William Kentridge’s “History of the Main Complaint”

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William Kentridge’s “History of the Main Complaint” is one of nine video pieces of a collection 9 Drawings for Projection produced between 1989 and 2003. The videos are comprised of a series of 35 mm photographs of Kentridge’s evolving charcoal drawings. Each drawing is photographed before parts of the drawing are painstakingly erased, redrawn, re-photographed, and assembled to unfold Kentridge’s narrative.

Set in an empty street, we hear a faint, distant siren, and a paper blows into the wind and disappears. We come to a bare hospital room with a bowl of blue water on a stand and a white curtain sectioning off an area. The curtain is uncovered to reveal a single bed, where the viewer finds a large man lying in bed, still in his pin-striped suit, hooked up to oxygen, and taking huge, lengthy breaths. A foreboding Monteverdi madrigal plays in sync with the man’s breathing. His eyes never open, and we see a doctor appear out of thin air, who looks exactly like the man lying in bed (Soho Eckstein). Our view oscillates between looking at Soho’s body parts through the hospital machines and looking at the Soho-like doctors, who have surrounded Soho in his bed. A stethoscope is sent slithering down Soho’s spine and reveals a paper punch, and then a telephone, encaged by Soho’s ribs, in place of his organs. We see many inanimate office objects where organs or body parts should be. We soon realize that we are privy to Soho’s dreams. We see him driving in his car down the road. We’re brought back to the hospital, and there are now ten Soho-clone doctors surrounding Soho. We see Soho driving in his dream again, when he comes across two men beating up another man on the side of the road. We are taken back to the hospital room, only for a moment, and then are taken back into Soho’s dreams. We see Soho get into a car accident, and immediately as his car hits the man, Soho’s eyes open and he wakes up, the hospital equipment screens shatter as they now show body parts and not inanimate objects. It becomes apparent that these were more than dreams, but memories of events to Soho. A giant eye opens and closes, and all of the shattered glass from the hospital machines fixes itself, and inanimate objects appear once again on the monitors. We arrive back in Soho’s hospital room; it’s empty again, except for the untouched blue water in the bowl and the white curtain covering Soho’s bed area. The curtain opens and his bed is no longer there. Soho, looking fatter than ever, sits at a huge table surrounded by objects of business and wealth, objects that were found in place of his organs. Void of emotion, he picks up the phone when it rings and smokes his cigar. Noise surrounds him and we fade back into the darkness.
When I walked into the room in the middle of the showing of “History of the Main Complaint,” I immediately felt the somber, depressing mood that was set by the music’s key and tone, as well as the screen’s depiction of a large man, still in his pin-striped suit, hooked up to oxygen, and lying asleep or unconscious in his hospital bed. The ominous music accompanying the sometimes startling sounds made by the inanimate objects in the video, along with the hospital scene with a large man on life support, led me to believe that something was obviously wrong, but I couldn’t tell what. I was intrigued, in part because I sensed that this was going to be some sort of a cryptic psychological short movie. I watched the entirety of it again, fully enthralled in all of the details, asking questions such as “Why is he wearing his suit in the hospital?”, “What is the significance of all of the testing equipment?”, “Why are we shown that he has a typewriter in his chest?”, and “Who is the person that Soho hit, and why does this memory wake him from his coma?” About twenty seconds later, the previous video of the nine-video series, “Felix in Exile” began playing and I watched more disturbing images enfold with graphic depictions of violence. Not until that finished, did I walk out, only to be drawn back in again after reading the plaque on the wall, stating that these were drawings from a South African artist during South Africa’s transition from its apartheid era to its post-apartheid democratic era, and were fed off of the violence associated with the county’s brutal history.

Much of the symbolism within “History of the Main Complaint” now became more lucid. Soho’s identity as a white, wealthy businessman, and representative of a privileged, white South African culture, is apparent in his pin-striped suit, which remains on him, even in his hospital bed. The doctors find no physical affliction; Soho’s problem is in his psychological torment. His missing organs, replaced with inanimate objects, status symbols associated with his profession, make him into a kind of machine, void of humanity, and a representation of the dehumanization of the apartheid era.

“History of the Main Complaint” cannot be analyzed adequately without reference to its historical and political background. The sixth of Kentridge’s 9 Drawings for Projection, “History of the Main Complaint” surfaced in 1996, six years after apartheid was officially abolished in South Africa, and two years after the end of the apartheid era, marked by Nelson Mandela’s election to presidency. In the same year, shortly after the release of “History of the Main Complaint,” a court-like system in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created. It sought to give restorative justice through hearing cases of human-rights violations of the apartheid era from either the victim or perpetrator’s side, and allowed perpetrators to request amnesty. Kentridge’s films arouse the psychological trauma of this era and the guilt associated with living within South Africa’s privileged white society.

Kentridge’s series, set in Johannesburg, narrate the experiences of the characters – Soho Eckstein, a gluttonous, greedy man in a pin-striped suit, Mrs. Eckstein – Soho’s neglected wife, and Felix Teitlebaum – sometimes described as the opposite of Soho, innocent and notably naked. As the videos progress, more is revealed about the main character, Soho Eckstein. In the first video, “Johannesburg: 2nd Greatest City After Paris” (1990), Soho buys up almost half of Johannesburg and loses a fight with Felix; he is later shown feeding the poor, but throws the food at them, literally obliterating them from the scene. Soho, revealed to be a gold mine owner in “Monument” (1990), erects a statue in honor of the workers he exploits, only for the viewer to find out, in the end, that the huge “statue” is actually being held up by a human, painted to look like the statue and breathing slow, agonizing breaths. Mine (1991) documents the horrors of the conditions of the gold mines in South Africa, and “Sobriety, Obesity, and Growing Old” (1991) includes love-making scenes between Mrs. Eckstein (who has left Soho Eckstein) and Felix. “Felix in Exile,” made in 1994, (the pivotal year during which South Africa’s first open elections occurred and Nelson Mandela was elected to presidency) shows the viewer, through drawings, the violence and shock of stories of violent killings piling up in newspaper clippings.

Watching “History of the Main Complaint” alone, without any context, reveals a sense of urgency and trauma, but a full comprehension of the works and characters requires an investigation of South Africa’s history of apartheid as well as Kentridge’s related video pieces in the series, 9 Drawings for Projection. Without knowledge of the other Soho Eckstein videos, the viewer would miss that a rare source of color in Kentridge’s videos, the blue water, was a symbol of love and tranquility, and notably remained in the hospital room completely untouched during Soho’s visit.

William Kentridge’s views on the inhumanity of apartheid were undoubtedly affected by his upbringing. His father was a well-known anti-apartheid lawyer, who fought Nelson Mandela’s case, and Kentridge’s mother’s occupation was similarly noble in cause; she was also a lawyer and gave legal advice to those who could not afford it. For Kentridge, growing up in an open-minded, wealthy family in South Africa, while attending an all-white school, being privileged came with the price of guilt.

Critical to analysis is the observation that Kentridge’s character, Soho Eckstein, looks strikingly like William Kentridge. As Kentridge’s aspirations were originally to be an actor, it seems as though he become one, nonetheless, through Soho. Stating that Soho and Felix are his alter egos, Kentridge encourages us to become aware of the duality of...
Yet when I come before her
seeking peace and balm for my illness,
at once my face grows pale
and I must lower my eyes.
I would speak, but cannot; then, trembling,
I begin. Finally my feelings find expression.

A splitting of personality is evident in Kentridge’s works through the relationship between Soho and Felix. After “Felix in Exile,” the fourth video of the series, Kentridge realized that Felix and Soho had become a “split, displaced self-portrait,” and from then on, Felix was absent from 9 Drawings (Kentridge, 238). Notably, in Kentridge’s expressionist-style drawings, form often alludes to content and content to form. In “History of the Main Complaint,” Soho Eckstein, usually drawn with harsh and messy lines, was drawn with the softer, deliberate lines associated with Felix, a symbolic fusing of the two, yet signifying a change in Soho. Kentridge states that he identifies with Felix as well as Soho, as parts of all society: “They both seem to encompass the good and bad qualities that make us human: self proclamation, generosity, closeness, ambition, greed, confidence, anxiety, all those things. Those two characters are both part of one brain trying to figure out its relation to the world” (238).

As a splitting of personality, or consciousness, is evident in Kentridge’s alter egos - Soho and Felix, it is also suggested in “History of the Main Complaint,” through the duplication of Soho Eckstein’s body. As Soho Eckstein lies in bed, and doctor-clones of Soho probe the comatose Soho for answers to his ailment, his complaint, a question of unconsciousness and consciousness within the same person arises. Freudian theory supposes that when an ego is unable to deal with something, it may split off into conscious and unconscious realms, “avoid[ing] a rupture…by effecting a cleavage or division of itself” (Freud 12). Repression, Freud wrote, cannot “arise until a sharp cleavage [occurs] between conscious and unconscious mental activity” (147). “We must be prepared, if so, to assume the existence in us not only of a second consciousness, but of a third, fourth, perhaps of an unlimited number of states of consciousness, all unknown to us and to one another” (170).

Freud’s account of the possibility of multiple states of consciousness calls to attention the ten Soho-clone doctors, and their mental disconnect with comatose Soho, despite their same body. Comatose Soho also can be further explained by Freud: “It may happen, too, that a person is brought so completely to a stop by a traumatic event which shatters the foundations of his life that he abandons all interest in the present and future and remains permanently absorbed in mental concentration upon the past.”
continue to lie unresponsive in his bed, unresponsive to society. However, we find him sitting at his desk, unchanged, smoking his cigar with a blank, emotionless stare, a body representing cultural amnesia. We know he has realized a trauma, a complaint, but was it his main complaint? It seems that he has either never remembered the original trauma, he has forgotten it, or he no longer cares for it. Soho leaves you dissatisfied, but effectively dissatisfied and rather concerned with his moral development. Will he ever change? We must wait two years before our next glimpse of Soho Eckstein, in the next video in the series, WEIGHING…AND WANTING (1998).

Sources:


