

The *Mine* metaphor in the work of William Kentridge

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Abstract

This article discusses how Kentridge's drawings for his film *Mime* explore the borders between memory and amnesia, drawing and erasure. His drawings reflect a rich record and leave traces of the animation processes of drawing and erasure. Kentridge portrays in this film a day in the life of the mines with the Johannesburg mine magnate, developer and industrialist, Soho Eckstein, as the main character, his wife, Mrs Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum, her lover.

Abstrak

Hierdie artikel bespreek die wyse waarop Kentridge die tekeninge vir sy film, *Mime*, inspan om die grense tussen onthou en geheueverlies deur middel van die teken en uitvee-aksie te verklein. Hierdie proses van teken en uitvee laat duidelike spore binne 'n ryk kreatiewe animasierekord. Kentridge verbeeld in dié film 'n dag in die lewe van die Johannesburgse mynmagnaat en aartskapitalis, Soho Eckstein, sy vrou, mev Eckstein, en haar minnaar, Felix Teitlebaum, teen die mynagergrond.

Introduction

Since the late 1970s, Kentridge has worked with a wide range of media and techniques, from charcoal drawing on paper to etching, from film to animation (*Drawings for Projection*), from acting and set design to directing numerous theatrical productions. He has created video installations and projected images onto buildings. He has made large-scale drawings in the landscape and an outdoor work, *Memory and Geography* (1995)¹, in conjunction with the Danish artist, Doris Bloom, using fire. Within this vast oeuvre of different mediums, the metaphorical exploration of the mine with its social and political implications has been a central theme, dominating his work during the period.

After I had come back from theatre school in Paris, and had decided I wasn't going to be an actor, and I wasn't going to work as a painter, and I had to restrict myself to one craft, I thought I would be a film-

maker. So I spent several years as an art-director of other people's films, learning the craft. One of the things that I learnt was the way the space in which people moved – film space – was so completely arbitrary and changeable.²



Figure 1

What does animation mean?

Animation literally means to bring to life. This happens when still images or drawings are combined to simulate the illusion of movement. This technique literally personifies the drawings or photographs to tell the story by means of the visual element. Dialogue, sound and colour can be added to enhance the illusion. This he coined his *Drawings for Projection* – films in their own right.

Since 1989 Kentridge creates short handmade animation films, using a conventional draughtsman's studio and a stop motion Bolex camera to negotiate his experience of the world. He will for example stuck a sheet of paper on the studio wall and half-way across the room have his camera ready for action.



Figure 2

Unlike the commercial technique of cell animation³, which uses a new drawing for every frame of film⁴, Kentridge's animation technique is simple and primitive: Kentridge makes and in succession adjusts his rough charcoal drawings by the introduction of new marks (re-drawing) or the erasure of pre-existing ones by means of an eraser or a cloth. After some drawing he shoots one or two frames, goes back to the drawing, changes it, goes back to the camera, and so on. His technique is more about making a drawing than making a film, but nevertheless refers back to the early black-and-white movies.

For each film he makes in the region of twenty-five drawings in charcoal and pastel on paper, then shoot it on 16mm film at each of the several stages of their evolution, rather than the thousands for standard cel animation. This imperfect erasure technique leaves grey smudges and traces of every stage of the production process on the paper. Filming not only records the changes in the drawing but also reveals the history of those changes. These traces capture the passing of time and the layering of events in remembrance. In the end there is a set of drawings that were filmed innumerable times and each one represents the final stage of one film scene. The elements of line and tone, especially in the broad strokes of his large drawings, constitute equivalents for, rather than simulations of, the reality that a pictorial language based in colour would produce.

The drawings nevertheless also reflect a rich record and traces of the

animation processes of drawing and erasure, used by Kentridge to produce progression in his film image. As the drawing proceeds, the interest shifts from the one scene to the next.

The creative drawing process is the core of his method. There are no tricks or special effects in Kentridge's films. The titles are handwritten; jerky movements and simplified gestures are main characteristics of his work. Kentridge's drawings are post-cinematic, because he even draws cinematic effects like long camera shots or close ups.

His drawings are in a constant state of metamorphosis – a change in line, contour, texture and subject is part and parcel of the drawing and filming process. Kentridge's drawings explore the borders between memory and amnesia, drawing and erasure. The process of re-drawing and erasure means that each drawing is poised in a state of uncertainty. Each stage of the drawing carries with it the visual memory and history of its recent past. Kentridge films his charcoal drawings as they mutate through hundreds of successive erasures and alterations. With its transmutations and erasures - a cat metamorphoses into a telephone, cigar smoke materializes as a typewriter clicking out messages - Kentridge's work epitomizes the provisionality of being, how becoming necessitates both doing and undoing.



Figure 3

When he is satisfied with a certain drawing, he combines the drawing medium with film shots (later video shots). To shoot the next scenes, he reworks a

drawing or draws a new one and continues the filming process. By using this sequential animation technique, Kentridge creates movement within the context of time and space and the viewer is encouraged to take part in the art making procedure. Several of these large drawings may be needed for a single scene.

His final drawings are usually exhibited alongside the films for which they were created and bear trace marks of the artist's process – even a near total erasure of a form. This leads to an atmosphere of historical memory. This process requires months to finish a single film.

Kentridge took a traditional graphic art technique and transformed it into a new expressive vehicle. This way several new textures and effects were created and Kentridge depicted the fragility and impermanence of the charcoal medium on film. The use of the film medium widens creative communication and stimulates new relationships between the artist and his audience (viewers). The experience of the viewer is influenced by the expression of the artist's soul, thought and medium. The artist renders the illusion of movement by using the camera. The viewer in return, must experience the procedure in real time, decode and comprehend it. This interaction between art and technology has extended the parameters of traditional South African graphic art.

First there was drawing, then filmmaking; then he began making drawings, as they were part of the process of film making itself.⁵ Once the film in the camera is processed, then all the actions of a normal film making technique follow – editing, adding music and sound.

Trace

In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* Rosalind Krauss writes the following on trace: e.g. A photo is an impression or print of reality - it is a photo chemical process where the image is part of the causality thereof e.g. fingerprints, footprints, a water ring from a glass of cold water.⁶ Another example is a photographs' status as trace or index, the dependency

on selecting a bit of nature by means of cropping.

Though they are produced by a physical cause, the trace, the impression, the clue, are vestiges of that cause which is itself no longer present in the given sign. Like traces ... represent the building through the paradox of being physically present but temporally remote. (: 217)

One can almost say that drawing is a passion for William Kentridge and that he sees drawing as a model for knowledge. One must start by defining drawing as a fluid action process opposed to a total different form, such as the frozen instant of a photograph.

Drawing for me is about fluidity. There may be a vague sense of what you're going to draw but things occur during the process that may modify, consolidate or shed doubts on what you know. So drawing is a testing of ideas - a slow-motion version of thought. It does not arrive instantly like a photograph. The uncertain and imprecise way of constructing a drawing is sometimes a model of how to construct meaning. What ends in clarity does not begin that way.⁷

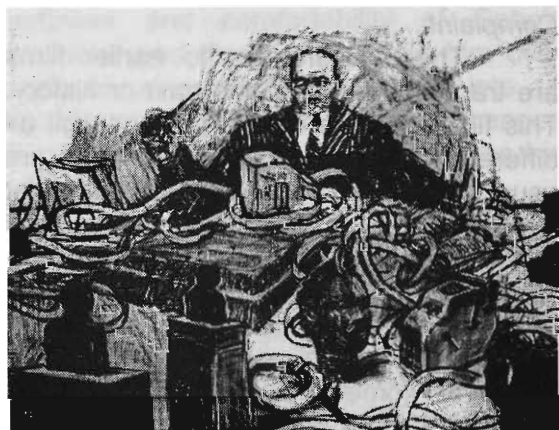


Figure 4

This fluidity of drawing can be coined as **DRAWING FOR PROJECTION**.

First, the drawing doesn't begin as a moral project; it starts from the pleasure of putting charcoal marks on paper. You immediately see two things: a sheet of paper with charcoal dust across its surface,

and the evocation of a landscape with a dark sky. There's a simple alchemy in the transformation of the paper into something else, just as there is in filmmaking or any mimetic work.⁸

In this film elements of trace also confront one. Trace is a subdivision of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida's *difference-theory*.⁹ Rosalind Krauss defines trace as:

Though they are produced by a physical cause, the trace, the impression, the clue, are vestiges of that cause which is itself no longer present in the given sign. Like traces . . . represent the building through the paradox of being physically present but temporarily remote.¹⁰

In his film *History of the Main Complaint* Kentridge deliberately emphasizes the traces from man and animal within the landscape. There are marks on the streets, on the walls, on the roads. Each mark is a trace and reference to things of the past – thus history. There's even a trace in this film's title "*History ...*"

These traces are also visible in his earlier films like images in the space (*Felix in Exile*) and mineshafts and lifts on Soho's x-rays in *History of the Main Complaint*.

These references to earlier films are traces of things of the past or history. This film searches for the truth as well as different meanings. His final drawings are usually exhibited alongside the films for which they were created and bear trace marks of the artist's process – even a near total erasure of a form. This leads to a sense of historical memory. This process requires months to finish a single film.

In some drawings the traces of movement provide the figures with a sort of shadowy history, a suggestive multivalence that is highly evocative. In others, the contrast between heavily and lightly worked areas seems to invite a similar openness of reading. And in others again, the very choice of forms that have been juxtaposed, and the manner in which they have been rendered, appears actually shocking in its unresolved state. These drawings are fragments in a sense, but

they are fragments that capture the essence of Kentridge's creative imagination.

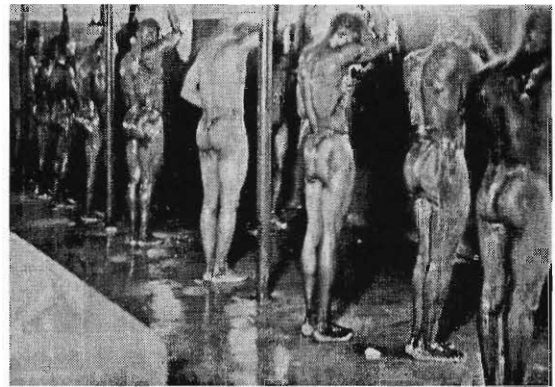


Figure 5

In his third film in the *Drawing for Projection* series, *Mine*¹¹ (1991), William Kentridge is concerned with the contrast between the rich and the poor as well as class differences within the mining community. Just like *Monument*, *Mine* is also an open political film, which makes ample use of metaphor, trace and character. This film is indirectly a propagandistic and historical document of the complex South African society of the 1980s.

Kentridge portrays in this film a day in the life of the mines with the Johannesburg mine magnate, developer and industrialist, Soho Eckstein, as the main character. Throughout this film there is a constant shift between up (Soho's world) and down below (the miner's world). It deals with the cross section of the earth – a geological landscape.

MINE has a setting unusual in Kentridge's animated film because the only landscape of the film, which actually is part of the cross-section of a mine, above and below the ground, is transformed into Soho Eckstein's bed and office. Soho's realm of Capital and idle pleasures above the ground. From this point in the film onwards, the world outside the mine is represented metaphorically to be no more than either the tray on Soho's lap or the surface of his office desk: the concealed, isolated and claustrophobic world of the miners, their poor accommodation as well as their dirty and

dangerous work place, is represented as if below ground, directly beneath Soho's lap.

Soho's wealth and power emphasize the thematic effect as well as the emotional impact on the masses. The thematic effect can be coined as the impact of the theme or motive on the portrayal of character. The artwork is no longer the subject, but rather the central idea. Kentridge made use of Leitmotiv¹² to keep the viewers' attention to his animation films. His characters (Soho, Felix and Mrs Eckstein), and the suburban Highveld landscape are the main repetitive elements or themes right throughout his animation oeuvre.

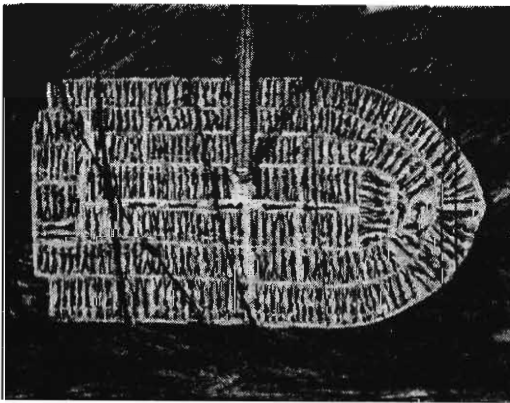


Figure 6

He juxtaposed his characters, frames and subjects to make the viewer aware of the class struggle: the poor miners doing their daily work in contrast to Soho as symbol of power and wealth. This is important for the theme.

When the film starts the screen is filled with blackness and a big noise almost like a nearing train (underground wagons moving on rails). The next scene displays the fixed image of a miner's head wearing a lamp or a crowned antique Ife¹³-head from Nigeria in the bottom left corner of the screen. This icon alludes to an exotic tourist or colonial view of Africa. Then follows the film title, *MINE*, out of the deep, followed by a mineshaft and a crowd of miners, while Dvorak's Cello Concerto in B *Minor* Opus 104 plays in the background, accentuating the nocturnal subliminal atmosphere.

The scene moves for a short period of time to Soho's bedroom. One sees Soho sleeping comfortably in his wide

bed. On top of the blanket nearer to his feet, one sees a wheelbarrow again with a precious Ife head therein. Then the scene moves to the compound, literally below Soho, where the tired miners sleep in narrow spaces with fire-tins¹⁴ between them to give them warmth. The miners look like corpses in a mortuary.

The scene shifts to where Soho sits dressed in his characteristic pinstriped suit in the comfort and luxury of his bed and rules and regulates the mining operations below him. He stately smokes his habitual cigar and blows circles of smoke into the atmosphere.

In the *Drawings for projection-series*, the land figures as prominently as a third major character. It appears desiccated, but living currents flow beneath its surface, for it has absorbed the lives and aspirations of its inhabitants. Littered with structures and the residue of abandoned mines, the land, like its metaphorical counterpart, memory (*trace*), is marked by emergency, scarred by partially completed roads. The landscape in *Mine* differs from Kentridge's other animation films in the sense that here one is confronted with a vertical cross-section of a mine¹⁵. A lift carries the workers up the mining shift, out onto the land, which is metamorphosed into Soho's bed. The softness and comfortability of Soho's cushions and duvet almost fold him over and transforms for a while into a landscape. In the next scene it changes into a busy cityscape when he waves his hand.



Figure 7

From this point in the film the external world (outside the mine context) is metaphorically portrayed as a tray, either on Soho's lap or on his office desk. Literally beneath the luxury of Soho's lap (bed / ground) appears the cold and miserable world of the miners: their sleeping quarters (dormitory) with the stark concrete bunks, their communal showers and working environment. These scenes recall the nightmares of Second World War Nazi concentration camps. Soho converts his own smoke rings into a bell that starts ringing to signal the miners that they need to get up and shower to go to work. The film constantly shifts from below to above and vice versa to portray the contrasting surroundings.

The use of metaphor in the narrative

Metaphor is an accepted figure of speech that is formed by the use of a word or phrase to establish an analogy, concept or idea; for example, *He shot down all of my arguments*. Words can thus be used in a completely different context than originally intended.¹⁶ Metaphor is not only a verbal phenomenon, but can also be used with great success in visual portrayals like William Kentridge' animation film, "*Mine*".

Metaphor in conjunction with other art elements can be utilized to enhance the context in a visual artwork. Familiar information is used to bring forth an original, aesthetic and creative analogy. By using metaphor the unknown is defined by the known. One or more characteristics of an object can be transferred via the metaphor to another object. The use of metaphor thus implies that words with different meanings can be used and that one set of meaning from one context can be transferred to another context.

The words *black* and *white* do not always refer to the text on this page. One can also say that a certain person has a very black view of life. In this sense black refers to a very dim view of life. This implies the use of metaphor. Other examples could be: *Man is a wolf* or *Man is a computer*. In a literary sense these statements are untrue, because man as representative of *Homo sapiens* cannot be a wolf (representative of the animal species) or a computer (as representative

of a machine). In a metaphorical sense the above statements implies that humans and wolves have certain communal characteristics and humans and computers have certain resemblances.



Figure 8

In other words: by using the metaphor the characteristics from one object is transferred to another. When the reader reads through a text, he would like to understand and eventually interpret it. The onlooker thus recognizes a metaphor on the grounds of his existing knowledge and experience of the world and reality and he knows that the metaphorical statement to be literally impossible and/or feasible. Metaphor can thus be coined as a descriptive function of language.

A metaphor also resembles a comparison in the sense that a metaphor is actually a simile or comparison squashed to a single word. A metaphor can undergo change, while a comparison flourish on the literal meaning. A metaphor is a combination of different references like for example in a work of art.

The pictorial metaphor are supported by the following two elements:

1. Context

The film context gets a new meaning within a unique situation of the mine to communicate and support the narrative. For example, when one looks at a cafetiere and a drill in isolation, there is no metaphorical merit, but when connected as in *Mine*, the metaphorical value come to the fore. Additional elements like circumstances, situations, knowledge on the mine subject and the

manners and opinions of the orator will all add to the value of the metaphor. For example in *Mine* where humans are portrayed as machines.

2. Title

In William Kentridge's short film, *Mine*, the title causes a connection between the subject and the image as well as a change of meaning. The title *Mine* may also have dual meanings. *Mine* refers firstly to a mineshaft and the daily happenings in and around the mine. A second meaning of the word *Mine* may also refer to Soho Eckstein, the Johannesburg mine magnate and super capitalist's inner greed – that everything belongs to him (it's MINE). "Eckstein" is the surname of an actual turn-of-the-century mine owner.

Metaphor has three distinct functions: theoretical, heuristic and didactical. The didactical function is very important in the sense that a certain element is explained by joining it to another, for example to refer to the eye as a camera or the kidney as purification organ.

The miners lie like corpses on their stark bunk beds. Soho's smoke rings transform into a bell that chases them for a shower. During breakfast Soho presses the plunger of his cafetiere. It descends like an inverted periscope or lift shaft through the cafetiere. It drills through his breakfast tray, through the base of his bed and layers of subterranean earth and detritus below. The long, sharp point of the drill tool drills very effectively through the hard rock formation and as it pushes downward, excavating history and passing fossils. Eventually it reaches the dormitory with many sleeping heads and the showers. The audience progresses through reminiscence and acknowledgement. It continues deeper into the dark past, until it reaches an infamous historical diagram illustrating the most efficient way to group men and women into every possible space aboard a transatlantic slave ship. Kentridge's nifty transmutations and the stark contrasts between the camaraderie of servitude and the isolation of power give way to a film of great poignancy.

Then it undergoes another transformation process: this time it transcends into a mine-lift that carries the men even deeper into the darkness of the earth. The lift goes right down to the lowest layer of the mine tunnel where the gold miners with stark faces are busy mining and drilling for gold ore to make Soho's life way above them even more comfortable. This drilling action can almost be seen as an act of rape and exploitation to ensure the survival and progress of Soho's empire. All this happens with big noise while Soho sits calmly chewing onto his cigar.

Then Soho's working day starts: his bed transforms to his office desk, the cafetiere transcends into a bell and then in a ticker-tape machine or an adding machine that spits out rolls of paper. The machine doubles as a lift-head that transports the masses of labourers, their bodies solidifying into gold ore ingots or blocks of modernist architecture right up to Soho's desk. The miners climb out of the machine and arrange themselves into a pyramidal mine dump shape of mineral waste. The ticker-tape machine then spews out and reconstitutes an ancient life head with an honorific badge on its forehead that appears to double as a miner's lamp.

With Kentridge's drawing technique each person is a mere charcoal mark on the drawing paper. If one, however, used real people and conventional film techniques one would need an enormous budget, thousands of extras, helicopters and an excellent administration to get the same effects as Kentridge does with his drawn crowds.

Below ground level a cocopan collects the lone-cemented form of a miner (seen from behind, recalls the silhouette of Felix from Kentridge's other films) from the mine dormitory and delivers it onto Soho's desk. Finally, the mine-lift is raised through the cross-section of the mine, past the macabre heads in their concrete bunks, and arrives at the surface of Soho's desk with the gift of a rhinoceros the size of a kitten. This symbol of Africa turned into a trinket mirrors the image of the tribal life-head at the beginning of the film and once

again draws the attention to the ecological damage wreaked by the mining industry.

Soho clears his desk of all the men and machines connected with the mine to make space for the rhinoceros to run around. The scene reverts to Soho's bed where the rhinoceros climb out of the ticker machine and the film ends with Soho idly playing with his new pet. Slowly the ticker machine transforms into Soho's pillows before the final curtain call.

Conclusion

The most shocking element in *Mine* is the fact that Soho Eckstein, as Mine Owner, excavates from the earth an entire social and eco history from where he regulates the lives of the miners. With bells and a cafetiere plunger Soho regulates the mining operations from his soft and luxurious bed and brings all the action to his desktop. In spite of his power and utter control measures, he is unconcerned with the mines' production process. He is not part of their suffering, but rather spends his time playing with his miniature rhinoceros.

Within *Mine* Soho manipulates the world, while Kentridge as artist firstly creates a monochromatic world of his own by means of the potent charcoal drawing medium just to erase part, or all of it in the next scene; film it with his stop-action animation camera before re-working it for the next scene(s). These techniques in conjunction with the use of trace, metaphor and dualities underline the Soho Eckstein-narrative.

Soho Eckstein's life as a capitalist Mine Owner also configures as a metaphor for the social-economical conditions prevalent in the South African society of the colonial society since 1900 and thereafter. It is not only a specific incident or example but also the general principle on which a whole capitalist system was abused and maintained.

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Fig. 1 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Mine Title Drawing*. Charcoal on paper. 60 x 75 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 2 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Soho Asleep with the Ife Miner*. Charcoal on paper. 75 x 90 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 3 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Miners in Tunnel*. Charcoal on paper. 75 x 120 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 4 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Soho's Desk with Ife Head*. Charcoal on paper. 120 x 150 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 5 Kentridge possibly used this photograph of showering male miners as inspiration for the shower scene in his animation film, *Mine*.

Fig. 6 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Mine Shift and Slave Ship*. Charcoal on paper. 83 x 124 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 7 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Compound Dormitory*. Charcoal on paper. 75 x 91 cm. Collection unknown.

Fig. 8 WILLIAM KENTRIDGE. 1991. *Soho in Bed with Rhinoceros*. Charcoal on paper. 120 x 150 cm. Collection unknown.

Notes

- 1 Although conceived as a series of different works, it included an gigantic, white-chalk, diagrammatic line drawing of a heart in the barren Highveld landscape. This is reminiscent of the ancient rock drawings (images engraved and painted on stone surfaces) of South Africa some 30,000 years ago. The landscape was not modified but rather used as a sheet of drawing paper onto which the gigantic anatomical heart emblem was etched. Hereby he sets up an analogy between land and body, a theme that recurs in his animations. A giant utopian gate was also drawn on the ground in front of the power plant in Newtown, Johannesburg, and thereafter set alight.
- 2 From interview published in: G. Davis, A. Fuchs, *Theatre and Change in South Africa*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, 1996.
- 3 The animator, under the supervision of the director or layout man, only makes the key drawings of the animation sequence. His assistant (inbetweener) prepares the in between drawings needed to complete the action. These drawings are registered on pegs in the animator's underlit drawing board. When all the drawings have been completed and assembled, the action is checked for flagrant flaws. Thereafter the drawings are traced (by yet another person) with a black crow-quill pen on sheets of transparent celluloid or acetate (cels) the same size as the drawing paper used by the animator. The opaquer applies opaque watercolours to the

- reverse side to hide the crude appearance of visible brush marks.
In the final stage of production, music and effects are mixed with the dialogue track to form a composite track, which in turn is combined with the optical negative to yield a composite print.
- 4 Traditional animation uses thousands of different drawings, by a team of animators, filmed in succession to make up a single film.
 - 5 *Bakargiev Interview*, in Cameron, D (et al). 1999. William Kentrige. London, Phaidon Press Limited, p 15.
 - 6 Krauss, 1984:110.
 - 7 *Bakargiev Interview*, in Cameron, D (et al). 1999. William Kentrige. London, Phaidon Press Limited, p 08.
 - 8 *Bakargiev Interview*, in Cameron, D (et al). 1999. William Kentrige. London, Phaidon Press Limited, p 19.
 - 9 Opperman, 1999: 118.
 - 10 Krauss, 1984:217.
 - 11 A 3-minute animated film. Drawing, photography and direction: William Kentrige. Editing: Angus Gibson. It was also the winner of the Weekly Mail Short Film Competition (Fiction) in August 1991.
 - 12 The term, *Leitmotiv* was coined by Hans von Wolsungen to define a musical theme that can be associated with a specific element, character or emotion throughout a work of art, for example an opera by Wagner. Thomas Mann used it as a literary term to define a repeating theme or passage. (Cuddon, 1991:485)
 - 13 Ife is the antique, holy capital (c. 1300) of the Yoruba and is situated between the woods in South-West Nigeria. In 1938, a number of life-size bronze heads were discovered during excavations there. (Willet, 1967:13).
These works are different from the stereotype African sculpture because of their utmost naturalism – although to an extent idealistic. These works are usually in bronze or pottery. Their eyes are almond shaped – from long and thin to wide and big eyes. The ears are usually very stylized and the lips parted. Paint has been used for the eyebrows and white of the eyes.
Human hair was attached to holes in the heads and holes in the necks were probably attached to wooden bodies that did not stand the coarse of time.
The Ife-like heads with linear decoration (to portray character and likeness) that Kentrige use in his films reminds one of the Ife heads in the British Museum in London. (Read, 1961:179).
 - 14 Also known as braziers.
 - 15 A mine is an excavation or hole in the earth for the purpose of extracting free metals, coal, salt, or other minerals. The term includes the site of such an excavation, with its surface buildings, shafts and equipment. It can also refer to any deposit of ore or minerals in the earth or on its surface. (*Readers Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary in 2 volumes*. 1984:1084).
 - 16 Metaphor: “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to *suggest a likeness or analogy* between them.” (<http://www.netSPACE.org/~erica/m4/Webster.html>)

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