

Theatre and the Image

Acts 1 & 2

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Abstract

The following thesis examines theatre's presence within the visual arts, aiming to evaluate the extent of its legitimacy as a meaningful and considered framework for the image-maker. It has been produced following theatre's noted occurrence within my own practice; from a want of grasp of its weight and connotations. Most importantly though, *Theatre and the Image* seeks to establish theatre's relevance in the contemporary space.

To fulfil these objectives, the text employs artists Walter Richard Sickert, Luc Tuymans, Paula Rego, and William Kentridge. Each channel theatre and were together chosen for their variety of approaches and motivations. In light of critical opposition to narrative and suspicion of cross-genre influences, *Theatre and the Image* investigates what practice in the contrary may provide the image that image alone cannot achieve. If theatre can uniquely illuminate truths of the modern day, or if its techniques can assist the artist in realising otherwise inaccessible messaging, it should not be dismissed: it should be widely accredited. *Theatre and the Image* finds it can.

The Ticket Office

Theatre, theatre, theatre, theatre, theatre. Theatre perhaps fundamentally is like painting. A cast may be choreographed and dressed accordingly to present a new perspective on the world, and acts broadly speaking without mind of unscripted audience intervention. Erika Fischer-Lichte contends this is theatre's exact distinction from the arts- it is activated by the connection between performer and spectator (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 12)- however the artist can be both. After all, the painter performs in the moment and converses with themselves the next. There is a separation between painting and the thought of the act or what to paint, an inherent loss of complete control by the artist's hand. Indeed, when a painter inverts the intuitive dynamic inferred and issues their work rather as a spectator to an audience's reaction (or performance, rather), it follows that this is theatre.

Fischer-Lichte critically establishes theatre as something ephemeral though, and something of human communication. Through the collaboration required to realize an act, community is fostered. Image-making does not involve this direct conversation. Interpretations of theatre are many, however it is this point crucially that will become relevant throughout this thesis. Theatre shall therefore be defined here as a process that is above all performative. It is the phenomenal moment between the presenter and reactor. Its surrounds; costumes, props and sets, are signifiers, and their presence indicates the artifice they promote.

This thesis endeavours to establish then whether the use of theatre in visual arts is, in light of its contradictions, valuable or fraudulent. In the coming chapters, four artists who have adopted theatre within their work will be discussed, and their intentions evaluated.

Act One: Painting for Keeps

Walter Richard Sickert (b.1860-1942) likely would have been remembered an actor rather than a painter if not for a professional embarrassment on stage that led a curious James McAbbot Whistler to seek him backstage; the American painter would take Sickert into tutelage the following year, changing his life course (Davies, 2022). Sickert however bore as close to the performing arts as he had before, making his name painting seedy music halls of London through the late 19th century under the influence of Edgar Degas' dancehalls.

As Doctor of Art History William Rough has before evaluated, Sickert's proximity to the acting world in particular soon found him on the ground zero of a new kind of feminist, socially realist theatre that engaged with the lives of the British working class: *The New Drama* (1900-15) (Rough, 2012). These were plays with only limited commercial popularity, and consequently they lacked the photographic representation in the press met by larger, higher rated shows (Rough, 2012). Interestingly, Rough claims that it was due to this lack of public imagery that Sickert did not paint this theatre, but through works of adjacent subject matter and ambience it manifested nonetheless. The influence of theatre by this account more incidental than intentional in Sickert's pre-war work (Rough, 2012).



Figure 1. Ennui

Rough's illumination of debatably Sickert's most renowned artwork, *Ennui* (Figure 1) (painted in 1914), certainly seems to suggest this. The image illustrates a domestic scene perhaps so ordinary one might question any direct relation to theatre: it seems to lack a clear narrative, and appears not staged, built of artificial props and performances, but of a real couple in a real home. The husband looks preoccupied with a cigar only recently lit, a half drunk drink to his side and an apparent indifference to his wife's presence behind him. The wife leans atop a cabinet clutching a cushion. Cultural pressure for women's social empowerment ran parallel to suffrage, and examples of similarly typical marital dissatisfaction and the desire of liberation from ordinary life was consequently a common theme in New Drama, too (Rough, 2012). Most interestingly though, Rough talks of press promotional images as of compositional influence. The very image of theatre is sought after.



Figure 2. *Jack the Ripper's Bedroom*

Jack the Ripper's Bedroom (c.1906-7) (Figure 2) is characterised by threat, and not solely through its title. It is dim; a private, secluded space locked behind window shutter viewed as a voyeur. A feeling of intrusion is only heightened through its claustrophobic layout: the room is confined within a tight, tall vertical strip within the picture. In turn, should be fear, as blood red curtains frame a robe, and it is unclear whether it rests over a stand or the killer's shoulders. If one squints, the picture may resemble a dimly lit stage, curtains not yet fully withdrawn. Sickert's appropriation of theatre iconography places the viewer in the observation stand. The viewer cannot move, fittingly transfixed as if struck by terror. It appears Sickert was more conscious of his draw from theatre than Rough theorizes.

While little is more dramatic in the arts than murder, Sickert's theatre was likely not a marketing ploy. The artist would name multiple images after the 1907 Camden Town Murder, crucially though, these images would be bestowed alternate titles irrelevant to the crimes- *Persuasion*, *What Shall We Do for the Rent* et cetera. These unquestionably shift the images' interpretations entirely, however seemingly counterintuitively Sickert stated in 1910 that 'names are not definitions' of paintings, 'but the loosest kind of labels that make it possible for us to handle them' (Sickert, 1910). Meaning, then, was not fixed. This unusually positions Sickert's works firmly as guises for narratives in a manner perhaps closer to actors adorning costumes than perhaps initially presumed.



Figure 3. The Juvenile Lead

As a rule, it is true Sickert was invested in costumes both figurative and literal. The *Juvenile Lead* (1907) (*Figure 3*) is a self-portrait at once as it is a projection of his artistic insecurities. The bowler hat was associated with business, worn by both tradesmen and city bankers by this time, and it was ubiquitous. Sickert doubted the quality of his output but not his ability (Baron and Shone, 1992, pp. 194)- his dress suggests he is indeed a skilled worker, self-proclaiming to be of the masses, yet he responds with inquisition. The question of his legitimacy in the position of an accomplished painter looms. How could he own his status truthfully if he believed he was not fulfilling his potential? And yet he did own it: Wendy Baron and Richard Shone induce ‘he [Sickert] wore a bowler hat when he wanted to make a serious impression’ (Baron and Shone, 1992, pp. 194). A juvenile lead is still a lead.

Beyond personal situation, the idea of a public face was engrained into late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, indicative of a widespread hypocrisy. In the mind of a Victorian, perpetuating immoral behaviour could become tolerable if in some manner it was outwardly staged as more socially acceptable (Himmelfarb, 1987, pp. 5-6). It was paramount to the alleged self-respecting man that he uphold his reputation, an image that regularly cloaked rampant vice. The fact alone Sickert’s title *The Juvenile Lead* was an amendment to the portrait’s initial name, *The Man in the Bowler Hat*, is

reflective of these values' legacy in that he refused his face obscurity. Indeed, he was perhaps so aware of his public impression that the press of the time, as well as authors past his death, observed his conscious effort to appear in some form forcedly theatrical (Ni, 2020, pp. 18). The makings of a persona; the artist's costume; theatre most often wrestles to control its narrative, although sometimes not.



Figure 4. Gaskamber

Like stage plays, Luc Tuymans' works are performed within a day (Wright, 2012); although if this preeminent Belgian painter's output were a stage play it would likely be one bordering on the unreadable. *Figure 4* is scarce and reproached, even poorly applied in its scantily brushed white wash, blued over similarly rough, inky blacks. The sketch's watercolour paper surface is yellowed with age, yet was presented this way, fresh, in 1986. Quick and carefree- a picture of a gas chamber.

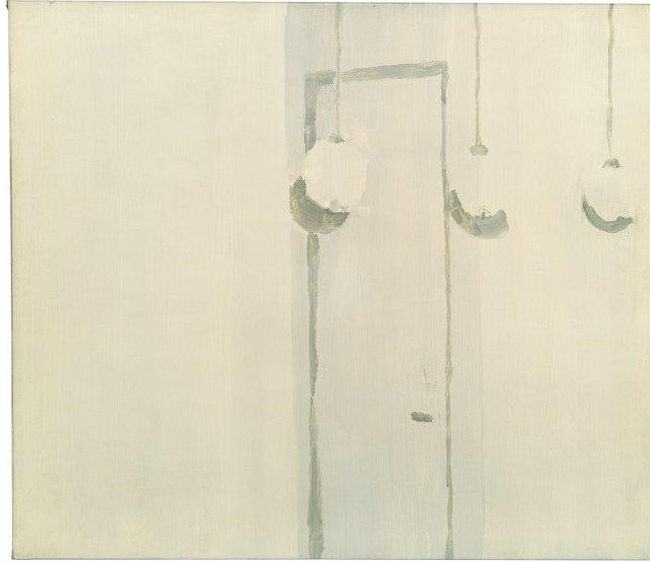


Figure 5. Lamp Room

Likewise, in *Figure 5*, faint, faded and exsanguinated, are three unshaded lamps hanging from above between the viewer and a doorway. The composition is scarce as before and the yellowing seen in *Gaskamber* seeps subtly into its corners. While Tuymans' brushstrokes appear marginally more deliberate in their more even coverage of the canvas, such changes in technique may be expected to have occurred within the six years that had elapsed between the paintings' productions.

Is this a scene from another concentration camp? Why is the door blocked? Is the door blocked? There is no evidence to suggest *Lamp Room* depicts anything other than a scarcely decorated room in an ordinary setting. It is telling that in a 2015 lecture entitled 'Image Theory and Artwork', he introduced his work by slideshow of 250 examples without narration or description (European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2016): Tuymans' operates with ambiguity. By painting a gas chamber in the same hand as household furniture, the artist has been associated in conversation with the concept of the 'banality of evil' (Lichtzier, 2020). It was a term coined by historian Hannah Arendt, influenced by her observation of Nazi Adolf Eichmann at his 1963 trial in Jerusalem. Arendt viewed him as an unremarkable yes-man (Arendt, 1963), bringing into the limelight the potential culpability of the nation's ordinary public in the regime's crimes. In the two decades leading to Tuymans' career, suspicion of the German public involvement only grew (Evans, 2007, pp. 53). The 'banality of evil' is the backbone of this contention; evil acts, ordinary people.

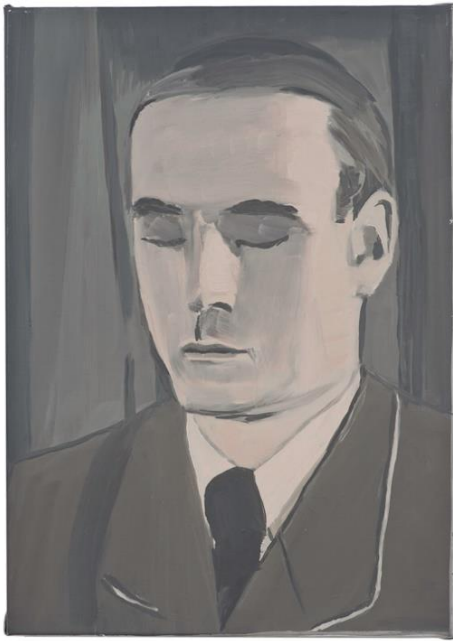


Figure 6. Secrets ; Figure 7. The Architect

The artist has painted solo portraits of Nazis Albert Speer and Heydrich Himmler (*Figure 6 and Figure 7*). The former masqueraded as sorry and cooperative with Allied authorities following his capture, all the while hiding the extent of his responsibility in the Holocaust and its adjacent slave labour his line of work as the Minister of Armaments and War Production utilized throughout the war's duration. True, Speer was self-serving, cold and an effective manipulator, but these are attributes found in offices, and businessmen are not, as a rule, genocidal. On the contrary, Himmler, regardless of existing discussion, could not truthfully be labelled with this same banality. Tuymans opposes Arendt; he painted Hitler too (*see Figure 8*),



Figure 8. De Wandeling

The juxtapositions Tuymans enforces press the audience to form ill-fated judgements of the images presented. If one does not recognise a lamp shade made of human skin in a concentration camp or the shape of a nuclear explosion then walks down to a picture of a fruit bowl or embroidered cloth with indifference, Tuymans has succeeded. If the audience passes by and acknowledges all contexts, he has also succeeded, for his work may act as this discussed counterpoint to Arendt if not alone a more potable means of remembering atrocity.

Fischer-Lichte wrote of meaning's loss in translation as of the fabric of theatre performance (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, pp. 38-41). Should one return to the professor's beliefs they may see her insistence that painting and theatre are distinguished in part due to the latter's existence separate from the creator's ego and its 'fleeting' presence (Fischer-Lichte, 2014, pp. 25). What Fischer-Lichte failed to consider is when the image-maker assumes the role of director rather than solely artist, as the real play of Tuymans' work is found in the interpretations made by its viewers. These performance [painting] to audience interactions activate the works' functions discussed. Tuymans creates theatre.

Whether or not Tuymans is in agreement with Arendt is therefore irrelevant. Critic Emma Dexter writes of Tuymans' practice as on the precipice of both the death of single narrative history and, the artist's long acquainted with, death of painting (Dexter, 2004, pp. 19). What does this mean? History, historically, may be defined as a generally accepted consensus of past events guided by an alleged authoritative source. Today however, such a thing is impossible. News is greatly decentralised across online platforms; often uncited on social media then reinterpreted and reiterated on a systematic scale. Tuymans' work observed how information may be mischaracterised some years before this actuality: his theatre activated communal premonition.

On the other hand, with the proliferation of said photography and the prominence of conceptual sculpture in the contemporary art sphere, painting is neither the foremost record or mouthpiece for high society or the domestic gateway into foreign lands. A great catalyst behind the notoriety of modernism and its painters, for example Jackson Pollock, was prominent mid-century art writer Clement Greenberg. Greenberg believed painting was at its most sanctified in its purest form, which is to say most original (Greenberg, 1961, pp. 6). To this end, a painting referencing any matter besides its own physicality would logically follow as of lesser quality, as what is representation but the drawing of inspiration from nature or made things? And what is narrative but a device of literature and theatre? To Greenberg then, painting with connotations to theatre- a medium already so tainted by writing and music- would be exceptionally cheap.

This philosophy is closed minded. Tuymans has evidenced that the choreography of images, themselves derivative from photographs, results in narrative only if the audience is in on it. Theatre is not only a purveyor of narrative, but the act of initiating play between two parties.

Greenberg's concept of originality is also flawed. Following a thing's augmentation, transcription or compounding with another, you would not claim the resulting thing necessarily the same as that which was begun with. In the thought experiment, The Ship of Theseus may be replaced as its parts are gradually entirely changed- it becomes instead a ship that merely belongs to Theseus. The picture and theatre, though similar in ways discussed, remain effectually different - the former is not dependant on its audience but at once the audience is the active party in its interaction, while the latter exists in faith between the viewer and performer. In this sense, artwork outside of performance can never claim to borrow from theatre's spirit, only the convention that surrounds it.

The curator is not far from composer; Tuymans' orchestra amassing a symphony in tandem with, and increasingly relevant to, the instability of contemporary popular perception clouded by muddled mass media and culture. Cynicism and an inferred want of a more frank society permeates through Tuymans' arrangements of the ordinary beside the irreprehensible perhaps, however it is indeterminable. Loss in translation is inevitable.

Intermission

‘The spectacle’ was a term posed by Marxist theorist Guy Debord in 1967 used to describe a mantra interpreted to occupy the core of modern capitalist society. “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear” (Debord, 1967, pp. 15). He described it as a pacifier, one pedalled through capitalist economic regime as a byproduct of its expansionist urges and a desire of those people living within its grasp. To this end, media, fashion and other products of the commercialised world exist in the pretext of a façade not indicative of human nature to ‘have’ or survive but of an order defined by ‘appearance’ (Debord, 1967, pp. 14). This monopoly of ‘appearance’ manifests in how one may present themselves in curated manner and dress, perpetuating artificial versions of their characters that replace their original minds (Debord, 1967, pp. 16).

Debord grapples with the idea that this web of unreality is inescapable in the capitalist West, for its development of an immovable social construct that pressures widespread conformity in the name of maintaining appearances prevents the likelihood of sufficient willingness to take it apart (Debord, 1967, pp. 18). ‘The spectacle’ is not only inescapable but unavoidable- for example, to get away from its perversion of working life, everyone, including those who may recognise these controls on their lives, will want to book a holiday in itself mandated and monetised. This only reinforces the loss of individualism ‘the spectacle’ fosters, optimising collective personal isolation so that the following loss of agency may be exploited by a system that tells itself what it wants for profit incentive (Debord, 1967, pp. 21-23).

‘The spectacle’ sets an interesting scene. Intuitively Tuymans’ work would come to the defence of Debord, his work emits artifice, a bubble of misinterpretation, misinformation, desensitisation and control. His audience subconsciously affirming the inadvertent collusion of civilisation in dismantling knowledge at once as creating a Debordian chamber of conformity. Tuymans wrangles with a theatre of media, a system of indifference and ignorance. Certainly, the concept of Western society as artifice predates even Debord. Sickert was born into, albeit late, Victoriana, which was, as touched on earlier,

a culture surrounded by fierce moral codes and prejudices and outstanding hypocrisy. Reputation, the 'appearance', was (as in Debord's modern day) the backbone of social interaction.

So perhaps, therefore, it is appropriate for artists to meet theatre within their work for its inherent basis in constructed narrative and distinction from reality is little different from the bigger picture. In the face of Greenberg the bleeding of genre is defended, as what is the value of purity if society's very notion of the matter is ostensibly contrived?

Act Two: The Playing



Figure 9. *The Pillowman*

Paula Rego's 2004 triptych *The Pillowman* (Figure 9) is obfuscating and twisted. The three images revolve around their namesake, the 'Pillowman'. He is a weary figure, never without rest unto furniture and his eyes perpetually shut. In each image, the Pillowman seems to seek comfort in his dress- a long velvet cloak brought up over his neck he may lie on, or soft pyjamas in which he might be asleep. There is a sense the Pillowman is somehow behind time as the cast around him appear in someway held up, sympathetic but ultimately frustrated.

This work began life recounting Martin McDonagh's stage play of the same title, and is derived from a story written by its main protagonist: a writer of notably violent tales named Katurian. 'The Pillowman' is a character made of sac who coerces children into suicide. Sharing MacDonagh's penchant for fairytale, Rego found herself redraughting and redirecting the playwright's script (Campbell-Johnston, 2019) until she realised the Pillowman to represent a depression that had took hold of her father when she was a child (Rego, 2019). Accordingly, Rego responded to this connection in part by transposing the narrative to the Portugal of her youth (Rego, 2019). Unusually therefore, these drawings exist within the peculiarly specific mythos of a work of fiction, adapted as vessel for Rego's own personal history.

This is not to say *The Pillowman* is void of other references to MacDonagh, though- in Katurian's 'The Little Jesus', an orphaned child thinks she is Jesus and is consequently crucified by believing foster parents. The girl is not the messiah and is not resurrected. Model Lila Nunes is seen in the first drawing carrying a ladder, atop it strapped a plank to form a cross depicting the pretensions of The Little Jesus. Rego seems to weave Katurian's narratives- the second image sees The Little Jesus dragging a fully realised crucifix herself across the beach, this time speculatively convinced by the Pillowman to act on the business of death herself. This character is not scene in the last third, presumably deceased.

Fischer-Lichte's ambiguity comes to a fore, a suspense. The Pillowman may have had a child with the woman in the central image; an older lady in the back of the third holding a characteristically grey, red lipped infant marking a major deviation from MacDonagh's material. Who surrounds the Pillowman? How could he, in light of his being and purpose, so give life? It is an interpretability and tension that Rego certainly would have been familiar with as of theatre, having fifteen years beforehand likewise pinched a play's title for her own reimagining- *The Maids* (1987) (*Figure 10*).



Figure 10. The Maids

Jean Genet's *The Maids* of 1947 too was a reimagining, though of a 1933 double homicide. Sisters Papin in frenzy victimised their working residence's mistress and daughter. Rego's image offers little resolve, though- the murders occurred amidst a power cut yet the table lamp is on; the left figure appears more masculine than either of the women killed, and why is a boar on the right of the floor? The audience questions whether what they are observing are even the beginnings of the massacre regardless of the maids' suspiciously scheming behaviours. Sickert and Tuymans; Rego and Genet- each recognised the dramatic theatrical power of the macabre in the name of suspense. In the spirit of the playwright, Rego withheld and held these devices tight into her future practice.

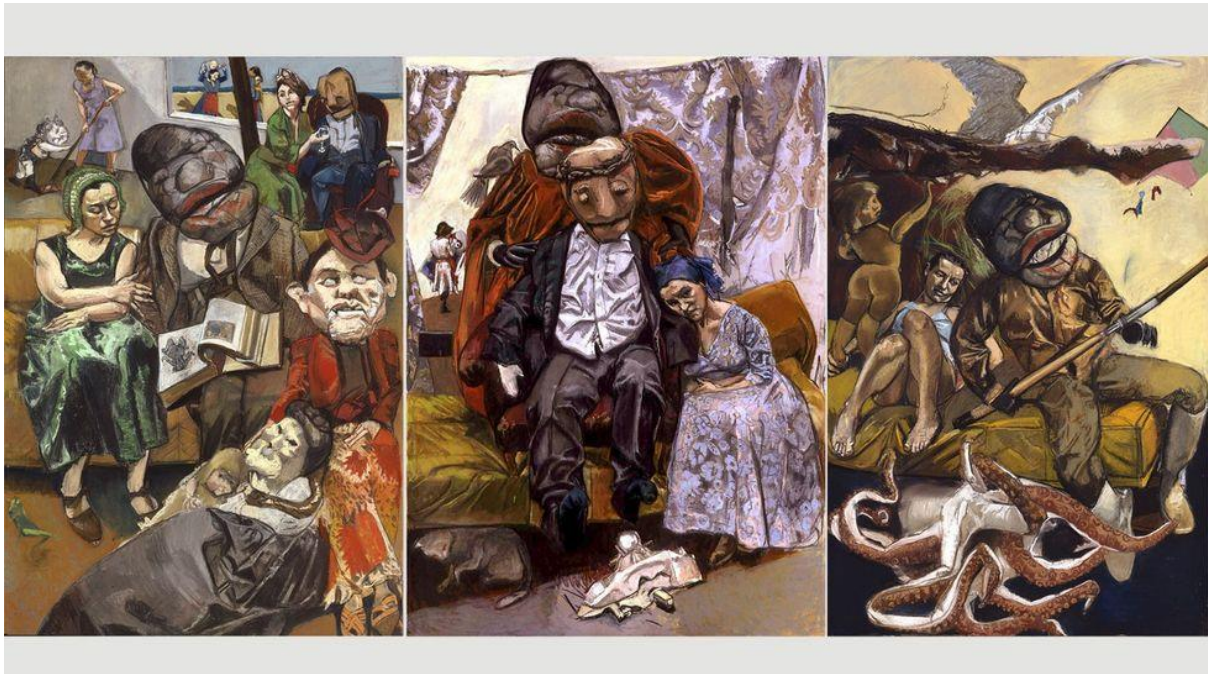


Figure 11. *The Fisherman*

Indeed, what makes the case of the Pillowman most insightful into this theatrical venture was its extended use beyond the MacDonagh tribute. Rego draughted a second triptych within the year. Outside the clear presence of the Pillowman, other signs suggest *The Fisherman* (Figure 11) exists very much within the same world as the former. In the first panel one can observe the same beach out the patio as seen in the second picture of *The Pillowman*, reestablishing Portugal. On inspection here is the same brown sofa, a similar chez long and another backcloth. The models crossover. This paper follows that the black jacketed figure in the first two pictures is a depiction of Rego's father, José.

Long-term model and perhaps more aptly described collaborator of the artist, Lila Nunes, was said to stand in for Rego herself (Angel, 2021), and here appears no different. She is sat beside the Pillowman in all three pictures and José grows closer to him in the second drawing, before ultimately becoming consumed in the third- in a surreal, tainted landscape. The implication here that Rego felt she rarely saw her father's real self and eventually not at all: when she did he remained clouded by the corrupting influence of the Pillowman's woe like the children in Katurian's writing. All the dolls, it seems the depression caught hold of people around him; in the second image, a mother [presumably representing Rego's] walks into the distance as if to escape. The father sits consumed with a Christlike crown of thorns around his head, as if in sacrifice. Like 'The Little Jesus', he is lost, replaced by the Pillowman for perhaps it was all his family saw him for like the fosters assumed the child of God.

Rego's prop design is telling. The father has a bag, like hessian, for a head; weighed down; drooping; his mind is heavy and cursed with a weariness emanated from the Pillowman. In the nights during the War, José would drink whiskey alone in the dark on the Rego household's landing (McEwan, 1997, pp. 31) presumably in angst; distaste for Salazar's secular state (McEwan, 1997, pp. 24) and business stresses compounding (McEwan, 1997, pp. 31).

Rego was much concerned with illustrating narrative, holding close her worldview once held as a child growing up in Lisbon; her interest in fairytales and myth born from elder family members' and maid's stories (Warner, 1994, pp. 7). With a preference to working from real-life references, the creation of props like the Pillowman may have allowed her to access recesses of her memory and imagination previously clouded. Rego, as astute critic Marina Warner would later suggest, seemed to have realised a 'theatre of her inner world'. (Warner, 2018, pp. 25). With this, Rego's work became unquenchably theatrical in all directions. Sewn figures, puppets, and models performed before her adorning accessory and inhabiting characters: actors for Rego's plays. Theatre became a tool for reconnection.

Greenberg did not account for these revelatory experiences, and those more crucially bound to narrative. Greenberg neither did account for the strength of the image as a means of storytelling. By condensing dense, unresolved narratives into stasis as with Rego, the viewer is given no choice other than to speculate. Even audience speculation of theatre or literature is not so universal as it requires an engagement at the least. In this sense, therefore, image-making holds a unique position in approaching narrative- unusually by Greenberg's standards of 'purity', then, artists might do to exploit it fervently.

And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are.

(Gaston Bachelard, 1958, pp. 5-6)

When reading of Gaston Bachelard's 'home' as discussed in *The Poetics of Space*, one may observe something of Rego- a place intrinsically connected to youth, its halls carrying memories and Bachelard suggested thoughts of comfort. Rego's homelife existed partly within the backdrop of the Estado Novo regime (1937-45) of dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. Rego returned to her childhood frequently, of which the only truthful constants were her own company, dolls, and the nation of which she resided. Her living situation changed more than once; her parents left her for England aged one; societal instability wreaked in the air; and before she knew it she was taken away from that life into England for education, which was not her home (The Literary Shed, 2017). Her home was those constants, unduly taken from her. Rego has been cited as having working automatically (Bradley, 1997, pp. 9)- forms instinctual and thought to be mistakes were welcomed into the final product. It is in these automatic moments one doodles, falling into a comforting safety net of reliable subjects and shapes; Rego's work, in all its repeated characters, dolls and models, seemed to fight to restore the homely comfort Bachelard wrote of. Theatre's use is cathartic.

For Rego, the child's vision- or version- always represents not a sugared truth, but an access to terror.

(Rosengarten, 1997, pp. 50)

The Pillowman, contrary to his name, is not comforting, and as Ruth Rosengarten illuminates, none of her work is. The very fact discomfort is found in these images defends theatre as a unique shovel for confrontation- one that tightens the borders between the real and unreal and so blurs the truth to address the intolerable. *The Maids* is an excellent example too. With theatre is an inbuilt play derived from the perceived folly of its models, dresses and performances. No longer is the audience only observing as they would regularly an image, for in the spirit of theatre witnessed they are encouraged to join their experiences together in connection with the work (Bradley, 1997, pp. 32). Rego's mise-en-scene bridges the gap of interaction between picture and theatre Fischer-Lichte proclaimed impossible, working backstage rather than Tuymans of the front aisle.



Figure 12. Self-Portrait as a Coffee Pot image 1 ; Figure 13. Self-Portrait as a Coffee Pot image 2

The scent of theatre encroaches like wet plaster the tight and winding streets of Venice. Even before the Republic had reached its peak of power in the 15th century it had for a couple of hundred years already seeded its now most iconic symbol of costume- the carnival mask.

Coinciding with the 2024 Biennale, William Kentridge's studio effects manifested within the city's Arsenale Institute for Politics of Representation. A series of nine half an hour films played on repeat (short intervals separating them) take centre stage, displayed on two separate screens either side of the small space. A constrained cinema potentially, though alternatively a decentralisation of ideas. In spite of its airy white walls and large store windows, the gallery is organized busily, even cramped- papers are pasted slapdashedly across the walls, loose drawings have been spilled onto yellowed typeset texts and over columns of newsprint; frank, capitalised printed text onto same such pages impose themselves in between. Paper props are lined up contrastingly neatly on a shelf as if the only works intentionally exhibited: they appear in the films after all, they alone have fulfilled their function in a room consumed by contingents.



Figure 14. *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*

The films were created during the COVID-19 pandemic and consider the artist's method through a period of global personal isolation and, for many, consequent introspection. *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot* sees the artist represented as two selves, regularly framed together and conflicting. One Kentridge, in one episode, affirms his love of words and their poetic, rhetorical power, while the other condemns equivocation, pretension and pomposity ('Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot', 2023). It is this dichotomy presented within the auteur's philosophy that reflects doubt and questioning with regards to his artistic aims and ability. To Kentridge, there is no difference from one thing to another besides the meaning we attribute it. A coffee pot need not be a coffee pot but a box; if not be a coffee pot, Kentridge argues, why not may its image represent him ('The Natural History of the Studio', 2023).

It is a prop, as with an array of other objects folded in paper and drawn over (see *Figure 13*). Before it was reincarnated this way, the coffee pot reappeared as a prop does. A definite mise-en-scene exists within Kentridge's work in a similar vein to that of Rego's, and beyond this a cast: where there is Lila Nunes, there are William Kentridges. Multiples have appeared since 2003's *7 Fragments* series of short films. Kentridge's machinery does not offer the same emotional response however- contexts are rarely given and the materials themselves lack intrigue in themselves. A different kind of ambiguity is created.



Figure 15. Triumphs and Laments

Shadows have a long lineage in theatre and have been used extensively by Kentridge. Socrates' Allegory of the Cave [expressed through Plato] establishes a group whom have been imprisoned since youth, tied and locked up so that they have been unable to move their heads or legs. At the bottom of a cave, all they have watched is a screen in which light from a fire shines through, casting shadows of passing, talking guards. Without evidence otherwise, the prisoners have come to accept the shadows as alive. They believe themselves as shadows. If one was able to move once more and be free of the cave, they would first doubt the authenticity of the wider world, however once accustomed to these new experiences they would so far as pity their past predicament and those who remain imprisoned. It is an allegory for intellectual enlightenment, the ease of accepting what is known, and the trepidation of stepping outside of it (Plato, 375BC, pp. 241-244).

Professor Stephen Clingman, his own research concerned with the postcolonial context of South Africa, suggests Kentridge's use of shadows is an active critique of this prose. Plato's retelling of the allegory reveals an intellectualism that did not necessarily extend to an appreciation of the arts (Clingman, 2022, pp. 28)- in *The Republic*, Plato so surmises with Socrates that the soul is enriched by rationality, exercisable by empirical investigation but not the imitation as which painting is perceived (Plato, 375BC, pp. 338-349). In a playful manner, Kentridge's shadows look to disprove this, and warn, Clingman contends, of the Cave's abuse.

Kentridge was 35 years old when Apartheid ended in 1990. Clingman makes mention of Plato's acknowledged 'dark underside of the Enlightenment', referencing how societies' alleged intellectual elite may justify atrocities in the name of a perceived greater good (Clingman, 2022, pp. 28). Indeed, as the author reminds, colonialism was in one way defended by such groups through arguing the mother country's way of life and peoples were superior to their victims, and so should be enforced (Clingman, 2022, pp.28). So Kentridge would be justified in a suspicion of Plato's appraisal of intellectualism- its legacy one of oppression in his homeland.

My interest in Plato is twofold. For his prescient description of our world of cinema – his description of a world of people bound to reality as mediated through a screen feels very contemporary – but more particularly, in defence of shadows, and what they can teach us about enlightenment.

(Kentridge, No date)

The waters are clouded though by Kentridge's own words. What can shadows teach us about enlightenment? The embodiment of a closed world view and the ignorance of that outside of it. Little more substantial has been said by the artist on what this means. On the one hand, Kentridge is drawn to the allegory's aesthetic qualities, evidently the screen and shadows. A passing audience may understandably question whether theatre's surfacing is superficial.

There are suggestions that Kentridge's use of theatre may more simply stem from its play. There is undoubtedly a playfulness within his process, if not a performative element too- the making of his charcoal animations is ritualistic in repeated drawings then erasures across the same sheets of paper, kept smudges of grey not withholding peeps of previous frames and missteps. The resulting films offer insight into the drawing stages behind each frame. It is the biproduct of the artist's fight with his own ability, the same alluded to in *Self-Portrait as a Coffee Pot*. Indeed, it seems Kentridge relishes creating within a place of uncertainty. It is entirely possible the restlessness of his body of work between various media stems from these indecisions: however, this comes at the risk of discrediting Kentridge.

Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot's discussion led to a brief point on props and their support in organisation of Kentridge's oeuvre. Typewriters and coffee pots. Rego's configurations of dolls may resurface her childhood's play with figures on the floor (Warner, 1994, pp. 7). Kentridge's mundane items allude to childhood too, objects taken from what curator Jane Kinsman suggests is its comforting memories of belonging and security (Kinsman, 2016). Props are more so a plight for understanding from an artist unsure of his place, work and the world around him- simple manual objects like these, he iterates, are rather "talismans" to regain the child's "clarity of sensation" (Kentridge, 2001, pp. 70). By this 'clarity' is meant an unfiltered reaction to life's experiences. Once again as with Rego, at least one facet of Kentridge's use of theatre machinery is the reconnection with the child's eye, although rather Kentridge would prefer to learn from it.

Much has been said about those aforementioned smudges found in his animation- imperfections and apparitions that may reflect convenient historical 'amnesia' in South Africa (Christov-Bakargiev, 2009, pp. 118). Despite their beginnings as accidents within his drawing, Kentridge has acknowledged their importance (Kentridge, 2024): they are no longer purely incidental. Thus, it is appropriate to view the wider theatrical approach of this artist with South Africa in mind. In 1976 Kentridge became affiliated with the fledgling Junction Avenue Theatre Company (JATC), an initially all-white group of University of Witwatersrand alumni making morality plays within the context of Apartheid (South African History Online, No date), self-aware of their own privilege, hypocrisy and complicity when only critiquing the legislation, not fighting it (Wendel-Poray, 2016, pp. 157). It was one of several theatre organisations following suit of the seminal Workshop '71, but crucially became the first interracial example (South African History Online, No date). And yet Kentridge resigned for art then left for Paris in 1981 to study acting, only to shortly resign to art once again. What kept him?

In true Kentridge fashion, his motivations behind the continued show of theatre are not black and white. Theatre represented accountability for young people during Apartheid, a means of distancing themselves from the inactivity of protest among older generations. In this sense, one may take these elements of theatre as remnants of activist zeal in the manner he learnt to express it, its democratic position and audience minded nature lending Kentridge's work an everyman, communally accessible quality. An artist who so rejected the abstract for its unreadability (Christov-Bakargiev, 2004) could viably foresee theatre's use this way. Greenberg's writings are flawed in this respect, too: the representational commands popular appeal in a manner of which the abstract often does not.

Shadows, sets and performances occupy Kentridge- there is an absence inherent to each. An implication of the artist is present yet fabricated. That the artist required a stunted dialogue between himself in order to consciously recognise the limits of his own worldview illustrates once more [see Rego] the usefulness of theatre as a confessional device. The barrier between the real and unreal depersonalises history, and allows one to approach it with confidence.

The crux though, is that the artist's note on shadows is more telling than previously supposed. What do shadows tell us about enlightenment? That barrier; the artifice. Kentridge speaks of a desire to regain a childlike reactivity to the world around him, but also with dissatisfaction toward the seriousness of adulthood (Kentridge, 2001, pp. 70). Debord would appreciate this sentiment. Enlightenment can be found looking into the shadows- an awareness of post-industrial social inauthenticity and repetitive occupation. Kentridge may sit oceans apart from any Western centre of the art world, hoping the prisoners will ask to what end those figures move back and forth so insistently.

Encore

Theatre is unique in its ability to publicise cultural undercurrents; its exhibition has been welcomed in establishments of all classes, and its appeal as the father of film has historically held mass appeal. Its heritage lies in a democracy of voices. Theatre needs not be created within the confines of a stage but something so accessible as a living room. Its actors need not be professionals, but anyone, for theatre itself, as Fischer-Lichte affirms, lies in the connection between one and another to create visage anew.

This thesis set out to evaluate the influence of theatre on the visual arts, yet more importantly whether it is broadly pastiche or holds genuine constructive weight to an image-maker's practice. This thesis concludes it is not only constructive but vital. If there is truth in Greenberg's writing it is perhaps in its corroboration with Dexter's referred death of painting and narrative. The artist lives in a disorganised world, entrenched into a system that promotes impersonality. The artist's work is often solitary, but theatre is intrinsically social. More than this, theatre offers an opportunity to play, returning to a child's perspective and in doing so unburden. It is both a metaphor of and detoxification from a life of masks not so distinct from Venetian carnival- a Debordian landscape of counterfeit humanity.

By adopting theatre within their art, an artist may access an approachable form of narrative that is recognisable and familiar to their audience. It is in this place of comfort that we are most amenable to challenge. So when this thesis contends theatre is vital as a tool for the image-maker, it is in advocacy for openness. Openness in self-expression and in reflection of the diorama we inhabit, as well as openness to all audiences. As Kentridge relates, in Plato's shadows we may learn of enlightenment after all.

The curtains close.

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