# The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

Technologies, ontologies and agents

Edited by Chris Wingfield, John Giblin & Rachel King

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with contributions from
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Acknowledgements

Chapter 14

Considering the consequences of light and shadow in some nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century South African images

Nessa Leibhammer

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies (Picasso, quoted in Barr 1946, 270–1).

There is no knowledge, political or otherwise, outside of representation (Bhabha 2004, 23).

Introduction

This chapter explores how artists have harnessed light and shadow in images in order to shape meaning. Positioning the discussion in relation to work done within Western canons, I draw on the nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century visual lexion of South Africa. I will look, in particular, at how light and shadow convey subliminal messages about subject peoples in eighteenth and nineteenth century South Africa and how, more recently, they are used as a 'decolonizing impulse' in contemporary art from the region.

Images offer explanations about the world, ordering information as well as presenting what is imperceptible to human vision (such as sound waves, the Higgs boson particle or unicorns). Brought together in an infinite range of combinations, pictorial renderings present possibilities of the 'knowable'. They encompass observed reality articulated in faithful mimesis to scenarios that seek to simulate inner states of consciousness or capture abstract conceptual imaginings that bear no resemblance to observed reality. Images rendered as if to faithfully capture observed phenomena might well present a scene that is entirely fictional. The power of the image lies in its ability to persuade.

In place of the graphic morphemes of the written alphabet, pictorial representation uses line, colour, tone, form, light, shadow, perspective and other elements to convey information (Leibhammer 2001). Like language, this lexicon must be mutually intelligible to both artist and viewer. Humans do not automatically comprehend pictorial conventions but learn to interpret them. Once learnt the viewer enters into a state of optical complicity (Desiderio nd., 1) with the image, participating in its decoding and transfer of information. Viewers bypass subliminally present aspects such as the phenomenological weight of light (or its absence) as they surrender to pictorial illusionism. In order to raise awareness of how images create 'truths', it is necessary to understand how pictorial narrativity is achieved. This involves accepting that images are not value-free windows through which 'realities' are presented. They are subject to the intention, purpose and intended meaning of the artist.

Light, and its corollary, shadow, plays an important but little recognized metaphoric role in the range of Western imaging and imagining.[1] In the production of the comprehensible, the articulation of light does not merely illuminate a scene but serves as a 'root metaphor' (Edgeworth 2003, 13) shaping understandings of the spiritual and secular world. As an augur of the immaterial it is frequently used to register the presence of the supernatural. Importantly, in classical Western canons of depiction it is inextricably wedded to Christian ideology. However, artists may use light and shadow in subversive ways. It can be manipulated to suggest the demonic and, used transgressively, fulfil an iconoclastic role.

Artists and illustrators most commonly feature multiple rather than single light sources in an image. There are also very different types and qualities of light such as electric light, diffused light, light from a hearth, sunlight, moonlight and starlight. This complex scenario must be the subject for another discussion. For the sake of brevity my focus will be on the main

Figure 14.1. *Map showing the sites mentioned in this chapter.*

source and quality of light, which determines how an image is read and received.

Scope and aim

I begin with a study of works by the nineteenth-century artist-travellers, Charles Bell (1813–1882)[2] and Thomas Baines (1820–1875),[3] both renowned for documenting scenes 'from life'. Their images were used to illustrate travel narratives read both locally and abroad. The accepted authenticity of their works, of showing how it 'really was', is linked to their naturalistic style as well as their having purportedly witnessed the scenes they portrayed. Baines, however, is known to have painted scenes he did not observe (Kennedy 1961, xviii). He also made preparatory sketches with annotations that he worked up much later into final oil paintings.

This is followed by a discussion of two different copies of the same rock art image. Joseph Millerd Orphen, a late nineteenth-century colonial administrator was the creator of the first, and South African archaeologist Patricia Vinnicombe the second. One hundred years separates the two copies and they show a vast difference in their understanding of the content and intention of the original image. This can be read from the pictorial languages used in the two copies.

As with these copies of the rock art image from Melikane, striking differences in appearance are evident when comparing a late nineteenth-century photograph of *induna* and headman Umdamane taken by the Trappist Mission in Natal and an engraved portrait copied from the same image. The divergence between the two renderings is intensified when the engraving is read as an illustration embedded in a missionary text – the purpose for which it was created.

The Modernist era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought with it a shift in the cultural order and visual languages of the West. A loss of conviction in the superiority of Europe and the 'manifest bankruptcy of the ideology of progress' (Clifford 1988, 119 & 121) followed its descent into the barbarity of the First World War. Early twentieth-century artists looked for alternative ways to imagine and articulate, and the cultural theorist James Clifford has suggested that Surrealism, as an art movement, deliberately flouted classical and traditional laws of representation, undermining inherited Western wisdoms. Fracturing the idea of a unifying metanarrative it valued fragments, unexpected juxtapositions and extraordinary realities drawn from the erotic, the exotic and the unconscious. Clifford (1988, 118) links these to the defamiliarized encounters of early ethnographers and writers with African and

other non-Western cultures. European artists such as Giorgio De Chirico and Max Ernst in particular used the genre to explore notions of the uncanny and the irrational. Surrealism provided an aesthetic language in which the non-logical and non-Christian could be legitimately realized. Using this opportunity of transcendent inclusivity, twentieth-century South African artist Simon Lekgetho celebrates African spirituality in his still-life paintings.[4]

Following the iconoclasm of Surrealism, the disrupted fields of authority in the work of contemporary South African artist Kemang Wa Lehulere are read to reveal a de-colonizing impetus, a strategy evident in the work of many contemporary South African artists.

Seeing the light

Our most familiar Western conceptions of light are associated with Judeo-Christian beliefs, though further research may trace its origins back to the Zoroastrian stories of creation, where the deity of wisdom existed in light above the chaotic, destructive principle that prevailed in darkness and ignorance below. The biblical narrative of creation tells of how:

> *In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth,*
> *And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep…*
> *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.*
> *And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.*
> (Genesis 1[1-4], King James Version).

Thus, not only does light allow us to see – it carries powerful emotive and metaphysical information (mental, textual and visual), so much so that in Enlightenment thinking light became a proxy for God, divine wisdom, saintliness and salvation – its denial or disruption evoking conceptual opposites. In fact, the Enlightenment is another key metaphor for light-based progressive thinking in the Western world (Leibhammer 2001).

In October 1834 Charles Davidson Bell (1813–1882) sketched a scene titled *Evening Prayers at Moriah*, also known as Morija in present day Lesotho (Fig. 14.2). At the time he was the expedition artist travelling with Andrew Smith on a two-year journey into the interior of Southern Africa (Lye 1975). Smith describes the occasion at Morija as a fine night with a bright moon in an unclouded sky. Some hundred individuals seated on the ground around them were enveloped in their skin cloaks so that it was 'difficult to discover anything in the dark circle anything like a human form amongst

them' (Lye 1975, 61). However, once the first words of the preacher, the French Protestant missionary, Jean-Eugène Casalis were uttered, the crowd elevated their heads and listened steadfastly to what was said.

Bell's sketch of this scene shows the preacher to the left, his face well lit by the moon behind. The gathered crowd are seated, many with their backs to us, their faces invisible. A clouded heaven (in contrast to Smith's 'unclouded' sky) brackets the orb of the moon – conjuring what could be read as the eye of God above. Viewed from the back with the moon directly ahead, the silhouette of each seated figure is fringed with light. Although we cannot see them, we know the listeners' faces are fully illuminated. The moon appears to be in league with the preacher bestowing spiritual radiance on the crowd who now glow in the light of Christian faith… no longer inhuman!

There are many paradigms for the depiction of numinous light in Christian religious images. Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn's (1634) etching *Annunciation to the Shepherds* shows the heavens opening with divine light emanating from the left, thwarting the darkness of night.[5] A radiant white angel brings the message of the birth of Christ to a group of shepherds and their flocks. The illumination used by Rembrandt is similar, albeit more dramatic, to the one used by Bell. However, both are the light of evangelical revelation.

Some 14 years after Bell's rendering of *Evening Prayers at Moriah*, Thomas Baines, also on an expedition into the interior sketched a 'Fingo Village' at Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape (Baines 1964, 39), completing the oil painting of the scene some 7 months later (Fig. 14.3). The year 1848 fell between the 7th Frontier War of 1846–7 and the 8th Frontier War of 1850–3. Raging for a hundred years, these wars saw violent conflicts between British forces and Xhosa-speaking people over ownership of land in what is now the Eastern Cape region. Baines' sentiment is well known to have been with the colonial enterprise (Kennedy, in Baines 1964, xvii).

In his notebook Baines describes how he 'sallied forth' at dawn on the morning of 20 March and 'sat down before a collection of beehive habitations' (Baines 1964, 39), making a derogatory aside on the industriousness of bees and the opposite quality of the human inhabitants. He describes how in the scene unfolding before him the 'inmates, warmed by the beams of the rising sun' … crept out from their dwellings 'into the light of day'. He observes that these people had made no further advance in civilization besides changing their skin *karosses* for blankets (Baines 1964, 39).

The morning sunlight is cast from the right falling between the dwellings. While western trained artists do not universally apply the convention of light radiating

Figure 14.2. Evening Prayers at Moria *by Charles Davidson Bell, 1834. This image appears on p. 61 of* Andrew Smith's Journal of his expedition into the interior of South Africa 1834–1836. *Image courtesy and copyright Museum Africa (MA2432).*

from the top left-hand position, it is generally favoured (Stoichita 1997, 143).[6] A light source emanating from the right-hand side of the image is often associated with scenes of angst, uncertainty and melancholy, as in early Renaissance artist Masaccio's (born Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone) *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, a fresco in the Cappella Brancacci, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy, painted between 1426 and 1428.[7] Similarly, in the painting *Charon Ferrying the Shades* by Pierre Subleyras (*c.* 1735 to 1740), now in the Musêe du Louvre, Paris, France, the mythical figure of Charon, the ferryman of Hades, rows two souls of the dead across the Rivers Styx and Acheron to the underworld.[8] A dramatic light enters from the right hand side while an ominous hazy black and reddish destination looms ahead – a portent of the hell fires to come. Those of us educated in a Western tradition are comfortable moving our eyes from left to right

across a page. Having to cast our eyes from right to left – against the grain of reading – subliminally alters our relationship with the image, to one of unease.[9]

If we were to imagine that north was above us, then the easterly direction from which the morning light is shining would be correct. However, this does not lessen the pall of lassitude cast by this image. The field of light takes centre stage and its power, rather than a positive force, seems to enervate the villagers, rendering them torpid in its rays. Pressed up against the sides of the woven dwellings, many seem pinioned by the light and warmth. A seated figure in the right foreground leans, head in hand, as if in despondency while a male figure on the left is tightly wrapped in his *kaross* smoking a pipe.

Baines describes the central female figure delivering, with 'impassioned' and 'eloquent' gestures, a 'harangue' (Baines 1964, 39). She is a target of his ridicule

by his insinuation that she considers her 'oratory' on menial tasks as deeply important. The men, those that did not attend their cattle, are described in an equally unfavourable light. According to Baines they dispose 'their limbs so as to enjoy with the least possible inconvenience to themselves the luxury of the warm sun and their tobacco pipes' (Baines 1964, 39). The tone of Baines' textual description is sarcastic and deprecating and his negative sentiments are evident in his rendering.

While the oil, painted towards the end of 1848, could be taken as a reliable rendering of the scene, a comparison with the original and earlier sketch done *in situ* on 20 March shows a strikingly different scenario (Fig. 14.4). In the sketch, light floods the whole scene rather than channels selectively into the space between the dwellings, and the mood captured is one of activity and purpose. The person to the right foreground sits up attentively, rather than slumping with head in hand. A walking figure, left out of the final painting, is raked by light and is moving purposefully with their cloak billowing to the left. The seated male figure is dressed

in what are clearly Western work clothes (straps crossed over the back supporting what are trousers or overalls). He sits upright and is not smoking. A man can be seen wearing a wide-brimmed western-style hat. These are indicators that defy Baines' claim that the villagers have made no advance into civilization beyond some swapping of their *karosses* for blankets.

In 1848 Fort Beaufort lay within the colonial frontier and the settlement housed a number of people referred to as 'Fingo' or 'Mfengu'. Consigned to the region to act as a buffer between the British and the Xhosa they are usually, and mistakenly, thought of as refugees from Shaka's wars of expansion (Webster 1995, 241–76).[10] In contrast to Baines' portrayal of the Mfengu, historian Paul Maylam writes that in the '1840s and 1850s it was the Mfengu who were be the most vigorous and enterprising peasant farmers. They sold tobacco, firewood, cattle and milk as well as surplus grain' (Maylam 1986, 105). In the later nineteenth century many Mfengu, such as John Tengo Jabavu (Oakes 1988, 283) and the Mbeki family (Gevisser 2009,

Figure 14.3. Fingo village Fort Beaufort 1848 *by Thomas Baines (45 × 65 cm). Oil painting completed 7 months after the sketch illustrated in Figure 14.4 on which the painting is based. Image courtesy and copyright Museum Africa (MA 6322).*

Figure 14.4. Fingo village Fort Beaufort 1848 *by Thomas Baines (14 × 23 cm). Wash and ink sketch made on 20 March 1848. Image courtesy and copyright Museum Africa (MA1955_937).*

14–17), became leaders of the black intellectual elite (Maylam 1986, 109).

The initial sketch by Baines fits better with reports of the industriousness of the Mfengu, both by contemporary and later writers. Unfortunately, these two images are seldom seen together, and the sketch would not have been circulated widely. Rather than show the view he witnessed by 'being there', Baines' has changed his original graphic response to cast the Mfengu in an unfavourable light. The *in situ* sketch, one of activity and energy has, in the oil painting, become a scene of stupor, apathy and romanticized hopelessness. Why he may have done this is a matter for speculation. Nevertheless, his pro-settler sentiments are well known.

Away from deterministic frameworks

By the twentieth century ties to linear logic and perspectival laws had been loosened. Mitchell (1986, 8) explains how language and imagery were no longer what they promised to be for critics and philosophers of the Enlightenment – 'perfect, transparent media through which reality may be represented to the understanding'. Ultimately, the scepticism of Postmodernism

followed. Moral relativity in the studies of non-Western societies brought an increased appreciation that Western ways of thinking were not necessarily normative or universal. An expanded potential for evocation in the depictions of light accompanied these ontological changes. To demonstrate this, I compare two separate copies of the same rock art image – one completed in 1874 and the other in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1874, colonial administrator for the British Empire in southern Africa, and self-taught anthropologist, Joseph Millerd Orpen transcribed onto paper three figures painted on the rock face of the Melikane Shelter, Lesotho (Fig. 14.5). The visual language of his depiction suggests that the rendering was informed by pervading ideological norms of the time. Rock art images were thought to be depictions of customs and daily life, or of people wearing masks, costumes or hunting disguises (Lewis-Williams 1990, 50).

This is reflected in the way the copy has been rendered – smooth, evenly applied solid planes of colour block in the bodies within well-defined edges. The figures are corporeal and tangible with layers of opaque paint lending a sense of physical weight. This is partly the result of the solid colour, but also a consequence of the way the figures have been positioned

within the format of the paper. Two have their legs perpendicular to the bottom edge and their backs parallel to it, a position that stabilizes the forms within the horizontal and vertical structure of the rectangular frame. Although no background detail is visible, the sticks held by the two left hand figures have their lower ends lined up with an imagined ground plane. A sense of balance in a determinate realm with gravitational forces, as per Newtonian law, is implied. The illusion is that of solid, static bodies occupying space in the physical world.

There is neither natural nor supernatural light implied nor any shadow visible. This non-light associated with the timeless 'Primitive' (Leibhammer 2001,

77) is reminiscent of Henri Matisse's *La Danse* (1909).[11] Perhaps Orpen was implying that for hunter-gatherer societies, such as those depicted in the image, time does not change – imagining that they existed in an anachronistic state repeating the same rituals since time immemorial.

When comparing Orpen's copy of the three figures at Melikane, made in the late 1800s, to Patricia Vinnicombe's from the mid twentieth-century (Fig. 14.6), significant differences are evident. Firstly, Vinnicombe has given the image a sense of being out of balance, one that counters the rectangular register of the sheet of paper. The top figure leans forward precariously. Behind are the hindquarters of an eland that
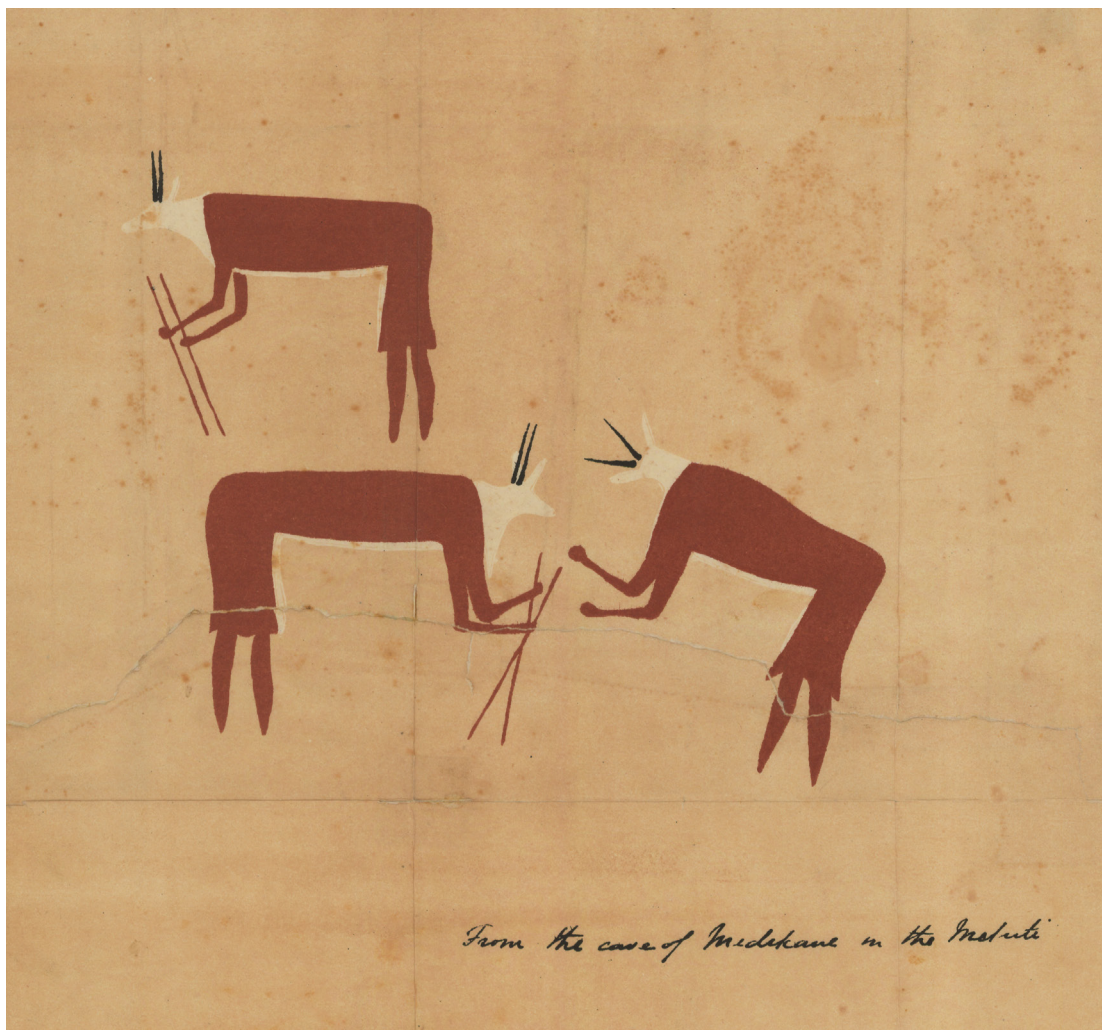
Figure 14.5. *Three trancing shamans by Joseph Millerd Orpen. Detail from Orpen's 1874 painted copy of the rock art panel 'therianthropes, sticks, karosses, buchu (aromatic herbs), rain animals, spears, dogs and head-dresses…' at Melikane, Qacha's Neck, Lesotho. Image courtesy and copyright Iziko Museums of Cape Town Social History Collections Department, South Africa. www.sarada.co.za. University of Witwatersrand. South African Rock Art Digital Archive Ref No. IZI-02-281HC.*

Figure 14.6. *Copy of section of rock art panel by Patricia Vinnicombe. Poster paints on acid-free watercolour paper. Mid-to late twentieth century. This is a section from the panel 'therianthropes, sticks, karosses, buchu (aromatic herbs), rain animals, spears, dogs and head-dresses…' at Melikane, Qacha's Neck, Lesotho, the same rock art panel that was copied by Orpen illustrated in Figure 14.5. Image courtesy and copyright Natal Museum, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. www.sarada.co.za. University of Witwatersrand. South African Rock Art Digital Archive Ref No.NMSA-PJV-166HC.*

slant forward and loom large in the background. Onto this, the three 'shaman' figures have been imposed – a detail totally absent in Orpen's copy. The vast shift in scale between the hindquarters and the three figures accentuates the unreal nature of space in the Vinnicombe copy. But, of most interest to us is that, in the Vinnicombe copy, luminosity radiates from within and behind – a glowing light in which these figures float. A sense of the supernatural is evident in the figures and the implied radiance of the picture plane. Even the original, painted onto the solid, opaque rock face of a cave would not have possessed this quality of light.

Vinnicombe's pioneering research work in the 1970s suggested that a sacred dimension existed in southern African rock art, with recurring motifs of spirit-travel and trancing shamans shape-shifting into animals, birds and elongated figures. Clearly Vinnicombe has imbued her rendering of the image with her understanding of the scene. The two copies, in their different articulations, particularly that of light, reveal a striking divergence in the meaning communicated by the image.

Invocations of immanence

The eclectic South African artist Simon Lekgetho (1929 – 1985) painted a varied range of subject matter including wildlife scenes, portraits, landscapes and still lives, each treated in stylistically different manners. However, the works for which he is best known are his renderings of divination objects in contexts saturated with immanence – light and its absence, darkness and shadow, playing a large part in the ambient invocation of the scenes.

In *Still-life with Sangoma's bones and other objects* (1964; Fig. 14.7) a tenebrous background fills the upper

two-thirds of the picture plane.[12] There is no horizon line to ground the viewer in known space and darkness curves slowly forward from above and behind, merging into a brightly lit foreground plane on which objects rest. Low light from the right falling on the cowrie shell, bones, divination dice and other paraphernalia casts long shadows. Suspended from unfathomable points above the picture plane, an animal hide and a string of beads with draped herbs float. A moth punctuates the dark surface with its pale presence. Smoke rises from the interior of a small hollow object – most likely the fragrant herb *mphephu* (helichrysum) burning to attract the ancestors with its scent.

While the direction of light in Lekgetho's painting recalls that of the surrealist work *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) by metaphysical artist De Chirico,[13] it lacks a sense of alienation and anxiety.[14]

While the register in Lekgetho's work is the paranormal, the light that bathes the objects is warm and glowing. Colour tones conjure the earthy domain of the all important ancestral 'shades' who dwell below ground. It is to these spiritual shades that respect must be shown, and small offerings of beer and tobacco made by their living relatives. If the ancestors are pleased by the respectful behaviour and the offerings of their descendants they will assist their family members. If not, misfortune will fall upon them.

Diviners are there to assist in interpreting messages from the ancestral spirits. The voluminously-lit spherical vessel in the painting most likely holds an offering of beer, while the hanging herbs are possibly tobacco. Together with the box of matches, the beer and snuff are a promise of pleasurable smoking and social drinking for the ancestors. In this way the

Figure 14.7. Still life with Sangoma's bones and other objects. *Oil painting by Simon Moroke Lekgetho, 1964. Image courtesy and copyright the Homestead Collection.*

inflection of meaning in the light and shadow of the painting that could be read as ominous take on a reassuring tenor.

Symbolic meaning aligned with psychological and metaphysical models hold clues to this alternative understanding of the portent of shadow. Art historian Victor Stoichita (1997, 133) discusses the demonization and investment of negativity in the cast shadow in Western painting. Following the tenets of Sigmund Freud, it is the double that replicates the self, becoming the uncanny 'other' and 'a thing of terror'. It is also perceived as a place in the soul where 'inner negativity, suspicions and doubts are born' (Stoichita 1997, 133).

Different to the inflection of Western understandings, the translation of 'shadow' in isiZulu is *'(i) isi-thunzi'* which not only describes 'the absence of light' but also refers to the 'idlozi' or ancestral shades. 'Thunzi' has a further translation that includes that of 'Moral weight, influence, prestige, soul, personality' (Doke and Vilikazi 2005, 433 & 809). This alternative spectrum of meaning intensifies the positive inflections that can be sensed from Lekgetho's painting.

Line and light: mission images

Most nineteenth-century missionaries in South Africa considered belief in the ancestors to be heathen superstition. They made it their calling to persuade 'non-believers' to reject the old ways of understanding and accept a Christian way of life. Those who had not accepted conversion were often referred to by the opprobrious term 'kafir'. Anthropologist Christoph Rippe (2016, 384–9), whose work looks closely at missionary photography in South Africa, has written extensively on the image of a man by the name of Umdamane, one such 'non-believer'. His photograph was taken some time around 1891 by one of the brothers from the Mariannhill Mission Station in Pinetown, Natal and it exists in the Mariannhill archive as a glass plate negative that, at some stage, was printed up into a photographic positive (Fig. 14.8).

A second image of the same man – a mirror-inverted engraving, 'Ein Kaffrischer Häuptling' (headman or chief) copied from the photographic image – was first published in the *Mariannhiller Kalender* in 1893 (Fig. 14.9). This publication (Anonymous 1893) was aimed at the support communities of the mission, both locally and abroad in Europe, and the image accompanies an article titled 'Physical and Mental Features of our Kafir Environment.' This discusses the differences between Christian and non-Christian Africans (Rippe 2016, 384–9). Here, unlike on the glass plate negative, the sitter has not been named and so loses his personal identity.[15]
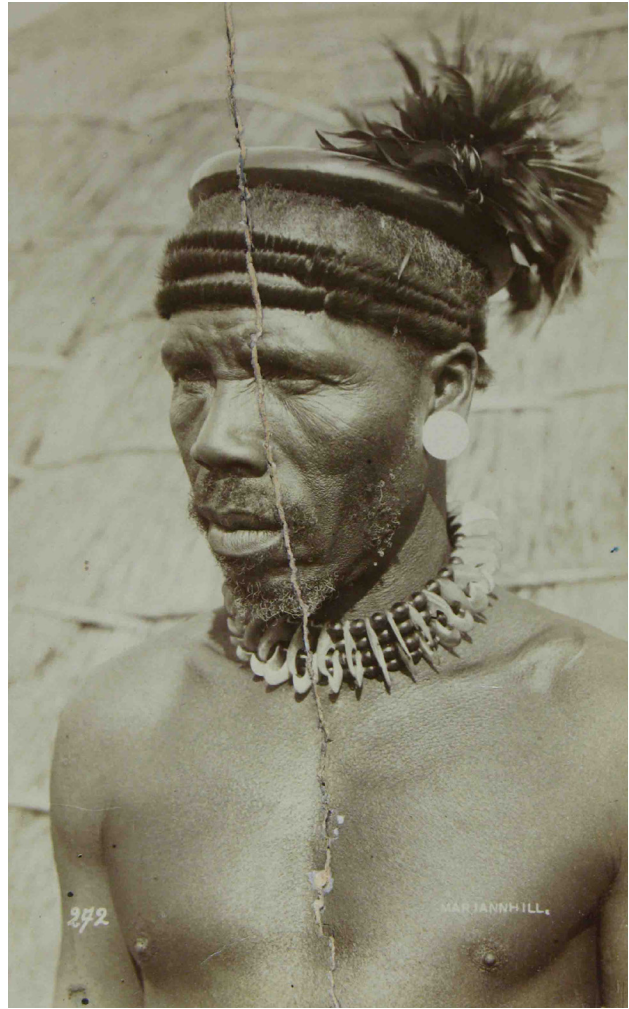
Figure 14.8. *Portrait of* induna/*headman* Umdamane *by unknown photographer. Digital inversion of the original glass plate negative produced by the photographic studio at Mariannhill Mission, Pinetown, in 1891 in what was then the Colony of Natal. Photograph courtesy and copyright the Congregation of Mariannhill Missionaries Archives.*

If analysed in terms of the graphic language of light and line, the two images – photograph and engraving – communicate tellingly different information. The photograph has been taken in natural light, out of doors. It is most likely around midday given the position of the light from the sun high in the sky. The sitter's head is turned towards his right and he stares into the distance. There is no focus as the eye details are not clearly visible, being shaded over by the brows and perhaps slightly closed against the light. It is a portrait of an individual with a strong face and inner composure. His features, the details of the

feather decoration in his hair and the articulation of the necklace he is wearing are soft, and the edges not crisply defined (possibly a result of the glass–plate photographic process). A large portion of his chest, including nipples, is visible – its smooth muscularity aesthetically pleasing, the illuminating light giving the portrait a sensual quality.

This softly molding light is entirely absent in the printed engraving. Here the image has acquired a hardened graphic quality. The engraver has gone to much trouble to articulate the three-dimensional form of the head, defining detail with the edges of things emphasized through definitive outline. The highlights and dark areas of the face are starkly contrasted, lending harshness to the portrait that is not

Figure 14.9. *Mirror-inverted engraving, 'Ein Kaffrischer Häuptling', from 'Leibliches und Geistiges über unsre Kaffernumgebung' that appeared in the Mariannhiller Kalender V, 1893, p.96. The image is a copy of the photographic portrait of* Umdamane *illustrated in Figure 14.8. Image courtesy and copyright the Congregation of Mariannhill Missionaries Archives.*

present in the photograph. The slightly wrinkled brow in the photograph has become heavily creased and the pupils of the eyes emphasized with pale corneas. The face now has an expression that could be read as troubled, brooding, and perhaps even menacing.

While the necklace he is wearing emphasizes the curvature of his neck, in the engraving Umdamane's naked torso becomes flattened as the eye travels down. The image has been cropped horizontally to just below the shoulders so that there is no longer a smoothly modulated chest and breast. What is left of this section is now as flat as the text into which it has been inserted. Facilitating this 'fit,' the vertical outer edges of the cropped shoulders are now the same width as the text on the page. The engraver has further flattened the area above and behind the shoulders with linear scribblings, visually reducing the contrast between the background and Umdamane's chest and shoulders.

All these pictorial devices have the effect of sinking his body back into the page while projecting the head out of the picture plane, offering it, and its headgear, up for close inspection – the head being of particular interest to those now discredited eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century 'sciences' of physiognomy, craniology and phrenology.[16] The lighter background of the page behind pushes Umdamane's darker head forwards, while his torso sinks into the shadow of the crisscrossed lines behind.

The light catches the high points of his face, throwing the crevassed folds and wrinkles into shadow, so that it appears aged. This strong contrast effect of black line against a white background is the authoritative language used in engineers' technical drawings, or specimens in biology textbooks. Subsumed into the graphic language of the text, Umdamane's corporeal body is effectively reduced, and his individuality denied. The image has been 'disciplined' losing its sensuality and individuality opening it up for scrutiny as a specimen of a heathen.

Kemang Wa Lehulere: disrupted fields of authority

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are marked by iconoclastic, subversive and ironic framing of the visual, with artists taking apart grand narratives and subjecting them to disrupted fields of authority and logic.[17] One contemporary artist working in this mode is South African Kemang Wa Lehulere, who was Deutsche Bank's 2017 'Artist of the Year'.

Lehulere's work often takes the form of installations, combining both two and three-dimensional elements. The two-dimensional drawings, executed in

Figure 14.10. The grave step *by Kemang Wa Lehulere. Section of 2014 chalk and paint on blackboard installation at the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art. Image copyright Kemang Wa Lehulere. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.*

white chalk on black painted surfaces, are a visual recall of the school blackboard. However, here the blackboard is no longer about instruction and construction, but about disruption and destruction – the ephemorality of fact played out in the idea of chalk and its constant erasure. An illusionist surface plane is eschewed – instead writing, cartoon drawings, odd and randomly placed motifs are juxtaposed – multiple elements from which the viewer must attempt to construct narratives.

Visual constructions in the works, including the element of light, make no sense if approached from classic canons of Western depiction. The image cannot be read in a linear fashion, as there is no horizon line or directional light or shadow to guide the eye. Sequential reading is impossible. Time is suggested through series of written numbers, drawn arrows and the appearance of signs that read 'Act 1', 'Act 2', etc., as if the scenes were from a chaotic theatre production.[18] Depicted light is 'illogical' and frequently features Lehurele's recurring motif of blank/dark page with luminosity emanating from behind. Here no light is

reflected off the surface – no words of past wisdoms come 'to light'. In effect his pictorial gestures deny the 'wisdoms' of Western empiricism.

In 'The grave step', a 2014 installation at the 8th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (Fig. 14.10), Lehurule renders a building by simulating the positive/negative reversals of light in a photographic negative. This is juxtaposed with a mountain of pencils drawn in linear graphic fashion as if it were a technical or engineering plan, with the matrix of the black surface visible through the lines of construction. Both graphic convention and scale are out of whack with the huge pencils and the 'photographic' negative in an 'illogical' relationship. A different visual dialogue is set up – one where mass dissolves, emptiness is dense, and solid form empty – a ghostly trace of matter.

One and a half apples float on top of the picture surface resting on what seems to be a crochet doily. Form and shadow both play with, and ignore, classical rules of depiction. Directional light falls on the fruit from the left hand side and shaded edges and dark

elements are defined both by no line and by double lines. Shadow and shape gloop into one, in a vignette of visual absurdity and graphic agility.

The eye and mind move in and out of a plane of coherence and incoherence – playful, cartoon-like, unsentimental, post-Apartheid images – a strategy perhaps to preclude the reconstruction of the unbearable.

Conclusion

Since the fourteenth century visual languages have sustained the metanarratives of the West. Conceived to carry particular phenomenological weight that sustained these narratives artists have, for centuries, played out the drama of light and dark in the service of good and evil, positive and negative. Perhaps the greatest role of light in the Western lexicon of images has been that of Christian spirituality.

The evangelical light in the image *Evening Prayers at Moriah* by Bell speaks of the conviction of early travellers and missionaries, who believed they brought Christian salvation to darkest Africa. Dramatically conceived light of Christian salvation lights up the faces of the gathered crowd. The positive force of Christian light is further dramatized through the dark shadows cast behind the listeners, possibly a pictorial metaphor for putting heathen beliefs behind them.

In contrast, there is no presence of the numinous in the image of the 'Fingo Village' by Baines. Here heat and light radiates from the rising sun. The villagers creep out of their dwellings to be warmed by its rays. Through his pictorial narrative of light, supported by written text, Baines has cast those portrayed in an unsympathetic way. In contrast to his original sketch, which shows an active and industrious group, those in the final painting appear indolent succumbing to the sensual gratification of the sun.

Two instances in this chapter illustrate the infinite degree to which images are open to interpretation. The first is the comparison of the three trancing shamans by Orpen, and the copy from the same original by Vinnicombe. Equally it can be witnessed in the photographic image of Umdamane and the engraving of his likeness used in a missionary text. In both cases the original was the same yet the copies differ significantly from each other. And in each, the choice of portrayed light plays a significant role in creating and registering these differences.

In comparing the image by Orpen to that of Vinnicomb, two very different understandings are evident. Where Orpen portrayed a scene of secular activity, perhaps one he imagined performed unchanged since time immemorial, the fruits of Vinnicombe's later research suggested a metaphysical world of trancing shamans, experiencing out of body travel to other dimensions. The illumination used in each underpins the divergent understandings of the same original.

In the case of Umdamane, the photograph and the engraving appear different because their creators, using different media for replication, intended them for different purposes. Rippe has written extensively on how the mission brothers at Mariannhill created their ethnographic portraits for sale to local and international museums and tourists, in order to generate income for the mission. These needed to have a wide appeal. The engraving, however, was made to illustrate an article on the physical and mental features of the 'mission's "Kafir" environment', which served as mission propaganda. The soft sensual light of the photograph has been replaced by a harshly contrasting black and white image that has the effect of demonizing the subject in the published article.

As relativism permeated Western ontological awareness, opportunities arose where non-Christian and non-empirical phenomenon could be celebrated and portrayed without a negative slant. Lekgetho, using the visual language of Surrealism, a European genre emerging in the early twentieth century, was able to celebrate his African spirituality. In this instance and in other similar works Lekgetho has colonized a Western art style to acclaim his own spiritual reality. This was perhaps only possible once a scepticism towards Western certainties had begun to take hold.

Increasingly, contemporary artists have taken Classical, Romantic and other canons of Western representation and undermined them to generate iconoclastic images. Driven by the urge to do things differently, late twentieth and early twenty-first-century artists have unpacked the 'taken for granted' framings of colonial knowledge. One such artist is Kemang wa Lehurele who continues to unseat the grand narratives of the West in transgressive visual critiques.

Neither 'objective' nor 'subjective' modes can make claims to possess 'absolute knowledge' or to 'capture truth'. This reinforces my contention that all images must be approached in a reflexive manner, in relation to the conventions through which they are rendered, to the contexts in which they are created and illustrated, and to any new contexts. The conventions of representation carry knowledge in and of themselves, not least the depictions of light and shadow or their absences. In observing diverse uses of light and shadow in pictographic images, I would argue that such images raise thought-provoking questions regarding the choices of conventions and their implications for the representation and assertion of knowledge.

Notes

1. While other visual phenomena are equally bound up in the making of meaning many have received substantial scholarly attention. See, for example: Edgerton 2009, Damish 1995, White 1953, Kubovy 1986, Panofsky 1939, Van Straten 1994, Kern 2003, Ackerman 1991, Harris 2005 & Gage 1995.
2. Bell was a Scottish civil servant who became the surveyor general of the Cape Colony in 1848.
3. A self-taught English artist and explorer of British colonial southern Africa and Australia.
4. Lekgeto was born in 1929 at Schoemansville near the Hartebeespoort Dam.
5. Image available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Print,_Annunciation_to_the_Shepherds,_1634_(CH_18383897).jpg (Accessed 6 April 2018)
6. The direction of the light also facilitates the reading of the image – from left to right – following the direction someone reading according to Western conventions would move their eyes. As such the image embeds comfortably in the textual matrix of page and book.
7. Image available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Masaccio,_The_Expulsion.jpg (Accessed 5 April 2019)
8. Image available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pierre_Subleyras_-_Charon_Ferrying_the_Shades_-_WGA21957.jpg (Accessed 5 April 2019)
9. A study of cultures that read from right to left or from top to bottom is still to be made, but it is interesting to note that many Chinese, Japanese and Korean images present us with a nearly shadowless world, with details of form delineated by line.
10. As slavery was illegal at the time, Webster traces a cover-up by the colonial government of the true origin of the Mfengu. He argues that the Mfengu were a heterogeneous conglomeration of people including Rharhabe and Gcaleka, many captured by the British to serve as a labour force for farmers in the region Webster 241–76. He explains further how the 'Fingo' could be separated into 3 types – 'labourer, collaborator (peasant farmer) and groups trained by the British as military corps' – with most groups containing all three. In 1835 the group at Fort Beaufort were largely transitional – some waiting for land to be allocated to them, some to be sent to farms to work as labourers. However, after only one year, they had already produced enough corn to be selling their surplus (ibid p. 271).
11. Image available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dance_(Matisse)#/media/File:La_danse_(I)_by_Matisse.jpg (Accessed 5 April 2019)
12. In the Bruce Campbell Smith collection: http://www.revisions.co.za/
13. Image available at: https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-de-chirico/mystery-and-melancholy-of-a-street-1914 (Accessed 5 April 2019)
14. See the description of the De Chirico painting by Arnheim quoted in Stoichita 1997, 147.
15. While the glass plate negative has the sitter name 'Umdamane' written on it, the subsequent photographic reproductions and the engraving do not.
16. An eighteenth-century champion of physiognomy claimed that 'it is not … the human face that is the reflection of the soul, but the shadow on his face' (Lavater, quoted in Stoichita 1991, 157).
17. See the works of Nandipha Mntambo, Zamaxolo Dunywa, Tracy Rose, Athi Patra-Ruga, Dineo Sheshee Bopape and Mohau Modisakeng.
18. I would like to thank J. Maingard for this idea. My appreciation also to all the participants of the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative workshop held on 27 March 2018 who read and offered comments on this Chapter.

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The pasts and presence of art in South Africa

In 2015, #RhodesMustFall generated the largest student protests in South Africa since the end of apartheid, subsequently inspiring protests and acts of decolonial iconoclasm across the globe. The performances that emerged in, through and around #RhodesMustFall make it clear how analytically fruitful Alfred Gell's notion that art is 'a system of social action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' can be, even when attempting to account for South Africa's very recent history.

What light can this approach shed on the region's far longer history of artistic practices? Can we use any resulting insights to explore art's role in the very long history of human life in the land now called South Africa? Can we find a common way of talking about 'art' that makes sense across South Africa's long span of human history, whether considering engraved ochre, painted rock shelters or contemporary performance art?

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference with the same title, arranged to mark the opening of the British Museum's major temporary exhibition *South Africa: the art of a nation* in October 2016. The volume represents an important step in developing a framework for engaging with South Africa's artistic traditions that begins to transcend nineteenth-century frameworks associated with colonial power.

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