The Shadow of the Object: William Kentridge and the Future-Past

> For a white suburban house the journey through Africa began across
> the yard in the servant's room. I remember trips to the market in
> Mbabane with mixed smells of overripe fruit and fresh basketwork;
> only later I became aware of the sculpture made in Venda and
> understood that in Africa some people lived in mud huts and herd
> cattle, though not in the way shown in school films. But then in the
> heart, in the centre of Africa in the Houghton house, was
> Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* and Hobbema's *Avenue*, the latter on the
> cover of *The Great Landscape Paintings of the World*, a book my
> grandfather gave me.
>
> William Kentridge[1]

With these parsimonious words, William Kentridge evokes a whole world: a class structure, a cultural and economic divide, the stereotypes surreptitiously sponsored by ideology. With sensuous economy and without apology, he invokes a material and bodily immersion in surroundings as seductive as they are safe. But more than this, he also pictures all that must be either harnessed (the servants' labour) or excluded (nature itself, other forms of sociability and habitation) in order that the childhood home be rendered a *telos*, both certain and absolute. From the sovereign viewing position of Albertian perspective, this home affords a prospect of nothing less than the African continent itself. Here, we apprehend the encounter between insouciant privilege and the conditions of its emergence. Spare words conjure an ethical dimension occluded from the eyes of the child as his feet pad across the hot flagstones of a back yard. We inhale with him the seasoned sweetness of fruit left too long in the sun, the sappiness of fresh wicker, and with him, we identify the otherness of these smells. And we feel the precious glossiness of pages turned, the wonder of first encounters with landscapes tamed by art. For in an affluent white suburb of Johannesburg, at the vital nub of the cool, shady home, are books and reproductions of canonical works of art from Europe.

Something of this version of himself persists in William Kentridge's work. In countless charcoal drawings, a South African landscape shunning the picturesque – the desolate yet comfortingly re-visited gold-reef that is Johannesburg's East Rand, or the highveld with its signs of human intervention in "varieties of high mast

lighting, crash barriers, culverts, the transitions from cutting, to fence, to road, to verge, to fields"[2] – is rendered through the filter of Beckmann or of nineteenth-century prints, while its human subjects are haunted by Grosz or Hogarth or Daumier. Now, captured for the first time by the movie camera, he touches again the pages of a book. At his fleshy fingertips, a moon materializes, the surrounding sky pulverized into charcoal dust.

Here, in *Journey to the Moon* (2003), Kentridge regards the view outside – the bristly stubble of veld stubbornly meshing over the landscape's hidden histories; the mine tips, residue and trace of the wealth that financed the growth of Johannesburg; and the night sky with its random configurations subdued by celestial geometry – from the cocooned enclosure of his studio. Simultaneously space-ship and home, the vehicle of a fantastic voyage and the place of return, the site of art's process is a capsule of both solitude and assurance. If Kentridge's prior work disinters a national past and materially embodies a process of collective anamnesis – an engagement with slowly realized recollection of the catastrophe of apartheid as a means of making history – *Journey to the Moon* thematises something more private that had always been implicit there: the studio as a safe place and the centrality of the working process as a means of thinking time and as a vehicle of epistemological transformation. For here we see the artist's practice – its rituals and procedures, its props and tools – as a point of origin. "The themes in my work," Kentridge has observed,

> do not really constitute its starting point, which is always the desire to draw. It can become a self-centred reflection of whatever is around that interests me rather than great issues that have to be answered objectively. Rather than saying, like Lenin, 'What is to be done?', my engagement is politically concerned but distanced. One contradiction in the South African situation, is the oscillating space between a violent, abnormal world outside and a parallel, comfortable world from which it is viewed.[3]

The studio, a "parallel, comfortable world" located amidst jacaranda trees in the gardens of the same Houghton house at the heart of the child's Africa, becomes, for the adult, not only the place from which a view is taken, but also the launching-pad for imaginative journeys into the unthought known. Where Christopher Bollas's pithy formulation refers to the animation, through language, of all that is unconsciously held but that has not yet cohered into the shaped articulation of thought, Kentridge explores, through the procedures that produce and transform images, "the place where knowledge unravels from its own self possession".[4] He sounds, in other words, the depths where knowledge constitutes itself as protean; an idiosyncratic blend of remembering and forgetting immersed in the sensuous and

corporeal.

Such knowledge is triggered by an enlivening to objects, for it is by a receptivity to small things that Kentridge comes to face the task of recalling and telling. In such an engagement with the concrete, he simultaneously embraces the ineluctable quiddity of things, and in those things, unlocks form from function. What emerges is a richly associative response to the morphological properties of the objects with which we cohabit intimately: kitchen and office utensils, medical implements, gardening tools, apparatuses of mechanical reproduction and communication. (Picasso may be here invoked as a prototype of an artist who enjoyed just such an intuitive assurance of the infinite availability of physical objects for appropriation and transmutation, most famously in the charmed metamorphosis of bicycle saddle and handle-bar to bull's head). The mercurial plasticity of things – their refusal to remain equal to themselves – prompts the making of works that trace the formation and mobility of thought itself. In *Shadow Procession* (1999), objects of everyday use – scissors, garden-shears, corkscrews – are swathed in cloth and, like shadow-puppets, backlit. Humour and pathos intertwine as, flattened onto the horizontal screen of projection, they are transformed into a pageant of the homeless or dispossessed, tripping or traipsing or jousting in silhouette across the screen. Most strikingly, "a fabulous heavy-bosomed dame made from an espresso pot sallies forth to do battle with the world."[5] In *Journey to the Moon*, it is the same aluminium espresso pot that, now gleaming and insolent with its own thingness, is launched with much calligraphic ado into a charcoal-blackened sky with its milky trail of stellar lights, finally to plunge into a saucer-moon. With the corporeal wit of a mime, Kentridge presses an upturned white espresso cup as a telescope to his eye.

 Kentridge attributes this felicitous encounter with an object's capacity for metaphor to an agency he calls *fortuna*, "something other than cold statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control",[6] an operation akin to, though not identical with, the workings of Surrealist objective chance, with which it shares the characteristic of being simultaneously fortuitous and foreordained. In a celebrated transformational sequence in *Mine* (1991), the third in the series of animated works Kentridge calls *Drawings for Projection*, the protagonist, South African mining magnate Soho Eckstein, takes his breakfast in bed. A plunger bores through the cafetière, through the breakfast tray on Soho's lap, and into the deepest geological strata, probing past Ife heads as they transmute into fossilised skulls, miners as they drill further into the rock-face, arriving finally at the aerial view of an Atlantic slave ship. A direct relationship is established between the apparent immutability of a white South African domestic space and the subterranean

activities that render that space both possible and always only provisional. In such an associative procedure, the relation between sight and knowledge is at once contingent and meaningful: "[t]he sensation was more of discovery than invention", Kentridge notes. "There was no feeling of what a good idea I had had, rather, relief at not having overlooked what was in front of me".[7]

Through the mutation of cafetière into mine-shaft, or espresso pot into rocket, objects within the artist's physical reach thus become the volatile agents binding visual fragments into narrative design. Sensory receptiveness together with the unconscious condensations of prior thought evolve as the imperatives of drawing-as-process, emerging simultaneously from *soma* and *psyche*. In her virtuoso analysis of the *Drawings for Projection*, Rosalind Krauss observes a parallel between the artist's "prowl through the kitchen"[8] to make coffee – a mundane activity through which, suddenly, an ordinary object is illuminated – and what Kentridge calls "stalking the drawing," the physical process whereby he produces his animated films. Through the late 1980s and 90s, Kentridge evolved a unique graphic technique of filmic animation in which objects and bodies are sketched in charcoal, partially rubbed out and re-emerge – transfigured – in a ceaseless flux of erasure and re-inscription. Where traditional cel animation requires a new image for each fractional change, here, it is the destiny of a single drawing to be gradually transformed, not only registering alterations of position, the emergence, disappearance, or movement of people and things, but also the ghostly, palimpsestic traces of its own history. A whole sequence is thus contained on a single sheet of paper on which, like Freud's model of the psyche as mystic writing-pad, the appearance and disappearance of graphic marks is analogous to "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception."[9] Each alteration of the drawing is captured by the camera, so that the artist's field of operation is determined by "this walking back and forth, this constant shuttling"[10] between camera and drawing. The hope, Kentridge notes, "is that without 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."[11]

Time and memory, then, are not so much themes in the *Drawings for Projection* as their very substance. They record, in the first instance, the very fact of drawing as a procedure that unfolds in time. Then, the filmic devices of emergence, dissolve, framing, transmutation, and intertext serve not as the indices of a stabilized memory – not as pictures of the past transformed into placid memorium – but instead, like Walter Benjamin's optical unconscious, render a world visible *for the first time*, transforming "the past forgotten in the hopeless present into the possibility of a

future."[12] A similar condensation occurs in the perpetual mobility of the signifier, in the fortuitously revealed, unlikely co-presence and mutually transformative significance of discrete objects (cafetière and mine-shaft, gas-mask and cat). For with the imperfect erasure of a past inscription, its after-image folds into an equally imperfect precipitate, or fore-image, of something else. And as no object is absolutely and definitively equal to itself, each station in its metamorphosis – or in its passage from embodiment to disintegration – is anticipated, celebrated, and remembered.

Resurrecting the outmoded design and obsolete technologies of objects that hark back to his childhood or before, Kentridge seems conscious of the capacity of inanimate things to invoke complex temporalities, attachments and losses. Such a relation to objects is, as Eric Santner argues in his discussion of *Heimat*, Edgar Reitz's television epic of 1984, important in the process of detachment from lost *psychic* objects, the decathexis that constitutes the work of mourning: "[t]he performance of formal *Trauerspiele* for objects of daily use […] is so important […] for it is in one's relationship to the things of the everyday world that one develops the capacity to feel and mourn all other forms of loss."[13] A failure to mourn might find the subject inhabited and haunted by the lost object, stranded in a process of melancholy identification with it.

In his famous paper 'On Mourning and Melancholia,' Freud observes that while, through a long and difficult process of reality-testing, the mourner recognizes and comes to terms with the final breach between himself and the lost object, the melancholic draws what has been lost into his own ego. "In grief," Freud notes, "the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself."[14] This self-absorbed and depleted ego nurturing the loss it cannot mourn has, as it were, no future. Contrariwise, to remember what has been lost and already mourned is to face a future alleviated of the burden of cyclical repetition, a process, as Santner continues "whereby an object that was a part of our ongoing lives is ritually guided into the past tense of our lives."[15] Mourning, in other words, performs a process of separation from those lost psychic objects that, in melancholia, stubbornly cast their shadow on the subject.[16] However, while clearly advocating mourning as a means of "moving on" – the expression itself implies a march forward in time as well as space – Freud also suggests that melancholia is necessary for the constitution of the subject. Indeed, as he proposes in a later essay, the very character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned attachments.[17] Our egos, in other words, are formed through identifications with those we have loved and lost; with the "archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief."[18]

For Kentridge, the artist's task consists in preventing the "past tense" from being edged back into oblivion; in a paradoxical sense, in undergoing the labour of mourning imperfectly. For of course one form of completed mourning would be forgetfulness. It is only through reiterated retrievals of lost objects – the *fort-da* of symbolic redress – that the past is salvaged from obscurity. Arguably, then, Kentridge's work performs a tension between mourning and melancholia and their conflicting temporalities. On the one hand, in the repeated erasures and resurgences of his forms, we find the evidence of a labour to decathect and, in that newly sundered space between subject and object, to allow memory to find its place. On the other hand, in that very same temporalization of space – in the graphic co-existence of an object and its shadowy absence, of a "what is" and "what was" – anteriority becomes presence, and loss is not reversed but kept alive. The *Drawings for Projection* thus realize a ceaseless oscillation between a past that is over and done with, and past that insinuates itself as destiny.

Importantly, for Kentridge it is *making* – the transformation and transportation of objects through drawing – that performs the commemorative ritual through which objects are not only retrieved from that "space of the unmourned, the unconscious"[19] but also, with Ovidian plasticity, regenerated as something else. It is thus in graphic and cinematographic procedures that the redemptive operations of *fortuna* are stimulated and that otherwise obscured equivalences come to light. If, in other words, *Drawings for Projections* bring "intimations of the interior", they do so through the processes of their own production. In showing the work of the hand, and in the fractional visibility of the stop-shoot action of the camera – a momentary jerkiness or a fleetingly held gasp of stillness that punctures the temporal continuum – these works are reflexive, exposing the conditions of their own materialization. As Rosalind Krauss convincingly suggests, Kentridge's form of drawing belongs, in effect, to the work's content: *drawing for projection* is not the application of a technique to a given format, but is, rather, the medium itself. Thus defined, the medium is not a material condition but an "automatism" – the term is borrowed less from Surrealism than from philosopher Stanley Cavell – a form or convention that not only "places procedure before meaning" but that also constantly reinvents and re-articulates itself.[20]

It is the looping and knotting of meaning and making – a confidence in his own ability to absorb the seen world into a vast mnemic archive, and a trust in the capacity of the interior life to erupt in the working process – that emerges in Kentridge's surprising recent works. Surprising because here, though drawing remains an integral part of the process, and though the metamorphosis of objects

abides as a guiding principle, Kentridge places himself not only behind but also before the camera. His presence radiates both intelligence and physicality. Slowly pacing about the studio, caught between contemplation, the suspended attention that enables free association, and the act of drawing – a sequence of caressing gestures of immense tenderness and carnality – he stages for the viewer a performance of the conditions of his work's production.

Journey to the Moon, *Day for Night* and *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès* (all of 2003), though autonomous pieces, are contrapunctually orchestrated, with the narrative and soundtrack of *Journey to the Moon*[21] binding the pieces together. Filmed in black and white, their texture and tonality is continuous with that of the *Drawings for Projection*. Kentridge's evocation of early cinema in the use of monochrome, the figures moving in and out of the frame rather than followed by tracking shots, the use of reverse-shooting (running the camera backwards) and the manipulation of the speed of filming and projection interrupts the homogenizing workings of suture: the sum of procedures that constitute cinematic interpellation by promoting the identification of the spectatorial look and the camera. Such breaks in the flow of fictional diegesis, materialise a unique, unstable temporality, a dynamic structuring of time which also participates in Kentridge's preoccupation with an aesthetics of the obsolete.

The object on the brink of its own demise jolts him – and us – to imagine "an 'outside' to the increasingly totalized system of 'second nature'"[22] by which commodities are naturalized and neutralized. It is with the use of outmoded telephones, megaphones, stapling and embossing implements, the paraphernalia of the office or the doctor's surgery crowding the *Drawings for Projection* that Kentridge reveals temporality, the relationship of "then" to "now", as a chronic problem. More importantly still, it is Kentridge's use of his medium and of technology itself that *performs* this problematization of time. Rather than ushering in nostalgia and retrospection, the obsolete proposes an alternative to the undisturbed continuum of traditional historicism.

Another way of realizing the co-presence of temporalities is intertextuality, the appropriation or citing of a previous text that then, like an insistent ghost, seems to drag the past along with it. Just as Hobbema had been the prototype for a landscape neither picturesque nor sublime, and the Weimar Republic an essential instantiation of the politicization of the arts; just as the work of earlier writers – Goethe, Svevo, Jarry, Büchner – had been springboards for previous animations and theatrical productions, so now it is the work of an early film-maker that discharges the flow of associations. Like the cafetière or espresso pot – concrete things in the perceptual

field – visual, acoustic or verbal texts become objects of attention, and as such, catalysts tapping the unthought known. Now it is the dream-like quality and early cinematic enchantment of Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la lune / A Trip to the Moon* (1902), wittily spiked with hints of another trip to the moon – Wallace and Gromit's *A Grand Day Out* (1989),[23] an adventure delightfully undertaken as a quest for an unlimited supply of cheese! – that serves as just such a mnemic object.

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> I was told by an encyclopedia of film that Méliès was the son of a wealthy footwear manufacturer born in Paris in 1861, studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, saw a stage conjurer in London in 1884, left his father's business and bought the theatre of [magician] Robert Houdin in 1888, performed acts of conjuring and illusion in his theatres, saw some of the early films of the Lumière brothers, started showing some films in his theatre as part of his act, in 1896 started making films indoors with the aid of artificial lighting, developed a wide range of tricks and effects using stop-motion, dissolves and multiple exposures, achieved great popularity by 1903, was bankrupt by 1915, made a living in his later years by running a toy concession with his wife at the Montparnasse railway station.
>
> William Kentridge[24]

Early French cinema – cinema before 1906 – was produced and exhibited within the context of the institutions of mass culture existing in the Third Republic, displaying product differentiation and variety through a division into genres, generally categorized according to two opposing tendencies. While the Lumière brothers represent the realist or documentary strand – legend has it that members of the audience of their first screening in 1895 rushed to the back of the projection room for fear that the train would hit them as it entered the station at Ciotat – the name of Méliès is associated with "non-actuality filming", with whimsical fantasy films known as *féeries*[25] and "trick" films, translating into a new medium their maker's gifts as a conjurer.

Some critics have seen such films as primitive antecedents to the cinema of narrative integration, while others regard them as exponents of a "cinema of attractions".[26] In the first view, such early cinema is thought to exist in an interval between nineteenth century bourgeois realism and classical twentieth-century narrative cinema. Its particularities are seen as symptoms of technical constraints, such as the

length of film physically accommodated by the camera, itself of necessity stationary and restricted to the horizontal plane. The second view locates the roots of these "trick" films in the fairground and amusement park (where indeed it was first shown) rather than in the theatre, in literature or in painting. In its self-consciousness as spectacle and its diverse strategies aimed at soliciting the viewers' attention, it reveals a structural incompatibility with the spatio-temporal continuities of fictional diegesis. Exhibitionism, in other words, pits the cinema of attractions against the much-theorized voyeurism of later narrative cinema with its transparent fourth wall. Rather than offering the absorbing pleasures of empathic identification, it presents a pleasure derived from the nature of the medium itself. Addressing itself to the enthusiasm of the early avant-garde for the stimulation offered by mass culture, the cinema of attractions announces, first and foremost, an opportunity to show off its own visibility. A rare device such as a close-up in Edwin S. Porter's *A Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903) is not aimed at creating narrative tension. Rather, it *is* the attraction. Similarly Méliès's use of substitution splicing, of which the earliest extant instance is the transformation of a woman into a skeleton in *L'escamotage d'une dame chez Robert Houdin/ A Lady Vanishes* (1896), does not advance a story but, rather, is itself the point.

With the wonder attendant on technologies at the moment of their inception, cinema for Méliès provided not only an expanded repertoire of sleights of hand, but also an opportunity to rehearse and display the magical properties of the cinematic apparatus itself. "As for the scenario, the 'fable,' or 'tale,'" he wrote, "I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the 'stage effects,' the 'tricks,' or for a nicely arranged tableau."[27] *Le Voyage dans la lune* harnesses such "tricks" to an embryonic narrative, culminating with the space-ship's return to a festive public welcome on earth in what was known as an *apothéose* – an escalation of visual momentum – rather than with narrative closure.

It is not surprising, then, that Kentridge should have turned to Méliès at a moment when he wished to pause the flow of narrative in his work. Of his *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès* he says: "I had resisted any narrative pressure, making the premise of the series what arrives when •It is this wandering around the studio that Kentridge re-enacts in *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès,* and, feeling a little later "the need to do at least one film which surrendered to narrative push", that he narrativizes in *Journey to the Moon*. In the peculiar formulation whereby he describes his working procedure, the artist, comfortable in a space made familiar or indeed prosthetic with use, is rendered passive; suspended and unfocussed, he is porous to

"what arrives". He is, in other words, ready for a rendezvous with lost psychic objects.

But it is, characteristically, to physical objects that he allows his attention to drift. Indeed these "threw themselves forward" (*WK*, 193). It is as though without physical *things* acting as catalysts or containers, not only would the contents of memory remain shapelessly fluid or inaccessible, but, more significantly, the artist would be at a loss as to which form of remembering – and forgetting – to use. In Adam Phillips' paraphrasing of one of Freud's meditations on the uses of recollection and its erasure,

> if you spit something out you dispense with it once and for all; if you eat
> something you forget it through a process called digestion. Spat out it will be,
> as it were, metabolized by the world in a future you hope to have exempted
> yourself from; taken in, it will be metabolized by your body, and fuel your
> future.[28]

The question of what to do with the past, collective or individual – whether to swallow it or spit it out – remains a central concern for Kentridge. And it is in the physicality of objects and, simultaneously, in the self-betrayal of that very physicality (for is not each object constantly threatened with its own dissolution and transformation into something else) that he works this concern. In the *Seven Fragments*, the coffee contained or spilt, the fat charcoal sticks transformed into graphic lines, gathered into the lineaments of a landscape or of Kentridge's own physiognomy, the rag blurring calligraphic clarity, crumpling, transforming into the articulated silhouettes of his earlier *Shadow Procession* – these transformations expose the procedures of his craft as exercises of memory and forgetfulness. But "expose" might not be the right word here. For while apparently revealing Kentridge's working process – the organic interconnections between drawing, erasing, cutting, filming, shaping – they also mystify them as acts of legerdemain, as illusion. They bring, in other words, the spectacle and the theatre back into the studio, while sharpening – as Méliès's own films do – our attention to the studio as self-contained world.

Not surprisingly, as Kentridge paces back and forth across the screen, moving in and out of the frame, the objects that announce themselves to him arrive already mediated by other works. Just as, psychically, the old and new co-exist, so here the appearance of familiar objects and renderings is at once novelty and (self-)quotation. And like all quotations, these speak not only of what is to hand, but also of what is absent. Indeed, absence is doubly felt, for it is also lodged at the very heart of the quoted works themselves.

In *Moveable Assets*, a drawing pinned to the wall reveals a typical scene: a fence, a field, a mining deposit. The drawing rapidly dissolves into a bleak picture of razed earth, the evidence of some unnamed disaster. The flattened, charred remains attempt to reconstitute a landscape again, only to dissolve once more. This reiterated dissolution and reconstitution animates before our eyes the tendency of nature to reclaim history, a process which Kentridge compares to the unreliability of memory:

> The difficulty we have in holding onto passions, impressions, ways of seeing things, the way that things which seem to be indelibly imprinted on our memories still fade and become elusive, is mirrored in the way in which the terrain itself cannot hold onto the events played out upon it. [29]

For Kentridge, the present work also talks about such a process of imprint and absorption as a form of meditation on past works. As in *Felix in Exile* (1993), the landscape of Johannesburg's East Rand becomes the central trope for thinking the relation of history to memory. In the earlier film, a body is shot down by a bullet, covered over with sheaves of newspaper which then flutter, dissolve, dematerialize. The red cordon lines of a forensic crime-scene evaporate and fade into illegibility, leaving an implacable and mute extent of earth. The earth's ultimate erasure of all trace of human agency, its capacity to represent catastrophe as renewal, renders it fertile for appropriation by ideology, for it speaks of a tenacious ability to outlive the past, to surpass rather than recall those events played out upon its surface.[30]

A similar invocation of his own work as anteriority occurs in *Journey to the Moon*, where the improvised telescope hones in on a progression of silhouetted figures snatched from the earlier *Shadow Procession*. From his studio-as-space-ship, he sees plodding across the lunar landscape familiar human subjects as revenants of his own making. Travelling to the far reaches of space is here coterminous with the mind's capacity for flight, but finally, confronts the artist with the shock of the old. For the moon's terrain is none other than the landscape of Germiston, near Johannesburg, "in effect the same landscape from which the rocket takes off" (*WK* 192.) Rather than explore it, the artist remains inside his capsule with a past "ghost-written as desire."[31]

In his text *In Praise of Shadows*, Kentridge presents his earlier processions of shadows in relation to Plato's parable of the cave, proposing to reverse the trajectory of that founding journey from darkness into light; to run, so to speak, the film backwards. "Can it work in reverse," he asks, "someone blinded or bewildered by the brightness of the sun, unable to look at it, familiar with the everyday world and the surface – choosing to descend, not just for relief, but also for elucidation, to the world of shadows?"[32] He suggests, then, that perhaps the shadow might act as a

symptom, telling us something about the real that the real itself cannot disclose.[33] Kentridge's reflection on the nature of representation might equally have found an analogue in Pliny's legend of the origin of painting. A Maid of Corith was bidding farewell to her lover who was about to cross the ocean when, noticing his shadow cast on the wall by the light of a candle, she seized a stick of charcoal from the fire and traced its outline, the better to remember him.

Charcoal, then, with its own material memories of combustion and heat, becomes a mnemonic tool, while the graphic copy of a body's contours, like a fetish, marks the site of a loss. As the imprint of an absence, the silhouette poignantly distils the loved object's "passage from the living moment into the flickering shadow world of memory".[34] It flattens, however, the living being it captures into a social sign. For, as Roland Barthes reminds us, in being simultaneously anatomic and semantic, the silhouette is the body "which has explicitly become a drawing, carefully outlined on one hand, entirely void on the other."[35] If in their exuberance and exaggeration, the figures of Kentridge's procession are intrinsically caricatural, in their status as the outline of a shadow they transport an inherent melancholy, speaking, like the charred landscape, of the lost thing. In this, they announce the sense of loss that saturates the second half of *Journey to the Moon*, to which we shall presently return.

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Journey to the Moon, then, functions as the narrative hub, details of which are elaborated as sketches or autonomous "attractions" in *Day for Night* and the *Seven Fragments*. Thus it is that

> the espresso pot and cup from *Tabula Rasa* became respectively the rocket ship and telescope, the rubbed-out landscape from *Moveable Assets* the basis for the moon landscape, the reversed catching skills from *Auto-Didact* the metaphor for weightlessness, and the dark shape that becomes the window of the rocket was one of the messy sheets of *Tabula Rasa II* […] which perforce meant that the inside of the studio was the inside of the rocket. (*WK*, 193)

In the encounter with these visual quotations, the viewer is required to recognize and remember, to move back and forth between the films and, in doing so, is both propelled inside the present work and pushed outside of it. It is just such a release from the saggittal logic of history-as-sequence that Kentridge explores in the "reversed catching skills" – the slow-motion succession of objects released from gravitational pull that, in *Journey to the Moon* informs us that the space-ship has

entered the moon's orbit. But, released from narrative in the *Seven Fragments*, reverse filming realizes a sustained immersion in paradoxical temporalities. For to run a film backwards is to eradicate the traces of human agency (like the landscape swallowing its catastrophes), to suture scars, to explore aftermath as origin. In its inversion of teleology, it presents not only "a utopian perfection of one's skills" (*WK*, 192) but also proposes an optimistic picture of the universe as both intrinsically ordered and bursting with potential. "Throw a pot of paint and when you catch it in reverse, not a single drop is spilt", Kentridge observes.

> Tear a sheet of paper in half and it restores itself without the smallest crease [*Invisible Mending*.] There is an extreme politeness of objects; pull a book out of a shelf and when you replace it, the books at each side at the last instance shift just the right amount to make space. […] The page of text returns letter by letter, word by word into the pen, leaving the load of ink pregnant with infinite possibilities (*WK* 192).

In *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès*, history is run backwards, away from the vantage point of the present towards a moment of perfect equilibrium in the future-past. Here, then, Kentridge rehearses a temporality that inverts the logic of his *Drawings for Projection*, producing an interrogative template for un-remembering, for reconstituting integrity out of things broken or abandoned, for completing the work of mourning so thoroughly as to lose all trace of the lost object. This is a "what if" world of retro-causality; a world that is tantalizing for the mastery it proposes in its capacity to do the impossible: to exert will over the past. "Willing liberates," announces Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was' – that is the name of the will's gnashing teeth and most secret melancholy."[36] But the possibilities recollected from the future in the *Seven Fragments* are importantly de-realized in *Journey to the Moon*, where the narrative moves towards an exploration of the melancholy persistence of lost objects.

A different reversal occurs in *Day for Night,* filmed while Kentridge was working on the *Fragments.* As ever, his own words capture with sensuous immediacy his receptiveness to association, to the workings of *fortuna*. He speaks of

> a summer plague of ants in Johannesburg, thin trails of them exploring different shelves of the kitchen every night, a syrup stain on a breadboard, a moving black patch in the morning. Examining one such patch, I was struck by how the ants themselves made a kind of proto-living drawing and I videoed this (*WK* 190).

Concocting a sugary solution, Kentridge laid a trail of words for the ants "so as to

teach [them] calligraphy". The ants' refusal to follow the whole text nevertheless revealed the possibility of using their collective drawings to plot a celestial map in some of the night sequences in *Journey to the Moon*. This was done by projecting the film as negative and producing the effects of "day for night" filming. Pragmatically restricted to studio shoots, "day for night" is a process whereby a scene is filmed during the day but given the appearance of night-time, traditionally through the use of underexposure and filters, but also through the application of scrims and goboes.[37] With its intertextual wink at Truffaut's eponymous film of 1973 – a skittish reflection on the medium, institution and conventions that together constitute the cinematic apparatus – *Day for Night* is the matter out of which Kentridge evokes the bustling nocturnal sky in *Journey to the Moon*, as his espresso pot travels to its lunar destination.

The encounter between capsule and moon as violent shock invokes Méliès not so much by enshrining the famous frame of the space-ship invaginated in the anthropomorphized moon, but, rather, re-enacting the older moment as present process enmeshed in new codes. In "[taking] along the text out of which the borrowed element is broken away, while also constructing a new text with the debris",[38] it operates as completion, supplement, interpretation.

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With its multiple decors and incorporating as many as thirty shots, Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune* was the most complex of his early *féeries* and immediately achieved widespread acclaim. In it are married some of the older techniques of his trick-films and new cinematic devices such as the proto-montage whereby a single event is repeated from different angles, or the spectacular descent of the space-ship to the sea-bottom through the virtuoso rapid movement of four separate scenarios.[39] Loosely based on Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and H. G. Wells' contemporary novel, *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), it shows a group of six scientists dressed as dunce-like medieval magicians building a space-ship (with the glass ceiling of Méliès's studio visible in the background), setting a launch-ramp above the roofs of the city, and rocketing off to the moon. After what appears to be a crash-landing, the men disembark; with the earth gleaming at a distance in the night sky, they sleep under a snowy shower of stardust, to dream of lissom girls materializing as stars. The moon's surface is transformed into an engulfing, uterine cavern where, in their explorations, the scientists confront the Selenites, the half-crustacean half-primate moon-dwellers. Pursued by the threatening, savage Others,

they flee back into their craft and hurtle down to earth.

With *le monde à la portée de la main* (the world at your finger-tips) as the motto of his film company, Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune* was produced against the background of the new social configurations spawned by the developing technologies of motion during the *belle époque*. At a time when France was the second biggest colonial power in the world, we see the trope of a quest of the unknown figured as a hostile confrontation with difference. There is much in this encounter that Kentridge might have borrowed and adapted: his production, for instance, with the Handspring Puppet Company, of *Faustus in Africa* (1995) explored the legend of Faust's loss of soul against a background of empire and its loss. But in the rarefied atmosphere of Kentridge's moon, it is his lost objects that come to find him. We see the modest espresso pot leaving its indentation on the lunar surface; we observe the ragged procession of shadows. Finally, as if this is what we have been waiting for, we witness the slow progression of the silhouette of a woman as she crosses the frame. Naked, she has materialized as truth, stubborn and elusive, out of charcoal drawings made on the pages of a dictionary open at E. *Exodus*, we read. *Exogamy*. An escape journey; marriage outside the tribe.

The soundtrack breaks off, to resume more slowly, more plaintively. Lingeringly, the artist's hands touch the drawing as if they contained life itself, about to slip away. Remaining lost in thought – or lost to a hovering suspension of thought – he paces. Out of focus in the foreground, a still-life as emblem of the artist's activity: books, sticks of charcoal, a blending brush, the beginnings of a drawing. On the wall, newspapers, drawings. We see a close-up of his shod feet as they tread across the studio floor. Keeping apace behind him, her bare feet follow his. Now we see their full bodies. Slowly he paces, slowly she follows. They are impervious to our gaze. Mimicking art, their shadows precede them in solemn procession. He sits down. The moment is dilated as the woman stretches out her hand and places it lightly on his shoulder. With the trained assurance of familiar gestures, his hand reaches out to meet hers, but as he turns to look at her, she melts into air. Again he paces; again we see her shadowing him, stretching up to look over his shoulder as he peers into the darkness, and again, she vanishes. Like Banionis's wife in Tarkovsky's filmed rendition of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1972) – a meditation on guilt at the neglect of love – she is at once muse and eidolon, provocation and solace, haunting him with the desire to undo loss.

As a familiar metaphor for the artist's "gift" and for the creative process itself as possession and inspiration, the concept of the muse is intimately linked to that of memory. Moreover, claiming a voice only through another, the muse gains agency

by her own absence, through her real or figural death. She operates, in other words, under erasure. This convention is literalized in the figure of the dead beloved as muse, whose gift to the poet is not her song but her life. For Novalis, for Poe, for Dante, inspirational power is drawn from such a source, requiring that the loved woman be a dead woman. Embalmed and preserved in poetry, she serves as a mediator of an otherwise elusive Otherness. Such loss exists as the precondition for the use of art as redress, and its prototype is Orpheus who, in his attempt to rescue Eurydice from the underworld, loses her again; Orpheus who, in Maurice Blanchot's piercing formulation, seeks in Eurydice the "forgiveness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of death."[40]

Another tale of shadow and light, that of Orpheus as narrated in Virgil's *Georgics* tells how, seeking his wife among the dead, he was permitted to take Eurydice away from the underworld on condition that he not look back at her until they reach the "upper air". Through darkness and in total silence, amidst ghostly forms lost to the light, he leads the way and she follows. And when his footstep on its "homeward path" has passed all perils, at the very threshold of daylight, Orpheus is suddenly caught off guard by a "moment's madness". He turns to look at Eurydice, who, momentarily his own once more, is borne away "like a wisp of smoke/ thinned into air".[41]

In this passage from depth (the domain of speculation or psychic work) to surface (the domain of the senses), at the very interface of light and darkness, we see the incompatibility between thought and visibility that raises death itself as the stake. Eurydice dissolving installs a necessary loss, a separation between internal objects and the art that mourns and immortalizes them: Orpheus is condemned to sing not *to* Eurydice, but *of* her. In the lasting resonance of the image of the rhapsod followed by his wife, Virgil presents us with the condition under which Orpheus's consolation is to be no longer that offered by an external agency, a muse, but rather, that tendered by art itself.

It is here with the movie camera that Kentridge claims consolation; that he arrogates that death-in-the-future which, for Barthes, was the *eidos* of the photograph and towards which, at the close of *Journey to the Moon*, the naked woman, now flattened to a silhouette, slowly moves. And, as in all his work, it is to the grainy, reflexive particularities of his medium and the technologies of its production that he calls attention. Heightening the oneiric intensity of the last sequences in the film, the fractional stillness between frames is the direct product of the technical procedures employed. The use of a 35mm animation camera shooting one frame a second

necessitated the slowing down of real movement to the pace of moon-walking so as to simulate a realistically contemplative pace when run at 24 frames a second.

Rosalind Krauss has recognized in the arrhythmia of the *Drawings for Projection*, "a kind of rictus" interrupting continuity and "reinstating the stillness of a single drawing",[42] flooding, in other words, the technical with the manual. In *Journey to the Moon*, the jerky motion of the first half of the film and the dilation of the second half work to de-nature film: to strip it of its empathic and realist heritage and to make it strange again, to undo the continuity of the time-image as a given.

Similarly, in the production of visibility and invisibility, in the materialization and evaporation of the naked woman – as in the activity of the charcoal mark formed through its residues and its anticipations, as in the time rewound of reverse-filming – Kentridge sustains the past as both immanence and desire. In doing so, he materializes the condition of film and the mnemonic burden it has inherited from the obituary, elegiac nature of photography. For more even than still-photography, the capacity of the moving film on the one hand to appear to capture a slice of life, and on the other to survive its objects, anticipates death in the midst of life, but also heralds a vivacity that outlives its bodily agents. "Film concerns itself with things and people that disappear from our sensory perception," writes Edgar Reitz, "with this pain that every good frame reproduces and produces […] Parting is the great theme of every film."[43]

The interplay between *Journey to the Moon*, *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès* and *Day for Night* gives evanescent form to the co-existence of all that is present and all that is lost but kept psychically alive in a melancholy that presents itself as the ambivalent alternative to mourning. Illuminated, the future-past plays before our eyes, relegating us, its observers, to the shadows.

Ruth Rosengarten

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[1] William Kentridge, from *Stret*, Vol. 5, no. 3, November 1988, reprinted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed. *William Kentridge,* Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1998, p.48

[2] Loc. cit.

[3] William Kentridge, 'Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with William Kentridge,' in Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, J.M. Coetzee, *William Kentridge*, London: Phaidon Press, 1999, p. 9.

[4] Jacqueline Rose, 'On Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas,' in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*, London: Chatto and Windus, 2003, p. 151. The term "unthought known" is Christopher Bollas's, from *The Shadow of the Object: The Unthought Known*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

[5] Jane Taylor, 'The Shadow of a Doubt: William Kentridge's Bronze Age,' in *William Kentridge*, exhibition catalogue, Rivoli-Turin: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2004, p.50.

[6] William Kentridge, Lecture, 1993, reprinted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed. *William Kentridge,* Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1998, p. 68.

[7] William Kentridge, ibid. p. 68.

[8] Rosalind Krauss, '"The Rock": William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', in *October*, no. 92, Spring 2000, p. 7.

[9] Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad"', (1925), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (henceforth *SE*) Vol. XIX, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, London, Vintage Books, The Hogarth Press, 2001, p. 230.

[10] Rosalind Krauss, op. cit. p.5

[11] William Kentridge, 'History of the Main Complaint', in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, op. cit. p.112.

[12] Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,' *Critical Inquiry* 25, Winter 1999, p339.

[13] Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 67.

[14] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in *SE*, Vol. XIV, p. 244.

[15] Eric Santner, op. cit. p. 67.

[16] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' op. cit. p. 248.

[17] Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, *SE* Vol. XIX, pp. 28-30.

[18] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 133.

[19] Ibid. p. 68.

[20] Rosalind Krauss, op.cit. See also Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000, p.56.

[21] As in several of the *Drawings for Projection*, the soundtrack was composed by Philip Miller.

[22] Rosalind Krauss, '"The Rock", op. cit. p. 33. She is speaking here of Walter Benjamin.

[23] The series of works narrating the adventures of Wallace and his dog Gromit was made following Nick Park's highly acclaimed series of short films, *Creature Comforts*. Both use the same technique of claymation. This is a form of animation utilising the production of moulded clay figures and computerized cinematography. The movement of figures is fractionally altered and photographed, one frame at a time.

[24] William Kentridge, '"Journey to the Moon" and "7 Fragments for Georges Méliès" including "Day for Night,"' in *William Kentridge*, Castello di Rivoli, op. cit., p192. All future quotations by Kentridge on these works are from this text and will be indicated by *WK* followed by a page number in the main body of my text.

[25] It is this whimsy, a surrealist quality of unexpected juxtaposition, that Susanne Themlitz tapped in her exploration of Méliès's work in the exhibition *Quiproquo* at the Chiado Museum in 1999. Though Méliès's prolific production also included *actualités*, Elizabeth Ezra's attempts to dismantle the distinction between realism and fantasy, arguing that his work contained the germs of modern narrative as well as documentary cinema, remain unconvincing. Elizabeth Ezra, *Georges Méliès*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.

[26] See Noël Burch, 'A Primitive Mode of Representation,'; Tom Gunning, '"Primitive" Cinema: A Frame-up? The Trick's on Us,'; Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,'; and André Gaudreault, 'Showing and Telling: Image and Word in Early Cinema,' in 'Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI Publishing, 1990.

[27] Georges Méliès, 'Importance du scenario,' in Georges Sadoul, *Georges Méliès*, Paris: Seghers, 1961, p.118, translated and quoted by Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,' ibid. p. 57.

[28] Adam Phillips, 'Freud and the Uses of Forgetting,' *On Flirtation*, London: Faber and Faber, 1994, p. 23.

[29] William Kentridge, 'Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory,' originally presented as a lecture at North Western University, Illinois, USA, November 1994; reprinted in Caroly Christov Bakargiev, op. cit., p.92.

[30] This point was elaborated in Jessica Dubow and Ruth Rosengarten, 'History as the main complaint: William Kentridge and the making of post-apartheid South Africa,' *Art History*, 27:4, September 2004.

[31] Adam Phillips, op. cit. p. 23.

[32] William Kentridge, 'In Praise of Shadows,' Lecture given in Chicago, 2001, reprinted in *William Kentridge*, exhibition catalogue, Rivoli-Turin (op. cit.), p. 156.

[33] A similar form of knowledge is proposed by contemporary American artist Kara Walker's deployment of silhouettes to explore the legacy of violence in the history of the American South.

[34] Eric Santner, op. cit. p. 67

[35] Roland Barthes, 'Erté, or à la lettre,' in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, transl. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p.107

[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufman, New York: Viking, 1954, p. 251.

[37] A gobo is a dark flag used for blocking out light or casting shadows on a film set.

[38] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', in *Art Bulletin*, LXXIII nº 2, 1991, p. 206.

[39] For an enlightening analysis of Méliès in the context of his contemporaries, see Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994.

[40] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, (1955), transl. Anne Smock, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 172.

[41] Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV, in *The Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid of Virgil*, transl. C. Day Lewis, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 125.

[42] Rosalind Krauss, '"The Rock"', op. cit. p. 28.

[43] Edgar Rietz, *Liebe zum Kino:Utopien und Gedanken zum Autorenfilm, 1962-1983*, Cologne: Verlag Köln 78, 1984, p. 127-129, cited by Eric Santner, op. cit. p. 69.