

L I M I N A L I T Y

I N

C O N T E M P O R A R Y A R T

A REFLECTION ON THE WORK OF WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

Judith Westerveld



The sounds and traces of the land slowly disappear into the dark mass of the water

Judith Westerveld

(Water 8) , 2010
Charcoal on paper
50 x 65 cm

CONTENTS

Preface	3-4
Chapter 1. The origins of Liminality: A sociological context	5-15
Arnold van Gennep	6-10
Victor Turner	11-15
Images	16-19
Chapter 2. William Kentridge: a connection between liminality and contemporary art	20-34
His individual position	20-22
Themes and narratives	23-28
Destabilized political systems	23-25
The usage of doubles	25-27
Disappearance and the initiation rite	27-28
The erasure, the shadow and the tear	28-32
Erasure	28-29
Shadows	29-30
Tearing	31-32
The role of the studio	32-34
Epilogue	35-36
Bibliography	37-38

PREFACE

I am a child of two continents. Of Europe and of Africa. As I sit here in my chair by the window looking down upon the dark water slowly moving in the canal below me, I feel the urge to jump in, become submerged in it and let it take me to that other side of the world. But after a while I start to float back, I always return. I am constantly transitioning between these two continents, with an airplane or with a phone call, crossing the borders of many countries and many cultures, of north and south, of summer and winter. I am transforming into a person that is no longer of two continents, but between two continents. Between Europe and Africa, or more specifically, between the Netherlands and South Africa. Being in between homelands, in between cultures and in between realities. This biographical detail is the root of my fascination with 'in-betweenness'. A feeling, a part of my existence. However, to clarify and explore what this 'in-betweenness' was, is and could be, I need to place it outside of myself. To also see it as a part of the world around me, as something that resonates silently in many aspects of existence. From the natural world, to the cultural world. Through my research about this in-between state I discovered the term *liminality*. This singular term, derived from the latin word 'limen', meaning threshold, is able to describe the characteristics of any in-between state, regardless of the context that it is part of. A place, a time, a situation, a being, all can be liminal. In itself or be a part of, or initiate a liminal event. To stay close to the origins of liminality, a threshold is a liminal space in itself, but the crossing of this threshold is also a liminal act. Therefore liminality is defined as a middle ground, a space and time where transformations take place, a transitional state filled with ambiguities

and contradictions. Even though, in an indirect way, one can recognize these characteristics in the works of many artists and the writings that exist about them, it struck me that the research done on liminality almost never explicitly mentions the relationship with art. In this thesis I link the more social, theoretical research about liminality with the visual works and thematic research of the artist William Kentridge. I do this, not to prove the existence of liminality, but to create a visual form for this liminal state that I am so interested in, through the work of the artist. It is my hope that the words of this thesis, and the works created parallel to the writing of them, together form a clearer image of the role that liminality plays in our contemporary reality, in our existence, and in the world of contemporary art.

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF LIMINALITY:

A SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The characteristics that describe the term liminality, and that give it meaning, date back as far in history as we have reflected upon and recorded our knowledge. The word liminality is derived from the latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, and closely associated with the word *limes*, meaning limit. Unlike a limit, a threshold is not an end point but a mid point, that allows fluid crossing of, or wavering between two worlds. This meaning appeals to my understanding of the term liminality. The term was first introduced as a concept in 1909 by the ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, in his fundamental work *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). Although it was a unique body of work, it wasn't until 1960, when it was translated into English (*The Rites of Passage* (1960)) and elaborated upon by anthropologist Victor Turner, that it received any attention outside the anthropological world, and that the terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' gained popularity. Arnold van Gennep's analyzed that all rites of passage rituals, like the transition from childhood to adulthood, from woman to mother, from elder to ancestor and so on, have the same underlying three-fold pattern: Separation, liminality and incorporation. This greatly enriched the understanding of ritual behavior in many other areas of study. Victor Turner borrowed and expanded upon Van Gennep's concept of liminality, starting in the 1960's. The significance that he placed upon the liminal phase, introducing it as a space of

transformation where the human being is between past and future identities and anything can happen, fed the imaginative power of the concept of liminality and heightened the usage of the term in other disciplines. To this day, the quality of liminality as an 'in-between' space or state is very useful in describing and understanding complex social and cultural phenomena such as the transcultural space and the trans-geographical space. However, the history of liminality, regardless of the field of research that one approaches it from, is still primarily drawn from the discourses surrounding anthropology. To look at the role that liminality plays in our contemporary reality and more precisely what place it holds in the thematic and visual work of artists reflecting upon our contemporary times, we first need to go back to the anthropological world of respectively, Van Gennep and Turner. Through their research we are able to create an understanding of the concept of liminality that resonates in the broader fields of philosophical, transcultural and artistic research.

ARNOLD VAN GENNEP

In his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) Arnold van Gennep defines rites of passage as "rites that accompany every change of place, state, social position or certain points in age" (Turner, 1967, p.94). Rites of passage mark specific moments in a person's life where a transition takes place, either of an individual, personal nature or one that affects the family, social group or nation that you are a part of. Either way, the transition allows for the movement from one world to another, whether this is from one status to another, from one place to another, from one situation to another or from one period of time to another. Therefore, even though the most prominent, celebrated and highly

ritualized rites of passage are those marking birth, puberty, marriage and death, Van Gennep has shown that rites of passage are not only present at these moments but may accompany any change from one state to another. Rites of passage are universal, they apply to any society in any part of the world, but the level of importance they have varies from nation to nation, society to society, family to family and from individual to individual. It is, however, the small-scale societies that Van Gennep refers to most, as it is them who envelope their moments of transition in ceremonies whose structure clearly marks them as rites of passage. In such societies no change in a person's life goes unnoticed, as it is believed that every transition that one goes through is an unquestionable part of one's very existence. For every transition there are ceremonies whose main purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another. Van Gennep sees similarities in the order in which these different transitions, or rites of passage ceremonies, progress. Within them he recognizes three different phases. The first phase is the *separation*, during which an individual or group is removed from their normal social structure and detached from their social position and previous identity. The second phase is the *transition* that is characterized by an ambiguous state of being where the individual or group has no identity and stand outside the normal space and time frame of their society. The third phase is the *incorporation* phase during which the individual or group re-enters their normal social structure, from that moment fulfilling a new but stable social position and identity. These three phases, although not always equally elaborated in every rite, becomes the underlying pattern that Van Gennep sees reoccur in every rites of passage ceremony that he analyzed.

To further clarify his ideas about rites of passage Van Gennep compares a rite of passage to a journey that one

under takes to get from one place to another. He calls these journeys territorial passages and sees them as the prototype for the other rites of passage that he describes, as within a territorial passage one can most clearly see the three phases described earlier. Here in the form of departure, travelling and arriving. This physical passage in space is however almost always accompanied by a passage of internal change of some kind as well. The physical, territorial passage is also a real transition in time and space, not a symbolic one. This allowed Van Gennep to root his ideas on rites of passage in the basic everyday behaviour of people in the different times and surroundings that they live in. Looking at the world at large, he gives many examples on how they view and experience territorial passages and how different territories were defined. For example how in the times when "Christian lands comprised only a part of Europe" (van Gennep, 1960, p.17), the frontiers of the different countries did not touch each other but were surrounded by a strip of neutral ground. Zones of this kind were very important in classical antiquity. Especially in Greece, where they were used for market places or battlefields (van Gennep, 1960, p.17). The same system of zones is found among different tribes living in close vicinity of each other. The sacred, neutral zones are usually deserts, marshes and most often forests where everyone has the right to travel and hunt. On a much smaller scale, neutral zones can also be found in a city, a religious building or a house, in the form of a gate, a door or a threshold. "Whoever passes from one territory to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds" (van Gennep, 1960, p.18). To van Gennep being in a any neutral zone, the moment spend between the two worlds, is a transitory experience and the crossing of such a neutral zone is in its entirety a complete

transition. He also calls such a complete transition 'a rite of the threshold', as a threshold of some kind needs to be crossed to enter the neutral zone and again to leave it. As the Latin word for threshold is *limen* he calls the rites of separation from a previous world, *pre-liminal* rites, those executed during the transitory stage *liminal* rites and the rites of incorporation into the new world *post-liminal* rites (van Gennep, 1960, p.21). Therefore, a whole rite of passage is liminal and within it harbours a distinct liminal phase.

Van Gennep notes that this latter liminal phase is most important, elaborated and autonomous in the rites of passage concerning pregnancy, betrothal and initiation, as within the liminal period in each of these rites, the person going through it, is very clearly between two very different social identities. Even though this is a period of time where a lot of new knowledge is taken in by the participant about the future role that he or she will fulfill, it is also a period of time where the participant is liberated from normative demands and exists in a gap between ordered worlds where everything is unknown and almost anything can happen. It is a period of time where knowledge and doubt, activity and reflection, weakness and strength go hand in hand. In many of the tribal societies that Van Gennep based most of his research on, the liminal phase is not only characterized by a specific period of time but often also by spatial seclusion. This is especially apparent in initiation rites of boys, where a boy undergoing initiation is secluded in the bush where he lives in a special hut located in a special place. He is invisible to the society that he is separated from and they consider him dead, waiting to be reborn, for the entirety of the liminal phase. All ritual symbolism that surrounds the initiate has to do with such ambiguity and paradox. "Hence, in many societies the liminal initiands are often considered to be

dark, invisible, like the sun or moon in eclipse or the moon between phases the 'dark of the moon'; they are stripped of names and clothing, smeared with the common earth rendered indistinguishable from animals" (Turner, 1979, p.18). They have to become one with the natural world in order to survive. To van Gennep this test is not a strange one, as to understand the importance of the transitional patterns in nature is to understand the importance that the transitional passage, the rite of passage, plays in life.

Throughout the book Van Gennep relates the rites of passage, all the transitions that humans go through in their lives, to the tangible world around us. Specifically to the natural world that surrounds us. In conclusion he links them to the celestial bodies and the great rhythm of the universe. It seems he does this not only as a symbolic gesture but more as a way to demarcate a real and logical place for the rites of passage in that outside world. For the rites of passage and the concept of liminality are not something that he made up, but are a result our of reflections about the positions and roles that we place ourselves in within the time and space that we occupy within existence as a whole.

To conclude this chapter I would like to use Van Gennep's words. Words that were written more than a century ago but that still ring true to this day: "For groups, as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night, the threshold of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife-for those who believe in it" (van Gennep, 1960, p.189).

VICTOR TURNER

Half a decade after the first publication of the words that conclude Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), a British anthropologist, Victor Turner, read the English translation. He was greatly intrigued by Van Gennep's analysis that all rites of passage in life, regardless of whether they concerned an individual or a group, consist of three phases that, depending on the type of rites of passage, differ in significance and elaboration. These three phases are *separation, transition* and *re-incorporation*, the title of each phase referring to the specific process that takes place and the structure that the rite of each passage has. He also calls these same three phases pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal to emphasize that each phase is also a passage carried out in a specific physical spatial way that takes a specific amount of time. This latter way of categorizing a rite of passage appealed to Turner. He realized through Van Gennep's book and through his own fieldwork that a rite of passage is more than a structured ritual, as each phase creates experiences of space and time that are different from normal everyday reality. Therefore Turner sees a rite of passage as a situation where there is a different structure from the one we know, and he recognized the liminal phase as being most explicitly characterized by this anti-structure. His great intrigue for rites of passage, and particularly for the liminal phase, prompted Turner to research and develop the concept of liminality further. He wanted to know more about the one phase within a rite of passage that by its very nature is filled with questions and doubts, ambiguity and contradictions and does not easily reveal answers. It was this nature that fuelled Turner's extensive, life long research about liminality, about its existence, its function and its role of importance within the small-scale

societies, and also within the large scale society that he himself was part of.

For Turner the start to understanding liminality is to understand that a whole rite of passage is a transition, a process, a becoming and that within this transition transformation is taking place. In his position as an anthropologist he was not only concerned with deciphering the symbols of transition, but rather with understanding “the very real changes that occur at times of transition and how these changes involve major reconceptualisations of the initial categories by which a person or group describe their identity” (MacKenzie, 2001). The phase within the transition where these changes surface and where the transformation of an individual or group occurs, is the liminal phase.

Turner formed the foundations of his liminal theory by observing all sorts of initiation rites of an African tribe. He carried out his early fieldwork in Zambia with the Ndembu tribe. It was within this small-scale stable society that he clearly saw the important role that a distinct liminal phase played in coming to terms with personal and societal transitions. This enabled him later on in his career to distinguish liminality within larger, more unstable societies, where liminality is more difficult to recognize as it is far less ritualized.

Turner saw many similarities in the different initiation rites that took place within the Ndembu tribe, but according to him the coming of age rite among young boys had the most extensive and elaborated liminal phase. Turner recorded that by being anonymous and silent, treated with uniformity and going through physical hardships, the initiates were ground down to a blank slate. Only once their past identities were forgotten, were they

able to receive the new knowledge that would enable them to cope with their future social position. Much of the symbolism used to clarify the complex social, cosmic and religious ideas that the initiates are asked to contemplate and interpret are based on human physiology, as the “human body is a microcosm of the universe.” (Turner, 1967, p.107). This stage of reflection that is characteristic of liminality, allows the initiates to think more abstractly about their position within their society, within their nation and within the universe at large. This does not have to be a solitary process as the boys of the Ndembu tribe are initiated in groups and comradeship is encouraged. As they do not have clothing, names and other physical attributes of status and have undergone the same physical hardships and mental teachings, a feeling of equality exists among the group of initiates. They are a “community of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions” (Turner, 1967, p.100). This form of human interrelatedness that is so clearly opposed to the given hierarchical social structure is what Turner calls ‘*communitas*’.

Turner sees *communitas* not only as a form of social behavior that surfaces during the liminal phase of a rite of passage concerning a group of people but also as a social need that is necessary for society at large to function in a cohesive way and in extreme situations to survive. *Communitas* often arises spontaneously when a moment, situation or phase in life presents a need for people to be or work together. When this happens the boundaries between segmented social positions disappear and the heightened sense of solidarity and equality, wellbeing and belonging, highlight the artificiality of the hierarchical social structure that is seen as the social norm. Therefore Turner concludes that society, as we all experience it, is a process that needs both models of human interrelatedness. The hierarchical

social structure made up of different categories where people are unequal to each other, is intertwined with a desire for *communitas*. According to Turner, *communitas* is always present in society, small-scale and large-scale. In Turner's words, *communitas* is a "matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there would be no society" (Turner, 1969, p.97)

The realization that *communitas* had a necessary place in society, urged Turner to explore how other social characteristics that emerged in the liminal phase formed their own category within society. Doing this also urged Turner to look beyond the small-scale societies of his earliest research, and to start to place liminality as a concept within the context of a large-scale society. There, social categories such as *outsiderhood*, *marginality* and *inferiority*, that all have characteristics typical of the liminal phase, but are not part of a ritualized rite of passage, are much more acutely present. *Outsiderhood* is a condition of a person or a group of people that either permanently or temporary, but often voluntarily, opt to live their life outside the structural arrangements of the hierarchical social structure. Some examples of outsiders across various cultures are shamans, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes and gypsies. They should not be confused with so called marginals who are not outside of the hierarchical social structure but simultaneously belong or feel acquainted with two groups within it, whose social and cultural norms are different, often opposed to each other. They are however often pushed to the edges, the margins, of the group that they actively live in because of their two-fold existence. Typical marginals are immigrants, persons of mixed ethnic origin and migrants from country to city. *Inferiority* is a category that is measured in economic terms and can be like

outsiderhood either permanent or temporary, but unlike *outsiderhood*, it is never voluntarily.

Although different forms of society have different ways of physically and mentally experiencing liminality, Turner also sees many similarities that enables him to draw conclusions about liminality that transgress a specific context. In both small and large-scale societies liminality can play an important role in ritualized social and cultural transitions but is not strictly tied to the ritual context. It can also be regarded as a permanent state. In that case the liminal is no longer only a mid point in a transition, a passage from one world to another, but a state of being, a part of ones existence that offers "no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (Turner, 1974, p.233). Inside or outside of the ritual context the way that one experiences space and time when in liminality is very different from a normal perception and conduct of space and time in everyday life. A liminal space is often foreign and strange to the liminal persona, a place where one feels invisible and where one's social position has disappeared, inflicting a sense of isolation that makes time pass slowly, but that no amount of time ever really erases. These negative forces alternate with positive processes of growth and constant reconceptualization of one's identity that generate new thoughts and customs These constantly form and change one's views and opinions about the way society is conducted and the understanding of one's position within the world and existence as a whole. The contradictory nature of liminality is reflected in the symbols that it brings forth and the many other forms of expression that give "an outward and visual form to an inward conceptual process" (Turner, 1967, p.96). Liminality itself forms a realm where questions instead of answers are raised and an inquisitive and critical attitude of ones surroundings is instilled. It forms the realm of creativity.



1

Photographs taken by Victor Turner during his field work in Zambia with the Ndembu tribe.

- 1. The lodge in which novices live during seclusion.
- 2. Naked novices confront adults across the fire in the lodge enclosure a few days after circumcision.



2



3

- 3. Novices decoratively disguised for the 'coming out' ritual.

- 4. The gateway between infancy and maturity. It is placed at the junction of an old and new path, the old clothes of the novices drape the crossbar.



4

- 5. Novices dressed in their new clothes ready to dance and be re-incorporated into their community.



5



1



5



6



- 1. Drawing for the film *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*, 1991
- 2. Drawing for the film *History of the Main Complaint (Consultation, Ten Doctors)*, 1996
- 3. Still from *Journey to the Moon*, 2003
- 4. Still from *Shadow Procession*, 1999

5. Still from *Breathe, Dissolve, Return (Dissolve)*, 2008

6. Stills from *Breathe, Dissolve, Return (Breathe)*, 2008

7. Drawing for the film *Felix in Exile*, 1994

8. Drawing for the film *Felix in Exile*, 1994

2



3



4



8



7

CHAPTER 2

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE:

A CONNECTION BETWEEN LIMINALITY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

The fact that Turner explored such far-reaching effects of liminality shows that he had taken the concept of liminality far beyond its original ritual context. He had hereby sown the seeds for liminality to be explored and analysed, discovered and used in many areas of research and practice outside of the anthropological field. However, one of the fields that has been scarcely linked with the concept of liminality is contemporary art. Turner only explored liminality in relation to the performing (theatre) arts, not to the field of contemporary art. This chapter tries to fill this absence by interpreting the art works and the position of the artist William Kentridge within the context of liminality. One could have chosen other artists, but by introducing William Kentridge one can form a clear and extensive image of the role that liminality plays in the contemporary art reality.

HIS INDIVIDUAL POSITION

William Kentridge was born in 1955 in Johannesburg, South Africa, as the son of two anti-apartheid lawyers. In 1976, he attained a degree in Politics and African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand after which he studied art at the Johannesburg Art Foundation until 1978.

In 1981 he moved to Paris to study drama at an international theatre school. He both acted in and directed theatre plays for more than a decade. In the early eighties Kentridge established his artistic identity with series of etchings and charcoal drawings.

His Jewish origin, in combination with being a white South African male of Eastern European decent, made him very aware of the social position that he inhabited in the apartheid society. The hierarchical structure of the South African apartheid society has formed the basis, of not only his artworks, but also of his personal developments. It is striking to see how Turner's concept of liminality, more precisely the subjects of *marginality* and *outsiderhood*, relates to the personal background of William Kentridge.

Kentridge once described that he lived in a state of marginality, one of the distinct liminal concepts of Victor Turner. When Turner discusses people in marginal positions, he defines them as people who live 'on an edge' due to, among others, their descend, religion and race that differs from the society that they live in. It is foremost the latter two that subject Kentridge to the marginal state of being. Kentridge, a white-born South African, raised in an apartheid society, was very aware of his white-race position. The position of his parents, being anti-apartheid lawyers, enforced this awareness. "He described living in a state of marginality, at the edge of huge social upheavals yet also removed from them, this for the obvious reason of his skin colour" (Rosenthal, 2009, p.37). Although being Jewish in a foremost Christian white South African society, the apartheid system classified people according to skin colour and established a system that divided people from each other permanently by creating separate areas for each group to live in. Besides his race, Kentridge felt further 'marginalized' due to this Jewish religion. "He felt

'uncomfortable' and 'other' too, because of his Jewish identity in a white Christian world" (Rosenthal, 2009, p.37).

The divide that Kentridge felt within himself was echoed in the extreme in the strictly divided hierarchical society where he lived in. He had to determine his position in a society where everything is categorized, all differences minutely separated and every aspect controlled.

"One might argue that the apartheid system effectively imprisoned each South African in a prescribed role: to be living in misery, a victim of violence; to be maintaining and perpetuating this state of affairs; to be observing; or to be ignoring the fact of apartheid" (Rosenthal, 2009, p.37). It can be stated that, to escape from this feeling of being in a privileged position due to his status as a white person, in combination with his feelings of guilt, he developed a strong aversion from the apartheid regime. Being highly affected by the political situation, the artist Kentridge used his art practice as a means to set himself aside. From there he could question, criticize and reflect upon this social system, showing the many contradicting feelings and facts that arise when being in such a situation. By voluntarily setting himself apart from the given social system and the behaviour of role-playing members who enforced the system, Kentridge placed himself in a state of outsiderhood, the liminal category as described by Victor Turner in his book *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (1975, p.233). The voluntary choice of outsiderhood also ensured that his art practice could rise above the possessive atrocities of the apartheid system that would otherwise restrict it. In an essay Kentridge addresses this position in his own words, in which he describes apartheid as an immovable rock; "{...} to escape this rock is the job of the artist", and he continues with "{...} escape is necessary, for as I stated the rock is possessive and inimical to good work" (Rosenthal, 2009, p.118).

THEMES AND NARRATIVES

Kentridge's state of liminal being, more precisely, being marginalized and placed in outsiderhood, is projected in his political and psycho-sociological themes which cover as good as all of his art works. Hereby the focus is on the situation in South Africa, but in later works his focus broadened to other countries that suffered from colonization as well. Kentridge sees similarities between the South African apartheid regime and countries which were in a state of war or revolution.

All these countries have in common that they find themselves in an unstable, transitional phase. The influence of this state on the individual life seems to have comparable ambiguous aspects. Inside his art works, most narratives are strategically chosen, to represent this ambiguous position. Certain themes keep coming back over the years, though sometimes in a different context or technique. These reoccurring themes make the works and the stories they tell liminal themselves.

Destabilized political systems

At the basis of all Kentridge's works lies an interest in destabilized political systems and the effects they have on the individual. In his early works Kentridge (re)presents his national and personal history. For Kentridge, art and life have a very intimate and dissoluble relationship. His position in the margin ensures that he works in a gap of the South African society, a political gap. From this gap he sees both sides and reflects on them, as he says, by producing "an art of ambiguity, contradiction, and uncertain endings" (Rosenthal, 2009, p.39). In his later work the effects of colonialism on the whole of Africa, revolution, war and diaspora movements in Europe and Russia, form the context for the unfolding of individual stories and struggles.

The post colonial era that we live in can be regarded as a liminal era where colonialism presents the former identity of many African and Asian countries and a satisfying new identity has not yet been fully formed. For South Africa, its last form of colonialism, apartheid, is not long ago at all. Kentrige doesn't want to ignore it, or any of the other horrors that formed a large part of the twentieth century, but instead wants to understand, unravel the meanings, motivations and consequences on an individual and collective level because it forms a part of the future identity of the country. Here, one can draw a parallel with Arnold van Gennep's concept of the rites of passage (1909). South Africa is in the middle, transitional (liminal) phase of its rite of passage. Its past identity is slowly being deconstructed and the ideas and knowledge to understand and build its future identity are still being processed. Kentrige also seems to be in the middle, looking back at the twentieth century, using its events and images, but his work also intimately reflects the present conditions of his local Johannesburg, and the South African state in general, where the transition from apartheid to democracy has taken place but the transformation is much more difficult.

The apartheid state, Kentrige asserts, presents the ultimate stage for a 'double life' with each South African having double understandings about people. In a broader context, similar effects occur in other colonized states. Examples are the German occupation of Namibia and the massacre of the indigenous Namibian people, and the effects of the Italian Fascist invasion of Ethiopia. People that by themselves can not do anything against the authoritative hierarchical system because they are inferior and marginalised, unite together and temporarily form a mass with one voice. At the same

time they are all individuals that are lost, that no longer, not yet or never had a position in the society that they are protesting against, or are running from. Kentrige's art does not re-present or translate the tragedies that formed the twentieth century, but shows how someone would perceive such a tragedy, what its effects are on the individual and what the individual can do to overcome it.

The usage of doubles

Inside his art works, most narratives seem to be strategically chosen and keep coming back over the years, though sometimes in a different context or technique. Nevertheless, a common aspect is the use of alter ego's in his narratives, as to relate the personages of his characters to his own marginal, liminal being. The epic cycle *9 Drawings for Projection* (1989-2003), a series of nine films, based on animated charcoal drawings, was the first body of work where Kentrige combined his knowledge of drawing, theatre and film. Through this medium he expressed his interest in drawing, while also benefiting from the more dynamic character of the moving image. It is in these films that the viewer is first introduced to elements in the narrative that deepens the work's liminal character. In the first film of the series, *Johannesburg, 2nd greatest city after Paris* (1989) it becomes apparent that the two main characters Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum are alter ego's of Kentrige. They represent two conflicting dramatized sides of his character. Soho is a man of the world, a greedy industrialist in a pinstriped suit who lacks an inner and emotional life whereas Felix is his complete opposite, a poetic soul, always nude, who overflows with feelings.

Throughout the last three films of the series (*Weighing and Wanting* (1998), *Stereoscope* (1999))

and *Tide Table* (2003)), the theme of the alter ego is further developed and more directly visualized in the motif of the double. Double as in double views of the same scene but also images that in form are a double of each other but contradict each other in meaning. In his work Kentridge constantly uses the double in one way or another. Soho's and Felix' personalities and their actions throughout the films suggest that they are also the alter ego's of the divided South Africa of the apartheid years.

In the latter half of the epic cycle, Soho starts to look more and more like Felix, the two characters start to merge. Kentridge has said to use this as a symbolic reference, for the people of South Africa that are brought a step closer together by the abolishment of apartheid. In the sixth film, *The History of the Main Complaint* (1996), Felix's character has completely disappeared. However, the theme of the alter ego continues to echo in the film, in the image of the ten doctors identical in appearance to Soho that surround his hospital bed. Soho is trying to cure himself just like his alter ego South Africa is trying to heal its wounds of three decades of apartheid through the meetings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that were publicized during the making of the film.

In his essay on Kentridge, Mark Rosenthal describes the usage of the double as follows: "At one moment he might ponder the confusion of the double, simply declaring its existence and naming the components; at another he might attempt to reconcile its opposites (Mark Rosenthal, 2009, p.46). This is particularly apparent in the eighth film *Stereoscope*, where a hope to resolve all the doubles by a stereoscopic vision, which is one of unity, is undone as the screen splits in two and the focus is once more put on the fact that there can never be a single meaning. In another body of work surrounding his creation of the opera *The Magic Flute* (2005), there are many images that look like

each other but are in fact each others opposite (shooting starts and shootings, the massacre and the safari, globes and skulls). The similarity of the images of such doubles prompt the viewer to compare and contrast. Kentridge understands the world by accepting that it is built on contradictions. The usage of doubles in his work mirrors this back to us.

In much of the work that followed *9 Drawings for Projection*, Kentridge uses the form of the self-portrait, either using photographs of himself as the basis for drawings and etchings, either performing different actions in his films, or performing his own role; the role of the artist. It is as if through employing all these different forms of self representation and self identification he wants the viewer to realize that there is always a part of oneself in both the positive and negative forces that are at play in one's direct surroundings, in the society and the country that one lives in and the world at large that we exist in. If we realize this, we can take a more active part in building our future, in idea and practice. The gaining, developing, understanding and exercising of this knowledge is an important contribution of the liminal phase towards a successful completion of a rite of passage as Van Gennep saw it.

Disappearance and the initiation rite

Kentridge often uses a form of disappearance in his work. People constantly disappear, often in the landscape. Miners disappear under its surface. The dead are left here as it is a place where no one will look for them. Masses of protesters move across it to disappear in the distance. It hides Soho's wife. He can no longer find her, the landscape is empty. In many of the tribal societies that Van Gennep based most of his research on,

the liminal phase is not only characterized by a specific period of time but often also by spatial seclusion. This is especially apparent in initiation rites of boys, where the boy undergoing initiation is secluded in the bush where he lives in a hut in a special place. He is invisible to the society. Being separated and considered dead, the boy is waiting to be reborn, for the entirety of the liminal phase.

The one that is isolated in Kentridge's work often goes through a comparable experience by reappearing in a later stage, sometimes in a different, reborn form. In a similar way, Kentridge uses the metaphor of a flood of blue water covering the arid landscape, as being a motif of solace that promises redemption of the disappeared.

THE ERASURE, THE SHADOW AND THE TEAR

Kentridge uses many different mediums and techniques in his work, though in general his major focus is on animations, or what he likes to call 'drawings for projection'. Nevertheless, he does not restrict himself to using drawings only. He regularly introduces, among others, himself, objects from his studio and sculptures within his animations. A common aspect remains the changing nature of static forms into moving images. He seems to use several reoccurring, physical techniques, to enforce the motives of his stories. Examples are the reoccurrence of erasures, shadows, tearing and collage. These also bring to mind the liminal characteristics that are harboured in his themes.

Erasure

To create his drawn animation, as he did for *9 Drawings for Projection*, Kentridge uses a large sheet of paper on which he draws multiple scenes with charcoal, sometimes adding

blue or red pastel. Each time the composition is changed, by erasing a mark and adding another one, the drawing is filmed. This technique of draw, record and erase that is constantly repeated, reveals the process of the construction of a moving image to the viewer. It does not create an illusion of fluidity, but the imperfect erasure shows the traces of each preceding stage of the drawing.

As the story progresses the drawn scene is filled with remnants of traces, until the paper's surface is consumed by the tactility of the erased smudges. The erasures in the works evoke a relationship with Van Gennep's concept of a transition in time and space. Van Gennep compares a rite of passage to a journey that one undertakes to get from one place to another, whether this is from one room to another, from one house to another, from one town to another or from one country to another. In visual terms the erasures and smudges create a fragile, unstable atmosphere, reminiscent of the transitional phase.

A journey takes time and Kentridge makes the time visible in his films through erasing. Each former stage is still present as a smudge, and everything that moves leaves a trail of traces. Our experience of time and space in life is very much like this. It is not one of constant flow, but it is very often filled with struggles, interruptions and complications by the process of life and its memories. The 'continuous draw and erase technique' is well suited to represent this reality.

Shadows

Through his work in theatre, Kentridge has been introduced to the effect of shadows. Instead of turning to the source of the shadow to seek knowledge and understanding as, Plato insinuates in his allegory of the cave, Kentridge prefers to look back to "the world of shadows" (Kentridge, 2009, p.50). To him the shadows

of reality with their unstable, uncertain and immaterial character trigger a greater quest for knowledge and a more complete understanding of the world with all its literal and figurative positive and negative forms. Kentridge began to explore and develop different literal and figurative ways of using shadows in his work. His multiple experiments with projecting light onto everyday objects lying around his studio, such as scissors, compasses and coffeepots, eventually resulted in the film *Shadow Procession* (1999). In this work the shadows of combinations of objects and jointed paper figures, ranging from playful to macabre forms march towards an unknown destination. In the theatre such figures had been “at the margin, glimpsed between scenes”, but here “they had to hold their own” (Kentridge, 2009, p.131). As the light source is moved, the shadows change and they take on a form that is very different from the original object. This ability to transform, to assume a life of their own allowed the movement of the shadows to become the main subject matter of the film. These multiple characters that Kentridge lets the shadows take on, evokes the liminal realm that in itself is a space of transformation where man is between past and future identities and anything can happen. Kentridge uses not just the reality of the shadow in his work but also the idea that it represents. He copies the forms they create by making silhouettes with torn pieces of black paper, giving the shadows a material presence. Yet he also plays with their immateriality by blowing the carefully constructed silhouettes apart again. The ambiguous form that Kentridge gives his shadows relates to the ambiguous nature of the personages that they represent. The personages of the *Shadow Procession* are trapped in a march that has no destination. They are not at the mid point of transition, but in a state of being that offers, as Turner said: “...no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” (Turner, 1974, p.233).

Tearing

A third body of work, rooted in the discoveries of *Shadow Procession* is based on the act of tearing and collage. The tearing insinuates collage. This destroying and recomposing go hand in hand in the work of Kentridge, yet there is no linear progression from the one to the other, from the fragmented to the whole. He employs many different ways of tearing and collaging. One of these ways becomes evident in the work *Breathe* (2008), a film “made using torn black tissue paper which successively swirls and falls making either random patterns or falling into specific images – a singer, a megaphone, a telephone, a close up of a mouth” (Kentridge, 2008, p.17). The tissue paper is torn to create the medium that harbours the potential to create the backward and forward movement between disintegration and reconstruction of the image. In the work *Return* (2008), pieces of paper mounted on wire are arranged in such a way that together they form a clear coherent image. However, as the structure starts turning in front of the eye of the camera, the “apparent coherence of the piece is ruptured” (Kentridge, 2008, p.21). Here the image is torn apart into random bits of paper and wires as soon as the turning starts to be re-composed only when the structure has returned to its original position. The presentation of his films is the final layer where his tearing and collage method is echoed. All the different images, the different rhythms, the different sounds, beamed on separate screens that completely surround you, make it impossible to understand all that is going on at once. By doing this he tears the suggestion of a linear narrative apart into different fragments leaving it up to the viewer to collage the pieces together into their own story, constructing their own meaning. The trajectories of

all these fragments, all attempting to gather chaos into order, shows the “fragility of coherence” (Kentrige, 2008, p. 25). As Kentridge says, the completed image is the simple task, but fragility, not coherence is the given form on which it is built. What is much more difficult is to, after every tear, every change, every disintegration, make sense of the dense shapeless pattern and reshape it into a new image. The ‘fragility of coherence’ is something that every one of us is faced with and feels every time we go through a transition in life. Certainties shift, change and disappear. A process, a becoming, is started.

THE ROLE OF THE STUDIO

Isolating himself in his studio with only its familiar attributes and materials to keep him company, is a very important and highly necessary act in Kentridge’s art practice. Very often Kentridge perceives even these familiarities to be strange and new, as it is a place where he can open his mind to internally ponder, deconstruct, review and reconstruct assumptions, ideas and images. All this invisible work is instigated by walking around the studio, pacing back and forth across the space, often in relation to a blank piece of paper on the wall that is waiting. These physical passages in space, accompanied by a passage of internal change, form periods of time where knowledge and doubt, activity and reflection, weakness and strength go hand in hand in Kentridges mind. In this process his mind resembles the mind of a person in the liminal phase of a rite of passage as described by Van Gennep and Turner, where such positive and negative forces are also at play. Just as these forces urge Kentridge to gather “the energy, the clarity to make the first mark” (Kentridge, 2009, p.13), the new thoughts

and customs that they generate, prepare the liminal persona for their new role.

To Kentridge the studio is “like an enlarged head” (Kentridge, 2009, p.13), where his pacing represents the ideas and images forming and fading away inside that head, inside his mind. In his works *7 Fragments for George Méliès* (2003), *Journey to the Moon* (2003) and *Day for Night* (2003), Kentridge explores different ways of giving a visual, external form to this internal process that is otherwise never explicitly shown. Projected next to each other in one room, these works, in total consisting of nine film fragments, are “the internal noise, each finished fragment a demonstration of these impulses that emerge and are abandoned before the work begins” (Kentridge, 2009, p.13). All seven film fragments that make up *7 Fragments for George Méliès* depict Kentridge in his studio doing and trying all sorts of things. We see him imagining, drawing, erasing, tearing and reconstructing images while constantly interrupting these efforts with physical acts of pacing, climbing up and down the ladder, standing still hesitating, and sitting down looking at what he has made. This creative realm that is show to us is filled with questions instead of answers that instil an inquisitive and critical attitude. It is reminiscent of the liminal realm where reflection constantly forms and changes ones view, opinions and understanding of ones position within society, within the world and within the universe at large. Especially in the other two films, *Journey to the Moon* and *Day for Night*, it looks like Kentridge is contemplating his position as a person and as an artist not only in relation to the society he lives in but also to the greater rhythm of the universe. Symbolically many of the images in the films depict outer space, the black cosmos speckled with white celestial bodies, images with which Kentridge tries to turn the

studio into the whole universe. He tries to stay in his complete inner world, to escape the incomplete outer world. Halfway through *Journey to the Moon*, reoccurring images of the familiar processions of people, the desolate landscape of Johannesburg and the interior of his studio, remind himself and the viewer that it is time to return to Earth. The studio is not the whole universe, but is the rocket ship where former assumptions, ideas and images can be perceived differently, changed, formed anew and be re-incorporated into the world.

EPILOGUE

The 'in-betweenness' of my own background, as a child very aware of being between homelands, between cultures and between realities by being Dutch but raised in South Africa, let me to research the concept of liminality. This journey let me through many fields of research that converged with my understanding, and more importantly, with the questions I had concerning my own 'in-betweenness' and 'in-betweenness' as a subject in the world around me. The sociological research of respectively Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner introduced the term liminality to me. The fact that they classified liminality as an 'in-between' state within a transition and as an individual state of being greatly intrigued me. Their concept of liminality, though dating far back in the 20th century, still functions as the root of the research done on liminality in many other fields of study. Even though liminality is such an important part of our social reality and our personal development within it, its transitory and sometimes hidden nature make it difficult to fully grasp it. In my experience, art has the ability to capture the transitory and reveal the hidden. However, throughout my research it struck me that the research done on liminality is almost never explicitly mentioned within my own field of study, and interest, the world of the contemporary art. I see art as a fertile practice for questioning, exploring and trying to express our social reality. The inquisitive nature that lies at the root of an art practice and the ability of art to condense our multifaceted and complex reality by fusing thought, feeling and form allow it to point out, capture and use liminality. In my opinion William Kentridge is an artist who does this. Having seen his work many times and familiar with his

background, I could not stop drawing similarities between the work as well as the personal background of this artist and the concept of liminality as proposed by Van Gennep and Turner. This thesis gave me the opportunity to scrutinize the original concept and to give it a visual form through the work of this South African artist. The results of my reflections of the sociological concept of liminality upon the art practice of William Kentridge gave me a better insight of how deeply liminality can be grounded in a person and the art works one makes. It also confirmed that liminality is a very versatile concept and very much applicable to the world of contemporary arts. Not only William Kentridge's work, and persona can be related to liminality and terms such as 'outsiderhood' and 'marginality' that it brings forth, though. Many other artists that inspire my thoughts and art works have much in common with liminality, usually both in their works and their persona. This goes for myself as well. I hope to continue to learn from this highly interesting subject. In theory and in practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Babha, H.K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004

Charta books (2008). *William Kentridge*. Italy

van Gennep, A (1909). *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press, 1960

Rosenthal, M (2009). *William Kentridge: Five Themes*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. London: Cornell University Press 1970

Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter 1997

Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. New York: Cornell University Press 1974

Turner, V. (1979). *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A study in Comparative Symbology*. New Delhi: Naurang Rai

La Shure, C. (2005). *What is Liminality?* [Online] October 2005. Available from: <http://www.liminality.org/about/whatisliminality/> [Accessed: 20 June 2010]

Lang, K. (2001). *Existence on the Threshold: Liminal Characters in the Works of A.S. Byatt* [Online] Available from: <http://limen.mi2.hr/limen2-2001/lang.html> [Accessed: 3 October 2010]

MacKenzie, I. (2001). Interlude on Liminality [Online] Available from: http://limen.mi2.hr/limen1-2001/iain_mackenzie.html [Accessed: 3 October 2010)

Schaetti, B.F. and Ramsey, S.J. The Global Nomad Experience: Living in Liminality [Online] Available from: http://www.escapeartist.com/efam/85/global_nomad.html [Accessed: 8 November 2010]

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_van_Gennep

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Turner

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>

http://parole.aporee.org/work/hier.php3?spec_id=19650&words_id=900

<http://www.cartage.org.lb/en/themes/arts/architecte/architecturalstructure/LookingforLiminality/LookingforLiminality.htm>

