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# TREATING THE BODY OF WITNESS: MEDICAL UNDERSTANDING IN WILLIAM KENTRIDGE'S *HISTORY OF THE MAIN COMPLAINT*

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## Abstract

William Kentridge's *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) renders its main character, the industrialist Soho Eckstein, in a comatose state as doctors labour to diagnose him. This article reads Kentridge's use of CT Scans and X-rays in the film as a metaphor for the diagnosis of apartheid narrated through South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Using Barry Saunter's (2008) reading of the ambiguity in radiological diagnosis, this essay argues that the diagnostic tools in *History of the Main Complaint* locate a similar state of ambiguity in the TRC. Throughout the film several red X's are marked upon the surface of these diagnostic images, denoting spaces of uncertainty, leading the viewer to flashbacks whose narratives of guilt and complicity are uncertain. To read through these ambiguities undermines what Mark Sanders (2007) termed the 'quasi-legal' domain of the TRC while uncovering narratives of apartheid that fall outside of the TRC's scope. Like the X-ray's stark black and white format, which serves as a legal document of bodily harm, the TRC encodes a juridical and singular narrative of the TRC. Instead these ambiguities narrate spaces outside of the main complaint that in themselves may be more illuminating of the legacies of apartheid in South Africa.

## Key terms:

William Kentridge, CT scan, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ambiguity, apartheid, X-Rays

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.

– William Kentridge, "The Body Drawn and Quartered," 1999.

## Introduction

South African artist and filmmaker William Kentridge's animated film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), opens as its main character, Soho Eckstein, lies in a hospital bed attached to a respirator and cardiogram machine. Soho's comatose state in the hospital is set

against the backdrop of South Africa's constitutionally mandated Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Rendered in his trademark animation style of drawing, photographing, erasing and redrawing on a single sheet of paper, Kentridge leaves a palimpsest on the paper's surface. In doing so, Kentridge's animations preserve traces of the film's history on the image's surface. *History of the Main Complaint* further evokes questions of memory in post-apartheid South Africa through the process of Soho's diagnosis in the hospital. Throughout the film, X-Rays, cardiograms, CT and MRI scans are used to look inside Soho's body. The images revealed from these tests feature red marks indicative of the diagnostic process in radiological rooms. These markers lead to flashbacks in Soho's memory where he recalls scenes of violence witnessed while driving his car. However, *History of the Main Complaint* reveals a sense of ambiguity in these flashbacks relating to Soho's injuries, and to how he is constructed as witness, victim, perpetrator, or a combination of these positions.

*History of the Main Complaint* is the sixth film in Kentridge's series *9 Drawings for Projection*. In this series of animated films, Kentridge uses the Johannesburg property developer Soho Eckstein and his wife, who takes a lover, the idealist dreamer Felix Teitlebaum. After *Felix in Exile* (1994), Felix disappears from the narrative, as Mrs Eckstein eventually returns to her husband. The remaining films focus on the divides between private and public life in Soho's empire and the personal divides between Soho and Mrs Eckstein. Using these three characters, *9 Drawings for Projection* explores questions of indifference, alienation, guilt and memory in both the personal lives of the Ecksteins and in South Africans as apartheid came to an end and a post-apartheid state was established.

I argue that Kentridge's exploration of memory in *History of the Main Complaint* uses the process of medical diagnosis as a metaphor to explore the narra-

tion of apartheid history in the TRC as an inherently ambiguous process despite its juridical desire for truth. Both the TRC and radiology employ a relationship between expert, witness, and testimony to narrate histories of the patient's malady or the history of apartheid. To examine the metaphors of diagnosis, I turn to emergency room Dr Barry Saunders' (2008) anthropological analysis of slide rooms of radiology departments. Saunders (2008:8, 15, 199) investigates the process of reading CT scans as an image, insisting on the centrality of vision in the practice of diagnosis. He reveals that the radiologist's analysis is termed a process of testimony, which links the evidentiary processes of the TRC with the diagnostic tools of radiology. Saunders' work resurrects the centrality of narrative in the clinical and evidentiary process of diagnosis, revealing that vision and testimony are part of the process of cutting up and seeing the body in a slide room.

Mark Sanders (2007:4-5) reads the discourse of the TRC in a similar way; locating ambiguity as a constituent feature of its narrative. Sanders (2007:17) argues that despite the TRC's openness to narrative accounts by participants, they were ultimately subjected to forensic criteria to determine truth or falsity and relevance to the scope of investigation, leaving the TRC with a 'quasi-legal' structure.

The TRC was established as part of the interim constitution of South Africa (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998:48). The Commission's goals were to establish a historical narrative of apartheid violence and its causes, granting amnesty to offenders, attempting to locate victims, and to prepare a report to the president of South Africa on gross violations of human rights committed from 1960 to 1994 (TRC 1998:55-57). The TRC (1998:55) committee describes 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.

The statement clearly establishes the desire of the report to narrate through the genre of history. Furthermore, the notion of amnesty highlights the judicial decisions engaged with by the Commission, emphasising the legal structure in Sanders' analysis. In his examination of amnesty, Jacques Derrida (2001:42-43) locates an aporia in the divide between chairperson Desmond Tutu's Christianised language of forgiveness and the 'judicial logic of amnesty'. In this divide, it is revealed that the TRC often rests on the narratives, authority and practices of a courtroom.

Sanders' (2007:5-6) emphasis on forensic truth reveals an inherent difficulty in the TRC's outlook: it often depends on the literary for witnesses to narrate their experiences. Forensic truth, at work in both radiology departments uncovering lesions and fractures lying beneath the surface of the body, and in the sessions of the TRC, engenders a series of ambiguities. The judicial order is often brought into contradiction with the literary narratives given as testimony. *History of the Main Complaint*, whose title suggests a case history of the patient providing symptoms and medical history that acts as a testimony by giving an account of one's self, brings these two systems of forensic truth together in the film. Each is a narrative structure reliant on testimony, and an expert in the form of a doctor or the Commission's report to constitute an official history of the malady, be it medical or, in the case of South Africa, apartheid.

Sanders' (2007:24) literary reading of the TRC argues that the official report's genre is history. Hayden White

(1987:48) has argued that narrative is necessary to constitute a historical text; it is dependent on the same rhetorical tropes such as irony and metaphor that constitute the form of fiction. In doing so, the legal narratives rely upon literary forms to constitute their history. It is here that ambiguity, defined by William Empson (1956:5-6) as indecision regarding what one means, a plurality of meanings, or that a statement may connote several meanings, becomes important for this reading of the TRC. Like any other literary form, the ambiguities in forensic testimony or radiological practice create several meanings, opening the field of testimony to a number of different narrative experiences. Often ambiguity in the medical image requires invasive surgery for more investigation. The TRC read as literary form (as opposed to the juridical) works through ambiguity to denote places where more needs to be said and where more than one conclusion can be drawn. It opens the text to a multiplicity of readings, resisting the finality and objectivity that forensic truth attempts to constitute.

By examining the inherent ambiguities of diagnosis in the radiology room, my reading of *History of the Main Complaint* uses Soho's diagnosis as a metaphor to explore the ambiguities inherent in the forensic truths of the TRC's report. The markers used in the radiology department, and marked upon Soho's body in the film, denote uncertainty on the CT scan, which reveal problems that necessitate further investigation. This process reveals the ambiguity at work in the TRC; it is unable to give a complete diagnosis of apartheid. Some narrative aspects cannot be addressed in a judicial forum; to locate the uncertainty of diagnosis highlights the place of these domains in the narrative of apartheid. I will begin by situating Kentridge's use of these devices in the scope of *9 Drawings for Projection* and contextualise the film's relationship to the TRC. I will then reveal the process of testimony and ambiguity in reading the

CT scan, contrasting it with the objectivity of the X-ray. My conclusion will then examine the implications this relationship between the TRC and diagnosis has in Kentridge's project, using ambiguity as a critical narrative.

## The film

In the previous film in this series, *Felix in Exile* (1994), Kentridge located the body as a part of the landscape of Johannesburg's industrial ruins. Several scenes of individuals lying dead in slurries and blasted pits dominate the imagery of the film; tying together political violence and industrial degradation in one terrain. In *History of the Main Complaint* and the following film, *WEIGHING ... and WANTING* (1998), Kentridge shifts the focus. Instead of the landscape being a repository of memory, these films locate the landscape inside the body. The body itself becomes a landscape, holding memories that need to be decoded. Kentridge has drawn landscape scenes inside Soho's brain scans and its imagery is evoked in the flashbacks Soho experiences in *History of the Main Complaint* as he drives out of Johannesburg into the countryside. Throughout *9 Drawings for Projection*, memory and landscape are linked through the evocation of geological metaphors, whereas *Mine* (1991) investigates Soho's relationship to the mines he owns on the outskirts of Johannesburg and *Felix in Exile* centres around representations of the landscape as a site of violence and industry.

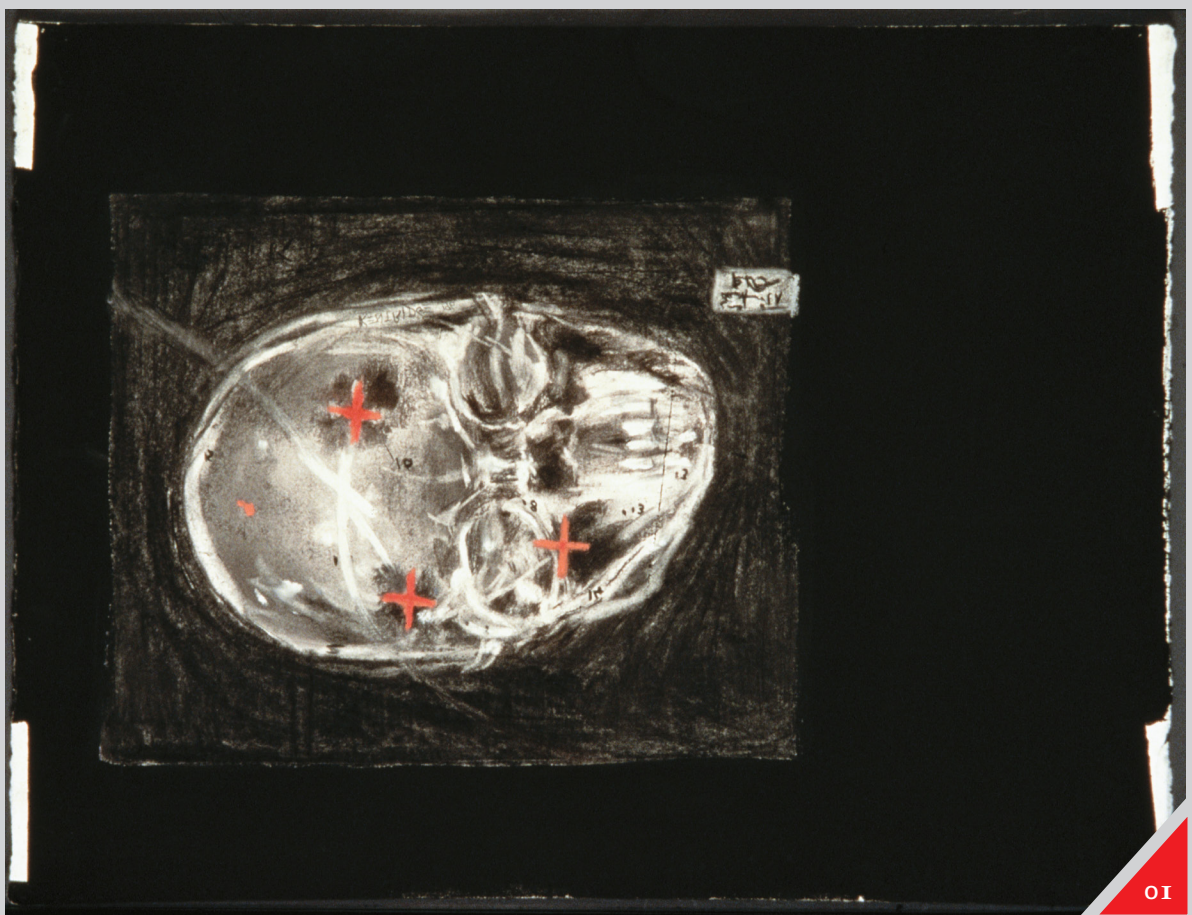
In *WEIGHING ... and WANTING* these geological referents emerge in CT slices of the brain, cutting through the brain the same way that a geological sample would cut through a rock.<sup>1</sup> Geological metaphors are also invoked through Kentridge's description of the challenges of narrating apartheid memories as a 'rock', arguing that the weight apartheid represents often obfuscates effective ways of representing it, engaging with its

legacies, and the place within one's life or artistic production (Kentridge 1998:74-75). To represent apartheid (or any looming socio-political issue for that matter) in a grand narrative leaves the response feeling inadequate. When apartheid is narrated in this way, Kentridge (1998: 76) argues that 'the rock always wins'. Kentridge (1998: 76) prefers aesthetic responses to apartheid: 'that have their origin outside a particular object may often be more illuminating in their oblique light than the full searchlights of the project that stares straight at this object.' That is to say, in the smallness of certain narratives, their specificity can illuminate the structures of a whole system, such as apartheid, rather than the overwhelming nature that a blunt and totalised narrative may represent.

As Kentridge reveals in the epigraph, these geological metaphors are strongly linked to bodily representations. Internal images of one's body, both medically revealed in X-rays and CT scans, and psychically represented in the emotions of guilt, loss, and pain become alien and difficult to decode or understand. To witness and comprehend images of Mars based on their resemblance to South Africa's Karoo desert becomes an easier task than knowing the functions of one's liver from a CT scan or decoding memories of violence and pain in the post-apartheid era. Comparable to the difficulty patients may have in understanding images of their body, the rock of apartheid as Kentridge puts it is suggestive of a sense of impenetrability.

*History of the Main Complaint* begins as the curtains surrounding Soho's hospital bed are pulled back to reveal him lying in bed still dressed in his trademark pinstripe suit. The film's title is revealed on a monitor next to Soho's bed and the hiss of a respirator is audible. As the doctors labour to diagnose Soho, they begin probing him with stethoscopes. The doctors appear like multiple versions of Soho, suggesting their interchangeability. During the course of Soho's examinations, there





**Figure 1:** William Kentridge, *Drawing for History of the Main Complaint*, 1996, reproduced courtesy of William Kentridge

are cuts between the examination and images from a CT scan or X-ray. These devices, in their representations of Soho's body, reveal several red markers denoting points of trauma upon his body. Trauma here is used in its strict medical sense, evoking a wound or bodily injury; these markers then denote points of injury on Soho's body (Caruth 1996:3).

As these markers are inscribed, the film cuts to a series of flashbacks from Soho's perspective, as the viewer looks on with him. These flashbacks show Soho driving out of Johannesburg into the city's townships and industrial ruin. Art historian Jill Bennett (2004:75-76) pays close attention to Soho's car ride, reminding us he is 'at the wheel', navigating through both time and space as he moves through South Africa's landscape.

The vehicle references both the picturesque and rural spaces that the car moves through, while reinforcing the divisions between public and private, evocative of concerns over security in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The car is a place that can be secured and armed with an alarm, yet this security is ruptured as scenes of violence break down this divide in the film (Bennett 2004:75-76).

The first flashback shows Soho leaving the city on a long straight highway, as it cuts to an image of a telephone revealed in a cardiogram monitor. This is followed by an X-ray of Soho's torso where a stamp removes the red markers on the screen, and then a typewriter whose action obscures the stamping from view. A cardiogram follows this image as a ham and a scrotum are



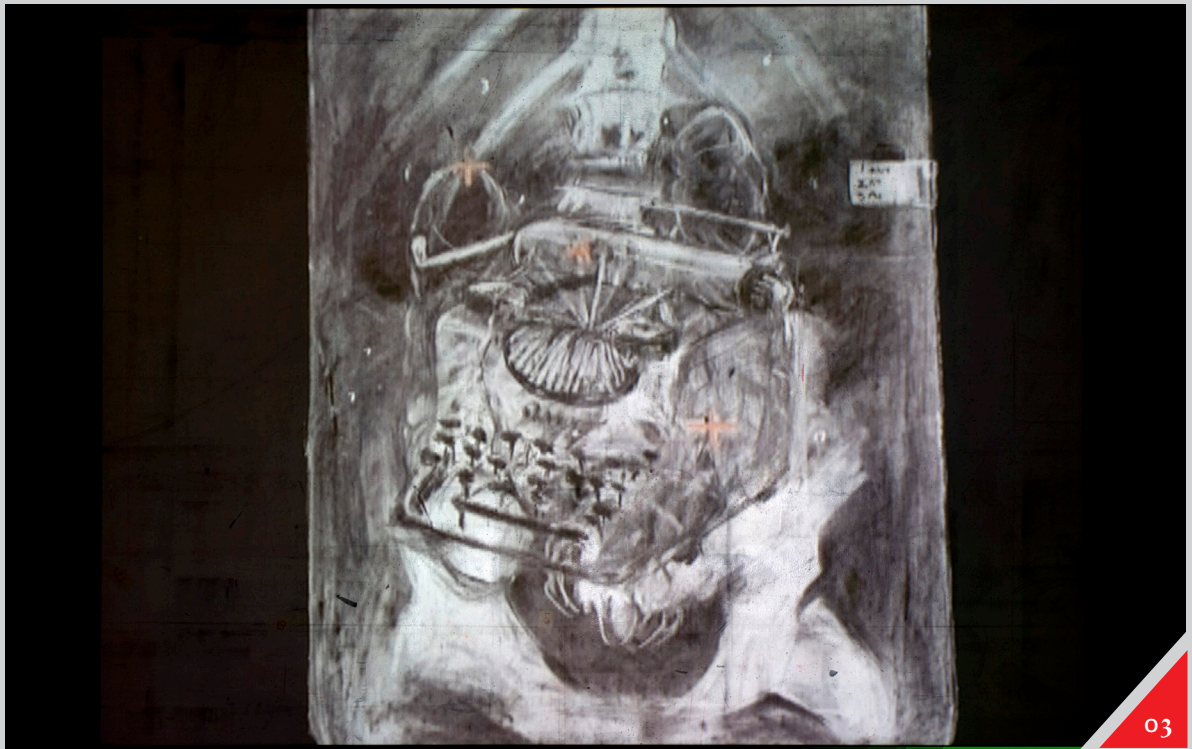
**Figure 2:** William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint*, 35mm film transferred to video, 5:50 min., reproduced courtesy of William Kentridge.

attached to electrical leads and energy surges through them. In this montage, the Sunday roast is confronted with a different system where the body is reduced to a piece of meat, recalling police torture tactics under apartheid. The image within the larger context of the film is suggestive of a divide between public and private in both social networks and in the body.

The second driving sequence features Soho driving down a long road, again leaving the city. As he gazes into the rear-view mirror, he witnesses two men kicking and beating a third. Kentridge's animation cuts between these scenes of assault and a CT scan of a head where the violence is denoted with red crosses at the points where the body is struck (Figure 1). Soho proceeds to drive past the scene of the assault, finding the red crosses on the windshield of his car. He turns on the wiper blades, erasing the crosses, though imperfectly

from the windshield (Figure 2). Soho is then shown lying in bed before the film cuts back to his drive. In the final flashback, his car strikes a person running in front of it, prompting the scene's images to be seen through the shattered shards of the windshield. These final two images of violence derive from experiences in Kentridge's own childhood. He witnessed a man being beaten and was the passenger in a car that struck and killed another person (Kentridge, Rinder, Rosenthal & Silverman 2009). The film ends as Soho awakens with a sudden jolt in his hospital bed, as the shattered fragments (their shattering is implied when the windshield of the car is broken) coalesce back into coherent images and they reveal Soho's office equipment. The curtains then open around Soho's hospital bed, revealing him seated at a desk as the clatter of typing and phones ringing is heard; he has returned to a state of 'business as usual'.





**Figure 3:** William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint*, 35mm film transferred to video, 5:50 min., reproduced courtesy of William Kentridge.

## CT scans and the ambiguity of testimony

As I argued at the onset of this essay, Kentridge's invocation of medical technologies and the ambiguity inherent in what they see becomes a metaphor for witness and memory. One of Soho's X-rays in *History of the Main Complaint* gives a clear depiction of the relation between body and memory pursued in the film. The image of Soho's torso (Figure 3), depicts the ribs and spinal cord, and situates a typewriter over the pelvis. The image of a typewriter emerges frequently in Soho's empire alongside other office equipment that references his history as a property developer in Johannesburg. The typewriter both connotes an image of his work as a property developer, and its placement in his X-ray suggests that it is perhaps part of his malady. In their

juxtaposition, the place of business and apartheid emerges into this discussion of the TRC; Dan Cameron (1999:70) has argued that the collapse of Soho's empire may have brought about his 'calamity'. However, even here, the implication of guilt is not made explicit.

The typewriter also documents, recording histories and providing a transcript; it even bears resemblance to a stenotype machine evoking a legal domain through its imagery. The typewriter is an apparatus like the X-ray machine or CT scan, a system of representation and communication. Both the typewriter and diagnostic tools narrate portions of Soho's history and memories. Within this scene, the typewriter's hammers move forward striking the surface behind them, presumably marking characters upon the X-ray. However the erasure traces present on the surface of the image obscure any clarity of its process; as it narrates, the production of its testimony cannot be seen. The uncer-

tainty here is further underpinned by the lack of any clear signs of injury, such as broken bones, underneath the red markers.

JM Coetzee's (1999:86) reading of *History of the Main Complaint* situates the red markers as places of exploration recalling their use as surveying markers in *Felix in Exile*. Likewise, Saunders (2008:76) demonstrates their importance in diagnosis in radiology departments, explaining: '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 [physician], lesions to be recalled at the time of dictation.' Saunders (2009: 76) continues his discussion by revealing that the wax pencil which makes these red marks on the CT scan, denote areas of suspicion; places where an expert needs to be contacted for further interpretation. Within the brain scans from *History of the Main Complaint*, several red markers are placed on the skull, marking points of injury or trauma. These markers also appear upon the body of the man whose assault Soho witnessed. The red markers, as Saunders' reading of the functions of the CT suite indicate, reveal a psychological wound that needs to be decoded or taken apart by the team of doctors residing around Soho's bed.

The red markers located here, as in the entire film, locate areas of concern but do not disclose a methodology for reparation; rather they call for an expert to perform a diagnosis. The marker also performs an act of reading and interpretation, much as the TRC does by locating specific individual histories where testimony is necessary. The reading of the CT scan and its marking calls attention to specific areas, it standardises the body (numbering vertebrae) and denotes spaces which the expert must be called upon to explain or speak about. The red markers on Soho's X-rays and CT scans demarcate instances mapped upon his body that demand the

expert's interpretation. These red markers 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 *History of the Main Complaint* the red markers are rendered on the surface of the image before Soho's flashbacks, suggesting that these scenes relate to the ambiguities in the medical image. While the markers of these traumas can be seen, their main complaint is complicated, as Soho is both the witness to an assault and injured in the car crash. Furthermore, it is only diagnosis, not treatment, that is represented in the films; Soho's recovery is absent. In the incompleteness of diagnosis, the red markers and more widely medical diagnostic tools become metaphors to explore the TRC's attempt to narrate historical "truth", expressed through a forensic legal domain. As I previously asserted through Sanders' (2007:17) literary analysis of the TRC, witnesses' testimony was subject to verification or falsification. What one claimed to have seen, what they saw, or even did not see is at the core of the narrative and legal structures of the TRC report as a historical archive of apartheid.

Because of this centrality of vision in producing narratives of memory, the CT scanner seems an appropriate metaphor to explore these claims; in fact the narration of the report is referred to as a process of testimony (Sanders 2008:207). The practice of radiology functions like a courtroom with regard to this evidentiary process: 'Evidence is introduced, testimony given, judgements formed' (Sanders 2008:207). The radiological department, like the TRC hearings, functions in a quasi-legal domain. In fact, a radiological relative to the CT scan, the X-ray is a legal document. Physician and historian Barron H Lerner (1992:392) states the emergence of radiography as an autonomous discourse of medicine arose partially because of the need for interpreting



X-rays in malpractice suits. In the TRC a domain of introducing evidence and testimony also exists: witnesses provide a narrative through testimony, judgement is passed on amnesty, and decisions are made on whose applications would be heard and what evidence is relevant to the hearings. The report even invokes a legal precedent in its structure, rejecting the Nuremberg trials as a model (TRC 1998:5).

However, the images produced by the CT scanner often reveal spaces of uncertainty; the radiologist must call upon a specialist for further interpretation (Sanders 2008:16-17, 20-31). The uncertainty within the CT scan as a visual record, often in contradiction to the presumed conditions of positivist evidence and fact that radiography represents in popular discourse (Sanders 2008:5, 308), is at the core of Kentridge's work. This uncertainty is most explicit through Kentridge's use of optical devices that are often employed to engender a sense of ambiguity in narrating history. I have shown elsewhere (Hennlich 2011:52, 61) that the camera becomes an ironic device in *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1999). In *Ubu*, the camera depicts Dirk Coetzee's testimony to the TRC; its functions in representing this testimony show the camera documenting the destruction of evidence while creating a record of this erasure. In doing so, the camera in *Ubu* represents both the action of witnessing and its impossibility.

More notable is Kentridge's frequent reference to the stereoscope. Kentridge has produced a number of stereoscopic cards, but the use of the stereoscope is most explicit in his film *Stereoscope* (1999). In *Stereoscope*, Kentridge uses its instability as a metaphor for the divides between public and private Soho experiences in his life. Jonathan Crary's (1990:122) study of nineteenth-century optical devices and their relation to modernity, reveals that the stereoscope functioned by merging the viewer's perception of two separate worlds into one plane to produce a three-dimensional effect. However, this device

was highly unstable and some stereoscopic cards were unable to produce the intended effect (Crary 1990:124). The stereoscope becomes a way of exploring how one reconciles different events into one world in Kentridge's project. For Crary (1990:8, 24), the stereoscope marks the collapse of a model of vision associated with the camera obscura as a rational disembodied form of knowledge, and constituting a model of embodied vision. The CT scanner is an unstable optical device in the field of medical vision. Its use in *History of the Main Complaint* suggests through its ambiguity an opening up of the narrative to new meanings; it undermines a verifiable reading engendered by judicial authority.

## The deathly space of the X-ray

As the red crosses referred to previously are uncovered, they reveal three flashbacks of Soho driving through the countryside. These spaces seem to be uncovered as the red inscriptions are made on the CT scans and X-rays. While the CT scan seems to refer to Soho's time in the hospital, the X-ray becomes linked with driving. The car is Soho's primary method of encountering the landscape of South Africa in *History of the Main Complaint*, reflecting a similar inside/outside model between the country and the body. In the three driving sequences the car becomes a link between landscape (exterior) and the mental traumas of Soho (interior), just as the CT scan reveals a separation between surface and what exists below it (Kentridge 1999:143).

The car and the X-ray become further linked because of their relationship to death through the accident. The accident is like the X-ray; it destroys the separation of outside from inside. Jean Baudrillard (2005:71) remarks that the car's imagined space is death because

of the imagined inevitability of an accident, something also suggested by the X-ray, which is used to diagnose and treat in the event of a car crash. Fredric Jameson's (1991:9) explication of postmodern culture turns to Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* as representative of postmodernism, stating that they represent 'glacéd X-ray elegance'. Jameson's reading argues that the X-ray as a formal feature of Warhol's work signifies deathly space as much as his imagery in the death and disaster works. Warhol's silk screens have the qualities of an X-ray because they do not plunge into the depths of content. Rather its deathly structure remains on the surface; it is precisely Jameson's (1991:10) 'waning of affect' that they represent. This metaphor of surface, not being able to plunge into content, begins to suggest the problems one faces with "the rock" of apartheid as Kentridge discusses it; in its looming force the rock resists a critical language to respond to it effectively, rather numbing one with its totality. As the X-ray is surface, so too is the rock, one cannot get to the bottom of it.

The car and X-ray overlap as deadly spaces, but it is in their exchange that they reveal scenes of death and violence in Soho's flashbacks. As Soho witnesses the assault, the red X's are marked upon his X-ray. The violence experienced in the car continues, as the markers are placed on the victim's scans, the victim and Soho's scans merge. During this sequence, the red markers are left on his windscreen as he eventually strikes a man crossing the road. Soon thereafter, the shattered scenes of his flashback return to whole images and Soho awakes. Presumably, the violence denotes the deathly space of the car, overlapping with the X-ray's own deathly domain. Not only is it the task of the doctors, who probe into Soho's body with their stethoscope snouts to mark the points of inquiry upon the X-ray, it also the task of witnessing as Soho looks out of the car that led to these red marker's inscription.

The violation of boundaries between public and private is at work in the X-ray's function as an image of death, which highlights the car and X-ray as spaces that embody a similar discourse. Lisa Cartwright (1995) emphasises 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 (1995: 113,121) describes the X-ray as an image of brutality and violence, stripping the system bare, leaving only a black and white image as a remnant. Cartwright (1995: 113,121) 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 gaze of medicine and the public at large.' The X-ray not only strips open systems, like the TRC attempts to do through its hearings to document a history, Cartwright argues the reading of an X-ray, like the Commission's hearings, also becomes a public affair. The X-ray subjects the body of the patient to the gaze of the doctors laden with the authority engendered by their expert ability to read such an image. Again, the notion of forensic truth raised by Sanders seems pertinent. Testimony, delivered in a public setting, subject (in the case of perpetrators) to the juridical power of cross-examination, is ultimately judged, as Derrida (2001:43) argues, to be deserving of such a legal distinction or not.

The X-ray does serve as a document of legal truth; Lerner (1992:392) reveals that radiography as an autonomous practice became necessary because of the need for interpreting X-rays for malpractice suits. Representing a discourse of accuracy and cohesion, the X-ray was developed to represent concrete proof of a fracture, so much so that doctors stopped using physical examinations to perform diagnosis (Lerner 1992:388). In this way, the X-ray is called upon in the judgement of

harm done to a body and who was responsible for that damage. The development of the X-ray provides a quickly reproducible and purportedly accurate way of imaging and understanding the body. The X-ray in this way becomes ironic; as it documents the act of injury, it flags its own signification of a system of violence and death.

Kentridge also sees medical imaging technology representing a certain sense of violence. Figuring the synthesis between nature and the medical image, Kentridge (2004:127) states: '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.' The image itself works in a rhetoric of violence; it slices open the body, distorts its perceptions and in its technical rendering can even alienate the patient when confronted with CT scans or X-rays (Saunders 2008:27). In *History of the Main Complaint*, it is not just the scenes Soho witnesses that are violent, but also the examination probes into the body, the stethoscopes moving in impossible ways through the body for the doctors to witness his interior through both sound and the images on the screen.

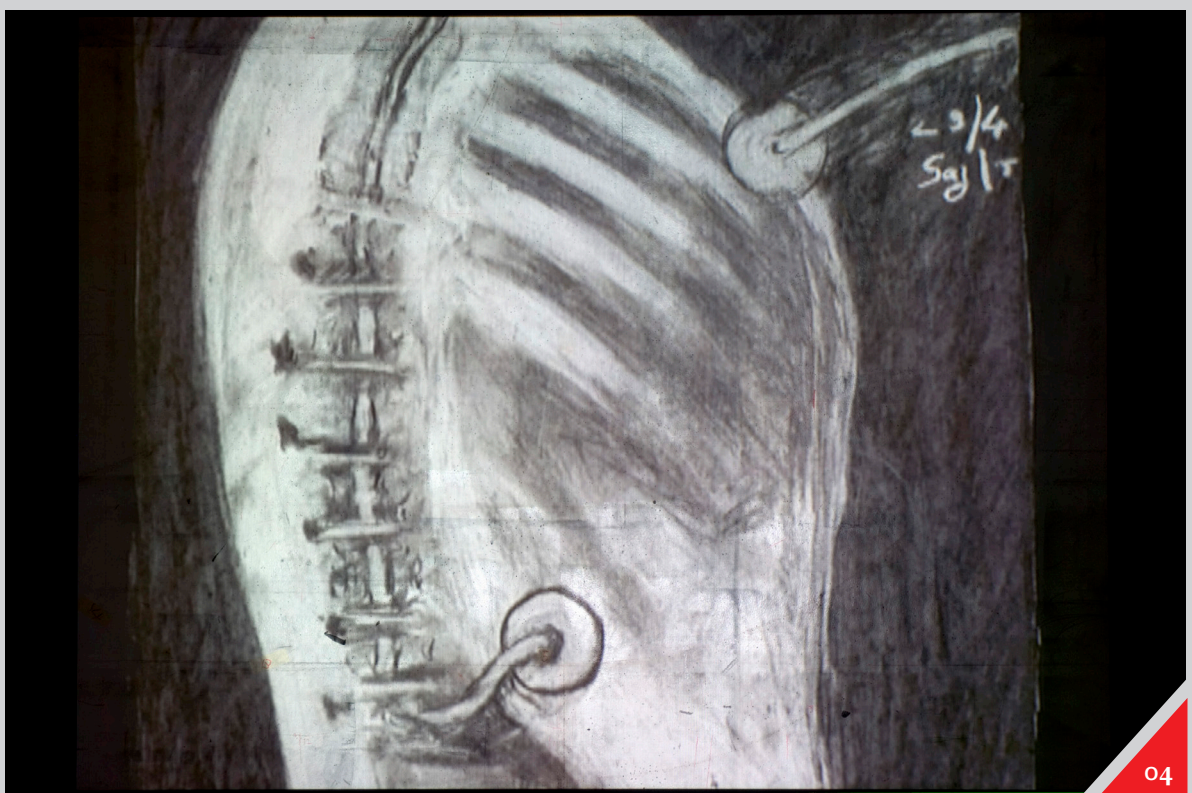
Roland Barthes' famous study of photography, *Camera Lucida* (1981), creates a division between *studium* and *punctum*. Barthes (1981:26-28) describes *studium* as a kind of 'education,' a knowing of the maker's intentions that drives most photographs. This is contrasted with something more visceral and personal he describes as *punctum*: an 'accident', an unexpected detail of the image that arouses an individual when looking at it a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole' (Barthes:26-28). In this analysis, Barthes (1981:14-15) sees photography as having a deathly quality to it. The X-ray in its verifiable evidence, a discourse to be studied objectively, seems to belong to the domain of *studium*. It is possible through looking to understand what is going on in the X-ray, to locate

fractures, for instance. However, Saunders (2008: 36) remarks that CT slices hold the potential of *punctum*; the discovery of something buried inside the body, an undiscovered lesion can prick both the radiologist and the patient. It is both a wound, holding resonances of medical traumas and an accident as something unintentional and unexpected, reminding us of Soho's car accident in *History of the Main Complaint*. In the CT room, the location of lesions, tumours or other spaces of ambiguity may produce this sense of *punctum*, according to Saunders (2008:36). Its own ambiguity may open the potential for unexpected readings of the scan.

In *History of the Main Complaint*, the process of diagnosis reveals the ambiguity inherent within its functions. We know that Soho has been in a car crash, but the extent of his physical traumas and their relationship to the scenes he has witnessed are unclear. During the examination performed in his hospital bed, the doctor locates office equipment lying beneath the skin's surface by probing inside Soho's body with a stethoscope (Figure 4). Kentridge then cuts to a scene where an X-ray shows the doctor's stethoscope snake through the spinal cord, and the next doctor plunges through the breast and ribcage to find the heart; 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. They recall the coffee plunger that Soho uses to drill from his bed to the mines in *Mine*; both devices are able to move impossibly across spatial thresholds.

The doctors' probing reveals a paper punch and telephone that transmit sonic impulses through the stethoscope's hose. The paper punch and telephone have an origin in the earlier films as Soho engages with his empire in both the Johannesburg skyline and the mining pits around the city. Michael Godby (1998:108) argues that the tools on Soho's desk not only assert the economic





**Figure 4:** William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint* (stills of examination and X-ray), 35mm film transferred to video, 5:50 min., reproduced courtesy of William Kentridge



power of his empire, but also symbolise '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, for example the typewriter is able to mark the red X's upon Soho's X-ray, and the rubber stamp which appears later erases them as it passes across them. In doing so, the office tools demonstrate a trauma inside his body while also obfuscating and erasing them from the field of view. While we know Soho is in the hospital from the car crash, the documentation and the erasure within Soho's X-rays reveal an uncertainty about what lies beneath the skin. It is unclear what lies dormant beneath his exterior, leaving Soho unaware of the damage they 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'.

Locating a main complaint was performed in the TRC through the production of the official report. The desire of the report was to not only give victims and their families the opportunity to give testimony (a case history of sorts), but also to establish an official history whose power is codified by law through the process of forensic evidence that attempts to prove or disprove. However, the uncertainty uncovered in testimony and in the process of diagnosis shown in *History of the Main Complaint*, uncovers ambiguities and spaces that the TRC is unable to address.

At times, as Derrida's (2001:43-44) mention of a woman reminding the Commission they do not have the authority to grant forgiveness for her, there is a divide between the Commission's goals and what the witness provides. This process creates a body in a legal and authoritative (evoking both evidence and the state) sense that may be at odds with what the witness feels or tries to communicate. In her Foucauldian analysis, Cartwright (1995) 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 microscope and the X-ray becomes particularly interesting for reading Kentridge's project. Through this process, she develops an increasing divorce between a conceptualisation of the body and its sensory functions. This divide between the body and the subject's understanding of it becomes a way to understand the divide between Soho's memories and the way they become mapped on the diagnostic tools in the film. It also becomes a way of understanding these breakdowns in memories and the outcomes that the TRC wishes to grant.

Cartwright's (1995:82) analysis of the body reveals that it is understood through institutional techniques and technological tools such as the microscope. Microscopy, utilised in fields such as pathology and haematology, segments the body, reading it through small fragments that are through the microscope blown up, stained, illuminated through a monocular gaze (Cartwright 1995: 83). In this process of reading the pathology, vitality or sexuality of the sample all traces of corporeality are removed as the sample on the slide becomes a trace of that subject (Cartwright 1995:83). In the development of the microscope, an emphasis was placed on calibrating the object to the eye to produce a standardised set of results. This meant adjusting the microscope so that no matter what the imperfections or variances in the viewer's eye, a universal result could be obtained when looking at test slides (Cartwright 1995:84-85). This universalised and objective sight, recalls a similar practice in the filmed and forensic discourse of the TRC where a specific mandate of what qualified as necessitating amnesty and who would be allowed to testify was outlined by the Commission's approach.

The TRC (1998:64-65) defined very specifically who would be allowed to testify and apply for amnesty, limiting 'gross violations' to specific acts defined as 'killing, torture, abduction, and severe ill treatment.' The TRC was left with an enormous interpretive task concerning what actions actually consisted 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 incorporating those most famous and serious violations emerges, leaving gaps in the narratives and histories of apartheid violence. Like the microscope, the TRC seeks to normalise and universalise 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 the medical diagnostic tools as visual technologies is to gain visual authority, knowledge and power over the subject examined. This activity is precisely what happens in naming and diagnosing, both in the TRC's amnesty hearings, and as Saunders (2008:34) reminds us, within radiological departments in the hospital.

While Kentridge's work does not feature the microscope, the same principles represented by the microscope as a metaphor for the TRC are applicable. We look on with Soho as he drives through the countryside, seeing him gaze back through the rear-view mirror. This looking back becomes both a metaphor for history, looking to the past and moving forward; in Soho's case, driving further into the landscape and leaving those things he witnessed in the past. Yet the mirror is another visual device enabling a perception of the past; these images stay with Soho reflected into his car as he moves forward, while the image of Soho's eye's looking back creates a cinematic device where it appears that we are looking on with Soho.

As Soho witnesses the scene of assault in the rear-view mirror, the film cuts to an X-ray, where red markers are mapped upon the victim's body, locating the points of impact on the skull from the attack. The relationships of these markers produce a sense of continuity between the two worlds (the attack and Soho's comatose state), suggesting that the trauma suffered of the attack victim may also be the source of Soho's traumas in his X-rays and other scans. This marking of the body, born out of expert medical knowledge, attempts to produce stable and universal narratives to be constructed despite the distortions necessary to produce the medical result; likewise, the TRC relies on a juridical structure mapped atop the narrative features of testimony in the TRC.

## Conclusion: ambiguity as critical practice

Kentridge's films suggest a degree of indeterminacy within the data it transmits to the doctors. It reveals the instability of radiology (despite its veneer of scientific accuracy). Saunders (2008:90-1) 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.

What Saunders exposes about the radiological gaze, is precisely what Kentridge engages with in 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'. This imperfect and incomplete history is a defining trait of Kentridge's work. Imperfection, he argues, resists gigantic and totalising mistakes (Kentridge & Breidbach 2006:97). The

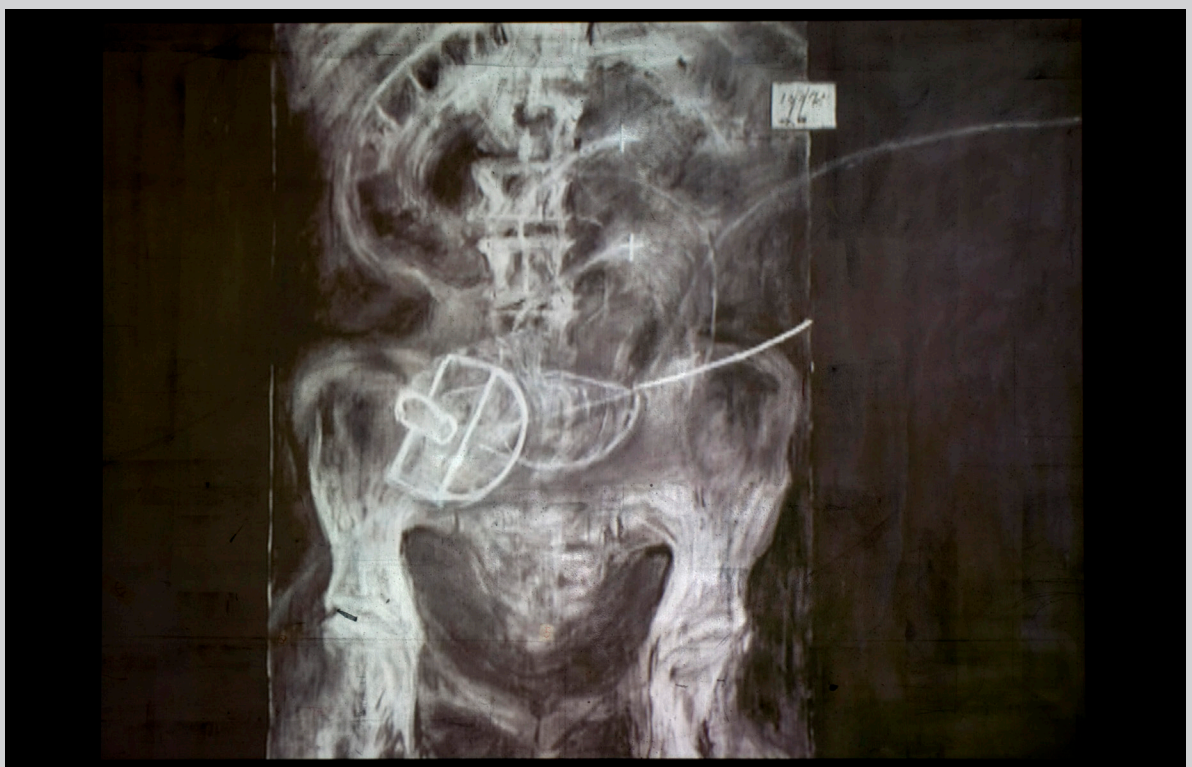
probing and searching, finding spaces of uncertainty brings one back to Kentridge's statement about the rock of apartheid discussed at the beginning of this article. To recognise uncertainty rather than pursuing a condition of completeness may be more illuminating about apartheid's legacies and its impact on South Africa's present than the TRC was capable of addressing. While this does not invalidate the necessary work of the TRC, it does suggest that a critical language can help to illuminate problems within its domain.

I have attempted to show that throughout *History of the Main Complaint* 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, what degree of guilt or remorse does Soho find inside himself? JM Coetzee (1999:93) argues that at the end of the film no truth emerges from these explorations; what they do is firmly in the realm of ambiguity; multiple meanings and narratives emerge. The 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 the TRC's domain and what falls outside of it.

Jacqueline Rose (2003:216-18, 222), in her study of apathy and accountability in the TRC, details the amnesty application of an Indian woman filed on the grounds she had not done enough. This application was turned down because it did not disclose an identifiable offence to which to grant amnesty (Rose 2003:217). Rose's study

of apathy reveals a place where people fall outside of the scope of the TRC; it reveals a space of guilt that is unable to be narrated in its domain. More tellingly, it raises the question of accountability: who is responsible for apartheid? For Rose's (2003:222) reading what is important is the question of Western accountability. The ambiguities Rose sees between the relationship between truth and justice cast a wide net on who and what should be held accountable for apartheid. While I in no way mean to suggest that certain actors are not directly culpable for human rights abuses, what this reading does is cast a wider net of accountability based on questions of apathy, corporate profits, and being a passive witness, amongst a host of other issues that open new narrative pathways to narrate apartheid's legacy. This application's claim for amnesty on the grounds of apathy reveals places where Kentridge's film and the ambiguity it employs becomes a critical narrative for exploring the TRC. Reading the CT scan's uncertainty leaves a space for a new testimony or narrative to be constructed that functions outside of the TRC's need for forensic truth. Rose (2003:218) argues that apathy's own ambiguities would make it impossible to give a full disclosure; it does not have a fixed temporality or specific intentionality that would be needed to fit into the TRC's domain.

In *History of the Main Complaint*, Soho's car keeps going after witnessing the assault, as his windscreen is shattered, its fragments reunite into a single image. Yet, the red markers are still marked on his body. The rubber stamp tried to erase them (Figure 5), as does Soho when activating his wiper blades to remove these markers on his windscreen. Yet through Kentridge's erasure process in his animations, traces, which function like scars remain on the surface of the image. What was originally rendered cannot fully be effaced from the surface or historical narrative. They become afterimages, images that persist in the viewer's field of



**Figure 5:** William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint*, 35mm film transferred to video, 5:50 min., reproduced courtesy of William Kentridge.



vision after the exposure to that image ceases (Crary 1993:98).

Like Kentridge's animation, the TRC has an afterimage despite attempts at trying to place apartheid in the past as a means of moving South Africa forward. Constructing the field of vision, seeing and subsequently witnessing through the afterimage not only acknowledges the ambiguities in history through its uniquely physical and therefore embodied production, but also preserves a historical trace. This historical narrative suggests that the history of the present cannot shed the past, contrary to the suggestion by TRC chair Desmond Tutu (quoted in Krog 1998:42): '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."' In fact the Commission's focus of amnesty suggests in and of itself a condition of forgetting. The *Oxford Dictionary of Law* ('amnesty' 2006) defines amnesty as: 'an act 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.'

The forensic and legal domain of the TRC engenders a condition of forgetting, to produce an official archive of apartheid, to grant amnesty, to move forward even through Tutu's rhetoric suggests that it can be left in the past (Derrida 2002:80). However, in Kentridge's treatment of the medical field, and through his turn towards aesthetics, this condition of forgetting, those narratives that are uncertain, can be illuminated. *History of the Main Complaint*, through the language of ambiguity, speaks to a situation where multiple outcomes and narratives are possible. Empson's ambiguity becomes a critical space for the narration of both apartheid

and for a critical language to suggest shortcomings of the TRC's focus.

The impossibility of forgetting, suggested by the palimpsest of Kentridge's working method, is 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. The impressions left on the wax slate persist as traces much like the erasure traces on Kentridge's surface, making it a useful comparison between the two. Furthermore, the fact that Freud turns towards the metaphor of toys, much like optical toys such as the stereoscope, and the number of puppets used in Kentridge's theatrical work, reveals another terrain upon which their explorations of memory merge. Freud (1961:230) argues that memory, like the mystic writing 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. When Kentridge speaks of the rock it is the oblique strategies he refers to that can illuminate different aspects of apartheid, shining a critical eye on its narration as historical event. Through the ambiguity in the relationship between Soho's psychic and physical injuries and their diagnosis, they uncover places where uncertainty emerges, even for the expert.

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 long after the end of the TRC. The notions of forgetting represented in Tutu's claims to leave apartheid in the past and the legal practice of amnesty feel impossible. Rather,

reading these spaces of ambiguity make it possible to speak on issues such as a wider space of accountability that reaches outside of the legal domains of the TRC. The persistence of the erasure traces on the screen retains a residue of the past while turning to the rock of apartheid, but considers how they impact the present. At the end of the film Soho awakens but returns to his world of industry; he may have considered his guilt, his role in witnessing these attacks, but at the end, he is seated at a desk with the tools of his empire that were buried beneath him. He has returned to business as usual.

To consider the imperfect erasures, traces of the past persisting in Soho's empire, is to consider how apartheid politics have not completely been left in the past. Reading in this temporal ambiguity suggests a number of outcomes, not only those spaces of narrating apartheid history where the TRC seems incomplete, but of Soho's present to consider its impact on the post-apartheid nation. Soho's position at the end of the film compels us to turn towards what Grant Farred (2004: 593) sees as a condition of 'after the thrill is gone', the political situation of the post-apartheid state. To consider how the struggle of inequity persists in the present is to consider how 'the new South African nomos is not sufficiently distinct from its predecessor' (Farred 2004:595). Through the ambiguity of the film, the role of office equipment that evokes Soho's empire and the authority that comes with it, and the dual temporality of past and present in Soho's diagnosis represent an opportunity to consider how the post-apartheid state carries with it the traces of the apartheid system. Kentridge's film not only provides a critique of the outcomes of the TRC, but also suggests, that these traumas of the past, though partly erased through amnesty, remain like the indentations

on Freud's toy; their residue has built up on the surface. Freud's mystic writing pad perhaps provides a better model for South Africa; its traces and ambiguities at work in *History of the Main Complaint* give a critical history not only of the TRC's attempt to diagnose apartheid, but also to consider how apartheid history is mapped upon the present.

## Notes

- 1 Barry Saunders (2008:40-44) 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.
- 2 Ivan Vladislavic (2006:173) discusses security measures in homes as a frontier boundary, placing security concerns into a long narrative of borders in Johannesburg. Home security spirals into ever larger and more intense measures of protection; he describes these security systems as a constituent part of the architecture of Johannesburg's suburbs.

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