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HISTORY AS THE MAIN COMPLAINT: WILLIAM KENTRIDGE AND THE MAKING OF POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

JESSICA DUBOW AND RUTH ROSENGARTEN

Behind a *cordon sanitaire*, dressed in his signature pin-striped suit, South African mining magnate Soho Eckstein – one of the stock characters in William Kentridge's body of animated films – lies in his hospital bed: prone, insensible (plate 10.1). Talking of his *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), Kentridge says, 'Here's a person who's in a coma because of the weight of what he sees. The question is, is it going to kill him?'¹ For Nietzsche, the chances are that it will. Indeed, in his famous essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche suggests one of the motives of a willed amnesia. By means of the parable of the grazing animal wholly 'contained in the present, like a number without any awkward fraction left over' (61), he discusses the ways in which human happiness and a creative future politics might depend on a practice of active forgetfulness, on the capacity to forget purposefully so as to avoid that descent into regressive rumination which a surfeit of historical awareness threatens to entail. 'With an excess of history man again ceases to exist,' Nietzsche argues, 'and without that envelope of the un-historical he would never have begun or dared to begin (61).' To be committed to memory or forced to recall what has happened an infinite number of times, is thus to assume an encumbrance that might crush us: a load which, though enjoining us to the affective ground of the past, might also preclude the vital, invigorating foundation 'upon which alone . . . anything truly human, can grow' (63). It is, as he writes, 'possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the [unhistorical] animal demonstrates, but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting (61).'²

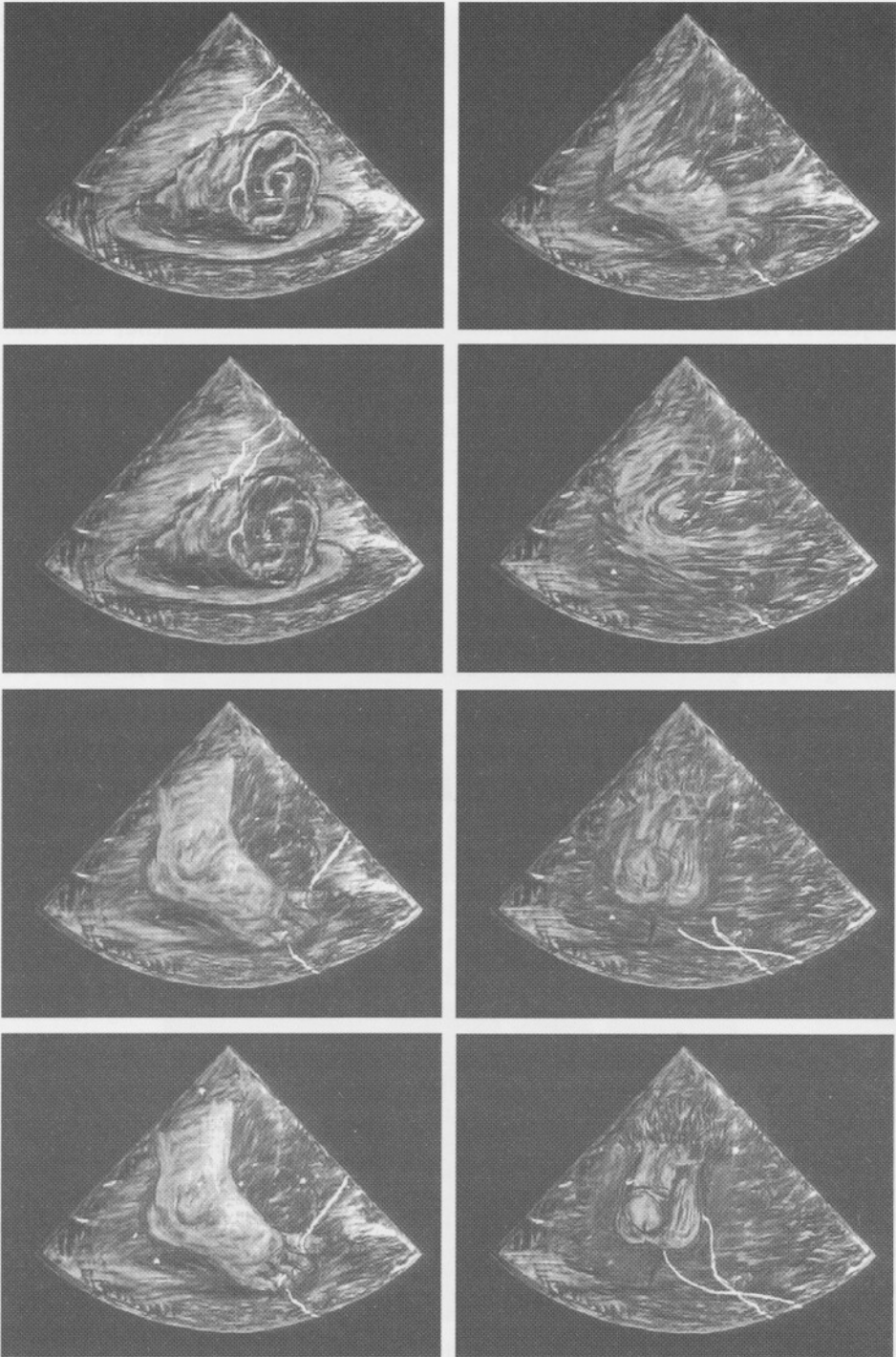
While Nietzsche sees the constancy of historical awareness as an enervating and unendurable constraint, Milan Kundera suggests the opposite. Citing Nietzsche in the opening chapter of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he asserts that if 'eternal return is the heaviest of all our burdens, then our lives can stand out against them in their splendid lightness.'³ But for Kundera, lightness, or the historically liberated, is as much of a problem as Nietzschean gravitas. For while



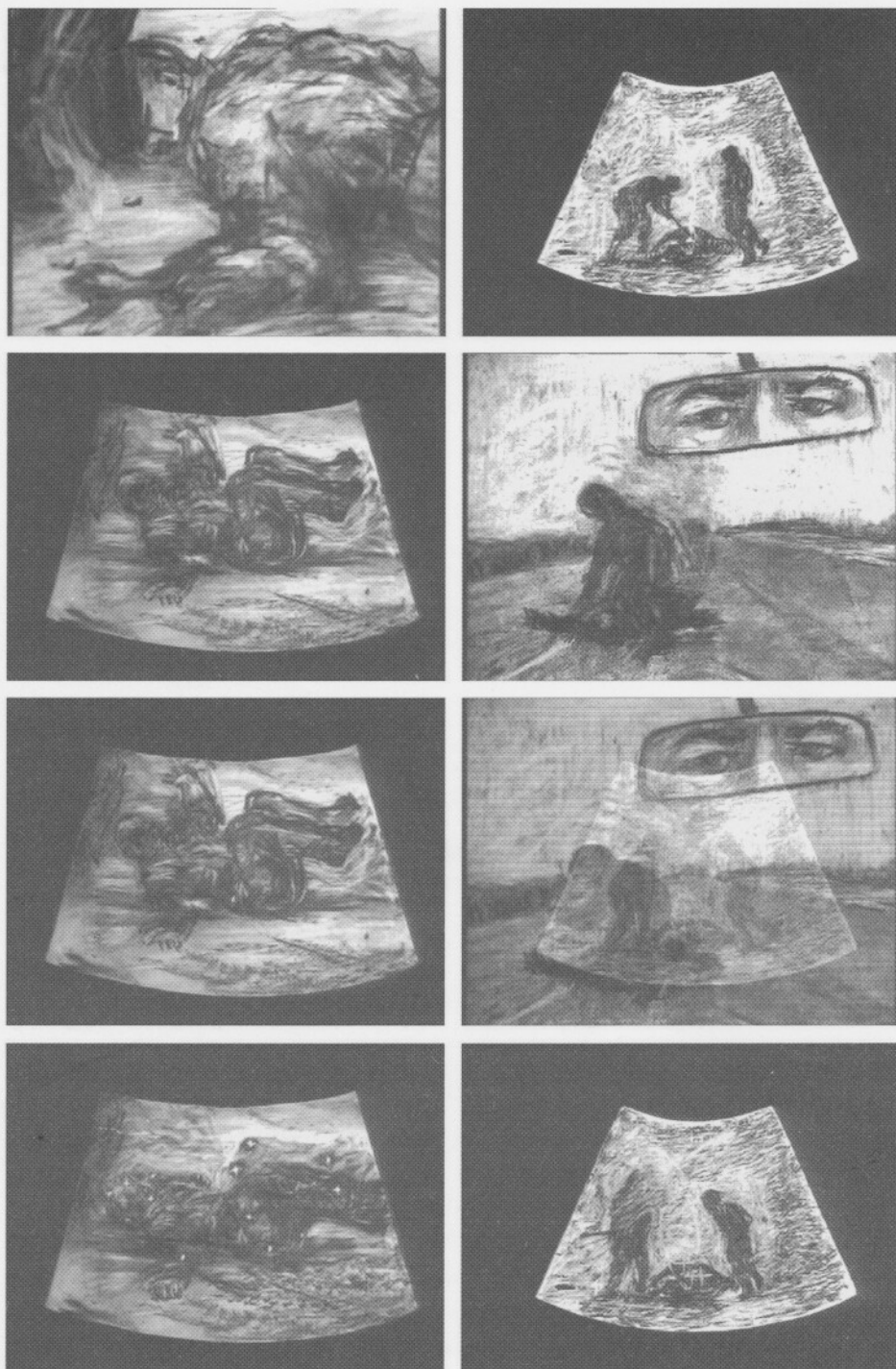
10.1 William Kentridge, 'Soho and his retinue of consultants', frames from *History of the Main Complaint*, animated film, 1996. Dimensions variable. Copyright © William Kentridge.

lightness may '[cause] a man to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly body', it also produces a subject that is 'only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant'.⁴ Here the choice is whether to survive Nietzsche's 'consuming fever of history'⁵ by releasing or repressing it: does one live with the virtuous, but untenable, weight of the past or in the vaporous air of a free, but unhistorical, present? And the decision, as Kundera indicates, is irreducibly ambivalent. For while the former risks producing a Nietzschean stasis (Soho's coma?), the latter offers no succour as it threatens the category of history with transcendence and so produces a speciously bouyant, and thus equally disabled, subject. In *History of the Main Complaint*, Kentrige shows how either case offers only a feigned resolution, a failure issuing from a non-recognition of the dialectic. Understood thus, at issue in the image of the comatose Soho is not a man made insensible because of the weight of what he has seen, but rather because of the burden of what he has not yet seen. What this means is that the moment of regained consciousness, for Kentrige's character, can be understood as an enlivening to history, or, more strongly, as an enlivening by history. And indeed, Soho awakens from his coma precisely at the instant that the past hurtles unexpectedly into the present. It is a head-on collision.

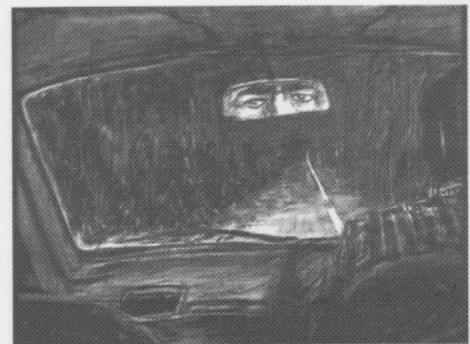
Or to start again. Soho Eckstein, Kentrige's allegorical figure of rapacious mining capital, lies dressed in suit and tie in a hospital bed. He wears a respiratory mask, his eyes are closed, his body rasps for breath. X-ray images, MRI scan and heart monitor report on his interior: the patient's broken pelvis, vertebrae, bruised organs, intestines.⁶ Against the doleful strains of a Monteverdi madrigal erupts another soundtrack: the insistent beep of medical technology, the dull syncopations of a typewriter, telephone, ticker-tape machine – the accoutrements of Soho's life as an industrial empire builder – and the sizzle of electrical contact. A physician and his retinue of consultants prognosticate around the body (plate 10.1). On the sonar screen, doubling as a car windscreen, Soho's insides metamorphose into a landscape. The scene cuts to Soho driving, his eyes reflected in the car's rear-view mirror, the road in front flanked by an avenue of pylons and thickening trees sketching the deep V perspective of spatial progression. But at the same time that we are propelled forward, the unfolding scene rushes towards us as memory. The transaction of past and present, of retrospection and return, is abruptly interrupted. Forks of high-voltage current crack across the screen; they course through a Sunday roast, become electrodes that wrap around a toe that itself mutates into penis and testicles (plate 10.2). Then a body abandoned on the roadside. This is the first of a series of anonymous figures injured, beaten to the ground by rifle butts, kicked about the torso (plate 10.3). The assaults are registered internally as red crosses on Soho's body scan.⁷ Windscreen wipers/medical scanner dial move repeatedly back and forth to eradicate the marks. Suddenly, a figure charges out of the darkness, hurtles into view, is momentarily held in the beam of the car headlights. The impact is brutal: the face is crushed, the windscreen shatters. Soho awakens to the crash



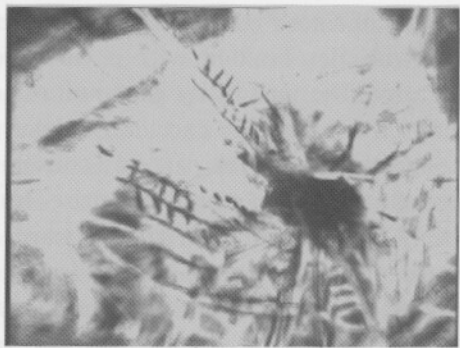
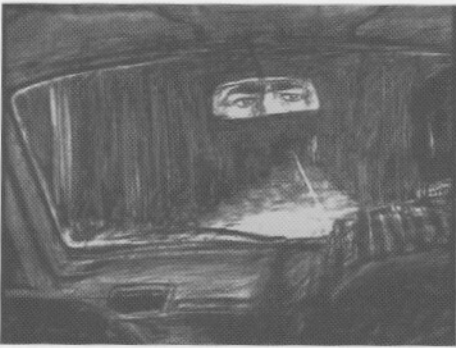
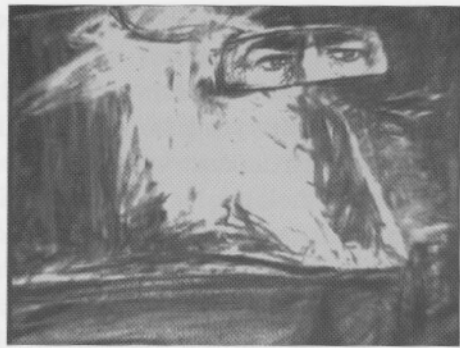
10.2 William Kentridge, 'Sunday roast/foot/electrodes/testicles', sequence (03:01:10–03:05:18) from *History of the Main Complaint*, animated film, 1996. Dimensions variable. To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right. Copyright © William Kentridge.



10.3 William Kentridge, 'Assaults on the road', sequence (03:36:13–03:42:02) from *History of the Main Complaint*, animated film, 1996. Dimensions variable. To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right. Copyright © William Kentridge.



10.4a and 4b William Kentridge, "The Accident", sequence (04:28:22-04:40:07) from *History of the Main Complaint*, animated film, 1996. Dimensions variable. To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right. Copyright © William Kentridge.



10.4b To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right.

(plates 10.4a and 10.4b). The collision is as much a matter of temporalities as it is of objects, bodies, images.

For Kentridge, in other words, it is the moment of crisis itself that signals the awareness of history, an awakening to the past at the point it is wrenched into shocking correspondence with present sight. As such, *History of the Main Complaint* stands, epistemologically, on entirely different ground from the logic of traditional historicism. Indeed, in this scene of a body revived both by and to danger, might be discerned nothing less than the critical potential of Walter Benjamin's dialectic at a standstill: that instant in which the sequential relation of past to present is exploded in a freeze-frame filled to the bursting point with 'the differentia of time',⁸ that flash irruption of a radical temporal discontinuity which otherwise lies bonded within the smoothed neutrality of classical historical narrative. The possibility gestured at here, however, is not that Benjamin's dialectic – like Kentridge's accidental insurgence of memory into the real – is simply the recollection of the past or a consciousness assailed by an indirect referent in the manner of a Romantic reprise. Indeed, if that were the case, Soho would simply have continued driving forwards, his eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror contemplating the past as reverie, as recall, as retrospection. Rather, what is realized here is the notion of time at the present and as the present, that unforeseen instant in which explodes the past immersed in immediacy. It may be said, then, that what the crash scene involves is less an image of time than a plunge into the time-image itself,⁹ into that Benjaminian dimension in which the compaction of the 'what-has-been' and the 'now' is apprehended within the density of their consonance and dissonance.

If this refers to a certain historical sensibility, it is also history effectively de-realized, resistant to sense and assimilation. For Benjamin, this is the critical power of the image blasted loose from the 'vulgar naturalism of historicism',¹⁰ in which transition is eclipsed by crisis and conciliation made to yield to destruction. It is in this sense that Soho's crash may be linked to that dialectical structure of temporal shock that Benjamin takes to be the ground of history and historical consciousness itself. The same accidental danger sounds in each. As such, the conjunctural terms in Kentridge's title might be reversed. For at stake, here, is not a 'history of the main complaint', but rather history *as* the main complaint: the experience of that incomplete temporality in which things are realized at the moment of their awakening, in and through a confrontation with crisis.

Kentridge's film was made in 1996 in direct response to the establishment in April of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in the National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995.¹¹ To understand the historical index of the work as a contextual one, however, is only to go so far. For beyond the merely referential or mimetic, it is an index of the very problematic inherent in the relation of history to time in the process of political change. And, indeed, in 1996 the problem of historical time was a vital one. For what transpired in South Africa during the

early 1990s was not the political apocalypse that had been widely anticipated. The spectacle of a 'classic' decolonization, a violent insurrection, or even a last-minute military coup by Afrikaner military generals, would all have been consistent with the modernist lexicon conventionally used for discussing the processes of radical social change. However, that a struggle of stark, but stabilizing, antagonisms ultimately resolved itself through the rationalization of political reconciliation foreclosed the clarity of any definitive catharsis. As the South African academic and writer Njabulo Ndebele has put it, what the liberation struggle was denied was 'the ultimate experience, the witnessing of the enemy's resounding defeat'. 'The Bastille', as he says, 'was not stormed.'¹²

Against any such expectations, the choice of a negotiated settlement necessitated the logic of political compromise. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in fact, was the key transitional statutory body created to promote a post-authoritarian constitutionalist political order enabled, in part, by the language of human rights reformulated as restorative justice. Its aim was to provide 'as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross human rights violations committed between March 1 1960 and December 5 1993'.¹³ Over a five-year period, the Commission was to provide a public forum for the victims of state racism to confront their perpetrators and to have the brutality of apartheid – its horrific catalogue of death squads, assassinations, mutilation, torture, rape – publicly exposed and admitted. With its origins in the pragmatics of Realpolitik and guided by a moral-theological injunction to 'forgiveness', its mandate was to grant indemnity to the perpetrators – aligned to both the State and the African Nationalist Congress – from judicial prosecution in exchange merely for a full admission of crimes authorized and committed.¹⁴ It was on this basis that a post-apartheid South Africa was to stake its claim to an inclusive notion of participatory citizenship exercised most crucially through a discourse of ethical sociability. Here, indeed, public confession divorced from retributive justice not only aimed at a corrective 'national history lesson'¹⁵ but at the very re-historicization of civic life grafted on acts of redemptive reflection. With its motto of 'Reconciliation Through Truth' lay the appeal to a new basis for moral re-integration and a redefined conception of the nation. In short, in confronting the past as a means of affirming the uniqueness of the present, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was simultaneously the only responsible political position to adopt and a liberal ideal fraught with contradiction.

For at the limits of truth-telling's purported 'normalizing' capacities lies the more awkward question of historical memory and the extent to which the past might yet disturb the conscious periodization of a national present. Indeed, what kind of present is it when the horrifying becomes the ghostly and the ghostly is itself surmounted by the structural visibilities of a new historical moment? Alternatively, what kind of present is it, as Michel de Certeau asks, when in the chronology of historical change is 'traced the decision to become different or no longer to be such as one had been'?¹⁶ The problem that de Certeau points to

might be called one of psychic historicism; that is to say, the creation of temporal delineation as part of the remedial relation of sickness to cure, of retrieval to reflection to repair. That this therapeutic discourse was to be played out under the glare of the broadcast media – and, moreover, that post-apartheid South Africa came to represent a re-enchantment of liberal rationalism for a world desperate for a successful conclusion to horrors of a very long twentieth century – imposed a peculiar kind of spectacularizing imperative onto the new nation's curative project.¹⁷

The retrieval of memory under the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came up against a central problem. The problem was one of temporality – or, rather, a certain codification of time linked to the synthesizing or harmonizing ideal of a restored body-politic. For at issue, in effect, was less the retrieval of trauma than an attempt to be free of its fixations; not a remembrance of the past but the relegation of history to the past. For those who perpetrated politically motivated abuses, in other words, the rhetoric of the confessional purge announced the potential of a new ethical subjectivity. At the same time the victims were confronted with the possibility of their reincorporation into the social as a belated healing of their initial excision.

Such language has a clear psychoanalytic tenor. Indeed, it corresponds to a double Freudian legacy: firstly, to that process of exteriorization and of 'working through' that, in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud termed *Trauerarbeit*, or the labour of mourning. Secondly, to the prophylactic procedures of the 'talking cure'; that is to say, the belief that it is only when forgotten (or repressed) psychic material has been brought into symbolic circulation that the subject may come to break the circular reiteration of the pathological symptom. Freud is explicit that the lost object of mourning may be not only a loved person, but also 'an abstraction', such as 'one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.'¹⁸ As such, it is precisely a Freudian-inflected idea of mourning that social historians have commonly designated as essential to the forging of a collective identity in contexts profoundly shaken by catastrophe and trauma.¹⁹ Simply put, what is aimed for, here, is the configuration of mourning as decathexis: the gradual disinvestment of energies from a lost object which, in incrementally confirming that loss, enables the subject to reconstitute itself and so figure a future untrammelled by infinite repetition. Indeed, if the aim of such a procedure is, as Freud says, to '[declare] the object to be dead', and '[offer] the ego the inducement of continuing to live',²⁰ it is, in effect, the labour of mourning itself that, in killing off the object once and for all, stands as the precondition for the sustained future life of the subject. Implicitly, then, it is not the process of mourning that, for Freud, enables the agency of memory but, rather, its moment of closure that inaugurates the work of remembering. Put another way, with the process of decathexis successfully completed, it is precisely in the newly sundered space between the subject and its relinquished object that memory begins to find its place.

With the relationship of mourning to memory thus regarded, *Trauerarbeit* may be taken as the political and psychic premise guiding the tasks of South

Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For here, arguably, the work of memory came to be driven less by any practice of historical re-engagement than by a retraction of that very energy binding subject to object, present to past: a form of release intimately linked to the instrumentalism of a pragmatic and progressive politics. Indeed, like a realization of Nietzsche's question about the value of history to life, the memory act, under the aegis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, functioned less as a dedicated retrieval of the past than as a means for moving beyond and living on. In order to think a future, the recollection of trauma was at once allied to the formation of a revived state and citizenry. Indeed, in its view of history as the significant site of illness and alterity, the recovery of both the subject and the social functioned as the means of their very constitution. It is here, in its discourse of critical self-examination, that South Africa was to embark on the work of nation-building and state-formation, that is to say, to a process of institutionalizing the past in the cause of a stable and effective future polity. It is also here, however, that the limits of South Africa's 'labour of mourning' have to be confronted; that is to say, the limits of a politics of psychic reconciliation in which memory is 'commissioned' to take the place of history.

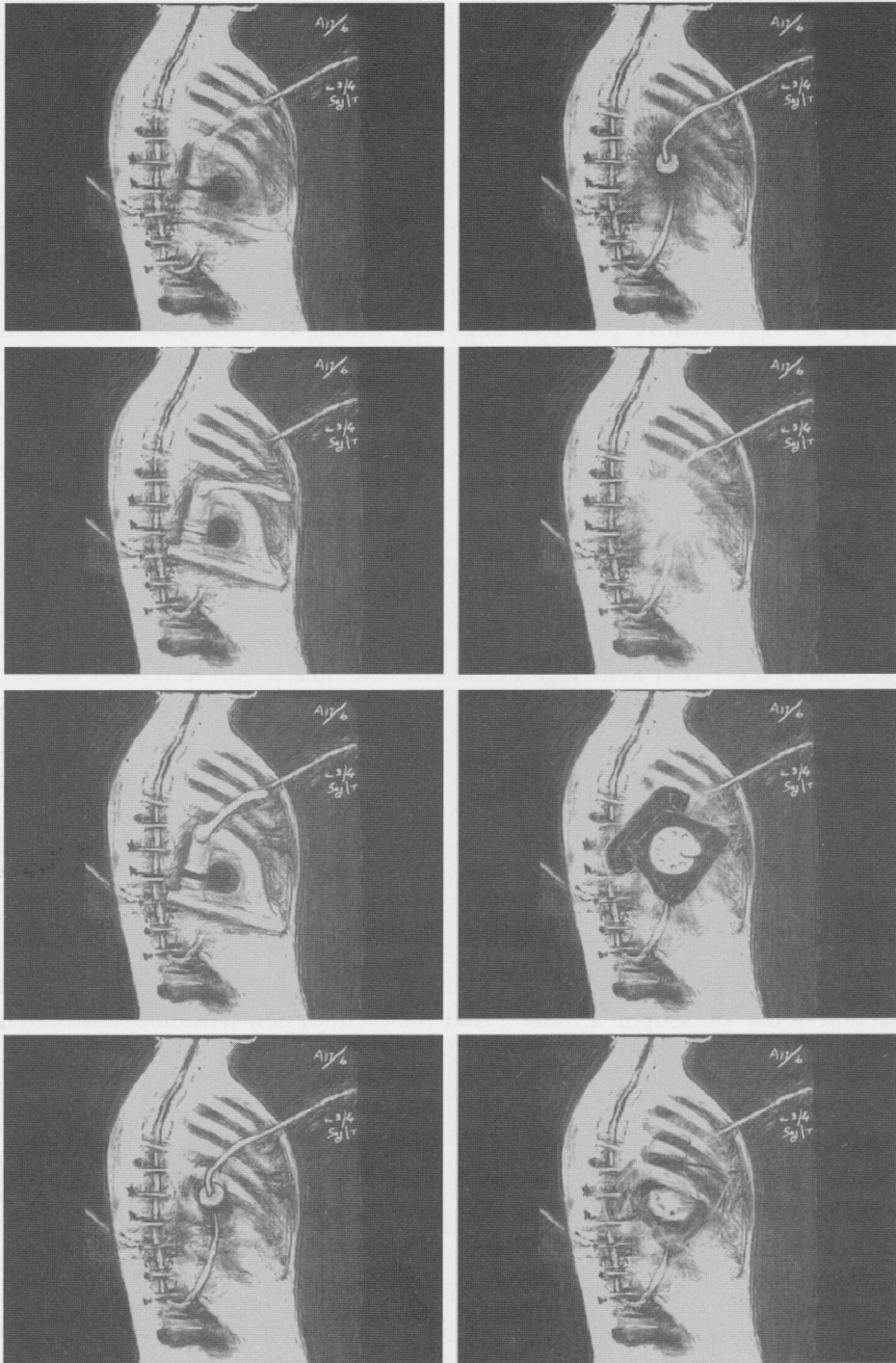
In looking at these limits, we return to Soho Eckstein. At its furthest reaches, his coma may be read as a matter of time; that is to say, as a chronic illness, a sickness of time, or rather, of chronology as sickness itself.²¹ Accordingly, if the imperatives of a new nationalism, as suggested, threaten to absorb the specificity – indeed, the historicity – of a traumatic event, how may its meanings be restored to material presence? How may we escape the deadening weight of an already determined (and de-cathected) past the political violences of which have been relegated to the space of stabilized memory? Differently put, if the comatose state is taken to be a matter of *chronos*, what sort of temporalization would Soho's awakening inaugurate? The crash scene, as earlier suggested, is one such refusal of historicist reverie, for it is a rejection, too, of that process of psychic detachment that seeks to lay the lost object forever to rest. It should be remembered that when Soho drives into the landscape, he does not merely cover space; he is immersed in the densities of time. Likewise, when the anonymous figure hurtles into the car windscreen, it emerges not from surrounding space but from the thickets of an occluded time (plates 10.4a and 10.4b). It is, in other words, by means of an accident of discordant temporalities that Soho is resuscitated to the present: a re-animation that depends less on the mnemonic apprehension of a previous event than on the instant of living an unmediated relation with it. Indeed, in a graphic exemplification of this point, the image of Soho crashing into consciousness hinges on another image that immediately precedes it: on his arm the crash victim wears a wrist watch which explodes on impact.

Such oneiric (or dream) appearances of the traumatic moment, Freud explains, 'have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.'²²

Freud connects this belated appearance of the truth – its deferred address in a dream or flashback – to the subject's incapacity to assimilate trauma as it occurs. Thus, if, in Benjaminian terms, the moment of temporal rupture bespeaks an awakening to history in that perilous moment in which time is seen to 'put on its true – surrealist – face',²³ then in the Freudian model, Soho's crash may be equated with the compelling discussion of memory presented in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For it is here that both the talking cure and the labour of mourning are associated less with the exteriorization of the contents of a concluded event, than with the performance of their sustained repetition.²⁴ In fact, much like Benjamin's constellatory instant, in which past and present objects collide to release their dialectic significance, Freud promotes the process of transference as the means of a dynamic temporal realignment and thus as the mechanism by which an unconfigured past might be re-enacted 'as contemporary experience'.²⁵ Here, in short, the redeeming of a historical referent – as object, image or thought – is not a fulfilment or a movement towards closure, but the sharpening of the question. It is the insurgence of a rupture in the mind's experience of time,²⁶ the irruption of a past made newly and shockingly recognizable in the present. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman observes, the psychoanalytic experience might itself be described as the testimony to an accident, as the site of a catastrophe known only retrospectively.²⁷ Kentridge materializes this moment.

Indeed, in line with what he has referred to as the dangerous etymological coincidence between amnesty and amnesia,²⁸ Kentridge has developed a unique graphic technique in which charcoal drawings of objects and bodies are sketched, partially rubbed out and re-emerge – transfigured – in a ceaseless flow of erasure and re-inscription. Forms body forth from sooty amorphous ground only to be swallowed up, subsumed and re-formed in a style of animation that renders the process of its own production materially evident, visible, factual. The procedure, one that Kentridge has dubbed 'stone-age film-making',²⁹ is at once lengthy and physical. It involves what the artist calls 'stalking the drawing',³⁰ the spatial action of walking backwards and forwards between the metamorphoses of the charcoal image and the movie camera that tracks these changes. Indeed, here, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, the proliferation of drawings of traditional cell animation techniques gives way to a idiom of 'extreme parsimony and of endless round trips',³¹ in which, at the end of filming, there remain only a handful of drawings that, like a palimpsest or mystic writing pad,³² bears within it the time – the history – of its making. Thus, in *History of the Main Complaint*, the physician's stethoscope boring down into Soho's spinal column becomes the metal plunger of a cafetière.³³ The contents of his abdomen metamorphose from paper-punch to telephone (plate 10.5). Bruised intestines become a joint of meat which itself is transformed into a sign of bodily torture as it sketches an outline of toes and testicles tied with electrical cord (see plate 10.2).

In this highly dynamic procedure Kentridge attributes the fortuitous collision with found objects to the agency of 'Fortuna' – 'something other than cold

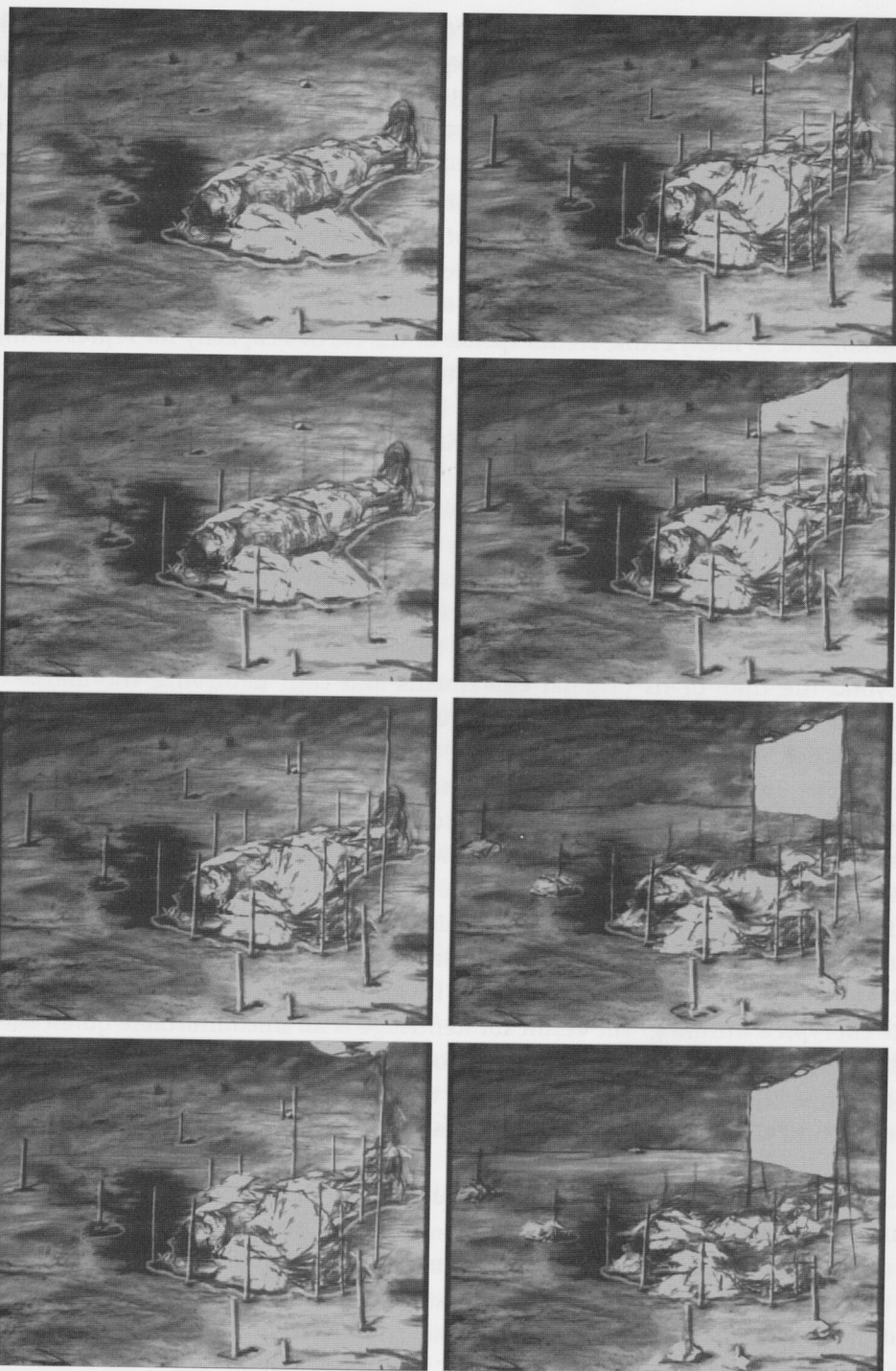


10.5 William Kentridge, 'X-Ray', sequence (01:32:18–01:42:14) from *History of the Main Complaint*, animated film, 1996. Dimensions variable. To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right. Copyright © William Kentridge.

statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control'.³⁴ Such found objects within the artist's local range – a cafetière, a telephone, a newspaper, more recently (in *Voyage to the Moon*, [2003]) a cup and saucer – become the arbitrary agents that metaphorically or metonymically bind the visual fragments into a narrative chain. Such a process is governed by a praxis – a performance in a bodily and visual field – unmediated by stabilized ideational schemes.³⁵ Rather, the drawing act is itself foundational, unleashing in its actual instant mnemonic streams which fix upon objects and bodies as triggers or hooks. In such a procedure, the relation between sight and knowing is at once contingent and meaningful: as in surrealist practice, discovery mines the always-already fluent contents of the unconscious, so, in a materialist practice, the instability of the visual field, its refusal of allotted form, prolongs a perceptual dimension which cannot readily be converted into prediction or progress.

Once again, the issue of time – retarded, dilated, made dense – is crucial. For it is precisely in moving from one image to another while simultaneously incorporating them as trace, as shadow, as graphic trail, that Kentridge's work materializes the relation of the historically disparate and non-identical. Indeed, it is in this peculiar temporal structure, as in the application of the charcoal mark itself – the medium, like ash, being the residue of an annihilating event, a conflagration, a fire – that Kentridge's aesthetic attempts to forestall what we have termed psychic historicism.³⁶ That is to say, it resists that ineluctable process of events becoming unrecognizably remote and available only through the backward reach of recollective thought. It resists, too, that phantasm of progressivism which, aimed at understanding the past, 'honours and buries it'.³⁷ Rather, in the production of visibilities and invisibilities, as in the activity of the charcoal mark formed in terms of its residues and its anticipations, Kentridge sustains the past as both immanence and desire. More than this, he suggests that any concept of personal and collective reckoning must be thought outside the historicist logic of epochal closure and coherent re-beginnings, indeed outside the narrative abstraction of the 'once upon a time'³⁸ that the event of new nationhood threatens to entail.

If *History of the Main Complaint* deals specifically with the dangers of conceiving the past as placid memorium, much of Kentridge's earlier work is concerned with the analogous category of space – or, more precisely, with the temporalization of space. Thus in *Felix in Exile* made between September 1993 and February 1994 (the period just before South Africa's first democratic elections), the landscape of Johannesburg's East Rand becomes the central trope for thinking the relation of history to memory.³⁹ In one particular sequence, a figure walks into a landscape and, as the camera tracks its procession, its charcoal contours dematerialize into the structures of civil engineering: a derelict drainage dam, a pipe-line, an abandoned roadwork. A body is shot down by a bullet, covered over with sheaves of newspaper, which then flutter, dissolve, and become interred within an invisible subsoil (plate 10.6). The red cordon lines of a forensic crime-scene evaporate and



10.6 William Kentridge, 'Body absorbed by landscape', sequence from *Felix in Exile*, animated film, 1994. Dimensions variable. To be read top to bottom left, then top to bottom right. Copyright © William Kentridge.

fade into illegibility; later the outlines of the corpse reform to diagram a constellation in the night sky. In another sequence, the camera action is reversed so that what at first appears to be an industrial gash in the earth recovers and recomposes itself to assume the specious unity of nature.

Kentridge's assimilation of walking bodies and massacre victims as landscape features renders space as the product of both history and nature and, as such, hints at the falsity of their categorical separation. At the same time, however, a landscape able to absorb the blood of so many fallen bodies and entomb the markings of so many crime-scenes speaks of the earth's capacity for representing repression as renewal. In a manner akin to the absorptive properties of its soil, its (ideological) power lies in its tenacious capacity to outlive the past, to surpass rather than to recall those events and violences played out on its surface. Landscapes, as Jonathan Smith similarly argues, allow 'historical context [to] decompose ... Over time, their permanence which is a function of their tangibility [allows] them to be cleansed of the taint of their creators, and to displace themselves from this context into the realm of private memories.'⁴⁰

Raymond Williams, as Smith notes, refers to this process of historical transcendence as the 'enamelled pastoral';⁴¹ that is, the ability of landscape to exist beyond the time of its original enactments and thus neutralize the marks of practice and intention. It is precisely such 'marks' that Kentridge seeks to re-materialize: restoring visibility to the trace, reactivating those meanings in landscape experience repressed by its surface sufficiency. For it is dangerous, as Kentridge's dissolving landscapes seem to say, when the referents of history metamorphose into the passivity of the memorial,⁴² when the stabilizing persistence of space, as a container of experience, functions to reduce the specificity of an event by interring it. Thus, a landscape might well retain the imprint of an earlier temporal occurrence – as the trails of partly effaced charcoal markings in Kentridge's animations suggest – yet it will never restore the full presence of its encrypted meaning. The result for Kentridge is an uncomfortable quiescence, the hidden haunt of a history undisclosed. Speaking of the notorious events of Sharpeville where, in March 1960, a peaceable protest against pass laws resulted in the police massacre of sixty-nine people, he says,

... [P]erhaps images from photographs and documentary films that may have been seen [recall the events]. But at the site itself, there is almost no trace of what happened there. It is an area that is still used, an area in which people live and go to work. There are no bloodstains. The ghosts of the people do not stalk the streets. Scenes of battles, great and small, disappear, are absorbed by the terrain ...⁴³

For Kentridge, then, the curious ability of landscape to conjure away thick time and so render it as a space of specular ephemera produces a form of historical vertigo. Like the mutation of bodies into corpses and corpses into earth, it means

that potentially any phenomenon is able to signify anything else or, as Derrida contends, it means 'to suffer the memory but lose the narrative'.⁴⁴ Indeed, like the empty continuum of traditional historicism, the loss of material specificity, for Kentridge, leads irrevocably to that pathologization of the past that, in *History of the Main Compliant*, renders Soho comatose, and which in *Felix in Exile*, threatens to create a national space whose historical traumas lie atrophied under the sign of natural plenitude.

Eric Santner has voiced analogous concerns. In discussing the psychic and mnemonic adjustments necessary to the narration of a unified Germany following the collapse of Eastern European Communism, Santner points to the dangers inherent in the extraordinary coincidence of Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938, and the first breach of the Berlin Wall, which occurred on the same date fifty-one years later. 'Would the weight of shattered glass', he asks, 'be buried and, as it were, metamorphosed under the sheer weight of all that crumbling concrete?'⁴⁵ The question is not just one of chronological continuity. More problematically, it concerns the structure of what Santner calls 'narrative fetishism': that is to say, the disavowal of historical loss by imagining its 'site and origin to be elsewhere', an undoing of past trauma by 'simulating a condition of [present] intactness'.⁴⁶ In this sense, while the fall of the Berlin Wall may well stand as the punctual point of a long-sought political goal, in the past from which it is distinguished is promoted the amnesia necessary to present legibility. Nietzsche's words seem apt: 'Written over with the signs of the past, and even these signs overdaubed with new signs: thus have you hidden yourself well from all interpreters of signs.'⁴⁷

The caution has clear relevance to contemporary South Africa. It is at issue at every moment that an apartheid place-name or geographic designation is surmounted by the procedures of re-nomination and re-territorialization. Equally, it is at issue at every occasion that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission expressed its concern to have the narrative – 'often called by the commissioners "this chapter of our history"' – closed.⁴⁸ Above all, it is the problem built into the incantation of a 'New South Africa' instantiated as much in the ritualistically demanded 'working-through' of a past as it is in the portentous language of birth and death, beginning and ending that attends the 'progressive' rhetoric of a new bureaucratic rationality.

Kentridge's films seek no such settlement. In the radical upheaval to which he submits chronology and teleology, the principle of his construction – the progressive-regressive mutations, the eruption of historical debris through surface intactness, the infinitesimal arrests and disjunctions between filmic frames – disables all sense of resolution. More than this, it is the perpetual mobility of the signifier – its changeability of forms, its endless metamorphic potential – that offers an alternative to the very theoretic of reconciliation.⁴⁹ For it is not that, in dissolving and mutating, Kentridge's graphic marks cancel each other out or fashion linear movements of causal addition. What is revealed, instead, is the

fortuity of their co-presence, the sense in which the imperfect erasure of a past inscription, its after-image, folds into an equally imperfect precipitate, its fore-image, to reveal the otherwise obscured materiality of their interconnection.

To address what is at stake here demands a return one final time to Soho Eckstein's crash. The accident, previously secured within his body's insentience, is now an insistent nearness that Soho can no longer ignore, an event that will no longer be left behind. In his revival to the past – as both flashback and present fright – Kentridge's character confronts not only his own near-death in the crash, but also his own survival as crisis. The meaning of this is two-fold. First, following Freud, it suggests that traumatic experience is precisely that which cannot be assimilated as it occurs; which cannot, in other words, be contained in a single temporal frame but which surfaces, rather, in the relationship between temporalities. Second, that the work of assigning meaning to trauma always occurs retroactively as the belated address of a truth that otherwise cannot be known. And, indeed, as Soho jolts up in his hospital bed, he is immersed in the currency of that aftermath which, for Benjamin, constitutes the terms of a properly materialist consciousness, and which Freud ascribes to the repetition compulsion inherent to the survival of trauma. Understood thus, what is given along with Soho's accident is a project that can only be called epistemological. For not only is it with the unexpected shock of a past made present that memory is activated. It is also at just such a temporal instant that a genuinely engaged historical awareness might, for the first time, begin.

In short, what is demanded in such an account is a conception of time linked to the impossibility of ever mastering fully what has taken place. If this troubles the stabilization of the past and spurns the possibility of aesthetic and historical completion, it also gives form to a particular moral imperative: that is to say, the need to respect the contemporary claims of history's victims, to understand the terms of their survivorship and, indeed, to reposition the past as a present vigilance. *History of the Main Complaint* or, rather, the idea of history as the main complaint, thus relates not only to the constant shock experiences of a radical temporal structure. It also bears on the ability of critical thought to sustain the moment of crisis, to keep alive the 'weight [...] of surprise, of fright'⁵⁰ and so to transform the 'past forgotten [...] into the possibility of a future'.⁵¹ Indeed, for Freud, for Benjamin – and implicitly for Kentridge – it is precisely this dynamic temporality that not only defines an always active past, but is also the accidental locus of 'present hope'.⁵²

Notes

We would like to thank Ian Garton for his invaluable help in reproducing the images.

- 1 William Kentridge, cited in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge*, Brussels, 1998, 110.
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, 1963. For an excellent analysis of Nietzsche and the danger of *ressentiment* as it formulates suffering as moral virtue, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Freedom and Power in Late Modernity*, Princeton 1995.
- 3 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, London, 1984, 5.
- 4 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 5.
- 5 Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 102.
- 6 For a detailed, frame-by-frame discussion of this work, see Michael Godby, 'Memory and History in William Kentridge's *History of the Main Complaint*', in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Cape Town, 1998, and J.M. Coetzee, 'History of the Main Complaint', in Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and J.M. Coetzee, *William Kentridge*, London, 1999, 84–93.
- 7 In Kentridge's *Felix in Exile* (1994), and the *Colonial Landscape* drawings (1995) similar red crosses denote the markings of landscape surveyors and forensic scientists.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [N1,2], trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999, 456.
- 9 On the notion of time-image in cinema, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Gelta, Minnesota, 1985, 38–43.
- 10 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N2,6].
- 11 In 1997 Kentridge produced two works in direct response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The first was a theatre performance, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, with a script by Jane Taylor and with the collaboration of the Hand-spring Puppet Company; the second was *Ubu Tells the Truth*, an animated film incorporating documentary footage.
- 12 Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Johannesburg, 1991, 9.
- 13 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 1, Cape Town, October 1998, 55.
- 14 While the issue of amnesty was not directly dealt with in CODESA I and II (the multi-party consultative process which negotiated South Africa's new interim constitution in 1991–3), it was entered as a last-minute postscript to the Constitution in December 1993 following a closed political deal between the National Party and the ANC.
- 15 Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, Cambridge, 2001, 14.
- 16 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, New York, 1988, 3.
- 17 While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has clear correspondences with similar forums in Chile and Argentina, it is significant, as Richard Wilson notes, that in other contexts the discourse of human rights was developing along very different lines, with the creation of an International Criminal Court and the prosecutions brought about by the United Nations war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.
- 18 Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London, 2001, (henceforth SE), 243.
- 19 The reconstitution of a German national identity after 1945 and the more recent questions surrounding the reunification of the Federal Republic and GDR are amongst the most vivid examples here. For a Freudian analysis of nation-building in postwar Germany, see Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Post-War Germany*, Ithaca and London, 1990, and 'History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma', in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, Cambridge, Mass., 1992.
- 20 Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 257.
- 21 Deleuze, *Time-Image*, 25.
- 22 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), SE, vol. 18, 13.
- 23 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N3a, 3].
- 24 In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud sets up an analogy between the eruption of the catastrophic event in the symptoms or flashbacks of trauma victims and the famous ritual performance of loss and mastery in a child's game. Both are interpreted as the forging of a 'new' identity sponsored by a repeated enactment of its founding loss.
- 25 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 18.
- 26 Cathy Caruth points out that Freud's discussion of the repetition of the traumatic event highlights such temporal rupture. See her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore and London, 1996, 61.
- 27 Shoshana Felman, 'Education in Crisis', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises*

- in *Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, London and New York, 1992. Both Felman and Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience*) discuss the *tropos* of the accident in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an event that is only known, paradoxically, through its psychic aftermath.
- 28 See William Kentridge, 'Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory' (extract), 1994, originally presented in longer form as a lecture at North Western University, Illinois, November 1994. Numerous edited versions have appeared. Here cited from Cameron, Christov-Bakargiev and Coetzee, *William Kentridge*.
- 29 William Kentridge, "'Fortuna': Neither Programme nor Chance in the Making of Images', 1993, extract in Cameron, Christov-Bakargiev and Coetzee, *William Kentridge*, 113.
- 30 Kentridge, 'Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory', 122.
- 31 Rosalind Krauss, "'The Rock" William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', *October*, no. 92, Spring 2000, 6.
- 32 Freud evolved the analogy between the memory traces left by perception on the mind and the 'mystic writing pad': a slab of resin or wax covered by a sheet of translucent waxed paper and a sheet of transparent celluloid. While the upper layer becomes blank when no longer adhering to the lower, the wax or resin contains the whole history of inscription upon the slab. See Sigmund Freud, 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"', *SE*, vol. 19, 227-32.
- 33 Here, Kentridge is citing the celebrated transformational sequence in his earlier film *Mine* (1991), where the cafetière plunger is seen to bore through the breakfast tray on Soho's bed and down into the subterranean depths of a gold mine, thus establishing a relationship between the stability of white South African domesticity and the occluded underground activities which render that surface space both possible and always only provisional.
- 34 Kentridge, "'Fortuna': Neither Programme nor Chance in the Making of Images', 118.
- 35 Rosalind Krauss makes a similar point when she notes that Kentridge's automatism - and here she is, unusually, equating 'automatism' with medium - places procedure before meaning. Krauss, "'The Rock" William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', 13.
- 36 For a fascinating discussion of ash as memory-trace, see David Farrell Krell's reading of Derrida's journal article 'Feu la cendre' ['Fire, the ash'], 1985, in David Krell, *On Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990, 309-314.
- 37 De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2.
- 38 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, 1970, 264.
- 39 For a further discussion on the relationship between landscape and memory in Kentridge's work, see Staci Borris, 'The Process of Change: Landscape, Memory, Animation', in *William Kentridge*, Chicago and New York, 2001.
- 40 Jonathan Smith, 'The Lie that Binds: Destabilizing the Text of Landscape' in James Duncan and David Ley, eds, *Place/Culture/Representation*, London and New York, 1994, 80.
- 41 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973, 18.
- 42 In a related way, Robert Musil refers to monuments as 'invisible'. For a discussion of this, see Andreas Huyssen, 'Monumental Seduction', in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover and London, 1999.
- 43 Kentridge, 'Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory', 127.
- 44 From the first of Derrida's 'Memoires: For Paul de Man', in Krell, *On Memory, Reminiscence, and Writing*, 283.
- 45 Santner, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 143.
- 46 Santner, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 144.
- 47 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Of the Land of Culture' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, London, 1969, 142.
- 48 Ingrid de Kok, 'Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition', in Nuttall and Coetzee, eds, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, 59.
- 49 In her discussion of Kentridge, Rosalind Krauss invokes Eisenstein's analysis of Disney cartoons. Eisenstein coins the term 'plasmatic' for morphological elasticity and mutability, for the 'rejection of a once-and-forever allotted form'. *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, Calcutta, 1986, 39, in Krauss, "'The Rock" William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', 15.
- 50 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 13.
- 51 Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street', *Critical Inquiry*, 25, Winter 1999, 339.
- 52 Andrew Benjamin proposes a project of 'stripping hope of its utopian garb' thus refiguring it as 'one way of naming the inherently incomplete nature' of the present. Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, London, 1997, 10.