

3 Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject

On Sebald and Kentrledge

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W.G. Sebald's 2001 prose fiction *Austerlitz* concludes with a surprising literary and geographical detour—surprising even for a text whose narrative ranges widely through transnational terrain and whose very fabric emerges from a dense web of explicit and implicit intertextual reference. In the final pages of the novel, the unnamed narrator returns to Breendonk, the Belgian fortress used by the Nazis as a prison camp and the site of Jean Améry's torture, among many others. Sitting beside the moat, the narrator takes out a book given to him by his interlocutor throughout the novel, Jacques Austerlitz, a Prague-born Jew who had been sent on a *Kindertransport* to England, where he grew up without any memory of his origins or any knowledge of his parents' fate. The book the narrator receives from Austerlitz is a memoir by Dan Jacobson, a real British writer and critic identified as a colleague of the fictional Austerlitz. Jacobson's book, easily identifiable as the 1998 *Heshel's Kingdom*, recounts, as the narrator of *Austerlitz* explains, 'the author's search for his grandfather Rabbi Yisrael Yehoshua Melamed, known as Heshel', and the world he occupied. When Heshel died of a heart attack at age fifty-three just after the First World War, his widow—Jacobson's grandmother—decided 'to emigrate with her nine children from Lithuania to South Africa', where Jacobson grew up in the mining town of Kimberley (Sebald, 2001, pp. 296–97). That fortuitous emigration saved this branch of the family from near-certain death in the genocide that was not yet on the horizon, but the rest of the family, along with ninetyfive per cent of all Lithuanian Jews, would be murdered some twenty years later. In the prologue to *Heshel's Kingdom*, Jacobson describes the abandoned mines of his childhood hometown as sites of oblivion meant to evoke the inaccessibility of the Eastern European Jewish past after the Holocaust. In a passage to which I will return, Sebald folds Jacobson's account of the mines into his own fiction of oblivion and establishes what I would call a multidirectional link between South Africa and the challenges of remembering the Holocaust.

Sebald's intertextual incorporation of Jacobson's story evokes two of the overarching issues at stake in my book *Multidirectional Memory*: how to think about the relation between remembrance of the Holocaust and

the transnational circulation of memory and how to think about remembrance of events that are not ‘one’s own’ (Rothberg, 2009). Indeed, the example of *Austerlitz* suggests that there are significant ethical stakes in thinking about the relation between transnational circulation and our implication in histories that we cannot be said to possess. Before returning to this specific issue as it relates to the intersection of Holocaust memory and South African history, let me briefly review the argument of *Multidirectional Memory*. In that book, I set out to re-narrate the place of the Holocaust in contemporary memory cultures and propose three fundamental shifts in thinking about cultural memory in transnational and transcultural contexts: a refusal of the zero-sum logic that characterises competitive approaches to memory; a commitment to exploring memories dialogically across allegedly distinct histories; and a deconstruction of the straight line that is assumed to connect collective memory and group identity. By making visible an intellectual and artistic countertradition that refuses the dominant zero-sum game, links memories of Nazi genocide, colonialism and slavery and reaches out beyond the apparent certainties of identity politics, *Multidirectional Memory* reveals how the public articulation of collective memory by marginalised and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice.

My focus in *Multidirectional Memory* was primarily on constructing an archive of transnational militant and minority articulations of the past—forms of ‘minor transnationalism’, to cite Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih’s term (2005). Clearly, however, not all forms of multidirectional memory are militant or emerge from minoritised locations, so here I pursue a somewhat different archive, which we might call an ‘archive of implication’. I use the deliberately open-ended term ‘implication’ in order to gather together various modes of historical relation that do not necessarily fall under the more direct forms of participation associated with traumatic events, such as victimisation and perpetration. Such ‘implicated’ modes of relation would encompass bystanders, beneficiaries, latecomers of the post-memory generation and others connected ‘prosthethically’ to pasts they did not directly experience (see Hirsch, 2012; Landsberg, 2004). These subject positions move us away from overt questions of guilt and innocence and leave us in a more complex and uncertain moral and ethical terrain—a terrain in which many of us live most of the time.

For the purposes of this essay, I’m interested in surveying one significant corner of this terrain: I want to explore how multidirectional memory works in cases of complicity or responsibility where the subjects of remembrance are ethically implicated, however ambiguously, in the realms of a dominant or even perpetrator culture, without themselves being perpetrators. Confronting such cases also means confronting the problem of oblivion and forgetting, as the Sebald/Jacobson example begins to suggest. These kinds of cases were not completely absent from my book (for instance, see the

discussions of *The Stone Face* and *Caché*) but remained somewhat in the background. In order to continue thinking them through here, I will look closely at the way one knot of multidirectional memory—the South African mine—has circulated in the work of two prominent contemporary figures, the late Britain-based German writer Sebald and the still active Jewish South African visual artist William Kentridge. While, at the conclusion to *Austerlitz*, Sebald deploys a South African mine to evoke the irretrievable losses of the Nazi genocide, a 1991 film by Kentridge references the Nazi camps in a depiction of conditions in the South African mines. Beyond this chiasmus, both Sebald and Kentridge imaginatively locate the mine within a transnational network of modern violence encompassing and connecting Europe and Africa. Starting from the figure of the mine, I pursue a constellation of histories and memories that includes apartheid, the Holocaust, slavery and colonialism in order to arrive, ultimately, at some thoughts about multidirectional memory and implicated subjectivity. I find in the work of Sebald and Kentridge two related but divergent ways of performing memory, which I will name, respectively, ‘the multidirectional sublime’ and ‘the art of transition’. Although Sebald and Kentridge create divergent aesthetics of engagement in confronting distinct historical situations, both reveal how performances of multidirectional memory can play a role in coming to terms with and mapping undesirable forms of implication in historical traumas.

THE MULTIDIRECTIONAL SUBLIME

Let us now return to the final pages of *Austerlitz*. Via the textual detour of *Heshel's Kingdom*, Dan Jacobson's story of a failed attempt to reconstruct a now disappeared Eastern European Jewish lifeworld, a South African diamond mine comes to provide one of the final and definitive images of Sebald's novel, an image I will ultimately link to Kant's notion of the sublime.¹ Sebald's narrator reports that:

Most of the mines, so I read as I sat there opposite the fortifications of Breendonk, were already disused at the time, including the two largest, the Kimberley and De Beers mines, and since they were not fenced off anyone who liked could venture to the edge of those vast pits and look down to a depth of several thousand feet. Jacobson writes that it was truly terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate was Jacobson's image of the vanished past of his family and his people which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again. On his travels in Lithuania, Jacobson finds scarcely any trace of his forebears,

only signs everywhere of the annihilation from which Heshel's weak heart had preserved his immediate family when it stopped beating. (2001, p. 297)

Sebald's evocation of the 'vast pits' of Kimberley and De Beers seems to take part in an established critical discourse characterising the mine as an 'anti-aesthetic abyss', a site that frustrates representation and thus the possibility of remembrance by dragging it into a kind of 'black hole' (Thesing, 2000, p. xiii). As such, it stands as the polar opposite of the Proustian trigger of involuntary memory, the madeleine or, more directly in *Austerlitz*, the 'uneven paving of the Sporkova' in Prague where Austerlitz attempts to re-experience his childhood, even if the most he can say is that it is '*as if* I had already been this way before and memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses' (Sebald, 2001, p. 150; emphasis added). Evoking an image of absence, forgetting, nontransition and historical rupture, the South African mine comes to figure the failure of the character Austerlitz's project: the attempt to recapture lost time, specifically his own childhood before the Holocaust, his mother's death in the camps and his vanished father. Although Austerlitz discovers traces and fragments of the past, his memory quest ends, like Jacobson's, without his being able to cross the 'dividing line' into the dark chasm left behind by annihilation.

In figuring the mine as a site of oblivion, Sebald seems to stay true to Jacobson's intentions. Like Austerlitz's parents, Jacobson's grandfather, he writes, as well as the Litvak Jewish lifeworld he inhabited, 'remains hidden still, and always will do so. His secrets are enclosed in time past like the pattern inside an uncut agate stone: not just beyond amendment or erasure, but unknowable too' (Sebald, 2001, p. 99). The model of memory shared by Jacobson, Jacques Austerlitz and Sebald's narrator and embodied in both the mine and the 'uncut agate stone' (a metonymy of the diamond mine, perhaps) approximates what Ann Rigney has called the 'original plenitude and subsequent loss model': 'Following this "plenitude and loss" model, . . . memory is conceptualized on the one hand in terms of an original "storehouse" and, on the other hand, as something that is always imperfect and diminishing, a matter of chronic frustration because always falling short of total recall' (Rigney, 2005, p. 12).

To be sure, the histories recounted in these texts are histories of radical loss. Yet, I want to suggest, a different model of memory also coexists in the novel *Austerlitz* and even, to a certain extent, in Jacobson's memoir. In order to locate this model, we need to differentiate between the experience of Jacques Austerlitz, the character, and the experience of reading *Austerlitz*, the book, a difference with potential significance for thinking about cultural memory. We need to attend not only to what the novel *says*—its enigmatic tale of a frustrated quest for the past—but also to what it *does*, for what it does, as the passage invoking Jacobson makes clear, involves the creation of

new forms of memory via intertextuality and a metonymical narrative technique, even at sites of emptiness and forgetting. Such an alternative model of memory, which I would describe as *performative* because of its attention to the productivity of what the text *does*, also turns out to be *multidirectional*, because such processes of reconstruction always involve temporal and spatial displacements and thus new layerings and constellations of time and place.²

Although *Austerlitz* speaks powerfully of absence and loss, it performs memory at the level of form, and that performance is distinctly global. In imaginatively moving in its final pages from Belgium to South Africa and then on to Lithuania, where the narrator recounts Jacobson's discussion of the Nazis' murder of 30,000 people at Fort IX outside Kaunas, *Austerlitz* completes a transnational textual circumnavigation of sites of racialised violence. This circumnavigation begins—the closing reference to Africa reminds us—with indirect invocations of the terrors of Belgian colonialism in the Congo. In Antwerp for the first time in the late 1960s, the novel's narrator experiences an imaginative confusion between the city's zoo—and particularly the Nocturama—and its 'fantastical' train station: he remembers thinking that the train station 'ought to have cages for lions and leopards let into its marble niches . . . just as some zoos, conversely, have little railway trains in which you can, so to speak, travel to the farthest corners of the earth' (Sebald, 2001, p. 6). Previously, the narrator tells us, he 'had taken in only vaguely' the façade of the station, but '[n]ow . . . I saw how far the station constructed under the patronage of King Leopold II exceeded its purely utilitarian function, and I marvelled at the verdigris covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky' (Sebald, 2001, pp. 5–6). The ironic juxtaposition of 'animals and native peoples' in proximity to King Leopold and the narrator's confusion of the spaces of the railroad and zoo create a constellation of associations that calls up multiple forms of violence without making explicit reference to any of them. We have no warrant to conclude that in these passages from the beginning and end of *Austerlitz* Sebald is equating Nazi genocide, Leopold's Congo massacre, South African apartheid, more ordinary forms of colonial expansion and exploitation and the treatment of nonhuman animals. But the text's metonymic mode of narration and its layered intertextuality do produce a haunting sense of the fragile co-presence of histories somehow connected. Even Jacobson (1999), while explicitly stating that all has been lost of his ancestors' lives and holding to a notion of the Holocaust's uniqueness, uses South Africa as a point of reference for establishing 'analogies and distinctions' (p. 151; cf. pp. 143, 228–30) during his trip to Lithuania. While the dead cannot be resurrected in their plenitude, more can be found than the image of the dark abyss implies, but what is brought back always involves a detour through multidirectional terrain. Because the text

juxtaposes different histories without equating them, multidirectionality becomes a self-conscious way of remembering the past without suggesting that memory's figures can substitute for what has been lost or resurrect the disappeared in their full presence.

Significantly, the multidirectional connections evoked in *Austerlitz* turn on disturbed acts of seeing: from the 'terrifying' stare into the bottomless emptiness of the mine to the 'confusion' of the Nocturama and train station that occurs, the narrator tells us, perhaps as 'the result of the sun's sinking behind the city rooftops just as I entered the room' (Sebald, 2001, p. 6). Such a context of perturbed vision marks another appearance of the South African mine in Sebald's previous novel, *The Rings of Saturn*, where it is also accompanied by a scratchy and faded image, presumably of such a mine. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the mine reference comes at the end of a ten-page-long memory of a trip the previous year to the Netherlands, a memory that is folded into the account of the narrator's perambulations along the English coastline. As, according to this reminiscence, the narrator's flight back to England takes off over the 'regulated, cultivated . . . geometrical' Dutch landscape, the narrator reflects on the fact that one can never see people from such a height, 'only the things they have made and in which they are hiding':

And yet they are present everywhere upon the face of the earth, extending their dominion by the hour, moving around the honeycombs of towering buildings and tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine, from the thousands of hoists and winches that once worked the South African diamond mines to the floors of today's stock and commodity exchanges, through which the global tides of information flow without cease. If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end, . . . (Sebald, 1998, pp. 91–92)

This passage associates the mine primarily with questions of empire and globalisation—the 'dominion' extended by human agents and commodity exchanges. This association complements an earlier mention in this section of the book of 'the foreign lands to which the power' of the Dutch empire 'extended' in the seventeenth century—foreign lands that obviously included what would become South Africa, although Sebald does not mention this (Sebald, 1998, p. 83). Like *Austerlitz*, this chapter of *Rings of Saturn* links these questions of empire to Nazi genocide: after evoking the mine, it continues by providing an account of the murder of hundreds of thousands of 'Serbs, Jews, and Bosnians' by the Nazis and their Croatian collaborators in the Jasenovac camp (Sebald, 1998, p. 97). Elsewhere, references to Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad make the Belgian Congo central to the novel's memory work, as well. As if to illustrate the point about the frightening

realisations that result when we view ourselves from a great height, the very last sentences of the chapter evoke (without naming) Kurt Waldheim, implicated in that Nazi massacre. In later years, the narrator tells us, after he became Secretary General of the United Nations, Waldheim ‘spoke into tape, for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II’ (Sebald, 1998, p. 99). The voyages that Sebald’s narratives make, here not just transnational but truly global (if not intergalactic!), themselves create ‘networks of complexity’ and ‘tides of information flow’ that traverse the abyss of the unrepresentable.

The crises of vision and representation staged in both *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn* around the mine and in relation to other sites of violence rupture a harmonious aesthetic vision, but the mine does not thereby become a purely anti-aesthetic site. Rather, this crisis bears a strong resemblance to Kant’s notion of the sublime, an aesthetic experience that ‘does violence to our imagination’ and is marked by an initial perceptual ‘bewilderment’ and ‘feeling of . . . inadequacy’ (Kant, 2000, p. 236). In Kant’s account, when we are confronted with a sublime site—such as the ‘Big Hole’ of the Kimberley mine—a contradictory process characterised by movement between feelings of ‘displeasure’ and ‘pleasure’ takes place (p. 141):

This movement . . . may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object. What is excessive for the imagination . . . is as it were an *abyss*, in which it fears to lose itself, yet for reason’s idea of the supersensible to produce such an effort of the imagination is not excessive but lawful, hence it is precisely as attractive as it was repulsive for mere sensibility. (pp. 141–42; emphasis added)

In Kant’s account, the imagination faces an ‘abyss’ that it fears accessing, but reason helps it to overcome this terror and to proceed nonetheless with its ‘effort’, thus demonstrating reason’s own ‘preeminence’ (p. 142).

While I have attempted to map out a related double movement of the blockage and the opening of memory in the confrontation with the mine, the feeling of reason’s superiority promised to us by Kant in the experience of the sublime does not describe well that confrontation with the terror of mass violence evoked by Sebald. Rather, the dark events of the twentieth century (as well as those of earlier periods) recounted insistently by Sebald across his oeuvre demonstrate the dangers intrinsic to the alleged superiority of reason and enlightenment. For instance, in its frequent passages discussing architectural modernity, *Austerlitz* tracks the absurd dialectic of security and destruction epitomised by the fortress. Visiting, for the first time, Fort Breendonk, a Nazi torture camp and the site where he will later sit reading Jacobson’s book, the narrator ‘could make out no architectural

plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization' (Sebald, 2001, p. 20). In passages such as these—and there are many—*Austerlitz* reveals a dialectic of enlightenment in which a 'rational structure' takes on the form of an 'alien and crab-like creature' (his description of Breendonk) and the function of housing torturers and genocidal killers (Sebald, 2001, p. 22). Although the narrator claims to be unable to connect Breendonk with any other human-made artefacts, in fact the narrative insistently performs just such connections, as I have attempted to show in tracing out a few of the many networks of association and intertextuality that constitute the very texture of Sebald's narrative.

These networks come together in what I would call a 'multidirectional sublime'.³ In Sebald's multidirectional sublime, reason does not triumph where imagination fails. Rather, cultural memory regenerates itself at the site of historical loss; it does so not by fetishistically disavowing loss but by inscribing loss in transnational and transcultural networks of association. These transversal forms of association create new memories even while marking those sites of loss, figured here by the South African mine, as irrecoverable. This sublime tension between unmappable loss and seemingly unending transcultural circuits of historical and memorial excess characterises Sebald's aesthetic in *Austerlitz* and elsewhere.

Although defined by a restless transnationalism, the multidirectional sublime in *Austerlitz* is not an abstract cosmopolitanism that disregards its own situatedness. To the contrary, the text's sublime tension between loss and excess suggests something about the *implicated* subject position from which Sebald writes, that of the second generation non-Jewish German. In an astute essay on post-Holocaust German authorship, the critic Julia Hell has tracked how crises of vision haunt a number of texts by male authors. As she puts it, 'This is a literature that investigates the very conditions of possibility of post-Shoah culture in Germany by revolving obsessively around that which cannot be seen, can no longer be seen, could never be seen, but which still determines both German culture and its subjects' (2003, pp. 35–36). Although she does not discuss *Austerlitz*, Hell situates Sebald squarely in this tradition that 'conjure[s] up powerful images produced by the vertigo of the male gaze—images that are always already reaching their vanishing point' (p. 36). In *Austerlitz*, the South African mine comes to figure that vanishing point. In other words, I would argue, Sebald's answer to the dilemma of post-Holocaust authorship—the haunting force of a determinant history that cannot be perceived directly—is the multidirectional sublime: a detour around the void that does not turn away from implication and responsibility but disperses them into more extensive networks of association in order to negotiate a new ethics of the gaze. This gaze is, in Hell's words, 'neither voyeuristically aligned with the perpetrators of genocide, nor lost in unproblematic identifications' (2003, p. 34). In *Austerlitz*, the multidirectional

sublime operates *horizontally* (to use a directional metaphor to which I will return): the narrator's and the narrative's lateral movements establish networks of complicity and connection while forgoing the *vertical* descent into the depths that might signal identification with either perpetrators or victims of genocide.⁴

THE ART OF TRANSITION

In paraphrasing Dan Jacobson's account, the narrator of *Austerlitz* reports that there is 'no transition' into the sublime abyss of the South African mine itself; for Sebald's text, that abyss remains irrecoverable, unrepresentable and inevitably detached from everyday life.⁵ By activating the mine as knot of absent memory, Sebald maintains the hold of past violence on the present without allowing past losses to be too quickly 'overcome' and 'repaired'. Yet his focus on an *abandoned* mine also implicitly situates violence itself in an earlier moment. In other words, what Gabriele Schwab (2010) calls the 'haunting legacies' of perpetration live on, but present-day violence is largely missing from Sebald's account. In *Austerlitz*, at least, Sebald thus largely avoids a question that Schwab situates at the heart of attempts to confront transgenerational trauma and the problem of implication: 'How do we deal with a haunting past while simultaneously acting in the present, with its ongoing violence?' (2010, p. 2). I now turn to the work of the South African artist William Kentridge, where it is precisely *transition* and *the present* that are at stake in the association of the mine with extreme forms of historical violence. The figures of the mine and the miner appear repeatedly in Kentridge's drawings and handmade animated films, where they serve as sites of memory and forgetting but also as sites of actuality in which the conflicts of South Africa's transitional present remain in play. The simultaneity of presentist concerns and a historicist mode of representation distinguishes Kentridge's work from Sebald's more melancholy second-generation aesthetic (although melancholy is by no means absent).⁶

Kentridge, who comes from a Lithuanian- and German-Jewish Johannesburg family involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, makes art that is weighted with political implication, yet, for the most part, indirect in its political critique. Here I focus primarily on Kentridge's film *Mine*, which is part of an open-ended series of nine short animated films that he calls *Drawings for Projection* and that he created between 1989 and 2003. In fragmentary form, these films tell the tale of the industrialist Soho Eckstein and the artistic Felix Teitlebaum, two men who physically resemble the artist and thus serve as his alter egos in a simultaneously comical and serious reflection on contemporary South Africa. The films, which include occasional intertitles and bits of text but no dialogue, 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 racialised violence and the political struggles marking its transition from apartheid to representative democracy. A significant dimension of Soho's empire includes a mining concern established in an area recognisable as the East Rand, the gold-mining region adjacent to Johannesburg.

Because of their moment of creation, thematic resonance and artistic technique, Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* constitute what I would call an 'art of transition', that is, an aesthetic practice that formally as well as thematically attempts to work through the transitional period in South African history as the nation moved from racist authoritarianism to multiracial democracy over the course of the 1990s.⁷ While Kentridge is quite rigorously and specifically focused on the South African scene, it is worth noting that the first of the nine films was completed in 1989, the year of a more global transition that preceded the most visible aspects of South Africa's process by a year and in which that national process was inevitably intermeshed. Like Sebald's work, Kentridge's art is deeply invested in particular locales, but, again like Sebald's, his is also involved, if somewhat less insistently, in making transnational moves.

The thematic content of the *Drawings for Projection* powerfully suggests the problems of the political interregnum, but Kentridge's unusual technique also resonates with the larger historical moment of the films' creation. 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. 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 16mm or 35mm 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 preserves layers of residual charcoal dust and concatenates palimpsestic images where 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 sometimes displayed in exhibitions alongside the films). In making time visible through a sculpting of drawn space, while working with a technique that simultaneously ensures disappearance and preservation, Kentridge turns animation into a medium for the performance of memory: his embodied drawing/erasing technique brings together memory, mourning and oblivion, much as Sebald uses intertextuality and metonymic narrative to indicate the extent and limits of what can be recovered from the abyss of genocidal violence. As in *Austerlitz*, Kentridge's films also reference the mine as a figure of that constellation of issues and as a site of



Figure 3.1 William Kentridge, Video still from *Felix in Exile*, 1994. 35mm film; video and laser disc transfer. 8 minutes, 43 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

multidirectional memory. In addition, for Kentridge, there seems to be an elective affinity between the organic, dusty nature of the charcoal he uses and the dusty, layered site of the mine he represents.

The multidirectionality of the mine emerges most obviously in the 1991 film *Mine*, but *Felix in Exile*, from 1994, is also of interest because it draws, like *Austerlitz*, on the space of the *abandoned* mine. As it does in *Austerlitz*, the abandoned mine serves in Kentridge as an image of oblivion. In *Felix in Exile*, the landscape of the East Rand is dotted with disused mine pits and mine dumps, which seem to absorb political violence in a quasi-natural way.

The metamorphic powers of Kentridge's animation technique show us corpses sucked into the land in a way that live-action film could do only with difficulty. 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. I am really interested in the terrain's hiding of its own history, and the correspondence this has not only with painting, but with the way memory works' (Cameron et al., 1999, p. 126). 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. His attention to the obsolescent mine—and his frequent representations of older technologies of all sorts—counters what he calls ‘disremembering, the naturalization of things new’, a process that he associates with the rhetoric of the ‘new South Africa’ (Cameron et al., 1999, p. 127). Against the absorption of the problems of the interregnum and an unredeemed past into the forgetful language of novelty, Kentridge’s ‘outmoded’ drawing and filmmaking techniques performatively reinscribe transition back into landscape and memory.

This anamnestic process frequently takes place through the same inscription of multidirectional networks of association that Sebald uses. Speaking about his colonial landscape drawings shortly before he began creating the *Drawings for Projection*, Kentridge refers to the related problems of landscape and representation raised by the Nazi genocide:

In a documentary on television there was a shot of forests somewhere in Poland. Deep grey-green pine trees and rolling hills in the soft European light. What is one to make of this landscape? On one hand, you see this idyllic countryside; on the other, you know that is the spot where some hundred thousand people were gassed in the back of trucks during the 1940s. . . . On the same documentary there is some ground not dissimilar to the land around Wadeville or Vereeniging, flat, featureless, a few horizontal striations in the ground which show where a foundation was, a null expanse of the Auschwitz crematoria. (Cameron et al., 1999, pp. 110–11)

In associating the landscape of Poland with Vereeniging, the site of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, Kentridge creates a new knot of memory out of a field of oblivion.

This double process of marking irretrievable loss and countering it with multidirectional linkage bears a resemblance to Sebald’s work, but, unlike Sebald’s, Kentridge’s aesthetics are not sublime. The sublime works with the establishment of a determinate distance, whereby the spectator is close enough to feel awe but removed enough from the site of awe to remain in security. Unlike Sebald and Jacobson, Kentridge does not leave us at the edge of the mine looking in but takes us into its pits and shafts. This vertical movement into the mine is most obvious in the film *Mine*, to which I turn now, but *Felix in Exile* also ends with an image of Felix wading into the abandoned pit, as if to indicate that the return from apartheid-era exile requires a bodily immersion in the wounded landscape of a postindustrial, postapartheid South Africa.⁸

Mine was created as the third of the *Drawings for Projection*, but Kentridge thinks of it as the second in the series and situates it between *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* and 1990’s *Monument*. *Johannesburg* documents the creation of Soho’s empire, including the mining town we associate with the later film, while *Monument* shows Soho

as supposed ‘civic benefactor’, erecting a statue in honour of the workers. *Mine*, in contrast, reveals the underside of Soho’s empire in no uncertain terms. In the film’s title sequence, we see an isolated head that recalls both a fourteenth-century Ife bust from Nigeria and a miner with a lamp. This visual pun already suggests that the film is interested in histories that extend beyond the nation-state. As the sounds of a Dvorak cello concerto build, resonant of a European Romantic tradition, the word ‘MINE’ rapidly approaches the viewer through a darkened mine shaft. Soon we will realise that this title constitutes another pun, this time verbal, which refers not only to the source of Soho’s wealth but also to his proprietary relationship with the human and natural worlds. The brief title sequence thus begins to establish colonialist capitalism as its target while also deploying a dynamic aesthetic of juxtaposition and layered meaning that bears resemblance to an internationalist avant-garde.

The film proper then opens with a scene of metamorphosis in which an explosion in a mine disrupts the landscape and transforms the land into an image of Soho sleeping. The following sequence deploys montage to cross-cut scenes of miners beginning their day with images of the mine owner Soho, already wearing his customary pin-striped suit, as he awakens, smokes a cigar in a leisurely fashion and takes his breakfast in bed. The film moves between Soho’s domestic and work spaces—shown, through Kentridge’s drawing/erasing technique, to be variations on the same space—and the miners’ underground work and living spaces, which similarly bleed into each other, as if to demonstrate the workers’ complete subordination to the biopolitical regime of modern capitalism. This sequence bears some resemblance to Eisenstein’s *Strike* (1925), which begins with alternating shots of a laughing, corpulent industrialist and labourers at work in the factory. While the signature use of charcoal drawing allows Kentridge to unite the spaces of capital and labour and thus to reveal simultaneously their dependent and radically unequal nature, as does Eisenstein’s editing, *Mine* also reveals the magical metamorphoses made possible by Kentridge’s technique to be complicit with Soho’s power to control labour and nature.⁹ As Soho lies in bed, the smoke from his cigar becomes a bell with which to call his unseen household help, after which the cigar morphs into a coffee cup; later the pillows of the bed rotate around Soho and become a desk that holds the tools of his trade, in particular the adding machine that spits out paper and then commodities, including the workers who produce his wealth and a set of Ife busts.

Kentridge’s answer to the industrialist’s power to control time and space and the natural and human worlds consists not in a refusal of those powers but in their self-conscious appropriation. Kentridge makes visible what Soho ‘owns’ but refuses to see. This rendering visible takes place most dramatically in a sequence that begins with Soho’s coffee pot—a *cafetière*, as Kentridge calls it, or a French press, as we say in the US. When Soho presses down on the plunger of his coffee pot, it does not stop at the bottom



Figure 3.2 William Kentridge, Video still from *Mine*, 1991. 16mm film transferred to video. 5 minutes, 49 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

of the pot but continues its downward movement through Soho's bed and into the mines below.

The coffee plunger creates a miniature mine shaft that cuts into the living and work spaces of the miners, through their barracks and showers and into the cavernous mines themselves—the plunger even passes through the body of one worker, which starts a flow of blood that continues downwards.¹⁰ Once again, Kentridge reveals that his technique partakes of the violence it depicts, an implicit comment on the complicity of the artist in a world of structural oppression. The plunger becomes a kind of drill (and is associated with drilling performed by the miners as well as with the artist's pencil), and, as the drill cuts into the rock, a strange image emerges that is soon recognisable as the cross-section of a slave ship.

This first association is then overlaid with the growing sense that the iconography of the mine also resembles a Nazi camp. Indeed, the image of the mineworkers' compound seems to be modelled directly on a famous photograph from the liberation of Dachau (one which apparently features a young Elie Wiesel), although Kentridge claims not to have had the Holocaust in mind at all. Regardless of the artist's intentions, however, recognition of this modelling also casts a dark shadow over the images of miners in

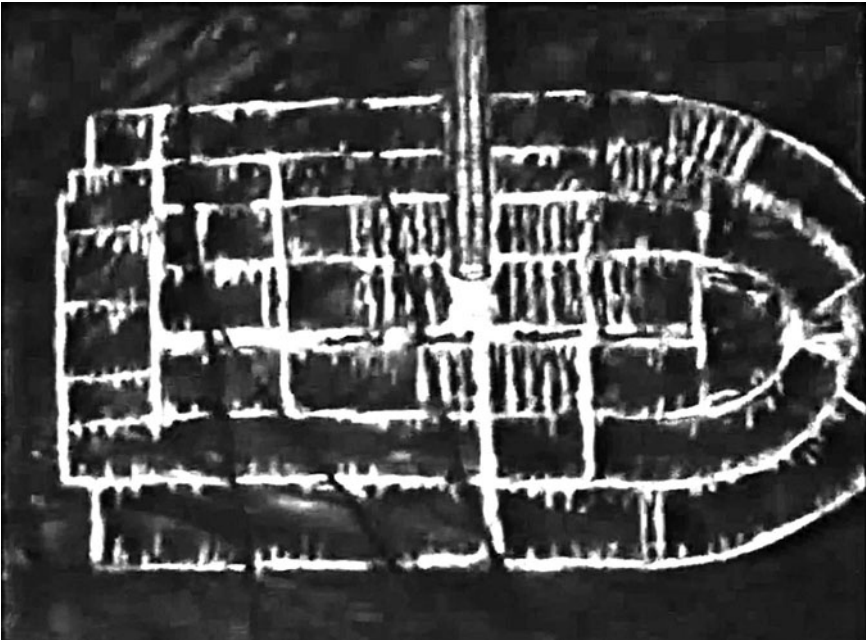


Figure 3.3 William Kentridge, Video still from *Mine*, 1991. 16mm film transferred to video. 5 minutes, 49 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

the shower, which can now be seen as punning on the habitual reference to the gas chambers as ‘the showers’.

Consistent with the entire series of *Drawings for Projection*, the film contains no clear narrative line or voiceover to guide interpretation of these multidirectional visual associations. If these are memories that are excavated from the formations of the mine, it is not clear whose memories they are. Out of this uncertainty at least two ways to read this sequence emerge, which correspond in turn to the two ways that multidirectionality arises in it: the unmistakable allusion to the slave ship emblematises a collective memory of the larger historical transfers and correspondences between different forms of violence connecting Europe and Africa (and theorised by the likes of Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt, among others), while the unconscious and ghostly presence of the Nazi camp suggests the peculiar psychology of domination and complicity of white and—perhaps more pointedly—white Jewish South Africans.

Pursuing the historical connections leads one to consider the mine and the mine compound as material forms and sites of discursive struggle. We might note, for instance, that the compound system for housing migrant labourers depicted by Kentridge originated in the nineteenth century at the

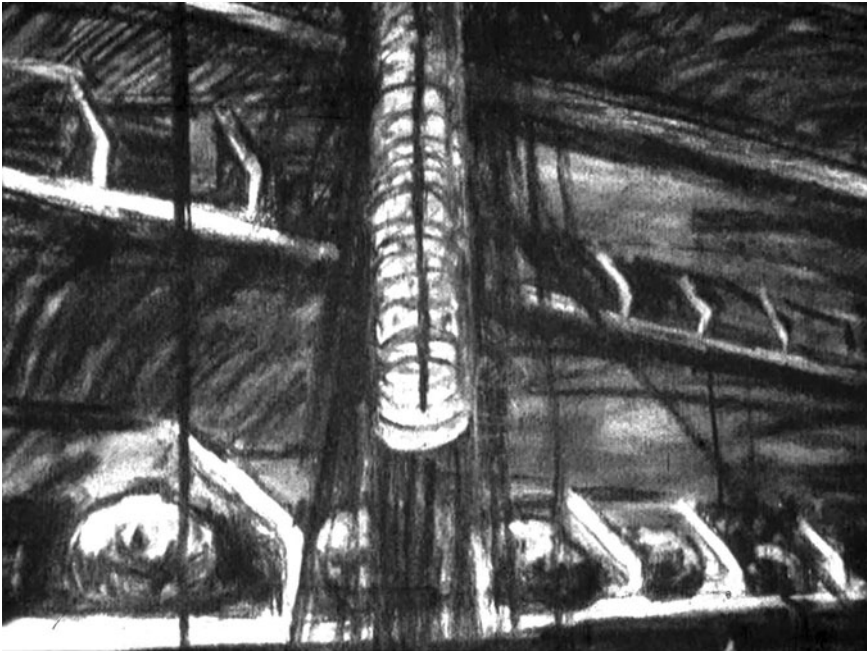


Figure 3.4 William Kentridge, Video still from *Mine*, 1991. 16mm film transferred to video. 5 minutes, 49 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.

Kimberley mine around which Dan Jacobson grew up and was later taken up in the mines around Johannesburg and then in other industries as well. And, regardless of whether the mine compounds actually resemble sites of slavery and totalitarian control, Kentridge's work does register the layers of meaning that both popular and scholarly discourses ascribed to the mines during the apartheid period. As geographer Jonathan Crush has shown, the notion of 'the African miner [as] a slave' living in 'medieval conditions' characterised African Mine Workers' Union discourse in the 1940s and reappeared in the 1980s in the rhetoric of the National Union of Mine-workers. But this discourse of slavery coexisted with—and was ultimately displaced by—Marxist and social historical accounts of the 'modernity' of the mine that, in language resonating with the Nazis' concentrationary universe, depicted the compound as a 'total institution' and its manager as a 'supreme dictator' (Crush, 1994, pp. 303–04).

In delving into the mines, instead of remaining at their edge, Kentridge certainly evinces a strong interest in the forms of domination that the mine powerfully materialises and that various discourses have attempted to describe through historical analogies; the figure of Soho clearly stands as a metonymy for those forces throughout the *Drawings for Projection*. But,

as already noted, Kentridge's approach to politics is never primarily—or simply—a matter of represented content. The nonexplicit form of the Holocaust reference in *Mine* suggests that it must also represent something other than an explicit analogy between different forms of violence. Rather, to construct an alternative interpretation, we might begin by noting that the Holocaust's ghostly presence in the film seems to reference the medium itself, the palimpsestic form of Kentridge's work. Such a resonance between form and history suggests that the Holocaust reference involves a new level of self-reflexivity, just as earlier we observed that Kentridge's metamorphic technique shares with capitalism itself the power to shape and exchange all manner of beings and objects.

If we take Soho's name, Eckstein, and the modelling of his image on the artist's grandfather as indications that he is of Jewish descent—indications that themselves remain indirect—a new message starts to emerge. The ghosting of the Holocaust may reference the similarity between German and South African racist regimes, as well as the presence of virulent anti-Semitism that accompanied Afrikaner nationalism, especially during the Nazi period in Europe. But it also draws attention to the vast distance of South African Jews from the Holocaust: the fact that immigration to South Africa represented a refuge for many of them, if not simply a bit of historical good fortune (the case for Kentridge's and Jacobson's families). In the figure of Soho we are reminded of the Jewish financiers who in the late nineteenth century fostered the growth of the mining industry (see Arendt, 1973; Jacobson, 1999). In the words of critic Claudia Braude, 'The history of the Johannesburg Jewish community . . . is intimately intertwined with the history of the early mining town' (2001, p. xviii). Soho's creation of the mine thus becomes a kind of historical allegory for one strand of Jewish South African history, but the allegory is many-sided.

Given the associations created by the film *Mine*, Soho's iconic pin-striped suit also becomes an ironic reminder of concentration camp uniforms—precisely what Soho never had to wear. The irony that, despite its racism and anti-Semitism, South Africa was a refuge for Jews during the Second World War is noted by Jacobson in *Heshel's Kingdom*, when he writes that, for his grandmother and her children, 'In leaving Lithuania for South Africa, they had exchanged an anonymous death at the hands of murderers for life itself' (Jacobson, 1999, p. 68). Even if, in Jacobson's words, the Jews' 'prominence in the development of the diamond and gold fields had done nothing to make them popular among either Britons or Boers' (1999, p. 90), a vast distance still separates South Africa's Jews from the fate of both their European relatives and the black populations among whom they now found themselves. Indeed, as Braude details, the post-Holocaust history of Jews in South Africa saw many in the community finding accommodation with the apartheid system and the ruling National Party—an accommodation that required what she calls 'a profound suppression of memory', the memory of anti-Semitism and Nazi influence in South Africa (2001, p. xlv).

Kentridge's palimpsestic art of transition—along with the multidirectional legacies it evokes—thus registers several things simultaneously. It uncovers the specific dynamics of South Africa's political interregnum but also demonstrates how the larger forces of capitalism, colonialism and genocide have framed South African history over the *longue durée*. It draws attention to the specific transitional position of the country's Jewish minority, yet also anticipates a more general return of suppressed memories that would accompany the end of apartheid. In other words, what the movement of the coffee plunger reveals is not simply a historical analogy between different sites of violence or Soho's (or Kentridge's) individual unconscious but rather a complex history of trauma, implication, complicity and forgetting that defines a social group—South African Jews—caught in what Kentridge once wryly described as 'an interesting position' between accommodation and marginalisation (quoted in Belasco, 2001, p. 35.)

A MULTIDIRECTIONAL KNOT OF MEMORY

Both Sebald and Kentridge take part in a broad contemporary aesthetic and social sensibility in which performances of memory play a significant role. The performative dimension of their memory work involves using medium-specific techniques to create new modes of access to—and new angles of vision on—the tangled nature of pasts made present. That is, both Sebald and Kentridge deploy the materials of their respective media—intertextuality and metonymic narrative in Sebald, palimpsest and metamorphosis in Kentridge—in order to evoke a knot of multidirectional memory where different pasts, elusive as they may be, intersect at the site of the mine. For each, the invocation of multidirectional memory is ultimately oriented less toward a historical referent or analogy than toward the problem of what it means to be a subject of remembrance in the face of historical responsibility or, in other words, what it means to 'do memory' in the face of a multivalent implication. Attempting to work through the dilemmas of non-Jewish, post-Holocaust authorship, Sebald depicts a multidirectional sublime in which horizontal movements through space and across texts trace a void of irrecoverable loss. He embraces implication against identification, yet that implication primarily concerns past losses and not their ongoing production. Kentridge's invocations of the mine also involve horizontal movements—as in the endless processions of the dispossessed that appear in his films and drawings (see Rothberg, 2012)—but his aesthetics are not sublime. They are oriented not only towards loss but also towards 'presence': the presence of continued suffering (see Ophir, 2005). As if to acknowledge his place in a history of violence that is still unfolding, he takes us down into the mine that for Sebald remains inaccessible. Yet the historical images awakened by the vertical descent into the mine do not refer only to the transitional present.

The very form of his work reveals the present as always haunted by a chain of allegedly outmoded problems still awaiting redress. ‘What does coming to terms with the past mean?’, Theodor W. Adorno (1963; 1988) asked a half-century ago. For Kentridge, especially, it means shuttling between the claims of the past and the present and excavating evidence of individual and collective implication from sites layered with multidirectional memory.

NOTES

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1. See Jacobson (1999). In the voluminous and rapidly expanding literature on Sebald, only a very small number of critics have considered the significance of Jacobson’s text or of the South African mine in Sebald’s work, and none have made it central to their reading of the novel or of Sebald’s oeuvre. For the exceptions, see Clingman (2009, pp. 203–04); Crownshaw (2004, esp. pp. 234–35); and Ryan (2007, esp. pp. 244–46).
2. This performative model is also close to the alternative Rigney offers to the plenitude and loss model: ‘A social-constructivist model that takes as its starting point the idea that memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past’ (2005, p. 14). Indeed, in a personal communication, Rigney told me that she also now prefers to talk of performativity rather than social constructivism. For more on the performativity of memory, see the editors’ introduction to this volume.
3. The multidirectional sublime is a version of the historical sublime. In Ann Rigney’s discussion of the historical sublime in *Imperfect Histories* (2001, esp. pp. 114–20), she demonstrates how the recognition of the limits of imagination and representation marked by the sublime can serve as spurs to further historical imagination and representation in new realms of social life and in new narrative forms. *Austerlitz* bears out this argument.
4. For more on the relation between horizontality and verticality, see Clingman (2009).
5. Rigney’s suggestive discussion of the sublime in her book *Imperfect Histories* warns that invocations of the irrecoverable cannot be taken at face value; assertions that access to particular realms of history or social life are beyond imagination and representation can come with dubious ideological baggage. At the same time, recognizing the interests that sometimes lie behind the rhetoric of the sublime can lead in turn to further excavation, as Rigney demonstrates. In Sebald, the assertion of irrecoverable losses in the Holocaust is not necessarily ideological in this way, for much is certainly lost without hope of recovery—not just millions of lives but an entire way of life. What interests me, though, is how those losses are figured through the image of the bottomless mine, for the mine is much more than an abstract metaphor of the irrecoverable, as the work of Kentridge attests (Rigney, 2001, pp. 116–19).
6. For critical remarks on Sebald and the sublime, see Whitehead (2004). More generally, see LaCapra (2001).

7. For further discussion of Kentridge's aesthetics, with an emphasis on his interventions into narratives of political transition, see Rothberg (2012).
8. As Okwui Enwezor remarks with reference to scenes such as this one from *Felix in Exile*, Kentridge establishes an analogy between the post-apartheid and the postindustrial: 'We are forced to examine this postindustrial site as a way of thinking about the postapartheid landscape and what could become of it' (Enwezor, 2008b, p. 92).
9. In an important essay on Kentridge's invention of a new medium, Rosalind Krauss (2000, p. 16) also makes a connection between the metamorphic possibilities of animation and capital's deployment of universal equivalence.
10. The possibility of the plunger cutting through the body is echoed in Kentridge's later film *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), in which a visually identical image measures the comatose Soho's heartbeat and then plunges into his body in order to provide a kind of x-ray. In more recent work, such as *Journey to the Moon* (2003), a stovetop espresso maker comes to serve as a rocket ship, this time taking us not into the earth or body but into the atmosphere. Meanwhile, stacked espresso cups become stand-ins for telescopes that the artist uses to track the movement of the espresso-rocket.