Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.34778

Transmedial Generation of Printmaking Thinking—A Case Study of William Kentridge

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Abstract. Most studies that have been done so far about William Kentridge's artworks mainly look at their stage structure, visual storytelling, and links to South Africa's political and historical background. They mainly explain the themes and symbolic meanings in his works, but they do not pay enough attention to the common working rules inside his different art forms. To fill this gap in research, this paper uses printmaking as a starting point to study how his artworks keep the same features across different media types. The first part studies how these media work from the inside. It finds that imprint is the key sign that forms the way images are made. It also shows that erasing and adding layers put time into the pictures through physical marks. The second part explains how printmaking ideas shape different media. It talks about four main kinds of ideas: randomness, reverse images, putting parts together, and printing one layer over another. The third part further looks at how this structure moves from one media to another. This lets different media develop using the same basic working rules. By studying these structural elements, this paper finds the shared idea behind Kentridge's cross-media art. It also gives a new way to understand why his works have such a consistent style.

Keywords: printmaking ideas, Kentridge, cross-media art

1. Introduction

William Kentridge is widely seen as one of the most important cross-media artists today. His art works cover printmaking, drawing, animated films, sculptures, plays, and big public art projects. These media look very different in form, but his works have the same basic features in how they are made and structured inside. Most studies now explain this consistency through themes, historical background, or story content. But they do not give a clear, step-by-step explanation of the basic rules that make his cross-media art work. In fact, for almost forty years now, printmaking has always been the center of Kentridge's art system. It is not just a less important or side part of his work.

This paper tries to study Kentridge's printmaking ideas as a basic structure. As Judith B. Hecker writes in *William Kentridge: Trace*, printmaking is not just where Kentridge started his art career. It also gives a very important way to understand erasing, leftover marks, and constant change in his animations and pictures [1]. But Hecker's research mostly only uses printmaking to explain his other works. It does not go deeper than that. This paper wants to go further on this basis. It will look at printmaking not just as one kind of art medium, but as a basic structure. In theory, this paper uses

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.34778

Rosalind Krauss's ideas about medium structure. It will look at Kentridge's multi-media works from both inside and outside. At the same time, it uses the ideas from Hou Weiguo's book *Printmaking Thinking*. The book talks about three different ways of thinking in printmaking: dynamic, representational, and abstract. This paper will use these ideas to study Kentridge's works that are not printmaking. By doing this, it shows how sculptures, animated films, big wall works, and other art pieces follow the basic rules of printmaking in their structure. Also, it explains how this basic printmaking structure works in one single medium. It also shows how this structure moves and is used in different kinds of art media.

2. Internal structure of the medium

How does printmaking influence the internal operation of media? Kentridge does not form images frame by frame following the logic of animation, but creates them using the logic of drawing. The repeated erasures of content in the process of charcoal drawing leave traces of memory for the symbolic content, and remnants of history are erased and rebuilt along with architecture. If ideas function as lubricating oil for the vast machine of social life, then the invisible riveted joints within the medium are permeated by this oil, making its operation possible.

2.1. Traces as the foundation on the technical level

Traces left by charcoal erasure constitute Kentridge's most recognizable personal visual feature for the audience, beginning with his first film. In image production, although Kentridge claimed in his early career that he used a Swedish-made Bolex camera and shot on 16mm film before transfer, he did not embrace such purely mechanical video equipment with the same spirit as he depicted outdated mechanical devices in his images. Later, Kentridge adopted a slightly more complex 16mm camera of the same type, the Arriflex, which also supports single-frame animation shooting and frame counting functions. Such equipment allows the artist to shoot each temporary state, each erasure, and each successive modification on the same physical surface frame by frame, rather than building the work on a large number of independent frames. Ultimately, upon the completion of a full-length moving image work, the total number of actual drawings is usually only around twenty, with each recorded frame retaining accumulated traces.

The work *Johannesburg: The Greatest City After Paris* first presents the three main protagonists of the series. The outlines and figures of people and objects linger in the traces of the picture, constantly in the process of emergence and dissolution. In *Mine*, Soho's private bed and desk transform into one another. In *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old*, the high-rise buildings owned by Soho collapse dramatically in the process of erasure. The image itself is the trace left by Kentridge's actions, and each modification retains the traces of previous stages. This structure is inherently consistent with the generative mechanism of printmaking, especially intaglio printmaking: in intaglio, the artist leaves irreversible marks on a metal plate with a burin through techniques such as drypoint, etching, or engraving. The formation of the image relies on continuous intervention on the plate.

One might feel confused or dislocated when connecting intaglio printmaking—a medium characterized by both multiplicity and traceability—with moving image, a medium in which traces do not necessarily change in each reproduction. Yet in contemporary printmaking, the significance of independent traces transcends multiplicity and becomes the core value of printmaking [2]. The following chapters will analyze the randomness in the traces of Kentridge's works and elaborate on how the technical foundation influences the artist's works in other media.

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3. How printmaking thinking constructs media

As a medium, printmaking is not merely a kind of material, but is generated as a structure and a mode of thinking. In existing research, scholar Judith B. Hecker has elaborated on the importance of printmaking to Kentridge's overall creation and how it "permeates all his media" [3]. Domestic scholar Wang Ziyun has also concluded that Kentridge's media forms are designated as non-teleological based on the concept of family resemblance [4], yet he does not explain in detail where the root of such family resemblance lies and in what aspects it manifests. On this basis, this paper explores the basis for the transformation among his installations, sculptures, drawings, and moving images, and how various printmaking thinking patterns are transferred and permeate into Kentridge's diverse media techniques.

3.1. Randomness

The "trace" discussed above, as the technical foundation of Kentridge's creation, is not only reflected in his construction of the internal structure of a single medium. The randomness inherent in imprinting—a core characteristic of printmaking—also permeates his other artistic practices.

Such randomness is first intuitively embodied in the methodology of Kentridge's early hand-drawn animation projects. Before starting an animation, he does not prepare storyboards in the traditional animator's sense. Instead, he takes several pre-completed charcoal drawings or prints as his starting point, revises them repeatedly to establish connections between frames, and gradually allows the narrative to emerge. His approach differs from the industrial animation model, in which thousands of discrete frames are drawn frame by frame and then played continuously through the principle of persistence of vision. He also rejects the deterministic structure of linear progression.

During the creation of the moving image *Felix in Exile*, Kentridge simultaneously produced a series of intaglio prints corresponding to the film's imagery using etching, drypoint, and aquatint techniques. Similarly, in his 1996–1997 series *Ubu Tells the Truth*, the vulgar images and daily behaviors of the protagonist Ubu Roi are presented across eight small prints—each numbered according to action and scene. These prints served as the precursor to his 1997 live theatrical work *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.

Kentridge's creative logic lacks the clear purpose and immutability of single-image media. On the contrary, his works remain in a state of constant revision and deviation, often involving both control and loss of control over time and materials. Randomness is inherent to the production of all types of printmaking: deviations and unpredictability may occur at any stage, from the transfer of paper sketches to plates, to the physical acts of carving and cutting, to the chemical corrosion processes involving agents such as ferric chloride. In his 2007–2009 *The Nose* series of etchings, Kentridge employed sugar-lift aquatint. As the sugar layer cracks in hot water, it creates natural edges and randomly generates mottled textures similar to ink wash. Later, in his 2010 opera production *The Nose*—adapted from Shostakovich's opera of the same name—he reconstructed the original work, placing vision, stage, and narrative once again within a variable structure. Thus, randomness is no longer merely a technical byproduct, but is transformed into a structural principle for image generation, running through Kentridge's multiple media and turning works into deposits of physical action and projections of ideas.

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3.2. Negative reversal

The production of relief prints generates images through deletion and reversal. The lines carved by the artist are precisely the areas removed in the final printed image. This negative-like logic and technical effect are evident in the moving image *Refusal of Time*, in which animations are drawn with black charcoal on white paper and then reversed to create white imagery on a black ground. This includes the method used in *Triumphs and Laments*, where patterns are formed by washing away, rather than adding to, the surface: patterns are revealed by spraying high-pressure water to remove bacteria and pollutants from the walls along the Tiber River in Rome. When transferring hand-drawn sketches to digital files, Kentridge must convert the gray tones of Indian ink wash and charcoal into pure black or white. This black-and-white language resonates with that of relief printing. The digital files are then sent to factories in Rome to produce full-scale plastic stencils, which are affixed to the walls. Workers pump and heat water from the river, with temperature, pressure, and nozzle type regulated by the heritage conservation and river management authorities. Heated water is sprayed through high-pressure guns to remove the unprotected parts of the wall surface, leaving behind dark images. Given this process, it is reasonable for Pamela Allara to describe the work as a "composite print". She also details how Kentridge collaborated with two printmaking studios in Johannesburg—Artist Proof Studio (APS) and David Krut Workshop (DKW)—to create *Triumphs and Laments* [5].

Kentridge also pays particular attention to the connection between linoleum cut prints and the material conditions of South Africa. Linoleum features a linoleum surface and a hessian backing, originally used as flooring material. Its low cost and availability have made it one of the most important relief media in southern Africa. Artists can carve raised lines with cutting tools, apply ink with rollers, and print mechanically or even manually with a spoon, achieving considerable durability. Structurally, it compels the artist to subtract from the plate to retain the image. As an industrial sheet material, linoleum is inherently cuttable. *Triumphs and Laments* scales up this material logic to an architectural dimension, using plastic sheets to function like linoleum blocks and turning the city walls into surfaces that can be inscribed.

3.3. Modular combination

Modular thinking comes from the basic working rules of color printing with separate plates. In this printing method, people split one image into several independent plates. Each plate only makes one color or one part of the whole picture. The way of putting these separate plates together to make a full image has the same inner logic as paper tearing and collage. It also matches the way movable bronze sculptures are put together.

In his work *Natural History of the Studio*, Kentridge shows a group of small sculptures with no fixed names. He puts them on four rows of bookshelves, and they can be rearranged as different scene parts. When you look at them, this arrangement looks like four thick lines of text on a piece of grid paper. Each single sculpture works like a word or a letter. It gets its position and relation from its place in the whole sequence. By changing the order of these sculptures on the shelves again and again, the artist "retypes" the whole space. He turns the space into a text structure that can be edited freely. He will not give any direct, literal meaning to this arrangement. He says, "you cannot put these different signs together to form a riddle, yet they seem to suggest a kind of meaning inherent within themselves." This way of making art, where separate small parts come together to make a whole, directly follows the basic rules of printing. In history, printmaking has always been closely linked to movable-type printing. The word "print" itself even includes the meaning of making marks

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with type. If we see these small sculptures as 3D movable types that have been taken apart, their meaning does not come from each single piece. It comes from how they are put together with other pieces. This 3D typesetting is different from just moving ink from one place to another. It focuses on how the structure can change. The small units can be put together, replaced, or rearranged many times. This keeps the whole work in an open, unfinished state.

So modular thinking is not just a way to make art look a certain way. It becomes a basic way of thinking about art. By using the logic of putting parts together again at the medium level, it breaks what viewers usually expect: that art has a fixed meaning and fixed form. It sets sculpture free from its unchanging, monumental nature. It turns sculpture into a set of system parts that can be rearranged over and over again. It also shows more clearly that printmaking is essentially a system that can be reconfigured in many ways.

3.4. Layered overprinting

Different from the horizontal joining inside plates talked about in "modular combination", "layered overprinting" is more like a vertical stacking structure. It includes covering, mixing, and moving between many different visual layers. Different images come together on the same surface. Each one keeps its own shape and rhythm. They also create new meanings where they overlap. This structure matches the multi-plate overprinting used in printmaking. Each plate holds different information. This information builds up when pressed again and again onto one piece of paper. The layered thinking needed for overprinting helps people break down and understand complex things. It also lets people look at small, specific problems in a wider way [6].

In his video work *Refusal of Time*, Kentridge also uses many screens to show images and create a rich visual space. Black shapes and words mix together. At the same time, sound and image do not match up perfectly. We see a person walking in circles and stepping over a chair. This image mixes with clips of people turning pages of maps or route plans. This lets body movements and geographical paths blend into each other. In another screen, this same image mixes with clips of the person reading a thick book at a desk. Two different time periods thus appear in the same space. The exhibition also puts a real chair right in front of the chair shown on the screen. This mixes the projected space with the real world. Objects thus connect between what is virtual and what is real. This setup makes people think of Plato's thoughts about ideas and images. It especially brings to mind the tension between shadows and reality in his cave story. Kentridge has studied shadows and their deeper meanings for many years. This gives these layered spatial arrangements a clear and important idea.

We can make this kind of layering using digital technology. But its basic way of thinking still comes from the old printmaking tradition. The most important part of multi-plate overprinting is how layers relate to each other. Each print leaves a physical mark and a time gap. This turns the image into a record of how it was made. Kentridge turns this layering logic into the language of moving images. He makes layering itself a way to create new meanings. This work is about how "standard time" was created in history. In the 19th century, people set up the Prime Meridian and Greenwich Mean Time. This was linked to the needs of colonial expansion and global trade. Making time the same everywhere meant creating a new order. Screens do not show things at the same time. Sound and image do not match up. Layers are placed on top of each other. All this makes time feel uneven and conflicting. Big historical events and personal experiences thus appear side by side on the same surface. By using this layering method, Kentridge brings the physical logic of printmaking to video works. He shows how time is linked to power and how media have their own physical nature, all in one structure.

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4. Transmedial transfer of printmaking thinking

As the above analysis reveals, printmaking thinking is not confined to a specific medium, but functions as an organizational principle for creative practice. This structure is manifested in the accumulation of traces, randomness of operation, reconfigurability of modules, and layered superimposition of images.

In Kentridge's practice, this logic does not remain within the medium of printmaking itself, but is transferred to animation, sculpture, and installation, enabling different media to display structural consistency. Differences between media no longer constitute ruptures, but become varied manifestations of the same structure supported by different technologies. At this point, the question is no longer how Kentridge employs different media, but how printmaking thinking transfers across media and forms the unified structure of his oeuvre.

Thinking can be externalized into tools and environments. In his post-2020 exhibition *Natural History of the Studio*, Kentridge materialized the theoretical framework and methodological concepts he first proposed in 2012. He treats his studio as an evolutionary system in which creative ideas emerge, transform, evolve, and even circulate ecologically. Within the studio, torn paper collages become sculptures, then paintings, then animated film series, and finally return to printmaking, realizing a cyclical translation of media. Beyond the repetition of physical forms and thematic content at the surface level, the structural repetition of themes across different media unifies these various outputs.

"Images constantly migrate from one form to another. Something begins as the outline of a torn piece of paper, becomes a sculpture, which is then used as source material for a drawing, which later appears in a series of films, only to reappear as a print." [7] Benjamin's core argument holds that mechanical reproduction diminishes aura, defined as the appearance of something at a distance, elusive and unattainable. Reproduction technologies weaken the ritual value of art and shift it toward exhibition value. On the surface, Kentridge's animations indeed belong to a mechanism of cinematic transmission; his works can be infinitely reproduced and looped in museums. Yet structurally, his art does not dissolve the aura of art: the handcrafted nature of each animation frame, the unreproducible traces of erasure, and the use of material residues to resist the smoothness of reproductive media all reinsert manual traces within mechanical reproduction itself. Kentridge's multi-media works realize a form Benjamin did not foresee, or complicate and supplement what Benjamin observed in his study of the transformations of mechanically reproduced art: "What is most striking is that its two distinct forms—artistic reproductions produced on a mass scale and the art of film—exert an extraordinarily profound influence on the forms, expressions, and modes of transmission of traditional art." [8] Benjamin's original point was that reproductive art poses an originary crisis of petrified aura for traditional artistic media. Kentridge's works, however, blend the exhibition value of reproductive media with the formal translation of traditional media. That is to say, while possessing the plural transmissibility of reproduced art, they also demonstrate the intervention of the specific logic generated by printmaking's representational and abstract thinking into other artistic media, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Within the theoretical reconstruction of the digital age, Krauss discusses new media as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical to) the material conditions of specific technological supports, developing forms that are both expressive and mnemonic. She argues against the idea that new media represent a return to specific traditional media. By analyzing artist Nauman's construction of contradictory collisions between stasis and movement and anti-narrative functions in his media practice—combining static slides with dynamic audio and placing projection equipment in

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the same space as the viewer—she explains that this semiotic game of displacement is precisely what new media seek to theorize [9]. Kentridge's hand-drawn moving images feature slight misalignments between canvas boundaries and plates caused by frame-by-frame shooting, resulting in a trembling overall image with the low-tech texture of early cinema. Recorded works such as *Dark Room* create an immersive theatrical spatiality through strong light-shadow effects and dim screening environments. Yet this does not mean discussions of his media should revert to traditional conceptions of film and theater. Instead, Kentridge achieves a semiotic displacement between low and high technology within his media, producing contradictory collisions: they make viewers aware that these are reproducible, tourable, multi-version moving images, while constantly reminding them that what they see possesses unique authenticity. It is not the medium of printmaking that is transformed into cinematic media, but printmaking as a logic of concrete operation and a framework of abstract conceptual extension that is transferred into other media.

5. Conclusion

Kentridge's creation consistently unfolds around an inherent structural logic, which derives from the working methods of printmaking: imprinting, superimposition, erasure, repetition, and recombination. Whether in paper prints, frame-by-frame animations, or spatial sculptures and installations, this structural principle operates continuously across diverse medium conditions. The shift of media thus appears as the transfer and reorganization of structure, rather than mere formal expansion.

In his animations, erasure and redrawing preserve traces of time, and the process of image formation directly becomes part of the visual composition. In sculpture and exhibition arrangements, the arrangement, separation, and reconstruction of elements form a typographic-like order, transforming space into a readable structural field. The "imprint thinking" embedded in printmaking continually emerges in these practices, maintaining contingency and control, repetition and difference within a single operational framework. In this way, printmaking is both a set of concrete technical experiences and a cognitive mode of how images can be reorganized. Through the transmedial extension of this structure, Kentridge retains and intensifies manual traces in moving images and installations, turning media into tools for thought and sites for visualization.

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