

Anti-apartheid Resistance and Postcolonial Visual Narratives in William Kentridge's Cine-Theatre

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A world-class multidisciplinary South African artist, despite his Lithuanian-Jewish heritage, consistently interrogates the legacies of colonialism and their enduring ramifications through his charcoal animations, puppet theater, and live performances. Employing subtle shadows, metaphors, and visual narratives, his work evokes the plundering of minerals and rare metals, the violence of slavery, colonial domination, and the forced displacement of indigenous populations. His oeuvre does not shy away from confronting acts of genocide and the historical traumas that reverberate across generations. From a postcolonial perspective, Kentridge's practice illuminates how South Africa's past—from colonial extraction to apartheid and political repression—continues to shape social structures, power hierarchies, and collective (post)memory. His art transcends mere documentation; it becomes a space for critical dialogue, where memory, guilt, and the aspiration for transformation intersect. Each piece challenges audiences to confront questions of justice, responsibility, and the possibility of redemption, emphasizing that the postcolonial legacy of South Africa remains vibrant, contested, and demanding of reflection. Through its layered aesthetics and intermedial strategies, his work bridges historical inquiry with contemporary critique, transforming personal and collective remembrance into performative acts of witnessing. It embodies the capacity of visual culture to mediate ethical reflection, evoke empathy, and catalyze a consciousness of historical accountability. Ultimately, Kentridge's practice underscores the inseparability of art and politics, memory and morality, and serves as a potent reminder that postcolonial histories are not relics of the past but living frameworks shaping ongoing societal realities.

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Introduction

In its complex history, South Africa was first a Dutch colony and, from the early nineteenth century, a British one—a process that unfolded at the expense of the indigenous population. Its strategic location, enabling control over the maritime routes linking Europe and Asia, the production of goods for export, the plunder of mineral resources, and the exploitation and racial discrimination of African labour were only some of the practices employed by white colonisers. Legal regulations long reinforced the institution of slavery. One of the significant steps towards formal legal equality was the issuing of *Ordinance No. 50* by the administration of the Cape Colony in 1828. The ordinance abolished a number of legal restrictions imposed on the Khoikhoi and other free people of colour, including the requirement to carry passes and restrictions on employment and land ownership. It thus granted them rights that placed them on an equal legal footing with other free inhabitants

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of the colony. It is worth clarifying that this emancipation took place in two stages: it formally occurred in 1834, yet it bound slaves in the Cape Colony to a compulsory period of apprenticeship until 1 December 1838, when it became an accomplished fact and finally guaranteed full freedom—though not equal rights with white colonisers, a disparity particularly visible among the Boers. In accordance with Calvinist doctrine, which they came in time to interpret as a justification of their own exceptionalism, the Boers regarded themselves as superior beings, indeed as a chosen people, and understood the existing social order as divinely ordained, with political and social power properly belonging to white people. Some of them interpreted the biblical story of Ham and Canaan as evidence that Africans were divinely destined to serve Europeans, thereby presenting racial hierarchy and white domination as part of God's will.

Nearly two decades later, the new parliament passed the notorious *Masters and Servants Act* (1856), which imposed five-year contracts on threat of severe penalties in favour of white employers. This was underpinned by ideas that remained false yet were reinforced by the authority of various great European minds, such as David Hume, who as early as 1748 linked skin colour to character and intellectual ability, describing the inhabitants of Africa as those who “are naturally inferior to whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.” In a similar spirit, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel spoke in his lectures of the 1820s, holding that Africa had never been a historical continent and displayed neither change nor development. Today, in light of the postcolonial turn and of scientific discoveries according to which our very species—*homo sapiens*—originated in East Africa, from where the first mass migrations to other continents began some 70,000 years ago, this thesis sounds particularly grotesque.

South Africa as the New Jerusalem

These religiously, politically, and philosophically motivated visions of racial hierarchy, though shaped within the nineteenth-century context of the Boer republics and British dominion, did not remain mere ideological declarations—in the following decades they found expression in concrete legal acts, from the *Natives Land Act of 1913*, which restricted black Africans' access to land, to the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948, which inaugurated the formal, institutionalised, and totalitarian system of apartheid, premised on building a state in accordance with a Christian social and national order. Its ideologues, in justifying systemic injustice, drew directly on the aforementioned concepts of divine election and the aspiration to make South Africa a New Jerusalem or a New Israel. The “Curse of Ham” was invoked in South Africa to legitimise the enslavement and subjugation of Africans, and the term “Ham” itself, in Afrikaans (“Gam”), was employed by the colonial establishment in precisely this sense. They—along with other non-white races—were stripped of full political rights and subjected to institutional segregation, unequal treatment, discrimination, and persecution. This is all the more shocking given that on 10 December 1948—the very same year as the doctrine of apartheid! —the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a body of both principles and rights due to every individual, was adopted in Paris by the United Nations General Assembly. The South African authorities, however, did not honour these international provisions.

A few years later, on 28 April 1955, in Johannesburg—within this black-and-white reality of apartheid—William Kentridge was born. It was a particular moment, too, in the history of South African education: the Bantu Education Act, in force since 1953, subordinated black education to the policy of apartheid, while the Universities Act, passed in 1955, paved the way for further segregation in higher education and restricted black

students' access to universities reserved for whites. Kentridge was born into a racially privileged minority of European descent, yet his parents belonged to the active opponents of apartheid. His father, Sydney Kentridge, was a lawyer and defender of those persecuted under the system; among others, he represented Nelson Mandela during the treason trial. His mother, Felicia Kentridge, was likewise engaged in human rights work and legal aid for those marginalised by the system of segregation. William came of age at a time when black and other non-white races were portrayed as a threat, subjected to numerous restrictions and prohibitions, violently segregated (ghettoisation), and treated worse in every respect—lower-paid and less prestigious jobs, a ban on forming associations, and so on—while in the public space of the cities even seating on buses or in parks, designated toilets, and beaches were kept separate for the ruling minority.

My childhood was different to that of most white South Africans. By the time I went to school I already knew that shameful things took place in that abnormal society, while for my classmates it was a seemingly normal world. I was more aware and, to some extent, better informed. (De Corral, 2012)

Whites benefited from a flourishing economy, industrial development, and the extraction of natural resources. Years later, the policy of apartheid, compared to German Nazism, met with the condemnation of the international community and the adoption, in 1973, by the United Nations General Assembly, of the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid.

It was in this period, after a year of compulsory military service, that the young William began not legal studies, but a degree in politics and African studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1975, together with others—among them Malcolm Purkey—he founded the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, active in Johannesburg and Soweto and staging politically engaged productions. The immediate impulse was a production of *Ubu Roi* (as *Ubu Rex*), staged earlier in 1975 at the newly opened Nunnery Theatre at Wits. As a student, Kentridge also took part in protests and marches against the racist policies of the time. Between 1976 and 1978, he undertook training in the visual arts at the Johannesburg Art Foundation under Bill Ainslie, a South African painter, activist, and founder of the country's first multiracial art school. There he met Dumile Feni, renowned for his large-scale figurative charcoal drawings, and the author, among other works, of *African Guernica*. Feni came from the circle associated with the Polly Street Art Centre, retrospectively identified as a key precursor of Black Consciousness. Feni's concern was the human condition—he portrayed the suffering and isolation of black people living in the townships on the urban periphery.

A Black-and-White World in Drawing

Charcoal drawing on white ground became an important medium for William as well, one he explored at varying scales, most notably within *Drawings for Projection*, a series begun in 1989—an evolving body of short animated films made without script or storyboard. The hallmark of his palimpsestic style was the technique itself: charcoal drawings subjected to transformation and photographed frame by frame, with the traces of erasure and redrawing left visible. Two fictional white characters recur within them: Soho Eckstein—a wealthy industrialist, mine owner, and property developer from Johannesburg—and Felix Teitlebaum, who appears as his opposite: a quiet dreamer-artist, a reflective observer of the world. Though their characters seem, at first, starkly opposed—a black-and-white contrast of character—the two figures are in essence two sides of a single personality and grow, over time, increasingly alike, blurring the boundary between the unambiguously read “perpetrator” and “witness” of the apartheid era. They were also alter egos of the artist himself, who

sought to reconcile within himself a duality—his own nature as an artist, and the models of dominant masculinity rooted in the legacy of white capitalists.

The fact that what had previously been drawn continues to show through in his manual works likewise reflects the mechanism of memory. In the gesture of erasing and redrawing, one can discern a struggle with the ineradicable trace apartheid left on individual and collective memory alike—everything bound up with it had to be cleansed, removed, and yet could not be entirely forgotten, for that would have been immoral. This has been, and remains, in his practice a striving toward catharsis, one that allows him to move forward with an awareness of, and a lesson drawn from, the past. The choice of white and black—colours lying outside the visible spectrum, being instead its total presence and its total absence—resulting in a general absence of colour, only occasionally broken, became a hallmark of his visual work.

Kentridge has repeatedly admitted that he does not feel comfortable with colour, and for this reason limits its use. What is certain, however, is that its sparing and infrequent deployment has made it a means of expression charged with powerful symbolism. (Corral, 2012)

This finds its reflection even in the artist's own dress—a white shirt and black trousers, which have become his recognisable, almost iconic “uniform,” worn consistently for years, as though the artist wished to embody in himself the aesthetic of his own studio. We might also read this in light of his dual status—that of a white man operating within a world marked by the experience of the black majority—as a creator who, within himself and within his art, joins together, works through, and narrates these two worlds.

The monochrome palette best captured the segregated, divided world that surrounded him. The gradual decolonisation of Africa, manifested in the transfer of power to indigenous communities, together with mounting pressure from within and without, brought about the weakening and, eventually, the collapse of apartheid; its symbolic date is taken to be Nelson Mandela's election as the first black president of South Africa in 1994. Kentridge, despite the uncertainty attending this transfer of power, chose to remain in the country even as his siblings and parents emigrated—after all, there was *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989).

Flat, though animated, charcoal drawings were soon complemented by shadow narratives, in which figures torn and hastily assembled from scraps of black card nonetheless constituted an individuated crowd. They moved from left to right, in single file, in *Shadow Processions* (1999)—reminiscent of a zoetrope effect. Unlike William George Horner's “wonder drum” (1834), we do not peer through slits but watch a linear, rhythmically advancing crowd. The motif recalls Francisco Goya's mural *Pilgrimage to the Fountain of San Isidro* (or *The Way to the Holy Office*), one of the fourteen *Black Paintings* completed around 1821-1823, in which the moving, almost fleeing figures are accompanied by the voice of a Johannesburg street musician and by flickering, indistinct forms in the background. The shadows function as an intermediary layer between the audience and the world, a membrane through which we perceive effort, labour, and the repetitive cycles of fate—evoking both shadow theatre and the cave shadows witnessed by trapped humans. Kentridge repeatedly returned to and analysed these motifs in his lecture series *Six Drawing Lessons*.

Shadow theatre becomes an intermediary between drawing and performance, a device of erudite narrative blending history, symbolism, grotesque imagery, and visual experience into Kentridge's distinctive “cine-theatrical” aesthetic. Paper figures, cut out and joined with metal rivets, are animated by hand, while the legibility of their frame-by-frame micro-movements depends as much on lighting and camera set-up as on technical skill (Kentridge, 2012).

A Cine-Theatre of History

The technique of animated charcoal drawing was not confined to independent films alone—Kentridge carried it directly onto the stage, creating projections shown during productions realised with the Handspring Puppet Company, a collaboration begun in the early 1990s. The company, founded by Adrian Kohler, Basil Jones, Jon Weinberg, and Jill Joubert in 1981, initially created productions for children, only later—thanks in part to Kohler's introduction of the West African tradition of puppetry for adults—moving toward a more mature, politically engaged repertoire. The collaboration with Kentridge, begun in 1992, constituted a post-apartheid fusion of puppet theatre, moving images, and live actors, oriented simultaneously toward the past and the future. As Kentridge recalled:

I contacted Handspring Puppet Company—I knew their puppetry, they had seen my animations—and we wondered what would happen if we combined the world of puppets, artificially constructed actors, with equally artificial landscapes that are drawings rather than films. There was a similarity between the carved puppet and the charcoal drawing that made this combination possible. (Kentridge, interview by Suzanne Cotter, 2022)

Their first collaboration was a contemporary adaptation of *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (from 1992; revived from 2011), transposed into a South African context. Life-sized wooden puppets with roughly carved faces appeared alongside Kentridge's animated films, which—like the live and behind-the-screen puppetry itself—animated drawn landscapes and spaces. The motifs of exploitation, betrayal, and Woyzeck's madness are here intertwined with social oppression, industrialisation, dehumanisation, and migration. Another important production was *Faustus in Africa* (from 1995), a live-action and puppet performance incorporating filmic elements, which addressed the oppressive history of colonialism—its rapacious destruction and plunder of the continent's natural resources, the killing of animals on safari expeditions, the enslavement and exploitation of people—as well as its contemporary repercussions and moral compromises. Flat animation interacts here with three-dimensional staging and a substantial musical component. A third production worth mentioning likewise merges a European text—Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*—with the South African context of the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission: *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (from 1997; revived in 2014 and 2016). Scenes of testimony are presented indirectly, through puppet figures which, combined with the actorly fiction of the grotesque despot Ubu, create a hybrid of the absurd and of historical tragedy. The production addresses memory and truth, balanced on the boundary between fiction and documentary.

The collaboration between the Handspring Puppet Company and William Kentridge was a long-standing one, and the productions mentioned here represent only its most striking examples. It resulted in performances in which manuality was intensified to the utmost degree. This manifested itself in the sculptural rawness of the puppets, whose material form retained the marks of the chisel, as though human and non-human animals alike had been “drawn” in wood. The materials used in these productions remained opaque—wood, metal, paper, charcoal, textiles retained their weight, texture, and resistance. Nothing was smoothed over or concealed in the name of illusion. Likewise, the filmic projections, though situated within the medium of the screen, did not lose their tactile origins. Hand-drawn animations, built from the trace of charcoal, of erasure and overwriting, retained the memory of the process.

Black Box/Chambre Noire (2005) was a mechanised optical performance. As the Polish scholar Artur Duda observes, there have long existed forms of theatre in which the human is represented through puppets, shadows, automata, and optical or photorealistic phenomena (Duda, 2011). For this work, Kentridge used

specially constructed miniature stage models, collaborating with technicians and mechanics, recalling authorial paper theatres. The title plays on scale: the performative object is smaller than a traditional theatrical black box, yet larger than a box camera—containing a black space in which optical processes invert and fix light, an object-hybrid, a scene-camera, also alluding to magic lanterns and to aviation voice recorders. Drawing on the traditions of shadow and puppet theatre, Kentridge mechanically animated shadows and miniatures—including everyday objects such as whisks, coffee pots, lamps, and conveyor belts—laying bare the soullessness of history through mechanised performance. Public presentations took place from October 2005 to January 2006 at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, and later in Johannesburg (2007).

The Black Box project anticipated and ran parallel to Kentridge's experimental work on Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels—a “dark offspring” of the opera. By situating the eighteenth-century work within a nineteenth-century colonial context, he layered narratives of German domination and the Herero genocide (1903-1907) onto it. The projections incorporated inverted drawings, black-line negatives, bellows cameras, scientific illustrations, Leonardo's proportion studies, Baroque calligraphy, typographic collages, birds, colonial maps, Masonic symbols, and animations of rhinoceros hunts. Multiplication, scaling, and iris transitions further heightened the baroque scenography, merging the live and the projected image.

There can be no doubt that William Kentridge, deeply bound to the Republic of South Africa, has drawn upon (and continues to draw upon) the country's complex history and its shifting present as inspiration for his mixed-media work. His drawings, films, and productions were shaped, indeed, within a post/colonial and post/apartheid reality. As he has declared:

I am interested in political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings; an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism [kept] at bay.

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