mapping of apartheid from fragmented and multiple viewpoints create narratives of apartheid history that locate the origins of apartheid in colonial histories and insist that apartheid problems have not disappeared in the “new” South Africa, countering the dominant and fixed ideologies of the TRC. (un)Fixing the Eye understands Kentridge’s work as framing a larger historical narrative of apartheid and South African history by

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engaging in narratives of colonialism and considering the relationships of European aesthetics to Africa, as a series of fragments that coalesce through the process of narrative. Each chapter in *(un)Fixing the Eye*, considers a different optical tool and several narrative approaches used by Kentridge to upset the fixed narratives constructed through a legal appeal to witness and testimony within the TRC.

William Kentridge’s family history is firmly woven into the narrative of South Africa, particularly its apartheid history. The family is made up of German and Lithuanian Jews who immigrated to South Africa in the late 1800’s. Kentridge’s grandmother was the first female barrister in South Africa and his grandfather Morris was a parliamentarian in the United Party. Kentridge’s father, Sidney Kentridge, represented Black Consciousness leader Steven Biko’s family at the inquest into his death and several other political trials in South Africa and his mother Felicia ran a public interest law firm in Johannesburg. Kentridge’s history became centered by this “family business.” Law and politics (Kentridge received a degree in politics from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg) are something Kentridge says comes naturally to him as opposed to art. In fact, representations of lawyers and their work (an omnipresent part of Kentridge’s childhood) have found their way into his animations. Images of ink blotters, old stamping devices, bakelite telephones and

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5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.
typewriters come from the experience of playing in his grandfather’s law office and occupy the desk of the emblematic industrialist Soho Eckstein, the protagonist of his best known *9 Films for Projection.*

Playing in his father’s law office provided an important experience in his life; when searching for chocolates in his father’s office he found images of the Sharpeville massacre placed inside a large Kodak box. Kentridge writes:

> I remember coming into his study and seeing on his desk a large, flat, yellow Kodak box, and lifting the lid of it- it looked like a chocolate box. Inside were images of a woman with her back blown off, someone with only half her head visible. The impact of seeing these images for the first time- when I was six years old the shock was extraordinary.

Kentridge’s first exposure to the brutality of apartheid was unearthed through an act of play, and encoded in discourses of the visual (photographic) and legal. The “family business” provided one vector of Kentridge’s political and artistic development. His parents introduced him to the canon of European art and literature (responses to these from an African context make up a strong component of Kentridge’s work) began as a young child in the same home where he discovered the photographs of Sharpeville and where he would eventually build his studio (He has built a separate studio now on the same property; his parents relocated to London in 1981). Kentridge began to study drawing by going to life drawing classes with his mother Felicia. His mother’s name would later subconsciously become the inspiration for one of the two main characters in his *9 Drawings for Projection*: Felix, the idealist dreamer and alter ego to

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8 William Kentridge, conversation with author, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 July 2009.


10 Tomkins.

11 Ibid.
industrialist Soho, whose wife takes Felix as a lover in these films.\textsuperscript{12} Kentridge remarked on the peculiarity of these life drawing classes: “When I was about fourteen, I started joining my mother in evening life-drawing classes… it seemed an adult thing to do—to draw naked women.”\textsuperscript{13} The study of art became firmly rooted within Kentridge’s childhood experiences (and his attempt to take the creativity of childhood into the realm of adulthood).

Kentridge’s exposure to art and literature took him between the bourgeois world of European art and the political realities realized in his parent’s legal and political engagement. One of his theatrical adaptations \textit{Faustus In Africa!} was inspired by a copy of Goethe’s \textit{Faust} he received at his Bar Mitzvah.\textsuperscript{14} While this exposure to European art, literature, music and theatre would not be unusual the exposure he received becomes an important point of engagement within his art. A number of Kentridge’s works reinterpret European plays and works of literature. He acted in a staging of Ionesco’s \textit{The Bald Primadonna} in high school, where Kentridge discovered absurdism as an aesthetic tactic.\textsuperscript{15} Alongside of these thematic expressions, Kentridge has also restaged or reinterpreted Georg Büchner’s \textit{Woyzeck}, Alfred Jarry’s \textit{Ubu} plays,
Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Monteverdi’s *Return of Ulysses*, and most recently Dmitri Shostakovich’s *The Nose*.

Kentridge began work on his first exhibited set of drawings while under trial for protesting against apartheid under the Riotous Assemblies Act, often sketching in court. These works would eventually become the series *Pit* (1979). Kentridge left Johannesburg for Paris studying theatre and mime at the École Jacques Lecoq for a year. Returning to South Africa Kentridge began exhibiting prints and drawings while working as a set designer for various film, theatre and television productions. In 1989 Kentridge completed the first of his 9 *Drawings for Projection*, which helped establish his presence in the international art community. Since then Kentridge’s work has delved thematically into several issues surrounding not only apartheid but also the relationship of fascism and the Enlightenment to Africa, colonial violence, and memory in post-apartheid South Africa, engaged through a vast array of aesthetic mediums.

Kentridge has stated that his work possesses a transnational quality, that its themes can address political concerns lodged within several specific localizations, yet the themes and imagery of his films ground his work firmly within Johannesburg’s setting. The history of this city and metonymically the nation as a whole are essential to a foundation of Kentridge’s themes and metaphors raised in a response to apartheid and the colonial experience in Africa.

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\text{16} \text{ Angela Breidbach and William Kentridge, *William Kentridge: Thinking Aloud* (Köl: Walther König, 2006), 7, 9.}
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\text{17} \text{ Rosenthal, 36-37.}
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\text{18} \text{ Ibid.}
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\text{19} \text{ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge* (1999), 34.}
\]
Southern Africa was first discovered by Portuguese colonial traders in 1487; in 1652 the Dutch East India Company set up a permanent station in Cape Town for eastward traveling ships. The British were to take the Cape Colony in 1795 and it changed hands between the Dutch and British until the British formalized control in 1814. Alongside of the number of tribal groups, still present today possessing distinct languages, the Dutch Afrikaners sometimes called Boers, English and Malay populations imported as slaves comprise the diverse population segments of South Africa. After years of inland expansion (most notably by Boer populations) a well-established mining industry sprung up around Witwatersrand and Johannesburg controlled by mostly British and to a lesser extent Jewish, industrial concerns despite the Boers proclaiming a republic in the interior. Tensions stemming from this led to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 where the British produced a brutal defeat over the Boers, and forced internment of Boers into concentration camps.

Struggles between Afrikaner parties and the British led United Party dominated South African politics as member of the Commonwealth. Before South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961 the politics of apartheid were firmly in place. The Afrikaner-led National Party took power in 1948 seeking to establish their culture firmly within the national framework. Apartheid became the answer to this problem.

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21 Ibid., 51-52.


23 Ibid., 251-56.

24 Gilomee’s history of Afrikaners provides a detailed account of the political tensions between Jan Smut’s United Party and Afrikaner nationalist movements.
(driven both by culture and economics), and was driven by a number of laws including: the prohibition of interracial sex and marriage (1949, 50), banning all colored people from voting (1951), the creation of homelands or “Bantus” for all races (which allowed for the forced relocation of the black population for white developments notable in locales such as District 6 in Cape Town and Cato Manor in Durban). One of the most crucial measures was the forced education of black students in Afrikaans at schools, which was seen as a limiting educational experience as most jobs required English language; subsequently this dissent over language education became a galvanizing factor in youth protests.

The black communities’ response to these situations was initially formed through the African National Congress (ANC) whose youth leadership of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu energized protests against apartheid in an attempt to both show dissent in the nation and win sympathy internationally. The police broke up one of the first visible public actions of dissent, the signing of the ANC’s Freedom Charter near Johannesburg in 1955. Violence intensified as protests against pass laws in Sharpeville in 1960 left 67 dead as the police opened fire against unarmed protestors providing a focal point against apartheid internationally. The ANC led by Mandela became more violent forming Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), meaning, “spear of the nation,” leading to Mandela’s arrest and internment on Robben

25 Thompson, 190-91.
26 Gilomee, 509-10.
27 Thompson, 208.
28 Thompson, 210.
Island. On the back of these events a number of laws were put into place to be able to repress organizations and mass protests against apartheid.

In the 1970’s Steven Biko’s formation of the Black Consciousness Movement led to protests in Soweto (the black townships southwest of Johannesburg) against the teaching of Afrikaans in schools. During the Soweto Uprising, the police shot 575 people including children, and Biko became a visible public figure of anti-apartheid dissent. Biko was eventually arrested under the Terrorism Act and died from head trauma suffered while under police custody in 1977. International resistance to apartheid intensified with a ban on arms sales passed by the UN in 1977. Military defeats in attempt to stem socialist revolutions in southern Africa ended in the South African Defense Force defeated in Angola by Angolan, Namibian (SWAPO), Cuban and ANC forces. This defeat, alongside of economic decline, weakened the strength of the apartheid regime. As violence increased throughout the country, a state of emergency was declared in 1985 and extended to the whole nation in 1986 giving the government sweeping powers to control dissent in the country. It was clear that apartheid was unsustainable at this point in time; the collapse of the cold war had left South Africa without political support abroad and bans on the ANC were made as

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29 Thompson, 211.


31 Thompson, 212-3.

32 Ibid., 222.

33 Gilomee, 589, 596.

34 Thompson, 235.
well as the release of Mandela from prison upon F.W. de Klerk’s entry into office in 1990.\textsuperscript{35}

As negotiations for a democratic election were held, violence increased from both covert police forces and the Zulu led Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) against the ANC (at times working in collusion to destabilize the ANC position).\textsuperscript{36} As an interim constitution was drafted, (and would see the election of Mandela and his ANC party) allowing for the first democratic election in which blacks participated, provisions were made for a Truth Commission to assess gross violations of human rights and the granting of amnesty for these crimes from the period of 1960 (just after Sharpeville) to 1994.\textsuperscript{37} A fuller consideration of the legal structures of the TRC appears in chapters one and three of \textit{(un)Fixing the Eye}.

Many scholars who have written on Kentridge’s work note the importance and even the “weight” of South Africa’s apartheid histories in Kentridge’s animations.\textsuperscript{38} Rosalind Krauss emphasizes the importance of process in Kentridge’s work; especially the semi-automatic method of drawing that Kentridge terms \textit{fortuna}.\textsuperscript{39} Turning to philosopher Stanley Cavell she argues that Kentridge’s automatic way of working becomes form in itself.\textsuperscript{40} The animation, Krauss argues, has a weight and a

\textsuperscript{35} Thompson, 246-47.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 248-9. It should be noted as well that the IFP is not an all-encompassing Zulu party. The supporters of the IFP and its violence were located mostly in the KwaZulu Natal rural areas; by and large most urban and educated Zulus supported the ANC.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 249, 259, 275.


\textsuperscript{39} Krauss, 7, 8, 10.

\textsuperscript{40} Krauss, 11.
simplicity whose technology predates the animated cartoon; highlighting its antiquated palimpsestic form as a way of preserving memory both in terms of working method and metaphorically.\(^\text{41}\)

Drawing from Hardt and Negri, Emily Apter has emphasized the ecological aspects of Kentridge’s works focusing his landscape drawings and films alongside of the poet John Kinsella.\(^\text{42}\) Apter is not alone in considering the importance of landscape in Kentridge’s work. South African Michael Godby considers the landscape as a site of witness in Kentridge’s work and an “empirical” sense in its rendering of industrial ruin in the Rand mines.\(^\text{43}\) Likewise, Staci Boris argues Kentridge’s landscapes contextualize the violence on them, lodging his work into a larger “post-Holocaust” discourse.\(^\text{44}\)

This traumatic framework is popular in assessing Kentridge’s aesthetic; art historian Jill Bennett sees Kentridge’s films as exploring trauma through journeys into the past, placing his work in a contemporary discourse of artists responding to violence.\(^\text{45}\) Likewise, Jessica Dubow and Ruth Rosengarten locate Soho’s body as a traumatic response to apartheid violence under the backdrop of the TRC in *History of the Main Complaint.*\(^\text{46}\)

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\(^{41}\) Krauss, 20, 27.


In a broader context Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has contributed to a number of exhibition catalogues on Kentridge. Her work considers Kentridge’s work in relationship to European aesthetics (both early 20th century avant-garde movements such as German Expressionism and Surrealism but also as working against conceptual movements of the later half of the century), as well as the traditions of landscape painting and print culture within South Africa. Christov-Bakargiev’s work also emphasizes a comparison of the apartheid condition to the horrors of violence in Europe, in particular the Holocaust, emphasizing the preservation of memories at work in his method.47 A constant thread in her essays on Kentridge is the presence of her thinking and Kentridge’s thinking on Adorno. More recently Christov-Bakargiev has read Kentridge’s work as an attempt to look back to a number of disasters in the 20th century, bringing his work on Stalinist Russia, German and Italian colonialism in Africa, and the Enlightenment alongside of apartheid, comparing his work to Alain Badiou’s historicist looking back in The Century.48

These essays represent a strong contribution to the work on Kentridge, and (un)Fixing the Eye seeks to expand upon their work in a number of ways. One of the primary points of emphasis in this PhD thesis is to expand the notion of optical devices. Writings on Kentridge are quick to point out his engagement with the stereoscope as an optical device. While the stereoscope is very important to this reading of Kentridge’s work, (un)Fixing the Eye also seeks to consider more widely


how Kentridge uses optical tools. The camera becomes both the device by which Kentridge films his animations, as Krauss reminds us, and a thematic consideration as an active political tool in the TRC and in Kentridge’s exploration of them in *Ubu Tells the Truth* as well as for colonialism in *Black Box/Chambre Noir*. Additionally, I locate the medical diagnostic tools and surveying equipment in *9 Drawings for Projection* as optical devices encoding trauma and colonial mapping and industrial work respectively.

Furthermore, *(un)Fixing the Eye* reads Kentridge’s work within a wider historical framework in South Africa. This is primarily achieved by expanding the traditional reading of Kentridge’s landscape to consider it as a response to colonialism through mapping and surveying tools. These devices also encode class-based antagonisms sometimes lost in readings of Kentridge’s response to landscape. To imbue Kentridge’s work with a class-based response acknowledges the great amount of economic disenfranchisement experienced by black populations during apartheid that persist today. This reading seems in keeping with Kentridge’s work, leaving ghostly traces on the surface, suggesting that the history of the present cannot shed the past contrary to the suggestion by TRC chair Desmond Tutu: “We should be deeply humbled by what we’ve heard, but we’ve got to finish quickly and really turn our backs on this awful past and say: ‘Life is for living.’” Additionally, this class-based analysis preserves the complexities of the origins of apartheid legislation as partially

49 Angela Breidbach’s interview while not specifically invoking Crary does feature a lengthy discussion with Kentridge over the physics of the stereoscope. Additionally Maria-Christina Villaseñor invokes Crary in her discussion of Kentridge’s *Black Box/Chambre Noir*. See: Angela Breidbach and William Kentridge (2006); Maria-Christina Villaseñor, *William Kentridge: Black Box/Chambre Noir*, Maria-Christina Villaseñor ed. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2005).

driven by economic anxieties in the Afrikaner community alongside of racist programs, as Herman Gilomee has argued in his history of the Afrikaners.\textsuperscript{51} Subsequently, apartheid remains a crucial historical moment in my reading of Kentridge’s work, but becomes lodged in a larger historical discourse of the history of South Africa and Africa as a whole.

Finally, \textit{(un)Fixing the Eye} expands the relationship Kentridge weaves between Europe and Africa. Like other commentators on Kentridge’s work, \textit{(un)Fixing the Eye} makes use of the tactical interventions Kentridge draws from European art. This consideration of Kentridge’s relationship with European aesthetics is accomplished through a detailed investigation of the political tactics Kentridge takes from Jarry and Nikolai Gogol in particular. The PhD thesis also argues that Kentridge’s work is involved in a more complicated relationship between Africa and Europe. Making use of Kentridge’s more recent work on German colonialism in Africa and his restaging of Shostakovich’s \textit{The Nose}, Kentridge’s engagement in African history is expanded beyond a consideration of apartheid (though it is still an important political source for this project). This wider engagement with Africa contextualizes politics not only across borders within the continent but also to consider its implications for European history. The primary way this done is through Kentridge’s work on German colonialism which links the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer war, genocide in colonial campaigns, Enlightenment history and finally Nazism. This complex reading offered by Kentridge’s work doesn’t simply draw a comparison between the existence of political violence that may be encoded by a legal

\textsuperscript{51} Gilomee, 500. While Gilomee does emphasize economic factors in the move to apartheid, he also stresses the racial ideologies inherent in the program drawing from a number of sources including academic racial rhetoric and religious structures in Afrikaner society as well.
(un)Fixing the Eye’s complex reading of Kentridge’s historical and political framework uses a rather eclectic theoretical approach that is in keeping with the multi-faceted approach Kentridge takes to producing his work. The key text for reading the complex histories of apartheid and their narration in the TRC is Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*. Krog, a poet by training, offers an account of her assignment reporting on the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, done in a thematic fashion sometimes interjecting her poetry and even one key scene of fiction within the narrative. Krog’s book is at once factual, reporting on the key moments of testimony and figures within the commission (and subsequently establishing a history of apartheid violence), yet personal, detailing the coverage and the toll her reporting assignments took on her and her family. *Country of My Skull* historicizes the TRC reflexively, by implicating Krog’s place within the trials, but also the difficulties in translations within the TRC’s use of a plethora of languages and the problems associated with the structure of the TRC themselves that defined who would speak and how it would be incorporated into a final report. Furthermore, Krog’s text and history of the TRC links itself into a number of other works relevant to (un)Fixing the Eye; it became a point of reference for Kentridge and Jill Taylor when penning the

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52 Though not present in the American publication of *Country of My Skull*, there is a fictitious passage in which Krog narrates an affair that she had during the course of the Commission and her radio reports. Mark Sanders’ *Ambiguities of Witnessing* takes this issue up in detail. Sanders’ book emphasizes the literary nature of Krog’s report and takes this into a wider narrative through his book. Sanders contends that the narrative structure of testimony suspends the possibility of truth in the TRC’s mission, engaging with Derrida and Melanie Klein Saunders seeks to not only highlight the use of memoir and novels to explore the legacy of the TRC, but to explore the testimony and language of itself as a highly symbolic function, signifying an overlap in legal functions with the literary. See Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* and it was also used as a reference for Jacques Derrida’s reading of the TRC and forgiveness.

Derrida’s *On Forgiveness* argues that a pure forgiveness demanded by the TRC is impossible; it can mete out a judgment but it cannot give forgiveness. Derrida contends that once it is asked for it becomes impossible to give.\(^{53}\) Kentridge incorporates Derrida’s lecture on forgiveness, given in Johannesburg (amongst other places in South Africa) in his film *Stereoscope*.\(^{54}\) Specifically, Kentridge uses the words “give” and “forgive” in this film inspired by Derrida’s talk. Kentridge reflects on this talk:

> Derrida who came and gave a lecture at that time which I could not understand but he said that the word give has an interesting etymology, that the word give comes from the Germanic root *gif* and knowing from Afrikaans, I don’t know from German but from Afrikaans the word *gif* means poison… there is a poison in the giving. And that acts of giving are acts of aggression and that the idea of forgiveness becomes very complicated.\(^{55}\)

Kentridge’s use of these terms following from Derrida’s lectures (which later appeared as the essay *On Forgiveness*) reveals a sense of irony in the TRC’s tradition: to give poisons one. This ironic position allows this PhD thesis to consider Kentridge’s films as a place that questions the outcomes of the TRC and the consequences of their implied forgetting with in the historical narratives of South Africa.

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\(^{54}\) Derrida gave a number of lectures in South Africa on the theme of forgiveness including a weeklong workshop at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg culminating in a talk entitled “Archive Fever in South Africa.” For a more detailed history of these lectures see Saunders, 209; and Hamliton, et. al. eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht, Netherland: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).

\(^{55}\) Kentridge, Rinder, Rosenthal and Silverman, *Learning From the Absurd: Panel Discussion*.
(un)Fixing the Eye argues Kentridge’s work turns to metaphor to narrate South African history, just as Krog and Derrida’s use of narrative tropes examine the TRC. Hayden White’s work, which has sought to expose the use of literary language, becomes productive to understand the historical work that Kentridge’s art performs within my thesis. Kentridge’s use of metaphor, absurdism, irony, and allegory allows an expressive language that restructures the histories outlined above. To understand White’s narrative and expressive approach to history, allows this PhD thesis to explore aesthetic forms such as Kentridge’s to be considered as history writing as well.

The historical work that informs (un)Fixing the Eye is used alongside formal considerations of Kentridge’s use of optical tools and tearing addressed in the work of Jonathan Crary and Melanie Klein respectively. Crary’s Techniques of the Observer, places the stereoscope at the center of his analysis of the development of modernity. His understanding of optical tools as active in the production of witness and sight become useful metaphors to address several issues at the core of the TRC. The understanding of the stereoscope as an unstable device that attempts to mesh together several distinct binaries that Techniques of the Observer provides becomes a core way of approaching political and social themes within Kentridge’s invocation of the device. The stereoscope, Crary reveals, physically produces its three dimensional effect by separating the two eyes but showing them two very similar images. Subsequently the observer’s eyes must make a decision to favor one image over the other, placing one atop the other while reconciling the two images into one image, producing the three dimensional effect.\(^5\) Crary argues that this superimposition emerges as a task of labor;

\footnote{Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 120.}
it trains the eye to see in a particular way.\textsuperscript{57} Crary’s fragmenting of vision upsets the stability of the monocular, empirical, and disembodied eye, making it an apt metaphor to critique the stability of witness and the binaries implied in South African history. Crary’s work also speaks to the presence of the retinal after image, which functions like the palimpsestic traces of Kentridge’s films. These divides, while most evident in the overlap between Kentridge and Crary’s personal interests in the stereoscope, the fragmenting of vision and its implied instability, extend throughout the consideration of a number of optical tools analyzed in \textit{(un)Fixing the Eye}.

Kentridge’s work also frequently uses torn paper puppets, formed out of ripped pieces of black paper, whose forms show the seams where they have been torn. This process of tearing and reparation is evident in British object relations theorist Melanie Klein’s “Love, Guilt, Reparation.” Klein’s work argues that the child must tear up the mother’s body as a process of maturation and so as to remake this body (akin to a process of making art), yet as the process of making whole goes on the mother’s body can never be made complete again.\textsuperscript{58} Reparation becomes a key term as it invokes the charge of the TRC to repair the violations of apartheid, yet through Klein’s lens it reminds us that it can never be made complete, the scars of apartheid remain imbedded in class-based structures today.

Furthermore the fragments used in the work to make a whole perform a task of making sense, they look to form coherent forms out of the fragment. Kentridge sees this process at work in the forms made from optical effects:

This pleasure arises from the fact that, though you know that two hands are making the shape, you cannot stop seeing it as a bird. Your

\textsuperscript{57} Crary, 131-32.

astonishment is at your inability to stop the suspension of disbelief. The child who plays with shadows delights not just in seeing the image of a creature on the wall, but also in watching and grasping the illusion, in learning how shadows of hands can be transformed into animals. The awareness of how we construct meaning, and this inescapable need to make sense of shapes, seems to me very central, indeed essential, to what it means to be alive—to live in the world with open eyes.59

The torn fragment and its use as a shadow are a frequent theme in Kentridge’s work. Assembling the paper fragments allow something new to be made, yet the tears that Kentridge makes and Klein theorizes leave something on the surface that cannot be concealed. These tears, like the erasure traces and fragmented vision become metaphors for witness and history in the “new” South Africa.

*(un)Fixing the Eye* takes this multi-faceted theoretical approach to respond to the history of South Africa through the use of several optical devices as metaphors in Kentridge’s work. Each chapter considers a separate optical tool as a central focus for its historical investigations. Chapter one uses the camera as a metaphor for the TRC narratives in Kentridge’s *Ubu Tells the Truth*. This chapter argues that Kentridge’s approach to absurdism (encoded through his use of French playwright Alfred Jarry’s corpulent Ubu) and the realist movie camera (which explicitly references Dziga Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*) construct a narrative of the TRC that radically undermines the stabilities the Commission’s report purports to have. Rendering several visual scenes of testimony, Kentridge shows that the grievously real becomes the most absurd moments, while using Vertov’s camera the absurd behavior becomes a device of truth telling. This inversion of the absurd and real, suggesting an ironic narrative, concludes with a consideration of Derrida’s lectures on forgiveness.

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59 William Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the lens and the Eyepiece,” in *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, Maria-Christina Villaseñor ed. (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2005), 47.
highlighting the bifurcated nature of both the camera and the imagery of *Stereoscope* (1999).

Chapter two turns towards *Felix in Exile*, Kentridge’s most explicit response to the popular South African tradition of landscape painting. Kentridge’s rendering of the landscape produces a destroyed and desolate image; portraying it as both a site of violence and a product of the mining industry. Rendered through surveyors’ tools, I argue that Kentridge’s drawings become a history of human intervention through apartheid violence, capitalism and colonialism, undoing the rugged ahistorical images of artists like J.H. Pierneef. Pierneef whose simplified landscapes of the interior were popularized during apartheid hide the transformations through mining as does the physical terrain itself resist the violence that fell upon it. Kentridge’s traces left on the surface document the presence of these histories and their disappearance.

Chapter three uses medical imaging devices (CAT Scans, X-rays and sonograms) to read the ambiguities inherent in diagnosing trauma through the TRC. In *History of the Main Complaint*, Kentridge uses red markers to demarcate places of trauma upon his main character Soho Eckstein’s body. Using these medical diagnostic tools as a metaphor for the process of diagnosis and treatment in the TRC this chapter argues that there is an ambiguity in this process of diagnosis and treatment both in the slide room of the hospital and the hearing room of the Commissions despite the fact that both processes necessitate an expert to diagnose the “main complaint.”

The final chapter returns to the camera this time in the narration of colonial history in German South West Africa (present-day Namibia). Kentridge’s *Black Box/Chambre Noir* uses a theatrical tableau with animations and robotic puppets. *Black Box* invokes three references to the title in the camera, theatre, and flight data
recorder and this chapter uncovers three key themes of the shadow, rhinoceros and toy inside of these references to narrate a melancholic history, invoked in Kentridge’s explicit reference to Freud’s Trauerarbeit. Through this melancholia and these themes, I argue Kentridge’s history creates a melancholic pairing between Enlightenment Europe and colonial Africa. In doing so, Kentridge’s history not only documents the brutality of colonialism in Africa, it is able to trace it back upon violence in Europe by connecting its eugenic projects between Africa and Europe.

Ultimately, (un)Fixing the Eye uses these optical tools to show how Kentridge fractures perception, narration and history. In doing so Kentridge not only widens the way in which apartheid is historicized, allowing for a number of narratives elided by the official report to be present, but provides a potent commentary on how these histories are written. Furthermore, it opens up history beyond apartheid to show it as linked to a wider network of concerns including colonialism and class antagonisms. Kentridge’s aesthetic not only writes a critical history, its criticisms open up spaces for new histories to be written.
Fig. 1. William Kentridge, film stills from *Felix in Exile* (1994).
CHAPTER 1- AMNESTY WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

Our eye sees very poorly and very little- and so men conceived of the microscope in order to see invisible phenomena; and they discovered the telescope in order to see and explore distant, unknown worlds. The movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account.

-Dziga Vertov “Kino Eye” 1926

William Kentridge’s 1997 film *Ubu Tells the Truth* is his most concerted investigation into the politics of forgiveness and remembering in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC), which were constituted to assist South Africa’s transition away from apartheid. The TRC became a way of historicizing the monumental weight of apartheid through its testimony delivered, radio and television broadcasts of the sessions and finally a report delivered to Nelson Mandela so as to prevent further instances of its violence. Kentridge’s response in *Ubu Tells the Truth* uses animations drawn with white chalk on black paper (an inversion of his traditional animation technique), torn silhouette puppets, and live footage of political unrest, taken from newsreels, during apartheid.¹ The film also uses a variety of music and sound effects including ragtime, African folk, slack key guitar, and 1980s electronic keyboard sounds. *Ubu Tells the Truth* comes from a long engagement with representations of the figure of King Ubu, traditionally rendered as portly and brutal, in his work. This film is a reedited version of footage created for a theatrical play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, made with the Handspring Puppet Company. In the

film, Kentridge’s Ubu interacts with a camera on a tripod, representing several images that conjure up key scenes of violence from testimony delivered in the TRC. These scenes are juxtaposed with images of several fantastic creatures plotting acts of violence in an office complex; conjuring up scenes of clandestine forces during apartheid. Each of these narratives, along with newsreel footage force the camera and Ubu to confront these acts of violence during apartheid just as the nation was doing under the TRC.

Using this formal backdrop, Kentridge explores how testimony is delivered and converted into an official narrative using two metaphors drawn from European modernism. The first is French absurdist playwright Alfred Jarry, who wrote the 1896 play *Ubu Roi*. Jarry composed *Ubu Roi* while a schoolboy, and his main character is forced to confront the TRC and their evidence in Kentridge’s use of Ubu. Through the corpulent and brutal King Ubu, Kentridge explores the testimony of the TRC where several moments of testimony are so violently real they appear as absurd. Jarry’s characterization of Ubu appears absurd in its abrupt endings, use of illogical (and poorly spelt) language, his character’s motivations (often containing ironic goals), and their vulgar behavior, reflecting the childish outlook of the adolescent Jarry. Subsequently, Ubu becomes a key influence for European theatre of the absurd and surrealism, and he takes his place within Kentridge’s film when he is confronted by a camera that derives from its animated (that is to say its lively form) actions from Dziga Vertov’s early Soviet silent film *Man with A Movie Camera*.² Vertov’s cinema

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² Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1980), 24. Esslin coins the term “theatre of the absurd,” though Jarry is not included in this canon. Esslin, engages his work at length in his chapter on its traditions. His list of absurdist thinkers (Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter) holds a post-war disillusionment that Esslin locates in Sartre and Camus’ philosophies. The “theatre of the absurd” emerges out of the political conditions of WWII, but also the post-colonial. While Kentridge argues that it is more Dada than “theatre of the absurd” that
engages with the notion of the camera being dynamic yet capturing a sense of reality; it attempts to create an image of the development of life under the newly formed socialist regime in the Soviet Union.

Subsequently, these farfetched and animated actions are derived from a sense of realism. Ubu’s absurd behavior, needing to confront reality, and Vertov’s realist camera performing fantastic movements make them ironic figures; they represent their aesthetic domains of absurdism and realism respectively, but the absurd also contextualizes real events while the camera captures truth through absurd performances. This conceptual engagement with the camera as an optical tool in *Ubu Tells the Truth* is also unique; it not only moves (panning across the screen at times) but also interacts, as both the camera in the back of the studio photographing his animation and as a central character within the film. The camera becomes a key metaphor of working and also making the artwork in Kentridge’s studio.

*Ubu* becomes a mixture of Kentridge’s two most distinct working modes: theatre and animation. Derived from revisiting his collaborations with the Handspring Puppet Company in Johannesburg, his work on Ubu began with a suite of prints. Kentridge then produced animations to be used as projections for the play, which he later reedited to be used in the filmic version of *Ubu*. Through this reworking, the

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3 Kentridge’s work with Handspring frequently adapts European theatre, highlighting modernism’s relationship with Africa by resetting the context of the play. These include *Faustus in Africa, Ubu and the Truth Commission, Woyzeck on the Highveld* (adapting the Georg Büchner novel) and *Zeno at 4 AM* (adapting Italo Svevo’s *Confessions of Zeno*). Recently, Kentridge has adapted both Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (2005) and a current production of Shostakovich’s *The Nose*. 

his understandings emerge from, it is important to note that Kentridge’s contains explicit influences from this canon; Beckett’s *Catastrophe* provides a loose inspiration for Kentridge’s film *Monument*, and Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* informs Kentridge’s production of *The Nose* (Kentridge also acted in an adaptation of *The Bald Primadonna* in high-school).
film reflects two different key formal aspects of his work: his theatrical performances, and his animation process. Further still, *Ubu Tells the Truth* uses shadow puppets assembled from fragments of torn black paper to make their shadowy forms, alongside of the chalk on black paper animation, and an appropriation of found footage depicting political unrest during apartheid in South Africa.

Engaging in the seeming divide between Soviet film maker Dziga Vertov’s desire for truth and Jarry’s Absurdist *Ubu Roi* plays, Kentridge employs both artists’ approaches as tactics for reading the historical narratives engendered by TRC, the constitutionally mandated hearings on apartheid era human rights violations, approach to healing the nation. This chapter takes up the question of the absurd as a historical tactic to come to an understanding of the narrative the TRC engenders. This chapter understands Absurdism as a set of aesthetic practices expressed by Jarry and later a number of writers including: Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter, as an abandonment of rational thought and language, arguing that it becomes a potent tool for reading truth and forgiveness conceptualized by the TRC. Absurdism as an aesthetic reveals the absurd (understood here as irrational, odd, or farcical) that takes place within the TRC narratives of truth and forgiveness that are revealed through testimony and ultimately the act of the state granting amnesty as a gesture of forgiveness. To further this historical reading, this chapter makes use of Hayden White’s approach to locating the narrative tropes used within history writing, reading these tropes, and specifically irony within this chapter, can reveal the ideologies and consequences inside of these “objective” histories.

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Absurdism forces one to come to an understanding of how the divides between cultural forces (that represent class, racial, urban/rural, etc.) purportedly reconciled through the TRC representation of a unified South Africa are narrated as whole and unified. White’s analysis of narrative structures in history writing turns towards a number of philosophical schools of history to show their dependence on tropes to narrate historical experience. When outlining Marx’s 18th Brumaire, White locates a set of “poetic tropes,” using expressive or symbolic language (especially synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor and irony) to narrate a story and to make a logic out of the content; his analysis emphasizes Marx’s choice of “farcical” to describe Napoleon’s coup, indicating that history writing functions like fiction.\(^5\)

Similarly, Jane Taylor, playwright of Ubu and the Truth Commission (the play in which Kentridge’s footage was originally used), describes the suitability of Jarry’s plays to South Africa because of their “farcical genre.”\(^6\) Both Marx’s absurd and Taylor’s Absurdist use of the farcical indicates that the aesthetic can produce history writing as effective as “objective” ones. While Absurdism and the absurd differ, this chapter engages Absurdism as a method as well as a trope of historical writing to reveal the absurd and farcical within the TRC narrative. Reading history through a lens of Absurdism becomes a useful and engaging way of writing; White productively believes history writing should break down distinctions between the objective and the literary, and one can subsequently see a breakdown where humorous tropes come to narrate experience for the grievously real. White’s relationship to history not only makes history writing reflexive about its narrative form, it also enlivens and allows for

\(^5\) Hayden White, The Content of the Form (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 46-47.

a greater subtlety in its content. In Kentridge’s rendering of *Ubu* the absurd and Absurdism are bound, providing a critical reading of the TRC. Absurdism reveals the methods and tropes used to produce readings themselves that are absurd or farcical.\(^7\) It is the most bizarre imagery within the world of Ubu that seems most suitable to talk about the absurd brutality of apartheid.

**WITNESSING THE ABSURD: JARRY’S *UBU GOES TO SOUTH AFRICA***

*Ubu Tells the Truth* consists of reedited film footage originally used in Jill Taylor’s play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* in collaboration with Kentridge and Handspring. The film and play adapt Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* plays, engaging Ubu’s profane and vulgar behavior (the opening line of Jarry’s play is “merde/shit!”) to a “domain where actions do have consequences.”\(^8\) Subsequently, not only his excessive and absurd behavior but also the cruelty to which Ubu Roi (himself a leader of a nation) subjects his citizens must now be confronted, and answered for. The metaphor Ubu represents in Kentridge’s film makes the behavior of those involved in the TRC responsible for their abuses (as the TRC sought to do), but the fictional character of Ubu as a king also becomes a metonym for the nation state having to face up to its own institutional abuses (which does not occur in the TRC).

*Ubu Roi* narrates the story of the corpulent and cruel King Ubu, who is also prone to blunder throughout Jarry’s plays. It begins with his wife goading Ubu to lead a violent coup and overtake the King of Baloney. Successful in this coup, Ubu begins a purge befitting of Stalin to extract more money from his citizens, enraging his

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\(^8\) Taylor, iv.
constituents. Ubu, leading the Polish army, loses a battle and is separated from Ma Ubu (Ubu Roi’s wife); they meet in a cave and reconcile only to be exiled in Engelland [sic] after the Polish and Russian armies defeat them.

The second play *Cuckold Ubu* features Ubu confronted by his conscience, reminiscent of the TRC’s goals for South Africa, after Ubu takes over Peardrop’s (a professional breeder of polyhedrons) house. Claiming remorse, Ubu’s conscience lets him free from the sewer where his conscious and Peardrop had laid a trap for him to fall into. Unable to locate the suitcase holding his conscious, the conscious falls into the sewer. Ubu’s minions terrorize the town; an Egyptian statue that has become Ma Ubu’s lover teams up with a banker to help free Peardrop. The play ends abruptly as a crocodile emerges presumably to push all the characters off stage.\(^9\)

The final play *Slave Ubu* represents Jarry’s Absurdism to its fullest extent. Here the characters long to be in slavery to experience freedom more fully. Ma and Pa Ubu, fed up with tyranny become slaves willingly, so as to experience the egalitarianism of a new France. Ma and Pa Ubu are sold to Sultan Suleiman, finding the prisons to which they are confined to be liberating. The play ends on a galley out of the Bosporus towards the ocean in pursuit of a happy ending.\(^{10}\)

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9 Though not present in the film installation, the crocodile plays a key role in the stage performance with Handspring. Kentridge and playwright Jane Taylor were faced with the issue of what Kentridge terms a “battle” between paper shredders and Photostat machines. As quickly as things were being documented for the TRC they were being destroyed. To perform this in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* a series of tests were performed using a paper shredder (too noisy) and a bread slicer (too much food wasted for effect), then a dog (mouths too small) but were all rejected. Ultimately the crocodile was chosen for the ability to feed a ream of paper or videotape into. The crocodile’s mouth became a metaphor for Kentridge’s production of *Ubu* and the TRC. See William Kentridge “The Crocodile’s Mouth,” director’s note to *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998).

Kentridge’s work reflects on the Ubu plays through explorations of cultural relationships between Europe and Africa, the brutality of rule between both Ubu and apartheid, confronting guilt personally rather than through the collective, and interrogations of torture become key themes and ideas for considering the TRC’s approach and history. These explorations bring out the absurdist conditions within Kentridge’s film, but it also reveals the absurd within the structures of the TRC. Systematized repression (in slavery and apartheid) was the political and economic foundations of South Africa and its colonial antecedents; those things that are at their most degrading and inhumane become the markers of stability, safety, and security.

In Kentridge’s *Ubu*, the burlesque (in its satirical form) and rotund central character of Jarry’s King Ubu interacts with several metamorphosing figures mounted on a tripod, most notably a camera and a cat outlined in white chalk upon the black background. The tripod and camera refer to Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*, juxtaposing Jarry’s Absurdism alongside Vertov’s realist cinema. Intriguingly Vetov’s imagery emerges as the city awakens to its new developed social reality, as South Africa purports to do through the use of the TRC. Their historical imperatives become linked through this awakening as both films responding to a nation state being made anew and undergoing a great political transition.

*Ubu Tells the Truth* highlights the untenable relationship between truth and reconciliation, which underpin the political transition to post-apartheid South Africa.

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11 Kentridge’s staging of *The Magic Flute*, engages with a number of Egyptian themes relevant to Masonic culture and the enlightenment including an illuminated eye atop a pyramid situated at the top of the opera’s set. As well as the rendering of Egyptian temples rendered with a long row of floral bud capitals atop columns adorned with hieroglyphics that lead to a series of geographic renderings of star systems.

12 Imagery from *Man With a Movie Camera* appears in a later series of installations, *The Nose*, in preparation for Kentridge’s adaptation of the opera by the same name.
Invoking the absurd reveals the impossibility of truth to ever achieve a pure “kino-eye,” understood as an editing technique that refines the raw data of the eye into a discernable narrative for South Africa. Vertov speaks of this kino-eye as a process of seeing, editing and writing that decodes the world of the naked eye. A close reading of Vertov’s writing reveals a belief that truth lies in narrative structure; linking Vertov to White’s claim that history is narrative in its form. It is not a question of whether or not something happened, it is a matter of how these events are put into language through literary tropes, or for Vertov how these images are edited down through the cut into a continuous message. To read these tropes critically (as Kentridge does in *Ubu*), provides the basis for critical analysis and understandings of how we know the world.

Absurdism as a historical trope allows a history to be written so that it is able to examine the effects of linking truth and reconciliation through an ethics of forgiveness. In South Africa’s new historical politics of truth and forgiveness the most absurd is the most grievously real, revealed to us both through testimony and an animation of certain events in *Ubu*. Linking these two concepts together in the commissions, it is suggested that the production of truth allows for the state to forgive

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13 Dziga Vertov, “From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye,” *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Annette Michelson ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 87. Vertov speaks optimistically over the powers of radio, what he refers to as radio-eye connecting film and radio as means of communication by radically eliminating distance between people. In a similar fashion the radio appears in *Ubu Tells the Truth* with a spiral that matches the one on Ubu’s belly inside its speaker grille that transmits sonic broadcasts montaged with the orators whose vocals emit newspaper clippings. Later, the spiral unravels to form a rain of static resonating with the shower scene earlier in the film) in which we see the bomb plot being arranged by Ubu and the wolf’s head on a tripod. Finally, its sonic impulses connect the cells of the building in the frenzied finish to the film, linking the sonic and the visual.

14 White, *The Content of the Form*, 27.

15 White, *Figural Realism*, 3, 16.
those who have committed crimes, while also providing a forum for those who were victims of human rights violations to tell their stories and subsequently grant forgiveness to their aggressors (which in chair Desmond Tutu’s opinion is closely linked to forgetting).

To write these histories, this chapter makes use of several thinkers alongside of Kentridge, Jarry and Vertov’s aesthetic outputs to reveal the camera’s access to history and truth as fractured and unstable. In addition to Hayden White, psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s theorization of the tearing of the mother’s body becomes a useful tool in reading Kentridge’s torn shadow figures and their subsequent reassembly. Finally, this chapter concludes by turning to Jacques Derrida’s investigation of forgiveness, conceived of as a response to the TRC, he suggests an impossibility of pure forgiveness. Reading Klein and Derrida through White’s lens make the connections between Kentridge’s formal production and the metaphors that this tearing suggests explicit. These tears become a writing of history, they show the truth to be composed of parts that are edited and put into a whole, and truth becomes a narrative discourse, the process of an author.

While Derrida’s engagement with the TRC and his influence on Kentridge’s work is a dominant thread in this essay, this chapter seeks to include both White and Klein whose work is suggestive of writing history (Derrida’s work on forgiveness also seems to examine), but makes something new in the process, either through White’s encouragement to pursue narrative writing and through that reflexive historical narratives, and Klein’s notion of reparation makes something new out of its destruction. Derrida’s history writing complements White’s historiography, as both are attuned to the slipperiness of language (the engagement with irony which both pursue is addressed here) and to the subjective perspectives necessitating a plural and
fragmented discourse. Derrida highlights the slipperiness of language by
demonstrating that forgiveness is difficult (to forgive means that there is nothing to
forgive and that it exists as a pure form in Derrida’s work) and impossible to achieve
in such a legal setting. Klein’s fragments located in the personal production of
reparation allow for several narratives to be made located in the individual, while it
also refuses the possibility of wholeness. This impossibility of a pure reparation that
bears no scars or traces from before is seen in Derrida’s claim of the impossibility of
forgiveness; it cannot be made by the state nor can it erase memory in such a function
as the TRC.

Kentridge’s work locates itself within a productive “tropological” history; he
engages in an ironic discourse and works with oppositions between truth and
forgiveness. He not only critiques history writing, he writes history conscious of its
narrative and literary tropes, explicitly using the vulgar Ubu to construct these
narratives. Klein’s narrative of rebuilding and Derrida’s analysis of forgiveness (and
reconciliation) help to understand, alongside Kentridge’s reading of the absurd, how
the truths of the TRC are constructed within narrative.

Derrida’s lectures on forgiveness are useful for reading Ubu Tells the Truth as
they not only engage with the incompatibility of truth and forgiveness (figured by the
TRC as reconciliation) but also are invoked in Kentridge’s film Stereoscope (1999), in
which Kentridge renders themes inspired directly as a response to seeing Derrida
speak on forgiveness in Johannesburg. Stereoscope uses the doubled vision of the 19th
century optical tool to highlight the process of reconciliation of several bifurcated
visions in post-apartheid South Africa. Kentridge commenting on hearing the lectures
by Derrida in Johannesburg remarked:

There are two things about that give/forgive which comes in the film,
the one was the film House of Games; in which there is a psychoanalyst
who keeps telling her patient who is in fact just shot someone in the airport, just remember forgive yourself as the key thing. So that’s kind of held in there. The other was a visit to Johannesburg by Derrida who came and gave a lecture at that time which I could not understand but he said that the word give has an interesting etymology that the word give comes from the Germanic root *gif* and knowing from Afrikaans, I don’t know from German but from Afrikaans the word *gif* means poison… there is a poison in the giving. And that acts of giving are acts of aggression and that the idea of forgiveness becomes very complicated.  

Forgiveness becomes another representation of absurd politics; it is presumed to repair and rebuild the nation, yet actually has an etymology of poisoning from the root of the German word *Gift* into Afrikaans as *gif*. Ultimately, forgiveness understood through truth and reconciliation becomes counter productive and impossible for the nation; underpinning Derrida’s reading of the TRC and Kentridge’s own analysis of the impossibility of forgiveness through his aesthetics of tearing and erasure.

**NARRATING THE PAST: UBU TELLS THE TRUTH**

Kentridge’s film *Ubu Tells the Truth* opens with the rotund Ubu with a spiral around his belly (this is how Ubu is frequently represented in stagings of Jarry’s play) pacing around, interspersed with images of both a blinking animated and filmed eye. Eventually Ubu pokes the animated eye, removing its iris. He then sheds his garment and places the iris atop a camera, effectively turning it into a flash, which pulsates brightly. This opening sequence references Vertov; in his film we see a similar dance made by a tripod in stop motion. This camera becomes a head for the tripod’s legs; the tripod lowers itself allowing the camera to attach itself to the tripod. The legs then

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raise the whole apparatus, with the camera swiveling and extending its lens ready to
capture what it sees, to convey truth to the Soviet proletariat (fig. 1, 1929).

In *Ubu* the camera sequence cuts to a shower tap turning on. As the water
starts to fall, body parts, bones, tools and a skull slip down the drain.¹⁷ The film then
cuts back to a burlesque dance in which a woman (with spirals similar to those on
Ubu’s stomach in the earlier scene on her breasts) transforms into a skeleton and
grasps a set of scissors. Thus the burlesque becomes a grotesque; historian Robert
Allen describes it as a “horrible prettiness.” It becomes one of several Absurdist
tactics in the film; the image of the erotic is overlaid with references to violence and
death.¹⁸ This dancer not only references Ubu’s own behavior, but also reminds us that
Absurdism can bridge the aesthetic and the violent, the beautiful and the threatening at
the same time. After the grotesque dance scene the film cuts back to the blinking eye,
and then to a pig’s head which explodes, leaving behind a mushroom cloud. Its skull
remains as Ubu then walks through a landscape transforming into a helicopter.

The film reaches a frenetic pace as Ubu and a white dog are seated at a table
wrapping a package that travels across a map and drawn landscapes of South Africa,
arriving on a beach where a woman and child formed from torn paper are standing.
As the package lands and explodes sound clips from political rallies are played. Next,
shadow puppets in pinstripe suits are at a microphone orating, as newspaper clippings
spill forth from their mouths. This is interspersed with more live footage of police at

¹⁷ Water and plumbing fixtures frequently appear in Kentridge’s work. In the
drawings for projection a faucet overflows playing a key role between Felix (one of
the main characters of the drawings for projection films) and the South African
landscape, additionally Soho Eckstein’s pockets overflow with water in *Stereoscope.*
For a discussion of Kentridge’s relationship with water see his: “Untitled Statement

¹⁸ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel
the uprisings during apartheid. The orators become riddled with bullet holes, as there is a cut to an office building black with white outlines and white windows suggesting a nighttime scene illuminated from the inside. We begin to see scenes played out in the windows, in shabby domestic spaces. A man falls from the building, and is cut against the police shooting a protester from the Sharpeville massacre. One close up inside these windows consists of a bare room where the silhouette of a man is slumped in a chair in the corner of the room with a basin and filing cabinet. The room is illuminated by a bare light bulb, stark and naked, whose light source resonates with the camera flash as a witness. Then a skull splits open as scissors, brushes and other objects spill out, a bomb falls in and explodes, and then back to the room as the man is hung upside down by his attackers, and finally we see the orators at the podium again.

These animated images of truth telling in the form of orations are juxtaposed with quick interspersed images of documentary footage from several key moments of violence during the apartheid era alongside of Ubu and other shadowy figures seated at a desk as a phone located on the desk sends sound waves that are fed via a wire into the orator’s megaphones. Kentridge’s films, deeply engaged with animation as a political tactic, take care to leave traces of South African violence on the plane of the film. Torn figures and similarly the erasures of Kentridge’s other animations, show how that even on the sheet of paper, complete reparation is not possible. As the film reaches its climax, we see some of the most savage images connected in small rooms via wires. These conduits of energy link snarling dogs with shadow figures that seems to be subject to violent interrogation practices. Pulling back from the building, we see all of the different windows comprising cells of the building. This seems to reference not only the ubiquity of violence in South Africa (as though each scene is the flickering light of a television set on in an apartment complex), but also the forms of
animation, its cellular divides meaning each photograph in an animation is a small
fragment or document of a wider system of violence. The frenetic cutting of these last
scenes highlights not only the dizzying and confusing brutality and politics of the
crumbling apartheid regime, but the cutting itself reflects the cutting of the body, and
all the saws and scissors that appeared with dismembered body parts.

The film closes as a man walks to meet the tripod camera that extends its lens
and becomes a cannon, shooting the man. Its flash then becomes a bomb, which the
camera places beneath the man, detonating the man’s corpse into torn up parts, and
the process repeats with the parts becoming even more finite (fig. 2, 1997). As the
cycle repeats a third time, the pieces burst into stars in the night sky, as Ubu’s spiral
form becomes a constellation. This scene refers to a specific event in the TRC
testimony where agents of the South African Defense Force revealed a project called
Buddha where a practice of detonating a corpse collecting the pieces and redetonating
it so as to leave no recognizable pieces left.\textsuperscript{19} Ubu’s Absurdist opening has come full
circle as the absurd violence of the camera is shown at the end of the film.

\textbf{ABSURDISM AS A POLITICAL TACTIC}

The development of Absurdisms is rooted in \textit{Ubu} and Kentridge’s most recent
work \textit{I am not me the horse is not mine} (2008) a performance detailing a number of
philosophical issues surrounding his development of an adaptation of Shostakovich’s
opera \textit{The Nose}. The juxtaposition between Absurdisms and realist testimony (both in
\textit{Ubu} and \textit{I am not me}) caused Kentridge to examine “the absurd” as a productive
aesthetic force:

\textsuperscript{19} Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “In Conversation with William Kentridge,” in \textit{William
Kentridge} (1999), 35.
The interest in the absurd... has to do with two different possibilities... one is that it gives us a sense of other logics of other possibilities of how the way the world is organized; what happens is that the world becomes so naturalized to us that it takes an act of will, it takes an act of determination to understand that there are possible other logics... The absurd is pointing to the contingency of the way we think we understand the world or the way that the world organizes itself is one part. And the second part is that it shows us the physical and mental act that we do in trying to construct a sense of the world as it arrives to us, the way in which we assume that it is all naturalized and that the word has simply arrives at us, but every now and then there is a way in which we understand no the world is arriving at us as a chaotic set of impulses and we do this huge work it’s both kind of mental and rational and psychic the whole time to keep all the different pieces in place and believe in the coherence of how they operate.  

*I am not me* turns back to the time of Shostakovich’s *Nose* opera written between 1927-28 (also Vertov’s period of production) to examine Nikolai Gogol’s absurdist short story of the same title, in which a man wakes up to find his nose missing, and has entered the bureaucracy at a higher rank than him forcing him to try and approach his nose so as to get it back on his face. This narrative of Kentridge’s Absurdism contains two 19th century Absurdists (Jarry and Gogol) and two early 20th century Soviets working under Stalinism (Vertov and Shostakovich). The literary forms of Absurdist aesthetics would become a starting point for the utopian social movements

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20 William Kentridge, *Learning From the Absurd*. These remarks were not only made concerning *I am not me* and *The Nose* but also in response to the xenophobic riots that broke out in South Africa during 2008. Kentridge remarks that a series of suburban objects including a patio umbrella, a golf club, a swing ball pole, a bush knife and a painted curio wooden giraffe appeared in a newspaper clipping as weapons used during one of these riots, heightening the absurdity of South Africa’s conditions, remarking that it was safer to live in the game preserves with the lions, rhinoceroses and elephants than in urban South Africa. For information on the xenophobic attacks see Barry Bearak and Celia W. Dugger, “South Africans Vent Rage at Migrants,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2008. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/21/world/africa/21africa.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=south%20africa%20xenophobic%20riots&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/21/world/africa/21africa.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=south%20africa%20xenophobic%20riots&st=cse).

21 Shostakovich’s opera was originally performed in 1930 and adapts Gogol’s short story written in 1835-36, effectively bridging Czarist and Soviet Russia.
that were to come later in Europe, in their engagement with these earlier messages. *I am not me*’s Absurdism can be traced back onto Kentridge’s earlier production in *Ubu*. Kentridge links Gogol with the show trials of Nikolai Bukharin; Absurdism and the absurd political conditions in Stalinist Soviet Union become bound in *I am not me*. Bukharin’s trial (Kentridge again locating the absurd at the part of a trial) contains several instances where testimony is met with laughter; the real has become absurd.

In one particular passage Kentridge quotes at length:

Bukharin: In any case I am speaking sincerely.
Molotov: And we too are criticizing you sincerely. (Laughter.
Uproar in the room.)
Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep your trap shut! How vile!
How dare you speak like that!
Bukharin: But you must understand- its very hard for me to die.
Stalin: And its easy for us to go on living?! (Noise in the room, prolonged laughter.)

It is precisely this condition of humor arising from an attempt to present the truth that Kentridge attempts to locate within the TRC. This is accomplished by animating several key moments of testimony within *Ubu*.

One of the more recognizable moments from the TRC is when the viewer sees, within *Ubu*, the pig’s head that has a pair of headphones attached to a portable cassette player. It comes to represent the absurd as real. And the movie camera documents a crime whose perpetrators attempted to hide. This image references a well known testimony during the TRC where it was revealed that headphones with explosives were tested on a pig to see if they would explode, so they could be used to assassinate enemies of the covert Vlakplaas unit, yet the image of the pig with headphones and its subsequent explosion seems closer to what one would expect to find on Saturday morning cartoons. In *Ubu* an explosion is heard on the soundtrack

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22 Reproduced in William Kentridge, *I am not me the horse is not mine* (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2008), 72.
and a mushroom cloud emerges (becoming a metonym for destructive explosions that hid bodies from being discovered) on the screen, the pig’s head has vanished (fig. 3, 1997). When the trials of Eugene Alexander de Kock, colonel of the Vlakplaas unit (and supervisor of Dirk Coetzee for whom the explosive was intended) were held, photographs of the pig’s head were presented as evidence.\(^{23}\) For Kentridge this poses a significant issue in the narratives of the TRC, the police provided evidence of their own activities and functions, recording the planning and commission of murder; yet at the time were attempting to veil their commission of crimes.\(^{24}\)

Kentridge argues the documentation of this violence makes its implications of truth, by being filmed, become absurd, and inverting Vertov and Jarry’s projects from each other. While we generally associate the photograph with the notion of truth or realism, it becomes absurd under the logic of the TRC. The image of a pig’s head being detonated and then documented does not appear normal for a unit that disappears bodies, producing an absence of evidence. The Vlakplaas unit is known for using dynamite to get rid of bodies as to erase the possibility of a truth being

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\(^{23}\) The circumstances of this event are quite confusing; de Kock sent the explosives headset to Coetzee who was then residing in exile in Zambia (Vlakplaas forces were active in revolutionary struggles throughout Southern Africa including Zimbabwe, and Namibia to preserve white rule). Unwilling to pay the import duty the package was returned. De Kock placed ANC lawyer Bheki Mlangeni’s address as the return address on the package, Mlangeni received the package and upon reading a cassette marked “Evidence, Hit Squad” placed the headphones into the cassette player and listened as they detonated, creating a fatal explosion. Despite then Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk denying any implications in the Vlakplas’s activities, Coetzee has intimated that de Klerk had knowledge of this event and insisted de Kock had a wider knowledge of the unit’s activities. See Bill Keller, “A Glimpse of Apartheid’s Dying Sting,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1995. [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CEEDB1F39F933A15751C0A963958260](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CEEDB1F39F933A15751C0A963958260). The testimony of Mlangeni’s mother and wife to the TRC can be located here: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Case GO0195 February 5, 1996. [http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/methodis/mlangeni.htm](http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/methodis/mlangeni.htm) (last accessed 29 October, 2010).

\(^{24}\) Breidbach and Kentridge, 93-94.
established, yet they filmed their own process of erasure.\textsuperscript{25} The image introduced as evidence during testimony represents an attempt at concealing the truth. As argued above, it becomes an ironic trope; the image itself is a dissonance between its content and its form. It is this opposition between truth and erasure in the testimony that produces the ironic nature of the TRC. Kentridge and Derrida both argue that the foundation of this notion of forgiveness is ironic.

For Kentridge amnesty and truth linked together produce an ironic foundation for forgiveness. The closer one comes to the truth of crimes committed the more the possibility of granting amnesty emerges.\textsuperscript{26} Additionally, Kentridge finds the premise of the TRC to be ironic. The TRC chose truth over justice, so that as the Commission got closer to the truth, absolution and amnesty were given.\textsuperscript{27} Derrida, in a memorable scene from the 2002 documentary \textit{Derrida} echoes these sentiments. He was speaking to a group of students in South Africa about forgiveness when one student pointed out the irony of Derrida’s notion that white South Africans should ask for forgiveness, Derrida replied “I take the problem of forgiveness very seriously,” and elaborated that the ironic is useful as it challenges the “common-sensical” terminology one approaches.\textsuperscript{28} It is precisely the seriousness of irony suggested in the process of truth and amnesty that is important.

Like Derrida’s engagement with irony to explore political situations, White locates ironic history writing within Art Spiegelman’s \textit{Maus}, a comic book narrating


\textsuperscript{26} William Kentridge, “The Crocodile’s Mouth,” viii.

\textsuperscript{27} William Kentridge, conversation with author, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 July 2009.

his father’s experience interned in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. Its brutality reduces all figures in the narrative to animals.\textsuperscript{29} It is precisely because it takes the comic strip as a narrative form that \textit{Maus}’ ironic discourse is able to evoke a moving account of the Nazi genocide; its stake is to present a commentary on hearing his father’s narrative of his Holocaust experiences. The comic strip presents the difficulty for historicizing the Holocaust; it reveals a part of the truth while at the same time revealing the impossibility of ever uncovering a complete truth (its frames seem to suggest a framing or arranging of the scope of the narrative).\textsuperscript{30}

While the politics of Spiegelman’s work is too vast to explore here, White’s analysis extends well to Kentridge’s torn paper puppets and animations that address the narrative of violence during the Holocaust. Speigleman’s ironic gestures suggest that it can be an approach to considering the methods of historicization for political violence. The narrative can locate the ironic by addressing and effectively locating meaning in the most grievously violent political situations. The testimony designed to construct the truth is the most absurd, it fractures the ability for truth to produce reconciliation, ironic tropes help us to read and understand what is at stake in the TRC’s narratives of testimony, amnesty and forgiveness.

**KINO-EYES AND BLIND SPOTS- NARRATIVE AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

\textit{Ubu Tells the Truth} connects the camera to the eye, combining them into a centralized apparatus. The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} defines apparatus as “the organs

\textsuperscript{29} White, \textit{Figural Realism}, 31.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
or means by which natural processes are carried on.”  

The apparatus is not only comprised of the system’s tools but also suggests the wider systems of the body, uniting the camera and eye. Here the eye and camera (as well as a larger series of other optical tools) become a series of organs united under optical perception. The eye is not only poked but becomes the flash bulb completing the total system of perception it both perceives and illuminates, looks (the eye) and documents (the camera). Additionally, several pieces of filmed footage of an eye with its lids being pulled open as it scans the field of vision are montaged against the documentary footage of protests and unrest in South Africa, suggesting the relationship between the eye, witness and the moving image. This pairing between the eye and camera as apparatus of perception, resemble the close relationship that Vertov places between the eye and the lens of the movie camera during *Man With a Movie Camera* (fig. 4, 1997 and fig. 5, 1929), the linking of the eye and camera embodies the work of witness in both Vertov and Kentridge’s work.

As *Ubu Tells the Truth* opens and closes we are left with two images of violence figured through imagery of optical perception. At the beginning Ubu’s exchange with the eye functions as a dyad between the absurd and optical perception coded as truth: the eye watches, blinks, records and documents, and ultimately photographs (the flash bulb eye cut with the filmed footage suggesting that it is documenting these histories) only to be subject to the same savagery it is trying to

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32 Kentridge’s most explicit use of optical tools was in *Stereoscope* (1999), which led him to produce stereoscopic cards. The stereoscope relies upon a binocular sight that privileges one image over the other, rather than the singular aperture focus of the camera. Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1993) provides an excellent discussion of the function of the stereoscope using Foucault and Marx as points of departure.
record. The eye is blinded by the absurd; the stick wounds it, only to be appropriated by Ubu in the form of the camera’s flash. At the end of the film the camera as producer of truth becomes inverted, as the camera becomes the mode of destruction. The camera has both an aesthetic and witnessing function here; it is an aesthetic device central to the development of both modernity and the moving image, but the camera also takes on a truth telling, documentarian role in the TRC (as the commissions were recorded and broadcast to the nation on nightly radio addresses and a weekly Sunday news show). This doubled role of the camera becomes a key metaphor for understanding the structure of the narrative of the absurd and the desire for the real that South Africa attempted to historicize through the TRC.

The camera, unblinking and recording at the back of Kentridge’s studio, is not only a witness of Kentridge’s process, but is also a witness when placed in the back of the TRC sessions, filming and documenting the testimony to be delivered for broadcasts throughout the nation. Kentridge refers to his work as “stalking the image:” drawing, walking back to the camera to take a photograph and then to return to the work, we return to the image of the camera as something that shoots in this

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33 Ulrich Baer reads the poetics of the flash in Charcot’s photographs at Salpêtrière, developing a number of metaphors that seem to evoke the historical processes at work in Kentridge’s use of the flash in Ubu. Baer’s psychoanalytical approach reveals that the flash is supposed to make readable a disease (hysteria), fixing it for the process of study, but in doing so brings on the hysterical condition and encodes a use of violence that arrests the subject (another metaphor that resonates with the arresting and torturing of political dissidents that is represented in Kentridge’s film). Yet Baer sees that the subject resists some sort of meaning, that eludes the fixed, and illuminated image that is supposed to work for concrete study and objective meaning (much as the TRC attempt to do). See Ulrich Baer, “Photography and Hysteria: Toward a Poetics of the Flash,” Yale Journal of Criticism 7, no. 1 (1994): 41-77.

34 Jill Taylor argues in her notes for Ubu and the Truth Commission, that the hyper-mediatized way of delivering the TRC (between commercials, sitcoms, etc.) makes a notion of objectivity difficult. Taylor, v.
metaphor. The practice of animating is here literalized; the camera becomes lively, something to be hunted and followed, inverting its traditional functions of watching and shooting. The camera in the TRC is not a truth-telling device, but a piece of narrative apparatus that breaks down and behaves illogically at times (especially in the notions of the Vlakplaas unit photographing themselves). The camera needs a discourse imbuing its images with validity and constructing a narrative for the image to be received.

Kentridge’s interest in the relationship between the camera and truth in *Ubu* derives from his interest in Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*. Vertov was originally trained in filmmaking, editing newsreels for cinema (a process close to the working process of the South African Broadcasting Corporation editing footage for radio bulletins and for the weekly Sunday news program about the TRC). Vertov’s work with the Kino-Pravda’s newsreel production refined his understandings of

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35 Kentridge states: “Walking, thinking, stalking the image. Many of the hours spent in the studio are hours of walking, pacing back and forth across the space gathering the energy, the clarity to make the first mark. It is not so much a period of planning as a time of allowing the ideas surrounding the project to percolate. A space for many different possible trajectories of an image, where sequences can suggest themselves, to be tested as internal projections. This pacing is often in relation to the sheet of paper waiting on the wall. As if the physical presence of the paper is necessary for the internal projections to seem realizable. The physical size and material enforce a scale, a particular starting point, a composition. The myriad of possibilities is called to order. This pacing is sometimes 10 minutes, sometimes a morning. (And the pacing is sometimes replaced by sharpening of pencils, gathering of materials, hunting for just the right music - all different forms of productive procrastination.),” quoted in Kenneth Baker “William Kentridge: 5 Themes for SFMOMA,” *San Francisco Gate*, 8 March, 2009. [http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/03/08/PKQV165ARU.DTL&key=printable](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/03/08/PKQV165ARU.DTL&key=printable) (accessed 5 May, 2009). The use of the word stalking here seems appropriately used within the colonial safari. There is a sense of stalking the animal in the bush within Kentridge’s use of the term and imagery of safari hunting appears in *Black Box/Chambre Noir*, the subject of chapter four of this project. Susan Sontag also reminds us that the photograph is linked to the safari. In *On Photography*, Sontag argues that the “gun has metamorphosed into the camera,” both these items are used to shoot that which is other to the Western self. See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 15.
montage as narrative; in Annette Michelson’s analysis Vertov’s eye is a reflexive force constantly refining vision.\(^36\)

Vertov argues that kino-eye should make the invisible visible again, a process akin to reading the erasures of Kentridge’s work as signifiers of history veiled by the TRC’s desire to forget.\(^37\) In the context of socialist aesthetics, this making the invisible visible again seems a simple mandate to unmask ideology, but what separates him from his contemporary, Soviet silent filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, whose films engage with the cut as symbolic, is an interest in the narrative structure of revolutionary cinema. Montage narrates the raw footage of the film, developing its message; in doing so Vertov expresses his desire to capture life’s realities, which are unrecognizable to the viewer in their everyday life.\(^38\)

Vertov’s narrative reediting of fragments captured on film to make the parts into a whole that evokes a truth recalls White’s claims of the relationship between narrative (located in editing and testimony) and truth (which the TRC see as an important part of building forgiveness. Vertov believes that through narrative structures, moving the image, using animation, and reediting the film, it arrives at truth. Here the concept of truth is apprehended through narrative structures. Hayden White reminds one that notions of what is “truth” can only emerge from narrative form, that which we assume to be fiction.\(^39\) History writing, often purporting to be

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\(^36\) Annette Michelson, introduction to *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Annette Michelson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix. Also, Krog’s *Country of My Skull* provides an account of her work with the SABC editing radio broadcasts and reports of the TRC.


\(^38\) Vertov, “From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye,” 88.

true, uses certain forms of expressive language and descriptive force to narrate a perspective of what has happened, and in doing so its approach to history arrives at its own relationship to truth, filtered through ideology and trope. As argued above, truth is placed into a narrative structure; it through a series of tropes creates a discernable story of what happened. The idea of montage, cut and editing in Vertov’s film do precisely that; they take raw footage and place it into a political narrative. Editing ultimately makes decisions about how truth is presented, and like White it is the context to which the event is placed that is central; both recognize the impossibility of pure truth in historical discourse. Shattering these myths opens historical narrative to productive modes of writing; including Kentridge’s interpretations of the TRC’s own work.

The eye and the camera tell stories, capturing and reediting testimony into specific historical narratives. This centrality of the eye permeates Kentridge’s film; the eyelid is stretched open revealing the eye scanning from side to side (fig. 6, 1997). The eye is also an animated image in Ubu; Ubu appropriates it into the camera’s flash. These two images reference specific moments in Man With A Movie Camera, in particular the eye seen through the lens of the film camera and the beginning of the film where Vertov’s cameraman and brother, Michael Kaufman, scurries up a starkly contrasted set of girders, places the camera on the top of the bridge and extends the tripod’s legs (fig. 5). The strongly contrasted silhouette of these images appear very similar to the torn paper shadows of Ubu, and the scaffolding reminds us of both Ubu and Shadow Procession in which industrial girders take the place of individual’s legs. Shadow Procession’s industrial imagery references the confluence of industry and violence that has occurred on the South African landscape through both the
transformation and the protest that is evocative of labor union strikes and protests against apartheid.

Subsequently the camera refines the eye; Vertov captures the camera with a sense of dynamism and rapidity. Towards the end of *Man With a Movie Camera*, the tripod legs perform a dance, moving around raising and lowering until the camera places itself atop the tripod, its lens protrudes and sinks back into the camera (fig. 1). In *Ubu Tells the Truth*, this dance becomes more sinister as the camera changes to its most dramatic shape at the end of the film, its lens telescoping outwards (which we see in an earlier film *Felix in Exile*, where the gaze of the two characters are met through a lens coming out of the mirror). Instead of unifying the lens shoots, the body falls dead, and the camera proceeds to place an explosive beneath the victim to blow the corpse into smaller and smaller bits. This imagery narrates Dirk Coetzee’s (the leader of a covert police unit in Vlakplaas) TRC testimony. Coetzee callously remarks that the police often used explosives to get rid of bodies, because it simply took too long to burn them. The detonation of corpses also provided the political benefit of erasing the body, eliminating the potential for the funeral to become a political rally.40

The camera in the film literally shoots, doubling the cinematic reference to shooting a film: it pierces the body; it destroys, tears and removes the body’s discernable form. After several explosions the body disappears and becomes the stars we are left with Ubu’s spiral forming a constellation in the sky. The camera takes one of several inversions of its role in the film (including being subject rather than object

40 Krog, 271-272. Coetzee was a leader of a covert portion of the South African Police Force based at Vlakplaas, who made an application to the TRC for 23 acts, 14 of which were adjudged to be gross violations of human rights, the most famous of these the November, 1981 murder of attorney Griffiths Mxenge in Durban. The ruling of his amnesty application can be found here: South African Government Information, “Statement from the TRC on Amnesty Granted to Dirk Coetze,” 4 August 1997, http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1997/08050w13297.htm.
and obfuscating rather than clarifying) instead of documenting the truth and capturing that which has been, it removes it from view. Optical devices in this narrative become confused; they can only document the impossibility of remembering. Here the body is not located, nor is justice restored; the camera documents the logic of violence being worked out, and then documents the impossibility of that restoration in the TRC. The image of violence figured through the camera and the eye is like testimony in the “new” South Africa. Its meanings come to us unevenly, taken in different ways depending on the narrative context it is lodged in. Despite its use to build an official truth for the government, we understand it as another narrative device, and Kentridge interrogates the photographic as such.

This use of the camera draws attention to a specific aspect of the TRC mandate: the desire to not only reconcile, but to locate the bodies of those who have gone missing in “gross violations of human rights,” as the Commission defines acts necessitating the appeal for amnesty. The camera records truth by documenting the commission of a crime, yet at the same time it also documents loss and the impossibility of a full recovery. Likewise, Dirk Coetzee’s testimony only serves to highlight the fact that through truth we have uncovered another loss, the irrecoverability of the body (its loss seems fixed, Barthes reminds us “the camera always leads us back to the body”) and, perhaps, the impossibility of forgiveness. The metaphor of the kino-eye within Kentridge’s work, constructs the camera as violent.

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Discussing the photograph, Roland Barthes compares it to sugar in *Camera Lucida*: “the Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because it can be refused or transformed (that we can sometimes call it mild does not contradict its violence, many say that sugar is mild, but to me sugar is violent, and I call it so).”\(^{43}\) This comparison between the violence of sugar and the violence of the photograph resonates with Kentridge’s life; as a young child he narrates the experience of playing in his father’s office:

> I remember coming into his study and seeing on his desk a large, flat, yellow Kodak box, and lifting the lid of it- it looked like a chocolate box. Inside were images of a woman with her back blown off, someone with only half her head visible. The impact of seeing these images for the first time- when I was six years old- the shock- was extraordinary.\(^{44}\)

Instead of sweets Kentridge uncovered pictures of victims of the Sharpeville massacre. It is the confluence between the sweet of the candy, and the violent images of peoples’ backs being blown off that highlights Barthes’ observations about the violence of the photograph. It is not just the sugar (Kentridge’s goal when finding the photos) but also its imposition; its force fills the reading of the image, shocking its receiver. It reminds us that despite the photograph appearing neutral produced from the effect of a simple chemical reaction, it connotes a message: here the simple act of eating sweets

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\(^{43}\) Barthes, 91.

\(^{44}\) Quoted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts de Brussels, 1998), 28. This relationship between playing and discovering photographs is eerily similar to Alice Kaplan’s narration as a child. Kentridge’s father represented victims of the Soveto uprising and was active as both a lawyer and a citizen in anti-apartheid movements in South Africa. Kaplan’s father was a member of the U.S. legal team at the Nuremberg trials and discovered photographs of the Holocaust as a young child playing in her father’s office as well. We can locate still a similar story in Susan Sontag discovering the Holocaust by witnessing the photographic as a young child. See Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 29-30; Sontag, 19-20.
mentioned by Barthes and a part of all children’s youth uncovers a world of violence that takes hold of the child forcing the brutality of apartheid upon its subject. Similarly, it is not the fact that the cameras of the TRC and the photographic evidence introduced in the proceedings or that is catalogued in history texts about apartheid; it is the discourse performed within the TRC that makes them violent. They attempt to assemble a whole, to witness, and to demand a reconciliation that seems bound up in an ideology that the country cannot fully understand.

Linking the camera and eye as ways of capturing the violence of apartheid reminds us that the TRC are a domain of witness and testimony. The photograph’s expectation is to capture the scenes that Kentridge represents; the camera does interact with them, and we do know from the TRC testimony that Kentridge reproduced these scenes from the cases being reported. Seeing and telling become bound together within the investigation of South Africa. The eye becomes connected to the photograph, yet the eye is not the lens, it does not capture light, it emits it from the flash. The flash can illuminate the scene making it possible to take images in darkness but can also temporarily blind the subject, obfuscating sight. The illumined and yet blind context of the flash/eye creates a tension between what the photograph shoots and what can be seen. Bearing witness and being able to photograph are not always the same thing.

Of course, what Ubu as an Absurdist tactic demonstrates is that the truth is not actually what we see. At the end of *Ubu Cuckolded*, Jarry’s crocodile simply demands an end — there is no clear resolution to the play. Likewise the trial meant to punish Ma and Pa Ubu only serves to liberate them and send them on a wild hedonistic voyage to an imaginary orient. The idea of a just or clear resolution to Jarry’s writing is consistently undermined, something that we can locate within a
narrative of the TRC, it is unclear what is to emerge from the end of the inquiry. Turning towards the camera in the TRC, truth and its filmic representation are not always representing what they claim. White reminds us that history becomes narrative like literature; those places in Ubu where the truth is about to be apprehended it reveals itself to be ironic; it might not mean exactly what it claims to mean. The photographic as well as the absurd must be apprehended in this ironic nature, the image doesn’t always represent what it purports to.

TELLING TRUTHS IN NARRATIVE FORMS: ON DZIGA VERTOV’S “KINO-EYE”

Conceptions of the illuminating eye go back further than Vertov; it is central to Enlightenment discourse. The eye sends out nearly blinding rays of light at the end of Kentridge’s adaptation of Mozart’s The Magic Flute (fig. 7, 2004) an opera representing Enlightenment ideals. Ubu Tells the Truth also reveals illuminating vision through the images that come at the end in rapid cuts between the individual windows of the large building and its exterior. An empty room with a naked light bulb swings, suddenly one of Kentridge’s torn paper shadows appears on the chair, is thrust backwards and suddenly lurches forward into a basin on the floor, suggesting that a phantom figure in the room is assaulting this man. Later, the man strung up by his ankles, swings from the light bulb (fig. 8, 1997). The use of the light bulb allows us to see the shadows cast, to witness the individual vignettes of violence and scheming that occur within the shadowy, black monolith of a building, but it also becomes an instrument of torture binding the man’s body for further degradation. As it reveals

what is going on its practices persist, creating a strong resonance between the camera and light bulb.

Connecting the light bulb with the eye and political witness is not new in art history; it can also be found within Picasso’s *Guernica* (fig. 9, 1937). The light bulb at the top of the painting has been interpreted as an eye witnessing the bombing of the Basque town.\(^{46}\) Picasso constructs witness as straightforward, displaying the events of the bombing of a small Basque town and its subsequent chaos. The light reveals a world veiled by ideology; it speaks for those who cannot. Despite the formal similarities between Kentridge’s film and the stark monochromatic canvas of *Guernica*, the motivations behind Kentridge’s interrogations of history and optical clarity (both in the camera and light bulb) differ greatly. In Kentridge’s work the figure is a shadow, it does not have the tears of the weeping woman, or the pointed tongue cry of the horse. It is silent, not heard above the soundtrack that is playing. Kentridge’s shadowy figure belongs to a wider network of individuals who exist in the building creating covert operations (Kentridge makes explicit references to CIA plans within *Ubu*), represented as shadows whose roles as members of government, victims and industry aren’t clear. We see events as testimony and government reports, but we do not have the access to a first hand narrative that Picasso professes to have. The light bulb doesn’t illuminate, but it makes the presence of shadows and ambiguity possible. The more it reveals the more difficult ascertaining a clear narrative becomes.

The light bulb seems to have a significant role in Kentridge’s work, it subverts the truth-telling eye of Picasso’s work, it obfuscates a full vision of the image,

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\(^{46}\) I am grateful to Ariel Dorfman for pointing out the role of the light bulb as witness in Picasso’s work in his Terror and Transitions seminar at Duke University in Spring 2006.
suggesting instead that the bright light of illumination can sometimes be as blinding as it is revealing. The stark, unshaded and simplified form of Kentridge’s bulb seems again to have much to do with the bright rays descending from Picasso’s bulb its simplified and utilitarian round form seem to place Ubu’s bulb in a modernist understanding, its function predominates over its design. Kentridge’s light bulb, however, subverts this modernist paradigm of illuminating utility. When the man is hoisted by electrical cable there are no other people in the room, yet we are led to assume that this individual is the victim of violence. What is actually occurring is difficult to discern. The light bulb becomes both an active tool (rather than just an illuminating force) and a method of obfuscating narratives as it illuminates them.

_Ubu Tells the Truth_ contains several of these torn paper shadow puppets like the man strung up on the electrical wire. These figures are comprised from several differing parties including victims, perpetrators of crimes, and Ubu’s business partners. These tears highlight the frailty of the body (some already contain bullet holes) and it has already been segmented for destruction (fig. 9, 1997). This destructive tearing reaches its climax at the end of the film when instead of a black shadow figure we see a thin white figure drawn on white paper with black charcoal laid against the black backdrop. This thinned out figure is striking compared to the figures of the Soho/Felix drawn with a much heavier weight (fig. 2). The figure appears to be drawn from an expressionist tradition that is closer to the etchings of Käthe Kollwitz (fig. 11, 1921-22) or Max Beckmann who is a great influence on Kentridge’s work (fig. 12, 1919). The roughly drawn forms, with use of thick black lines form a striking aspect of Kollwitz and Beckmann’s work that gets taken up by
Kentridge.\footnote{To look at the drawings Kentridge produced earlier in his career, the formal similarities to Beckmann are even more striking here, in the insistence to show the works in triptychs like Beckmann. Additionally, the figures formal similarities between Beckmann’s Weimar figures, and those in Kentridge’s \textit{Dreams of Europe} makes direct reference to Beckmann, the triptych scene of a café is cluttered with figures, dominated by a reclining woman in the foreground and two suited men resonating strongly with the imagery of Beckmann’s \textit{oeuvre}.} In \textit{Ubu}, though the colors are inverted, the thick white lines and naked figure already appear twisted when approaching the camera which seems to be in place with the expressionist tradition.

The role that both Beckmann and Kollwitz play as witness amid the destruction and loss of WWI is also significant. Beckmann and Kollwitz render the world of violence they perceive not with the official calculating accuracy of the TRC report, but rather with a fractured expressivity, its objectivity is hard to ascertain. In fact, Kentridge argues that Beckmann’s \textit{Death} (fig. 13, 1938), with its twisted perspective representing a scene of chaos, renders the existence of a compromised society but does not participate in its actions. It remains willing to acknowledge without engaging in its practices.\footnote{William Kentridge, “Art in a State of Grace, Art in A State of Hope, Art in a State of Siege,” in \textit{William Kentridge} (1999), 103.} Kentridge likens Beckmann’s image to a theatrical space where the forms present a condition of which no clear solution emerges.\footnote{William Kentridge, “Beckmann’s ‘Death’” in \textit{William Kentridge}, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev ed. (Milan: SKIRA, 2004), 71.} The expressionist language works in the service of Kentridge not only because of their sustained interest in graphic work, but because their work presents a political crisis, the terror and ethics of the situation presented (like in \textit{Ubu}, it is in a theatrical setting) are displayed but not resolved.

Kentridge wants to locate this tactic of representing but not participating in the compromised society of both apartheid and its difficult reparations; it is the idea of a
damaged witness that seems most likely in *Ubu*. The witness confronting the camera perhaps contained in the expressive figure at the end of *Ubu* is shot by the camera, which removes its flash (which earlier in the film is taken by the camera in the form of the eye), and places it below the corpse, demolishing the corpse into smaller and smaller torn pieces. The imagery of the camera shooting a man like a gun not only heightens the notion of a bright and darkened space for the body (and all of its racial dimensions for South Africa) and its frailty in a regime of violence and torture, but also proves an important lesson on the relationship between Absurdism and the absurd. Kentridge began a recent lecture with a discussion of how one makes a rhinoceros. He proceeded to show a brief film (fig. 14, 2009) where he assembled torn paper parts into a rhinoceros, making it perform different and implausible tasks by moving the torn pieces. Subsequently, Kentridge argues that one must perform a similar kind of logic in reading and understanding history and our everyday lives; we must understand how these pieces of torn paper become the form of the rhinoceros or the form of a body being attacked. Absurdism forces one into new realms of thinking and interrogation, ways of being productive, making something new out of the remnants of loss and destruction.

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50 Kentridge states a concern about the intolerability of giving evidence of crimes committed allowing amnesty, see Kentridge, “The Crocodile’s Mouth.”

51 William Kentridge, *Learning From the Absurd*. In this lecture Kentridge adopts the rhinoceros as representative of the political climate of South Africa, arguing that the nature preserves of South Africa are removed from the constant security concerns that dominate the large cities, especially his native Johannesburg. Subsequently an aggressive and threatening wild animal becomes a symbol for safety and security in South Africa. Further still, this working method derived from working with 8 year olds making fantastical figures by rearranging these torn paper pieces. See William Kentridge, “In Praise of Shadows,” in *William Kentridge* (2004), 159.
REBUILDING: ON TEARING AND FORGIVENESS

Kentridge’s tearing points to the frailty of the body, yet its reassembly suggests a process of reparation much as the TRC does. These processes can be read through British object relation theorist Melanie Klein’s notion of reparation and tearing. Her discussion develops metaphors for understanding both the shadow puppets at play in Kentridge’s work and the TRC aims. Through this link, Klein becomes potent for reading the rebuilding performed in Ubu.52 Klein claims that it is necessary for the child to tear up and then rebuild the mother as a natural part of the reparation process.53 The child’s destructive phantasies are also the root of creative activity, allowing the child to repair the mother.54 The threat of loss binds the child to his act of destruction however; the repairs cannot conceal the fissures, tears, and ruptures. Reparation suggests both an incomplete and ongoing process within the child. The aesthetics of tearing are similar to Kentridge’s erasure, showing that a pure erasure or repair is impossible; the aesthetic of the tear documents this incompleteness.

Klein’s work reads the reparation of the body, allowing one to construct narratives of how we make sense of the world around us and how we write histories (both personal and national). Julia Kristeva’s reading of Melanie Klein’s

52 This chapter is not the first to suggest a connection between a Kleinian reparation and the TRC. Mark Sanders reads Klein’s wider considerations of reparation alongside of Antjie Krog’s poetry to illuminate a way of understanding both fiscal reparations as well as to consider the difficulties of making whole. See Mark Sanders, Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).


54 Klein, 308-9.
methodology and intention to work within the language of each particular child’s manner of speaking, locates precisely this action in the figure of Ubu; it is both silly and serious in Kristeva’s account.\textsuperscript{55} Ubu, in both Kentridge and Klein’s worlds, becomes a tool of reading the tropes of history (in either the patient’s or the society’s). Ubu becomes both a universal and a particular, a dialectic explored within both the play and Kentridge’s film \textit{Ubu}. A number of thinkers have noted the suitability of Klein’s work for political engagement. Judith Butler uses Klein to consider questions of the other and survivability in her analysis of war and grieveability, Jacqueline Rose in two lengthy chapters on Klein in her book on war and psychoanalysis highlights the intense interest on negativity and ambivalence in psychoanalytic circles during World War II leading to questions about reparation and restoration.\textsuperscript{56} Most telling for this project is Mark Sanders’ work, which considers the TRC alongside a reading of Klein; here he is interested in the phantasy of reparation allowing for shared reparation across all social groupings in South Africa.\textsuperscript{57}

Klein’s work represents a union of two different processes: the absurdist work located within \textit{Ubu} represents a process of rationalization, just as the reconstruction of the tears’ fragments in Kentridge’s world and the child’s phantasy create a new form out of the fragments before them. Life, in its most violent, silly, and circus-like, demands that we engage in absurd discourses in order to make sense of the world. Tracing their histories while acknowledging their damages is precisely what Kentridge and Klein achieve by engaging Ubu as a figure.


\textsuperscript{57} Sanders, \textit{Ambiguities of Witnessing}, 128-29.
The tearing that takes place in Ubu and the erasures in Kentridge’s films perform historical critiques that look forward while being grounded in a historical model of the past. As Klein does psychoanalytically, we are able to see the traumas and acts of violence the body performed or suffered in Ubu, but we also see how they are reassembled to form a whole. In this reformation the question of remembrance is preserved, but still holds within it a notion of what is the present and what is to come. This contrasts Desmond Tutu’s model for the nation: “We should be deeply humbled by what we’ve heard, but we’ve got to finish quickly and really turn our backs on this awful past and say: ‘Life is for living.’”58

In Kentridge’s conceptualization of the TRC through Ubu we see traces of the past, their destruction and how they are reassembled. Likewise, in Klein’s definition of reparation this is how the body of the mother must be located, it has to be destroyed, and in rebuilding it the mother can never be whole again. All of the traces of destruction are preserved, but the mother becomes a new form, and symbol of the labor performed by the child forcing it to take a new form, and the ways in which they have made the decisions to make this form, an aesthetic we can locate within Kentridge’s rhinoceros. The ability to mark and trace out these scars are important, they must be preserved in the body of the nation. Coming back to Kentridge’s own discussion of art making, the work of art (and history writing) must work like Beckmann’s paintings, documenting the world as it exists (both in its brutalities and its attempts to veil them), yet refusing to participate in its damaged functions.

Writing history through artistic production (like Kentridge and the German Expressionists) contrasts with the TRC narratives, a close analysis of how amnesty functions bears this out. The *Oxford Dictionary of Law* defines amnesty as: “an act

58 Desmond Tutu quoted in Krog, 42.
erasing from legal memory some aspect of criminal conduct by an offender. It is most frequently granted to groups of people in respect of political offences and is wider than a pardon, which merely relieves an offender of punishment.” Amnesty literally removes memory from history; however Kentridge’s films still bear traces of erasure and marks from tearing. We come to understand that in South Africa amnesty isn’t just a simple keystroke erasing something from public record, but is impossible to fully grant. Like the lines left on a sheet of paper, the political and economic structure still reflect the impact of apartheid, a complete erasure legal or otherwise is impossible.

In the TRC there is no desire to remember to historicize; its mandate is to forget. This is Tutu’s aim in trying to heal the nation through the TRC as a reparative gesture, forgetting to move forward. Despite recording testimony and a massive tome of a report, it is still a desire to erase and forget that dominates the logic of the TRC. Tutu’s statement above suggests that these documentations allow one to be freed from the processes of history; Ubu shows us the impossibility of doing that. Kentridge argues that on a deeper moral level, the TRC construct a discourse of the absurd:

A full confession can bring amnesty and immunity from prosecution or civil procedures for the crimes committed. Therein lies the central irony of the Commission. As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable that these people should be given amnesty.60

The truth commission’s narrative becomes divorced from justice, making it seem as though people have made applications not out of any desire for reconciliation but rather to escape the threat of prosecution. Amnesty contradicts the notion that those


60 Kentridge, “The Crocodiles Mouth,” viii.
parties who have committed “gross violations of human rights”\textsuperscript{61} must ask for forgiveness. Certainly as Tutu’s invocation of prayer and Christian ideology (he is an archbishop of the South African Anglican church) highlights the form of forgiveness within a specific context, demanding that it should be asked for and given, forgiveness then forms a portmanteau of the entire TRC process.\textsuperscript{62} It is through forgiveness that Jacques Derrida engages with ethics of the TRC. Derrida understands forgiveness as something that can only work in the realm of the unforgivable, creating a fantastic impossibility to forgiving; this reading seems to join with a legal reading of amnesty casting a serious criticism upon the practices of the TRC.

CONCLUSION: FORGIVENESS AND THE ABSURD, A DIALECTIC OF FORGETTING

Kentridge produced \textit{Stereoscope} two years after \textit{Ubu}; it engages the outcomes of the TRC political transition. Ultimately both \textit{Stereoscope} and \textit{Ubu} question the makeup of the “new” South Africa and its relationship to the TRC. This interrogation returns to questions of forgiveness and amnesty, which have very different demands

\textsuperscript{61} The TRC established as part of the interim constitution of South Africa through the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 attempted to transition from a lengthy past of political and social violence to a stable and racially diverse nation. It drew a very specific line on who would get to testify and apply for amnesty, limiting “gross violations” to specific acts defined as “killing, torture, abduction, and severe ill treatment. The commission’s goals were to establish a complete picture, granting amnesty, attempting to locate victims, and to prepare a report to the president of South Africa of gross violations of human rights committed beginning with the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 to the release of ANC prisoners and the democratic transition of 1994. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, \textit{Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report}, vol. 1.

\textsuperscript{62} Sanders’ \textit{Ambiguities of Witnessing} provides a detailed account of \textit{ubuntu}; the foundation for Tutu’s philosophy of forgiveness.
on the subject. In *Stereoscope* Kentridge uses the stereoscope as a metaphor to explore the divides between personal and public life and how the subject resolves these bifurcated portions of their life into one distinct image. Jonathan Crary argues that the stereoscope functions through not only the perception of difference of its two distinct images, but the reconciliation of these two images into one. Of course, this metaphor brings up a whole host of binary issues within the South African political context. Putting that discussion to the side, the stereoscopic form raises issues of how these binaries return to us in fractured and uneven ways.

Crary argues that the stereoscope works on a recognition of disparity between two images, yet this recognition is highly unstable. Many cards did not produce the intended three-dimensional effect and subsequently Crary concludes: “stereoscopic relief or depth has no unifying logic or order.” The model of the stereoscope reminds us that vision, like the politics of South Africa, comes to the viewer in often-fragmented ways. The reconciliation and reunification of two distinct images (which we can think of in themes, of race, class, urban/rural, and ethnic identifications within South Africa) cannot be reassembled in a seamless way. At the end of *Stereoscope*, Kentridge renders one such pairing that explicitly engages with the politics of the TRC; the image rendered with a smoky grey charcoal background the word drawn in blue “give” emerges with the prefix “for’ joining it to make “forgive” this interplay repeats, “for” disappears making “forgive” becoming “give” and back again (fig. 15, 1999).

The ethics of forgiveness are central to *Stereoscope*. Recalling the quote at the beginning of the chapter, Kentridge takes one central note from Derrida’s reading of

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63 Crary, 119.

64 Ibid., 120, 124-25.
South Africa: that the word forgiveness has a notion of poisoning in its etymology, that is to say to give forgiveness in a way poisons the subject, and weakens the entire apparatus of transition to a new nation state. Derrida’s *On Forgiveness* develops a critique of forgiveness in South Africa that reveals an insufficiency in the TRC’s aim to repair the nation, and it also critiques the desires of a neatly constructed memory politics and transition that Kentridge also makes in both *Ubu* and *Stereoscope*.

Derrida argues in *On Forgiveness* that forgiveness is rooted in the unconditional, that “in order to have its own meaning, [it] must have no ‘meaning’, finality, even no intelligibility. It is a madness of the impossible.” Forgiveness can only forgive the unforgivable, and for Derrida must strive to be “without power unconditional but without sovereignty.” Forgiveness seems pure within Derrida’s assumptions and almost impossible to achieve, suggesting that it is always deferred. Derrida’s conceptualization of forgiveness, however, performs the absurd. It is without intelligibility, end or even meaning, all traits that we can see traced across Kentridge’s aesthetic of Absurdism. Kentridge’s tactic suggests that history writing should find ways in which the absurd is reconciled within the world, perhaps a tactic that Derrida would support to read the TRC. Investigating the absurd conditions of forgiveness indicates not only its impossibility, but also its desire to forget founded through legal appeals to truth in order for post-apartheid South Africa to transition to a new nation state.

These definitions of forgiveness, in their pure form are outlined by Derrida to specifically respond to the practices of the TRC, arguing that in the process of politically negotiating the concept of amnesty Nelson Mandela’s tactics were poorly

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66 Derrida, 33, 59.
translated (both out of good will and confusion Derrida notes) by TRC chair and archbishop of the Anglican church, Desmond Tutu into forgiveness. Ultimately Derrida recounts a story of one woman who testified before the commission and informed Tutu that she was not ready to forgive. This is a prime indicator of the TRC failures for Derrida, it is precisely a judicial system that can mete out amnesty (as we are reminded above amnesty is a juridical concept), but it cannot grant forgiveness; only the individual is able to achieve that task. Kentridge echoes Derrida’s concepts when approaching the concept of forgiveness:

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somebody said that the interesting thing about forgiveness is it’s only possible when it no longer matters, that it no longer counts, up to that point its not possible when it still has a huge weight you can’t forgive and once you can forgive it means there is nothing to forgive.
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Forgiveness seems to be impossible for both men; Derrida calls it so, and Kentridge uses the idea of weight (which appears in the form of rocks and scales in *WEIGHING and... WANTING*, one of the Soho and Felix films produced around this time) to suggest the impossibility of moving around apartheid ideology within South Africa. What is clear from Derrida’s philosophical and Kentridge’s visual investigations into forgiveness are that the TRC are not the place to dole them out, that the legal and official structure of the country cannot make forgiveness a reality. In *Stereoscope* this

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67 Derrida, 41-42.

68 Ibid., 43-44.


70 Kentridge describes apartheid as a rock that necessitates at the very least oblique strategies of dealing with its attendant issues. Rosalind Krauss is interested in the implications of this metaphor in her essay on Kentridge and the history of animation’s development. See Rosalind Krauss, “‘The Rock’” William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection,” *October* 92 (2000): 3-35.
is made evident, we find emblematic businessman Soho located as a solitary figure split between two worlds, one in which life has gone on relatively unchanged (business as usual) and one where Soho exists within introspection. We see this performed as Soho sits in the office cluttered with tickertape and a growing pile of numbers on one side of the world and in the other, Soho left alone to sit and reflect seated on a bed (fig. 16, 1999).

It is in these solitary conditions that we see “give… forgive… give,” but this seems to be made up of three words “give,” “forgive,” and “for.” It demands of the viewer to ask who needs to forgive, who is it for, and what are they actually giving. It also reminds us of the forgetting that Tutu asks of the South African people. Harald Weinrich reminds us that “forgetting” is likewise made up of “for” and “get,” encapsulating a process of moving away from something, to go away from it. Derrida too reminds us of this fact when speaking in South Africa stating: “there is a perverse… desire for forgetting in the archive itself.” Derrida’s words are in reference to both the psychoanalytic archive and the TRC’s report. His argument reminds us that the production of the TRC report as a document of apartheid means there is a tremendous level of forgetting bound in the process of forgiveness. Breaking both “forgive” and “forget” up reveals a process of asking just what the word and its functions mean for South Africa.

Demanding that one give is a process different from forgiveness. It places a divide upon the nation or in Stereoscope’s case, perhaps suggests a divide that was already there. To answer these questions seems unclear, their sorrow hued in rich blue hues.

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beneath the black backdrop, suggests perhaps like Derrida’s assessment of forgiveness that there can be no true answer to who is supposed to forgive and what should be given as part of that process. Rather the concept of forgiveness, being so heavy with the weight of a history that it interprets through its own lens that in the end it becomes empty, seems to bring us back to the other “for” word in “forget”.

Forgetting takes us back full circle to amnesty, erasing from memory, and the erasures of Kentridge’s films. Again the idea of forgiving and forgetting remind us of the links between the forgetting implied in amnesty that confuses truth and forgiving which is impossible (both in the sense of the demands for truth the commission makes and in the difficulties Derrida outlines). It is the giving of amnesty as both a way of forgiving and erasing (in its legal definition) that implies a moving on and a forgetting. Those erasures are the points in which a history of apartheid South Africa can be traced, it is how we come to see these erasures; why some are engrained deeper into the paper, and others erased. The paper puppets of Kentridge’s *Ubu* project do the same; their forms are not those that we expect to be there, but their images are formed by the viewer making sense of the little shapes as one does with the abstract forms of clouds. These tears make a whole but show the fissures and ruptures upon the surface, the disjointed unions, and the gaps, their metaphorical function resonates with Kentridge’s erasures. In doing so, the viewer performs the same historical critique and analysis that Kentridge draws out of the absurd, we understand how we build the foundations of the world we stand upon, and how we might change these foundations and open up new ways of thinking for the future. The absurd makes it possible to construct a terrain upon which to address not only the past, but how it has affected the present. To return to the Vertov quotation at the beginning of the chapter, it is
Absurdism that allows us “to not forget what happens, and what the future must take into account.”

IMAGES

Fig. 1. Dziga Vertov, film stills from *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929)

Fig. 2. William Kentridge, film stills from *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997).
Fig. 3. William Kentridge, film stills from *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997).

Fig. 4. William Kentridge, film still from *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997).

Fig. 5. Dziga Vertov, film still from *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929).

Fig. 6. William Kentridge, film still from *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997).
Fig. 7. William Kentridge, film still from *The Magic Flute* (2004).

Fig. 8. William Kentridge, film stills from *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997).

Fig. 9. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937).
Fig. 10. William Kentridge, film still from *Ubu Tells The Truth* (1997).

Fig. 11. Kathe Kollwitz, *The Parents* (1921-22).

Fig. 12. Max Beckmann, *The Ideologues* (1919).
Fig. 13. Max Beckmann, *Death* (1938).


Fig. 15. William Kentridge, film stills from *Stereoscope* (1999).
Fig. 16. William Kentridge, film still from *Stereoscope* (1999).
CHAPTER 2- SHIFTING THE TERRAIN OF HOME

Johannesburg is very flat. Throughout my childhood the only mountain we had were the mine dumps, the large mine tailings all around Johannesburg from the gold mines. If you looked down to the end of the main streets of the city, you could see these golden dumps. In the mid-1970’s when the price of gold went up and technology improved, it became possible to reprocess all the pay dirt from the mine dumps and re-extract small quantities of gold. One by one these fundamental parts of the Johannesburg landscape were literally removed, washed away overnight, turned into a slurry, and reprocessed. So this sense of the contingency of the landscape is built into the history of Johannesburg itself. It is not a naturally formed landscape; it has been made by the tractors of engineering. The work draws what is there, reporting the traces and process of how the landscape is made. The way to draw that landscape is not dissimilar to the way landscape itself has been structured. When you are making a drawing of it, it is a line that you describe across the surface, but it is also a civil engineering line drawn across the landscape; accumulated excavations for road-cuttings and so on.


William Kentridge’s landscapes represent a gritty post-industrial South Africa that documents industrial transformations, their class relations, and ecological ruin alongside acts of political violence. Rendering the landscape in this way links apartheid violence and ecological ruin upon the same terrain, suggesting not only a long history of landscape painting but of political relationships to this landscape. Kentridge’s most explicit filmic investigation of landscape, *Felix in Exile* (1994), renders the bleakness of the landscape clearly. In one film still (fig. 1) Kentridge shows a pool of water surrounded by engineering pylons, with scorched and dying trees rendered with a single mark of deep black charcoal (itself scorched wood).  

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Susan Stewart considers the media of Kentridge’s films as indicative of the landscape as well. She argues that the scratching and pushing of a mineral surface is evocative of the plowing and mining of the landscape that takes place in South Africa. Stewart also reminds her readers that both printing ink and charcoal are made primarily from scorched materials that evoke the burning of barrels within the townships on the edge of South Africa’s major cities and the forest fires that occur throughout the veld of the rural countryside. In this way Stewart’s reading of the medium holds together a town/countryside bind that drives the relationship of South African landscape art including Kentridge’s engagement with mines and the
Next to the pool of water are raised mounds of earth, billboards, and industrial scaffolding with loudspeakers on top of it: the detritus of industry. Kentridge’s documentary approach to landscape clashes with the images and themes represented in South Africa’s famed landscape painter J.H. Pierneef (1886-1957) whose Rustenburgkloof (fig. 2, 1931) renders the landscape as pure and untouched, but also through a specific palette using greys, tans, several shades of deep brown, and dark and olive greens to represent the foliage of the South African veld. Pierneef’s landscapes represent the velds and grasslands of South Africa but also what novelist J.M. Coetzee sees as an aesthetic of emptiness. His paintings come to represent an absence of human intervention, represented in the emptiness and silence of the image makes the landscape appear eternal and ahistorical. Unlike Kentridge’s rough industrial landscapes, Pierneef’s are smooth simplified blocky forms of rock and tree.

Pierneef does not singularly represent the tradition of landscape in South Africa, he responds to a long tradition of painting in the nation, yet represents these scenes with a uniquely interior and empty aesthetic. South African landscape writing and painting stretches from William Burchell’s 1822 Travels in the Interior of South Africa, a treatise on the unique qualities of the South African landscape, traveling from Cape Town through the grasslands and deserts of the interior. J.A Volschenk, townships throughout his films and print work. See Susan Stewart, The Open Studio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 60-1.

2 Veld has a complicated definition in South Africa, meaning both generally a term to describe the specific botany of the grasslands and plains, but it contains with in its Afrikaans roots both a sense of cultivation and ownership but a distinctly African one. Here again like Pierneef’s work, the term comes to stand in for a uniquely African paradigm but one still controlled and made orderly by white control. See Jennifer Benningfield, The Frightened Land: Land, Landscape and Politics in South Africa in the Twentieth Century (London, Routledge: 2007), 17-18.

Edward Roworth, and Hugo Naudé comprise a generation of landscape painters working in the generation before Pierneef painted mainly idyllic and brightly colored images of the Western Cape and mountains around Cape Town. Subsequently, by the time Pierneef emerged on the art scene, he was fitting into an established and popular genre of art. What separates Pierneef from these predecessors is that Pierneef is a painter of the interior. Instead of the bright and lush colors of the cape, Pierneef’s style was rendered through muted colors. This emphasis on interiority is found in Kentridge’s work as well; he frequently drives his car a predetermined distance, for example 34.2 kilometers, from Johannesburg to draw the landscapes on the edge of the city, and his writings address the images of the Karoo desert and industrial ruin outside of the major cities. This interior landscape interests Kentridge the most, like Pierneef who focuses on the Karoo desert, velds and even Namibian desert as preferred settings.

Pierneef’s imagery finds its contemporaries in a number of writers who, like Pierneef, are of Afrikaner descent. Jeremy Foster, in his history of the literary landscape in South Africa, is keen to point out that a relationship to the landscape was a formative part of defining white African identity, especially establishing an identity that exists separate from Britain. The vacancy in Pierneef’s painting and Afrikaans literature and poetry comes from the Great Trek which displaced Dutch population

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into the interior from the British controlled Cape. Inscribing movement into the interior through painting, poetry and even historical re-enactments attempt to represent a controlling and cultured narrative upon the landscape. In addition J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing*, a collection of essays on white writers, devotes considerable attention to a number of novels in both Afrikaans and English that emphasize farmland and landscape. These novels constitute an attempt at making the interior in their unique image, as owners of the landscape represented and to make it a uniquely African one, away from the traditions of Europe, yet claming it for white populations as well. The simplified forms of Pierneef’s landscape do just that; his work has been described as “convey[ing] the Afrikaner’s sense of being mystically linked to the land,” and “establishing Afrikaner’s claim to the land, on the basis of the strength of historical justification and divine ordination.” Pierneef’s landscape makes a claim for ownership precisely as the rise of Afrikaner nationalism (whose leaders helped construct apartheid policies) came to power and during the 1913 Native Land Act which severely restricted where native blacks would be able to buy property. At the same time a fixed pastoral image of the rugged landscape was rendered in its ahistorical fashion; black populations and their labor disappear from the landscape. J.M. Coetzee writes:

Pastoral in South Africa therefore has a double tribute to pay. To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labor; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labor . . . the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal. In more ways than one the logic of the pastoral mode itself thus makes the incorporation of the black man – that is, of the

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7 Benningfield, 27.
8 Ibid. 49.
10 Benningfield, 94.
black serf, man, woman, or child – into the larger picture embarrassing and difficult.¹¹

Coetzee’s narrative reminds us of the threads at work in *Felix in Exile*; the erasures at play in Kentridge’s films render a landscape that erases labor and conflict and naturalizes ownership. These key ideological factors at work in this large body of writing and image making are taken up in Kentridge’s representations of landscape, labor and apartheid violence within the film.

The fascination of landscape takes its form in vernacular culture as well. South African art historian Michael Godby has recently considered the landscape as a source of particular interest in camera clubs and amateur photography in South Africa in the middle of the 20th century.¹² These literary, visual and even leisurely examples build a long tradition of landscape in South Africa. Kentridge’s specific engagement with landscape first emerges in a 1988 essay on the South African, considering Volschenk and Pierneef most closely, using their works as examples of landscape painting produced in South Africa.¹³ The visibility of Pierneef within the South African tradition was quite noticeable as his *Rustenburgkloof*, was formerly part of a series of panels installed in Johannesburg’s Park Station. This visibility of Pierneef alongside of the nationalist spirit of his works among the Afrikaner community makes his work a valuable and present comparison point in this chapter. Furthermore, Pierneef becomes a key example because his paintings render similar spaces in the interior of South Africa to Kentridge’s works, and become a point of response for Kentridge’s

¹¹ J.M. Coetzee, 5.


engagement with landscape as well. Pierneef’s smooth, drab color fields become an image of both a similar spatial domain as Kentridge, yet in imagery they are vastly different in their imagery.

To return to Kentridge’s landscape, rendering it in a polluted and destroyed nature becomes an act of criticism. Animating these conditions in *Felix in Exile* allows Kentridge to show the material conditions of South Africa’s terrain and the artifice of the pristine landscapes of Pierneef. Additionally, this imagery ruptures the divides between the pit mines and townships that exist on the peripheries of South Africa’s major cities from the lush and protected neighborhoods that upper class South Africans reside in (including the Johannesburg neighborhood Houghton where Kentridge lives). Kentridge’s landscapes write histories of the bodies that reside there, protecting them against being forgotten, erased and displaced as apartheid policies of relocation rendered these populations. However rendering these images as a process of remembering does not become complete in Kentridge’s work; what he represents is an absence of remembering, the process of things slowly fading from consciousness. Subsequently these erasure traces left as ghostly traces on the surface of the image use the working method of his automatic animation as a metaphor for the erasure of political struggle and violence from the surface of the landscapes that they represent.

*Felix in Exile*, a concerted investigation into the artificial construction of landscape and home, becomes the focus of this chapter. The film ultimately focuses on notions of witness, exile, and the material relations of property ownership in Kentridge’s native Johannesburg. To highlight this relationship of political culture and the land of South Africa, *Felix in Exile* shows landscape as a commodity, something that is owned, controlled and manipulated. Kentridge represents the landscape as often witnessed through engineering tools: the theodolite used to level the terrain of a
construction site, and a sextant an early maritime navigational tool used to calculate angles based on the positions of stars. This process revisits an overarching theme in Kentridge’s work; he uses an antiquated system of tools and mapping to resurrect and write new histories. By using the old and outmoded, Kentridge not only roots these histories in their past origins by using tools that define their origins (here in colonial mapping), but also resists the ideology of the new, that suggests post-apartheid history represents a forgetting of the past in order to move on. These tools which use sight to both witness and render the landscape, emphasize the economic relations of the terrain, taking us to the mine but also to the early mapping techniques used to claim and control South Africa. This colonial root forms a point of departure that takes Kentridge’s history through apartheid whose legal roots are found within colonial rule. Furthermore, economic exploitation is coded through land ownership in colonial empire, including the core of both the mining industry and the desire to mark white ownership of the terrain of South Africa.

**LANGUAGE GAMES**

The transformation from wilderness in Pierneef’s work to an industrial construction site, like those shown in *Felix in Exile*, is a transformation made frequently in childhood; young boys using toy construction equipment to shape and mould the landscape of the sandbox or beach to their desires. A metamorphosis of earth through toys represents a theme of play Kentridge repeatedly returns to in his work. Kentridge uses word games, animation, and optical toys (like the stereoscope), to the later use of actual toys in his bronze sculptures, bringing his artistic production
into a time of childhood. His films employ antiquated technology, represented in the trams and bakelite telephones that appear in Stereoscope, which takes the mise-en-scène of Kentridge’s films to the time of his childhood where the apartheid policies of the ruling National Party seemed stable and functioning. This emphasis on childhood enables Kentridge to literally toy with representations of the picturesque. Toying, constructed through several binaries throughout Kentridge’s oeuvre, examines the notion of the picturesque, and its relation to national identity, engaged through the dialectic of “home and exile;” opening a new subjectivity for social critique and identification in the “new” South Africa. This dialectic produces a horizon of thought that is grounded in history but looks forward at a crucial moment of political transition.

*Felix in Exile* derives from Kentridge playing a series of word games, resembling a word scramble by which the letters of a phrase are rearranged to form new words. This word jumble took the form of several phrases with similar spelling: “FELIX; EXILE/ AMNESTY; ELIXIR/AMNESIA.” These phrases, which thematically appear within *Felix in Exile*, were derived by Kentridge leisurely playing

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14 Marina Warner’s “Out of an Old Toy Chest”, explores the history of the toy in the history of a child’s learning process. Warner develops a history of toys that emphasizes the process of making something real that through the act of play an image of the real world is arrived at, much akin to Kentridge’s act of play as a notion of political criticism. Warner further emphasizes the idea of play in art making, using Kiki and Seton Smith’s often making paper cut outs to assist their father David Smith’s sculptural processes. Again play not only makes a real form, as Kentridge’s toying with visual forms makes new images but also shows the importance of play in making art. See Marina Warner, “Out of An Old Toy Chest,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 2 (2009): 6-7, 9.


before drawing as an attempt to work out an overall narrative to the film.\textsuperscript{17}

Kentridge’s language games are representative of the artist’s process of *fortuna*, working without a fixed narrative, his “interest shifts from what was originally central to something that appeared incidental.”\textsuperscript{18} Because there is no fixed narrative, the film evolves as Kentridge’s thinking about it evolves. *Fortuna* allows Kentridge to forge a link between landscape and its politics within the content of the film, while at the same time through the uncertain outcomes of his process create a working method that reveals the unstable and often random structure of memory.\textsuperscript{19}

*Felix in Exile* is the fifth of nine films referred to as 9 *Drawings for Projection* Kentridge executed focusing on three central characters: Soho, the emblematic capitalist always depicted in a pinstripe suit, his wife only identified as Mrs. Eckstein, and Felix, rendered naked frequently gazing out into the landscape, who through the narrative of these films becomes Mrs. Eckstein’s lover. Felix is modeled after Kentridge (taking his name subconsciously from an association with Kentridge’s mother Felicia) and Soho bears some resemblance to his grandfather.\textsuperscript{20} Their identity,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} William Kentridge, “‘Felix in Exile.’ Geography of Memory,” *William Kentridge* (2004), 99.
\item \textsuperscript{18} William Kentridge, “‘Fortuna’: Neither Programme nor chance in the Making of Images,” in *William Kentridge* (1999), 118.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Rosalind Krauss’ “The Rock’: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection,” *October* 92 (2000): 3-35 also provides a detailed investigation of the role of *fortuna* within Kentridge’s working process and the art historical and cinematic referents it draws from.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Okwui Enwezor, “Truth and Responsibility: a Conversation with William Kentridge,” *Parkett*, 54 (1998): 168; Angela Breidbach, *William Kentridge: Thinking Aloud*, 66. Kentridge in interviews hasn’t provided a rationale behind the name Soho Eckstein but has insisted that it is evocative of a South African Jewish surname. His role is more of an industrialist archetype, though in later films comes to express feelings of guilt and remorse. Furthermore Mark Rosenthal finds that Eckstein, Soho’s last name, reinforces his capitalist archetype in the films, as it is German for cornerstone. See Mark Rosenthal, “William Kentridge: Portrait of the Artist,”
\end{itemize}
like Kentridge’s, is Jewry of European heritage. Kentridge states: “What characterizes Felix, apart from his nakedness, is the Nation that he represents the eternally victimized, while Soho embodies the stereotype of the avaricious Jewish industrialist intent on owning the entire world.”\(^{21}\) These characters reflect different aspects of Kentridge’s understanding of South Africa and the concerns and issues facing the white upper class during political transition, including safety, guilt, and racial relations as a new political terrain unfolds in South Africa and time passes in this series of films.

The first film, *Johannesburg the 2nd Greatest City After Paris* (1989), focuses on the struggle between Felix and Soho for Mrs. Eckstein, as Soho’s mechanistic interest in industry drives him from his wife, and *Monument* (1990) further develops Soho’s perceived and actual relation to the laborer, represented as queuing workers presumably from the mine, bearing semblance to German expressionist imagery. *Mine* (1991) moves the focus away from Soho’s psychology towards a material analysis of the relations between the mining industry and the wealth that Soho extracts from it. *Society, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991), focuses on protests in South Africa, the three characters largely ignoring them and turning to personal concerns. This film finds Felix and Mrs. Eckstein together, prompting Soho to use his ever-metamorphosing cat that changes into a lever, to destroy Johannesburg, finding Soho and wife together at the end of the film.

*Felix in Exile* (1994), produced during the first multi-racial elections after the end of apartheid, finds Felix alone in Paris interacting with a new character Nandi, a black female surveyor, across continents. Nandi, named for the woman who modeled

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\(^{21}\) Enwezor, 168.
for Kentridge in the film, communicates to Felix through drawings. These communications recount scenes where, through a theodolite, Nandi witnesses several people die, become covered by newspaper, and then sink into the landscape. These scenes of violence culminate with Nandi’s death prompting Felix to return to South Africa powerless to change the landscape or the violence upon it. Kentridge’s use of landscape in this film as in other films is gritty, owing to the use of charcoal as a media along with the erasures and smudges of his working method, often with dark skies and punctuated with little use of color, using only blue pastel for water and red pastel to indicate surveyor’s marks and scars upon the landscape and bodies.

The final three films focus on Soho’s psyche and his relationship to memory. *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) dredges up memories buried in the mind as Soho falls comatose. *WEIGHING... and WANTING* (1997) uses similar images to *History of the Main Complaint* drawn from medical imaging technology and geological samples to focus on the relations of memory to landscape. *Stereoscope* (1999) uses the bifurcated vision of the stereoscope to focus on differing perspectives on the relations of history and class (represented through growing masses but also accountant’s tickertape) between Soho and the public. The most recent film in this set, *Tide Table* (2003), deals with issues of AIDS in South Africa using the image of thinning cows on the beach as Soho is on holiday; largely inactive the protagonist watches the tide come in and reads a newspaper for a significant part of the film. Kentridge has stated throughout 2010 that he intends on beginning another film in this series in the coming year.
SURVEYING/SEEING

Kentridge’s films make the dichotomy between the ideology of landscape and its material reality explicit, rupturing the traditional notions of landscape, and pushing the apparatus of property ownership and the legacy of colonialism to the front of the narrative. Colonialism becomes an ongoing process; it originates through British and Dutch control of the Cape and subsequent British control of the territory. Through the administrations of white administrators under colonial rule and as an autonomous state that enforced racism and terror, traces of colonialism appear in apartheid violence and through today in class and racial issues. These conditions are seen in the landscape; it is Cecil Rhodes who helped develop mining as an industry in South Africa, and the colonial laws such as the 1913 Pass Law limit black population’s access to the landscape. Colonialism here is treated not only in its formal and legal structures (that led to apartheid legal structure), but also as a residue that makes felt on the surfaces of both the apartheid and post-apartheid terrain in South Africa. It is not just the rendering of the landscape alone that is significant in the film, it is also the way it is framed, witnessed and seen. Felix, engaging with concepts of vision, connects the legacy of colonialism to apartheid and present day concerns over property ownership and labor in South Africa. The mapping tools that were used in colonial exploration become metaphors to read the violence that has occurred on the South African landscape through apartheid and the present day. Kentridge reveals the processes of

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22 The 1913 Land Act was intensified under apartheid rule; in 1959 legislation was paved to allow semi-autonomous rule for “Bantus” or homelands for black populations. In 1970 all black populations were assigned to one of the “Bantus” canceling out their South African citizenship regardless of where they resided. These laws facilitated the resettlement of blacks in large cities to make space for white expansion.
mapping or fixing the colonial landscape as occurring simultaneously with ownership and control over the land. In *Felix* we see alongside Nandi, primarily through surveying tools: the theodolite to plot the landscape, and later a sextant to chart the skies.\(^{23}\) Looking with both devices holds a referent to surveying practices that are used to build industry and infrastructure, but also to colonial mapping, which is equally a discourse about owning and marking.

Nandi’s mapping and navigation tools ground the concept of vision in *Felix in Exile* within the politics of land ownership and property. Vision constructs witness as engaged in seeing South Africa’s political economy. Witness understood through the giving an account in the TRC testimony to establish a history of apartheid violence, becomes expanded through this seeing, which looks in different ways (through the tools of labor) to decode and build histories of disenfranchisement that go beyond the narrow scope of direct violence on an individual that was assessed by the TRC report. Instead, this wider witness, already destabilized by the tools used in *Felix* allows for a more expansive and plural history able to read material concerns about apartheid, its colonial roots and its traces in post-apartheid culture. The theodolite becomes not only a symbol of witness, a way of figuring the violence that occurred on the landscape, but it is also a way of conceiving sight through a lens of property ownership and regulation of the landscape. In his analysis of mapping in colonial

\(^{23}\) The theodolite is a surveying tool used to calculate angles of triangulation, plotting the landscape from two separate points and superimposing them onto one graph or grid to accomplish this. This process of plotting and measuring land to scale and reconciling two different perspectives into one system, possesses a similar function to the stereoscope, another key visual instrument within Kentridge’s body of work. Superimposing two slightly different images on top of each other produces the stereoscope’s three-dimensional effect. For a detailed account of the physics and Foucauldian disciplinary techniques of the stereoscope, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer, on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).
India, Ian Barrow locates a shift between the route map and the trigonometrical map. He argues that this shift, while ushering in a new era in accuracy in mapping, had a secondary goal of applying reason to the British rule over colonial India. The theodolite, a trigonometric mapping tool, becomes a symbol that can move between colonial mapping projects and the contemporary concerns about property ownership and excavating minerals from the earth. It becomes a useful tool to reference both the processes of mapping in a colonial context, and the surveying necessary for mining to begin. The optic frames the history of South Africa to trace a history from its colonial histories that emerges as a potent metaphor today.

The sextant, Nandi’s other imaging device, used when gazing at the night skies (whose stars frequently metamorphose to form images in the night) seems to refer to South Africa’s colonial heritage. An early maritime navigational tool, the sextant calculates the altitude of stars to enable accurate routes on maps, becoming a device that enables exploration, further mapping, and colonial control. Its conception of vision is firmly ensconced within the Cartesian politics of the colonial regime, tracing a history of optical tools from English and Dutch colonial histories to the massive industries that dominate the economic structure of contemporary South Africa. In the use of these devices by the surveyor, contemporary industry is linked to colonial industry. The sextant is also a key tool in the shift that Barrow outlines; it was used primarily during the transition from route maps that placed an importance on the

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picturesque to the scientific and ordered trigonometric surveys. The sextant and theodolite are perfect symbols for Kentridge’s treatment of the landscape. They represent both the scientific and ordered world of industry and the image of the picturesque which conceals the role that labor plays in the South African landscape.

The use of the theodolite and sextant already code the landscape with labor. That is to say the landscape is defined by labor in South Africa. It is transformed by the work performed by the mining industry that Kentridge alludes to in the epigraph to the chapter. Raymond Williams associates labor with landscape primarily noting its genesis as a term from “a common sense of ploughing or working the land,” going on to clarify the term in a Marxist understanding describing it as “that element of production which in combination with capital and materials produced commodities.” It is this linking of work and the production of commodities that drives the reading of labor in this chapter. Williams clarifies this relationship in *The Country and the City*. He argues that landscape is an ideological discourse borne of a nostalgia for a childhood vision of landscape before the thresher and tractor came to alter it for “the service and for the gain of others.” We can see the transformation that Kentridge alludes to in the epigraph. Landscape is built in the service of labor; the landscape of Johannesburg changed as the fortunes of the mining industry rose and fell. Furthermore, it is necessary to see the laborer in the landscape as a distinct social group. John Barrell describes the laborer as a recognizable class, one seen as linked to the landlord who perceives himself as a producer and is seen by the laborer as

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25 Barrow, 76.


someone consuming from their labor.\textsuperscript{28} This image immediately conjures up an image from Kentridge’s first of the 9 Drawings for Projection, Johannesburg the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Greatest City After Paris (1989). Kentridge draws a desolate landscape of a blasted open pit with industrial lighting grids and industrial scaffolding dominated by a long snaking line of queuing workers. The line of workers, perhaps after an evening meal, wait as Soho sits down to gorge himself on a feast, eventually indifferently hurling food at the growing mass. The divided world of industry and the goods that it informs make the 19\textsuperscript{th} century English landscape and their material concerns seem ever present. The landscape and labor are linked together in South Africa; mining is one way in which we see this, the national claims of the Afrikaner in Pierneef’s work is another. To read the landscape as a site of ecological ruin and the image of dispossession insists upon a convergence of class exploitation and racial violence in apartheid politics. The fact that they do not fade in Kentridge’s palimpsest suggests that these politics have not faded in South Africa. Shantytowns in Johannesburg are made on top of the mine tailings and removed from the city centre; work and landscape are overlapping in the actual terrain of the city.\textsuperscript{29}

Furthermore looking in these films performs an active industrial labor. Nandi witnesses the landscape with the tools of industry, not the leisurely paintbrush of the landscape painter. She performs a job for us (and presumably the owners of that terrain, preparing it for construction) that is converted into an aesthetic; labor informs


\textsuperscript{29} Soweto township on the Southwest part of Johannesburg containing the underdeveloped housing for (according to official census) nearly 900,000 people, the majority of them black, is defined by the mine dumps of the East Rand. Nearly 438 million tons of sand is deposited with several degrees of environmental contamination occurring. See Benningfield, 197-98.
the production of the culture she presents to Felix. Furthermore, as Jonathan Crary convincingly claims in his *Techniques of the Observer*, the process of looking is a job, training the eye to focus and getting it to perform labor.\(^\text{30}\) Looking and providing witness in *Felix and Exile* are tasks of labor further suturing the strands of violence, colonialism, work, and witness together in *Felix’s* complex narrative.

Kentridge’s willingness to engage with the processes of optical tools, surveying practices, and mapping techniques unearths a material reality to the landscape. *Felix in Exile* shows landscape as a discourse that is known, mapped and controlled, making it impossible for landscape to be seen as pure nature. Kentridge’s use of landscape also represents something material that is owned, marked and manipulated for the interests of power. Looking in *Felix in Exile* is grounded in ideas of property; the devices that open the narrative to the viewer delineate ownership. It is through the theodolite that we can literally see the structure of labor and material relations in post-apartheid South Africa.

**LANDSCAPES THEN/LANDSCAPES NOW**

Kentridge’s landscape is a vast expanse of empty land, a blank plane of hard-pressed dirt. In one of the sequences of a victim falling dead (several appear in the film) in *Felix in Exile* (fig. 3) the body lies on the earth, as small pylons surrounded in deep red pastel slowly rise up out of the surface, the pit in which the figure is held grows deeper, finally a billboard emerges and the body disappears. The landscape undergoes a metamorphosis, leaving piles of industrial detritus and pylons growing

\(^{30}\) Crary, 7-8, 84.
out of a terrain that is seemingly flat, limitless, and shrouded with a dirty, black, and sunless sky.

This general configuration of the landscape persists throughout *Felix in Exile*, later when we witness the landscape through Nandi’s theodolite (the image presenting a rounded focus through which we see {Fig. 1}), the same pylons grow, this time in pure red pastel rather than being encircled by it, and the pool of water is fed by a culvert beneath an elevated road, suggesting not the purifying water of a safe drinking supply, nor the picturesque ocean, but a polluted and dingy industrial supply. The treatment of the body and its relationship to labor and violence engages with the ecological and natural constructions of landscape and its artifice as two central themes repeated throughout Kentridge’s work on landscape. Kentridge is intrigued by the “ephemera of human intervention” within landscapes; these are the images he wants to sketch. He argues that the scenic vistas of the Western Cape become particularly uninteresting (precisely those that intrigued the generation of landscape painters before Pierneef), as they do not trace the history of intervention and change upon the terrain but rather attempt to represent a picturesque that does not apply to the rest of

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31 Well after the completion of this film, the politics of water rights have become much more complicated in South Africa. The privatization laws pursued by the African National Congress (ANC) under Thabo Mbeki’s government have required poor South Africans living in the townships (especially Soweto) to pay for cost recovery of past disconnections to gain access to potable water making it extremely difficult to procure utilities. Since the end of apartheid 18% of people given access to water are unable to pay “no matter how hard they try.” The economic structures of the landscape that Kentridge alludes to in *Felix in Exile*, have become more accelerated and prevalent in the wake of the film. For a detailed account of the politics of privatization in South Africa see Ashwin Desai and Richard Pitthous’s engaging essay “Dispossession, Resistance and Repression in Mandela Park,” in Grant Farred and Rita Barnard eds., “After the Thrill is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa,” a special edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (2004): 841-875.
South Africa. Kentridge used to draw the landscape by driving a fixed distance in his car and drawing the view presented to him. This *fortuna* of the Johannesburg area leads him inevitably to burnt veld and industrial ruin. Nandi’s surveyed landscape contains these ephemera in its culverts, dirt roads, and slurry. This still from *Felix* (fig. 1) has thin trees on the far edge of the edge of the composition, but like the water they do not suggest the lush fauna of the Johannesburg suburbs; they appear barren and lifeless, their rendering in charcoal perhaps suggesting that they are charred like the charcoal itself.

The landscape in Kentridge’s work sketches scenes of blackened skies, industrial scars, blasted pits, slurry, pylons and culverts. These images of industrial detritus connect with those bodies in the landscape sinking and disappearing. Often within the narrative of the film Kentridge renders the figures sinking and disappearing on construction sites, most notably one figure surrounded by surveying pylons, and a billboard to one side as he sinks to the earth. Like the surveying tools suggesting a lineage of racial and economic exploitation being aligned, these images do the same by showing a confluence of industrial ruin and images that recall political protest and unrest in the 1970’s and 80’s. Landscape becomes a counter-memory or a temporal memorial, its rendering documents the existence of violence enacted upon laborer,

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34 Emily Apter considers the ecological nature of Kentridge’s work and especially his landscape’s in her “The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats,” *October* 99 (2002): 21-44. Apter’s essay draws a relationship between contemporary globalization that she finds to be most lucidly outlined by the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the ecological impacts represented by Kentridge and others, embedded in a tactic of “geopoetics” that are able to link ecological concerns to questions of human rights.
protestor and the land, but the erasures also become a document of their loss and eventual absence, fading from consciousness through time and ideology. This loss brings body and landscape together; it is the land that absorbs the body as memories fade, creating closer ties between the nation and the body.

The images of Nandi and others sinking into the landscape have two origins; one is Kentridge’s friend who described police photographs of murder victims always being in the landscape. This prompted Kentridge to draw bodies in the landscape based on how he imagined them from the description, only later to realize the police photographs were vastly different than he imagined. Rather than bodies on an open plane, the photographs were tightly composed, almost always in confined outdoor spaces rather than the vast expanses that he draws in *Felix in Exile*. Sam Nzima’s newspaper photograph featuring a young woman holding a child while another runs alongside her is typical of images of the Soweto uprising (Fig. 4, 1976). Its tight composition shows only the figures in the foreground and a house in the middle, the scene focuses closely on people in a tight urban centre rather than out in an open plane. The second reference for these drawings was Francisco Goya’s *3rd of May 1808* (fig. 5, 1808). Kentridge’s rendering of bodies sprawled out upon the ground

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35 Class-consciousness in South Africa could be perhaps one of the most daunting challenges to the post-apartheid state, perpetuating the ideological and hegemonic control of white capitalism in South Africa. Despite the end of racial segregation laws and the ANC government’s election, the country has pursued economic policies of deregulation and outward attention to global markets, through the GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) program advocated by the IMF. GEAR has done little to help alleviate the massive poverty concerns in South Africa. Subsequently, the tripartite alliance of the ANC with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is seen as significantly weakened and by some as a “revolution betrayed” to borrow Leon Trostky’s term about the Stalinist Soviet Union. Neil Lazarus, Michael MacDonald and Zine Magubane take up different aspects of this problem in Grant Farred and Rita Barnard’s excellent “After the Thrill is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa,” a special edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (2004).

bear some formal similarities to the bodies in the lower corner of Goya’s painting. Additionally, the cartoonish nature of Goya’s painting provides a further resonance with Kentridge’s animation. Kentridge’s rendering of victims in *Felix in Exile* evokes the image of Goya’s painting, rendering state violence that shows bodies cut down, which recalls images of Sharpeville and other protests where the armed forces brutally suppressed protestors. It is also worth noting that Goya formally links to Kentridge; while this is a painting, Goya is known for his prints, which helped inspire Kentridge early in his career where numerous theatre posters and other graphic works representing political dissent against apartheid emerge. This connection of state violence weaves the culture of violence in South Africa back to its European origins.

Both artists show the body in the space before it gets lost, covered, and forgotten. In Goya’s work the figures stand bravely but with futility against the strength of the state, and in Kentridge’s drawings the body becomes lost, sinking into the landscape suggesting both the burials and burning practices of the police during the apartheid regime. Where losing the body was an all too true reality as police practices frequently disposed of the body without any marker or ways of recovering it. This removal of the body is a portion of the narrative of Goya’s painting that one could imagine, their execution renders them silent, removes them from the ability to represent a dissent towards the state.  

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37 Anjtie Krog’s *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998) details the testimony of several police and SADF (South African Defense Force) members revealing tactics for getting rid of these corpses, some testifying that they would braai (an Afrikaans word for barbequing) alongside the fire to burn the victim. The text also discusses the discovery of these bodies during the TRC’s.

38 The chaos of Goya’s painting is a theme revisited by Kentridge later in his career when using news footage of protests and uprisings that turn violent as part of the narrative in *Ubu Tells the Truth*. These bodies (the actual ones in the archival footage as well as those Kentridge draws) become a part of the landscape, eaten up by the
The bodies in *Felix in Exile* are also rendered like the photographic
descriptions of his friend; the body is placed in the centre of the landscape sprawled
out so that it becomes the focal point. The terrain upon which the bodies lie is
comprised of firmly compacted dirt and without any distinctive characteristics,
leaving the body, lying rigid and alone as paper blows over the corpse. Both
photography and Goya’s painting represent tactics for rendering violence that show a
way of remembering and preserving the memories of violence that occurred on the
landscape that Kentridge depicts in *Felix in Exile*. Kentridge represents bodies within
the landscape that have a degree of permanence that photographs cannot. There is a
representation of loss in *Felix* the image shows the earth holding the body, and it
represents the passage of time, something the photographic cannot achieve. It
becomes a history of disremembering yet documents a landscape of South Africa that
shows what is buried beneath it.

Kentridge’s use of labor as a mode of transforming landscape picks up on a
long tradition of representation throughout the history of art. His interest in class
structures, the worker, their body, and the landscape has interesting ties to the legacy
of British landscape painting. John Barrell in his analysis of the role of the laborer in
British landscape from 1730-1840 argues that the poor belong to the “dark side of
landscape” existing within the shadows of the scene, contrasting with the illuminated
rich aspects of the landscape.\(^{39}\) *Felix in Exile* is this dark side of the landscape,
employing a metaphor of light and dark, rich and poor, illuminated and shadowy;
Barrell’s metaphor lends itself well to the former British colony and the politics of
harsh terrain (and to some degree the nation) as well, as their traces preserved, marked
in red outlines reminding us of police techniques to outline the body after a homicide,
but also to mark property boundaries.

\(^{39}\) Barrell, 22.
Kentridge’s work. This reveals within the South African context not only a racial divide in the status of labor, but also a divide in geography between the dark mines and the wealthy white suburbs of Johannesburg. We should not forget in terms of nationality that this “dark side of landscape” is what J.M. Coetzee uses to describe the racial dimensions of labor in South African landscape painting. It seems Barrell’s Marxist approach to reading the landscape as a terrain of labor, one that is coded by the transformations of work that are performed upon it, is keenly felt in the geography of South Africa’s great trek, farmlands, and mining industry.

Kentridge’s representations of labor reveal a perpetuation of the dark side of landscape; the worker located within the dark, coal-sodden, subterranean spaces of mines and shallow unmarked graves. This darkness is the repository of memory that holds the history of violence and labor in the land veiled in the picturesque landscape. The exception being of course that Kentridge works to represent the damage to the laborer and to the dark side of the landscape, unlike the English landscape which strives to keep a separation between laborer and landed classes. In Kentridge’s films, the image of the dark side of the landscape is brought to the foreground, not forgotten or pushed aside but becomes central to the animation. These representations of labor (and its tragic relationship with color) link the brutal realities of the apartheid regime, disparities of property ownership, police control of the state, and wealth divides across racial lines in South Africa together in one historical project.

Further theorizing the notion of labor in the landscape, and its relationship to colonialism, art historian W.J.T. Mitchell argues that landscape functions like a commodity. His analysis contends that landscape has no utility in itself, but has a limitless value in the realm of exchange; and secondly that landscape conceals the value inside of it through a process of naturalizing its function and making the concept
of nature appear conventional. Mitchell goes on to argue that landscape’s economic basis also holds close ties to colonialism stating:

> These semiotic features of landscape, and the historical narratives they generate, are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives of itself precisely (and simultaneously) as an expansion of landscape understood as an inevitable, progressive development in history, an expansion of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ into a ‘natural’ space in a progress that is itself narrated as ‘natural.’

Bridging colonialism and the economic structures of painting, Mitchell addresses similar themes to Kentridge’s work and an examination of South African landscapes, though not directly taking up Kentridge’s work or South Africa. Mitchell’s analysis constructs relationships between the discourses of culture and imperialism, to the system of apartheid and present day globalized and deregulated economic structures affecting South Africa, grounding these discourses in a materialism that shifts between natural resources and labor. Again, Williams’ definition of labor is keenly felt, having its origins in making up of the landscape and a transformation of goods into objects for profit for others. *Felix in Exile* weaves these threads together; the violence of the civilizing discourses that grew out of colonialism and their impact not only on the land are made visible on the landscape, but also on the people of that land and their narratives buried far beneath the surface, erased from memory.

Mitchell’s arguments draw from both Ann Bermingham and Barrell’s analysis of the naturalization of 18th and 19th century British landscape painting, and its obfuscation of material relationships. Developing a two-pronged critique of landscape, Mitchell is concerned with revealing the economic processes that the image and the land represent. He is also concerned with the subsequent naturalization


41 Ibid, 17.
of the terrain; neutralizing the politics of colonization and labor exploitation occurring within its representations.\textsuperscript{42} This economic bind between nature and culture is present in Kentridge’s films, concerned with the ecological remnants of the mining industry, the artificial nature of the mountains of Johannesburg, and the histories buried beneath the earth; making history an ever-present condition in representations of landscape.

Endeavoring to reveal similar historical foundations in earlier landscape painting, Mitchell argues that the history of landscape painting bound itself up in purity, a desire to preserve a true natural experience for the viewer. Drawing from an analysis of Emerson’s work on the concept of nature and the natural, Mitchell contends that this desire to preserve the landscape as natural and subsequently pure, meaning the work attempts to veil ownership, or human intervention.\textsuperscript{43} This sense of naturalness in landscape painting is a central part of the South African tradition. Jeremy Foster’s history of white landscape in South Africa emphasizes that in pictorial traditions the monotonous, empty and unimproved wild nature promoted a sense of exploration and adventure and Benningfield emphasizes the emptiness of landscape in Thomas Pringle’s South African poetry creates a primacy, the prehistory

\textsuperscript{42} In \textit{The German Ideology}, Marx develops a critique of labor based upon the relationship between nature and culture. Within this analysis Marx argues that the shifts towards capitalist modes of economy are dependent upon the material goods that “nature” provides. Subsequently the development of capitalism is restrained by nature, needing a certain amount of natural resources such as coal to advance and impacts nature at the same time through urban growth and pollution creating a dialectic whose synthesis is not clear. See Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., Robert C. Tucker ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 168. Terry Eagleton’s \textit{Versions of Culture} also develops a similar analysis arguing that culture and nature as historical concepts are dependent on each other, both historically and linguistically. They are attached and not a simple dialectic of culture triumphing over nature. Terry Eagleton, \textit{Versions of Culture} (London: Blackwell, 2000).

\textsuperscript{43} W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in \textit{Landscape and Power}, 13, 15.
they imagine makes them closer to god.⁴⁴ The sparse terrain makes it possible for the terrain to serve ideological functions, its cuffing up through cultural representations, from the farm to the painting or poem allow a historical message for white settlers to communicate to Europe and to legitimize their own control of that space. As Foster continues in his discussion of Pierneef his woodcuts and landscapes become a screen where a racist politics and ownership of the landscape can be projected.⁴⁵

Pierneef configures the landscape as barren, brown and sparse but at the same time pure, static and unchanged. Pierneef’s landscapes are without human presence, there is no evidence of any intervention unto the land that he is representing; it is represented as pure and untouched. To do this is to divest the landscape of history and of ownership; it forgets the violence that has occurred on the terrain and at some times remnants of violence held within it. In J.M. Coetzee’s study of the picturesque this untouched nature is crucial, the South African landscape is conceived of as being empty and vacant; he believes that unlike British or European landscape painting which emphasize vegetation, South African landscape writing emphasizes geology.⁴⁶ This rocky landscape makes it a singular thing, rock. This metaphor not only recalls the rock of mining but also is the descriptor Kentridge uses for apartheid, again suturing the strands of industry and racism together.⁴⁷

Kentridge also responds to Pierneef’s work in his early writings, (just before he began his drawings for projection) believing these paintings to be “documents of

⁴⁴ Foster, 68-69; Benningfield, 25.
⁴⁵ Foster, 199.
⁴⁶ J.M. Coetzee, 171-72.
⁴⁷ Quoted in Krauss, 4.
disremembering,” and abandoning “processes or history” in art.48 Kentridge is arguing that the sites he represents do not indicate a presence of industry or strife that was occurring on the land, these images in their eternal simplified brown forms. Pierneef’s landscape paintings are, for Kentridge, one of the more focal points within a long history of representing the South African terrain that stretches from the scientific and cartographic studies that are referenced in the Colonial Landscapes series where Kentridge redraws illustrations from Africa and Its Exploration as Told by Its Explorers, a 19th century account of the European exploration and finally reaching its teleological apex in Pierneef’s landscape which Kentridge describes as “pure.”49 We can understand this claim of purity as a desire to embrace the naturalized state to make claims about a stable national identity; it provides a singular and ahistorical vantage to read history through.

Earlier landscape art in South Africa takes its starting point from a communication with the empire back home, Godby’s study of two British landscape painters, Thomas Baines and Thomas Bowler, argues that. Godby shows these two landscape painters coming to terms with exile and eventually a sense of South Africanness as they adapt to their home, Bowler in particular renders lithographs (fig. 6, 1849) showing demonstrations against the Cape being used as a convict colony, at one level keeping the Malay (Asian Muslim) community at the margins and another forming the foundations for a white notion of rule.50 Similarly Samuel Daniell’s A


49 Ibid.

Boor’s House, (fig. 7, 1805) is bound with a difficult relationship between colonial control and labor. The image is an idyllic landscape of laborers returning sheep from a day’s grazing as a plantation farm is nestled in a sweeping expanse of hills behind it. The image seems to naturalize British codes of landscape and the pastoral, which Daniell came from. Yet this image codes two divergent images of labor in South Africa. We are meant to see this as a white farmstead on the frontier; its architecture and ox cart signifies a Dutch farmstead, naturalizing white control of the land, significant to the British colonies to give wage labor to unemployed in Britain and to provide a buffer against displaced Xhosa communities.51 Yet the workers are riding oxen, a traditional Xhosa method of transport, seamlessly showing free labor (and with it a representation of white control of the nation) and slave labor within the naturalized and pastoral mode of its representation.52 The image indicates a normalization and control of the landscape, labor and control become part of the naturalized mode. However by the time of Pierneef’s work questions of national identity and a separate “Africanness” that is at once white emerge, as discussed above, landscape becomes a discourse of being able to define and project national identity as a site of control (especially for Afrikanners forced to the interior).53 This transition becomes a point of foundation for both race and apartheid politics.

51 David Bunn, “‘Our Wattled Cot’” Mercantile and Domestic Space in Thomas Pringle’s African Landscapes,” in Landscape and Power, 154.
52 Bunn, 161-2.
53 See Foster, 2-3. He reminds the reader especially that the concern over the landscape and its representation is a source of concern for a number of writers engaged in anti-apartheid discourses as well. Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Andre Brink, Doris Lessing, Alan Patton and more recently Antje Krog all engage with concepts of landscape, ownership and its difficult relations with race.
Felix like all of Kentridge’s “Drawings for Projection” leaves ghostly traces of the film’s development, making impure images that trace histories concealed in earlier modes of landscape painting. Each stage, while the image fades from erasure, places a trace of history on the image. Kentridge’s erasures become dynamic within an aesthetic form that is coded to be “natural” and static, rupturing the stability of the nationalist ideologies contained in Pierneef’s landscapes. Felix constructs a narrative of the metamorphosis of the physical landscape over time. Throughout the history of Johannesburg and the East Rand, the mining areas Kentridge renders, massive transformations of these landscapes have occurred. Currently the mines are abandoned, and Kentridge argues this absence gives the mining areas a sense of nostalgia. Not only are people nostalgic for the pure images of nationalism of Pierneef’s kloofs and velds, they are nostalgic for the economic booms and security that occurred as apartheid was codified. However Kentridge’s films attempt to render space in such a way as to make it clear that these simplistic notions of the past were never as stable as they claim. As Kentridge states in the epigraph to this chapter, the terrain of Johannesburg is contingent on the economic factors of the cities, having hills as a child because of the necessity of leaving mining tailings, only for the hills to be removed later as technology made it possible to extract more gold.

Johannesburg’s vistas become artificial and dependent on industry, becoming a rather unique entity. Its form assumes the exact shape of capital, carved and molded by the demands of gold in the global market, it now stands stark and blank seemingly perfect to be adapted to the ever-changing and metamorphosing needs of late capital. Mitchell’s assessment of landscape as a discourse that naturalizes the material processes occurring on the actual land is intensified in South Africa. The land itself

becomes naturalized within the landscape painting of Pierneef and others, epic and unchanging, masking any construction or interventions upon the terrain. These transformations are effaced within the works of traditional landscape painters, especially Pierneef. Capturing the picturesque scenes of the Western Cape or the grassy velds and the mountains of the interior conceals the developing and changing terrain and landscape (and the central issues of ownership) around the growing urban spaces of South Africa. Instead these landscape traditions prefer to render the terrain in such a way that it appears untouched since colonial settlements emerged. This discourse of pure naturalism hides the processes of labor, violence, and conflict within the landscape leaving the viewer with a static image that no longer shows the farms, mines, factories, or the taming of the landscape for colonial needs.

**MINE/MINING**

Kentridge’s gritty smudges give *Felix in Exile* a materiality and texture that makes a sense of emptiness or an untouched nature impossible. The subject matter of *Felix in Exile* implicates the role of the landscape in South African politics to make a pure claim about the nation impossible either. Kentridge’s landscape is already coded with the relations of property, as effaced through the pylons that function as property markers that emerge and recede throughout the films. The materiality of charcoal as a medium also reminds the viewer of coal mining, its sooty texture signifying an industry that makes up a vast portion of the economy of South Africa.\(^{55}\)

\(^{55}\) While diminishing in significance since the 1980’s the mining sector is historically the most important part of the South African economy. Gold mining alone currently accounts for about 5.8% of the GDP of the nation in 2007, and the mining industry in general makes up the largest sector of employment in the country. Traditionally gold, coal and diamonds are the crucial resources extracted, although other precious metals
One of Kentridge’s earlier films, *Mine* (fig. 8, 1991), makes the relations of this materiality clear when moving from enigmatic capitalist Soho Eckstein’s bed to the mines that he owns. Needing to forge some connection to them, Kentridge draws Soho’s cafetière plunging down through the bottom of the coffee pot, through the bed, and beginning to bore through the earth taking us past large sculptural heads (referencing Ife sculpture), skeletal remains of dinosaurs or perhaps a rhinoceros, past a diagram of a slave ship, and finally arriving inside the showers and the core of the mine. It cuts through the nation into the chasms of memory and economics. Kentridge’s drawing bores through the earth and the history buried there, mining histories that remind us of the close ties that the legacy of slavery plays with the apartheid structures of government and the role that mining plays in the national economy. The word mining takes on a double meaning because of the commodity structure of the mines. Mining refers not only to the physical place but also becomes a verb signifying ownership; mine moves into mining. Mining is not just about the industrial practice of mining but about claiming and controlling, a struggle that encompasses colonial struggles (including those between the Dutch/Boers and English), apartheid, and tribal rights today.

Kentridge is actively engaged in a discourse of mining history; concerned about the rapidly fading collective memories that happen once a struggle becomes such as platinum are becoming increasingly more important. For detailed accounts of the mining industry in South Africa, see “Mining and Minerals in South Africa,” (May, 2008) [http://www.southafrica.info/business/economy/sectors/mining.htm](http://www.southafrica.info/business/economy/sectors/mining.htm). Apartheid legislation also heightened tensions in the mining industry, beginning with the British colonial regime the passing of the 1911 Mines and Work Act prevented blacks from becoming skilled laborers or getting into most apprenticeship programs in the mining industry, relegating them to the entry level and most harsh jobs in the mining industry.
covered up and buried.\textsuperscript{56} Cutting open the earth much like Benjamin’s surgeon becomes a way of exposing the memories carried in the body and deep below the earth, allowing one engage directly with the event.\textsuperscript{57} This cutting, mirrored in the rapid “cuts” between Felix’s Parisian exile and Nandi’s surveying work, opens the narrative to new associations and tactics of approaching the historicization of South Africa. In her analysis of the role of hospitality and justice in the work of Jacques Derrida, Ranjana Khanna argues precisely this point; the cut in her analysis opens the work up to unknown, new ways of thinking, creating a new sense of beauty.\textsuperscript{58} The cut creates a new way of approaching old discourses, enlivening and approaching things like landscape painting anew. \textit{Felix in Exile} opens up a new way of seeing primarily through the red marks, little cuts upon the landscape of Johannesburg. The use of color in \textit{Felix in Exile}, a shift away from the drab browns and greys of Pierneef, to blue fields of water and surveyor’s red cuts upon the surface, open up new ways of thinking, and new ways of conceiving of the future of South Africa.

\textbf{RED/BLUE}

The landscape no longer is picturesque scenes from the travel narratives Kentridge borrowed as source material. \textit{Felix’s} landscape has fresh red cuts on its surface, marking pylons rising out of the surface, and bodies disappearing beneath it.


\textsuperscript{58} Ranjana Khanna, \textit{Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present} (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2008), 40.
It is witnessed through the tools of colonial control and inscribed by the capitalist
discourse that inherited this system. These cuts, brief instances of red in a film
otherwise rendered in the black and greys of charcoal, refer to surveying markers
which denote property lines, water pipes and other items not immediately apparent on
the surface of the landscape, marking the ground with signifiers of possession and
ownership.

J.M. Coetzee argues this point in his analysis of Kentridge’s *History of the
Main Complaint*. These red markers whose origins in Kentridge’s work he finds in
*Felix in Exile*, indicate points of trauma on the landscape as well as the body (imaging
the body is a crucial theme in *History of the Main Complaint*).\(^{59}\) Linking the body
with the landscape, the presence of the red marker highlights the points of trauma or
violence upon the land like a cut, scar, or medical imaging device would do. While
Coetzee’s argument is no doubt true, especially considering his interest in the
relationship between these red markers and the body in *History of the Main
Complaint*, not to be overlooked is the relationship between the red markers and the
surveyor. It is the very connection of the body to the surveyor’s tools that enables a
relation between land and trauma to emerge. The cuts of red on the surface of the
landscape represent not just the bodies buried beneath the surface, but traumas upon
the nation as well.

Red pylons emerge several times throughout the film, as characters die
providing an evocative representation of a sense of falling into the landscape and
becoming lost. In the final images of the film, Nandi’s body becomes covered in
newspaper and sinks into the landscape (fig. 3). The space of violence and terror is
marked and preserved not through monuments, but rather through the property

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\(^{59}\) J.M. Coetzee, “History of the Main Compliant,” in *William Kentridge* (1999), 84.
markers and techniques of ownership that have further plunged the terrain into crisis. In this way they preserve history through a trace that eventually dissipates, to sink as the demarcations fade and the progress of industry transforms and hides the violence of the original landscape.

The red marker is put into place through the use of visually regulated tools as Kentridge’s drawings are kept in place through the use of the photographic. The red marker leads us back to the theodolite used in surveying ordinances. In *Felix in Exile* the color of these surveying markers provides a trace reference to something that has passed. The similarity between the red marker (representing a trauma that fades from memory) and Kentridge’s animation is revealed through the process of the erasures that leave a ghostly trace of the physical presence upon the landscape and upon the page as the narrative progresses. The erasures become scars when viewed in tandem with the red cuts, the memories aren’t as present as they fade but still bear traces upon the body of the land, reminders upon the surface of what is held beneath it.

Kentridge executed a series of drawings done around the same time as *Felix* under the title of *Colonial Landscapes* (1995-6, figs. 9-11) that employ the use of red as markers of ownership quite explicitly. Kentridge used colonial era etchings as source material for this series of drawings and are rendered in Kentridge’s traditional charcoal media. *Colonial Landscapes* take traditionally picturesque imagery as their referent: a waterfall, the rocky banks of a river, and a stream flowing through the South African veld. Drawn as appropriations of a 19th century text on the exploration of the continent, Kentridge superimposes over the landscape the red pylons we are familiar with from *Felix*, staking out the land. Kentridge inscribes the history and political development of the landscape onto these 19th century images. These stakes are tied to each other, connected with red lines shooting across the landscape; their
imagery suggests measuring tape or poles used in colonial mapping expeditions.

These mapping expeditions as argued earlier, reference the politics of ownership, control and regulation of the discourse of landscape. Other drawings within the *Colonial Landscapes* series are superimposed with dotted crosses and ovals over the landscape, mimicking telescopes and other sights, referencing again the same regulating techniques that the theodolite serves in *Felix* upon this landscape, drawing further connections between the body (both visually and physically) and the landscape. These optical devices becomes a scarring tool upon the land, regulating with violence, yet at the same time it allows a documentation of history, revealing the scars and ecological traumas suffered both by the landscape and by those bodies held within it. Scarring and cuts while damaging, become the points in which buried narratives emerge, their traces hold a comparative history that moves through several phases of South Africa’s history linking them. While this large national history takes its form in the film, the cut creates small pauses in the film, giving the viewer time to take in the pain and trauma of South Africa without overwhelming.

Blue is the other color featured in the films, creating a pair of colors which link the red surveying markers and the landscape with the blue water. Furthermore, it calls attention to the blue veins and red arteries running through the body, a closely matched pair. If red is the image of trauma in these films, and the image of land and body, blue is its opposite. Instead of trauma it is sorrow, it is the color of water in the film and a marker of energy. The materiality of red cuts is met with the abstraction of blue in the narrative.

Indeed the scars in the landscape as a dominant discourse of Nandi’s experience are visible, but water and subsequently blue are the domains of Felix in the film. Water floods his tap as Nandi’s gaze meets his through the sink in his room,
flooding the room and eventually leaving him alone in a pool of water (fig. 12, 1994). This burst of water comes like an outpouring of emotion, a flood that has its source in the mind but manifests itself on the outside of the individual. We see this theme repeated in Stereoscope (fig. 13, 1999), when Soho becomes overwhelmed; water in deep blue pastel pours out of the pockets of his pinstripe suit. Blue becomes the image of sorrow, reflection and remembering, a companion to the red cuts as traumas on the landscape. However the status of blue is not clear, Kentridge’s desire for flooding does not have a symbolic nature; holding no Jungian resonances, it derives from “a longing for water.” Blue becomes a color of desire, mourning, sadness, passion, and loss: all ways of figuring Felix’s exile in the film.

Roland Barthes’ final text, Camera Lucida, an investigation into the emotive structures of photography, and its relationship to the body, meditates on the blueness of his mother’s eyes when looking at a picture of her as a young girl shortly after her death. This photograph is black and white (like all the photographs Barthes desires) but it is color that seeps through the discourse, creating a somber and mournful tone to both Barthes’ writing and Kentridge’s black and white animations. Intriguingly, eyes as the image of witness open Camera Lucida; Barthes discusses a photograph of Napoleon’s brother as having eyes that witnessed the emperor. Kentridge’s work,

61 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, New York: Hill and Wang (1981), 66. Dianna Knight and Carol Mavor both link the blueness of Barthes mother’s eyes to the blue Daniel Boudinet Polaroid that is located at the beginning of Camera Lucida, uniting the image not reproduced (a picture of Barthes’ mother as a young girl) and the only color image in the text. See Diana Knight, “The Woman Without a Shadow,” in Writing the Image After Roland Barthes, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 138; Carol Mavor, Reading Boyishly (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 137.
62 Barthes, 3.
engaged with the photograph as a trace, is rooted in the black and white materiality of South Africa and all the greyness that emerges from its complexities. Its economic referents and the changing and empty nature of the landscape, leave Kentridge’s films in the darkness of colonialism, mining, and brutality. However, blue seeps through. It pours out of pockets and sinks filling the consciousness of characters that links them across continents. Sorrow and emotion emerge from the body of history.

At the end of Felix it is a blue pool of water where Nandi dies, and eventually where Felix is found standing waist deep in the water (fig. 14, 1994). Blue becomes the color of sorrow and loss, the image of Felix’s inability to repair the red scars, and to prevent Nandi’s death; as red fades the blue emerges. This relationship gets the body to an inside/outside model, showing us the psyche of the individual at the same time that we see the trauma manifest on the body. Blue and red as visceral symbols mirror the landscape as well, moving between the surface and the history buried beneath the surface.

Blue also becomes a vector of energy in Kentridge’s films; Stereoscope also shows this, using blue lines jutting throughout the cityscape indicating connecting points between switchboards, power stations, trams and various other points of energy, these blue lines make it possible to connect the intangible aspects of the world of industry. These vectors also act as the dividing lines in several aspects; as much as it connects it also implies splitting, reminding us of the stereoscopic divide existing in that world (fig. 15, 1999). This movement constructs blue as the cut as Khanna reads it through Derrida suggesting it moves between space and time, across geographies. Like Barthes’ notion of the punctum, this is the photographic condition that pricks or wounds us, blue cuts through the characters and us in the film.\footnote{Barthes, 29.} It connects in
Stereoscope, moving throughout the city, creating a web of activity. This blue also travels sorrowfully; it is the blueness of loss and trauma of Felix in Exile that gets him from his Parisian exile into the South African landscape again, returning home. It takes Felix to be blue in exile to see the red cuts he was blind to in Kentridge’s earlier films.

**HOME/EXILE**

Meditations upon the relationship of home and exile are persistent throughout the artist and his central character’s life. Felix and Kentridge’s engagement with the European intellectual tradition confuse and blur notions of homeland; it is unclear whether their homes reside within the South African context of birth or within European philosophy and art which makes up Kentridge and presumably Felix’s education. Kentridge speaks about his work holding a specific difficulty due to geography and international sanctions; the contemporary and theoretical upheavals within the art community did not touch South Africa, causing Kentridge to feel his work has a certain “quaintness” and difficulty engaging with contemporary trends. As an artist working in the 1970’s Kentridge felt that the conceptual movements occurring in the U.S. and Europe were miles away from the type of language and engagement that was occurring in South Africa and artists’ engagement in anti-apartheid politics. Denied access to the European and American theoretical and conceptual movements of the late 1960’s and 70’s, left Kentridge to seek formal inspiration and methodology from earlier modes of political art, theatre and literature.

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His work at the core of a newly emerging “global” art does not derive from an intense interest in theoretical production, but rather seeks to imbue the work with politics through form. This intellectual exile from Europe juxtaposes with his work on European landscape painting (Kentridge was first introduced to landscape through a catalogue of European landscape painters given to him by his grandfather), firmly leaving his education within a European tradition. Kentridge’s aesthetic position becomes doubled he was at once shut off from Europe and lack of engagement with contemporary art, producing instead what he calls “stone age filmmaking.” Yet his work is firmly situated within a European intellectual tradition of 20th century avant-garde movements (Brecht, Mayakovsky, Italo Svevo, Beckett, etc.) and traditional forms of European culture represent his interest in landscape painting.

Kentridge’s animated counterpart, Felix, reflects this sentiment, residing in Paris, a city dubbed in earlier films, the “The Second Greatest City After Johannesburg,” and also where Kentridge received his theatrical training. Felix resides in a hotel room whose source material comes from Kasimir Malevich’s installations of Suprematist paintings (figs. 16, 1915 and 17, 1994). Malevich’s art interests Kentridge in its utopian spirit for the relationship of art and politics, is installed in the gallery space with several trademark crosses and square drawings stacked in scattered formation upon the wall. Felix’s hotel room looks like Malevich’s installation most notably through the repetition of the image hung across the corner of the room in both spaces. In addition to these resemblances to Malevich, Felix’s room has papers scattered on the floor, has a similar arrangement of frames whose images keep changing throughout the film, and a naked bulb suspended above the bed to illuminate
the scene. Felix’s historical and intellectual referents are at the heart of Europe, residing in Paris and living in a spirit of avant-garde art that appears alien to South Africa. His culture and identity are completely European (Coetzee describes Felix’s nudity as part of a tradition of weltschmertz, a Central European display of heroism), yet we find him at the film’s climax alone and forlorn in a pool of industrial water that is clearly within South Africa.

While Kentridge/Felix has two homes, the stability of their homes is called into question. Kentridge’s sense of Johannesburg is doubled, the white neighborhoods that mimic Europe, and the African Johannesburg. Kentridge’s childhood home holds two senses of place and two distinct forms of cultural identity within it, the African identity of the servants home and that of his parents house that held within it volumes of literature and art anthologies that provided a European referent to Kentridge’s childhood and adolescence. In some ways Felix and Kentridge are already outside of South Africa, impacting the artist’s understanding of home within Felix in Exile.

It is this European identity (Kentridge’s grandparents emigrated from Lithuania and Germany) and a confused sense of African identity that informs Felix in Exile. The doubled identity Kentridge straddles in all of his work is reflected in Felix

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67 Included in these books are several significant texts that became inspirations for part of Kentridge’s work including a copy of The Great Landscape Paintings of the World, containing several Dutch landscape masters especially Miendert Hobbema, whose landscape also factored into Kentridge’s understanding of the discourse in Felix in Exile. Additionally, Kentridge discovered a copy of Goethe’s Faust given to him for his Bar Mitzvah inspiring him to adapt the text, setting it in Africa. This became the play Faustus in Africa! done with the Handspring Puppet Company, long time collaborators with Kentridge. See William Kentridge, “Landscape in a State of Siege,” and “Faustus in Africa!, Director’s Note” in William Kentridge (1999), 109, 128.
and Nandi’s relationship. Felix represents Europe and the white South African residing in his Parisian hotel room, and Nandi represents witness and the eventual victim of the violence that occurs beyond the preserved suburbs of Johannesburg, in the scarred and polluted terrain of industrial South Africa.

The landscape these characters navigate interrogates the relationship of history and memory establishing a narrative of both concepts at once permanent, but flexible enough to allow for differing flows of memory. Kentridge’s history in *Felix in Exile* guards against forgetting the violence suffered by people who were injured or killed during the years of the apartheid regime. He is fearful of a sense of “cultural amnesia,” as Kentridge calls the condition that the TRC might engender, but it also writes a history. This narrative establishes a relation between things that are not represented (the industrial landscape) and the violence that occurred on the landscape, remembering for all the forgotten bodies in the landscape.

This relationship between intellectual exile in South Africa and Felix’s Parisian exile in *Felix in Exile* plays itself out between the artist’s utopian hopes (signified by the strong European cultural traditions of both the artist and of Felix) and the material reality of the landscape. Constantly moving between European

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68 Kentridge at some points in the working process considered working Soho, the emblematic capitalist that features in several of his drawings for projection, but found his presence to unnecessarily complicate the narrative structure.

69 Boris, 33.

70 The idea of the South African intellectual in exile is not uncommon. Poet and novelist Breyten Breytenbach lived in exile from South Africa after marrying a French woman of Vietnamese ancestry, and upon an illegal visit was imprisoned for seven years for violating mixed marriage and sexual relations laws in South Africa. More recently, J.M. Coetzee has been living under what has been dubbed a self imposed exile in Australia after backlash from the ANC over his novel *Disgrace*, which describes a white woman being raped by three black men and then deciding not to prosecute. For a history of the fallout over Coetzee’s *Disgrace* see Rachel Donadio, “Out of South Africa,” *New York Times*, December 16 2007,
abstraction and South African picturesque, blue and red, home and away, culture and nature; Kentridge conceives of figuring a South African identity that is mindful of the losses and traumas of the past (something Felix and the Ecksteins are blind to) and at the same time is able to write a future both utopian and cognizant of the shortcomings that political transition has brought about in South Africa.

CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTICS OF EXILE

Exile becomes a dialectic for Kentridge in the film. It reinforces his utopian desires and fantasies found in European culture. Felix exists in a fantastic realm of pure intellectual pursuits and desires, witnessing the events of South Africa from afar, yet representing a poetic idealism for South Africa. While Nandi’s activities and interventions into Felix’s space materially ground both characters and their struggle within the political conditions of the country. Despite working towards both ends of the spectrum, Felix in Exile does not ever resolve this dialectic, only at the end of the film when we see Felix’s return are we given a potential, the utopian and material text. Kentridge’s film ends much like the present historical circumstances of South Africa are faced with; at a crossroads between a politically engaged criticism that is able to move beyond the class and racial structures of the apartheid regime, yet these issues still persist through the economic and social structures of a neoliberal South Africa.

Felix in Exile remains grounded in the politics of South Africa rendering the ruin and loss of history that the landscape engenders, becoming a metaphor for the

political conditions facing the ANC government in a post-apartheid South Africa. At the same time the film reveals the untenable nature of the traditional and nationalist landscapes of Pierneef and others. Ultimately Felix in Exile attempts to write histories of those lost beneath the dirty mining landscapes and the pure veld of Pierneef, but can only document a loss of those histories, fading from consciousness.

Felix’s dilemma then is to bridge the gap between idealism, utopianism, and being aware of the material and historical concerns of South Africa. Subsequently we see him gazing and witnessing the events, but from a distance. It is not until Nandi’s death that Felix returns to South Africa. This exile represents the divide between theory and praxis, something that Kentridge’s drawings for projection are able to bridge. Felix in Exile, not only opens the chasm of politics and landscape stretching from colonial politics to the post-apartheid government, but also raises issues of the role that aesthetics plays within this paradigm. Exile engages with these material concerns, through the role of memory, culture and utopianism, forcing viewers to read the image as a culturally and politically coded entity. Felix, while distanced, ends up engaging the very material discourses he escapes from. Through his ghostly erasures, Kentridge leaves traces of memory that document loss through physical violence, but they also document erasure and destruction on the landscape. In doing so Kentridge expands South African history beyond apartheid, bringing colonial histories and their impacts to bear upon post-apartheid South Africa, he crafts a history that maps links between a number of issues in his and Felix’s homeland.
 IMAGES

Fig 1. William Kentridge, film still from *Felix in Exile* (1994).

Fig. 2. J.H. Pierneef, *Rustenburgkloof* (1931).
Fig. 3. William Kentridge, film stills from *Felix in Exile* (1994).
Fig. 4. Sam Nzima, Newspaper photograph of Hector Pieterson (1976).

Fig. 5. Francisco Goya, *3rd of May, 1808* (1808).

Fig. 6. Thomas Bowler, *Anti-Convict Demonstration of 4th July 1849* (1850).
Fig. 7. Samuel Daniell, *A Boor’s House* (1805).

Fig. 8. William Kentridge, film still from *Mine* (1991).

Fig. 12. William Kentridge, film still from *Felix in Exile* (1994).
Fig. 13. William Kentridge, film still from *Stereoscope* (1999).

Fig. 14. William Kentridge, film still from *Felix in Exile* (1994).
Fig. 15. William Kentridge, film still from *Stereoscope* (1999).

Figs. 16, 17. l- Installation of Kasimir Malevich at Petrograd exhibition 0-10 (1915).  
CHAPTER 3- TREATING THE BODY OF WITNESS

These images – sonar, X-ray, MRI, CAT-scan – are different from either external images of the body or even anatomical paintings or photographs of dissections revealing a body. They are, by their very nature, internal images. Dissect as deep as you like and you will never find the mimetic reference of the sonar. They are already a metaphor. They are messages from an inside we may apprehend but can never grasp. In their separation from the apparent they come as reports from a distant and unknown place.

By contrast, for example, the photographs sent back to earth from Mars a year ago are quite remarkable for their familiarity. I know Mars; it is outside Colesburg in the Karoo, midway between Johannesburg and Cape Town. I’ve drawn that landscape. The astonishing thing about Mars was how local it was.


Against the backdrop of the TRC, Soho Eckstein, Kentridge’s emblematic capitalist and Johannesburg property developer falls ill in History of the Main Complaint (1996). This film and the film following it in Kentridge’s series 9 Drawings for Projection, WEIGHING... and WANTING (1997-98) render images of Soho, as always, drawn in his trademark pinstripe suit undergoing a number of diagnostic tests. These tests, like the TRC, do not always reveal their outcomes; instead of giving medical causes Soho’s tests lead the viewer to vignettes of memories buried in his past. Throughout these two films, Kentridge uses Soho’s body and the diagnosis performed by doctors and revealed through a number of medical tools, as a way of exploring metaphors for South Africa in the era of post-apartheid.

The attempted diagnosis of Soho’s maladies locates problems that necessitate reparations (both in the body and the nation), and becomes a metaphor to explore the narratives of the TRC’s own historical writing. Kentridge’s use of diagnosis as metaphor also locates problems within the TRC’s process of diagnosis through expert decoding that is at work in radiology departments. Soho’s transition from the early films that express an anxiety between both his personal life and empire to this current
illness becomes a model for the historical shifts that South Africa underwent in the 1990’s moving from the end of apartheid to the TRC’s attempt to provide a history of apartheid abuses.

During South Africa’s transition between the 1994 presidential elections to the TRC Kentridge’s drawings for projection shifted focus. *Felix in Exile* engages with the body and its histories held within the landscape, the body represents loss disappearing within the terrain. This focus changed in Kentridge’s next films: *History of the Main Complaint* and *WEIGHING...and WANTING* (1997-98). Here Kentridge turns towards the individual, diagnosing traumas suffered, much like the TRC. Instead of locating the body within the landscape, these films explore landscapes residing within the body and mind, focusing on personal histories held within the body. Through his typical black and grey renderings with hints of blue and red pastel, Kentridge accomplishes this task by engaging with medical imaging technology: sonograms or cardiograms (the distinction is difficult to discern in these films), MRI, CAT scans, X-rays, and the sound of beating hearts through stethoscopes. These technologies form a new kind of optical vision and witness, forcing the body and the memories held within it to be viewed and decoded through the expert represented by the doctor and the narratives rendered through his diagnosis.

While working on an adaptation of Monteverdi’s *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria* (1641), which tells Homer’s *Odyssey* tale of Ulysses’ homecoming, Kentridge rendered a number of period and contemporary anatomical drawings for his staging.¹ One source for this interest in medical illustrations was taking a five-year-old nephew for an X-ray; watching the technician perform the X-ray, Kentridge reflected:

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On the video screen you could see the moving skeleton of the child, the incredibly fine and fragile collarbones, the thin pylon of the spine and in the jaw not just the child’s teeth, but also the adult teeth still on the bone, waiting to erupt. Vulnerability and the process of growth as continuous acts of transition. This movement between what we see and what we know seems to me the areas in which visual artists, filmmakers operate. When an X-ray is drawn it can not only allude to the otherness of our bodies, but also to other less tangible parts of us.2

Kentridge saw the X-ray as a metaphor of both frailty and flux; the body emerges as weak, held up by a tenuous, growing and developing frame. The X-ray as a space of seeing and unknowing suggests both a way of making art (as Kentridge suggests) but becomes a metaphor for the outcomes of the TRC. The TRC emerged to encourage a transition to establish a history of apartheid and move on in a plural democracy; it aspires to develop a skeleton for South Africa to be able to transition into a stable and plural democratic nation. Despite this ability to see, a sense of unknowing still persists, Soho’s illness is unclear just as seeing does not always produce truth in the TRC. Like the nation state, Soho too has a vulnerable frame. His comfortable existence during the apartheid regime crumbles, he destroys the makers of white Johannesburg industry (when he demolishes the skyline of Johannesburg), his wife takes a lover; his world has become destroyed. After these scenes of personal loss and destruction in the earlier films, Soho becomes ill and is admitted into the hospital. As the doctors labor to diagnose Soho, the sonograms display a number of flashbacks in Soho’s mind. During these flashbacks, Soho witnesses two men beating one another, and later his car strikes a person. CAT scans reveal the location of these memories within his brain, and X-rays place the markers of Soho’s work and life as an industrialist; the rubber stamp and the typewriter mark and erase these traumas within Soho’s torso. At the end of the film Soho is removed from the respirator and awakes

with a sudden jolt, only to reveal behind the hospital curtains that he is seated at his
desk, engaging in business as usual. He faced the damages of the nation and grew to see
their relevance, yet despite facing them Soho’s corporate work suggests that he has grown ignorant to the history of the damages in his everyday life.

The film suggests that the process of transition, like the X-rays of his nephew, is vulnerable. The mechanisms of reparation cannot be as rigid as to narrowly define who gets treatment either medically or through a truth commission. Rather, elasticity is needed to assist the frailty of the body or of the nation; the post-apartheid nation needs to take account of those traumas outside of the TRC mandate and those damages that persist after the mandate expires as part of this system of violence. The vulnerable body is accompanied by the promise of growth and transition; it means that while the body will change it cannot forget what was left behind. Broken bones, no matter when they occurred, are visible in an X-ray. This impossibility of erasing the past that Kentridge’s drawing style insists upon makes it necessary for a South Africa in transition to find ways to document the past and incorporate these narratives in the process of constructing a new state.

Kentridge’s exploration of medical imaging reveals a tension between the body and the expert (doctor or truth commission), performed through an expert decoding narratives of the body that becomes a metaphor for the processes of the TRC diagnosing trauma. This chapter uses emergency room doctor Barry Saunders’ anthropological analysis of reading CAT scans in radiology departments’ slide rooms. His own medical practice brings him close to his field of study, yet he remains distanced (he is not a radiologist). His project engages in how the body is understood through seeing and how the radiologist is trained to see (describing it as a process of
In CT slide rooms a radiologist locates ambiguities and problem spots in the scan, marking these spaces (done with red-X’s as Kentridge does) so that they may be analyzed further to perform a diagnosis. Like Kentridge, Saunders reminds us of the unknowing that is inherent in seeing. Saunders’ work resurrects narrative in the clinical and evidentiary process of diagnosis; it locates how vision and narrative are part of the process of cutting up and seeing the body in a slide room.

The CAT scan emphasizes sight, narrative and testimony, thus becoming a potent metaphor for Kentridge’s work. A similar cutting up exists in the TRC through an emphasis on individuals, seeing and witness, and the production of a narrative through the TRC report. The report’s goals were not only to create a history, but also (like the radiologist’s testimony as pedagogy) to prevent further abuses of racial violence in South Africa. Medical diagnosis and legal diagnosis begin to merge through their use of evidence and sight, yet cannot be sure of what they see.

This chapter also makes use of Lisa Cartwright’s analysis of X-rays in which she argues through a Foucauldian approach that medical imaging standardizes the body and homogenizes abstractions. Both Saunders and Cartwright investigate the body’s alienation from its diagnosis, uncovering the ambiguities inherent in these devices representing medical perception and certainty. Using the analysis their work represents for the medical community alongside of Kentridge’s investigation of the “main complaint” in South Africa allows one to see what is left out and ignored in the TRC push for an objective, fixed and definite diagnosis of apartheid’s abuses made, like the doctor, through expert diagnosis.

The expert medical narratives in History of the Main Complaint, whose title suggests a case history of the patient providing symptoms and medical history that

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3 Barry Saunders, CT Suite; The Work of Diagnosis in the Age of Non Invasive Cutting (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 8, 15, 199.
links the TRC to the doctor’s office as the TRC tries to establish case histories of violence during apartheid, reveal the insufficiency in the TRC notion of both victim and perpetrator which operate on a narrowly defined legal basis necessitating an expert to decode them. Instead Kentridge prefers an unstable notion of vision incorporating a vast number of witnesses and narratives into the framework of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, countering the alienating, Christian and narrow framework of the official TRC reports. The historical backdrop of the production of these medical films suggests that Kentridge is engaging with questions surrounding the TRC. Kentridge’s description of apartheid as a “rock” within South African history and his automatic methods of working suggest that this must be important, existing somewhere in his thoughts as he is producing his films. *Ubu Tells the Truth* made a year after *WEIGHING... and WANTING*, explicitly engages with the discourse of the TRC suggesting that it is productive to consider the presence within Kentridge’s *9 Drawings for Projection* as well.

**MENTAL LANDSCAPES**

Kentridge’s landscape films question, “What is South African-ness?” by interrogating notions of the state, its ideologies and heritages. *Felix* is engaged with ideas of South African-ness at a time in history when the nation was reforming itself in the wake of democratic elections. *History of the Main Complaint*, produced during the TRC, brought a new series of questions about apartheid history to the foreground. The TRC, largely concerned with acts of individual violence, turned on an explanation of apartheid engaged through the specific and narrow focus of the individual. This shift between nation and body did not dispense with landscape all together, but rather
internalized it, bringing it into the mind of the pinstripe-suited industrialist Soho Eckstein.

The second film Kentridge produced on medical technology, *WEIGHING... and WANTING*, conveys a process of transition capturing the gravity of the situation and desire. Its title forming a word jumble of sorts (much like the word jumbles that led to the titling of *Felix in Exile*) creates “waiting,” signifying an endurance of the politics of transition. Kentridge has said that the title was derived from a consideration of scales (which appear in the film) the idea of weighing and its result leaving something wanting, encoding both mass and lack.\(^4\) This weighing can be seen as a way of assessing guilt or trauma suffered, and wanting signifies the lack one feels after this process has been endured. Wanting suggests that something is still missing, again becoming suggestive of the processes of the TRC.

Both films explore the process of historicization in post-apartheid South Africa through CAT scans, X-rays, EKG, sonograms and various other diagnostic tools. This medical technology, juxtaposed with references to the geological metaphors also at work in *Mine* (1991) where Kentridge and Soho engage with history and labor tensions buried beneath the surface. In *Mine* Soho’s empire is linked with the extraction of minerals that provided much of the actual wealth that Johannesburg was founded upon, interrogates Soho’s relationship between memory, industry and nature. In two stills from *WEIGHING...and WANTING* (fig. 1, 1997-98), Kentridge draws a series of MRI scan slices of Soho’s brain, Soho is laying on a gurney still dressed in his pinstripe suit being slid into the tunnel of the MRI machine. These stills, two cross-sections from the MRI, feature different content within the brain. In the right

image is a murky image of what we come to understand as a typical rendering of the brain—grey, smudges, blurs and curved lines denote the space inside the skull. The brain is drawn fairly realistically; Kentridge copied them from his wife’s (a rheumatologist at Johannesburg General Hospital) medical textbooks and journals.\(^5\) Despite this effort towards rendering the MRI scan realistically, the picture appears as a grey abstraction, revealing the difficulty in understanding images of the brain and the information stored there.

The image on the left of the scan has an easily decipherable content; the slice of a section of the skull containing the nose and ocular space of the skull has a similar landscape to the ones in *Felix in Exile*. The viewer sees similar rows of trees demarcating the road’s boundaries to those present in Miendert Hobbema’s *The Alley at Middelharnis* (fig. 2, 1669) one of the great European landscapes contained in a large volume Kentridge had as a child.\(^6\) Kentridge’s typical inversion of landscape occurs, instead of leading us to green landscapes of well tilled and maintained fields and a small rustic village of huts, a metal structure rises up next to two sheds, suggesting either grain elevators or perhaps a gravel quarry. These buildings appear to be situated next to a river or stream that pours dark water forth to the edge of the scan’s frame. Furthermore, the grey pooling of polluted water in the centre takes the place of the ditches on either side of the road in Hobbema’s famed landscape, but with a post-industrial update.

\(^5\) Here Kentridge seems to represent his process of *fortuna* (Kentridge’s term for outcomes of chance within his work), insisting that these images were not sought out, but rather discovered randomly as they were lying around the house that adjoins Kentridge’s studio. See Kentridge, “The Body Drawn and Quartered,” in *William Kentridge* (1999), 140.

Susan Sontag’s analysis of cancer in “Illness and its Metaphors” (which already suggests like Kentridge’s use of medical technology that illness and the body is given over to metaphorical discussion, lending itself well to a reading of the TRC) suggests that the disease is a “pathology of space,” making the body a spatial domain.\textsuperscript{7} It seems that Soho’s mind has been overtaken with landscape images, considering the images of industry and construction that occur on the peripheries of the city, perhaps seeing their attachment to the empire that he clutches onto in Johannesburg. These landscapes and the violence that occurred in the spaces of South Africa are embedded in Soho’s body, but it is important to remember that the body is mapped spatially in these films, and it too is treated with traumas buried inside it using these visual devices to map the body and the authority of the doctor to read these maps decoding the pathologies provided.

While the landscape references are rich in \textit{WEIGHING… and WANTING}, the earth is also referenced in geological aspects, linking the film’s concepts with industry previously interrogated in \textit{Mine} (Soho at the end of the film rests his head on a rock, and several brain scans mirror segments taken from minerals). One scan (fig. 3, 1997-98) provides the viewer with a cross section of the body rendered from the shoulders to the top of the head. The brain is shown along with the skeletal features of the body. Seven brilliant red lines shoot out through the brain, marking cross-sections of the brain that mirror cross-sections of a boulder that proceed it within the film.\textsuperscript{8} The red markers in \textit{Felix} that indicate trauma and demarcate property denoting the history


\textsuperscript{8} Barry Saunders points out that there is a strong methodological connection between sectional representation in geology and biology. Both discourses use sectional imaging to provide a more realistic representation that ultimately distorts the image through the use of cutting, slicing, and invasive technologies. See Saunders, 40-44.
buried beneath it extends as a metaphor to WEIGHING...and WANTING. Instead of representing property markers and the loss of bodies beneath the landscape, in these films the red markers indicate points of trauma upon the body; as J.M. Coetzee argues in his analysis of *History of the Main Complaint.*

Coetzee’s essay, a descriptive reading of Kentridge’s film, becomes most useful in this reading of the red markers. Coetzee’s transition allows one to link the landscape and the body together, and in doing so further develops a relationship between psychic trauma revealed in the flashbacks (experienced in drives into South Africa’s countryside) and physical traumas rendered in the diagnostic equipment.

In Saunders’ analysis of the functions of CAT Scan (CT) technology, the red marker seen in *History of the Main Complaint* appears in the form of a wax pencil in the CT reading room in a hospital’s radiology department. It takes on an important role as he explains: “It is used in spine studies (CT and MRI) to number vertebrae. In addition to level, size, and density, the wax pencil marks suspicious areas, findings to be discussed with the attending, lesions to be recalled at the time of dictation.”

Saunders later argues that the wax pencil denotes areas of suspicion, places where an expert needs to be contacted for further interpretation. Thus the marker not only denotes a relationship between trauma and the body, it performs an act of reading and interpretation, much as the TRC by locating specific individual histories where testimony is necessary. The reading of the CAT scan and its marking, calls attention to specific areas, it standardizes the body (numbering vertebrae), and denotes spaces in which the expert must be called upon to explain or speak about. The marker

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10 Saunders, 76.

11 Ibid.
becomes a narrative process leaving traces of interpretation upon the body, denoting the significance of territories, and making spaces that define who gets to speak about the body. The red markers on Soho’s X-rays denote traumas located on his body that demands the expert’s interpretation. These red X’s in Kentridge’s films become places of trauma, places where the doctor’s attention should be orientated, but they are also unsure, the viewer does not see their source or origin. In Kentridge’s films there isn’t a clear link between the traumas in Soho’s body and their causes, leaving the viewer with a sense of uncertainty about their causes and what is at stake inside his body.

In Kentridge’s drawing of the CT or MRI scan the spinal cord descends from the brain carrying its memories and red cross-sectioned traumas down to the body forming a tunnel that mimics the mining shaft of Soho’s cafetière in Mine (fig. 4, 1991). The shaft in Mine burrows from Soho’s bed that doubles as an office, down towards the mines buried deep below the surface. Instead of leading from Soho’s world to the subterranean mines, the spine connects the memories contained in the mind to the body that sensed and felt them, linking the internal to the scars on the body’s surface. At the base of the neck, the image contains a dark line extending across the body with sooty smudges beneath it obfuscating the spinal cord. This deep black line suggests the form of a horizon line, placing the viewer within the realm of a bodily landscape. Kentridge’s image of the bodily landscape develops into something alien and unknown to the viewer, despite its visceral status being so linked to our own bodies and to the bodies we see, reminding us of the difficulty each individual has in explaining or understanding the processes going on inside of them.

Driving is Soho’s primary method of encountering the landscape of South Africa in History of the Main Complaint. In three key driving sequences the car becomes a link between landscape (exterior) and the mental traumas of Soho
This model of interior/exterior makes the car like the body, the protected interior of the car separate from the exterior. The accident is like the X-ray, a random chance that destroys the separation of outside from inside. This deathly space of the car as an experience in post-modern culture is felt in the post-structuralist cultural analysis of Jean Baudrillard. In his analysis of the place of the car in French culture, Baudrillard remarks that the car’s imagined space is death because of the potential for an accident (which happens in *History of the Main Complaint*, derived from Kentridge’s own experience as a child), something also suggested by the X-ray which is used to diagnose and treat in the event of a car crash. However the car moves through time, a discourse of velocity, while the X-ray stops time, it makes an image. This overlap between velocity and fixed time in the X-ray creates a tension in the image in *History of the Main Complaint*, it is the narrative uncovered by the fixed image that opens up to a world of velocity fixed in the car. Yet this overlapping of the deathly space of the car and the photograph seems to echo the violence found in both these discourses as Soho experiences the diagnostic tests and the memories they suggest. Baudrillard continues by arguing that this potential for death is always imagined and reside in the mind, which is frozen in medical technology. These deathly concerns are found in the brain and mapped as traumas upon the body in Kentridge’s films.

*History of the Main Complaint* opens with Soho situated in the hospital hooked up to an oxygen mask pumping air into his body. The manifolds of the compression system moving up and down as the sounds of the respirator are heard.

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clearly on the soundtrack (the raising and lowering of the respirator begins to function in a similar fashion to the cafetière that bores through the earth in *Mine*, uncovering several images of African history on its way to link Soho to the mines that he controls; each uncovers histories buried beneath the surface).

After this establishing shot, Kentridge renders three doctors dressed in pinstripe suits (identical to Soho’s) surround Soho. They use stethoscopes to probe the interior of his body, and this probing reveals office equipment (these tools appear in previous films) inside Soho’s body; the dated office equipment resonates with the antiquated medical technology, giving the film a mid-20th century mise-en-scène. During the medical examination, the viewer is taken on three driving sequences.

In the first sequence, Soho drives out of Johannesburg transitioning onto a country road. The film then cuts back and forth between driving and medical treatment. The use of driving plays a universalizing role in the film. In her analysis of travels (moving through space), art historian Jill Bennett pays close attention to the car ride that Soho takes, reminding us he is “at the wheel,” navigating through both time (to suggest an interaction with the past) and space, moving through the landscape of South Africa. The use of the vehicle references both the picturesque and rural spaces that the car moves to from the city and the divisions between public and private. The car is a place that can be secured, armed with an alarm, yet it is ruptured when Soho strikes a man running across the road, creating a break in Soho’s insular world. In South Africa the car can also become a place of fear and crime due to the large number of carjackings that occur annually in South Africa; it is a place where

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15 Ibid.
the threat of violation is high. Bennett argues that while the universality of Soho’s character isn’t cinematically clear (the time, linearity, and possessor of the memories are difficult to be ascribed to one individual), the viewer is sutured to Soho through the car and its journey through the past.16 The struggles Soho faces both past (the trauma’s he’s witnessed) and present (the threat of crime being a central fear amongst all but in particular white South Africans) make up a series of issues facing middle class white culture (especially in the cities), suggesting that the questions Soho struggles with are both particular (located in the individual) and universal (confronting large groups in South Africa).

The car scenes make Soho a more universal figure, as does the medical imaging. Bennett argues that the medical imaging devices also open the images of the film across time and space.17 While these images show different events that occur throughout the past, and it seems as though they only belong to Soho (his body is the one being examined), it is through doctors huddled around his bed dressed in pinstripe suits that we surmise a sense of universality. The characters become a set of archetypes for upper middle class culture, and the images themselves remove personal subjectivity in fixing the subject through pathology. This universal and specific narrative placed in South Africa creates a dichotomy that suggests a way of widening and opening up of apartheid traumas not only at the individual level but to a wider social corpus, thereby incorporating a social reading of the root causes of apartheid, rather than diagnosing its guilt through the individual alone, while at the same time containing these individual narratives.

16 Bennett, 74.

17 Ibid., 73.
As the car moves through the nation, it probes South African identity and imagery, just as the medical images probe the psyche and memory of white upper class South Africans, which must come to confront not only the individual crimes (which the TRC did address). Yet the narrative this process of diagnosis engenders does not address the structures that enabled apartheid to persist. It is not just Soho on life support, but this universalizing reading of History of the Main Complaint makes it possible to read South Africa as attached to the respirator as well, its pulse being monitored, needing to address a main complaint that falls outside of an emphasis on the individual that the TRC addresses. It seems of course that apartheid might be the main complaint, but it is difficult to ascertain; for Soho it may be the transition to a new political condition and its concerns about security. Therefore the number of ambiguities of what the main complaint might be, suggests a difficult diagnosis, one that a simple pathology made from the X-rays or other diagnostic tools may miss.

The second driving sequence features Soho driving down a long road with poles on either side, seemingly referencing Hobbema’s rows of trees (fig. 2), but now they are fully man-made lighting poles along the highway. This is the most traumatic driving sequence in the film; Soho passes two men kicking and beating a third, as Kentridge marks points of trauma upon his body with red crosses. We see Soho’s eyes through the rear view mirror, as well as a sonogram or cardiogram screen. A montage of the assault upon the victim is juxtaposed with an X-ray or CAT scan of Soho’s skull bearing red crosses upon it. The film cuts back to Soho’s drive as his car strikes a figure running in front of it, prompting the shattering of the scene’s images through the car’s windscreen. These scenes derive from experiences in Kentridge’s own childhood witnessing both a man being beaten and being the passenger in a car.

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that struck and killed another person.\textsuperscript{19} Soho awakens in his hospital bed, as the shattered fragments are repaired into images of industry, and in a final scene the curtains that partition the hospital bed open, revealing Soho back at a desk, back at work.

\textbf{ALIEN BODIES/ALIEN NATIONS

Kentridge states the body is something alien, difficult to comprehend and decode in the epigraph to this chapter. In doing so he suggests the alienation of understanding the physical processes that occur inside of one’s body. While an individual seems to own their insides, their functions and uses are difficult to understand.\textsuperscript{20} In this process of decoding, often done through the expert gaze of the doctor, the subjectivity of the body gets lost and pushed away from the subject to be claimed in the medical/legal official diagnosis. Conversely, Kentridge sees something as alien as Mars to appear familiar, it is the landscape of the Karoo (a semi-arid region of central south Africa) Kentridge and other South Africans have traversed thousands of times. That which is seen as alien (especially in science fiction and other fantastical discourses that seem to resonate with animated cartoons) is more familiar


\textsuperscript{20} Kentridge writes: “These images- sonar, X-ray, MRI, CAT-scan- are different from either external images of the body or even anatomical paintings or photographs of dissections revealing a body. They are, by their very nature, internal images. Dissect as deep as you like and you will never find the mimetic reference of the sonar. They are already a metaphor. They are messages from an inside we may apprehend but can never grasp. In their separation from the apparent they come as reports from a distant and unknown place.” see Kentridge, “The Body Drawn and Quartered,” in \textit{William Kentridge} (1999), 140.
to the South African experience. Subsequently, that which appears the most familiar becomes alien and distant planets and images brought back from space telescopes appear as immediately understandable.

This alien strangeness of the body makes the body difficult to decipher and comprehend. Kentridge argues that the body has already moved from the physical to a metaphor, which further suggests its utility as a metaphorical process for the TRC. *History of the Main Complaint* certainly reflects this concept of a foreign body, difficult to understand for itself, both in terms of the alien landscape of Mars but also in terms of what exists inside of it decoding the physical experience of that body. Arguing that the body is something distant, Kentridge locates it as more alien than Mars. Inside the body lurks memories and traumas that are unexposed or not understood between the individual’s mind and the body that experienced them. The processes of the body and the traumas it suffers are often difficult to place into a knowing narrative. In two stills from *History of the Main Complaint* comprised of scans of Soho’s skull (fig. 5, 1996) several red X’s are placed on the skull, marking points of injury or trauma. These markers reappear upon the body of the man whose assault Soho witnessed. The red X’s as Saunders’ reading of the functions of the CT suite remind us, indicate a psychological wound that needs to be decoded or taken apart by the team of doctors residing around Soho’s bed, whose corporate marker of the pinstripe suits suggests interchangability (fig. 6, 1996).

The use of the X-ray is not a new one in art history, Robert Rauschenberg’s *Booster* (fig. 7, 1967), employs a full body X-ray of the artist fragmented into small sections, with a red grid laid over it. The body is broken up and subjected to a regulation through the grid, which marks and denotes parts of the body useful to the doctor. Yet in *Booster* the image functions with discord, the bricolage of images such
as the chair in the top right of the work does not prescribe or diagnose, but leads the viewer on a system of associations between images. Rauschenberg’s X-ray creates a number of associations outside of imaging the body. His work, already suggestive of erasure, here is engaged in print culture (where Kentridge first started work) and his imagery also seems fascinated with space and the space race. This transition of the near and the far (the interior of the body and the galaxy) makes a shift that reminds us of the closeness and distant space of these two metaphors that become inverted in Kentridge’s work. The X-ray also appears in Andy Warhol’s work, Fredric Jameson describing his silk-screens as having a “glacèd X-ray elegance.”

Warhol’s death and disaster paintings distance us from the horror of the scene; it makes the deathly trace of both the X-ray and the scene represented appear glamorous. It reminds us precisely of what Jameson terms a “waning of affect,” meaning slowly seeps out of the work in favor of style. Its ever present image of violence and death in contemporary culture recalls Kentridge’s discussions of apathy and reproducible media amongst white culture in South Africa during the state of emergency, yet Warhol’s reproducibility and lack of affect seems miles from Kentridge’s time consuming approach. Despite these examples of X-rays in visual culture, it is the metaphors suggested by these technologies that remain unexamined in Warhol or Rauschenberg’s work that are taken up by Kentridge’s investigation of the TRC.

The X-ray has become a symbol of accuracy and cohesion; the X-ray was developed to represent concrete proof of a fracture, so much so that doctors stopped


22 Ibid., 10.

using physical examinations to perform diagnosis. The development of the X-ray provides a quickly reproducible and purportedly accurate way of imaging and understanding the body. The desire for truth, located within the patient’s body and interpreted by a medical professional, can be found in the TRC’s mandate to locate only one story or experience most frequently arising out of physical traumas, constructing only a few narratives in which the traumas are situated. In fact the X-ray is itself a legal document, as physician and historian Barron H. Lerner reminds us the emergence of radiography as an autonomous discourse of medicine arose partially because of the need for interpreting the X-ray in malpractice suits.

Legal uses for the X-ray point to its use as a metaphor in the TRC but the history of the X-ray itself seems to point to several places of overlap with animation and cinema suggests its applicability to Kentridge’s work too. Cartwright’s Foucauldian approach to the X-ray mentions that Auguste Lumière, famous for developing modern cinema, spent much of his life working on developing technology for the treatment of cancer and tuberculosis, as did Muybridge’s motion studies, which can find their place in the optical tools of Kentridge and even his animations, which capture each stage of movement on a single sheet of paper. Additionally, these medical studies become entertainment devices. Edison’s film of Coney Island elephant Topsy being electrocuted was meant as a study of electrocution but became

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25 Lerner, 392.

incredibly popular film displaying the technological power developed to kill. Both
the documentation of violence on film (especially electrocution used as a mode of
torture) and the image of the elephant recall imagery Kentridge has rendered of both
the filming of police violence (discussed at length in Ch. 1) and the image of Africa in
the elephant (similar to Kentridge’s treatment of Africa through rhinoceroses and
other animals). Further still images of X-ray goggles suggesting the potential to break
down divides of public and private, the X-ray vision of the superhero and the
popularity of the X-ray in the cartoon to denote the effects of the cartoons on the body
of the animal or character indicate the cinematic popularity of the X-ray. The
animation process that Kentridge undertakes seems to be tied strongly to the X-ray
itself.

Cartwright’s reading of the X-ray provides a metaphor that can be extended
further into an analysis of expert structures and the TRC. She focuses on the
fascination over the X-ray in popular culture and in particular its status as an image of
mortality. In two passages describing this process, Cartwright renders the X-ray as an
image of brutality and violence, stripping the system bare and leaving only a black
and white image as a remnant. Cartwright argues: “Rather, light becomes a brutal
force that physically penetrates its object, stripping away its concealing surface to lay
its structure bare,” and later “the X ray signifies the ultimate violation of the
boundaries that define the subjectivity and identity, exposing the private interior to the

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27 Cartwright, 17-18.

28 The black and white metaphor extends into Kentridge’s works with the Handspring
Puppet Company where Kentridge began to produce black shadow puppets projected
during the performance made out of torn paper. Kentridge also produced larger works
including Shadow Procession, composed of forms made out of torn paper. These
projects mirror an interest in the metaphors of black and white resonating with
Cartwright’s reading of the X-ray.
gaze of medicine and the public at large.” The X-ray forces its reading into stark narratives without any ambiguity, Cartwright’s language of brutality resonating with the violence that the TRC attempts to contextualize. The X-ray forces the body open aggressively and without consent to perform a reading which we neither have access to the vocabulary, nor consent to it being performed, taking the personal, private and subjective, stripping it bare for all to see. While these formal methods invest the X-ray metaphorically as a system of violence and brutality, it still becomes (like the other devices here) a useful tool in medical treatment, saving a number of lives. Kentridge’s wife is a doctor at a central Johannesburg hospital, and her medical textbooks are a source material for several of the drawings in this image, yet the metaphors and process the readings do suggest encode a violent and deathly history that mobilizes for a productive reading of the TRC occurring as a backdrop while Kentridge made *History of the Main Complaint*.

Kentridge also sees medical imaging as having a certain sense of violence, figuring the synthesis between nature and the medical image: “The naturalistic rendering of certain oblique slices through the head become distorted, grotesque, evocations of a head – they are used, fragmented in the violent *petit mal* towards the end of the film.” These medical images’ metaphorical links to South Africa are encoded with violence. Instead of the photograph, which touches or pricks us, these images slice, probe, invade; they engage with the language of force. Saunders remarks that CT slices hold the potential of *punctum*, the discovery of something

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29 Cartwright, 113, 121.


buried inside the body, an undiscovered lesion can prickle both the radiologist and the patient.\textsuperscript{32} The medical image represents the same task as the TRC, mapping a history of pain and trauma onto the body, but often without rehabilitating or the consent of the victim.

The use of the X-ray and CAT scan become ambiguous in Kentridge’s films. Cartwright’s arguments about the brutal truths of the X-ray are met with the force of the CAT scan at the end of Kentridge’s film and Saunders’ documentation of the ambiguities of the CAT scan. Fusing the image of violence and uncertainty in these medical devices represents a diagram of diagnosis that encodes violence and one of uncertainty that seems to also be at play in South Africa to move from a language of violence to one of uncertainty, full of breakdowns and irregularities despite the legal format to provide clarity and stability. The X-ray and CAT scan as a set of diagnostic tools also find a similar perspective to the shifts in optical tools that Jonathan Crary discusses in \textit{Techniques of the Observer}, the shift from two dimensional perspective to the purportedly more accurate stereoscope as a three-dimensional model of the stereoscope had a highly variable effect whose image created a “disjunction between experience and its cause.”\textsuperscript{33} Once again a model of alienation and uncertainty emerges, as a system is imposed, like the CAT scan and the TRC emerge the clarity of apartheid as a singular “main complaint” and a diagnosis of the X-ray through brutality becomes confused in a number of finer questions. This perceptual world of truth and a pursuit of it seem to usher in more ambiguities in finding the “main complaint.” In Kentridge’s investigation these moments of ambiguity in a system that desires clarity and accuracy in establishing a history uncover images of trauma whose

\textsuperscript{32} Saunders, 36.

origins are unclear. Through this uncertainty Kentridge raises questions of what or who has been elided from the TRC suggesting a more expansive and careful investigation of apartheid histories than the scope set out by the commission may be necessary.

In *History of the Main Complaint*, Kentridge represents a scene of diagnosis that uncovers such ambiguities. Here, the doctor locates office equipment lying beneath the skin’s surface by probing inside Soho’s body. Through an X-ray (presumably as only the skeleton is visible) the viewer sees the doctor’s stethoscope snake through the spinal cord, the next doctor’s plunges through the breast and ribcage to find the heart, as Soho’s faint breath is barely heard above the sound track. These stethoscope snouts bore through the body like a mine’s drill leaving metal discs inside Soho’s body that resemble a pacemaker (as they lodge themselves near the heart). The doctors’ probing reveals a paper punch and telephone that transmit sonic impulses through the stethoscope’s hose (sound is how the stethoscope works). The paper punch and telephone are both symbols of Soho’s capitalist work; their origin lies in Kentridge’s memories of his grandfather’s law office. These tools become active in the earlier films as Soho engages with his empire in both the Johannesburg skyline and the mining slurries around the city. In Michael Godby’s analysis of the film he argues that these tools not only assert the economic power of Soho’s empire, but they also symbolize “the power to absorb or deny the violence on which it is based.”

In *History of the Main Complaint*, these tools become ways of marking traumas inside the body which lay dormant leaving Soho unaware of the damage they

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are causing until it becomes necessary for a doctor to diagnose, revealing what resides within the flesh, rooting out the cause of the “main complaint.”

The trauma experienced requires the expert gaze of a doctor to decode the body; the doctor must diagnose and explain what is present in the image. The doctor’s authority and knowledge takes the images of the body and turns them into a diagnosis. The doctor reads the image and places it into a narrative that will be understood by the individual suffering from the illness. This process of experiencing and decoding by a medical expert sets up a relationship between expert and witness, which in many ways functions similarly to the structure of the TRC in South Africa. The TRC relies on a notion of testimony before an expert panel, which is often translated by this panel of experts into an official report for the national government. This process works like a case history or diagnostic test presented to the doctor in order to make a diagnosis distilling all of these facts into finding a main complaint and a course of treatment. Saunders remarks that the CT’s “expert” discourse often makes the patient feel “handicapped,” suggesting that if these red markers are the psychological trauma, the expert and normalizing discourses of the TRC further alienate Soho from confronting his own role in the traumas.35

Derived from “expert” looking, the gaze of the committee members adjudicating amnesty performs a diagnosis of both physical and psychic traumas suffered during apartheid violence, as the gaze of the doctor reads and decodes the image making a pathology and diagnosis for the medical staff and, ultimately, the patient. In her Foucauldian analysis Cartwright develops a convincing case that the body is segmented and dissected in medicine’s quest for objective truth, left for an expert to make sense of the abstractions that persist. Cartwright’s focus on the

35 Saunders, 27.
microscope alongside of the X-ray becomes particularly interesting for reading Kentridge’s project. Here she develops an increasing divorce between a conceptualization of the body and its sensory functions. This divide between the body and the subject’s understanding of it becomes a way to also understand the divide between Soho’s memories and the way they become mapped upon the various diagnostic tools in *History of the Main Complaint*.

Within Cartwright’s analysis the body is understood through institutional techniques and technological tools (such as the microscope).\(^{36}\) The utilization of the microscope slices or dissects the body (utilized in the cross-sections of Soho’s body and the lines slicing the brain into zones in Fig. 3) allowing the individual controlling the microscope to both distance himself from the body and remove corporeality from the body examined, the shape of a person leaves only a cellular image as a trace.\(^ {37}\) The microscope was designed to remove the subjectivity of the viewer; in the development of its accuracy an emphasis was placed on calibrating the object to the eye to produce a standardized set of results. This meant adjusting the microscope so that no matter the imperfections or variances in the viewer’s eye, a universal result could be obtained when looking at test slides. This universalized sight, acting as objective and perfected, recalls a similar practice in the filmed monocular discourse of the TRC through the conditioning and selection of those who would testify, and what qualifies as one necessitating amnesty, where the narrative was defined such that each

\(^{36}\) Cartwright, 82.

\(^{37}\) Ibid, 83.
case of testimony came to comprise a bit of the narrative defined in the Commission’s approach.\footnote{Cartwright, 84-85. In Jacqueline Rose’s On Not Being Able to Sleep, Rose discusses an investigation of an Indian woman who applied for amnesty in the TRC’s on the ground of apathy, arguing that she did not do enough to prevent the injustices of the apartheid. The TRC committee denied this application because it did not meet the threshold of gross violations of human rights. This judgment of what qualifies as guilt or innocence is precisely how an expert committee is able to control narratives of culpability in the amnesty applications. See Jacqueline Rose, On not Being Able to Sleep (London: Vintage, 2004).}

This selective narrative is made clear in the TRC; they defined very specifically who would get to testify and apply for amnesty, limiting “gross violations” to specific acts defined as “killing, torture, abduction, and severe ill treatment.”\footnote{Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, vol. 1, (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998), 64-65.} This adjudication ignores any systemic forms of mistreatment and abuse that may have stemmed from government legislation or economic hardships that apartheid industry may have created. The TRC were left with an enormous interpretive task of what actions actually consisted as gross violations of human rights, and who would be able to testify in front of the panel. Subsequently a narrative structure edited for effect, representation, and to incorporate those most famous and serious violations emerges from the desire to create as clear a picture as possible. Like the microscope, the TRC seeks to normalize and universalize the narrative of apartheid violence. What was filmed and transmitted to the nation projected a notion of guilt and victim that had well-defined and outlined parameters, rejecting claims for amnesty and victim testimony that fell outside of it as aberrant. The ultimate goal of these visual technologies (whose development leads to remote viewing, surveillance and reconnaissance technologies) is to gain visual authority, knowledge and power
over the subject examined. This activity is precisely what happens in naming and controlling both in the TRC (defining what constituted human rights violations) and as Saunders reminds us (drawing a close link to testimony) within radiological departments in the hospital as well.

While Kentridge’s work does not feature the microscope as an optical tool (other medical tools used to magnify images inside the body are represented), the same principles represented by the microscope as a metaphor for the TRC can be applied to his work. Through the red markers upon Soho’s X-rays, and within the sonogram images of the two attackers assaulting a third man, the viewer witnesses along with Soho on his countryside drive. These medical tools, not immediately perceptible to those being examined, produce images that locate a specific knowledge of the body understood through demarcating precise points of narrative and traumatic discourse. Furthermore, the relationships of these markers produce a sense of continuity between the two worlds (the attack and Soho’s illness), suggesting that the trauma suffered of the attack victim is also the source of Soho’s traumas in his X-rays and other scans. This marking of the body, borne out of expert medical knowledge, enables stable and universal narratives to be constructed out of the plethora of stories and experiences of the TRC.

Soho’s X-rays in History of the Main Complaint, the viewer sees the protagonist’s torso and the bottom of his ribcage (fig. 8, 1996); yet where his pelvis should be, an antiquated typewriter obfuscates the view. Kentridge further muddles the clarity of the medical image. In Additionally, there are two red crosses, one at the bottom of the ribcage and one on the right hand side of the typewriter. This

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41 Saunders, 34.
confluence of images brings out traumas that can be pinpointed and identified. Kentridge’s animations suggest that there is much more subtlety to memory and history than the precision marks imply. In this X-ray the image is blurred. The doctor cannot discern whether or not a trauma has been incurred upon the pelvis, because the bone structure is hidden.

The typewriter suggests a relationship between the body, the work Soho performs and the trauma experienced that is unclear. It symbolizes Soho’s corporate work and alludes to the report that a radiologist would make to the doctors, through typing and dictation. Radiology reports involve a vast amount of interpretation, contextualization, and analysis; the image isn’t as clear as the thing seen as there is some blurring involved in the process. The typewriter as an image of industry conjures up after-images between Soho’s economic control over Johannesburg and violence, as it marks points on the X-ray and suggests a link between grief and work.

Subsequently, Kentridge’s films suggest a degree of indeterminacy that undercuts the certainty of medical imaging technology and the data it transmits to the doctors. It reveals the instability of radiology (despite its veneer of scientific accuracy). Saunders writes:

> The radiological gaze is not always confident: it is expectant, searching, somewhat anxious, reassured by friends (the normal, the nameable), alert to confusions between findings and artifacts. Though films on the viewbox are thoroughly reified as specimen objects, now and again something ‘catches the eye’ of the radiologist.

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42 The use of office tools are present in several Soho/Felix films; earlier projects such as Mine use a series of ticker tape and adding machines spewing forth ribbons of paper surrounding Soho’s desk. In Society, Obesity and Growing Old, Soho uses a paper punch that metamorphoses into his cat to pull a lever that destroys Johannesburg’s skyscrapers.

43 Saunders, 80.

44 Ibid., 90-1.
What Saunders exposes about the radiological gaze, is precisely what Kentridge engages in within each of his projects: the impossibility of objective vision, of providing a complete and knowable diagnosis of giving a whole “history of the main complaint.” Throughout the narrative, Soho’s role in the trauma is difficult to diagnose; it is unclear whether he is victim or perpetrator. Soho witnesses the attack while driving through the countryside (we witness alongside him through a montage of Soho’s eyes in the rear-view mirror, and a sonogram-like image of the attack itself) and later Soho’s car strikes another individual. While these two images are violent, the narrative is difficult to decode. Is Soho participating in the attacks or is he a witness, and if he is a witness, what degree of guilt can we assign to him? Or even further, what degree of guilt or remorse does Soho find inside himself?

Soho striking another individual with a car raises further questions about the ability to quickly or clearly diagnose a situation. The car strike is unclear as accident or intention, its relationship to the previous attack and its relationship with race. This ambiguity in the political motivations and outcomes of these moments of violence within History of the Main Complaint suggests difficulty in assessing what comes under the rubric of what the TRC committee describes within their mandate as:

establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights… [and] facilitating the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective.45

The TRC mandate is narrowly defined, unable to capture the full narrative of traumas (both mental and physical), or guilt within apartheid South Africa. Investigating the frames, in which the inquiries were made, reveals a structure in which blind spots, and underlying systemic problems become ignored. The TRC established as part of the

45 TRC Report, vol. 1, 55.
interim constitution of South Africa through the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 attempted to transition from a lengthy past of political and social violence to a stable and racially diverse nation.\textsuperscript{46} The commission’s goals were to establish a complete picture, granting amnesty, attempting to locate victims, and to prepare a report to the president of South Africa on gross violations of human rights committed since the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 to the release of ANC prisoners and the democratic transition of 1994.\textsuperscript{47}

Chairing the former Archbishop of the Anglican Church of South Africa, Desmond Tutu, the report is heavily tinged with religious metaphor including the invocation of god’s desires in the forward to the report, and insisting upon the need for a Christian understanding of reconciliation as a key concept.\textsuperscript{48} This Christian tilt is met with a particular African flavor as \textit{ubuntu}, which holds a sense of community, and an emphasis on restorative justice is invoked several times throughout the TRC report.\textsuperscript{49} The TRC insists upon all parties coming together and making claims for their wrongdoing. Subsequently both members of the white elite and members of the ANC and other black radical groups were asked to make applications to the commission for amnesty. However, this creates a series of blind spots, insisting that all should ask for

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{TRC Report}, vol. 1, 48. Earlier in the report the TRC establishes the importance of all parties applying for amnesty and being allowed to testify, distinguishing amnesty from “victor’s justice” which is characterized by the Nuremberg Trials. “Victor’s justice” became impossible because of the difficulty in gaining the support of the largely white South African Defense Force. Furthermore the costs associated with trials for all perpetrators of human rights violations, and the elevated burden of proof required with a trial would make it nearly impossible for trials to work in South Africa. See \textit{TRC Report}, vol. 1, 5.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{TRC Report}, vol. 1, 55-57.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 22-23, 108.

\textsuperscript{49} The Commission outlines the role of \textit{ubuntu} as a part of the TRC in Vol. 1, 125-131.
and want to grant forgiveness, which is a difficult task to require of anyone, especially those who do not follow Christian theological beliefs. Secondly, it means that all crimes committed during the mandate are made equal, drawing no distinction between anti-government actions and the government’s response. This equivocation of violence is troubling, but also reveals the extent to which the TRC became a narrative, read through a religious prism, making it difficult to establish the clear picture the Commission so desires.

This narrative structure of the TRC becomes metonymic; parts of the apartheid experience stand in for the whole of South Africa, like Kentridge’s X-ray. This history moves away from the certainty and “factualness” of the courtroom, the transcript, or the photograph/medical image into a narrative structure despite the narrative frame being there from the beginning. Soho’s actions within History of the Main Complaint allude to this issue; certainly Soho suffered a trauma. This is why he is at the hospital, but it is unclear if he is a perpetrator and suffering from this or not. Subsequently, it is not as easy to construct a complete picture without entering into a narrative, editing and acknowledging the soft spots and difficulties when attempting to restore justice to South Africa, or even in locating a stable definition of justice. This understanding of narrative structures reveals the impossibility of the TRC goals, but also suggests that a more flexible discourse or cultural practice needs to emerge in order to encompass a larger range of socio-political issues outside of the mandate the Commission set up. Kentridge’s films perform a very crucial task; they represent and

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50 Hayden White’s The Content of the Form, provides useful insight into the relations between narrative structure and history. White argues that at the moment history is written it uses a series of literary tropes based around narrative. This is borne out in Kentridge’s work, through a mediation and subsequent translation of the body, and through the commission itself, where one carefully selected victim is meant to stand in for several within the Truth Commission’s narrative. See Hayden White, The Content of the Form (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987).
reveal the difficulties in understanding the transition away from apartheid. History of the Main Complaint raises a discussion about industry and about personal guilt for those who were not incorporated the TRC proceedings.

Kentridge’s work illuminates a sense of the TRC’s incompleteness; it is certain that Soho’s traumas fall beyond the scope of the Commission. There is nothing being done to acknowledge the economic and systemic flaws that apartheid created and which there is still little being done to remedy in South Africa.\(^{51}\) It begs the question of whether business should feel culpable for the disparities that the system of capitalism created in South Africa and across the African continent. The systemic problems between race and class create as much damage to the community as do direct manifestations of violence.

History of the Main Complaint suggests that class and political foundations for Soho’s trauma could be components of his ailment; they are the instruments of Soho’s injuries buried deep inside of him. The image of Soho’s hipbones being obfuscated by the typewriter (fig. 9) reveals traumatic markers on both the typewriter and body. This confluence of the body and labor suggests that industry is the cause of the trauma, yet Soho is a victim. The rubber stamp, also frequently used as a signifier of industry by Kentridge obfuscates the truth that the TRC wishes to establish, erasing from view the facts it traditionally certifies as true. The stamp bears with it connotations of the formulaic structure of bureaucracy, suggesting an incompleteness or formal way of dealing with applications for amnesty, a rubber-stamping of the truth. In the director’s note to Ubu and the Truth Commission, Kentridge has a great deal of concern over the

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\(^{51}\) The ANC has pursued a policy of economic neo-liberalism since 1994 under the GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) plan which has done little to alleviate the poverty of South Africa. Michael MacDonald’s “The Political Economy of Identity Politics,” South Atlantic Quarterly 103, no.4 (2004): 629-656, provides a summary of the effects of the GEAR plan.
amnesty process, arguing that the truth of the amnesty proceedings make the amnesty more unbelievable.\textsuperscript{52} Kentridge contends that there is a fair amount of formality to a system that is unable to deal with the real core of the crimes committed. Similarly, the repetition of the windshield wipers, used to clarify vision when one is driving in rainy weather, actually erase and blur the understanding of the scene suggesting that truth is not as crystalline as the commissions suggest.

Within \textit{History of the Main Complaint}, Soho undergoes the same difficulties confronting these issues as those who gave testimony in the TRC, he is feeling ill and only wakes up after he relives all the trauma of the apartheid era. He needs to bear witness to work through the traumas he confronts; yet there is no system for him to engage in these experiences.\textsuperscript{53} This dichotomy suggests the insufficiency of the TRC to reinstitute the nation state; it can diagnose the problem but it doesn’t repair. Like the medicine of the doctors, \textit{History of the Main Complaint} suggests that pure science is unable to restore; the TRC’s expertise is unable to locate a precise point of reparation. Despite these claims to objectivity, they cannot move beyond diagnosis. It takes Soho’s own subconscious exploration to come to terms with his trauma, and it takes the invocation of cultural rather than “objective” frameworks in the Christian/\textit{ubuntu} structure for Tutu and the rest of the commission to move beyond the trauma.

Like Kentridge’s work, the TRC has an afterimage despite their attempts at trying to place apartheid in the past as a means of moving South Africa forward.


\textsuperscript{53} Jessica Dubow and Ruth Rosengarten more fully consider memory politics and Freudian dimensions of Soho’s experience in their “History as the Main Complaint: William Kentridge and the Making of Post-Apartheid South Africa,” \textit{Art History} 27, no. 4 (2004): 671-690.
Apartheid cannot be erased, forgotten or moved beyond, and the economic and systemic scars are still keenly experienced today. Kentridge’s method as a metaphor for memory works similar to Freud’s analysis of the mystic writing pad, a toy made of a celluloid sheet and a wax slate that can be erased after writing on it as a metaphor for the mind. Freud argues that memory, like the pad, functions on two levels: one the infinitely erasable surface that receives external stimuli, and a deeper level like the wax base that saves all the memories but is only able to be revealed in certain lights. Similarly, Kentridge’s drawings with their imperfect erasures show the memory processes at work in the TRC; thoughts come out unclear, faint and uneven. Kentridge’s animation comments upon the desire for objective narratives in the TRC that pure history could not, showing the difficulty in reproducing memory fully.

Soho’s body reveals the difficulty in the processes of memory; the images and markers that point to the scenes he witnessed reside internally, and yet are difficult to recall. The afterimages suggest that the issues apartheid raises will still be with the nation far after the end of the TRC. The transitory bridge and the forgiveness it desires seem both difficult and ineffectual. Just because one makes an appeal for forgiveness and it is granted doesn’t mean that the problems of state violence are so easily solved. History of the Main Complaint suggests a wider system that needs to be interrogated, to understand the differences in histories and narratives, and to see the plurality of positions within South Africa rather than fixing with a medical precision to narrate the history of apartheid.

WEAK AND HUNGRY BODIES

Kentridge’s story of his 5-year-old nephew being X-rayed brings to the surface a weak and frail system in motion, becoming an apt metaphor for the TRC. The child’s teeth had a second set “waiting to erupt,” suggests a new system beneath the surface. Despite this newness, the bones are vulnerable and frail. This weak body can be nourished, and repaired depending on the emphasis that the nation plays in unveiling its roles, structures, and systems. Both Kentridge and South African poet Antjie Krog focus on the importance of food and eating in South African culture and the emphasis the nation puts on attitudes of diagnosing and repairing.

Kentridge seems to be using History of the Main Complaint as a vehicle to move beyond the traumas and culpability of the individual, to the problems and effects that the TRC poses for various social groups within South Africa. This chapter already addressed the role industry takes in South Africa, falling outside the TRC’s scope, yet directly responsible for a plethora of problems during and after the fall of apartheid. In a brief sequence in the film Kentridge manages to move between images of industry (the stamp erasing traumas, and the typewriter placing them upon Soho’s skeleton) and domestic spaces. After these images of industry erase and redocument (which could allude to the police process of destroying evidence and then providing a reproduction for the Commission to get amnesty), Kentridge renders a montage of images in a sonogram or cardiogram monitor. In this sequence wires cross and then

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55 Again while Klein’s definition touches on the instability of reparation, by suggesting it can never be complete and scars are left behind, the underlying model of her terms seems difficult to bring to a notion of discussing political transition in the nation-state. See Melanie Klein, Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works (New York: The Free Press, 1975).
lead into a roast or a ham, then a cut to wires wrapping around a foot, and finally around a scrotum (fig. 9, 1996). Soho is then seen lying in hospital without breathing apparatus to assist him as his chest rises and falls with a great degree of pronouncement. The juxtaposition of these two sequences suggests that the images are in Soho’s psyche (referencing Eisenstein’s ideas of montage by attraction, where an image is reinforced by a cutting to another unrelated image), and that the trauma to the body and meat is the trauma that Soho suffers from.⁵⁶ Soho then drives into the countryside; this movement between his inner psyche and the image of the countryside suggests that these images move from the individual outward. They are encountered by velocity, through a motor vehicle.⁵⁷

This journey from interior to exterior, from personal to cultural shifts in the film changes from Soho’s X-rays to the sonogram images of family dinner juxtaposed with torture. This transition comes to represent a complex series of attitudes about torture. The viewer is faced with two things that structure South African life, an image of the Sunday dinner and images that were broadcast on the South African Broadcasting Corporation, in their Sunday television program about the events of the TRC. Two rituals of the nation become superimposed, pastoral family life represented in the Sunday dinner alongside the violence carries several layers of resonance that go back beyond the structure of the TRC into the lived practices of violence under the apartheid regime. During the 1980’s when it was apparent that the apartheid regime was crumbling Kentridge reflected on white guilt during a lecture in Grahamstown, South Africa:


⁵⁷ Bennett, 75.
White guilt is much maligned. Its most dominant feature is its rarity. It exists in small drops taken at infrequent intervals and its effects do not last for long. But the claim goes further than this. People far closer to the violence and misery still return out of the tear smoke and an hour later are cooking their dinners or watching the A-Team on television.  

Once again Kentridge emerges with a medical metaphor, using inert medicine as a symbol of the ineffectiveness of guilt, and suggesting the populace is all too happy to retreat to their homes and eat, forgetting the political conditions existing outside their doors. Subsequently, a sharp divide between public and private emerges; the Sunday roast and the violence of their homeland have not been tied together with wire yet. Kentridge’s sequence engages with these incongruities in violence and domesticity as synthesized in everyday life; violence is ignored, covered up and suppressed so that the difficulties of associating the barbeque with torture (or the subsequent reduction of a body to a piece of meat) and murder no longer become apparent. This sequence sutures them together, as does the testimony of people such as Dirk Coetzee (who admitted to barbequing along side of burning victims); the body is so debased in the brutality of apartheid it becomes meat, no longer a conscious being.

The inability to connect the wires or threads between these histories, through the desire to forget, or perhaps the hegemony to be apathetic, clashes with the material realities of the violence of South Africa, creating a blank space between memory and history. This is what the history of the main complaint is within Kentridge’s film; a history of a patient falling ill to symptoms he is failing to confront. Soho does this in earlier films; so consumed with his own internal world and the crumbling domestic space that he ignores the politics of the world around him. In Johannesburg the Second Greatest City After Paris, Soho is indifferent towards a growing mass of people (whose relation either to racial protests or organized labor is unclear), instead

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sitting at a massive table gorging himself on a feast, Soho acknowledges the masses only by hurling food at them, continuing his gluttonous consumption (fig. 10, 1989). Later in *Society, Obesity and Growing Old*, Soho is so consumed in his own world and his sorrow over his wife taking a lover that he proceeds to destroy all of the buildings in downtown Johannesburg (fig. 11, 1991). By the time Soho’s narrative progresses to *History of the Main Complaint* he can no longer ignore the symptoms and becomes ill. It is only when he experiences and acknowledges these traumas is he able to move beyond them and regain consciousness. This process becomes a more universal trope, the interchangeably of Soho and his doctors, all bearing the pinstripe suit as a previously seen as a symbol of business suggests that perhaps white culture needs to undergo the process of diagnosis and treatment as Soho experienced. Illness seems to suffer from a failure to diagnosis or apply treatment to the country.

In Krog’s narrative, food also becomes a process of restoration. Invoking Adorno, Krog argues that she wants no poetry to come from what she has witnessed in the TRCs stating: “May my hand fall off if I write this.” Despite this claim, Krog by the end of her account is able to write poetry. Her loss of words leads her to a reparative gesture: “When in despair, I bake a cake,” she states.59 She pours over the details of making a fruitcake; the dried fruits, spices, the velvet texture of its butter and eggs are all outlined, as she proceeds to eat the cake during the Cape summer.60 This ritual becomes a way of addressing the traumas she experienced, while trying to

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59 Krog, 65. Krog’s later text *A Change of Tongue* focuses heavily on the idea of homeland and its relationship to food. An important part of the text is producing boerwors an Afrikaner sausage using salt from specific parts of South Africa. Further still these sausages creating a resonance of home are tied to notions of keeping or selling the family farm (which is tied to both familial heritage as well as tribal histories on the land), where the family makes the sausage annually. See *A Change of Tongue* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2003).

60 Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 65.
confront it in a personal way. In doing so, she addresses the public and political. While the cake or the poetry she produces cannot repair, they address the fact that there can be no complete, pure, or scientific reparation.

Kentridge also addresses this impossibility of reparation; the pure and objective gazes of the television camera, the TRC archive and the doctor’s tools are not sufficient to repair the traumas, nor is it possible for them to. In Benjamin’s metaphor about historical writing, he differentiates between the magician who seeks to cure by laying his hands on the patient, where the surgeon must open the body and engage with the disease by feeling the organs, diagnosing by perception and touch rather than through reproduction. In doing so he “diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body,” which is quite different from the tools doctors engage in Kentridge’s work. It is this level of engagement that Kentridge addresses; it is the antithesis of the CT or the X-ray, which photographs and reproduces to be examined at a distance. Benjamin is interested in the production of history as engaged. For South Africa this means confronting the damages to the nation in a broader and more direct fashion than the trials can account for. Soho’s recovery and reawakening reveals this, confronting his traumas literally head on, engaging with the body, rather than remaining distanced (as the doctor’s diagnosis attempt to do), before any transition or recovery can happen. However, Soho’s traumas never leave him; they will still linger upon him. The objective glances of the doctor and the TRC cannot leave history at the level of discourse and metaphor as a means of dealing with the problem, fixing history as objective, stable and then


62 Benjamin, 233.
attempting to move beyond (which suggests an emphasis on forgetting) the trauma. Kentridge’s animation resists this both as a historical model and a way of dealing with apartheid within South Africa. It produces culture, which preserves a plurality of historical narratives, and reveals the impossibility of forgetting or removing the political event from the narrative of the country.

CONCLUSION: REPAIRING VISION, REPAIRING THE NATION. SOUTH AFRICA’S STEREOSCOPIC FUTURE

After the completion of these two films, Kentridge produced Stereoscope (1999), an investigation on the instability of perception. The medical films suggest that the objective and rational orders of both medicine and the TRC cannot encompass all of the difficulties of the body and transition, it is incumbent on both a culture (whose problems within the apartheid regime frequently fell outside the scope of the TRC whose goal was to repair the nation) and the individual to work through the history of the trauma reflecting on the relations of the past to the present to be able to both be cognizant of the past and to figure out methods of moving forward while remembering.

Stereoscope unveils the pluralities at work in South Africa’s post-apartheid culture. The film deals with Soho’s reorientation into the business world. However the images presented are often split like stereoscopic cards. In one image (fig. 12, 1999) Soho is seated in his office, the left half of the stereoscopic image a cluttered mess with numbers scrawled across the wall, multiple renderings of Soho moving in the room, the familiar pile of office equipment on the desk, and blue lines, indicating vectors of energy shooting through the image. On the right side these lines have faded from erasure, the calculations and activity are replaced by solitude the stamp, tape
machine, and phone remain silent as Soho sits, gazing at his black cat sitting on a
table stationed in front of a couch in his office. This presents two different views
synthesized into one vision, the bustle of industrial life and the solitude and guilt that
Soho must confront.

Crary’s analysis of the stereoscope in the 19th century emphasizes the role of
afterimages; arguing that they present a problem in the disinterested and autonomous
types of vision that are conceived of through the Enlightenment.63 This afterimage
allowed the body to produce sensation without any adherence to an external referent.64
Kentridge’s erasures can be read as afterimages, traces produced in the subjective
memory of the individual drawing further links with Crary’s argument. These
erasures are traces of history, traces that demarcate the interaction between past and
present. Furthermore the superimposition of two views in Stereoscope represents the
device’s main function. Drawing equally from Foucault’s interest in discourse
analysis and Marx and Engels’ concern about the hybridization of the machine and
worker, Crary argues that the stereoscope forces the viewer to perform a type of labor,
arguing that “physical proximity brings binocular vision into play as an operation of
reconciling disparity, of making two distinct views appear as one.”65 In order for the
stereoscopic machine to produce its intended three-dimensional effects, it requires the
viewer to perform labor, superimposing the two images, putting one forward and
allowing the other to recede. Though Kentridge’s stereoscopic images are not able to
produce the three-dimensional effect that a stereoscopic card would, they do represent

63 Crary, 98.
64 Ibid.
65 Crary, 113, 121.
a similar task of performing labor to synthesize past and present concerns in the history of South Africa.

Returning to the image from *Stereoscope*, it represents two bifurcated parts of Soho’s life: public/private, active/static, and consumptive/remorseful, revealing the disparity between moments of white guilt and the everyday practice of Soho as an industrialist. Since *History of the Main Complaint*, the emphasis of these internal meditations are no longer on his personal life, but reflected on the disparity between his business practices and their impacts on culture. The divided structure of Soho’s life must, in a stereoscopic vision, be synthesized into one image. To unify these two visions requires a decision, by the subject to place an emphasis on one image in front of the other. Soho must place an emphasis on his industrial empire, or turn inwards and focus on the impact he has had on South African culture. There is of course another imperative, between present and past, Soho like most South Africans must decide to live in the narrative of apartheid, or to move forward. Choosing between past and present poses a huge risk in staying in the past, and refusing to acknowledge a new political system. In South Africa, the ANC was represented as the party of Mandela and subsequently symbolized the end of apartheid, which creates an ideological obfuscation of the policies that the ANC currently pursues. Here the past conceals the present. Conversely, moving forward driven by an active process of forgetting as Desmond Tutu advocates runs the risk of not acknowledging the deep seeded scars and historical roots of contemporary problems in a desire to move forward.\textsuperscript{66}

Kentridge’s engagement with the stereoscope represents a sublimation of the dialectic of past and present. It is a treatment for the diagnosis that is not sublated in

\textsuperscript{66} Desmond Tutu quoted in Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 42.
History of the Main Complaint, or WEIGHING... and WANTING. Soho must superimpose the two visions of himself on top of each other to produce one history of South Africa. It is working through, as Crary argues a literal labor of synthesizing industry and guilt, victim and offender, past and present. Soho wakes up at the end of History of the Main Complaint only after confronting what he has witnessed/perpetrated in his subconscious. These diagnostic tools do not repair Soho, yet he awakens at the end ready to face the future only after these images of the past integrate with his present circumstance. In that search to synthesize past and present, Stereoscope, represents a narrative approach to history that overcomes an emphasis on either the past or the present; it emphasizes the relationship of both within South Africa’s history and frees the individual to produce these histories. In this way the political culture of South Africa moves beyond mere diagnosis, a history of the main complaint, and begins to repair the damages not only done to the individual, but also focuses on the deep and systemic problems that colonialism and apartheid created within the nation.
IMAGES

Fig. 1. William Kentridge, film still from *WEIGHING...and WANTING* (1997-98).

Fig. 2. Meindert Hobbema, *The Alley at Middelharnis* (1669).

Fig. 3. William Kentridge, film still from *WEIGHING...and WANTING* (1997-98).
Fig. 4. William Kentridge, film still from *Mine* (1991).

Fig. 5. William Kentridge, drawings for *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).
Fig. 6. William Kentridge, film still from *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).

Fig. 7. Robert Rauschenberg, *Booster* (1967).
Fig. 8. William Kentridge, film still from *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).

Fig. 9. William Kentridge, film stills from *History of the Main Complaint* (1996).
Fig. 10. William Kentridge, film still from *Johannesburg, Second Greatest City After Paris* (1989).

Fig. 11. William Kentridge, film stills from *Society Obesity and Growing Old*, (1991).

Fig. 12. William Kentridge, film still from *Stereoscope* (1999).
A robotic puppet with a paper megaphone for a head emerges from a small theatrical tableau inside William Kentridge’s 2005 *Black Box/Chambre Noir* bearing a sandwich board with the phrase *Trauerarbeit* (Freud’s term for grief work) written upon it.¹ Using this Freudian terminology Kentridge specifically invokes a melancholic reading of colonial history and its relationship to the Enlightenment from the outset. Moving from South Africa’s apartheid history, its precursors and legacies, to an adjacent history centered in present-day Namibia (which was under South African control first as a British colony then as a sovereign nation from 1920 to 1990), Kentridge assembles a series of historical fragments revealing the brutality of colonialism that juxtapose the illuminated joy of the Enlightenment (represented through his staging of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* which Kentridge links to *Black Box*, representing the shadowy side to this dyad).

*Black Box* is comprised of five newspaper collaged curtains made of plywood that conceal tracks for each of the puppets (which Kentridge calls “automata”) and a screen upon the back for archival films, photographs and his own animations to be projected, the work is also accompanied by a score containing orchestral music and diatonic sound to supplement the character’s actions. The theatrical space of *Black Box* refers to black box spaces in three ways: to a flight data recorder, black box theatre and the interior space of a camera. Engaging with the metaphorical

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¹ While not explicitly outlined in his work, Kentridge has indicated the importance of Freud as a part of his projects. In a personal interview, the artist replied “I follow the teachings of the two great secular rabbis of the 19th century: Freud and Marx,” while discussing the relationship of Jewishness and exile to his work. Furthermore he has noted the relevance of Freud in highlighting the relationship between his character Felix and his mother’s name Felicia. While these examples aren’t explicit in his work, the presence of trauerarbeit in *Black Box* seems to suggest a sustained interest in Freud. William Kentridge, conversation with author, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 July 2009.
associations of light and shadow, playing and emergency suggested by these devices. Kentridge narrates several historical fragments of the German colonization of South West Africa (now Namibia) in what has been described as the first genocide of the 20th century. In doing so, Kentridge’s historical fragments enable the viewer of the work to link a number of seemingly disparate historical experiences. Kentridge himself has invited the comparisons between colonial violence, eugenic projects and the Holocaust. Furthermore, Black Box allows one to read narratives that connect across temporalities and geographies, linking to apartheid politics and present day xenophobia in South Africa, histories of hunting and colonialism, Enlightenment and violence, photography as witness, and the roles of playing and absurdity as ways of narrating this situation.

This chapter argues that Kentridge’s approach to narrating this history of South West Africa in particular, and the relationship between the Enlightenment and colonialism in a wider context, is melancholic. This melancholia becomes a history writing rather than just a pathology; it is a dialectic of present and past able to maintain a sorrow while its historical force is contextualized in the present. Freud

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3 Kentridge discusses the eugenic links in his lecture “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece” 51. Benjamin Madley’s essay takes up a more detailed account of lessons learned from the colonial experience for the genocidal project in a much larger context in his essay.
reminds us that in melancholia the loss never leaves the subject. Ranjana Khanna argues that this always-present melancholic condition becomes productive for both the colonized subject and psychoanalytic work. Khanna takes the loss at the center of melancholia as a place where the agency of the colonial subject emerges.⁴ Additionally, Julia Kristeva locates a positive creative factor in the melancholic condition seeing melancholia as bound up with imaginative forces; in doing so it becomes a condition of making forming a shield that protects the subject from death but also at the same time can construct jouissance.⁵ These three positions of melancholia suggest the process of melancholia becomes productive history in Kentridge’s investigation of the Herero in South West Africa. Like Freud, Kentridge suggests the persistence of these histories, particularly the violence encoded in the Enlightenment. Yet like Khanna and Kristeva, Kentridge’s historical critique is bound in a dialectic of loss and sorrow that becomes a point of departure for both historical critique as well as a consideration of material concerns in South Africa today while at the same time preserving a sense of joy in the imagery and toy-like figures used in Black Box. The rhinoceros, a central symbolic theme in Black Box, becomes the central symbol that unifies these two melancholic processes. Its ancient status and colonial history roots it in the past, but through Black Box, the rhino travels across geographies and time as a symbol of loss and violence while also performing a number of fantastic scenes in the film. These fantastic scenes allow a sense of wonder


in this narrative of loss that like the rhino’s armor-like skin can protect the viewer from a numbing sense of totality.

Kentridge uses a number of metaphorical devices inside of his black box(es) that link Europe and Africa together showing how these narratives of political violence often localized in Europe and Africa repeat and connect to each other in each continent; in particular this chapter traces the metaphor suggested by three of these devices- the aforementioned rhinoceros, toy and camera. Each of these is bound to the shadow as a metaphor for exploring the relationships between the presumed “dark continent” of Africa and Enlightenment thinking in Europe. The rhinoceros is linked to Africa as a dark continent and an object of curiosity. Kentridge’s toys are frequently made of black paper or using one’s hands mimicking children’s games. In doing so they cast shadows (similar to shadow puppets he has used in his work with Handspring Theatre Company) throughout the work. Finally, the photograph relies on the interplay of shadows to fix meaning on the negative.

Throughout this relationship between light and shadow, melancholia becomes a useful narrative trope. Its incomplete nature dovetails with the working through suggested by Trauerarbeit, to form an approach to this history that, like melancholia, seems to repeat itself. Freud first uses the term Trauerarbeit initially in “Mourning and Melancholia,” where he outlines how the individual negotiates the loss of a cathected object. When loss occurs (Freud argues it is most commonly experienced over death but can also happen over a nation) the subject performs work (Trauerarbeit) to test the loss of that object, in an attempt to free the ego from its libidinal attachment to the object. Freud outlines a neurosis that occurs when the individual is not able to identify exactly what in the lost object has been lost.

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6 Freud, 243-245.
Subsequently, the feelings of mourning are turned towards the ego, and the subject becomes overwhelmed with feelings of worthlessness and self-reproach. The repetition or working over suggest that work towards narration not only tells a story, but also suggests that its narration is never complete, its historical traces linger in a number of different histories.

*Black Box* becomes psychoanalytically bound through its use of *Trauerarbeit*. Kentridge writes a melancholic history through the project, investigating the ruins of Namibian and German history, but also of the world of his childhood. His parents shared with him a love of opera in a time when South Africa was involved heavily in the affairs of the Namibian government (it is his production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* that inspired this project, and it is to his parents that this production of Mozart is dedicated). It is this melancholic connection between culture and politics that makes an unresolved history so important. Melancholia’s demand of the subject to work through seems important as it suggests that these histories reemerge through the process of working through, their place as finalized is undermined. The repetition of genocide is visible not only in its movement from Namibia to Europe under National Socialist control but it returns in a number of places such as Biafra, Rwanda through the violent and racial politics in apartheid. Like Kentridge’s erasures and tears (alongside other metaphors of uncertainty) melancholia helps us to see a wider network of connections and to refuse a simple closure of the past. As his work on South Africa questions the smooth transitions away from apartheid, so too *Black Box*, through its melancholic narrative makes it difficult to accept “never again Auschwitz” as a claim. This melancholia says there is a history that precedes it and one that carries on after it. Furthermore, Kentridge’s work works with a graphic tradition that

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7 Freud, 245-6.
moves between these two locales. His own artistic training came in the form of print media, a space that recalls Albrecht Dürer’s works *Rhinoceros* and *Melancholia*. These thematic issues so central to narrating this history are a part of the formal tradition between Africa and Germany. Again the figure of a melancholic history binds together form and content in *Black Box*.

To decode this history the optical device and toy become central metaphors; they are invoked in the dollhouse-like stage and camera references that the title suggests, but hold fragments in this history of loss that is never fully complete. Like all the other optical devices examined in *(un)Fixing the Eye* the camera in *Black Box* captures fragments and opens up histories buried, forgotten and disconnected allowing for new histories to be written. It is this type of history Kentridge attempts to write. A fragmented history, according to Kentridge, locates the imperfections so as to resist the homogenizing and unitary narratives that Enlightenment master narratives suggest. To write imperfectly, rhetorically and through a damaged narrative avoids both ideologies, but opens history to a series of new and different interpretations. At the core of these histories is one narrative of the Herero people in South West Africa (now Namibia), which allows Kentridge to tell stories that move to Cameroon, Germany, South Africa, wider colonial histories and the core of Enlightenment philosophy (and its outcomes).

German colonial history in South West Africa began with Christian missionaries and traders settling in the territory in 1842, and raising the Prussian flag in 1864. Eventually incursions from native populations and British expansion from

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South Africa led them to ask Bismarck to provide protection in 1884. Reluctant to do so, the German government acquiesced to the settlers’ requests and Bismarck declared the territory under German “protection” on 24 April 1884. As the development of the colony expanded, supreme official Theodor Leuwein pursued a project of impounding and diverting Herero cattle and land to German settlers; these herds of cattle were at the core of the tribal diet and livelihood, exacerbating tensions about land and self-determination. After an outbreak of disease amongst the cattle wiping out close to 90% of the Herero herd (losses were far lower amongst German cattle due to vaccination), a typhoid outbreak amongst Hereros, the construction of railways occupying most of the suitable farmland in Namibia and complaints of mistreatment of tribal women, the Hereros decided to revolt against the Germans. The Herero revolt began in January 1904 when a Herero ambush of settlers and railway workers in Hereroland was executed in an attempt to secure cattle and farmland. In July of that year with Wilhelm II desperate for the rebellion to be crushed, Germany appointed General Lothar Von Trohta to manage the war and he began a ruthless pursuit of the Herero, with complete destruction of the tribe his goal. Von Trotha’s campaign was described in the official report of the German army as:

This bold enterprise shows up in the most brilliant light the ruthless energy of the German command in pursuing their beaten enemy. No pains, no sacrifices were spared in eliminating the last remnants of enemy resistance. Like a wounded beast the enemy was tracked down from one water-hole to the next, until finally he became the victim of

9 Drechsler, 18-19.
10 Ibid., 86-90.
11 Ibid., 98, 134.
12 Bley, 149.
13 Ibid., 159, 164.
his own environment. The arid Omaheke was to complete what the German army had begun: the extermination of the Herero nation.\textsuperscript{14}

The war reached its most crucial battle at Waterburg on 11 August 1904 where Von Trotha and the German army, having concentrated the Herero tribes, encircled them, forcing them into the arid deserts to certain death, capturing survivors and either killing them or interning them into concentration camps.\textsuperscript{15} At the point of armistice, only 16,000 (about 20\% of the original population) remained, due to both the execution policies in war and in concentration camps modeled after those the British used to house Boers after the Second Boer War.\textsuperscript{16}

Historian Benjamin Madley in his essay “From Africa to Auschwitz” argues that a strong claim for complete annihilation of all Hereros existed in German colonial rhetoric. It was termed a race war; POW’s were forced into labor camps and murdered (these were modeled after concentration camps used by the British in the Boer Wars in South Africa).\textsuperscript{17} This interment and exacting execution of Herero and Nama (the other major tribal group in German South West Africa) has led to a number of historians seeing German action against the Hereros as the century’s first genocide. The Herero genocide became a moment of fascination during the Nazi regime; Madley reveals that \textit{Lebensraum} has its origins as a concept in Namibia, eugenic studies were done on Namibian skulls, the annexation of Eastern Europe strongly modeled the Namibian genocide with rhetoric about weakness and an emphasis on

\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Bley 162, from, Department I of the Military History Section of the General Staff, \textit{Die Kampfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika}, vol i. (Berlin: 1906), 207.

\textsuperscript{15} Bley, 162.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 150-51.

\textsuperscript{17} Madley, 400, 442.
forced labor emerging in both. Finally, he argues that several members of the Nazi party had strong personal connections to the Namibian experience, especially Hermann Göring whose father was a colonial administrator and Eugen Fischer who conducted eugenic studies on Herero. Fischer’s work influenced Hitler’s thinking on interracial mixing, and he later ran the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute directing eugenic study where Joseph Mengele, who performed eugenic studies in Auschwitz, began his career.

This difficult history of Namibia and its relationship with Germany emerges in Kentridge’s work through his contemporaneous staging of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* and his production of *Black Box*, which he sees very much as a linked project. In fact, the score used for *The Magic Flute* is Thomas Beecham’s 1937 score performed by the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and discovered by Kentridge in Namibia (fig. 6, 2004-5). *The Magic Flute* is a utopian project and *Black Box* its opposite; it represents the failures of Enlightenment ideas of purity. These two projects exist as a dialectical pair of light and dark that is very much a part of Kentridge’s approach, their histories modify each other; *The Magic Flute*’s purity is ruptured through *Black Box* as the joy of Mozart’s opera becomes a melancholic language to explore the history of Namibia.

Kentridge is mindful of the danger of these perfect utopian sentiments expressed in *The Magic Flute* where the path to knowledge is fixed and predetermined for its young prince Pamino. In a similar manner, Marxist geographer David Harvey locates a history of spatial utopias that starts with Plato’s *Republic* (whose model of

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18 Madley, 432, 437, 440-1, 449.

19 Ibid., 451, 453-55.

20 Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 51.
enlightened leaders and use of shadows concern Kentridge). The goal of these social utopias is to produce stability within a fixed space.²¹ Harvey shows spatial utopias (both imagined such as More’s Utopia and real) as spaces where power is codified; they often produce totalitarian or repressive spaces of commodity culture (such as the shopping mall).²² Harvey sees the colonial process as a preeminent example of a spatial utopia example where free market capitalism is codified through the colonizing nation-state that brings nationalist beliefs racial superiority and “‘civilizing missions” to its project of expanding markets and access to raw materials.²³ What Harvey’s critique of colonialism and spatial utopias reveals is precisely the danger of pure notions of history seen in the brutality of colonial projects such as German colonization of Namibia. This danger, however, is also present in the Enlightenment rhetoric of the prince in The Magic Flute. Kentridge sees the codification and violence in utopian projects that Harvey also localizes in his analysis of spatial utopias, binding the Enlightenment and colonial projects further. It is the invocation of Enlightenment beliefs in the colonial world that concerns Kentridge about utopian narratives; it is these beliefs that produce violent outcomes in both Namibia and Nazi Germany.²⁴

Harvey pursues a model of “spatiotemporal utopianism” to imagine transformation through the material conditions of the present historical condition. In doing so, utopia is always historically embedded and an evolving process that impacts space through the dialectic of time (being both present and past), utopia does not


²² Harvey, 156, 160, 163, 168.

²³ Ibid., 180.

²⁴ Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 47.
become fixed.\textsuperscript{25} Kentridge’s critique is able to imagine this present and past; its contingency is based in time. Connecting these historical fragments in \textit{Black Box} is a process of \textit{Trauerarbeit} locating the specific and fragmented portions of history undermining the purity of Enlightenment utopianism, suturing Africa to Europe’s Enlightenment history, what the artist describes as: “bringing light to what was called the ‘Dark Continent.’”\textsuperscript{26}

The narrative of \textit{The Magic Flute} revolves around the young prince Tamino, who must rescue the heroine Pamina from the evil Sarastro. The story is driven by misinformation as the Queen of the Night has deceived Tamino into seeing Sarastro as evil, so as to convince Tamino to rescue her daughter. As Tamino sets off to rescue Pamina he finds Sarastro is not evil, but rather a high priest of light. Sarastro’s goal through the abduction is in fact to lead Tamino into Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{27} As the opera progresses, several scenes have Tamino standing in the dark waiting to move into the light. At the time of its production (1791) the Enlightenment was at its height; just two years before, as Kentridge reminds the viewer in a lecture about \textit{Black Box}:

Robespierre came to power, and he, like Sarastro, was a Platonic figure, a philosopher king. Robespierre believed that, in order to bring people to knowledge, out into the light, one had to being by chopping off heads. Almost every tyrant since then—from the late eighteenth century to Pol Pot, who was a student at the Sorbonne and studied the

\textsuperscript{25} Harvey, 191-92.

\textsuperscript{26} Kentridge “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 49. While Kentridge is engaging the term “Dark Continent” in a particularly historical reading of 19th century colonial history, it is important to note that the term has a particular currency within Freud’s own work, Khanna engages with Freud’s claim in \textit{A Question of Lay Analysis} that woman’s sexuality was a ‘dark continent’ bringing it in dialogue with Henry Morton Stanley’s use of the term as a metaphor for Africa. The text makes the claim that psychoanalysis emerged as a discipline during the height of colonialism. See her \textit{Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism}.

\textsuperscript{27} Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 45.
history of the Enlightenment and French Marxism—has also described himself as an enlightened despot.28

The Enlightenment becomes a Janus-faced figure; its foundations of reason, logic and scientific inquiry lead very quickly into a discourse of brutality and violence. This fragment connects with the craniometrical studies and concentrational lessons engaged in during both the Herero genocide and Holocaust. The utopian operatic music that Kentridge found as a child is now at the core of entertainment in Nazi Germany, only to be rediscovered in Namibia where a century earlier the skulls of Herero men were taken to further eugenic study. Both light and dark can find threads of this violent narrative of Enlightenment here. While not the focus of this chapter, The Magic Flute’s narratives are at the core of the development of Black Box. Tying these two works together Kentridge states: “Black Box also comes out of The Magic Flute, as I have described. But if The Magic Flute suggests the utopian moment of the Enlightenment, Black Box represents the other end of the spectrum.”29 The Magic Flute’s themes travel to Africa through Kentridge’s restaging of the opera, but also through its shadowy other in Black Box.

THE SITE

Black Box is comprised of thirteen separate acts, beginning with “Black Box Overture.” The viewer is situated in a darkened room with the tableaux having five collaged screens on the side of the box and is left free to explore the mechanical infrastructure, as Kentridge has left the sides of the box open. Frequently this tableau is shown with a similar box constructed for The Magic Flute where the opera’s

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28 Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 47.

29 Ibid., 51.
projections are screened, further inviting the viewer to consider the relationship between the two projects.

“Black Box Overture” begins with a robotic cone wearing a sandwich board upon which *Trauerarbeit* is written. This figure emerges to lead viewers through the thirteen acts in the work. A sound track that contains singing, instrumental music, as well as diactic sound supplements the actions going on in the stage. While no clear narrative emerges throughout the installation, each act presents a fragment that reperforms or documents a different symbolic or historical fact within the history of South West Africa. To reveal these fragments Kentridge employs his trademark animations, found film footage, and the puppets including the *Trauerarbeit* cone, a compass forming a soldier, an egg beater and mesh netted woman, a running man, a shattering skull and two calipers that dance.

After “Black Box Overture,” and its megaphone automaton orients the viewer to this grief work with its board and sorrowful music, the screen “pulls” its curtains open, achieved through animating the projections, and sets us in Berlin for the act “Berlin Opening,” which references life in Germany, Houghton (the district of Johannesburg where Kentridge lives) and finally Windhuk (Windhoek) the capital of Namibia as each screen opens. “Measuring Part I” follows, where a compass with a robotic arm marches forward, its pointing arm mimics both a fascist salute and an army march, each stroke demarcating lines upon a globe. “Running Man,” follows as the running man sprints across the stage. “In diesen heil’gen Hallen,” which can be translated as “within these sacred grounds,” and is named for Sarastro’s second aria in *The Magic Flute*, contains two torn paper puppets, filmed and projected, that metamorphose into mechanical diagrams. They strike an object, mimicking the act of swinging a pickaxe in mining until a figure of an eagle is left, leaving an image of
German nationalism, but also referring to the birds that Sarastro tames with his flute in *The Magic Flute*. “Walfisch Bai” which refers to Walfisch Bay, Namibia follows. In this scene Black Box’s projections pan through encyclopedia texts with overlaid dotted curving arabesques. “The Waterburg,” a scene of found footage of African grassland follows this act, as another of the automata, the Janus-faced eggbeater and mesh doll comes out, bows and retreats again.

“Fairground,” becomes another explicit reference to the toy, the running man reemerges as an armadillo (possessing armored plating like the rhinoceros) and a mantis, along with a globe and various advertisements that are shot at on the discs of a shooting gallery. The decision of the animals used here refers to optical devices; later the armadillo coils, forming the aperture of a camera. Benjamin mentions the mantis in *The Arcades Project*, describing it as an automaton, which matches Kentridge’s term for the puppets used in *Black Box*. Benjamin indicates that the automaton can perform nervous functions when decapitated, making the mantis a mechanical and nervous function rather than one defined by consciousness.\(^{30}\) Kentridge frequently draws both people and animals moving from their recognizable forms to mechanical diagrams, their movement defined by gears, spring and cogs residing inside of these figures. This mechanistic characterization can be located within the gears and cogs of both the puppets being exposed but the mechanisms of the whole black box open to view. The play of light, which is also rendered through technical diagrams showing the ray’s refractions in *Learning the Flute* (his preparatory film for *The Magic Flute*),

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\(^{30}\) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann ed., Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin trans. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002), 696. Kentridge is not specifically referencing Kentridge in *Black Box*, while he is aware of Benjamin’s fragmented structure to the work, he disclosed in a personal interview in 2009 that he had yet to begin reading the work, but intended on doing so. William Kentridge, conversation with author, Johannesburg, South Africa, 3 July 2009.
becomes heightened in “Die Wahrheit,” where Kentridge projects archival photos, presumably from South West Africa, of chained men, wild animals and the landscape. This is followed by a series of shadow puppets where the artist’s hands cast a shadow that forms among other things a rhinoceros, cannon, German helmet (whose own horn atop the helmet resonates with the horn of the animal) and finally a light. This play is a type of game Kentridge describes as “shadowography,” where making the shadows creates a game to make sense of the shapes cast on the wall. Kentridge discusses this game in the context of Plato’s metaphor of the cave, acknowledging the first thing one does is understand that the form is not what you see, but nonetheless we cannot escape the form that the shadow casts on the wall. Additionally and most importantly for Kentridge is the pleasure that one derives from the recognition of this image. He continues: “This awareness of how we construct meaning, and this inescapable need to make sense of shapes, seems to me very central, indeed essential, to what it means to be alive—to live in the world with open eyes.” In doing so Kentridge has created another bind between light and dark in formal terms that matches the metaphors suggested by the Enlightenment and colonialism, but he also suggests a way of narrating these histories. “Shadowography” forces one to make sense to make the forms recognizable out of the dialectic of light and dark.

Ethnographic fragments follow in “Measuring Part II,” which references the crainometric and ethnographic projects of Germany in Namibia through the robotic compass taking measurements of a teakettle and then skulls of both German soldiers and Herero. As these measurements are taken his arm mimicking a fascist salute

31 Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 49.

32 Ibid., 47.

33 Ibid.
inscribes lines upon the image denoting angles at which the facets of the face are measured. Their geometric axis reminds the viewer of the diagrams of the black box as camera and the rays of light fixing meaning through their illumination. Geometry in its purity is shown to be at the core of Enlightenment metaphors such as the camera obscura, yet this geography also becomes fixed in ethnographic reading. The craniometric fragments Kentridge documents are followed by film footage from German filmmaker Robert Schumann’s *Rhinoceros Hunting in German East Africa* (1910-11), which depicts Germans hunting in the bush killing a rhinoceros in “Rhino.” This scene is significant as this particular breed of rhinoceros went extinct during Kentridge’s production of *Black Box*, symbolizing a continuum of violence and loss within the image. “Dance Macabre,” features a paper skull that fragments,

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34 The use of the word axis becomes increasingly resonant not only to these geographies but also the Axis forces whose fascist violence can be seen as the outcome of Enlightenment politics. Kentridge has made the connection in his writings between the enlightened ruler and the benevolent despot who inevitably invokes the name of the Enlightenment in his rule. Adorno has made similar claims. A large portion of the work done in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* to trace the links between the Enlightenment and the rise of National Socialism; arguing that Enlightenment’s relationship to power manifests itself in the dialectic of domination and assimilation. This notion of the Axis and the relationship of to the Enlightenment and colonialism goes beyond *Black Box* in Kentridge’s work, he has also produced a work entitled *What Will Come (has already come)* (2007) which examines the role of popular entertainment and violence in the narratives of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia. See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 138.


36 Kentridge mentions that the xenophobic riots in South Africa make it safer to sleep in the game preserves with the rhinoceroses than in Johannesburg further insisting on the rhinoceroses as a figure to narrate the violence of South Africa. See William Kentridge, “Learning From the Absurd,” (lecture University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California, 15 March 2009) podcast available: [http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/webcast_Kentridge.shtml](http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/webcast_Kentridge.shtml).
connected by pieces of erector set, and comes back together. At the end of the act it is joined in the end by calipers and the remainder of the other automata. This “macabre” again refers to the notion of play (in particular theatrical play), as its origins are a play that performs the slaughter of the Maccabees. Suddenly the deathly skull and its deathly referent unite with the devices that measure the skull. These two items again suggest the possibility of linking not only play, but also the politics of eugenic and genocidal projects between colonial Germany and National Socialism. “Lament from the March of the Priests,” features the bowing woman set in front of a backdrop of a register of names as a night sky appears, and the performance concludes with “Elegy for a Rhino,” as the cone becomes circus leader forcing an animated rhino to perform tricks.

BLACK BOX I: THE PLANE CRASH, REBUILDING RHINOCEROS

Perhaps the most familiar of the three references in Black Box is to the black box flight data recorder. Black box flight data recorder technology is made up of two components: the flight data recorder, which records physical statistics about the plane’s flight, and the cockpit voice recorder that maintains a recording of the individuals in the cockpit. The flight data recorder’s common name is somewhat of a misnomer; it is painted day-glo orange. Originally developed in 1953, the black box is now a commonplace part of commercial travel. Designed to record failure, its technology is so sophisticated that it is constructed to be the most durable and rugged


aspect of the plane so as to outlive a plane crash, imbuing the object with a certain sense of irony.\textsuperscript{39} It only becomes useful in the moment of destruction and in that emergency it outlasts that which it seeks to protect. In his quite brief and provocative analysis of the flight data recorder, essayist Tom Vanderbilt writes: “there is a kind of mystical quality to the black box, this device that, rather than looking ahead in a clairvoyant sense, is able to look back on the past, presenting through its myriad recorded variables a lineage of how history was, and how it might have been.”\textsuperscript{40}

Vanderbilt’s argument about the black box’s utility roots it in looking back, doubling the referent to the black box in Kentridge’s project. Not only does it document a disaster, it is a process of looking back through history and philosophy to build the historical links that explain several political contexts unearthed through the work. For Vanderbilt, the flight data recorder only becomes of use at the moment of failure and emergency, capturing raw data to be used to dissect and produce a narrative of what has happened and ways to improve it for the future. It necessitates retrieving and contextualizing a history to move forward. It is in this aim of capturing of data and transforming it into a recognizable form that the black box links with the camera. They both attempt to provide a transparent witness to the things they represent. In the plane, the black box captures not only a record of the pilot’s discussions in the cockpit, but up to 770 precise readings to understand the functions of a plane.\textsuperscript{41} These pieces of data while different from the camera function like the rays of light that fix themselves upon the photographic film; they are both traces of something that has passed. Of course both the camera and the black box recorder

\textsuperscript{39} Vanderbilt, 70.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 71.
necessitate a narrative to be put in place, to make sense of the historical fragments they capture. This link between both a disaster and reparation becomes a point of production for Kentridge’s work.

The most recent flight data recorders are able to capture an immense amount of scientific measurements, a process that recalls German photography and craniometry for eugenic projects. In several instances within *Black Box* trails of raw data are fed out into charts, while images of measurement, such as rulers and calipers, overlay the image (fig. 7, 2005). These measurements unfurl upon page after page. Despite Kentridge’s renderings of long antiquated script in register format, one can see its updated and digital format in the flight data recorder in printouts of numbers that themselves are subjected to the complicated geometries represented in the film. It is these measurements that are crafted to form a narrative of flight safety and how to re-engineer the plane so as to make it safer, or to construct a history out of the data that supposedly proves racial superiority.

*Black Box*, like a plane crash, is comprised of several fragments differing in form, technique and origin, necessitating reassembly into the black box. These pieces come from several creators, geographies and points in history to form one constructed whole. Having the parts laid out forces one to make narrative and historical decisions about how they should be arranged, given prominence, omitted and so on. This is the process of history writing. Kentridge demonstrates this fragmentary form becoming whole in the formation of a torn paper rhinoceros used to model for the film’s conclusion. He shifts around a series of torn pieces of paper to make the rhinoceros take preposterous and absurd shapes and actions (fig. 8). Kentridge reminds us that we know the image isn’t true, but in its fanciful nature we take delight in it, stating: “This pleasure arises from the fact that, though you know that two hands are making the
shape, you cannot stop seeing it as a bird”\textsuperscript{42}. Making sense of this rhino not only becomes a practice rooted in play, but also becomes a metaphor for writing history. In the film the rhinoceros appears on the stage. The \textit{Trauerarbeit} megaphone acting as a ringleader of sorts, directs the rhino, pivoting as he leads the rhino through his tricks. The rhino is able to stand up on its hind legs and dance, and eventually take a running start and do a back flip over the cone (fig. 5). These two scenes of assembly produce a history but also trace the ways in which those histories are outlined. It takes the raw data from an abstract witness and recreates it into a narrative. Each bit of paper has been reassembled to make a form that creates a narrative about the rhinoceros. We recognize the form as that of a rhinoceros and the moving of its parts in Kentridge’s torn paper example suggest, however fantastical (including standing on its hind legs, and a beach ball), what the animal is capable of.

The rhino is a central theme in Kentridge’s work including appearances in the “Drawings for Projection,” as a puppet in \textit{Woyzeck on the Highveld}, and in later versions of \textit{The Magic Flute} the rhinoceros footage from \textit{Black Box} takes the place of several of the birds in the opera. In \textit{Black Box} in particular Kentridge considers a number of specific cultural referents to the rhino in European culture: Ionesco’s \textit{The Rhinoceros}, at the core of post-War European theatre, and Dürer’s drawing of a rhinoceros (fig. 4, 1515). Dürer’s image is of particular interest, having been rendered with amour-like plates and a spear like form emerging from its shoulder blades. When discussing Dürer’s image Kentridge notes that the drawing of this rhinoceros is inaccurate not as an indictment of the artists’ drawing skills, but rather because the boat carrying the rhinoceros to the courts of Europe sank on the way and Dürer was

\textsuperscript{42} William Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 47.
forced to render the animal based on accounts of the sailors transporting it. The rhino journeys through Dürer’s work, and the actual travels of Clara (an Indian rhinoceros that toured Europe from 1741-58), making this animal an object that moves between Africa and Europe. Furthermore, the colonial brutality the Hereros suffered is bound to the rhino not only through the hunt in Namibia, but through forced labor; the whips used for control of the Herero were made of rhinoceros skin.

Clara’s life becomes a potent place of exploring the imagined and real relationships between Europe and Africa in the age of Enlightenment and colonialism, being the first living rhinoceros imported to Europe in 1741. She had already been trained in India to walk indoors and be able to eat from dinner plates. This taming becomes an image that sends us forward towards the taming and controlling of Africa. Jan Wandelaar renders an image of Clara in an anatomical textbook; this etching Human Skeleton with a Young Rhinoceros (fig. 9, 1747) places the grazing gigantic animal naturally rendered behind an etching of a skeleton in the foreground. This link between the exotic other in the rhinoceros and the image of the skull reappears in Black Box, as the rhino is domesticated so too is the skull brought into a scientific control attempting to assert the superiority of the German people. The two images become tied together as symbols of this relationship that are taken up again within Kentridge’s Black Box. This discourse of controlling and regulating the skull as the

43 William Kentridge, “Learning From the Absurd.”

44 Glynis Ridley’s, Clara’s Grand Tour (New York: Grove Press, 2004) offers a detailed account of Clara’s journeys throughout Europe and the history of visual imagery produced of her as the first living rhino to be seen by the courts of Europe.

45 Bridgman, 31.

46 Ridley, 1.

47 Ridley provides a detailed account of the history of this image and its place within marketing tactics for both publisher and Clara’s owner Douwemout Van Der Meer.
animal in the bush was tamed and brought to Europe as an image of the fantastic other stretches all the way to the Holocaust, as the Herero skulls were used in Nazi studies of racial superiority. One can think of the core of so many historical linkages (colonialism, the Holocaust, apartheid, revolutionary struggles in both Namibia and South Africa as well as Cold War violence and its afterlives in South Africa) as a way of being rooted in this past, excavating the disaster of the Herero.

These rhinos brought from the imaginary peripheries of European knowledge as a source of amazement and wonderment becomes twined with the skull within *Black Box*. As the skull travels back to Europe from the suppression of the Herero revolt and the subsequent genocide, the rhinoceros becomes a part of European culture. It sends a communication back to Europe integrating itself into Europe’s core. This transmission of narratives performs the photographic fixing that the black box and its camera metaphors allude to, becoming a stable image of Africa within the European consciousness. The relationship of Europe and Africa represented through the rhinoceros is poignantly reflected in the images of the animal being hunted in the found film footage of a shot rhino dying a violent death in the bush, and at the end of the film when the rhinoceros is able to perform a series of tricks like a pet or a circus performer, suggesting that the African other has been brought under the rational control of Europe.48 To turn this metaphor back towards Namibia and in a larger context the entire continent of Africa, the disaster this controlling rationalism has

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48 Kentridge has also taken footage from *Black Box* and used it in later performances of *The Magic Flute*, especially in South Africa. Replacing the birds that Tamino captures in the opera with the Rhinoceros suggesting further that the enlightened subject can through the use of rationalism and light be able to bring the wild and other under his control. See William Kentridge, *Flute*, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen ed. (Parkwood: David Krut Publishing, 2007), 35.
brought reveals a core of violence and brutality within its image of fantasy and pleasure.

Within European painting the rhino rejoins with the cabinet. Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s *Rhinoceros* (fig. 3, 1749), a portrait of Clara rendered in brown in an idyllic landscape was stored in a cupboard when acquired by Christian Ludwig the II.49 The image’s storage suggests a space similar to *Black Box*; images of the first rhino to travel to Europe were stored in a cabinet or dollhouse suggests that the rhino is an image of play or fantasy, kept away like a special toy or treasure. Both Kentridge’s *Black Box* and the storage of Oudry’s *Rhinoceros* recall Walter Benjamin’s recollections of his childhood hiding several trinkets for play away in special drawers inside his bedroom cabinets.50 Clara’s meaning has been reconstructed, much like the young Benjamin remaking pieces of foil into hoards of silver. The rhinoceros within the cabinet merges the theme with Kentridge’s critical use of the toy as a historical tool. Its image as a child-like and toy-like figure reminds us of the toys that lead us through the installation and entrench a melancholic historical approach. In Fredric Jameson’s “The Politics of Utopia,” he tries to locate the potential for utopianism as universal employment.51 Citing examples of garage workshops, Lego kits and the miniature, Jameson argues that these represent non-alienated labor.52 They imagine and remake the world Kentridge’s toys (like Jameson’s examples they are scientific

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52 Ibid., 40-41.
and building kits) also remake the world as narrators of Black Box’s history of violence.

In a larger historical context, the rhinoceros’ ancient and almost dinosaur-like qualities suggest it (like the “dark continent” view of Africa) is without culture. At the same time its armor-like skin suggests it is an image of violence and militaristic expansion; performing both ends of the tragic history of German South West Africa. It is this animal that appears in many drawings and puppets throughout Kentridge’s career, and here appears as both drawing and in appropriated film footage that leads the viewer between these optical dualisms in the shadow and its image; between the structure of the box, and its contents inside. The rhinoceros is something that is at once alien to Europe and at its core; the rhinoceros represents the wild animal of Africa and Asia, something of mystique and curiosity.

Kentridge’s project, represented through the rhinoceros, traces the pure light of Mozart’s operatic play to a shadowy partner on the African continent that is tragically reinvigorated in Europe. The movement between Africa and Europe, traced through the interplay of light and the rhinoceros as a metaphoric figure, constructs a more tightly knitted relationship; the rhinoceros is no longer just an image of Africa but of the narratives that Europe constructs of Africa. It renders the brutality brought upon the animal, at the same time documenting the joy the image can bring. The continuity Kentridge constructs seems at the core of the historical models traced in Alain Badiou’s The Century, which outlines, “how the [20th] century thought its own thought.”53 Badiou contextualizes the century as tragedy:

Well before the war of 1914, there is Africa, delivered over to what some rare witnesses and artists will call an upright conquering savagery.

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I myself gaze with dread upon that Larousse dictionary of 1932, passed on to me by my parents, wherein, under the heading – viewed as particularly unproblematic – of the hierarchy of the races, the skull of the black man is positioned between that of the gorilla, on the one hand, and European on the other.

After two or three centuries of the deportation of human meat for the purpose of slavery, conquest managed to turn Africa into the horrific obverse of European, capitalist, democratic splendour.\textsuperscript{54}

The quotation immediately resonates with Kentridge’s work; the Herero genocide he narrates is the first genocide of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Genocide is one of the constituting conditions that define the 20\textsuperscript{th} century experience both in terms of the Holocaust and African genocides. We are reminded not only of the histories of these events Kentridge evokes, but of the dictionary pages upon which Kentridge creates his shadow figures from \textit{Portage} (fig. 10, 2000). Overlaid with the jagged images of protesters and laborers toiling under their heavy loads are the logical and ordered world of several entries from a French encyclopedia.

These images are also played out in the projections of \textit{Black Box} as the craniometrical measurements of both a Herero man, followed by a German soldier are taken as the vectors of their measurements protrude out of the screen (figs. 11 and 12). Later a scene shows the skull whose fragments are connected with erector set pieces slide across the stage, shattering into fragments, and reattaching them in an act described by Kentridge as a “dance macabre”. This shattered skull leads back to the black man alluded to in Badiou’s passage. The skull, the symbol of death and destruction also refers to rational and systematized measurements taken of the skull. Yet this deathly dance macabre repairs itself as the skull comes back together. This skull is met with the megaphone, repeated in Kentridge’s drawings for projection such

as Monument (fig. 13, 1990), where these cones act as communication devices between Soho’s world of capital and the terrain outside of Johannesburg’s centre.

Black Box’s cone bears the tag Trauerarbeit, Freud’s term for grief work, suggesting a turn towards a melancholic psychoanalytical model upon which we can draw to take these historical circumstances into account through building a reparative politics.

Khanna argues in her history of the relationship between psychoanalysis and colonialism that the psychoanalytic, and specifically the melancholic, can become a productive force, noting the development of the discipline emerges contemporaneously to colonialism. This Freudian melancholia is expressly invoked in Kentridge’s work through the use of the phrase Trauerarbeit (which is taken up in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia”) and through a suite of prints engaging with Dürer’s Melancholia prints, which will be addressed later in the chapter. Khanna argues that it can be used as a “colonial discipline,” to understand the violence inscribed upon the history of the nation. More specifically, she turns towards a notion of melancholia, as it forces an inward turn to rebuild the loss suffered inside of the subject. She states: “And if Freud would eventually transfer the critical agency into the unworking of conformity, and into the critique of the status quo.”

In doing so, melancholia figured through Trauerarbeit becomes a productive way of writing critical histories. The fragmented disaster and these torn bits that make up Kentridge’s rhinoceros document a history of the Enlightenment that prioritizes the fragment, using this fragment then requires the subject to collect these pieces of data together turning inward to produce a history of the violence caused by the initial fragmentation. Plane crashes also signify a state of emergency, a legacy of violence and loss, and a condition of disaster that needs to be

55 Khanna, 6.

56 Ibid., 21, 23.
repaired. This reparation is engaged further in the remaining resonances of the black box.

**BLACK BOX II: THE PHOTOGRAPH, STALKING SHADOWS**

The photograph follows on logically as a black box from the flight data recorder. Instead of taking the fragments of disaster and reediting them into a report, the fragment (in the photo) becomes the focus; the play of light becomes more certain as it is fixed on the photographic negative. Kentridge states, in relation to the production of meaning in the photographic chamber, “The second association of the black box is the *chambre noir* – the central chamber of a camera between the lens and the eyepiece, into which light enters and where a kind of meaning is created. The infinite possibilities of the outside world come in, but a single image is chosen, fixed upon the plane.”57 This *chambre noir* is made explicit by Kentridge in the staging of *The Magic Flute*, its Baroque sets of flat scenery create a referent to the bellows of a camera and a flattening of the three dimensional world into two dimensional planes.58

If the photographic bellows of an old camera take place within *The Magic Flute*, it is certainly true that *Black Box* is also inside photographic bellows. The manifold side curtains are present in both settings. Light’s passage through the lens becomes a useful way of conceptualizing the passage of ideas from an enlightened core through its dark other, which in this case is the relationship between the German colonial core in Berlin and its other in South West Africa. In *The Magic Flute* Kentridge makes this metaphor explicit; rays of light are diagramed with dotted lines,

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57 William Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 51.

58 William Kentridge, *Flute*, 60.
passing through an aperture, bounding the edges of its image (in this case a perching bird) that casts its shadow, as it passes through to the interior of the photographic chamber (fig. 14, 2005). It is the movement of light as vectors into the interior of the camera that makes the image and then later inverted as the negative produces shadows that block out light. This dialectic between light and shadow constitutes the photographic image making, becoming a productive metaphor for the consideration of colonial histories.

Shadows as both an art historical and metaphorical concept intrigue Kentridge. Considering the development of *Black Box*, he begins a brief lecture on the project describing the effects of witnessing a solar eclipse through a creeper vine growing outside of his house. Kentridge witnessed the leaves blocking the light, each leaf producing a “miniature moon” from the sun trying to project its image on the floor.59 From this experience he described the effects of light and thus: “diffuses mystery, naturalizes the world, and makes everything immediately comprehensible.”60 However this simple illumination is not enough to explain the world, Kentridge elaborates:

The second thing the eclipse made me consider was the question: What is the nature of the meeting point between the individual receiver of images and the broad projector of them? If the world consists of infinite projections (in this particular instance, they came from the sun) and infinite receptors – be they floorboards, a sheet of paper, or the retina of the eye – then what is the nature of the meeting point between projection and reception? I ask this question not only in terms of looking, but also in terms of our direct experience in the world. What parts of the world do we have some control over? What parts are utterly beyond us?61

59 William Kentridge, “Black Box: Between the Lens and the Eyepiece,” 43.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 43, 45.
Subsequently Kentridge constructs a pairing that complicates the projection of Tamino’s world in *The Magic Flute*, that movement from darkness into enlightenment. The subject cannot rely on the simple rays of light to shed truth and reason; instead it is the shadow that produces meaning within the *chambre noir* of the camera. This meaning is produced through movement between the person taking the picture and the subject of that image, but also between light and shadows that are cast in that image making. It is an interplay as Kentridge’s questions suggest: how do we make meaning of the world, how do we read the images and stories given to us and produce narratives, and who controls the ideology of those narratives? The simplicity of the Enlightenment mode is undermined by *Black Box* complicating these relationships.

Kentridge interprets this photographic relationship between light and dark as central in *Black Box* and his staging of *The Magic Flute*; there are several scenes within *Black Box* where archival images are captured in the background of the projection (fig. 15).

However, *Black Box* is not just about the physics of what it means to take an image:

> Rather, it is about the artificial construction of an image – which is what we do when we look through a camera lens – as a metaphor for what we do when we look through our own lives. We understand the artificial nature of looking through a camera, but we don’t understand the unnatural activity of looking when we are just looking.⁶²

It is an interaction between spectator and space, coming to terms with how stable historical narratives are produced and how we make sense of the histories that the viewer has accepted. A tremendous amount of metamorphosis goes on in the movement of the light and the production of meaning in *Black Box*, as the sunset’s shadows grow longer and as history moves ideologies get lost in the light of certain vectors that are dominant. Looking in this way becomes active, to analyze it as

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⁶² Kentridge, *Flute*, 38.
Kentridge suggests begins to unravel the politics of light and at the same time the histories and materialities we are confronted with. It expands the domain of the colonial gaze and how we make sense of the world upon certain ideologies.

The photographic in Black Box immediately puts one in a colonial discourse. In one particular image, Kentridge draws the phrase Zeiss atop the scene, referencing the famous German lens makers, while a white opening is drawn on the outer curtains of the screen; in doing so, Black Box turns into a camera. On the interior projection newspaper clippings make up the individual aperture pieces in negative format (black background and white font). The camera captures images of the landscape and finally locates itself on a tree upon which two lynched men appear (figs. 16 and 17). This image appears similar to a colonial photograph taken at the time of lynched Herero hanging from a tree (fig. 18, 1918). Later, an armadillo in white chalk on a black background appears on the projection set against the night sky, and coils into a ball making its protective shell, fragmenting into the pieces of a lens as it opens. The scene fades to black just before the final act of Black Box, “Requiem for a Rhinoceros” (fig. 19).

These scenes link the photograph to colonial histories. The initial use of the lens (doubled by reference to the negative format in the newspaper clippings) within the installation suggests a relationship between the landscape and violence (something that is investigated closely in Chapter 2); the rendering of these scenes not being dominated by the large plateaus and hills but rather by the two lynched men hanging from the craggy silhouette of a tree in the centre of the image. The image of systematized violence is made ready for the archive (light fixes meaning in the newspaper clipping). These images of violence in the landscape are heightened later when two of Kentridge’s trademark silhouettes pound a skull into the shape of a
plateau (fig. 20); the symbol of both death and the eugenic projects within this project have transformed into landscape. Further still, the image of the animal in the sky itself opens to allow light (and the image of another traumatic scene with an animal to come through later), connecting with hunting and the wild of Africa and the curious and fantastic images of Clara’s tours around Europe. Clara existed as a spectacle to delight Europe, now the photographic becomes a way of capturing the wild otherness of Africa in its native context and brought back to Europe in the scrapbook rather than the trophy room. Her image as a scene of the joy and pleasure that one takes in *The Magic Flute* seems to have an image on that other end of the spectrum that Kentridge discusses in the Schumann film of the rhinoceros hunt, where we see film footage of the rhino killed in colonial entertainment transmitted to us as documentary.

In *The Magic Flute* Tamino is able to tame birds, creating yet another bridge between the works through the central theme of animality. Kentridge uses a bird’s cast shadow both in *The Magic Flute* and *Black Box* further binding their themes. In the opera it is the artist’s shadow catches and moves the birds, and in the play the artist’s hands cast shadows that become animated forms (figs. 21 and 22), he not only takes on Tamino’s role in the opera controlling the birds, but also achieves this task through play. He casts shadows as young children do trying to make animal or other fantastic shapes by placing their hands in front of a lamp to cast shadows on the wall. Kentridge terms this process or game “shadowography.” This ability to control animals and order their world has a lot to do with Enlightenment discourse; it is the cast shadow and the projection of light that makes these spaces work. At the same time this desire to collect order and know is at the core of Enlightenment taxonomy. The colonial relationship seems embedded in this collecting and global curiosity, bringing to mind Clara’s own training to eat in the house from a dinner plate. The fantastic
tricks Kentridge makes his rhinoceros perform at the end of *Black Box* do not seem that far from the reality of Clara’s actual existence. The animal’s control brings it under the utility of the European and delights the European subject in its otherness.

The documentary film, like shadowography, provides yet another image of the control of animals, though with a violent outcome rather than the joyous one of the shadow. Kentridge’s engagement with the documentary image constructs a scene more violent and sad. In *Black Box* it is achieved through Kentridge’s crucial appropriation of the Robert Schumann documentary of rhino hunting. The viewer, in *Black Box*, is presented with archival film footage of a rhinoceros in the bush; a man dressed in khakis and pith helmet comes forward and shoots the animal at near point blank range. As the animal thrashes about, the hunter moves towards the rhinoceros and then sprints back. Finally, a second shot is made and the rhinoceros dies, and the two men hunting approach it as the camera provides a close up of the animal’s head as one of the men inserts a long branch with leaves hanging from it in the animal’s mouth. The scene ends as a large group of African men assist the two hunters with the animal’s corpse; it appears as though they are preparing to remove the rhinoceros’ foot as a trophy. Kentridge reveals in a later lecture that this scene films a particular species of rhinoceros that became extinct during the production of *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (though it should be noted that neither the footage nor the death of the last rhinoceros took place in Namibia or South Africa).

The hunt in this film is brutal and shocking. It is not the guns alone that shoot, the violence is coded through the use of the photograph as well; it attempts to be transparent, and yet becomes complicit in this order. Susan Sontag’s narrative of the photographic safari in Africa indicates the way in which the gun has just been replaced

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63 William Kentridge, “Learning From the Absurd.”
by the camera: “One situation where people are switching from bullets to film is the photographic safari that is replacing the gun safari in East Africa. The hunters have Hasselblads instead of Winchesters; instead of looking through a telescopic sight to aim a rifle… Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy.”

While Kentridge’s image is in a different locale and time than Sontag’s description, the overlap is felt. The colonial relationship between photography and the hunt is present in both. Several photographs of the hunt within Namibia exist; the confluence between shooting and photography overlap, a colonial exhibition of photographs from Namibia reminds us that celluloid photography, which allows one to take images in the wild, developed from development of gun cartridge technology. Both images, especially within Kentridge’s project where the camera and gun seamlessly merge (in Sontag they become symbols of two different eras of tourism), become documents of savagery and control. At the end of the film we see the two hunters lift the leg, denoting a point upon which the animal should be cut. To take the animal as trophy, a documentation of power and control becomes a chilling companion to the taking of skulls; both involved a dismembering of the body and taking pieces of it as objects of both curiosity and classification. As Kentridge reminds us, the skulls were taken for craniometrical studies; the Nazis were very interested in this data to prove the superiority, power and control of the European subject both in Africa and later in the Holocaust. We can think of the trophy room, the natural history museum, the royal menageries housing animals, and the portraits of Clara as instances of this accumulation and ordering of the animal.

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Sontag’s photographic investigation links shooting the image and shooting the subject, making little distinction in the violence of looking (as Kentridge reminds us how loaded with interpretation editing looking involves) in hunting and photographic safaris; both exist as violent discourses for her. The photograph seems particularly laden with violence and childhood for Sontag, seeing images of the Holocaust as a young child. These images divide Sontag’s life from before she became aware of photographs that “broke” something inside of her, and after. This exposure to violence as a young child through the photograph was a presence in Kentridge’s life, and just as the gaze is loaded with historical assumptions, so too is the act of play. Playing soldier or making shadows invokes these violent narratives. Kentridge’s shadowography doesn’t just make images of birds, rhinos and other objects of delight; it also produces German war helmets (fig. 23). The photograph emerges in childhood and reveals violence to its subject; for Sontag it connected its documentarian imagery with the bewildering violence of the Holocaust.

Kentridge’s project takes this connection between shooting and photography one step further, synthesizing the shooting that the photograph and gun perform with childhood toys. *Black Box* features a scene where one of Kentridge’s torn paper puppets lurches forward, appearing labored as it marches (although suspended on a mechanical apparatus) across stage almost dragging it body against its will. In the background a spinning disc appears, overlapping with the walls of the stage. A portion of these discs are enlarged on the front top of the stage. A soundtrack of metallic clicks and vibraphone is played. As the disc spins it eventually stops as the image becomes clear as panes in a shooting gallery. The images in each pane include bottles and targets, suggesting a carnival atmosphere are shot at. Bullet holes fill the pane of

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66 Sontag, 20.
the image and the disc goes back to spinning (figs 24 and 25), only to stop later as the process repeats itself with different images.

The image of the animal reemerges in these shooting gallery scenes; both the mantis and armadillo are shot as well as a globe and black individuals, which like Sontag and Kentridge’s appropriated imagery links the violence performed on the animal with the violence performed in Africa in general. As stated before, the mantis seems suited for Kentridge’s project. As Benjamin notes in the *Arcades Project*, the mantis is an automaton like Kentridge’s puppets; they move with mechanical precision without knowing minds. Throughout the film the mantis takes on a number of metamorphosing roles to form things like gallows and mining equipment (doubling the references to automata). In addition to these forms shot at, advertisements and newspaper headings for German products erupt into flames in the shooting gallery. Towards the end of this first cycle we see a pair of binoculars and eventually a series of archival photographs including the landscape, animals and shackled black men with the “Welt-Detektiv” (world detective) masthead overlaid atop.

The image of the binoculars references the stage space; Kentridge discusses how the binocular space makes the world into a planar logic much like the stage. This space is portrayed in *Black Box* and *The Magic Flute* through the flat wooden sides mimicking curtains, and collaged over with many newspaper clippings and drawings. Additionally, the binoculars reference opera glasses and hunting as a device to facilitate seeing far distances in the bush to aid in stalking animals, two ways of looking that are at the core of this project.67 The binocular becomes an important optical tool bridging Europe in its resonances with the opera and the hunt bringing together both *Black Box* and *The Magic Flute*, the tool of operatic looking is also a tool

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67 Kentridge, *Flute*, 60.
of violence in the African bush. The shooting gallery as a toy also places us in a transformative world where hunting and violence become a game; suddenly the space of the theatre transforms into a shooting gallery, the gears and paper change into the running man lurching forward to avoid the projectiles. The actors and scenes of the utopian opera move into the everyday world where the spectacle is marked by violence. The toy develops a space that links the animal and human through shooting. Sontag’s claims about the safari are intensified through the shooting gallery; this shooting and violence is done through entertainment with the camera and the gun. Animals in *Black Box* are not just significant as a marker of violence, but as a marker of the trans-continental movement this project makes.

Returning to the rhino, a central figure that moves between these worlds of play, hunting, colony and metropole, Dürer’s *Rhinoceros* renders the image of the rhino violently placing an errant spear like image atop its shoulders. The factual error Dürer makes can be forgiven; the artist was working from a report of someone who had claimed to see a rhinoceros in Lisbon in 1515 rather than by first hand observation. However, the errors are suggestive of “‘preconceived prejudices’” and the reliance on memory to produce the woodcut as Gombrich’s reading of the image suggests. Dürer’s prejudices and errors suggest cracks and shortcomings within the purity and scientific rationalism suggested by the Enlightenment (the image’s representation is encoded by perception rather than pure science) that would come with later 17th century images of the rhinoceros, just as Kentridge wants to pursue imperfect histories in *Black Box*. Dürer’s work suggests another place within Enlightenment

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68 Radley, 23.


70 Angela Breidbach and William Kentridge *Thinking Aloud*, 97.
thought that suggests precisely this condition of scientific rationalism in drawing; his *Artist Drawing a Reclining Nude* (fig. 26, 1524) suggests a rational, focused and gridded way of understanding the world. Here interpretation is done with a pure and objective looking. The artist sits rigid and upright, one eye focused and perfected with the help of the obelisk, breaking down the subject that he sees before him with the grid.

This notion of seeing the world as empirically knowable and monocular is a part of the wider narrative in Jonathan Crary’s reading of the scientific rationalism of 18th century vision, especially the camera obscura (itself a black box). Kentridge reproduces several optical charts that show the reflections from the interior of a closed chamber that look similar to those reproduced by Crary (fig. 27), representing the reflections of light inside of the camera obscura. Crary describes the camera obscura subsequently: “For two centuries it stood as model, in both rationalist and empiricist thought, of how observation leads to truthful inferences about the world; at the same time the physical incarnation of that model was a widely used means of observing the visible world, an instrument of popular entertainment, of scientific inquiry, and of artistic practice.”  

This black box is constructed and perceived to be a place of stability and truth, a way of constructing the knowable about the world, Crary continues: “This same unity of the camera obscura, a field of projection corresponding to the space of Descartes’ *Mathesis Universalis*, in which all objects of thought ‘irrespective of subject matter,’ can be ordered and compared.” Comparing and ordering within the black box takes us to another grid beyond Dürer’s work in the

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72 Ibid., 56.
registers within *Black Box*. These grids become filled with names and numbers often appearing behind the images of measurements being taken, suggesting the data taken in craniometrical studies. On top of these registers the vectors of the angles upon the faces rendered there move along like those rays of light bouncing into the black box before fixing themselves upon the negative at the back of the camera.

The black box brings the viewer back to the colonial in its pairings of capturing the skull and the rhinoceros as fixed meanings between Africa and Europe. However, these stable narratives that Europe attempts to construct are undermined through the difficult and unstable optics that Kentridge takes. As Crary continues in his analysis, even the camera obscura’s rationalist underpinnings could not ensure that it was used or understood as a stable way of understanding optical perception.\(^{73}\) While even this model of perfected western renaissance perspective and truth “becomes a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth.”\(^{74}\) Problems in the stability of this discourse become more apparent when the system surrounding the monococular camera obscura breaks down; Crary traces this breakdown in the beginning of the 19\(^{th}\) century owing to a number of visual devices that engage visual toys and binocular sight.\(^{75}\) *Unfixing the Eye* has discussed this breakdown using the stereoscope at length in other chapters. This visionary device is perhaps the most notable in Crary’s project emphasizing an erratic and laborious system of looking where one eye must take power over the other to produce its three dimensional effect.

Crary’s project outlines a number of issues surrounding the histories of optical

\(^{73}\) Crary, 29.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., Crary explicitly refers to how the camera obscura is taken up in Freud, Marx, and Bergson.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 16-17.
toys, including devices such as the phenakistoscope that Kentridge has constructed elsewhere. The binocular is also an important device in this shift; it moves from the singular optic seen by the telescope, as Kentridge has explained making a three dimensional effect, to a two-dimensional one where things seen in depth are observed in flattened out planes, again reflected in Kentridge’s staging of *The Magic Flute*. The doubling, seen in the relationship of rhinoceros to skull, Europe and Africa, and most importantly light and shadow makes a synthesis of the narratives these pairing suggest difficult. In fact it is the shadow that provides the basis for Kentridge’s reading of history. Kentridge states:

> Our best hope seems to be something much more imperfect. If there are mistakes, there will not be titanic, huge, gigantic mistakes that destroy whole generations at a time. The monopoly of knowledge should not be invested with people outside, but with people actually living their lives. It is a sense of a vanguard of understanding as in Leninism—and this had a very bad history in the last hundred years. Because philosopher kings knew best they understood. This translated into calamities not just once or twice, but very regularly.  

The imperfections of the shadow (along with drawing and optical tools) look for ways to write history unevenly, showing their fractures, tears, and the processes with which the viewer perceives them. In this constantly moving and shifting view, like the creeper vine shadows outside Kentridge’s home and the changing toy in Benjamin’s room, history is an adaptive and forward-looking methodology.

**BLACK BOX III: Performing Loss, Playing History**

Throughout *Black Box* the images seen on the screen and their projections are met with a series of actors in the toy like “automata.” It is these figures that orient us and perform the action within the stage. Kentridge as discussed in the beginning of

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76 Angela Breidbach and William Kentridge, *Thinking Aloud*, 97.
the chapter engages with the theatrical resonance of the black box, producing a performance space for these figures. They guide us through the narratives of this fragmented history. The transformative power of playing and toys is taken up in Walter Benjamin’s reflections on his middle class upbringing in Berlin circa 1900. Within these brief essays he writes on cabinets, of which we can see the image of Oudry’s painting of Clara stored in as well as Kentridge’s Black Box as examples. Benjamin’s essay narrates the magical capability of the contents within the small drawers of his dresser. Trinkets contained there metamorphose: pennies become shields, blocks become coffins and pieces of tinfoil become “hoards of silver.”  

Benjamin’s remaking of the image arrests time. The old constantly becomes new again in the eyes of the collector, but the cabinet also becomes a way of questioning truth; for Benjamin this remaking is the “the veil and what is veiled,” uniting not only the object held within its container but the container itself, suggesting that we can consider this a way of understanding how history is written.  

Black Box constructs forms that radically change, suggesting a transformative play similar to those that Benjamin discusses in his cabinets; armadillos become the aperture of a camera, a shadowy hand makes a rhinoceros, and teakettles become skulls. This shape shifting allows Kentridge to make associations between aspects of the world that appear isolated. It produces an engaged history writing that in its own making performs an associative historiography linking these different geographies and locales. By showing the metamorphosing and often changing forms of images (and subsequently narratives) that we come to believe as true, Kentridge’s new narratives  

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77 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, 156.

78 Ibid, 153, 156.
attempt to write histories connecting the ideological disparities between the
Enlightenment and colonial Africa.

Benjamin’s work seems appropriate to Kentridge’s narratives and projects; recently Kentridge’s work focused on the idea of the fragment and the whole. Within Kentridge’s lectures and performances detailing his approach to an adaptation of Shostakovich’s *The Nose*, he works through a series of fragmented and scattered historical events: Nikolai Gogol’s short story, upon which the opera is based, the purge trials in the Soviet Union, psychoanalysis, Kentridge’s upbringing, and xenophobic riots in South Africa. These are united under the rubric of the absurd, which Kentridge uses as a particular methodology to force one to understand how they make sense of the world. Kentridge’s engagement with the absurd seeks to locate the imperfect, points at which logic break down, and the world doesn’t make sense. It functions like shadowography as well, forcing one to produce a coherent logic out of the chaos.

Kentridge has engaged in the idea of fragments as an explicit metaphor in some of his more recent projects, he uses torn paper blown or scattered across the page. When Kentridge reverses the film as one sees in a gallery the fragments reunite to form a coherent image. This process for Kentridge becomes a utopian project, the imperfect becomes another move towards a time- and process-based move towards utopianism; Kentridge’s utopian reversing works from the past to remake the present through this reversing and fragmentary form. This fragmentary history writing, alongside of the absurd (which takes us through Ionesco to the rhino), and the notion of the imperfection are at work in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, an assemblage of

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79 William Kentridge, “Learning From the Absurd.” During the questions in this lecture Kentridge speaks of the wonderful capability playing something in reverse has, it allows the world to become utopian and perfect.
several writers’ passages to make a history of 19th century Paris and the historical transformations that occurred within it. Like those imperfect histories Kentridge advocates the *Arcades Project* isn’t complete or unitary; its brief entries and appropriated nature have gaps where Benjamin has assembled various passages together, and combining these fragments to make a complete form is an approach Kentridge takes with his puppets later in the century.

While this approach to narration is important in both Kentridge and Benjamin’s work, it is the transformative nature and creative work Benjamin suggests is capable through play that is of most use to approaching *Black Box*. Its cabinet-like space becomes a place where things take on radically new forms, the penny becoming a shield. Likewise histories that are rarely considered or buried throughout history become resuscitated, linked and considered in new lights, often through these linkages. The automata made up of a compass and used to inscribe arcs in geometry appears in the film mapping with its robotic arm that extends forwards and back again as it slowly moves across the stage, rapidly swiveling (fig. 28). Rulers bound appearing initially in the act “Measuring Part I”, the stage set as he inscribes marked lines upon a projection that appears to be a report; the phrase “Deutsch-Sudwest Africa” is legible. This movement mimics the march of a soldier in a parade but also seems to suggest a fascist gesture. The caliper soldier extends his arm to make arcs that go across the screen inscribing lines in both maps and along the lines of the faces of individuals on the screen who are being measured for racial stereotypes. His arm demarcating racial types and maps suggests a confluence between geographic and racist practices, the invasion and claiming of territory overlaps with the eugenic projects. The seed of one is located within the other, linking the foregrounding principles of both. *Black Box* reminds the viewer of the connection between these
colonial projects and Nazism; both discourses seem tied to expansionist land projects and a racially supremacist ideology.

In a second act of measuring within *Black Box*, the eugenic histories in both German South West Africa and Germany become more apparent, as a teakettle, heads of soldiers and finally the lines this soldier-like figure draws demarcate skulls. At the end of one sequence a skull replaces a globe on its mountings (fig. 29) suggesting that the measurements taken on the skulls and their projections extend to a worldview.

The appeal to nationalism is made apparent as his lines become hidden by a small bird perched atop a ball, a reference to the bird catching scenes of *The Magic Flute*. Both figures grow to the point at which the bird becomes a large black eagle perched atop a globe whose wings spread and it flies away (fig. 30). The bird, growing into an eagle, as a reference to German nationalism cannot be ignored; the eagle is the national symbol in Germany. Subsequently its growth here symbolizes a movement from the pure and utopian aims of Mozart’s opera, to nationalistic expansion.

Kentridge’s playful birds in the opera reference another form of play (in addition to theatre) in the production of shadowography, making cast forms on the wall with the hands. Kentridge makes these forms in the film, with the shadows cast appearing in animated form on the screen, his arm protrudes outwards making an animated bird, and then another followed by a rhinoceros, military helmet with a spike on top and then a shaded light that transforms into a showerhead before Kentridge’s hands disappear from the projection (fig. 21). The shadow becomes a way of making sense of the world, of approaching and writing history; its playful use in Kentridge’s work suggests again the emergence of metamorphosis that occurs within the child’s mind. These images produced by Kentridge’s shadow play suggest another confluence between the fantastical images of a childhood shadow game and the military violence
suggested by the military helmet that eventually makes its metamorphosis from light, to showerhead, finally to a noose of the running man. It provides a link between the animal and the military, but it also suggests a link between the joy and play in childhood and its ability to read difficult and traumatic historical events.

The child-like joy of the shadow, to which Kentridge refers when making images upon the wall, becomes a mournful one in its referent to the “dark continent,” a shadowy other. We can see this dual nature that the shadow holds inside the rhinoceros as well. The rhinoceros is both fantastic and mournful, an image of violence and pure joy. While it refers to the processes of play and childhood, the shadow is also an image of loss. Victor Stoichita’s history of the shadow begins with a discussion of Pliny’s *Natural History*, reminding us that the “shadow makes absence present,” and later that it becomes a surrogate image. As the shadow reveals one form, it loses another, or more accurately marks the absence of another thing. This pairing is marked in the relationship between the Enlightened *The Magic Flute* and the shadowy *Black Box*, as the pure image of light and knowledge shines the absence of brutality; violence and colonialism appear in Kentridge’s paring. Subsequently, the shadow becomes a part of this melancholic image by Kentridge, the “dark continent” suggested by Freud and Khanna’s reading of this history reemerges in the shadow.

Freud’s grief work is of course suggested by the presence of the megaphone ringleader/announcer bearing a sandwich board reading *Trauerarbeit*. It opens the performance in the black box by tilting back and raising its cone to suggest that it is emitting the music heard in the gallery. Kentridge, from the onset of the work, places the viewer within a melancholic discourse. Emerging several times throughout the performance the megaphone ringleader’s most lengthy appearance comes at the end of

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the work’s duration when the cone emerges and encourages an animated rhinoceros performs tricks including dancing on its back legs and eventually doing a back flip over the cone (fig. 5).

The cone’s sandwich board suggests that the character is a figure of mourning; the translation of Freud’s term written upon it means grief work. Kentridge confirms this by naming the last act of this opera “Elegy for a Rhinoceros,” suggesting that a loss or death has occurred. In his analysis of grief work, Freud sees this overlapping as casting a “shadow of the object upon the ego,” bringing this melancholic system close to Kentridge’s playful world of shadows and their relationship to history. Kentridge’s toys and play and Freud’s analysis of melancholia begin to merge. Despite the reflection on the self, the processes of work involved in mourning and melancholia manifest themselves as very similar; the process of Trauerarbeit is to distance oneself from the loved object. To detach oneself in melancholia, Freud argues a great battle must be waged by the ego to detach oneself, making the object function “like a painful wound.”

The grief work performed by this ringleader advertising Trauerarbeit, takes its form in the conclusion, training the rhinoceros. Within Black Box, this work sadly cannot be completed, the delightful image, another attempt to reconcile the wild animal to the understandings of European Enlightenment and the opera Kentridge so loves cannot be made whole. This playful elegy attempts to reconcile the rhino as an image that works between Africa and Europe. Yet in this desire to make the divides between Enlightenment culture and African colonialism, the rhino and ringleader are caught in a constant sense of melancholia. The play (both as a way of working through but also the theatrical performance) represents a tremendous amount of this

81 Stoichita, 217-18.
work, to tie together two strands of Kentridge’s own life: the European culture that makes up a continual trend in his work with the history of his native Africa. As effaced by Black Box, the connections between European culture and African colonialism do not merge smoothly; the loss of the object never dissipates within their interplay. The rhinoceros in Europe is a sight of curiosity and joy for its viewer, yet it becomes paired with the somber woman bowing in the brush, the brutal image of the animal being shot and of its connection to the images of skulls measured and shattered.

CODA: MELANCHOLIA, RHINOCEROS AND THE OPTICAL

Kentridge’s work with the rhinoceros and melancholia persists after Black Box, constructing two sets of stereoscopic photogravures, Étant Donnée and Still Life (figs. 31 and 32, 2007). Their interior tableaus in which one peers into suggest Kentridge is referring to Marcel Duchamp’s Étant Donnée (1946-1966) through Kentridge’s use of the title and a similar use of space in the works, where one peers into an enclosed space. Kentridge’s first image, Étant Donnée, is of a collaged rhinoceros standing atop a table, facing an open window in which a head is trailing in, suggesting images from surrealist painting. The second, Still Life, shows a skeleton of a dog or other animal curled up and seated atop a table. Also, Kentridge with his back to the camera stands in the right corner alongside several images that reference his body of work. A gas masked man and biplane suggest What Will Come (has already come), (whose title is printed in Étant Donnée as well) an anamorphic film the artist produced in 2007, the rockets suggest turn of the century French filmmaker Georges Méliès whose famous Journey to the Moon Kentridge remade in 2003. Additionally a
staple gun, wood plane and compass appear, these items, industrial tools used in the
studio, seem to suggest both the process of working as well as the office tools used on
industrialist Soho Eckstein’s desk in 9 Drawings for Projection. In Still Life there is
also a polyhedron in the corner of the image covered in phrases. The polyhedron in
Kentridge’s work makes reference to the same form present in Dürer’s engravings of
Melancholia (fig. 33, 1513-4). It is not only the implication of optical tools (and the
power of looking that they contain) and his rhinoceros as a symbol of travel between
Europe and Africa, but also an emotional state that Kentridge engages with.

Kentridge’s attempt at Trauerarbeit seems through his own process to be an
incomplete project, something that extends throughout his work, the erasure traces and
tearing suggesting similar things. Incompleteness becomes a part of Kentridge’s
historical narrations. Soho, Kentridge’s brooding character in Stereoscope; takes the
same position with his head tilted down looking at the ground seemingly lost in
thought in one of the film’s stereoscopic cards as does Dürer’s figure of melancholia
(fig. 34, 1999). The doubling of the poses implies that melancholia is at the core of
his characters’ and film’s motivations. In fact, Soho’s world is one of the first
instances of the image of the rhinoceros in Mine (1991); Soho begins to play with a
rhinoceros that appears on his desk cluttered with this office equipment (fig. 35). The
viewer again returns to the concept of play central to Kentridge’s work. The rhino
becomes a play item for Soho who through these films tries to work out a relation
between internal and external worlds. To play not only breaks down the divides
between internal and external worlds, but also reveal an unsettled and continual
melancholia. These traces and losses cannot be easily forgotten. Despite attempts at
doing so they seem to linger, and creep back into both history and the filmic work in
several paths.
Unsettled melancholia is to be at work in Black Box, the horn of the Trauerarbeit ringleader announces a history and a future, it looks both backwards to history but announces to us that these histories are still very much a part of the status quo. All the examples discussed here — the Enlightenment, Africa, Europe, genocide, and the Holocaust — cannot be divided in a state of melancholia; it is the process of Trauerarbeit, never complete and always being worked towards that connects these tragic links of violence and history, despite the divides suggested by the work of mourning. To return to the two stereoscopes, it is the transformations within the toy cabinet of Black Box that perform a similar connection of two disparate histories. Kentridge’s melancholic narration not only unites disparate histories, producing new ones but also reveals the processes that weave these histories together.
Figs. 1 and 2. William Kentridge, film stills from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 3. Jean Baptiste Oudry, *Rhinoceros* (1749).

Fig. 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros* (1515).
Fig. 5. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 6. William Kentridge, film still from *Learning the Flute* (2004-5).
Fig. 7. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 8. William Kentridge, “Taming of Beasts,” extract from *The Magic Flute* (2005).
Fig. 9. Jan Wandelaar, *Human Skeleton with a Young Rhinoceros* (1497).

Fig. 10. William Kentridge, *Portage* (2000).
Fig. 13. William Kentridge, film still from *Monument* (1990).

Fig. 14. William Kentridge, film still from *Learning the Flute* (2004-5).
Fig. 15. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 16. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 17. William Kentridge, film stills from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 19. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 20. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 21. William Kentridge, film still from *Learning the Flute* (2004-5).

Fig. 22. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 23. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 24. William Kentridge, drawing for *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 25. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 26. Albrecht Dürer, *Artist Drawing a Nude* (1524).

Fig. 28. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 29. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).

Fig. 30. William Kentridge, film still from *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (2005).
Fig. 31. William Kentridge, *Étant Donné* (2007).
Fig. 32. William Kentridge, *Still Life* (2008).
Fig. 33. Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia* (1513-4).

Fig. 34. William Kentridge, film still from *Stereoscope* (1999).

Fig. 35. William Kentridge, film still from *Mine* (1991).
CONCLUSION: (un)FIXING NEWNESS

William Kentridge has an uneasy relationship with Theodor Adorno’s philosophy. He discovered Adorno’s writing during the apartheid era as a student at the University of Witswatersrand and was, like Adorno before him, attempting to come to terms with how to produce art after political violence (in Adorno’s case the Holocaust and in Kentridge’s apartheid). Kentridge has spent an extensive amount of time writing and producing visual culture that concerns the role of the artist during and after apartheid in South Africa. At one level Kentridge finds it difficult to accept Adorno’s claim that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Adorno seemingly implying that to produce poetry after Auschwitz would redouble the barbarism of the Holocaust.¹

Kentridge witnessing the transitions away from apartheid insists that there must be art made to respond to this tragedy, stating in response to Adorno’s statement: “After Auschwitz, there is, alas, lyric poetry. ‘Alas’, because of the dulling of the sensibilities we must have in order to make that reading or writing possible. But of course, also, thank goodness that such poetry can still be read. The dulling of memory is both a failure and a blessing.”² Kentridge’s statement finds difficulties with Adorno, he sees the numbing and alienating effect that representations of culture may


have but yet finds a degree of liberation within their representations. The “alas” in Kentridge’s statement seems to signify a sense of mourning, that art somehow has lost some of its potential in the wake of this violence, yet it must be made. Kentridge’s work shows a number of appeals through the absurd, ironic, landscape, metaphor, and allegory that despite the difficulties in making art in response to violence, it is perhaps through the narrative tropes of making art that makes this expression possible in Kentridge’s work. In this difficulty of coming to terms with artistic production in the wake of such political violence, Adorno’s 1951 *Minima Moralia* finds its way into Kentridge’s aesthetic production.

Exposed to *Minima Moralia* through his university coursework in politics (he found the text’s brief aphoristic entries more readable than the lengthier texts by Adorno), Kentridge enjoys its fragmented nature, a theme Kentridge returns to repeatedly in his torn paper works. In both instances the historical fragment coalesces to make up a whole, yet the whole cannot be complete, it still shows the gaps and imperfect assemblies along the tears’ seams. Inside of this structural parallel of the fragment in Kentridge and Adorno’s work both explore the concept of “newness.” The concerns they both express over ideologies of the new can be examined throughout Kentridge’s films as a central theme of post-apartheid South Africa and its crises of historical representation.

Within *Minima Moralia* there is an entry entitled “Late Extra,” which examines the emergence of newness in modernity through the work of Poe and Baudelaire. Adorno argues that the concept of newness emerges as a response to the fact that modernity makes it impossible for any new thing (presumably concepts or

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consciousness) to emerge.\textsuperscript{4} This newness, Adorno argues, exists as a phantasmagoric sensation, a term recalling the phantasmagoric sensations of retinal afterimages that so greatly influenced Jonathan Crary’s study of vision in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{5} Crary’s history contends that the phantasmagoric sensation becomes an object of study to construct a disciplined and conditioned subject that despite its scientific and rational approach begins to fragment in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{6} It emerges as a field of study not only during the rapid expansion of popular culture (in these optical toys) but in the development of the factory; the study of optical effects was of great interest to condition the worker. Subsequently this image of phantasmagoria is both at the core of the study of vision and a key metaphor for capitalist development.\textsuperscript{7}

Adorno, writing in an era of accelerated modernity and capitalism, became concerned with the way the phantasmagoric qualities of newness during economic modernity (focusing on 19\textsuperscript{th} century writers at the beginning of modernity) and under National Socialism became an ideological trope. “Late Entry” becomes a place in Adorno’s work where the two dominant strands of his research, an anxiety over the spread of industrialized capitalism and how life goes on after the Holocaust begin to merge. Adorno sees newness as a dominant force in capitalism, using terms like “glitter” to demonstrate capitalism’s (and by extension modernity’s) use of ceaseless change to become an ideological mask repeating the past.\textsuperscript{8} Likewise he sees a similar


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. 7,9.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. 132-33.

\textsuperscript{8} Adorno, \textit{Minima Moralia}, 237.
project going on under National Socialism; considering their appeal to propaganda he describes it as “absolute sensation”, in its appeal to excitement, its “glitter” conceals the primeval brutality and violence of the fascist regime.\(^9\)

In “Late Entry” Adorno argues that both National Socialism and capitalism destroy the capability of sensation as the shock of violence destroys the subject.\(^10\) Pairing Crary with Adorno one can see, a reemergence of the beginning of modernity with Crary’s project and its complete destruction located in the Holocaust within Adorno’s project; these two histories begin to intertwine. In an era of post-Fascist newness Adorno concludes: “newness, of no matter what kind, provided only that it is archaic enough, has become universal, the omnipresent medium of false mimesis. The decomposition of the subject is consummated in his self-abandonment to an ever changing sameness.”\(^11\) Newness, *Minima Moralia* argues, homogenizes and divests culture of history; it becomes an ideology in the world of post-Fascist culture, which Adorno also sees as the rise of an even more insidious type of capitalism that preoccupies so much of his writing on the topic of “the culture industry.”

Under the condition of a transition away from an era whose defining experiences are violence and destruction to an intensification of capitalism and the loss of affect in this era of late capital, Adorno’s critique seems primed for the political and cultural transitions that South Africa made in the democratic elections of 1994 and the TRC that followed. South Africa’s TRC constitute the national experience through apartheid violence and an appeal to newness suggests that issues of the past do not persist in the present. The transition away from apartheid moved

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\(^9\) Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

\(^10\) Ibid., 237-38.

\(^11\) Ibid., 238.
from a discourse focused on the violence of the government, but with its dissolution, a new cultural situation emerged. South Africa’s “newness” seems to obscure issues such as the presence of industry that runs as a current from the apartheid era to the present.

Kentridge in his essay “Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory,” writes a similar remark about the dangers of newness: “The very term ‘new South Africa’ has within it the idea of painting over the old, the natural process of disremembering, the naturalization of things new.”\(^\text{12}\) Kentridge’s newness is certainly different from Adorno’s use of the term. Adorno is troubled by the ideology of brutal regimes and the ability of capitalism to mask itself under the process of reinvention, while Kentridge is writing about a newness embodied in the nation, an ideology that fixes the past in a history that severs itself from the public. Kentridge’s statement warns against the historical problem of forgetting and erasure that newness can bring for the country, it obfuscates the presence of issues under apartheid to the present political condition.

In the bliss of transition and making the country anew there is a threat of forgetting the lineages of industry and colonialism, which have clearly played a role in the conditions of both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Concluding that the TRC and the end of apartheid is understood through a transition that poses certain ahistorical and ideological risks, Kentridge reveals his concerns over newness. This concern is preserved through his methods of working that preserve the historical trace even though the events rendered may fade from the surface. Rendering these erasures as a process of history making undermines the ideologies of the new in this palimpsestic mode. The erasures built up on the paper’s surface possess traces of

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what has come before in the sequence of images, and the tears leave behind their scars and imperfect junctures. His working method actively seeks to resist a washing over of the past that can result from a process of “newness.” Additionally, Kentridge’s statement reflects a desire to return and understand the past. His work, as Rosalind Krauss contends, has a certain degree of heaviness that brings his films to a more labored sense of weight, including the palimpsest, for Krauss this formal weightiness becomes a method for exploring the political condition of South Africa. Kentridge’s films are constructed with a certain set of antiquated imagery that conjures up a white ruled South Africa of the past, where the politics of apartheid and race relations seemed to be easy and stable, however he renders a tremendous amount of damage and violence beneath the surface. Not only is it an antiquated technological condition that drives the production of these films, but this antiquated technological condition is also part of the historical critique Kentridge uses where the outmoded shows the instability of apartheid in its very foundations and sureness.

Kentridge’s projects are not just unstable in narrating a history of the “rock” that he calls apartheid; his work also unearths histories that link colonialism and class into the history of apartheid that dominates the history of South Africa. In doing so Kentridge’s work undermines the ideology of Desmond Tutu’s claim that forgetting is necessary for the nation to move on. In a nation that is still overwhelmed with drastic class divides and a crisis over AIDS, it is necessary to see the economic disparities encoded through racial ideology and capitalism that stretch from colonialism and through to apartheid, to understand how these political transitions contributed to the current history and material realities of the nation. Providing a model of a historical

past allows one to perform a historical critique that attempts to come to terms with the present political situations.

*(un)*Fixing the Eye has taken as its central claim that the play undertaken by Kentridge’s use of optical toys not only destabilizes the act of witness, but it constructs new histories out of its instabilities. These new histories create a narrative of South Africa (and its relationship to a wider question over southern Africa in general) that encompasses a series of political legacies often neglected by the TRC, especially class and colonialism, which are specifically left out in the Commission report. To write these histories, Kentridge’s erasures and smudges contain traces of what has come before in the narrative while also contextualizing the process of forgetting. Kentridge’s work goes further though, in rendering specific scenes; his work documents histories and their places within larger networks, but always done through a fragmented narrative clear of its own tropes for telling that history.

Each specific chapter of *(un)*Fixing the Eye has shown Kentridge’s use of optical tools to become a metaphor within his work that fragments the official narratives of South African history. By turning to the narrative tropes of absurdism, landscape, metaphor, and allegory amongst a number of other tropes, Kentridge’s work and subsequently its reading as allegorical here show the uncertainty of witness in historical narratives. This PhD thesis has also attempted, through Kentridge’s work to question the outcomes of the TRC as well as to suggest the presence of other historical forces that have influenced the political landscape of the “new” South Africa while also drawing historical traces of events before apartheid, mainly the colonial experience as part of the material conditions of the present.

Using these optical tools in *(un)*Fixing the Eye has not only tried to contextualize Kentridge’s work through one of the more persistent aesthetic themes
throughout his work in the optical tool, but in using these tools it locates metaphor as the central form of both production and historical materialism in Kentridge’s work. These optical tools call into question the idea of witness so central to the history of South Africa, and in destabilizing that witness determined both through testimony and its recording in the TRC sessions, yet it also captures Kentridge’s films in his studio. Its fragmentation, this PhD thesis has argued, opens up the terrain of official histories of the nation to a number of perspectives and histories.

To go back through history in Kentridge’s work is to understand the roots from which the current cultural predicament of South Africa has emerged. Adorno performs a similar shift in *Minima Moralia*, in which his entry on newness moves from the origins of “newness” at the beginning of modernity to their outcomes in the cultural destruction performed under Fascist governments. Not only does Adorno’s work look through the development of mass entertainment and ideologies in capitalist and fascist cultures to explain the current political circumstances in a similar manner as Kentridge, but they are both able to use this historically rooted analysis to look forward and explain how the present is informed by these narratives.

Kentridge’s use of the photograph and witness in Vertov’s realist montage based cinema and its relationship to absurdism within Jarry’s figure of Ubu, takes the viewer back to the 19th century (in Jarry’s absurdist theatre) and the dawn of cinema (in Vertov’s silent era *Man With a Movie Camera*). Absurdism and realism become important metaphors for a society in transition to examine how a narrative of testimony emerges as a way of remembering in the TRC, but at the same time insists that a culture of the new, encapsulated in forgiveness, creates a problem for moving forward; newness instills a poisoning cultural amnesia. Likewise, *Felix in Exile* engages with a tradition of landscape painting within South Africa that renders the
terrain as ahistorical. By rendering the landscape in its history of interventions through surveying, navigation and political violence, Kentridge not only uncovers the violence of the past, but shows the present and rapidly changing terrain of South Africa engaged with narratives of mining and property control. These industries within Johannesburg and their financial and corporate institutions as Kentridge writes in “Some Thoughts on Obsolescence” are divorced from the mines’ own material reality in the Rand, or the property ownership and development concerns with the peripheries of South Africa’s metropoles.14

The issues of memory are unearthed not only in their childhood seeds, but with the assistance of high-tech visual imagery in History of the Main Complaint and WEIGHING... and WANTING; the use of the hospital diagnostic equipment provides a way of seeing the wounds previously made on the landscape inside the body, but it is unclear how they have emerged or what the nature of the injury is. This uncertainty in both the diagnosis as well as who is responsible become a metaphor for truth and its narratives through committee experts in the TRC. Like the ambiguities inherent in the TRC, there is some ambiguity in what has transpired upon Soho’s body. Again we see the present as unable to move forward; the newness suggested in the radical break of the TRC is unable to address problems that fall outside of their mandate which may be the main complaints from which Soho suffers.

At a point in time where decolonization and the painful wounds it has left become apparent, Black Box/Chambre Noir provides perhaps the most Adornian method of looking back. Kentridge digs through the history of the Enlightenment, locating a dark side that is held in the images of joy in the European culture that it represents. Using a reference to a black box that is simultaneously antiquated (a

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chambre noir as the interior of a camera) and modern (the flight data recorder of a plane), Kentridge constructs an image of violence and enlightenment (itself a discourse based around a new rationalism) that reveals long legacies of colonial brutality.

Returning to the question of newness proposed by Kentridge’s interest in landscape and the obfuscation of histories that the transition to a new South Africa implies, looking backwards allows us to understand the construction of what South Africa is and shatters the myth that the political situation in the “new” South Africa creates. For Adorno, newness hides the fact that nothing has changed; it numbs people to the brutality and political violence present as a long historical narrative. Kentridge believes that newness creates an erasure of the past; it simply vanishes in the bliss of the new. Like Adorno, he finds the concept of “newness” to have a certain capability to erase its historical continuities. Kentridge’s materiality actively resists this process; the erasures he uses are never pure, they leave behind traces both in the work’s form and metaphorically as a process of history.

During the transition away from apartheid, Kentridge began a series of collaborations with his fellow South African artists Deborah Bell and Robert Hodgins. The first of these collaborations explores the themes of industry and idleness by reinterpreting William Hogarth’s suite of prints by the same name. In 1991 the artists undertook a suite of prints entitled *Little Morals*, inspired directly by Adorno’s title *Minima Moralia*. Amongst these images is *Anti-Waste* (fig. 1, 1991), which features a destroyed construction site reminiscent of the themes in Kentridge’s “Drawings for Projection;” twisted spikes rise suggesting the corrugated metal that might make up the roof of a dwelling in the townships. On the horizon line industrial electrical

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pylons and jumbled stacks of rubbish emerge, while in the foreground an easel covered in newspaper clippings is erected. Facing the easel is a figure shrouded in newspaper clippings, with arms extending towards the background of the etching; the person seems to be struggling to take refuge from what appears before it off the right side of the image’s frame. The work’s anti-waste statement seems to suggest some ecological irony; the moral to not waste subjects the landscape and those who reside in the townships to endure economic hardships. Those residing in the township must make do with the waste of both the newspaper and the other construction detritus rendered in the image.

Despite being concealed beneath the newspaper, this person is still intriguing; its shroud of news is of course made up of the “new,” the current stories that define the world. Despite the implied newness, the viewer must presume that these are also old stories rather than a new paper straight off of the rack. These discarded papers purchased from the comfort of cars from the many salesmen standing in traffic in the busy intersections of are now in the shantytowns, where their salesmen reside, as discarded.¹⁶

The presence of these newspapers is also a new use for the old; refashioning that which has come before it into a new narrative. The newspaper shroud is presumably made up of news stories about the transition to a democratic South Africa and political violence during apartheid, but it is important to consider what it does for its wearer. It is both a protection (in the form of dress) and a hindrance; the wearer struggles against its weight. At this point of transition, the concept of the new,

¹⁶ Jennifer Benningfield reminds us that the foundations of Soweto themselves are made up from the discarded refuse of Johannesburg’s industry in the mine dumps from the gold mines around the Rand. See: The Frightened Land: Land, Landscape and Politics in South Africa in the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 2006), 197-98.
symbolized in the papers, becomes a weight. Weight is something Kentridge returns to repeatedly in his the titles of his work (*Society, Obesity and Growing Old*) and through imagery (the rock of apartheid, the size of the monument in *Monument*). At the same time, the “little morals” of those who benefited from apartheid seem to imply that the state is not giving enough. Kentridge’s project captures the difficulties and insufficiencies in the newness of a post-apartheid state. The distance of the Townships from city centers, such as those depicted in *Anti-Waste*, and their accumulation of detritus seems to suggest that the “anti-waste” ethic of the city moves its legacies away from the centre to its peripheries. The newness of the post-apartheid state is presumed to be a salvation from the old ways of doing things, yet in Kentridge, Bell and Hodgins’ print this newness provides an ineffective protection and home for the victim while also restraining or holding them back.

Kentridge’s project of critique suggests that a solution to these inequities should be found. One response to criticisms of the TRC is that, despite its insufficiencies, something needs to be done to document and help to solve traumas under apartheid, allowing the nation to move on from the problems it created. This is certainly what chairperson Desmond Tutu attempted to do by proposing the concept of *ubuntu*, an African notion of interpersonal dependence. In *ubuntu* the individual is constituted through their relationship to other individuals. This solution of forgiveness suggested by the TRC becomes a perfect break; the newness it promises suggests that the past can be left behind.

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17 Mark Sander’s *Ambiguities of Witnessing* provides an excellent account of the difficulty of understanding *ubuntu*, highlighting its ambiguity specifically Sanders wants to understand the TRC’s narrative structure in a very literary context. See Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
The impossibility and difficulty of leaving apartheid histories behind emerges in another collaboration between Bell, Hodgins and Kentridge in their 1994 film *Memo*. This brief narrative features Hodgins seated at a desk dressed in a pinstripe suit, surrounded by familiar office tools (reminding the viewer of Soho’s desk from Kentridge’s *9 Drawings for Projection*.) As Hodgins begins his day’s work, the items on the desk begin to take control; their sooty erasures stain and mark the letters, ledgers, and receipts on his desk. In one instance, Hodgins attempts to stamp a piece of paper “PAID” yet the stamp that he marks on the paper instantly moves off the page (fig. 2, 1994). While not directly engaging optical toys (the artists do make some references to flip books) the moving and shifting quality of the erasures and the marks they make point to the difficulty of establishing clear views of what is happening. No matter how much one tries to pin down this paperwork, to establish truth through the production of a new archive, it is impossible to do so. Instead, like the tears left in the puppets and smudges of the animation’s erasures, Kentridge’s work suggests that turning towards imperfections allows one to write histories that do not run the risk of having such massive weight placed upon them. To look for imperfections allows a wider consideration of narratives that aren’t present in official histories. Looking at the history of the Enlightenment, Kentridge sees the notion of a pure and overarching history to be disastrous, which drives his desire to locate these imperfect histories.18

*(un)Fixing the Eye: William Kentridge and the Optics of Witness* acknowledges a process of history writing implicit in Kentridge’s work while at the same time offering a critique of the ways in which history has been narrated in South Africa. The thesis sees the eye and its attendant metaphors of witness as being at the

core of a narration of South Africa’s apartheid history through witness and the legal structure of the TRC. While Kentridge, through several films, examines crucial issues surrounding memory and forgiveness, he also unfixes the stability of the eye. In doing so he implies that there are a number of other narratives and histories in South Africa that are not addressed in the scope of the TRC.

The histories Kentridge writes by unfixing them suggests that there are narratives that are left out of the TRC’s approach to the history of apartheid. Furthermore, it argues that the abuses and exploitation of apartheid has their roots in colonial brutality. They persist, like the afterimages on the surface of his animations, in the present post-apartheid South Africa. To (un)fix, however, refers not only to a breaking down of narratives but also to a reparative gesture, both the visual devices such as the stereoscope that pluralize vision and the tearing addressed through Melanie Klein’s reparative gestures in the thesis suggest that Kentridge locates strategies of narration outside of the legal context of the TRC. These new narratives allow people to speak and repair, while not leaving historical traces in the past. Repairing or fixing becomes a way of seeing in a reflexive manner that documents the damages done in the past. The reparative also embodies a strategy to write histories of South Africa and African history at large.

This destabilization of the centrality of witness, and its fragmented and reparative gestures allows Kentridge to move between national traumas, histories and temporalities In doing so, *(un)Fixing the Eye* shows Kentridge’s work as concerned not only with apartheid but with expanding these historical narratives, addressing their colonial roots and legacies in Europe and Africa while also considering the politics of immigration, dispossession and poverty that are at the center of the post-apartheid nation.
To narrate these histories, Kentridge has turned towards imperfect histories. These imperfect histories do not witness with a pure monocural vantage, and they show the gaps between its fragments, as he does in his animations and torn paper works. These imperfections, which drive Kentridge’s work, take us back to the antiquated. This is realized through the image of the highly unstable stereoscope whose effects diverge from viewer to viewer who produces their own image synthesizing two different visions into one. The stereoscope becomes a metaphor for South Africa that has followed a series of other distinct optical toys throughout the narrative of *(un)Fixing the Eye: William Kentridge and the Optics of Witness*. These old and unstable devices create a way of looking backwards to write histories while moving forward in the new nation state. Kentridge’s looking back constructs a horizon of potential through a political critique rooted in historicity. Yet, like the small instances of blue that appear in his films as a utopian image of water in an arid terrain, the old can create ways of enlivening and producing potential for the current political climate, shaping a political model for the future.
Fig. 1. William Kentridge, Deborah Bell and Robert Hodgins, *Anti-Waste* (1991).

Fig. 2. William Kentridge, Deborah Bell and Robert Hodgins, film still from *Memo* (1994).
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