



# Progress, Progression, Procession: William Kentridge and the Narratology of Transitional Justice

## Living in the Interregnum

In 1990, the South African artist William Kentridge completed *Arc/Procession: Develop, Catch Up, Even Surpass*, a large drawing in charcoal and pastel created on eleven sheets of paper that together arch over an area of approximately 24.5 x 9 feet (Figure 1). Typically installed high on a gallery wall, the shape of the work recalls the triumphal arches of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Kentridge may have had in mind a famous instance of triumphalist architecture, the first-century Arch of Titus in Rome, which depicts the bearing away of the booty of imperial conquest, including a menorah and other spoils from the sack of Jerusalem. In an often-cited theorization of the link between “documents of civilization” and “documents of barbarism,” Walter Benjamin implicitly evokes the same scene when he writes of “the triumphal procession [*Triumphzug*] in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (256). Close in spirit to Benjamin’s reflections on history, Kentridge’s cryptic and decidedly non-triumphalist procession nonetheless involves not imperial booty, but rather the detritus of the dispossessed.

Most emblematically, on the far left-hand (or forward) side of *Arc/Procession*, the head and upper body of a hunched-over figure disappear beneath an indeterminate burden that includes cups and bowls, sacks and megaphones, all of which

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Figure 1. William Kentridge. *Arc Procession: Develop, Catch Up, Even Surpass*, 1990. Charcoal, pastel on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

seem to be lashed around his body. A hobbling, one-legged man follows close behind. The feet of these two figures are hemmed in by low-lying barbed wire as they move toward a scarred landscape rendered in miniaturized, non-perspectival space at the left-bottom corner of the drawing. Following them in the procession we find a dense space populated by miners, a sandwich-board man, and male and female figures gesturing with despair, or perhaps imprecation, toward the heavens, along with abandoned cans, ladders, more megaphones, and two hyenas. Just to the left of center, three showerheads rain blue water on the proceedings—the only color in the drawing other than small triangles of green in the tiny landscapes at either corner of the arch. Meanwhile, imperfectly erased sketches at various points of the arch create an effect of layering, as do several human figures rendered in dark shadow.

In reworking the Roman triumph, *Arc/Procession* gives visual form to Benjamin's indictment of the violence embedded in progress narratives. Completed in the year in which the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of political organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and Communist Party officially inaugurated South Africa's transition from apartheid to an eventual nonracial democracy, Kentridge's drawing cites—in order to ironize and even violate—a series of tenets of the progressive narrative of nationalism in its classical and postcolonial variants. As critics frequently note, Kentridge has taken his subtitle, "Develop, Catch Up, Even Surpass"—incorporated into the drawing in neat, cursive hand—from the political vision of the modernizing Ethiopian leader, Emperor Haile Selassie (Cameron 47). Selassie, who titled his autobiography *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, was an anticolonial hero and convener of the Organization of African Unity who believed that the country "must make progress slowly" (qtd. in Whitman). At the same time, he sought to incorporate aspects of European modernity while holding on to traditional forms of hierarchical authority, a double-game that ultimately failed and eventuated in his replacement by a military dictatorship in 1974.<sup>1</sup> The production of *Arc/Procession* in the midst of a massive civil rights struggle may also contain an echo of Martin Luther King's oft-repeated phrase, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice"—a phrase that continues to circulate in proximity to political change.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even as its title suggests an ambitious narrative of historical progress, the work's formal features complicate and undercut the progression at stake. Central to the piece's impact is the tension between the large-scale narrative suggested by its subtitle and the minimally narrative content of the drawing: if a procession is most certainly an event, the depiction seems to lack both an explicit causal agent setting the movement in motion and the sense of an ending. Tension derives in addition from the way the viewer's eye is pulled in two directions: while the procession moves from right to left, the drawn-in subtitle reinforces the tendency of Latin-alphabet users to "read" from left to right. Finally, the composition of imperfectly sutured panels gives the arc a jagged line that doesn't simply "bend," as King's phrase would have it, but rather stutters—and thus fractures the seamless continuity promised by the notion of progress.

Working at a moment on the verge of massive social change, Kentridge explores what his compatriot Nadine Gordimer has called "living in the interregnum." In the 1980s, when she presciently saw change on the horizon, Gordimer twice cited Antonio Gramsci's famous sentence from the *Prison Notebooks*: "The old is dying, and

the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.”<sup>3</sup> By staging progress as unresolved tension, *Arc/Procession* confirms what Gordimer also knows: that the crisis of the interregnum is also a problem of narrative. In the following pages, I explore some of the questions that arise from this conjunction of narrative form and political transition. What challenges and opportunities attend narration from and in transition? What stories of collective transformation and improvement remain possible after the collapse of “grand narratives” of progress? If the old is indeed dying, how can its story still be told along with that of the emergent “new”?

In pursuing these questions, I turn not to more obvious purveyors of transitional narratives, such as Gordimer or the collective authors of the monumental *Truth and Reconciliation Report*, but to Kentridge, an artist who works the edges of narrativity. The increasingly prominent Kentridge, who comes from a Lithuanian- and German-Jewish Johannesburg family of lawyers involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, makes art that is weighted with political implication, yet, for the most part, indirect in its political critique. To be sure, Kentridge’s innovative films, drawings, and prints—created throughout the transitional period of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early years of the twenty-first century—appear as illustrations of what “living in the interregnum” means. They help make visible the “morbid symptoms” of that moment of transformation: betrayal, violence, and complicity, to name some of the most important themes of his work. But understanding Kentridge’s interventions requires delving into the varied, media-specific techniques he employs as well as the form, content, and context of his heterogeneous oeuvre.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I take the open-endedness, indirection, and outmodedness of Kentridge’s aesthetic as an inspiration for thinking more fundamentally about the narrative form embedded in what has come to be called “transitional justice”—a politico-legal regime that has emerged in response to transformations like the one in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> I thus begin by providing a brief introduction to what we might call the “narratology” of transitional justice.<sup>6</sup> Drawing critically on the legal theorist Ruti Teitel, I suggest that transitional justice brings with it a fundamental narrative tension involving the negotiation between continuity and discontinuity and implication and disembeddedness. This framework helps open up the narrative dimensions of Kentridge’s experiments in animated filmmaking, where he first begins to explore the minimally narrative genre of the procession. Reading Kentridge in the context of work on the narrative form of political transformation by theorists such as Benjamin, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Santner brings to light several keywords that orient these investigations: progress, progression, procession, implication, and transition. This vocabulary is rich with narratological association, yet will appear here in defamiliarized form. To the extent that Kentridge creates a narrative of South Africa’s transitional moment, it is a narrative that rewrites the conventional liberal narrative of change, which is founded on a notion of disencumbered progression through a “homogenous, empty time” (Benjamin 261), and forges instead an alternative chronotope and a different kind of protagonist. Moving from progression to procession in a transitional era, Kentridge provides resources for new forms of storytelling in the wake of racialized trauma and in the midst of a triumphalist capitalism.

## Transitional Justice as Narrative

At the same time that South Africa was making its dramatic political transition—and in dialogue with that process—a new way of responding to and thinking about what Gramsci called the interregnum was taking shape globally under the rubric of “transitional justice.” Generally applied to states, like South Africa, Argentina, or the former Soviet bloc, which have emerged from authoritarian or totalitarian rule into democracy, transitional justice involves the invention of contingent procedures and practices in the course of reckoning with particular past injustices. The institutionalized forms of transitional justice—often traced back to the Nuremberg Trials and Germany’s post-Nazi reconstruction—include truth commissions, the payment of reparations, and the practice of lustration (the banning of politically tainted politicians and civil servants from public office). The goal of transitional justice is the facilitation of new democratic regimes that break with the past yet maintain social peace; the attainment of such a goal proceeds necessarily from compromise (see Bickford; Teitel, *Transitional Justice*).

For all the importance of its institutional forms, transitional justice also entails a potent cultural logic. In the words of one of its leading theorists, the legal scholar Ruti Teitel, “Transitional law is above all symbolic—a secular ritual of political passage” (“Liberal Narrative” 249).<sup>7</sup> As a rite of passage, transitional justice possesses a strong narrative dimension. Narratives associated with regimes of transitional justice can appear in a variety of media that traverse the fiction/non-fiction divide—including courtroom testimony, truth commission reports, and literary and cinematic works. Regardless of the medium in which they appear, such narratives give form to political transformation by helping shape the transitional era’s time consciousness, both its space of experience and its horizon of expectations.<sup>8</sup>

In her influential account, Teitel proposes that transitional narratives possess certain shared generic features. She emphasizes, in particular, their “contextualized and partial” nature: they are not “meta’-narratives but ‘mini’-narratives, always situated within the state’s preexisting national story. They are not new beginnings but build upon preexisting political legacies” (“Liberal Narrative” 241, 255). In other words, transitional narratives do not stand alone, but only exist in relation to past narratives of violence and violation. They “recategorize” key events from a nation’s past in the light of a new political dispensation (translating, for instance, “anti-terrorist” measures into “crimes against humanity”), and they simultaneously “emplot” a vision of national history that projects from a tainted past into a different future (Teitel, *Transitional Justice* 85). As such, they combine continuity with discontinuity, recapitulation of a nation’s history with a will to break with that history.

A fundamental tension in Teitel’s account emerges, however, when she places transitional narratives under the sign of what she calls a “redemptive,” “liberalizing” project (“Liberal Narrative” 257). Teitel’s synthetic summary of the genre illustrates the risks of this subsumption:

Transitional narratives follow a distinct rhetorical form: beginning in tragedy, they end on a comic or romantic mode. In the classical understanding,

tragedy implicates the catastrophic suffering of individuals, whose fate, due to their status, in turn implicates entire collectives. ... Contemporary stories of transitional justice similarly involve stories of affliction on a grand scale, but, while they begin in a tragic mode, in the transition they switch to a non-tragic resolution. ... In the convention of the transitional narrative, unlike that of tragedy, the revelation of knowledge actually makes a difference. The country's past suffering is somehow reversed, leading to a happy ending of peace and reconciliation. ("Liberal Narrative" 252)

Despite their contingent origins, transitional narratives, in Teitel's version, possess a strong, teleological drive. The genre shift she identifies at their core—from tragedy to comic resolution—facilitates a parallel shift from contingency toward certainty: liberalizing transitional narratives become metanarratives or masterplots founded on a forgetful will to reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> As masterplots, transitional narratives shed their contingent connection to "preexisting political legacies" and become much more conventional stories that take for granted the direction of progress: in this case, toward the closure of liberal democracy.

While committed to the masterplot of transition as liberalization, Teitel does show awareness of its dangers, and acknowledges that, "despite its appeal, its entrenchment as a story of unity could undermine its potential for a more revolutionary project" ("Liberal Narrative" 257). Yet, insofar as Teitel emphasizes "the potential of individual choice" as central to the "liberalizing function" of transitional "narratives of progress," her model becomes easily amenable to conventional, Hollywood-style plotting. Consider *Invictus*, Clint Eastwood's 2009 film about Nelson Mandela and the 1995 Rugby World Cup. There, the victory of the South African Springboks and the personal friendship between Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) and the Afrikaner rugby captain Francois Pienaar (played by Matt Damon) become allegories of the "wholeness" and reconciliation transitional justice promises to the post-apartheid nation (Teitel, "Liberal Narrative" 257). In this drive toward closure, well meaning individualized stories triumph while structural problems of race and class go missing.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the truth of the Springboks is more complicated than the film can admit. A decade and a half after their World Cup victory, the team remained almost entirely white and success in the sport remained strongly correlated with ongoing economic inequalities (see Smith).

*Invictus* is, of course, a blatantly Americanized version of South Africa's transition. Yet, as such, it also emblemizes the transnational forces that are shaping the narrative of transitional justice today. As human rights scholar Paul Gready explains, "Globalisation as a whole is forging transitions and democracies characterised by continuity as well as change, by structures of inequality and patterns of conflict that are reconfigured rather than brought to an end" (*Era of Transitional Justice* 8).<sup>11</sup> While predominantly a matter for political contestation, the limits of transitional justice in confronting such structures and patterns are also narrative limits, for, as Robert Cover has influentially argued, "No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning" (4). The generic conventions of



the narrative of transition help install powerful ideological parameters that limit the field of possibility for new stories of transformation.

Although transitional eras are premised on a disruptive, qualitative break in political regime, liberal transitional narratives seek to install a more reassuring plot promising closure, as *Invictus* demonstrates. Central to the genre shift of transitional narrative, both Teitel and the film make clear, is a sense that closure is possible via a *letting go* of the past. While tragedy, in Teitel's account, "*implicates* the ... suffering of individuals" and, through them, "entire collectives," the historical reversal that takes place in nontragic endings implicitly frees both individuals and collectives ("Liberal Narrative" 252; emphasis added). Disavowing the implication of individuals in collective contexts of suffering, such narratives take on not simply a *liberal*, but a *neoliberal* guise and may become a form of what Eric Santner has called "narrative fetishism."<sup>12</sup> Writing about German attempts to "master" or overcome the Nazi past (known as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), Santner defines narrative fetishism as "the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place" (144). A fetishistic narrative emerges out of a traumatic situation and may even, Santner proposes, "acknowledge the *fact*" of trauma, but it "disavow[s] the traumatizing impact of the same event" (150). In pointing to the need to preserve the *traces* of trauma's *impact*, Santner implies that the problem of fetishism lies not only in a past disavowal—or a disavowal of the past—but in the ongoing production of disavowal through narrative. The genre shift of transitional narrative from tragedy to comedy-romance constitutes a disavowal of two forms of implication. What is disavowed is not necessarily the past trauma, the "fact" of which may remain in view, but rather, first, the *hold* of the past on the present and, second, the ongoing inextricability of individuals from collective, social contexts.<sup>13</sup>

Regimes of transitional justice thus occupy a field of tension and remain poised at the intersection of conflicting demands. On the one hand, the drive for justice demands an account of subjects as implicated in histories of injustice and traumatic violence. On the other hand, the understandable desire for social peace and progress diverts such a drive and seeks to create citizens for the new dispensation who are disembedded from past histories. Such contradictory demands play out in narrative form as a tension between continuity and discontinuity. The conventional transitional narrative seeks to deny continuities between past and present in order to forgo the need for a more fundamental break from previous social arrangements; it attempts to install moderate progress in place of qualitative transformation. At the limit, such a vision becomes a form of narrative fetishism, its version of progress built on disavowal of the ongoing production of trauma and inequality in the present.

The thought of Walter Benjamin helps us to diagnose the problem of the liberal narrative at a more fundamental level—that of the chronotope (Bakhtin)<sup>14</sup>—and to open up alternative possibilities for thinking transition. Benjamin proposes in his reflections "on the concept of history" that the liberal (or in his time, social democratic) narrative of progress derives from an underlying gradualist temporality. As Benjamin famously argues, "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot

be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time” (260–61).<sup>15</sup> This same chronotope of progression lies at the heart of nationalist imaginings, as Benedict Anderson has demonstrated. For Anderson, the imagination of the modern nation becomes possible through the emergence of a new experience of temporal simultaneity, whose emblems are the novel and the newspaper, both of which present “the idea of a sociological organism [i.e., the nation] moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time” (26). While the idea of the nation connects citizens to a horizontally conceived community as well as to that nation’s canonical history, the homogenous, empty time in which that community comes into being establishes a terrain purified of collective implication in traumas past and present. Combining Benjamin and Anderson, we can propose that despite the peculiar, historically and socially heterogeneous circumstances in which the transitional nation necessarily emerges, the conventional transitional narrative that accompanies that emergence attempts to found the nation in this image of progression through homogenous, empty time.

The notion of progression targeted by Benjamin is a much stripped-down version of the kind of progression that interests narrative theorists such as James Phelan (cf. *Experiencing Fiction; Reading People*). In place of the dynamic organization of beginning, middle, and end that Phelan reveals in narrative, Benjamin finds in progressive thought a reduced temporal imagination with dangerous political implications. For Benjamin, this concept of time stymied opposition to fascism because it led the progressive mind of the era to grasp fascism as an outmoded aberration bound to disappear of its own accord (257). Today the stakes are different and involve not fascism, but rather the sense of inevitability that accompanies the assumed link between democratic nation-building and capitalist marketization—an inevitability that some versions of transitional justice help to produce and reproduce.

The liberal narrative offers one way of managing the tension at the heart of the transitional era between desires for stability and justice, yet, counterforces are also at work in transitional contexts. Benjamin’s critique of progress offers a framework for thinking about such counterforces. When he writes that “[a] critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” (261), he suggests the grounds on which an alternative narrative of transition might emerge, one that is not indebted to a gradualist vision, but remains true to the other demand of transitional justice for a reckoning with ongoing implication in historical injustice. But what would such a narrative look like?

### William Kentridge’s Counternarratives

Just as South Africa’s transitional process was getting under way, William Kentridge embarked on a remarkable period of productivity that would bring him to international prominence and would include, among other features, a sustained exploration of the problems of time, narrative, and progress that are at the heart of the transitional genre. In highly mediated and indirect form, Kentridge’s work depicts the contradictions and crises of narrative that accompany the long-wished-for moment of political



change, a moment when the emancipatory possibilities of nonracial democracy run up against the persistence of entrenched privilege and material inequality. Well aware that the aesthetic production of one white South African artist could not possibly provide a totalizing overview of the era of change, Kentridge describes his approach as “trust in the inauthentic, the contingent, the practical as a way of arriving at meaning” (“Director’s Note” xi). Infused with the contingent and the pragmatic, Kentridge’s work operates on the same terrain as transitional justice, yet pushes back in at least two ways against the subsumption of contingency to the masterplot of progress: in place of the homogenous, empty time of progression, Kentridge models a “thick time” and a dynamic, variable space; and in place of the disembodied liberal subject of the transition, Kentridge evokes an implicated, embodied subject.<sup>16</sup> In order to illustrate this alternative transitional chronotope, I will focus primarily on *palimpsest* and *morphing*—two techniques that emerge from what Rosalind Krauss calls Kentridge’s “reinvention” of the medium of animation—and I will connect those techniques to a recurrent narrative function in Kentridge’s films and other contemporaneous work: the procession of the crowd.<sup>17</sup>

These features (palimpsest, morphing, and procession) appear together for the first time in the *Drawings for Projection* series, an open-ended set of short animated films begun in 1989 and currently numbering ten.<sup>18</sup> The films reference early cinema, Weimar painters like Max Beckmann, and contemporary African artists like Dumile, among other sources. They include evocative extradiegetic music and non-synchronous diegetic sound effects as well as occasional descriptive and narrative intertitles and bits of text, but no dialogue or voice-over narration. Despite minimal use of language—and an ambiguous, associative style—the films do offer both individual narratives and a collective story arc. In fragmentary form, they tell the tale of the industrialist Soho Eckstein and the artistic Felix Teitlebaum. These two men physically resemble the artist in their corpulence—Felix, in addition, always appears naked—and serve as his alter egos in a simultaneously comical and serious reflection on contemporary South Africa. The films recount a love triangle between the two men and Mrs. Eckstein, but also track the rise and fall of Soho’s business empire while alluding to South Africa’s history of racialized violence and the political struggles marking the transitional period. In coordinating intimate foibles with large-scale public events and transformations, Kentridge evokes certain conventions of the transitional narrative, as defined by Teitel. As she writes about the genre in general, “These tales of deceit and betrayal, often stories of longstanding affairs, appear to be allegories of the relation between citizen and state, shedding light on the structure and course of civic change” (“Liberal Narrative” 255). Like other transitional tales—including novels by the likes of Gordimer (*None to Accompany Me*), J. M. Coetzee (*Disgrace*), and Achmat Dangor (*Bitter Fruit*)—Kentridge’s *Drawings for Projection* explicitly narrate the morbid symptoms that emblemize the interregnum through stories of interpersonal deceit and betrayal. Yet, acutely aware of the non-representative status of his primarily white cast, Kentridge also mediates the citizen/state allegory through the figure of the crowd, which appears in almost every film, albeit in different guises.

Although the *Drawings for Projection* bear some obvious similarities to Teitel’s account of the transitional genre—not only in their foregrounding of personal betrayal

but also in their construction out of a series of micro-stories—they lack the overarching narrative progression from tragedy to comedy that the legal scholar finds in the genre and move instead in largely aleatory fashion between different subgenres and subplots. Unfolding simultaneously with the events of the transitional era, the series weaves in and out of relation to historical change. While Kentridge himself has voiced the opinion that apartheid constitutes a “rock” that cannot be confronted directly and thus needs to be approached with indirect and figurative means, in fact the series sometimes mobilizes quite literal references to issues of race, class, and violence.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the “realist” and historically referential aspects of the *Drawings for Projection* still arrive mediated by experiments with form and media. These experiments create the possibility of a new approach to transition by embracing the outmoded at the level of technique—Kentridge’s reinvented handicraft version of animation.

The unusual drawing and filming technique Kentridge develops in the series resonates with the larger historical moment of the films’ creation and constitutes his most original contribution to rethinking narration in transitional times. Unlike traditional animation, in which the filming of a large series of images creates the illusion of movement, Kentridge works with a small number of drawings (typically between twenty and forty for an eight minute long film). His process of drawing for projection is based on marking, smudging, and erasure instead of the creation of an animated series.<sup>20</sup> That is, he draws an initial image on a white sheet with charcoal—occasionally supplemented with blue and red chalk—and then walks across his studio to his 16 or 35 mm film camera, where he shoots two frames of the image. He then returns to the drawing and amends it through additional drawing, smudging, and erasure, before shooting two more frames. The process of creation continues like this for a period of months and results in a film that, even after editing and transfer to video or DVD for projection on a gallery wall, preserves layers of residual charcoal dust and concatenates palimpsestic images. In these palimpsests, traces of previous drawings remain on celluloid and in the final film, even as the drawings themselves that make up each frame disappear forever (except for the final image in each sequence, which is often displayed in exhibitions alongside the films). Kentridge makes virtuosic use of the technique when he depicts, as he frequently does, newspapers fluttering through the breeze (Figure 2). The passage of the newspaper leaves a trail and thus supplements the ephemeral with the trace of persistence. If, following Anderson, the newspaper has served as a medium of national formation—figuring forth a simultaneity that would link citizens in an “imagined community” across the territory of the nation—in Kentridge’s hands the newspaper becomes a figure of flux and temporal drag. Such scenes may thus be understood as intervening in the homogenous, empty time of the nation. Using the same palimpsestic technique, Kentridge also directly reveals the human consequences of such temporal drag, which stands in opposition to the disencumbered time of progress—notably, the burden suffered, in differential fashion, by the nation’s citizens and denizens, as in scenes from many of the films in which, recalling *Arc/Procession*, a worker carries a heavy load across a scarred landscape.

This technique of drawing/smudging/erasing, which makes possible the palimpsest with its layered persistence, also allows a form of morphing that highlights disappearance. The stakes of Kentridge’s work emerge at the intersection of these two



Figure 2. William Kentridge. Video still from *Felix in Exile*, 1994. 35mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minute, 43 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

tendencies. *Felix in Exile*, made shortly before the first democratic elections in 1994, registers the violence of the interregnum and the problem of land distribution (a problem that even today remains largely unaddressed). Here we find Felix in a Paris hotel room as he reflects longingly on his homeland, but with an acute sense of the losses that are accumulating in his absence.<sup>21</sup> Alternating “European” and “African” music evokes the layered experience of exile. Through the drawings of a black surveyor, Nandi, which spill out of Felix’s suitcase and flutter to the walls, Felix has access to the continued political violence back home. An object of desire and nostalgia, Nandi maps the landscape of the dead. In her drawings, palimpsest and the newspaper are associated with death. But the drawing/erasing technique also produces a supplementary narrative that uses morphing to correlate death with disappearance and forgetting, as Nandi herself becomes a victim of violence. In a rapid sequence, Nandi is shot by unseen assailants and forensic crime scene lines appear to cordon off her bleeding body; her corpse then morphs quickly into the landscape and loses recognizability, before finally giving way fully to Kentridge’s signature depiction of the postindustrial East Rand, a landscape dotted with disused mine pits and mine dumps (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>22</sup> As Nandi disappears, the landscape preserves the marks of violation in the guise of ecological devastation—even as it obscures the evidence of murder. As Kentridge has written in a discussion of this film, “The landscape hides its history . . . There is a similarity between a painting or drawing—which is oblivious to its position in history—and the terrain itself, which also hides its history” (“Landscape” 126). Nevertheless, by creating “imperfect” works filled with smudged images and traces of what has been erased, Kentridge’s work seeks to counter precisely this “hiding” or absorption of history by the landscape.<sup>23</sup>

In making time visible through a sculpting of drawn space, while working with a technique that simultaneously ensures disappearance and preservation, Kentridge brings together memory, mourning, and oblivion in an original, medium-specific chronotope whose production has ethical implications. The depiction of Nandi’s death indicates that the potential for trauma lies not only in political violence, but also in the erasure of that violence from human consciousness. Confronted with such a displacement, Kentridge avoids the perils of Santner’s narrative fetishism by narrating that very erasure and marking irrecoverable loss in a non-fetishistic way. This double movement of marking and erasure resembles what I have called traumatic realism (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*).<sup>24</sup> A counter to narrative fetishism, practices of traumatic realism index loss and the inaccessibility of what has been lost without redemptive acts of recuperation. By depicting both Nandi’s murder and the disappearance of her murdered body, Kentridge shows us why loss is unredeemable: not just because of the materiality of political violence but because of the temporal structure that accompanies it. The techniques of palimpsest and morphing make temporal progression itself an “actant” in the scene, both an experience Kentridge marks and a force against which his narrative struggles.

But Kentridge’s technique also has a further specificity. The simultaneity of continuity and rupture made possible by drawing/erasing calls forth not just trauma in general, but the layered temporal dynamics of political transition: the fact that a break in the historical narrative of the nation coexists with persistent violence and the

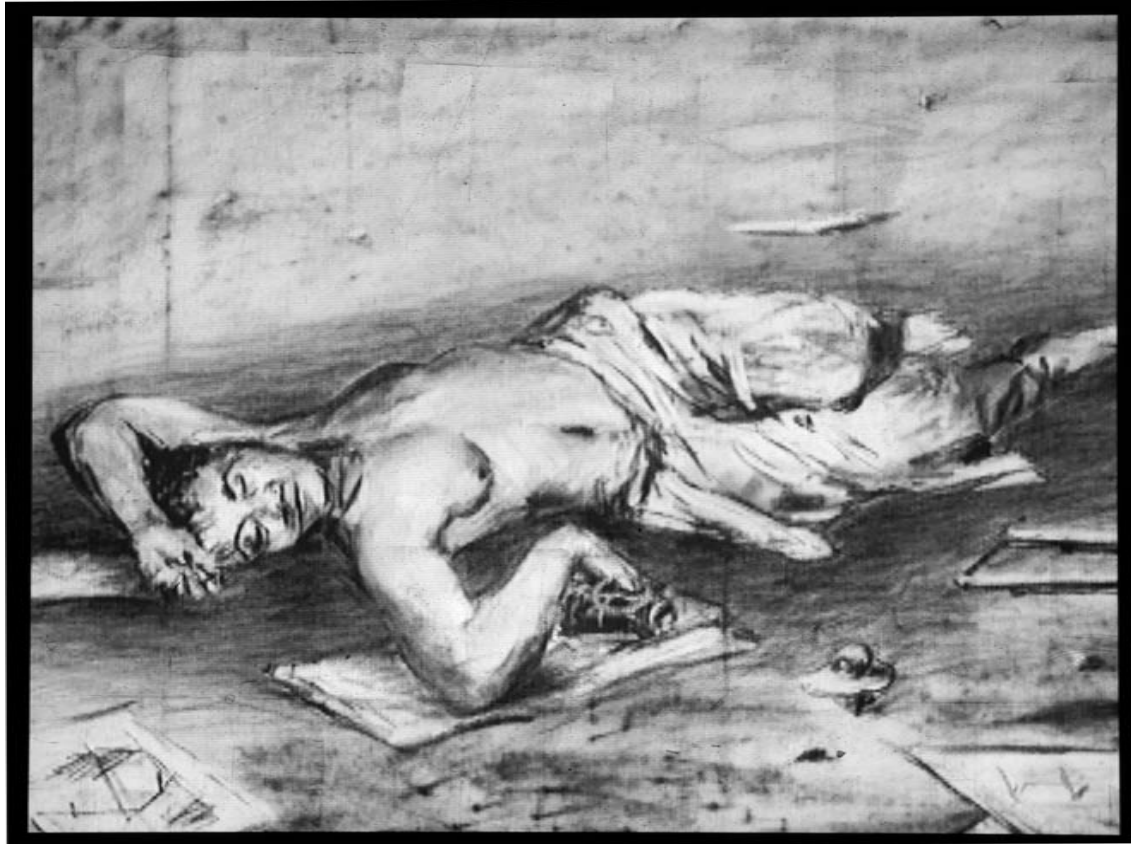


Figure 3. William Kentridge. Video still from *Felix in Exile*, 1994. 35mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minute, 43 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.





Figure 4. William Kentridge. Video still from *Felix in Exile*, 1994. 35mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minute, 43 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



persistent traces of past violence. Kentridge's attention in *Felix* and other films to the obsolescent mine—and his frequent representation of older technologies of all sorts: Bakelite phones, adding machines, and so on—counters what he calls “disremembering, the naturalization of things new,” a process that he associates with the rhetoric of the “new South Africa” (“Landscape” 127). Against the absorption of the problems of the interregnum and an unredeemed past into the forgetful language of novelty—into the “happy ending” of the liberal transitional narrative—Kentridge's “outmoded” drawing and filmmaking techniques reinscribe transition back into landscape and memory.

In addition to challenging the temporal progression of the liberal narrative, the *Drawings for Projection* also undercut its disembedded subject. When *Felix in Exile* ends with the return of its protagonist to the scarred South African landscape, where he wades into the mine pit, Kentridge also suggests that the escape of exile is not an option in the face of unavoidable, embodied implication. In addition, by foregrounding focalization through the presence of surveyors' tools, such as the theodolite, and through mimicry of cinema's “iris” lens, Kentridge also implicates viewers in *Felix*'s gaze at the violence projected on the museum walls.<sup>25</sup> Kentridge's innovative reinvention of the medium also furthers the sense of embodied implication. In Rosalind Krauss's terms, “Kentridge's technique constantly narrativiz[es] his own process” (*Perpetual Inventory* 53). This narrativization mimics but goes beyond the kinds of self-reflexivity made familiar by postmodern authors such as Paul Auster or Italo Calvino, who reference an authorial avatar in their fiction. As in the works of those authors, the Kentridge-like figures of Soho and Felix occupy the storyworld of the *Drawings for Projection*, and in more recent works like *Journey to the Moon* and *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès* (both from 2003), Kentridge himself appears interacting with a drawn storyworld. But Kentridge's work arguably goes a step farther: he renders the very medium of his narrative worlds—charcoal on paper captured on celluloid—as a narrative of implication: the medium itself indexes the artist's body as it traverses the studio and bears the imprint of a story of material production and technique.

In a further twist, this story of technique folds back into the narrative discourse and shifts from the story of individual production to one of mass movement. Kentridge attributes the emergence of crowds in his films to the drawing/erasing technique. Referring to the opening of the third film in the series, *Mine* (1991), in which a crowd of miners spills out of a lift, he remarks: “[The crowd's] origin has a huge amount to do with the particular technique I use. In a film using actors one would need a huge budget, thousands of extras, helicopters, an elephantine crew and a military administration to capture the huge crowds emerging from the ground. With this charcoal technique, each person is rendered with a single mark on the paper. As more marks are added, so the crowd emerges. The crowds draw themselves. It is far easier to draw a crowd of thousands than to show a flicker of doubt passing over one person's face” (“Fortuna” 67). In other words, technique—the marking of paper with charcoal—helps generate the actors and settings of the storyworld. It leads Kentridge toward the crowd and, finally, toward the procession. The procession represents the fulfillment of the drawing/erasing technique insofar as the movement of the crowd from the horizon (their usual point of origin in the films) involves both the additive

qualities of marking through which the crowd accumulates and the subtractive qualities of erasing through which the crowd displaces itself across the sheet of paper and across the space of narration.

While Kentridge uses the example of his third film in the series, *Mine*, in fact the entry of the crowd into the storyworld of the *Drawings for Projection* takes place just after the midway point of the first film, *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989). As the film irises out after an erotic scene in a swimming pool depicting the affair of Felix and Mrs. Eckstein, a postindustrial landscape fades in and fills up with terraced terrain, light and sound towers, and a Hollywood-like sign announcing that this is indeed Johannesburg (and definitely *not* Hollywood!). Once the landscape is filled in, movement begins at the horizon, at the top of the image. A series of small black marks emerges and forms itself into a procession, which then snakes along an S-shaped path toward the front and bottom of the frame (Figure 5). As they approach the viewer and start to take on more human form, the film cuts to an apparent intertitle, which declares: "Soho feeds the poor." However, the intertitle turns out, ironically, to be an inscription on the napkin Soho has tucked into his suit as he sits down for an enormous meal, the scraps from which he will then fling at the crowds outside his luxurious abode. This first film of the series ends with a fistfight between Soho and Felix, an event whose pettiness comes into sharp relief as the film irises out in its last seconds on a receding procession of the poor. Resonant of the forced removals of the apartheid era, the procession of the impoverished masses (a direct predecessor of *Arc/Procession*) thus occupies the narrative space between Felix's affair and Soho's greed—an indictment by editing of two versions of the bourgeois subject and an indication that procession and not progression provides the key to Kentridge's vision of transition.

Although this early film from the series seems to position the masses as passive and resigned, the series as a whole also registers the becoming active of the people through public procession. Later films, especially *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991) and *Stereoscope* (1999), use the same drawing/erasing techniques to present processions as political demonstrations and often juxtapose the stagnant private worlds of Felix and the Ecksteins with the ever-metamorphosing public sphere of the transitional era. In *Sobriety*, for instance, Felix and Mrs. Eckstein look on passively as a politically mobilized crowd bearing signs and banners literally passes them by (Figure 6). The very blankness of the banners—unreadable except for an occasional, suggestive red tint—emblemizes the gap between politics and the private sphere in which Kentridge's privileged white figures attempt to live, even in the midst of the transitional era. These juxtapositions suggest that if Kentridge's particular technique leads him to the crowd, it would be misleading to imply, as he does, that he therefore foreswears the "flicker of doubt passing over one person's face." Doubt is, in fact, a powerful marker of the implicated subject, especially the white bourgeois beneficiary of racial and class oppression faced with the self-activation of the masses in procession and transition. Indeed, the mini-narratives of the *Drawings for Projection* focus predominantly on the flickers of doubt experienced by Soho and Felix, but the films ultimately draw their power from a double dialectic: that between the suffering and agency of the crowd and between individual implication and the collective occupation of space.



Figure 5. William Kentridge. Video still from *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*, 1989. 16mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minutes, 2 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



Figure 6. William Kentridge. Video still from *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*, 1991. 16mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minutes, 22 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

## Conclusion: From Progression to Procession

From progression to procession as a means of representing transition; from narrative fetishism to traumatic realism via palimpsest and morphing; from disembodied individual to implicated subject in proximity to the masses—Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* mobilize an arsenal of visual narrative techniques that provide a powerful alternative to the liberal story of transitional justice. In the works I've discussed here, Kentridge presents the time and space of transition as thick and dynamic, not empty and homogenous. He drills down into the sediment of history while also tracing movements across the surface of the earth. He innovates without fetishizing the advent of the new, and he does so at the level of narrative discourse and the aesthetic medium as well as in his approach to political change. But Kentridge's narrative of transition is not simply the opposite of the conventional liberal narrative. Indeed, his work banishes neither the importance of individual responsibility nor the hope for progress (something that is also visible in his recent engagement with the utopian energies of the Soviet avant garde, as in his Metropolitan Opera production of *The Nose* [2010]). Rather, Kentridge reworks responsibility in the direction of a broader notion of implication and depicts metamorphoses (political and otherwise) from a decidedly materialist and non-anthropomorphic perspective.

I began with *Arc/Procession*, a work that emerges out of Kentridge's first experiments with charcoal and the procession form in the *Drawings for Projection*. A decade later, after most of the film series (thus far) had been completed, Kentridge's interest in the procession explodes.<sup>26</sup> In this new phase, Kentridge begins to multiply the media of his experiments. Processions emerge cast in bronze (e.g., *Procession* [1999–2000]) and printed onto the pages of atlases and encyclopedias (e.g., *Portage* [2000]). A 1999 film, *Shadow Procession*, uses ripped paper, pins, and light projected on a screen to evoke the same kind of burdened procession found in *Arc/Procession* and many of the *Drawings for Projection*.<sup>27</sup> In these proliferating processions, Kentridge can be seen as giving a twist to narration in the age of new media. In his films and drawings especially, an impoverished and outmoded set of materials becomes the basis for reinventing the media of storytelling. Perhaps this is also the scenario for a reinvented postcolonial intervention, an alternative narrative for a nation at once old and new; traumatized and hopeful; burdened and full of the energy of collective practice—a call for justice in an age that remains in transition.

## Endnotes

This essay was first presented as a lecture at the 2011 Narrative Conference in St. Louis. I am grateful to Erin McGlothlin and Emma Kafalenos for the invitation to speak at the conference and to James Phelan for his encouragement. Allyson Purpura first sparked my interest in Kentridge and conversations with her as well as Irene Small were crucial to my thinking about Kentridge's work. Yasemin Yildiz read many versions of the essay and provided crucial feedback and support. Thanks also to John Claborn for research assistance and productive conversations, and to Catherine Belloy at the Marian Goodman Gallery for help with the images.

1. The moderated, gradual progress in which Selassie believed will be relevant to our later discussion of liberal narratives of transitional justice. Selassie's *New York Times* obituary includes a description of the Emperor that seems pertinent to the form of *Arc/Procession*: "Around the clock, he was guarded by lions and cheetahs, protected by Imperial Bodyguards, trailed by his pet papillon dogs, flanked by a multitude of chamberlains and flunkies and sustained by a tradition of reverence for his person" (Whitman). *Arc/Procession* may well represent an ironized version of this royal procession as well as a counter-narrative to the Roman *Triumphzug*.
2. King used this phrase, for example, in "Where Do We Go From Here?," his 1967 address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The phrase remains resonant as a way of narrating historical dynamics. In his remarks after the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, President Barack Obama echoed King: "Egyptians have made it clear that nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the day. It was the moral force of nonviolence — not terrorism and mindless killing — that bent the arc of history toward justice once more." See Kirkpatrick.
3. Gordimer cites Gramsci in an epigraph to her 1981 novel *July's People* and takes it as the inspiration for her 1983 essay "Living in the Interregnum." The standard translation of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* reads: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276).
4. For an engaging series of essays on narrative, media-specificity, and the possibilities of intermediality, see Ryan. Kentridge's oeuvre is suggestive for this narratological literature, much of which is focused on the so-called "new media," insofar as Kentridge turns to—and reworks—*outmoded* media in order to bring forth new possibilities for storytelling.
5. The literature on transitional justice is recent but vast. For a basic definition, see Bickford. For a more detailed, lucid account, see Teitel, *Transitional Justice*. For a deeper historical approach that includes ancient Greece and nineteenth-century France, see Elster.
6. A narratology of transitional justice would relate both to work on narrative and law and to emergent interest in narration in postcolonial contexts—fields which, as in the case of South Africa, often overlap. For seminal work in legal narratology, see Cover; Brooks and Gewirtz. On postcolonial narratology, see Prince. At the 2011 MLA Convention a roundtable (which included Prince) addressed the question: "Postcolonial Narratology: Do We Need One?"
7. For approaches that emphasize literature and culture without slighting the institutional dimensions of transitional justice, see also Gready, "Novel Truths" and *Era of Transitional Justice*; and Sanders.
8. On time consciousness, the space of experience, and the horizon of expectations, see Koselleck.
9. For the concept of "masterplot," see Abbott.
10. For a related argument about how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ignored the fundamental structural forms of violence characteristic of apartheid while privileging individualized stories of suffering, see Mamdani.
11. Gready's book provides a nuanced evaluation of the impact, problems, and potential of transitional justice regimes, with a focus especially on South Africa. He also grants particular attention to the potentials of literary and other cultural forms.
12. I qualify such narratives as "neoliberal" in order to recognize the diversity of stories that can be told within a liberal framework. The neoliberal variety common in the current conjuncture seeks to mobilize (and therefore produce) subjects as "free agents" disembedded from social implication, while other varieties of liberalism certainly sustain visions of communality and sociality. I take the idea of neoliberalism as a form of disembedding from Yildiz. Her comments are apt, even if made in a very different context: "The recent rise of neoliberal governmentality, with its attempt to extend market rationality to all spheres of life, increasingly directs mentalities toward regimes of privatization and responsabilization. ... To achieve this kind of 'privatization,' an af-



fective project of disembedding and disconnecting subjects from their social ties, values, and premises appears necessary” (72). Narrative, broadly conceived, is a crucial realm in which this affective project may take place.

13. Such an insight speaks to transitional South Africa as much as it does to the post-Holocaust Germany analyzed by Santner: not only do the traumas of apartheid linger on but the production of certain forms of trauma continues despite the change of political regime—especially in socio-economic realms—and individual citizens remain caught in complex webs of social implication.
14. Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope is apposite for Kentridge’s work. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope captures the simultaneity of spatial and temporal articulations in cultural practices: in the production of chronotopes, “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). As Hayden White remarks, the “socially structured domain” of the chronotope “defines the horizon of possible events, actions, agents, agencies, social roles, and so forth of all imaginative fictions—and all real stories too” (341n).
15. Although this text has been best known in English under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (after a title given by Adorno and Horkheimer), a more literal rendering of Benjamin’s own title is “On the Concept of History.” The latter version also more clearly indicates the extent to which Benjamin is concerned in his late essay with fundamental dimensions of historical narration.
16. The concept of “thick time” is one of the ordering principles for the recent exhibit *William Kentridge: Five Themes*. See Rosenthal.
17. For Krauss’s reading of Kentridge, see “The Rock” and *Perpetual Inventory*; for more of her thoughts on the concept of the medium in art history, see “Voyage.” On the procession in Kentridge, see also Cameron.
18. The most recent of the series is *Other Faces*, which premiered at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in 2011; the previous film, *Tide Table*, had been created in 2003. The irregular nature of the series also reinforces the “non-homogenous” time in which Kentridge conceives its narrative structure.
19. See Krauss’s essay “The Rock” (reprinted in *Perpetual Inventory*) for an affirmation of Kentridge’s own views on the necessity of an indirect approach to apartheid.
20. For a “thick description” of this technique, see Gunning.
21. Felix’s hotel room is modeled after Malevich’s design for the Final Futurist Exhibit—another version of palimpsest. With its many intertextual and intermedial references, all of Kentridge’s work constructs such palimpsests, a version of the “vertical” spatiality of narrative to which Friedman draws our attention in contrast to the “horizontal” of movement through time. For a related reflection on horizontal and vertical dimensions as aspects of the spatial orientation of narrative, see Clingman.
22. On Kentridge’s landscapes, see Enwezor. On mines in Kentridge, see Rothberg, “Multidirectional Memory.”
23. Much of Kentridge’s work clearly engages the question of environmental justice, which—like transitional justice—also involves concerns about narration and temporality. On the difficult-to-narrate temporality of ecological devastation as a form of “slow violence,” see Nixon.
24. For an exemplary reading of Kentridge’s film *History of the Main Complaint* in relation to traumatic memory and the problems of South Africa’s transition (especially the TRC), see Dubow and Rosengarten.
25. For more on how film techniques can produce viewer implication, see Catherine Cole’s essay on the *TRC Special Report*.

26. I am grateful to Melissa Bushnick for sharing Kentridge-related materials with me, including her unpublished essay “On the Move: Processions in the Work of William Kentridge.” Bushnick draws attention to the resonance of the procession in the Jewish history of diaspora and the South African context of forced removal, but ultimately reads the processions as gesturing toward a common human experience of displacement.
27. Kentridge’s technique in *Shadow Procession* also resonates with the work of Kara Walker, which similarly interrogates the legacies of racialization through the silhouette form. On Walker, Kentridge, and the silhouette, see Saltzman.

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