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Authorship and *auteurism* in *Another Country*[1]

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In 1873 Benjamin Disraeli could bemoan, "[a]n author who speaks about his own books is almost as bad as a mother who talks about her own children." Today, however, authorship is a consumable that demands endless promoting in order to be profitable. The ironic predicament of the author within contemporary (technocratic) culture is his frequent invisibility. *Another Country* is an apposite vehicle for raising the quandary of contemporary authorship since it is first, a music video and thus a promotional tool itself and second, an authorial collaboration between musical artists Mango Groove and "fine artist" William Kentridge. **Key words:** William Kentridge, *Another country* (music video), Mango Groove.

Although authorship is a timeless debate it is becoming progressively more important as technology plays an increasing role in the arts. Whereas Roland Barthes (1979: 142) announced the "death of the author", I affirm that the author lives. Perhaps veiled by the mediation of technology, or robbed of his autonomous genius? But still alive and active, particularly in the context of technologically driven art.

Through photography and film the image has migrated from the élite world of the masterpiece in its exclusive milieu to the public domain of mass distribution and social networking. In the words of Okwui Enwezor (1997: 69): "There is very little doubt that photography and film, once vociferously evicted from the thick walls of the museum, are today objects of 'fine art' envy; not least because of the pluralisation of visual culture, but also because of their ability to enact aspects of speculation and simultaneity."

Music video simply embodies the extension of this into the television industry and by implication represents the symbiosis between video art and new trends in music. Hence, music video itself disputes the distinction between television and video art or film, which had already grown up by analogy with the avant-garde/kitsch, fine art/graphics and literature/pulp polarities. As a vivid example of the marriage

between commerce, technology and art, music video is, in other words, a consonant vehicle for examining authorship.

Evidently, postmodernist forms, like those established in music video, necessitate a postmodernist reading. According to Peter Wollen (1986: 169), "The polarized distinction between avant-garde and kitsch, high and low art [and] the cluster of aesthetic concepts around the idea of artistic originality – are all useless for any serious engagement with a hybrid and technologically sophisticated form such as music video." Of course I agree with Wollen that the old cultural apparatus has tended, in practice, to be outdated, but I do not agree that the concepts related to traditional discourse (such as "authorship") "are all useless" (Wollen, 1986: 169). The intertextuality, pastiche, traces and layering of special effects that embody current music video all hint at the "death of the author", but it is exactly in this commercial contradiction that the need for an author is established (not least because of the financial remuneration that is due to the author). The question of authorship or possession for example, is one that cannot and must not be expelled from the discourse surrounding a market-driven commodity such as music video, albeit a part of the postmodern arena. I propose to cross-examine the pre-existing ordinance of ownership that governs music video.[2]

Another Country (1994) was written and performed by Mango Groove as a hopeful yet reserved anthem for the "new" South Africa that arose out of the ashes of Apartheid. Perhaps more significant is the fact that the music video that accompanies the song was directed and "illustrated" by William Kentridge, the South African artist, whose video art has evoked interest around the world. The music video is a kind of animated charcoal illustration in the style of his acclaimed short films. The film is predominantly black and white with rare bursts of red and blue, typical of his art. Claire Johnston is inserted into the animated film and is, thus, surrounded by Kentridge's drawing.

Due to the equal acclaim (both politically and artistically) of Mango Groove and Kentridge the question of ownership or authorship becomes a more complex one. The nature of the work (as music video) dictated that the media only credited Mango Groove as the authors, meaning that only their name appears at the beginning of the video. It is possible, however, that William Kentridge is the more rightful author/owner of *Another Country*.

One might turn to the 1950s *auteur* film theory for a formula of authorship. The *auteur* theorists were primarily concerned with the aesthetic style of a director as the seat of his signature. Thus, a kind of

Morellian tracing of the "signature" or "mark" of the artist is seen to hint at their authorship.[3] According to this *auteurist* logic, the more blatant the "mark", the more justified the right to *auteurship*.[4] Although not quite the literary text of Milton or Shelley, song lyrics are perhaps the poetry of postmodernism. This is then where the relationship between text and image becomes so relevant. The lyrics and poetry of the song are the signature of Mango Groove. The related images and animated illustrations of the video are Kentridge's.

In defining music video, many initially relied on the term "illustration", which is so rooted in the authorship debate. De Beer (1993: 216) claims that a music video is an "interpretation of a song". Hence, the music video would function as an illustration of a song, or, it could even be said as an illustration of the lyrics. Obviously this definition ignores the "artists" involved in making the music video, but it also lowers the function of the music video to that of an accessory for the music.

At least since the time of Plato the homily of the visual arts has been rooted in the tension between the "real and its copy" (Camille, 1996: 31). This duality has shaped the ensuing debates that question whether music video is an imitation of, or a conquest of the real. A simulacrum threatens the very substance of representation itself, because it overthrows the treasured dichotomy of "model and copy, original and reproduction, image and likeness" (Camille, 1996: 31). So too, the music video is denigrated to a negation, caught up somewhere between the subject and its image, the image and its shadow, even though "the representation of a representation is no longer inherently subversive as in modernism" (Goodwin, 1987: 37). The trend currently is for music video to be less tied to the lyrics, and therefore to be less "illustrative". What makes *Another Country* interesting, is the semblance of illustration it pursues (both in the lyrical narration and the animation technique employed by Kentridge). The complex associations of language creation (sophistry) and image creation (mimesis) in platonic philosophy (Camille, 1996: 32) extends beyond the matter under discussion here, but it is crucial to comprehend the role of language as an integral part of the music video "text". By passing through written communication, music video, in the words of Barthes (1967: 20): "becomes an autonomous cultural object, with its own original structure and probably, with a new finality. Through the language which henceforth takes charge of it, [music video] becomes narrative." The realm of "narrative" signs (both linguistic and visual), therefore translates not simply into a secondary alternative, but into a primary reality (Wollen, 1986: 169).

How this reality relates to the function of identifying an author is the question that follows.

Appropriation, as the signature of this age, makes tackling the identity of the author more difficult. Not only is one confronted with the physical choices between musician, lyricist, producer, record company and music video director, but also with the more abstract notions of borrowing, copying, simulation, replication, eclecticism and intertextuality. Reproduction, pastiche and quotation, rather than being seen as modes of textual parasitism, are now constitutive of textuality. In the words of Wollen, (1986: 169) "songs are made out of found music, images out of found footage". To identify the *auteur* within this anarchy of appropriation is therefore difficult.

Francois Truffaut, founder of the *auteur* theory, and his colleagues tender that the greatest films are dominated by the "personal vision of the director" (Gianetti, 1996: 1). A filmmaker's "signature", or so they would have one believe, can be discerned through a perusal of her or his total output, which encompasses a unity of style and theme, or technique and tone. In particular it is the tone that is of interest to me, since with both Mango Groove and William Kentridge it would appear that their technique is the mere realisation of their tone.

Any discussion about art and culture in South Africa is deficient without reference to the relationship between art and politics. Notwithstanding the great differences between Mango Groove and Kentridge, "they are equally the product of the same social system" (Godby, 1990: 112). What is apparent, though, is that the "personal vision" they have obtained from this system is quite divergent. Whereas Mango Groove are the cheerleaders of this new country, Kentridge is its critic, skeptic and philosopher (see Viljoen, 2002: 326-329).

The characteristic tone reflected by Mango Groove's songs, albums and music videos is colourful, bold, seemingly spontaneous, almost carnival-like. The album cover (designed by DDS&A, C. Johnston & J. Leyden) for their compact disc, released in 1993, and also titled *Another Country*, presents their lead singer Claire Johnston in a strapless evening gown against the backdrop of bright blue presumably African skies. Although not nearly as festive as some of their previous album covers, it in no way conveys the didactic, documentary-style temper of the almost alien music video. Johnston's party frock and simplistic hair style (quite a contrast to the curls and teased coiffures of previous covers) seem to hail the arrival of a new, brighter less complicated country filled with a future of clear blue skies. This idyllic image is further

reiterated by their choice of typography. "Mango Groove" is written in an angular white sans-serif typeface that seems to suggest a futuristic, dispassionate and impartial image. Perhaps the band furnishes itself with the title of unbiased mediator. "Another Country" is written in a sophisticated, almost feminine font possibly implying the era of advancement, finesse and urbanity that mother Africa is now entering.

Even the various photographs of the members of Mango Groove, inside the album cover, convey a sense of optimism, festivity and all round revelry. Granted the response a viewer has to these images is as subjective as the author's, but when viewed in contrast to the music video from the same album, the disparity is definite. Mango Groove are presented, not only, as the cheerleaders of a new nation, but also as a "unifying force between two previously discrepant ethnic or ideological groups" (Peterson-Lewis, 1986 : 109). This is in particular achieved by the "crossover" appeal of their band. In other words their videos, covers and merchandising tend to feature a supporting cast evenly divided between minority and non-minority persons. To name but one, their *Home Talk* album boasts the entire band on the cover, celebrating, as always in full multi-cultural flair. However, this is not the case in *Another Country* (the music video), where the only person with a distinguishable race is Claire Johnston and the masses surrounding her feet hold a kind of threateningly anonymous ethnicity.

Could it be that Kentridge's influence veers towards a more sobering almost pessimistic imagery? In 1985 Kentridge based a mixed-media triptych called *The Boating Party* on Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous painting by the same name. But the idyllic vision of a luminous world, iridescent with light and colour has been transformed to one of horror. "The great Impressionist paintings give me such pleasure," says Kentridge, "a sense of well-being in the world, a vision of a state of grace in an achieved paradise" (quoted in Williamson, 1989 : 30).

However, the "sense of well-being" has been sabotaged in Kentridge's paintings. Renoir's languid diners are now surrounded by cut up warthogs, burning tyres and various other menacing objects. It is perhaps best explained in his own words, (Kentridge quoted in Williamson, 1989: 30):

> The state of grace is inadmissible to me. I know this is contradictory. The world has not changed that much between then and now in terms of human misery. In bad years peasants starved in the countryside around Tiepolo's ceilings. But in paintings of the time the effect is not of history distorted but of a benevolent world. How-

ever, it is one thing to be grateful for those lies and quite another to perpetuate them.

Herein lies the disparity between Mango Groove and Kentridge. Where Kentridge despises even the *pretence* of a "state of grace" (Kentridge 1989: 30), Mango Groove, it would appear, actually *believes* in it. Through the entire album of *Another Country* Mango Groove christens this new country in jovial honour. "In Kentridge's work we encounter not entertainment, but something ambivalently coded, haunting, indefinable" (Enwezor, 1997: 79).

The divergent political "vision" of Mango Groove and Kentridge is perhaps best illustrated in their respective interpretations of the term "another country". Since the first democratic elections in South Africa (1994) the community has shifted from confrontation and opposition to reconciliation; from resistance to reconstruction. There is the new-found desire that political considerations be put aside and that artists find themes, images and metaphors for the new, democratic society (Martin, 1997: 144). Mango Groove enters this new country with a cheery assortment of banners, flags and anthems. What they see is "Another time, another place, another country, another state of grace". Their aim is not to relive the past, but instead to "make history blind," and to thereby offer hope for the future (J. Leyden is *Another country*'s lyricist). The tone of their message is blissful optimism. In "Dream Softly" (1993), they promise the listener that "everything will be all right". Songs like "Home Talk" (1990) and "Keep on Dancing" (1993) create a patriotic warmth not only in their lyrics and titles, but also in the festive tune and homegrown sounds (African drums and pennywhistle). The sentiment throughout all these songs is predominantly that of courageously looking to the future. They do make occasionally melancholic references to the past, but their philosophies are not emphatically reflected in the music of *Another Country*; instead it is Kentridge's "signature" that resides here.

When no answer is the only one and a question's all we'll find, we can fear and we can cry but we'll never look behind (Mango Groove's "Follow My Mind" [1993]).

Kentridge's "personal vision" may quite firmly be placed in his entirely unique approach to working with "narrative structures of historiography" (Enwezor, 1997: 74). According to Kentridge (2003):

In the same way that there is a human act of dismembering the past, both immediate and further back, that has to be fought through

> writing, education, museums, songs and all the other processes we use to try to force us to retain the importance of events, there is a natural process in the terrain through erosion, growth, dilapidation that also seeks to blot out events. In South Africa this process has other dimensions. The very term "new South Africa" has within it the idea of a painting over the old, the natural process of dismembering, the naturalization of things new.

Of particular interest here, is Kentridge's fascination with layers, erasures and displacement reflecting his geological and historical sense of transformation. Through his adaptation of the print technique into an exacting postmodern animation, Kentridge aims to critique history – colonialism, apartheid, anti-semitism – and thereby expose a socio-culturally conscious present, irremediably haunted by the past. It is the urgency of this quest that feeds the remarkable energy of Kentridge's art and the "thematic and stylistic coherence of his work" (Godby, 1992: 11).

Kentridge's work can be seen as archeological tracings, at the heart of which lies an anxiety about relinquishing memory. The eeriness and success of his aesthetic forms lies in their familiarity. Merged and metamorphosed, his images reflect "remembered childhoods, travels, points of settlement" (Williamson, 1996: 46), and various antiquated images (such as old gramophones) stimulate unexpected connections and nostalgic associations in the viewer. Through this cathartic remembrance disaffected and betrayed geographies are given the recognition they deserve, and dismembrance is exiled for the time being.

As Sue Williamson (1996: 46) points out, Kentridge's stance is best defined as that of a "pesoptimist", a word coined by theorist Edward Said. Herein one finds Kentridge's maxim that one ought to "keep optimism in check and nihilism at bay" (Kentridge quoted in Godby 1992: 16). It is this ambivalent caution that defines the disposition of the work – Kentridge's tentative tone is the overriding signature on *Another Country*.

Neither Mango Groove nor William Kentridge are satisfied with the end result of *Another Country*. Claire Johnston (2000) thinks the video is too gloomy (not colourful enough?) while Kentridge (2003) is so dismissive of the project that he does not even include it in his filmography, commenting that he will never collaborate with commercial musicians again. Both, it seems, feel that their authorial voices were compromised. Although the question of authorship may not be a fash-

ionable one in this postmodern age, its practical relevance – even today – should not be neglected. If one is to broaden the parameters of the term "art" to include that which functions as a merchandising mechanism one is forced to address the 'artistic' debate of authorship. Within this context one can overthrow the notion that technologically advanced art is less reliant on the intellectual validation of a text and unveil the illusion that technology denies art of an author.

Notes

1. *Another Country* is the name of a music video created as an ode to the "new" South Africa. 2004 marks the ten-year anniversary of democracy in South Africa. Thus, this essay takes an over-the-shoulder-look at authorship in this context. The essay is based on a conference paper delivered at the 2000 *Image and Imagery* conference hosted by Brock University, Ontario, Canada.
2. When this research was initiated, it was customary for television stations to show the name of the musical group alone at the bottom of a music video as the "authors" of the music video. MTV and VH1 now show the name of the director as well, but many other stations do not. Either way, this inquiry aims to merely highlight the quandary of authorship in commercial art forms such as music video.
3. Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), founder of Connoisseurship, emphasised the need of making a careful study of ears, hands and small detail, where the authorship of a painting was in question.
4. The formalist nature of both the *auteur* theorists and Morelli is simultaneously salutary and limiting.

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