

William Kentridge – creating animated images in space and time

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At issue in this article is *History of the Main Complaint* (1996)¹, which is the sixth film in Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* series (1989-1999). The discussion is centred on spatiotemporal manipulations employed in the juxtaposition of past and present. The film continues the chronicles of Soho Eckstein, mining magnate and capitalist, his remembering of the past by means of flashbacks and dreams, his accumulated and ineradicable guilt, his memory and absolution. Soho is no longer depicted as the formidable mining magnate and capitalist of Kentridge's earlier films, but rather as a lonely, fragile, sick and unconscious man in a hospital bed. Once he accepts his guilt for his outrages (past), he opens his eyes and starts living (present) again.

Keywords: William Kentridge, Soho, animation, drawing

William Kentridge – die skepping van animasiebeelde in tyd en ruimte

In hierdie artikel word William Kentridge se sesde film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), in die *Drawings for Projection*-reeks (1989-1999) ondersoek en bespreek aan die hand van ruimte en tyd: verlede teenoor hede. Die film sit die saga rondom Soho Eckstein, aartskapitalis en mynmagnaat, voort rondom sy belewing van sy drome, sy ewige skuld, sy onthou en sy vergifnis. In teenstelling met sy robuuste en formidabele verlede as mynbaas, verbeeld hierdie film Soho as 'n hulpelose, siek en bewustelose man. Wanneer hy die skuld vir sy wandade (verlede) aanvaar, maak hy sy oë oop en begin leef (hede) soos vantevore.

Sleutelwoorde: William Kentridge, Soho, animasie, tekenkuns

Kentridge made his short, animated film, *History of the Main Complaint* after the founding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in April 1996. During the public hearings of the TRC apartheid-era human rights abuses and other crimes of the past were projected in prominence by publicly examining human-rights abuses in an effort to discover the truth and move beyond the wrongs of the past. Many witnesses testified during the commission hearings to tell their stories, retrieve lost histories and receive amnesty and compensation for suffering caused to them and their families during the apartheid era. The aim of the TRC was thus to provide amnesty and reconciliation for all the victims of apartheid within a post-colonial milieu.

History of the Main Complaint (the sixth film in the *Drawings for Projection* series) was premiered on 16 June² 1996 during the *Fault Lines* exhibition at the Leerdam bastion at the Castle in Cape Town. Jane Taylor was the curator in charge of the exhibition, which was held from 16 June 1996 to 31 July 1996. Work addressing the themes of truth and reconciliation was presented by thirteen exhibitors³ working in various fields of the visual arts.

Drawing as process

Inspired by the TRC hearings, William Kentridge investigated how history can be remembered. He used memory, guilt, absolution and reconciliation as underlying themes for this film and chose process drawing and film as mediums to fit the theme of the exhibition.

As with his earlier films, he used his stone-age animation technique to record the process of creating a drawing for his short, animated film, *History of the Main Complaint*. Instead of making thousands of separate drawings he manipulates a single drawing by making alterations to it during the course of filming. As the narrative unfolds, the image is in a constant flux of change. The image is altered, photographed, some areas erased, photographed again, new areas added and others covered and photographed again. When a different frame sequence is

required, he starts a new drawing and the process is repeated. Kentridge's films usually consist of about 20 of these drawings in motion. Regarding this process Kentridge says:

As with my other films, *History of the Main Complaint* was made without a script or story board. The idea is for the film to develop in the way a drawing might. The hope is that, without directly plunging a surgeon's knife, the arcane process of obsessively walking between the camera and the drawing board will pull to the surface intimations of the interior.⁴

Besides presenting a story in progress, his films take the viewer through the process of creating a drawing in motion. As new objects/features appear within the frame, traces of what the picture looked like before remain and are decoded by the viewer, creating an impression of movement reminiscent of the earliest black-and-white films with unnatural jerky movements caused by the invariable projector speed.

Kentridge's drawing and filming process individually captures each of the stages in the making of the drawing, and eventual filming. His narrative unfolds as the creative process continues. Thompson (2006: 818, 819) states

Kentridge's process of the filmed erasure of drawings situates his work at the juncture 'between' impermanence/flux/undecidability and the process of filming, of fixity. While he fixes his art by using film, he is nevertheless filming a process of erasure, where the 'between' forms the connection between the visible – animated drawings and the invisible or the process of filming. [. . .] The process of erasure mimics the ways in which we attempt to erase the memory of our engagements, even as the prior bleeds, traces, or blots into the present. Drawing has the dual function of a personal discovery and a reminder, an injunction to formulate our attitudes and our lives in respect of these traces of the past.

Thus Kentridge uses erasure and re-drawing to create movement in space and time as he reworks the drawings, leaving traces of previous frames, all the while making visible, as it were, the process of image retention in the viewer's mind, which the conventional filmmaker exploits (by carrying forward traces from one frame to the next) to create a "natural" flow of action.

Title of the film

The title of his animation, *History of the Main Complaint*, refers to the remembering of the most important illness and/or ailment (a bodily disorder and the symptoms of such a disorder) from Soho's past. Godby (1998: 107) states

Thus in *History of the Main Complaint*, whose subject is the past, the project is not to understand history for its own sake but, rather, the relationship of the individual to the past. The truth and reconciliation process itself is concerned as much with the present as the past. [. . .] history, [. . .] the medium of memory that connects the spectator to the past.

In essence the film deals with the creation of contrasting spatiotemporal environments. The concepts of time, space and motion are exploited so that Soho's dreams of his past are juxtaposed and overlapped with his current bed-ridden state.

The images deal with events that are no longer present but which are very much part of Soho's ailments. The viewer is transported to Soho's time and place by giving visual information about his distant past – thus enabling the viewer to enter imaginatively into the immediacy of Soho's misery.

Kentridge has described the current situation in South Africa as a contest between amnesia and memory – between "paper shredders and photocopying machines," in the artist's words⁵ – and this is the basic theme of this animation. The expression "paper shredders" refers to total memory loss (amnesia) or fragmentation as the past is destroyed by the march of time, in direct contrast with the remembering of the past, referred to by the expression "photocopying machines".

Kentridge furthermore combines his unique style of charcoal animation with the music of Monteverdi and modern medical and scientific methods of penetrating, examining and imaging Soho's body by means of X-rays, MRI and CAT scans to show up his innermost secrets for all to see. Soho has to come to terms with this exposure, which would otherwise be a major obstacle to the continuation of his life.

The film under discussion was used as a framework for the presentation of Kentridge's Monteverdi opera, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1999) in which he combined his moving images of *History of the Main Complaint* with other drawn and scanned imagery, added Monteverdi's music, and projected the imagery as backdrop to the complete opera. The general features of the stage layout for this production are essentially those of a 17th century anatomical theatre⁶: an array of concentrically tiered ovals (for seating and viewing) placed around a central dissecting table. This seating arrangement allows the audience to have a clear view of the cadaver and the anatomist performing the dissection (dismemberment). In both productions a body is surrounded: in *History of the Main Complaint* Soho's body is surrounded by doctors (figure 4), and in *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse*, Ulisse is lying on a bed, waiting for his body to be examined.

History of the Main Complaint opens with a sheet of newspaper driven by the wind, blowing through an empty street with a wailing siren – almost as if Soho's sickness was reported in the newspaper. A sudden screen change takes the viewer to a 19th century hospital ward with a white curtain pulled around a hospital bed (figure 1). The only other object in the room is a basin of water, blue in colour, which stays untouched right up to the end of the film. Could this basin of water be used for spritual cleansing or could this be a symbolic representation of a baptismal font? Images of water have a special symbolic meaning for Kentridge (luxury, value, comfort)⁷ since open water is sparsely distributed around his hometown, Johannesburg. Water is indicative of spiritual barrenness – unquenchable despite nearness (“Water, water everywhere, and never a drop to drink” – ST Coleridge). In this animation the symbolic presence of water may mean that unconscious or not, Soho still has luxuries (a hospital room to himself and a number of doctors at his bedside) and personal comforts (wearing his suit) to enjoy.

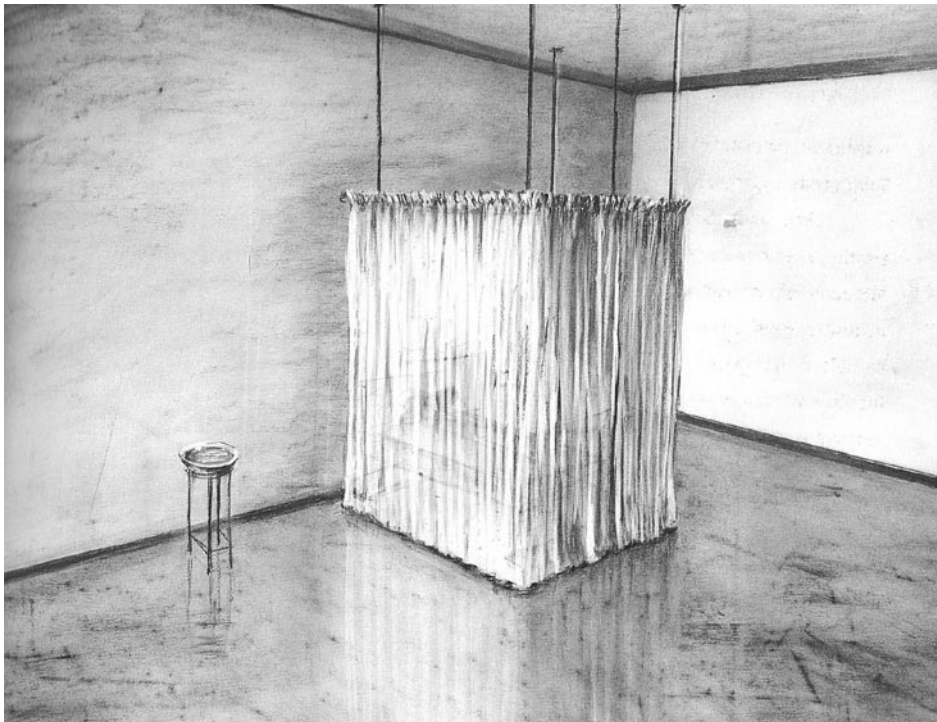


Figure 1
William Kentridge. Drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint*
(1996, charcoal and pastel on paper, 100 x 120 cm, private collection).

When the curtains around the bed open, the figure of a man is revealed. Monteverdi's Madrigal⁸ sets the scene – even in his fragile state he wears his pinstriped suit and tie, which identifies him as Soho and shows that there is still a trace of life in this old man. Soho lies alone in this bed surrounded by curtains. He is in a coma, his eyes are closed; his gaping mouth is seen through a transparent respiratory mask framing his face. The pump that delivers oxygen to his lungs brings to mind the *cafetière* from his earlier film, *Mine*. Soho is in a coma because of his stubborn blindness to the past, thus rendering his recovery uncertain. His body evolves into a journey through his memory in which his persona tends to merge with Felix's as he surveys scenes of death.

The title of the film appears on the monitor next to his bed (figure 2) – almost as if Soho is 'saying' it visually by means of his oxygen mask:

**HISTORY
OF THE
MAIN COMPLAINT**



Figure 2
William Kentridge. Title drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint*
(1996, charcoal and pastel on paper, 70 x 120 cm, private collection).

The word “history” in the title of the film indicates to the viewer that the film is about remembering a faded past – bringing into view the passage of time by rendering it visible through the spectral traces wrought by the erasures as the film unfolds. Note outlines of bed visible through “doctors” surrounding the bed – the figures are spectral too.

Voyages in time and space

Soho dreams in his comatose state and remembers his distant past, which haunts him because he has been abusive in his dealings with people. He is the embodiment of physical and mental infirmity caused by greed and guilt. In his dreaming hidden information is brought to the surface of his consciousness for the viewer to see and experience.

Obsolete technologies represented by equipment from Soho's entwhile office environment (adding machines, a ticker-tape machine, Bakelite telephones and rubber stamps) are juxtaposed with state-of-the-art medical equipment, mainly in the form of scanning devices used for diagnostic purposes (sonar, MRI⁹, X-ray, CAT scanner etc.), which examine and expose the

bruised condition of his body, his heartbeat, his intestines and his broken pelvis. Kentridge states in Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 111)

While making the film I was also fascinated by the new ways of seeing the body using X-rays, CAT and MRI scans, sonar, etc. What is hidden under the skin? And is our blindness to this similar to our blindness to the effects of our actions?

Kentridge takes this ‘What is hidden under the skin?’ further as he reveals images from Soho’s past through his dreams and scanned images and X-rays. These scans of the inside of Soho’s body provide a brutally probing vivisectionist’s exposure of body and soul, searching the recesses of his conscience, trying to find images of the unconscious.

In *History of the Main Complaint* the X-ray image assumes new qualities in that instead of the conventional static X-ray images the viewer is confronted with moving images used by the artist to probe beneath the surface of a comatose Soho, scrutinising and revealing a body racked by pain, as well as the violent acts committed against black South Africans by Soho and other people. The images also metamorphose into objects such as plungers and telephones. It is only through Soho’s acknowledgement of his responsibility for his deeds of the past that he awakens into consciousness (Guggenheim 2003: 128).

The main theme in this film is Soho’s acknowledgment of his liability for the situation. Kentridge’s images underline the fear and guilt that haunt him from his past. Kentridge commented in Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 110) on Soho’s situation in this film: “Here’s a person who’s in a coma because of the weight of what he sees. The question is, is it going to kill him?”

The weight of what he sees (the past and / or memories) is in direct contrast to the present that still has to be committed to memory in order to become history. As the viewer is confronted with visible marks, signs, images and traces from Soho’s past. Some traces are barely perceptible but nevertheless leave a mark or sign (like footprints) that indicates the passage of a person or event. “So in each drawing you have a trace, somewhat like the trace a snail leaves behind it, of every stage, every development of the drawing. Built into the very process itself and into the drawings then is a notion of the passing of time, of the trace of time, of history.”¹⁰

Flickering images: memories in the making

The drawings are loaded with visible traces from previous drawings that have been rubbed out and reworked to new drawings. The very specific technique of Kentridge’s films is part of the meaning of his work as a whole. No matter how hard you rub to remove unwanted areas, you cannot get rid of all traces of the previous drawing: the vestiges remain as part of the history of making the movie. The build-up of history and time is recorded by Kentridge’s use of charcoal, the eraser and chalk. Benezra *et al.* (2001: 26) states that “Throughout his work Kentridge has repeatedly imbued each character with fragments of himself – references to his family, his body, and his memory – and we now see his willingness to bear the cost of these dissonances.”

The first doctor (actually Soho himself), also dressed in a pin-striped suit (Soho’s industrialist uniform) and a clone of Soho-cum-Felix, comes to stand next to Soho’s bed (figure 3). He is physically similar in appearance to both Felix (the artist’s persona) and Soho: an overweight, balding, middle-aged Jewish man). Kentridge uses himself as a convenient model for drawing himself as both doctor and patient.



Figure 3
William Kentridge. *Second Opinion*. Drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996, charcoal on paper, 80 x 120.7 cm, private collection).

A stethoscope is a diagnostic medical instrument consisting of a hollow disk that is connected by earpieces (one for each ear) to two tubes. This instrument is used to listen to sounds from within the patient's body. As the doctor moves the disk to various parts of Soho's comatose body he not only auscultates in the somatic sense but becomes aware of personal qualities of the patient as the monitor next to his bed picks up what is heard through the stethoscope and projects it as visual images seen by both the viewer and the doctor. The doctor's probing stethoscope delves deep into Soho's unconscious searching for guilt-ridden memories.

A second doctor arrives and now X-rays appear of his chest and lungs. X-rays are used to see bone fractures and other abnormalities. The X-ray image looks like his earlier eraser marks and smudges on paper. An X-ray drawing cuts through Soho's body and moves down his spine almost like the *cafetière* plunger in *Mine*. The X-ray assumes the characteristics of a living organism as it starts to breathe. The monitor screen constantly changes to show new images either from Soho's past or of his internal organs.



Figure 4
William Kentridge. *Consultation, 10 Doctors*. Drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996, charcoal and pastel on paper, 120 x 160 cm, private collection).

More doctors are added to the scene until Soho's bed is surrounded by a meeting of doctors (all duplicates of Soho) all wearing the Soho industrialist uniform: the pin-striped suit, possibly to show solidarity with the patient as they are all alter-ego's. Bells and phones are ringing in the background – these can be interpreted as traces of his distant past as mine-owner and landowner extraordinaire.

The circle of doctors (figure 4) act as medieval anatomists and curious observers, rather than healers of Soho's body. The sonar-cum-windscreen displays images of Soho's internal organs that transmute or morph into a landscape. The contents of the abdomen then metamorphose, first into a paper-punch, then into a telephone and a typewriter. Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 110) states: "It is as if traces of Soho's buried past are emerging. The more Soho recognises, acknowledges, these internal tools, the more his sensitivity to events beyond his own ego is heightened."

The scenes switch rapidly between the doctors' search for information with the aid of high-tech equipment and Soho's dream as he is driving along a deserted road looking through the windscreen. Soho's heart is beating violently on the heart machine. The car hits something and a plate breaks. The action intensifies as the telephone rings once more. An X-ray of his abdomen flashes on the screen, then an ink damper becomes visible. A typewriter rattling frenetically speeds the action even further and various body parts flash on the screen.



Figure 5
William Kentridge. Drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint*
(1996, charcoal and pastel on paper, 120 x 160 cm, private collection).

The action moves back to the road and the next moment a pair of eyes appear in the rearview mirror (figure 5). Although Soho is driving the eyes looking back at him from the mirror belong to Felix. Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 110) states that the merging of Soho and Felix was previously only implied, while it becomes reality in this film.

The sonar screen next to Soho's bed (in the hospital ward) shows images from his own body before it metamorphoses into the rearview mirror that shows glimpses of Soho's past as the car drives into the future. Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 38) states that

we see internalised signs of his past emerging in the form of telephones and other office tools. Parallel to this, he remembers scenes of roadside beatings to which we are introduced obliquely, through fragments of his partially erased experiences. But the original experiences were already filtered and indirect, witnessed through the windshield of his car: the viewer therefore perceives them doubly mediated. Our obscene gaze is reversed and sent back to us by the eyes of Felix/Soho disquietingly reflected back at us from the rear-view mirror, implicating us through this mirroring in an awareness of possible indirect responsibility.

Re-membering the past

Kentridge states in the brochure of his Drawing Center art exhibition (1998): "There was both the pleasure of making drawings based on these images (there is a great affinity between the velvety gray tones of an X-ray and the softness of charcoal dust brushed onto paper) and also

a sense that these ways of looking inside the body function as a metaphor for looking inside thought processes or conscience.”

When a lightning bolt strikes the Sunday roast it goes through a series of transformations, becoming consecutively a toe, a scrotum, and lastly a penis. In the next scene Soho is driving and he notices people being brutally assaulted, kicked and beaten to the ground¹¹ next to the road, but he drives on. These painful self-inflicted sequences recall images from his 1997 theatre production, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. A skull marked with red crosses and various wounds is superimposed on Soho’s facial features.

The scene switches back to Soho’s car again. He closes his eyes, as the wipers have to work extremely hard to get the rain off the windscreen. A field of red crosses appears on the bodies to mark the exact location of each injury and is erased. The scene returns to the hospital room showing the water near Soho’s bed. Then the scene switches to scans of Soho’s body, only to be erased by the windscreen wipers and the scanning equipment at the hospital.

In the next scene Soho drives his car at night on a poorly lit road - he dreams/remembers/ sees an accident happening as a figure appears in the car’s headlights and runs across the road, naturally causing an accident in which the windscreen is shattered, the victim is killed and a face is crushed. The scene shifts back to Soho’s hospital bed where the curtains around his bed are now closed. Like the curtains drawn round the bed, so, in a sense, the ‘curtains’ are drawn round the accident, obscuring it from view. But although nobody knows about this incident it is one of his ineradicable memories that will haunt him until he takes responsibility for his actions and is reconciled with his past. Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 110) states that “His sense of responsibility is awakened and he is no longer able to lie unconscious as a disengaged witness of events.”

The viewer shares Soho’s journey into his murky past by means of flashbacks reminding him (Soho) of the human suffering he caused. Once Soho accepts his guilt the curtains around his hospital bed open dramatically, to show an empty space.

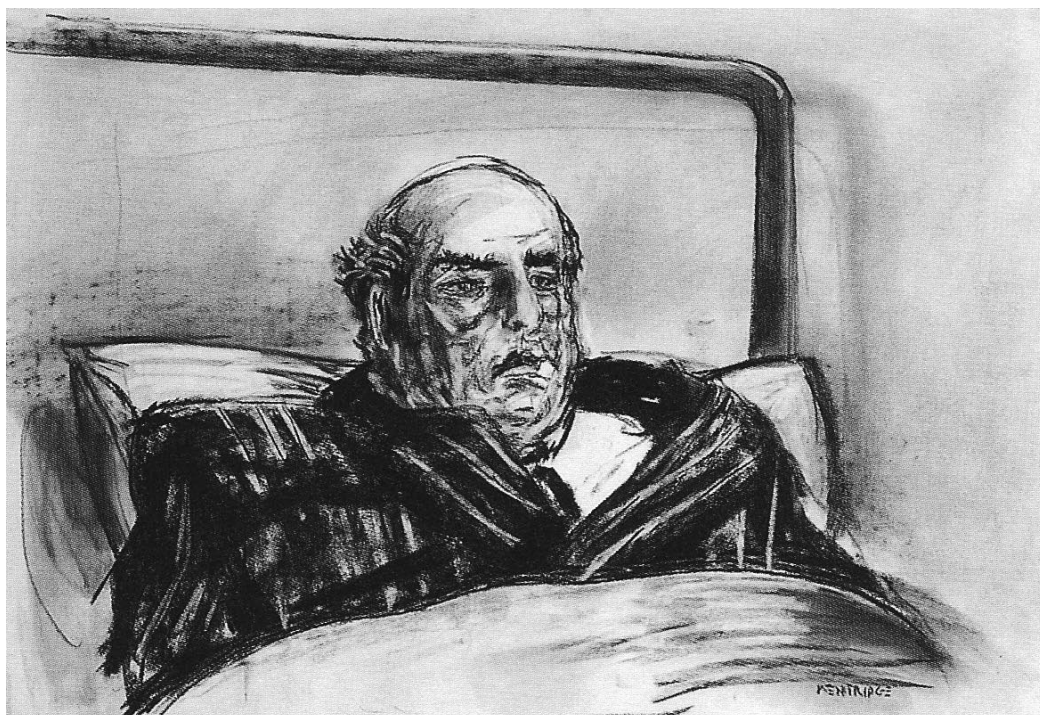


Figure 6
William Kentridge. *Soho Awake*. Drawing for the film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996, cCharcoal on paper, 69 x 103 cm, private collection).

Soho realises on regaining consciousness that he caused the death of the victim of his car accident. The scene shifts to his known office space. Here Soho sits upright at his desk which is laden with papers. He is surrounded by the instruments of his former power, the luxuries of yesteryear: a ringing phone, a printer chattering madly, and the ringing of a cash register. Once this happens the viewer is immediately suspicious about the meaning of Soho's recovery from his coma as he happily returns to the time and space of his past: nothing has changed. The viewer is left with questions about Soho's moral progress, and therefore, whether his journey through space and time has been worthwhile.

Conclusion

In *History of the Main Complaint*, Kentridge joins disparate scenes from SA's apartheid era, thereby drawing attention to both history and politics. Kentridge states that he is interested in an ambiguous political art in which spatiotemporal settings are a critical element (Godby 1999: 83): "I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalised society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to say, an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay."

The spectator is transported backwards and forwards in time and space as images of past alienation and oppression flash through Soho's brain. The medical examination can be seen as an allegory of reconciliation, but its effectiveness is undecided. In the next film in the series, *WEIGHING ... and WANTING*, the complaints against Soho are explored further.

Although past and present, right and wrong, victim and aggressor are juxtaposed interactively in *History of the Main Complaint*, the film does not polarise the audience to take sides, but rather to view the film within the unique cultural setting of a contemporary South Africa.

Notes

1. The film was premiered at *Fault Lines: Inquiries into Truth and Reconciliation* – a group exhibition (13 exhibitors) at the Leerdam Bastion, The Castle, Cape Town (16 June – 31 July 1996) under curatorship of Professor Jane Taylor. Kentridge's film was projected onto a small white board on a blackboard easel. *Fault Lines* was a series of cultural events to mark the 20th anniversary of the Soweto uprising (1976) – in essence this exhibition was about issues of truth and reconciliation.
2. 16 June 1996 was the 20th anniversary of the Soweto riots.
3. Thirteen South African artists exhibited: Kentridge showed his *History of the Main Complaint*, 1996 and Kevin Brand his *Piéta*, 1996.
4. Kentridge, William. 1998. *Drawings for Projection. Text for brochure for his exhibition at The Drawing Center* [online]. January. Available from: <http://www.forumart.org/kentridge.html> [Accessed 28 May 2007].
5. William Kentridge, "The Body Drawn and Quartered" (unpublished), September 1998. In Benezra *et al* 2001: 25.
6. For example Rembrandt's painting, *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, Oil on canvas. 216 x 170 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague. Anatomy lessons were a social event in the 17th century, taking place in lecture rooms that were actual theatres, with students, colleagues and the general public being permitted to attend on payment of an entrance fee. The spectators are appropriately dressed for a solemn social occasion. It is thought that, with the exception of the figures to the rear and left, these people were added to the picture later. [online]. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatomy_Lesson_of_Dr._Nicolaes_Tulp [Accessed 14 September 2009].

7. Kentridge, William. Transcript of lecture [online]. Available from: http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Pinto/gene4/kentridge_eng.htm [Accessed 14 September 2009].
8. Madrigal: Any part song. [Italian *madrigale*, earlier *madriale*, “(piece) without accompaniment”, probably from medieval Latin *mātrīcālis*, “of the womb”, newly sprung from the womb. *Readers Digest* 1985: 1018.)
9. Magnetic Resonance Imaging.
10. Kentridge, William. Transcript of lecture [online]. [http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/](http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/Pinto/gene4/kentridge_eng.htm)
11. Kentridge quoted in Christov-Bakargiev *et al.* (1998: 29): ... when I was four or five, I had been driving in a car with my grandfather, and out of the side window I saw two men kicking a third man on the edge of the road, which was also, for me, a shocking image of violence. I mention it because that image comes into *History of the Main Complaint*. (Lecture, Triennale, Milan, 19 November 1997, published in *Facts and Fiction*, ed. R. Pinto, Commune di Milano, Milan, 1998).

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